

The Mercersburg Christology

Introduction

John Williamson Nevin (1803-1886) was an American theologian who taught at Mercersburg Seminary—the seminary of the German Reformed Church in the United States—in Pennsylvania from 1840-1851 and wrote numerous books, tracts, and journal articles propounding what would come to be known as the Mercersburg Theology.¹ The Mercersburg Theology is rooted in German idealist thought and challenged many aspects of the ecclesiastical scene of nineteenth century America, such as its antiauthoritarianism, its lack of historical perspective, and its individualism. But underlying all of these challenges was the fundamental tenet of the Mercersburg system: the centrality of the Person of Christ. The purpose of what follows is to demonstrate that Nevin's understanding of the Incarnation and Christ's organic union with humanity conditioned how he thought of the Atonement as well as the two most enduring aspects of the Mercersburg system: its doctrine of the Church and its theory of historical development. We will begin by examining Nevin's Christology and the place which the Incarnation held in his thought. This will be followed by an analysis of the impact which this Christology had on his opinions regarding the Atonement, the Church, and history.

Nevin's Christology

In a letter to Dr. Henry Harbaugh, Nevin explains in perhaps the most systematic and concise form which we possess the fundamental tenets of the Mercersburg Theology. In this

¹ Richard E. Wentz, *John Williamson Nevin: American Theologian* (Oxford University, 1997), 5.

letter he makes it clear that the Person of Christ is the central feature of his entire thought, stating that: “The distinguishing character of the Mercersburg Theology, in one word, is its Christological interest, its way of looking at all things through the Person of the crucified and risen Savior.”² This “Christological interest” focuses on three areas in particular: the incarnation of the eternal Logos, the organic union between the incarnate Christ and the human race, and the mystical union of the incarnate Christ with his people.

Earlier in the same letter to Harbaugh, Nevin declares concerning his theological system that,

Its cardinal principle is the fact of the Incarnation. This viewed not as a doctrine or speculation but as a real transaction of God in the world, is regarded as being necessarily itself the essence of Christianity, the sum and substance of the whole Christian redemption. Christ saves the world, not ultimately by what he teaches or what he does, but by what he *is* in the constitution of his own person.³

Here we have a theme that is reiterated throughout Nevin’s writings. When most American Christians were focusing on what Christ did (his work) or what he said (his doctrine), Nevin wanted to push the emphasis back to the foundation of who Christ is in his very being as the God-Man. According to Nevin, nothing Christ did or said has any meaning apart from the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures in his very person.

The two works in which Nevin lays out his Christology in the fullest way are his 1846 work *The Mystical Presence* and his tract, *Antichrist, or the Spirit of Sect and Schism*, published two years later. As the contents of *Antichrist* will be the primary focus of a later section, our

² Nevin, John Williamson *Letter to Dr. Henry Harbaugh*, in Catholic and Reformed: Selected Theological Writings of John Williamson Nevin. (Edited by Charles Yrigoyen Jr. and George H. Bricker. Pittsburgh, PA: Pickwick Press, 1978.), 410.

³ Ibid. 408.

discussion here will be confined to the Christological teaching contained in *The Mystical Presence*.

The Mystical Presence was written primarily as a defense of the historic Reformed or Calvinistic understanding of the Lord's Supper, but it betrays the Christological focus of Nevin that a large portion of the work is taken up with a discussion of the person of Christ and his relation to the world and his people. Here Nevin postulates his fundamentally organic understanding of the Person of Christ and his union with humanity. In the Incarnation, the divine Logos took on human form, not simply so that he could do the work which no human had the ability to do, but so that he could *be* what no human being could be. The Incarnation is the fundamental *fact* of the Christian redemption because in it God became organically united with the human race in the Person of Christ.

In Nevin's thinking, an organic understanding of redemption is necessary because the fall of mankind into sin was organic in nature: "The ruin in which we lie is an organic ruin; the ruin of our nature; universal and whole, not simply because all men are sinners, but as making all men to be sinners. Men do not make their own nature, their nature makes them."⁴ Thus, it is not enough for Christ to have simply done for man what man could not do—i.e., atone for sins committed—for this only deals with the guilt of sin. It is more fundamental that Christ *be* what humanity cannot *be*, thereby dealing with the organic corruption which entered the race through the disobedience and subsequent corruption of Adam and Eve. Hence, in the incarnation Christ,

⁴ John Williamson Nevin. *The Mystical Presence: A Vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist*. (Edited by Augustine Thompson. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000.), 155.

by entering into humanity, united human nature with his divine nature and thereby elevated the race to a status which could not otherwise have been achieved:

That the race might be saved, it was necessary that a work should be wrought not beyond it, but in it; and this inward salvation to be effective must lay hold of the race itself in its organic, universal character, before it could extend to individuals, since in no other form was it possible for it to cover fully the breadth and depth of the ruin that lay in its way. Such an inward salvation of the race required that it should be joined in a living way with the divine nature itself, as represented by the everlasting Word or *Logos*, the fountain of all created light and life. The Word accordingly became flesh, that is assumed humanity into union with itself.⁵

Flowing from Nevin's understanding of the organic union between Christ and humanity is his perspective on the believer's mystical union with Christ. According to Nevin, the salvation of a Christian is not merely an abstract idea contained in a certain order of doctrines; it is an existential fact of the believer's life. The very power of Jesus Christ's resurrected life is actually communicated into the Christian's own being in a dynamic way:

Christ communicates his own life substantially to the soul on which he acts, causing it to grow into his very nature. This is the *mystical union*; the basis of our whole salvation; the only medium by which it is possible for us to have an interest in the grace of Christ under any other view.⁶

Therefore Christ, the ideal man, communicates his life to his people in a real, substantial way, activating within them a divine power and life which renews their corrupted nature, eventually culminating in the eschatological resurrection.⁷ This understanding of the mystical union between Christ and believers looks very similar to the vine and branches analogy employed by

⁵ Ibid. 156. Nevin's patristic scholarship is demonstrated here in that this was basically the understanding of the early Church as represented by the Nicene and Chalcedonian Creeds as well as in the writings of Athanasius and the Cappadocian Fathers.

⁶ Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 159.

⁷ Ibid. 166.

Jesus himself, which is used by Nevin as support for his doctrine.⁸ According to William DiPuccio, this “actualization of the ideal in space and time is... the *fons et origo* of the Mercersburg Theology.”⁹

Atonement and Imputation

Because of the emphasis he placed on the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures of Christ in his thought, Nevin was led to challenge the doctrines of the Atonement and Imputation as they were understood in his day by conservative American Protestants. For Nevin, Jesus is not merely the federal representative of His people; he actually takes up the nature of his people and communicates his own life to them. This understanding brought Nevin into opposition with the traditional American Protestant understanding that it was Christ’s work of atonement that was most crucial and that the Incarnation was primarily brought about so that Jesus could pay the penalty for the guilt of sins and that his righteousness could be imputed in a forensic way to his people as their representative. This way of looking at redemption was unthinkable for Nevin, because it does not deal with the fundamental problem of the organic corruption in human nature. Human nature needs to be redeemed in fact, not in a purely legal, abstract fashion.

Although he does relegate the Atonement to a secondary status below the Incarnation in his system, Nevin does not do away completely with its significance, for he declares the

⁸ Ibid. 216.

⁹ William DiPuccio, *Nevin’s Idealistic Philosophy*, in Reformed Confessionalism in Nineteenth Century America: Essays on the Thought of John Williamson Nevin (43-67). (Edited by Sam Hamstra and Arie Griffioen. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 1995.), 44.

Atonement to have been necessary for the forgiveness of sins.¹⁰ But he is clear that the Atonement is only efficacious to redeem humanity as it relates to the union of the divine nature with humanity in Christ's person. Also, Nevin denies a strictly forensic understanding of the Atonement because, according to him, sin is a deep rooted organic fact of human existence and must be dealt with within our nature, not outside of it. All the forensic imputation of righteousness in the world will avail for nothing if our nature itself is not elevated from its state of corruption:

The atonement as a foreign work, could not be made to reach us in the way of a true salvation. Only as it may be considered *immanent* in our nature itself, can it be imputed to us as ours, and so become available in us for its own ends... When Christ died and rose, humanity died and rose at the same time in his person: not figuratively, but truly; just as it had fallen before in the person of Adam.¹¹

It is important to note at this point that Nevin does not deny forensic imputation as such. In fact, he claims that his placing of the Atonement under the Incarnation and the organic union of Christ with humanity was an attempt to defend and establish the doctrine of imputation:

Do we then discard the doctrine of imputation, as maintained by the orthodox theology in opposition to the vain talk of the Pelagians? By no means. We seek only to *establish* the doctrine; for without it, most assuredly, the whole structure of Christianity must give way. It is only when placed on false ground that it becomes untenable in the way now stated... The Bible knows nothing of a simply outward imputation, by which something is reckoned to a man that does not belong to him in fact... The scriptures make two cases, in this respect, fully parallel. We are justified freely by God, on the ground of what Christ has done and suffered in our room and stead. His righteousness is imputed to us, set over to our account, regarded as our own. But here again the relation in *law*, supposes and shows a corresponding relation in *life*. The forensic declaration by which the sinner is pronounced free from guilt, is like that word in the beginning when God said *let there be light*, and light was. It not only proclaims him righteous for Christ's sake, but sets the righteousness of Christ in him as part of his own life.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid. 157.

¹¹ Ibid. 157.

¹² Ibid. 180.

Thus, it may be said that in Nevin's thinking imputed righteousness leads to infused righteousness. While it is important to note that he is careful to guard against postulating an infused righteousness leading to *meritorious* good works as in the Roman Catholic system, he nevertheless speaks of an actual transfer of Christ's life to the faithful.¹³ Thus, in his integrative, dialectic mindset the old Reformation antitheses merge into a synthesis of imputed righteousness *leading to* infused righteousness. To the Protestant *either*, and the Roman Catholic *or*, Nevin offers a conciliar *both/and*.

Not surprisingly however, despite his attempts to clarify that he was seeking to safeguard the Protestant doctrines of the Atonement and Imputation, many Reformed theologians of his and subsequent generations took exception to this emphasis of the Incarnation and organic union over the Atonement and imputed righteousness in Nevin's thought. According to Maxwell, "So theologically encompassing was Nevin's view of the incarnation that he understood the atonement only in light of it, and this seeming deprecation brought him not a few critics."¹⁴ Not the least of these critics was Charles Hodge, contemporary of Nevin and Professor of Theology at Princeton. Space does not allow here for a full examination of Hodge's scathing critique in his article entitled *The Doctrine of the Reformed Church on the Lord's Supper*,¹⁵ but a few remarks are necessary. In this article, Hodge performs a theological "hatchet job"¹⁶ on Nevin, charging

¹³ Nevin himself does not speak of his doctrine as "infused righteousness," but all the essential elements are found in his thought.

¹⁴ Jack Martin Maxwell, *Worship and Reformed Theology: The Liturgical Lessons of Mercersburg* (Pittsburg: Pickwick, 1976), 27.

¹⁵ Contained in *The Biblical Repository and Princeton Review*, vol. XX, 1848, 227-278.

him with a variety of heresies, such as Eutychianism and Monothelitism (because of his understanding of the union between divine and human in Christ),¹⁷ as well as denying the fundamental principle of the Reformation, which Hodge understood to be the forensic imputation of Christ's *alien* righteousness.¹⁸ Hodge also accuses Nevin of Sabellianism, Rationalism, and declares him to be nothing more than a disciple of Schliermacher.¹⁹ Nevin responded to Hodge's onslaught of indictments in the *Mercersburg Review* and in his preface to the *Antichrist*, repudiating all of his charges and retorting that Hodge was himself a rationalistic Nestorian.²⁰ Most of Hodge's charges were unwarranted and unfair, as Nevin demonstrates in his responses, but the fact that the great mouthpiece of Princeton orthodoxy saw fit to level such an assault demonstrates how far Nevin had moved in his own mind from traditional American Reformed thought. His Christology had brought him to an all out war with the widely accepted soteriological system held by the majority of American Reformed and Presbyterian Christians in the nineteenth century.

¹⁶ Mark Horne. *Real Union or Legal Fiction? John Williamson Nevin's Controversy with Charles Hodge Over the Imputation of Adam's Sin*, http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/mark_horne/real_union_or_legal_fiction.htm#39a, 1997.

¹⁷ Hodge, *Doctrine of the Reformed Church*, 265.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 272.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 275.

²⁰ *Antichrist*, in Augustine Thompson ed. *Anxious Bench, AntiChrist, and the Sermon on Catholic Unity*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000, 10-11)

The Unity of the Church

It may be observed at this point that the Mercersburg Theology is fundamentally a theology of union, having its foundation in the union of divine and human in the person of Jesus Christ. Where many Protestants were making strict distinctions which seemed to border on separations, Nevin was stressing as much as he could the unity of divine and human in Christ and the unity of Christ with his people. The hypostatic union of Christ's dual natures in the Incarnation leads to his union with human nature in general and to the community of the redeemed in particular through his death and resurrection.

Due to the realistic way in which he interpreted union with Christ, Nevin came to a very realistic and organic understanding of the unity of the Church as a whole. This way of thinking goes back to Nevin's belief that Christianity is not necessarily a doctrine or law (though it includes these things), but a new sphere of life introduced by the Incarnation: "Christianity is no such outward statute-book of things to be believed and things to be done. It is the law of life in Christ Jesus. It is a new constitution of grace and truth starting in Christ's *person*, and perpetuating itself in this form, as a most real historical fact, by the Church."²¹ Indeed, as David Layman states, "For Nevin, the incarnation is not primarily a doctrine, law, or even an event; it is an 'historical enduring fact' ... The incarnation inserts a new realm of powers, a new spiritual reality, into the material."²²

Hence, believers are organically united with each other in Christ because they are all members of his body, the Church, which has an objective existence because of the fact of the

²¹ John Williamson Nevin, *The Sect System*, in Catholic and Reformed, 153

²² David Wayne Layman, *Nevin's Holistic Supernaturalism*, in Reformed Confessionalism, 200.

Incarnation.²³ Nevin writes in his *Sermon on Catholic Unity* that the individual members of the Church,

are all actuated by the power of a common life, and the whole of this life gathers itself up ultimately in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the principle or root of the Church; and the Church through all ages is one, simply because it stands, in the presence and power of this root, universally and forever.²⁴

Therefore, schism in the Church is not something to be taken lightly. In fact, two years after the appearance of *The Mystical Presence*, Nevin published his tract *Antichrist, or the Spirit of Sect and Schism*, in which he proclaims that a sectarian posture towards the Church is the very spirit of antichrist spoken of by the apostle John in his first epistle. This idea betrays the realistic and organic way in which he understood the union between Christ and the Church. The Church is the body of Christ in such a true sense that to deny its reality is to deny the fact that “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.” And unity is such an essential attribute of the Church that to deny it is to deny the reality of the Church itself.

Therefore, Nevin pulled no punches in his attack upon the sectarianism of nineteenth century American Protestant Christianity. In the *Antichrist*, he ingeniously traces the roots of this schismatic tendency to the ancient Gnostic heresy which plagued the early church. Tracing back through the previous eighteen hundred years of the Church’s existence, Nevin formulates a Hegelian theory of the history of heresy, stating that the Church has always struggled against two antithetical heretical tendencies: Ebionitism, which destroyed Christ’s divinity for the sake of his humanity (this being the materialist side of Antichrist), and Gnostic Docetism, which destroyed

²³ The reality of the Church is so objective in Nevin’s thinking in fact that he wrote in his *Letter to Dr. Harbaugh*, that the Church is “an object of faith.” He was also led on this account to claim in his *Sermon on Catholic Unity* that “The Church does not rest upon its members, but the members rest upon the Church.” (6).

²⁴ John Williamson Nevin, *Sermon on Catholic Unity*, 3.

Christ's humanity for the sake of his divinity (this being the spiritualist side of Antichrist). The originator of these two heresies is the spirit of Antichrist, which has developed and morphed into various forms throughout history.²⁵ The Church was victorious in the struggle with these first two heretical manifestations of Antichrist, but two more soon arose: Pelagianism (materialist) and Manicheism (spiritualist). After these two came Nestorianism and Eutychianism, which were then followed by the medieval capitulation to Pelagianism and its antithesis of magical supernaturalism. The Reformation—which was a reaction within the Church against each of these aberrant medieval tendencies—eventually emerged victorious over them, and thus may be seen as a valid stage of development within the historical church.²⁶ However, the Protestant churches were soon thereafter themselves infected with yet two more manifestations of Antichrist: Rationalism (rooted in Ebionite materialism) and Sectarianism (rooted in Gnostic/Docetic spiritualism). Sectarianism, in Nevin's thinking, is the more insipient of these two because it is the more subtle and seemingly Christian. It even contains within it a rationalistic tendency. Nevin explains:

The spirit of Sect... would seem to carry in itself an original natural affinity with the Docetic or Gnostic way of looking at Christ. More practical than theoretic at the start, it is disposed to lay peculiar stress on the spiritual side of Christianity, as the revelation of a higher life in the world. But this higher life is not apprehended, as the true universal sense of the world itself; comes to no full human revelation, in the person of Christ, as the principle and ground of all religion. Sectarianism is ever inclined to place Christ wholly in the clouds, or to turn him into an ideal phantom, that it may be left the more free in the exercise of its own subjectivity. In this way, however, it is carried over, by a sort of inward necessity, to the sphere of theoretic Rationalism. The divine which it affects to grasp and hold in such fantastic style, becomes identical at last with the simply

²⁵ *Antichrist*, 27-38. It is interesting to note that this is the antichristian counterpart of the theory of the Church's historical development formulated by Nevin and his Mercersburg colleague Phillip Schaff.

²⁶ We will pick up on this idea of historical development in the next section.

human. That which has begun in the spirit finds its tame, flat conclusion, ultimately in the flesh.

It is by no accidental connection, then, that Sectarianism is found to be rationalistic. It belongs to its very constitution to have this character. The spirit of sect, wherever it may prevail, involves necessarily a false view of the person of Christ, and is utterly incompatible thus with sound Christian orthodoxy. As a spirit at once of heresy and schism, in this way, we pronounce it to be emphatically the Antichrist of the Church in our own time. So far as its power goes, it is at war with the whole fact of the incarnation.²⁷

Thus, the Church and Christ are so united in Nevin's thought that an ecclesiological heresy is ultimately a Christological heresy. He proclaims further that, "If Christ be the principle of a new creation... it follows at once plainly that the Church in which is comprehended the power of this fact, and which for this very reason is declared to be his BODY, the fullness of him that filleth all in all, must carry in itself a constitution of its own, as really objective and enduring." But in the sect system, which downplays the importance of the person of Christ, "the Church must become as Docetic and idealistic as her imaginary head."²⁸

Therefore, sectarianism is *ecclesial Docetism*. But it is also, Nevin declares, fundamentally dualistic and at best Nestorian. Sectarian theology always likes to put things in nice neat categories and divisions. It begins with a Nestorian-like separation of divine and human in Christ, and goes from there to separate spirit and material in nature, visible from invisible in the Church, and sign from reality in the sacraments.²⁹ But most importantly, sectarianism cuts off Christ (the head) from the Church (his body) and therefore has no qualms

²⁷ *Antichrist*, 36-37

²⁸ *Ibid.* 40-41

²⁹ *Ibid.* 48-49

about severing the members of the body from each other, all in the name of fidelity to Scripture.

Nevin sums up the Sect mindset thus:

Sects have no true theology, they are prone always to undervalue it in any form, as having a secret consciousness that for *them* it is in fact nothing. And in such shape as they have it, we find it to be always a system of mechanical abstractions, as barren for the understanding as it is cold and jejune for the heart. All runs out into a scheme of invincible dualism; man here, God there; two worlds, set over against each other, in the way of everlasting abstract opposition; all communication between them magical only and fantastic, not historically real; the incarnation a divine *avatar* simply, in human shape; the Church, an idea; its sacraments, signs, the Bible, an aerolite, shot from the skies; the whole process of salvation, a sort of divine legerdemain, wrought in the soul by the help of invisible powers; all resolving itself at last, some outward supernatural apparatus only excepted, into marvelous coincidence, at almost every point, with the grossly subjective, neological theology of the mere Socinian or Deist, from which the idea of the supernatural is banished altogether.³⁰

The above being said, Nevin is quick to guard against the misconception that he is against denominations in any sense. It is the sectarian *spirit* which he is arguing against, not the existence of confessional distinctions. This sectarian spirit frequently separates itself from confessional denominations, but it also in many cases infects them with denominational zeal or bigotry. Yet, in no way is Antichrist to be identified with denominations as such: “A denomination or confession forms a component part of the one universal Church... A Sect, on the other hand, stands in no organic connection with the Church as a whole... It affects to be a perfectly original, and perfectly complete Christianity by itself.”³¹

Thus, Nevin is clear that he believes denominations to be for the time being necessary (a necessary evil, in a sense), but that they are not to be desired over a truly catholic Christianity, which is the proper outward form and visible manifestation of the *one* Church. It is a delight in denominations *for their own sake* which constitutes the “Sect system,” at least as Nevin saw it in

³⁰ Ibid. 53-54.

³¹ Ibid. 55

nineteenth century America. Ultimately, the Mercersburg theologian believed that it was inevitable that this Sect system would eventually die out: “The very sense of sect, as related to the sense of the Church, requires that the first should pass away. The whole sect system then is interimistic, and can be rightly endured only as it is regarded in this light.”³²

The reality of the Church’s organic union with Christ also dramatically affected how Nevin understood the Church’s sacraments. Unfortunately, it is not possible within the scope of this paper to offer a full treatment of Nevin’s sacramentology.³³ Let it suffice to say that it was his understanding of the organic union between Christ and the Church which led to his elevation of the Lord’s Supper as the focal point of the Church’s life, because it is here in the sacramental mystery that the Body of Christ on earth is brought into contact with the life giving substance of its heavenly food; the very divine/human life of the glorified, incarnate Christ himself. Nevin accordingly states concerning the Eucharist that “it may be regarded as in some sense central to the whole Christian system. For Christianity is grounded in the living union of the believer with the person of Christ; and this great fact is emphatically concentrated in the mystery of the Lord’s Supper.”³⁴

Historical Development

Not only is the Church united in space in Nevin’s thought, but it is also united throughout time. This understanding led to the Mercersburg doctrine of historical development, which was originally formulated in Phillip Schaff’s *Principle of Protestantism*, but picked up by Nevin

³² Nevin, *Sect System*, 172.

³³ Such a topic would merit a paper of much longer length in its own right.

³⁴ *The Mystical Presence*, 47.

throughout his career and seen in one way or another in the vast majority of his writings. We have briefly seen this theory at work in Nevin's interpretation of the history of heresy and schism,³⁵ and when we come to his view of the historical development of the Church we see his principle of organic union historically fleshed out even more completely. Due to his understanding of the organic union of Christ with his people and the organic unity of the Church as a whole, it was necessary that Nevin should understand Church history as the story of the one true Church organically united and developing throughout the ages.

According to the theory of historical development as propounded by Schaff and Nevin, the resurrected Jesus gave grace to his apostles to begin a new community of faith, the new Israel, and all who are connected to the life of this historical community—the body of the resurrected Christ on earth—are united with Christ himself. Therefore, each generation in the Church is necessarily united with the life of all previous generations, ultimately having reference back in the life of the incarnate Christ himself. This led Nevin to view the Reformation in a dramatically different way than his contemporaries, whether Protestant or Roman Catholic.

In 1851, Nevin published the first of three essays in the *Mercersburg Review* on *Early Christianity*, which would have him writing into the year 1852.³⁶ These three essays form perhaps the fullest expression which we possess of Nevin's understanding of Church History. His purpose in these three articles was to demonstrate the fallacy of the Puritan³⁷ theory of

³⁵ Pp. 10-11 above.

³⁶ Published in *Catholic and Reformed: Selected Theological Writings of John Williamson Nevin*. Pittsburgh Original Texts and Translation Series, vol. 3. Ed. Charles Yrigoyen and George H. Bricker. Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1978.

Church history, which holds that the Christians of the first two centuries were an altogether different breed from the Christians of the post-Nicene era and into the middle ages; that during the reign of Constantine the Church began its rapid downslide into the apostasy which culminated in the papal supremacy; and that the Reformation was a complete separation from this apostate church and a repristination of the pure state of the early church. In opposition to this compartmentalized historiography, Nevin claimed that the growth of the church into the medieval system was a quite natural one, and that early Christianity was altogether different from the Puritan scheme. He states in his first essay concerning the relationship between the early church and the medieval:

Whatever differences there may be between the first ages and those that followed, it is still plain enough that the course of things was from the very start *towards* that order at least, which afterwards prevailed; that this later order [the medieval church] therefore stands bound by true historical connection with what went before; and that Protestantism accordingly, as a still more advanced period in the general movement of history, holds a living relation to the first period only through the medium of the second, and is just as little a copy of the one in form as it is of the other. This we sincerely believe is the only ground, on which may be set up any rational defense of the great revolution of the 16th century, (unsupported as it stands by miracles or inspiration,) in conjunction with a true faith in the Divine character of the church. It is the theory of historical development, which assumes the possibility and necessity of a transition on the part of the church through various stages of form, (as in all growth,) for the very purpose of bringing out more and more fully always the true inward sense of its life, which has been one and the same from the beginning.³⁸

This, as pointed out above, is absolutely necessary given Nevin's organic understanding of the Church. The only way he could hold to his organic understanding of Christ's union with his people was to view the Church as organically united through both space and time, and the

³⁷The term "Puritan" as used by Nevin in these articles can be somewhat misleading. Puritanism, in Nevin's thinking, is really more encompassing than a group primarily confined to the 17th century.

³⁸ *Early Christianity*, 197.

only way he could hold this understanding of the Church and remain a Protestant was to view the Reformation as a legitimate outgrowth of the medieval Church:

If this cannot stand, if it be found at war with the true idea of a Divine revelation, we for our part must give up all faith in Protestantism, and bow as we best can to the authority of the Roman church; for an interest which revolves itself virtually into infidelity, as Protestantism under every other view in which it can be put seems to us to do clearly, has no right, as in the end also it can have no power, to stand.³⁹

This theory of history ultimately reaches back through Nevin's organic understanding of the unity of the Church and the union of believers with Christ to the foundational principle of all organic union: the hypostatic union of God and man in the person of Christ.

Conclusion

Thus it has been demonstrated that John Williamson Nevin's Christology dramatically affected the entire Mercersburg system of thought in its most characteristic tenets. Due to his fundamental understanding of the significance and centrality of the hypostatic union between the divine and human in Christ, Nevin was brought to challenge the accepted Reformed mindset of his day in the areas of soteriology, ecclesiology, sacramentology, and historiography. Not insignificantly therefore, the Mercersburg system is seen to be an *organic* whole, finding its ultimate reference in every area in the divine-human Person of Jesus Christ, in whom God and man are organically united, thus carrying within his very person the principle of the new creation, in which all of history has its ultimate end.

³⁹ Ibid. 198.

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