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The Emergence of Mercersburg Theology within the German Reformed Church

Within the rich converging traditions and histories of the United Church of Christ resides a unique and highly influential movement known as *Mercersburg Theology*. A product of the German Reformed Church in the United States, this stream of Theology was birthed at the Reformed Theological seminary at Mercersburg, PA in the 1840s (which would later move to Lancaster, adopting the name of this new location). The Mercersburg movement was largely the work of two scholars: John Williamson Nevin, an American theologian and Pastor, and Phillip Schaff, a German historian. The Christian landscape of America underwent rapid changes in the first half of the nineteenth century as the effects of the Second Great Awakening took hold of the Protestant church. No denomination was left unaffected and totally insulated from “the new measures” of revivalism (a name popularly given to the prescribed methods for leading revival worship and preaching). Even within the traditionally stoic worship of the Calvinist Reformed tradition, many pastors and congregations began embraced these evangelical methods.

Yet not all corners of the Church greeted the “new methods” with warm sentiment. With every action there is always an equal and opposite reaction that takes place. The Mercersburg Movement is regarded as one such manifest reaction to the methods and effects of the Second Great Awakening. Both Nevin and Schaff looked upon the new methods with suspicion and contempt. They believed that there was a better and more spiritually fulfilling alternative to American Revivalism. What set these two men apart from many discontenting clergyman,

however, was the extent to which they began to systematically develop a unique and practical theological and liturgical response. In the decades between 1840 and 1860, these two men would almost singlehandedly be responsible for birthing what quickly became known as “the Mercersburg Theology.”

John Williamson Nevin, a Pennsylvania native, was born in 1803 on a farm in south central Pennsylvania near the town of Shippensburg to a Presbyterian family. Borneman quotes Nevin’s personal reflections of his upbringing, stating that his parents were “conscientious and exemplary professors of religion.” Borneman also notes that the Scotch-Irish Presbyterian faith that Nevin knew placed great emphasis on the notion of a *covenant family*, the catechesis of children, and preparation of children for the Lord’s Supper (42).

In 1840 he took a professorship at the seminary in Mercersburg, having previously taught at the Western Presbyterian seminary in Pittsburgh. Bricker writes that Nevin did not feel as though he was deserting his Presbyterian faith; but rather simply was going to work among German Calvinists rather than the Scotch-Irish Calvinists of his upbringing (Bricker 12). Nevin was a brilliant scholar and writer who was not afraid to speak on controversial or unpopular subjects. While a seminarian in Pittsburgh, he actively defended temperance and anti-slavery movements and supported Sunday school and Missionary societies (Bricker 14).

Phillip Schaff was born in 1819 in the town of Chur, located in modern day Switzerland. He was educated in Germany at Tübingen, Halle, and Berlin, where he was immersed in the rich conversations of systematic theology and church history taking place in Germany during the early nineteenth century (Britannica, “Phillip Schaff”). At the young age of 25 he was invited to come to America to serve on the faculty of the seminary at Mercersburg in July of 1844. Schaff was a member of the Evangelical Church of the Prussian Union of Lutheran and Reformed

churches (the European ancestor to the Evangelical branch of the United Church of Christ). Importantly, he was also a member of a group of scholars in Berlin who believed the future of the church lay in “evangelical Catholicism” (Bricker 14). Shortly after arriving in the United States, Schaff delivered one of his most influential essays, *The Principle of Protestantism*, which advanced his ideology that Catholicism and the Reformed church would eventually blend to form the future of the church. Not surprising, the lecture was met with a myriad of reactions, so extreme. Charges of heresy were brought forward, but were dismissed by the Eastern Synod of the German Reformed Church (Britannica).

The development of a relationship between Nevin the theologian and Schaff the historian was certainly more than coincidental. Shortly after arriving in America, Schaff heard Nevin deliver a sermon on “catholic unity.” Schaff was overjoyed to find this shared perspective present in America (Bricker 14). These men would become teaching colleagues at the Mercersburg Seminary, and would work together to develop what became known as their distinctive theology within The Reformed Church in the United States.

In his paper “A Brief History of the Mercersburg Movement,” George Bricker retells the events which reportedly prompted Nevin to begin his theological writing. In the fall of 1842, Dr. Nevin was observing the trial sermon of a potential minister for the local Mercersburg church. After delivering a pleasing sermon, the minister then brought out an “anxious bench” and issued an altar call to the congregation; which purportedly erupted with great excitement and fervor. The anxious bench had become a staple object of many evangelical revivalist preachers. Placed in the front of the church or meeting place, the bench served as a triage for those who were considering “conversion.” When the pastor issued the altar call, those on the anxious bench would be invited to publically profess their faith and experience conversion in Christ.

Nevin's recorded reaction to what he witnessed is remarkable. Tradition tells that he rose gravely from his place to speak to the congregation that, "while [they] had gotten some good exercise, they should not assume that they had progressed at all in piety. The excitement of the service was over, but the excitement of the congregation and the campus was just beginning." William Ramsey, the guest minister, (not surprisingly) took great offense to Nevin's remarks and declined the call—to the outrage of the local congregation and many of Nevin's students. The ensuing onslaught of criticism from the religious community moved Nevin to publish his pamphlet *The Anxious Bench* in the following fall of 1843 (Bricker 13).

In *The Anxious Bench* Nevin states clearly his belief that "[this measure] is adapted to obstruct rather than to promote the true progress of godliness; and that it deserves to be discouraged on this account" (11). Nevin proceeds to deliver a venomous blow to the system of "new measures" in the tract; even referring to them as heresy (14).

As seminary professor Dr. Anne Thayer discussed in a lecture titled "Mercersburg Theology 101" given at Lancaster Theological seminary's 2011 Mercersburg Convocation, Nevin believed that Protestantism in antebellum America had become too subjective and individualistic. As revivalism continued to take hold, so too did the denominational landscape of Protestantism continue to widen as church splits occurred over issues of theology and practice. What the Protestant church needed, in Nevin's view, was to reunite by reclaiming its historical roots, rather than by focusing on its branches. Both Nevin and Schaff sought to nurture what they felt was the ongoing, living tradition of the church. They abhorred the individuality of revivalist Christianity, and felt that the "new measures" sought to produce a manufactured emotional response from believers.

Thayer notes in her lecture that the Mercersburg movement had two primary practical concerns: a renewed and expounded Christology and a revival of ecclesiastical and liturgical tradition. These two concerns, however, were directed toward one great goal: the restoration and unification of the church. An important locus for Nevin's theology was his personal source for salvation. Contrary to the popular evangelical notion that salvation is delivered through a conversion experience, Nevin believed that salvation is received through participation in the life and sacraments of the church. Christ is alive in the Church and imparts life through the Church. Nevin considered this to be fundamental to New Testament teaching. He claimed that the revivalist practices of American Protestantism were actually contradictory to this biblical teaching (Bricker 13). In his book *Church, Sacrament, and American Democracy*, Adam Borneman says that "Nevin's theology of incarnation and the Eucharist renders the dualisms, divisions, and dichotomies created by the cultural shifts of the nineteenth century as false and unnecessary... He believed that the fragmentation of society and disintegration of its authority structures had gone well beyond notions of human freedom and subjectivity, which, in theory, he supported" (6-7).

Borneman points out that Nevin's theology incorporates a modified Hegelian view, in which he incorporates a threefold, hierarchical relationship between the natural "lower organic sphere," moral humankind, and the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. Humankind, created in the image of God, serves as the unique vehicle which possesses both "an organic relation to the lower, natural, created order and possesses qualities that manifest God's character" (5). Humanity is reconciled to the divine through the sacramental process of the church.

Central to Mercersburg Theology was its sacramentality. Nevin strongly emphasized not only the importance of the two recognized sacraments, but also articulated their profound power to impart grace to the believer. Borneman quotes Scott Collins-Jones:

“Nevin’s thinking on the sacraments reflects his understanding of the unity of the orders of creation and redemption. For him, the sacraments are not merely symbols of supernatural grace, but real means of it...The world does not just point to or symbolize the spiritual, but was filled with it. The two divinely ordained sacraments, which reveal the mystery of the new creation through an organic union of the spiritual and the material, point to the same organic union in all creation, revealed most clearly in the incarnation” (6).

Nevin believed that the Eucharist was central to the life of the church and the Christian.

Churches who embraced the teachings of the Mercersburg movement began to celebrate weekly communion. Widely believed to be his masterwork, Nevin later wrote “The Mystical Presence” in 1867 to fully articulate his “theology of incarnation.”

Many Reformed churches built in central Pennsylvania in the century following Nevin’s writing strongly reflect the influence of Mercersburg Theology on the church. One of the most striking examples of this church architecture is the Santee chapel of Lancaster Theological Seminary. Built in 1893 (after the deaths of both Schaff and Nevin), the chapel originally revealed the strong currents of anti-liturgical backlash that circulated in the late nineteenth century. The architecture, while beautiful, maintained a restrained, ubiquitously reformed design—devoid of graven images, with a central pulpit and radiating “Ursinus” type pews. However, a resurgence of Mercersburg sentimentality flooded the seminary community during the early 20th century, and through generous benefactors the chapel was completely redesigned in a high church style during the seminary’s centennial celebration of 1925. With its magnificent high altar, reredos, side pulpit and lectern, and medieval stained glass windows, the chapel is

quite “catholic” in its appearance today. Close inspection, however, will reveal the names and faces of many great reformers in the history of the church within the chapel’s windows! The worship space remains a testament to the Mercersburg church’s efforts to reunite Protestantism with catholic tradition.



The Santee Chapel at Lancaster Theological Seminary

It’s certainly not off base that the life and practices of the church were so important to Nevin. Another important premise of Mercersburg Theology suggested by Thayer is the idea that one is not a Christian simply on one’s own. Humans are social beings. Moreover, Christ came to humankind *in community*, and spent the vast majority of his ministry speaking to communities of people. We learn together, worship together, and grow together in faith *through* the institution of the church. We are birthed into the church, we grow through the church, and we subsequently live through the church. As Rich Lusk notes in the forward to *Church*,

Sacrament, and American Democracy, Nevin saw the church as the goal and aim not only of Christ's redeeming work, but of all of human life and history (xiv).

Nevin and Schaff were quick to point out that Protestantism grew out of Catholicism. This was important to their argument for a return to early church liturgical practices. As Thayer addresses in her lecture, Nevin asserted that this history was a clear indication that we should view the history of Catholicism as a part of our own Reformed heritage and history. Nevin and Schaff both possessed an uncommonly high opinion of Catholics for their day. In a time when many Protestants still viewed Catholics as heretics (or worse), the mere assumption that Catholic heritage and tradition could be positive was a very difficult premise to sell to the Reformed church.

Additionally, Nevin did not speak highly of the pluriformity of the Protestant church in his theological writings. As Rich Lusk notes, it was a common American presupposition that the vast denominational landscape of Protestantism as a positive asset. This sentimentality was accented by the characteristically American desire for individualism. Churches influenced by the second Great Awakening tended to emphasize the importance of private religious experiences and conversions over and above the corporate Christian life. Lusk articulates some of the obvious outcomes of this mentality:

“American Protestantism is a religion of private judgment and liberty of conscience. The result is that the church has been given over to sectarian revivalism, democratic individualism, and uncritical nationalism. The [Protestant] Church in America has been increasingly marginalized because a divided church with a privatized theology cannot provide an integration point for society...Hence, Americans have looked to the state (that is, the American nation), rather than the church, to bear God's purposes in history and serve as humanity's last, best hope. ‘One nation under God’ has trumped ‘One Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church’” (Borneman xiv).

Lusk's own opinion of a privatized theology is no less scathing than Nevin's. Yet his words ring loud and true to the current state of the Church; which, not unlike to broader society of America, seems on a good day to be hopelessly fragmented. Nevin and Schaff were huge advocates for movements in ecumenism. During the mid-nineteenth century, Nevin publically advocated the union of the German and Dutch reformed churches—two minority denominations that suffered from diminished resources and clergy. The spirit of Mercersburg Theology is that the church has “grown organically from Christ, and has many manifestations, all of which are unified in Christ” (Thayer).

As can be imagined, many Christians did not appreciate or welcome Mercersburg's liturgical approach at the time. There were, as Thayer points out, a myriad of reasons for rejecting Nevin and Schaff's ideas. With criticisms of revivalism set aside, some felt that it was unwise to limit the Spirit by tying it to a set liturgy. Others still complained that the worship was just too catholic and not protestant enough. These conflicts were significant at times, and a schism almost took place within the German reformed church in the mid nineteenth century. While the church remained unified, two prevailing theological movements had emerged by the 1870s: the Mercersburg Movement, and the Ursinus movement—which taught liturgical practices contrary to Mercersburg. It was not until 1884 that a “compromising” liturgy would be realized and introduced to the church.

Within the scope of recent history, however, it is obvious Mercersburg's spirit of ecumenism was ahead of its time—and that it had a lasting effect on the Protestant church. More than 150 years later, the words and ideas of these two men continue to have a significant impact on the Church. Within the Pennsylvania conferences of the United Church of Christ Mercersburg theology and liturgy are alive and well within many local churches. Within the

wider church, however, the spirit of ecumenism and sacramentology found in Nevin's writings have blossomed over the last century.

The pioneering spirit of these men is alive in more ways than one. Their commitment to progressive ideals and theology and church unity are in keeping with the spirit of the United Church of Christ. While Mercersburg Theology was in many ways isolated in practice to the region of Pennsylvania, its spirit of ecumenism and richness of history were no doubt instrumentally present in the founding of the United Church of Christ a century later.

Today we still can experience the liturgical work of Nevin and Schaff within the worship and hymnody of the UCC. These men were largely responsible for the liturgy found in the 1866 book of Reformed worship. When the liturgical committee of the Evangelical and Reformed Church published their book of worship in the 1930's this service remained fundamentally the same. Since the formation of the United Church of Christ, the words of Word and Sacrament Rite I still bear some of the work of Phillip Schaff (Bricker 10). Hymns like "Jesus, I live to You," penned by Pastor Henry Harbaugh, were written by and for those in the Mercersburg tradition and can still be found in popular hymnals today.

In recent decades there has been resurgence in the popularity and research of Mercersburg Theology. The Mercersburg Society was founded in 1983 to explore how this tradition has shaped history and the church. The New Mercersburg Review was begun shortly thereafter to provide an ongoing forum to discuss the continuing issues in Protestantism that were addressed by Schaff and Nevin. Today, many revere Nevin and Schaff as prophets of the great ecumenical movement (Thayer).

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