

Lancaster Theological Seminary's Special Sauce

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We always like to say that Lancaster Theological Seminary is unique, special. We assert that it is a big ecumenical tent, that it is spiritually nurturing, that it is a formative community. A few years ago, a person who evaluates theological schools studied us and noted our self-description. He said, somewhat dismissively, “Oh, yeah, big tent, spiritual formation, nurturing. Yeah, every seminary says that.” Then he interviewed students, faculty, and staff. He even sat in on some classes. When he left, he remarked, “Every seminary boasts of those virtues. The difference with you is: It’s actually true.”

In many ways Lancaster Theological Seminary does have a unique ethos. In fact, it has always been an odd duck. So, as we think about our identity, the question is: What is its special sauce, that has rescued it from being just another standard issue seminary? I think it has something to do with this: On the one hand it has endeavored to remain faithful to a particular expression of Christianity, one that has doggedly insisted that the Good News is that God has tabernacled with humanity. On the other hand, it has been open to new movements of the Spirit and has been stretched and enriched through interaction with a swirling array of Christian traditions. Most other seminaries do one or the other of these things, but not both at the same time. We walk and chew gum.

You can’t talk about the legacy of LTS without beginning with the theology that had flourished in its predecessor institution located in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania. Some folks point out that most of our students (and faculty and staff) don’t self-identify with that movement, or

even know what it was. We don't have a required course on Mercersburg theology, and usually not even an elective. But, the influence of Mercersburg doesn't have to be explicit. It is incarnated in the way we worship, in the architecture, in the stained-glass windows, in the way we teach and learn. It was, and is, in the water.

Starting in the 1830's and 1840's, the Mercersburg heritage remained an exceptional phenomenon in the history of American theology. Of course, in some ways it wasn't all that different; it maintained the distinctive emphases of the broader Reformed tradition, most notably the sovereignty of God in all spheres of life, and the enactment of God's redemptive purposes in human history. No matter how the curriculum has changed, that theme of God working out Gods' redemptive purposes has remained a constant. That conviction continues to play itself out in our current efforts to engage the pressing issues of our era, from LGBTQ rights, to economic equity, and to redressing systemic racism in our own small ways.

However, in other ways the Mercersburg heritage was significantly different from other strands of the Reformed tradition, and that difference still lives on. In part this distinctiveness was due to its German rather than Swiss, Dutch, or English origins. The German Reformed heritage had arisen in a region of western Germany that had been subjected to rival Lutheran, Zwinglian, Calvinist, and Catholic influences. While celebrating the Lord's Supper around 1560, a Lutheran and a Zwinglian minister in Heidelberg slugged each other while co-celebrating the Eucharist, fighting over the words of consecration. That destructive conflict of spiritualities motivated many of the ecclesial and political leaders of the territory to search for a theology that was broadly orthodox, congruent with the ecumenical creeds, tolerant of differing opinions about nonessential matters of faith and practice, avoidant of speculation about unknowable mysteries,

and passionate about Christian unity. This irenic ethos diverged from the finicky doctrinal focus of the English and Dutch traditions.

But the uniqueness of the Mercersburg heritage was not merely attributable to its rootage in the German Reformed tradition. It was also a response to the idiosyncrasies of early nineteenth century America. During this era the revivalists of the Second Great Awakening were striving to trigger conversion experiences, often by using very sensationalistic and coercive strategies. They would first imbue their audiences with a crushing fear of damnation and then promise them relief from guilt. For the revivalist the typical introduction to the Christian life was the “born again” experience which was a datable episode in an individual’s life.

The Mercersburg theologians were appalled at revivalism’s glamorization of the individual’s instantaneous spiritual transformation, its denigration of the nurturing power of the church’s worship and catechesis, and its reduction of the church to a voluntary society of reborn individuals. In opposition to this, the Mercersburg theologians redirected attention away from the drama of the individual’s alleged rebirth to the gradual communication of Christ’s sanctified life to humanity. For the Mercersburg theologians the essence of the Good News is God’s enactment of fellowship with humanity rather than the rectification of sin. Consequently, for theologians like Nevin and Schaff intimate spiritual communion with Christ through the church became the centerpiece of Christian faith. Attention was shifted away from the judgment and power of God to God’s consoling love for humanity. “New life in Christ” was the mantra, and it has remained so.

This concentration on the Incarnation as an on-going and life-giving potency had significant consequences for faith and practice. The Mercersburg theologians maintained that the

typical way to become a Christian was to be immersed in the life of the church, particularly the celebration of the Eucharist through which believers received Christ's glorified life. To their contemporaries, this "high-churchism" looked Roman Catholic. The Mercersburg theologians like Schaff and Nevin resisted the more virulent forms of anti-Catholicism and reconceived the Catholic heritage as the soil from which Protestantism had emerged. This was radical in an era when the hostility to Irish Catholic immigrants was at its height, who were condemned as drunken, rowdy, criminal, idol worshipers who took jobs away from "real Americans" and poisoned the blood stream. The more things change, the more they remain the same.

The Mercersburg heritage was still going strong at the beginning of the twentieth century. The key theologian in its preservation was Emanuel Gerhart (1817–1904). He likened his systematizing role to that of John Calvin in the early years of the Reformed tradition, and even borrowed the title of his major tome from Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.¹ (Gerhart was not known for his humility.) He died after experiencing a head injury while climbing up the steps of the Lark Building at the Seminary, but only after he had finished delivering a lecture and attending a baccalaureate service.²

Gerhart pushed the Mercersburg theology in a more cosmic direction. For Gerhart, the Incarnation revealed that the basic dynamic in the whole universe is the reconciliation of the infinite God with finite creatures. The original differentiation at Creation of the finite and the Infinite implied a separation that could be painful, just as the separation of a child from its mother can be painful. Therefore, God desired to overcome this alienation by embracing finitude,

¹ Emanuel V. Gerhart, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols. (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1891 and 1894).

² See Annette Aubert, ed., *Christocentric Reformed Theology in Nineteenth-Century America: Key Writings of Emanuel V. Gerhart* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2021), p. 19.

sharing its limitations, and thereby sanctifying it. The life of God, incarnated in Christ, spreads throughout the world through the life of the church, sanctifying humanity in general and ultimately nature itself. The organic process is slow, but it will triumphantly culminate in a glorious new heaven and a new earth. That theme has interesting intersections with African notions of Ubuntu and the power of community and the interconnected web of life. By advocating this, Gerhart was cautiously flirting with the ancient doctrine of “*apokatastasis*,” the hope that all things will be perfected in God. That focus on community, including communion with nature, would survive and meld with the African sense of ubuntu.

The theology of Gerhart was motivated by hopes and yearnings that differed from those typical of more traditional Calvinists.³ The older theology was dominated by legal concepts and metaphors, particularly the notion of obedience to the will of God as the transcendent source of order. But for Gerhart the good news of Christianity is that human beings, and all creatures, can participate in God’s very life and thereby experience reconciliation, harmony, and unity. The situation from which Christ saves us is not so much God’s punitive justice as it is isolation from God and one another. Jesus as God’s enactment of solidarity with humanity heals the wound of purely individuated existence and removes the impediments that inhibit the development of a cosmic community. For the older Reformed theologians the Christian story was a saga of fall, reprieve, and restoration, particularly the restoration of the status of being a good and faithful servant of the Lord. For Gerhart, however, the basic plot of Christianity was humanity’s gradual growth in godlikeness, *theosis*, stretching from creation to the eschaton. The basic Christian message is that all shall be well. That underlying note of joy and cosmic optimism has never left LTS.

³ See Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vols. 1-3 (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, & Co, 1872).

Most basically, Gerhart and more traditional Calvinists were proposing fundamentally different construals of the God/human relationship.⁴ For most contemporary British and Dutch Calvinists, God was the transcendent Other who should be adored and obeyed. The God/human relationship was likened to that of a dutiful child to an overwhelming parent. For Gerhart, however, the God/human relationship was more like that of intimate lovers to one another.

Gerhart and more traditional Calvinists also differed on the nature of faith. For the older theologians faith began as cognitive assent to propositions about supernatural realities. But for Gerhart faith was a very different sort of phenomenon. Gerhart understood faith to be a kind of knowing in which the knower participates in the known. Faith occurs in a dimension of the human spirit prior to both cognition and volition. During the late nineteenth century most Reformed theologians were attempting to prove the truth of Christianity from the fulfillment of prophecy, the testimony of biblical miracles, the authenticity of the biblical texts, the trustworthiness of the biblical authors, and, eventually, the evidence of archaeology. But Gerhart and his Lancaster colleagues challenged this understanding of biblical theology. For them, the believer's incorporation into the life of Christ was a self-validating experience. The biblical witness needed no further justification. Immerse yourself in the story of Jesus and you will feel its power.

The Impact of the Social Gospel and Neo-Orthodoxy

⁴ Here I am differing from interpretations that regard the Mercersburg theologians as ordinary Reformed thinkers who merely had a more ecclesial and sacramental sensibility than most. For such an interpretation see Darryl G. Hart, *John Williamson Nevins: High Church Calvinist* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2005).

The Mercersburg theology did not remain unchanged. At Lancaster it adapted to the new cultural and intellectual challenges spawned during the second half of the nineteenth century. Most importantly, by the 1890's a movement called the "Social Gospel" had arisen, encouraging a deeper concern for the social and economic well-being of humanity.⁵ This concern was not alien to the spirit of Mercersburg. The Mercersburg theology had always stressed the love of neighbor as a consequence of the communication of Christ's compassionate life to the faithful community. It made sense that genuine love for the neighbor necessarily required attention to the neighbor's earthly, material needs. While the early Mercersburg movement had enacted this love for the neighbor through deeds of philanthropy, by the later nineteenth century the understanding of altruism expanded to include political reform projects. This more political orientation was fueled by the obvious disparity of wealth and poverty generated by the technological, industrial, and transportation revolution of the 1890's. The conviction grew that the dynamics that produced hunger, poverty, and powerlessness had been created by human beings and could therefore be corrected by human beings. As a result, in 1911 Lancaster Seminary introduced courses in sociology and by 1915 social service was recognized as a form of ministry.⁶ Faculty members championed the labor movement and various programs of economic reform, particularly those designed to alleviate poverty in urban and rural areas.

In the early twentieth century a new theological spirit, arising in Germany and known as "the theology of crisis" or "Neo-Orthodoxy," swept through Lancaster Seminary. Because the German Reformed Church in America was culturally oriented toward Germany, the influence of this "Neo-Orthodoxy" in America was first felt in Lancaster Theological Seminary. Emil

⁵ See Gary Dorrien, *The Spirit of American Liberal Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2023), pp. 131–159.

⁶ See George Richards, *History of the Theological Seminary of the Evangelical and Reformed Church at Lancaster Pennsylvania*, (Lancaster: Rudisill, 1952), pp. 416, 618.

Brunner, one of the seminal thinkers of this new theology, came from Germany in 1928 to give one of his first American lectures in Lancaster's Santee Chapel. The even more influential Karl Barth was also invited to speak in 1933, but declined because he feared that if he left Germany, where he was then teaching, the Nazi government would not allow him to return. We have his letter in the archives; it was dated a few days before he drafted the celebrated Barmen Declaration

The chief promoter of Neo-Orthodoxy at Lancaster Seminary was George Richards, professor of ecclesiastic history and later president of the seminary (1869–1955).⁷ Richards was attracted to Neo-Orthodoxy because of his disillusionment with liberalism's optimistic view of human nature and its belief in the inevitability of human moral and spiritual progress. The horrors of World War I, the continued rise of militarism, the spread of authoritarianism, the lethal resurgence of racism, and the devastating global depression debunked convictions about the innate goodness of humanity and the progress of human culture. Young theologians like Richards were shocked that their "liberal" professors in Germany proclaimed that God was at work in German nationalist culture and therefore enthusiastically endorsed the Kaiser's war effort. Like Barth, he concluded that if liberal theology could lead to the justification of poison gas, trench warfare, and the destruction of civilian populations, then there must be something seriously wrong with it. Liberalism's optimism about the progress of human culture could easily translate into a self-serving (and lethal) conviction that God was uniquely at work in one's own particular culture. LTS' suspicion of Christian nationalism did not start in 2017; it is in our DNA.

Because of this dissatisfaction with liberal optimism, Neo-Orthodox theologians like Barth began to stress the intransigence of human sinfulness and the need for God's redemptive

⁷ See Denis Voskuil, *Beyond Modernism: the Emergence of American Neo-Orthodoxy*, dissertation, Harvard University, 1974.

intervention through Jesus Christ. This Christocentric orientation of thinkers like Barth meshed well with the Mercersburg heritage.

Even during the period of the 1930's to the 1950's the synthesis of the Mercersburg theology and Neo-Orthodoxy was not the exclusive factor in the development of theology at Lancaster Theological Seminary. In 1934 the German Reformed Church merged with the Evangelical Synod of North America, a denomination that had blended Lutheran and Reformed Pietist tendencies. The Pietists had grounded the assurance of faith in a heart-felt sense of being personally loved by Christ. As some faculty and students with an Evangelical Synod background appeared in the seminary, a new focus on personal religious experience emerged. For the Pietists Christianity primarily involves the individual's appropriation of Jesus' consciousness of God, a consciousness that is transmitted through the experiential life of faithful Christians. Concern for personal religious experience has never declined at LTS, as is evident in the focus on students' faith journeys and in courses on spiritual formation.

More theological changes were in store for Lancaster Seminary. Two major developments fueled this transformation. The first was the creation of the United Church of Christ in 1957. The union of the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational and Christian Church brought with it an infusion of the passion for social transformation that had been characteristic of the Congregational churches. The Congregationalists were the spiritual descendants of the seventeenth century New England Puritans who had aspired to construct all the political and economic structures of the New England colonies according to biblical principles of equity. The Congregationalists retained the spirit of direct political action and the hope of forging a nation based on Christian ideals of justice. By the 1970's this trend would generate interest in various theologies of liberation, all of which insisted that theological

reflection must be done from the perspective of oppressed and marginalized groups. This trend toward political theologies was further propelled by the pervasive passion for the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement and the widespread reaction against the Viet Nam war. Odd as it may seem, LTS' more recent commitment to justice for minoritized populations is traceable back to the Puritan Congregationalists.

The second development that affected theology at Lancaster Seminary was the explosion of cultural diversity in the United States that had become evident by the 1960's. For Lancaster Seminary a major source of the sensitivity to the cultural variability of Christianity was its support of the German Reformed Church's historic global missions, particularly the mission to Japan. Ever since the nineteenth century the encounter with Japanese Christianity had fostered the recognition that Christianity in the West was saturated with European cultural values and concerns that were not essential features of the faith. As a result, we still proudly require that every student have a cross-cultural immersion experience. Now the African-American religious experience is becoming as much a part of our genetic code as is the German-Reformed tradition.

A multitude of cultural dynamics helped nurture a deeper appreciation of Christian diversity. These included the liberalization of immigration laws, geographic mobility, rapid but unevenly distributed technological change, and the globalization of the economy. These social forces weakened traditional denominational loyalties and encouraged inter-faith relationships and associations. As a result, a vigorous diversity of theological opinions proliferated in a multitude of denominations and congregations. In many ways this latitudinarianism meshed with the ecumenical spirit of the Mercersburg tradition. "Big tent" at LTS no longer meant that we tolerate a handful of Presbyterian and Methodists, but that we welcome everyone from the Church of God in Christ to Unitarian Universalists, and from Mennonites to Wiccans.

Lancaster Seminary responded to this welter of religious options by becoming more theologically pluralistic. By the 1970's process theology, which emphasized relationality, diversity, change, and novelty as core Christian values, was represented on the faculty. More contextual theologies, stressing the ways that Christianity had assumed different forms in different regions of the world, began to be further emphasized in the curriculum. The number of liberation theologies, all foregrounding the perspectives of specific marginalized populations, increased dramatically.

Through the complicated history of Lancaster Theological Seminary, a persistent dialectic can be discerned. On the one hand, there has always been a desire to remain faithful to the confessional, liturgical, and spiritual traditions of the church. We like history, as a treasury of the wisdom of the ancestors. On the other hand, there has always been an equally strong desire to respond to new promptings of the Spirit, whether the Spirit works through the general culture, the academy, novel developments within Christian communities, or the voices of previously marginalized groups. Perhaps that is the true spirit of the seminary (and of the Mercersburg movement): the recognition that theological vitality prospers through the push and pull of divergent tendencies.

Many crucial themes have remained constant. LTS has always focused on God's reconciling love enacted in the Incarnation. It has always had a crazy hope that the entire cosmos will be brought to fruition. It has always been committed to the nurturing power of the church and its sacramental worship. It has always honored a specific Christian tradition while it has

practiced an ever-expansive ecumenism. It has always looked for guidance in Christian history while it has been open to the new winds of the Spirit. It has always insisted that that God's love for humanity must be reflected in Christian involvement in the social and political spheres. It has always resisted Christian nationalism. This combination of ingredients is unusual; it is like fusion cuisine, mixing German sausage with Indian curry and down-home collared greens, and making it work. Each of these ingredients is found elsewhere, in other seminaries, but not altogether in this spicy combination. That reconciliation of diverse elements was the heart and soul of the Mercersburg movement, and it is the secret of our special sauce.