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

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

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

From the Editor

"From Misery to Majesty: The Gospel's Response to Human Suffering" was the theme of our annual convocation held this spring in Lebanon, PA. It was thought time again for the society to consider pressing social issues in a theological way. The society's own Geneva Butz was a logical choice to address the members on the topic of the church's obligation to serve the needy. Many inside and outside of the United Church of Christ know of the Reverend Butz's tireless efforts on behalf of the poor in central Philadelphia. I can't imagine anyone not being touched by her paper. In addition she has provided ample evidence of Nevin's convictions concerning Christian charity, and when she ties Christian charity to Eucharist we have the sense that she has found the mark!

Dr. Greg Carey brought a profound and well-researched paper before the convocation from his background as a New Testament scholar. He focused on Nevin's preoccupation with Ephesians and subsidized Nevin's enlightened pre-criticalism with the best of recent scholarship, spelling out Paul's relationship to the book of Ephesians. Carey raised provocative questions that must be satisfied if Paul is to be considered the author of Ephesians (which Carey concluded, he is not), and by doing so, allowed us to see how, as Mercersburg insisted, doctrine develops and does not descend from heaven full-blown. He was up-front to point out Nevin's shortcomings, but in general found his hermeneutics consistent with an "organic" and unified (single-souled) Gospel. Certainly one fact of Carey's paper cannot be disputed and might boost any lagging confidence brought on by critical research: St. Paul, the unknown writer of Ephesians (AE), Nevin and God bless him, even Dr. Hodge all agreed, the Gospel is the only source of ultimate relief from human suffering, the true and lasting source of human comfort, and the divinely inspired way from human misery to divine majesty.

Our departure to the rarefied air of academia was counterbalanced by the practical lessons of an accomplished chaplain and clinician who reflected on the predicament of human misery and the prospects for its solution. Allan Kramer-Moyer is Vice President of Pastoral Care Services at Phoebe Ministries in Allentown, PA. His sensitive treatment of the issue of care of the needy (explicitly the elderly) was tested according to three cardinal tenets of the Mercersburg theology: its Christocentrism, its

churchly and historical character, and its sacramental and liturgical focus. The Reverend Kramer's paper resonated with those pastors and students of Mercersburg for whom the Mercersburg theology was a chief source of Christian nurture. Mercersburg theology and piety not only shaped their theology, but added depth, maturity and compassion to their calling and, in the case of the laity, their Christian service. His tender examples of pastoral care hint at what Nevin called the "system of the catechism," in that not just one individual or one generation is formed by the principles of Christian life, but generations!

F. Russell Mitman preached to the society on Monday. His text led him to the ancient illustration of the Church as a boat and the Church's people as oarsmen and oarswomen. The illustration was meant to contrast sharply with modern, new revivalism's ecclesiology, which might suggest that the Church is like a luxury liner. The pool-laced decks, gambling floors, song and dance cabarets suggest the mega-church image, but the destination of this doomed Titanic is somewhere other than where our divine and gritty pilot would have us go. Likewise, Mitman admirably admonishes us to question whether the spiritually starving (as well as the materially neglected) are best served on such outwardly splendid vessels, or whether Nevin and Schaff's alternative idea of the Church, which metaphorically might look more like a working men and women's boat, complete with a sacramental manifest and historic and apostolic compass, isn't the ship more likely to reach heaven's harbor?

From Misery to Majesty: The Gospel's Response to Human Suffering

A Practical Response to Mercersburg Theology

Geneva Butz

I was honored when the Rev. Deborah Rahn Clemens called me at the end of last year to ask me to write a paper for the Mercersburg Society. She gave me the title, "From Misery to Majesty: The Gospel's Response to Human Suffering." I thought it would be important to spend some time reflecting on this critical topic, especially following the tragic events that happened on September 11th. I was raised in the German Reformed Church, and Mercersburg theology has shaped my sense of liturgy and my understanding of the church since my childhood. The material is a part of me in such a way that intuitively it seems to make sense, but I have never really studied it objectively. So this invitation was an opportunity to do that.

After spending several weeks on the "anxious bench"—not the kind John Williamson Nevin had in mind however, I realized that this was not the first time I've had to stretch beyond my comfort zone. Ever since 1975 when I was asked by the Taize Community in France to travel on their behalf in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, I have had many "stretching" moments. This period of travel, which included meeting and working with Mother Teresa and her Sisters in Calcutta, India, was as critical in shaping my sense of church, as was my German Reformed roots.

Let me say at the outset, that I invite you, who know Mercersburg Theology far better than I do, to add your comments and reflections. My goal is to open a dialogue with you, to offer some practical realities from the parish, rather than a critique from the writings of John Williamson Nevin and Phillip Schaff. I think you know the theological documents quite well. How this theology connects to real life in the parish is what I propose to offer for your consideration.

Initially I had thought of concentrating on three specific areas of transformation that I have witnessed in the context of the church during my eighteen years of ministry at Old First Reformed Church (United

Church of Christ) in Center City Philadelphia. "From Misery to Majesty" is not something abstract, but a reality which I experience over and over again in my congregation and among my people. But eighteen years is a long time, and I soon found myself overwhelmed with too much material. So I have focused this paper on my local church's ministry with the homeless poor and on the poor within the congregation.

But first I would offer a folktale from Haiti that I think has some bearing on our topic:

> There once was a woman who wanted to buy a new dress. So, she decided to take a calabash of molasses to market to sell. She put the calabash of molasses in a basket and put the basket on her head. As she went down the road she thought about her new dress. She imagined it to be something "prettier than the sunset." Tippy, tappy, she went down the road with the basket poised on her head.
>
> A monkey, perched high in a tree, saw the woman on her way to market. He watched her walk ever so slowly, balancing the calabash of molasses in the basket on her head. Suddenly the woman tripped and fell. Her calabash smashed to the ground, oozing molasses. "Mon Dieu," the woman cried. "My God, why do you give me such misery?"
>
> Now the monkey had never before seen misery, so after the woman left crying, the monkey scampered down the tree and poked a finger in the molasses. He tasted it and loved it. "Papa Dieu," the monkey begged after lapping it all up. "Give me some misery too!"[1]

Misery—what is it? I got started on this paper by pondering the meaning of misery. I don't know anyone who would sign up for misery, unless, like the monkey, he or she has no idea what it is. Anyone who has suffered would never volunteer for it. Suffering comes to us whether we choose it or not. Suffering is part and parcel of the human condition. Yet, as the folk tale illustrates, what misery is to one person, might not be misery for the next.

For me the person who best exemplifies the journey from misery to majesty is Mother Teresa. It was my good fortune to meet her and work with her sisters in the Home for the Dying Destitute in Calcutta, India for several months more than 25 years ago, and her witness has had a definite impact on my ministry in Philadelphia. It is very curious that

Mother Teresa and Princess Diana, who met in real life, became associated with one another through their deaths that occurred within a few days of each another in 1997. Princess Diana married into royalty—majesty in a worldly sense, but lived a life touched by misery and Mother Teresa, who associated with the lowly and miserable of this world, became a holy person, elevated to majesty, both in her life and in her death.

Mother Teresa understood her mission and that of her sisters, the Missionaries of Charity, as suffering with the poor—living with them. She once said, "We must share [the misery of the poor], for only if we are one with them, can we redeem them . . . by bringing God into their lives and bringing them to God."[2]

Mother Teresa has been criticized for sentimentalizing poverty and promoting masochism. But a look at the motivation for her ministry opens up her work to a much wider perspective. Mother Teresa once explained: ". . . if you turn your back on the poor, then you are turning it on Jesus. He has made himself hungry, naked, and homeless so that you and I may have the opportunity to love him. Our poor are tremendous people. . . . They need our respect; they want to be treated with love and attention."[3]

In order to accomplish the work of serving the poor, Mother Teresa's sisters spend time in silence and prayer. Each day, no matter how busy they are, the Sisters spend at least one hour in adoration. "Genuine interior life makes the active life burn brightly and consume everything," Mother Teresa urged her sisters. "It helps us to find Jesus in the dark holes of the shantytowns, to find him in the most heart-rending wretchedness of the poor: the naked God-man on the cross, the sad Man of Sorrows, despised by everyone, crushed by whipping and crucifixion like a worm. . . . There is the kingdom of Christ . . . "[4] She once said to her sisters, "Try to grasp, how Jesus allows himself to be crushed."[5]

Every morning at the Mother House, the Missionaries of Charity begin their day with prayer and the Eucharist. The Eucharist is the source in which all of Mother Teresa's work begins and ends. Mother Teresa explained,

> In Holy Communion we have Christ in the form of bread. In our work we find him in the form of flesh and blood. It's the same Christ. "I was hungry, I was naked, I was sick, I was homeless." If

> we can see Jesus in the form of bread we can also see him in the broken bodies of the poor. . . . We need the poor so as to touch him. We find strength and nourishment in the Eucharist; and if we have been strengthened, we want to use this strength to pass it on.[6]

Bard Thompson, in his chapter on "The Reformed Church in the Palatinate" in *Essays on the Heidelberg Catechism,* seems to describe the same sense of Eucharist. He writes:

> What really happens in the Lord's Supper is that the living energy, the animating power of Christ's life—his "vivific virtue," to use Calvin's terms—is brought over into the center of our lives, making us more and more one with Christ himself. "From the substance of his flesh," said Calvin, "Christ breathes life into our souls–indeed pours forth his very life into us."[7]

Mother Teresa always considered her work to be "hands on love,"[8] entirely the work of God. "We are all just his tools that do their little bit and go away," she once said.[9] She was known for thinking of herself as a "pencil in God's hand."[10]

Again Bard Thompson seems to be describing Mother Teresa when he writes of our Reformation theology, "'Grace,' said Melanchthon, 'is not medicine, but good will. . . . God's personal love in action, bringing the sinner into fellowship with [God].'"[11]

Mother Teresa is an example for the whole world of what God can do when one allows God to enter fully into the frailty of human life. Mother Teresa's graphic way of speaking can make us smile. She understood so keenly that it was God working within and for people that transforms their suffering into grace. In many ways she pointed to the incarnation as the chief means of grace that God uses, even today. She once said,

> [God] would like to live his life in you. He would like to see with your eyes, walk with your feet, love with your heart. He will coax the good out of a person. That's the beautiful thing about God . . . That he can stoop down and let you feel that he depends on you. . . . That's the 'most' beautiful thing about God . . . That he's almighty, and yet he doesn't force himself on you.[12]

Mother Teresa worked with her sisters on the streets of Calcutta, India, but even in Center City Philadelphia, Christians can band together to do the work that she advocated. John Calvin once said that the local church

is the place where, "God has deposited treasures of grace." I would like to examine the local church as the setting for the redemption of human suffering, as the community where salvation is worked out, both individually and collectively, as the place where human misery is transformed through forgiveness and reconciliation and all are welcomed into majesty, into the presence of God.

I find the process of redemption very mysterious. Because of it, the church itself has sacramental value. In the urban setting where anonymity is the norm, I marvel at the variety of people who end up in the church. They did not choose one another. Old First members come from widely diverse socio-economic, ethnic, and educational backgrounds; some were reared in very different parts of the country; others are immigrants who arrived in the U.S. only recently. The lives of some of the immigrants have been marked by quite diverse experiences of suffering—even quite extreme suffering. One family escaped the civil war in Liberia, running for their lives from bullets. The children were separated from their parents in refugee camps in Ghana and the Ivory Coast for three years. We have helped this family maneuver through the educational system in Philadelphia—no small feat! One of the daughters was so traumatized by the war that she had to be institutionalized for a time. After an incident with a teacher, she was incarcerated, and church members helped get the charges dropped and arranged for better school placement. A second refugee family is from Nigeria, and again we are offering support to their four teenage children which mainly means helping them feel at home in a new country. Old First also has members with serious mental illnesses for whom there is an endless spiral of incidents and hospitalizations. Some of Old First's members have suffered from spousal abuse and still cower in the face of authority. Others have been held up at gunpoint. Several have children who are in deep trouble with the law.

The mystery of our diversity is that all of us have been called by God to work out our salvation together, in a voluntary and free manner and at a level of some depth. Sometimes we have had to accept the fact that there is no way we can fix the pain that some of our members experience. Christ is the only one who can do that. But we can pray and offer support through small spiritual companion groups where people are able to share personal struggles in an intimate setting. During Sunday morning worship we have opened the "Prayers of the People" to

spontaneous petitions from whoever wishes to come forward to pray. I don't think John Williamson Nevin would be entirely opposed to this kind of spontaneous prayer set in a liturgical context.

J.S. Whale looks to Christ the Redeemer, as embodied in the church, as the means of this grace. He writes,

> . . . as prophet, priest, and king, the Incarnate Son is the actualization in time of the eternal Father's will to save us. The church is, as it were, his outward and visible body; it is not only relevant but undeniably, indispensably visible" [in this process]. [13]

When I first came to Old First, the church wanted to reach out to homeless people who were living in the narrow streets and hidden alleys of Old City Philadelphia. Already the church had been engaged in an outreach ministry using its kitchen to prepare food and its van to deliver sandwiches to "street people" nightly. So, when the call came asking if we would shelter twenty homeless men each evening in our Social Hall, the Official Board of the church agreed—at least for a three-month trial period. Now, nearly twenty years later, we are continuing this ministry that has touched hundreds of frail men. (We shelter only men because there are shelters for women nearby.) Through this ministry, anonymous "street people" have become known as unique individuals by the people of Old First.

We regard the mission of our nightly shelter as providing family for those who have none—for those who have been abandoned by society. Our shelter involves more than simply providing a roof and two meals a day. Building relationships is at the heart of our ministry with the homeless. One man who came to our Food and Clothing Cupboard, after he had been given a bag of food and some clothing, was asked, "So what more do you need?" He said, "What I really need is a church—a place where I can be known and know others, a place where I can trust people and share those things that are troubling me."

It is interesting that when John Williamson Nevin was president of the first General Synod that met in Pittsburgh in November 1863, the Synod heard a report recommending the creation of homes for orphans. The report ended with these words:

> . . . whatever may be the varied internal regulations of these branch Homes, the general form of their government shall always be based on the idea of the 'Christian Family,' under the nurturing life of the Reformed Church as that flows from the true faith taught in the Heidelberg Catechism.[14]

At that Synod Nevin was named one of three new directors for these homes. Later Nevin wrote an article in *The German Reformed Messenger,* giving his theological reasons for these new actions of charity. Remember, it is the Civil War, and the homeless poor were the children left orphaned by the ravages of this catastrophic event. To gain support for these new institutions, Nevin wrote:

> It is the duty of the Church to care for the poor, and especially to look after the wants of the helplessly destitute. . . . It is not enough to say, that it is the duty of single Christians to be benevolent and charitable . . . it lies in the very idea of Christian charity, that it should have its "perfect work" by means of the Christian Church. And so it belongs . . . to the very conception of the Church, that it should include in itself the office and function of charity as a constituent part of its own being.[15]

Nevin continues in a very forthright manner:

> No Church can thrive without some systematic care for the poor. No sanctuary observances can prosper, where no account is made of supplying the wants of the needy. No theology can be wholesome, no liturgy a sacrifice well pleasing to God, where the cause of the widow and the cry of the orphan, are allowed to plead in vain.[16]

It is not my purpose to present Old First's ministry with the homeless as charity. It is far more than that, but Nevin's words on reaching out with "Christian compassion and help" are worthy for us to note. Nevin was not an ivory tower intellectual.

At the same time that we at Old First have reached out, God has reached in and transformed us as a congregation through the vulnerable men who stay with us during the winter months and who feel free to drop in for Sunday morning worship, adult education classes, and congregational dinners. There is always room for one more, and I am constantly amazed to see well-dressed, well-educated people pull up a chair for someone who has spent the night on the street and is still reeking of alcohol or body odor on Sunday morning. It is common practice for church members at Old First to speak to homeless people and to try to listen to

their stories, even when their speech is somewhat confused because of drugs, alcohol, or mental illness. More times than not, the comments the men make add poignancy and depth to a discussion of a Bible passage or a social contemporary issue. Even children are comfortable getting a cup of coffee and serving it to one of our guests during the Coffee Hour. I think of these homeless men as evangelists, coming to convert us to be a church that is hospitable and open to all people. Several times a week, I and others in the congregation are present to the men in the shelter to share prayer, listen to individual stories, and study the Bible. These men who wander the streets are very religious, have a wealth of biblical knowledge, and have many individual experiences that add vividness to our discussions.

Christmas Day is a special time when the homeless are at the center of our celebration. We begin with Eucharist in the church sanctuary and end with a meal and gifts in the Social Hall. One year we had a man who called himself the Prince of Ethiopia. With many cloths wrapped around his head in turban-like fashion and bundles of items in stow, he strode up to the piano and played and sang with abandon. He was truly a prince, regally holding forth as we waited to begin worship.

Another Christmas, one of the men stood silently before the Christmas crèche on the communion table, gazing at the scene for what seemed like a very long time. The whole sanctuary became quiet as this man led us in contemplation of the wonder of "God-with-us." The misery of the suffering of these homeless men is transformed again and again into majesty when we gather in the church sanctuary for worship or in the Social Hall for Bible study. There is even a feeling on an ordinary night at the shelter that since the men are sleeping in a church, God is the one who is sheltering and protecting them. The blessings of God become real in this "holy" space.

Some years ago, one of the men who stayed in our church's nightly winter shelter asked to be baptized.[17] This man had been living in the recesses of the subway system for years. When I asked what had led him to his decision, he recalled that on Christmas Day our soprano soloist who was sitting in the congregation dressed as a "bag lady," had sung the Appalachian carol,

> I wonder as I wander, out under the sky,
> How Jesus the Savior did come for to die/

> For poor ord'nary people like you and like I;
> I wonder as I wander, out under the sky.

The words of this song really touched him, and so he wanted to be baptized. Because baptism is about becoming part of a new community, the church, the body of Christ, I told the man that I would have to talk to the elders of the church, and that I would like him to attend worship for a few Sundays.

At the meeting with the elders they probed a bit further. Did he know Jesus? Had he ever read the Bible? What part of it was "good news" for him? "Oh, yes," he responded. "I've read the Bible over and over. When I was in prison, I was often in solitary confinement, and there I read the Bible. I know the story of Jesus." He began to tell us some of the stories that meant the most to him. Then he added, "I've been in prison 28 years, beginning at age 14, so please don't make me wait too long."

The Elders agreed that the baptism could be soon. They offered only one warning to the man:

> Baptism will connect you with a source of interior strength and with a new community of support and encouragement, but it doesn't mean all your problems will vanish. In fact, they might even worsen. Baptism will not magically remove all your troubles. However, through baptism, you might find a way to deal with them.

After his baptism the man's presence turned out to be a gift the whole church was able to appreciate. Because he had been sleeping in our Social Hall, he felt very much at home in our space. We were beginning to discover how he might be part of the ministry of our church.

But during the weeks that followed, the man's growing discomfort with his new life became more and more apparent. He threatened to go back to living in the subway. He became intolerant of the behavior of the other men in the shelter. He found it easy to argue with the shelter supervisors. He was impatient with the circumstances of his life and longed for solitude, time by himself, even if it meant going back to the deep recesses of the subway. We presented options and encouraged him to stop drinking. And then the man disappeared. No one knew where he had gone. All of our efforts to inquire about his whereabouts turned up no clues.

We enter into the majesty of God in the church through the sacraments. The meaning of "majesty" from the baptism section of the Catechism states: "[Baptism] means to have the forgiveness of sins from God, through grace. . . . so that we may more and more die unto sin and live in a consecrated and blameless way."[18] However, not everyone is able to sustain this consecrated way of living that ebbs and flows.

Nevin thought that at regeneration the Christian "is inwardly united to Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. . . . A divine seed is implanted in him, the germ of a new existence, which is destined gradually to grow and gather strength, till the whole man shall be at last fully transformed into its image."[19]

I experienced this sense of transformation through the sacraments quite unexpectedly one day when I went to visit one of my church members who was in a personal care boarding home after having suffered a nervous breakdown. It was not a very elegant boarding home. All the people sit in a very tiny front room all day long. There are no stimulating activities; there is no adult conversation. Though the residents live close together, sharing much in common, in reality they are quite isolated from one another. The first time I went to visit, I felt so awkward. In order to have a conversation with my church member, I had to compete with the TV set which was continually on. There wasn't even a chair for me to sit down. Meals are served in this same room, on TV trays—with the TV on, of course. I hesitated. Should I give her communion?

There was absolutely no privacy in that room. Yet, I had come to give her communion. So, shutting out everything else in the room, I went ahead. The TV kept blaring. I had to kneel beside the woman, balancing the communion elements on the arm of her chair. I went through the whole service, and when I finished, I noticed that everyone in the whole room was looking at our church member and smiling. I could tell that this church member, who had probably never been noticed and who was perhaps even looked down upon by the others, was suddenly held in high esteem by everyone in the room. People sitting around in their chairs nodded their heads in approval, and our church member was beaming! The whole room had become brighter.

The next time I visited this personal care boarding home I noticed that after I started the communion service, the TV set was turned off and the whole room became silent. Everyone was paying attention. After

serving the church member, I turned around and offered communion to anyone who wanted it. Many hands went up to receive the bread. And as I left, a staff member—the staff usually stay in a tiny, walled-in, Plexiglas office, isolated from the residents, offered me a separate room the next time, so that I could serve communion to anyone who might want to receive it.

John Nevin wrote that the purpose of the Lord's Supper was "to become more and more united to Christ's sacred body." He wrote in *The Mystical Presence*:

> The sacramental doctrine of the primitive Reformed Church stands inseparably connected with the idea of an inward, living union between the believers and Christ, in virtue of which they are incorporated into his very nature and made to subsist with him by the power of a common life.[20]

The definition of majesty, as reflected in the third section of the catechism, is about a life of gratitude, a life of faithful obedience. The majesty of the human condition comes from God, through Christ. It is a gift that we cannot achieve through our own human efforts. The real majesty of the Gospel results, according to the Heidelberg Catechism, when we offer ourselves to Christ "as a living sacrifice of thanksgiving."[21]

Through interaction with numerous homeless people for various amounts of time, our church has grown in its sensitivity to issues of inclusion, its ability to accept difference, its understanding of the church as a place of hospitality, and its capacity to share human pain. In an anonymous city, simple human friendship can be a sign of God's grace, love, and healing; and Holy Communion can be that energizing presence which allows us to reach out again and again in love.

The Church of the Palatinate understood the church as "the bearer of spiritual life to her children."[22] Bard Thompson describes the Palatinate Church as

> an empirical church of believers, chosen by God for himself, where his Word is truly preached and heard, where the sacraments are administrated according to Christ's institution, where discipline stimulates the community and guards its integrity, where worship is understood to mean the liturgy of the elect who gather to hear God's

> most holy word and to set forth his most worthy praise—where, in sum, God has deposited the treasures of his grace.[23]

The Heidelberg Catechism sets out the concepts of misery and majesty in the scope of its organization. It begins with Christ who saves me, continues with God who protects me, and ends with the Holy Spirit who assures me of eternal life.[24] The first question of the Catechism deals with "comfort" which Hendrikus Berkhof, in an essay titled "The Catechism as an Expression of our Faith," says ". . . is something like shelter. . . . We belong to Jesus Christ. His protection is the protection of his Father and his assurance of eternal life."[25] It is this protective presence of Christ that enables us to avoid anxiety in the face of difficult and stressful situations that confront us all the time. This kind of comfort helps not just homeless people, but all Christians, cope with the fragility of life and the stress it produces.

The answer to the second question of the Catechism provides the framework for the three sections of the catechism that follow. There are three things I must know in order to receive this comfort: "First, the greatness of my sin and wretchedness," or my misery. Second, I must know "how I am freed from all my sins and their wretched consequences," or my redemption. Thirdly, I must know "what gratitude I owe to God for such redemption." This third section of the Catechism on gratitude and new life through the Spirit deals with majesty, for if we are heirs with Christ to the promises of God, then we are living in a redeemed condition, a state of majesty, in which our human life has worth, value, and dignity. It is interesting to look at the Catechism from this overall perspective, and notice that its whole scope is addressed by our convocation theme, "From Misery to Majesty."

Andre Pery in his Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism sums it up with these words,

> The church of Jesus Christ knows that from now on her destiny is absolutely bound to that of her Lord. Just as Jesus died and arose from the dead, so the church and the world with her shall have to pass through death and resurrection in order that the "reign of God" [the majesty of God] may come.[26]

It is a mystery, this process of transformation, regeneration, and resurrection. But if we are truly the church, especially in our day, we have to be willing to die with Christ through our sufferings in order to rise with him to a new life. In today's world it is this process of regeneration and transformation that gives authenticity and credibility to the church. When others saw what Mother Teresa was doing in Calcutta, India, they wanted to follow her. Today, when others see the effects of a transformed life, they want to become part of that process in the church. In that way, Christ really *is* present in his own body, the church.

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2. Christian Feldman, *Mother Teresa Love Stays*, translated from German by Peter Heinegg, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company,1998), p. 93.

3. Ibid., p 78.

4. Ibid., p. 90.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., p. 56.

7. Bard Thompson, "The Reformed Church in the Palatinate," in Bard Thompson, Hendrikus Berkhof, Eduard Schoweizer, and Howard G. Hageman, eds., *Essays on the Heidelberg Catechism*, (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1963), p. 42.

8. Feldman, *Mother Teresa*, p. 82.

9. Ibid. p. 80.

10. Ibid.

11.Bard Thompson, "The Reformed Church," p. 42.

12. Feldman, *Mother Teresa*, p. 87.

13. Quoted by Bard Thompson, "The Reformed Church," pp. 44-45.

14. Quoted by Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, Lawrence N. Jones, and Robert A. Schneider, eds., *Outreach and Diversity*, Vol 5 of *The Living Theological Heritage of the United Church of Christ*, (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), p. 385.

15. John W. Nevin, "Orphan Homes," in *Outreach and Diversity*, p 388.

16. Ibid.

17. A fuller version of this story appears in *Christmas in All Seasons*, Geneva M. Butz, (Cleveland, Ohio: United Church Press, 1995), pp. 61-64.

18. Andre Prey, *The Heidelberg Catechism with Commentary*, 400th Anniversary Edition (New York, NY: The Pilgrim Press, 1962), Question 70 p. 119.

19. Quoted by Bard Thompson, "The Catechism and the Mercersburg Theology" in *Essays on the Heidelberg Catechism*, p. 62.

20. Quoted by Bard Thompson, ibid., p. 68.

21. *Heidelberg Catechism*, Question 32, p. 72.

22. Bard Thompson, "The Reformed Church," p. 43.

23. Ibid. p. 45.

24. Hendrikus Berkhof, "The Catechism as an Expression of Our Faith, " in *Essays on the Heidelberg Catechism*, p. 93.

25. Ibid., p. 95.

26. Andre Prey, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, p. 206-207.

A COSMIC GOSPEL: JOHN WILLIAMSON NEVIN ON THE CHURCH AND EPHESIANS

Greg Carey

In his famous essay, "The Will to Believe," William James imagined a situation in which both belief and unbelief are "live options."[1] There are those for whom unbelief has never appealed as a live option, but they baffle me. For how, I wonder, can one look on the ambiguity of our cosmic situation, where the problem of suffering is so apparent and not wonder whether any adequate response is available? In the face of prevalent suffering, suffering caused not only by human choices but also by the very structure of our reality—how can religious faith survive easily?

To ask these questions is not to undermine the gospel, nor does living with the possibility of not-faith reveal a deficit in one's faithfulness. For asking God hard questions has an honorable legacy in our faith tradition. Abraham challenged God's judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah, Moses bargained with God on behalf of Israel, the Psalms echo with the refrain of "how long"—as does the Book of Revelation and Job claimed his own righteousness in the face of catastrophe. The apocalyptic discourses of early Jews and Christians in part emerged from challenges to God's righteousness, since the available evidence suggested that God had not delivered on the covenant with Abraham to bless Israel with land and greatness. In the wake of Jerusalem's second devastation, the visionary of 4 Ezra (or 2 Esdras in the Apocrypha) complains: "It would have been better for us not to be here than to come here and live in ungodliness, and to suffer and not understand why" (4:12, NRSV). So when in Romans Paul is writing about the "righteousness of God" in Romans, he is answering the question of theodicy (Is God righteous?), rather than speculating about the status of individual believers.

God's righteousness in the presence of suffering is a big question, a cosmic question and it requires a response of equal scope. While there

[1] *The Will to Believe and Other Essays* (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1897).

may have been other motives, answering questions of a cosmic scope was precisely what the Mercersburg theologians were about: articulating the gospel on the grandest conceivable scale. In doing so they resorted to Platonic and Hegelian philosophy and to the cultural categories of their age, but they also turned to Scripture. And in the case of John Williamson Nevin, the appeal was especially to one book, the Epistle to the Ephesians.

I cannot claim to be expert in the primary texts of Mercersburg theology and their interpretation. And yet I am grateful for this opportunity to engage the Mercersburg tradition in constructive dialogue. In my three years at Lancaster Seminary, the high view of the church, "one, holy, and catholic," that animates Mercersburg has also set to work in me, both challenging and nurturing the gleefully sectarian Baptist sensibilities with which I arrived. I am also thankful to Lee Barrett, John Payne and Peter Schmiechen for their guidance toward helpful primary sources and categories of reflection. So with joy I have immersed myself (pun intentional) in classic Mercersburg texts as part of my own spiritual development.

My interest is fairly particular. While many have written concerning Nevin's hermeneutics, I cannot find much discussion concerning his treatment of particular biblical texts. I am interested in how Nevin employed Scripture, specifically the Epistle to the Ephesians, in articulating his ecclesiology. Nevin had a grand view of the church; he believed that in the church reside all the resources for the world's salvation. Not only was Nevin a serious reader of Scripture, but also his interpretation of Ephesians reflected deep engagement with it, a profound appreciation for the specific contributions Ephesians offered contemporary reflection. At the same time, Nevin could not anticipate how later readers would come to understand Ephesians, and I believe that our own appreciation for Nevin and his ecclesiology can be enhanced by developments that largely postdate his career.

Ephesians in Contemporary Pauline Scholarship: What Nevin Didn't Know

While Paul's authorship of Ephesians is a disputed issue these days, it seems both that (a) a slight majority of scholars do not believe Paul wrote the letter and (b) the momentum of opinion is against Paul's authorship. In my estimation, the clear weight of evidence stands against

Paul's authorship. Briefly stated, the following considerations justify this view.

- The "general" nature of Ephesians. Whereas Paul's authentic letters all name particular addressees and address specific contexts, Ephesians does neither. (In my view, "in Ephesus" of Eph 1:1 is an interpolation.)
- Syntax and vocabulary. Ephesians is noteworthy for its concentration of lengthy paratactic sentences, whereas Paul's sentences are usually more direct. In Greek Eph 1:3-14 is one sentence! Moreover, Ephesians occasionally uses Pauline words, but the sense differs. Especially important is the term "works" (*erga*), by which Paul usually means "works of the law" while Ephesians connotes more general "good deeds" (cf. Eph 2:9).
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- Autobiography. While Paul repeatedly affirms his successful life in Pharisaic Judaism (Gal 1:13-14; Phil 3:4-8), in Ephesians "Paul" joins those who had "formerly lived in the desires of our flesh" (2:3).[2]
- The apostles. Whereas Paul demonstrates an ambivalent relationship to the other apostles, especially the Jerusalem authorities (cf. Gal 1-2), in Ephesians we find that the church, "God's household," rests "upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets" (2:20).
- Eschatology. Paul insists upon an inaugurated eschatology, according to which Jesus' resurrection is the "first fruits" from

[2]It is now generally agreed that the speech in Romans 7 is not an account of Paul's troubled conscience but an example of "speech in character."

the dead (cf. 1 Cor 15; Rom 6:3-5). This is a critical matter for Paul. But in Ephesians we find a relatively realized eschatology. One can scarcely imagine Paul affirming the claim in Eph 2:6 that "we *have been* raised with Christ and seated in the heavenly realms."

- Social divisions. While Paul's attitudes concerning gender and slavery remain contested, I believe that the *Haustafel* of Ephesians 5 and 6 could not have emerged from his pen.[3]

I offer these observations neither to pursue an irrelevant question nor to diminish the authority of Ephesians, but rather to call attention to one important fact: Within the Pauline corpus, Ephesians offers a distinctive voice. Indeed, Ephesians was written to draw upon the insights of Paul and expand them to address a later exigence. This distinctiveness is especially apparent with respect to salvation and ecclesiology. While Nevin apparently did not question Paul's authorship of the epistle, he clearly made much of its distinctiveness in his writings on the church.

One way in which Ephesians both draws upon Paul's vision and expands it has to do with the cosmic scope of salvation and in the relationship of that cosmic salvation to Christology and ecclesiology. Paul certainly did not restrict his horizons to the atomistic salvation of individual believers. His apocalyptic eschatology would not allow for that. For Paul, the resurrection of Jesus is an apocalyptic sign, all the evidence one would need to believe that a new age is dawning. In Jewish apocalyptic discourse of the day, the resurrection of *one person* was unheard of; thus, Paul insists that if Jesus has been raised, so too will everyone else: "If there is no [general] resurrection of the dead, then neither has Christ been raised" (1 Cor 15:13). So Paul names Jesus' resurrection as the "first fruits" from the dead (15:20, 23). Likewise, Paul sees in Jesus' resurrection the key to the redemption of all of creation. In the very context in which he discusses how creation itself eagerly awaits (*apekdechetai*) its own liberation (Rom 8:19), Paul also argues that "we" who have the first fruits of the Spirit—a gift brought precisely through the resurrection, also are awaiting (*apedechomenoi*) our own redemption (8:23).

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[3]Richard A. Horsley, "Paul and Slavery: A Critical Alternative to Recent Readings," *Semeia* 83/84 (1998) 153-200; Neil Elliott, *Liberating Paul: The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994).

So when we find in Eph 1:10 that God's purpose is "to bring all things together in Christ" we know that we are *overhearing* Paul's voice. And yet somehow Ephesians has taken one step beyond Paul, for in Ephesians it is explicit that creation's *telos* is implied already in Christology and ecclesiology. In Ephesians the elect reside in Christ from before the world's creation (1:4). That is, the church has always been objectively present with the preexistent Christ, a reality that is bearing itself out in God's plan for the redemption of all things. Moreover, through the resurrection, Christ has become "head of all things in the church . . . the fullness of Christ who fills all in all" (1:22-23). This is a grand vision, one that I believe is consistent with Paul's gospel, and yet one that I think resides beyond Paul's expressed horizons. Thus, while in some respects Ephesians misrepresents, modifies, or contradicts Paul's teaching, in important ways, Ephesians is "more Pauline than Paul." That is, Ephesians builds upon Paul's vision in articulating an even grander program.

Ephesians in Nevin's Ecclesiology

The call of Ephesians is for unity, apparently with a primary interest in unity between Gentile and Jewish believers. This vision reaches its highest point in 4:1-6, which proclaims that there is

> one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called in one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all (Eph 4:4-6).

This passage was the text for Nevin's 1844 sermon to the joint Convention of the German and Dutch Reformed churches in Harrisburg. We might also recall that Schaff included this sermon as an appendix to his book *The Principle of Protestantism*, translated by Nevin.[4]

Nevin was a careful reader of Scripture. On this occasion Nevin outlines the larger argument of Ephesians, noting its grounding in early tensions among Jews and Gentiles, and identifying the justifiable hermeneutical leap from how the epistle addressed an ancient Christian tension, to its

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[4]Richard E. Wentz, *John Williamson Nevin: American Theologian* (New York: Oxford University, 1997) 21.

more "comprehensive" significance.[5] Throughout the sermon Nevin demonstrates his grasp of Ephesians' argumentative structure when he appeals to other sections of the epistle. But more to the point, Nevin notes the declarative tone of 4:4-6: this unity is not a goal to be achieved, but rather the divinely given basis for Christian oneness.[6] While Nevin recognizes the church's diversity, "The union by which it is held together through all ages is strictly *organic*."[7] The status of the church as one body, then, is objectively grounded in God's initiative in Christ.

Nevin's articulation of this ecclesiology has manifest implications. In one sense, the church does not need to be called together, for the church's oneness precedes the individuals who participate in it. If "Christ is the root of the Church,"[8] then the church rests not on individual Christians, but rather those individuals properly exist only in the church.[9] In Nevin's words, "Christ lives in his people, by the life which fills his Body, the Church, and they are necessarily one before they can be many."[10]

Ephesians also offered the text for Nevin's 1846 sermon on "The Church," which was published in 1847.[11] Nevin could scarcely have found a grander text for articulating his ecclesiology than Eph 1:23: "Which is his body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all." The ecclesiology here is clearly influenced by a certain appropriation of Platonic and Hegelian categories. Nevin is interested in distinguishing the *idea* of the church from the "actual church." Yet both idea and

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[5]"Christ and the Church," in *The Mercersburg Theology* (ed. James Hastings Nichols; Library of Protestant Thought; New York: Oxford University, 1966) 35.

[6]Ibid., 36.

[7]Ibid., 40.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Cf. John Williamson Nevin, *The Anxious Bench* (3rd ed.; Reading: Daniel Miller, 1892) 116.

[10]"Christ and the Church," 41.

[11]"The Church," in *The Mercersburg Theology* (ed. James Hastings Nichols; Library of Protestant Thought; New York: Oxford University, 1966) 57-76.

actuality are necessary for an adequate appreciation of the church, since the church must be actualized in history.

One might object that Nevin's Platonism and Hegelianism obscure the apocalyptic dimension of his text. The Ephesian conception of a church is properly apocalyptic; that is, the oneness of creation spoken of in Eph 1:22-23 is grounded in Jesus' resurrection. However, Nevin himself fully appreciated the gospel's apocalyptic dimension. He asserts,

> The Ideal Church is the power of a supernatural creation, which has been introduced into the actual history of the world by the Incarnation of Jesus Christ.[12]

Thus, as a key to Nevin's hermeneutics, the incarnation governs the articulation of every doctrine, as it marks God's commitment to embodiment.[13] "It is the key that unlocks the sense of all God's works, and brings to light the true meaning of the universe."[14] The incarnation, then, implies the "givenness" of the actual church, as Christ's saving presence is embodied in it.[15] Nevin claims,

> The principle of this new creation is the Lord Jesus Christ. In him the Word became flesh, the divine nature was associated with the human as never before, and life and immortality were brought to light in our fallen world. The fact thus accomplished in his person was at the same time a fact for all time. It included in itself all the resources of life and salvation that were needed for the full redemption of humanity, onward to the grand millennial triumph in

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[12]Ibid., 58.

[13]See, for example, Nevin, *My Own Life: The Earlier Years* (Papers of the Eastern Chapter, Historical Society of the Evangelical and Reformed Church 1; Lancaster, 1964) 71.

[14]Nevin, *The Mystical Presence and Other Writings on the Eucharist* (Lancaster Series on the Mercersburg Theology 4; ed. Bard Thompson and George H. Bricker; Philadelphia and Boston: United Church Press, 1966) 201.

[15]On this, see William DiPuccio, *The Interior Sense of Scripture: The Sacred Hermeneutics of John W. Nevin* (Studies in American Biblical Hermeneutics 14; Macon, GA: Mercer University, 1998) 25-30, 180-83.

> which it is destined to have its end. The Church, through all ages, is the depository of these resources.[16]

Here the church carries the full dynamism of the new age, the apocalyptic life of the risen Christ. And this power is so great as to offer "full redemption," the only sufficient answer to cosmic suffering.

While throughout his writings Nevin quotes freely from the entire New Testament, Ephesians clearly plays a formative role in his ecclesiological thinking. During his Princeton days, Nevin briefly studied under Charles Hodge. Hodge was sufficiently impressed by Nevin's success in Hebrew that he recommended the student as his own substitute to teach courses in biblical studies during a two-year travel leave.[17] Hodge also became one of Nevin's chief rivals, to the degree that in 1857 Nevin published a ninety-two-page critique of Hodge's commentary on Ephesians in two parts.[18] Importantly and rightly, Nevin begins with a hermeneutical claim. He maintains that theology does and should guide interpretation, thereby dismissing the notion of objective exegesis. Nevin's assessment of Hodge, then, rarely engages exegetical specifics; rather, it emphasizes how particular theologies nourish specific exegetical effects. Nevin argues that Hodge's theology prevents an accurate reading of the epistle.[19] Thus, Nevin chooses Ephesians as the setting for a larger doctrinal debate concerning election and the church. At the same time, Nevin reveals the prominent role Ephesians plays in his own theology in general and his ecclesiology in particular:

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[16]"The Church," 59.

[17]The relationship between Nevin and Hodge was pointed out to me by John Payne, who also pointed me to Nevin's review of Hodge's commentary on Ephesians. Cf. James Hastings Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology: Nevin and Schaff at Mercersburg* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961) 16-17.

[18]"Hodge on the Ephesians," *MR* 9 (1857) 46-83, 192-245; Hodge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1856).

[19]Nevin's praise of Hodge, which he also shares in his autobiographical writing (*My Own Life*, 20), is clearly subordinated to his scathing rejection of Hodge's theology and his repeated accusation of Hodge for faulty reasoning at particular points.

> The Epistle to the Ephesians is of cardinal authority, in particular for the doctrine of the Church; and it forms in such view the key, we may say, for the right understanding of all of St. Paul's epistles generally, which must serve of course also at the same time, to open the true sense of all the other Epistles of the New Testament.[20]

Also,

> St. Paul's Epistles all . . . take for granted everywhere the existence of a most real distinction between those whom they address as saints and the world in its general and natural character. Let any one consider in this view particularly the Epistle to the Ephesians.[21]

Both Hodge and Nevin were aware of challenges to Paul's authorship of Ephesians. Hodge discusses the problem explicitly, showing familiarity with both the Tübingen School and with other contemporary developments in biblical scholarship. To my knowledge Nevin does not discuss the question directly, though as a reader of Hodge's commentary and German theology, almost certainly he would have known the issues involved.

What does Nevin see in Ephesians? The critical issue is election and its implications for church and world. In his review Nevin asserts:

> . . . the Church is regarded by St. Paul as a real constitution, of supernatural origin and force, existing in the world under an outward historical form, and comprehending in it the opportunity and possibility of salvation as they are to be found nowhere else. It finds its symbol or type in the Ark, which served in the days of Noah to save those who sought refuge in it from the waters of the deluge.[22]

Indeed, the church becomes for Nevin "the necessary medium of salvation" for humankind.[23] It has "an objective organic life," which is

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[20]"Hodge on the Ephesians," 46.

[21]Ibid., 54.

[22]Ibid., 207.

[23]Ibid., 210.

rooted in the person of Christ.[24] Perhaps most strikingly, in another context Nevin cites Eph 5:30 ("We are members of his body, of his flesh and of his bones") in asserting that the church participates in the embodiment of Christ himself through the Eucharist.[25]

Ephesians plays a foundational role in the articulation of Nevin's ecclesiology. First, he takes the epistle to represent the most articulate expression of Paul's gospel. Second, Ephesians reveals the church's objective unity, which precedes, transcends, and defines individuals and sects. And third, Ephesians reveals the organic unity of Christ with/and the church and their oneness in the economy of salvation. Ephesians, according to Nevin, presents the church as a sufficient response to cosmic disorder.

Nevin's Hermeneutics: Incarnation and Mystical Presence

Some have praised Nevin for his hermeneutical prescience. In particular, he is credited for recognizing the limitations inherent in an exegesis that aspires to some sort of grammatical and historical objectivity, and for acknowledging the inevitable and constructive role that presuppositions play in interpretation. Thus, Nevin's hermeneutics is characterized as almost postmodern, or at least postcritical.[26]

I find this picture of Nevin compelling. For by his own account Nevin moved beyond a purely grammatical and historical exegesis to a more "spiritual" one. And while that "mystical" hermeneutic may sound suspiciously self-serving in that it does not account for the question of social location that is so prominent in cultural theory and biblical interpretation today, Nevin is at least honest in appraising what he is about. In fairness, no one could accuse Nevin of being removed from the social arena of his day, though by some accounts (including possibly his own) his anti-slavery activism declined markedly after his move to

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[24]Ibid., 211.

[25]"Early Christianity," in *Catholic and Reformed: Selected Theological Writings of John Williamson Nevin* (ed. Charles Yrigoyen, Jr., and George H. Bricker; Pittsburgh Original Texts and Translations 3) 241. Compelling manuscript evidence shows that the phrase "of his flesh and of his bones" is a later interpolation.

[26]Cf. DiPuccio, *Interior Sense of Scripture*; and Wentz, *John Williamson Nevin.*

Mercersburg and closer to the Mason-Dixon line.[27] Nevin was most clear about the necessity that theology govern interpretation. As he wrote, "It may sound well, to talk of coming to the Scriptures without any theory or scheme; but there is not in fact, and cannot be, any such freedom from all prepossession."[28] Nevin rejects the "Puritan" view that the Bible alone governs the life of faith; this view, he says, subjects the "divine text" to "private judgment."[29] Instead, he insists upon the "rule of faith"—in particular, the Apostles' Creed, in which he holds great historical confidence, as a necessary criterion for interpretation.[30] For the Creed embodies the "clearest, most primitive, and most authoritative" expression of the "divine tradition."[31] While the church is to be ruled by the Bible, the Bible itself is ruled by the life of the church, as it is expressed in the Creed.[32]

Nevertheless, there are clearly some ways in which Nevin's hermeneutics are pre-critical by today's standards of interpretation. He assumes an organic wholeness to the New Testament that critical study has thoroughly undermined. Here is just one example of many that one could offer: "Behold a true figure of the Christian Church (1 Peter 3:21), as it appeared to the mind of St. Paul."[33] The twenty-first century New Testament instructor winces; this represents one of the fundamental interpretive errors we teach seminarians to avoid. How would one possibly assign the ecclesiology of 1 Peter to Paul, when 1 Peter most

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[27]James D. Bratt, "Nevin and the Antebellum Culture Wars," in *Reformed Confessionalism in Nineteenth-Century America: Essays on the Thought of John Williamson Nevin* (ed. Sam Hamstra, Jr., and Arie J. Griffioen; ATLA Monograph Series 38; Lanham, MD: The American Theological Library Association, 1995) 14. Nevin himself discusses the question in an ambiguous way (*My Own Life*, 89-95).

[28]"Hodge on the Ephesians," 48.

[29]"Early Christianity," 244.

[30]Ibid., 247-50. I must credit DiPuccio (*Interior Sense of Scripture*, 107) for calling my attention to this passage.

[31]"Theology within the Creed," in *The Mercersburg Theology* (ed. James Hastings Nichols; New York: Oxford University, 1966) 310.

[32]Ibid., 311-312.

[33]"Hodge on the Ephesians," 208.

likely post-dates Paul by decades and probably emerges from a very independent stream of early Christianity? By the standards of rhetorical and historical interpretation, this intertextual leap makes no sense. And yet Nevin undertakes such exegetical expeditions repeatedly.

Yet on another level Nevin's pre-critical hermeneutics do make sense. For whatever the New Testament's historically determined origins, Nevin receives it as an inheritance. It is, as he receives it, an organic whole. And its interpretation requires integration on the part of the reader. For Nevin, to identify a tension between, say, Paul and 1 Peter cannot be interpretation's *telos*. His Hegelian instincts are too strong for that. The reader, preacher, or theologian must bring Paul and Peter into conversation, even if the historical critic denies that the voices in question belong to the "real" Peter and Paul. And it is that larger impulse toward a constructive appropriation of Scripture that is the true mark of Nevin's hermeneutics. From our contemporary vantage point, whether or not Paul wrote Ephesians does not exhaust the epistle's relevance for salvation or ecclesiology. Rather, the reader hears Ephesians in the context of church and creed, and the epistle then emerges—with John's Gospel, to be sure, as *the* critical text for constructive ecclesiology.

To Nevin's credit, he did not regard understanding the biblical text *in se* as interpretation's proper *telos*. Rather, he insisted that while Scripture may have an outward "form" its "proper nature" resided in its "true soul." Thus, various Christian groups and individuals have developed conflicting theologies on the basis of the Bible's words ("outward forms").[34] But, "There must also be joined with such use of the sacred text always some insight (possible only for faith) into the actual substance with which the text is concerned."[35] For this reason, interpretation falls short unless it leads to the apprehension of Christ:

The supernatural *object*, which in its ultimate fullness is the Word Incarnate, Christ Himself, must itself shine into the eye of our spiritual intelligence; else all will be dark.[36]

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[34]*My Own Life*, 109.

[35]Ibid., 110.

[36]Ibid., 115.

This is a fully incarnational view of Scripture.[37] Christ is the true object of the Bible, and adequate interpretation requires both the sort of "external information" available through the methods and data of biblical scholarship and the "internal illumination" of "believing experience."[38]

Concluding Observations

Ephesians, along with Romans and 1 Corinthians, was among the most widely known and frequently cited of the "Pauline" letters in the postapostolic period.[39] It was also the key "Pauline" text for Nevin's ecclesiological reflections. Ironically, while Nevin was likely "wrong" in regarding Ephesians as representing Paul's authentic voice, his reasons for so believing were extremely insightful, even prescient. For in some important respects, Ephesians pulls together and develops authentic threads of Pauline theology, to such a remarkable degree that one might describe the Ephesian ecclesiological vision as "more Pauline than Paul." As Ernest Best has written, "While AE's [the author of Ephesians'] teaching on [the church] can be said to be in line with Paul's and not to depart from his major emphases but only to represent a development, yet there are considerable differences."[40] Ephesians goes beyond Paul by identifying the universal church with Christ's body, and then naming the church as the continuing incarnation of saving presence on earth. Thus, at the risk of anachronism, Nevin was profoundly "right" in being "wrong." Moreover, Nevin's own hermeneutics creates ample space for precisely this sort of irony: What matters to Nevin is neither the letter of

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[37]David Wayne Layman, "Nevin's Holistic Supernaturalism," in *Reformed Confessionalism in Nineteenth-Century America: Essays on the Thought of John Williamson Nevin* (ed. Sam Hamstra, Jr., and Arie J. Griffioen; ATLA Monograph Series 38; Lanham, MD: The American Theological Library Association, 1995) 204-05.

[38]Nevin, *My Own Life*, 131. I am especially grateful to Paul Schweitzer of the Mercersburg Society, who suggested that one might investigate the role of early Christian interpretation of Scripture in Nevin's hermeneutics. This is a worthy goal, which I do not at present have time to pursue.

[39]Harry Y. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Guides to Biblical Scholarship; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 40.

[40]*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998) 33.

the text, nor its historical origin, but its witness to a greater organic whole.

Now, with serious playfulness, I propose that we put Nevin's reading of Paul to the test. If we could interview Paul, we might ask him what he would think of Nevin's reading of his Ephesian self. I can imagine three particular topics of interest.

1. Is the church as Christ's body the incarnation of saving presence in the world? *Paul: I suppose so, but I haven't really thought about it that way. I have identified the church as Christ's body, but when I did so it was for the sake of the churches'* [plural!] *unity. The divisions among the Corinthians and the Romans were different, of course. The Corinthians had strong divisions in terms of status and party spirit, while for the Romans there were divisions between Gentile and Jewish believers as well as between social strata. However, if one takes seriously my metaphor, one might envision the church as Christ's body in an extended sense, for how else is the effective presence of Christ made known in the world? Perhaps it is my language of "in Christ" that comes closest to this vision, for that image invokes our common participation in the life of faith.*[41] *I am somewhat cautious on stretching this metaphor to the point of exclusion, though, as I received my own revelation apart from the church, and so have others. On the other hand, faith in Christ is lived out in the community of believers. This is an interesting question.*

2. Would you, with Nevin, define the church in terms of Creed, canon, and apostolic witness? *Paul: No, I wouldn't. During my ministry I could rely on no external authorities to persuade my audiences. There was no creed, of course, though we often appealed to traditions from Jesus and traditions that had become common among the churches. And we had no set Scripture. I frequently argued from the Law and the Prophets, but not all Jews shared these sacred texts. Thus, I could not assume that my congregations shared common understandings of Scripture. In fact, I relied not so much upon appeal to Scripture as I did upon the persuasiveness of my own interpretations of it. And finally, those "acknowledged leaders" added nothing to my own gospel* (cf. Gal 2:1-14). *While I affirm their witness to the risen Jesus, the church is built upon Jesus Christ and not upon any of his followers* (cf.1 Cor 3:11).

3. What, then, can we say about the church? Is the church's united gathering already objectively present in some sense, or is it a goal to be sought after? *Paul: Absolutely the church's unity is objectively grounded in its one foundation, Jesus Christ. The church bears the first fruits of God's new age. It has begun in the resurrection of Jesus, and it will be manifestly fulfilled upon Jesus' return. We are already one in Christ, whether it appears that way or not. Our unity does not depend upon our reconciliation or our obedience. Christ is present whenever the church gathers; indeed, the church exists only through Christ's prevenient presence.*

In conclusion, John Williamson Nevin was such a careful reader of Scripture that he appreciated Ephesians precisely as it was designed to be read. This irony is at once surprising and easily explained, for while it mattered a great deal to Nevin that he get Scripture "right," he also had every reason to read Ephesians as the high mark of Paul's theological reflection. In this sense Nevin's "Paul" goes beyond the apostle's own explicit horizons by drawing out some critical implications of Paul's own constructive insight.

[41] I am grateful to Scott Hengen for his suggestion along these lines. Note also Rom 12:5: "we . . . are one body in Christ."

The Mystical Presence As Revealed Through A Cloud of Witnesses

Allan Kramer-Moyer

Introduction

I want to express my gratitude for the opportunity to present this paper. As Geneva Butz mentioned yesterday when she acknowledged that she spent a few moments on the "Anxious Bench" as she prepared her paper, I, too, spent more than a few sleepless nights on the Anxious Bench preparing this paper. Overall, it has been a creative process and I am grateful for this opportunity.

First, I'm grateful to the Rev. Dr. Howard Paine for inviting me here today. Six months ago Dr. Paine called me and asked me to speak to this convocation. At that time Howard was the chair of the Board of Trustees at Phoebe Ministries. When the chair of your board calls you and asks you to do something, you think twice before you say "Yes" or "No." I asked Howard about the convocation and he explained the nature of the Mercersburg Convocation and that the theme for this year's convocation was "From Misery to Majesty: The Gospel's Response to Human Suffering." I thought about this for a time and replied that I had some thoughts about the gospel's response to human suffering, but I didn't have a good grasp of Mercersburg Theology. Howard replied, "Well, this will be a good opportunity for you to learn." He promised to provide a bibliography and tutor me in developing a remedial understanding of Mercersburg. He kept his promise. Here I stand.

In addition to learning about Mercersburg over the past few months, I also developed a deep appreciation for Howard Paine. As we discussed this topic, I learned that Howard Paine has a great love for the church, a comprehensive understanding of history, and he is a man of deep conviction. Thank you, Howard.

Secondly, I'm grateful to the Rev. Geneva Butz, D.D., for her presentation yesterday. I'm grateful for what I learned about Mercersburg Theology. I'm grateful for the format of her presentation: how she developed her understanding of Mercersburg Theology and

reflected on it in light of her experience with the Taize Community, her experience with Mother Theresa, and her experience at Old First Church in Philadelphia. I will use a similar format in reflecting on Mercersburg Theology in light of my experience as a chaplain at Phoebe Ministries. I'm also grateful to Geneva for discovering John Williamson Nevin's remarks at the first General Synod of the German Reformed Church in 1863 when he affirmed the church's responsibility to care for widows and orphans. This acknowledgement that widows and orphans are part of the body of Christ were the theological seeds which produced fruits such as Bethany Children's Home and Phoebe Home. Thank you Geneva.

Finally, I want to thank the members of the Mercersburg Society for offering these convocations. I've already met some inspiring individuals and re-connected with an important part of my theological heritage. Last evening I sat at table with Gabe Fackre and Sheldon Mackey and Deborah Rahn Clemens and heard stories about Reinhold Niebuhr, Triman Douglas, Jim Wagner, and learned things I never knew about the history of our church. And the communion service last evening was deeply moving. Thank you members of the Mercersburg Society. I'm grateful to be here today.

Let me remind you what I told Howard Paine when he invited me to prepare this paper: "I'm not a scholar. I'm not an academic. I'm a chaplain, a clinician, and a clinical pastoral educator. I do my theology in the context of a long-term care community." Phoebe Ministries includes four nursing homes, two assisted living communities, two retirement communities, eight affordable housing communities, and a variety of services for older persons. I do a lot of listening. I've learned to reflect theologically on my pastoral experiences. I've learned from the spiritual elders who live in our communities, and I've learned from the students I supervise in our Clinical Pastoral Education program at Phoebe.

My earliest encounter with Mercersburg theology was through the liturgy of the Evangelical and Reformed Church. I grew up in St. Paul's E & R Church in Pottstown, PA. I never formally learned about Mercersburg Theology until I went to seminary. Although we used the book, *My Confirmation*, Mercersburg isn't mentioned in this UCC confirmation book. My pastor, Peter Booke, was a graduate of Andover Newton Seminary and I doubt he ever heard of Mercersburg.

Nevertheless, I grew up with the E & R Hymnal. Even before I was confirmed, I heard these words each time our congregation celebrated Holy Communion:

> Dearly beloved in the Lord: Our Blessed Savior Jesus Christ instituted the Holy Communion of his Body and Blood, that it might be the abiding memorial of his atoning death; the seal of his perpetual presence in the Church through the Holy Spirit; the mystical representation of the sacrifice of himself on the cross; the pledge of his undying love for his people; and the bond of his living union and fellowship with them to the end of time. The celebration of the Lord's Supper has ever been regarded by the Church as the innermost sanctuary of the whole Christian worship. We have to do here not with signs merely, but with the realities which these signs represent.[1]

The faith of my earliest years was nurtured by the liturgical fruits of the Mercersburg Movement. Although my understanding of the Eucharist is very much influenced by this movement, I didn't know the origins of my beliefs at the time I was learning them. Like Geneva Butz, I learned Mercersburg Theology intuitively through the liturgy.

I attended Franklin and Marshall College, majored in religion with Dr. Charles Spotts and Professor Robert Mickey. But it wasn't until I was a student at Union Theological Seminary in New York City that I formally learned about Mercersburg. The Rev. Paul Sherry was an adjunct professor at Union at the time. He taught a course on the polity of the United Church of Christ to a group of three or four of us who were UCC students at Union. I remember learning about John Williamson Nevin's book, *The Anxious Bench*, how the Mercersburg theologians critiqued the revivalist practices of their day, and how they promoted the notion that the church is the body of Christ and as such is dynamic, organic, and ecumenical. That's about as much as I knew about Mercersburg when I was ordained 31 years ago.

Following my ordination, I pastored a church in the Pennsylvania Southeast Conference for seven years, before I was called to hospital chaplaincy and then certified as a CPE supervisor. I have served as a chaplain and CPE supervisor for the past 24 years.

A Method of Theological Reflection

One of my friends once observed that CPE supervisors think pain is more real than pleasure. In terms of our theme for today, I think she was suggesting that chaplains and CPE supervisors get stuck in the misery of the human situation and never get to the majesty of the risen Christ. I remember one CPE seminar in my early years when my peers suggested that I would rather wander around in the wilderness than arrive in the Promised Land. Indeed, one of my strongest beliefs is that we not offer premature grace when an individual is suffering spiritually. It's important to be present to suffering persons in such a way that they learn to experience God's grace in their own process of suffering. When I accepted this assignment, I began to ask what the Mercersburg theologians and the gospels have to say about moving us beyond the misery of our lives and into the majesty of the risen Christ.

During the past few months I've read *The Mystical Presence*,[2] *The Principle of Protestantism*,[3] *The Mercersburg Theology*,[4] and several articles in *The New Mercersburg Review*. I was especially grateful for John Shetler's article "Entrance Into the Mercersburg Movement and Its Influence on Church Union,"[5] in which Dr. Shetler used a narrative approach to describe his entrance into the Mercersburg Movement. I was also appreciative of William DiPuccio's article, "Mercersburg and Contemporary Thought: The Incarnation as Meta-Narrative."[6] Both of these articles, along with Nevin's own autobiographical writing,[7] supported my own narrative approach.

As I read and studied these sources, I began to develop a deeper understanding of the significance of the Mercersburg Movement. Nevin described the significance of Mercersburg when he wrote:

> In the first place, it is Christological, or more perhaps, Christocentric; in the second place, it moves in the bosom of the Apostles' Creed; in the third place, it is objective and historical, involving thus the idea of the Church as a perennial article of faith. . . . A theology which is truly Christocentric must follow the creed, must be objective, must be churchly; and with this again, must be sacramental and liturgical.[8]

From my reading and reflecting, I concluded that there are at least three major components of Mercersburg Theology:

1. Our faith is Christocentric.
2. Our faith is churchly and historical.
3. Our faith is sacramental and liturgical.

As I read and reflected on these three theological components, several clinical experiences came to mind. Each of these clinical experiences helped me understand how the gospel can serve as a resource in responding to human suffering. As I reflected on these experiences in light of these three theological components of the Mercersburg Movement, I developed a deeper understanding of my experiences, of the gospel, of the nature of suffering, and of Mercersburg Theology. At this time, I would like to reflect on my clinical experiences in light of these three theological concepts.

A Christocentric Faith

First, the Mercersburg theologians were Christocentric. Throughout his career as a theologian, Nevin wrote about the mystical union between Christ and each true believer.

> The Christian has his life from Christ. He is not only placed in a new relation to the law by the imputation of the Saviour's[sic] righteousness . . . but a new nature is imparted to him. . . . In his regeneration, he is inwardly united to Christ . . . A divine seed is implanted in him, the germ of a new existence, which is destined gradually to grow and gather strength, till the whole man shall be at last fully transformed into its image. The new nature thus introduced is the nature of Christ, and it continues to be his nature through the whole course of its development, onward to the last day.[9]

Nevin develops this very Pauline notion that we do not live unto ourselves, but it is Christ who lives in us.[10] As such, we participate in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In this way, our suffering is given meaning. As Christians, we suffer not alone; for we are part of the body of Christ. We are members of Christ's body, the church; our suffering is given meaning as we, through Christ, are raised again from the dead. We are saved in the church—the mystical body of Christ. Just as Christ's resurrection from the dead transformed his suffering from misery to majesty, so our suffering is transformed through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our old self has passed away and we are transformed into a new creation.[11]

Nevin's concept of the mystical presence of Jesus Christ reminded me of a clinical experience that I had 30 years ago when I was pastor of St. Paul's UCC in Birdsboro, PA. One of my predecessors at St. Paul's was the Rev. Ralph Folk. Rev. Folk graduated from Lancaster Theological Seminary in 1928, and served the Birdsboro church for several years in the 1940s and 50s. Ralph Folk was dearly loved by the members of St. Paul's.

In the mid 1970s Ralph's wife, Florence, died of cancer. I remember visiting with Ralph in the coffee shop at St. Joseph's Hospital in Reading. We were sitting at the counter, sharing a cup of coffee, and sharing his grief as his wife was dying. He looked at me and said, "You know Allan, when I was a young pastor like you, I used to preach about growing old gracefully. Don't you ever preach about growing old gracefully. There is no way to grow old gracefully." I was deeply moved by that encounter and I never have preached about growing old gracefully. Ralph's wife died shortly after that encounter.

The members of St. Paul's decided that they wanted to purchase pew Bibles and dedicate them in memory of Mrs. Folk. It took us about six months to purchase these Bibles, and by the time we were ready to dedicate them, Ralph himself was in a nursing home, dying of throat cancer. I went to visit him the Saturday before we were to dedicate the Bibles. I told him that we had purchased these Bibles and that we were going to dedicate them in memory of Florence. He was, as always, very gracious and appreciative. Because of his throat cancer, he could hardly speak. After expressing his gratitude, he spoke to me in a whisper, "Allan, I guess my days of ministry are over."

I answered, "Ralph, there were times when even our Lord found that the only way he could minister was through his suffering. I think you're still ministering to us even through your suffering." When I finished speaking, tears filled Ralph's and my eyes. In that moment I experienced a presence that was more than Ralph Folk or Allan Moyer. I experienced the presence of the risen Christ in that pastoral encounter.

Jeffrey Roth has written, in a footnote to his article, "The Real Presence and Its Implications for Ministry and Discipleship:"

> I personally find that the times in people's lives when they are most open to a word about the life-giving power of the risen Lord is in the midst of grief, or in times of crisis. It is at such times that ordinary time is interrupted and the *mystical presence* of Christ can be communicated in real ways.[12]

That day I went to visit Ralph Folk, I went hoping that I might speak to him a word about the life-giving power of the risen Lord. But in the process of sharing his suffering with him, I heard spoken to me a word about the power of the risen Lord. In that pastoral encounter I experienced something of the mystical presence of Christ which Nevin wrote about.

My encounter with Ralph Folk that day changed my whole understanding of pastoral ministry. As a young pastor, I had studied Matthew 25:31-46 and I believed that we Christians are called to visit the sick, feed the hungry, and care for outcasts. I believed that it's our moral imperative to do these things. I believed that Matthew 25:31-46 taught us that its our duty and responsibility to feed the hungry and visit those who are in prison. But my experience of the risen Christ at the nursing home that day as I was visiting with Ralph Folk taught me a new understanding of pastoral ministry. Pastoral visitation is not a responsibility or duty or moral imperative. It is a spiritual opportunity. For it is in visiting the sick and shut in and outcast persons of this world that we most often encounter the risen Christ in our lives.

Each time I go to visit a new admission to one of our Phoebe communities, I go expecting to meet the risen Christ. Each time I make a follow up visit to a resident who is hurting or dying, I go expecting to meet the risen Christ. Each time I go to visit with the residents on our Alzheimer's units, I go expecting to meet the risen Christ. This is how the mystical presence of Jesus Christ has and continues to shape my pastoral ministry.

This reminds me of an insight I received during our discussion yesterday when someone asked Geneva Butz if Old First Church had a "moralistic" or "Eucharist" understanding if its ministry to homeless persons in Philadelphia. As Geneva said yesterday, we minister not because we should, but to discover more of who we are. We are all members of the body of Christ, middle class, homeless, wealthy, and frail elderly.

Serving one another becomes an opportunity for all of us to discover more of who we are and to encounter the risen Christ in our midst.

A Churchly and Historical Faith

The Mercersburg theologians believed that faith is dynamic, organic, and historical. Over against the revivalist sects of their day, they declared that faith is not a static reality that comes to us in a moment of revelation or conversion. Rather, faith is a dynamic way of being which is planted in us like a seed through the mystical presence of Jesus Christ, is nurtured in us by the catechisms, creeds, and liturgies of the church, and grows to fruition through our life and service in the church. Philip Schaff describes how the church nurtures individual believers.

> Next to the word of God which stands in unapproachable majesty, far above all human creeds and confessions, fathers and reformers, popes and councils, there are no religious books of greater practical importance than catechisms, hymnbooks, and liturgies. They shape the moral and religious sentiments in early youth; they feed the devotions of old age; they are the faithful companions of the most solemn hours in the House of God, around the family altar, and in the silent closet; they give utterance to the deepest emotions, the purest thoughts, the highest aspirations; they urge to duty and every good work; they comfort affliction, and point to heaven at the approach of death.[13]

Nevin describes this development of our faith as "beginning at regeneration and ending in the resurrection."[14] Faith grows in us like leaven, gradually and progressively, until in the end, we are united in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.[15]"

Our spiritual development does not happen individualistically. The Mercersburg theologians are clear and emphatic that we are nurtured in the life of the church.

> He [the individual] is saved in the church—the mystical body of Christ—and can become complete only as the whole is made complete of which he is a part. His resurrection accordingly, the last result of the organific[sic] power of his new nature, will be reached only in connection with the consummation of the life of

> the church as a whole, when, in the fullest and most glorious sense, old things shall have passed away and all things become new.[16]

As I reflected on this understanding of how our faith is nurtured through the church, I began to think of one of our residents who died recently at Phoebe Home.

Anna Mohr was born in Easton, PA, in 1910. When she was 12 years old, her father took her to a program sponsored by the Knights of Pythias in Easton. There she met a man who introduced himself and asked her if she attended a Sunday School. He then told her about St. Mark's Reformed Church in Easton, reached into his pocket, and gave her two tickets to a ham and eggs dinner which was scheduled for the following Thursday evening. That Thursday Anna and her brother went to the ham and eggs dinner. As soon as she and her brother entered the church hall, the man came over to them and welcomed them. It turns out that this man was the pastor of St. Mark's Reformed Church. His name was the Rev. Allan Meck. Anna began to attend Sunday School and church regularly. She became active in the youth group, and was eventually married at St. Mark's. The Rev. Allan Meck performed the ceremony.

In 1933 Anna and her husband moved to Allentown. According to Anna, Rev. Meck eventually left St. Mark's in Easton and went to serve a church in York, and eventually became president of Lancaster Theological Seminary. He served as president of the seminary from 1947-1957.

It was sometime around 1948 when Anna saw an announcement in the newspaper that Dr. Meck was scheduled to speak at one of the Reformed Churches in Allentown. By that time Anna and her family were living in nearby Slatington. Anna took her son David, who was 12 years old at the time, with her to hear Dr. Meck speak. Following his presentation, Anna and David stayed in their seats while the rest of the congregation left the sanctuary. According to Anna, when Dr. Meck saw her, he ran to her and cried, "Anna, Anna, I'm so happy to see you."

She used to tell this story with such love and affection. "I loved this man," she would say, as she told the story. I used to invite her to meet all the CPE students at Phoebe Ministries and tell her story. At this point, she would always add, "Now note the significance of this: I was

12 years old when I met Dr. Meck and my son David was 12 years old when he met Dr. Meck."

On the return trip to Slatington, according to Anna, her son David said to her, "Mother, I want to be like this man. I want to be a minister." At this point, Anna would say, "Imagine, this man who so influenced my life was now influencing my son." She would always be quick to add the disclaimer, "Of course, David might tell a different version of the story." Upon hearing this story, David did tell a different version. But that doesn't matter to me. What was so impressive about Anna's story was the way she told it. She was so sincere. She was so grateful to Allan Meck and his influence on her life. She was so appreciative of her faith and how the church nurtured her faith. She inspired all who heard her tell this tale. "But the story doesn't end here," she would always be quick to add.

David went on to attend Franklin and Marshall College and then Lancaster Theological Seminary. Dr. Meck was president of the seminary during David's years as a seminarian. David graduated in 1957. It was the year Allan Meck retired as president of the seminary. Dr. Meck's last official act as president of Lancaster Seminary was to give the benediction at David's seminary graduation. Following the ceremony, Anna went up to him and said, "You started it and now you finished it." Anna was so appreciative of Allan Meck's ministry as pastor and as president of Lancaster Theological Seminary.

She would always end her story by telling the CPE students, "When you get to my age (she died at the age of 92), you look back over your life and see how God has moved the pieces so that your life all fits together. You have to be as old as I am before you can look back and see God's hand in your life. And don't ever take anything for granted. Those two tickets to a ham and eggs dinner changed my whole life!"

Anna Mohr was reared and nurtured in the E & R Church. She learned the Heidelberg Catechism, sang the hymns and recited the liturgy of our faith. Anna's faith inspired many persons: her family, her son, all those with whom her son ministered during his 45 years of ministry, the residents at Phoebe Home where she spent the last years of her life, the 20 CPE students who heard her story and me.

Anna Mohr had a picture of Jesus in Gethsemane hanging on the wall of her apartment. She told me how she had discovered this picture at a yard

sale, how she had purchased it, how it had hung in her home for years, and how she had bought it to Phoebe when she moved from her home. She also told me how she used to sit and receive inspiration from this picture. During her later years, Anna suffered several significant losses, including the loss of her independence, the loss of her eyesight and the loss of her mobility. She struggled with God as she experienced each loss. She said that this picture of Jesus in Gethsemane reminded her of the anguish Jesus experienced as he anticipated his own death. Through praying over this picture, she learned to say with Jesus, "Nevertheless, not my will; but thy will be done." Her faith was a great source of spiritual strength during the last years of her life.

I trust that Anna Mohr's faith is an example of the dynamic, organic, and historical faith described by the Mercersburg theologians. Certainly she was a woman of faith, who was nurtured in the church and who served the church through her prayers and inspirational stories. We continue to reap the fruits of the seeds sown in Mercersburg.

A Sacramental and Liturgical Faith

The Mercersburg theologians developed their understanding of sacramental and liturgical faith in opposition to the non-liturgical practices of the revivalist sects of the 18th and 19th centuries. These revivalist notions eventually began eroding the liturgical practices of the Reformed churches, erupting in a liturgical controversy which threatened the very unity of the German Reformed Church. In response to this controversy Philip Schaff, John Nevin, and five other clergy were appointed to draft a new liturgy which led to the Provisional Liturgy of 1857. This liturgy became one of the hallmarks of Mercersburg Theology.[17] Nevin described the sacramental and liturgical nature of Mercersburg thought when he wrote:

> [The] sacraments cannot possibly be regarded as outward signs only of what they represent. They become, for faith, seals also of the actual realities themselves which they exhibit. . . . In the end, also unquestionably, the sacramental feeling here cannot fail to show itself a liturgical feeling.[18]

The heart of Mercersburg liturgy was the Eucharist. Nevin's, *The Mystical Presence*, asserted strongly that the risen Christ is mystically and truly present in the sacrament of Holy Communion. Nevin described this mystical union as follows:

> It is real and close as the union which binds the branches to the trunk of the vine . . . This is indeed figurative language, but if it have any meaning at all, it teaches that the union of the believer with Christ is not simply moral, the harmony of purpose, thought, and feeling, but substantial and real, involving oneness of nature. "We are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones" (Ephesians 5:30).[19]

Here Nevin asserts Calvin's notion of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist over against Zwingli's notion of the Eucharist as a memorial meal. In this sense, the body and blood of Christ become agents of God's grace in and of themselves, apart from human understanding or merit.

This understanding of the Eucharist allows me to raise an issue which is important in the clinical setting of a nursing home, and that is the issue of celebrating Holy Communion with persons suffering from dementia. Some of my colleagues have challenged our practice of serving Holy Communion to residents suffering from dementia on the basis that such individuals are already in a state of grace and therefore have no need of salvation through the Sacrament. This approach is not only insensitive to these individuals and their families, it is theologically incorrect.

If we accept the Mercersburg view of the Eucharist which asserts the mystical presence of the Risen Christ, then we are obliged to include persons with dementia as members of the body of Christ who are mystically united with Christ regardless of their ability to understand or articulate this mystery. It is proper, it is right, and it is theologically correct to celebrate Eucharist with individuals suffering with dementia.

I could go on at length to describe many different stories about celebrating Holy Communion on our dementia units at Phoebe Ministries. Persons who have no idea who they are, where they are, or what day it is, listen attentively to the liturgy, sing passionately the old, old hymns, and receive graciously the consecrated body and blood of Jesus Christ. These persons are again living reminders that it is through the least of our brothers and sisters that the risen Christ comes to us and speaks most clearly. They remind me again and again that the presence of the risen Christ truly is a mystery.

These clinical experiences describe some of the fruits of the Mercersburg Movement. Our theological ancestors such as Rauch, Nevin, Schaff and

Harbaugh, sowed the seeds which germinated and matured through the faith of the pastors and parishioners of the German Reformed Church, many of whom have gone on to join the cloud of witnesses looking down upon us from the heavenly world. Through their lives and their faith we continue to learn how the mystical presence of Jesus Christ transforms the misery of our human situation in the majesty of the Risen Christ.

Conclusion

Elie Wiesel has written, "When a Jew is asked a difficult question; and there is no good answer, he at least has a story to tell."[20] So when a Jew is asked, "Why does God allow us to suffer?" and he has no good answer, he at least has a story to tell: the Passover story, the story of how God delivered the Hebrew people from their bondage in Egypt and brought them to the promised land.

In a similar manner, we Christians might say, "When a Christian is asked a difficult question and there is no good answer, we at least have a story to tell." When we are asked, why does God allow us to suffer? we may have no good answer, but we at least have a story to tell: the Easter story; the story of how the word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and glory; the story of how the flesh died and was raised up on the third day that we might have life and have it abundantly.

This is the story we tell. It's an incarnational story, an Easter story, the ongoing story of Jesus and his love. It's the story revealed to us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It's the story told in the articles of the Heidelberg Catechism. It's the story that inspired the Mercersburg theologians. It's the story that inspired Henry Harbaugh when he wrote:

> Jesus I live to thee, the loveliest and best;
> My life in thee; Thy life in me; In thy blest love I rest.

This is the story that inspired Ralph Folk and Anna Mohr to find hope in the midst of suffering, and to find meaning in their later years. How does the gospel respond to human suffering? I don't know. But somehow and in some way, when we tell the story of our suffering and pain in the context of the gospel story, that suffering and pain is transformed. Our misery becomes mystery; and somewhere in the mystery God's presence becomes real. The mystical presence of The Risen Christ appears. And that's a majestic experience!

1. "Order for Holy Communion," in *The Hymnal* (St. Louis: Eden Publishing House, 1941), p. 21.
2. John W. Nevin, *The Mystical Presence and Other Writings on the Eucharist*, Bard Thompson and George H. Bricker, eds., Lancaster Series on the Mercersburg Theology (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1966).
3. Philip Schaff, *The Principle of Protestantism*, ed. Bard Thompson and George H. Bricker, Lancaster Series on the Mercersburg Theology (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1964).
4. James Hastings Nichols, ed., *The Mercersburg Theology*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966).
5. John Shetler, "Entrance into the Mercersburg Movement and Its Influence on Church Union," *The New Mercersburg Review*, No. 13, Spring 1993, pp. 18-31.
6. William De Puccio, "Mercersburg and Contemporary Thought: The Incarnation as Meta-Narrative," *The New Mercersburg Review*, No. 20, Autumn 1996, pp. 29-52.
7. John W. Nevin, *My Own Life: The Early Years*, (1870; rpt. Lancaster, 1964).
8. John W. Nevin, "The Theology of the New Liturgy," *The Mercersburg Review*, XIV (1867) as quoted in *The Mercersburg Theology*, ed. Nichols, p. 16.
9. Nevin, "Catholic Unity," *The Mercersburg Theology*, pp. 37-38.
10. Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, p. 233.
11. Nevin, "Introduction," *The Principle of Protestantism*, p. 51.
12. Jeffrey Roth, "The Real Presence and Its Implications for ministry and Discipleship," *The New Mercersburg Review*, No. 25, Spring 1999, p. 45.
13. Philip Schaff, "The New Liturgy," in *The Mercersburg Review*, X, April 1858, p. 203.
14. John W. Nevin, "Introduction" in *The Principle of Protestantism*, p. 50.

15. Romans 6:5

16. Nevin, "Introduction" in *The Principle of Protestantism*, p 51.

17. Theodore L. Trost, Jr., "The Sacrament in The Mercersburg Theology," *The New Mercersburg Review*, No. 25, Spring 1999, pp. 57-73.

18. Nevin, "The Theology of the New Liturgy," p. 16.

19. Nevin, "Catholic Unity," in Nichols, p. 38

20. Elie Wiesel, *Somewhere A Master* (New York: Summit Books, 1982), p. 11.

Servants of Christ and Stewards of God's Mysteries: A Sermon

F. Russell Mitman

"Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries." (I Corinthians. 4:1)

"Think of us in this way," Paul wrote of himself and his co-workers workers to the Church at Corinth, "Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries." "Servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries." That could be a mission statement for the Church and a description of the vocation of the Church's leaders, couldn't it?

Notice that I did not say, "job description." Jobs are what people do to earn money and for which businesses and governments hire employees. The vocation of Church leaders is a matter of being called, called as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries, and for neither of those is there a legal contract or a salary scale or a benefits package. "Think of us in this way," Paul wrote, and for Paul in the days before Christendom and for us in the days after Christendom, thinking about vocation meant and means thinking differently from how the prevailing culture thought and thinks. Think of [our vocation] in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries, literally in Paul's Greek, "as oarsmen of Christ and householders of God's mysteries." Perhaps I should be more inclusive in the translation and say, "oars-persons of Christ."

The word comes from the Greek word to "row," as, yes, in "row, row, row your boat." Sculling is an ivy-league, collegiate sport where I come from, and sculling conjures up images in my mind of a row of rather muscular souls seated one behind another in a pencil-thin craft all rowing in tandem to the rhythmic stroke set by the coxswain sitting in the stern. The goal of those oars-persons is to row faster than the competitors in a similar craft and to win the race.

However, such a sport is not the right image for Paul's description of the Christian vocation. Maybe the better image is of a work-boat, perhaps a

lapstrake fishing boat, with but a few oar locks on each side where a few hardy souls strain for all their worth to keep the craft afloat on a less than calm sea. Maybe that's not too farfetched an image for the Church, because for a longtime the Church was likened to a ship—not the kind of floating hotels with golf putting greens and rock-climbing walls that take paying passengers to exotic places with strange-sounding names. The Church is a much more fragile craft in our days, even an alien craft.

Standing in the bow is the captain, dressed not in a crisp white uniform with gold-braided epaulettes, but in the overalls of a gardener or the garment of one accustomed to walking along dusty roads when the day is far spent or in bloodstained operating-room greens-standing in the bow looking across the waves to a destination of which the rowers are always clueless. Sometimes the rowers don't even know he's there in the boat with them. And the one standing there in the boat, is not some jump-aboard pilot who's been called in to navigate a difficult course, not even someone asked aboard just for a Sunday outing on the water. No, the one standing in the bow is the One for us, with us, in us, Emmanuel. Christ, the incarnated One, in the Church and the Church is Christ's. The boat we row is Christ. Kind of a radical thought, isn't it? It also was to Reformed Zion when folks in Mercersburg began to talk that way a century and a half ago.

"Think of us in this way, as oarsmen and women of Christ . . . and householders of God's mysteries" (*oikonomoi*). We get the secular English word "economist" from *oikonomos*, and there is something more than coincidental in the languages. Stewarding God's mysteries as a precious and costly treasure needs sound managing as any householder would do to keep the family's heirlooms that have been entrusted to her keeping. Managing the mysteries is what ministry is all about, and the mystery managers are not just folks who wear funny clothes on Sundays. We know that. We believe that. We believe ministry is something all God's people are called to do, and the vocational agreement is signed, sealed and delivered in our baptism.

"Think of us in this way, as oarsmen and women of Christ and householders of God's mysteries." Think of us as managers of God's mysteries, people privileged to touch and handle things unseen, privileged not by birthright, but by baptismal adoption to manage holy treasures, heavenly signs and seals that immerse people into the very splendor of God; privileged to manage the means through which people

taste and see how good the Lord is; privileged to household all the riches of God's grace, not as some royal horde to be guarded under glass by uniformed and armed policemen, but an abundance to be shared with all who are hungry and thirsty for more than bread alone and more than money can buy.

Think of us as householders of God's mysteries, maybe even more humbly as housekeepers of God's mysteries, always ready to invite the curious, the hurting, the abandoned, the frightened, the estranged: "Come, for all things are ready." "Think of us in this way, as oarsmen and women of Christ and housekeepers of God's mysteries."

Yet, the housekeeping of these mysteries is more than sometimes in a sad state of disarray. The mega-church movement is self-righteously convinced that the only way to do church is *their* way and arrogantly tries to convert pastors and leaders of congregations in decline that the only way to change the course is to adopt these "new measures."

I attended a gathering recently, and the opening worship service was supposed to model what worship ought to be: perambulating preachers with hand-held microphones, snippets of scripture chosen to fit into the chosen theme, a quartet of singers repeating each one-line praise chorus at least 24 times, accompanied by a five-piece band amplified to decibels hazardous to one's hearing. (Why is it that volume seems to be the guarantor of the Spirit's presence, when "mystery" comes from the Greek word *muo*, which literally means "to shut the mouth?")

Revivalism's "new measurers" that prompted Nevin's, *The Anxious Bench*, have mutated electronically into today's evangelism techniques that are nothing more than manifestations of the same sectarianism of the 1840's, and have ignited again the worship wars being waged in the Church more than a century and a half later. I propose that seminarians and church leaders be offered a course in which the participants would read *The Anxious Bench* and some other writings of Nevin and Schaff alongside some of the books and articles produced by the devotees of the new measures in our own time. There would be some significant discoveries in that interplay, not only about worship expressions but also about theology and ecclesiology as well.

In my role as Conference Minister I have seen the devastations when well-meaning pastors and lay leaders have instituted the new measures only to find congregations divided and decimated. That's when I get

called in and pastors update their profiles! The issue, most times, is not one of worship styles but of competing theologies, one grounded in scripture and tradition, the other based on rationalism and the entertainment media. The United Church of Christ will not be saved by new measures! One astute pastor said recently to me, "The Church has to decide whether we are at table or on stage." "Think of us in this way, as oarsmen and women of Christ and housekeepers of God's mysteries."

And, what are the curious, the hurting, the abandoned, the frightened and the estranged looking for, hungering for, thirsting for, searching for? Not more entertainment. Neil Postman warned almost a quarter of a century ago that we are "Entertaining Ourselves to Death." That was in the days before the Internet and DVD! Ruth, our two children (now adults 28 and 31 years old) and I decided to go to New York City for a day just before Christmas. Ruth and I thought that we might take in the Christmas show at the Radio City Music Hall. Lucy and Kurt, however, decided they wanted to go to Ground Zero. This was but three months after September 11, and the dust and stench from the terrorists' attack on the World Trade Center still pervaded lower Manhattan. We walked as far as we were allowed to go. We were joined that morning by others: the curious, the hurting, the abandoned, the frightened and the estranged—drawn to that place by something unexplainable.

Manhattan is usually a noisy and raucous place, but at Ground Zero people were silent or spoke only in hushed voices. It was and still is a place to shut the mouth. God was and is there, despite the carnage, despite the holocaust, despite the rubble. God is there: *Musterion.*

That congregation of by-standers at Ground Zero was perhaps a microcosm of religious seekers in this new millennium, seekers seeking more than they were promised by rationalism and nationalism and consumerism and militarism and entertainment-ism. "Spirituality," it is called, and in every bookseller's emporium there are bookshelves stuffed full of self-help guides, and there are Internet hawkers peddling all sorts of spiritual new measures and self-ordained gurus proselytizing the shopping malls for teenage converts. Yet, so much of the offerings of things spiritual are based on that same marriage of rationalism and sectarianism that Nevin so rightly discerned 160 years ago and which the seekers now, just as in the days of nineteenth-century revivalism, find empty and unfulfilling. The epistemology of modem fundamentalism, ironically, is driven by the same rationalism it disclaims.

Nevin's prophetic voice in the spiritual and theological wilderness of the nineteenth century was recorded in his book *The Mystical Presence* in which he reaffirmed the classic, Reformed doctrine of the Eucharist shaped by the Reformation, particularly by John Calvin. Now, I know that's not news to most of us gathered here, nor is it news that *The Mystical Presence* was Nevin's attempt to get the Reformed Church to own its own theological heritage. I'm lecturing to the choir on this one! Yet, there is also a need for a homiletical reminder that *The Mystical Presence* was not just a scholarly polemic intended to elicit theological debate, which it did—but also a pastoral call to the Church to a spiritual rebirth through the life-giving presence of Christ in the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist. My teacher, advisor and mentor, James Hastings Nichols, rightly discerned that Mercersburg was in a real sense a Eucharistic revival. He said as much in 1961 in his book *Romanticism in American Theology*. It was a call to an *alternative* revival, a prophetic alternative to the rampant *Schwaermerei* of the nineteenth century that was threatening the mainline churches.

To the congregations of on-lookers after September 11, rationalistic explanations and sectarian answers will not do! They are looking for a presence, a spiritual presence, a mystical presence. They are not satisfied with us telling them "the old, old stories of Jesus and his love." Like those Greeks who came to Pastor Philip, they too want to *see* Jesus. Like Isaiah in the temple, they too want to listen to the angels singing; they too want to be touched by the cleansing coal; they too want to hear the voice of God. It's all about presence, the mystical presence that seekers are seeking.

Kirk Hadaway who is Minister for Research and Evaluation for the United Church of Christ in his studies of trends in mainline denominations several years ago discovered that while most mainline denominations were declining in membership, two were increasing—the Unitarian Universalists and the Episcopalians. The reason for growth in both has to do with the cultural quest for spirituality, namely in the UUA, through their appeal to New Age'rs and the Episcopal Church, through their liturgy and sacramental focus.

'Think of us. . . ." Think of us, the other mainliners, the UCC and other kindred folk, "think of us in this way, as oarsmen and women of Christ and housekeepers of God's mysteries." Think of us, *logizestho,* in Paul's

pen, "take an inventory" of us, "reason with" us, "reckon" us in this way, as oarsmen and women of Christ and housekeepers of God's mysteries.

There is another Eucharistic revival in the making, perhaps a larger *sacramental* revival that is pushing us beyond the strictures and definitions of sacraments of the sixteenth century to explore the mystical presence in other "sign-acts" of Christ's mystical presence, holy things that in the polemics of the Reformation the Church overlooked. God is calling ministers, lay and ordained, to row, row, row the church boat of Christ through some tough ecclesiastical and cultural times, calling us to housekeep, to steward God's mysteries for a world waiting for Christ's presence; a world waiting for the mystical presence; a world waiting to be touched and handled by things unseen, waiting, waiting, waiting for the meeting, waiting for the presence, waiting for the word, waiting for the invitation: "Come, for all things are ready!"

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