

Discovering Mercersburg: The Concept of Catholicity in the Writings of Philip Schaff and John  
Williamson Nevin

A Thesis

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## CHAPTER ONE Introduction:

*Rediscovering Mercersburg*

When we talk about Church History in America we talk of names like Jonathan Edwards and Charles Chauncy, Charles Finney and Charles Hodge. We think about the arguments for or against slavery, both sustained by scripture. We think of revivals, revivalism, westward expansion, Christianization, Calvinism. We may throw out the word Sectarian or Schismatic. We think of Missions Movements and great debates such as the Old Lights & New Lights, Old School and New School, Fundamentalist and Modernist, Calvinists and Arminian, Conservative Evangelicals and Liberals. We think of men like J. Gresham Machem, great families such as the Beecher's and Grahams. We talk of religious freedom, a religious right, the conflation of the cross and flag. Political alliances, separation of Church & State, Power Religion, and much, much more. We look back on our history as the Church in America with romantic tendency, even when we should not. Many in our churches lack an understanding of this history, nor of the history of the church outside of the United States or the Western Hemisphere, assuming a superiority or exceptionalism to the church in America, as if we were somehow selected by God above all other parts of the church. For two centuries ecumenicism was largely neglected and even maligned and those few who fought for any sort of catholicity were accused of "Romanizing" or "Liberalizing."

Yet, in the nineteenth century there was a strong ecumenical and catholic theology nourished and put forward within the German Reformed Church at its small college located in Mercersburg Pennsylvania. This theology, put forward by the German Historian and Theologian Philip Schaff who immigrated to America in 1843 at the request of the German Reformed Synod

to teach at Mercersburg Seminary, and the Scotch Irish Presbyterian John Williamson Nevin along with men like Emanuel V. Gerhart and Daniel Gans. Together they responded to events of their day through their journal *The Mercersburg Review* and addressed key theological issues such as Finney's "New Measures" and Charles Hodge's defense of sectarianism. They were concerned with preserving the reformed faith in the tradition of the Church Fathers and the Reformation which they saw as under attack by internal forces that would remove its deep sacramental and confessional faith in favor of appeasement to culture, sectarianism and political power. Schaff and Nevin worked together to build a concrete and sound ecumenical ecclesiology that they considered to be unassailable. They fought hard for and gave the church in America a sound and ancient view of the church as a visible, organic union marked by oneness, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity. The latter of which they redefined as the handing down of the apostolic teachings, not the ascendancy of the Papacy. Consequently, they drew the ire of the men who handed down the system of evangelicalism we still find practiced today, men like Hodge and Charles Finney and even those within the German Reformed Synod who first leveled the charge of Romanizing at Schaff in 1846.

It is their concept of Catholicity, defined as the substance, tradition and practice of the universal church<sup>1</sup> - found in the writings of Philip Schaff and John Williamson Nevin that this investigation is concerned with. In the following pages we shall explore first Schaff in Chapter I, Nevin in Chapter II. Chapter III will explore the divergence and agreements between Schaff and Nevin while the final chapter will endeavor to briefly lay out the ecclesiology of Schaff and Nevin's principle critic Charles Hodge and will even more briefly address their combined

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<sup>1</sup> Definition is my summation of Schaff and Nevin's combined viewpoints and is in line with common understandings today, including Kevin Vanhoozer's definition of "Neo Catholicity" found in: *Biblical Interpretation after Babel*, 2016, Brazos Press, Grand Rapids MI.

argument against Finney. All in the hopes of recovering what was once lost to gain a fuller understanding of the Church in America.

*The Mediating Theology:*

Mercersburg draws its influence from the nineteenth century theological system known as Mediating Theology. The fathers of this system were the great German idealists Hegel, Immanuel Kant and others formed as a direct response to the issues raised with Hume's Foundationalism of basic truths confirmed by the senses. Kant is given credit for reopening the possibility for an ontological transcendence. The Mediating Theology then worked to mediate between speculative science and theology. In essence to: "Make speculative science less antagonistic to Christianity" and alleviate the strain on the relationship between science and faith that The Warfare Theory advanced in the 1780's and 90's had caused between the two disciplines.<sup>2</sup>

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) and those who came after him were also important and necessary for the development of the Mercersburg Theology. Specifically, in the creation of the German Idealism<sup>3</sup> which dominated Mercersburg and which forms the backdrop for the competing ideologies of the idealism of Mercersburg and the Realism of Princeton and America. Linden J. Debie calls Hegel and his contemporary Joseph Schelling a corrector to Kant

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<sup>2</sup> Linden J. Debie, *Speculative Theology and Common-Sense Religion, Mercersburg and the Conservative Roots of American Religion*, 2008, Pickwick Publications, Eugene

<sup>3</sup> Also known as Romanticism

because they brought about the synthesis of the two worlds, the “seen” and “unseen” which Kant had put forward, a synthesis that will drive Schaff’s own view of the Church.<sup>4</sup>

To understand Schaff and Nevin’s views you must understand the back drop of their philosophical framework. The Speculative Methodology found in German Idealism gives us the means of understanding why Schaff will insist on the single structure of the church that we will explore in the next chapter. It will also help us unpack Nevin’s Sacramentology and the transformation of his views brought on by his relationship to Schaff and the German School of thought which he engaged in as early as 1833 through the writings of August Neander.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Debie: *Speculative Theology and Common-Sense Religion*

<sup>5</sup> Theodore Appel, *The Life and Work of John Williamson Nevin, 1889*, Reformed Church Publication House, Philadelphia, ebook 134



## CHAPTER TWO:

## The Concept of Catholicity in the Writings of Dr. Philip Schaff

“He worked for the unity of the Church”<sup>6</sup> are the words enshrined on Dr. Schaff’s tomb and on his life. In fact, in the Americas at least, it is hard to think of anyone who worked more tirelessly or with greater fervor for the unification of the church in the theological and social spheres. His life crossed paths with nearly every strain of Protestantism and Catholicism, from his upbringing in Sweden, his education in Kornthall, Tübingen, Berlin and Halle, to his time teaching at Mercersburg alongside Dr. Nevin, to the post-civil war stint as head of Church History at Union.<sup>7</sup> In his life and writings he laid the groundwork for what modern scholar and professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Chicago, Kevin Vanhoozer, calls “Protestant Catholicity.”<sup>8</sup>

*The Principle of Protestantism:*

To Schaff, there were certain matters of substance that for him delineated catholicity, and groups that divorced themselves from those matters could not be considered part of the true Church, catholic. He first introduced his “principle” in his inaugural sermon at Mercersburg, preached in 1844, “The Principles of Protestantism”. It would have been a completely innocuous sermon if preached in his native Germany, but as an introduction to the writings of Dr. Schaff for American theologians unfamiliar with Mercersburg Pennsylvania, home of the Mercersburg Seminary, or who objected to the influence of German thought dominated by Kant, Hegel and

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<sup>6</sup> John T. Ford, *Ecumenical Studies*, 245-293, Ed by Henry Bowden, *A Century of Church History, The Legacy of Philip Schaff*, 1988, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale

<sup>7</sup> Schaff, Schaff, *The life of Philip Schaff*, 101

<sup>8</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity*, 198, Brazos Press, 2016, Grand Rapids MI. This idea is the basis for what is called “The Mercersburg Theology” and does not original with Vanhoozer.

Schleiermacher, the idea of “catholic” ideas were jarring when discussed in an increasingly divided church in the United States.<sup>9</sup> For his part, his son David Schaff contends that Schaff was unaware of the impact his book had made stating that, “The author was never aware that he had produced something original or distinctive.”<sup>10</sup> The ideas were felt in full-force almost immediately. To Schaff, the “Gold of Catholicity”<sup>11</sup> was a very tangible, real unity held up both in scripture and in Church History.

The principle was two-fold, and Schaff divides it as such: The Formal Principle of the Reformation and the Material Principle of the Reformation. The Material Principle dealt with the substance of doctrines that were essential to the Reformation and essential from the beginning of Christendom. While Schaff acknowledges a myriad of doctrines in describing the Material Principle, such as the doctrines of the “Trinity” and the doctrine of the Incarnation, he places one doctrine far and above all as the full material principle: “This, according to history,” Schaff writes “is none other than the great doctrine, which is presented by Paul...the doctrine of *justification by faith alone through Christ.*”<sup>12</sup> To Schaff, there was no greater doctrine within Christian dogma or doctrine. It was what the Reformation was based upon. By right then, the Formal Principle was simply: “The Word of God, as it has been handed down in the forms of the Old and New Testaments is the pure and proper source as well as the only certain measure of

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<sup>9</sup> See Mark Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, 2006, the University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill: Here Noll traces the theological divisions specifically over slavery but points out that the church was already splintered over a great deal of issues. He puts the beginning of the fracture over Slavery at 1841, 5 years before Schaff arrived at Mercersburg.

<sup>10</sup> David S. Schaff, *Philip Schaff, The Life of Philip Schaff in part Autobiographical*, 1987, Scribner & Sons, New York, NY.

<sup>11</sup> Philip Schaff, *The Principle of Protestantism*, 1964, United Church Press, Philadelphia PA as part of the Lancaster Series on the Mercersburg Theology ed. Bard Thompson George H. Bricker, Listed here on out POP

<sup>12</sup> Schaff, POP 80, Italics Schaff's

saving truth.”<sup>13</sup> To Schaff, all substance within the history of the Church was to look back to and be informed by scripture and must be subordinate to scripture.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, Schaff did not see the Reformation, as many of his time did, as a schismatic retreat from the Catholic Church but instead as a sort of coming of age of the entire church through the rediscovery by Luther of the Material and Formal Principles. He vigorously defends the Reformation, not as a sectarian movement meant to throw off all authority by man, but instead, as he points out: “Their aim was rather to bind man to the grace of God and to lead his conscious captive to God’s Word.”<sup>15</sup> In his defense, he points out that Luther had already written his doctrinal statement on justification before his split with Pope Leo, and Melancthon had written he could still recognize the Pope as the earthly head of the Church before the Smalcald articles were written.<sup>16</sup> To Schaff, the splitting at the Reformation was merely a result of the growing pains for, he says: “The Church...has its periods of infancy, youth, manhood and old age. This involves no contradiction to the absolute character of Christianity.”<sup>17</sup> To Schaff the Reformation was part of the natural progression of the Church, one not meant to disassemble the church but to help it grow from youth to adulthood. Though he was concerned about the sect system that had arisen after the Reformation, which we will see Nevin call “A great evil”<sup>18</sup> he predicted that most sects would either die off or return to the church.

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<sup>13</sup> Schaff, POP, 98

<sup>14</sup> These Principles, the Formal and Material originate with Aristotle and are just two of his four causes. The Material Cause: The Substance that makes up the object, Efficient Cause, the thing that pushes the object into existence, the Formal Cause: The form or function of a thing and the final cause: or purpose of which a thing serves. To learn more see: Jonathan Barnes: Aristotle, A Very Short Introduction, 2000, Oxford University Press, Oxford, Chapter 12, pg 83-91

<sup>15</sup> Schaff POP pg. 79

<sup>16</sup> Schaff POP pg. 79

<sup>17</sup> Schaff POP Pg. 76

<sup>18</sup> W. Bradford Littlejohn, David W. Layman, John Williamson Nevin: The Mercersburg Theology Series Vol VI: One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic: John Nevin’s Ecclesiastical Writings: 2017, Wfpf & Stock, Eugene, Antichrist: or the Spirit of Sect and Schism, 160-254

Four hundred years before Schaff, John Hus had argued that there were two churches, in his work *“On the Church”*, Hus puts forward his doctrine as such: “From here we put forward that there are two churches, one for the sheep and one for the goats. One for the predestinate and one for the reprobate.”<sup>19</sup> Hus’s goal was to maintain the purity of what he considered to be the Church. He was, in essence, separating the human from the divine by saying that those within the church were perfect and those who were in the church but were part of the reprobate were part of a wholly other Church. To Schaff, this would have seemed similar to what was being put forward by his opponents. Men like Charles Hodge, the old school Presbyterian whom Schaff and Nevin would debate, believed in: “The reformed doctrine of the Lord’s Supper and the Nature of the Church”<sup>20</sup> and who this investigation will look at further in the next chapter argued for a similar two church model, to them the church was perfect in its spiritual state and imperfect in its human state. In short, the Church could not be a “continuation, as it were, of His (Christ’s) incarnation”<sup>21</sup> as Schaff believed it to be because like Hus, they believed the Church could not be marred by human sin and error. Schaff allows for deviations and differences within the Church to arise, and he does not exclude those people as being part of the Church. He even allows for church as institution. He does exclude anyone who denies the Reformation principle, such as, in his words:

All sects accordingly, who either deny justification by faith alone, as the Socinians, Unitarians, and Swedenborgians, or reject the Written Word, as the Schwenkfeldians and Quakers are to be excluded from the territory of orthodox Protestantism.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> John Hus, *On the Church* (1413), reprinted in: Bradord Littlejohn and Jonathan Roberts, *Reformation Theology, a Reader of Primary Sources with introduction*, 2017, The Davenant Institute, Eugene OR. Pg. 60-94

<sup>20</sup> James Hastings Nichols, *The Mercersburg Theology: A Library of Protestant Theology*, Oxford University Press, 1966, New York, pg. 4

<sup>21</sup> Philip Schaff, W. Bradford Littlejohn, *What is Church History, As Printed in The Mercersburg Theology Series Volume III: The Development of the Church- The Principle of Protestantism and other Historical Writings of the Church*, 2017, Pickwick Publications, Eugene OR. Pg. 208-308

<sup>22</sup> Schaff, POP pg. 123-124

Schaff could allow for error because man was hopelessly wicked. Schaff did believe in the old debate between the dualistic nature of the church as visible and invisible. For his part, Schaff just called the church, The Church, in that both existed in the same sphere and could not be separated.<sup>23</sup> Schaff saw the reformation as a “Natural growth to maturity of the Catholic Church itself, and these various pre-reformations (such as John Hus and the Hussites) testify to this organic unity.”<sup>24</sup> The church was and will always be unified because Christ had promised that he would always be with us (Matthew 28:20). To Schaff, that meant organic unity through the Holy Spirit and the Church.

According to James Hasting Nichols, the biggest issue Schaff and Nevin both took with their opponents were what they deemed to be the effects of American Puritanism or the “Individualistic, anti-traditionalist evangelicalism” that they saw as central to the Sectarian spirit.<sup>25</sup> Still, Schaff’s insistence on the union between the visible and invisible church, or lack of distinction between the two, drew the ire and contempt of their fellow reformed. To the degree that by 1845, only a year into their time at Mercersburg, the two were accused of heresy by the German Reformed Synod. They were acquitted by a vote of 40-3. Still, their fellow reformed wanted little to do with their high church eucharistic Reformation theology, and so they missed what the pair was working to accomplish. Bradford Littlejohn states their goal in his book, *“The Mercersburg Theology and the Quest for Evangelical Catholicity”*. He writes: “This was not so much due to Mercersburg’s abandonment of reformed heritage, but to their stubborn refusal to leave it behind and join the rest of their American contemporaries in desacramentalized,

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<sup>23</sup> Bradford Littlejohn, *The Mercersburg Theology and the Quest for Protestant Catholicity*, 2009, Pickwick Publications, Eugene OR. Pg 28.

<sup>24</sup> LittleJohn, *The Mercersburg Theology and the Quest for Protestant Catholicity*, pg. 29

<sup>25</sup> Nichols, *The Mercersburg Theology*, pg 4.

individualistic Christianity.”<sup>26</sup> To Schaff, as we discussed with Nevin, the traditions of the Church had to be first and foremost in line with Scripture. Thus, one of the reasons that the Reformation happened was that the Romanists had added traditions that violated the relationship between scripture and tradition and justification.

In Schaff’s view the principle of Protestantism dealt more with cause and effect. Schaff writes:

Protestantism, on the contrary, places both powers in each case in their natural relation to each other, in the relation namely of ground and consequence, cause and effect, origin and process. Faith alone Justifies, but produces at the same time good works as is necessary fruit: the word of God is the only fountain and norm of knowledge but it flows forward in the church, and comes there continually to clearer and deeper conscious. As moreover, according to this view, the value of works is estimated by the measure of the faith which forms their ground, so the worth of tradition also is determined by the its organic connection and agreement with the Word of God.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, we partake of the Lord’s Supper because scripture has put before us to do so. We baptize babies into the covenant because we desire to see in them the fulfillment of the promise of salvation. While today the study of the relationship between tradition and scripture has been the study of a great many scholarly works such as Robert W. Jenson “*Canon and Creed*” and Timothy George’s “*Evangelicals and Nicene Faith*” and were led by the late Jaroslav Pelikan in his essay “*The Will to Believe and the Need for a Creed.*” In Schaff’s day, this would have been jarring to his opponents and any who subscribed to the sectarianism that Schaff detested.

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<sup>26</sup> Littlejohn, *The Mercersburg Theology and the Quest for Protestant Catholicity*. Pg 25

<sup>27</sup> Schaff, *POP*, pg. 98

*Ecumenicism and The Church v. The Two-Church Model*

Since the church had, for the sake of unity, this principle of Protestantism, it should have been then a place of “conciliar ecumenicism.”<sup>28</sup> It should have been a place where Christians of all veins could gather. Schaff drew on his ecclesiological understanding that the Church was not merely unified by “spiritual and eschatological, but necessarily visible and attainable.”<sup>29</sup> This was something other than the widely accepted Post-Millennialism<sup>30</sup> of the reformers, carried to America by Jonathan Edwards, where the Church was to be united in a glorious “age of the Church”, which Edwards believed himself to be at the beginning of.<sup>31</sup> Schaff did subscribe to this view of eschatology, but to him this unity was real and attained at the moment of the incarnation of the Holy Spirit. So, while in his mind history was going to culminate in a “Church Age” this did not deny the current, organic unity brought through the incarnation.

In our own day, many have questioned whether or not Schaff’s idea of visible unity is plausible. David Bloesch writes in his book on the Church: “The question remains is this a visible, structural unity or a spiritual unity that embraces altar and pulpit fellowship.”<sup>32</sup> John Jefferson Davis calls for a reconsideration of the type of post-millennialism of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and he uses the progression of church history to point such a coming age by tracking the growth of the Kingdom from Rome to today. However, Davis never invokes, and has apparently never read, Schaff.<sup>33</sup> In his essay on Schaff’s ecumenicism, John T. Ford addresses

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<sup>28</sup> Ford, *Ecumenical Studies*, pg. 249

<sup>29</sup> Ford, *Ecumenical Studies*, pg. 249

<sup>30</sup> “Church Age” Post-Millennialism, as described at the end of the paragraph, as in, the Reformers saw themselves as at the beginning of an age of the church which would bring the return of Christ.

<sup>31</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The History of the Christian Church*, in *Works Volume 1&2*, 2012 (Kindle Edition) Banner of Truth Trust, Seattle

<sup>32</sup> David Bloesch, *Christian Foundations: The Church: Sacraments, Worship, Ministry, Mission*, 2002, Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove IL. Pg 257

<sup>33</sup> John Jefferson Davis, *Christ’s Victorious Kingdom: Postmillennialism Reconsidered*, 1986, Baker Book House, USA

the fact that many who study ecumenism are uncomfortable with the study of ecumenism as anything other than a theory unless one is only discussing the invisible church.<sup>34</sup>

Schaff never makes a distinction between the “visible” church and the “invisible” church. He does allow for a distinction between “Visible” and “Institutional” but sees one as theologically commanded (visible organic unity) and the other, a necessary evil. To him, they were the same. This would have confused Charles Hodge when he first read and reviewed “*The Principle of Protestantism*.” “His principles,” Hodge writes, “as to conformity and the preservation of outward union, seem to be erroneous.”<sup>35</sup> Hodge also took issue with Schaff’s treatment of Sectarianism, which Schaff saw as a greater evil than the Romanism. Hodge called on the “supremacy of (individual) conscious” which made sects necessary to preserve the true gospel and true Church.<sup>36</sup> This investigation will look closer at Hodge in the final chapter, but we must mention it here because it comes in direct opposition to Schaff’s ecumenism and has created problems for the modern ecumenical movement. In short, if we look at Bloesch’s question 100 years later we see the same debate: visible vs. spiritual unity, at the forefront of modern ecumenism. Schaff understood himself as advocating for, “a new and advanced position of Protestantism itself.”<sup>37</sup> To Schaff, the visible unity of the visible church was what Christ intended through the High Priestly prayer in John 17. To Hodge however: “It is obvious that the church considered in the communion of saints, does not necessarily include the idea of a visible

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<sup>34</sup> Ford, *Ecumenical Studies*, pg. 250

<sup>35</sup> Hodge, Littlejohn, *The Development of the Church*, Charles Hodge’s response to *The Principle of Protestantism* pg.217

<sup>36</sup> Hodge, Littlejohn, *The Development of the Church*, Charles Hodge’s *Review of the Principle of Protestantism*, pg. 218

<sup>37</sup> Schaff, Littlejohn, *The Development of the Church*, *The Church & the German Question*, pg. 323



society organized under one definite form.”<sup>38</sup> To Schaff, the Church was organic; to Hodge, the Church was spiritual.

### *Schaff & Organic Unity in Sacrament*

It might be hard to believe that two men who were thrown together could already work towards a consensus on so much, but just as Nevin joined Schaff in the debate over the nature of the Church, Schaff joined Nevin in the debate over the Sacrament. Both men argued robustly that our salvation was determined by our organic unity to Christ, not merely because of the work of Christ, but because of our organic unity too the person of Christ. Because the church was a “continuation of the incarnation,”<sup>39</sup> it had to share in the divine nature through the Spirit. Also, if the Church was a continual growing body of Christ, then there must be certain traditions that arose in the Church as part of that organic growth. Schaff saw two sacraments that developed from scripture and came alive in the church back to the Apostolic Age. These traditions, he argued, were the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper and of baptism,<sup>40</sup> which included, as it did with Nevin, infant baptism.

To Dr. Schaff, the entire church shared in an organic unity with Christ, making the church, like Christ, one substance but two natures. This is why all the church had for centuries affirmed the full humanity and full divinity of Christ, even solidifying the language in the struggles against the Gnostics.<sup>41</sup> This meant Christ’s divine presence could not be separate from the ordained implements, the bread and the cup, present in the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper

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<sup>38</sup> Charles Hodge, *Discussions in Church Polity*, 1878, repr Westminster Publishing House, 2001, Scarsdale NY, III

<sup>39</sup> Schaff, Littlejohn, *The Development of the Church - What is Church History*,

<sup>40</sup> Schaff: POP

<sup>41</sup> Philip Schaff, John Williamson Nevin, Ed. Bradford W. Littlejohn, *The Incarnate Word, Selected Writings on Christology The Mercersburg Theology Series VOL V*, 2014, Pickwick Publishers, Eugene OR. On the Moral Character of Christ (article 8), pg 184

and of the water in baptism. As we will see in chapter II of this investigation, Nevin called this the “mystical presence.” It was not the bread or the cup or the act of baptism that held power. Separate from Christ, these were mere objects with various uses. However, because of the divine power, the bread and the cup are a part of the continuous communion and acknowledgement of the divine union and the Holy Spirit, working through the water, sealing us to the promise fulfilled, or in the case of pedo-baptism, the hope of the future fulfillment of the promise of salvation.<sup>42</sup>

To Schaff it was impossible for one to become a confirmed Christian without baptism. In an article taken from his *Geschichte der Chr. Kirchof*, and reprinted in the Mercersburg Review under the name “The Apostolical Origins of Infant Baptism” Schaff writes in response to the Baptists view of believer’s baptism:

If it were possible to become a confirmed Christian without baptism, and so also without a connexion with the church, the church would be altogether useless, at least not necessary, and to this the baptistic theory also conducts which always misapprehends the nature and pedological significance of the church as an institution indispensable to salvation, and considers it simply in its ground as an association of saints. Besides, to insist upon regeneration and conversion as a necessary preliminary condition to baptism render this also impossible, or at least requires that it should be indefinitely postponed. Inasmuch as God has not furnished us with the gift of infallibility searching the heart.<sup>43</sup>

Because Christ shares in an organic union with the Church, salvation must come from the Church. There was no Christian apart from the Church because Christians made up the Church. Therefore, to wait until the time one believed for baptism was almost to wait until the final days

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<sup>42</sup> It is originally Martin Luther who mentions this idea of the fulfillment of a promise in regards to infant baptism with the hope of future salvation.

<sup>43</sup> Philip Schaff, John Williamson Nevin, Emmanuel V. Gerhardt, Ed. W. Bradford Littlejohn, *Born of Water & Spirit, Essays on the Sacraments and Christian Formation, The Mercersburg Theology Series, VOL XI. The Apostolical Origins of Infant Baptism*, 2016, Pickwick Publishers, Eugene OR

when all that was believed could be believed without doubt.<sup>44</sup> Thus, by “desacramentalizing,”<sup>45</sup> the church was separating itself with Christ. This was a very dangerous notion to say the least and the biggest problem facing those who argue for a two-church model.

### *The Development of the Church in History*

In his article entitled “*German Theology and the Church Question*,” Schaff acknowledges that much of his ecclesiology might make one wonder why we need Protestantism, since he upholds the Catholic Church as the “true church.”<sup>46</sup> Two things must be remembered here to understand Schaff’s assertions concerning ecclesiology the second being greater than the first. 1.) that Schaff understood the Reformation not as a separating of the Catholic Church but as sign of the growth of the “uninterrupted church,”<sup>47</sup> so that the church could be both Catholic and Protestant without having to put the two at odds with one another. 2.) That history is an open system in which God speaks and guides the growth of the body and of His Holy Church through what Schaff deemed “The Development of History.”<sup>48</sup>

It was for this reason that Schaff kept up and maintained many different conversations across ecumenical lines that many of his time thought better not crossed. This also differs from the mechanical “closed” system of history that Protestantism and Catholicism must be at odds in which the reformation was a shaking off of the tyranny of the Catholic Church and visible unity gave way to invisible, unknowable unity. The church was, as has been discussed, progressing

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<sup>44</sup> There is little difference here between the Catholic view of the church as the de one which dispensed salvation. The difference was that it was the divine union, not merely the “keys to the kingdom” that determined that the church was that which dispensed salvation.

<sup>45</sup> Littlejohn, *Mercersburg and the quest for Evangelical Catholicity*, pg. 25

<sup>46</sup> Schaff, *The Development of the Church, German Theology and the Church Question*, pg. 322-342 p. 335

<sup>47</sup> Schaff, *The Development of the Church, German Theology and the Church Question*, pg. 335 See also Schaff’s argument in section one of POP concerning the continuity of the reformation and the organic growth of the church from childhood to adulthood.

<sup>48</sup> chaff, *The Development of the Church, German Theology and the Church Question*, pg. 335

towards something whole and complete, and so that which had passed was an important part of that progression. Therefore, the past must inform the present, because if we did not have the past we would not have the present. That is why, when defending infant baptism, Schaff calls on the Apostolic age of the Church and their immediate successors. It was also, for this reason, that he meticulously edited over three thousand documents of the Church Fathers,' books, letters and so forth. Unlike the Puseyism of the Anglican Church,<sup>49</sup> Schaff did not look back to a former golden age, but saw the past as proceeding and progressing towards a future golden age. Therefore, one must mediate<sup>50</sup> between the scripture and tradition rather than toss out either, because the tradition showed the progression of the Church as lead, in most cases, by scripture.

*Summation:*

As this investigation includes its discussion of Schaff, let us take a moment to summarize the concept of Catholicity within Schaff's writings. Schaff understood the Church to be progressing towards a Church Age similar to that which his predecessors believed in. The Church then, being completely and eternally unified, was an organic body that existed as the continuation of the incarnation of Christ in the World. Christ, through the Spirit, had come to share in divine union with us humans and so there could be no distinction between a "visible" and "invisible" Church, the church was always both and existed in total unity.

Schaff held up two parts of one principle: The Formal principle and the Material principle. The Formal principle was the fact of justification by faith alone and the Formal Principle with the Authoritative Word of God and all the traditions and doctrines of the Church that came forth from the Word. Therefore, the scriptures were to inform tradition and the

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<sup>49</sup> Nichols, *The Mercersburg Theology*, pg. 11,

<sup>50</sup> See Introduction "On the Mediating Theology"

traditions showed the progression and historical development of the Church through the ages of Church History. Therefore, the Reformation was merely the organic growth of The Church and we should continue to look back to learn what our predecessors learned from scripture even as we are learning. We must also work against sectarianism and against those who would gut Christianity through desacramentalization and by removing Scripture, Christ and tradition from their proper places in the Church.

## CHAPTER THREE:

## The Concept of Catholicity in the Writings of John Williamson Nevin

When looking at the concept of Catholicity within Philip Schaff's writings, it was possible to inspect the theology and historiography without an extensive explanation of his historical context.<sup>51</sup> In studying Nevin we must do the opposite and place him within his historical situation because Nevin speaks to very specific situations within the Church and culture that Schaff rarely addresses and which references too generally reside in his non-catholic writings such as "*The Bible and Slavery*", which he co-wrote with Schaff in 1861 as the Civil War was beginning. Schaff is highly theological, historiographical and philosophical. Nevin, on the other hand, while holding all those credentials, is highly practical as well. One could argue that Nevin is in large part Schaff applied. Nevin puts into the play the implications of Schaff's theology. While Schaff engages Hodge on a purely theological level, Nevin engages him on the practical level. While Schaff goes after the "sectarian spirit" Nevin strikes at the sectarians themselves, addressing Charles G. Finney and the Revivalists in "*The Anxious Bench*" and the secessionists in "The Party System." Therefore, we cannot address Nevin without addressing his context. While the biographical details can be found in chapter 1, we will briefly set the context for Nevin's writings before we seek to exegete them.

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<sup>51</sup> This is because while Schaff speaks to current events, such as Sectarianism, he is writing on a highly theological, historiographical level. His theology and the debates that ensued with Hodge and others are primarily theological debates that, though played out in a specific historical context, are still widely debated today and which do not directly, but indirectly, address the cultural situation. It is enough to understand Schaff's dislike of the widespread Sectarian Spirit of his day because with few exceptions he never mentions specific situations.

*Broader Historical Context in Brief.*

It is well documented in history the tensions leading up to the Civil War. A divide not only stretched geographically across the Mason-Dixon line, a political, philosophical and theological line also separated the political and religious institutions of the day. About the time Nevin was finally retiring to live out the final 20 years of his life in 1861 Henry Ward Beecher was preaching his fiery abolition sermon and calling the institute of slavery: “The most alarming and most fertile cause of national sin.”<sup>52</sup> Meanwhile, slavery apologist James Heneley Thornwell in a sermon in Columbia South Carolina called slavery “good and merciful”, as well as a means of “organizing labor which providence has given us.”<sup>53</sup> Schaff and Nevin responded in kind in the Mercersburg review, laying out the biblical argument for slavery, but then condemning the practice of chattel slavery in “Slavery and the Bible” in which they argue that while slavery was practiced in the ancient world, “It had no place in the kingdom.”<sup>54</sup>

Of course, tensions were not just running high in 1861. In 1856, on the senate floor, Preston Brooks (D-SC) attacked Charles Sumner (R-MA) with a cane in retaliation for a pro-abolition speech on a few days prior.<sup>55</sup> The Presbyterians, already split from the “new and old School” controversies (which played into Nevin’s background) split further, as did the Baptists into northern and southern factions, while smaller sects like the revivalists continued to break away. There were even attempts at schisms in the Dutch & German Reformed Churches over the implications of what, at that time, had become known as the Mercersburg Theology. For

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<sup>52</sup> Henry Ward Beecher, “Peace Be Still,” in fast day sermons or, the pulpit on the state of the country, 1861, Rudd and Carleton, New York, 276,

<sup>53</sup> James Henley Thornwell, “Our National Sins” in Fast Day Sermons, 48, 44

<sup>54</sup> Philip Schaff, John Williamson Nevin, Slavery and the Bible, Mercersburg Review, April 1861, 301-316

<sup>55</sup> Stephan B. Oates, With Malice Towards None, A Life of Abraham Lincoln, 1994, Harpercollins E-Books, New York City

example, in 1874 Dr. Schneck, a reformed churchman wrote an article in *The Reformed Monthly* entitled: “Mercersburg theology, inconsistent with Protestant and Reformed Doctrine” which neither Nevin or Schaff felt the need to respond to.<sup>56</sup> They did respond in 1854 when Dr. Proudfit published in the Dutch Reformed Literary voice *New Brunswick Review* accused Nevin and Schaff of “Romanizing” something they had already been accused of an acquitted for in 1845. Their response in Nevin’s article: “The Dutch Crusade” established Nevin and Schaff purely in the Anti-Puritan camp while their opponents, who Nevin’s biographer Theodore Appel points out were Irish, not Dutch, were: “In full sympathy with puritanical ways of thinking.”<sup>57</sup>

Nevin also directly addresses the debate over new and old measures propagated by the revivalists, particularly put forward in Charles G. Finney’s essays “*Lectures On Revivals of Religion*” which were published in Joseph Leavitt’s “*The New York Evangelist*” which was created by the Congregationalists and Presbyterians for the sake of promoting the New Measures and the modified Calvinism that gave the Mercersburg Theologians fits.<sup>58</sup> During Nevin’s days at Princeton (where he was under the professorship of Charles Hodge), he had attended a revival service during which the evangelist had brought out what was known as the Anxious Bench, and invited all who desired the prayers of the church to “present themselves before the altar.”<sup>59</sup> The resulting chaos was enough to permanently turn Nevin against the Anxious Bench as will be shown when we address his theology.

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<sup>56</sup> Theodore Appel D.D *The Life and Work of John Williamson Nevin, 1889*, Reformed Church Publication House 907, Philadelphia

<sup>57</sup> Appel, *The Life and Work of John Williamson Nevin*, ebook, location 4456. For a more detailed discussion on the time leading up to the Civil War see Mark A. Noll *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, 2006, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, and for a fuller discussion on the nature of sectarianism in American Culture see:

George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2006, Oxford University Press, New York and Mark A. Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*, 2002, Oxford University Press, New York, NY

<sup>58</sup> Mark A. Noll, *America’s God: from Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*, 2002, Oxford University Press, New York, New York, 302, Bradford Littlejohn, *Mercersburg and the quest for Protestant Catholicity*, 2009, Pickwick Publications, Eugene OR. Pg 25.

<sup>59</sup> Appel, *The Life and Work of John Williamson Nevin*, ebook, location 2672



Were we to examine all the controversies over the Mercersburg Theology here, we would never address Nevin's theology directly. A broader discussion will be held concerning the views of the Mercersburg's principle opponents in the final chapter. Suffice to say, Nevin is writing to a very specific set of issues, theological, political, practical and otherwise, that we must be at least partially aware of to have a deeper discussion of Nevin's theology. By its very nature, Nevin offers practical solutions to the general debates of the day that pressed upon the minds of the American born theologian more than his German counterpart.

*One, Holy, Apostolic & Catholic Church.*

While Nevin was fulfilling his teaching duties at Allegheny College near Pittsburgh, he came across a little book written by an upcoming German historian who was, at that time, under the instruction of Johann Neander at Halle. The little book, entitled "*What is Church History*" was the beginning of a journey for the young Princeton trained Nevin. It would not be long until he met and worked alongside the writer of this work, the young and aspiring Philip Schaff. Raised in the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, Nevin was staunchly within the camps of the heirs of Puritanism. By the time he had accepted the call to Mercersburg by the German Reformed Synod, he had largely abandoned that upbringing and moved wholly towards what he deemed "the Idea of the Church."<sup>60</sup>

*Nevin & The Idea of the Church & the Dangers of the Sect System*

In an article in the Mercersburg Review in 1858 Nevin writes:

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<sup>60</sup> David W. Layman, John Williamson Nevin, The Mercersburg Theology Study Series, Volume VII: One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church Tome Two, "Thoughts on the Church (Article One)" pg 131-152, 2017, Wfpf & Stock, Eugene OR.

The fundamental question is not of the Sacraments, nor of a Liturgy, nor of the Church year, nor of ordination and apostolic succession, nor of presbyters, bishops or popes, but...of the nature of the church itself, considered in its ideal character, and as an object of thought anterior to every such revelation of its presence in an outward way.<sup>61</sup>

Thus, Nevin tells us, the best way to answer the church question is to return to the original character of the Church. To understand Nevin and his reactions to his time period we have to understand this key idea. To Nevin, the idea of the church had been distorted by the sectarians, particularly by puritanism, and that damage needed to be fixed. Therefore, he works to make distinctions between what he calls “the derivative” meaning that which is man-made, (i.e the sects) and that which was “original and fontal”<sup>62</sup> meaning what has existed since the beginning of the Church. Like Schaff, Nevin goes all the way back to the first century and the origins of Christianity, most specifically to the teachings of Jesus and Paul, to determine what the Church was and is to be, His conclusion; that the Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic.

Addressing the Triennial Convention of the Reformed Protestant Dutch and German Reformed Churches in Harrisburg PA on August 8<sup>th</sup> of 1844, preaching from Ephesians 4:4-6, in a sermon entitled “Catholic Unity” Nevin says of his vision of the Church: “This is the image of the Church as delineated by the hand of the inspired apostle. In the whole world we find nothing to resplendently beautiful and glorious under any other form.”<sup>63</sup> To Nevin, the church did not come into existence because of the consensus and personal agreement by the Apostles. Instead, the church just was found first in Christ and then in man whom Christ had come to dwell in through the divine Union, the incarnation of Christ in man. Influenced by Schaff, to Nevin the

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<sup>61</sup> Layman, Nevin, One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, Tome Two, Thoughts on the Church, (article one) pg. 145

<sup>62</sup> Layman, Nevin, One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, Tome Two, Thoughts on the Church, pg 144

<sup>63</sup> David W. Laymen, John Williamson Nevin, The Mercersburg Theology Series Volume Six, One, Holy, Catholic & Apostolic, Tome One, “Catholic Unity” Pages: 112-133, 2017, Wfpf & Stock, Eugene OR. Pg. 112

Church was just that, a continuation of the presence of Christ and the fulfillment of the promise in the Great Commission of Matthew 28.<sup>64</sup> It was because of this unity, the state of the Church that has existed and will exist visibly that Nevin could write that: “The church feeling thus is older and deeper in the order of nature than the sacramental, or the liturgical, or any other of the like partial kind and form.”<sup>65</sup> That is to say, that since the Church in all its forms feels that it is the Church, there is still a distinct “church feeling”<sup>66</sup> that would preclude the sects, thus making catholic unity something one cannot opt out of because they disagree over matters of sacrament. As we saw with Schaff, this would drive Nevin to devote his life to the unity of the Church, especially against the sect system which tried to deny the unity of which it was undeniably and inseparably a part.

To Nevin, there could be no individual Christian apart from the church, therefore there could be no individual sect of the church with the corner of the market on religion. Adam S. Borneman in *Church, Sacrament and American democracy*, the social and political dimensions of John Williams Nevin’s theology that: “Nevin was not anti-individual. Proper reason and proper religion however, only took place if the individual submitted their own subjective reason to universal, objective reason. Private judgement, if it remained private, was not sound judgement.”<sup>67</sup> Since sects rose from the private judgement of men who thought their own views and opinions greater than that of the universal objective truth of the church then individualism, as it was understood in the American context, had to be curtailed. Not that there was no room for the individual to have individual thoughts, but those thoughts must eventually be held up to the

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<sup>64</sup> Schaff, *What is Church History*

<sup>65</sup> Nevin, *Thoughts on the Church*, pg 133.

<sup>66</sup> “Church Feel” the feeling that we are all part of a global universal Church and that we all contain this feeling regardless of whether we believe it or not.

<sup>67</sup> Adam S. Borenman, *Church, Sacrament and American Democracy*, *The Social and Political Dimensions of John Williamson Nevin’s Theology*, 2011, WFPF & Stock, Eugene, pg. 83

objective truth of the word and the mediation of the tradition. To deny the church was to deny Christ, It was with this in mind that Nevin said in a sermon preached at Mercersburg in 1847, “No Church, No Christ.”<sup>68</sup> Since in he and Schaff’s estimation, the church was that glorious continuation of the incarnation without the church catholic there could be no continuation of Christ’s presence. That meant that there was no salvation without the Church: “The complete salvation and conversion of the world would not be accomplished by simply adding the names of more and more individuals to the roles of believers.”<sup>69</sup>

For Nevin, because the church was one organism in its make-up to separate based on the perceived authority of individual opinion was to do the church great damage. He saw the sectarian spirit arising from the sin of Adam and if it were allowed to continue it would; “lead to the breakdown of social and ecclesiastical unity.”<sup>70</sup> For this reason the Christian should not work solely off private judgment, but bring that private judgment to their fellow Christians so that the scriptures could be discussed and the fullness of the truth could be known. To Nevin, you could not have a solitary Christian, and the Church was not a place where individuals came to worship and then went away. It was a continuous reality that persons continually dwelt in and which had authority over private judgement. It should not be a place where we go to find their wants, but a people whose membership was from its inception, in Christ. For instance, Nevin writes:

The Church is not a mere aggregation or collection of different individuals, drawn together by similarity or interests, and wants, not an abstraction simply, by which the common in the midst of such multifarious distinction, is separated and put together under a single general term. It is not merely all that covers the actual extent of its membership, but the whole rather in which membership is comprehended and determined from the beginning.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Laymen, Nevin, *The Mercersburg Theology Series Volume Six, One, Holy, Catholic & Apostolic, Tome One, The Church*, Pg 141-158

<sup>69</sup> Luther J. Binkley *The Mercersburg Theology*, 1953, Sentinel, Manheim PA. pg. 85-86

<sup>70</sup> Borneman, *Church, Sacrament and American Democracy*, pg 143

<sup>71</sup> Laymen, Nevin, *Catholic Unity*, pg 118

The sect system, the two-party system, which Nevin saw as not dissimilar in arising from the individualism pervasive in the culture, were contrary to how the Church was to function and, if necessary as some preached, meant that: “The Reformation, as we hold it to be from God, has not yet been conducted forward to its legitimate result.”<sup>72</sup> As we have seen, both Nevin and Schaff understood the Reformation in terms of an organic growth, not as a split. Since the Reformation was not a split by individuals, namely Luther and Zwingli. Therefore, the argument that sects were a result of the individual reformers did not hold water by the Mercersburg Theologians estimation.

This is an interesting development for Nevin. In fact, if one reads the documents from the 1840’s one finds an interesting pattern of growth. For instance, in “*The Anxious Bench*,” a response to Charles G. Finney and the revivalist’s practice of bringing about a bench for those “getting through”<sup>73</sup> to receive special prayers, Nevin actually takes a more puritanical stance against the Catholic Church: “Popery started, in the beginning, under forms apparently the most innocent and safe”<sup>74</sup> before becoming corrupt. By the end of the decade, Nevin had abandoned this view altogether and instead had written three treaties in which he saw the ultimate corruption as the sect system and not the Church of Rome. Theodore Appel, in his biography of Nevin notes this change began after reading August Neander and his soon to be colleague Philip Schaff, which caused him to abandon his hostilities towards Catholicism.<sup>75</sup> Nevin thus sees

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<sup>72</sup> Laymen, Nevin, Catholic Unity, pg 124

<sup>73</sup> “Getting Through” was a Puritan Colloquialism to describe the state of someone just before they came to saving faith. See, Jonathan Edwards: A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God & An Account of the Revival of Religion in Northampton in 1740-1742, Works Vol 1&2, Banner of Truth Trust, United States

<sup>74</sup> Laymen, Nevin, The Mercersburg Theology Series Volume Six, One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, Tome One, The Anxious Bench, pgs 29-111, pg 31

<sup>75</sup> Appel, The Life and Works of John Williamson Nevin, chapters VII-XXIII – Devotes a long section to this change because it was so gradual, beginning the 1830’s and being solidified by the end of the 1840’s.

individualism and sectarianism as the greatest threat to the church. In *Catholic Unity* he writes: “The unity of the Church then is a cardinal truth, in the Christian System...To renounce it...is to make shipwreck of the gospel.... There is no room here for individualism or particularism as such.”<sup>76</sup>

*The Debate Over the Visible & Invisible Church.*

Since Nevin was once a student of Princeton’s Charles Hodge, it should not be a surprise to find that Nevin weighs in heavily in the debate over the visible and invisible church. Like Schaff, Nevin thought it was foolish to try to make a distinction or even try to create a distinction. Again, in *Catholic Unity* Nevin writes:

The Body is not the man; and yet there can be no man, where there is no body. Humanity is neither a corpse on the one hand, nor a phantom on the other. The Church then must appear externally, in the world. And the case requires that this manifestation should correspond with the inward constitution of the idea itself. It belongs to the proper conception of it, that the unity of the Holy Catholic Church should appear in an outward and visible way; and it can never be regarded as complete where such development of its inward power is still wanting.<sup>77</sup>

This is in stark contrast to Hodge who wrote in a work entitled “*Discussion in Church Polity*”, published posthumously by his son A.A Hodge right after his death which reads: “It is obvious that the Church, being the communion of Saints<sup>78</sup> does not necessarily include the idea of a visible society organized under one definite form.”<sup>79</sup> To Hodge, the unity of the Church was a spiritual unity, in that, those who had come to saving faith were the elect and therefore the true church. The ungodly, at least those in the church, could not be counted: “The Church, considered

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<sup>76</sup> Laymen, Nevin, *Catholic Unity*, 119

<sup>77</sup> Laymen, Nevin, *Catholic Unity*, 120

<sup>78</sup> See Chapter V – The Opponents of Mercersburg – Hodge, the sectarians and the revivalists.

<sup>79</sup> Charles Hodge, William Durant, *Discussions in Church Polity: From the Contributions to “The Princeton Review”* 1878, Scribner and Sons, New York

as the communion of Saints, is one in faith.” Hodge writes, this faith came from the spirit to lead God’s people into truth.<sup>80</sup> Sects then were necessary in the visible church to maintain the purity of the church. We must understand too that Hodge is trying to address an issue that has baffled theologians since Augustine. that is, how do we account for the nature of the Church as visible when in the institution of the Church there are unbelievers. The obvious solution would seem to be to make a distinction between visible and invisible Church, to say that, as Hodge does, that the Invisible Church is the church in its ideal form and the visible church is the church in its current, sinful state.<sup>81</sup>

Nevin of course, would have none of this calling it “injurious to Christ” to even consider that a sect, founded on a private judgement, could possibly be a way of maintaining the purity of the Church.<sup>82</sup> He writes in “*On The Church*” in 1847: “An invisible state or invisible family or invisible man is not so great an absurdity and contradiction as an absolutely invisible Church.”<sup>83</sup> To Counter Hodge’s assertion that “The Creed....constitutes a visible Church”<sup>84</sup> Nevin assures us that: “The Church of the Creed, the proper object of our Christian Faith, we say, is visible.” Thus, her inward nature was “invisible” but that inward nature must result in an outward manifestation. “To become real” writes Nevin “The inward is urged from the very start to represent itself in an outward form.”<sup>85</sup> Thus we must consider the church as visible proceeding from an invisible inward reality, that is, that Christ dwells within the Church and so His presence continues an organic body, “The actual organic presence of the new creation in Christ Jesus

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<sup>80</sup> Hodge, Discussion in Church Polity, 5

<sup>81</sup> Hodge, Discussion in Church Polity, 7

<sup>82</sup> Laymen, Nevin, Catholic Unity, 122

<sup>83</sup> Laymen, Nevin, On The Church, 145

<sup>84</sup> Hodge, Discussion on Church Polity, 4

<sup>85</sup> Laymen, Nevin, On The Church, 150

among men.” The church could not be a “an invisible and impalpable abstraction” but had to be “Outward, real” having “historical form”<sup>86</sup>

Nevin was also concerned that Hodge’s theory in form was to “Deny the incarnation itself...either the supernatural entered into organic, that is real and historical union with the natural in the person of Christ, or we must say of the whole mystery, that it was an optical illusion simply.”<sup>87</sup> Indeed this seems like the great issue of creating a division between the visible and invisible Church. It would imply like the Gnostics, that there can be no interaction between the human and the divine, denying, as Nevin says above, the very incarnation. If the Church is merely invisible then where does Christ persist in the world? Is the church, even in its state of imperfection still meant, to use the words of the modern evangelical, to “be Christ to the world?” How can it be such if the supernatural cannot interact with or incarnate the natural? If the Church is not the “Continuation of the Presence of Christ on Earth”<sup>88</sup> then it must be something wholly other, something that is unsupported by biblical theology. Denying the incarnation is to mute the very historical event that gave salvation to the Church.

What Nevin understood is not dissimilar to what Jonathan Edwards observed in “Religious Affections” and his defense of the First Great Awakening, that “A mark of the work of the Spirit of God is that outward fruit is produced”<sup>89</sup> The inward reality of the incarnation had to manifest itself visibly and so the invisible aspect of the Church, must result in a visible one. Accordingly, since the Church was an organism, in Nevin’s mind it made no sense to speak of the institution, those who were unbelievers who were counted among the members of the church

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<sup>86</sup> Laymen, Nevin, *On The Church*, 156

<sup>87</sup> Laymen, Nevin, *The Mercersburg Theology Series Volume Six: One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Tome One, “Antichrist: or the Spirit of Sect and Schism (1848)*, pg 160-245 pg 170

<sup>88</sup> Schaff, *POP*

<sup>89</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 2012, Fig, Seattle,



buildings were not actually members of the church universal because they had not come to saving faith. Understanding this distinction between Hodge, who refers to the church as an institution, and Nevin, who refers to the church as organic, helps us understand why both Schaff and Nevin cannot conceive of two churches, visible and invisible.<sup>90</sup> While this investigation will visit Hodge's view of the church in the final chapter, we need to address this difference here to more fully understand the debate. It would seem that Nevin's estimation of the Church gives us an answer to the old debate started by Augustine of what to do with sinners who come to our churches and remain unsaved. The very question that sparked the debate over an invisible and visible church, Nevin seems to solve. If the church is an inward reality, the invisible incarnation, that becomes an outward reality, the organic, visible body of the Church, then those who have never come to saving faith are actually not part of the church. They may be part of the buildings that make up the organization of the meeting places of the church, but because they lack the incarnation they are not and never were part of the church.

The structure is not dissimilar to Jonathan Edwards<sup>91</sup> treatment of the First Great Awakening and his debate with Charles Chauncy over the nature of the Awakenings. Edwards believed, as he wrote, that the only true mark of a revival was that the inward presence of the Spirit brought about the outward Fruit of the Spirit.<sup>92</sup> Nevin, who had likely read Edwards during his time at Princeton, probably did not take his estimation from Edwards and applied to it to the Church. It is more likely he drew the conclusion from reading the works of Neander and more

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<sup>90</sup> Laymen, Nevin, *On The Church*,

<sup>91</sup> Here we are dealing with not simply what Edwards said in *Religious Affections*, See Footnote XXXIX, but with the structure if A then B, if the spirit dwells within the person the fruit is the natural outward end, comparison here with Nevin's estimation, if A then B, if the Church is always visible then it must have an inward, invisible component that comes forth to produce the outward reality. Therefore, if Christ is incarnate in the Church then that Incarnation must be manifested visibly

<sup>92</sup> Jonathan Edwards: *Religious Affections*,

directly from Schaff.<sup>93</sup> Still the comparison is an interesting one, especially since Edwards was largely schismatic and purely puritan in his view of the Church and the Reformation. Like Hodge, Edwards seems to view the church purely as an institution, which is why he can gloss over eight-hundred years of Church History by dismissing it as “Popish heresy” and “the rise of Antichrist.”<sup>94</sup> Nevin was once closer to Edwards than Schaff, at least at the beginning of the 1840’s, but by the end he directly identifies the Antichrist not with the Pope but with the sect system and schism and what was to Nevin and improper view of the church, as institution rather than as organism, that allowed for a visible and invisible church.<sup>95</sup>

*Conclusion:*

When we address the language of Catholicity in the writings of John Williamson Nevin, we must work to set Nevin within his own historical context. He is a member of the faculty at the German Reformed Seminary at Mercersburg who speaks to the very specific issues of his time. Nevin takes a very different approach than his contemporaries. He addresses the sect system, calling it anti-christ and applying the same German thought he had to the Two-Party System that was relevant in Politics leading up to the Civil War. He addressed the debate between the Invisible and Visible Church, removing, in his theology, the need for such a distinction.

Nevin, like his peer at Mercersburg, believed the church to be organic, not institutional. He echoed the belief that the salvation was through the Church which remains a teaching of the Catholic church to this day and saw the enemy of catholic unity not as Catholicism but as the schematic and sectarian spirit that not only had taken hold in the church but also in the political

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<sup>93</sup> Appel, *The Life & Works of John Williamson Nevin*

<sup>94</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption: Period III Part III. The Works of Jonathan Edwards Volume 1, 1869, Banner of Truth Trust, Seattle*

<sup>95</sup> Laymen, Nevin, *Antichrist or the Spirit of Sect & Schism (1848)*

atmosphere fueled by a fierce individualism. To Nevin, the Church was always meant to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic. The continuation of the presence of Christ through incarnation, that being unbreakable and undividable in history and in Nevin's own time.

## CHAPTER FOUR:

## Synthesis and Divergence between Schaff &amp; Nevin

Given the history between Schaff and Nevin, a history we have seen goes all the way back to Schaff's distinguished teacher August Neander, we also know that because they worked so closely together and, as Appel tells us, were good friends for so many years at Mercersburg and even after that there are going to be significant points of synthesis and much less divergence than we may find in typical circumstances. For that reason, it may be more prudent to talk about the differences in the writings themselves, as both men tend to emphasize different parts of the Mercersburg Theology. We have already seen that it is prudent to see that Nevin is the application of Schaff's historiography and theology, once could even call him the practical side of the Mercersburg coin. Yet, the writings of the two men are distinctly different yet share a sameness in their theological and historiographical outlook. The purpose of this section of the investigation then is to mark those areas of synthesis and divergence within the writings of themselves. The following chapter, then, will allow us to look at the ultimate divergence of their principle opponents which to this point we have only touched upon.

What we find in Schaff and Nevin is what we will call Atonement Theology and what some have called Eucharistic Reformed Theology. One critique that can be leveled against the Church in America is that we tend to be so focused on the cross that we fail to consider the full implications of the resurrection. We either treat the resurrection as lesser, or we live as if it did not happen at all. Schaff and Nevin answer this criticism by laying out for us the full implications of post-resurrection Christianity. The cross is the atoning work, and we need to place proper value in the cross, but we cannot overlook or under value the fact that the complete

work includes the resurrection. On the cross, Christ takes our penalty of death. In the resurrection, Christ shows final triumph over the grave so that we may not taste death but could share in the eternal reality of the divine life. Nevin of course explains this through Baptism in his lecture entitled *The Old Doctrine of Christian Baptism*: where summarizing Chrystsostom he writes: “Christian Baptism was held...to be an actual regeneration, by the grace of God, to the power of a new and heavenly life. It was no sign simply of a spiritual fact.”<sup>96</sup> One almost hears echoes of Paul in Romans in Romans 6:5 which reads: “For if we have been united like this in his death, so we shall we be united with him in his resurrection to life.”<sup>97</sup> Or Titus 3:5: “He saved us, not because of works of righteousness we had done, but according to his mercy he saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>98</sup> This is not to say that Nevin and Schaff believed Baptism to be salvific, as this would have violated the Material Principle, but that they saw it as Luther did, conferring grace by the cleansing by water and Spirit. This is the greater scope of their theological framework, that the Church now lives in a post-resurrection world. Christ has risen and He is still in the world through His Church.<sup>99</sup>

We must take into account one other thing when considering differences between Schaff and Nevin, that is this: Nevin, being the one who draws out the implications of Schaff is ultimately weightier than Schaff, though Schaff is the more prolific writer of the two. He is also the more a historian than a theologian and so at points substitutes forming his own views for the views of others. Therefore, there are points where they seem divergent where they have true

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<sup>96</sup> John Williamson Nevin, Philip Schaff, Emanuel V. Gerhart, *Born of Water and the Spirit, Essays on the Sacrament and Christian Formation*, The Mercersburg Theology Series V. Six, “The Old Doctrine of Christian Baptism” 2016, WIPF and Stock, Eugene, Digital Book. Location 5907

<sup>97</sup> Romans 6:5 Translation Mine

<sup>98</sup> Titus 3:5 Translation Mine

<sup>99</sup> This paragraph was included here and not in the introduction because we will be discussing aims and so we must frame their reformed theology in a broader system that for the Church in America has been neglected.

synthesis though they point where they diverge, though actually rare, are fairly pronounced. We also must take the growth of the two men into account. It is quite obvious, as has been addressed in the chapter on Nevin, that there is great growth in Nevin's position between 1844 and 1849 and that growth accounts for one of the major divergences. This growth can also likely be attributed to his proximity to Schaff and his profound influence on Nevin. With these considerations in mind, we can start to considering the topic before, to trace out the areas of synthesis and divergence between the two great Mercersburg Theologians.

*Synthesis between the writings of Schaff and Nevin*

For great relationships to work there must either be a sense of continuity and single-mindedness, or, the persons involved must be able to disagree with respect to the other and even esteem for the others position. The former is true when it comes to Schaff and Nevin, and with that single-mindedness they were able to look towards a single purpose, that is the preservation of catholic unity within the Church held best, in their minds, in the spirit of the reformation and the reformed tradition. Bradford Littlejohn captures this single-minded aim when he discerns that:

I think 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 no so much due to Mercersburg's abandonment of the Reformed Heritage, but to their stubborn refusal to leave it behind and join the rest of their American contemporaries in desacramentalized, individualistic Christianity.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Littlejohn, *Mercersburg and the Quest for Evangelical Catholicity*, 25

In that single aim they would together “mount a significant critique of modern Protestantism” which to them: “revealed the close connection between the rationalist impulse and the pietist impulse.”<sup>101</sup> It is against this backdrop that the two men solidified and continued to defend their positions. Neither was unfamiliar with conflict, Nevin, as has been discussed, was at Princeton during the break between the Old and New School Presbyterians and Schaff was at Tubingen during the delusion stirred by David Strauss “The Life of Jesus.” A time when many lost their faith. So, it should be no surprise to us that when they saw the very nature of the church under attack, they would stand up in defense of it.

Indeed, it is the nature of the church that marks their greatest point of Synthesis. We must make a brief distinction here, for while they agree on the nature of the church, later we will see a divergence in one of these categories: They agree in which form the church takes. That is, it is an organic body that grows and changes over time. Therefore, it cannot be the same from age to age, and thus the Reformation was merely a coming of age of the Church into something greater as the Reformation returned the church to what Schaff calls the “Material and Formal” principles.<sup>102</sup> The Church in form then is made up of two substances, the divine through the divine union and the human. This is made possible for both men via the incarnation. They believed that when Jesus said “I will be with you always” in Mark 28:26, He was referring to His church as the “continuation of his presence”<sup>103</sup> on earth. The second is the purpose of the Church: The Church is, in being the continuation of Christ’s presence is also the instrument or vessel in which salvation comes because salvation is by grace through the faith of Christ whose

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<sup>101</sup> Littlejohn, *Mercersburg and the Quest for Evangelical Catholicity*, 20

<sup>102</sup> Schaff, *POP*, for elaboration see Chapter 2

<sup>103</sup> Schaff, *POP*, Nevin, Laymen, *On The Church*

person is in divine union with the Church. Through this: “The Church becomes the instrument for reconciling the “living economy of the world more and more into the reign of Christ.”<sup>104</sup>

We must pause here to talk in brief about what is meant in their writings by divine union. Oddly enough, when Bradford Littlejohn talks briefly about the connection between Mercersburg and the Eastern Orthodox Church, he never really addresses this particular issue. Within the Eastern Orthodox church there is the theology of theosis which says plainly what we have stated above, that Christ becomes joined with humanity in a form of hypostatic union, and we then experience deification.<sup>105</sup> Though Schaff and Nevin clearly do not believe in the idea of deification, it is clear that they understood the language of theosis. It is possible, since both men had read the apostolic fathers, indeed no one has written so prolifically about them since Schaff, that they took the idea from Cyril of Alexandria and other apostolic writings for it was taught that there was a sort of Hypostatic Union between God and his saints. To Schaff and Nevin that meant not deification, but participation in the divine life through Christ.

Without this understanding the sect system was allowed to reign in the hearts of the Church and do damage to that which was meant to be unified. Indeed, their dislike of the sect system is another major point of synthesis. Both men view the sect system as something unchurchly and not in the interest of Christian unity. Though Schaff does not speak on the subject as much as Nevin does he does: “Lament the spirit of divisiveness as utterly foreign to the teachings of the church.”<sup>106</sup> Schaff finds the source of sectarianism in puritanism which insists on a spiritual Christendom. Littlejohn writes: “For Schaff the nature of sect lies not so much in the face of a body’s distinct denominational polity as in that body’s attitude toward the

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<sup>104</sup> Borneman, Church, Sacrament and American Democracy, 19 Quoting Nevin “Catholicism” 17

<sup>105</sup> Millard J. Erickson, Christian Theology Third Edition, 2013, Baker Academic, 49

<sup>106</sup> Littlejohn, Mercersburg and the Quest for Reformed Catholicity, 34



history, catholic nature of the Church and its traditions.”<sup>107</sup> Both saw the rise of rationalism and common sense religion as a catalyst for Schism and sect, Puritanism and American Christianity in general developed in the cradle of the teachings of John Locke and David Hume, which “Mercersburg Theology has rejected”<sup>108</sup> while the German system alive and well in the thought of Schaff and Nevin relied heavily on Hagel, Schleiermacher, Neander and Baur leading to a clash of ideas on American soil between the school of English empiricism and German Speculative Theology.<sup>109</sup> Jonathan Edwards himself in his treatise “*Freedom of the Will*” relies heavily on Hume and Locke’s understanding of personal conscious and the duality of mind and body.<sup>110</sup> This separation of mind and spirit, in the minds of Schaff and Nevin made it easy for to split the church both into visible and invisible and justify churches breaking from one another. Since personal conscious, the purely subjective, is what often contributed to the splitting of churches and the spirit of sect. According to Samuel Miller’s summation of the Mercersburg Theology this brand of thinking in relationship to the Church, the creation of a doctrine based on rationalism and common sense religion, was to: “Deny that it is a life” while resolving it “into mere idea or doctrine or precept or anything else” causing the church to fall “helplessly into the arms of rationalism and infidelity.”<sup>111</sup> Schaff and Nevin had developed from the German Theology an “Organic Law” that governed Christianity, that law dictated that all aspects of Christian Life, Humanity, Family, Church and even the state, carried the properties of organisms<sup>112</sup> while their opponent’s saw the church as an institution that could split, the

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<sup>107</sup> Littlejohn, *Mercersburg and the Quest for Reformed Catholicity*, 39

<sup>108</sup> Samuel Miller, *A Treatise on Mercersburg Theology or Mercersburg and Modern Theology compared*, 1866, 2016, CrossReach Publications, Philadelphia, 14,

<sup>109</sup> Linden J. Debie: *Speculative Theology and Common-Sense Religion: Mercersburg and the conservative roots of American Religion*, 2008, Pickwick Publications, Eugene, Digital Book location 157

<sup>110</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 2014, Brighton Books, Chandler AZ. Ebook

<sup>111</sup> Miller, *A Treatise on Mercersburg Theology*, 42-43

<sup>112</sup> Miller, *A Treatise on Mercersburg Theology*, 39

Mercersburg Theologians insisted rightly that to split and organism meant death for that organism.

The final point of synthesis that requires our attention is their agreement on the sacrament and traditions of the Church. We have already discussed briefly in the introduction of this section how the Mercersburg Sacramentology is tied in directly with their view of the Church.<sup>113</sup> We have already taken an in depth look at Schaff's "Formal Principle" which denotes the Word of God as the true authority and which all tradition must be subjective too. Both men were well read in the Church Father's and so take much of their sacramentology and ecclesiology from their writings. In their Atonement Theology, both recognized an act taking place in the sacraments that followed the Material Principle of Salvation by grace through faith. Both dedicated some time to writing concerning their sacramentology. Indeed, the topic of Mercersburg Sacramentology could fill its own thesis, however in this investigation we will only treat it generally. Miller summarizes as follows:

It is enough to say that according to Mercersburg Theology, the sacrament of Baptism is the divinely instituted means by which ordinarily, the life-communication takes place, which as already stated, is the beginning of that process by which Christ is formed within us, the hope of glory; and that life is especially fed and nourished by the bread of life, communicated to us by the sacrament of the body and blood of Jesus Christ. As Modern Theology has no such conception of life-communication at any time and has given up the idea of partaking of Christ in any form.<sup>114</sup>

Given one of Nevin's most controversial non-ecclesial works was *They Mystical Presence* and both wrote a myriad of articles in *The Mercersburg Review* on the topic of what Nichols calls

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<sup>113</sup> See Introduction to this section, This view is also supported by James Hastings Nichols in his introduction to: *The Mercersburg Theology: A Library of Protestant Thought*, 1966, Oxford University Press, New York, 25

<sup>114</sup> Miller, *A Treatise on Mercersburg Theology*, 38-

“Baptismal grace”<sup>115</sup> it is not hard to discover their synthesis on this point.<sup>116</sup> Both agree that certain traditions developed early in the church in regard to sacrament and creed that were under the development of Christianity, guided by the Apostolic Father. Both look back to the Church fathers because of a recognition that at the time of the reformation: “While tradition<sup>117</sup> as it then stood contradicted it entirely, directing men for salvation, not by faith, but to mechanical outward observances and forms.”<sup>118</sup> This of course is a direct violation of the Material Principle and caused the neglect of the Formal Principle. It should be noted that Nevin: “Came to the church father’s later and was forced to wrestle with their implications.”<sup>119</sup> Though by 1845 he was drawing the same conclusions on sacrament and tradition as his colleague even prompting Isaac Dorner at Tubingen to comment on his “Orthodox Character”<sup>120</sup> It is also true that after 1876 Nevin began reading the works of theosopher Emmanuel Swedenborg<sup>121</sup> and diverged from the Mercersburg view of Eucharist<sup>122</sup> however for the majority of his time at Mercersburg and later Franklin and Marshall Colleges he is in-line with the consensus. Both recognized a spiritual presence in the bread and cup and both recognized regeneration in the washing of baptism for those baptized later in life and the promise of regeneration for infants.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Nichols: The Mercersburg Theology, 23

<sup>116</sup> See John Williamson Nevin, Charles Hodge, Ed Linden J. DeBie, *Coena Mystica, Debating Reformed Eucharistic Theology*, The Mercersburg Theology Study Series V.II, 2013, WIPF & Stock, Eugene or Nevin, Schaff, Gerhart, Born of Water and Spirit, The Mercersburg Theology Study Series V.VI, 2016, WIPF & Stock, Eugene

<sup>117</sup> Tradition of the Catholic Church of the High Middle Ages, penance, the buying and selling of indulgences, cult of the saints etc.

<sup>118</sup> Schaff, POP 97

<sup>119</sup> Nichols, The Mercersburg Theology, 23

<sup>120</sup> Nichols, The Mercersburg Theology, 23

<sup>121</sup> Remember, Schaff did not consider the Swedenborgians part of the actual church because they rejected the authority of God’s Word, see Schaff, *The Principle of Protestantism*, 96

<sup>122</sup> Nevin, Schaff, Gerhart, Born of Water and Spirit, Editors Introduction to the Bread of Life A Communion Sermon, ebook location, 6310

<sup>123</sup> Miller, The Mercersburg Theology, Chapter 8

Both also agreed in the proper place of tradition in the Body of Christ, that is, they both agreed that the tradition was part of the Historical Development, as Schaff said: The Tradition answers to love”<sup>124</sup> Therefore, protestants should not reject tradition if it is not in contradiction to or in violation of scripture. Proper historical understanding is required to grasp this view as the entire argument as to what traditions must be kept and must be done away with is contingent on a historical biblical perspective<sup>125</sup> and approach to historiography. Both believe God continued to work within the confines of history, that history developed organically as an open system rather than mechanically as a closed system.<sup>126</sup> This meant there had to be some kind of revelatory aspect to church history, that there were reasons the tradition developed in the early church in the manner that it did, under the guide of the Holy Spirit with the aim of not merely preserving the Church and Scriptures, but continuing to use them to their day as a means of establishing the Kingdom.<sup>127</sup> For Mercersburg, this meant that the traditions needed to be held in submission to the ultimate divine revelation of Holy Scripture, and not rejected completely or treated as mere symbols as is the tendency of American Protestantism.

### *Divergence:*

As we turn our attention to divergence we find that, while it would be difficult to present here an exhaustive list of all areas of synthesis and divergence, there are, as we have mentioned, a greater amount of points of synthesis than those of divergence and those divergences that can

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<sup>124</sup> Schaff, POP

<sup>125</sup> The phrase is mine

<sup>126</sup> David Bebbington, *Patterns in History a Christian Perspective on Historical Thought*, 1990, Regent College Publishing, Vancouver Canada See Also: Robert F Bea, *Why Church History Matters, and invitation to love and learn from our past*, 2014, IVP, Downers Grove IL. And Jay D. Green, *Christian Historiography, Five Rival Views*, 2015, Baylor University Press, Waco TX. For a further discussion on views of Historiography.

<sup>127</sup> Nevin, Schaff, Gerhart, *Born of Water & Spirit*, From the editor’s introduction to Article Seven: *The Bread of Life: A Communion Sermon*, ebook location 6306

be found either deal with background information in regards to points of synthesis or require the reader to take into account Nevin's age and upbringing or Schaff's work as a historian allowing him the privilege of not drawing out discussions as thoroughly as Nevin.<sup>128</sup>

The first seeming divergence then between Schaff and Nevin deals primarily with the mechanics behind the workings of the Church in regard to catholic unity. That is, as we have seen, they both agree on catholic unity, but it seems there is a slight divergence in how this is engineered by the Spirit. For instance, Schaff seems to have no problem whatsoever referring to the "Institution"<sup>129</sup> of the church while Nevin refuses the language of institution all together. This institution is not similar to Hodge's "communion of saints," Rather, it just refers to the organizing structures where the Church meets. This makes sense for Schaff who held a deep affinity for the "unwritten" historical sources such as the paintings and architecture of medieval cathedrals.<sup>130</sup> Nevin, meanwhile, never makes mention of the meeting places of the Church, rather, the Church to Nevin seems to be entirely a visible, spiritual organism outside of the need for organizational structures or at the very least considering them to be a necessary evil which actually allows Schaff to accept denominationalism.<sup>131</sup> It must be pointed out that though Schaff is okay with the language of institution he will still hear nothing of a separation between a visible and invisible church. To Nevin, the Church just was because of the Divine Union and so he seems to want nothing to do with an established institution but a growing organism.

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<sup>128</sup> We historians can sometimes be a little "Dodgy" to use Ryan Reeves turn of phrase, allowing us to merely quote a historical person without fleshing out the full implications of a quote. This can make an analysis such as this one a little bit more difficult because a point of synthesis may actually be a point of divergence and vice-versa. Schaff does have enough material that we can say for certain what his views are pertaining to certain issues, while he leaves the mechanics behind the view up to interpretation.

<sup>129</sup> Schaff, *The Principle of Protestantism*

<sup>130</sup> Bernard McGinn, *The Gold of Catholicity*, Ed. Henry Bowden, *A Century of Church History, the Life of Philip Schaff*, 1988, Southern University Press, Carbondale IL.

<sup>131</sup> Miller, *The Mercersburg Theology*

This also meant that, at the beginning of their careers, both men took very different stances on Catholicism. We have already seen that in Nevin's earliest writing at Mercersburg, *The Anxious Bench* that Nevin considers Romanism the greatest enemy of true Christian Orthodoxy while to Schaff the great enemies are always sectarianism, schism and rationalism. Though this divergence seems to disappear after 1846 it is important to note because it contributes to Nevin's later struggles to balance Rome and Wittenberg, as well as his wrestling's with the Church Father's. The original position held by Nevin was a brief source of tension between the two Mercersburg Theologians and the change shows Schaff's considerable influence on his counterpart.<sup>132</sup>

#### *A Holy Cohesion:*

Though the men are not completely interchangeable, we need to understand how cohesive the Mercersburg Theology is. So often throughout Church History we find great debates over fundamental doctrines and sacraments. In fact, the Reformation's first split came as a result of one such point of tension, namely, the Lord's Supper. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of the Church in America has been to split often over minute doctrinal issues. What the Mercersburg theologians were able to accomplish in their twenty-plus years together was a cohesive, working system that directly and thoroughly combatted the sectarian and schismatic nature of the church in their context.

Such cohesion allowed for agreement on the important, essential matters of their theology. It also allowed them to work out the various high and low points that often get overlooked or become later points of tension. They had a singularity of mind that seems

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<sup>132</sup> Appel, *The Life & Work of John W. Nevin*,

unparalleled. Their goal was this, to maintain and preserve what they saw as the founding principles of Christianity, those principles rediscovered at the time of the reformation but largely missing in their American context. The reformed faith was, to them, a sacramental and eucharistic faith lived out in the organic body of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, the continuation of the presence of Christ on this Earth, which it was of the utmost importance to preserve for the sake of the next generations.

## CHAPTER FIVE:

## An Expanded look at the Theology of Mercersburg's Principle Opponent Charles Hodge

Having thoroughly discussed Mercersburg on Catholicity, we now turn our attention to those whom they are responding too in an attempt to present a better balanced and more nuanced presentation of the context into which Nevin and Schaff were speaking. We have spoke briefly in the previous chapter, just in passing, of the Scottish common-sense theology that had taken hold in North America at the beginning of the eighteenth century, as well as the influence of English enlightenment thinkers on the Puritans. We have also discussed at some length, though, admittedly with both Schaff and Nevin's hostility in view, the views of Hodge on the Church and the debate over new measures in regards to the Anxious Bench.

However, it does the historian or the theologian no good to merely glance over something while dealing with a person or persons who are hostile to a certain ideal. These ideas must be able to speak as well and be treated by their own merits. Sadly, because of the practice of redaction it has been difficult to address the full breadth of some of the theology of these men until recently. We are forever indebted to men like Garth M. Rosell and Alan D. Strange for helping us recover a better understanding by returning to us the un-redacted works and memoirs and for further explanation on points that seem to make no sense. Our situation is even more precarious because, while Hodge said much on the Church in relationship to his responses to Schaff and Nevin, the one work we do have, *On Church Polity* was compiled late in life by A.A Hodge and published posthumously, Hodge's systematic theology lacks any section on Ecclesiology, so while we can compare the collective work published under Charles Hodge name against his responses to Schaff and Nevin, we are still left with very little actual material in



Hodge's own words. One final difficulty we face in writing this chapter is Finney's lack of mention of names. While Hodge and Mercersburg have no problem attacking each other by name, Finney refers to his opponents as "professors of religion" leaving us to assume whom he is referring to within the context of his writings. Further complicating our ability to address Finney is the extreme lack of a serious scholarly biography outside of Rosell's comments in his edits of Finney's memoirs. A quick study of biographies of Finney find an overly favorable revisionist view that almost always omits the debates entirely.

These difficulties aside, we can piece together enough to make a clearer and more concise explanation of the theology and theologians opposed to Mercersburg. It must also be said that there were some, within the German Reformed who had embraced new measures and sectarianism and who took exception to Schaff and Nevin. These incidents, though bearing some weight, were merely symptoms of the larger theological frameworks this chapter wishes to address as this investigation moves to Hodge.

### *Common Acquaintances*

Before we get to the primary purpose of this chapter, it would be helpful to point out a few points of contact between Hodge, Schaff and Nevin shared by these three and not by the revivalists, but still helping up to understand Hodge's theology in light of his training.

After graduating from Princeton, Hodge had decided to go abroad to study first in France and second in Germany.<sup>133</sup> Once there, he would follow a similar route to that of the young Schaff, who when Hodge set out in 1826 was only seven years old and attending primary school at Chur, near his boyhood home in the Canton of Graunbutden.<sup>134</sup> Meanwhile, Hodge's

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<sup>133</sup> W. Andrew Hoffecker, Charles Hodge, The Prince of Princeton, 2011, P&R Publishing, Philadelphia, 88-103

<sup>134</sup> Schaff, The Life of Philip Schaff, 1

responsibilities at Princeton were taken over by a newly graduated Professor Nevin who had come to Princeton in 1823 where he was first introduced to the Church Father's through studying biblical antiquities.<sup>135</sup>

While in Germany Hodge attended Halle and then Berlin, as Schaff would 10 years later, where he befriended August Tholuck and August Neander who would later teach Schaff and who with Nevin would form an affinity. They also took in lectures by Schleiermacher whose works would also influence Nevin during his Mercersburg years. No one had yet heard of David Strauss, who's *Das Leben Jesu* (Life of Jesus) would be the cause of great religious consternation at Tubingen where Strauss taught and Schaff attended between 1837-1838. Though Schaff never attended lectures by Strauss, he did with Strauss's colleague Isaac Dornier and Bruno Baur the latter of whom Schaff had "utmost respect for" but whom he disagreed with.<sup>136</sup>

During Hodge's time in Germany he fell in with a very interesting ecumenical group which his now friend August Thulock had introduced him too. The likes of which were laying the ground work against German Liberalism which would be one of the main weapons used later against Strauss<sup>137</sup> but would also later develop into the Lutheran High Church Prussian Movement that had a profound influence on Schaff when he came into the company of Tholuck while at Halle in 1839.<sup>138</sup> The New Pietism which had been so influential in the circles Hodge communed with during his time at Halle ten years earlier had fully developed by the time Schaff arrived.

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<sup>135</sup> Appel, The Life and Work of John Williamson Nevin, ebook – 969-972

<sup>136</sup> Schaff, the Life of Philip Schaff, 19

<sup>137</sup><sup>137</sup> The other was Hegelianism

<sup>138</sup> Littlejohn, The quest for Evangelical Catholicity, 89, Schaff, the Life of Philip Schaff, 28-29, Thulock actually employed Schaff as a book keeper and amanuensis. Schaff's journals, which are contained in The Life of Philip Schaff, reflect fondly of his time in the Thulock household.

The final connection the three share is their friendship with August Neander. Though Neander was not the powerful scholar whose lectures Schaff attended at Berlin, but a mere student who Hodge had befriended during his own time at Berlin in 1827.<sup>139</sup> Nevin would come in contact with Neander's ideas during his time at Allegheny in the 1830's, and would later have the chance to meet him when he accompanied Schaff back to Germany.<sup>140</sup>

Given the similarity of the influences between the three one wonders why there is not slightly more continuity between Old Princeton and Mercersburg. It is, in fact, from Neander and the High Church Lutheran's that Schaff received a great deal of his understanding of the church and sacrament, expanding upon and building upon the understanding of the Church Father's he inherited from Neander at Berlin. Though Neander was just a mere student when he and Hodge were acquainted, he would have had to have already formed a great deal of his ecumenical thoughts. However, we must understand that Hodge had a sharp disagreement with Neander's Lutheranism. Hodge, a strict reformed Calvinist had trouble understanding German thought in respect to his own Scottish Common-Sense theology. He was also urged by his friend Archibald Alexander to "beware of German thought"<sup>141</sup> so that he could maintain his Princeton Orthodoxy. So, while he considered Neander and Tholuck good friends, he disagreed with them sharply, while amicably, on major theological issues, including ecclesiology. What he did take from his friends was a new resolve to "Stay the course" upon his return to Princeton, to maintain his piety and academic scholarship of Princeton.<sup>142</sup> He remained hostile to German thinking throughout the remainder of his life and teaching career as is evidenced by his responses to Nevin.

With these connections established, let us look deeper at the theology of Hodge.

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<sup>139</sup> Hoffecker, Charles Hodge, 86-103

<sup>140</sup> Appel, The Life and Work of John Williamson Nevin

<sup>141</sup> Hoffecker, Charles Hodge, 86-103

<sup>142</sup> Hoffecker, Charles Hodge, 119

*Spiritual Unity: Charles Hodge on the Church & Sectarianism*

There is an argument that goes back to the establishment of Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire, that led to the institutionalizing of the Church. This argument was one that troubled Augustine and many others, that following the centuries of what Allen Krieder calls “a patient fermenting”<sup>143</sup> of the early church and its establishment as the state religion, that one needed a way to explain the existence of unbelievers who belonged to the institutional Church. Especially since, as Robin Daniel points out in her book “This Holy Seed” many Christians during the days following the end of persecution became comfortable causing a shift from patient evangelism to the comfort that accompanied power.<sup>144</sup> The result to declare the church to have two parts, in Manichean construction, of a visible and invisible Church. The visible Church was the institutionalized Church and the invisible Church consisted of the true “communion of Saints” who were living in Divine Union with Christ. The idea of an invisible Church would seem to have been taken from Hebrews 12:1-3 which reads: Therefore, since we have such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”

What is laid out above is a crude explanation, but it must be at least partially laid out to help us interpret Hodge’s position. The understanding Hodge has of Ecclesiology and his own insistence on a visible and invisible church was nothing new and had even survived the

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<sup>143</sup> Allen Krieder, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, 2016, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids,

<sup>144</sup> Robin Daniel, *This Holy Seed: Faith, Hope and Love in the Early Church of North Africa*, 2010, Tamarisk Publications, Chester UK, 229-346

reformation through John Calvin's "Institute of the Christian Religion."<sup>145</sup> So to think Hodge to be advancing or contributing to this doctrine would be presumptuous. We would not know what Hodge believed on the Church were it not for his son and redactor A.A. Hodge who began to collect all of his father's ecclesiological writings to organize into book form called "On Church Polity" which, though begun before his death was completed and published posthumously.<sup>146</sup> Hodge had always wanted to write on the doctrine of the church, a section which never made it into his systematic, but his responses to Mercersburg and "On Church Polity" help us determine his thoughts on the topic.

For starters, he continues the distinction between a visible and invisible church using the same starting point as Calvin and others making such distinctions. That is, Hebrews has told us there is a "cloud of witnesses," those who have gone before us, the heavenly communion of saints, the very people of God that are bound in a "Spiritual Unity" that cannot be broken.<sup>147</sup>

According to Hodge:

Such then is the true idea of the Church, or what is the same thing, the idea of the true church. It is the communion of Saints, the body of those who are united to Christ by the Indwelling of his spirit. The two essential points included in this definition are, that the Church consists of Saints, and that the bond of their union is not external organization, but the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, These, therefore, are the two points to be established. As, however, the one involves the other, they need not be considered separately. The same argument, which prove the one, prove the other.<sup>148</sup>

Hodge will go on to describe a type of "invisible catholicity"<sup>149</sup> that held together the true and pure church unstained by the world. Since "every (visible) church has been baptized by the

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<sup>145</sup> John Calvin, Beveridge, Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book IV Chapter 1, Section 7-9, 2012, Fig Books, ebook

<sup>146</sup> Alan D. Strange, Ecclesiology of Charles Hodge, 2017, P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg

<sup>147</sup> Hodge, On Church Polity, Ebook, location 26-658

<sup>148</sup> Hodge, On Church Polity, Ebook Location, 65

<sup>149</sup> The phrase is my descriptor.

world from the beginning” Hodge saw it as a necessary distinction to make. To Hodge this meant that there was no divine promise of protection for the external or visible church because it was not the true and holy communion of the saints and allowed in its rank and file the reprobate. It was only the invisible church, the Holy Church in its purest form, that afforded the divine protection.<sup>150</sup> The true church was governed by the Holy Spirit and the result of the indwelling of the spirit which was unseen, thus rendering the true church as invisible. He sees such a distinction as an “unavoidable” between the “real” and the “nominal” even seeing that this is, in his opponents at Mercersburg; “substantially and of necessity admitted.” We have already discussed at great lengths Nevin’s consideration of the church as organic meaning that those who do not have Holy Spirit are outside of the true organic church. Unlike Schaff who will acknowledge the existence of an institutional church containing the unsaved, but juxtaposed not with an invisible church like Hodge, but with the visible and organic, so Hodge is correct on this point about Mercersburg. Still Hodge insists that since there are “real Christians and...nominal Christians” there must be a real and nominal church.<sup>151</sup>

Hodge then saw no problem with sectarianism so long as the invisible catholicity remained intact. Hoeffecker notes:

Hodge adamantly defined these separations, not as sectarian divisions but as breaks essential to maintaining the integrity of the Gospel. Therefore, he held that rather than condemn them as sectarian, “Such separations (should be viewed as) a duty, which we owe to God and to the real unity of the church, whatever unscriptural terms of communion are enjoined.”<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Hodge: On Church Polity, Ebook Location, 523-525

<sup>151</sup> Hodge: On Church Polity, Ebook Location, 722

<sup>152</sup> Hoeffecker, Charles Hodge, with a quote from Hodge’s response to Schaff’s Protestantism, PR 17, 4, 1845, 626

To Hodge, so long as “brotherly love” was maintained, there was no violation of the “Principle of Unity” even where there were “different locations, diversity of languages, opinions.”<sup>153</sup>

Divisions then were necessary and needed to be deemed as such because they were a way of preserve the purity of the true church and the Gospel entrusted to it.

### *Hodge & Finney*

Before Hodge took on Mercersburg, he took on the revivalists, specifically the great Charles Grandison Finney who perfected the use of the Anxious Bench which would catch the ire of Dr. Nevin. The complaint Hodge lodges is not dissimilar too Nevin’s complaint, though the complaints originate from different places of concern. For Hodge it was the case of Old School Nurture Verse New School Revivalism<sup>154</sup> while we have already seen that Mercersburg concern was the “desacramentalization” of the reformed faith.<sup>155</sup> Hodge took his understanding of the Conversions from the results of the Old and New School Controversy within Presbyterian ranks during the First Great Awakening of 1741-58. Using Richard Osmer’s distinction between the New School – Conversion “culminating in the expanded nurturing process of catechizing children in the Westminster doctrines” and Old School – “Crisis Conversions.”<sup>156</sup> To Hodge there was little difference between what he considered “new measures” and “Old School Conversion” to be. The difference here was that Finney’s “New Measures” were considered to be, as Hoeffecker writes: “Arminian and even more radically Palagian.”<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Hodge, On Church Polity, Ebook Location, 761-762

<sup>154</sup> Hoeffecker, Charles Hodge, 152

<sup>155</sup> Littlejohn, Mercersburg and the quest for Evangelical Catholicity

<sup>156</sup> Hoeffecker, Charles Hodge, 253

<sup>157</sup> Hoeffecker, Charles Finney, 252

Interestingly enough, though phrased very differently, this second point is a point of agreement between Mercersburg and Princeton, in fact it is the primary driving argument behind Nevin's "*The Anxious Bench*" and many of the post 1850 Mercersburg writings that conversion is an ongoing process that requires nurturing, rejecting any form of crisis conversionism or conversion that relied on the individual and not on God. Further, the Catechism was a requirement for the nurturing and understanding of faith. The difference was that the Catechism used by Princeton was the Westminster and the one Schaff and Nevin looked towards was likely the Heidelberg. Regardless, Hodge rejected New Measures as virulently as Mercersburg. Finney, who in his public writings never names Hodge or Nevin by name was definitely aware of their responses, referring to them in his public writings as "professors of religion" and boldly stating that "Such professors will soon be in Hell."<sup>158</sup> Finney's insistence on page of Revivals that "A revival was a work of man" likely did not sit well with the Calvinist Hodge either. Nor would it have sat well with Finney's revivalist predecessors such as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield, both of whom saw revival as a work of God that produced fruits within the individual. Though one can compare the bench with the Puritan idea of "getting through" the Puritans mostly insisted that it was God who brought the person out on the other side rather than the individual reasoning within themselves to be converted to Christianity in spite of God's calling.

*Conclusion:*

All this being said, we do not have time here to discuss more fully the debate between Hodge and Finney, the brief section here is meant to show a point of agreement between

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<sup>158</sup> Charles Finney, *The Works of Charles Finney Volume 1: On Revivals, Lecture 3*, 2015, Classic Christian Ebooks, Amazon, Location 4578



Mercersburg and Princeton after presenting a more detailed look at Hodges' theology and Ecclesiology. It is important also to understand that some of these debates have never been settled and that both ideologies continue to exist today's world. Furthermore, the debate over nurture vs. conversionism continue to exist. As well as debates over the nature and sacraments of the Church. These have also generally not been the debates held between the people of the pew, but of the ivory tower, between Mercersburg and Princeton, though modern circumstances have caused us to think through these debates again at least on within denominational leadership. Therefore, it is important for the modern theologian to understand they are not working from a blank slate and their theological leanings have been shaped by debates going back one-hundred and even one-thousand years and that those arguments have barely changed in that time.

Hodge's contentions remain thus, that the Church has both visible and invisible manifestations, that the true church contains the "Communion of Saints" an invisible body. While the visible church contains both the saved and unsaved. That sectarianism and schism were essential to preserving the Gospel so long as the bond of peace and love were maintained. To Hodge, the failure to make these distinctions was to violate the purity and holiness of the Church.

At the same time, Hodge agrees with Mercersburg in his approach to revivalism and the idea of crisis, free-will, conversionism. Rejecting the Anxious Bench and the theology of Charles G. Finney the principle revivalist of his time. Preferring instead a slow, nurturing conversion marked by catechetical milestones, for Hodge taken from the Westminster Standards that include the sacraments of Baptism and Communion and lead the convert into full membership with the Communion of Saints.



## CHAPTER SIX:

## Conclusion:

It cannot be stated how great an impact the nineteenth century had on the formation and growth of the church in the young nation. It was a time of discovery, doctrinal solidification, intense debates, sectarian debate and religious establishmentarianism. We are indebted to the Finney and Hodge for their enormous contributions to the formation and direction they gave to American Evangelicalism for it was ultimately the Revivalist and Princeton strains that would dominate and indeed still dominate the landscape of the American Church. Whether this is good thing this is not the place to debate. However, in the rediscovery of the Mercersburg Theology we find another part of the story of the growth of the American Church. Schaff and Nevin set out to define, for the American Church, the doctrine of ecclesiology. Instead of doing this through the dualism of Princeton or the associations favored by Finney. They called upon the long and deep history of the church, going all the way back to the first century, indeed, to Jesus Himself. They sought to give us a church that was marked not by a visible and invisible dualism, by a real and organic church marked not by what it lacked, but by Unity, Holiness, Apostolicity and ultimately Catholicity.

The Church was to them an organism, growing, being shaped by the power of the Holy Spirit who was working through Historical Development. For that reason, schism and sect were mortal enemies of the Church, as were the desacramentalizing and individualizing of the Christian Life and Worship. All of this was because they understood the church to be the continuation of the incarnation of Christ, His presence indwelling in and sealing the unity of His Church in a visible and organic sense.

To Mercersburg, this was a historical doctrine, bringing together the veins of the reformation which they saw not as a split from Christianity, but as a continuation and natural outgrowth or daughter of Roman Catholicism. Thus, unlike their counterparts, they do not see a benefit to sect and schism, Indeed, to them it is a hindrance to the Gospel and antithetical to the spirit of the Reformation. Schaff and Nevin then stand against the doctrines and ideas that split the church and deny its historical practices.

This is the charge they would lay on Hodge, the Sectarians and the Revivalists. That they were in effect doing harm to the Church and to the Gospel by splitting the church and desacramentalizing of the Baptismal waters and the Bread and the Cup. To Mercersburg the resurrection was essential, what they consider a “Post-Atonement” theology<sup>159</sup> hinges on Christ’s incarnation and indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Like their predecessor Hegel, Mercersburg understood a synthesis of and dialectical relationship between God and Creation and that His indwelling was given to guide the Church and guide its growth through Scripture and the Traditions that came from them. This was reflected in Schaff’s *Formal and Material Principles of the Reformation* and in Nevin’s understanding of the Church’s role in Salvation and its corporate identity. This stands in stark contrast to the almost Platonistic formulations of American Realism and the splitting of the Church into Visible and Invisible Spheres.

The Theology of Mercersburg speaks radically against the strains of thought of its time, reaching agreement with its principle opponent only on the matter of a nurtured faith verses a crisis conversion. Consequently, it speaks against our own time as well, leading us back to the spirit and purpose of the reformation and reminding us of our primary identity and position. As the Church, totally visible and Organic, One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic.

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<sup>159</sup> See Chapter III

*Take Aways:*

Normally, when one speaks of the nineteenth century they think of men like Hodge and Finney, Princeton and the Revivalist. That is largely because these are the strains that dominate the post-Civil War, reconstruction era and which our modern era of American Church History are built upon. One does not usually think of the small group of German Theologians in Southern PA who gathered at Mercersburg, lead by Philip Schaff and John Williamson Nevin, if they know of them at all. Yet there is much we can learn from Mercersburg, especially as the center of Christianity has shifted from the West to the Global South, specifically in the continents of South America and Africa.

For starters, Schaff already believes in a universal, global church, one that is organic, visible, one, holy, catholic and apostolic. This is something we have a hard time grasping in our limited world of sectarianism Protestantism, but the growing pressure on the church and the emerging awareness of the sheer immensity of the global church outside of the west requires us to adopt. Schaff also acknowledges the historical geographical origins of our faith which, due to developments in western thinking such as the Discovery Doctrine we have largely forgotten, choosing to refer to places like the African Continent as “Unconverted” and “Barbaric” when Christianity existed there long before Constantine came to power. Included in Schaff’s definition of the Church is multi-ethnicity and multi-culturalism for as Schaff recognizes the ethnic origins of Christianity, he also acknowledges that Christianity did not destroy cultures, but transformed them.<sup>160</sup> Whether this was Schaff’s intent we cannot know, for elsewhere he repeats the same sins of his time period.

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<sup>160</sup> Schaff, *The Principle of Protestantism*, 75-79

In a time when Christianity has passed out of prominence in the West, there has never been a time when our outward, visible unity was more important. We are given, from Mercersburg, arguments against the sect and schism that we are now starting to heal from and those same arguments can be used to argue against segregation and in favor of integration. All these things, sect, schism and segregation are the privileges of a church in power, as perceived conveniences we can no longer afford. Mercersburg gives us a global definition of the church and a guideline to follow for restoring an ecclesiastical unity that embraces reconciliation and justice, something Schaff also wrestled with outside of his ecclesiastical writings.<sup>161</sup> Further, Mercersburg gives us a better model for distinguishing between the true church and the church which contains sinners. They move beyond the platonic construction of Invisible and Visible to better reasoned amalgamation of Organic and Institutional, with the institutional more of a necessary evil than intended form of the Church. This is a more historical and first century understanding of the Church which Schaff takes from the Church Fathers.

Finally, Mercersburg can return us to essential, universally held substance and doctrines and help us regain a first-century sacramentology. There are already protestants using Mercersburg in this regard, such as Kevin D. Vanhoozer in his *"The Reforming Catholic Confession"* and his book *"Biblical Interpretation after Babel."* The drawback to his "Neo-Catholicity" that while these movements want to regain unity in the essential doctrines, they still want to down play the beauty of and depth of sacramentology which was essential to

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<sup>161</sup> See The Mercersburg Review volume 13, pg 288: The Bible and Slavery: <https://books.google.com/books?id=MW02AAAAMAAJ&pg=PA288&dq=Schaff+The+bible+and+slavery+The+Mercersburg+Review&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewiA54S9uqrgAhXnguAKHQKJAzkQ6AEINTAC#v=onepage&q=Schaff%20The%20bible%20and%20slavery%20The%20Mercersburg%20Review&f=false> accessed 2/9/2019

Mercersburg and which they fought to protect and restore to the American context.<sup>162</sup> In Mercersburg we find a fully formed and fully reasoned definition of catholicity which is much broader than those outlined in Vanhoozer's confession.<sup>163</sup>

Perhaps the path back to unity in the west, and particularly in America is to go all the way back to the beginning, to the scriptures themselves, then the Church Father's and their interpretations and then to the reformation, learning to see it not as a split, but a natural growing or coming of age. Perhaps then we will follow the journey of John Williamson Nevin, who stepped back from his puritanism, through the ages, to rediscover a biblical and historical Church. One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Kevin D. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority After Babel*, 2016, Brazos Press, Grand Rapids. The argument Vanhoozer employs is that we should recapture the essence of the reformation that are captured in the five Sola's. Read *The Reforming Catholic Confession* here: <https://reformingcatholicconfession.com/> accessed 2/9/2019

<sup>163</sup> See Footnote 161

<sup>164</sup> Appel, *The Life and Work of John Williamson Nevin*

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