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# Between Mercersburg and Oxford: The Ecclesiology of John Williamson Nevin

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts

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**Between Mercersburg and Oxford:**  
The Ecclesiology of John Williamson Nevin

Thesis format: Monograph

By

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Graduate Program in Theology

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts

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London, Ontario, Canada

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the ecclesiology of the American theologian John Williamson Nevin (1803-1886) and its relationship to the wider “church question” of the nineteenth century. It will argue that Nevin’s “high church” theology defended the freedom of the church against both theological and political obstacles. Nevin maintained that the American church must establish an identity separate from modern “Puritanism,” as expressed through revivalism, rationalism and sectarianism. Crucially, Nevin was aided in this struggle by the insights of the Oxford Movement. It is a common misperception that the Oxford Movement never influenced American Protestantism. This thesis will contend that Nevin proves to be an exception to this rule and that his work can only be understood in relation to the theological insights of the Oxford Movement. In this respect Nevin was unique when compared with many nineteenth century American Protestants, and deserves wider recognition for his unique contribution to theology.

**Keywords:** John Williamson Nevin, the Mercersburg Movement, the Oxford Movement, “church question”, ecclesiology, identity, the Gorham case

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction: The Focus of the Inquiry**

#### **1.1 Introduction:**

John Williamson Nevin is not a well-known name in theological circles by any stretch of the collective imagination. His name is essentially unknown amongst students of theology and his works for the most part go unread. Even among members of his own Reformed tradition, the United Church of Christ in the United States and amongst the various strands of Presbyterianism in the United States, Canada and Scotland, Nevin remains a relatively forgotten part of the Reformed theological legacy. This neglect of Nevin and his ecclesiological insights concerning the identity and nature of the church is unfortunate because we have just passed through a century that was marked by significant ecclesiastical events dealing with the very nature of the church, and we quite possibly face more upheavals in the decades ahead. Nevin's theology, however, offers unique ecclesiological insights that ought to be better known among specialists and students of theology alike.

In the twentieth century, there was the Edinburgh Missionary Conference in 1910 that in many respects paved the way for the establishment of the World Council of Churches in 1948. There was also Vatican II, and the massive theological efforts surrounding it, that brought renewal to ecclesiology in the Roman Catholic Church. We also witnessed the movement of a "uniting spirit" that gave birth to for example, the United Church of Canada, the United Church of

Christ in the United States and the United Reformed Church in England and Wales. Other Protestant denominations have also experienced a coming together during this period, while conversely, Protestantism continued to experience “splintering” as new denominations were formed. We could also include other significant events like the birth of new forms of Christian fundamentalism and the rise of Evangelicalism as a significant religious and cultural force.

The neglect of Nevin’s insights is unfortunate because his efforts to answer the “church question” concerning the nature of the church in his own time may serve as a guide for those of us who are still members of the institutional church and who wrestle with the “church question” in our time. Sadly, this neglect of Nevin seems to serve as one more example and confirm the existence of the historical amnesia that seems to be so much a part of the human condition especially in North America.

Every age assumes that its questions and problems are unique and this includes our own. We struggle even to find a name for this particular time in human history. Is our era distinctively “postmodern” or is it simply an extension of modernity? The underlying assumption impacts upon the church as well as it struggles with the dismantling of a particular way of being “church” in this part of the world. The “Christendom” that once surrounded is slowly eroding, as it has been for two or three centuries, but within the last fifty years we have seen the pace accelerate.

With this increased acceleration questions of ecclesial identity that perhaps remained latent or were only spoken of in hushed tones in certain theological circles are now becoming particularly acute and are being uttered publicly in both



the academy and congregations. We are facing our own “church question” concerning the identity of the church and the freedom of the church to establish its identity according to its own internal criteria of unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity — rather than, for instance, merely to acquiesce in the late modern presumption that makes it something of purely private or tribal significance, a “personal choice” or a “faith community” akin to any other. But these questions of identity and freedom are not unique to this current crisis situation. As we will see, in the nineteenth century theologians such as John Williamson Nevin and the leading representatives of the Oxford Movement wrestled with many of these questions as well during a period of upheaval and crisis.

What, after all, is the church? What are its central qualities? Most would take it for granted that the church consists of people, but what is it about any group or groupings of people that enables them to be called “the church”. Is “the church” more than simply a collection of individuals who have organized themselves around a common purpose? These questions point to the very nature or essence of the church because they are questions concerning identity. But even acknowledging this insight only leads to more questions because any quest for identity brings with it a new set of problems because the search for identity is often born of crisis or threat.

In his book, *Anglicanism and the Christian Church*, Paul Avis writes that “identity” is a word whose time has come, yet he also writes, “‘Identity’ is one of those blessed words we latch on to when we know what we mean but cannot quite

pin it down.”<sup>1</sup> Avis does go on to note, “My identity is my sense of who I am and where I belong. Our identity is our conviction that we are part of the meaning of things. It is where we fit in.”<sup>2</sup> We also acknowledge that identity includes the knowledge from whence we have come. “Identity contains a dynamic of stability and change, sameness and development, continuity and adaptation.”<sup>3</sup> This dynamic oscillates then between two “poles”, the “pole” of continuity and the “pole” of progress as one seeks to maintain identity.

But in times of crisis or threat this dynamism between the poles of continuity and progress can become destabilized as one swings to and fro between stability and change, continuity and adaptation. During these times of instability the quest for identity also raises the question of integrity. Avis is “reluctant to make this equation between identity and integrity.”<sup>4</sup> However, it could be argued that there is a strong co-relation between the two, just by the very fact that sometimes a strong identity does not necessarily guarantee integrity. When we turn our attention to church history, we see that when the church is made something relative and non-essential, whether by virtue of political expediency, or by its juxtaposition against rival sects and secular belief systems, there questions regarding identity and concern for the integrity of the church inevitably emerge.

I will rely a good deal on Avis’ treatment of the church’s “identity” in this thesis, as will be seen. What I propose to do in this first Chapter and in the next,

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Avis, *Anglicanism and the Christian Church: Theological resources in historical perspective* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 16.

however, is mainly to introduce the reader to the person and world of John Williamson Nevins in order to get a sense of who he was as a man and a theologian who along with others wrestled with these ecclesiastically oriented questions and issues of the church identity. For it is these questions and the struggle for identity that nineteenth century Protestant theologians in the United States, England, and Scotland and on the continent of Europe sought to answer under the heading of “the church question”.

## **1.2 The “Church Question”:**

The “church question” emerged in the nineteenth century in response to the spirit of the modern era. This was a time that was marked by a radical anthropocentrism — “everyone was an *emancipated, autonomous individual*.”<sup>5</sup> It was a time when “reason” was the measure of all things. Human beings were separated from their environment and there was a sharp separation between the human “subject” and the “object” that was observed. Any sense of purpose within the universe was dismissed by science in the name of direct mechanical causality. As Bosch notes, “even though the Christian faith continued to be practiced after the Enlightenment, it had lost its quiet self-evidence.”<sup>6</sup> The Enlightenment and advances in scientific knowledge had led to an undermining of traditional Christian doctrine. The emphasis on reason and science had left no place in the religious life for what could be termed the supernatural or the mysterious.

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<sup>5</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991) 273.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

Questions emerged regarding the relationship between God's sovereignty and the world. In a world such as this, can God still be the author of providence and grace? Can he establish a church that addresses humanity with divine authority?<sup>7</sup> As E. Brooks Holifield notes, "The 'church question' became during the 1840s an international preoccupation".<sup>8</sup> Certainly, the reasons for the emergence of the question were different in the United States, England and the continent of Europe but there came to be a series of shared concerns around issues of identity and integrity that emerged in the efforts to respond to this theological preoccupation. In his essay, *The Tractarian Liturgical Inheritance Re-assessed*, Louis Weil states:

On the Continent such men as Wilhelm Loehe in Germany, Nicholas Grundtvig in Denmark, and Prosper Gueranger in France were all concerned the same fundamental issue: the rejection of a sterile, rationalist religion in favor of a reaffirmation of orthodox Christian doctrine. For all these men, this reaffirmation of traditional orthodoxy involved the lifting up of the sacramental principle and a concern for the place of corporate worship as fundamental dimensions of the Church's being.<sup>9</sup>

In Scotland, the Free Church was formed under the leadership of Thomas Chalmers when Evangelicals broke from the Church of Scotland in 1843 in protest against what they regarded as civil encroachment on the spiritual independence of the Church. The immediate issue was the spiritual independence of the church, and specifically the idea that individual churches had a right to call their own minister through the disciplined, "churchly" process of hearing a minister and then

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Brooks E. Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 472.

<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Rowell, ed., *Tradition Renewed: The Oxford Movement Conference Papers*. Princeton Theological Monograph Series (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1986), 111.

extending a call, and not having the imposition of a minister by a wealthy patron or, indeed, by the state. The “Oxford Movement” in the nineteenth century Church of England was thus not an isolated phenomenon. In England, the leaders of the Oxford Movement”, such as John Henry Newman and Edward Pusey, wrestled with much the same threats, in the form of “Erastianism”, “Evangelicalism” and arid rationalism.

In mid-nineteenth century America, the Presbyterian and later German Reformed theologian John Williamson Nevin, the focus of this study, also struggled to answer “the Church question” in the face of a range of issues thrown up by frontier revivalism, subjectivism, denominational sectarianism and anti-Roman Catholicism. All of these were factors that contributed to Nevin’s spiritual struggle for identity, not only for the church, but also in his own life. In an effort to respond to the challenge he faced, however, he turned to the “Oxford Men” and theologians in Germany for insight and support, seeking a renewed foundation for ecclesiastical identity amid a search for a normative past, and in an effort to find a “catholic” response to the central ecclesiological question of his day.

As noted above, John Williamson Nevin is not a well-known name in theological circles, even among those of his own Reformed tradition. However, I believe that a study of his writings can shed light on many of the ecclesiological questions that we struggle with today, especially concerning the very nature of the church. Rather than accepting the newly-dominant conception of the church as a gathered, voluntary association of free individuals, Nevin’s unwavering conviction was that the church is rather an ideal extension of the Incarnation, the logic of

which entails that Christ seeks actualization in the midst of history. Thus the church is, for Nevin, the true body of Christ in the world, with Christ as its head, and so it is both human and divine.

Much of the recent literature on Nevin has focused on the debate between John Williamson Nevin and the better known Princeton theologian Charles Hodge on the subject of Reformed Eucharistic theology. Certainly, this is a topic worthy of historical inquiry and it is intimately connected to Nevin's ecclesiology. However, the purpose of this study is to focus on the relationship between John Williamson Nevin during his years at Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, and the Oxford movement in England, and to explore the impact that the Oxford movement had on Nevin's developed ecclesiology in what came to be known as the Mercersburg Movement.

The Mercersburg Movement was a "high church" movement in the German Reformed Church in the United States. It came into existence in 1844 through the theological insights of John Williamson Nevin and Philip Schaff when they were professors at the Mercersburg Seminary in Pennsylvania. The significance of the Mercersburg Movement lies in its attempt to establish a synthesis between John Calvin and the early church fathers. It is also marked by its affirmation of the "real presence" in the Eucharist and its theological critique of Evangelicalism.

As we will see, these two nineteenth century high-church movements shared a number of parallels as well as struggles in their efforts to answer the "church question". But before we begin to delve further into this relationship, it is important to begin to lay the groundwork and note what other scholars have written regarding Nevin and the Mercersburg theology.

### 1.3 Nevin in Recent Scholarship

A search of the literature indicates that very little, in fact, has been written on the subject of John Williamson Nevin and the Mercersburg theology. From the publication of Theodore Appel's biography on Nevin in 1889 until the early 1960s, scant attention to Mercersburg can be identified. During this period there is only a handful of materials that focus on Nevin and Mercersburg specifically, consisting primarily of journal articles<sup>10</sup>. Otherwise little academic work was done on Nevin during this period. However, in 1961 a church historian at the University of Chicago, James Hasting Nichols, published what has become a classic summary of the Mercersburg movement, in a book entitled, *Romanticism in American Theology*, and Nichols followed this publication in 1966 with an anthology entitled, *The Mercersburg Theology*.<sup>11</sup> While this might appear on the surface to have heralded a new interest in Nevin, the immediate aftermath of Nichol's pioneering work was unfortunately that Nevin and the Mercersburg Theology again faded into obscurity. The exception was a chapter in Brian Gerrish's, *Tradition and the Modern World: Reformed Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, a collection published in 1978.<sup>12</sup>

This general attitude of neglect began to change only when *The Mercersburg Society* was established in 1983 in order to promote the work of both Nevin and

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<sup>10</sup> Sam Hamstra, and Arie J. Griffioen, eds., *Reformed Confessionalism in Nineteenth Century America: Essays on the Thought of John Williamson Nevin*. ATLA Monograph Series, No. 38 (Lanham MD: The American Theological Library Association and the Scarecrow Press, 1995), 245-253.

<sup>11</sup> W. Bradford Littlejohn, *The Mercersburg Theology and the Quest for Reformed Catholicity* (Eugene OR: Pickwick Publications, 2009), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Brian A. Gerrish, *Tradition and the Modern World: Reformed Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978)

Philip Schaff, his better-known Mercersburg colleague. Since the early 1990s, there has accordingly been a small increase in interest in the Mercersburg movement. A full-length study of Nevin himself appeared in 1997 with the publication of Richard Wentz's book, *John Williamson Nevin: American Theologian*.<sup>13</sup> This was followed eight years later with another Nevin biography written by D. G. Hart entitled *John Williamson Nevin: High Church Calvinist*, published in 2005.<sup>14</sup>

More comparative scholarly interest in Mercersburg Theology is also in evidence, in the publication in 2002 of Keith Mathison's, *Given For You: Reclaiming Calvin's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper*.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, there is Jonathan Bonomo's book, *Incarnation and Sacrament: The Eucharistic Controversy between Charles Hodge and John Williamson Nevin* which was published in 2010.<sup>16</sup> Both of these latter studies take a particular interest in the controversy between Nevin and Charles Hodge over Reformed Eucharistic theology. A series of essays dealing with various aspects of the thought of John Williamson Nevin entitled, *Reformed Confessionalism in Nineteenth Century America*, was published in 1995.<sup>17</sup> One of

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<sup>13</sup> Richard E. Wentz, *John Williamson Nevin: American Theologian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>14</sup> D. G. Hart, *John Williamson Nevin: High Church Calvinist*. American Reformed Biographies (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> Keith A. Mathison, *Given For You: Reclaiming Calvin's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2002).

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Bonomo, *Incarnation and Sacrament: The Eucharistic Controversy between Charles Hodge and John Williamson Nevin* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> Sam Hamstra, and Arie J. Griffioen, eds., *Reformed Confessionalism in Nineteenth Century America: Essays on the Thought of John Williamson Nevin*. ATLA Monograph Series, No.38 (Lanham, MD: The American Theological Library Association and The Scarecrow Press, 1995).



the most recent works entitled, *Church, Sacrament and American Democracy*, published in 2011, explores the political ramifications of Nevin's theology.<sup>18</sup>

However, when one seeks recent studies specifically on Nevin's ecclesiology there is little material to be found, apart from the most recent work by W. Bradford Littlejohn entitled, *The Mercersburg Theology and the Quest for Reformed Catholicity*, published in 2009.<sup>19</sup> Littlejohn continues to work and write in order that the work of Nevin and the Mercersburg Movement will not once more slip into obscurity. In recent years *The Mercersburg Research Fellowship* has been established, with Littlejohn serving as the general editor. The purpose of this group of scholars is to promote Mercersburg studies in the academy and the church, an enterprise realized to date primarily through the establishment of the *Mercersburg Theology Study Series*, which endeavours to re-publish Mercersburg theological texts. Two volumes have been produced, with more projected to follow, in an effort to gather both the popular and the often inaccessible writings of Nevin and his colleague Philip Schaff into one series for study.

On the specific subject of this thesis, what can be said is that Nevin's relationship with the Oxford movement receives some general attention in the biographies on Nevin, but a search of the relevant literature indicates that there are only two works that deal specifically with this subject. The first is an essay entitled, "The Oxford Movement's Influence upon German American Protestantism:

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<sup>18</sup> Adam S. Borneman, *Church, Sacrament and Democracy: The Social and Political Dimensions of John Williamson Nevin's Theology of Incarnation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> W. Bradford Littlejohn, *The Mercersburg Theology and the Quest for Reformed Catholicity* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2009).

Newman and Nevin” by Noel Pretila.<sup>20</sup> The second is a chapter in W. Bradford Littlejohn’s book entitled, *The Mercersburg Theology and the Quest for Reformed Catholicity*.<sup>21</sup> It is also useful to note that in an important recent work edited by Stewart Brown and Peter Nockles entitled, *The Oxford Movement: Europe and the Wider World 1830-1930*, published in 2012, there is a chapter dealing with the Oxford Movement and the United States, but no mention is made in it of John Williamson Nevin, or of the Mercersburg theology.

It appears, therefore, that on the whole, John Williamson Nevin is now receiving a great deal more attention when we consider the recent secondary literature.<sup>22</sup> But Nevin scholarship has been in this place before — until interest waned and Nevin returned again, as it were, to nineteenth century America. With the establishment of The Mercersburg Research Fellowship, perhaps such forgetfulness can be avoided but this is not a sure thing.

The literature also reflects another concern, and that is the fact that Nevin scholarship is restricted to a small group within the Reformed Church community and in particular the United Church of Christ. Scholars working outside of this circle have made few if any links between Nevin and the Oxford Movement, and the recent work edited by Stewart Brown and Peter Nockles is a good contemporary example of this problem.

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<sup>20</sup> Noel Pretila, "The Oxford Movement's Influence upon German American Protestantism: Newman and Schaff." *Credo ut Intelligam* Vol.2 (2009). Accessed October 8, 2010, <http://theologyjournal.wordpress.com/the-oxford-movement's-influence-upon-german-american-protestantism-newman-and-nevin/>

<sup>21</sup> Littlejohn, *The Mercersburg Theology*, 88.

<sup>22</sup> Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 412.

As to content, we find a variety of approaches to Nevin in the literature available. In his book, *Romanticism in American Theology*, the University of Chicago church historian James Hasting Nichols states, ‘John Williamson Nevin, theologian of the Mercersburg movement grew up in “Puritanism”’.<sup>23</sup> Nichols borrows this term from Nevin’s own writings, and goes on to explain that what is meant by the term is what we call “Evangelicalism”, meaning a subjective approach to Christianity rooted in sudden conversion, an appeal to personal scripture reading, and the highlighting of private judgment rather than a reliance on church, tradition and the sacraments. Nichols maintains, in fact, that Nevin was a “Puritan”, defined on these terms, for the first forty years of his life and that the Mercersburg theology that he helped to develop was an effort by Nevin to break significantly from the first half of his life and find reconciliation with the “catholic” substance of the Christian tradition. He notes that Nevin admits:

The hardest Puritan we have to do with always is the one we carry, by birth and education, in our own bosom. But the misery of it is, for our quiet, that the Catholic is there too, and will not be at rest.<sup>24</sup>

In the reconciliation of these two spheres lies Nevin’s theological vocation and project, according to Nichols. But Nichols’ conclusion would not be the last word on Nevin’s legacy and other scholars would challenge it.

With the publication of his 1997 book, *John Williamson Nevin: American Theologian*, Richard Wentz was the first scholar to take up the subject of John Williamson Nevin as such in any depth since Nichols had in the 1960s. Wentz is

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<sup>23</sup> James Hastings Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology: Nevin and Schaff at Mercersburg* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1961), 5.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

mentioned simply for this fact alone, however, because he fails to capture the spirit of Nevin's theology. As Littlejohn aptly notes, "Wentz is clearly a theological liberal, and, instead of admitting his differences with Nevin and then doing his best to explain Nevin on Nevin's own terms, he persists in a rather unsuccessful and patronizing attempt to make Nevin a forerunner of the liberal agenda."<sup>25</sup> But Wentz could at least be given credit for bringing Nevin once more to the attention of scholars and the church at large. He also recognized that both movements, Nevin and the Mercersburg Movement as well as the Oxford Movement, shared a common struggle against "religious subjectivism", with the Oxford context being more political.

D. G. Hart, on the other hand, takes the opposite position from Nichols. He suggests that Nevin's adult life "was a search to recover and bolster the churchly faith upon which he had been reared at Middle Spring Presbyterian Church before having to endure the revivalistic measures of Congregationalism at Union College."<sup>26</sup> Littlejohn, however, argues that Hart "fails to do justice to the depth and catholicity of Nevin's thought. He fails to understand the sacramental center of his thinking, derived from patristic as well as Reformation sources."<sup>27</sup> Hart views Nevin as an odd character when compared to other nineteenth century theological figures in the United States. Certainly, Hart's argument does seem a little too simple, in suggesting that the Mercersburg theology was basically an effort by Nevin to recover the religious experience of his youth. This is not to suggest that

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<sup>25</sup> Littlejohn, *The Mercersburg Theology*, 7.

<sup>26</sup> Hart, *John Williamson Nevin*, 59.

<sup>27</sup> Littlejohn, *The Mercersburg Theology*, 6.

the churchly experience at Middle Spring did not have some bearing, of course, but it cannot capture the whole story. Nevertheless, Hart is correct in terms of his theological assessment regarding Nevin's early formation, and here offers an advance on the understanding developed by Nichols. The congregation in which Nevin grew up was not a "Puritan" congregation in spirit or expression, but rather churchly and sacramental. The two are not at all the same thing.

When we turn to the writings of the historical theologian Brian Gerrish regarding Nevin and the Mercersburg movement, we find the claim that any effort to understand Nevin must begin in the sixteenth century. Gerrish argues:

For Nevin... the shape of the problem was much closer to the original Reformation pattern. Nevin's problem was that the modern Reformed church had fallen away from the original tradition: it had succumbed to diseased thinking for which a return to Calvin was the best antidote. A nonchurchly, unsacramental piety had crept into Reformed circles, and only an abysmal ignorance of Calvin could explain the fact that apostasy had gone unnoticed.<sup>28</sup>

According to Gerrish, Nevin was reaching back beyond the corrupt present in order to find a normative past, and for Nevin that normative past was the theology of John Calvin. Certainly, there is truth to Gerrish's position, and it finds its fullest expression in Nevin's book, *The Mystical Presence*, where he articulates in great detail John Calvin's Eucharistic theology. However, Gerrish also misses much that is distinctive of Nevin's overall theology.

Thus, to summarize, Nichols argues that Nevin is seeking to escape the early "Puritan" years of his faith journey, with its emphasis on the Bible and private

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<sup>28</sup> Brian A. Gerrish, *Tradition and the Modern World: Reformed Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 8.

judgment, and to find some new reconciliation, whereas Wentz seems to miss the thrust of Nevin's theology altogether. Hart suggests in opposition to Nichols that Nevin was never a "Puritan" and was trying to find and recapture the church of his youth. Gerrish moves beyond the confines of Nevin's nineteenth century America to argue that Nevin was looking for a normative past rooted in the theology of John Calvin.

However, when we explore the writings of Nevin himself, we find that the theological question of the identity of the church does not end in Middle Spring, Pennsylvania, or in the sixteenth century with John Calvin. In fact, it reaches back to something else altogether, which is through the centuries to the early church. During a period of deep spiritual crisis precipitated by the "Gorham Case" in the Church of England and exacerbated by other factors, Nevin looked longingly to early Christianity, and in particular to the seminal third century theologian Cyprian of Carthage, for a normative source for an ecclesiology marked by theological integrity and catholicity.

The Gorham Case will be developed in greater detail later in Chapter 4, but very briefly, the term refers for our purposes to the controversy that arose in the Church of England in the nineteenth century revolving around questions regarding the efficacy of the sacrament of baptism, and, once again, around the ideal of a church sufficient to govern its own affairs apart from civil control. The controversy deeply concerned the leaders of the Oxford movement, and the importance of the Gorham Case for Nevin himself, who observed it from afar, illustrates the fact that his theological and spiritual search quest was largely shaped by events in the

Church of England and by the insights by the men of the Oxford movement and their attention given to the early church fathers, rather than purely by his own religious upbringing or his several reactions to it.

This may help to explain why Nevin looked backwards to the early church fathers in his time of crisis rather than forward. Nevin expressed a deep respect for the insights of the “Oxford men”, but at the same time, he could be critical of their project. He shared their deep respect for the writings of the early church fathers, but his goal was not simply a repristination of the early church. Like them, he was looking for a normative past, but a normative past capable of historical development, a “catholic substance” to sustain the faith as the church moved forward in the midst of history.

This thesis will argue that Nevin paid careful attention to events that had been taking place in England with the advent of the Oxford Movement (1833-1845), and he would come to share a deep affinity with the sacramental writings of the Anglican theologian Robert I. Wilberforce in particular. During the 1830s when he was serving as a professor at the Presbyterian seminary in Pittsburgh, and prior to the development of Mercersburg theology (1843-1853), the work of the men of the Oxford Movement came to his attention. While it is true that this encounter had little observable impact at this early stage in Nevin’s theological development, the importance of the Oxford movement for Nevin would grow once he made his move to the German Reformed Church and took up his post as a professor at Mercersburg, Pennsylvania.

As noted above, the “Gorham Case” is of importance to understanding Nevin’s mature theology. Indeed, this is so much so that, as we shall see, it precipitated a deep spiritual and theological crisis in Nevin’s life that almost led to his conversion to the Roman Catholic tradition. But it must be noted that Nevin’s search was not simply about his own faith journey. This search for a normative past was tied closely to Nevin’s struggle regarding the freedom of the church to establish its own identity, grounded ultimately in the Incarnation rather than the surrounding political culture. This effort to establish identity is also related to an integrity that is rooted in the historic marks of the church, unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity. Nevin witnessed the men of the Oxford movement engaged in a similar struggle for the soul of the church, and in them he found kindred spirits.

The scope of this study will cover what is essentially a ten-year period in the life of John Williamson Nevin and the Mercersburg Movement, the years 1843-1854. It will begin with the foundation of the Mercersburg Movement and close with the passing of Nevin’s crisis years. Because of the connection between Nevin and England and especially Mercersburg and the Oxford Movement, there will be particular focus in this study on that relationship, and on those “five” years of crisis in Nevin’s life precipitated by the Gorham case and its influence on Nevin’s ecclesiology.

While Nevin was also profoundly shaped by the German theological tradition, as will be noted in this study — becoming a theologian and teacher in the German Reformed Church, and reading fairly extensively in Germanic theology — I have chosen to examine Nevin’s relationship to the Oxford Movement for reasons of



scale. Furthermore, as Littlejohn notes, “More than any other theological development in the last two centuries, the Oxford Movement offers an intriguing comparison for the Mercersburg Theology.”<sup>29</sup> In terms of timing, both movements overlapped, and shared a profound concern for the revival of “high-church” doctrine concerning the church and the sacraments. The importance of this relationship can be documented in Nevin’s own work. Yet the connection has scarcely been examined in scholarship, as we have seen.

Prelita notes, “It is a common misperception that the Oxford Movement never influenced American Protestantism.”<sup>30</sup> I will argue that, to the contrary, John Williamson Nevin proves to be an exception to this misperception and, indeed, that he can be best understood in his relation to the core characteristics of the Oxford Movement. Nevin, like the “Oxford men” whom he admired, was intent on defending the freedom of the church to establish its identity apart from the dominant cultural forces of the day, whether they came in the form of state policy, cultural norms, or the expectations of the “free” individual of American ideals.

In seeking to do this, Nevin sought a normative foundation on which to stand for the sake of the church. Nevin shared a deep although not an un-critical affinity with the Anglican tradition, and in particular the work of men like Newman, Pusey and Wilberforce at Oxford, because they shared a parallel struggle for both the identity and integrity of the church. So it was this tradition in which Nevin had such high hopes that influenced his search for a normative “catholicity” that would serve as such a foundation. Nevin longed to find the “catholic substance” in the face of

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<sup>29</sup> Littlejohn, *The Mercersburg Theology*, 89.

<sup>30</sup> Prelita, “The Oxford Movement’s Influence”, 26.

sectarianism, arid rationalism and subjective religion. As Hart notes, “Nevin would write, ‘Alas where was my mother, the Church, at the very time I most needed her fostering arms? Where was she, I mean, with her true sacramental sympathy and care?’”<sup>31</sup>

In his search Nevin was seeking a normative past. As Avis writes, “The rebirth of identity comes about through returning to our origins and applying the strength there derived to the problems of the present.”<sup>32</sup> Tradition is integral to identity and it is this sense of continuity to the past that tradition seeks to maintain from generation to generation. Nevin, then, was seeking a solid foundation on which he could stand in his struggle to establish the freedom of the church to articulate its identity according to its internal criteria rather than having that identity shaped by the powerful forces of subjectivism, sectarianism and revivalism that were shaping nineteenth century America.

#### **1.4 Primary Sources**

John Williamson Nevin was not a prolific book writer. His two best-known books, *Anxious Bench* and *The Mystical Presence* are not long works. The first is only slightly over seventy pages in length while the second is slightly under two hundred and fifty pages. Compared to his theological contemporaries, Nevin’s output seems limited. However, this conclusion can be revised when we take into consideration the articles, reviews, essays and sermons that Nevin produced during the relatively short duration of the Mercersburg Movement, with many of them being published

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<sup>31</sup> Hart, *John Williamson Nevin*, 59.

<sup>32</sup> Avis, *Anglicanism and the Christian Church*, 20.

in the journal, *The Mercersburg Review*. This journal had been established by Nevin and Philip Schaff, his theological partner at Mercersburg, for the very purpose of circulating the Mercersburg theology, and thus needs to be factored into any assessment of Nevin's theological project.

D. G. Hart notes that during the first six years of the journal's existence Nevin contributed close to half its contents.<sup>33</sup> During this time he produced almost fifteen hundred and fifty pages of material. This was a rather remarkable feat on Nevin's part, especially when we take into consideration his numerous professional and personal responsibilities both within the seminary at Mercersburg, within the German Reformed Church, and his family responsibilities. Rather than the book, in other words, it was the article and the essay that John Williamson Nevin used in order to address the "church question" and work out the implications of his theology. We will see also that this was the medium that Nevin used in wrestling with his unstable faith during his period of spiritual crisis.

This study will explore in particular a series of primary source writings that are directly related to Nevin's ecclesiology and span the duration of the Mercersburg Movement. Through them, we can see the development of Nevin's theological thought concerning the church. Beginning in 1844 with *Anxious Bench* and concluding with the 1852 series on Cyprian of Carthage, this study will also include the sermon "Catholic Unity", *The Mystical Presence*, "The Church" and *Antichrist*. All of these were published prior to Nevin's years of crisis. The writings published

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<sup>33</sup> Hart, *John Williamson Nevin*, 144.

during the crisis years included in this study are the articles, “The Anglican Crisis”, “Early Christianity” and “Cyprian”.

As noted, *Anxious Bench* is not a long work. When it first appeared in 1843 it was essentially a short pamphlet. It was written in response to the revivalist methods of Charles G. Finney that were beginning to make inroads within the German Reformed Church. Nevin provocatively challenged Finney’s “system of the bench” with the “system of the catechism” drawing in part from his own formation within the Presbyterian Church. A great deal of the book is taken up with criticism of Finney’s system, so Nevin’s system of the catechism receives only brief attention in the final chapter of the material. However, it does lay the foundation for what is to follow theologically from the pen of Nevin.

Nevin followed this publication with the sermon, “Catholic Unity” that was preached in 1844 by Nevin at the Triennial Convention of the German and Dutch Reformed Churches. In the sermon Nevin continues to develop the theme of the organic nature of Christianity, a theme that he first introduced in the *Anxious Bench*. Two years later Nevin published what is probably his best-known work, a monograph entitled, *The Mystical Presence*. In this book, Nevin addressed the subject of Reformed Eucharistic theology. Drawing upon the rich sacramental theology of the early church as well as that of John Calvin, Nevin here challenged the Zwinglian view that had gradually crept into the Reformed churches, where the Eucharist is seen simply as a bare sign pointing to an event that had happened centuries before. This work was met with a great deal of opposition both within the German Reformed church and within the Presbyterian Church in the United States

as well. One distinct advantage of this work is the fact that it is actually a book and not simply a series of articles. This results in it being the most fulsome (and, in some respects, concise) work of Mercersburg theology.

Following the reception of *The Mystical Presence*, Nevin preached a sermon entitled “The Church”. Preached in 1846 at the opening of the Eastern Synod of the German Reformed Church, Nevin continued to develop the theme of “organism” in relation to the church. The church was in the process of actualization as it moved in the midst of history and this process of actualization included not simply the visible church as a whole but the qualities of unity, holiness and catholicity as well. Nevin argued that it was the vocation of the German Reformed Church to lay claim and emphasize the “catholic” dimension of its tradition rather than the “reformed”. This sermon marks a significant shift for Nevin, as he turns his attention more and more to the catholicity of the church.

The final work in this period prior to Nevin’s crisis years was a small work also written in 1848 entitled *Antichrist*. In this essay Nevin is responding indirectly to Charles Hodge’s criticism of *The Mystical Presence*. Nevin used this brief work to flesh out what the Incarnation meant for the church both in terms of orthodoxy and heresy. It also gave Nevin the opportunity to deepen and broaden his theology of the mystical presence of Christ beyond the bounds of the Eucharist.

Nevin’s spiritual crisis was made public in 1851 with the publication of the essay “The Anglican Crisis”. He followed this piece with further work on the early church that found expression in the essays “Early Christianity” and “Cyprian”. These works will receive a great deal of attention in Chapter 4, so what follows will

be brief. The essay, “The Anglican Crisis”, was written in response to a theological crisis that was taking place within the Church of England in the late 1840s and early 1850s but it also captured the theological and spiritual crisis that was taking place in Nevin’s life. In this essay Nevin turned his attention once more to questions of ecclesiology as a result of the events in England and once more finds himself arguing in support of the church’s status as a divine institution.

He continued to pursue the subject of ecclesiology in “Early Christianity” written in 1851 and “Cyprian” written in 1852. This quest regarding the nature of the historical church had begun with *The Mystical Presence* but the events in England had led to a crystallization of the tension that Nevin felt between modern Protestantism and historic Christianity. These essays brought forth the chasm that Nevin saw between modern Protestantism and the ancient church. By the end of the essay on Cyprian Nevin had concluded that if the early church fathers were to return they would find a much more congenial home in Roman Catholicism than in Protestantism.

The subject of ecclesiology was Nevin’s major concern when we follow the twisted path that begins with *The Anxious Bench* in 1843 and ends with series of essays on Cyprian in 1852. Nevin was consistent in his argument concerning the church’s status as a divine institution and this consistency led him to do battle with members of his own denomination and those of the wider Reformed community. But even Nevin probably did not envision that his effort to stay on message would bring with it a period of deep personal crisis that would affect his health and

challenge his very place within the German Reformed church and the wider Reformed tradition.

### **1.5 Overview of the Study:**

Following this Introduction, chapter 2 includes a brief biographical sketch of John Williamson Nevin as well as an outline of the primary theological marks of what would come to be known as the Mercersburg theology or Mercersburg movement. This is done in an effort to establish those theological points of contact that Nevin would find with the men of the Oxford movement. Chapter 3 looks at the relationship between John Williamson Nevin and the Oxford movement in an effort to explore those significant theological parallels between the two nineteenth century high-church movements as they struggled for the freedom of the church to establish its identity on the basis of its internal criteria. Chapter 4 will look specifically at Nevin's years of crisis that were precipitated by events in the Church of England. Chapter 5 is the conclusion and will offer possible avenues for further study in relation to the theology of John Williamson Nevin.

## Chapter 2

### John Williamson Nevin and the Mercersburg Theology

#### 2.1 Introduction

In his book, *Making the American Self*, Daniel Walker Howe writes, “The decades following the American Revolution and the establishment of the Constitution witnessed an extraordinarily rich and varied experimentation by the people of the new nation with new, voluntarily chosen identities.”<sup>34</sup> These experiments in the establishment of identities would lead these new Americans during the antebellum period to use “their freedom to reshape their physical surroundings, their society and themselves.”<sup>35</sup> Reshaping efforts would include a social dimension that led to joining organizations such as the Masons, the militia and women’s auxiliaries. In the wake of religious revival it would include church membership as well. In each case the organization was seen as a collection of autonomous individuals who had come together for the sake of a common purpose.

These experiments in identity formation also included an economic dimension as the market economy expanded. This expansion provided new opportunities for the building of identities as business partnerships were formed and employees joined together in associations. This period of great freedom would also include serious efforts to shape personal life and character, and such possibilities were reflected also in American religion. The message of the Second Great Awakening

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<sup>34</sup> Daniel Walker Howe, *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 108.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.



‘encouraged converts to conceive of their life in terms of “rebirth” as a new person.’<sup>36</sup> It was during this time of immense freedom and fluidity that John Williamson Nevin was born, and the results of this new search for identity would shape Nevin’s own spiritual search for identity and his theology, for he rejected this understanding of the church as a mere relationship between free individuals born of a common, voluntary purpose.

Now theology, like all systems of thought, originates within a particular socio-cultural context. The development of a theologian’s thought is greatly influenced by the life experiences, particular issues, problems and challenges that existed in his or her culture. This national search for identity would also impact Nevin’s struggle for the freedom of the church to establish its identity apart from the cultural forces of the period.

## **2.2 The Early Years: 1803-1840**

John Williamson Nevin (1803-1886) was born near Shippensburg, Pennsylvania into a family of Scotch-Irish descent. At the time of Nevin’s birth, western Protestantism was in the midst of significant change. As Mark Noll notes, as a result of the First Great Awakening of the 1740’s it was moving in the 18th and early nineteenth century, “from establishment forms of religion, embedded in traditional, organic, premodern political economies, to individualized and affectional forms, adapted to modernizing, rational and market-oriented

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<sup>36</sup> Walker Howe, *Making the American Self*, 110.

societies.”<sup>37</sup> These changes would have great bearing on theological expression in the new country of America.

Noll goes on to point out that this led to the immanence of God being stressed rather than the transcendent. Divine revelation was simply equated with the Bible alone, which is susceptible to personal interpretation, rather than Scripture in relation to an objective, rather more “impersonal” ecclesiastical tradition. Under the influence of Enlightenment ideas, theological method came to rely less on Confessions and Creeds and more on self-evident propositions supported by scientific method.<sup>38</sup> Each of these factors was particularly evident in the United States as the churches sought to evangelize the new and chaotic nation. However, these new trends were also met with opposition as denominations eventually divided into “Old School” and “New School” parties in response to religious revival.

As “Old School” and “New School” supporters struggled against each other they reached out to like-minded souls in other denominations for support. The result was that denominational identity did not receive a great deal of emphasis in some church quarters, resulting in the Plan of Union of 1801, according to which Congregationalist and Presbyterian missionaries worked together, despite their historic differences, to establish congregations to meet the religious needs of a rapidly expanding country. As Noll notes, this was an effort of mediation “between traditional Calvinism and an active evangelism aimed at the conversion of both

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<sup>37</sup> Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 4.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

Americans and American civilization.”<sup>39</sup> This kind of mediating Calvinism within the Presbyterian Church eventually became known as the “New School”.

However, this was not the only response to revivalism and the religious needs of the new nation. Another option was the promotion of historic Calvinist confessionalism. This option looked back to conservative theological parties in Ulster, Scotland and the continent of Europe and would eventually come to be known as the “Old School”. As Leyburn states, “Presbyterianism remained orthodox and earnest, just as it remained seriously theological; it kept much that had come with it from Scotland by way of northern Ireland.”<sup>40</sup> The “Old School” party made little adjustment to the new American experience and had little sympathy or support for religious revivals, but simply called for Calvinist orthodoxy according to the Westminster Standards, though buttressed by Scottish Common Sense Realism.<sup>41</sup>

The representatives of the Old School “positioned themselves as the defenders of the true Calvinist tradition against critics and revisionists on every side.”<sup>42</sup> Their religious expression was “churchly” and sacramental, rooted in the Bible and the preaching of the Word and the system of the catechism. Sadly, the confused

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<sup>39</sup> Noll, *America's God*, 129.

<sup>40</sup> James G. Leyburn, *The Scotch Irish: A Social History* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1962), 295.

<sup>41</sup> Noll, *America's God*, 129. Scottish Common Sense Realism was a eighteenth-century school of philosophy that was established in Scotland by Frances Hutcheson and Thomas Reid as a response to David Hume's philosophical skepticism. This school maintained, among other things, that God's intentions for human beings could be known apart from traditional sources of religious authority by using commonsense moral reasoning. Scottish Common Sense Realism was especially influential at Princeton Seminary. John Williamson Nevin was exposed to this school of philosophy during his theological studies at Princeton.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

religious response failed to meet the needs of Americans, and resulted in much theological controversy within the Presbyterian Church after 1801. This theological controversy eventually openly divided the Presbyterian Church into “Old School” and “New School” in 1837.

John Williamson Nevin was raised in the “Old School” Presbyterian Church at Middle Spring, Pennsylvania. It was there that he first experienced the care and nourishment of the church. The congregation was part of the Presbytery of Donegal that was first established in the 1740s during the First Great Awakening. D. G. Hart states that congregational life registered a deep impression on the young Nevin, and that even as an elderly man, he could still recall that system of piety that was established in the church.<sup>43</sup> It was a system that was rooted in the idea of covenant and found expression in the catechism, the teaching of sound doctrine and the coming to the Lord’s Table. In many respects it was systematic and formal in its expression when compared to the religious revivals of the same period.

Given Nevin’s spiritual formation, it is perhaps unusual that he attended Union College in New York during the years 1817-1821, for Union College was considered to be “an outpost of New England Puritanism in upstate New York”, and Nevin would have much to say about the modern “Puritanism” that he encountered there in the years to come.<sup>44</sup> It was, however, at Union that Nevin first encountered the “techniques” of conversion via the person of Asahel Nettleton. Nettleton has been described as a “Calvinist, who stood self-consciously in the

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<sup>43</sup> Hart, *John Williamson Nevin*, 37.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 40.

revivalist tradition of (Jonathan) Edwards and the First Great Awakening.”<sup>45</sup>

Needless to say, the experience was not a positive one for Nevin and it leads one to speculate upon its impact when Nevin witnessed as an adult and criticized Charles Finney’s “New Measures” of revivalism.

Many years later Nevin recalled, “I, along with others, came into their hands in anxious meetings, and underwent the torture of their mechanical counsel and talk. ... In this way I was converted, and brought into the Church — as if I had been altogether out of it before.”<sup>46</sup> Evidently he broke with revivalism in later life, but following graduation with honours, Nevin returned home to Pennsylvania for a period of time in order to restore his health after this period of spiritual turmoil. Following this two-year sabbatical John Williamson Nevin made his way to that bastion of “Old School” Presbyterianism in the United States, the Princeton Seminary.

Princeton Theological Seminary had only been established in 1812, so it was a relatively new institution when Nevin arrived in 1823. He would remain there for five years until 1828. It was at Princeton that Nevin came under the influence of the theologian Charles Hodge, who would come in later years to be “widely acknowledged as the Pope of Presbyterianism.”<sup>47</sup> One can safely assume that Hodge held Nevin in high regard, for when Hodge made his way to Germany for two years of study, Nevin took over some his teaching duties at the seminary. As we will see, Hodge will figure prominently in Nevin’s life at a later date when they

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>47</sup> Paul C. Gutjahr, *Charles Hodge: Guardian of American Orthodoxy* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3.

clashed over the correct understanding regarding Calvin's Eucharistic theology, once Nevin had moved to Mercersburg.

Following graduation from Princeton and ordination in the Presbyterian Church, Nevin taught for ten years (1830-1840) at the Western Theological Seminary, founded in 1825, that would later become Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. During this period, the stresses in the church resulting from revivalism began to take their toll on the Presbyterian Church. Charles Finney's "New Measures" were loudly decried by the "Old School Presbyterians", leading to the aforementioned schism of 1837. At the General Assembly of that year, a motion was passed that ousted a number of "New School" entire congregations from the denomination. However, Nevin, though no fan of revivalism, did not support the motion because of its divisive character — displaying rather at this early date a "catholic spirit" instead.

It is important to note that Nevin's time in Pittsburgh was not restricted to the classroom and the life of the seminary. He also provided regular pulpit supply at a congregation outside of Pittsburgh, and as Hart notes, "Nevin took an active interest in the debates over slavery while continuing to oppose alcohol and objecting to the theater in the city."<sup>48</sup> While these were "New School" concerns at this point in Nevin's journey, he still remained theologically within the "Old School" fold. Nevin would continue serve the seminary in Pittsburgh but its tenuous existence on the frontier eventually took its toll leading to the important decision of 1840.

### **2.3 Mercersburg, 1840-1849, and the Crisis Years**

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<sup>48</sup> Hart, *John Williamson Nevin*, 55.

It was in 1840 that Nevin experienced what could be considered his second conversion experience when he was appointed to be the professor of theology at the German Reformed theological seminary in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, and the headmaster of Marshall College. But this language of conversion is perhaps too strong. One of his former professors at Princeton, Archibald Alexander, assured Nevin that the move was not really any jarring change. It was simply a move from one branch of the Reformed tradition to another.<sup>49</sup> However, while this move only takes place within the Reformed family of churches, it perhaps foreshadows a much greater move that Nevin would face during his years of crisis and at the same time, crucially, begins to move Nevin beyond the influence of Charles Hodge and the tradition of Princeton.

The German Reformed congregations that had been established in the United States consisted of immigrants from the Palatinate and the German-speaking region of Switzerland. The seminary was first established in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, in 1825 in order to meet the growing religious needs of the German Reformed community. It would eventually move to Mercersburg in 1837, and it was there in Mercersburg that Nevin and his colleague Philip Schaff, the church historian, developed a unique and distinct theological response to the “church question” that came to be known as “Mercersburg Theology”.

It is important to note at this point that “German” modes of thought were not foreign to Nevin. During his time at Pittsburgh he availed himself of developments in German scholarship, and was introduced to the writings of the church historian,

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 61.

Augustus Neander. Hart states, “Nevin found in Neander two matters that were particularly influential. The first was an acquaintance with and esteem for the church fathers.... Second, the German church historian imparted to Nevin a theory of organic development in church history.”<sup>50</sup> As we will these matters will figure prominently in, and qualify the results of, Nevin’s search for a normative past.

When Nevin first arrived within the folds of the German Reformed Church, however, he found it threatened by an old foe: religious revivalism. As Nichols notes, “In the 1840s the German churches, the Lutheran even more than the Reformed seemed to be repeating the experience of the Presbyterians and the Congregationalists with Charles Finney’s revivals twenty years before.”<sup>51</sup> Nevin’s response to the challenge is interesting. It has been suggested that the seeds of the Mercersburg Theology or the Mercersburg Movement were first planted in the early 1840s with the publication of Nevin’s tract, “The Anxious Bench”, (1843), where he challenged Charles Finney’s “system of the bench” with the “system of the catechism” and “unmasked the ecclesiological assumptions at the root of revivalism.”<sup>52</sup> But one could trace the theological origins of the response that he would formulate back to 1840, when Nevin was still at Pittsburgh. For it was there, as he notes in his autobiographical piece, *My Own Life*, that he was first introduced to the ideas of the Tractarians at Oxford. Gerrish writes that, “[A] friend passed on to him a volume of the Oxford tracts as a psychological curiosity that he himself had tired of, [and] Nevin recognized in it at once, though without being converted,

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 74-75.

<sup>51</sup> James Hastings Nichols, ed., *The Mercersburg Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 8.

<sup>52</sup> Littlejohn, *The Mercersburg Theology*, 5.



an earnest religious spirit.”<sup>53</sup> As we will see, Nevin’s position would change significantly over the years, and a “conversion” of sorts would be the result. For this recognition by Nevin of an “earnest religious spirit” amongst the men of Oxford would grow into a deep affection for the Oxford Movement, as Nevin found many parallels there to his own efforts in responding to the “church question”.

The Mercersburg Movement gained momentum when Philip Schaff, a church historian of like mind, came to join Nevin at Mercersburg in 1844. Littlejohn states, “His inaugural address, “The Principle of Protestantism,” embodied Schaff’s strong sense of catholicity and historic continuity.”<sup>54</sup> In 1846, Nevin would publish his best-known work, *The Mystical Presence*. In this book, Nevin addressed the issue of Reformed Eucharistic theology. Littlejohn writes that this work was “a historical vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic doctrine of the Lord’s Supper, and of the entire Christocentric, ecclesiocentric view of religion which that tradition embodied.”<sup>55</sup> However, the work would elicit opposition from a powerful source. It took the “Pope of Presbyterianism”, Nevin’s old teacher Charles Hodge, two years to respond to Nevin’s challenge but eventually he did in a long response published in *The Princeton Review*, where he went so far as to question Nevin’s orthodoxy and his commitment to the Reformed tradition.

A running battle ensued between Mercersburg and Princeton. As Littlejohn writes, “Most scholars have concluded that, whatever the virtues of Nevin’s

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<sup>53</sup> Gerrish, *Tradition and the Modern World*, 56.

<sup>54</sup> Littlejohn, *The Mercersburg Theology*, 15.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

theology, he manhandled Hodge on the historical question.”<sup>56</sup> The theological battle with Hodge would also result indirectly in the establishment of the journal, *The Mercersburg Review*, in 1849. The goal of the publication was to give Nevin and Schaff a platform from which to promote the Mercersburg theology. The year 1849 would also, significantly, see the publication of Nevin’s article, “The Anglican Crisis”<sup>57</sup>, and Nevin would follow this essay with a thorough study of the early church fathers. Three articles on “Early Christianity”<sup>58</sup> appeared in 1851 and four on “Cyprian”<sup>59</sup> were published in 1852 during the time of Nevin’s spiritual crisis.<sup>60</sup>

The heyday of the Mercersburg Movement was relatively short in terms of duration, because it essentially came to a close with Nevin’s semi-retirement in 1853. But despite its brevity, it was to be a pivotal period, as Nevin battled with opponents both within the German Reformed Church, who favoured the “system of the bench”, and the more politically and theologically dangerous criticisms of Charles Hodge. During this time, however, Nevin would come to the attention of scholars in Germany and England, and (along with Schaff) would come to be recognized for his “high church or catholicizing tendency within the framework of German idealism and historical thought.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>57</sup> John Williamson Nevin, "The Anglican Crisis." *Mercersburg Review* 3, no.2 (1851): 359-398.

<sup>58</sup> George H. Bricker, and Charles Yrigoen, eds., *Catholic and Reformed: Selected Theological Writings of John Williamson Nevin*. Pittsburgh Original Texts and Translation Series Number 3 (Pittsburgh, PA: The Pickwick Press, 1978), 177-310.

<sup>59</sup> John Williamson Nevin, "Cyprian." *Mercersburg Review* 4, no.3 (1852): 259-563.

<sup>61</sup> Nichols, ed., *The Mercersburg Theology*, 11.

However, as noted above, Nevin would also experience five years of deep spiritual crisis. This spiritual crisis was precipitated, as noted previously, by the “Gorham Case”, but it was also clearly exacerbated by Hodge’s attacks and by Nevin’s disgust with the vapidness of American Protestantism.<sup>62</sup>

As we shall see in more detail later in this thesis, Nevin considered abandoning his church connections, but after much soul searching, he decided by 1854 to stay within the Reformed tradition. The crisis unquestionably took its toll upon him. Yet so too did the pressure of work. It is remarkable that in this brief period, Nevin, while responsible for both a seminary and a college, established and circulated the “Mercersburg Theology” through books like *The Anxious Bench*, *The Mystical Presence*, articles, sermons and a journal, *The Mercersburg Review*. His responsibilities, indeed, extended beyond Mercersburg itself to serving in a variety of positions within the German Reformed Church.

Upon his semi-retirement, Nevin, who was never physically robust, resigned his posts both at Marshall, Mercersburg Seminary, and the *Mercersburg Review*. In the years following 1853, Nevin would continue to provide service to the German Reformed community as president of the merged Franklin and Marshall College. He would also write a new liturgy that was rooted in the Mercersburg Theology and this would result in 1867 in a heated debate within German Reformed circles. Following the battle over liturgy, and contrary to his own expectations due to ill health, Nevin survived until his death in 1886.

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<sup>62</sup> Littlejohn, *The Mercersburg Theology*, 17.

It is somehow ironic that Nevin, who believed that he would die young, would live such a long and productive life. So firm was his conviction of early death that it contributed to his spiritual crisis, as he literally sought to discern in which church he would soon be buried, Reformed or Roman Catholic. Still, he served Christ's church for many years, with his most insightful theological work being carried out during the period of 1843-1853, coinciding with the development and promotion of the Mercersburg theology.

John Williamson Nevin was obviously a "high-churchman". But Sam Hamstra and Arie J. Griffioen rightly suggest that Nevin also "must be recognized as a confessionalist", arguing that confessionalism, with its emphasis on historic Creeds and Confessions served as a response to a lack of denominational identity found in revivalism during the antebellum period in America.<sup>63</sup> They also suggest that Nevin "must be understood as a Calvinist and an evangelical", arguing that Nevin also recognized the need for personal transformation while seeing himself working in continuity with the Reformed tradition and the legacy of John Calvin.<sup>64</sup> I would agree with this assessment of Nevin, as long as the term "evangelical" is understood in the classical Protestant sense of bearing gospel or good news. For, as we have seen, Nevin was not an "evangelical" in the more conventional, revivalist sense.

This brief biography some insight into the complexity of Nevin as a person, and some light on how the events of his life and involvement in "the church question" of his day shaped the development of his theology.

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<sup>63</sup> Hamstra, and Griffioen, eds., *Reformed Confessionalism*, xviii.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, xix.

At this point, however, we turn our attention to the Mercersburg theology. Nichols states, “the Mercersburg theology is to be grouped with that series of high-church movements which sprang up across several countries and ecclesiastical traditions in the middle third of the of the century.”<sup>65</sup> He goes on to note that if one is seeking to situate Mercersburg theology, it “may be triangulated from high-church Lutheranism and Anglo-Catholicism”, because of shared theological concerns and an emphasis on “catholicity” — though in America the Mercersburg theology was usually associated with “Puseyism” or the “Oxford Movement”, and as noted, Nevin paid particular attention to what was taking place in England.<sup>66</sup> If so, then we may say that the significance of the Mercersburg Theology rests in the attempt to craft a synthesis between the Reformed tradition and the early Church Fathers by way of the Anglican tradition and Lutheranism, thereby establishing a normative past.

#### **2.4 The Mercersburg Theology:**

Nevin’s effort to craft such a synthesis led him early on to the affirmation of the spiritual real presence in the Lord’s Supper, and severe criticism of the theological foundations of the new Evangelicalism. Mercersburg theology has then a series of essential characteristics. As outlined by Nevin himself in his work, *Vindication of the Revised Liturgy*, written in 1867, however, it finds its ultimate foundation in the

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<sup>65</sup> Nichols, ed., *The Mercersburg Theology*, 11.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

theology of the Incarnation.<sup>67</sup> At the same time, it is a dynamic Christocentric system that borrows from the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel a particular understanding of history. It stresses the “objective” character of the Christian faith as embodied concretely in scripture and sacraments, the Creeds, the Confessions, Christian tradition, liturgy and ordained ministry. This objective character is emphasized over the “subjective” as demonstrated by revivalism with its mixture of Scripture, personal experience and private judgment.

So let us begin to “flesh” out the essential characteristics of this theology, and turn our attention to Nevin’s approach to the theology of the Incarnation. In 1846, Nevin had laid out in a comprehensive fashion his thoughts on the relationship between Christology, Eucharistic theology, and ecclesiology in his book, *The Mystical Presence*. In 1850 Nevin would return to the topic of the Incarnation when he published a comprehensive article entitled, “The Incarnation,” outlining his views in the pages of *The Mercersburg Review*.<sup>68</sup>

He was inspired to write this article after reading a book on the Incarnation by the Anglican theologian and Tractarian Robert I. Wilberforce. Nichols notes, “Nevin’s essay was not really a review of Wilberforce’s book, but a statement of his own kindred conceptions”, for Nevin and Wilberforce were in general agreement, as was natural since both had drawn much from the same German springs.<sup>69</sup> For Nevin, the Incarnation of Jesus the Christ was the central principle

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<sup>67</sup> Charles Yrigoyen, and George H. Bricker, eds., *Catholic and Reformed: Selected Theological Writings of John Williamson Nevin*. Pittsburgh Original Texts & Translation Series Number 3 (Pittsburgh, PA: The Pickwick Press, 1978), 313-403.

<sup>68</sup> Nichols, ed., *The Mercersburg Theology*, 77.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

on which the Mercersburg system was to be built. Wilberforce would also found his theology on this central principle of the Incarnation.

The importance of the Incarnation appears for Nevin from the way he distinguishes it from and relates it to the mediatorial work of Christ, which in nineteenth century Calvinist orthodoxy had come to be very much associated with the cross. Nevin, however, writes as follows: “His Incarnation is not to be regarded as a device *in order* to his mediation, the needful preliminary and condition of this merely as an independent and separate work; it is itself the Mediatorial Fact, in all its height and depth, length and breadth.”<sup>70</sup> For Nevin, “All rests on the mystery of the Incarnation” because it is the “true idea of the gospel, the new world of grace and truth, in which the discord of sin, the vanity of nature, the reign of death, are brought forever to an end.”<sup>71</sup> The only method for theology was to start with the person of Christ, rather than his works, and then follow the order in which the doctrines of Eucharistic theology and ecclesiology unfold.

The approach taken at this point was consistent with Nevin’s earlier writings. Beginning with his first book, *The Anxious Bench*, Nevin had constructed his Christology on the contrast between the first and second Adam, which is a motif often associated with strongly “incarnational” theological systems. Nevin writes, “Thus humanity, fallen in Adam, is made to undergo a resurrection in Christ, and so restored, flows over organically, as in the other case, to all in whom its life

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 80.

appears.”<sup>72</sup> This contrast between the first and second Adam seems to suggest that already in the 1840s, Nevin was moving in the direction of the early Church and the insights of the second century church father, Irenaeus of Lyons — although this is not explicitly stated.

Nevin would, however, continue to develop this theme in his later writings as well. As he writes, “The race starts in Adam. It is recapitulated again, or gathered into a new center and head, in Christ....”<sup>73</sup> For Nevin, Adam embodied “that living law or power which, whether in Adam alone or in all posterity, forms at once the entire fact of humanity.”<sup>74</sup> This law or power is organic. Here we find traces of Germanic influence, in the notion of a theological perspective influenced by Romanticism, and its view of the world as a living organic entity that continues to grow and develop.

The result, as Holifield notes, is that for Nevin, “the second Person of the Trinity, by assuming human nature, brought that principle into union with the Godhead. This was an event transforming the law of human nature.”<sup>75</sup> Nevin, indeed, would speak of the mystical unity of the divine and human in Christ and the church in terms of completion, a higher stage in the continuing process of divine creation.<sup>76</sup> In it is seen the unity of the human and the divine, rooted in the Incarnation, toward which all creation has struggled.

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<sup>72</sup> John Williamson Nevin, *The Anxious Bench. Antichrist. Catholic Unity*, ed. Augustine Thompson, O.P. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000), 65.

<sup>73</sup> Nichols, ed., *The Mercersburg Theology*, 83.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>75</sup> Holifield, *Theology in America*, 476.

<sup>76</sup> Nichols, ed., *The Mercersburg Theology*, 84.



Nevin would also turn to philosophy in order to support his insights concerning the principle of the Incarnation and its workings in the midst of history. But as DiPuccio notes, “The origin of Nevin’s philosophy is not easily discernable. He was first and foremost a theologian rather than a philosopher.”<sup>77</sup> Unfortunately, Nevin left no body of philosophical writings, and in fact there are few writings prior to 1840 and his move to the German Reformed Church. However, DiPuccio states, “The 1830’s marked the formative period of Nevin’s idealism”, and during this period he “found in Plato fertile ground for his mystical inclinations.”<sup>78</sup> For Nevin, Plato would serve as an ally in his struggle against the subjective rationalism of his time. In the “Platonic universe”, ideas had objective force and were not merely subjective notions — thereby countering the one-sided subjectivity of the modern era. But Nevin’s Platonism “grew more immediately out of his spirituality rather than his philosophical training.”<sup>79</sup>

Such Platonic convictions would arise naturally in a mind attuned to the claims of patristic theology. However, such convictions would develop further once Nevin arrived at Mercersburg, where he encountered German Idealism through Frederick Augustus Rauch, who was a professor there. Rauch was the first person in the United States to write on Hegel’s philosophy of mind, but unfortunately Nevin’s relationship with him would be of a rather short duration. Rauch died less than a year after Nevin’s arrival but in that short period Nevin was greatly influenced by Rauch’s Idealism. As DiPuccio writes, “The genius of Rauch’s philosophy was his

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<sup>77</sup> Hamstra, and Griffieon, eds., *Reformed Confessionalism*, 45.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

paradigmatic use of the organic idea to unite the ideal and the actual.”<sup>80</sup> This concept of the “organic” would serve as a bond between Nevin’s earlier interest in Platonism and his romantic and spiritual longings for wholeness between the ideal and the actual, the spiritual and the material.

Nevin was to this extent familiar with the world of German Idealist philosophy. Holifield goes so far as to state that, “Nevin could sound as if he were speaking of a Hegelian universe in which humanity gradually realized the primal Idea through its struggle toward consciousness of truth,” but goes on to maintain that “he was no Hegelian.”<sup>81</sup> For Nevin was not a rationalist. He continued to affirm the statements of faith as outlined in the historic Creeds of the church. For example, Nevin rejected the impersonal principle in certain interpretations of Hegel’s system, and continued to affirm the doctrine of the Holy Trinity (unlike many of Hegel’s interpreters of the period), but Hegel’s philosophy did provide him with the language and the concepts needed to formulate a dynamic and evolutionary approach to theology and church history, and it accordingly moved his earlier Christian Platonism in a new direction.

According to Holifield, Nevin thought that, “the Ideal existed only as a possibility before it became actual in space and time, but as “the inmost substance of that which exists,” the Ideal could not be reduced to the sum of the particulars in which it attained visibility. It was a dynamic force and power at work in the midst of history pressing towards embodiment and completion.”<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>81</sup> Holifield, *Theology in America*, 476.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

Whatever the difficulties of interpretation, this variety of the broadly “Hegelian” vision enabled Nevin to view the Incarnation as an event that occurred in one divine-human person, Jesus the Christ, recasting the general principle of human nature as it moved inexorably towards fulfillment in the midst of the church through history.

For Nevin, the Church is the embodiment and the extension of the Incarnation through history. It is not simply a gathering of like-minded individuals who had come together for the sake of a common purpose. This understanding was a protest on Nevin’s part against the “subjective” turn in American theology and church life as embodied in what he termed, “Puritanism”. Puritanism emphasized the view that faith in Christ must be a conscious personal experience. This caused people to question the adequacy of church attendance, liturgy, creeds and catechism without this personal experience of the Christ. It also led to rejection of infant baptism in favor of adult baptism.

This subjective emphasis meshed neatly with aspects, at least, of the new American identity being forged in the period, and would have a powerful influence in congregations through the work of the revivalist Charles G. Finney. But it was not limited to individual congregations, as men were ordained without any approval from church authorities, while individuals split from parent church bodies to form new sects whose only adherence was to the Bible. Nevin sought to offer a corrective to such excesses by emphasizing the Church as the body of Christ and fruit of the Holy Spirit working in ordered ways through the sacraments, the system of faith, and a duly ordained ministry.

As Nevin writes,

The Church is his body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all. The union by which it is held together through all ages is strictly organic. The Church is not a mere aggregation or collection of different individuals, drawn together by similarity of interests and wants, and not an abstraction simply, by which the common in the midst of such multifarious distinction is separated and put together under a single term....The Church does not rest upon its members, but the members rest upon the Church.<sup>83</sup>

The church is thus the mystical body of Christ, a body that continues to actualize the unity of the divine with human life:

The Church is the historical continuation of the life of Jesus Christ in the world. By the Incarnation of the Son of God, a divine supernatural order of existence was introduced into the world, which was not in it as part of its own constitution before.<sup>84</sup>

Drawing upon the Hegelian “organic idea”, Nevin described this process of actualization by means of a distinction between the ideal and the actual. The ideal church is seen as a function of the power of the incarnation, so ideally the church is holy, one, and catholic, free from sin and error. But Nevin also acknowledged that the ideal church exists in time and space, only in a fragmented and incomplete way. The “actual” church of historical exigency, however, is also necessary. As Nevin writes, “The Ideal Church can have no reality save under the form of the historical.”<sup>85</sup> But Nevin goes to write that despite the fragmentation and error of the historical church, it is “always the bearer of the Ideal Church, and the form under which it has its manifestation in the world.”<sup>86</sup> Yet it requires a process of evolution

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<sup>83</sup> Nichols, ed., *The Mercersburg Theology*, 40.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 64.

in order to actualize itself. Underlying all is the principle of the Incarnation, the power of which is immanent within the actual church working towards completion. This incarnational understanding of the Church implied for Nevin a high church ecclesiology. As Nevin writes:

The idea of the Church, as thus standing between Christ and single Christians, implies of necessity visible *organization*, common *worship*, a regular public *ministry* and *ritual*, and to crown all, especially grace bearing *sacraments*.<sup>87</sup>

Nevin would continue to claim throughout his writings that Christianity inevitably requires for these reasons that one participates in the life of the community called the church. The Christian life and Christian commitment is not a “decision” that is made, or a series of doctrines to be learned or a set of Creeds to be memorized. The Church is rather the bearer of Christ’s life through tradition, scripture, sacraments and liturgy. For this reason, the church gives birth to her children through baptism and continues to nourish them throughout their lives, for the final purpose of the church is the mystical union in which the divine-human life of Christ flows into his members.

Nevin’s theology stands in sharp contrast to his contemporaries and it is this contrast that would lead for example to his battle with Charles Hodge over Eucharistic theology. As Holifield notes, “In making the incarnation the center of his system, Nevin altered the standard nineteenth century Protestant view of redemption” which rested on the doctrine of the atoning death of Christ.<sup>88</sup> For Nevin, however, it was the Incarnation that was the redemptive “fact”, for it spoke

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>88</sup> Holifield, *Theology in America*, 477.

of union between divinity and humanity. It was this incarnational principle that would continue to find extension in the church because Nevin was adamant that the implications of the Incarnation need to be continually actualized in time and space.

The church was thus an organic entity, the “body of Christ”, and not merely a group of individuals drawn together for a common purpose. For Nevin, it was a fundamental mistake to confuse the church with any of the other voluntary associations that had been established in the first half of the nineteenth century in the United States. Even philosophically, Nevin would stand at odds with his contemporaries. Charles Hodge had embraced Scottish “Common Sense Realism” married to Calvinist orthodoxy, and Nevin would be educated in this philosophical tradition while a student at Princeton. But he would turn to Platonism and German Idealism in order to find the language and the concepts to articulate his own dynamic vision.

Mercersburg Theology is a churchly and sacramental system where the church is truly the body and presence of Christ in the midst of history. For this reason the church is seen as both divine and human. It is a mediator of God’s grace through the Word preached and the Sacraments that serve as “seals” for the spiritual mysteries that they present. Finally, its liturgy is Christocentric and Incarnational as well, moving away again from the “subjective” and private judgment. The Mercersburg Movement was a “high church” movement within the Reformed tradition. It is interesting that it possessed a deep ecumenical spirit. It shared common ground and concerns with the Oxford Movement in England and the Neo-Lutheran “high church” movement in Germany during the same period of the

nineteenth century. Each of these ecclesiastical movements expressed reverence for the “catholic” tradition as found in liturgy, theology and the writings of the early church fathers.

## **Chapter 3**

### **John Williamson Nevin and the Oxford Movement**

This Chapter introduces the relationship between John Williamson Nevin and the Oxford Movement. Significant theological parallels between these two nineteenth century “high -church” movements will be noted and explored, as they each struggled for the freedom of the church to establish its identity on the basis of internal criteria.

#### **3.1 Introduction**

In 1847 George Cornelius Gorham, a priest in the Church of England, was recommended to become the vicar of the parish church in Brampford Speke, which fell under the jurisdiction and care of Henry Phillpotts, Bishop of Exeter. Bishop Philpotts examined him and took issue with Gorham’s theological views on the sacrament of baptism. It seems that Gorham held the view that baptismal regeneration for infants was conditional and dependant on the adoption of the promises made when one became an adult. The Bishop found Gorham unfit for the post at Brampford Speke and refused to institute him.

Gorham appealed the decision to the ecclesiastical Court of Arches but the court ruled in Bishop Philpot’s favour. Gorham then appealed to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council. This decision by Gorham caused great controversy because a secular court was being asked to rule on a question concerning the doctrine of the Church of England. In 1849 the Judicial Committee



ruled in favour of the plaintiff and granted Gorham his institution at the church in Bramford Speke. This decision would result in a further exodus of Anglicans to the Roman Catholic Church following the lead of John Henry Newman in 1845.

John Williamson Nevin had been following the Gorham Case closely and it would serve as a catalyst for a serious spiritual and theological crisis in his own life. During a period of five years, beginning in 1849, Nevin would wrestle deeply with the “church question”, much to the concern of both his family and friends who feared for both his spiritual and physical health. The crisis would only come to an end with his sermon, “The Christian Ministry”, preached in 1854 at the installation of his successor.

But we are left to wonder why “the Gorham Case” had such an impact on Nevin. Even James Hastings Nichols was left puzzled. As noted, Nevin had grown weary by this point of his battle with Charles Hodge and the vapidness of American Protestantism. We could include the pressure that Nevin felt over the number of responsibilities that he carried within the German Reformed Church. However, while these issues might have exacerbated Nevin’s crisis they do not explain the impact of the Gorham Case on Nevin’s life.

In order to understand the impact of the Gorham Case we have, I suggest, to look at the unusual relationship that John Williamson Nevin shared with the men of the Oxford Movement, whose theological efforts preceded and to some degree overlapped his own. Pretila writes, “For most nineteenth century Protestant Americans, the Oxford Movement in England was either uncritically dismissed as just another form of despised Catholicism or was looked upon as a theological

curiosity which seemed to have no relevance here in America.”<sup>89</sup> But, as noted by W. Bradford Littlejohn, the two movements did share a number of parallels. The first is the era itself, for the Oxford Movement began in 1833 and ran until 1845 according to the title of the book by R. C. Church <sup>90</sup> while the Mercersburg Movement began in 1843 and was essentially finished by 1853. Secondly, it also could be argued that both movements find their origins in a single sermon that captured the ecclesiastical issues of the day. In England it was John Keble’s sermon, “National Apostasy”, while in the United States it was Schaff’s sermon, “The Principle of Protestantism”. Each movement, thirdly, began publications in order to promote their theological views, which often centred, fourthly, on the church and Eucharistic doctrine. The leaders within both movements, finally, shared a temptation to Roman Catholicism with John Henry Newman converting and John Williamson Nevin coming very close indeed to the same decision. <sup>91</sup>

At first glance these similarities may be deemed superficial, a historical curiosity, but the parallels between the two movements ran much deeper. As noted previously by Nichols, Mercersburg theology may be triangulated from high-church Lutheranism and Anglo-Catholicism. But in the United States where Lutheranism was little known, it was usually associated with the Oxford movement or “Puseyism”, as it was called, because of its shared concern regarding the doctrine of the church and the catholic substance of Christian faith. As Littlejohn states, “Nevin revered the catholic heritage and rejoiced to find that the Oxford men did so

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<sup>89</sup> Pretila, "The Oxford Movement's Influence", 10.

<sup>90</sup> R. W. Church, *The Oxford Movement: Twelve Years, 1833-1845*, ed. Geoffrey Best (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1970).

<sup>91</sup> Littlejohn, *The Mercersburg Theology*, 89.

as well.”<sup>92</sup> This shared reverence for the catholic heritage will figure prominently as we will see during Nevin’s crisis years but it was not always the case.

Nevin indicates in his essay, “My Own Life”, in the chapter on “Historical Awakening” that while at Pittsburgh he “became reconciled to the old Christian Fathers generally. They were no longer to me the puzzling mysteries they had been before.”<sup>93</sup> But Nevin also goes on to indicate that his first exposure to the Oxford movement led him to “regard it with pity and contempt.”<sup>94</sup> Yet when he considered their tracts he found their serious and earnest men who were concerned with the essence of the church. He admits that he was at this point not converted to their position but he recognized the seriousness of the religious problem that they were trying to solve. He just didn’t agree with their solution during this early period of his theological development.

This lack of agreement would continue to find expression in Nevin’s book, *The Anxious Bench* and in his sermon, “Catholic Unity” both written in 1844. Nevin writes, “It is not enough now simply to cry out against popery and puseyism, as a return to exploded errors.”<sup>95</sup> Certainly, when one considers these words and compares them to what Nevin would write a decade later it shows considerable development in Nevin’s spiritual and theological journey.

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>93</sup> John Williamson Nevin, "My Own Life: CHAP. XV1. Historical Awakening." *Reformed Church Messenger* 36, no.24 (1870), 1.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Nevin, *The Anxious Bench. Antichrist. Catholic Unity*, 19.

### 3.2 The Oxford Movement

What was the Oxford Movement? Before beginning to answer this question it must be noted that the subject of the Oxford Movement has received a great deal of attention from scholars over the years and that there is a wealth of material available concerning it that far exceeds the bounds of this study. Our purpose here is simply to offer a general account sufficient to explain its appeal to Nevin and the Mercersburg movement, because it figures so prominently in his theological development. Material will be drawn primarily from the works of Paul Avis, Owen Chadwick, George Herring and Peter Nockles.

The term, “The Oxford Movement”, is sometimes used to describe the nineteenth century catholic revival in the Church of England in its entirety, and even its continuing influence. For example, we noted previously the recent work edited by Stewart Brown and Peter Nockles, which bears the title, *The Oxford Movement: Europe and the Wider World 1830-1930*. But for our purposes, the term must obviously be taken in a more limited sense to refer to the writings and the work of a small group of men mainly at Oxford University, beginning in the early 1830s, who were concerned about the growing strength of secular and ecclesiastical forces and their impact on the church. Drawing upon the catholic doctrines of the early church fathers, the men of the Oxford Movement battled for the identity and the integrity of the church in the face of both “Erastianism” and “Evangelicalism”.

The roots of the movement can therefore be traced to the early 1830s. At Oriel College, Oxford University, a number of young men who had gathered around the figure of John Keble were becoming increasingly outspoken regarding the

relationship of the Church of England to the State. But the actual start of the Oxford Movement is tied to Keble's Assize Sermon entitled, "National Apostasy", which was preached in July of 1833<sup>96</sup>. The sermon was preached in response to a decision by Parliament to reduce a number of bishoprics in the Church of Ireland. For Keble and the others at Oriel College this piece of legislation cut to the very heart of the identity and integrity of the Church of England because it worked on the assumption that the Church was simply another department of the State to be governed like other departments by the forces of secular politics.

Following Keble's call to arms, John Henry Newman, Richard Hurrell Froude and William Palmer joined with Keble to write and launch a series of tracts that dealt with this question of ecclesiastical identity. Because of their publishing work, they would come to be known in many circles as the "Tractarians". In 1834, Edward Bouverie Pusey came to join this group, sharing their concern. There would be ninety tracts written in all and it would be Tract 90, written by Newman and appearing in 1841, that would prove to be one of the most explosive because of its strong catholic thrust. For Newman argued in Tract 90 that there was nothing in the Thirty-Nine Articles contrary to the Council of Trent.

In the wake of the strong negative response to Tract 90, Newman began to withdraw from leadership within the Movement and retired to a semi-monastic life. The lacuna left in leadership would be filled by Edward Pusey, as the Movement sought to have its message heard in the Church of England. Richard Church indicates that the history of The Oxford Movement in the narrow sense with which

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<sup>96</sup> Littlejohn, *The Mercersburg Theology*, 93.

we are concerned here effectively ends in 1845, with Newman's conversion to Roman Catholicism.

Obviously, as Church notes, "All the world knows that it was not, in fact, killed or even arrested by the shock of 1845. But after 1845, its field was at least as much out of Oxford as in it."<sup>97</sup> Certainly in this twelve-year period a strong foundation for the catholic revival within the Church of England had been established. But further battles concerning ecclesiastical identity and integrity would ensue around the Gorham Case, which as noted would impact Nevin as well, and many others would follow Newman's lead and make their way to Rome.

So having sketched briefly the outlines of the Oxford Movement, we turn our attention to the concerns of the movement and what they were trying to accomplish. As noted above, the men of the Oxford Movement were struggling to establish the identity, integrity and the authority of the church in the face of Erastianism, to which they thought Evangelicalism offered no answer. As Paul Avis writes, "the quest for the identity of Anglicanism was urgently renewed in the 1830's in the Tractarian movement which was the defensive response of the old high church Anglicanism to the threat of an emerging secular state".<sup>98</sup> For them, the Church was not simply one more department of the State to be managed by the decisions of Parliament, but had an identity of its own that was rooted in Christ and its own internal criteria.

In a classic essay entitled, "The Mind of the Oxford Movement", Owen Chadwick makes the point that the political situation regarding the bishoprics in the

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<sup>97</sup> Church, *The Oxford Movement*, 271.

<sup>98</sup> Avis, *Anglicanism and the Christian Church*, 17.

Church of Ireland only provided the context for this crisis of identity within the Church of England, but does not itself explain its real genesis. The religious ideas of the Oxford men sprang from somewhere deep in their souls, and in reality the Oxford Movement was a movement of the heart rather than the head. The struggle with Erastianism only served as an accelerant for the eruption of these deeper stirrings. Regardless, the “catalyst for this disruption of Anglican identity was a revolution in the relation of church and state.”<sup>99</sup>

So what beliefs did the Tractarians hold that made them so distinctive within the Church of England? George Herring indicates that it is very difficult to give a precise theological definition because the Movement was marked by a dynamism that resulted in a shifting of positions as the years progressed.<sup>100</sup> But looking at the evidence, there are central themes that can be found in the writings of the Tractarians. Chadwick writes that, “Concern for the ‘tradition’ of the ancient and undivided Church is the foundation of Tractarian thought.”<sup>101</sup> Tractarianism was an ecclesiastical movement that looked backwards to the very earliest centuries of the church in order to establish the identity and integrity of the church, so as to set the church on a solid foundation and thus establish its divine authority.

However, the church is not static because for the men of the Oxford Movement, the church is “seen to be like a living being, with its breath, and its

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>100</sup> George Herring, *What Was the Oxford Movement?* (London: Continuum, 2002), 24.

<sup>101</sup> Owen Chadwick, *The Spirit of the Oxford Movement: Tractarian Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 30.

limbs and its head.”<sup>102</sup> It is a living organism, conceived according to the Romanticism of the period that recognized the presence of the sacred in the organism of nature as well. So these two elements, “an appeal to the Fathers as interpreters of Scripture, and a sacramentalism of nature and the world, into which the sacraments of the Church fitted easily — were to be fundamental to the mind of the Oxford Movement.”<sup>103</sup> The church, furthermore, is not just any body. It is the visible body of Christ in the world, an extension of the incarnation, so that, on the basis of this unique act of God, the church has in the substance of faith the basis of its own identity, integrity and mission to the world.

While the state can create a variety of temporal positions within its own sphere, no state can create bishops and priests because this is the exclusive domain of the Church, because of its reliance on the incarnate one, Jesus the Christ. This separation of powers arising out of the separate divine identity and authority of the Church in many respects set the Tractarians apart even from other high-church Anglicans. For them, the relationship between throne and altar was a positive one, but as we as can see, for the Tractarians this relationship was a clear and present danger.

As Chadwick notes, “It was politically necessary, that the clergy of the Church of England should look to leaders who would declare that the authority of the church does not rest upon the authority of the State.”<sup>104</sup> Rather, the authority of the bishop and the priest rest upon his apostolic commission. So the men of the Oxford

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<sup>102</sup> Chadwick, *The Spirit of the Oxford Movement*, 31.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.



Movement wished “to find a place and value for historical tradition against the irreverent or sacrilegious hands of critical revolutionaries for whom no antiquity was sacred.”<sup>105</sup>

One area where this emphasis on tradition found a place was in the interpretation of scripture. Scripture, for the Oxford Movement, was to be approached not simply through the ahistorical rationality of the individual operating on the basis of private judgment (a concern clearly shared by Nevin), but through the tradition of the “undivided” Church. The undivided Church carried with it a unique weight for a man like Newman, because it allowed an appeal to the period before the Latin West and the Greek East went their separate ways in the eleventh century, and to the earlier epoch in which the fundamental Christian doctrines as articulated in the the classical Creeds were established by the early church fathers.

The Oxford Movement was marked, then, by three essential characteristics: first, an appeal to the early church fathers of the undivided church; second, a sacramentalism not only in the church but also in nature and the world; and third, an emphasis on the “heart” rather than the “head”, as expressed primarily in the writings of the early church fathers, the sacraments and the liturgical tradition of the church. These three characteristics were integral to the Oxford Movement’s efforts to defend the identity and integrity of the church, its own intrinsic authority and order, against the growing power of the secular state.

Stewart Brown and Peter Nockles write, “The Oxford Movement transformed the nineteenth-century established Church of England with a renewed conception of

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 2.

itself as a spiritual body.”<sup>106</sup> The Movement reminded the members of the Church of England that “theirs was a branch of the holy, catholic and apostolic Church, and not merely a creation of the Tudor state at the Reformation, as many of its critics asserted.”<sup>107</sup> The Movement stood for a significant shift in ecclesiastical identity, such that the Church was instituted by Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit and enriched by the apostolic tradition of the early church fathers. As such, and only as such, could it be a purveyor of grace through the sacraments.

### **3.3 The Eucharist**

Having sketched, then, the basic contours of the Oxford Movement and its theological intentions, we turn our attention beyond simply the superficial similarities that were noted above. At this point we look at the growing relationship between John Williamson Nevin and the Oxford Movement in their shared struggle. As noted previously, according to Littlejohn, “Nevin revered the catholic heritage and rejoiced to find that the Oxford men did so as well.”<sup>108</sup> In them, he believed that he had found allies for a common struggle in defence of the one, holy, catholic, apostolic church. So in this section we will explore two shared areas: the Eucharist and the early church fathers.

We begin with the subject of the Eucharist. The Eucharist was, in fact, Nevin’s central preoccupation, it would guide his thoughts on “the Church question”, and it

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<sup>106</sup> Stewart J. Brown, and Peter B. Nockles, eds., *The Oxford Movement: Europe and the Wider World 1830-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Littlejohn, *The Mercersburg Theology*, 91.

would be the subject of his major work, *The Mystical Presence*, published in 1846.

Nevin writes:

As the Eucharist forms the very heart of the whole Christian worship, so it is clear that the entire question of the Church, which all are compelled to acknowledge, the great life-problem of the age, centres ultimately in the sacramental question as its inmost heart and core. Our view of the Lord's Supper must ever condition and rule in the end our view and the conception we form of the Church.<sup>109</sup>

By placing the Eucharist at the center of his system, Nevin was making a major departure from the Reformed theology of his day, with its emphasis on the act of preaching and its effect in human decision, and we have seen how this shift in emphasis would draw the ire of Charles Hodge. But the importance of the theme is far-reaching. As Gerrish writes, "In Nevin's judgment, what a man thinks of the Holy Eucharist is a plain index to what he will think of Christ, the church, and theology itself."<sup>110</sup> However, it is not my purpose here to cover the battle between Nevin and Hodge in any detail, for it has received a great deal of attention recently from scholars. For the present, I simply want to find those points of connection between Nevin's Eucharistic theology and what can be found within the theology of the Oxford Movement. This can be done most succinctly by looking specifically at Nevin's interest in the work of Robert I. Wilberforce.

Nevin believed that Christianity finds its foundation in the living union that is established between the believer, the church and the person of Christ, in whom humanity and divinity are reconciled. This foundation, however, is expressed in a

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<sup>109</sup> John Williamson Nevin, *The Mystical Presence: A Vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist*, ed. Augustine Thompson, O.P. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000), 3.

<sup>110</sup> Gerrish, *Tradition and the Modern World*, 52.

peculiarly concentrated way in the mystery of the sacrament of Holy Communion.

Nevin writes:

this great fact is emphatically concentrated in the mystery of the Lord's Supper: which has always been clothed on this very account, to the consciousness of the Church, with a character of sanctity and solemnity, surpassing that of any other Christian institution.<sup>111</sup>

For Nevin, this notion of mystical union is rooted in the Incarnation and the Resurrection and it is through this combination that a new life in Christ is made available to the believer by participating in the Eucharist. As Nevin writes,

We must eat his *flesh* and *drink* his blood, otherwise we can have no life. His flesh is meat *indeed* - his blood drink *indeed*; aleithos, in reality, not in a shadowy or relative sense merely, but absolutely and truly in the sphere of the Spirit. The participation itself involves everlasting life; not simply in the form of hope and promise, but in the way of actual present possession; and not simply as a mode of existence for the soul abstractly considered, but as embracing the whole man in the absolute totality of his nature, and reaching out to the resurrection of the body itself as its legitimate and necessary end.<sup>112</sup>

Certainly, Nevin affirms that the very body and blood of Christ are the nourishment of the Christian's life, but as Gerrish notes, "he firmly repudiates any suggestion that the eating is crassly literal or the presence local."<sup>113</sup> Rather, Nevin speaks in the language of John Calvin and draws on Calvin's idea of the "spiritual real presence". New life in Christ for both our souls and our bodies is crucial for Nevin, and Littlejohn notes that from this perspective, Nevin follows closely the Christology of

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<sup>111</sup> Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 47.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 226-227.

<sup>113</sup> Gerrish, *Tradition and the Modern World*, 58.

Cyril of Alexandria, a massively important source for the mature Christological synthesis of patristic theology.<sup>114</sup>

Nevin perhaps knew that his combination of Johanine language concerning everlasting life, his Cyrillian spirit, and his appeal to the high Eucharistic theology of John Calvin would cause waves within the wider Reformed community, not only in America but also in Europe. However, as Gerrish notes, his target in this enterprise is clear: “The adversaries are the Puritans, who may have Zwingli for their father, but not Calvin.”<sup>115</sup> Nevin sought to challenge the rampant rationalism and subjectivism that had become so dominant in many Protestant denominations by turning to Calvin and beyond him to the writings of the early church fathers. As Gerrish writes, “It is Nevin’s stout persuasion that in all of this he is simply presenting the Eucharistic doctrine of the universal church.”<sup>116</sup> The “mystical presence” is thus treated as the true doctrine of the universal and undivided church that has been handed down from the fathers, and no less mediated through the Reformation — even if its latter disciples have largely forgotten its implications.

We turn our focus now to the Oxford Movement and its views on the Eucharist. Herring writes, “What often surprises the modern reader is how little there is in the “Tracts for the Times” about the Eucharist, given its centrality in Tractarian liturgical life.”<sup>117</sup> One suggestion for this lack of attention is that the Oxford men were on their own two-decade-long theological journey regarding the Eucharist. Indeed, a systematic approach to Eucharistic theology within the Oxford

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<sup>114</sup> Littlejohn, *The Mercersburg Theology*, 104.

<sup>115</sup> Gerrish, *Tradition and the Modern World*, 59.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>117</sup> Herring, *What was the Oxford Movement?*, 38.

Movement would not appear until the early 1850's with the writings of Robert I. Wilberforce.

Herring notes, "In the 1820's there was little difference in the way the Eucharist was perceived among the various parties within the Established Church; the arrival of the Tractarians in the 1830's was to change that permanently."<sup>118</sup> During the 1820s, Eucharistic theology within the Church of England fell essentially into three categories: receptionism, virtualism and memorialism. Receptionism was predicated on the spiritual worthiness of the one receiving the sacrament. Virtualism allowed for the spiritual presence of Christ following the consecration of the elements but not a physical presence within the Eucharist. Memorialism, which was undoubtedly rarer and which drew from Zwingli's theology, regarded the elements of bread and wine as no more than memorials with no supernatural gifts being imparted to the believer.<sup>119</sup>

As noted above, these theological positions would be challenged by the writings of the Tractarians. By rejecting the theology of the Reformation and by drawing upon the early tradition of the undivided church, they sought to respond to the individualism and arid rationalism that they judged to be plaguing the church. But during the early years, as Herring states, "The Tractarians were reluctant to offer any alternative explanation for *how* Christ was present in the bread and the wine."<sup>120</sup> For Newman and the other Tractarians the focus and concern was on the

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

moral and spiritual effects of the grace that was received through the sacrament rather seeking to articulate precisely how this was done within the Eucharist.

The leaders of the Oxford Movement soon came to realize that they would have to be more explicit in their teaching, and as noted, this recognition found its fullest expression in the theological writings of Robert Wilberforce. His book on the Incarnation, published in 1849<sup>121</sup>, received positive attention from John Williamson Nevin and he followed this with his book, *The doctrine of the eucharist*, published in 1853.<sup>122</sup> I realize that Wilberforce's book lies at the closing of the Mercersburg period under study, but it is nevertheless valuable because it offers a systematic understanding of Tractarian Eucharistic theology, added to which is the fact that it stands in relationship to Nevin's writings on the subject and there are a number of parallels. Nevin would publish a review of this book as well in 1854, and Nichols notes that there is some indication that perhaps Wilberforce had sent him a copy personally because of Nevin's previous positive review of his work on the Incarnation.<sup>123</sup>

Wilberforce rejected the positions of "receptionism", "virtualism" and "memorialism" and turned instead to the consensus of the early church fathers

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<sup>121</sup> Robert I. Wilberforce, *The Doctrine of the Incarnation of Our Lord Jesus Christ, in Its Relation to Mankind and to the Church*. 2nd ed. (London: Murray, 1849).

<sup>122</sup> Robert I. Wilberforce, *The Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist* (London: John and Charles Mozley, 1853).

<sup>123</sup> Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology*, 228. Nevin received a personal letter from Wilberforce in the fall of 1853 and another letter of a more confidential nature in the winter of 1853. This suggests to some degree the level of friendship between Nevin and Wilberforce. Nichols goes on to note that Wilberforce was probably the best theologian of the Anglo-Catholics and was much influenced by an "organic" theory of the church.

regarding the presence of Christ in the Eucharistic elements. In the Introduction, Wilberforce indicates that he appeals to the anti-Nicene Fathers as well as St. Athanasius, the Gregories, the Cyrils, St. Basil, St. Chrysostom, St. Jerome, St. Gaudentius, St. Ambrose, St. Leo, and St. Augustine.<sup>124</sup> He then proceeds to argue “that Christ’s presence in the Eucharist is supernatural, sacramental or not perceived by the senses, but at the same time real and not merely symbolic.”<sup>125</sup> It is perhaps important to note that the term “symbolic” seems to refer here pejoratively to a bare sign, and that Wilberforce does not anticipate the more realist twentieth century understanding of the symbol.

In support of his own position, Wilberforce argued that, “the fathers generally believed in the presence of Christ in his humanity locally in the elements, effected by consecration and made the basis of an act of oblation and sacrifice by a qualified priest as the main function of his ministry.”<sup>126</sup> Wilberforce writes, “In the East and West ... there prevailed the same full conviction, that the Body and Blood of Christ were really communicated, under the forms of bread and wine in the Holy Eucharist.”<sup>127</sup>

For Wilberforce, the Eucharist is a sacrifice and in its sacrificial aspect, the Eucharist is presented as an extension of the work of Christ the High Priest who intercedes eternally for the sake of the world. Christ is located in the Eucharistic elements after consecration by the priest and the presence of Christ is not dependent on the worthiness of the celebrant or the recipient. Wilberforce writes:

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<sup>124</sup> Wilberforce, *The Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist*, 5.

<sup>125</sup> Herring, *What was the Oxford Movement?* 39.

<sup>126</sup> Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology*, 228.

<sup>127</sup> Wilberforce, *The Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist*, 296-297.



It is the offering up of the collective Church, Christ's mystical Body, but it is also the offering up of Christ himself, by whom that body is sanctified. Yet He is not offered up as though anything could be added to the sacrifice of the Cross, or as though that sacrifice required renewal. The blood-stained sacrifice which the One Great High Priest for ever pleads before the Father's throne, admits neither of increase or repetition.<sup>128</sup>

So there is a real re-enactment of the sacrifice of Calvary in the Eucharist for Wilberforce, and a real participation in Christ which cannot be reduced simply to a form of "memorialism". The worship of the church, then, is an extension of Christ himself, and so "the Church through its visible, sacramental life becomes for Wilberforce the extension of the Incarnation itself: the body of Christ is both what it is and what it offers."<sup>129</sup>

Certainly, it had taken a number of years for the Tractarians to reach this theological position but there was a significant shift in emphasis. Two decades of development, indeed, had led to the place where, for the Oxford men, "the Eucharist was the centre of Christian life, and it was meant to feed the Christian heart and lead to holiness."<sup>130</sup> But there is also implicit in this outlook a clear and close identification of the church with the body of Christ. As Wilberforce notes, "The Eucharistic Sacrifice is the offering up of the collective Church, Christ's mystical Body, but it is also the offering up of Christ Himself, by whom that Body is sanctified."<sup>131</sup>

Ultimately, for the Tractarians, the church must be taken to be rooted in such a way in the mystery of Christ that it is not conceivably a department of state. The

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 392.

<sup>129</sup> Herring, *What was the Oxford Movement?* 39.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>131</sup> Wilberforce, *The Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist*, 392.

church, rather, has its own identity and integrity, because it is the visible extension of the Incarnation in the world that offers grace to the world through the mediation of Christ the Great High Priest.

Even on the basis of this brief survey of Tractarian Eucharistic theology, we can see immediately that despite the parallels, Nevin and Wilberforce also differed in terms of their understanding of Christ's presence within the sacrament. Nevin would agree with Wilberforce that real communication did take place between Christ and the believer, but would disagree with his conclusions regarding the ancient church. Nevin would also argue for organic development regarding the doctrine of the Eucharist, and while authoritative, Nevin did not see the authority of the ancient church as binding. Drawing on the writings of John Calvin as well as the church fathers, Nevin argued for the "spiritual real presence" received in faith. Wilberforce, by contrast, locates Christ's "real presence" in the elements themselves. But Nevin and the Tractarians would agree that the Eucharist was the centre of the church and the Christian life. Indeed, at this point they were drawing on the same sources. As Littlejohn notes, "Both seek to recover much the same Patristic heritage, both attempt to graft themselves onto the trunk of catholic tradition,"<sup>132</sup> Both seek to use the Eucharist in their struggle for the freedom of the church to establish its identity and integrity as the body of Christ in the world in the face of rationalism, sectarianism and Erastianism.

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<sup>132</sup> Littlejohn, *The Mercersburg Theology*, 121.

### 3.4 The Early Church Fathers

At this point we turn our attention to the subject of the early church fathers, since, as we have seen, patristic theology figures prominently in the writings of both Nevin and the Tractarians. It appears that Nevin was led initially by the German scholar, Augustus Neander, to a deeper appreciation of church history and of the writings of the early church fathers. In an effort to trace Nevin's use of these writings and his own development, we will focus on a series of Nevin's writings that stretch over a four-year period, 1844-1848, stopping just prior to his crisis years. We will look specifically at *The Anxious Bench*, written in 1844, the sermon "Catholic Unity", also written in 1844, *The Mystical Presence* written in 1846, the sermon, "The Church", written and preached in 1846, and finally at the little book, *Antichrist*, written in 1848. At this point it is important to note that the early church fathers received a great deal of Nevin's attention during his crisis period also, but the writings of that period will receive greater focus in the next Chapter.

When we turn our attention to *The Anxious Bench*, we see that Nevin gives little note to the subject of the early church as he addresses the subjects of religious revivals and the "new measures" of Charles G. Finney that were making such inroads in the German Reformed Church. He makes one brief negative mention of St. Simeon the Stylite, comparing the "quackery of the Pillar" to the "quackery of the bench", and then proceeds to condemn the whole Christian monastic tradition as another example of human folly.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Nevin, *The Anxious Bench, Antichrist, Catholic Unity*, 21.

Turning to Nevin's sermon, "Catholic Unity", there is no direct mention of the early church fathers but there is, as noted previously, mention of the Oxford Movement. Nevin notes the return of the "mysterious charm of popery" that is found in the Oxford doctrines, but nevertheless proceeds to write, "It springs from the deepest and most general ground, in the character of the age. It belongs to the inmost history of the Church. It is the grand rebounding movement of the Reformation itself."<sup>134</sup> Yet he proceeds to roundly condemn the errors of the Oxford Movement and calls for a return to the ancient symbols and traditions of the church. Clearly, Nevin is conflicted at this point, and ironically, as we will see, Nevin too will almost succumb to the "mysterious charm of popery" a short few years later.

Upon turning to Nevin's book, *The Mystical Presence*, however, we see a significant shift in the attention given to the writings of the early church fathers. Nevin acknowledges in the work that the fathers have no binding authority, but at the same time insists that their authority cannot be ignored entirely. He offers a full chapter dealing with the selected writings of the early church fathers in an effort to refute the arid rationalistic tendencies of the modern "Puritanism" that he opposed, while drawing connections from patristic sources and his own views to the Eucharistic theology of John Calvin.

It is interesting that Nevin draws on many of the same early church authors that Wilberforce would use a few years later. Nevin writes, "The sacramental doctrine of the early Church recognized no local presence of Christ's body in the

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid.,19.

elements.... But just as little, on the other hand, did it fall over to the opposite extreme of making the ordinance a mere representation of spiritual blessings to the mind of the worshipper.”<sup>135</sup> Nevin regards the Eucharist to be a peculiar and extraordinary mystery, and as noted previously, he takes a different view than Wilberforce regarding the presence of Christ within the sacrament. But he does share with Wilberforce the search for a normative past. Moving back beyond the classical theology of the Protestant Reformation, Nevin too turns in this time of crisis to the writings of the fathers of the undivided church in order to corroborate and support his position. For both Nevin and Wilberforce, the writings of the undivided church marked by a visible unity carried great weight.

In his sermon, “The Church”, Nevin does not explicitly mention any of the early church fathers. But he uses as a central pillar for his sermon “that ancient article of the Creed: I believe in the holy, catholic Church.”<sup>136</sup> Drawing on the central qualities of unity, holiness and catholicity, Nevin outlines the nature of the church as a body that is visible in the world, precisely as the body of Christ, arguing on incarnational grounds that without a “real church” in the world, there can be no “real Christ” in the world either. In his concluding paragraph, he warns his hearers to be aware of the unchurchly spirit that lays such emphasis on the “invisible” church that it denies the presence of the church in the world, allowing only for what he sees as a Gnostic and Nestorian glow.

We turn our attention now to *Antichrist*, written in 1848. References to the early church fathers are few, but it is important to note the positive attitude that

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<sup>135</sup> Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 121.

<sup>136</sup> Nichols, *The Mercersburg Theology*, 59.

Nevin continues to display towards them. In the Preface, Nevin responds to the challenge offered by Charles Hodge in his review of *The Mystical Presence*. Nevin here continues to argue for “an *organic* union between the natural and the supernatural.”<sup>137</sup> He appeals to the writings of the early church to support his view, noting, “The ancient church fathers abound with this view, of the organic view of the divine life with the human in Christ; and through him in the Church, as lying at the foundation of all Christianity.”<sup>138</sup> Nevin gives special mention to Athanasius, the Gregories, and Basil. He is in agreement with their position, and they clearly have authority for Nevin because of their connection to the undivided church. It is this ancient article of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church that Nevin sees as the antidote to the proliferation of sects that bedevilled the church in America in his time.

Looking at these selected writings from Nevin, written over a period of four years, we see a significant development regarding the early church fathers. Certainly, apart from *The Mystical Presence*, references to the early church fathers are few. However, a negative and even derisive attitude towards the fathers gradually began to shift to a positive one, as Nevin sought that normative past from which to do battle with the rationalist and sectarian spirit that he sought to challenge, both in his Eucharistic theology and in ecclesiology. Moving back behind the period of the Protestant Reformation and Calvin’s theology, the early church fathers would come to be authoritative sources for Nevin in this period of crisis. Theirs was not a binding authority, but it was also not an authority that could

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<sup>137</sup> Nevin, *The Anxious Bench, Antichrist, Catholic Unity*, 8.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

be ignored. There is a foreshadowing here, perhaps, of the deeper and more devastating crisis in Nevin's life when he will turn to the early church fathers once more.

The Oxford movement also embraced the writings of the early church fathers in their struggles with Erastianism and rationalism, but there is a significant difference from Nevin. Herring writes, "In seeking to present evidence for their truth of their concept of the Church the Tractarians here ... turned to the first centuries of Christianity, the early Church, or primitive church of antiquity as it was often then called."<sup>139</sup> They turned to this period because it was the age of the great theologians who first began to articulate the implications of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It was also the period when the great Councils of church took place and when the Creeds were formulated. Finally, it was the time when the church was still undivided. For example, Newman began a systematic reading of the fathers in 1828, and this would result in the publication of the book, *The Arians of the Fourth Century*, published in 1834.<sup>140</sup>

But it is important to note at this point the significant difference between Nevin and the Tractarians in terms of the use and the weight of authority given to the early church fathers. As noted, Nevin gave authority to the early church fathers but it was not binding. He used them primarily to corroborate and support his position regarding Reformed Eucharistic theology. The Tractarians, by contrast, "led by Newman, used the Fathers and antiquity in a radically different way to any previous

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<sup>139</sup> Herring, *What was the Oxford Movement?* 30.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 32.

Anglican tradition.”<sup>141</sup> Like Nevin, High Churchmen had previously used the early church fathers to corroborate their theological positions within Anglicanism. But the men of the Oxford Movement would use Christian antiquity as a benchmark, so that, for them, “Antiquity was the normative model of the true Church, and the Church of England was only a true Church in so far as she was in agreement with that model.”<sup>142</sup> The early church fathers were no longer used in a corroborating fashion, in other words, but rather came to have for the Tractarians a binding authority upon the Church of England.

In conclusion, John Williamson Nevin and the Tractarians shared at this stage a number of parallels that were more than merely superficial, as well as having significant differences. In the face of challenges to ecclesial identity and integrity, both movements turned to the Patristic heritage and sacramental theology. They shared a deep reverence for the catholic tradition. The Eucharist, rooted in a rich theology of the Incarnation, was the center of life within the church and the individual believer for both Nevin and the men from Oxford.

When first exposed to the Oxford movement at Pittsburgh Nevin did not embrace their project but he did grant them respect for what they were trying to achieve. This respect would grow gradually over the years, however, into a deeper affection for the Tractarians because of their shared struggle for the freedom of the church to establish its identity according to its own criteria. This shared affection for the early church fathers and the catholic heritage of the church will figure prominently in Nevin’s theology, as we will see in the next Chapter when we turn

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.



our attention to Nevin's years of crisis. Nevertheless, it is also important to acknowledge that Nevin was not uncritical of the Tractarian movement. As we have seen, there were significant theological differences between them. Yet for both, the identity of the church seems to be rooted in the same thing, a rich, patristically-informed theology of the Incarnation, issuing in a high theology of church and sacrament.

Having examined the development of John Williamson Nevin's theology down to 1848, we turn in the next Chapter specifically to the theological insights that emerged for Nevin during his years of crisis, a crisis that was precipitated by events in the Gorham case in the Church of England, and that led him deeper into sympathy with the Oxford Movement.

## Chapter 4

### John Williamson Nevin and the “Five Years of Dizziness”<sup>143</sup>

#### 4.1 Introduction

The previous Chapter explored the early relationship between John Williamson Nevin and the men of the Oxford Movement. It was a relationship that began with grudging respect from Nevin and grew into a relationship marked by a deep affection but also criticism. Noel Pretila writes, “It was specifically the German theological notion of organic development ... which proved to be the key element differentiating the mission of the Mercersburg Movement from that of the Oxford Movement.”<sup>144</sup> Certainly, this is true, and as we have seen, there is much evidence of this key element of progress to be found in Nevin’s pre-crisis writings. The early church fathers are there as well, finding mention as early as 1846 with the publication of *The Mystical Presence*. However, when we turn our attention to Nevin’s period of crisis we witness Nevin turning backwards to the early church and the early church fathers with greater intention and interest, in an effort to find some solid footing in what was a time of spiritual vertigo. This would seem to indicate that Nevin, despite traveling in “German circles”, has a greater affinity for the Oxford Movement than might first be imagined.

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<sup>143</sup> Nichols, *Romanticism in American theology*, 192. This term is taken from an opponent who later referred to this period of crisis as Nevin's "five years of dizziness".

<sup>144</sup> Pretila, "The Oxford Movement's Influence", 9.

In this Chapter we explore in some depth Nevin's crisis years that were precipitated by the Gorham case in the Church of England, for no previous issue had so focused for Nevin the "church question" and the critical question of historical development. We look in particular at a series of writings dealing with the Church of England, early Christianity and Cyprian of Carthage during this important period in Nevin's life. At this time, family and friends feared that he too would follow John Henry Newman to Rome. As Nichols writes, "Like Newman a decade earlier, Nevin had seen a ghost, the serious realization that Rome might be right."<sup>145</sup>

#### **4.2 The Gorham Case**

As has been noted, Nevin followed the Gorham Case closely, and it was seemingly the 1849 decision by the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council rendered in favour of Gorham that precipitated Nevin's crisis.<sup>146</sup> This period of crisis was also undoubtedly exacerbated by overwork. For a number of years Nevin had been almost singlehandedly carrying the seminary at Mercersburg. Certainly, Schaff was present as well. It was a two-person effort but the statement does give some indication of the professional burden that Nevin was carrying prior to his crisis years.

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<sup>145</sup> Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology*, 195.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid. Nichols notes Nevin's engagement with the Gorham case with no evidence of any local incident that would perhaps serve as a catalyst for Nevin's crisis. Hart, *John Williamson Nevin*, 148. Hart notes that the Gorham case shook Nevin to his core because it challenged the sufficiency of the ecclesiology of Protestantism.

Responsible for teaching, administrative, and fund raising duties, Nevin also had the added responsibility of preaching regularly at the German Reformed congregation in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania. These various professional responsibilities were only the tip of the proverbial iceberg, for Nevin also had responsibilities as a husband, son-in-law and a father of eight children.<sup>147</sup> It is surprising that Nevin was able to produce anything of theological substance at all when one considers the multiple tasks that lay heavy on his shoulders. It would not be a stretch to suggest that because of his myriad responsibilities, Nevin had likely been close to psychological collapse and “burn out” for some time, and it is certainly reasonable to conjecture that he was accordingly vulnerable to what would become his “five years of dizziness.” Hart notes, “Nevin was entering a period characterized by religious doubt, illness and spiritual gloom.”<sup>148</sup> The results of the Gorham decision upon Nevin, furthermore, were exacerbated by the precariousness of the seminary at Mercersburg and the state of nineteenth century Protestantism in the United States. Nevin could very well be described as experiencing a mid-life crisis during these years.

The Gorham Case itself, however, involved a question that was near to Nevin’s own theological commitments, as it concerned most immediately a question in sacramental theology and ecclesiology: the sacramental question concerning the efficacy of baptism. The controversy was also bound up with church-state relations

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<sup>147</sup> Hart, *John Williamson Nevin*, 143. Sadly, three of Nevin's eight children would lead short lives. George Herbert died a year after his birth in 1840. Richard Cecil, born in 1843, died prematurely at the age of twenty-four. John Nevin Jr. who was born in 1846 would die at the age of twenty-six. Robert Nevin became a priest in the Episcopal Church.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

and issues of church identity and church power. Once again, the state, by ruling on the Gorham case, had encroached in an area that was felt by both the men of the Oxford Movement and Nevin to be the sole responsibility of the church, so that it had violated both the divine nature and the integrity of the church. Nevin saw “Gorham as another example of low-church Anglicanism in which sacramental grace had to be abandoned in order to avoid the dangers of Rome.”<sup>149</sup> But Nevin did not at all agree with this unsacramental view of the church. Indeed, he saw the outcome as, in a manner of speaking, a case of the “anxious bench” all over again, with its privileging the decision of the religious subject in relation to issues of faith over the theologically structured life of the church.

He responded to the situation in England by publishing an article in July 1851 entitled, “The Anglican Crisis”<sup>150</sup>. He followed this with separate, extensive articles dealing with the subjects of early Christianity and the early Christian bishop, Cyprian of Carthage, that would follow in 1851 and 1852. Over a relatively short period of one and a half years Nevin, in fact, would delve deeply into the writings of the early church fathers, all in an effort to respond to the critical church question posed by the Gorham case, and that emerged in his own conscience as such a troubling matter during this period of personal crisis.

Nichols notes how “The Anglican Crisis” shows Nevin as engaged with surprising intensity in the affairs of the Church of England.<sup>151</sup> But it is Nichol's

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>150</sup> John Williamson Nevin, "The Anglican Crisis." *Mercersburg Review* 3, no.4 (1851): 359-358.

<sup>151</sup> Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology*, 195. Noel Pretila notes James Hasting Nichols who observes that there does not seem to be a clear connection for

assessment of this situation that is really the greater surprise. As indicated in the previous chapter, both Nevin and the men of the Oxford Movement share a number of parallels that are more than superficial. Both turned to the patristic heritage and a rich sacramental theology in an effort to respond to the ecclesiastical crisis of the day. The Oxford Movement was clearly a partner for Nevin, which he drew upon to combat the blight of modern religious subjectivism. As Nevin wrestled with religious subjectivism found in the forms of revivalism, rationalism and sectarianism, the Oxford men struggled with its manifestation in the forms of “Erastianism” and evangelicalism. So what had begun for Nevin in a spirit of grudging respect had grown in common struggle into deep affection.

A prime example of this affection is found in the relationship between Nevin and Wilberforce. So, with the development of the relationship between Nevin and the representatives of the Oxford Movement, it should not necessarily come as any surprise to find that Nevin would experience the Gorham situation so acutely and respond so intensely. He had, furthermore, a longstanding affection for important aspects of Anglican polity that he saw to be threatened in this situation. As Pretila states, “Nevin admitted later in his life that he had always favoured the practical outworkings of Anglican sacramental theology over the inward emphasis characteristically placed on the sacraments by German theologians.”<sup>152</sup>

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why this event in England so greatly affected Nevin from across the ocean. "The Anglican Crisis" shows Nevin heavily engaged in the affairs of the Church of England with no local incident to explain his intense involvement in English ecclesial affairs.

<sup>152</sup> Pretila, "The Oxford Movement's Influence", 18.

Returning to the issue of the Gorham case, Herring indicates that since the earliest years of the Reformation in England there had been churchmen who had emphasized the continuity of the national Church with its pre-Reformation past and the wider catholic tradition. This sense of continuity was rooted in polity and the structure of the church that remained firmly built on bishops, priests and deacons. This was a deliberate move in order to maintain a link with the catholic past, a link that Herring suggests had been abandoned by many Reformers on the continent of Europe.<sup>153</sup>

As in the centuries past, this sense of continuity was maintained, but took on new importance in the early nineteenth century when the Church of England found itself struggling for its identity in the face of state intrusion in ecclesial affairs. As Herring notes, ‘For the Oxford Movement the existence of the continuing episcopal government in the national Church was a matter of highest importance; the earliest “Tracts for the Times” centred on this concept of Apostolic Succession, the linking of the contemporary Church back to the Apostles themselves and hence to Christ, through the unbroken chain of their successors, the Bishops.’

Herring proceeds to make the point that, “the Tractarians invested this arrangement with an importance, and interpreted it in a way, quite at odds with the English Reformers or those who followed them in the next centuries.”<sup>154</sup> In fact, the concept of authority and its foundation in Apostolic Succession was at the very heart of the Oxford Movement during its early period, as reflected, for instance, in the first Tracts. The sacramental transmission of the authority Jesus had first given

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<sup>153</sup> Herring, *What was the Oxford Movement?*, 6.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

to his apostles, which included the powers to forgive sins, teach, and celebrate the Eucharist, passed on through the centuries to the present generation of bishops. There was sacramental continuity in the apostolic succession, therefore, that extended back to Christ himself.

For the Oxford men this was unquestionably the central point that separated the Church of England from the Protestant churches on the continent of Europe.

As Herring states:

The Church of England possessed this precious chain with its links unbroken by the Reformation that gave it a unique identity back to the early Church and the apostles themselves. To be 'the Church' in the fullest sense of the word, episcopacy and an episcopally ordained priesthood was essential. This was not just a matter of Church order or government; it went to the heart of the Christian life, giving a guarantee to the validity of the sacraments, such as the Eucharist, through which the Church itself was spiritually enlivened.<sup>155</sup>

As will see, the subject of apostolic succession would receive a great deal of attention from Nevin too during his crisis period, when he was driven to focus specifically on the early church and especially on the seminal ecclesiology of Cyprian of Carthage.

Turning our attention to the article, "The Anglican Crisis", it is significant that Nevin used this medium to address not simply the crisis in England, but what he perceived to be the wider crisis in Protestantism as a whole. By raising the issue of the relationship between baptismal grace and the faith of the recipient, Nevin pondered whether "baptism is to remain a sacrament at all for Protestantism, in the old universal church sense."<sup>156</sup> But Nevin believed that this was only the tip of the

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>156</sup> Nevin, "The Anglican Crisis", 372.



iceberg, and that the Gorham Case once again revealed the “puritan face” of modern Protestantism and even of Anglicanism in all of its nonsacramental and nonchurchly aspects. He laments, “This too is clearly the order and course of the age; all is tending, by political and ecclesiastical revolution as well as by the onward march of science, towards this glorious result of independence and freedom.”<sup>157</sup> As a result of these cultural forces, Nevin was concerned that “apostolic succession” had again proven to be no bulwark against the intrusion of the state into what was a doctrinal question. In fact, Nevin writes,

Episcopacy here becomes a mere circumstance; it may be in itself an element of some considerable account for the final settlement of the subject in hand, but it is still a secondary and subordinate particular only, and by no means the central or main thing.<sup>158</sup>

Nevin goes on to note, “Episcopacy, as it prevails in England and this country, admits either too little or too much for the stability of its own claims.”<sup>159</sup> It is for this reason that Nevin did not focus his primary attention on the issues of the sacrament of baptism, baptismal grace and apostolic succession but rather the much more important issue concerning the “church question”.

For Nevin, however, the primary issue was never about polity and governance, and to this extent there is a difference between his views and those of the Oxford Movement. He was concerned rather with the very nature of the church itself. Was the church “a living supernatural fact, back of all such arrangements, having its

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 362.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 361.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 373.

ground and force in the mystery of the Incarnation”?<sup>160</sup> Was it able to truly dispense sacramental grace? Obviously, for Nevin it was and is and could be, and this idea goes far beyond questions of how the church arranges itself either as Episcopalian or Presbyterian, which are treated as matters of relative indifference. Nevin’s emphasis is instead that this idea of sacramental grace “looks directly to the original promise, *Lo I am with you always to the end of the world*; and lays hold first and foremost of the mystical being of the Church.”<sup>161</sup>

Nevin would go on to argue that this central idea concerning the divine constitution of the church had to be affirmed in all its fullness, “in order to believe in divine sacraments, or in divine ministry under any form.”<sup>162</sup> Without this central idea, the church becomes no different than any other voluntary association that has come together for a common purpose, or “anything more than that of the American Tract Society or any other outward league of evangelical sects!”<sup>163</sup> Nevin believed that it was here on this foundation that the church stood, and it was from this point that Nevin would begin to address issues of identity, freedom and ecclesial power during the period of crisis.

Nevin acknowledged that in the Gorham case, the issue of ecclesial freedom was at stake, and he wondered “whether the church shall be allowed to have any such headship of its own at all, or be regarded as a mere branch and dependency of the civil government, like the judiciary, the army or the marine.”<sup>164</sup> Nevin also let

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 377.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 379.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 378.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 381.

this question of ecclesial freedom linger when he cast his gaze to Thomas Chalmers and the establishment of Free Church of Scotland. But a sense of wonderment is always present in Nevin, grounded in the divine constitution of the church.

As a solution to the Gorham crisis Nevin envisioned four possibilities. The first was the deliberate giving up of the sacramental system altogether. The second was Protestant reconciliation with Rome. The third involved a fresh apostolic commission that superseded both Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. The fourth solution, interestingly, involves organic development, as both Protestantism and Roman Catholicism progress to become a new body that exemplifies “the rich wealth of the old Catholic faith”, “the type neither of St. Peter or St. Paul but of both rather as brought together by St. John.”<sup>165</sup> Note that in this fourth and final solution, Nevin is advocating for organic development that continues to progress in the future into this new body, but that, at the same time, his gaze is turned backwards to the early church and the rich deposit of the old Catholic faith. It is not certain whether or not this new “Johannine” body of the church reflects the thought of Ferdinand Christian Bauer. Certainly, Nevin was well versed in German theology so may F. C. Bauer may very well be the source of Nevin’s thought.

As we will see, Nevin would move ever deeper into the Christian past in the ensuing years. The Gorham case had served as a catalyst for this movement, and raised again for Nevin the question of the church’s status as a divine institution, together with the related subjects of freedom and ecclesial identity. This question led Nevin even deeper into Christian history as he sought to determine its origins in

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 396.

his own time of spiritual crisis. With his growing frustration with the “Puritan Protestantism” at home that found expression in a combination of the Bible, emotionalism and private judgment, and with much the same forces now impacting the Church of England in the guise of the Gorham case, Hart notes that Nevin set out to study the church fathers and the earliest forms of Christianity as remedy.<sup>166</sup> Nevin had grown increasingly angry with low-church expressions of Protestantism, an expression where the sacraments and the church lacked an objective dimension. Prelita even goes so far as to write, “Nevin began to ponder the abandonment of the Mercersburg project in favor of the historical method laid down by Newman.”<sup>167</sup> To see if this is the case we turn our attention to Nevin’s other works on the early church fathers.

In 1851 Nevin published the three part series entitled “Early Christianity” in the pages of *The Mercersburg Review*. In this series he challenged the “Puritan” theory of church history that had argued that, “Christianity began unadulterated as a religion solely of the Bible and individual interpretation. Worship resembled that of New England or Scotland.”<sup>168</sup> This “pure” form of Christianity, according to its supporters, only lasted approximately three hundred years before the church became polluted with corruptions, and so the centuries following up to the sixteenth century were considered to be the dark ages of the church. Hence, the need of the

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<sup>166</sup> Hart, *John Williamson Nevin*, 151.

<sup>167</sup> Prelita, "The Oxford Movement's Influence", 20.

<sup>168</sup> Hart, *John Williamson Nevin*, 153. It is interesting to note that Celtic Christianity suffered a similar fate at the hands of Protestants who portrayed it as an early form of Protestantism separate from Rome. See Ian Bradley's *Celtic Christianity: Making Myths and Chasing Dreams* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999)

Protestant Reformation to return the church to its original pristine condition resting solely on the Bible and individual interpretation.

In the first part of the series Nevin writes in response to a letter that had been previously printed in a number of church journals. This letter, written by one Rev. Dr. Bacon, perpetuated the “Puritan” theory of church history as it recounted a recent visit to Lyon, France. Nevin begins his response by calling for clarity and objectivity concerning the Roman Catholic tradition. Certainly, this was a rather courageous act on Nevin’s part, since Protestants in the United States were in the grip of a wave of anti-Catholicism that associated Rome with everything that was un-democratic and therefore un-American. Nevertheless, Nevin writes:

To deal with Romanism to any purpose, we must get rid of the notion that it carries in it no truth, no grace, no principle of religious activity and life; that it is as bad as infidelity, if not a good deal worse; that it lacks all the attributes of a church, and is purely a synagogue of Satan or a mere human confederacy, or worldly and unhallowed ends.<sup>169</sup>

Nevin proceeds then, from this call to charity, to explode the “Puritan” theory of church history. He writes, “No defence of Protestantism can well be more insufficient and unsound, than that by which it is set forth as a pure *repristination* simply of what Christianity was at the beginning.”<sup>170</sup> Echoing the conclusions of John Henry Newman, Nevin notes the incongruity between historical Christianity and modern Protestantism. Nevin goes on to make the point that when one looks at the writings of the early church fathers, Christianity was something very different from modern Protestantism and in fact more closely resembled Roman Catholicism.

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<sup>169</sup> Yrigoyen, and Bricker, eds., *Catholic and Reformed*, 195-196.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

Having made this connection, Nevin, as we will see, is also capable of keeping a critical distance from the full implications of such an ecclesiology. Even the Anglican argument for “apostolic succession” carries no weight for Nevin, despite his deepening affinity for the Oxford Movement. Returning to the argument that he first raised in “The Anglican Crisis”, Nevin challenges the Anglican glorification of the first four or five centuries of the church and its adherence to the concept of “apostolic succession”. Drawing on the church fathers, Cyprian, Ambrose and Augustine, Nevin asks the rhetorical question what these men would make of a church with episcopacy but no unity with Rome.

Nevin’s conclusions here were radical. He writes, “The promise of our Saviour to Peter, is always taken by the fathers in the sense that he was to be the centre of unity for the church, and in the language of Chrysostom to have the presidency of it throughout the whole earth.”<sup>171</sup> Nevin seizes on this concept of the primacy of Peter because, “at the ground of it lies the conception of a truly Divine character belonging to the church as a whole”<sup>172</sup> As Nichols writes, “Bishops in apostolic succession, but out of communion with Rome, would have been mere schismatics to Cyprian, Ambrose, or Augustine”<sup>173</sup>

Anglicanism, then, whether it was high or low, was simply schism and even dressing it up in “Tractarian” garb and ceremony would not change this fact. In this first article Nevin would close by noting, “The fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries were not Protestants of either the Anglican or the Puritan school. They

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>173</sup> Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology*, 201.

would have felt themselves lost, and away from home altogether, in the arms of English Episcopalianism, as well as in the more bony and stern embrace of Scotch Presbyterianism.”<sup>174</sup> One could not ask for greater clarity concerning the status of Protestantism or Anglicanism in relation to the early church.

In the second and third articles Nevin would continue the same argument regarding this “Puritan” theory of church history, in an effort to demolish it once and for all. However, as Nichols notes, Nevin pushed back beyond the fourth and fifth centuries into the second and third in order to demonstrate “that there never was in truth any such identity as Puritanism dreams between the early church and its own modern self.”<sup>175</sup> Nevin made the difference between two contrasting ecclesial identities, namely early church and “Puritanism”, explicit in six significant ways.

The first dealt with the very nature of the church, as to whether it was simply a human construct designed to teach or whether it was a divine institution that actually mediated grace to those who were members of it. The other five differences all flowed directly from this first one: the ministry — pastors versus a divinely established order of ministry; the sacraments — actions of the faithful or mediations of divine grace; the Bible — interpreted privately versus corporate interpretation with the church; the order of doctrine — theological novelty versus the creeds of the ancient church; and finally faith in miracles — supernaturalism

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<sup>174</sup> Yrigoyen, and Bricker, eds., *Catholic and Reformed*, 205. Nevin would attribute this comment to John Henry Newman and give him credit in the footnote. He also would supply Newman's quote in its entirety concerning what type of church St. Athanasius and St. Ambrose would feel at home in if they were brought back to life.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

versus rationalism.<sup>176</sup> The third article in the series would continue to pursue the familiar argument of the first two articles, but adds to it a significant new emphasis, one that will be taken up separately in what follows.

### **4.3 Nevin and Newman**

In the third article of the series, “Early Christianity”, Nevin considers at some length the issue of the historical development of the church. Drawing on recent scholarship on the early church by both German and Anglican scholars such as Richard Rothe, Johan Adam Mohler, Isaac Taylor and others, Nevin gave considerable attention to this topic. But this issue became especially focused for Nevin because of John Henry Newman’s, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, a seminal book that had been published in 1845.

Newman’s *Essay* introduced this concept of the development of doctrine in an effort to defend Roman Catholic teaching from its Anglican and Protestant detractors. Relying on an extensive study of the early church fathers, Newman argued that the development of doctrine could be traced through church history, and was implicit in some way in the revelation found in scripture and tradition. Time in combination with human reason is necessary for understanding the full comprehension of such doctrinal truth as well as the consequences of it that might at first not be obvious.

Regarding this work, Nevin would write, “Few theological tracts, in the English language are more worthy of being read, or more likely to reward a diligent

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 232-254.



perusal with lasting benefit and fruit.”<sup>177</sup> Nevin then proceeds to give an overview of Newman’s argument that insisted upon continuity in regards to the historical development of the church. There is a substance, a kernel, and a pole of continuity that exists even in the midst of the twists, turns and modifications that have resulted through history. Following Newman’s lead, however, Nevin seizes on the early church as the measure of modern Christianity.

In Nevin’s opinion, modern Protestantism, especially as it manifested itself in the United States, lacked continuity with the substance of the early church and was a long way from the earliest Christian forms of the faith. Nevertheless, he also took the view that any such continuity as could ever be possible would need to take into account the concept of development. Continuity, in short, is not something static. Nevin writes, “It *must* be one with the ancient church, to have any valid claim to its prerogatives and powers; but this it *can* be only in the way of historical growth. Give that up, and all is gone. Without the idea of development, the whole fact of Protestantism resolves itself into a fearful lie.”<sup>178</sup>

Nevin would bring the series, “Early Christianity”, to a close by summarizing his arguments. In a series of eight propositions, Nevin emphasizes the fact that the early church is not in any way shape or form identical with modern Protestantism. Whether one is considering the established early church of the fourth and fifth centuries, or even pushing the relationship back to the more precarious time of Irenaeus of Lyons, modern Protestantism is not identical with the early church. Nevin notes, “Protestantism then, if it is to be rationally vindicated at all on the

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 289.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 291.

platform of faith, must be set in union with the original fact of Christianity through the actual history of this fact, as we have it in the progress of the old Catholic church from the second century down to the sixteenth.”<sup>179</sup> From the first article to the third, Nevin remains consistent in his denunciation of the modern “Puritan” view of church history. He hammers home again and again that the early church is in no way identical with either modern American Protestantism or nineteenth century Anglicanism. Rather, it is the Roman Catholic Church that better maintains unity with the early church and the ancient faith.

It is interesting and perhaps even fascinating to watch Nevin’s respect and estimation for the Roman Catholic tradition grow with each article of “Early Christianity”. At the end of the essay, “The Anglican Crisis”, Nevin left us with four possibilities for future church development, but when we reach the end of “Early Christianity”, it is Newman’s theory of historical development that receives the attention with its emphasis on the development of a deposit of doctrine that was in some way present in the divine revelation of scripture and tradition from the very beginning, but that requires such development. This sense of doctrinal continuity through the early church and the following centuries, along with its continuing elucidation, is for Nevin the measure of the contemporary church.

It is also important to note how Nevin was continuing his attempt to establish a solid foundation for the identity and freedom of the church to operate according to its own internal criteria. By stressing the idea of a continuity that extends through the early church and subsequent centuries of church history, the contemporary

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 309.

church is placed by Nevin on a much more solid footing regarding its life and ministry, as it struggles with the encroachment of the state and of individual subjectivism. Obviously, Nevin's conclusions concerning modern Protestantism were devastating, and they left his colleague Philip Schaff and members of Nevin's own family wondering if he too was going to convert to Roman Catholicism. A number of Nevin's opponents within the German Reformed church were also understandably dismayed by his conclusions and called for him to be disciplined by the denomination.

Nevin's respect for the Roman Catholic tradition would continue to grow, however, with his subsequent series of articles on Cyprian of Carthage, the third century North African bishop. Nevin would publish four articles on Cyprian in 1852 in the pages of *The Mercersburg Review*. The first article provided an overview of the life of Cyprian and the church in the third century. The second article looked more in depth at Cyprian's theological response to those Christians who had lapsed during the persecution by the Roman Emperor Decius and the issue of schism within the church. In this article Nevin begins to develop Cyprian's ecclesiology with particular emphasis being devoted to the idea of the unity of the church. The third and fourth articles offer a contrast between Cyprian's doctrine of the church and that of modern Protestantism.

Hart notes, "This four part series mainly added depth to the point already made, namely modern Protestantism was far removed from the earliest forms of faith."<sup>180</sup> But the particular significance of the study of Cyprian for Nevin was the

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<sup>180</sup> Hart, *John Williamson Nevin*, 155.

fact that he found embodied in the person of Cyprian a high view of the church grounded in the office of Peter that stood in stark contrast to modern Protestantism. For Nevin, the figure and thought of Cyprian embodied the principles that Nevin himself had laid out in the series, “Early Christianity”, beginning with the divine constitution of the church which finds its ground and life in the Incarnation. As Nichols states, however, “Nevin consistently preferred the Roman to the Anglican reading of Cyprian. Cyprian was not merely a champion of hierarchy and episcopal succession; he found the virtue of the episcopal office dependent on the unity of the bishops, a unity signalized by their communion with Rome.”<sup>181</sup> So fulsome was Nevin’s praise for the “Roman” Cyprian that his writing at certain points almost reached the level of hagiography.

With the publication of the several essays comprising “Early Christianity” and “Cyprian”, Nevin’s conclusion concerning the future of Protestantism and its historic connection to the early church became all the bleaker. At the end of the fourth article on Cyprian, Nevin notes, “Early Christianity was in its constitutional elements, not Protestantism, but Catholicism.”<sup>182</sup> The two essays, “Early Christianity” and “Cyprian”, had demonstrated the non-historical character of contemporary American Protestantism — and, as Nevin saw it (agreeing with Newman, evidently), of nineteenth century Anglicanism as well. They had also defended the strength of the Roman Catholic position in relation to historic Christianity and argued that modern Protestantism and Anglicanism were unable to offer a substantive challenge.

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<sup>181</sup> Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology*, 201-202.

<sup>182</sup> Nevin, “Cyprian”, 561.

With the end of the series on Cyprian, Nevin had thus produced a substantial study on the early church, but “by the end of the series in the fall of 1852 Nevin was clearly growing weary of the tension between modern Protestantism and historic Christianity.”<sup>183</sup> However, it was becoming clearer to Nevin that if he was to find a churchly and sacramental expression of historic Christianity, then he must turn to the Roman Catholic tradition. Yet he could not bring himself at his point to follow in the footsteps of Newman and Newman’s disciples who had made their way to Rome.

Nevin had, however, made his theological objections to modern Protestantism abundantly clear, and he sounded like a convert in the making. But the truth is that he had reservations concerning Roman Catholicism as well. These reservations were grounded in the subject of human nature. Hart writes, “Catholicism made authority everything and freedom nothing. As such, human nature was completely passive in the reception of religious truth as handed down by the teaching office of the church. While Protestantism provided an outlet in private judgment and will, Rome crushed all dissent.”<sup>184</sup> Nevin also objected to Roman Catholicism because, in his judgment, it allowed no room for organic development, as everything was subordinated to the complete authority of the church — a view that differed radically from John Henry Newman’s.

In fact, Nevin was convinced that Protestantism, in principle, provided a needed corrective to allow proper scope for the concept of development. With these

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<sup>183</sup> Hart, *John Williamson Nevin*, 156. Nevin had always held out hope in the Protestantism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries but by the end of the article on Cyprian that hope was gone as well.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

objections to Roman Catholicism, Nevin found himself facing a genuine spiritual quandary, while “Roman Catholics as well as Protestants were watching the course of affairs in Mercersburg with close interest.”<sup>185</sup> As noted, Nevin had grown weary of the tension brought on by his seeking for the truth, but this weariness was not simply of an intellectual sort. It included physical weariness if not physical exhaustion, and Nevin’s concern for his own health had grown during this period of crisis. As Nichols puts it, “Thus for him the question between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism was largely the question as to which church to die in.”<sup>186</sup> By 1853, in other words, John Williamson Nevin, the theological leader of the Mercersburg Movement, was a confused and broken man standing on the verge of converting to Roman Catholicism, and yet finding himself unable to do for reasons of principle.

#### **4.4 The Crisis Ends**

Ultimately, Nevin did not make the move to Rome. This certainly may come as a surprise when one considers that he sounded so definite about the superiority of the Roman Catholic tradition at the close of his essays on the early church. Just how close he may have been to following in Newman’s footsteps is difficult to judge. Certainly, Nevin, for the reasons stated above, valued both the Roman Catholic and the classical Protestant position, but in his writings during this period he never explicitly states his reasons for remaining within the German Reformed Church.

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<sup>185</sup> Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology*, 210. The *New York Freeman's Journal* and the *Philadelphia Catholic Herald* continued to urge prayers for Nevin's conversion.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

Nichols notes that 1854 marks a pause in Nevin's story, because there is no clear evidence of his state of mind between the whole period February and November of that year, until Nevin delivered a sermon entitled, "The Christian Ministry", at an installation service for his successor as professor of theology at the seminary.<sup>187</sup> Both Nichols and Hart argue that Nevin's participation in the service and the content of his sermon give the clearest indication of his decision to remain within the Reformed tradition. The sermon did not by any means signal a clear vindication for Protestantism over Roman Catholicism, but the sermon did indicate a strong positive turn in Nevin's life, indicating that his "five years of dizziness" had passed, and that he would remain within the German Reformed Church.<sup>188</sup>

In an effort to defend the freedom of the church, then, and as the result of his deepening relationship with the men of the Oxford Movement, John Williamson Nevin had been following events in England very closely. The Gorham Case served as the catalyst for what can only be considered Nevin's years of crisis, where he struggled to find the foundations for the identity of the church as well as to explain its development in the midst of history. This crisis was, of course, exacerbated by Nevin's exhaustion from carrying too many professional and personal responsibilities, but this search was more than intellectual. It was a search that was also deeply spiritual and personal.

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<sup>187</sup> Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology*, 230.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 234. Nevin decided to remain in the Protestant fold in the same month that his Anglo-Catholic friend, Robert I. Wilberforce, went over to Rome. Unfortunately, Wilberforce would die in 1857 as he was preparing for ordination in the Roman Catholic Church.

Frustrated as well by the vapidness of American Protestantism because of its turn to the subject and its reliance on personal judgment, John Williamson Nevin turned his attention backwards and gave attention to the early church fathers as a measure against which to set the contemporary church. Nevin came to the conclusion that modern Protestantism is emphatically not identical with the early church, and that its common theory of historical development was not merely insufficient but wrong. This conclusion impacted on Nevin's views of the identity of Anglicanism as well.

Nevin argued, however, that the church is grounded in the Incarnation. It is more than simply a human construct formed for a common purpose. As noted in Chapter 2, Nevin struggled for years against the ecclesiology that he labeled "Puritanism". "Puritanism" for him represented an understanding of the nature of the church that found expression in the "subjective" turn in American theology and church life. "Puritanism" for Nevin stressed the view that faith in Christ must be a conscious personal experience, something freely chosen by the individual rather than mediated in a "churchly" way. This caused people to question the adequacy and value of church attendance, liturgy, Creeds, sacraments and Catechism without this personal experience of Christ.

Nevin would counter this theology with the claim that Christianity is a life grounded in the Incarnation in which one participates in the continuing "body" of Christ, in the form of the community called the church. Christianity is not a series of doctrines to be learned, or a set of Creeds to be memorized. It is not a function of individual decision, or a creature of the state. Rather, the church is the bearer of the



risen Christ to the world, through tradition, scripture, sacraments, an ordered ministry, proclamation and liturgy. The church gives birth to her children through the sacrament of baptism, and continues to nourish them throughout their lives. For the purpose of the church is not to reflect the dynamics of modern democratic individualism, but to embody in its life that mystical union in which the divine-human life of Christ flows into the members of his body.

Certainly, this theological point is not an ecclesiological innovation. It can be found far beyond Nevin, and Nevin himself had been arguing for the divine constitution of the church since his earliest writings. The other theological points that Nevin made concerning ordered ministry, sacraments, Biblical interpretation as well as theological doctrine flowed directly from the principle of the Incarnation and the church as a divine institution. Nevin's insistence on organic connection with the early church, however, and his commitment to the principle of historic development, ultimately places him under the "spell" of John Henry Newman who also looked backwards in an effort to establish a sense of continuity for the sake of the identity of the church.

Newman felt that the twin dimensions of continuity and progress could be reconciled through his theory concerning the development of doctrine in combination with an office with teaching authority residing in Christ. In this dynamic, the church could make definitive statements because of the doctrine of Tradition. But in Nevin's view, evidently, there was little evidence in nineteenth century Roman Catholicism of a taste or sense for such development, while the

danger from this position that emphasized a single teaching authority was that allowed little room for protest or dissent.

Nevin recognized this shortcoming in Newman's efforts to reconcile continuity and progress in relation to the church. As noted in Chapter 2, Nevin, drawing on a variety of Hegelianism, outlined an "organic" model of development that saw the Incarnation as progressive, finding expression through dialectical advancement in the history of the world. But in the end, Nevin was not a philosophical thinker, and as someone who was "more backward looking than forward looking in his doctrine of organic development, he was already sympathetic to the Oxford Movement's appeal to antiquity."<sup>189</sup>

Nevin's "years of dizziness" had taken an intellectual and spiritual toll on him that would leave Nevin scarred and worn. But he had established to his satisfaction that the true identity of the church must be grounded in its divine constitution, and furthermore, that it must find continuity with the early church as reflected in particular in the patristic theology of church and sacrament.

At this point in Nevin's journey, with his open return to the Protestant fold, a question perhaps arises. In his remaining years, could Nevin articulate a "Reformed Catholicism" that would be rich enough and strong enough to meet the challenge of the "church question" in the face of revivalism, anti-catholicism and the vapid state of American Protestantism?

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<sup>189</sup> Prelita, "The Oxford Movement's Influence", 20.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusion**

This final Chapter of the thesis will seek to give an assessment of John Williamson Nevin's theological work, and of the continuing theological relevance of his struggles with the "church question". Possible avenues for further inquiry concerning Nevin and the Mercersburg Movement will also be offered.

#### **5.1 Introduction:**

The "church question" dominated the thought of many theologians in the nineteenth century. It was a question that was born of crisis, and a question that crossed both denominational and national boundaries. Theologians on the European continent as well as those in England, Scotland and the United States gave considerable attention to this question, and their answers in some cases gave birth to a series of "high church" movements. John Williamson Nevin and the Mercersburg Movement that he established were a product of this intense time of struggle in the life of the church.

At this point in the study, however, we seek to give a sober estimation of Nevin's efforts and influence as he wrestled with the "church question". Certainly, it is not too much to suggest that Nevin was consumed by the "church question" as it manifested itself in the United States. The characteristic American Protestant turn to the "subject", spread through the revivalist movement popularized by Charles Finney with his emphasis on an emotional experience of salvation, was the initial

occasion for the development of Nevin's ecclesiological thought. This emphasis on emotionalism and personal religious decision led to the creation of the "anxious bench" and the "bench" became the symbol in Nevin's estimation for everything that was wrong with American Protestantism in the middle decades of the nineteenth century.

Nevin criticized this expression of American Protestantism that he called "Puritanism" because of its impact on church life. The church had come to be viewed simply as a voluntary association of people who had come together for a common purpose, and such a theologically compromised ecclesiology lacked both theological substance and continuity with the ancient faith. The results of these defects were manifest when church authority was dismissed, when men were ordained on the basis of their charismatic personalities without any approval from church bodies, and when the principle of private judgment was exalted in such a way as to defend schism.

In their efforts to establish personal identity, nineteenth century Americans were free to join whatever church they found to their liking. New denominations and sects sprang up almost overnight as the result of new interpretations of scripture by individuals standing outside the bounds of the wider church body. New religious groups like the Seventh Day Adventists and the Church of Latter Day Saints even went beyond the boundaries of historic Christianity. The subjective turn transformed the religious landscape of the United States in the nineteenth century.

John Williamson Nevin saw the threat that this subjective turn with its emphasis on the sovereign individual posed to both the identity and the integrity of

the church. He struggled in the face of the new “Puritanism”, as he called it, to establish a form of Protestantism that was both churchly and sacramental. He struggled in particular to articulate a Eucharistic ecclesiology that would serve as an alternative to the “low-church”, subjective expressions of Christianity that he found in American Protestantism.

In his struggle Nevin sought a normative past, a solid ecclesiological footing on which to stand. It has been suggested by D. G. Hart that Nevin looked for this foundation in the church of his youth, with its emphasis on sober worship, sacraments, creeds and catechetical instruction. It has also been suggested by Brian Gerrish that Nevin sought this solid footing in the 16th century theology of John Calvin.

However, this study has demonstrated that Nevin found solid footing rather in the Incarnation and its continuing expression in the world of time and space, as was reflected, in his view, in the life of the early church and the writings of the early church fathers. For Nevin, an incarnational understanding of the church implied a “high church” ecclesiology. This meant a visible organization, marked by common worship as well as by an ordered ministry intended for authoritative proclamation and grace-bearing sacraments. Here, each mark of the church found its foundation in the Incarnation and stood in continuity with the early church fathers.

Nevin’s efforts to articulate this ecclesiology, however, were aided greatly by his relationship with the Oxford Movement. The men of the Oxford Movement shared a similar struggle for the identity and integrity of the church in the face of the challenges of modernity. What had begun simply with a nod of respect grew for

Nevin over the years into a relationship of depth, in which strong theological affinities are evident. The parallels between Nevin and the Oxford Movement were more than superficial, and it was events in England that served as a catalyst to Nevin's years of crisis. In his struggle for the identity and integrity of the church in the face of "Puritanism", Nevin found ready partners in the representatives of the Oxford Movement as they each turned their attention backwards to the very earliest centuries of the church in order to find the resources for the present struggle.

Like the leaders of the Oxford Movement, Nevin discovered what he needed in the doctrine of the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. For Nevin, the church is the visible body of Christ in the world because of this basic incarnational claim. It is more than simply one more voluntary association seeking to do some good in the world. The church is an extension of the Incarnation, as it seeks with the aid of the Holy Spirit full redemptive expression in the midst of human history. The church is, for Nevin, both human and divine and it is a medium of God's grace to the world.

According to Nevin, the Incarnation manifests itself in the world through an ordered ministry, as well as through the ancient creeds and doctrines of the church. Within it, we find the corporate interpretation of scripture rather than simply an individual hermeneutic. The sacraments, especially the Eucharist, make visible the body of Christ for his people. The Eucharist is truly a sacrament of the real presence of Christ with his people and through this sacrament they are nourished on the true body and blood of Christ.

For Nevin, the Incarnation implies a churchly and sacramental system that stands in continuity, not simply with the Protestant Reformers, but with the early

church fathers. This churchly and sacramental system with its emphasis on unity and catholicity, best expresses the identity and integrity of the church as the visible body of Christ in the world. Nevin seeks in this way to provide an important corrective to modern “Puritanism’s” subjectivism by emphasizing that the church is the body of Christ, in which the Holy Spirit is working in the world through the sacraments and an ordered ministry. Ecclesiology must be grounded in the Incarnation, and find its voice in a rich sacramental theology. It is there that the church can uniquely discover its freedom and its identity in opposition to those cultural forces that insist that the church should be defined differently.

Unfortunately, while John Williamson Nevin continues to be a subject of interest to a handful of scholars, he has not enjoyed the same success and lasting impact as the Oxford Movement, and in the American context, the principle of religious subjectivism clearly triumphed. This conclusion is not meant to diminish Nevin’s theological efforts in relation to the identity and integrity of the church, but it represents simply an honest assessment of the man’s influence. The Oxford Movement continued to grow and has to a considerable extent shaped modern Anglicanism, not least through recent liturgical reforms within the Anglican tradition. Certainly, Nevin was both intellectually and theologically creative, but his legacy and that of the Mercersburg Movement is great deal more modest, finding expression only amongst a handful of adherents primarily in the United Church of Christ in the United States through the work of the Mercersburg Society — of which I am a member.

So why does John Williamson Nevin matter? Nevin matters because he fought for the freedom of the church to articulate an identity independent of the cultural forces of his day. By rejecting modern “Puritanism” and the subjective turn found so prominently in nineteenth century American Protestantism, with its unchurchly and unsacramental character, Nevin articulated a vision of the church that was grounded much more firmly in historic Christianity. His theology was thereby more capable of rooting the identity of the church in its own internal criteria, constituted by the doctrine of the Incarnation, and in continuity with the writings of the early church fathers. Nevin thus emphasized the corporate over the individual, and the ecclesial over the personal, because for him the church truly was the body of Christ in the world.

But Nevin’s struggle for identity and integrity is not limited to nineteenth century America, because his critique of modern “Puritanism”, with its emphasis on the individual and its characteristic emotionalism, raises a number of questions concerning the identity of the church in our day also, especially as it finds expression in contemporary North American and even global Evangelicalism. In our time, as in Nevin’s, churches of classical Protestantism are not immune from these forces. We face much the same struggle for the “soul” of the church. For many people in Canada and the United States, after all, and in the wider world as well, the church is not the body of Christ in the world operating according to its own internal criteria. It is rather a “product” to be shopped for by individuals like any other commodity. The church provides “services” to meet particular individual



needs. This emphasis on the individual continues to perpetuate the “Puritanism” of Nevin’s day.

This modern expression of Nevin’s “Puritanism” finds embodiment especially, as I have said, in contemporary Evangelicalism. Here, in this way of being the church, the individual is given precedence over the corporate. The spectres of anonymous “mega-churches”, in which individuals alone matter; of non-denominational, so-called “community” churches cut off both from the world and from other Christians; and the frightening “gospel of prosperity” thus appear on our religious horizon. The worst excesses of consumer culture are here married to Christianity for the sake of cultural “relevance”, and supposedly in the interest of the individual Christian.

It is to this very point that John Williamson Nevin speaks still, by providing an important theological corrective to this subjective turn. Nevin emphasizes the fundamental theological claim that the church is firmly rooted, not in individual decision, but in the event of the Incarnation. It is therefore the visible body of Christ in the world, and it finds its identity and its integrity in continuity with the early church, in the sacraments and in profession of the ancient Creeds. It grasps itself as one with Jesus Christ in his resurrection power — or it does not grasp itself at all.

Nevin’s critique of the American Evangelicalism of his own day is an area that deserves greater attention and further research. Nevin’s writings raise serious questions concerning Evangelicalism’s theological depth and its relationship to modern culture. The ecclesiology of John Williamson Nevin also offers the

opportunity for a series of ecumenical bridges with other “high church” expressions of historic Christianity. For such reasons, it ought not to be forgotten.

This study has explored the deep, though not uncritical relationship between Nevin and the Oxford Movement, and it has offered an avenue for more fruitful research, I would suggest, on the relationship between John Williamson Nevin and Robert I. Wilberforce. Similar research could be done on the potential relationship between Nevin’s Protestant ecclesiology, and the Protestant relationship with both Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy — a wider question concerning which Nevin himself was mainly silent, but which has emerged as a major issue of importance in the context of modern ecumenism.

W. Bradford Littlejohn in his book, *The Mercersburg Theology and the Quest for Reformed Catholicity*, has done some initial work in this area of research. In these traditions, we find a reliance on the early church fathers and a concerted effort to be in continuity with historic Christianity. Nevin’s “Reformed catholicism” may very well serve as a point of contact with these venerable traditions and an important, if neglected, resource for those wishing to explore such ecumenical questions in our time.

John Williamson Nevin’s response to the “church question” in nineteenth century America was marked by creativity, struggle and crisis. Nevin attempted to uphold the freedom of the church to establish its identity according to its own internal criteria of unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity by stressing historic continuity with the ancient catholic faith. He did this through a renewed appreciation for the early church and the early church fathers, an appreciation that

was also shared by the men of the Oxford Movement. Nevin perhaps stressed the “pole” of continuity over the “pole” of progress, as he looked backwards to the historic roots of Christianity in an effort to respond to the ecclesial challenges of his time, but he was also acutely aware of the importance of the theme of historic development, as likely associated the Protestant principle with it. No doubt he would have been thrilled by the ecumenical innovations of the twentieth century. But in his own time, John Williamson Nevin offered a courageous attempt, developed in the face of individualism, revivalism and rationalism, to reconnect theologically with the Church’s ancient foundation and to find a unity rooted in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ.

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