



A REFORMING CATHOLIC CONFESSION

As A Renewal of the Ecumenical Vision of Dr. Philip Schaff



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Setting the Stage:

“He advocated the reunion of Christendom” These are the final words of Dr. Philip Schaff’s memorial inscription.¹ Indeed, if we survey the life of Dr. Philip Schaff we find that this is the truth embodied in the pages of his works and in the life that he lived. Since he first stood up at Mercersburg and preached on what he called “The Gold of Catholicity.” Schaff, in the tradition of the High Lutheran Orthodoxy he had encountered in Berlin and deep, reformed theology he received from his German Reformed heritage, had an exceedingly positive outlook for the Church. Like many who went before him he believed in a glorious age of the Church, an ecumenical eschaton which would consist of a unified, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church that spread over all the world. Unfortunately for Schaff other forces were at work for in his time in America revivalists such as Finney and D.L. Moody and Theologians such as Charles Hodge advocated a more sectarian revivalism. One that, when combined in the post-Civil War rise of liberal theological pessimism and the gutting of Christian Dogma by the wildly popular liberalism, was lost by the beginning of the 20th century.²

The challenge was, of course, that this was a long and arduous battle, like most things theologically, one generation does not necessarily get the final say in these matters. Schaff himself may have seen this as a long climb, one not to be given up on. One could have understood if, post-Civil War Schaff had given up his dream of catholicity. He had stunned

¹ Henry W. Bouden: A Century of Church History, Celebrating the Life of Philip Schaff, John T. Ford: Ecumenical studies, pg 245-280, 1988, University of Southern Illinois, Carbondale

² W. Bradford Littlejohn, The Mercersburg Theologians and the Quest for Reformed Catholicity, 2009, Pickwick Publications, Eugene OR.

everyone with his “Principles of Protestantism” and could have given up there, instead he kept working towards, advocating for, the union of the Church along all fronts. Even to the bitter end he remained as John T. Ford puts it in his essay on Schaff’s ecumenical studies: “a convinced ecumenicist, whose commitment derived from his understanding of the Church, its history and especially its historical development”³ Even to his final presentation in Chicago a month before his death “The Reunion of Christianity.”

Though today we may look at our landscape and mourn the loss of the kind of optimistic ecumenicism. We will explore in this investigation that very mourning may be pre-mature. While it seems, the theological pessimists have won, we would be remiss if we ignored a new thing that is being done among us. There is more unity than we think and the spirit of Dr. Schaff lives on specifically in the work of Dr. Kevin Vanhoozer Ph.D a professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Dr. Vanhoozer has written multiple books on the subject of protestant unity and even written a confession. It is this Confession, A Reforming Catholic Confession which is the subject of this investigation as it seems to be a step towards the fulfillment of Mercersburg Theological catholicity. In any case this confession will be viewed as a renewal of Schafftian Theology concerning the nature of the church and a call for Protestants to continue the return to unity which God seems to be moving us to.

A New Confession: The Reforming Catholic Confession & the other Narrative

There are two narratives that seem to be part of the discussion when we talk about the history of Protestantism. The prevailing one is that we are the people of schism, that we gave rise to secularism and the rampant individualism of the enlightenment. Unfortunately, this has been

³ Bowden: Ford, Ecumenical Studies, pg. 245-246

the popular narrative as well as the discussion of many current scholarly works such as Timothy George's edited volume: *Evangelicals and Nicene Faith* as well as Dr. Kevin Vanhoozer's *Biblical Interpretation after Babel*. This narrative, that the sectarians and schismatics have won the day is the prevailing narrative among the media, however there is another narrative that needs to be considered as well. That the history of Protestantism is also an endeavor of rediscovery of the Church and the Gospel. As the introduction to the Reforming Catholic Confession states: "They therefore believed their efforts to be both catholic and evangelical, that is, on behalf of the whole church and for the sake of the integrity of the gospel, particularly the singularity and sufficiency of Christ's person and saving work."⁴ Historically, it was the intent of the reformers to preserve catholicity which is defined as: "Universal scope" and "historical Consensus; continuity in doctrinal substance."⁵ That is, those traditions and doctrines which make up the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church that would later dominate the language of the Mercersburg Theologians. The Reformers focused their attacks on the Roman Catholic Church while seeking preserve the idea of catholicity. They were not interested in destroying that which was universally held and believed but, similar to Jesus in Mark 7, were opposed to the man-made traditions that had denied the life of the full Gospel within the Roman Catholic Church⁶ such as the sale of indulgences and so on. For his part, it would seem that Luther did not wish to separate himself from the Catholic Church but instead separation became the unintended consequence of the reformation.

⁴ A Reforming Catholic Confession: Kevin D. Vanhoozer, <https://reformingcatholicconfession.com/explanation/> 2018

⁵ A Reforming Catholic Confession, Vanhoozer, Introduction

⁶ See Martin Luther: The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, as printed in W. Bradford Littlejohn, Reformation Theology: A Reader of Primary Sources, 2018, The Davenant Institute, ebook, Seattle WA.

We, as protestants, are a people of one book, with one spirit and one God all heirs with Christ. It was this idea that the Reformers wanted to maintain. Because of this they: “Had great respect for traditions and councils.”⁷ Understanding that the cyclical nature of the relationship between scripture and tradition.⁸ This is the same relationship that Schaff understands and puts forward in his first books *What is Church History and The Principle of Protestantism*. As Historians and as Christians, we can look back and see the glory of the Church in the past and we can mourn whatever loss we see. Or we can look forward, being mindful of the past as we do, to what God is doing next and to the unity and fulfillment of the Churches mission as one unified body. A Reforming Catholic Confession sets us on the track towards a forward looking progressive, used here in the same manner as the Mercersburg Theologians, Protestantism. As something grows organically there must be growing pains, think of a child who goes through a rebellious, dissident phase. While the Church, specifically in America, may seem like the wayward child and perhaps was going through a rebellious period of sectarianism and fundamentalism as well as a distortion of the true Gospel due to the embracing of various heresies. The hope of a parent for a rebellious child is that the child would grow to maturity.⁹ The trouble with renewal movements in the U.S. is that they have tended to rely upon human measures. If we look at the church in America right now we may be surprised to discover that God is working his own renewal movement by the Holy Spirit. Indeed, it is possible we are even on the cusp of a micro, lay-led reformation, one no longer marked by sectarianism or gnostic

⁷ A Reforming Catholic Confession, Vanhoozer, Explanation

⁸ Robert W. Jensen, *Canon and Creed*, 2000, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville KY See here for a fuller discussion on the relationship between Creed and Canon in the early Church.

⁹ Philip Schaff, *The Principle of Protestantism*, Vol 1. Of Lancaster series on the Mercersburg Theology, 1845, Reprinted and edited by Bard Thompson and George Bricker, Schaff gives this example in reference to the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages as the “Legitimate Offspring” of the Catholic Church is the growing to Maturity of the Reformation. I am using it here in reference to the American Church.

revivalism, but by unity based on a liturgical and confessional faith that joins in the global confessional faith of the global church catholic.¹⁰ A Reforming Catholic Confession gives us the essential doctrines on, 1. The Triune God 2. Holy Scripture 3. Human Beings 4. Fallenness 5. Jesus Christ 6. The Gospel, 7. The Atoning Work of Christ 8. The Gospel 9. The Persona and Work of the Holy Spirit 10. The Church 11. Baptism and Lord's Supper 12. Holy Living (Piety) and 13. Last Times.¹¹ The Confession is also based in a reclaiming of the five solas. For example, Article 2 on the Holy Scripture reads: "That God has spoken and continue to speak, the only infallible and sufficiently clear rule and authority for Christian faith, thought, and life (Sola Scripture)"¹² Since the explanation for the confession is couched in the language of the reformation understanding of Sola Scriptura, like Schaff, we have demonstrated how the authors of this confession uphold the Creeds as a summation of Christian Belief based on the Authoritative Word of God.

One also should look at the diversity in the creators of the Creed for Vanhoozer, though a principle composer, was not the only composer of this Creed. He even says in an interview available through the Confessions Website, where you can also join the 1,406 others who have signed the confession, that the confession was composed by: "We do not represent any one protestant denomination, we do not represent any one particular ethnic group, we do not even represent one particular theological tradition because we've got Calvinists and Wesleyans and

¹⁰ This is based on years of research through visiting various churches across denominational boundaries, talking to various Christian Leaders, again, crossing various denominational boundaries, as well as studies done by David Haskell of The Washington Post, https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2017/01/04/liberal-churches-are-dying-but-conservative-churches-are-thriving/?utm_term=.b63db03e3843, David Brienart's April 2017 article in The Atlantic Monthly - <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/04/breaking-faith/517785/> and the most recent Post-Election Barna study published in December 2017, <https://www.barna.com/research/year-one-american-views-president-trump/>

¹¹ Kevin Vanhoozer, A Reforming Catholic Confession: <https://reformingcatholicconfession.com/> 2018 – The List here is the list of all the section headings in the confession.

¹² Vanhoozer, A Reforming Catholic Confession, Article II- Holy Scripture

Pentecostals together.”¹³ This is true, if you look at the list of editors and developers you find men and women from almost every corner of Protestantism both in America and Abroad. The Confession, though not meant to replace any standing confessions, does provide common, doctrinal ground for those long divided can work together to smooth out some of those things which have long separated us.¹⁴

Dr. Philip Schaff – Biographical Information in extreme brevity

“I am a Swiss by birth, a German by Education and an American by Choice.”¹⁵ These are the opening words to Dr. Philip Schaff’s¹⁶ biography put together by his son David with contributions from Schaff’s journals and dedicated to his mother. Born on the 1st of January 1819 to Philip Schaff and Maragetha Von Salis. Maragetha in the Canton of Graubundten’s little town of Chur he was not born of wealth or of nobility. He was, in fact, born into poverty, something he did not begrudge, in fact, he thought it to be: “a better capital to start with than wealth or pedigree”¹⁷ because it would stimulate the mind and help the development of the great creativity and genius that we now remember Dr. Schaff by. This of course, meant that he worked his way through school fairly quickly, entering lower school at Chur and then working his way up through Classical School so that by the age of 14 he was supporting his family through tutoring

¹³ Vanhoozer, *Reforming Catholic Confession*, 2018, <https://reformingcatholicconfession.com/about/>

¹⁴ Some do say though that the Confession does not go far enough, for example, in Article Eleven, On Baptism and Lord’s Supper the first line reads: “These ordinances...which some among us call “Sacraments” likely would have been better written had it said: “These sacraments...which some among us call “Ordinances” since the greater history of the Christian Church, as written by Schaff and others, shows us that the word “Sacrament” is the preferred term throughout the generations and is even still the word used by the majority of the church.

¹⁵ David Schaff, *Philip Schaff, The Life of Philip Schaff, in part Autobiographical*, 1987, Charles Scribner’s Sons, Norwood Press, J.B. Bushing & Co. Herwick & Smith, Norwood MA. U.S.A. pg 1

¹⁶ Spelled “Philip” because that is how he spelled it until later years according to his biography.

¹⁷ Philip & David Schaff, *The Life of Philip Schaff*, pg. 2.

the children of local nobility. At this point his education took an ecumenical trajectory as he headed for Tübingen then Halle and finally Berlin.

It would be hard to speak of Schaff without at least a nod to his ecumenical development for this is essential to understanding the man. I have already mentioned that Schaff was baptized Christian Reformed and received Catechization from the Catholics. He would also be surrounded by Catholic thinkers during his time at Tübingen though his main educators were from the Protestant part of the school. On top of that, while in Kärnthall he was ordained as a Lutheran Minister and began preaching in two or three small congregations. Given this information one must not be surprised that he come to his almost Joachimist interpretation of Church History.¹⁸

Indeed, it was during this time he learned from men such as Dorner and Krapf, Bauer and Neander who instilled in him the love for Church History that would mark his career. During his time at Tübingen he was surrounded by the turmoil stirred by Liberal Theologians Dr. David Strauss's gutting of Christianity and of Christ in "*Life of Jesus.*" The Controversy, which caused many in the region to turn from Christianity, did not upset the young and upcoming Schaff. The debate would later fuel his own responses to Adolf Van Harnack late in his own life.

As for Schaff's Ecumenical emphasis, Ford makes the following observation: "Schaff's lifelong interest in Christian union seems to have been in part of his personal "Ecumenical Pilgrimage." Baptized in the Reformed Church in Switzerland, he was confirmed in the Lutheran Church during his student days in Germany and...became a member of the German Reformed Church" upon coming to America.¹⁹

These things combined for Schaff to create the perfect storm of Ecumenicism, one that would define him and still defines him one-hundred years later. During his career he was also in ecumenical dialogue with Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterians and others of the Revivalist,

¹⁸ Jonathan David Faulkner, *The Life, Historiography & Vision*, 2016, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Historiography, Independent Study Final Paper.

¹⁹ Ford Ed. Bowden, *Ecumenical Studies*, 245

Sectarian Tradition. His ecumenical leanings did get he and Nevin in trouble during their time at Mercersburg, on more than one occasion they were accused, principally by the Princeton Theologian Charles Hodge, of Romanizing, particularly after they attempted to revive Eucharistic Theology. They were also accused of heresy by their fellow churchman in the German Reformed Church but were found to be within sound doctrine.

By the end of his life in 1893 Dr. Philip Schaff had done more for the unity and preservation of the Church than any of his contemporaries. He worked hard for the catholicity of the Church, even to the detriment of his own good name. Even up to his final presentation in Chicago a month before his death *The Reunion of Christianity*, was a final push for the church towards that one, single goal, to be unified, One, Holy, Apostolic and Catholic Church.

Schaff's Nature of the Church As Reformed Orthodoxy

W. Bradford Littlejohn writes in his book *The Mercersburg Theology and the Quest for Protestant Catholicity*:

I believe it is crucial to understand Nevin and Schaff in their reformed context. Of course, their fellow Reformed often had little use for their theology, but this was not so much due to Mercersburg's abandonment of the Reformed heritage, but in their stubborn refusal to leave it behind and to join the rest of their American Contemporaries in desacramentalized, individualistic, Christianity.²⁰

Having this understanding, that the Mercersburg Theologians, and Schaff in-particular, were working to defend the vision and intent of the initial Reformers, the same goal as those who composed the Confession we looked at in Section 1, therefore we can place Schaff in the proper

²⁰ W. Bradford Littlejohn, *The Mercersburg Theology and the Quest for Protestant Catholicity*, 2009, Pickwick Publications, Eugene OR.

context, over and against those whom put themselves forward as their primary opponents, such as Hodge and others. What they saw, was a breaking down of the reformed tradition into the sectarianism and fundamentalism that gave us our modern Hyper-Calvinism and such deep divisions we are only now beginning to heal from them. It was Nevin who witnessed the cheapening of the work of God in Salvation, which he wrote about in *The Anxious Bench*²¹ and Schaff who saw the attacks on Romanism as antithetical to the spirit of the Reformers. Both were concerned about the reduction of sacrament to ordinance and the continued attacks on the High Church traditions.

Though some argued against this at the time, it is clear by reading Schaff's writings, particularly his earliest writing *What is Church History*, that schaff's own view of catholicity was directly informed by Scripture. He quotes, on a number of occasions, the High Priestly prayer of Jesus in John 16-17, noting particularly the prayer for unity in 17:21: "that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me."²² Schaff's desire, the goal he poured his energy into was that the Church would be unified as it was at the beginning. But to reach this synthesis and unity Schaff had to ask two questions, who is Jesus Christ? What is the nature of the Church? To Schaff, according to David W. Lotz: "Ecclesiology and Christology are inseparably joined."²³ Meaning you could not define the Church separate from Christ. To Schaff and Nevin the Church was the visible body of Christ on Earth.²⁴ And so, what you believed about Christ would tell you

²¹ See the Anxious Bench, as it appears in: John Williamson Nevin ed. Sam Hamstra Jr. One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, John Nevin's Writings on Ecclesiology (1844-1848), 2017, Pickwick Publications, Eugene OR.

²² Philip Schaff, *The History of the Apostolic Church with an introduction on What is Church History*, 1853, Mercersburg PA.

²³ Henry W. Bowden, *A Century of Church History: The Legacy of Philip Schaff*, David W. Lotz: Philip Schaff and the idea of Church History, 1-31, 1988, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Edwardsville

²⁴ Lotz Ed. Bowden, Philip Schaff and the Idea of Church History, 2

what you believed about the Church. Schaff's thoughts on this tend towards the Eastern view of Theosis, that God, through Christ, is now unified to man through belief and Baptism. Lotz sums up Schaff as follows:

“What is the church? Schaff answered: It is, in the most profound and pregnant sense, the body of Christ. It is indeed an organic union of different members under a single head, but it is specifically the body of Christ...Christ and his Christians the soul and his body, are joined in lively union, one that is not merely moral, a harmony of wills, but a “mystical” – a real incorporation of the faithful with Christ in the most intimate and albeit ineffable way. Therefore, the churches story, properly told is the story of the “uninterrupted presence of Christ, the God-man in and among his people,” in keeping with his promise “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age (Matt. 28:30)”²⁵

One might wonder then how to account for the various sects and changes that occurred during this time and in previous ages. Schaff uses the Hegelian Dialectic central to German Historicism. Schaff understood the Church to be an organic, growing and maturing creature. Like flowers, moving from seed or bulb to Raluca's or Hydrangeas' or a child from conception to full adulthood.²⁶ Therefore, there was room for growth, while acknowledging those things which indicated permanence. After all, a Child is still a human when he becomes an adult though he has gone through many transitions, he is still a human being. In the same way, to Schaff, the Church goes through transitional periods and has points where there may be diversity of viewpoints but still retains the identity given as the visible Body of Christ, the church catholic and thus remain the representation of the incarnate Christ on Earth. It is for this reason Schaff can refer to “The Gold of Catholicity”²⁷ no matter how divided the church got, it was still One, Holy, Apostolic and Catholic Church and would continue to progress towards catholic synthesis.²⁸ One could say

²⁵ Ford, Ed. Bowden, Philip Schaff and the idea of Church History, 10 - Quote in the above text is cited as: P. Schaff, What is Church History? 1846, as Translated by John Williamson Nevin, Mercersburg PA. - 36

²⁶ Schaff, The Principle of Protestantism

²⁷ What is Church History, 137

²⁸ Lotz – Philip Schaff and the Idea of Church History 21

then that the sectarianism so prevalent in the church in America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was merely the immature adolescence brought forth by a rebellion against the unity desired by the Head which is Christ.²⁹ Many of the Polemics written by Schaff and Nevin against the spirit of sectarianism and fundamentalism inherent in the larger reformed movement were written because these sects were dismantling the high church reformed orthodoxy of Calvin and Luther.³⁰

It might be prudent to consider The Mercersburg Theologians “High Church Reformed”³¹ who are the true representatives of reformed orthodoxy on American soil. Their high view of the Church, their high Christology and with that high sacramentology were unique to the American reformed scene and were in-part, the reason Schaff was accused of Heresy for “Romanizing” by his own fellow German Reformed.³² “the sect system, along with rationalism,” Schaff writes; “is a prostitution and caricature of true Protestantism, and nothing else.”³³ So, it should be considered that the sectarian system and: “not Romanism should be the first concern of true protestants.”³⁴

If we retain Schaff’s view of the Church it is easy to see what is happening in the church in America today as not a mere reformation movement but as a maturing and reunification of the American wing of the global, catholic, church which has only existed for around 3 centuries and has been distracted by now waning power and prominence, even popularity, in culture not enjoyed by the church fathers. Of course, we have heard the story: the church rises to power, the

²⁹ This view is my own based on my understanding of Schaff’s view of church History as being “Progressive.”

³⁰ Mercersburg and the quest for Protestant Catholicity, 25

³¹ Nevin has incurred the nickname “High Church Calvinist” by historians including the recent Biography by D. G. Hart “John Williamson Nevin, High Church Calvinist, 2005, P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg NJ.

³² The Life of Philip Schaff 104-107

³³ Philip Schaff, the Principle of Protestantism, Vol 1. Of Lancaster series on the Mercersburg Theology, 1845, Reprinted and edited by Bard Thompson and George Bricker, 2004 7

³⁴ Mercersburg and the quest for Protestant Catholicity, 34

church begins losing power, the church reforms and goes about the business of being the church, before. Though, as Dr. Jim Singleton pointed out in a lecture at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary: “We have never lived in a time closer to what the early Church lived in terms of the unpopularity and misunderstanding of the Christian Faith.”³⁵ Schaff understood that the natural end of Sectarianism was to either die away or return to: “a truly catholic Spirit”³⁶ or to return to those things which are the substance of the church and make up the core beliefs of the church, namely, holiness, oneness, apostolicity, catholicity and organic progressiveness with a deep view of the sacraments, particularly in rejecting a commemorative memorial view of communion³⁷ towards an age of the church that was foreshadowed in Christ.³⁸ These things make the Mercersburg Theology and as part, Schaff and Nevin unique in their time and in our own.

A Reforming Catholic Confession & the Schafftian Ecumenicism Renewed

It is difficult, as historians, to draw comparisons between two different time periods. Especially in a church setting that to Schaff and others lacked an understanding of Church History. Unfortunately, the charge of historylessness could continue to be leveled today, though the ignorance of our history is starting to dwindle as the Holy Spirit works his reforms. Recent attempts though, such as the emergent church movement, which have claimed to be movements

³⁵ Dr. Jim Singleton, Professor of Practical Theology, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Lecture on the state of the Church given to the Evangelism and Discipleship Class in April of 2017.

³⁶ The History of the Apostolic Church with an Introduction on What is Church History? 18

³⁷ The Life of Philip Schaff, 218

³⁸ Luther, Calvin and Edwards also believed in what they referred to as “The Glorious age of the church” This would be an easy view to hold to, an optimistic one to be sure, were it not for the fallen state of man in the old Adam and the nominal state of much of Christendom (though this is changing). I do believe there will be a golden age of God’s people upon Christ’s return after tribulations. Perhaps though, the Schafftian optimism is not too far fetched, it could depend on how one defines a glorious age of the church, if one defines it as a political age then we will not have that sort of government until Christ returns. If it refers to an age when the Church will live as the Church was originally intended to live by Christ and the church fathers, then perhaps we can see that in our lifetime through the power of the Holy Spirit.

back to the early church have only been perversions of what the early Church taught, believed and lived. As the Laity reforms though, there is developing a new thirst for the historicity of Christianity, particularly as more and more archeological discoveries that attest to the truth of scripture are made.³⁹ Though someone like Schaff might warn us against letting these discoveries lead us to rationalism and away from faith.

Article 10 of the confession reads:

That the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church is God's new society, the first fruit of the new creation, the whole company of the redeemed through the ages, of which Christ is Lord and head. The truth that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, is the church's firm foundation (Matt. 16:16-18; 1 Cor. 3:11). The local church is both embassy and parable of the kingdom of heaven, an earthly place where his will is done and he is now present, existing visibly everywhere two or three gather in his name to proclaim and spread the gospel in word and works of love, and by obeying the Lord's command to baptize disciples (Matt. 28:19) and celebrate the Lord's Supper (Luke 22:19).⁴⁰

This definition very well could have come from Schaff himself and even uses the language of both Nevin & Schaff to describe the church as "visible" and in the selected terms for unity, "One, Holy and Apostolic."⁴¹ Language that was also central to the writings of the early church fathers which Schaff meticulously edited. This historical language used in this and other articles in the confession, prevailing upon the many points of unity that have always existed within the church catholic is prominent in both the Mercersburg Theologians and the language used by the framers of the confession.

In developing A Reforming Catholic Confession, the writers attempted to be as historically minded as possible though they did fail at one point, implying that the majority of the

³⁹ This view is my own and based upon personal interactions in various churches and with various Christians throughout the Northeast as well as various readings by current popular preachers like Brian Zhand and others.

⁴⁰ Vanhoozer, A Reformed Catholic Confession, Article 10, The Church.

⁴¹ Vanhoozer, A Reformed Catholic Confession, Article 10, The Church

Church considers “Sacraments” as “Ordinances.”⁴² This has never, and likely will never be the case since the low church phenomenon which continues the “Desacramentalized”⁴³ nature of the nineteenth century was never the world majority⁴⁴ and is now in sharp decline.

But what benefit does a new confession give us? Especially given that many would still consider “univocal agreement is philosophically impossible”⁴⁵ in our current climate. Though that analysis may be based on old information and an ignorance of the current ecumenical thrust. It is true that some of the “old guard” in America decried the Reformed Churches signing of the Catholic Lutheran Accord on Justification⁴⁶ as “Romanizing” and that there is still a prevailing attitude of prejudice against even the word “catholic”⁴⁷ The criticism then is as follows: “What is the purpose of formulating consensus statements, if they are open to divergent, and even conflicting, interpretations?”⁴⁸

Church History has shown us that while there has always been consensus, there has also, always been divergence. Schaff holds this tension and is able to on account of his of his “Hegelian Dialectic” and resulting view of the Church which most Ecumenicists do not have, though they share in Schaff’s optimism about the Church.⁴⁹ So, while another confession may seem like another failed attempt at unity, it is the climate in which it is composed, an age of budding ecumenicism and unity brought on by the Spirit, not by man’s efforts, that makes this

⁴² A Reforming Catholic Confession, Article 11 On Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, For an expansive response to this view see Footnote 13

⁴³ Mercersburg and the Quest for Protestant Catholicity, pg 25

⁴⁴ See Footnote 13

⁴⁵ Lotz, Ed. Bowden Ecumenical Studies, 252

⁴⁶ Tom Henegan, Reformed Churches Endorse Catholic Lutheran Accord on Key Reformation Era Dispute, July 2017, <https://religionnews.com/2017/07/06/reformed-churches-endorse-catholic-lutheran-accord-on-key-reformation-dispute/>

⁴⁷ Shortly after sharing that I had signed the ARCC I was blasted on social media for using the word “catholic.” My father’s church has even removed the word “catholic” from the Apostles Creed in their hymnals in favor of the word “Presbyterian.”

⁴⁸ Lotz, Ed. Bowden, Ecumenical Studies, 252

⁴⁹ Lotz, Ed. Bowden, Ecumenical Studies, 253

confession unique and why it has been accepted by so many different groups who traditionally, in the United States, would avoid any kind of dialogue. While the first reformation might be seen as a reformation *for the laity*⁵⁰ the coming reformation will be one *from the laity*. One which the current generations of Pastors-in-training need to be aware of and taught to recognize in our theological seminaries and Christian Education programs at Christian Colleges. If we do, as the Anglican Tractarians did, and simply look back at the gloriousness of the churches history which leading Mercersburg Scholar James Hastings Nichols calls: “repristinating,”⁵¹ and couple that with the pessimism that invades the church from the Post-Civil War and later Post-World War I eras, we will, and do, lack the ability to look forward to something that the Holy Spirit is doing.

A Case Study of how we might evaluate the current state of the Church is within the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference (CCCC) which requires churches and pastors to uphold seven essential doctrines all of which, from authority of the Word, to the trinity, to sacrament, are held as doctrines the church has held, however, they recognize that, while the Church should be unified in these essential doctrines, similar to Schaff, they allow for divergence on those issues which we would call “peripheral” meaning there is a wide variety of churches within the denomination, from higher liturgical churches with high sacramentology to low-church, low-sacramentology churches⁵² all communing as one and supporting one another as well as other churches from other denominations. Though this type of unity has long been the exception across the United States, it has slowly been becoming the accepted practice.

At this time, in this ecumenical atmosphere, A Reforming Catholic Confession reminds us of common doctrinal ground on which to build continued unity because it is grounded in

⁵⁰ This view is mine

⁵¹ James Hastings Nichols, *The Mercersburg Theology*, 1966, Oxford University Press, New York

⁵² Conservative Congregational Christian Conference, *About us*, 2018, <http://www.cccusa.com/about-us/>

Church History, it looks towards the unity and fidelity of the protestant church and in its pages upon pages of signees gives us a sweeping look at the coming age of unity. It renews for us a Schafftian ecumenicism long lost, particularly in its definition of the Church as “one, holy, apostolic”⁵³ and, by its very name, catholic church. Giving words to those who do not have language for what they are experiencing and noting on Sunday as well as in their private readings of scripture and history books. Though it has yet to generate a true Mercersburg positivity, that may very well be the next step as the church looks to its future as the one, unified, visible body of Christ left here to be his incarnate form on Earth, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Further Up and Further In

I love the end of the Narnia books, as the children and animals and all of Narnia is running through Aslan’s country following the cry “Further up and further in.” It reminds me that we cannot so easily boil down God and His works to some simple formula or man-made philosophical construct. God is work and living and active and, just like the children could not fathom the beauty and eternity of Aslan’s country without continuing to run we cannot begin to fathom the things God is doing until we actually set out to discover His fullness and participate in what He is accomplishing.⁵⁴

There are some, who will be skeptical that this confession, as part of what God is doing, does represent a renewal of the Schafftian vision for the church. Some will take issue with the language of catholicity and choose to quarrel over words instead of seeking a deeper and fuller understanding. Some will continue to look at the world, at news medias portrayal specifically of

⁵³ Vanhoozer, *Reforming Catholic Confession*, Article 10, The Church

⁵⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia, The Last Battle*, 1956, Harper Collins, Sydney

evangelical Christians and assume we are divided and weak, a people without a god and in some places and cases they would be right.

However, if we look closely we see a new and vibrant unity, a renewal of Dr. Schaff's vision for the gentle progression of the church that has the potential to rediscover the positive nature as it recaptures the rest of Schaff's vision. The Church, the body of God, the incarnation of Christ in this world, the continuation of his presence, visible and invisible, as one, holy, apostolic and catholic church participating as one in the blessings of grace bestowed in the sacraments. A new reformation is upon us, one in spirit of the Church Fathers and in the vision of Schaff. Dr. Schaff is still influencing and working towards his goal, the unification of Christendom even from glory. Perhaps we will have a glorious age of the Church after all.

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All Scripture is based on personal translation from the Greek text or was part of Schaff's original manuscripts and are retained for authenticity.