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**The Church Question,
the Creed and Christian Unity:
The Ecclesiology of John Williamson Nevin
and the Ecumenical Task**
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The Mercersburg Society has been formed to uphold the concept of the Church as the Body of Christ, Evangelical, Reformed, Catholic, Apostolic, organic, developmental and connectional. It affirms the ecumenical Creeds as witnesses to its faith and the Eucharist as the liturgical act from which all other acts of worship and service emanate.

The Society pursues contemporary theology in the Church and the world within the context of Mercersburg Theology. In effecting its purpose the Society provides opportunities for fellowship and study for persons interested in Mercersburg Theology, sponsors an annual convocation, engages in the publication of articles and books, and stimulates research and correspondence among scholars on topics of theology, liturgy, the Sacraments and ecumenism.
The **New Mercersburg Review** is designed to publish the proceedings of the annual convocation as well as other articles on the subjects pertinent to the aims and interests of the Society.

From the Editor

F. Christopher Anderson

This issue of the NMR consists largely of one very long essay. The second article is a brief review of a scientific article from Behavioral Science! The third article is a brief book review.

The previous editor (Linden DeBie) once disclosed to me that the biggest problem he had with editing this journal was the lack of material that was submitted. He said that he wrote so many articles because he was not getting articles sent to him. The growth of the interest in Mercersburg Theology appears to be changing this. At this moment I have some excellent material that I am not able to fit in this edition! As a Society we should rejoice in this growth of interest!

The main article in this issue is a Mercersburg Roth Prize Paper. Michael J. Stell is a Ph.D. student at Catholic University of America. The paper he delivered at the Annual Convocation was taken from this longer essay. I believe it is worth publishing the whole article. It serves as a great introduction to those who are new to Mercersburg Theology and as a refresher course to those who have spent many years studying Nevin and Schaff. It is also an excellent way to prepare for this year's Convocation (June 1-3 @ LTS), entitled **"The Future of Ecumenism from a Reformed Perspective."**

My wife and I met Dr. G. Andrew Mickley and his lovely wife, Jackie, while we were on a cruise of St. Paul sights with Richard Rohr. A discussion we had about his field of Neuroscience led to this brief review of an article on Augustine's views of memory and how they relate to recent scientific studies. I love it. I think both Nevin and Schaff would have also appreciated it!

The brief book review shines some light on a book that deserves attention. George Demetrion has offered the church a book that compares theologians that are often not discussed together.

The Church Question, The Creed and Christian Unity: The Ecclesiology of John Williamson Nevin and the Ecumenical Task

Michael J. Stell
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September, 2014, Mercersburg Roth Prize Paper

There has been a recent resurgence in interest in the theological writings of John Williamson Nevin and the Mercersburg School which grew out of his teaching and writings. This is evidenced by groups like the Mercersburg Society, a foundation which seeks to perpetuate and publish critical editions of Nevin's writings as well as supports continued scholarship on Mercersburg Theology.[1] Another group of theologians, from a more evangelical perspective, have rediscovered Nevin and are using his theological system to reexamine aspects of Presbyterian theology. They are known by a couple of names, most commonly either as "Auburn Avenue Theology[2]" or the Federal Vision.[3] A new biography by D.G. Hart has also contributed to more people becoming interested in Nevin's life and writings.[4] There are also a small, but growing number of theses and

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1 See their web site for more information: http://library.lts.org/mercersburg/index.html.

2 Named for a pastors conference that was held at Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church in 2002.

3 For a good introduction to the Federal Vision, see Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner, ed. *The Federal Vision*. (Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2004).

4 D.G. Hart. *John Williamson Nevin: High Church Calvinist*. (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2005). Two excellent older biographies of Nevin are still available, though one is a reprinted edition: Theodore Appel. *The Life and Work*

dissertations being written about the theological system of Nevin and his more well-known colleague at Mercersburg, Philip Schaff.

The purpose of this essay is to explore John Williamson Nevin's emphasis on creedal catholicism specifically on the question of church unity. Nevin spent most of his academic career answering what he called the "Church Question." For Nevin, even from his earliest writings, the Church question was answered in reference to two realities: the Incarnation of Christ and the Apostle's Creed. Because the Church is presented in the New Testament as the body of Christ, there was a strong connection for Nevin to Christ's incarnation. In his later reflections on the Mercersburg System, Nevin said that the fact of the Incarnation is its "cardinal principle."[5] He continued, "Christ saves the world, not ultimately by what he teaches or by what he does, but by what he *is* in the constitution of his own person."[6] His view of the Incarnation became central to his understanding of the nature of the church as an organic reality in the world.

The Church as an organic reality is also addressed in the Apostle's Creed. For Nevin, as soon as we say "I believe in one holy catholic Church," the Church question must be answered in a way that speaks to these elements. The Church is thus an object of faith; an actual reality in the world. For Nevin, the answer to the

of John Williamson Nevin. (Philadelphia: Reformed Church Publication House, 1889; Reprinted by Forgotten Books, 2012), and J.H. Nichols. *Romanticism in American Theology: Nevin and Schaff at Mercersburg.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

5 "Letter to Dr. Henry Harbaugh." in *Catholic and Reformed: Selected Theological Writings of John Williamson Nevin.* Edited by Charles Yrigoyen, Jr and George H. Bricker (Pittsburgh: The Pickwick Press, 1978), 408.

6 Ibid.

Church question had ramifications for the way that we understand history, the development of doctrine and what today we call the ecumenical task. Church unity was not only prayed for by Christ, it is a creedal necessity.

In the first section, I will focus on the incarnational, organic nature of the Church. The second section will examine Nevin's view of the Church in light of the Creed. The final section will focus on Nevin's thoughts on church unity. Because the main purpose of this essay is the issue of the Church and church unity, I will not be attempting to give a full presentation of Nevin's thought in the first two sections.[7] Rather, the focus will be on Nevin's thought from several of his key writings on these subjects. The final section will draw heavily on two of Nevin's writings which focus specifically on the subject of church unification.

The Church Question and the Incarnation

John Williamson Nevin's first well-known treatise was *The Anxious Bench,* in which he polemically writes against the "new measures" of Charles Finney which were increasingly being found in the German Reformed Churches where Nevin was now serving as their new professor of theology at Mercersburg Seminary.[8] His stance against the new measures was not new; he had been trained in old school Presbyterianism growing up in the Cumberland presbytery.[9] This was renewed in his thinking while he was a student at Princeton and even more

7 For a very good summary of Nevin's views on the church see, W. Bradford Littlejohn. "Paradigms in Collision." in *The Mercersburg Theology and the Quest for Reformed Catholicity* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2009), 56-87.

8 *Romanticism*, 49-58.

9 *John Williamson Nevin*, 29-30.

while he was teaching at Western Seminary in Pittsburgh.[10] His move from Presbyterianism to the German Reformed Church did much to transform "Dr. Nevin from a somewhat harsh Presbyterian divine into a broader German theologian, of the Calvinistic-Melanthanonian school..."[11]

While this may be true, there was much which did not change such as his stance against Finneyism. His emphasis however, was slowly changing focus onto what Nevin began to call "the Church Question." Previously, Nevin followed the Old School Presbyterian critique of Finney's "anxious bench" as a means of gaining converts based on a Pelagian understanding of man's nature. Nevin agreed with that, but he was beginning to understand that the issue was larger and more fundamental -- this was really about two different ways of understanding the Church itself. He frames the issue this way:

> A crisis has evidently been reached in the history of these Churches; and one of the most serious points involved in it is precisely this question of New Measures. Let this system prevail and rule with permanent sway, and the result of the religious movement which is now in progress will be something widely different from what it would have been under other auspices. The old regular organizations, if they continue to exist at all, will not be the same Churches. Their entire complexion and history in time to come will be shaped by the course of things with regard to this point.[12]

He added later, "The whole system is considered to be full of peril for the most precious interests of the Church."[13] He ends the tract by countering the "way of

10 Ibid., 52-58.
11 *Life and Work*, 132.
12 "Anxious Bench" in *Catholic and Reformed: Selected Theological Writings of John Williamson Nevin.* Edited by Charles Yrigoyen, Jr and George H. Bricker (Pittsburgh: The Pickwick Press, 1978), 23.
13 Ibid., 25.

the bench" with the way of the catechism as the means of raising up Christians in the Church. It is here that he begins to develop his view of the connection between the Incarnation and the Church. Although this is an extended passage, it will help frame Nevin's thinking on this subject:

> Man is the subject of [Christian salvation], but not the author of it in any sense. His nature is restorable, but it can never restore itself. The restoration to be real, must begin *beyond* the individual. In this case as in the other the general must go before the particular, and support it as its proper ground. Thus humanity fell in Adam, is made to undergo a resurrection in Christ, and so restored flows over organically as in the other case to all in whom its life appears. The sinner is saved then by an inward living union with Christ as real as the bond by which he has been joined in the first instance to Adam. This union is reached and maintained through the medium of the Church by the power of the Holy Ghost. It constitutes a new life, the ground of which is not in the particular subject at all, but in Christ, the organic root of the Church.[14]

Instead of the Church being an aggregation of individual parts "mechanically brought together," Nevin focused on the individual being supported organically because she is connected to the root which supports the branch, and not the other way around.[15] Thinking of the Church in these terms allowed Nevin, like Calvin before him, to say that "the Church is truly the *mother* of all her children."[16]

Nevin developed this thinking further in his book on the Eucharist, *The Mystical Presence*, in which he challenges the current understanding of the merely symbolic presence of Christ in the Eucharist among the Reformed. He returns to Calvin and the early Reformed creeds to develop his understanding of the real, mystical presence of Christ in the Eucharist. In the chapter "Scientific

14 Ibid., 107.
15 Ibid., 110-1.

Statement on the Mystical Union" he says, "that the human race might be saved, it was necessary that a work should be wrought not beyond it, but in it; and this inward salvation to be effective must lay hold of the race itself in its organic universal character, before it could extend to individuals..."[17] "The Word accordingly became flesh, that is assumed humanity into union with itself," he adds further down in the same section.[18] "The object of the incarnation was to couple the human nature in real union with the Logos, as a permanent source of life."[19] This was important for two reasons. First, Nevin came to understand that the Incarnation was at least as important for human salvation as the death and resurrection of Christ.[20] Second, Christ's life became the means of constituting the Church, the body of Christ; "...it forms the ground, out of which and in the power of which only, the whole life of the Church continually subsists."[21] Because of his human nature, Christ draws humanity into union with God; because of his divine nature, "Christ is personally present always in the

16 Ibid. See also Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, VI.1.4 and his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, 4:12.

17 J.W. Nevin, *Mystical Presence:A Vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist,* ed. Linden J. DeBie (Eugene: Wipf + Stock, 2012), 147.

18 Ibid., 147.

19 Ibid., 147

20 This is becoming a position more evangelicals are beginning to hold; see Oliver D. Crisp. "By His Birth We are Healed." *Christianity Today* (March, 2012), 31-34. Nevin eventually comes very close to the place where he would even say that the Incarnation was necessary for humanity to be united with God even if there had been no fall, or at least that the Incarnation is planned by God before the decision to allow the fall. For more, see Nevin's treatment in the sermon, *Christ and Him Crucified,* 11 and "Liebner's Christology" *Mercersburg Review* 3(1851), 70-1.

21 *Mystical Presence*, 154.

Church."[22] Developing his understanding of the Church based around the Incarnation, with two natures united in one person, gave Nevin a way to speak of the Church as both spiritual and physical, instead of setting one idea against the other, which he thought was all too common.

We will end this section with a consideration of his essay, "The Incarnation" which is one of his more developed treatments of the connection between the Incarnation and the Church. It is important to remember that, for Nevin, his view of the Incarnation is tied to his view of the Church. At the end of the essay he says, "We come to a true and sound conception of the Church through a true and sound Christology..."[23] The occasion for this essay is his reaction to R. I. Wilberforce, an Anglican theologian, which Nevin uses to present his own views on the Incarnation.

For Nevin, the Incarnation is the key to understanding everything in Christianity. "All rests on the mystery of the Incarnation. *That* is itself Christianity, the true idea of the gospel, the new world of grace and truth, in which the discord of sin, the vanity of nature, the reign of death, are brought forever to an end."[24] This did not mean that the Incarnation itself was enough; the hypostatic union rather provided the context for how the New Testament speaks

22 Ibid., 154.

23 "Wilberforce on the Incarnation." *Mercersburg Review* 2 (1850), 196.

24 "The Incarnation." In *The Mercersburg Theology* ed. by John Hastings Nichols (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966. Reprinted by Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers), 80. In this text the quotations from Wilberforce's work have been removed, leaving only Nevin's thoughts on the Incarnation. The editor justifies this because "Nevin's essay was not really a review of Wilberforce's book, but a statement of his own kindred conceptions."

about the life of Christ for his people, from the Virgin Birth to his continual mediation. No article of the Christian Creed deserves to be considered "which comes not to be of force in this order and on this ground."[25] Nevin even challenges the Protestant principle of Christianity -- the Bible as the foundation of the Church -- based on this principle; "However grating it may sound to some ears, the truth needs to be loudly and constantly repeated: the Bible is not the *principle* of Christianity, neither its origin, nor its fountain, nor its foundation."[26] Since the Church existed before the Bible and the Bible was written in the context of an already existing Christianity, the fountain and foundation of Christianity must be the Word made flesh; it is Christological in its origin. To say otherwise is rationalism in Nevin's mind.[27]

Humanity, not all individuals but all that comprises humanity in Adam, was redeemed by Christ in the Incarnation. "Humanity, as a single, universal fact, is redeemed in Christ, truly and really..."[28] Nevin clarifies this by reminding his readers of the difference between all and whole. All is finite and speaks of a corpus of individuals. Whole speaks rather of, "the universal life of man" organically and universally joined to Christ as the second Adam.[29] The beginning of the new creation, the seed of woman, is the human nature of Christ, the "foundation of the universal conception of humanity in its highest form."[30] "The

25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., 81.
27 Ibid., 82.
28 Ibid., 83.
29 Ibid., 84.
30 Ibid., 85.

race starts in Adam. It is recapitulated again, or gathered into a new center and head, in Christ."[31] Nevin says if this is not the case, then to speak of the Incarnation is nothing but a "mere Gnostic vision or Hindu avatar."[32]

This brings us to Nevin's understanding of the relationship between the Incarnation and the Church. It is here that Nevin brings these concepts together under his understanding of the *unio mystica.* Since we cannot be united to God through Christ's divinity, we must be mystically united through the humanity of Christ. In this way, Nevin will speak of being lifted up into union with God, thus completing human nature in a way which could not be accomplished any other way. "...a Central Person, in whom Divinity may be actually united with humanity, and who may be qualified thus to communicate the fellowship of the 'divine nature' mediately to all who trust in his name. This is just the mystery which meets us in Christ."[33]

For Nevin then, this mystical union translates into the life of the Church. "There is no room, then, to object to the idea of the mystical union as now stated, that it implies a continuation of the hypostatical mystery over into the life of the Church."[34] Nevin mentions that this concept was understood by "the ancients" as "being deified in Christ, as sharers of his nature."[35] This is one of the few places where Nevin will speak of theosis or deification, which is a concept that is becoming more common among Protestants. Littlejohn is correct when he says

31 Ibid., 83.
32 Ibid., 84.
33 Ibid., 88.
34 Ibid.

that this concept of theosis in Nevin is potentially an ecumenical connection point between the Reformed and the Orthodox.[36]

The Church then is Christ's presence in the world, in and by his Mystical Body. As such, it is better to think collectively of the Church rather than individually. "His relation is at once to the whole family of the redeemed, and single Christians accordingly have part in him only as they are comprehended at the same time in this whole."[37] To be in Christ is to be a part of his Mystical Body, the Church. The Church then must be real, historical and physical because these are characteristics of Christ's humanity in the Incarnation. The Church is not made because individuals have come into union with God in Christ, but because Christ has come and redeemed humanity, lifting humanity up into union with God, the Church is an organic reality which flows out to individual believers. "This is the idea of the Church. It comes from within and not from without. It grows out of the mystery of the Incarnation, apprehended as an abiding fact, and comes before us in the Creed accordingly, not as a notion or speculation merely, but as an article of *faith*."[38] "The Church, in this view, does indeed stand between Christ and the believer, but only as the body of a living man is between one of his limbs and the living soul by which it is quickened and moved."[39] In the historical context of America in the Nineteenth Century, one can begin to see why Nevin's

35 Ibid.

36 Littlejohn, *The Mercersburg Theology,* 124-146. Nevin's treatment of theosis and the supernatural end of man also provides a connection into the Catholic debates of nature and grace.

37 "The Incarnation," 89.

38 Ibid., 90.

opponents accused him of Romish tendencies. This concept was so foreign to the thinking of many in the Reformed communities in America that they could not understand Nevin's point.[40]

For Nevin, this meant not only that the Church needed to have a visible reality, but that there needed to be certain characteristics in her life. "The idea of the Church, as thus standing between Christ and single Christians, implies of necessity visible *organization*, common *worship,* a regular public *ministry* and *ritual*, and to crown all, especially, grace-bearing *sacraments*."[41] This mystery of Christ's mediation objectively touches men in and by the life of the Church through her functions and services, "with the same objective reality that attaches to the powers of nature under their own form and in their own place."[42] This objective reality needed to find expression both inwardly as well as through an outward declaration and testimony. This is, for Nevin, in direct opposition to those who think of Christianity as a mere transaction of the mind, which for Nevin is another theory of religion, and should not properly be called Christianity but "rationalism under the Christian name."[43] Christianity is instead to be understood as a "mediatorial economy."[44]

39 Ibid., 90.

40 See Hart, *John Williamson Nevin*, 111-137 for more details on these accusations. This is the same accusations that some make of those being influenced by Nevin's theology, see http://theaquilareport.com/pcas-pacific-northwest-presbytery-finds-te-peterbreaking-news-leithart-not-guilty-of-federal-vision-charges/. Accessed 12/7/12.

41 "The Incarnation," 90.

42 Ibid., 91

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

For Nevin, the Church question must ultimately be answered in light of the Incarnation. What is the Church; it is the body of Christ. It is humanity caught up into union with God, the mystical body of Christ, mediated to individuals through the life of the Church, most especially in the sacraments. The Church is the object of faith because it is the body of Christ which mediates life through its character. For Nevin, the nature of the Church is acknowledged as an object of faith, whenever the Creed is recited, "I believe in the holy catholic church." The Church for Nevin was not only Incarnational; it had to be connected to the Creed.

The Church Question and the Creed

In his dissertation studying the ecclesiology of Nevin, John Cordoue said, "In his theology John Nevin gave unquestioned primacy to the apostle's creed as the touchstone of orthodoxy and Christian unity."[45] When Nevin answered the church question, he framed his answer in the twin realities of the Incarnation and the Creed. The Church then should be understood both Christologically and sacramentally. When it came to describing what the attributes of the Church were, Nevin relied heavily upon the Apostle's Creed. It is not that Nevin saw the Apostle's Creed as comprising all necessary doctrine, but as Sell says, "...all doctrines are properly developed only within the orbit of the Creed."[46] In this section, we will be exploring Nevin's creedal understanding of

[45] John Thomas Cordoue. *The Ecclesiology of John Williamson Nevin: A Catholic Appraisal.* PhD Dissertation (Catholic University of America) 1968, 210.

[46] Alan P.F. Sell. "What Has P.T. Forsyth to do with Mercersburg?" in *Testimony and Tradition: Studies in Reformed and Dissenting Thought* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005), 189.

the Church which will be the foundation for understanding his views on Church unity.

When considering Nevin's view of the Church, it is important to at least place some emphasis on his understanding of the Ideal and the Actual. Often, in Protestant circles, theologians would speak of the universal and the local church. In his essay entitled "Catholicism," he takes up his distinction between the conceptions of the Church as Ideal versus Universal as typically understood by Protestants. It was, for Nevin, the difference between 'all' and 'whole.' Regarding the conception of the Church as 'all' he said is an "abstraction, derived from the contemplation or thoughts of a certain number of separate individual existences, which are brought together in the mind and classified collectively by the notion of common properties."[47] In Nevin's mind, understanding the Church in this way was nothing other than a numerical aggregation of those who hold mentally the notion of certain properties. There is no reality to this understanding; it is mere abstraction; a mental apparition. In contrast to that idea, Nevin related his idea of the Ideal to being one of wholeness. "The generality" this idea of wholeness "is not abstract, a mere notion added to things outwardly by the mind, but concrete; it is wrought into the very nature of the things themselves, and they grow forth from it as the necessity and perpetual ground of their being and life."[48] This conception of wholeness is a "living and concrete mystery which is set before us as an object, not of reflection simply, but of divine supernatural faith, in the old

[47] "Catholicism." *The Mercersburg* Review 3 (1851), 2.

[48] Ibid.

oecumenical symbols."[49] The parts -- individual Christians -- have real subsistence only as they enter into the constituted whole. The whole is before the individual and the individual gains life through the whole, not the other way around. As such, the Church,

> ...has a real historical existence in the world in and through the parts of which it is composed; while yet it is not in any way the sum simply or result of these, as though they could have a separate existence beyond and before such a general fact...underlying them at every point and as comprehending them always in its more ample range.[50]

This understanding of the Church as having real existence is important for comprehending Nevin's understanding of the Ideal and the Actual when it comes to the Church. This understanding is built on a German speculative theology, rather than the common sense realism which so dominated Princeton.[51] Borneman says, "Nevin adhered to an idealist ontology which insists that reality fundamentally begins with the ideal and the universal, not the finite and the actual."[52] For Nevin, this gave him a way to think about the Church which made the Church of the Protestant Reformation connected to the Church of the Apostolic Age, the Patristic Age and the Middle Ages.[53] For Nevin, "we take *Idea*

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49 Ibid., 4.

50 Ibid.

51 See Linden J. DeBie. *Speculative Theology and Common-Sense Religion: Mercersburg and the Conservative Roots of American Religion*, in the Princeton Theological Monograph Series, edited by K. C. Hanson, et. al. (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2008), 31-57.

52 Adam S. Borneman. *Church, Sacrament, and American Democracy: The Social and Political Dimensions of John Williamson Nevin's Theology of the Incarnation* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Pub., 2011), 63.

53 This position was not without controversy on many sides; both from within the German Reformed communion as well as without. Bomberger's critique of the new Liturgy and Nevin's "Vindication of the New Liturgy" says

here in its true sense, by which it expresses the very inmost substance of that which exists, as distinguished from its simple phenomenal character in time and space. As such it is not opposed to what is actual, but constitutes rather its truth and soul." [54] As an Idea then, the Church "is no fantastic figment of any man's brain, no utopian dream of the closet, no creature of human councils or human popes, no devise of the state, and no contrivance of the schools. But it is the most real of all realities that God has established in this world."[55] The Ideal nature of the Church demands that it has a reality to it that is not comprised of an aggregate, nor is it merely a mental creation. As such, "the Church … is the necessary and only form in which Christianity can have a real existence in the world."[56] The Ideal Church, then, is one Church through all ages and in all places. This allowed Nevin to boldly state, "Christianity and the Church are identical, and it lies in the very Idea of this last, that as it is Catholic and universal..."[57] The Ideal Church must be visible as a Church, instead of invisible; "its catholicity, unity, sanctity, all call for externalization."[58]

The Actual Church "is a process, not only covering a large field in space, but reaching over a long tract in time; and to be understood at all, it must be

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volumes even in its title: *Reformed, Not Ritualistic. Apostolic, Not Patristic: A Reply to Dr. Nevin's "Vindication, etc."*

54 "The Church." In *The Mercersburg Theology* ed. by John Hastings Nichols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966. Reprinted by Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers), 58.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid., 60.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

apprehended and viewed this way."[59] In this way, you can't speak of the Church of England as the Church any more than you can speak of the Church of the Nineteenth Century as the Church. The Actual Church is the church that is in process, "always pressing forward to its completion," as it will appear in the "millennium."[60] The Actual Church is the Church that lives in history and is therefore not perfect, it is not free from error or sin, but it is nevertheless the true Church.

This conception of the Actual Church allowed Nevin to connect the past and the present, even the present where the Church was fractured after the Reformation. This was also one of his critiques of Rome. "The Church of Rome, in claiming to be infallible, claims to be in fact the Ideal Church itself, as though this had already actualized itself in full in her communion."[61] The Actual Church is the true church, but it is not yet the Ideal Church. There will come a point when the two will be expressed as one, but this point has not yet arrived. The Actual Church is the Church that strives for her own reality as holy, apostolic and catholic. Nevin says, "with all their difference, however, the actual Church and the Ideal Church, it must be always born in mind, are in the end the same."[62] One of the reasons that Nevin is so set against the "sect system" or what he elsewhere calls "pseudo-protestantism" is that it works against this connection between the Actual and the Ideal. Unity in the Actual Church is working toward the time

59 Ibid., 61-2.
60 Ibid., 62.
61 Ibid., 62-3.
62 Ibid., 64.

when the Ideal will be realized. "The actual is the body of the Ideal in *growth*, the process, constantly changing and flowing, by which it is externalized and so made complete, as the great world-fact of redemption."[63] No matter how defective and abnormal the Actual may be, it must be understood that the Actual will become the Ideal because of the connection between the Incarnation and the Church. "The Church is the historical continuation of the life of Jesus Christ in the World."[64]

The Church then should always be understood in connection to her historical self. There is continuity between the Church in the present and the Church in the past. One of those connections is that the Church is to be understood as an object of faith as it is found in the Creed. "Without faith in the Church, there can be no proper faith in Christ," Nevin said in the same pamphlet.[65] He continues, "If there be no such supernatural constitution in the world as the Idea of the Church implies, the whole fact of the Incarnation is turned into an unreal theophany, and the gospel is subverted to its very foundations."[66] The Church then is not simply the witness to the truth, but by her very constitution "she comprehends and upholds the truth... as being in the fullest sense the depository of the life of Christ himself."[67] Even here, where the main focus is on the Church in its creedal understanding, it is easy to see how closely Nevin connected the Church to the Incarnation.

63 Ibid., 65.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid., 67.

This Christological connection is important because it is also creedal in its origin. Nevin elsewhere says, "The Mercersburg Theology claims the advantage of standing here, in its main positions, on the same ground with the faith of the early Church. Its Christology is that of the ancient Creeds."[68] He closes his letter to Dr. Harbaugh with the following, which is helpful for our understanding of the Church as creedal:

> In thus agreeing with the Creed, the system of course holds itself to be to the same extent in full agreement with the proper sense of the Scriptures; where in truth all stress is laid on the person of Christ, on his resurrection from the dead, on his glorification at the right hand of God, on the sending of the Holy Ghost, and on his presence and working through all time in the Church which is his body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all.[69]

When one rests theologically on the Creed, it is necessary to think about the Church in light of the Creed. "It belongs to the nature of the Church to be one and universal, catholic as well as holy, in an outward visible way no less than its unseen constitution," is how Nevin understood the Church in her creedal formula.[70] Each of these elements must be present, or the Church is no longer the Church. "To let go any of these attributes in our thought, is necessarily to give up at the same time the being of the Church itself as an article of faith, and to substitute for it a mere chimera of our own brain under its sacred name."[71]

For Nevin, the Church of the Creed is not Ideal vs. Actual. You cannot say this of one and not the other. As such, the Church should be understood in the

67 Ibid.
68 "Letter to Dr. Henry Harbaugh," 410.
69 Ibid., 411.
70 "The Church," 62.

following way: visible, catholic, historical and life-bearing. To place the Church in the context of the Creed and say that it is an object of faith, it must be at least these four things. "This much, and nothing less, is comprised in the article: *I believe in the holy catholic Church*"[72]

When Nevin speaks of the Church being visible, he does not want to deny that the Church has a spiritual reality. The inward, invisible power is what causes the external to become real. This is the process of growth that Nevin calls externalization, which is not instantaneous, but is a "process of centuries...to make it in this respect complete."[73] This means that the Church, to be properly the object of faith must have an external reality. The Ideal cannot be simply Ideal. There must be an Actual which is connected to it. He contrasts this to the Quakers, whose conception of the Ideal is nothing but a mere phantom. "An absolutely invisible Church can never be apprehended as a real church."[74] The difference for Nevin is the ability to say 'this is the Church' as opposed to simply 'there exists a church.' "In the way of actual presence and force upon the earth, the invisible Church, as it is called, can have no being whatever apart from the visible."[75] The Church is an organic reality, with its own nature, and must never be confused with any other organization, no matter how profitable they may be for society. The Church has her own organization, her own reality, that cannot be shared with any other organization. The Church alone is the body of Christ. It is

71 "Catholicism" *The Mercersburg Review* 3 (1851), p. 2.
72 "The Church" p. 67.
73 Ibid., 68.
74 Ibid.

only in this way that the Christian can think of the Church as the object of faith which we find in the Creed. We confess in the Creed that we believe in the holy, catholic Church, as a visible reality.

To confess the Church as catholic will be the focus for the next section in this essay, so we will say less now about Nevin's concept of unity. A couple of points are worth making here however, to retain the flow of Nevin's thought of the Church as connected to the Creed. First, when we confess that the Church is One, we must be careful not to think of unity as "mere abstract thought, as something purely spiritual, or as a result to be expected at best from some other quarter only in her heavenly state."[76] There is an eschatological bent to Nevin's understanding of the Ideal and the Actual, but one must be careful not take that to mean that Nevin has given up on the idea of catholicity as a reality of the Actual Church. He has not done so and in fact his constant work against the sects was just on this point. Sects restrict the Ideal from being realized more completely in the Actual. But even the Sects must in some way be organically connected to the Church, or they are not properly to be called Christians.

> We must believe that our sects, therefore, however necessary, are something wrong, a most defective, abnormal condition of the Body of Christ, an intermistic abomination, in the Church but not of it, that is destined in due time to pass away, and which, while it lasts, all good men are bound to deplore.[77]

75 Ibid.
76 Ibid., 69.
77 Ibid., 70.

This will become an important understanding in the modern Ecumenical movement. Indeed, Nichols called Nevin and Schaff the "major prophets of the twentieth-century ecumenical movement."[78]

When Nevin spoke of the Church of the Creed as historical, he was moving into territory that had been allowed to go fallow for many years. He was returning the Protestant Church of the Reformation to an understanding which the Reformers had, but had been overtaken with an alternative narrative. This alternative narrative was that the true Church was not found in the Roman Church, or even in the Eastern Church, but that the spiritual mother of the Protestant Reformation was in splinter groups like the Waldenes and Albingenes, effectively eliminating the Middle Ages from any kind of influence on the Reformation.[79] The Reformation then was a repristinization of the Church; an attempt to go back to the time when the Church was uncorrupted. This counter-narrative had become popular – and remains popular in some circles – because it seemed to give priority to strongly held Protestant beliefs about the corruption of Rome. "According to this *bold* view, Christ properly speaking had no visible Church through the whole period of the Middle Ages – and his promise that the gates of hell should not prevail against the Church...has suffered an interruption which covers more than half the tract of time that has elapsed since his

78 Nichols, *Romanticism*, 4.
79 For a more developed recounting of Nevin's tracing of this view see his "Pseudo-Protestantism." *The Weekly Messenger* 10 (1845: Aug 13, 20, 27, Sept 3, 10).

resurrection..."[80] In his introduction to Schaff's *The Principle of Protestantism*, Nevin goes even farther, "If Protestantism be not derived by true and legitimate succession from the church life of the Middle Ages, it will be found perfectly vain to think of connecting it genealogically with the life of the church at any earlier point."[81] To say this is to remove the Church from the life of the world and denies its reality as visible and catholic. If that is the case, the Reformation "cannot be vindicated as the work of God."[82] Instead, it makes the Church a mere Gnostic phantom.

Instead, for the Church to be "real, in this case, and historical, are the same thing; and when we say, *I believe in the holy catholic Church,* we do in fact profess our faith … in the Church as a visible, outward constitution, that has never failed under this character since it was first established among men, and that never will fail while the world shall last."[83] The Church then must be found in history. The Churches of the Reformation should then be understood as an organic outgrowth of the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages. Nevin calls the Middle Ages the "womb in which was formed the life of the Reformation itself."[84] The alternative is to state essentially that the Church began in the Reformation, or at least was a "restart" of the Church springing directly from the

80 "Pseudo-Protestantism," 2065.
81 "Introduction" p. 48.
82 "Pseudo-Protestantism," 2065.
83 "The Church," 70.
84 "Introduction," p. 47. One of Nevin's (and Schaff's) most provocative ideas is that the Church of the Tenth Century must be understood as an advance over the Third. This was the only way that Nevin could conceive of the

Bible. But for Nevin, this was not possible for it was "most assuredly to belie its existence as a real Church entirely."[85] It was much better in Nevin's mind to think of the Church as having become corrupt in her proper character than to annihilate "in thought her outward, visible, organic perpetuity."[86] To do that is to deny the Creed itself and the Church as an object of faith.

The final characteristic of the Church as understood by the Creed is that the Church is life-bearing. Christianity is not a system of doctrines, or an ethical system, or a historical record of events that have taken place. It is rather a "perpetual fact, that starts at the Incarnation of the Son of God, and reaches forward as a continuous supernatural reality to the end of time."[87] This perpetual fact includes what Nevin calls "life-powers" which belong to the Church as the Church and can be found in none other save the body of Christ. These should not be understood as being part of the outward properties of the Church, but flow from Christ as the head of the body to the Church through the work of the Holy Spirit.[88]

These life-bearing powers should be understood in light of the Church as a visible, historical reality which gives life to those who are joined with her. He adds,

> The Church is not the aggregation merely of all the individual actings of piety that are found on its compass; for, in that sense, we might call a

Reformation not being an aberration and ultimately was his complaint against the Puseyites in Anglicanism.
85 "The Church," p. 70-1.
86 Ibid., 71.
87 Ibid., 72.
88 Ibid.

> Christian association of any sort by this name; but it is the power of a divine constitution, which lies at the ground of all individual piety, and whose existence is absolutely at hand for the purpose it contemplates, independently of such piety altogether, though never, of course, without its presence.[89]

This means that the Church has an objective character. The Church exists objectively outside of the individual and the individual grows in piety through the life-bearing character of the Church through its visible organization.

What Nevin has in mind here are the sacraments, "The sacraments in particular have living power in themselves."[90] While it would be beyond the scope of this essay to delve too deeply into Nevin's view of the sacraments, it is important here to understand that Nevin has in mind an objectivity to the sacraments which he finds lacking in many Protestant churches.[91] He demonstrates this in the following:

> If there be no supernatural force in the ministry and sacraments for their own ends, it is plain that the entire objective character of the Church, and with this its true historical character, and at last its character as a real divine constitution, the 'Body of Christ,' in the world must virtually fall to the ground at the same time. And then the great fact of the Incarnation will be found, as before said, to be reduced also to a Gnostic abstraction, a thing of mere memory and notion. Without faith in the holy catholic Church there can be no full, abiding faith in the Word made flesh.[92]

The sacraments are then to be understood not as invisible abstractions, but outward life-giving realities which the Christian can have full faith in to

89 Ibid.
90 Ibid., 73.
91 Two areas that Nevin mentions in this section that are not often addressed in his sacramental theology are ministry and authority. Ordination for Nevin does convey some measure of objective force. He also comes very close to at least a Lutheran understanding of absolution.
92 Ibid.

accomplish the "ends they were designed to secure."[93] Taking the issue of baptism as his example, Nevin asks if the child who is baptized is related to the covenant in anyway other than nominalistically. He poignantly asks if these children are really children of God or are they still children of Satan. Does baptism, Nevin asks, "carry divine power, that properly improved will issue in eternal life?"[94] Harkening back to his argument in *The Anxious Bench*, he asks,

> Shall we lean upon the resources of the Church, faithful parental and pastoral education, to form them to a holy life, or shall we distrust and neglect this whole method, teach them to practically despise their own spiritual birthright, and thrust them out from us as aliens, who are to be recovered by the Church, if recovered at all, but an extraordinary process of conversion in some different way altogether?[95]

It is better indeed to trust in the life-giving means which have been given to the Church. He adds, "All will depend on our view of the Church, and the faith we may have in its visible institutions."[96] Faith in the Church and its life-bearing means is necessary, according to the Creed, to complete our faith in the Holy Trinity and in the fact of the Incarnation.[97] To deny this creedal aspect of the Church is to instead take up the spirit of antichrist. It is in its fundamental character, a denial of the holy catholic Church.

Christian Unity

From the very beginning, when Nevin began answering the Church question, he began thinking about the concept of unity. It is important to

93 Ibid., 74.
94 Ibid.
95 Ibid.
96 Ibid.
97 Ibid.

remember that his theological foundation for considering Church unity is the Incarnation and the objective reality of the Church as presented in the Creed. When St. Paul speaks of the Church as the body of Christ, there is only one body which is being referenced. Additionally, when the Creed speaks of the holy catholic Church, there is only one Church which is being referenced.[98] Because Nevin began to think about the Church in the terms of the Incarnation and the Creed, he had to develop a conception of unity and catholicity which would be able to bear the weight of his conception of the Church as an organic, life-bearing reality. In this section, I will examine two aspects of Nevin's thought: his understanding of catholicity and his understanding of what we today would call ecumenical unity, the joining of two existing ecclesial bodies.

Theodore Appel, the earliest of Nevin's biographers (some consider him to be the most authoritative on his thought since he was a student of Nevin), said regarding Nevin's views on catholicity, "Nevin's mind was much occupied with the idea of the Church as truly Catholic. Nowhere could he see it realized in the Christianity of his times..."[99] It fell to Nevin then to define what he meant by true catholicity. He did this in several places and over the period of several years he would come back to it repeatedly. One of the earliest is a sermon he delivered by the name of "Catholic Unity" which we will take up more in the second part of

98 While the blogosphere and chat rooms are not generally places of great theological reflection, while writing this author did come across an argument for polygamy based on the idea that Christ marries many wives because there are many churches. This is at least reflective of the problematic thinking which Nevin sees becoming pervasive in the spirit of the sects.

99 *Life and Work,* 369.

this section. Many of the ideas that Nevin introduced in that sermon, he took up in a more developed way in the article "Catholicism" written in the early 1850's. He begins that essay, "Among the attributes which Christianity has claimed to itself from the beginning, there is none perhaps more interesting and significant than that which is expressed by the title *Catholic."*[100] He adds a few more descriptors which are familiar ground for Nevin including the idea that the Church is the very nature of Christianity and the Church as an object of faith demands an understanding of catholicity which could bear that weight. Remove catholicity from the Church and you lose the very nature of the Church; catholicity is not an accidental or artificial quality. Because catholicity is the very nature of the Church, the Church has tenaciously held to this title as "her inalienable distinction over against all mere parties or sects bearing the christian name."[101]

Nevin covers familiar ground in the beginning of the essay with a discussion of the distinction between "all" and "whole" when it comes to conceiving of catholicity. Since this was discussed in the last section, it will only be necessary to see how Nevin developed this idea for his overall purpose of Catholicity. Nevin will only allow that true catholicity can be found in understanding wholeness; that parts only have meaning in the whole. The following is a very important statement which Nevin makes on this point:

> When christianity is declared to be *catholic*, the declaration must be taken in its full sense to affirm, that the last idea of this world as brought

100 "Catholicism," 1

101 Ibid., 2

> to its completion in man is made perfectly possible in the form of christianity, and in this form alone, and that this power therefore can never cease to work until it shall have actually taken possession of the world as a whole, and shall thus stand openly and clearly revealed as the true consummation of its nature and history in every other view.[102]

It is beyond the scope of this essay to delve deeply into his understanding, but there are many similarities between Nevin's views of election and what has come to be known as the "New Perspective on Paul."[103] His idea here is that in the Church, Christ takes up all of humanity as the Second Adam into himself. All religion, all learning, all peoples, all nations, etc. belong to the empire of Christ because he is the Second Adam.[104] Christianity is then "the reconstruction or new creation of man's universal nature..." Nevin likens this to the idea that Christianity is the leaven of Matthew 13.[105] He concludes this idea, "the life of the Church is the salvation of the world."[106]

He ends the essay with several conclusions regarding the wholeness which he has in mind with these descriptions of catholicity. Wholeness in Christianity should not be understood as an arithmetical sum in which the parts constitute the whole, rather the parts draw their life from the whole. Catholicity should be understood in a Christological context. "So the *whole* fact of christiainity gathers itself up fundamentally into the single person of Christ, and

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102 Ibid., 5. He also develops a very nuanced understanding of human salvation which is built around his understanding of Christ's incarnation and the nature of the Church as catholic.

103 See N.T. Wright's *Justification.* For instance, Nevin changes the way he conceives of election from that of individuals to the idea of the election of the church, see "Catholicism," 10; cf. *Mystical Presence,* pp. 147ff.

104 "Catholicism,"12.

105 Ibid., 16.

is found to grow forth from this literally as its root."[107] The Incarnation brings a new order of humanity into the world. Christ is the root out which this new order of life – the Church – grows. This implies a trajectory to history; the completion of all things in Christ. This for Nevin implies a form of exclusivism, for one cannot speak of catholic Judaism or an Islamic catholicism.[108] All this must be brought about in Christ and in the Church as his body.

He ends this essay with his discussion of the nature of divisions in the Church. "As the attribute of catholicity is distinctively characteristic of the Church as such, it follows that no mere sect or fragment of this can effectively appropriate the title."[109] The sect says that the rest of the Christian world has been cut off from the root and now they alone have title to the word 'Church.' The sect must act as though it is the whole, when in truth it is only a part, even by their own admission. In essence, the sect makes the same mistake which Rome does; they claim to have the exclusive rights of the use of the word Church and the powers which go with that usage.[110] The problem is that sects nullify the Creed because they recognize they cannot say their sect comprises all Christians. In essence they would be saying that they believe in one holy catholic Presbyterianism, etc. in place of the Church. He bemoans the sect spirit in this way, "What sect of those now existing, Lutheran, German Reformed, Methodist,

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106 Ibid., 17.

107 Ibid., 19.

108 This should be understood from the perspective of these other religious expressions pointing toward the higher reality of the Incarnation, and not from the perspective of exclusivity of truth or eternal destiny.

109 Ibid., 23.

&c., can seriously expect ever to take up the universal world of man's life into its bosom...?"[111] For Nevin, catholicity must comprise the totality of life, not just an individual's life, or the German life, but all of humanity itself. No sect could do that, and the more sects split off, the harder it became to conceive of catholicity in the manner which Nevin described it.

With that in mind, we will turn to our final topic for this section, Nevin's thoughts on the reversal of the sect problem, Church union. While most of his writings on the issue of catholicity talk more about his distinction regarding the Ideal and the Actual church, he does address the issues surrounding the practical implications of Church unity in several places; we will consider two for our purposes.

In August 1844, there was a meeting between the Dutch and German Reformed Churches to consider closer relations between the two Reformed communions which maintained cordial though separate relations. Nevin, as the leading theologian of the German Reformed Church, was asked to speak. His topic reflects this ecumenical theme – Catholic Unity. He took as his text Ephesians 4:4-6.[112] Among the listeners was the newly appointed professor at Mercersburg, Philip Schaff, who requested that Nevin's sermon be included in the English translation of his *The Principle of Protestantism* when it was published in

110 Ibid., 24.

111 Ibid., 25. We begin perhaps to see the issue which nearly drove Nevin to Rome. See Hart, 139-168 and Nichols, 192-217 for more details on his "dizzy" period as it is often called.

1845. Unfortunately, Nevin's and Schaff's ideas presented in these two works had the opposite effect of the one they desired. In his introduction to the sermon, Nichols says, "The hostility to Mercersburg among the Reformed Dutch became so great, indeed, that all hope of closer ties between the two denominations was clearly precluded by the theological views of the very men who had advocated them."[113]

Nevin's first point is familiar ground by now, focusing on the idea of catholicity that would be further defined in essays like "Catholicism" which we have previously considered. He is focusing in this first point on the organic reality of the Church and how the believer's life is to be understood in relation to the Church. His second point will be the focus of our consideration here. He takes up the duty which Christians have toward the already existing catholicity of the Church.

He begins by making the distinction between the Ideal and the Actual as he has done elsewhere. However, his purpose is to address the reality of the Actual Church being divided, especially among two Reformed communions. Though separated by original languages, nevertheless in the New World they share a common language in English as well as a common creed in the Heidelberg Catechism. Though there is an admission that the Actual lags behind the Ideal when it comes to visible expression of existing unity, this should be

112 "There is one body and one Spirit, even as ye are called in on hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all."

113 *Mercersburg Theology*, 35.

understood as an "intermediate stage, through which the life of the Church is constantly struggling towards a revelation, which shall be in all respects adequate to its nature."[114] The Actual Church cannot rest upon its status; instead, it must struggle to realize the Ideal. Quoting Christ's High Priestly prayer that 'they may be one', he says, "The whole Church then must be regarded as inwardly groaning over her own divisions, and striving to actualize the full import of this prayer; as though Christ were made to feel himself divided, and could not rest till such unnatural violence should come to an end."[115] For Nevin, the task of every Christian to reach for, pray for and work for "the Catholic Unity of the Church."[116] In many ways, this could be used as the motto of the modern ecumenical movement.

Nevin proposed three things which all Christians should do to help overcome this reality. First, it is the duty of every Christian to "lay to heart the evil that is comprehended in the actual disunion and division, which now prevail in the Catholic Church."[117] The Church should be outwardly what she is in her inward life. This was particularly true in Nevin's mind in the Protestant world "with its rampant sectarianism and individualism."[118] Instead of seeing the sects as necessary as some had argued, Nevin wanted his audience to see them as an

114 "Catholic Unity" In *The Mercersburg Theology* ed. by John Hastings Nichols (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966. Reprinted by Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers), 43
115 Ibid.
116 Ibid., 44
117 Ibid.
118 Ibid.

"immense evil in the Church."[119] There was no sense in which these sects should be seen as a good thing; instead they are a vast reproach to the Christian cause. "By no possibility could they be countenanced and approved as good, by the Lord Jesus Christ, if he should appear again in the world as the visible head of his people."[120] As long as that is the case for Nevin, the sect spirit is evil and should be worked against whenever and wherever Christians can do so. He laments, "Can any one suppose, that the order of things which now prevails in the Christian world, in the view before us, is destined to be perpetual and final?"[121] This becomes important for Nevin, because he is harkening back to the foundational ideas of the Reformation. In Nevin's mind, if this division among sects is what the Reformers had in mind, the Reformation has not achieved its own legitimation. To be legitimated, the Reformation must be able to bring back together what it has separated. There is hope in this because there is something which we can strive for in making the Actual more like the Ideal. In almost prophetic overtones, Nevin says, "The hour is coming though it be not now, when the prayer of Christ that his Church may be one, will appear gloriously fulfilled in its actual character and state throughout the world. But before this great change shall be effected, it will be the object first of much earnest desire and expectation."[122] This did not mean that Nevin was advocating a crusade against the sects, whereby they are 'forced' to be brought together. This change must be

119 Ibid.
120 Ibid.
121 Ibid., 46
122 Ibid.

understood to take place organically from within the sects themselves. Nevin firmly believed that the sect system as it existed was unsustainable. The sect spirit will end because it must end by its very nature. This is not the Church Catholic; it must therefore end. It was a statement of theological ecumenicity bounded by lamentation at the evil which brought it about and a prayer for its ultimate end.

Second, Nevin warns against conceiving of this unity in reductionistic terms. Nevin was not going to advocate an ecumenical task which sought to ignore the realities of division based on doctrine which he called "one of the worst forms of separatism, aggravating the mischief it proposes to heal."[123] Don Yoder correctly points out that Nevin's conception of Christian unity could only be understood in theological terms, not in the negation of theology itself. Doctrine was not the problem for Nevin. Yoder says that Nevin rejected three existing ideas of Church unity: eliminate denominations and return to the New Testament, liberal union based on indifference to confessional standards, and any concept of federal union.[124] Instead of any kind of external union, it must be one that grows from the inside out. "To be valid, it must be free, the spontaneous product of Christian knowledge and Christian love."[125] Christian duty then is "to follow after the things that make for holiness and peace; and to seek in every way the coming of God's kingdom, with the new power and glory, in the hearts of his

123 Ibid., 47

124 Don Herbert Yoder. "Christian Unity in Nineteenth-Century America." in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517-1948*. Edited by Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967), 287.

125 "Catholic Unity," 47

people, that they may be brought to understand and feel, continually more and more, the force of that common life, by which they are all one in Christ Jesus."[126]

The third area that Nevin addresses as a duty of the Church is to always take advantage of areas where unity can be advanced based on the previous two points. The reformation process must begin internally in the life of the Church, but it cannot stay there. It must seek external expression for this to be real union. We cannot go ahead of the Lord, but we must not lag behind him either. This is really based on his understanding of the Church question. Everything that Nevin understands the Church to be is poured into his understanding of the ecumenical task in front of him. If the Church is what he believes her to be incarnationally and creedally, then she cannot help but move past this current position. Life, given to the Church by Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit, is not to be kept internal, but must be expressed outwardly. There is no other way for Nevin to conceive of church union. Every opportunity where unity can be sought should be sought, even if that results in nothing. He states, "Every instance then in which the open correspondence and communion of particular sections of the Church, is made to assume in a free way, a more intimate character than it had before, deserves to be hailed as being to some extent at least an approximation towards the unity, which the whole body is destined to finally reach."[127] He ends with a statement of his own heart-felt prayer, "If I might be instrumental … in helping only to pull down a single one of all those walls of partition, that now mock the

126 Ibid., 48.

127 Ibid., 49.

idea of catholic unity in the visible Church, I should feel that I had not lived in vain..."[128] This could perhaps be truly the prayer of the ecumenical movement itself and those who participate in it.

As the closing to this section, we will be looking at Nevin's thoughts on Church unity that were occasioned by the Presbyterian Union Convention (1867). Nevin wrote his thoughts on unity nearly 25 years after he had delivered his sermon "Catholic Unity." Nevin begins the essay by recounting the details of the convention, which was called to discuss the potential union between the Old and New Presbyterians. One of the events which took place during the Convention was the potential that there might be union between Presbyterians and Episcopalians. A detailed recounting of particular details is not pertinent for our purposes, but Nevin does reference this, so it is necessary to at least briefly consider some details.

He begins his comments on the Convention by stating something very much in line with his final point in "Catholic Unity." He says that all should see the Convention "as one of the most interesting and significant movements of the time in favor of Christian union."[129] He harkens back to themes which have been important in his thinking on the Church question saying that the Church should be understood as an object of faith as one, holy, and catholic in accordance with the old *regula fidei* of the Creed. His thoughts here sound very much like the first point in his earlier sermon, "For the true Christian spirit, then the existing

128 Ibid., 49-50
129 "Presbyterian Union Convention," 90.

divisions of the Protestant Church can never fail to be a cause of lamentation and grief."[130] Unity cannot be achieved, Nevin restates all these years later by seeking the lowest possible terms, but only in true organic oneness. He does have the advantage of time when he recounts the Protestant longing for something greater than they currently have; a real 'communion of saints' that is talked about in the Creed. And this longing has resulted in all the best theology of the day being focused on this idea of unity, moving toward "this magnificent end."[131] Even if these first attempts at union are only the idea of "outward leagues" they demonstrate "how deep-seated and wide-spread the feeling is, that our religious divisions are wrong, and sadly at war with the true Spirit of Christ."[132] The addition of the discussions with the Episcopalians made this even more noteworthy for Nevin, especially when they jointly recited the Apostle's Creed.

This leads Nevin to reflect more deeply on how the proliferation denominations has caused even more problems in American Christianity. He develops his understanding of the distinction between denominations and differences. Differences such as between the Greek and Latin Churches are legitimate as are the Protestants of the Reformation and perhaps even the division between Lutheran and Reformed. In a statement that sounds similar to a branch theory of ecclesiology, Nevin says, "Even these cases of principal division, as it may be called, in which different sides of one and the same organic totality find a certain amount of legitimate expression, are required to come together in the

130 Ibid., 91.
131 Ibid., 92.

deeper unity of Christ..."[133] Divisions, even if they are legitimate, should not be understood as the final stage, but as something to be moved beyond. He will even allow that the Presbyterian bodies might properly be called part of this division, as the Scotch Reformed. However, there is no way to include the growth of the denominations in America as part of this divisional conception. Healing denominational divisions should not be understood as part of Nevin's ideal of evangelical catholicity. Denominational divisions should always be understood as illegitimate divisions. In his best biting irony, he says, "Only think of the grand confessional and theological issues of the sixteenth century being made to bend to the question of singing Rouse's Psalms!"[134] Denominational divisions make the real division of the Protestant Reformation smaller in comparison; the exact opposite of the way it should be.

Nevin's tone in the remainder of the article seems much more pessimistic than his earlier writing. But this can perhaps be understood from the perspective of how small the intention of this convention actually was. Both of these groups already subscribe to the Scriptures being God's word and the Westminster Confession of Faith, they hold to the Presbyterian form of government, and both hold that the book of Psalms should be used in worship. By having a conference to state these things publicly, they have not really said anything except what everyone already knew. They have not advanced Church unity; they have not even ultimately advanced Presbyterian unity. These things were already true.

132 Ibid., 93.
133 Ibid., 95.

"But so far as the cause of true catholic unity is concerned, the great Christian thought that underlies all these calls for Church union, we cannot see that this Presbyterian movement means much, or that its full success would be of any very great account."[135] Denominational unity cannot be understood as representing the proper wholeness of the Church and as such can only obliquely be the Actual striving for the Ideal.

Nevin's solution, and perhaps his most far-reaching ecumenical idea, is to think of the Apostle's Creed as the necessary symbol for the task of actually achieving catholicity. "All confessionalism, all denominational symbolism, to be of a truly catholic, and not merely sectarian character, must refer itself ultimately to the Apostle's Creed, as the primary basis of the universal Christian faith."[136] Remove the Creed from the Church, and their own symbols of faith deserve no respect. "Here Lutheranism, Anglicanism, Presbyterianism, Methodism, and New England Puritanism, are required to meet on common ground, … these platforms must plant themselves on this common ground to carry with them any legitimate force as separate confessions."[137] This is Nevin's prescription for an understanding of unity and diversity being able to co-exist. The catholicity of the Church can be realized in diversity if there is faith in the Church of the Creed which connects them. It is not necessary, at least in an interim sense, to eliminate the theological distinctions if there is connection between these churches and the

134 Ibid., 97.
135 Ibid., 100.
136 Ibid., 102.
137 Ibid., 103

Church. Any attempt to gain unity outside of the Creed is destined to never achieve what it attempts to create. Only the Creed as a common symbol will bring unity.[138]

For Nevin, there is no sense in which there can be a Church which is non-denominational either. There can be no appeal a generic kind of Christianity that transcends denominational boundaries. There can also be no union based on this idea. There is no creed that can be established which will provide the reality of catholic unity which is not itself based on the Creed. And if it is not based on the Creed, there can never be true catholicity. The most catholic event of the Convention for Nevin, was when the Episcopal delegation came to the hall, and together they recited the Creed. "The truth is," Nevin writes, "it was in involuntary homage to catholicity, which forced upon the assembly" and "carried the Convention beyond itself, and lifted it out of its own sphere..."[139]

However, Nevin is not advocating the mere recitation of the Creed as a catholic event. If the Creed is to have any meaning, it must not be allowed to mean whatever the sects want it to mean. It must carry the meaning of the Creed, in all the fullness of its intentionality, for it to have real ecumenical meaning. If

138 This sounds very similar to the first thesis which Fries and Rahner posited in their book *Unity of the Churches,* although they also include the Nicaean and the Constantinoplean Creeds. *Unity of the Churches: An Actual Possibility.* Translated by Ruth C.L. Gritch and Eric W. Gritch. (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1983, 13-23.

139 "Presbyterian Union Convention," 105.

not, it is merely an "absolutely hypocritical compliment;"[140] a reality which is false at its very core.

It is not that the Creed is being called upon to serve this role just because Nevin likes it and the sects do not. The Creed points to a reality that the sects do not like, and so they reject it; but in doing so, they reject the very reality which they are trying to achieve. "The Creed is historical, makes the Church the object of faith, and throws a sacramental character around the mystery of godliness throughout; all so effectually, that its whole theory of Christianity is felt, by these sects themselves, to be different from the scheme in which they stand."[141] The Creed then is the "perpetual prophecy of evil against our modern evangelical sects" which is the reason they have neglected it in their worship and teaching.[142]

We will close this section with Nevin's words:

> If anything in the world is certain, we think it is, that no such Catholic unity, whether in theology, or in worship, or in Church life, can ever be reached except on the basis of the old Creeds, taken in their old, only true historical sense; and that the first, and most necessary of all conditions, therefore, for any effectual movement toward this end, is the resuscitation of the interest in these Creeds; while all that works the opposite way in our modern religious life, tends wholly and inevitably toward disintegration only, and ultimate chaos.[143]

Conclusion – Nevin and the Modern Ecumenical Task

We have developed in this essay how John Williamson Nevin answered the Church question through the lenses of the Incarnation and the Creed. We have also seen how Nevin's answer to the Church question led him to his

140 Ibid.

141 Ibid., 106.

142 Ibid.

understanding of visible Church unity. For Nevin, Church unity is about the Actual Church becoming more and more like her Ideal self in reality. Not as a separate reality, but becoming something she is already. The Church is one, holy and catholic as the Creed says. The Ecumenical task then is to constantly strive for that reality. Denominations, sects and divisions are not the way the Church is to be understood and therefore they should only be understood as temporary. Nevin, in spite of the fact that the Churches of the Reformation were being broken apart in his day, remained steadfast on this idea – I believe in one holy catholic Church. The Ecumenical task still lies before us. But faith in the Church as the Church of the Creed should give us hope. Let us say with the saints of old and the Christians of the world, "I believe in one holy Catholic Church."

143 Ibid., 109.

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ARTICLE REVIEW

Jean-Christophe Cassel, Daniel Cassel, and Lilianne Manning
"From Augustine of Hippo's Memory Systems to Our Modern Taxonomy in Cognitive Psychology and Neuroscience of Memory: A 16-Century Nap of Intuition before Light of Evidence"
Behavioral Science 3 (2013), 21–41; doi:10.3390/bs3010021. Available: http://www.mdpi.com/2076-328X/3/1/21

Review by G. Andrew Mickley, Ph.D., Emeritus Professor and Founding Chair, Neuroscience Program; Baldwin Wallace University; 275 Eastland Rd., Berea, OH 44017-2088. amickley@bw.edu

My mother instructed her young son with no fashion sense that plaid and stripes clash. Likewise, over the centuries, the sciences and humanities have experienced similar tensions of just "not playing well together." So it is welcome to witness the occasional agreement between the intuition-based truth-seeking of religion and the reductionist-based fact-seeking of science. Such is the case when we compare some of the modern findings from psychology and neuroscience and the writings of *Aurelius Augustinus Hipponesis* (354–430, CE), a.k.a. "Augustine of Hippo" or "St. Augustine." Augustine is perhaps best known for his theological and philosophical contributions in the *Confessions* (401 CE) and in Book 10[144] of that work, he reflected on the topic of memory. Now three neuroscientists[145] at the "Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique" (National Center for Scientific Research) in France have done a nice job of comparing and contrasting St. Augustine's writing on memory with some of what modern science has learned about the same topic.

The authors begin with a brief overview of the study of cognition, noting that the experimental methods required to study memory arose towards the end of the 19th century. Before then psychological phenomena were examined introspectively, mostly by philosophers. Certainly Aristotle and Plato contributed to this examination even before St. Augustine. But the work of modern psychologists and neuroscientists, studying normal memory as well as people with brain damage and amnesias[146], has led to a variety of taxonomies of memory systems[147] that have yielded fruitful heuristic value. The authors hasten to point out that St. Augustine's introspective insights about memory 16 centuries ago were not the basis for the modern taxonomy - rather, just that the similarity is striking.

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144 Augustine
145 Cassel, Cassel and Manning
146 Vargha-Khadem, Gadian, Watkins, Connelly, Van Paesschen and Mishkin
147 Atkinson and Schiffrin

In Book 10 of *Confessions*, St. Augustine wrote about "*the vast domains and palaces of memory*"[148] , and he actually distinguished different categories of memories. In particular, he commented on the topics of sensible memory, memory of self, intellectual memory, memory of memories, memory of feelings and passion, and memory of forgetting. Modern psychologists and neuroscientists have also categorized several different kinds of memory storage based on observation and experimentation.[149]

The categories of memory are given different names by modern authors and St. Augustine, but the taxonomy is remarkably similar. For example, through the study of persons with damage to particular parts of their brain Tulving[150] and collaborators have discovered that certain unfortunate individuals cannot remember anything they have ever done or experienced in the past. They know facts about themselves ("I know that cars exists and that I own a car") but they do not recall personal experiences related to that fact ("I do not recall driving or going anywhere in my car"). Thus, these investigations tell us that particular parts of the brain are required to store memories of events or episodes (i.e., *episodic* memories) and that these memory storage locations are separate from the brain areas that store facts about the world (i.e., *semantic* memories). Likewise, St. Augustine[151] directed his reflections towards memory of the self, akin to the current definition of episodic memory: "*There (in the vast court of his memory) also meet I with myself, and recall myself, and when, where, and what I have done, and under what feelings.*" But these memories are distinct from facts personal and otherwise: "*Here also is all learnt of the liberal sciences and as yet unforgotten.*"[152]

As Cassel et al. summarize, "... although St. Augustine's reflections did not rely on any scientific evidence and were proposed in a phrasing much different from current neuropsychologists' and neuroscientists', this brilliant man totally devoted to faith had eventually described a taxonomy of memory systems which, for most of them, appear to overlap part of some of the memory systems as they are described and debated in our most modern conceptual frameworks (e.g., explicit and implicit memory, episodic memory, semantic memory, perceptual memory...)."[153]

Cassel *et al.* do not mention it but it is worth noting that there is not an exact congruence between St. Augustine's Book 10 of *Confessions* and modern

148 Augustine, 10.8.12
149 Atkinson and Schiffrin
150 Tulving , 202
151 Augustine, 10.8.14
152 Augustine, 10.9.16
153 Cassel, Cassel and Manning, 27

knowledge about memory and recall. One example of this is the topic of "reconsolidation." Briefly, over the last few years neuroscientists have discovered that, independent of their age, memories remain open to alteration as soon as they are in an active state, as is the case during recall.[154] So we are likely to change (reconsolidate) a memory every time we recall it. This leads to the counter-intuitive prediction that non-revisited memories are more stable than are the memories we recall time and again. Said another way, our most accurate memories are not those that we consider and reconsider but rather the ones that we don't revisit.

Augustine seems to recognize that his memories are labile on most topics: "*...I perceive that the present discerning of these things is different from remembering that I oftentimes discerned them, when I often thought upon them.*"[155] But in regards to his memory about what he knows of God, he seems to make the point that these memories do not change: "*...Thou remainest unchangeable over all, and yet hast vouchsafed to dwell in my memory, since I learnt Thee.*"[156] Modern neuroscience would predict that memories of God (ethereal as they may be) would obey the same rules as any other memory. But discrepancies between St. Augustine's writing and recent experimental data should not detract from the main point made by Cassel *et al.* that Augustine's intuitions about memory and its taxonomy largely hold up (at least in a general way) in the light of modern science. [Interested readers may also wish to read Manning *et al.*'s companion article[157] that concerns itself with Book 11 of the *Confessions* and St. Augustine's reflections on memory, subjective time, and mental time travel.]

There is an interesting side note (not made by Cassel *et al.*) about St. Augustine's other name: Augustine of Hippo. Of course, Hippo was an ancient city of northwest Africa (in present-day northeast Algeria south of Annaba) where St. Augustine was bishop from 396 to 430 CE. However, for neuroscientists, the Greek prefix "hippo" (horse) has special meaning. The seahorse-shaped brain structure, called the hippocampus, is one of the most likely nuclei where working memory is processed and temporarily stored in the human brain.[158] When I try to convince my students about how special the brain really is, I sometimes comment that "You know, the brain is the only organ that studies itself." It is thought-provoking to consider that Augustine of Hippo's hippocampus was likely working overtime as he considered the many facets of memory in Book 10 of the *Confessions*.

154 Besnard, Caboche and Laroche
155 Augustine, 10.13.20
156 Augustine, 10.25.36
157 Manning, Cassel, and Cassel
158 Tulving and Markowitsch

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BOOK REVIEW

In Quest of a Vital Protestant Center: An Ecumenical Evangelical Perspective.
By George Demetrion
Wipf and Stock ISBN 13:978-1-62564-048-2
313 pages.
by F. Christopher Anderson

George Demetrion places a Gabriel Fackre insight in a footnote in the middle of his new book. (128) Fackre points out that in an evangelical seminary there was "the Modern Theology course." This course functioned as offering an alternative to the evangelical point of view. Fackre pointed out that was no such counterpart in mainline seminaries. Now which seminary was more inclusive?

I have been personally criticized as having a narrow education because I received my M.Div. from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. This overlooks the facts that I had 12 years of Roman Catholic education, a Sociology/Eng. Lit. double major from a secular state university and a D.Min. from a UCC seminary.

It is against such a background that I highly recommend this book. Oddly enough, many who have been trained in mainline seminaries do not have a large grasp of differing views of the Christian Faith. Often their views on evangelicals are merely stereotypes. One very honorable UCC pastor, who was close to 60 at the time, asked me if The Christian Missionary Alliance was a cult! George

Demetrion has done the church a wonderful service. He has broken down certain walls in the theological world that should never have been erected.

What book can you name that compares J.I Packer, Donald Bloesch, Gabriel Fackre, Walter Brueggemann, Douglas Hall, Richard Lints plus has discussions of Barth, Bultmann, Bonhoeffer, Dorrien, Daly, Grenz, Erickson, Ruether, Moltmann, Henry, Pinnock, Schussler Fiorenza, Stott, Olson, Newbigin, both Niebuhrs and Tillich? I have had conversations with well-educated mainline pastors who had never heard of J.I. Packer or John Stott. This book helps address this situation.

Demetrion helps us all in our search for a vital Protestant Center by beginning this dialogue. This book deserves a wider audience. It is worth the investment.

P.S. Many Mercersburgers (who have been around a while) may want to know that Willis Elliott both encouraged this book and wrote the Foreword. It has to be one of the last things he wrote for publication.

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