THE NEW MERCERSBURG REVIEW

Journal of the Mercersburg Society
Number XXXIII Autumn 2003

ISSN: 0895-7460

Biannual journal of the
MERCERSBURG SOCIETY

THE NEW MERCERSBURG REVIEW

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

If my calculations are correct you should receive this edition of *The New Mercersburg Review* a short time after the arrival of your Christmas gifts. I think the journal can be numbered among them! This year's convocation chose a theme most dear to Mercersburg (especially Nevin's) heart: The Heidelberg Catechism, calling it the "substance of the Church's faith," and found exceptional scholars worthy of this beloved confession.

Nevin hadn't been at the seminary long before he wrote a series of articles for the *Messenger* called "Essays On the Heidelberg Catechism" (December 9, 1840). As the new intellectual leader of the German Reformed Church, Nevin steeped himself in study of the Catechism with the effect that it undoubtedly reshaped his thinking. In practical terms, it became an antidote to the malaise perceived by many plaguing the denomination. He believed renewed exposure to the ancient symbol might revitalize the churches and aid him in the crucial fund-raising efforts required by the seminary. He considered it an infinitely superior remedy to the one being offered by revivalism.

However, five years before Nevin dove into the Catechism with his customary furry, Professor Rauch had raised the issue of the Catechism's position on the Lord's Supper in the *Messenger* ("German Characteristics," 1835). Indeed, before Nevin, ever the controversialist, raised an outcry for suggesting the mystical and Calvinistic (specifically anti-Zwinglian) character of the Catechism's teaching on Holy Communion, Rauch had received similar criticism with letters of complaint to the *Messenger* from the *Lutheran Observer*. So the matter of the Heidelberg Catechism is original to the Mercersburg movement, and represents one of the earliest (perhaps the earliest) of a long list of controversies.

The first article published in this issue is from a scholar in the Reformed Church in America, historically sometimes referred to as the Dutch Reformed Church, Daniel Meeter. His health-club analogy is precious. It aptly contrasts Heidelberg and Westminster, which is his chore, by suggesting that it's fair to characterize Westminster as seeing the church (expressly worship) as a gymnasium, where athletes (Christians) can find

the exercise equipment necessary to develop their muscles (faith). The verdict is so close to home you can see the porch. Writes Meeter,

> To introduce a definition [of worship] that is like Westminster is to condemn our congregations to the constant cycle of rationalism—revivalism—rationalism—revivalism, and the constant invention of substitute sacraments that finally do not satisfy.

Rather, with Mecersburg, Meeter would have us drink deep of the mystical presence. And although Mercersburg might have wanted more than a "meeting" (they might have preferred "uniting") with God in Jesus Christ, still Meeter's point is well taken—in miraculous epiphany we understand Calvin's sense of *sursum corda*; his insistence, in spite of the Reformation tension that sought to clarify to what extent the objects of worship including the liturgy could contain and dispense saving grace, that Reformed Christians remain unbending to the memorialist alternative which would have us merely remembering rather than meeting God in Christ.

The second paper is from the professor of theology at Lancaster Theological Seminary, Lee Barrett. Rarely do two papers compliment each other so well. Like Meeter, Barrett reminds us that the art of the Catechism lies beyond and perhaps above a systematic approach. Here we discover the appeal of the Catechism in a more existential style of theology, a style becoming more and more common in theology today. In this style, which is the style of the Catechism, believers are nurtured and edified by means of a shared experience in witness to the Faith.

Two scholars were asked by the Society to speak on the future of Mercersburg. Gabriel Fackre sees the Mercersburg Society's future as rooted in the past. His provocative and challenging paper calls for hindsight when plotting our course for the 21st century. In spite of the crooked halting of the ecumenical movement, Fackre believes that our lot is cast by virtue of the ecumenical thrust of the Mercersburg founders and their hopeful vision of the Church of St. John as the next significant development in church history. Of course, Fackre realizes what we're up against and yet he provides practical, achievable goals that we should consider. It would behoove us to take these goals seriously and debate them within our ranks. Fackre's love of Mercersburg, his churchly

wisdom and his considerable expertise in ecumenism must certainly hold sway for our members.

Peter Goguts considered the future of Mercersburg in terms of the all important issue of Table fellowship. The Table took on a remarkable breadth in Goguts' treatment, and in his portrayal of the Table's expansiveness we are provided the 'virtual' platform for Christian discipleship. Goguts challenges us to symbolically act out the Table's breadth through the uses we make of it, be it Table as desk, where theological reflection and study take place, along with catechetical instruction; be it Table as true table, where the meal is served at funerals, weddings and before meetings; or be it Table as metaphor for Christ's fellowship with and mission to the poor, broken and marginalized. Restoring or emphasizing the Table in both its symbolic, communal character and its utility might just be the way of the Mercersburg future.

Then there's a sermon by Barbara Kershner Daniel with these two challenging sentences: "The Heidelberg Catechism reminds me that the teaching ministry of the church cannot be separated from our worship life. They go hand in hand in the process of Christian formation." If for no other reason than to be connected to the Saints who have gone before us and who formed our faith, the Catechism provides a time-honored means to remain united and thus edified. Daniel implores us to heed the sound alternative to the trivial and unedifying, "Anxious-Bench" like tactics which seek to merely inspire us rather than edify us, and she warns us about the modern forms or methods which often depend on "fear and emotion" rather than a "faithful teaching ministry."

Finally we conclude with a review by former Society president Benjamin Griffin. Its timeliness becomes apparent after reading the paper by Fackre, where the book being reviewed is highly recommended.

HEIDELBERG AND WESTMINSTER: ESPECIALLY ON WORSHIP

Daniel Meeter

My topic today is "Heidelberg and Westminster, Especially on Worship." This is most unfair. It's like discussing the Red Sox and the Yankees from inside Fenway Park. If the Reformed movement is the Eastern Division of the American League, we know that our team has not been dominant. And yet I notice that the Presbyterians have added the Heidelberg to their constitutional Book of Confessions, and placed it before the Westminster Confession and the Shorter Catechism. Isn't that kind of like the Yankees stealing all their best pitchers from Boston? I have the impression that right now the Presbyterian leadership values the Heidelberg more than my own denomination's leadership, and I beg you to remember this if I sound overly negative about the inheritance of Westminster.

Thank you for the honor of speaking to you this afternoon. I consider the witness of the Mercersburg Society to be of critical importance. Your learning is churchly learning. You stand for that life-changing experience of reading *The Mystical Presence*. Thank you. At the Lord's Table I am a disciple of John W. Nevin. And in my study I am a disciple of Phillip Schaff. This lecture is from my study. You will quickly notice how *Schäfliche* my spirit is. I know that for many Mercersburgers there will always be an asterisk next to the name of Philip Schaff. How could he do the unthinkable of going over to Union Seminary, that Babylon of New Light Presbyterianism, the gothic tracery of which only disguises that its cornerstone is the Anxious Bench.

In many ways, Schaff is to Nevin as Melanchthon is to Luther, and Elisha to Elijah. (That's a very Schaff-type comment to make.) By nature I am a conciliator rather than a controversialist, a gatherer rather than a hunter. This is due, not only to a singular lack of courage on my part, but also to the peculiarities of my spiritual formation. I came to faith in the warm and happy nurture of a Dutch Reformed parsonage in Brooklyn, NY. My father loved the Heidelberg Catechism, and my parents sang the psalms. My father was the pastor of a black congregation in the ghetto of Bedford-Stuyvesant. It was founded as the German Evangelical Dutch

Reformed Church of New Brooklyn. Every Sunday four stained-glass faces looked down upon that congregation: the Lord Jesus, St. Paul, Martin Luther, and King Frederick of Prussia (they still do)! My parents sent us to a Missouri Synod Lutheran School, and I had to memorize Luther's Small Catechism. My parents saw no conflict at all in any of this. Today I am the pastor of a Dutch Reformed Church that practices weekly Eucharist, and which, during the nineteenth century, when Brooklyn was a citadel of aggressive Congregationalism and New Light Presbyterianism, quietly and steadfastly practiced a generous traditionalism. Can this redeem me among the *gnesio*-Nevinites?

Although the Heidelberg Catechism and the Westminster Shorter Catechism were written eighty enormous years apart, and for slightly different purposes, they deserve comparison because of their similar influence and ubiquity. They are the epitomes of the two divisions of the Reformed movement. By the nature of the case, I will stress the differences between them, but we do well to remember that many of our Reformed ancestors took them as harmonious.

First, a word about catechisms in general. The literary genre of the catechism predates the Reformation. In the 9th century already some German dioceses had primitive catechisms. The Waldensians and the Bohemian Brethren had in common a very interesting one. But the genre was invigorated by the Reformation, and the golden age of catechisms extended from 1529 to 1647, from Luther to Westminster. In this flourishing of catechisms the genre was developed and enriched. Even Rome and Constantinople produced their first authorized catechisms at this time. All these catechisms were written by the best and busiest theologians, who regarded this task among their prior obligations. One wonders why Moltmann and Pannenberg haven't published catechisms. What if Harvey Cox had dedicated two years of his life to this? People might still be reading him today. We must commend the Presbyterians for their recent efforts in this regard.

The genre is not a simple one—a number of interests are always to be served. There is the obvious interest of children, and the most basic instruction in the Christian faith. But there is also the interest of pastors and teachers. And it was for this reason that many catechisms were issued in pairs. Luther published a Small and a Long. Westminster published a Shorter and a Larger. The Heidelberg is not a children's catechism, it was designed for preachers and teachers. Churches that

used the Heidelberg also had specific children's catechisms, such as the one my father used in his ministry. But the remarkable thing about the Heidelberg is that it's the only one of the longer catechisms that has come to be loved by ordinary church members.

The genre often had also to deal with political interests. Both Heidelberg and Westminster first appeared as parts of larger legal documents. The Heidelberg was published within the Church Order of the Palatinate, which itself was part of the law of the land. The Westminster Standards were presented to Parliament as the official Advice of the Westminster Assembly. Parliament ratified the whole set of standards, but they could hardly take effect before the Restoration of Charles the Second. The standards did hold their legal force in Scotland, of course.

In this regard, the great difference between the Heidelberg and the Westminster is that the respective ruler was the patron of one and the enemy of the other. Elector Frederick, if not the father of the Heidelberg, was certainly its godfather, while King Charles Stuart bitterly opposed the whole Westminster project, and the Standards were written against the royal interests. The polemic purpose lies just beneath the surface of Westminster. It was meant to push things further along, and its system was conceived as an ideal. The Heidelberg was eminently practical, and it was intended to consolidate religion and to keep the peace. Furthermore, the Palatinate, unlike Great Britain, was a principality where the ordinary pastor knew somebody who knew the Elector. Let me frame the political dynamic in the words of a pastor colleague of mine, in a talk he gave ten years ago to some elders in Ontario:

> Now you know that the Heidelberg Catechism was part of the Palatinate Church Order of 1563, and that included rules for church government and administration, and worship too. Why did they do this? You to have to understand that the Reformation spread quickly in the universities, where they could all read Latin, and it spread quickly in the cities, where they could all read German, but when it got to the countryside, the people couldn't read, and it ground to a halt. And so in the Palatinate, as late as the 1560s, you had Ursinus in the university, and Olevianus in the city, but when you got out to the countryside you still had Father Schultz and Father Schmidt (*note: that probably should be Father Franz and Father Hans.)*. Now these were good men, but they weren't scholars. They were loyal enough to their prince, and they didn't mind doing what they were told to do. So the Heidelberg Catechism is basically a "How-to-be-a-Protestant-minister Kit" for Father Schultz and Father Schmidt. (Meeter, *Meeting Each Other*, 203:n.14)

You get the picture.

Let me compare the outlines of the two. The first answer of the Heidelberg is that beloved overture which establishes the key, sets the tone and opens all the themes. The second answer provides the outline; the triple knowledge of Guilt, Grace and Gratitude. There is movement implicit in this structure—from guilt through grace to gratitude—and this movement is built into many of the answers, with their threefold pattern of past, present and future, such as in answer 1: "he has fully paid and set me free / he watches and he assures / he makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him." The answers of the Heidelberg often tell a story, the whole thing's got a plot and that's part of its appeal.

The first answer of the Westminster is also justly famous, but for its precision and clarity. Its second answer does not provide the outline, however. It deals with the sufficiency of scripture. You might consider this a sidetrack, but think of the context. The enemy was not modernism nor liberalism, but the pretensions of the crown, the prerogatives of Canterbury and York, the preferments of the bishops in the House of Lords, and the ancient patterns of English common law. It was a strong statement to make, and we ought not underestimate its daring.

The third answer gives Westminster's outline, and it's a very simple one: first, what man is to believe concerning God, and second, what duty God requires of man. The first part, answers 4 through 38, takes us through the doctrine of God, the decrees, creation, providence, sin, election, Christology, redemption, effectual calling, justification, adoption and sanctification. The second part, answers 39 through 107, the duty which God requires, takes us through the Ten Commandments, faith, repentance, the word, the sacraments, prayer and the Lord's Prayer. The Apostles Creed is included only as an appendix. That section on the Ten Commandments takes up 41 answers, which is quite more than a third of the whole document, and this brings out the strongly ethical tone of the whole catechism.

I consider the Westminster Standards to deserve our honor and admiration. Philip Schaff's estimation of them in his *Creeds of*

Christendom is judicious and worthy of full acceptance. The first question of the Shorter Catechism is brilliant, and it is a question that people are asking every day. My wife has a book by Wendell Berry with the title, *What Are People For?* This is another way of asking, "What is the chief end of man?" The answer: people are for glorifying God and enjoying God forever. I use that answer all the time in my ministry, and it is better than the first answer in Calvin's catechism, "to know God," an answer that is open to New-Age Gnosticism. There is a transcendent vision to the Westminster Shorter that goes beyond the Heidelberg. And the Westminster system speaks beyond the church to human society as a whole.

And yet, while we admire the Westminster, it is not lovable in the way that we love the Heidelberg. This is more than just bias. I haven't seen Presbyterians love it in this way, even when they are passionately loyal to it. The best evidence is that you do not see answers from the Westminster Shorter on Presbyterian funeral bulletins, as you do among us with the Heidelberg. And I'm not just talking about Heidelberg answer 1. I have seen other answers used this way as well, including answer 54, on the Holy Catholic Church. What accounts for this difference in affection?

The reasons are many, and I may point you to the relevant chapters in volume one of *The Creeds of Christendom,* where Schaff is very good on all of this (Volume I:787). His trenchant observation is that the Westminster deals in dogmas rather than in facts. "It addresses the disciple as an interested outsider rather than as a church-member growing up in the nurture of the Lord." (This, by the way, is why it can speak to the seekers on my street.) "It substitutes a logical scheme for the historical order of the Apostles' Creed." This, I may say, is because the Westminster is the harvest of Calvinist scholasticism, while the Heidelberg was written at the seedtime. The Heidelberg takes the standpoint of the *"ich"*, it is an I-statement from one end to the other, while the Westminster was written in the third person. It's the difference between the tourist slogans of New York and New Jersey. Nobody remembers, "New Jersey and You: Perfect Together," but even in Michigan people sing, "I love New York."

The Heidelberg is historical, while the Westminster is philosophical. The Heidelberg is narrative while the Westminster is logical. The Heidelberg stresses the actions of God on our behalf, while the Westminster stresses the obligations of humanity towards God. The latter is about what we

should do, and the former is about what God has done, does now and will yet do. And this is why we love the Heidelberg more, because it's more about God and less about us. If we were designed to enjoy God, not ourselves, we'll like better a catechism that is more about God than about us. We love to tell this story, of Jesus and his love, and because we belong to this story, we feel that it belongs to us.

The scholastic character of the Westminster is most obvious in the emphasis it places on the two related doctrines of the "decrees" and "effectual calling," which terms are used throughout the document. God has decreed, before the foundation of the world, everything that will come to pass (*Westminster Shorter* 7 & 8). Some of these eternal decrees are for the salvation of the elect (*W.S.* 20). This is timeless and unchangeable. God brings these decrees to reality in the individual by means of effectual calling. Listen to 30 & 31:

> The Spirit applieth to us the redemption purchased by Christ by working faith in us, and thereby uniting us to Christ in our effectual calling. / Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel.

As I see it, this scheme of the decrees and effectual calling has two problems. The material problem is that salvation is removed from history and located in eternity, which is unreachable and unknowable. The formal problem is that Westminster, in a shorter catechism, raises to first importance a pair of theological terms that are derivative and extra-Biblical. You know what happens when your stock portfolio is based on derivatives.

The Heidelberg does not lack for human obligation. But its categories are Biblical and dynamic. Question and answer 88 is one of my favorites.

> Jn wieuiel stücken stehet die warhafftige buß oder bekerung des menschen? Jn zweyen stücken: Jn absterbung des alten vnd auffer-stehung des newen menschen. / In how many parts is the true repentance or conversion of man? In two parts: in the dying-off of the old man and the resurrection of the new (*Kirchenordnung Kurpfalz*, in Niesel, *Bekenntnisschriften,* 171; my translation).

Then answer 89 defines the dying-off of the old man and 90 defines the resurrection of the new. These three answers locate our human obligation in the death and resurrection of Christ. Answer 88 is thoroughly Lutheran. It goes back even to the Ninety-Five Theses, which state that the whole life of Christians is repentance. I submit that this sort of Lutheranism is not the result of some Melanchthonian political compromise in the Palatinate, but is actually the proper inheritance of original Calvinism at its evangelical heart.

Let me compare their ecclesiologies. Here is Heidelberg 54, in the newest translation:

> **What do you believe concerning the Holy Catholic Church?** I believe that the Son of God, by his Spirit and his Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life, and united in true faith. And of that community I am, and always will be, a living member.

Wonderful! Notice, first, the personal and experiential emphasis, even approaching the emotional. Notice, second, the threefold past-present-future pattern of "gathers, protects, and preserves." This is an example of what Schaff means by calling it historical. Third, the church is defined as an activity of the Son of God. It is within God's activity that we find ourselves and our identity.

The Westminster, by contrast, has no equivalent answer about the church. (Nevin would say, "I told you so.") Indeed, the only mention of the church that I can find is in the answer on the administration of baptism, number 95, where the word appears twice, but coupled with "visible" as in "visible church," and this, in scholastic Calvinism, is by definition a second-class church. Indeed, I think I can say that the Westminster lacks a positive ecclesiology. The community that it addresses is the whole Christian commonwealth of the British crown. You could almost say that its church is England and England is its church. This represents the full secularization of the church. This statement is not necessarily negative. In fact, it is a wonderful ideal and the vision of Revelation 21. It is a fully realized eschatology. It is the full Calvinist vision of the total reformation of Christendom. (One thinks of Bucer's *De Regno Christi*, a comprehensive plan for the total Reformation of England politically and economically no less than

theologically.) But what if God's economy is not there yet? Or, what if Christendom is over? We know from history that Heidelberg had an immediate appeal to the refugee and the persecuted congregations of the Dutch and the Hungarians. It can better survive the end of Christendom.

In the same way, the Westminster lacks a positive doctrine of worship. This is in spite of the fact that it is all about worship, from one end to the other. The whole life of Christians is worship, all day, every day, at work, at rest. Again, it is a great ideal, almost a heavenly one. But something so general is bound to be diffuse, and therefore weakened in reality. Worship is always assumed, but never defined, and this is a huge lack in a document that trades in precise definitions.

Neither does the Heidelberg offer a definition of worship as such. But one can easily deduce it. We find it question and answer 65, and this is the heart of my address today:

> Dieweil denn allein der glaub vns Christi vund aller seiner wolthaten theilhafftig macht woher kompt solcher glaube? Der heilig Geist würckt denselben in vnsern hertzen durch die predig des heiligen Euangelions vnd bestätiget den durch den brauch der heiligen Sacramenten. **Since then only faith makes us partakers of Christ and all his benefits, whence comes such faith?** The Holy Ghost fashions (works, creates) this faith in our hearts through the preaching of the holy gospel and strengthens it through the use of the holy sacraments (Niesel, *Bekenntnisschriften,* 164; my translation).

The point here is that the ordinary worship service is God's chosen workshop for creating and strengthening faith. God's activity in the worship service is paramount. God uses preaching and the sacraments for the creation and sustenance of faith. Preaching is the constant presentation and rehearsal of the gospel promises, which are the object of our faith. The sacraments point us to and sustain us in the passion of Christ, by which he won the benefits that the Holy Spirit applies to us. Worship is at the very center of God's saving work. You go to church to get saved.

Westminster does give the worship service a role in effectual calling. Answers 88 & 89:

> The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption are his ordinances, especially the Word,

> sacraments, and prayer, all of which are made effectual to the elect for salvation. / The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching, of the Word an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith unto salvation.

The difference is subtle but significant. First, the ordinances of worship are qualified as the outward means and are therefore relativized. Second, faith is presupposed in order for the believer to get the benefit of the ordinances, and not as being generated by the ordinances themselves. This is more apparent in answer 91:

> The sacraments become effectual means of salvation, not from any virtue in them, or in him that doth administer them, but only by the blessing of Christ, and the working of his Spirit in them that by faith receive them.

What does it mean that the sacraments have no virtue in them? They end up sort of like the modern exercise machines in the health clubs of my neighborhood. You can use them if you need to. The long-range effect of this is to remove worship from the table of Emmaus back into the Second Temple, which was empty of the presence of the glory-cloud.

If you combine such statements with answer 60, on the Sabbath Day, the picture is complete:

> The Sabbath is to be sanctified by a holy resting all that day, even from such worldly employments and recreations as are lawful on other days; and spending the whole time in the public and private exercises of God's worship, except so much as is to be taken up in the works of necessity and mercy.

Notice that phrase, "the public and private exercises of God's worship." Worship is a human exercise and it can be either public or private. It is no less in these private exercises that effectual calling can take place. This is a natural conclusion which can be drawn from the fact that after effectual calling is defined in answers 30 & 31, the subsequent answers treat it in a most general way, as something that God just freely and mysteriously does in us, without any reference to either the worship service or the church.

Let me restate my thesis. In the Heidelberg, the service of Word and sacrament is the essential means by which God makes faith in us. In the

Westminster Shorter, the worship service is an outward human exercise, the ordinances of which may by used by God, along with other things, for effectual calling, among those persons who have saving faith. Here *in vitro* is the difference between Mercersburg and Princeton, between Nevin and Hodge. And which of these is truer interpretation of Calvinism, its Lutheran core or its scholastic speculation? We know which way the energy was moving in the world.

Schaff regards both Heidelberg and Westminster as each reflecting the genius of their native nationalities. Maybe. Winston Churchill is supposed to have said of architecture, "We shape our buildings and then our buildings shape us." It is certain that these catechisms, once wrought, gave shape and formation to centuries of spiritual culture. Over time, in some places, their subtleties will have been magnified in effect, and in other places, they will have conditioned each other. I don't know to what proportion the Westminster has reflected or determined the kind of worship, which became typical of Calvinism, but we know what happened. And it happened even to the lovers of Heidelberg in spite of Heidelberg, because, in a real sense, Westminster was closer to where the mind of Europe was going.

Evidence for this in my own denomination is the loss of the Flood Prayer from the Liturgy for Baptism. As you know, this prayer was likely written by Martin Luther. Leo Jud, the successor of Zwingli, introduced a revision of the prayer to Zürich. It was taken into many subsequent church orders and liturgies, including the Palatinate Liturgy that accompanied the catechism. From here it passed into the Dutch Reformed Liturgy. In North America, beginning in the 1760's, the Flood Prayer began to be omitted by some preachers, and by 1815 it had been deleted from our official Liturgy altogether. And this happened without any approval or even notice of our synods. I don't think it's coincidental that this was the same era in which we were introducing English preaching by importing Presbyterian ministers. The Flood Prayer speaks strongly of baptism as foremost a miraculous activity of God. In the Netherlands it was a century later that the Flood Prayer was disused, and it is no surprise that Herman Kohlbrügge defended it, that champion of Heidelberg.

It is well known to you that American revivalism was born in backwoods Presbyterianism. The original camp meetings were held in Scotland. They were called "sacramental seasons." They were always tied to the

Lord's Supper. They were the preparation meetings, and they could sometimes last a week. The people had to get themselves ready for eating and drinking worthily, and they did this through many exercises of penitence and self-examination. The Supper was not taken lightly, and God's presence was not denied, but the sacrament was regarded first as duty and obedience, and one had to be converted first in order to profit from it. In 1801, at the Presbyterian Church of Cane Ridge, Kentucky, many thousands of Scotch-Irish believers had gathered for such a sacramental season, and it was here that the first revival broke out, with all the physical manifestations. In the words of Barton Stone himself, "Many things transpired there, which were so much like miracles . . ." (Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, p. 433).

I submit that what you have here is the result of a hunger for some experience of worship in which the action of God is paramount. When the sacraments are emptied of miracle, then people will come up with substitute sacraments that have miracle in them. If the worship service itself neither converts them nor makes faith in them, then they will get converted and get their faith outside of church. And eventually they will turn all their worship services into such exercises, once they have shaken off the firm authority of Westminster. Nevin was right to make the connection between Puritanism and revivalism. Horton Davies and Charles Hambrick-Stowe were right to have taught us to be fair to the Puritans themselves, but the issue we all face is the nature of God's activity in worship. Does God work saving miracles in church?

In 1986 my denomination added to its Constitution the following definition of worship: "Worship is the action of acknowledging God's worth" (*The Directory for Worship of the RCA, 1986).* This is a rather shallow exercise in etymology, but worse than that, it approaches worship as primarily human obligation. Yes, of course, when doing the scientific study of religion, we will have a phenomenological definition that will define worship as a human cultural activity. But a church's definition of worship must be theological, and a Reformed church's definition ought to harmonize with Heidelberg. To introduce a definition that is like Westminster is to condemn our congregations to the constant cycle of rationalism—revivalism—rationalism—revivalism, and the constant invention of substitute sacraments that finally do not satisfy.

Let me propose a definition which has arisen out of my own meditations on Heidelberg 32, 54, 65, 66, 67, and 88. Christian worship is when God

comes to have a meeting with us in Christ. I define liturgy as the form which the church has given to these meetings which God has with us. These meetings are business meetings, for God is busy with us, by means of Word and Sacrament, saving us, gathering us, and converting us into a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (I use the word "convert" according to Heidelberg 88.) In the very act of our embracing the work of God in us, we offer praise to God. There is a lot of unpacking I would love to do here, but I will leave that for another occasion.

The sacramental question was framed for Nevin as the question of the real presence of Christ. The corollary question is the real action of Christ. The presence and action of Christ in the sacraments and in the whole service is to be distinguished from the general presence and action of God in the world. There are sound biblical reasons to make this distinction, reasons which may be drawn from a new and better understanding of the covenants. The covenant theology we have inherited is the federal theology of Westminster, which doesn't hold up, and which, together with the decrees, suggests an incipient Unitarianism. We need to do better with covenant, and we need to do better with the Trinity as well. We need to move beyond Nevin to a more fully Trinitarian theology of the sacraments and of the church, especially with an enriched pneumatology, and there are signposts in the Heidelberg for this. For myself, I am working on a synthesis of covenant and Trinity according to the lines set out in the Gospel of John, chapters 13-17. Here the church is presented as the new temple, in which, especially in worship, the world is brought to the Trinity, and the Trinity is opened to the world. Does this interest anyone of you?

I close with Thanksgiving. The Lord's Supper is Eucharist. It is thanksgiving—we know that from our historical studies better than Nevin did. In the Palatinate Lord's Supper Form the prayer of consecration is not a proper Eucharistic prayer. But the note of thanksgiving is triumphant in the Supper by means of it ending on Psalm 103, "Bless the Lord, O my soul." This is what I grew up with—we end communion by blessing God. I think the worship service is always supposed to rise to thanksgiving, even when you don't have communion. The worship service stages the same drama liturgically that the Heidelberg does catechetically, from Guilt, to Grace, to Gratitude. The kind of praise here is not just a general praise, as in Westminster, but the particular sort of praise which is thanksgiving. In a real sense, therefore,

the Heidelberg is a Eucharistic catechism. If the Heidelberg is not as transcendent as Westminster in its vision for humanity, it is deeper in its feeling for the heart of God. The Book of Revelation tells us that the saints in heaven will be singing the Song of Moses and the Lamb. These are Eucharistic songs, songs of thanksgiving for rescue and reconciliation. So then, what are people for? To glorify God and enjoy God forever, yes, but what this will look like is a great feast of thanksgiving.

WORKS CITED

For the Heidelberg Catechism:

Wilhelm Niesel, ed. *Kirchenordnung der Kurpfalz.* 1563. In *Bekenntnisschriften und Kirchenordungen der nach Gottes Wort refom ierten Kirche.* 3rd ed. Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1938.

Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions. Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1988.

For the Westminster Shorter Catechism:

The Confession of Faith; the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, etc. Edinburgh: Johnstone, Hunter, & Co., 1876.

For both Catechisms:

The Constitution of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, Part I, Book of Confessions. 2nd edition, 1970. New York: Office of the General Assembly, 1970.

Secondary sources:

Ahlstrom, Sydney E. *A Religious History of the American People.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972.

Honders, A. C. "Remarks on the Postcommunio in Some Reformed Liturgies." In *The Sacrifice of Praise: Studies on the Themes of Thanksgiving and Redemption in the Central Prayers of the Eucharistic and Baptismal Liturgies; In Honour of Arthur Hubert Couratin.* Edited by Bryan D. Spinks. Bibliotheca "Ephemerides Liturgicae," 19. Rome: Edizioni Liturgiche, 1981.

Meeter, Daniel James. *Meeting Each Other in Doctrine, Liturgy and Government: The Bicentennial Celebration of the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America.* Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, 24. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993.

The Directory for Worship, in *Worship the Lord.* Edited by James R. Esther and Donald J. Bruggink. Grand Rapids: The Reformed Church in America and Eerdmans, 1987.

Schaff, Philip. *The Creeds of Christendom.* 3 Volumes. Revised by David S. Schaff. Harper and Row, 1931. Reprint. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983.

A MATTER OF PASSION: THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM'S UNIQUE THEOLOGICAL METHOD

Lee Barrett

I have a rather sad history of giving unpopular addresses, like the time I read a paper entitled "Why the Constantinian Revolution Was a Good Thing" to a group of Mennonites, or the time I spoke on "The Pitfalls of Pietism" to The John Wesley Society. So, tired of public abuse and ridicule, I have turned over a new leaf. With the Mercersburg Society I am going to advance what I hope will be a perfectly non-controversial thesis: John Nevin was right about the Heidelberg Catechism.

I advance this claim in all seriousness. In a series of essays that appeared in *The Weekly Messenger* from 1841-42, Nevin recognized that there is something quite remarkable about the Catechism.[1]

For Nevin, it is extraordinary not only or even primarily in what it teaches, but rather in the way it teaches. It is not just the content of the theology that accounts for its perennial power, but also the style of the theology. In his enthusiasm for this feature of the Catechism, Nevin waxes embarrassingly poetic, in fact positively purple. The Catechism is more than mere doctrine; it is the expression of a form of life. Using vitalistic categories, he rhapsodizes that it is the spiritual life of a people incarnated in print. Heidelberg is intended for the heart fully as much as for the head. Nevin contrasts its passion-laden character to more pedestrian theologies that are carried out theoretically, addressed exclusively to the "understanding," and that are fraught with excursions into metaphysics. For Nevin, historic Calvinism with its knotty points is a particularly pernicious example of theology's metaphysical derailment. But Heidelberg avoids this temptation. Nevin points out, accurately, that the Catechism does not even attempt to explain the origin of sin. In regard to the relation of grace and human responsibility, it rejects fatalism on the one hand and Pelagianism on the other, without showing how a third option is conceptually viable. This is as it should be, according to Nevin. Heidelberg appropriately leaves the understanding to get along with its own embarrassment. There is no disturbing supralapsarianism, no theory that God ordained some folks to salvation and some to damnation even before God had ordained the Fall; in fact,

there is no theory of the order of God's decrees at all, an issue that had plagued metaphysical Calvinism. To Nevin's delight, there is no theory of the relationship of Divine sovereignty and human freedom. He also exults that the Catechism does not really say whether grace is irresistible or not. It talks movingly about God's will governing all things, but then it turns right around and exhorts Christians to act responsibly. Nevin concludes that, like the Bible, the Catechism seems to present views that appear to our feeble understanding to be in conflict. That apparent flaw is actually its salient virtue, according to Nevin. The ostensible contradictions that so confound our understanding, testify to the mysterious, multidimensional nature of God's truth. Our finite understanding cannot synthesize grace and freedom, but that human incapacity does not mean that they cannot be reconciled in some deeper ground known only to God.

In these musings, Nevin was entirely right. Nevin sensed that there was something wonderful and unique about the basic approach to theology in the Heidelberg Catechism. Others have sensed it too, calling this unique feature "existential," as did Hendrikus Berkhof,[2] or "experiential," as did Eugene Osterhaven.[3] Even its enemies have sensed the difference. B. B. Warfieldperhaps the archetypal late nineteenth-century exponent of the theoretic/metaphysical theology that Nevin so despised, complained that all that "heart" business in Heidelberg, all that subjectivism, was uniquely suited to compromise the theocentricity, the focus on God's objective truth, that true piety requires.[4] According to Warfield, the Catechism's very method, of situating doctrines in matters of the heart, makes it seem that God exists for our benefit. As such, the uniqueness of Heidelberg resides in its unfortunate capacity to subvert the faith.

This alleged "personalism" or "subjectivism" is the key to the extraordinary nature of the Heidelberg Catechism. It is much more than an emotive add-on or a psychological addendum. If taken seriously, this feature leads to a distinctive conception of the theological task. I will argue that this approach to theology, one which insists upon situating doctrinal assertions in the context of human passions, has always been the appropriate way to do theology. It is not entirely new with Heidelberg; it has not been without its venerable witnesses. Exemplars of this type can be found throughout the theological tradition. It can be seen in Augustine's "Confessions", in Luther and Calvin at their rhetorical best, in Pascal, preeminently in Kierkegaard, more recently in

existentialism, and currently in the polyglot movement known as post-liberalism. I do not quite know what to call this way of doing theology. For want of a better term, I will christen it "self-involving theology" (for it incorporates the deepest passions of the human self into its very method) and contrast it to speculative/theoretic theology.

To illustrate how Heidelberg practices this way of doing theology let us focus on one issue: the relationship of spiritual well-being as an unconditional gift from God to spiritual well-being as a human task, or, to put it another way, the relationship of grace to human agency, or, to put it yet another way, the relationship of gratitude to responsibility. Nevin himself regarded this issue, particularly as developed in answers 27 and 28, as the paradigmatic example of the uniqueness of Heidelberg's approach to theology. Again, he is right about this. The complexly interweaving dance of gratitude and responsibility are indeed at the heart of the Catechism. The centrality of gratitude is signaled by the main theme of the Catechism's third movement, and the importance of responsibility by the presentation of God's law as a guide to the saintly life. It is appropriate that this dialectic should have such prominence, for the interaction of both themes is at the core of Scripture. Our cannon both exclaims, "Not I, but the grace of God working in me,' and admonishes "Work out your own salvation in fear and trembling." Ever since Augustine clashed with Pelagius, the relationship of these two motifs has been one of the perennially troubling problems in the history of Christian theology.

The problem is this: If these two themes, gratitude and responsibility, are expressed as context-neutral truth-claims about divine and human agency, they do ostensibly conflict. Some of our ancestors reasoned thus: Total reliance on God's grace implies that God not only gives us salvation but also the faith with which we receive it. Therefore, if faith is a gift, to which we contribute nothing at all, God must irresistibly move the human will. Then, given the observation that some people seem to have faith and others do not, it would seem to logically follow that God has arbitrarily granted grace to only some individuals. On this Augustine, Luther, and Calvin were agreed. This would then seem to suggest that God has predestined some people to salvation, in which case we would have to affirm at least a single divine decree of election. With this Augustine was content. But what about the others, the folks from whom grace is withheld? Some of our spiritual forbearers reasoned that for an

omnipotent being there is no difference between withholding grace so that some persons end up damned, and actively deciding that they would be damned. So they concluded that God must have predestined them to damnation. Consequently, dual decrees concerning the salvation of some and the damnation of others were clearly affirmed by Zanchius, Ursinus' colleague and Theodore Beza of Geneva. Both of them derived the doctrine of dual decrees from a consideration of God's absolute power, and both of them deduced from it the doctrine of limited atonement, the idea that Christ died only for the elect. This trajectory could even be extended in the direction of metaphysical determinism, viewing all events and actions as produced by God as their efficient cause.

Others of our ancestors took another tack: we Christians "should" responsibly strive to lead a life of faith, hope, and love; the word "should" in this context seems to imply an imperative to take action. Further, if imperatives imply the power either to perform or not perform the recommended action, then responsibility implies that the human will is free to choose or not choose the life of faith. And if freedom requires the absence of predetermination by prior conditions, then the will would have to be at least somewhat undetermined by God's grace. Furthermore, if this freedom is morally evaluable, then individuals would deserve some credit for its proper use, or at least congratulations for refusing to resist grace. Such responsibility was affirmed to an extreme degree by Pelagius, and in a more qualified way by all subsequent semi-Pelagians.

These two series of inferences generate conflicting conclusions. One would imply that the human will has no causal efficacy in the matter of salvation, while the other implies that it does. Unfortunately, (or fortunately) most Christians have yearned to affirm both the efficacy of God's grace and the need for human responsibility. But such a glaring contradiction could not be ignored; the themes of grace and responsibility needed to be coordinated. So, many theologians have tried to mediate and synthesize their respective implications by developing theories concerning the way that God's agency and human agency can interact. Some sort of speculative picture, possibly involving a full-blown metaphysical system, seemed to be necessary in order to reconcile the discrepant propositions about Divine and human action. The predestinarians attempted to do this by proposing that God brings some events to pass through necessary laws and other events through free, contingent actions. But even the free actions, including the free actions

of human agents, have been ordained by God and will inevitably come to pass.

The concept of free but nevertheless divinely determined actions was not attractive or intelligible to all Reformed theologians. Consequently, a variety of alternative, more obviously mediating positions developed. One way or another, all of them suggested a certain division of labor: God does something, and we do something. For Lutheran synergists, like the later Melanchthon, the human will must cooperate with grace in order for faith to appear. The human agent must freely embrace the unmerited gift once it is offered. In this synergistic theory, election really amounts to nothing more than God's foreknowledge of who will actually accept the offered grace. God looks into God's crystal ball and foresees who will eventually have faith. Following this line of thought, Conrad Vorstius insisted that faith always logically precedes election. Others developed a more subtle position, proposing that the unaided will possesses the power to withstand or resist grace, but not the power to embrace it. Therefore God's gracious activity is exclusively responsible for the genesis of faith, while the human will is exclusively responsible for the rejection of it.

Ursinus himself, the primary architect of the Heidelberg Catechism, was aware of the progress of this discussion up to the early 1560's. Moreover, in his lectures on the Catechism, later redacted as his *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, he entered the fray with an opinion, taking a stab at the speculative theory game.[5] I am going to argue that there are two Ursinuses, the non-theoretic Ursinus of the Catechism, and the theoretic Ursinus of the *Commentary*. (Ursinus was not the best expositor of his own Catechism, in the same way that, according to several literary critics, Robert Frost was a great poet, but a poor interpreter of his own poems.) In the late Ursinus of the *Commentary* we see a shift toward a neo-scholastic tendency to treat theology as cognitive propositions to be logically arranged and assented to. This is not surprising, for Ursinus had become familiar with the use of Aristotle's logic in theology through studying with Melanchthon, Bullinger and Peter Martyr. Especially from Peter Martyr, Ursinus acquired a tendency to proceed deductively in theology, spinning out corollaries from first principles, a habit that informs his treatment of grace and human agency in the commentary on the Catechism.

By the time of the lectures, Ursinus was clearly not a synergist (one who regards the will as freely cooperating with grace) on the matter of grace and human agency. A major theme in his commentary is that God's will, not the human will, is the sole source of faith and good works. He backs this up with a strong view of providence, proposing that all things that are done are accomplished by the will of God. Nothing comes to pass except by God's free and good counsel. Consequently, predestination must be regarded as a subset of providence; it is the act whereby God ordains every person to a final destiny. As such, predestination involves both the election of some and the reprobation of others. However, Ursinus recoiled from the prospect that sin or damnation was somehow rooted in the Divine agency. He was loathe to imply that these two decrees were logically on a par, that God was active in them in the same ways. So, he proposes that good things like election are brought about by God positively willing, commanding and effecting them, but that evil things, including sin and damnation, are not accomplished in this way. God does not positively will sins; nor does God effect them or contribute to them in any way; nor does God tempt human beings to perform them. According to Ursinus, the first sin of Adam and Eve did not have its origin in God, but rather in the free will of humanity. Before the fall Adam and Eve had possessed the undetermined power to choose good or evil. Although God could have circumscribed their choices, God decided not to protect them from temptation, but rather determined to put humanity on trial. God withheld persevering grace from Adam and Eve, even though God foresaw that they would freely choose sin. God allowed them to succumb to this Fall, but was not the designer or the cause of it. Ursinus proposes that God does not positively will what God merely permits or refuses to prevent. Then, we might ask, in what way does sin and damnation fall under the providential rule of God? Ursinus has an answer: having foreseen that people would freely sin, God also saw that sin could be used as an instrument to promote God's good purposes. For example, God permitted the selling of Joseph, which was a sin, in order to save the Israelites from famine. God executes God's just purposes and accomplishes beneficent designs through sinful instruments. In this matter of election and reprobation the good purpose is the manifestation of retributive justice toward some and mercy toward others. Because God could have rejected all of humanity, God is not unjust in denying grace to any individual. The fact that God offers grace to anyone is a cause for amazement and celebration.

Through this distinction of willing and permitting, the Ursinus of the *Commentary* attempts to divvy up the respective roles of divine and human agency by ascribing the exclusive agency for salvation to God, and the primary agency for damnation to humanity. He was not alone in this effort. In an analogous way the Lutheran Formula of Concord proposed that God predestines the salvation of the elect, but only has foreknowledge of the damnation of the reprobate. Like all theologians who supported this theory, Ursinus had to engage in complex speculations about the logical sequence of God's acts of purposing, foreknowing, permitting, and decreeing. To accomplish this conceptual project, Ursinus had to probe with daunting audacity the mysterious depths of God's inner life. As with all such efforts, the results are less than convincing. One is left with the sneaking suspicion that all of Ursinus's speculative maneuvers are rather desperate attempts to neutralize an embarrassing surd in his theological system.

The Heidelberg Catechism, the product of this very same Ursinus, is strikingly different. It cannot be identified with any of the theories that we have considered, not even the one proposed by the Ursinus of the *Commentary*. All of those systems assume that the tension between salvation as a "gift" and the Christian life as a "task" is amenable to a theoretic resolution. All treat the relationship between divine and human agency as a matter that could be clarified by specifying exactly how and to what degree God is active and how and to what degree humanity is active. Theologians have exercised wondrous ingenuity in inventing speculative theories to integrate freedom and grace in the way that natural scientists develop theories to account for seemingly discrepant observed data or logicians develop new systems of logic to accommodate apparent conundrums and paradoxes. In order to accomplish this, each theory had to rely upon an elaborate metaphysical framework, complete with Aristotelian distinctions of primary and secondary causality and differentiations of formal, efficient and final causality, in order to describe and compare the interaction of the two types of agency. However, the Catechism does not even attempt to synthesize God's initiative and human response in a theological theory. It restricts itself to a staunchly non-theoretic approach. Rather than answer the question of the relationship of divine and human agency, Heidelberg presents the themes of grace and responsibility in such a way that the question itself evaporates. It pursues an alternative way of giving meaning to Christian

concepts, a way that makes any systematic, theoretic resolution to the paradox of grace and responsibility unnecessary.

The Heidelberg Catechism does indeed exhibit both the themes of absolutely effective Divine grace and resolute human responsibility. It contains both the languages of passivity and of activity, both the rhetoric of dependence on God's grace and of active growth in faith. Sometimes faith sounds like something one does and sometimes like something that happens to one. Sometimes it seems analogous to a deliberate decision to get married and sometimes more like unexpectedly falling in love. Consequently, one would expect the usual paradox to emerge and demand a resolution. But it does not. Heidelberg avoids this trap by showing how the two sets of discourse perform different functions in different contexts. It is a commonplace that the Catechism always asks with monotonous regularity "What is the benefit of this doctrine?" or "How does it help you now that you believe this?" (I am reminded of the story that circulates in Dutch Reformed circles of the little boy who, when asked the answer to Question 56, responded "I don't know, but I bet Question 57 will be "What comfort does it give me?") But this refrain is essential for understanding the distinctiveness of the Catechism. It signals that the meaning of a doctrine is given through grasping its existential purpose. Accordingly, we will take a close look at Heidelberg's presentation of the purposes of the doctrines of grace, providence, election, and human responsibility.

Let us begin by examining the confession's treatment of Divine agency in its discussion of grace and providence. The main purposes of the sections that make claims about God's will are to encourage reliance on the power of God, and the concomitant virtues of trust, gratitude and assurance. The rhetoric highlights the contrast of God's sustaining capacity over against human incapacity apart from God. Consider the celebrated first answer: ". . . that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation." And consider Answer 26: "That the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . is for the sake of Christ His Son my God and my Father. I trust in Him so completely that I have no doubt that he will provide me with all things necessary for body and soul. Moreover, whatever evil he sends upon me in this troubled life He will turn to my good, for he is able to do it, being Almighty God, and determined to do it, being a faithful Father." And

consider Answer 27: providence is "The almighty and ever-present power of God whereby he still upholds, as it were by His own hand, heaven and earth together with all creatures, and rules in such a way that leaves and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and unfruitful years, food and drink, health and sickness, and everything else comes to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand." Notice what these selections do not say. They do not discuss the relation of primary to secondary causality. They do not distinguish between God designing certain acts and God merely permitting others. They do not elaborate a metaphysical scheme to show that God is the primary agent in good things but that we are the primary agent in bad things. All they assert is that we are to trust God in all things, good and bad. The primary purpose of these passages is to give comfort to those who are anxious and troubled. They are intended to be an antidote to despair over one's own moral failings, personal tragedy, public calamity, and the prospect of one's own mortality. Similarly, Question 120's reflection on the first line of the Lord's Prayer is designed to awaken in the responder a childlike trust and reverence. As Answer 28 makes clear, the subsidiary purposes of these passages are to encourage patience in adversity, and gratitude in the midst of blessing. The intent of asserting that nothing can move without God's will is to assure the believer that nothing can separate us from God's love.

These questions and answers about providence do more than comfort the afflicted. The teachings about God's power redirect our loyalties and allegiances, warning us to withdraw our trust from all earthly sources of strength and place it exclusively in God. In Answer 128 the purpose of the talk of God having power over all things is to direct our gratitude to God, rather than to our own achievements. We are encouraged to be so overwhelmed by the role of God in our coming to faith that we feel the absurdity of making a fuss about our own part in the business. The "primacy of grace" language insures that our response to God's gift of grace is itselfregarded as a gift. When Answer 21 insists that it is the Holy Spirit that creates faith in the believer and Answer 65 adds that it does so through the proclamation of the Gospel, the intent is to forestall any ultimately frustrating reliance on our own spiritual capacities. God grants grace prior to the sinner's hopeless attempts to rectify the sinner's own impure will. We are to take no pride in the nascent and feeble stirrings of faith in our hearts, and no credit for our sporadic pangs of contrition. A contrite spirit should be an occasion for thanksgiving, not for self-congratulation. Furthermore, our growth in an active faith

should not be chalked up to our own credit, for, as Answer 86 insists, it is God who renews us through the Holy Spirit. To those who are disheartened, weak, and who cannot stand by themselves, Answer 127's words of reassurance are given that God will preserve and strengthen them. We are guaranteed that growth in the Christian life will occur, for, as Answer 64 phrases it, it "is impossible for those who are ingrafted into Christ by true faith not to bring forth the fruit of gratitude." All of these themes combine to take salvation out of the domain of justice, out of the nicely calibrated calculations of merit and demerit, and transposes it into the realm of mercy. Salvation should not be conceived as an heroic feat rooted in human strength. Heidelberg's repeated reminders that it is grace that moves the will serve to console the troubled conscience, humble the haughty spirit, and inspire gratitude. The glory of our salvation must be attributed to God alone. Like Paul in I Cor. 4:7, Heidelberg asks. "What have you that you did not receive?"

In a similar way, talk of election is intended to give hope concerning one's future and final destiny. Election is essentially a doctrine about the continuing reliability of God's graciousness. It is significant that election is only mentioned in passing in the Catechism, and not in any ruminations about God's omnipotence, but in the context of an exploration of the church. The proper home for talk of election is the experience of salvation and possible worries about its enduring character. Accordingly, Answer 53 assures us that God's spirit is given to prepare the believer to share ultimately in Christ and all his benefits. Answer 54 gives similar encouragement: "God gathers, protects and preserves for Himself a congregation chosen for eternal life. The believer is and forever will remain a member of it." The doctrine of election serves here to reassure us that, just as God has hedged our paths and driven us back to the proper road in the past, so God will continue to do in the future. Notice that in these contexts reprobation is not even mentioned.

All this language of election and the sovereignty of grace functions as an elicitation of trust in God's parental care, dependence on God's grace and sustaining power, confidence in the triumph of God's loving purposes, and gratitude for all these bountiful gifts at every stage of the Christian life, from the initial rumblings of faith to the final entrance into glory. In these contexts The Heidelberg Catechism scrupulously eschews the imperative mood and volitional language. To exhort us weak, feeble sinners to grit our teeth and perform a strenuous act of

spiritual will-power would be worse than counter-productive. Therefore, the mood of passivity is entirely appropriate. The general rule for the maximization of such dependence and trust is: take no credit for anything. The overarching rhetorical purpose of these sections is to wean us away from a self-destructive reliance on our own powers in order to experience the sustaining power of God Almighty.

It must not be overlooked that there is a countervailing theme in the confession: the call to take life with maximum seriousness. In the confession there are also exhortations to assume responsibility and actually do something. This dynamic is established early on in the confession, in Answer 9's insistence that we were created so that we could obey God's law. Most significantly, the imperative mood suffuses the entire presentation of the Ten Commandments. Calls to responsibility are also inserted into contexts concerning our reception of faith. Answer 20 admonishes that we should accept the benefits that Christ offers so that we may be saved. Similarly, Answer 60 warns that the benefits of Christ's perfect expiation are only available if the individual accepts such favor with a trusting heart. Answer 116's announcement that God will give grace only to those who seek Him functions as an admonition to get busy with the search. In Answer 94 "trust" in God alone is presented as something that one "ought" to do. After faith has been given, Answer 55 warns that we are obligated to use the gifts of God freely. In both the contexts of justification and sanctification, the language of imperatives, embedded in calls to responsible action, recur with surprising regularity.

The rhetorical thrust of all these admonitions is to encourage the reader to increase vigilance about the quality of the reader's own life. The questions and answers are intended to foster rigorous, critical self-scrutiny. The Catechism warns the reader to be on guard against succumbing to temptation. It insists that we must make absolutely certain that we grasp the benefits of Christ as they are offered. In effect, the text exhorts: attend to your grateful response in the pursuit of God's will for your life. Cultivate the necessary self-concern to assure that the Christian faith will take deep root in your heart.

So there we have it: two themes, maximum trust and gratitude on the one hand and maximum responsibility on the other, present in the same document, all seemingly jumbled together. The startling thing is that the Catechism contains no attempt to show how they are logically compatible, no attempt to integrate them. The two seemingly contrary

themes are not shaken or stirred, but merely juxtaposed. The document seems to be blithely and cavalierly oblivious to the lurking presence of a paradox. Did Ursinus just not notice?

I do not think so. The Catechism seems to scrupulously avoid theoretic subtleties as a matter of principle. At one point, in Answer 21, it comes close to admitting a kind of theoretic agnosticism, reminding us that we have no earthly conception of the heavenly majesty of God. It is then quick to add that when it comes to God, we do, however, know the one thing necessary for us: that from God we can expect all things needful. This is the clue to what I have called the self-involving method of the Catechism. In its pages God is not defined as abstract omnipotence, or omniscience, or through an analysis of God's metaphysical perfections. Rather, God is consistently defined in relation to human neediness. God is identified as the ultimate source of all that we truly require for a blessed life. This strategy is symptomatic of the singular method that we have seen employed over and over again in the Catechism. Christian concepts are defined in terms, not of metaphysics, but of their roles in the Christian life.

Let us pause at this point in order to clarify one matter. I am not arguing that The Heidelberg Catechism is utterly unique in adopting this self-involving method. Its style of theology certainly has immediate historical precursors and parallels. It is probably indebted to Melanchthon's contention that the concept "Christian doctrine" refers not just to the content of the teachings, but also to the manner in which they are conveyed, to the unleashing of God's gracious power in the life of the hearer. Here Melanchthon himself was indebted to the turn toward rhetoric and the pragmatic potentialities of language that was typical of renaissance humanism. Moreover, the concern to situate theology in the pragmatics of the Christian life that was typical of late medieval spiritual groups may have been a remote ancestor. Luther also may have influenced The Heidelberg Catechism's sensibility, with his conviction that the gospel is deficient if it is merely employed to convey information, but exercises its proper power only when it is proclaimed to the sinner. Words about God are true and meaningful when they perform their appropriate faith-catalyzing function, not when they are used to chat casually about God. The influence of Lutheranism's focus on the "*pro nobis, pro me*" aspect of the gospel cannot be ignored. Also, Heidelberg's style of theology certainly owes something to the very

genre of Catechism. One cannot expect arcane theological gymnastics in something intended to be a simple introduction to the essentials of the faith. Many of the other Catechisms spawned by the Reformation had at least some experiential dimensions. Heidelberg's self-involving theological method is not entirely *sui generis*. But the consistency with which it interprets doctrines in the pathos-saturated contexts of human misery and human hope is indeed distinctive.

Something methodologically distinctive is happening in The Heidelberg Catechism. I have no idea if Ursinus intended it or if happened fortuitously, or, should we say, providentially. But happen it did. An alternative to the theorizing way of doing theology was presented in an extraordinarily popular and influential form. That turn from metaphysics to human pathos as the proper context for explicating the Christian faith was a decisively beneficial theological shift. There is something odd and counterproductive about the whole conception of theology as an exercise in theory. Entertaining a theory is like holding an opinion about a conceptual puzzle. The problem with this approach to theology is that the speculative mood of holding an opinion is not conducive to cultivation of such lively passions as repentance, faith, hope, and love that Christianity requires in order to be intelligible. It is one thing to hunger and thirst for righteousness; it is quite another thing to wonder about the exact connection of body and soul. The first longing can only be satisfied through a transformation of the heart; the second perturbation can be quieted with a convincing theoretic construct. Heidelberg breaks free of the allurements of theology-as-theory. In The Heidelberg Catechism the meaning of a Christian concept is not a function of its location in a theoretic system. Rather, such concepts as "grace," "election," etc. are clarified by putting them to use in their proper passional contexts, as they are employed to shape human lives. Heidelberg does not just hand the individual a definition of grace; rather, it instantiates the concept's employment in the Christian life. The meanings of concepts like "grace" and "election" are rooted in such specific activities as exhorting, praising, trusting and repenting. These activities constitute their natural environment, apart from which they loose all significance. Consequently, Heidelberg presents us with the passions, activities, and concerns that are ingredient to the very meaning of these doctrines. Understanding them even in the most rudimentary way necessarily involves discerning their life-transforming point. For example, the activities of trusting, hoping and thanking are constitutive

of the very meaning of the concept "God." The meaning of "God" cannot be stipulated neutrally, as if God were one being among many who might be referred to in the way one might refer to a chair or a horse. It is a part of the core meaning of "God" that God is that which is to be trusted, obeyed, and adored. The referential use of the concept cannot be artificially separated from the worshipful activities that define it.

By keeping the passional purposes of Christian teachings in the foreground The Heidelberg Catechism gets things right. It knows that the meaning of a doctrine depends on the life-threatening fears and the life-giving hopes of the contexts in which it is preached and received. That is why Heidelberg introduces the concept "election" in the context of a hunger for an enduring hope and assurance. Wisely, the Catechism presupposes that dissatisfaction with one's self and all the attendant inner disharmonies are necessary conditions for grasping the doctrine. An individual needs to have been sufficiently frustrated in the search for ultimate happiness in order to grasp what "grace" and "election" are all about. Outside of this context of personal concern, translated into the rarified atmosphere of metaphysical speculation, the doctrines lose their focus and their point becomes obscure. After all, one can understand every word in a doctrine's formulation and still not get the point of believing it. For example, many non-Buddhists have pondered elaborate definitions of Buddhist "emptiness," but, lacking the requisite passions, have no idea what the concept denotes. The wording of a belief is not enough to guarantee understanding.

By sorting out the passional purposes of the twin themes of gratitude and responsibility, Heidelberg shows that they need not conflict with one another or generate logical contradictions. By clarifying the contexts in which these crucial doctrines are used and the purposes for which they are used, the problem of possible theoretic inconsistencies and the consequent urge to reconcile them does not even arise. Clarity about the appropriate contexts for the use of each of these themes obviates the need for a theoretic integration. Familiarity with the appropriate passions, concerns, interests, and emotions which give these concepts meaning replaces the quest for resolution by means of theoretic system. Conceptual conundrums do not arise if the language of gratitude and responsibility are not treated as context-neutral propositions that could come into conflict with other context-neutral propositions. The key strategy is to refuse to regard these doctrines as ciphers in an abstract

calculus. Rather, the clarification of the doctrines' specific roles in the formation of human lives will delimit the range of intelligible implications that they can have.

Indulge me while I illustrate this point with this a personal reminiscence. When I was in the eighth grade Iwas much enamored with a girl who sat in the second seat of the third row of my social studies class. Being less than cool, I had no clue concerning the appropriate way to manifest my affection and cringed at the prospect of rejection. So I sought advice from my worldly-wise and very popular older cousin. He considered my plight, thought for a moment and sagely intoned, "Faint heart never won fair maiden." Trusting his wisdom, I declared my feelings to the object of my desires. She said something like "Buzz off, spaghetti face." Dejected and confused, I again sought out my cousin and asked him what had gone wrong. Again he thought for a moment and then authoritatively warned, "Look before you leap." Sensing a paradoxical tension in his wisdom, I objected that both of his maxims could not be simultaneously true. He replied, "Nevertheless, they are indeed both true. You just need to learn when to act on the one and when to act on the other." His teaching was mysterious and not very helpful at the time. However, it was entirely right. A theory could not help me to integrate the maxims and thereby improve my social life. I needed practice in discerning the differences among various contexts. With that practical wisdom in place, the contradiction evaporates. In a similar way, no theory has been able to integrate the conflicting models of light as particles and light as waves. Nevertheless, each model is necessary in order to account for differing aspects of the behavior of light in different contexts. The sophisticated scientist simply needs to develop skill in discerning when to employ which model.

The language of grace and the language of responsibility should function in similar context-specific ways. Then the alleged contradiction of gratitude and responsibility will not appear, as long as the two sets of context-specific purposes to which they are put are not contradictory. In fact, the purposes of talk of gratitude and talk of responsibility are by no means mutually exclusive. Showing trust and gratitude in the appropriate ways in the appropriate contexts does not conflict with the assumption of responsibility in the appropriate ways in the appropriate contexts. The learner simply needs to develop skill in recognizing when and how to resort to which theme. Then the learner must also develop

skill in using one theme to inform and suffuse the other, so that gratitude become responsible and responsibility becomes grateful.

With the help of Heidelberg, we can sort through the contexts appropriate for talking about grace and the contexts appropriate for talking about responsibility. For example, when an individual is tempted to compare favorably her own virtue to that of others, she should have recourse to the gratitude for grace theme, eliminating the possibility of pride. The motif of trusting in grace is also ideally suited for situations in which one might brood over one's moral and spiritual inadequacies. To those who despair that their own efforts can ever secure blessedness, the language of grace can announce, "Relax, you do not have to achieve anything." To those who punish themselves for their moral failures, the language of grace can say, "Surrender your sovereignty as the final judge of your own acceptability and worth." To those who see ultimate happiness as an achievement, the language of grace can declare, "Abandon hope in all prudential calculations and futile self-help programs." The language of grace can promote the serene spiritual security that can afford to acknowledge an impure heart and forego self-deceptive displays of righteousness. On the other hand and in different contexts, the responsibility theme could be used to counteract moral lassitude and spiritual complacency. Reminders that the Christian life involves growth in Christ-likeness could be issued to those in danger of taking grace for granted. To those antinomians who feel that the pursuit of a virtuous life and the fulfillment of moral obligations no longer matter, the third use of the law can remind, "The highest satisfaction is a life lived in accord with God's purposes." Talk about the use of God's law to guide the saints could be employed as a prophylactic against self-congratulatory comparisons between the elect and non-elect.

Along with developing some skill concerning when to resort to which theme, catechumens could practice the interaction of the themes of gratitude and responsibility. Responsibilities could be situated in the context of gratitude, so as not to promote self-righteousness. Tasks could be taken up out of gratitude, not cold obligation. The project of self-salvation could be abandoned without renouncing the struggle to live out the faith daily. The learner could be encouraged to accept herself without condoning failures or relaxing moral ideals. Here the integration of the two themes does not take place through the auspices of a theoretic

framework, but through the sagacity of passionate Christians. In the nitty-gritty particularities of Christian lives, the paradox dissolves.

Heidelberg represents a drastic revision of the conventional way of conceiving the theological task. Throughout history the majority of theologians have tended toward the speculative/theoretic approach, viewing theology as the integration of discrete doctrinal propositions into some sort of systematic framework, thereby producing a sort of comprehensive cosmic picture. Their hope was that once we have generated that grand map, we can deduce from it how we as Christian ought to act and feel. According to the dominant model, the propositions should be organized according to the principles of formal logical relations. Some propositions would be seen as entailing others, and some could be combined to generate more complex propositions. The framework in which all these propositions would be integrated would need to be some grand metaphysical system, be it Plato's, or Aristotle's, or Hegel's, or Whitehead's, or Heidegger's, and so theology is often still done, usually much more eclectically and idiosyncratically, by contemporary theologians ranging from Gordon Kaufman to Sallie McFague. Now the grand frameworks come from bits of romantic vitalism, or neo-Marxism, or feminist theory, all cobbled together. But, as John Nevin recognized, Heidelberg rejects this entire approach to theology. These speculative pyrotechnics may make Christianity more credible to its cultured despisers in a superficial way, but they do not make it more edifying as a truth to live by. To expect speculative considerations to ground religious assertions and promote religious belief is to expect way too much. Moreover, most people in the contemporary world have developed a healthy distrust of all grand theories. Our culture is increasingly exhibiting incredulity toward grand cognitive frameworks that promise to explain all phenomena. Our ideational aspirations are much more modest and humble. Consequently, we twenty-first century Christians may be uniquely situated to appreciate the self-involving method of The Heidelberg Catechism. As an alternative to theory, Heidelberg does theology as the clarification of the use of Christian concepts in the shaping of human lives. Doctrines are not connected by logical relations, but by concrete activities and emotions. The synthesis of the various concepts and propositions occurs not on paper, but in the lives of individuals. As a test of the meaningfulness of any theological proposal, Heidelberg directs us always to return to the crucial question, "What comfort, what benefit, does this doctrine give you?" If that strategy were always kept foremost in mind, contemporary theology would benefit immeasurably.

ENDNOTES

[1] These were subsequently republished as John Nevin, *The History and Genius of the Heidelberg Catechism* (Chambersburg: Publication Office of the German Reformed Church, 1847).

[2] See Hendrikus Berkhof, "The Catechism in Historical Context," in *Essays on the Heideberg Catechism* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1963).

[3] See M. Eugene Osterhaven, "Man's Deliverance" in *Guilt, Grace, and Gratitude*, ed. Donald Bruggink (New York: The Riverside Press, 1963).

[4] See B. B. Warfield, *The Princeton Theological Review*, 6 (1908), 565f.

[5] Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus* on the Heidelberg Catechism (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956).

MERCERSBURG IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Gabriel Fackre

The 20th anniversary of the Society prompts, for me, some vivid memories of our founding: an image of the living room of Howard Hageman on the campus of New Brunswick Seminary, 30 or so of us seated in a circle, taking that vote to continue in the late 20th century the witness of Nevin and Schaff. As I remember, Fred Trost was presiding, as the then leader of the "BTL Club"—the Biblical-Theological-Liturgical Group (in contradistinction to the infamous PTL Club of the Bakers). BTL with its interests in the sacraments and ecumenism was something of a trajectory toward the new Society converging with the Worship Convocation in which John Shetler was such a key figure. And of course, the cluster of other movements with similar or parallel interests that grew up under the impetus of the Mercersburg Society—the Craigville Colloquies, the Mercersburg Society being co-sponsor with BTL of its first historic gathering in 1984, the Confessing Christ movement that was proposed at Craigville Colloquy X in 1993, the Order of Corpus Christi and more. All things to celebrate on this anniversary! But what of the future? Not just the future of the Society, but the future of the vision of the 19th century Mercersburg movement in the 21st century? Such are the questions posed at this session.

The Mercersburg Society came to be out of the theological ferment of that time, twenty years ago. The occasion at New Brunswick coordinate with its founding was a consultation sponsored by BTL on the Faith and Order document, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. The focus of the meeting was the sacramental and doctrinal substance of classical Christianity. Its background was concern about the fads and frenzies of the day in mainline denominations, the worry that such ideology might overwhelm these centralities in our tradition. The same matters are still with us, and thus the continuing timeliness of Mercersburg's commitment to them and for that matter, the commitment of all the evangelical and catholic stirrings in ours and other denominations. This year's focus on the Heidelberg Catechism, the recent republication of

Nevin's *Mystical Presence* are cases in point.[1] But I believe there is an organizing principle for the sacramental, doctrinal and christological accents that was hinted at in our founding, but now needs higher visibility in the new context of the 21st century. It is nothing new to the historic Mercersburg movement and was, in fact, the gleam in the eye of Nevin and Schaff and I believe still is, as they look down on us from the heavenly ramparts.

The eminent church historical Sidney Ahlstrom pointed to it when he said that "the most creative manifestation of the Catholic tendency in American Protestantism was the movement of theology and church reform which flowered for two or three decades after 1840 in the German Reformed Church."[2] By "Catholic tendency," Ahlstrom meant the drive toward the universal church. Our Mercersburg mentors spoke of it in their theology of history as the coming to be of the "Church of John," what they called the church of "love," that was the transcending union of the "Church of Peter," representing "hope" and the corrective Reformation "Church of Paul," representing "faith."

This Nevin/Schaff gleam in the eye is *ecumenism* in its profoundest sense, the answer to Christ's prayer that we all be one as the Father and the Son are one. However, more than a few church pundits declare the ecumenical movement to be, right now, in serious trouble. That judgment is made even by some of its friends. For example, Michael Kinnamon, recent executive Secretary of COCU, and long-time ecumenical insider struggles with its problems in his new book, with its revealing sub-title: *The Vision of the Ecumenical Movement: And How it Has Been Impoverished by its Friends*, remarking, "Over the past eighteen years, I have come to realize that the ecumenical movement . . . is not in good shape."[3] For example, major ecumenical bodies—the National Council

---

[1] See my review of *The Mystical Presence: A Vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic Doctrine of the Eucharist*, Augustine Thompson, O.P. ed., (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000) in *Pro Ecclesia*, Vol. XI, No. 4 (Fall 2002), 494-496.

[2] Sidney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 615

[3] Michael Kinnamon, *The Vision of the Ecumenical Movement and How It Has Been Impoverished by Its Friends* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003), 2

of Churches, the World Council of Churches—ironically, appear to have turned from the goal of fundamental church unity to other agendas—the pressing political, social and economic issues of the day or the challenge of interfaith matters. The executive secretary of the WCC, Conrad Raiser, seems to give his blessing on such, calling for a "paradigm shift." And closer to home, and personally painful to me was the decision just made by our Massachusetts Confessing Christ Steering Committee to terminate our four-year effort in Catholic-Lutheran-Reformed collegiality, as attendance at our yearly events had dropped from a high of 150 to last month's 33 folk gathered for what appeared to be a compelling subject, especially so given the problems of the Boston archdiocese, "The Moral Crisis in Our Churches" (note the "our" as we included Protestant clerical promiscuities as well). But the energy was not there for busy pastors, who, I am told, only will come out for matters of "practical Christianity."

But it was not always so for "busy pastors." One of the busiest was Douglas Horton, known to many as one of the outstanding leaders of ecumenism in the 20th century. So Ted Trost's excellent, *Douglas Horton and the Ecumenical Impulse in American Religion* just out this year.[4] Is it any accident that a Mercersburger like Ted would have the eye to see that ecumenical impulse? From his earliest days, Douglas Horton, as a pastor, through his deanship at Harvard, his leadership in the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, his role as one of the architects of the United Church of Christ, his being veritable dean of the ecumenical observers at Vatican II—embodied the paradigm of Christian ecumenism in the 20th century. But must we say that he also represents a *lost* "ecumenical impulse" in the Christian churches today?

For all that, consider this manifesto just published: *In One Body Through the Cross: The Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity*.[5] Here are some people who want to return ecumenism to a central place on the church's agenda, one built on solid christocentric faith and order foundations.

[4] Theodore Louis Trost, *Douglas Horton and the Ecumenical Impulse in American Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Theological Studies, 2002).

[5] Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, *In One Body Through the Cross: The Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2003)

These 16 theologians meeting for three years decided to put their call in the words of the 1961 New Delhi Assembly of the WCC, the mandate to make visible the already given unity of the church,

> as all in each place who are baptized into Jesus Christ . . . are brought by the Holy Spirit into one fully committed fellowship, holding the one apostolic faith, preaching the one Gospel, breaking the one bread . . . .[6]

In fact, Kinamon, the very friend of ecumenism who bemoans its sad state appeals to the same assembly and to just those words with the same passion for recovering the vision. Indeed, Ted Trost makes the case that Douglas Horton's work in the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC was a factor in this New Delhi vision of ecumenism as "one bread, one baptism, one ministry"[7]

Surely you will recognize in this sentence from New Delhi echoes of something earlier. Who planted the seeds in this country for such a call for 1) the unity of Christians, 2) baptized into Jesus Christ 3) holding the apostolic faith and preaching the one Gospel and 4) breaking the one bread?

Ironically, there is no mention of Mercersburg in the Princeton document. However, I cannot help but believe that some of the signatories and sponsors—Geoffery Wainwright, George Lindbeck, William Rusch, Mark Achtemeier (Lancaster Seminary's Bud and Betty Achtemeier's son), Michael Root, Carl Braaten, Robert Jenson and others involved in this manifesto know of Mercersburg's pioneering role in setting the Church's sights on that goal.

And the 1961 New Delhi assembly itself? I was a UCC alternate delegate to that meeting, having attended the first assembly at Amsterdam in 1948 and the second at Evanston in 1954 with my spouse, Dorothy. However, the regular UCC delegates did not get sick and there was no UCC money to send in the second team as well, so I never made it to the assembly. Bob Moss, of blessed memory, then president of Lancaster Seminary and on the first team, did bring home a consolation prize for me, the emblem

[6] *Ibid.*, 11.

[7] Trost, *op.cit*, 211.

of that assembly, now on proud display in a cabinet of memorabilia. With Bob at New Delhi and Horton too, friend of George Richards and knowledgeable about the tradition, I'm sure the witness of Mercersburg was not unheard at this landmark meeting with its ecumenical message for that century and this one. (Of course, regarding Horton, we must ask whether his ecumenical impulse came from his view of it as instrumental to a moral passion for the reconciliation of a warring and unjust world, one that could play out as well in establishing of a center for world religions at Harvard and similar peace-making efforts, rather than from a Mercersburg sense of obedience to John 17:21 as such, seeking this Christian kingdom of unity first and all other things following in train, a question that I think is in the back of Ted's own mind as he reviews the ecumenical Horton.[8]

Yet we must ask, is the Princeton group a voice crying in the wilderness? Is a Mercersburg call for an apostolic faith unity of the church catholic a pipe dream in the 21st century? The difference between hope and wishful thinking is this: some signs present right now of the anticipated future. There are such portents of the coming Kingdom of catholicity. I have seen them myself and you have too. The 1997 Formula of Agreement of Lutheran and Reformed Churches in North America, reflecting the 1983 Leuenberg Agreement of Lutheran and Reformed Churches around the world, is a solid sacramental and theological unity in the Mercersburg tradition. It was hard to come by, as some of you know who were active in bringing it to be. Indeed, the Society planted a few seeds of its own when it had Lutheran theologian Carl Braaten as speaker at one of our meetings, giving him a glimpse of the evangelical catholicity which preceded his own evangelical catholic self-identity. The FOA is based, not on a theological indifferentism that marks too much ecumenism, but on hard-won doctrinal agreements, including sacramental ones kin to Mercersburg thinking on the real Presence.[9] (A personal aside on the influence of Nevin is subtly at work in agreements like this and possible future ones. Here is a note from Robert Wilken, chair of the board of the Center of Catholic and Evangelical Theology, on which this

[8] *Ibid.* , 13, 61, 111.

[9] See Keith F. Nickle and Timothy F. Lull, eds., *A Common Calling: The Witness of Our Reformation Churches I North America Today*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993.

Mercersburger also serves, and onetime active participant in these negotiations, "Thank you for your review of Nevin's *Mystical Presence* in the current issue of *Pro Ecclesia*. He was one of my inspirations while studying under James Hastings Nichols." Parenthetically, it was Nichols, interpreter of Mercersburg to another generation who put two of his other students, my wife and I, in touch with Nevin and Schaff and counseled us to join the Evangelical and Reformed Church in 1950.)

Another small sign of 21st century hope for the Mercersburg vision is the multilateral agreement reflected in the "COCU Consensus" that undergirds what is now the present manifestation of COCU, Churches Uniting In Christ. Our own John Shetler has been a firm voice supporting COCU through all its ups and downs. We'll see where this next step of CUIC goes. It needs our support.

Yet another portent of things to come in the Mercersburg vision is the 1999 Augsburg Accord, the groundbreaking Lutheran-Catholic Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. While this doctrine did not have the prominence of the doctrine of Incarnation in the Mercersburg scheme of things, the reaching out of the Lutheran Churches to the Roman Catholic Church and vice versa, is very much a piece of the movement of the Church of Peter and the Church of Paul toward the Church of John. It is interesting to note that this agreement on justification was, in fact, made possible by placing it in the framework of a larger, Reformation-Roman Catholic convergence on a trinitarian-christological reading of justification, which is exactly a Mercersburg accent. I argued just that as accounting for the agreement in a recent Yale dialog with Cardinal Kasper, George Lindbeck and others.[10] Here is the key sentence in the *Joint Declaration*:

> The foundation and presupposition of justification is the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ. Justification thus

[10] "A Reformed Perspective on the Joint Declaration o the Doctrine of Justification," in *Ecumenical Perspectives on the Joint Declaration* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, forthcoming, 2003).

means that Christ himself is our righteousness in which we share through the Holy Spirit in accord with the will of the Father.[11]

How can we not believe that Nevin and Schaff were smiling down on the city of Augsburg on October 30, 1999? The genius of Mercersburg is that its ecumenism is based on the christological core so central to all the significant new movements manifest along today's ecumenical frontier.

This is also Kinnamon's view with an appeal to the vision of its modern founders such as Visser't Hooft, Nathan Soderbloom, William Temple, Suzanne De Dietrich: we are *already* in unity for it is Christ who has brought us together by baptism into his one Body, an invisible ontological gift given that now become our task to make visible. We don't create it, as it is already here by the grace of Jesus Christ. The Lutheran-Reformed Formula of Agreement puts it this way (so cited by Kinnamon): unity begins not conditionally with an "if . . . then," but unconditionally with a "because . . . therefore."[12] Kinnamon also commends this agreement, incidentally, for the formula, "mutual affirmation and mutual admonition," that is, an ecumenism in which we realize that we do need the gifts that other traditions bring in order to have the fullness of the Body (I Cor. 12), again precisely what our Mercersburg forebears had in mind.

Christology is inseparable, also, from Mercersburg's stress on the real Presence of Christ so much a partner in the ecumenical advances of the day as in the BEM document and connected with the importance of the ordering of ministry, yet another Mercersburg emphasis. Once again, Mercersburg's stress on catechesis and thus doctrine, is another key factor in the kind of ecumenism espoused by the Princeton Call, the New Delhi Assembly, and the bilateral and multi-lateral advances. So when we lift up 21st century ecumenism as the legacy of Mercersburg, it is that kind of ecumenism which is christological, trinitarian, sacramental and liturgical.

---

[11] The Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification English Language Edition (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1999), 15.

[12] Kinnamon, *op.cit.*, 18 quoting from A Common Calling;*op.cit*, 57.

If the accents of Mercersburg, not to mention its influence, are alive and well in the 21st century, what implications does that have for this Society in the 21st century? Could the Society, for example, help to implement the cascade of suggestions made by the Princeton Proposal? I mention some of its suggestions:

a) Seminaries should hire faculty and leaders actively committed to the ecumenical vision of New Delhi.

b) Where there are formal agreements in full communion, every effort should be made to actually implement such, rather than leave them in bureaucratic limbo as is often the case. (The Penn Southeast Conference of the UCC and especially the commitment of its Conference Minister, Russ Mitman, in working with the ELCA bishop in cross-pollinating UCC and ELCA congregations and pastors is a good example of this. Sadly, I'm not sure that kind of thing is widespread.)

c) Efforts in ecumenical witness and service should be pushed forward. Instead of sheep-stealing or solo denominational programs, joint evangelism is needed. Already, we do a lot in partnered social service and social action. An earlier UCC slogan seems as apt as ever in all departments, "Do nothing separately that you can do together."

d)) Princeton says, "When baptism is mutually recognized, it should be plain in the manner of administration."[13] My guess is that this is a warning about deviant formulas which, in the effort to be inclusive, undercut the standard language of "Father, Son and Holy Spirit," rendering those so baptized as entered only into that congregation and not into the church catholic.

e) Then there are a series of injunctions for those who are desperately needed to make ecumenism a reality—initiatives by the Roman Catholic Church following the lead of its pope; involvement of evangelicals and Pentecostals who have too often been sectarian and thrown stones at ecumenism; initiatives by the Orthodox Churches, avoiding the temptation to be stand-offish.

f) And very close to home, paying attention to the congregation around the corner or down the street, and doing with them things that are better done together than separately.

---

[13] *In One Body Through the Cross*, *op.cit.* 49.

All these are suggestions to which the Mercersburg Society and its members could well give aid and comfort. Let me put a few in specific terms vis a vis the Society in the 21st century:

1) Could its meetings and projects better mirror the ecumenical vision? Of course, the Society's membership is, to a small degree, a reflection of that, including UCC, RCA, ELCA, Episcopal, Christian UUA. . . . Why not broaden that base significantly and thus embody the vision of the Church of John, with many more parts of the Body of Christ in its membership? One way to facilitate that is to makes sure the meetings of Mercersburg include participants of other traditions in the program with invitations out to the constituencies they represent. Also, choose topics that deal with the ecumenical challenges and advances of the 21st century. Again, issues of the *New Mercersburg Review* could be devoted to cutting edge ecumenism of the 21st century.

2) Support of the "Church of John" means participation of Mercersburg members in events that embody the vision. For example, Craigville Colloquy XX (the Society co-sponsored Craigville I, as noted) is on the subject "Christian Solidarity in a Fragmented World: How Can We All Come to the Table" featuring WCC Faith and Order executive secretary, Tom Best, and other ecumenical notables from the Churches of Peter and Paul. Again, it means solid support for our ecumenical officers. We could not ask for a better one than the UCC's Lydia Veliko and she needs all the help she can get. And again, regarding the UCC, support for the seven volume *Living Theological Heritage Series* produced by instrumentalities of our church, which is shot through with the influence of Mercersburg and reflects exactly its concerns, theological and ecumenical.

3) It might mean devoting programs, *Review* pieces, website focus to the solid doctrinal issues about which Mercersburg founders were interested, showing linkages to ecumenical advances. This 2003 meeting on the Heidelberg Catechism is just such a model of serious theological attention to classical teaching.

4) It surely means support of the ecumenical relations our various Churches have with other bodies, such as the Formula of Agreement, Churches Uniting In Christ and the like.

5) It means battling in our own denominations for the christological, doctrinal and sacramental teachings so integral to Mercersburg, and

resisting the cultural ideologies by which our mainline denominations are so easily seduced. In the 21st century that includes providing an alternative to popular forms of worship so like the "new measures" that our forebears resisted. And it has to do with challenging the sectarianism of the left or the right, the self-congratulation that announces that we are the only ecclesial body doing the right thing—whether it be on culture-war issues such as gay-lesbian agendas or interpretations of theological programs such as "God is Still Speaking" that ignore the fact that God has already spoken in Christ, Scripture and tradition. The Preamble to the UCC Constitution has it just right on this point when it speaks about "making this faith" its own in every generation, "this faith" being, "the faith of the historic Church expressed in the ancient creeds and reclaimed in the basic insights of the Protestant Reformers."

An example of the need to "resist the powers" as it relates to the baptism issue mentioned by the Princeton Proposal, might be for Mercersburgers in the Connecticut Conference of the UCC to ask its leadership why the UCC is the only mainline denomination that declined to participate in the ecumenical baptismal certificate (Roman Catholic, Protestant) because it could not endorse the trinitarian formula. Ironically, our own UCC Book of Worship uses just that formula: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." In passing, it should be noted that the largest UCC church in New England, the 3300 member Wethersfield congregation, is right now debating whether to leave our denomination because it feels its own christological, trinitarian and evangelical commitments are not being represented in the UCC that it sees. (Hence the appearance of John Thomas and the Connecticut Conference Minister, Davida Crabtree before 150 of their members at a recent evening meeting to urge them to stay, and an invitation to a Confessing Christ delegation the very next week to speak about why our group has chosen to stay. Three of us took part in the latter and pleaded for the congregation to remain in the UCC, free to be a loyal opposition to trends they opposed, on the grounds of our professed UCC commitment to inclusivity.)

Conclusion

How many challenges to the Society and its members to witness to the ecumenical faith of our forebears in this the 21st century! We have a mission to share our charism with the church catholic. And we are not alone. We have allies in that mission and momentum toward it. With a

good heart and a confident hope . . . indeed the Heidelberg Catechism's only hope and "comfort, in life and in death" . . . let us join our Lord in the long march toward the land of the Church of John.

YOU PREPARE A TABLE BEFORE ME

Peter Goguts

(This paper originated as a partial requirement for course in reformed theology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. The course explored, compared and contrasted the piety of five Reformed theologians: Edwards, Schleiermacher, Hodge, Nevin and Barth. Without this knowledge some references may seem oblique and extraneous. In addition, the vocabulary was determined and dictated by the classroom dialogue. Preference was given to the word Piety, when characterizing Christian life. Piety is a word primarily associated with the Reformed Tradition when discussing expressions of gratitude to God. I hope this explanation will contextualize the material about to be presented. A note of interest to the members of this society, a large portrait of John Williamson Nevin graces the faculty dinning room at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.)

Just 21 days after my birth I became a member of the Church of Jesus Christ. Near noon on September 3rd 1944, I was baptized at St. John's Evangelical and Reformed Church, Shamokin, PA. Over the years my claim of discipleship from the time I was 3 weeks old has been challenged. When confronted with the question have you been saved, I answer, yes, at noon on September 3rd 1944. It is this claim and challenge that fueled the Mercersburg movement. Is it enough to be baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit? Or does discipleship require preconditions; such as self-awareness, knowledge and language? Can an infant be a true disciple? Or is he or she always a second class disciple? From this issue emerges a constellation of questions regarding the Church, the sacraments and the nature of discipleship. John Williamson Nevin, along with his colleague, Phillip Shaff, took exception to the dominant theology of their day, by challenging revivalism's assumptions, logic and techniques. They developed a theology that claimed the Church in all space and time as their own and that placed the Eucharist at the center of the Church's life. The trajectories of these features form a particular understanding of Christianity. Nevin insisted

> . . . we say of Christianity that it is a life. Not a rule or a mode of life simply; not something that in its nature requires to be reduced to practice; for that is the character of all morality. But life in its very nature and constitution, and as such the actual substance of truth itself. This is its grand distinction. Here it is broadly separated from all other forms of religion that ever have claimed, or ever can claim, the attention of the world. [14]

What is the basis for this statement? What are the implications of this claim for the Church and Christ's disciples? What are the marks of a Mercersburg Church? Answers to these questions make a sketch of what we will refer to as "the piety of practice".

The Word Became Flesh

Writing to his one time student and soon to be colleague, Henry Harbaugh, Professor Nevin identified the first principle of his theology.

> We come now to what is more important, the organization of inward of the Mercersburg system regarded as a whole. Its cardinal principle is the fact of the Incarnation. This viewed not as a doctrine or speculation but as a real transaction of God in the world, is regarded as being necessarily itself the essence of Christianity, the sum and substances of the whole Christian redemption.[15]

It is the union of God and "man" in Christ that is the measure of all things.

The incarnation is more than an illustration of God's love or a paradigm for human humility. In the "Mercersburg System" God's becoming flesh atomically alters creation. The world is and will always be a different world because of Jesus Christ. In Christ there is an organic union between heaven and earth. Christ is the planting of the new creation in the midst of the first creation. Once Christ became flesh and dwelt among us the cosmos was changed forever. The union of God and humanity guaranteed the destiny of the creation. In the incarnation God

[14] Ibid., p. 217.
[15] John W. Nevin, *Letter to Dr. Henry Harbaugh*, eds., Charles Yrigoyen, Jr., and George H. Bricker, *Catholic and Reformed: Selected Theological Writings of John Williamson Nevin* (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1978) p. 408.

made a covenant like no other. In Christ, God formed a union of spirit and matter that can never be broken.

Professor Nevin in his letter to Dr. Harbaugh emphasizes this point when he writes, "Christ saves the world, not ultimately by what he teaches or by what he does, but by what he is in the constitution of his own person."[16] In the context of the mid-1800's, the Mercersburg movement responded to the liberalizing tendency promoted by Ralph Waldo Emerson, as well as to the common-sense rationalism of Old School Presbyterianism articulated by Charles Hodge. Both movements embraced rationalism, which Nevin perceived as threat to orthodox Christianity. But Nevin did not take these approaches to the Christian faith as new threats, but rather new embodiments of an ageless challenge to the Christian religion. In the preface to "The Church," a sermon preached at the opening of the Synod of the German Reformed Church he wrote,

> It is far more easy to believe in a Gnostic Christ and a Church in the clouds, than it is to grasp the mystery of Christ in the flesh, and a Church furnished with real life-powers, as the actual body of his divine human presence upon the earth, to the end of the world.[17]

Nevin cautioned, don't be fooled by the packaging. Charles Hodge and Ralph Waldo Emerson were repackaging the ancient heresy Gnosticism in rationalism. The most dominant characteristic of Gnosticism is syncretism. It begs and borrows from theologies and philosophies without shame. There is much in Christianity which is attractive to Gnosticism. By combining a Persian dualism with a ghostly Christ it developed a very seductive understanding of salvation. Williston Walker summarized first century Christian Gnosticism as, ". . . the fullest accomplishment of that amalgamation of Hellenic and Oriental philosophical speculation with primitive Christian beliefs which was in greater or less degree in process in all Christian thinking."[18]

Nevin was keenly aware of the early Church's struggle with Christian Gnosticism because he claimed and owned the whole history of

[16] Ibid., p.. 408.
[17] Nevin, "The Church," p. 4.
[18] Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, revised 1959) p. 53.

Christianity. He recognized its symptoms. All forms of Gnosticism reject the material and esteem the spiritual. Gnosticism dissects reality into these two realms. And so when Christian theology divided things between mind and matter, Nevin recognized this methodology for what it was Gnosticism. Like his first century ancestors, Nevin prescribed the Incarnation as the antidote for Gnosticism.

In Christ matter and spirit are so united that they cannot be separated. The two have become one in Christ. Christ is an organic whole. His teachings cannot be isolate from his person. When Charles Hodge espouses believing as foundational for true discipleship, John Nevin gets nervous. When he reads, "Religion consists in great measure in the secret intercourse of the soul with God,"[19] Nevin imagines he feels the breath of Gnosticism. For Nevin (Christian) religion is not secretive and private. It is public and communal. On the night of the Incarnation the heavens opened, the heavenly hosts sang, the shepherds "go over to Bethlehem," "Wiseman came from the east" and "there was no place for them in the Inn." Christmas takes place in the real world, not in the realm of knowledge and doctrine, Professor Nevin insists. Nevin suggests that whenever Christianity begins with wonder or knowledge it is traveling in the land of the Gnostics, and it will be tempted to establish permanent residence there.

Nevin's concern is as true in 2002 as it was in 1846. Gnosticism's relentless attempt to dematerialize and individualize Christianity continues. In a book titled, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation*, Professor Harold Bloom exhibits the evidence that Gnosticism, American style, is alive and well. [20] In this work, Bloom argues Gnosticism is not only alive and well, but it is the dominant faith of America. Professor Bloom considers American Gnosticism "a pragmatic, experiential faith that called itself Christianity while possessing features very unlike European or earlier American doctrinal formulations."[21] In addition, "Conversion from death to life was purely emotional and individual; it seemed to exclude a social dimension."[22] As Professor Bloom describes, "Jesus is not so much an

[19] Charles Hodge, *The Way of Life*, ed. Mark A. Noll (New York: Paulist Press 1987), p. 180.
[20] Harold Bloom, *The American Religion* (New York: Simon & Schuster 1992).
[21] Ibid., p. 64.
[22] Ibid., p. 65.

event in history for the American Religionist as he is a knower of the secrets of God who in return can be known by the individual."[23] Finally, "The God of the American Religion is an experiential God, so radically within our own being as to become a virtual identity with what is most authentic in the self."[24]

Nevin's piety of practice with its emphasis on the incarnation is prepared to bear witness against the Gnostic cultural faith Professor Bloom embraces. Nevin's piety of practice honors the freedom of God by insisting that God need not conform to human expectations. And by celebrating the sacraments and the rites the Church, this piety affirms the materiality of its faith.

Lo, I Am With You Alway

In 1932 St. John's (Hain's) Reformed Church redesigned its chancel. The old pulpit centered chancel was replaced with an altar centered one. The antique communion table diminished by the massive pulpit was replaced with an altar. The elevated altar built against the north wall was the focal point of the new design. Installed in the north wall above the altar was a large stained glass window depicting the Ascension. Above the ascending Jesus is his reassuring promise, "Lo, I am with you alway".

In the liturgical life of the people of St. John's (Hain's), Ascension Day was a very special day. Over the centuries Ascension Day developed many traditions and much folklore.[25] In earlier times the 40th day after Easter was a day of worship. On Ascension Day work was *verboten*!

It is reasonable to assume that many of the practices and much of the lore regarding Ascension Day grew from the root of the early Reformation dispute over the ubiquity of Christ. Was Christ in heaven at the right hand of the Father? Or was Christ in the bread and the wine ingested by his followers. Much of this controversy is focused on differing understandings of Ascension. If Christ was not in glory then why is our hope in him? If Christ is not present with us, then what of his promise, "Lo, I am with you alway?"

[23] Ibid., p. 65.
[24] Ibid., p. 259.
[25] Richard E. Wentz, ed., *Pennsylvania Dutch Folk Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), p. 205, 208.

The stained glass rendering of the Ascension above the altar at St. John's (Hain's) makes a theological statement. It points to Christ's presence in his absence. The gathered disciples standing before the altar praying God, "to send thy Holy Spirit upon us and upon these gifts of bread and wine, that the bread which we break may be to us the communion of the body of Christ, and the cup of blessing which we bless, the communion of the Blood of Christ."[26] In the loaf and the cup Christ is with us always the window proclaims.

Moreover, Nevin insists the Incarnation does not disappear when Christ ascends to the right hand of the Father. The Incarnation continues in the body of Christ, the Church. Looking at the Church through the lens of the Incarnation, Nevin concludes, "The Church exhibits itself to us under two aspects . . . In one view, it is the Ideal Church; in another it is the Actual Church."[27] "The Ideal Church is the power of a new creation, which has been introduced into the actual history of the world by the incarnation of Jesus Christ."[28] "The Church moreover is the necessary and only form, in which Christianity can have a real existence in the world."[29] In other words "Christianity and the Church are identical."[30] Lastly, the Church . . . "includes in itself the necessity of a visible externalization in the world."[31] Nevin draws little, if any, distinction between the Ideal Church and the Incarnation.

In the next portion of his sermon, Nevin draws a distinction between the Ideal Church and the Actual Church. " . . . the actual Church is a process which has never yet become complete, but is always pressing forward to its completion, as this will appear in the millennium."[32] Nevin concludes, "The actual (Church) is the body of the ideal (Church) in growth."[33]

As with the human and divine in Christ, so it is with the ideal and actual in the Church, they can not be separated. To separate is to disembody, to

[26] *The Hymnal* (Saint Louis, Missouri: Published for the Church by Eden Publishing House, 1941), p. 34.
[27] Nevin, *The Church*, p. 7.
[28] Ibid., p. 8.
[29] Ibid., p. 9.
[30] Ibid., p. 10.
[31] Ibid., p. 10.
[32] Ibid., p. 11.
[33] Ibid., p. 15.

spiritualize, to deny the very essence of the Christian faith. For Nevin there is one Church that embodies both the ideal that is growing and the actual that exists. Similarly, in this age the ideal is overwhelmed by the actual. But this is not a reason to deny the existence of the ideal, or to divorce the ideal from the actual. There can be no disembodied Christ nor can there be a spiritually invisible Church. The Church created by God in Christ is visible and real.

The real and visible "Church is one and universal. Her unity is essential to her existence."[34] If bodies are organic wholes—then the body of Christ, the Church, must be one. In Nevin's day the Church, the body of Christ, was dividing daily. It has continued to be divided into our day.

On Sunday morning, October 20, 2002, two congregations of the United Church of Christ, within 10 miles of St. John's (Hain's) United Church of Christ voted to withdraw from the denomination. This brings to three the number of congregations that have withdrawn from the Heidelberg Association[35] of the United Church of Christ in the past year. However, Nevin would ask if the Church is one and her unity is essential how can withdrawals be justified? The separations cited above occurred over moral distinctions, specifically the issues of abortion and homosexuality. Of course, the moral differences were a consequence of "second order doctrinal differences."[36]

Under Nevin's theology it must be asked, are "second order doctrinal differences" and moral difference justification for dismembering the Body of Christ? William Erb, who documented Professor Nevin's lectures, made the following observations. First, "Schism means separation, cutting off. It [schism] is an error in life and practice. Heresy

[34] John Nevin, *Catholic Unity*: A sermon delivered at the opening of the Triennial Convention of the Reformed Protestant Dutch and German Reformed Churches at Harrisburg, Pa., August 8th 1844.
[35] Associations are the smallest regional bodies in the UCC. The Heidelberg Association's territory is the western portion of Berks County, Pa. In 2002, 21 congregations composed the Association, presently 18 congregations constitute the association.
[36] I employ the term "second order doctrinal differences" to draw a distinction between foundational doctrines such as "Jesus is Lord," "Jesus is the Christ," "God as Creator," and interpretive doctrines such as the inerrancy of Scripture, predestination and millennialism.

is an error in doctrine"[37] In addition "The sects may be justified as an order ad interim, but not as answerable to the order and genius of Christianity, nevertheless the unity of the Church is a higher interest which we are bound to seek."[38]

In Nevin's day and in ours, few see the unity of the Church as a higher interest. The body of Christ is mutilated and dismembered over the most insignificant differences because many have reduced their understanding of the Church to an association of voluntary clubs of the morally righteous. Church is all about us who we are, and not about God and what God did. Today's Church is about living by the rules and not living in Christ. Professor Nevin drew the distinction in this way:

> Christ, then was not the founder simply of a religious school—of vastly greater eminence, it might be, than Pythagoras, Plato, or Moses, but still a teacher of truth only in the same general sense. Christianity is not a doctrine, to be taught or learned like a system of philosophy or a rule of moral conduct. Rationalism is always prone to look upon the gospel in this way.[39]

It is important to remember Nevin does not separate Christ from the Church. As he said, "Christianity, then, is a life, not only as revealed at first in Christ, but as continued also in the Church."[40] In this understanding schism is a cardinal sin.

But it is only incidental sin in contemporary Protestantism, most especially America Protestantism. By denying the visible Church is the body of Christ, and by refusing to understand Christianity as a life, the American Protestant community has eliminated the sin of schism. If the Church is voluntary groupings of individuals who confess Jesus Christ as their personal savior, schism can never be serious. In this voluntary system the Church is not the body of Christ in a literal sense, but only a gathering of Christ's friends. And Christ's friends are free to assemble where and when they desire.

---

[37] The Rev. William H. Erb, complier & editor, *Dr. Nevin's Theology* (Reading, Pa.: I.M.Reading Publisher, 1913), p. 433.
[38] Ibid., p. 437.
[39] Nevin, The Mystical Presence, p. 216.
[40] Ibid., p. 222.

As the former congregations of the Heidelberg Association exhibited, it was their right and privilege to decide that they no longer wish to assemble and associate with people who do not embrace their moral values. They don't want to meet and eat with people who accept abortion and befriend homosexuals. With the knife righteousness they cut themselves free while imagining they have protected the purity of the faith. For people who hold this conception of Church schism is not a sin, but a good work.

In the Mercersburg System the Christian life is centered about the table. In the very first chapter of The Mystical Presence Nevin asserts, "The doctrine of the Eucharist is intimately connected with all that is most deep and central in the Christian system as a whole."[41] Later he explains, "Christianity is grounded in the living union of the believer with the person of Christ; and this great fact is emphatically concentrated in the mystery of the Lord's Supper."[42] Note how Nevin's understanding of Christianity in the present age, parallels his understanding of the Incarnation. Every Christian is a combination of Adam and Christ. The new creation, Christ, enters the existing creature, Adam. This combination forms an organic union. Once Christ enters, human beings are changed. And they can never return to their previous state. Nevin ties this transaction to the sacraments. Christianity is life in Christ. A life lived from the Lord's Table. The table to which "all who labor and are heavy laden"[43] are invited. It is the table of sustenance and nourishment for Christians. Nevin understood this to be the time honored understanding of Christ, the Church and discipleship.

THE MUSTARD SEED[44]

Discipleship begins with baptism. Baptism takes place as early in the life of a person as possible. In baptism God acts through the body of Christ, the Church, to plant the seed of the new creation in the one being baptized. Born of the womb we are brothers and sisters of Adam; when we are born of water and the spirit we become brothers and sisters of Christ.

---

[41] Ibid., p.29.
[42] Ibid., p.36.
[43] Matthew 11:28.
[44] Luke 17:6; Mark 4:31.

Baptism is a divine act. It is an act of grace by which God begins our growth into a new creature. Nevin who was always attracted to biological and organic metaphors and analogies, would give his assent to appropriating the parable of the mustard seed to illustrate his understanding of the development of Christian discipleship. At baptism the seed of new life is planted in the inner being of the baptized. This seed of new life is as small as a mustard seed. But with time and nurturing the seed will grow into a bush of some proportion. In this process the first Adam is replaced with the second Adam, Christ. Nevin also ties this growth to the Lord's Supper. Reflecting on the Heidelberg Catechism's understanding of the sacrament, Nevin writes, "The Lord's Supper is the actual bearer of a divine life; the mediatorial life of the Son of God, designated as his body and blood; with which he feeds the souls of his people, by the power of the Holy Ghost, unto everlasting salvation."[45] Thus the seed is feed from the table. Disciples grow by eating at the table of the Lord.

It is important to remember that for Nevin and those who follow the Mercersburg system Christ is objectively present at the table. This is a unique table, but what is received from this unique table shapes an entire life. The practices of eating and drinking, sharing and giving thanks form those who gather and partake. Christianity in this theology is about being the body of Christ in the world. Christ points to the Church as the fulfilment of the promise, "Lo I am with you alway".

Nourishing and cultivating the ever growing divine life within disciples is the responsibility of the Church just as it was the mission of Christ. Taking a clue from Kathryn Tanner, who in her essay "Theological Reflections and Christian Practice" observed, "Christian practices seem to be constituted in great part by a slippery give-and-take with non-Christian practices; they are mostly non-Christian practices—eating, meeting, greeting—done differently, born again, to unpredictable effet.." In the Mercersburg way, Lord's T able redeems the other tables and other occasions where disciples meet and work. No one holding a Mercersburg understanding of discipleship should dismiss study as a vital dimension of growth. The study table is where disciples sit alone or with others to acquire a better understanding of God and God's creation.

---

[45] John Nevin, *History and Genius of the Heidelberg Catechism*, (Chambersburg: Publication Office of the German Reformed Church. 1847), p.152.

Early on the youngest among us set at table on the lap of another who turns the pages and tell the stories. Often at the study table the very young just watch the conversation move around the table. As months accumulate into years, the young take their own seats; turn pages and read aloud the mighty acts of God.

Over time they learn the table has many uses. They are invited to set the table for a meal. Then they join parents and friends and partake of the fellowship and nourishment the table provides. This is an ancient Christian tradition, the table of the love feast. It is set on many different occasions: after funerals, before annual meetings, as part of the celebration of a wedding and even for those who have no table to call their own. Each time disciples serve or eat they remember and they learn.

Often the table is the destination for gifts—the mission table. This is a place to put cans and boxes for the food pantry, to place Christmas gifts for less fortunate brothers and sisters, to assemble school kits or first aid kits. And once a week the very same table is covered with the Church offering as it is being counted. Giving, assembling, delivering are the fruit of the mission table; it is a place to practice the faith. The table is a place that helps the divine within each of us to grow.

As disciples grow older the table acquires other uses. It becomes a place for discerning and deciding. As the divine grows within us the decision table plays an ever more prominent role in our common life. As we mature in Christ we have an ever increasing responsibility to participate in discerning the will of God for the Church and for disciples' individual lives. It is at this table the approaches of Karl Barth and John Nevin merge.

Theologians Barth and Nevin argue that the Christian faith cannot be a set of rules or a system of doctrine. And they both insist Christianity in its essence is communal and not individual. These two qualities command the need for communal discernment. For Nevin this is the mature Church transforming the old creation with the power of new creation. It is the Church of the enlarging "Ideal." For Barth meeting at the table of decision is the meaning and purpose of Church. Communal discernment is what God require of disciples. Frequently Barth gives the impression there is no room for growth, that maturity precedes Baptism. Often Nevin leaves the impression there is no need for growth that union with Christ is complete at Lord's Table.

Both agree every table and every task is closely related to the Table that stands at the center of the Church. All fellowship and all service originate at the gracious table of the Lord. They both affirm praise and thanksgiving as primary human responses to God. The two men have very different interpretations of the transaction that takes place between God and humans at the table. But both agree the table is essential for maintaining authentic Christianity. Barth wrote, ". . . with regard to the sacrament, the Evangelical Church has made a grave mistake. There is undoubtedly a connection between the neglect of the sacrament and Protestantism's becoming modernist."[46] John Nevin made the same argument to the Churches of America in the 19th Century. "Office for the Holy Communion" Nevin insists is, "The central character of this service, ruling as it ought to do the whole Order of Worship to which it belongs . . ." [47] Neglecting or diminishing the Lord's Table creates the impression that the Christianity is a faith of words and feelings. A tableless faith devolves into a non-material mind-centered system. Tablelessness encourages the construction of bypasses around community. A faith of words and affections constructs an expressway directly to God. Without the Lord's Table Christianity is easily transformed into the post-Christian faith Harold Bloom so vividly describes.[48]

But if we, like Nevin, stand in the Church of all space and time we must confess the Incarnation of Jesus Christ is a cornerstone of authentic Christianity. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." And low he is with us always to the end of the age. Every time we are invited to come to the table of the loaf and the cup we participate in the Incarnation. At that table, God feeds the new life that is growing within us. God will continue to nourish the people of the table until the end of time. For God prepares a table before us in the presence of our enemies.

---

[46] Karl Barth, *Credo,* trans. J. Strathearn McNab, (New York: Charles Scribner's Son, 1936), p.200.
[47] John Nevin, "Historical Vindication of the New Litugry" , *Catholic and Reformed Selected Theological Writings of John Williamson Nevin,* eds. Charles Yrigoyen, Jr and George H. Bricker, (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: The Pickwick Press, 1978), p. 400.
[48] Bloom, *The American Religion.*

Conclusion

The piety of practice is the most challenging type of piety to embrace. This piety is practiced amidst the hustle and bustle of daily life, and employs the very same furnishing and appointment others employ in their secular lives. The Mercersburg way claims creation as the workplace of God. In the bazaar of life God is transforming the old into the new; tables of commerce into tables of grace, persons destine for death into persons destine for eternal life. From the basics of creation God nourishes the new life that is planted in us. All this is difficult to detect. And none of it happens in the blink of an eye. Often we are uncertain if anything is changing. It is tempting to forsake the piety of practice for a warm heart or a logical thought. But to do so is to run the risk of forsaking authentic Christianity.

Selected Bibliography

Bloom, Harold. *The American Religion The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992.

Bricker, George H. "A Brief History of the Mercersburg Movement." Lancaster, Pennsylvania: An Occasional Paper published by Lancaster Theological Seminary, 1982.

DiPuccio, William. *The Interior Sense of Scripture The Sacred Hermeneutics of John W. Nevin*. Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1998.

Nevin, John Williamson. *Catholic and Reformed Selected Theological Writings of John Williamson Nevin,* eds. Charles Yrigoyen, Jr. & George H. Bricker. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: The Pickwick Press, 1978.

_____. "Catholic Unity" in *The Mercersburg Theology*. ed. James H. Nichols, 33-55. New York: Oxford University Press, 1966.

_____. "The Church": a sermon preached at the opening of the Synod of the German Reformed Church at Carlisle, October 1846. Chambersburg: German Reformed Church Publishing House, 1847.

_____. *History and Genius of the Heidelberg Catechism*. Chambersburg: Publication Office of the German Reformed Church. 1847.

_____. *The Mystical Presence and Other Writings on the Eucharist*, eds. Bard Thompson & George H. Bricker, Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1966.

_____. "The Year 1848" *Mercersburg Review* 1 (1848): 10-44.

Wentz, Richard E. *John Williamson Nevin ~ American Theologian*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

DWELLING RICHLY IN THE WORD OF GOD: A SERMON

Barbara Keshner Daniel

Texts: Colossians 3: 12-17 & John 3: 16- 21

On the afternoon of September 11th, 2001, I turned the TV on for the first time in four weeks. I had just arrived to my hotel room in Cairo, Egypt after spending two weeks with my friend Mary Mikael, President of NEST, in Lebanon and Syria. Egypt was a brief stop before I headed off to Lesotho, Southern Africa, to visit one of the young women from our church serving there as a missionary. All I really wanted to do was see the pyramids.

I found CNN just as they announced "breaking news." I watched in horror for the next few hours, not believing what I saw. It was surreal. Like a movie. It couldn't be true. I felt so far away. So cut off –from my country, from my church, from my family.

Cairo was the only place on my sabbatical travels where I didn't have a friend or missionary contact. I hadn't even met my guide.

I'm sure we can all remember where we were on September 11th. It doesn't take much imagination to feel once again what those hours and days to follow were like.

For me, I felt so isolated and alone. The last place I wanted to be was alone in a hotel room. I wanted to be with family and friends. I wanted to be in more familiar surroundings.

I lit the candle I had brought from St. Paul's and stared at it. Every year when we teach the confirmands how to acolyte, I tell them we light candles because it is a reminder that Jesus is the light of the world and that the darkness of evil cannot put it out. I needed that light.

I read my Bible and found myself humming hymns like "Amazing Grace" and "How Great Thou Art." I watched the National Prayer Service that Friday from the National Cathedral in Washington and was grateful that I knew the hymns they were singing by heart. I didn't need a hymnal to sing, "Our God, Our Help in Ages Past." I could quote the

passage from Romans along with President Bush. The blessing at the end of the service is one I use all the time, "Be of good courage, hold fast to that which is good, render to no one evil for evil . . ."

I was grateful that way back in confirmation class years and years ago that we had memorized the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism, that my dad had made me memorize, I Corinthians 13 and Psalm 23 as part of a Girl Scout God and Country project. John 3:16 was part of the assurance of parson in worship each Sunday.

I know passages of scripture, I know hymns, I know faith stories because so many people shared them with me, taught them to me, testified that these verses, these songs, these words, these stories have given them hope and strength in times of crisis, struggle, joy, and pain. And I knew to whom I belonged, thanks to words written hundreds of years before, by those who sought to unite the faithful in a time of great division and turmoil. Words meant to bring peace after so much blood had been spilled across Europe. Words that were meant to bridge ideologies and cultures.

Especially that week and in the months since, I have found myself digging deep into that reservoir of faith that has been passed on to me by my parents, Sunday School teachers, camp counselors, all kinds of adults that have shared their faith journey with me. I recalled stories of perseverance and faith from the residents of the Philadelphia Protestant Home where I grew up. Incredible stories of faith and determination as they lived through World War I and II in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria, German concentration camps, Russian concentration camps, refugee camps, no food, no shelter, no warm clothing. I remembered their testimonies of how they believed that God was always with them.

I wondered, what did the people climbing down the stairs of the World Trade Center that day call upon? What gave them hope in the midst of certain death? And then I asked myself, "What have we taught the children and youth at St. Paul's? Have we been faithful in sharing our faith? If adults who had grown up at St. Paul's were in the twin towers that day would they have scripture, would they have songs, hymns, would they have stories to recall that would give them hope?

What words will our children hold onto in the future if we haven't been faithful in our preaching and teaching about what it means to be disciples of Christ? Without the church community, will our children have deeply

ingrained in their minds and souls such scripture like Psalm 23 or great hymns of faith like, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," to turn to in times of struggle and pain?

I'm sorry but those little ditties of praise songs like "Our God is An Awesome God," and here I will show my prejudice, just don't cut it on a September 11th. I can sing, "Our God is Awesome God" a hundred times but it still feels shallow and wanting.

The challenge to the church in Colossae was the abundance of false teachers trying to lead people into a different kind of religious experience. The author of Colossians describes their teaching as "philosophy and empty deceit." We don't have to look far today to find evidence of that still. Even within the church.

In the days of our Mercersburg founders, the philosophy and empty deceit took the form of new emotional and theatrical measures like the Anxious Bench. Nevin suggested that the practitioners of the "New Measures" were religious quacks in the way they manipulated the emotions of the people. In order to combat this "quackery," that led to people professing a shallow faith, more in the bench than in Christ the Lord, Nevin argued that we needed a living Catechism. Nevin wrote that, the Zealous advocates of the emotional system meant to

> rouse the Church from its dead formalism. And to do this effectually, they strike off from the old ways of worship, and bring in new and strange practices that are adapted to excite attention. These naturally produce a theatrical effect, and this is taken at once for an evidence of waking life in the congregation.[49]

How many have taken a pilgrimage to Willow Creek, Saddleback, or the Crystal Cathedral? How many have bought all kinds of books, tapes, videos that promote this or that new measure to increase church growth and attendance? How many are more concerned about numbers and what looks good when we're filling out the annual reports for the denomination or talking with our colleagues at a ministerial meeting?

---

[49] John W. Nevin, "The Anxious Bench," in *Catholic and Reformed: Selected Theological Writings of John Williamson Nevin*, edited by Charles Yrigoyen, Jr. and George Bricker, p. 48.

Whose fault is it that the old forms aren't working? Listen to Nevin's response:

> If it be true that old forms are dead and powerless in the minister's hands, the fault is not in the form, but in the minister . . . The man who had no power to make himself felt in the catechetical class is deceived most assuredly and deceives others when he seems to be strong in the use of the anxious bench. Let the power of religion be present in the soul of him who is called to serve at the altar, and no strange fire will be needed to kindle the sacrifice. He will require no new measures. His strength will appear rather in resuscitating, and clothing with their ancient force the institutions and services already established for his use. The freshness of a divine life, always young and always new, will stand forth to view in forms that seemed sapless and dead.[50]

Nevin promoted something that today would seem folly. Catechetical instruction will be employed by all in the church from the very beginning of a child's life. How many ministers dread even the thought of confirmation for one year? Perhaps because we invest so much fluff and nonsense into the process as a society that it loses its meaning for the kids and for us. How many of our colleagues even know what's going on in the Sunday school? We need to be about the teaching ministry from the moment a child is born into the congregation. Providing nurture and education is fundamental to a process the end of which isn't confirmation. Instead confirmation is just that—a confirming of adult status, of adult conviction and adult commitment to Jesus Christ and the Church.

This involves children's participation in worship as well. The word and the sacraments are essential in the shaping of the Christian heart and mind. How congregations have fretted over whether to admit children to the communion table before they are confirmed. We want to have worship that includes the spiritual needs of all ages. We want even the children to experience the mystery that it can take a lifetime to comprehend even in a limited way. Worship is where we find our place in God's order, in God's salvation story. Worship is for each person

---

[50] Ibid. pp. 49-50.

gathered a highly personal yet communal event. Why shouldn't children be actively present and involved and engaged in worship?

I participated in a noon Good Friday service lead by our children, planned with our Minister of Christian Education. The kids told the Holy Week story using a wooden model of Jerusalem, some cloth figures representing Jesus and the disciples. Can they explicate fourteen theories of the atonement? No, but they know the story and they can tell it to you and their parents and their friends. They know it's an important story in the life of the church and it will take on deeper and deeper meaning each year as we re-tell it and as they mature.

Since sabbatical I have asked myself what are we teaching our young people? And what are we sharing with the younger adults who show up, babies in tow? Is it philosophy and empty deceit? Is it only lukewarm milk when they are really hungry for spiritual food?

How do we teach and mentor children, youth, and adults in the life of the church to face the principalities and powers? How about the false teachers in our midst? Those who preach to an emotional experience? Will the folks sitting in our pews be able to stand firm in the shifting winds of whatever new spiritual innovation blows into our midst? And what is my role as a pastor in all of this?

Several years ago I attended a Group Ministry workshop in New Holland, at one of these non-denominational, auditorium churches. The leaders for the day were Jonny Baker and Pete Ward, youth ministers from England, strongly rooted in the Anglican tradition. Their whole youth ministry focus derives from worship. They go into the streets and pubs and invite youth and young adults to worship. No pizza parties. No bowling. Not even discussion type groups. Their youth ministry is based on worship. The emphasis on reforming the traditions and liturgy of the church, using technology and music of the culture to bring new life to such things as the Apostles' Creed. Though it seems a bit disconcerting to sing the Apostles' Creed to techno European club music, I was fascinated by how the rich tradition was made new. Pete Ward has edited a book called *Mass Culture*, get it? It's a collection of essays from youth workers in England speaking to how the practice of the sacrament of Holy Communion is at the center of worship and an important outreach to youth and young adults. The authors, from a variety of faith traditions, speak to how they relate the old practices of

Holy Communion, the ritual, and its rootedness to the gospel truth, to contemporary culture. They call for a renewed commitment to the sacraments of the church, especially the Lord's Table as the place where God welcomes all. Nevin, writing in his "Vindication of the Revised Liturgy" reminds us that liturgies can and do become antiquated. If they fail to become alive again for the minister, how unlikely will they come to life for those who need them most, the people in our pews?

I recently read a story about a visit to a "contemporary" service by a teenager. Here's the account as written in "Worship for the Seriously Dechurched."

> "I wish they would've sung real music." That was part of the after-service evaluation from Amanda, my non-Christian, dechurched friend. (She was taken to church as a young child, but left when she got into her teens.) I asked her what she meant by "real music." There was an awkward silence, as she looked at me, incredulous that I wasn't following her. "You know, music that sounds like church. I used to sing it when I was little—what do you call it . . . "Hymns," I said. "Yeah, those. Don't churches sing them anymore?" "Some do. But a lot of churches think hymns are hard to sing and sound old, so they use music that sounds more like what the top 10 CDs sound like . . ." "Well, the music the band played today didn't sound like any CD I've ever heard. It was just . . . weird." She paused, and then brightening, added, "Hey, maybe they could play hymns and make them sound like U2 or Nelly. I saw a pipe organ in the balcony that no one was playing. They could. . like . . . play it with the band. Organs are very cool sounding." ("Worship for the Seriously Dechurched" in *Rev.*, March/April 2003, p. 18)

The Greek Orthodox Church in our area is attracting younger people. When speaking the one of the priests, he believes that there is a hunger in our society for a connection to the past, to the richness of tradition, to ritual that connects us to the holy. Attending services with his congregation during my sabbatical, I saw how he brought to life ancient texts and chants. It was far from a boring recitation of prayers, it was a living Catechism.

A magazine, *Worship Leader*, unsolicited, appeared in the mail last year. It is self-named as evangelical. Imagine my interest at an editorial

written by a former Southern Baptist preacher on why he joined the Greek Orthodox Church. He found the worship in his Southern Baptist tradition lacking depth and connection to the ancient church.

In subsequent issues there have been more than a few articles explaining the difference between the free-church patterns and "formal" liturgy. The biggest concern, this is a quote, is that the free churches "have set aside the weekly service of the Table." The author in one article goes on to say that more scripture is read in liturgical churches with at least three readings and that scripture permeates the prayers and hymns. "In evangelical churches," he writes, "the only Scripture read is that passage from which the pastor has developed his sermon. . . . the Word of God is held in high esteem but demonstrated differently in public worship." And here's another statement, "Liturgical worship, with its emphasis on congregational participation is uniquely qualified to meet the needs of a high tech generation." That article is followed by an article on *Lectio Divina*.

The Heidelberg Catechism reminds me that the teaching ministry of the church cannot be separated from our worship life. They go hand in hand in the process of Christian formation.

The Catechism was directed at teenagers and yet today just like then we have adults sitting in our pews who are hungry for the basics of faith, they want to know why we believe what we believe. They want the tools for daily living that can be called upon and drawn upon in times of challenge, when they feel like they're world is collapsing around them.

Younger adults, well let's say my age and into their fifties, are asking for sermons on the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's prayer, the symbolism of the rose window in our church. We recently replaced the white and green paraments and people were fascinated by the description of the symbols chosen.

My concern about whether our members had those tools of faith, deeply embedded in their hearts and minds caused me to think outside the Wednesday evening Bible study that was not very well attended. Now we're into our second year of practicing *lectio divina* as a congregation. Each month we have a featured passage and the congregation is invited to pray that passage every day. Committees of the church include the passage as their opening prayer and ask the question, "What does this passage have to say about our work as a . . . Stewardship Committee, the

Hospitality/Evangelism Committee." The youth group studies the passage at one their meetings during the month as well.

The passages we're studying have been identified by the congregation as those passages of scripture they, we, believe every Christian ought to know. The newsletter contains the passage with some exegetical/historical comments. Each week the passage is printed in the bulletin with some directions for reading prayerfully and thoughtfully. A thought-provoking question or two is included as well. Our hope is that at the end of a month, after dwelling in the passage, the words will be embedded in the heart and mind for recall when needed.

How do you measure the changes of following such an ancient process as a community? I notice that people are more comfortable responding to the passages, raising questions, asking for more information, wanting to study further. There have been more requests for bible study resources and study guides. The language of the Bible has crept into more conversations at meetings and in gatherings such as coffee hour. It's not unusual for someone to write to me from work and say, "I was just reading the passage for the month and I was wondering . . ." It occurred to me that this is a model of a living catechism, bringing to new life an ancient practice for a new day.

Today's anxious benches are all around us. How do we respond as church leaders when we discover that members of our churches are reading things as the *Left Behind Series*, meant to scare people into believing in Christ because you certainly don't want to be one of those unfortunate, ignorant people who were left behind. Nevin reminds us that the Kingdom of God is not advanced by fear and emotion but by a faithful teaching ministry that includes catechism, worship and expressing the gospel through pastoral presence in visitation. So do we ignore these challenges in our midst or do we reclaim our teaching roles and offer an alternative vision of God's Kingdom of love and grace.

The author of Colossians proclaims that to face the principalities and powers of the world and the false teachers, one must keep an open door for the word of God (4:3) and let the word of Christ dwell in you richly (3:16). That it is through the word of God that we teach and admonish one another, we hold one another accountable. With gratitude in our hearts we sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God. Teaching and worship go hand in hand. Hymns and spiritual songs are meant to form

our identity and our community, as well as praise God. What we have learned in our heads will be demonstrated in our behavior, in our life as a Christian community and in how we treat other creatures.

For more than four centuries the Heidelberg Catechism has formed part of the teaching and preaching ministry of Reformed churches. It was meant to be used in worship as well as taught to young people; spiritual formation of youth as well as adults; meant to shape the community of the church to provide a firm foundation for faith.

Here is our Heidelberg Catechism once more. Will its words carry us over and around the tragedies of our personal lives? Will its spirit reach forward to us as we experience the historical upheavals and political uncertainties of the present? I guess it depends. Nevin would say, it depends on us. From the perspective of the Heidelberg Catechism we can find either a document mercifully resigned to the dusty past or a rich resource for building Christians today. We can toss it aside as a historical relic, or crack it open and mine it for theological riches beyond compare. What we do with it largely depends on us. What we as ministers of the Word and Sacraments need to find to feed our own spiritual selves is what will energize us for the witnessing and nurturing of the faithful, eager to be lifted even in our own high-tech times. What we do with it depends on us, on us right here and right now. Amen.

DOUGLAS HORTON: UCC ARCHITECT

Benjamin Griffin

Douglas Horton and the Ecumenical Impulse in American Religion by Theodore Louis Trost, Harvard Theological Studies, 2002, 277 pp.

Douglas Horton was one of the principal persons responsible for the creation of the United Church of Christ, but his work and influence extended beyond that Church. I suspect that only those who know something about the history of the UCC even known the name of Douglas Horton. Theodore Trost, who comes from a distinguished UCC family, has written not only a superb biography of Horton, but in so doing traces the developments in American Congregationalism before and after World War II which fostered an ecumenical impulse in the Congregational Christian Churches.

The road to the union of Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church was often winding and frequently bumpy. At times the road appeared to be at a dead end. More than anyone else, Horton never gave up hope that the union would take place. Trost vividly describes Horton's roles and those of his friends and adversaries. Perhaps, Horton's most original ecclesial contribution was his concept of Congregationalism B.

Congregationalism A was the conviction that "church" is found only in the local congregation. "Church" did not reside in Associations and national assemblies such as the General Council. Horton argued in his addresses, writings, and in civil court in favor of Congregationalism B. Briefly stated, Congregationalism B held that when an Association and the General Council gathered they were "church" in a similar sense as when a local congregation gathered. Congregation, Association, and General Council were autonomous of each other, but bound in a covenant relationship.

Congregational opponents to the union argued in church and court that the proposed United Church of Christ would result in a dramatically different understanding of "church" from that of historic Congregationalism. Congregationalism B was Horton's attempt to convince the court and Congregationalists opposed to the union that the doctrine of the church proposed in the United Church of Christ was not a radical departure. I have written elsewhere that I have serious doubts if Horton's Congregationalism B has any solid historical basis. I also wonder if it is really the case that "church" subsists in the same way in congregation, Association, and national assembly even in Congregationalism B. Horton did not adequately address the ontological relationship between what we now call in the UCC the "several 'settings' of the Church." One of the unfinished legacies of Douglas Horton is to address again in the UCC our theological understanding of church.. Horton's Congregationalism B could be a point at which to begin the conversation.

Two other major contributions of Douglas Horton were his deanship of Harvard Divinity School and his presence at the Second Vatican Council. With the strong support of Harvard President Nathan Pusey, Horton revitalized the divinity school and brought it into the mainstream of the ecumenical movement. The first Roman Catholic professor was appointed and the Center for the Study of World Religions was established. The faculty was significantly strengthened. Not simply because I work in a theological school I find Trost's chapter on Horton at Harvard the most fascinating of all.

Horton was widely considered the "dean" of the Protestant observers at the Second Vatican Council. He attended all the sessions! United Church Press published four volumes of his *Vatican Diary*.

Besides being a well known parish minister, Minister and General Secretary of the General Council of Congregational Christian Churches, Harvard dean, Horton introduces the writings of Karl Barth to the United States as well as welcoming brothers of the Taize Community to this country.

Theodore Trost's book—is a major contribution not only to understanding the United Church of Christ, but also the religious currents in post-war America, many of which are still with us. This is a book that pastors,

denominational leaders and especially students in UCC history and polity classes will find valuable.

An invitation to join the Mercersburg Society and attend the annual convocation!

President
Rev. Dr. Norman Kansfield
17 Seminary Place
New Brunswick, NJ 08901
(732) 247-5241

Vice President
Rev. Dr. Deborah Rahn Clemens
PO Box 268
Souderton, PA 18084

Secretary
Rev. John Miller, O.C.C.
1321 Marie Avenue
Ephrata, PA 17522
(717) 733-9049

Treasurer
Rev. Dr. Thomas Lush
310 W. Main Ave.
Myerstown, PA 17067
(717) 866-5252

Administrative Vice President
Rev. Dr. Jeffrey Roth, O.C.C.
1811 Lincoln Way East
Chambersburg, PA 17201
(717) 263-8593

Membership Secretary
Rev. Phyllis Baum
100 Haybrook Drive
York, PA 17402
(717) 848-4007

- Membership in the Society is sustained by $35.00 per annum for general membership and $20.00 per annum for students, payable to the Treasurer.

- Membership includes receiving *The New Mercersburg Review.*

- Manuscripts submitted for publication and books for review should be sent to:

Linden DeBie, Editor
The New Mercersburg Review
2700 Mayan Drive
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33316
E-mail: lindendb@aol.com

- Manuscripts must be submitted by disk or by e-mail attachment. Please include the appropriate biographical information.

THE NEW
MERCERSBURG REVIEW

JAN

3c USA 5 3c USA

PHILIP SCHAFF LIBRARY
555 WEST JAMES STREET
LANCASTER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
LANCASTER, PA 17603