

**THE NEW
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REVIEW**

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**THE LITURGICAL LESSONS OF
MERCERSBURG**

John M. Maxwell

**DONALD BLOESCH:
THE LAST INTERVIEW?**

Richard E. Burnett

THE CHURCH IN ADVENT

Kenneth Aldrich

BOOK REVIEW

F. Christopher Anderson

*Drawn to Freedom: Christian Faith Today in
Conversation with the Heidelberg Catechism.*

By Eberhard Busch, (William Radar, translator)

Philip Schaff

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

The Society pursues contemporary theology in the Church and the world within the context of Mercersburg Theology. In effecting its purpose the Society provides opportunities for fellowship and study for persons interested in Mercersburg Theology, sponsors and 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 the subjects pertinent to the aims and interests of the Society.

From the Editor

F. Christopher Anderson

The Fall issue reveals the broad interests of the Society.

Jack Martin Maxwell is very well known in Mercersburg Theology. His book *Worship and Reformed Theology: The Liturgical Lessons of Mercersburg* (1976, Pickwick Press) is required reading on the subject. We are extremely happy that he gave a wonderful overview on this subject at a recent Corpus Christi Retreat. On the one hand his essay helps those who have studied his classic text to review the work and on the other hand it helps those new to the study get a great summary of his almost 500 page book. Maxwell does bring up some new issues that will lead to debate. One such item involves his view on standing for the reading of the Gospel.

Richard Burnett has very kindly allowed us to publish what so far as we know is Donald Bloesch's final interview. Dr. Burnett earned his M.Div. from Princeton, a S.T.M. From Yale Divinity School and a Ph.D. from Princeton Theological Seminary. He is the author of *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis* (Eerdmans, 2004) and editor of *A Cry of Need and Joy: Confessing the Faith in a New Millennium* (Reformation, 2002). He has served for twenty years as a pastor in the PCUSA and he presently serves as Professor of Systematic Theology and Assistant Director of the D.Min. program at Erskine Theological Seminary. Donald Bloesch is the only recent theologian to have completed a seven volume systematic theology. To appreciate Bloesch's significance to Mercersburgers see Gabriel Fackre's tribute in the Fall 2010 edition of the NMR.

Kenneth Aldrich (retired Episcopal priest) gives all of us preachers a sermon for Advent. By that I do not mean he has given us a sermon to preach. Instead he is preaching to us! Are we really preaching the message of Advent?

Lastly, I have reviewed Eberhard Busch's book *Drawn to Freedom: Christian Faith Today in Conversation with the Heidelberg Catechism*. I hope this encourages us to go back to the sources and seriously reclaim and rethink our common faith.

THE LITURGICAL LESSONS OF MERCERSBURG THE REVEREND DOCTOR JACK M. MAXWELL

Delivered on May 5th, 2011 @ the Order of Corpus Christi
Retreat in New Baltimore, PA

I am grateful for the opportunity to re-visit research which I began more than forty years ago; and I am also grateful for the Mercersburg Movement. The liturgical controversy enabled me to acquire both my Ph.D. and my "Mrs." I first learned about that controversy in a course taught by James Hastings Nichols at Princeton Theological Seminary. His notes from that course became the book, *Romanticism in American Theology*, first delivered as the Currie Lectures at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary – an institution I would subsequently serve as president.

The "Mrs." came about this way. The repository for the Mercersburg material is, as you know, the Historical Society of the German Reformed Church, housed in the Philip Schaff Library at Lancaster Theological Seminary. It was in that Historical Society, with a folio volume of the *Weekly Messenger* open on the table at which we sat, that I presented her engagement ring to Sandra Nagy, then secretary to librarian George Bricker, and weekend "weather girl," as she was called in those politically incorrect days, at WGAL television in Lancaster.

Upon leaving the faculty of Princeton Seminary in 1969, I became senior pastor of The Presbyterian Church of Sewickley, PA, suburban Pittsburgh. Imagine my surprise and delight to discover that the first minister of that congregation was Daniel Eagle Nevin, John Williamson's youngest brother; and that a parishioner was David Schaff, grandson of Philip.

Another member of the Nevin family – the songwriter Ethelbert Woodbridge Nevin, of "The Rosary" and "Mighty Lak'a Rose" fame – was also a member of the Sewickley Presbyterian Church. Indeed, the Nevins were so prominent in that congregation and

community that the children, it is said, thought the Lord's Prayer began, "Our Father, who art a Nevin."

I first became aware of the Order of Corpus Christi some months ago when I "Googled" my own name. Your web site appeared, because at the time it indicated that my book had been selected as the resource for the 2011 retreat. That surprised and delighted me to know that the hours I spent in the old Philip Schaff Library at Lancaster Seminary might still be of benefit to someone lo these years later. But I was even more surprised as I explored the web site to see pictures of what looked for all the world like monks – United Church of Christ monks. "Wow," I thought. "I like this outfit." An e-mail to Abbot Richard is what subsequently led me here, and I thank you for the invitation.

Luther Binkley put the matter succinctly: The Mercersburg liturgies are "a working out in an art form of the ideas and faith of the Mercersburg theology."¹ And Howard Hageman drove the point home:

What made the Mercersburg liturgical movement so remarkable was not the *Order of Worship*, despite its high degree of liturgical skill. It was rather the fact that it was the first liturgy in the Reformed Church to articulate a theology. Indeed, it was at Mercersburg that there was worked out, often in the heat of battle, for the first time in the Reformed churches what could be called a theology of the liturgy.²

More will be said about that before we are through, but this is surely the place to begin: the Mercersburg liturgies are "a working out in an art form of the ideas and faith of the Mercersburg theology." And it is that relationship between theology and the liturgy which is the perspective from which to judge the so-called "contemporary worship," with which not a few congregations are

¹ Luther J. Binkley, *The Mercersburg Theology* (Manheim, PA: The Sentinel Printing House, 1953), p. 109.

² Howard Hageman, *Pulpit and Table* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1962), p. 92.

experimenting today. And more will also be said about that before we are through.

The Liturgical Lineage of the German Reformed Church

It is fair to say that the liturgical lineage of the German Reformed Church was thoroughly Zwinglian. In his understanding of worship, the sermon was the solemn center to which everything else referred, from the first plea for the presence of the Spirit who "opens the Word," to the last act of confession, made in the knowledge of human misery and divine mercy which only the Word affords.

Although it was never published in America before Bomberger's English translation in 1850, the Palatinate Liturgy was known to some and used more extensively than any other liturgy, according to Philip Schaff.³ A preaching order which found its liturgical focus in the sermon, nevertheless the Palatinate Liturgy prescribed a pattern of monthly preparations for and celebrations of the Eucharist – a discovery which was to shock the German Reformed brethren in America three centuries later.

Revivalism was also a part of the German Reformed Church's liturgical lineage, and would have been an even greater influence were it not for Nevin's quick and effective response in *The Anxious Bench*. Despite that, the theology of revivalism and its liturgical implications are evident throughout much of American Protestantism in the Nineteenth Century. Revivalism understood the Church to be "an assemblage of religiously inclined neighbors," as Julius Melton described it,⁴ rather than the people of the Word, as Calvin had argued. Objectivity in worship yielded to the maudlin sentimentality of revivalistic hymns, and the "liturgy" lost its historic sense of a corporate oblation in response to God's gift in Jesus Christ. The purpose of worship was conversion, and the

³ Jack M. Maxwell, *Worship and Reformed Theology: The Liturgical Lessons of Mercersburg* (Pittsburgh: The Pickwick Press, 1976), p. 57.

⁴ Julius Melton, *Presbyterian Worship in America: Changing Patterns Since 1787* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1967), p. 51.

liturgy became an instrument used by clergy and choir to precipitate the sort of emotional crisis which would guarantee conversion.

The worship over which German Reformed clergy presided in the mid-nineteenth century was sacerdotal and, in some quarters, quite informal. In 1853, a *Weekly Messenger* correspondent chastised those who “have their spittoons arranged through their pews, so that they could intersperse their devotion with a bit of carnal enjoyment, with seeming importunity.”⁵ A month later the same correspondent wrote again, complaining about the dearth of congregational singing. The choir completely dominates the service and the people do not even know what is being sung. In a telling comparison he wrote: “The sale of indulgences in the Romish Church is a practice regarded by Protestants with unmitigated abhorrence, but the habit of depending on others to praise God for us in the sanctuary involves precisely the same principle.”⁶ Two years later another correspondent described the liturgical landscape this way: “The minister does the preaching and praying, . . . the choir is drilled to a fiddle-de-dee music, and does the singing; and the people are the listening spectators, and receive credit if only they perform *that* part in a wakeful and silent way. . . . The preacher takes the Bible to himself, the choir takes the hymnbooks, and liturgy we have none.” If the minister fails, the service fails. “For the benefit of the congregation, then, and the elevation of the ministry as an order, or institution, give us a liturgy.”⁷

Early Liturgical Stirrings

Mercersburg produced that liturgy in 1857; however, the earliest liturgical stirrings in the German Reformed Church began before some of the Mercersburg professors were born. On May 3, 1820, at the first meeting of the Maryland Classis, it was agreed that it “be recommended to Synod to improve our Church Liturgy, and at the same time to translate it into English and to promote its printing.” Nothing much came of this proposal, but the matter surfaced again in 1834. A committee developed what came to be called the Mayer

⁵ Maxwell, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Liturgy, adopted by the Synod in 1840. It was an extremely didactic book of forms for occasional services, which never required a second printing.

If anyone cared much for the Mayer Liturgy, they were not quick to admit it, with the result that the Hagerstown Synod in 1848 appointed still another committee to take up the liturgical question. This committee was chaired by none other than John Henry Augustus Bomberger, whose liturgical understanding at this stage in the drama was not unenlightened. For the committee, he reported to the Norristown Synod in 1849, “earnestly advocating the propriety and importance of Liturgies in general, and urging the necessity of a new Liturgy as called forth by the wants of the Church.”⁸ And he went on to say: “Let us realize that the eloquence of the preacher . . . is as sounding brass apart from the fervent, believing prayers, and cheerful praises of humble and devoted Christians.”

In the ensuing debate there emerged a number of issues which, although constantly debated, were never resolved. Some argued that a liturgy implied that God heard only proper prayers. Others replied that the issue is not what is acceptable to God, but rather what is most edifying for the Church. Some argued that if one prayed in the words of another, then it was the other who prayed; but the question came back: Well, then, would you say the same thing about singing a hymn? Nevin’s successor in the Seminary, B. C. Wolff, spoke in favor of a “fuller liturgy” as a doctrinal safeguard against heretical preaching. And for the first time we hear the voice of Philip Schaff, who attempted to allay the concerns of not a few: Free and fixed prayer must never exclude each other, he insisted.

A committee was appointed to report to the next Synod “a Plan or Schedule of a Liturgy.”

The Provisional Liturgy

That committee, moderated by Schaff, made the most extraordinary report to the Baltimore Synod in 1852. From the start it was

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

evident that the committee intended a complete prayer book, to include forms for the Lord's Day, the festival seasons, infant and adult baptism, confirmation, Holy Communion, visitation and communion of the sick, the visitation of prisoners, the solemnization of matrimony, the ordination and installation of pastors, elders and deacons, the laying of a cornerstone, the consecration of a church, the burial of the dead. And in addition to all that, the book was to include a complete lectionary and a family liturgy to be used in morning and evening devotions, and on special occasions.

These forms were intended to illustrate in some measure the seven principles which the committee suggested should guide their future liturgical labors – principles well worth rehearsing 159 years later. First, “the liturgical worship of the Primitive Church, as far as it can be ascertained from the Holy Scriptures, the oldest ecclesiastical writings, and the liturgies of the Greek and Latin Churches of the third and fourth centuries, ought to be made, as much as possible, the general *basis* of the proposed Liturgy. . . .”⁹ This may be the most profound and surprising of all the proposed principles, except for those who came to comprehend Schaff's dynamic understanding of Church history. The early Church is normative for liturgical composition, insisted Schaff. He and Nevin argued that the Sixteenth Century was great for doctrine but not for liturgical development.

Nevertheless, the second principle proposed that among the later liturgies, special reference ought to be had to the old Palatinate and other Reformed liturgies of the Sixteenth Century. While the peculiar insights of the Reformation are acknowledged, the Sixteenth Century is pointedly a secondary liturgical reference.

Third, none of these liturgies, whether ancient Catholic or Reformed, should be “copied slavishly, but reproduced rather in a free evangelical spirit and adapted to the peculiar wants of our age and denomination. . . .” “In short, the liturgy must be indigenous both to the denomination and to the geography – again typical of

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 132 – 139.

Schaff's dynamic view of history and revelation. The ancient liturgical forms – the Decalogue, Lord's Prayer, Magnificat, Te Deum, and all the other New Testament canticles – could not be excelled for their devotional quality and their ability to lend continuity and context to the church's worship; however, the excellence of these ancient forms did not preclude new forms peculiar to the present age and place of the church.

Fourth, the most frequently used forms – Regular Service for the Lord's Day and the Eucharist – should embrace several forms – shorter/longer, with/without responses – with a view to avoid monotony and adapt them more readily to the condition and wants of our various ministers and congregations. As we will see, such internal options were provided in *The Provisional Liturgy*, but were removed in the *Order of Worship* – a disastrous mistake politically.

Fifth, “the language and style ought to be throughout scriptural as much as possible; that is, simple, sublime, and devotional, such as we find in the Psalms especially, and in the Lord's Prayer. “ The doctrinal tone so evident in the Calvinistic liturgies should be used sparingly. Schaff believed that it was possible to be both theologically sound and inspirational.

Sixth, the addition of a family liturgy would have independent value, but would also help to facilitate the introduction of the liturgy among the laity and thus promote its right use in the Church. “For, in the opinion of your committee, a Liturgy will never be sufficiently appreciated by the congregations, if it is confined to the hands of the minister.” Members of the congregation ought to own a Bible, a hymnbook, and the liturgy. They will take more interest in the devotional exercises, the committee argued, “if they can follow the minister by their book, and respond at least with an audible Amen to the end of each prayer.” So, this was to be a peoples' prayer book rather than a pulpit manual of forms. And this, it is worth remembering, is a Protestant rather than a Catholic idea.

Seventh, “a liturgy ought not to interfere with the proper use of extemporaneous prayer, either in public or in private, but rather to

regulate and promote it. Sufficient room should be left for its exercise in connection with” – note well – “the Sunday afternoon and evening services, as well as in weekly Bible lectures, social prayer meetings, catechetical exercises, and on special occasions.” Missing from this list are the sacraments, ordinances, and the regular Lord’s Day worship.

Quite remarkably, *The Provisional Liturgy* of 1857 fulfilled these seven proposals. In its basic design and orientation, it is “a bond of union both with the ancient Catholic Church and the Reformation, and yet . . . the product of the religious life of [the German Reformed Church in America] in its present state.” The Church Year and the Apostles’ Creed provide the ancient liturgical superstructure for a peoples’ liturgy and hymn book. Scripture is the norm throughout. There are verses provided which call the people to worship, and verses for the individual to consider “whilst washing and dressing.” There are, on the one hand, the great canticles and corporate prayers prescribed for the festival seasons, while on the other hand there are the humble prayers suggested for the family altar: “Visit, O Lord, with Thy grace this house and family. Drive far from us all snares of the enemy. Let Thy holy angels have charge over us to preserve us in peace; and let Thy blessing be upon us forever, through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

The Order of Worship

Two major questions concerning the *Provisional Liturgy* gave rise to the *Order of Worship*. The first was a polity matter – viz., the constitutionality of a *provisional* liturgy. The use of the word, “provisional”, suggested an impermanence, which even affected the sale of the book. Nevin claimed that “the very fact of its being an experiment stood in the way of any general serious effort to bring it into use.”

The second question was: How should the Liturgy be introduced into the congregations? Clearly, it could not be forced. Harbaugh and Steiner sought to facilitate the *Provisional Liturgy’s* way into the denomination’s worship through education and music. A volume of musical settings for the hymns and canticles was published in 1859. Parenthetically, Bomberger was enthusiastic

about *Cantate Domino*, as the book was called, and told Steiner that his choir director at Race Street wanted it introduced to the choir.

Truth be told, the *Provisional Liturgy* was not widely used, and, accordingly, neither did it receive a fair trial. It did, however, provoke not a little agitation within the denomination, and that, in many ways, is the story of John Henry Augustus Bomberger – a story about which we will hear more later on. Let it be said here that initially Bomberger seemed to be enthusiastic and even promoted the use of the *Provisional Liturgy*; however, in the three years following its publication his mind and mood changed, and the reasons are not entirely clear. By 1861, he was calling for a revision of the *Provisional Liturgy*, which dumbfounded Nevin and Harbaugh; thus the polemic began which was to continue for two decades. The more questions Bomberger raised, the more abuse was heaped upon him by Nevin, Schaff and Harbaugh. And the more abuse he suffered, the madder he got; and the madder he got, the further he moved from his medium-liturgical moorings, until he was finally making charges and advocating positions quite inconsistent with his own earlier statements.

It must be said that many others shared his concerns about the responsive form of worship, the great length and didactic character of some of the forms, and “certain sacramental doctrines and high church views,” particularly ministerial absolution, baptismal regeneration, and the priestly character of the ministry. Indeed, there were enough others sharing these and similar concerns that the Synod in 1861 resolved to return the *Provisional Liturgy* to the original committee for revision.

In short order the committee and Bomberger reached a complete impasse. Nevin agreed to present to the 1862 Synod a report articulating the two mutually exclusive positions on the liturgy. The report was published as *The Liturgical Question* in June 1862, and included a piece by Schaff, who argued that the matter of responses was the symptom, not the issue. The issue was rather, “Shall the new liturgy be a book of forms only for the use of the

pastor in the study and on the pulpit, or shall it be a book of the pastor and people for common worship?"¹⁰

The former was essentially Bomberger's position, Nevin argued. By contrast, the liturgical theory of the majority would have it that . . . a liturgy is not just a collection of prayers and other single forms of devotion, but a whole order or scheme rather of public worship, in which all the parts are inwardly bound together by their having a common relation to the idea of the Christian altar, and by their referring themselves through this always to what must be considered the last ground of all true Christian worship, the mystical presence of Christ in the Holy Eucharist.¹¹

Such a theory implies that the "sacramental principle" governs the liturgy throughout – i.e., the Eucharist becomes "a single grand system" around which the entire liturgy revolves. The theory implies, as well, a "priestly character" – i.e., the focus of worship is the altar rather than the pulpit. So, too, must the liturgy revolve around the Church Year and the Apostles' Creed. And, finally, this liturgical theory necessitates the "active cooperation of the people, along with the officiating minister, in its services" – i.e., responses with the body and the voice.

If it chooses, the Synod may change the liturgical plan entirely; however, Nevin argued forcefully that the *Provisional Liturgy* could not be fundamentally changed. "Like a work of art, it has in this view its own plan, and is governed throughout by its own reigning idea. . . . As a work of literature at least, if nothing more, let the liturgy live."¹²

The Synod authorized further trial use of the *Provisional Liturgy*, claiming that to do otherwise would violate its contract with the publisher, and instructed the revision committee to proceed with its work. It held six meetings and 45 sessions, making no fundamental changes save for certain modifications in the order or sequence of

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.273.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 276.

some of the services. Harbaugh admitted that the changes were largely editorial. Some services, such as the optional Lord's Day, were dropped, and others were added: an evening service, a service to be used at sea, and scripture readings for families.

The change in the title was deliberate. The word, liturgy, was dropped, and the revised work was called, simply, *An Order of Worship*. "Liturgy" had become an offensive word to a number of persons. Considerable work was done on the lectionary, although it was largely adopted from Shields' *Presbyterian Book of Common Prayer*. Despite a number of changes in the Lord's Day service, the character and nature remain the same. As in the *Provisional Liturgy* the entire service is conducted from the altar until the Psalm or Hymn prior to the sermon, at which time the minister enters the pulpit to preach a sermon which "should be in harmony with the general order of the Church Year."

The two most important decisions made by the committee in regard to the Lord's Day service were the omission of the alternative forms and the intention to relate the service more directly to the Eucharist. The committee pointed to the Eucharist as central even on those occasions when it was not celebrated. In omitting the alternative forms, the entire Liturgy became more internally consistent and more expressive of Mercersburg theology. Even the token gesture of free prayer, included in the *Provisional Liturgy*, was omitted in the *Order of Worship* – not only in the morning service, but also in the evening service. This clearly went far beyond the Baltimore proposals, as Bomberger was quick to point out; however, now sans Bomberger, the committee proceeded strictly on principle with no concession whatever to politics.

The most striking change in the eucharistic order was made in its structure. The opening portion indicates a return more to a Reformed than to an Anglican pattern, with the Confession and Declaration beginning the service. The Consecration Prayer is preserved with one regrettable exception. For no explicable reason the Prayer of Oblation was reduced substantially, thereby removing most of the anamnesis and expectation.

To sum it up: the several changes made by the revision committee resulted in a prayer book more internally consistent, and one more completely expressive of the Mercersburg theology. Alternative forms were omitted; and all services were related more directly to the Eucharist, thus the better expressing its centrality. It goes without saying, however, that political expediency was sacrificed on the altar of liturgical integrity.

Strengths and Weaknesses

By way of assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the Mercersburg liturgical movement, there is no better place to begin than with the title of Nichols' volume: *Romanticism in American Theology*, for it is both descriptive and critical. Nevin and Schaff were clearly the Reformed exponents of Romanticism in America, and, as such, participated in all that was both defensible and indefensible in this "appreciation if not emulation of the ways of ancestral generations. . . ."¹³ Hageman calls the second generation of the Nineteenth Century the "Gothic Age," and architecturally and aesthetically it was. A return to the past was necessary in order to recover a lost liturgical heritage; and in this sense Protestantism owes a substantial debt to Romanticism. The Sixteenth Century was rediscovered as well as the Early Church; and that made the Nineteenth Century the golden age of liturgical renewal in the Reformed churches.

Here is the weakness in that strength, however: the historical and theological began to mean less and less as the demands of the psychological and the aesthetic loomed larger, as Hageman argued.¹⁴ That Mercersburg encouraged the aesthetic – recognizing the holiness of beauty as well as the beauty of holiness – is hardly a criticism; yet the extent to which Mercersburg's second and subsequent generations became preoccupied with architectural frills is indeed a criticism.

Here is another: there is every indication that the liturgical machinations were exclusively a clerical pastime – a "pothor,"

¹³ Melton, *op. cit.*, p. 59.
¹⁴ Hageman, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

Hageman called it, that was going over the heads of the laity and one in which they had no great interest. This was not entirely Mercersburg's fault, it must be said, for the liturgical committee made a serious effort to produce a volume which would in every sense be a people's prayer book.

A related aspect of this clerical infatuation with the liturgical movement is that a substantial number of Mercersburg's sons left the German Reformed Church for the Episcopal and Roman Churches. The quantity was not as great as the quality of the defectors, and the Mercersburg movement was seriously diminished by the loss of several of its brighter lights.

Still another criticism, perhaps borne of liturgical romanticism, is the fact that the Mercersburg liturgical movement focused almost exclusively on the Eucharist to the detriment of preaching. There was virtually no serious discussion of the relation of Word to sacrament. Prominent in the Mercersburg liturgical enterprise is a theology of the Eucharist, but notably absent is a theology of preaching. It is the case, however, that neither Nevin nor Schaff undervalued preaching. The latter wrote that the sermon cannot be valued too highly. "It produced the Church in the First Century, reformed it in the Sixteenth, and must also regenerate it in the Nineteenth Century."¹⁵ Perhaps the criticism that preaching receives inadequate treatment is based simply on a comparison of the weight of the words written about the sacraments and the sermon. In that respect, there is clearly an imbalance; however, in an article appearing in the *Mercersburg Review*, George Lewis Staley, minister of St. John's Reformed Church near Petersville, Maryland, provided his readers with a remarkably sound description of preaching: "the preaching of the word, which is truly a sacramental power, is not a dry, lifeless discussion of doctrine, but a vivid reproduction and *re*-presentation of the facts and mysteries of our Holy Religion."¹⁶

¹⁵ Maxwell, *op. cit.*, p. 361.
¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 362.

If the principal liturgical weaknesses of Mercersburg are those of romanticism, then so are the principal strengths also those of romanticism. Mercersburg participated – if not led the way within the Reformed ranks – in a rediscovery of the past. Nichols calls it a “polarity between the theologies of Protestantism and of the early Fathers.” Schaff described it as “a bond of union with the ancient Catholic Church and the Reformation, and yet . . . the product of the religious life of our denomination in its present state.” In short, the Mercersburg movement, through its theological investigations, philosophy of history, and liturgical studies, assisted in breaking the back of provincial sectarianism and in introducing American Protestantism to the Church catholic.

Liturgical renewal both contributed to and reflected the strong ecumenism of the Mercersburg movement. Perhaps more than any other aspect of the movement, this has led to its rediscovery a century later and made it both interesting and paradigmatic for today.

To my mind, however, Mercersburg’s greatest strength and lasting legacy is precisely in the relationship of theology and the liturgy which it rediscovered and articulated so forcefully and well. That there is a relationship is obvious; however, the specific nature of that relationship is not so clear. Patrick Cowley states the general principle this way:

It is theology that makes worship, and worship is always the expression of theology. It is only in theology that worship has its legitimate origin and sanction, and so the faith of the Church is revealed in the worship of the Church, as also in its daily work. Worship is the dramatization of theology, and is its living technicolor film. As emphases in theology alter, so one finds changes in, or additions to, worship.¹⁷

The Roman and Orthodox traditions would likely agree in principle with Cowley’s characterization of the relationship of theology and the liturgy; however, in his last sentence they could not concur. The Orthodox Church considers the Divine Liturgy to be the center

¹⁷ Patrick Cowley, *The Eucharistic Church* (London: The Faith Press, Ltd., 1953), pp. viii-ix.

of its theology. It *is* its theology in fact. Whereas Cowley suggests that the liturgy articulates a given theology, the Orthodox would insist that theology is what the liturgy articulates.

The Roman Church might sum up the relationship between theology and the liturgy with this familiar dictum: *lex orandi – lex credendi*. Liturgy is the source of doctrine and doctrine is the norm of the liturgy; and between the two there is constant cross-fertilization and modification. While the source of theology is scripture and tradition, the sacrifice – the central mystery – takes place under the form and content of the liturgy. The Divine Liturgy proclaims; the Mass effects.

The Lutheran and Reformed traditions would share fundamentally the same characterization of the relationship of theology and the liturgy – *viz.*, that theology and preaching determine the form and content of the liturgy; the liturgy is not determinative of theology and preaching. The self-revelation of God through Word and Sacraments occurs within a liturgical framework; however, that framework is not itself an integral part of the self-revelation. The liturgy is a functional instrument for the Lutheran and Reformed traditions, and its effectiveness is judged by the adequacy with which it facilitates God’s address in preaching and the sacraments, the peoples’ response in prayer and praise. Theological re-definition should lead to liturgical revision; and the obverse: liturgical revision should begin in theological re-definition. According to Luther, in his admonition to the clergy of Lubeck in 1530: “Do not begin with innovations in rites. . . . Put first and foremost what is fundamental in our teaching. . . . Reform of impious rites will come of itself when what is fundamental in our teaching has been effectively presented, has taken root in our pious hearts.”¹⁸

All of which brings us back to the beginning and to Hageman’s insight:

What made the liturgical movement [at Mercersburg] remarkable was not the *Order of Worship*, despite its high

¹⁸ Maxwell, *Ibid.*, p. 380.

degree of liturgical skill. It was rather the fact that it was the first liturgy in the Reformed Church to articulate a theology. Indeed, it was at Mercersburg that there was worked out, often in the heat of battle, for the first time in the Reformed churches what could be called a theology of the liturgy.

The Liturgical Lessons

The Mercersburg liturgical committee – particularly Schaff, Nevin and Harbaugh – had no doubts about what is essential, and here is some of what they are telling us all these years later. First, **theology matters**, and especially **ecclesiology** matters. If you believe the Church to be the Body of Christ, an article of faith, your worship will take one form; and it will take quite another form entirely if you believe the Church to be a voluntary society of the like-minded. Is worship an end in itself, its chief aim to please God; or is it “entertainment evangelism,” as Marva Dawn puts it?¹⁹ She goes on to say this: “An emphasis on what we ‘get out’ of worship” – above all that we feel good about ourselves – “displaces the theocentric praise of God with anthropocentric utilitarianism.” “Since the worship of God is an end in itself, “making worship useful destroys it, because this introduces an ulterior motive for praise.” Ronald Byars says, Worship may have an evangelistic dimension, but it is not primarily about evangelizing people or recruiting new members. Worship is not meant to serve some practical purpose. Worship isn’t a means to an end; it’s an end in itself.²⁰

That this is an on-going concern is seen in recent articles by both a Presbyterian and a Lutheran. LindaJo McKim is an ordained Presbyterian minister, organist, and the editor of *The Presbyterian Hymnal*. She has observed, as every one of us has, that in light of membership declines and in an effort to reach out to the various kinds of seekers in their midst, many congregations have tried to

¹⁹ Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), p. 50.

²⁰ Ronald P. Byars, *The Future of Protestant Worship: Beyond the Worship Wars* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2002), p. 5.

design worship experiences which appeal to the different types of “seeker groups.” But, she asks, can worship be both evangelistic and still be nourishing for church members who attend regularly. Too often worship exhibits little discernable theology and focuses on entertaining the congregation rather than praising God. Yet at the heart of it, worship is not a means *to* anything else. God may use it as such, but at its heart, worship is the one thing we humans do that stands as an end in itself.

The Lutheran, Jonathan Micheel, would agree, but, interestingly, he comes at it from the other side: Is liturgical worship a hindrance to evangelism? Here is his answer: “. . . if the gospel is the power of God to convert unbelievers, and liturgical worship is full of the gospel, then liturgical worship is good for evangelism. . . . If we consistently employ the church year, that means that the gospel will be preached every time a visitor comes to our worship.”



Theology matters and so does **the universal church**. So much of “contemporary worship” seems to be ephemeral, to exist only in and for the moment, demonstrating no past and hinting at no future. Over against that is Schaff’s dynamic view of history, seen so clearly in the first principle articulated at Baltimore: the new liturgy would be grounded in “the liturgical worship of the Primitive Church, as far as it can be ascertained from the Holy Scriptures, the oldest ecclesiastical writings, and the liturgies of the Greek and Latin Churches of the third and fourth centuries.” William Buckley described people who get up every morning as if nothing had ever happened before in the whole of history; yet history has a claim on us. No matter how contemporary we think we are, we are members of the “holy, catholic and apostolic church,” surrounded by so great a “cloud of witnesses.” Surely there is a way to be “contemporary” while looking “to the rock from which [we] were hewed and the quarry from which [we] were digged.”²¹

²¹ Isaiah 51:1b.

Jonathan Micheel got the point. He writes that we should never apologize for the fact that we do things the way believers have done them for centuries. The realization that Christianity is an ancient and changeless truth may be the very stability for which seekers yearn in a chaotic world. Rather than mumbling our way through the Apostles' Creed, for example, the pastor should say, "Let us now, with all of Christendom on earth, confess our most holy faith." In a very simple way the pastor has instructed the worshipers about the catholicity of the Christian Church. We have brothers and sisters around the world who believe as we do. . . . When the unevangelized come through our church doors, what awaits them? Let us all answer, "The gospel." Let us proclaim that as long as we have breath. Let us preach the gospel." So says Jonathan Micheel.



Architecture matters, Mercersburg tells us. While the worship of God can take place anywhere, whether in a store front or a cathedral, nevertheless the worship space matters. Mercersburg was keenly aware that form follows function and that the theology of the liturgy being articulated had architectural implications. Certain liturgical furnishings are required in order to enable preaching, baptism and Eucharist. Tom Long describes a congregation with a contemporary and a traditional service. For the former, the pulpit, communion table, and baptismal font are moved to a storeroom, and in their place go a giant screen, an overhead projector, two drum sets, a bevy of guitars, and a control board connected to an elaborate network of stage lights and a concert-sized sound system.²² Over against that, Mercersburg would insist that there is a fundamental significance inherent in liturgical furnishings, which are integral to worship rightly understood.

Those furnishings sometimes tell their own story. If we believe that preaching is the exposition of a biblical text, does the architecture not contradict that when the Bible is read from one liturgical furnishing, usually smaller, lower, and considerably less grand,

²² Thomas G. Long, *Beyond the Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship* (The Alban Institute, 2001), p. 56.

while preaching takes place some distance away from another liturgical furnishing much grander in size and appointment and elevation?

Mercersburg's "romanticism" had one architectural implication which was radically inconsistent with the Reformed theological tradition out of which it came – namely the high altar attached to the east wall, still found in many sanctuaries today. Reformed eucharistic theology demands a table, not an altar, from behind which much of the liturgy should be conducted.



Another thing Mercersburg tells us – not that we need any reminder – is that **music matters**. Indeed, music is the battleground on which the fiercest fighting between "traditional" and "contemporary" often takes place. Music matters so much, of course, because what we sing is formative – formative of our theological understanding, perhaps more than any other thing. Schaff knew that, and wrote: "The church hymn is one of the most powerful means for promoting the unity of the faith and the communion of saints."²³ He wanted only "classical hymns, derived from all ages and divisions of the Church." And he wanted those hymns arranged according to the order of the Apostles' Creed and the evangelical Church Year. Schaff was also clear about the sort of hymns to be avoided: those which exhibit offensive dogmatism, subjective caprice or mediocrity in content and form, prosaic dullness, weak sentimentalism and trifling, artificial phraseology.

Now, can you find a better critique than that of much that passes for "praise songs," which are said to cultivate a monotonic, downsized faith which is too naïve and simple to handle complexity. They are often noted for their absence of awe and their indecent narcissism. Marva Dawn got the point. She said that praise which uses only upbeat songs can be extremely destructive to worshipers because it denies the reality of doubts concerning God, the hiddenness of God, and the feelings of being abandoned by God that cloud believers

²³ Maxwell, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

going through difficult times. She quotes Brueggemann's criticism of happy worship as not wanting to acknowledge or experience the disorientation of life. A church that goes on singing "happy songs" in the face of raw reality is doing something very different from what the Bible itself does.²⁴



Order matters. Properly understood, worship does not consist of ten or a dozen things and it doesn't much matter the order in which they are done. Indeed, there is a theology to be read out of the very structure of the liturgy. There is a difference of considerable theological significance between Zwingli's Prone and Calvin's ante-communion. How do you understand the function of the Law? Well, where does it appear in the liturgy: before the Confession (Luther) or following the Absolution (Calvin)?

Mercersburg did not prescribe a specific order of worship, but it was clear that the liturgy must be an "altar rather than a pulpit liturgy" – that is, it must be a corporate vehicle by which the eucharistic union between Christ and his people can transpire rather than simply a collection of prayers and forms for the minister alone.

Clearly, the Eucharist is that which provides the structure and rationale for the liturgy, rather than its being merely an addendum to the preaching service. The committee wanted the regular Lord's Day service to point to the Eucharist as central, even on those occasions when it was not celebrated.



Presidential style matters, for which reason the rubrics directed that the entire liturgy be conducted from the altar, until the Psalm or hymn prior to the sermon, at which time the minister enters the pulpit. As there is a theology to be read out of the structure of the liturgy, there is also a theology to be read out of the leader's presidential style – a theology which may well contradict the

theology one thinks one holds. I can imagine that some clergy carve the Thanksgiving turkey with a greater sense of *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* than they exhibit when presiding at the eucharistic table; yet were you to ask them, they would likely go on at length about the spiritual real presence and the mystical union. Tom Long says that whether the leaders are eloquent or prosaic, formal or informal, experienced or novice, when they perceive that worship occurs in the context of holy mystery everything changes – voice, posture, language, gesture. Conversely, if the worship leaders are convinced that nothing is happening in the sanctuary beyond the projection of their own personalities, that shows, too, and worship becomes merely theater and is compressed to the exclusively horizontal.²⁵

To understand the significance of presidential style means that we consider carefully everything from the vestments we wear to the bells and whistles we introduce into worship. Within a fifteen minute drive from my house there are Presbyterian churches in which the minister appears in an academic robe and hood, an alb, and a suit – thoroughly convinced, this minister is, that any other vestment becomes a barrier to his preaching and presiding. Avoiding the authority which is inherent in the gospel we proclaim is a problem for some; for others there is the danger of sacerdotalism suggested by elaborate vestments, bells and whistles.

Liturgical style leads me to raise another matter which may annoy you, although that is not my intention. It is offered rather in the hope that someone may finally enlighten me about a practice which I find puzzling – namely, standing for the reading of the gospel. The first time I celebrated Communion at Austin Seminary I had the congregation stand. The next morning my secretary came into my office and said, "Dr. Maxwell, the entire Biblical Department is in the board room and would like to speak with you." Here is what they wanted to know: "What makes you think that a reading from the gospel is more significant or more inspired or more to be acknowledged and revered than, say, a reading from Genesis or Jonah or, for that matter, Obadiah? Given your understanding of the

²⁴ Dawn, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

²⁵ Long, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

Reformed theology of scripture, can you explain that to us?" Need I tell you that I have never again had the congregation stand for the reading of the gospel?

Worshiping this past Christmas Eve in the Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church I experienced what may be a first in ecclesiastical history. There were several readings from the synoptic gospels, during which we remained seated in typical Presbyterian fashion. Then came the Prologue, and solemnly we were directed to stand. I wrote to the pastor inquiring about this phenomenon. He never replied.



Less obviously to be sure, but no less certainly, Mercersburg tells us that **preaching matters**. It is so easy, when caught up in the excitement of a liturgical and sacramental make-over, to forget about preaching; however, the more excited one becomes about the Eucharist, the more attention one should pay to preaching, lest, like the Roman Catholic Church, preaching all but disappear from the liturgy. So consuming is the ceremony and symbolism of the Divine Liturgy of the Eastern Orthodox Church, that proclamation has vanished altogether.

The Reformed tradition has gone in the other direction entirely, as we all remember, and for years didacticism smothered the life out of devotion. Happily, however, during the decade of the 1960s there came a liturgical renaissance in a number of churches, which resulted in an increase in the frequency of celebrating the Eucharist (about which more later), greater attention paid to the Church Year, and a rediscovery (for some) of the lectionary.

There is much to be said for *lectio selecta*; but I would like to make a case for *lectio continua* – that pattern of reading and preaching associated particularly with the Reformed tradition. In the city of Zurich, Ulrich Zwingli, inspired by the preaching of the early Church fathers, Augustine and John Chrysostom, preached through the gospel of Matthew. John Calvin enthusiastically adopted Zwingli's *lectio continua* approach, and during his long ministry in Geneva he preached through most of the Bible.

After twenty years of using a modified version of this method of preaching, I am confident that it has as much value for our congregations as it had for the congregations of Calvin and Zwingli. I found that it also had considerable value for me. Rather than exegeting pericopes week in and week out, I would devote my study leave and some of my vacation each year to mastering an entire book of the Bible, and then plotting out not a verse by verse exposition, as Calvin did, but rather preaching on major themes and incidents.

Lectio continua does not ignore the Church Year. If necessary, I would temporarily set aside whatever the series in which I was engaged, to deal with the major festivals, particularly Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. I was often delighted to discover, however, that some text from whatever book I was dealing with at the time, provided a fascinating interpretation of the nativity or the crucifixion, for example.

If you get chills at the thought of abandoning *lectio selecta* altogether, you might consider a suggestion James Hastings Nichols made – namely, that we use *selecta* from Advent to Pentecost and *continua* during the season of Pentecost.



Finally, there is this: **mystery matters**; and the absence of mystery and awe may be the most telling criticism of much of what passes for “contemporary worship.” For Nevin, the “mystical presence” was what he most wanted the liturgy to convey; and I venture that it is still precisely the numinous for which most of us search and yearn.

There is an issue, however, which I can find no one taking seriously, as I wish they would – the relationship between the frequency of our celebrations of the Eucharist and ecclesiastical discipline. Once upon a time the two went hand in glove; thus Calvin's dramatic – offensive some would say – fencing of the Table. With the exception of the occasional minister being disciplined, ecclesiastical discipline, particularly up to the level of

excommunication, has all but vanished among so-called Main Line denominations.

During the 1960s two Reformed heavy weights did deal with this issue. James Hastings Nichols said that we should not increase the frequency of celebrating the Eucharist beyond the monthly celebration until we sort out the matter of ecclesiastical discipline. J.-J. von Allmen, on the other hand, said that we will never rediscover an appropriate understanding and application of ecclesiastical discipline, until we increase the frequency of celebrating the Eucharist.

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In her sermon at a meeting of the Mercersburg Society a few years ago, an associate conference minister of the UCC strongly suggested that those of us who were interested in and committed to the study and perpetuation of Mercersburg's insights into theology, history, and liturgy were antiquarians, who ought to get out of the Nineteenth Century and into the Twenty-first. Only one who is unaware of those insights could make such a remark. The more I revisit the work of Nevin and Schaff, the more I am convinced that their work is as relevant today as it ever was; and that we must continue to explore ways to perpetuate it. Particularly for that reason I am grateful for the Order of Corpus Christi.

Editor's note: In contrast to the more formal academic prose one encounters in Dr. Bloesch's books and articles his largely unedited comments here are informal, conversational and colloquial. They are less measured theological assertions than personal reminiscences and reflections- sometimes meandering but always interesting.

Donald G. Bloesch: The Last Interview? (1928-2010)

by Richard E. Burnett, October 18, 2009 Interview

Could you say something about your own theological background and upbringing?

I come out of the Evangelical Synod of North America. I was ordained in that particular denomination when it was still a denomination and not merged with any other tradition. That Church merged with the German Reformed Church - the Reformed Church in the United States, I think was the name of the German Church - related to the Mercersburg movement. I think it was 1934 when the merger took place and I became automatically a minister in the Reformed Church as well as in the Evangelical Synod of North America, which was mainly Lutheran. Then a few years after that the Evangelical and Reformed Church merged with the congregational Christian Church to form the United Church of Christ. All along the way the loyalty to the Reformed tradition was in place and I inherited those elements of the Reformed tradition that some of my colleagues in Presbyterianism haven't had. And that's why it seems that some of the things I say are new. But for those who know that longer tradition I am simply rephrasing an old tradition.

And your father was a pastor?

I was raised in the Church. My father was a pastor also in the Evangelical Synod of North America, as was Reinhold Niebuhr, our most famous graduate, who went to Elmhurst College and then Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis, which was the school most influential in the development of the Reformed Church.

This is a topic I could keep talking and talking about but it's necessary to see that there were cultural and religious reasons for some of the things that I hold. The practice of confirmation, for example, is something that seems to be new but is actually an older practice ... an older practice with a different interpretation. ... They thought they were returning to an earlier interpretation, but they were returning to a theological innovation. And in some ways I think it's more true to biblical faith, that is, their innovation ...

And your own spiritual pilgrimage and calling? When did you decide to become a theologian?

It was in my high school years that I became very interested in theology. But in the home in which I was raised, my grandparents also lived there, for a time at least, and their influence was also very palpable, very noticeable in my theological development. Both of these men were ministers, ordained ministers. They both came from Europe as missionaries to German-speaking people in this country, so there was a Germanic cultural influence in my life that was probably absent in most ministers, even in that German tradition, the Evangelical and Reformed Church. I should mention that the Bible itself and *Pilgrims Progress* by John Bunyan were the two religious, primarily religious books, in my life and in my development. I should mention, too, the role that Elmhurst College played in my development where I was challenged to believe in the gospel once again. Evangelical renewal groups on the campus of the college had an influence on me simply through natural friendships. ... And the influence of Chicago Theological Seminary on my development made me wary of the realities of liberalism and what it can do to a congregation, so that played a role, too.

You say in your volume on *The Church* that growing up your denomination was more Lutheran than Reformed and you've even said that you've thought of yourself as more Lutheran than Reformed ...

For many years I thought of myself as more Lutheran than Reformed. Now I would say I feel myself more Reformed than Lutheran.

Yes, and when did you have a sense of being more Reformed?

I think through the readings of Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, the theology of crisis, later called "Neo-Orthodox" theology, was much more decidedly Reformed than Lutheran. Karl Barth himself was much more Reformed than Lutheran. In fact, several of the controversies that have developed around Barth arise out of this tension between Lutheranism and Reformed.

And you said once to me that you read Calvin's *Institutes* as a young student of theology and that it also made an impression on you.

That's right. The reading of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* played a major role in my developing interest in Theology.

How would you describe your theological education at the University of Chicago and Chicago Theological Seminary?

Those schools are a wonderful place to be introduced to the history of the Church and the research materials and sources that are found there are probably the best in the Midwest. It's a wonderful place to earn a Doctor's degree in theology. But as far as nurturing personal faith, it just isn't there. I know of many students who have come to the University of Chicago Divinity School and CTS who have lost their faith. They came as serious minded Christians, pre-theological students. But I was able to retain the faith, I think, through my past relationships with many ministers and actually not only from the so-called E&R [Evangelical and Reformed] traditions but some other traditions, including the Salvation Army, which are more outspokenly evangelical. So I feel my parental and national heritage and cultural heritage have played a major role in my theology. But I should add that when still in high school I read through the entire Bible several times and also, in addition to the Bible, story books intended for younger people. Both played a role, a positive role.

How did your experience at the University of Chicago shape you for your future?

I was active for the so-called “evangelical cause” when I was still in seminary and when your back is pressed against the wall you finally have to speak up [with a smile]. There were some things I said that brought upon me the wrath of people in power, but despite that I was still able to weather the storm, so to speak. I think one reason that I wasn't dismissed was the fact that there was a segment of the faculty that actually sympathized with me, and there were some faculty members there who were liberal and on the right side, who were self-critical and, in addition, there were some that harbored a Reformed faith but kept it hidden. So all of these things played somewhat of a role. I should mention, too, my interest in participation in community movements, religious communities, was apparent even at Elmhurst College; and meeting and living in some of these places like Koinonia Farm in Americus, Georgia, for example, or the Evangelical Sisterhood of Mary in Darmstadt, Germany, and many groups like them where real piety was embodied, had a special attraction for me - and those movements helped cement my faith.

Who were among your most influential teachers in Seminary and at the University of Chicago?

One of the early theological books that influenced me was *Choose Ye This Day* by Elmer Homrighausen, who was a teacher at Dubuque Seminary for a time (a powerful preacher, I would call him, an evangelical preacher). And the whole theology of crisis has played a positive role. I had discovered Karl Barth in seminary as well as John Calvin and Emil Brunner. I visited both of those men [Barth and Brunner] in Switzerland, some years later. Alfred North Whitehead, who was really the leading thinker in the Divinity School, also [had] an influence on me. He taught in the United States for a time. He was a British professor. But the impact that he had was partly negative as well as positive because he was a devout opponent of evangelical Christianity. Charles Hartshorne, who was also in the process school of theology and philosophy, had

an influence on me as well and I thought him to be a very fair person, very knowledgeable and actually very supportive.

You studied under Wilhelm Pauck?

Yes, I took a course on Kierkegaard's religion with Wilhelm Pauck. He was at Chicago for many years then left when I was still in the Divinity School. Pauck had left for a position at Union Seminary in New York.

There are so many people that I could mention.

Well, you studied under Karl Barth in Basel?

Yes. But I should say the main influence of Karl Barth was mediated to me through Arthur Cochrane, who was really a longtime interpreter of Barth, so that should be considered, too.

How did you find Barth as a man in Basel?

A person of complete integrity and a deeply earnest man, a sincere person committed to the Gospel.

What aspect of Barth's theology has been most influential in your own theology?

Regarding Karl Barth, the great difference between finitude and infinity, between this world and the higher spiritual world, an emphasis on the “wholly otherness” of God, the cleavage between God and humankind. All of these are all in Calvin too and in Luther, but Barth brought that debate up to date, so to speak.

I am quite sure I would not have developed along these lines, stressing the otherness and infinity of God if Karl Barth were not in the picture. Even someone like Emil Brunner, who is in that same tradition, I don't think would stand firm on some of these issues as Karl Barth did. Brunner was kind of silent on the rise of the “German Christians” whereas Barth took a stand against those people from the very beginning. And Barth, I think, gained a lot of his influence because of these political stands, although he himself cautioned never to confuse politics and theology.

What do you see as the greatest temptation facing the Church of North America today?

Worldliness. I think that is the greatest temptation in so many aspects of life, not only in thought but also in being. The growing secular influence, the rise of a new kind of mysticism, which I call "secular mysticism," a new kind of spirituality, the rise of syncretistic cult movements, should definitely be observed and warned against.

When compared to the other ideologies the church has faced throughout the centuries how do you see the prevailing ideologies of radical inclusivism, multi-culturalism, globalism?

It's all part of the same phenomenon, which I call "worldliness." This has an effect on the culture, politics, religion, and manifests itself in various philosophical forms. ... Immanuel Kant's philosophy was especially influential on German/European theologians. But I've always had an admiration for Kierkegaard and I was introduced to Kierkegaard in a course on History and Christian Thought at the Seminary. Kierkegaard had an influence on Karl Barth, but that influence was much less than others. But regarding my own development, Kierkegaard should be mentioned and included. ... In addition to Barth [and] Reinhold Niebuhr, Kierkegaard should be included in that set, so to speak.

And Bonhoeffer?

Bonhoeffer, too.

One student asks, "What do you see as the greatest challenge facing Ministers today?"

I think that same phrase "holy worldliness," the temptation to resort to the things of the flesh to understand the things of the Spirit or to lead us into the things of the Spirit, is at times so often well meaning, but [these beliefs] betray a lack of confidence in the power of the Spirit to bring about these changes Himself, that is, God bringing about these changes Himself. [It is] the desire to

accommodate to academic opinion, but also the desire to find the security of our people in the nation state itself, which is what happened in Germany. But it could happen in this country very easily given the right cultural changes and so forth.

What advice would you give beginning students of theology today?

Always explore several options to various issues. Always remain self-critical and believe that all truths need to be constantly restated in order to have efficacy.

Any advice you would give ministers today if asked?

"Stay put" would be one piece of advice. There are so many ministers, and professors too, who have an anxious quality about themselves and are insecure in the traditions that God has placed on them. So, "be patient" would be the advice I would give. "Patience overcomes all things," said St. Teresa of Avila ... [which suggests something of] my ecumenical interest ... It's along some of these lines that in addition to an evangelical persuasion I also have an ecumenical concern and an ecumenical outreach in my theology, which is a little different I think for evangelical theologians.

Yes, when I was at the celebration of the completion of these seven volumes [of the *Christian Foundations Series*], I saw an incredible range of people in the audience: Roman Catholic monks, Pentecostals, many "high church" Lutherans, Presbyterians, Baptists, there were all kinds of evangelicals.

Also the Anglo-Catholics are a group that I did not seek out. They came to me. And their magazine, the *New Oxford Review*, has pushed my books. And yet there is no kind of spirituality I think that is more different from my own than the Anglo-Catholic position because they combine an ultrahigh liturgy with a kind of a mystical theology that puts people off guard and undercuts genuine ecumenical dialogue. ... I did not sign "Evangelical and Catholics Together" ... I don't want to be tied down that way because I want to be free to criticize the Catholic Church as well as appreciate their

differences. But I think we have to be strong in the faith and say “no” to some of their beliefs to be true to our own beliefs and our own traditions.

One student asks, “What lead you to become so interested in Pentecostalism?”

That's a good question because that interest was not even apparent during my college years and hardly during the years I was at seminary. But it's a question I haven't really mediated on because it came on me very suddenly and I think it was when I first began teaching at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, that first year was the rise of the Pentecostal movement, ... 1962 or ... early in the 1960's. I saw the Pentecostal revival [or at least] a mini-revival as it passed right through our seminary and Wartburg Seminary. And all schools in this part of the country were touched by it. And the fact that some of our best students were going over to this movement, so to speak, made me doubly interested and it's appeal to evangelicals was an additional reason to consider Pentecostalism as one of the theological options today.

You state this with far more specificity in your book on the Holy Spirit in your chapter on Pentecostalism but what worries you the most about Pentecostalism?

Sectarianism is one of the worries. The fact that Pentecostals often will not work with other Churches and use ecumenical dialogues as a means to advance their own position or their own denomination. So self-advancement would be something I would caution against to Pentecostals. I can't think of a Pentecostal theologian who been an influence ... comparable to say in liberal theology where you can point to many different people who have large influence in wider space, so to speak.

One student asks, “Has your view of John Wesley changed over the years? There seems to be a greater appreciation of him in your later volumes. (This particular student writes:) “Is it because of your interest in holiness?”

Yes, I think that's a yes to all of those questions. I had to become more open to Wesley's position but I haven't been influenced enough to sever my relation to Calvin or to Luther, so I try to learn wherever I can. Wesley's impact on the Pentecostal movement has to be taken seriously. Many Pentecostals have pointed to Wesley and claimed Wesley as one of their own theologians. So to understand Pentecostals you need to understand Wesley and vice versa.

Since your book, *The Church*, where you devote a chapter to worship in the United States and to evangelicalism generally, have you had any further thoughts about the dangers of any of the trends going on today in American worship services?

The shift to contemporary music, of which I have written, is certainly a sign of secularism coming into the Church through the medium of music. Love for ritual for rituals sake I think is always dangerous and I see this as a temptation today. A trend to ritualism and formalism, ecclesiasticism, all of these things should be mentioned. I refer you here to my book *Faith and Its Counterfeits*, a small book on spirituality written some years ago in which I was one of the first to cite the danger of formalism in worship. We need forms but not formalism. I tried to make that distinction. We are losing the sense of the utter transcendence of God and men like Kierkegaard and Karl Barth can help us here, and Calvin, too for that matter.

How do you determine the point at which to reject established liturgy in favor of new trends without becoming “contemporary”?

In the first place, when we say “contemporary,” we are talking about method more than content, but those who are in the contemporary music movement or in the contemporary worship movement see these distinctions differently. They see a need for change of content as well as method. ... But I didn't catch that. What was the full question?

It says, "How would you determine the point at which to *reject* established liturgy in favor of new trends?" ... I guess the question would be: You can't die on every hill as a pastor, you've got to decide on which hills you're going to die on and (I don't know that there is a right answer to this question and it's an open ended question), ... but as a pastor coming into a situation, [do you have] any advice on how to bring them back to a more traditional or more orthodox [position]?

We need to redefine orthodoxy and heresy to understand when the time has come to protest or when to begin to raise serious questions has to do with our knowledge of heresy. We need to call for the gift of discernment, discerning the Spirit, in order to understand, when to speak plainly, when to speak up. We have to develop a sense, a sense that something is wrong before we can set the matter straight. But that's a good question.

You mentioned that the end of denominationalism is upon us and they may - I don't think I'm quoting you exactly - but denominations may become irrelevant.

H. Richard Niebuhr made that statement and I sent it to him, a brother of Reinhold Niebuhr.

Yes, H. Richard at Yale, yes. ... One of the questions is, "Do you see any hopeful trends in American Evangelicalism?" "With the demise of denominationalism" - I know they're not asking you to be a prophet - "are there things that you see that are of strength in the future for the American Evangelical Church?"

Well, I think the willingness of the lay people to go out and work for the Church, to give time and money to support the Church, are promising. It doesn't have to be accommodation. It can be transformation of the culture by the Word of God. These are all possible signs that are positive.

The Billy Graham revivals and other revivals might all be considered promising at least in part. But I've yet to see a genuine

revival taking place. These are all eruptions, you might say. But real transformation can only be brought about by the Holy Spirit Himself and we have to remind our hearers of that. We mustn't become too excited about peripheral changes because they come and go. But still something is happening. There are real gains in membership in the part of evangelical denominations and certainly in the advance of Pentecostalism. All of these things have to be considered, I think in the long run, positively.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, when he was in this country, said that America has experienced many revivals but never a reformation. Why do you think that is?

There is an anti-intellectual bias that has come into the Church after the Reformation through Pietism, Puritanism and some of these other spiritual movements that are in themselves good things, but when they lead people away from serious study, as Calvin himself also warned, as you know, as a Calvin scholar. Calvin saw the need for study as well as prayer for the good of the Church and the success of the Church. And here is where the conservative movement, I think, is really letting us down. It's ignoring the need for study and the need for theology, as the discipline of knowledge as a science. There's a deliberate attempt, you might say, to ignore the theological happenings and to give cultural and political answers to questions that are really theological and can only be answered by theologians or by ministers. So I see this trend in the Catholic Church and in the Protestant Churches, but it's more apparent in the conservative evangelical Protestantism than in Catholicism. The Catholic Church, to its credit, has always made a place for theology. Still, the lay Catholics are probably caught up in small things as well as Protestants. The anti-theological bias is in Catholicism very much too. And the Eastern Orthodox Church is not an answer, to that question, by any means.

Do you think that the Chicago Statement on Inerrancy has done anything to help or to hurt the Church's understanding of the authority of Scripture?

I think it's helped to obscure, to obfuscate the situation. They have themselves come up with no redefinition of inerrancy that would make dialogue meaningful. It's been a disappointment on the whole. Younger theological scholars themselves point this out [about] that particular statement. Though we need probably a new statement of inerrancy, it has to be a radically new statement, and can't be just the changing of words, as if you were doing a crossword puzzle.

Do you sense that there is an American empiricism playing a great role in this discussion?

Very much so. It is the Enlightenment again coming back in new forms. The philosopher John Locke, who was a great empiricist of the Enlightenment, his power is probably greater today in America than ever before.

Well, your theological work has been an enormous blessing to many, many students at Erskine Seminary,

Oh, well, thank you for saying that.

And we are very grateful to you. And is there anything you would care to say to them as we conclude?

I would just say: Keep the faith and learn from others.

Good, we thank you.

Thank you.

[Dr. Bloesch then asked how his work is considered ... left or right, conservative or liberal?]

Well, many don't know quite what to make of you on the far right, the ones who come with a pretty strong ideological conservatism, because they can't deny your theological orthodoxy. They see that. The ones who are typical mainline students, who don't have a strong theological foundation, your work has helped them to see the problem in mainline Protestant

theology and that's invaluable. And so they don't see your [theology] as being left or right. I've not heard any students say that.

Well, good, because I don't like to be pigeonholed, so to speak. Still, we have to make distinctions before we evaluate another theology.

What have you enjoyed the most about being a theologian?

I think the great books that were introduced to me and I've read, including great works of philosophy, because philosophy, in my life, has really been a stepping stone through theology and philosophy and Theology both together.

Well, one of the most important things your work has done is to help students to understand the difference between theology and philosophy. Your discussion of classical theism is very helpful and students begin to see the Hellenization of the faith, then ... I talk to them about the German Church struggle and the Germanification of the faith and then they begin to wonder about the Americanization of the Christian Faith and these are some of the things that your work provokes in them.

Well, I hope we keep in touch.

The Church in Advent: A Mercersburg Perspective

Kenneth Aldrich

Karl Barth said that the church always finds itself in Advent, the season between the already and the not yet. What better season then to reflect upon the meaning and purpose of the church of Jesus Christ. Schaff often wrote and spoke about the “church idea.” He and Nevin never ceased to be amazed at the widespread indifference to and ignorance of ecclesial ontology among American Christians, even on the part of the theologically educated.

In some sense, the 20th century ecumenical movement (of which Schaff was a forerunner) called Christians to an historical ecclesial self-awareness. But things have backslidden in our time and the apathy regarding the “church idea” resembles that which obtained when Mercersburg theology first saw the light of day.

Today the church is often perceived variously as a kind of religious club, a collective for socio-economic change (or alternatively, for the maintenance of the socio-economic status quo), or one of a number of associations organized to explore and promote human spirituality, etc.

Although the prophets have made it totally clear that God loves justice and righteousness and is well pleased when we do the good works our heavenly Father has prepared for us to walk in—nowhere in scripture is the church defined as a humanistic modality for justice seekers, mercy lovers or 'do-gooders' of any sort. She may embrace all of the above, but she is something infinitely greater.

In the midst of the prevailing confusion and ignorance, Mercersburg Theology, because it is so thoroughly grounded biblically and confessionally, helps us to know what it means to be incorporated into the church of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It proclaims and affirms the joyful truth that the church is nothing less than the Body of Christ: Jesus is the head and we are the constituent parts. The church is a mystical, organic entity whose life is God given and Spirit breathed; incarnated from above not cobbled together from below, constituted by divine grace not by human will. We are called

by God into the church (divinely elected, if you will). It is not something we choose to join simply because it suits our fancy.

The church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. The church is a living spiritual organism: Christ is the vine and we are the branches engrafted into him through baptism.

Yes, there is indeed a place for witness in and by the church to justice, peace and the reign of God. Yes, there is place for mutual human fellowship binding together and building up the members in love one for another. Yes, there are appropriate quiet times and places for personal piety (being alone with our Savior in a “garden of prayer”). There is certainly a necessary place for compassionate outreach and works of mercy, because faith without works is dead.

But, while wholly affirming the validity of these and other churchly endeavors, we must continue to hold up the Eucharist as the paramount and ultimate constitutive act of the church. For in Eucharistic worship we recall the mighty acts of God in Christ which have wrought our salvation as we also anticipate by faith the eschatological hope of the marriage supper of the Lamb, all while joyously celebrating the mystical presence of our risen Savior in our midst—simultaneously experiencing the Kingdom of God, past present and future. The church perforce reflects the Incarnation and mystically embodies the risen Christ. If the church at some level fails to grasp this, she cannot but fail to grasp the full nature of her own identity.

Mercersburg Theology recognizes and thanks God for the sacred matrix of the church in which our union with Christ is inaugurated, nurtured and brought to fulfillment. It encourages us not to be dismayed or discouraged by the imperfections and shortfalls of the members (including ourselves) and to focus upon the perfection and all sufficiency of the Head—Christ in us, the hope of glory.

The creed rightly calls the church holy because she belongs to Christ who himself embodies all holiness. The awesome holiness of the church's head covers, redeems and sanctifies the whole body

despite the sins of the members. That is why we remain people of hope even (indeed especially) when facing disappointments.

In insisting upon the indispensability of the church for the normative Christian life, one does not thereby replace Christianity with "*Churchianity*." One does, however, unabashedly affirm that the glory of the Lord fills the house of his habitation, however modest the house, in and of itself, may be.

We are convinced that to assert a high view of the church in no way diminishes the pre-eminence due alone to the Lord of the church. As the light of the moon, however lovely, exists only as a reflection of the brilliance of the sun, so all that is good, beautiful, and true in the church reflects the infinite goodness of Christ who alone is our sun of righteousness, risen with healing in his wings.

Sad to say, the compelling metaphor of the church as the Body of Christ gets rather short shrift in many places today. The complementary metaphor of the church as the Bride of Christ (together with feminine pronouns referencing the church derived from this metaphor) are totally ignored, or even explicitly rejected, by some contemporary theologians. Yet both of these biblical images are essential to any meaningful grasp of ecclesial ontology. In the words of S. J. Stone:

"The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord
She is his new creation by water and the word
From heaven he came and sought her to be his holy bride
With his own blood he bought her and for her life he died."

While the image of the church as the Body of Christ is particularly helpful in understanding the church in the context of history, the image of the church as the bride of Christ is especially helpful in understanding the church in the context of eschatology.

Holy Matrimony is the most sacred and intimate of interpersonal relationships and it models the relationship between Christ and his church. Earthly marriages, even the most beautiful, loving, faithful and durable, all must end, but the relationship which the portend endures eternally.

Let me reiterate the strength of this image. The church as the bride of Christ enters into a covenantal relationship with her heavenly spouse who has gone to prepare a place for her that where he is there she might also be. Christ and the church enter, as it were, into a covenanted relationship analogous to the promise and commitment between earthly spouses to love honor and cherish one another so long as they both shall live. Since Christ has promised that all those who believe in him will not perish but have everlasting life, the relationship between Christ and the church endures forever. The Bride of Christ enjoys the promises of Christ eternally.

The world views the church as a quarrelsome plurality; God views her as a many faceted unity. Jesus is a monogamist not a polygamist. He is coming for one bride, his beloved for whom he has gone to prepare a place that where he is there she may be also.

Preachers within the historic confessions often bemoan the eschatological errors and fantasies of the Dispensationalist televangelists. But what eschatology hope do we offer our people instead? Are they as the Bride of Christ eagerly awaiting the Marriage Supper of the Lamb? The Advent propers have many passages dealing with the last things. Do we preach on them? Do we sing the Advent hymns which speak of eschatological hope, or do we yield to our congregations' demand for sentimental Christmas carols the whole of December?

The pastors and teachers of the "mainline" churches need not offer our people end time charts filled with questionable speculation, but we do need to offer them eschatological hope, both for this life and the life to come. Scripture gives us abundant resources for this task. I subscribe to the classical Augustinian amillennialist view, but recognize that other views are possible. The important thing is that we address the topic!

The concept of the church as the Bride of Christ offers promise and hope as we face God's future and our own. The Spirit and the Bride say, "come," but we say little or nothing. The people of God need to

be encouraged to trust the promises of Christ. Our congregations deserve to hear the good news that our God triumphs in this life and in the life to come and that we who trust in Christ will share in his victory.

The Advent readings bring words of comfort, promise and hope to God's people. We need to proclaim them. The New Testament word for hope, *elipis*, is not merely a synonym for "a fond wish." It denotes a clear and certain expectation; such as the blessed hope of the Lord's appearing, the glorious hope of the resurrection, the thrilling hope of a new heaven and a new earth when the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ. Hallelujah!

This Advent let us celebrate the church, the pilgrim people of hope, the company of those who love Jesus and one another because he first loved us, the family of faith—faith proclaimed, faith shared, faith lived out together in the blessed anticipation.

The church is the unique corporate witness to the Kingdom of God and all that it entails. Our witness is indispensable. When the Bridegroom returns may he find each of us with our wicks well trimmed and our lamps replenished with oil, brightly illuminating his path. Blessed be the Christ who was born of Mary for us and our salvation! Blessed be the Christ who is present in bread and wine as we gather around his holy table! Blessed be the Christ whose coming again in glory the church, his bride, awaits with joy!

Advent, the season of the already-but-the-not-yet, speaks to us of many things: the beginning of the Christian year and the end of the secular year, judgment and hope, salvation history and eschatology, incarnation and *parousia* - Alpha and Omega. Advent is the season when the church rediscovers her true identity in the light of them all.

BOOK REVIEW

Eberhard Busch, *Drawn to Freedom: Christian Faith Today in Conversation with the Heidelberg Catechism*. Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010. 363 pages.

F. Christopher Anderson

This is not your father's or your mother's Oldsmobile! I have a rather large collection of commentaries, aids, books of sermons, translations, introductions, historical studies, biographies of the authors, collections of essays, confirmation materials and devotionals on The Heidelberg Catechism. This book differs from every one of them. (Oddly I think *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism* comes closest to it since the main author of the catechism was not afraid to freely expand the teaching of the catechism with his own theology.)

Busch states:

"Because church history does not begin with us, the book proceeds by giving its interpretation in ongoing conversations with one of the classic texts of the church's past: the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563. The primary purpose is not to understand the Heidelberg Catechism, but rather *through it* to understand what it means for us to believe in the merciful and just triune God." (xii)

Busch touches powerfully, thoughtfully and faithfully on such issues as the Trinity, the importance of the objectivity of God and the gospel, Anselm's atonement theory and its critics, the threefold outline of the catechism as being Trinitarian, the freedom of God, the freedom of humanity, justification, the person of Jesus Christ, the beauty of Article 1, natural theology, modern views of sin and their limitations, creation, the church, church discipline, free will, Jewish/Christian relations, and the limits of theology. This does not cover the topics he discusses. His discussions are beyond introductions to the topics. He has written a book designed to reveal his struggles with present day theological issues. This is not a book

that would be easy for someone who does not have some basic theological grounding.

Those with a solid theological background will become aware quite quickly that Busch is an astute student of Karl Barth. He is not a slavish follower but he does emphasize many of Barth's important themes. Yet this is a book written over 40 years after Barth's death so that Busch is dealing with questions that Barth did not face. One senses in Busch someone who has deeply entered into the ongoing conversations in ecumenical theology. He takes seriously various views but states very clearly how he thinks the issues should be taught. This should make the book very appealing to those interested in the theology of Barth.

Busch breathes life into various sections of the catechism by showing how they speak to various theological issues that face us today. He shows us the importance of *ad fontes* (to the sources) in this study. Every period of reformation involved serious study of the faithful who have come before us. This book should particularly be read by those whose theological education leans more toward the theologies of the last 50 years. They will learn that those who have come before us have much to teach us in our present struggles. In this book one senses what one senses in reading Luther or Calvin. On the one hand though the author is clearly coming from a tradition and he is deeply loyal to it, on the other hand he is an original thinker. Busch is a theologian who is able to relate things in ways that we have not seen before. This is real theology and not merely propaganda.

We are very excited that the translator, William Radar, is a faithful member of the Mercersburg Society. We are thankful that this pastor and theologian has worked so hard to complete such a worthwhile translation for English speaking theologians. The UCC Confessing Christ online group has been discussing it section by section. We have thoroughly enjoyed it. We would invite any and all of you to continue with us in our continuing discussion. If you are actually interested in this discussion please contact me at fcba@comcast.net.

William Radar states in his Translator's Preface: "The word 'catechism' can suggest dry bones of doctrine, rather than free exploration of ideas. But his book has come to me as a free, fresh, carefully developed, wide-ranging exploration of what it means to answer the question 'Why are you called a Christian?' and to see the relevance of the gospel in this tangled world." (viii)

I highly recommend Busch's book. I will conclude with one of the many wonderful quotes that one finds in this book. This one comes out of a discussion on the Christocentric emphasis of Article One of the catechism.

"Our entire comfort depends on the fact that the relationship in which I am no longer alone is brought about and sustained by an event in which Jesus Christ is the creative subject, not we. It is brought about not because we reach out to him and want to come to terms with him. It comes about only by his coming into our midst and binding himself with us and us with him." (46)

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