

**HISTORY AND SACRAMENT:
JOHN WILLIAMSON NEVIN AND CHARLES HODGE
ON THE LORD'S SUPPER**

by Peter J. Wallace

Introduction

IT IS A commonplace to see the revivals of the Second Great Awakening as an important part of the background to the controversy between John Williamson Nevin and Charles Hodge. Both Nevin and Hodge attempted to stem the tide of revivalism in their own ways; but there is a larger set of issues at work: (1) a shift from covenantal to constitutional language in Reformed theology, both in the New Divinity and more broadly in the wake of the American Revolution; (2) the spread of common sense philosophy as the dominant paradigm in American theology—especially in Nathaniel William Taylor; (3) the revival movement of Charles Finney, which was rooted in both of these first two movements; and (4) the social reform movement of the United Front which flowed from the revivals and sought to transform American culture into a Christian society.

First, the shift from covenantal to constitutional language may be seen in the sacramental debates of the antebellum era. Presbyterians and Baptists tossed their arguments back and forth, flinging out their tracts for or against infant baptism. A perceived trend away from infant baptism in Presbyterian circles led to a

furious defense of the practice in the late 1850s.¹ The doctrine of the covenant had emphasized the corporate nature of the church, with its emphasis on communal blessings and curses for obedience or disobedience. The newer governmental doctrine (as represented in New School Presbyterianism) focused on individual rights and responsibilities, utilizing the languages of constitutional republicanism and the New Divinity.² Such a shift de-emphasized the corporate, communal nature of the church, preferring a more legal and individualistic model. Hence it is not surprising that where the New England theology flourished, the Baptists also saw dramatic growth.³

Debates about the Lord's Supper also flourished during the antebellum era. Both American and German theologians marveled at how many American Lutherans had abandoned their traditional belief in the local presence of Christ, in, with, and under the elements, adopting a Zwinglian doctrine of the Eucharist, thereby viewing the Supper as a mere memorial.⁴ This transition is

¹John Williamson Nevin, "Noel on Baptism," *Mercersburg Review* (hereafter, MR) 2:3 (1850): 231-265; Lyman Atwater, "The Children of the Church and Sealing Ordinances," *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* (hereafter, BRPR) 29:1 (1857): 1-34; Charles Hodge, "Neglect of Infant Baptism," BRPR 29:1 (1857): 73-101; "The Church Membership of Infants," BRPR 30:2 (1858): 347-389; E. V. Gerhart, "The Efficacy of Baptism," MR 10:1 (1858): 1-44. Each of these authors refers to numerous books, pamphlets and articles on the subject.

²The transition from substitutionary (or covenantal) to governmental (or constitutional) to moral influence views of the atonement are key for understanding the basic shifts in American Calvinism. Cf. Allen Guelzo, *Edwards on the Will: A Century of American Theological Debate* (Middletown: Wesleyan, 1989), 129-135; Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 124-130.

³See Peter J. Wallace, "Visible Saints and Notorious Sinners: Presbyterian Sacramental Doctrine and Practice and the Vicissitudes of the Baptist Movement in Colonial America" (forthcoming).

⁴Nevin quotes several American and German Lutherans on the subject, pointing out that the *Lutheran Observer*, the leading Lutheran journal in America, had endorsed the Zwinglian position that the Lord's Supper is a mere memorial. See, *The Mystical Presence: A Vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1963/1846), 52; "Sartorius on the Person and Work of Christ, MR 1:2 (1849): 168; "Liebner's Christology," MR

coincident with the rise of revivalism in the Second Great Awakening—a phenomenon which spread to many of the immigrant churches as well. While revivals received their initial impulse from the Scottish communion season, the unchurchly character of American evangelicalism soon dropped the sacrament as too intrusive into revival preaching.⁵ Here as well, the shift from covenantal to moral or legal terms is evident.

A second feature of antebellum religious life was the spread of common sense realism. This philosophical position attracted numerous adherents, at least in part due to its democratic appeal. While influential in Presbyterian circles, the Congregationalist Nathaniel William Taylor took the Scottish common sense philosophy to its fullest extent, arguing that common sense served as the final arbiter of what should be believed. As he stated: “It [common sense] is the competent, unperverted reason of the human mind, whose decisions in the interpretation of the Scriptures are to be relied on as infallible. Man must be in some things beyond the possibility of mistake, or there is an end to all knowledge and all faith.”⁶ Not coincidentally, he also took the governmental view of the atonement further than others within the New England tradition.

Third, much of the revivalism of the Second Great Awakening, at least in the north, was rooted in Taylor’s theology. Charles Finney applied Taylor’s common sense approach to preaching and called evangelicals to see more human involvement in the work of salvation. Charles Hambrick-Stowe argues that Finney and Taylor were working essentially on the same project: carving out “a position that was simultaneously within the Calvinist tradition and

3:1 (1851): 65.

⁵Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Holy Fairs: Scottish Communion and American Revivals in the Early Modern Period* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1989); Paul K. Conkin, *The Uneasy Center: Reformed Christianity in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1995); *ibid.*, *Cane Ridge: America’s Pentecost* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1990).

⁶Taylor, *Essays, Lectures, Etc. Upon Select Topics in Revealed Theology* (New York: Clark, Austin, and Smith, 1859), 221; cited in Earl Pope, *New England Calvinism and the Disruption of the Presbyterian Church* (New York: Garland, 1987), 72.

progressively and evangelically American.”⁷ More traditional Calvinists—whether John W. Nevin at Mercersburg or Charles Hodge at Princeton—tended to doubt that either Finney or Taylor had succeeded at the first half of that project.

The early Republic marked a new epoch in American history, as the new nation wrestled with the question of its national identity. While the Revolutionary period synthesized Christian and Republican values, the actual influence of the churches began to wane. But in the years roughly between 1790-1835 the tide turned. As revival swept the land, Christian leaders attempted to utilize the rhetoric of republicanism and the moderate Scottish enlightenment to forge a united front that could maintain evangelical hegemony in the American experiment. Both in the moral and intellectual arenas, evangelical religion played at center stage. Moral reform movements grew out of the revivalist agenda for a Christian America; as did the evangelical colleges which dotted the countryside in ever increasing numbers. Both inculcated a moderate common sense realism that attempted to uphold the reasonableness of Christianity. These twin engines of revival and the Scottish enlightenment propelled evangelical Protestantism into the cultural ascendancy, yet bore a heavy price tag. On the one hand, as Nathan Hatch has shown, the first third of the nineteenth century revealed the democratization of American Christianity and the triumph of populist views of the church; on the other hand, as James Turner suggests, the intellectual synthesis of evangelical and enlightenment modes of thought produced a culture more concerned with scientific than with religious truth—and indeed made religion dispensable for the first time.⁸

⁷Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 32.

⁸Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale, 1989); James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1985); Mark A. Noll, *Princeton and the Republic, 1768-1822* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1989); Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1980/1957); Fred J. Hood, *Reformed America: The Middle and Southern States, 1783-1837* (University: University of Alabama, 1980); Walter H. Conser, Jr.,

The disintegration of the united front began in the 1830s.⁹ While Scots-Irish Presbyterians encouraged revival and republicanism, they were uncomfortable with the extremes of the heirs of Jonathan Edwards in New England. The Old School/New School split in 1837 demonstrated the uneasiness that some Old School Presbyterians felt about the effects of the New England theology and polity, and the schisms of other denominations over slavery during the next two decades unveiled a sectional rift in the movement.¹⁰ Baptists and Methodists had already gained numerical predominance by the 1820s, but as they began to establish their own schools and denominational structures they preferred to retain control over their own endeavors, and the cooperative ventures of the united front gradually collapsed. At the same time the proliferation of restorationist groups, the fragmentation of existing churches, and the introduction of various immigrant bodies led to a bewildering variety of religious denominations. By the 1840s John Winebrenner counted over seventy in his *History of All the Religious Denominations in the United States*.¹¹

God and the Natural World: Religion and Science in Antebellum America (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1993); Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *Protestants in an Age of Science: The Baconian Ideal and Antebellum American Religious Thought* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1977); George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford, 1994). E. Brooks Holifield, *The Gentlemen Theologians: American Theology in Southern Culture, 1795-1860* (Durham: Duke, 1978).

⁹Hood, *Reformed America*; Marsden, *Soul of the American University*; *ibid.*, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience: A Case Study of Thought and Theology in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Haven: Yale, 1970); James D. Bratt, "Nevin and the Antebellum Culture Wars," in *Reformed Confessionalism in Nineteenth-Century America: Essays on the Thought of John Williamson Nevin*, edited by Sam Hamstra, Jr. and Arie J. Griffioen (ATLA Monograph Series, No. 38. Lanham: Scarecrow, 1996).

¹⁰C. C. Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation: Denominational Schisms and the Coming of the American Civil War* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1985).

¹¹Cited in Wentz, *John Williamson Nevin, American Theologian* (New York: Oxford, 1997), 88; For treatment of the period see Marsden, *Soul of the American University*; Hood, *Reformed America*; Hatch, *Democratization of American Christianity*; statistics and some moderately useful analysis can be found in Roger Finke and Rodney Starke, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our*

At the same time the intellectual alignment of Common Sense Realism and Republicanism faced the new challenges of German and English romanticism and idealism. The 1830s launched the Transcendentalists in New England and the Oxford Movement in Britain, as well as the historicist studies of John Williamson Nevin. This Scottish Presbyterian eventually became the most German thinker in the German Reformed Church, as many Germans in that denomination grew closer to their American evangelical brethren. Winebrenner, who would become one of Nevin's first opponents in the early 1840s, had left the German Reformed to found the Church of God in the wake of his conversion to the revivalist tradition.¹²

In this context John Williamson Nevin and Charles Hodge engaged in one of the most interesting theological debates of the century. Hodge participated in numerous theological disputes throughout his fifty-six years on the Princeton faculty, and engaged in most of them in an attempt to stave off radicalism on all sides and maintain what he considered a moderate center.¹³ Nevin haunted his dreams whispering, "the center will not hold!" As American evangelicalism plunged headlong into paroxysms of democracy and sentimentality, Nevin became increasingly convinced that the revival mentality was part and parcel of a deadening rationalism and individualism which was devoid of any true sense of Christ's objective presence in the church. Hodge also objected to the subjectivism of American evangelicalism, but countered it with an objectivism that Nevin found equally

Religious Economy (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1992).

¹²Cf. Bruce Kuklick, *Churchmen and Philosophers: From Jonathan Edwards to John Dewey* (New Haven: Yale, 1985); James Hastings Nichols *Romanticism in American Theology: Nevin and Schaff at Mercersburg* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961); and Charles D. Cashdollar's *The Transformation of Theology, 1830-1890: Positivism and Protestant Thought in Britain and America* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1989).

¹³Two recent studies have examined Hodge's moderate tendencies: John W. Stewart, "Mediating the Center: Charles Hodge on American Science, Language, Literature, and Politics," *Studies in Reformed Theology and History* 3:1 (Winter 1995); Peter J. Wallace, "The Defense of the Forgotten Center: Charles Hodge and the Enigma of Emancipation in Antebellum America," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 75 (Fall 1997): 165-177.

problematic.

The debate between these two theologians is especially interesting because (1) it was one of the first American confrontations between Idealism and Realism. While both Nevin and Hodge grew up in the Scottish Presbyterian church, Nevin joined the German Reformed Church and became the most zealous defender of German thought and worship in his adopted home. (2) While both men attempted to stem the tide of shallow revivalism and vapid rationalism, ironically both adopted intellectual stances which served to undermine the very beliefs and practices which they held dear. (3) Both theologians came from the Reformed tradition and shared the same doctrinal beliefs on the surface. Yet their understandings of these doctrines often proved to be light-years apart. The philosophical frameworks which both theologians utilized critically affected the resulting product, creating several misunderstandings and misinterpretations on both sides. At the root of their debate lies an irreconcilable difference over the nature of history. This seed of disparity grew over the years and first blossomed in their sacramental theology—revealing the intellectual and cultural gap between them.

In 1846, Nevin published *The Mystical Presence: A Vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist*.¹⁴ Having previously objected to the revivalist approach in his critical treatment of Charles Finney's *New Measures*, *The Anxious Bench*, Nevin now attempted to articulate an alternative form of spirituality and a new understanding of the church. Dissatisfied with both the revivalism of the New School and the intellectualism of the Old School, Nevin suggested that the historical and theological scholarship of the mediating theologians in Germany could provide a useful paradigm for the American church. Nevertheless, as Richard E. Wentz has pointed out, Nevin remained an American theologian, preoccupied with American issues and articulating a response that was conditioned in a uniquely American fashion.¹⁵ It would be misleading to say that Nevin "became" German, because

¹⁴(Philadelphia: J. B. Lippencott, 1846).

¹⁵Wentz outlines his thesis in, *Nevin*, 11-13.

his whole project was to revitalize American Christianity; he merely utilized different tools than most of his compatriots. Conversely, as Walter Conser suggests, Hodge was also influenced by the German mediating school, perhaps not so profoundly as Nevin, but nonetheless, his two years abroad did not leave him entirely untouched.¹⁶ The clash between these two intellectual titans is heightened by the fact that Nevin had been one of Hodge's prize students in his early years of teaching at Princeton, and had even taught Hodge's classes while Hodge studied in Germany.¹⁷

A Question of History

At the heart of the philosophical and theological differences between Hodge and Nevin rests mutually exclusive conceptions of history. Dialogue alone could not bridge the vast chasm that separated the realist from the idealist.

Scottish Realism strongly influenced Hodge's works. But Hodge's attachment to the Scottish philosophy was intended merely to serve his confessionally Reformed piety and theology. He had no sympathy for the radical common sense views of Taylor. Prior to the publication of his *Systematic Theology* in 1872-73, Hodge had used the Latin text of Francis Turretin as his primary theological source. This seventeenth-century Genevan theologian exercised the greatest single influence over Hodge's developed theology, and Hodge frequently quoted him with high approbation. Hodge believed that whereas Calvin may not have been entirely consistent, the later Reformed theologians, such as Turretin, developed his views into a coherent whole. Hence Hodge attempted to translate Turretin into the language and thought-forms of nineteenth-century America.¹⁸

Turretin had distinguished between archetypal theology (God's own infinite and exhaustive knowledge of himself) and ectypal

¹⁶Conser, *God and the Natural World*, 65-74.

¹⁷As demonstrated by the fact that Nevin was chosen as Hodge's substitute while the latter studied in France and Germany from 1826-28.

¹⁸"Turretin and Hodge on Scripture and Theology" (unpublished paper, Wheaton College, April, 1992), 12-14.

theology (humanity's derived knowledge, which is true but limited and finite). Naturally God cannot communicate exhaustive knowledge to finite creatures, but Turretin specifically grounded ectypal theology in the incarnation, insisting that the union of God and man in Christ gives confidence that God can truly communicate to humanity in a way that people can understand.¹⁹ Regenerate reason and sense experience have an important place because they are trustworthy enough in their own sphere, but they must be bounded by the Word of God, and not vice versa. Ultimately, the believer's confidence rests upon the divinely self-authenticating Word of God, the Bible. Using the traditional Aristotelian language of causation, Turretin claimed that the objective cause of someone's believing the Scripture, is the Scripture itself. The efficient cause (the principle by which she is made to believe) is the Holy Spirit, who produces faith in her. The instrumental cause is the church, which is the means through which the Scripture reaches her. The Holy Spirit works both objectively through the Word, and subjectively (efficiently) in the heart of the believer, impressing the truth of the Scripture upon her mind. Those who doubt the divine quality of the Bible do so because they lack "a healthy faculty of reception," i.e., faith.²⁰

Hodge attempted to translate this into Scottish realist language. When Hodge said that we must "subject our feeble reason to the mind of God as revealed in his Word and by his Spirit in our inner life,"²¹ he attempted to restate Turretin's doctrine of formal (Word) and efficient (Spirit) causes. Throughout his work, one can see the objective, formal, divinely authenticated Scripture paired with the efficacious work of the Holy Spirit, bringing the Scriptures to bear on the hearts and minds of believers. The Scriptures are perspicuous in an objective sense to everyone, everywhere, and at all

¹⁹Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* I. ii. 6. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1993/1679). Cf. Timothy L. Phillips, "Francis Turretin's Idea of Theology and Its Bearing upon His Doctrine of Scripture" (Ph.D. dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1986), 138-40.

²⁰Turretin, I. ii-v. Cf. Phillips, 74-82.

²¹*Ibid.*, 16.

times, but apart from the Spirit's subjective renewing, the mind cannot grasp that which is as plain as day.²² Yet while paralleling Turretin in most respects, Hodge's expectations for the "common" exercises of human intellect and moral virtue clearly exceed those of the seventeenth-century Genevan.

Hodge took a scientific perspective on the relation of scripture to theology but blended it with a traditional Reformed view of the work of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps his most famous dictum is: "the Bible is to the theologian what nature is to the man of science. It is his storehouse of facts."²³ Hodge certainly believed in some form of objectivity in that anyone who worked hard and was careful with his facts should come to the right conclusions. Yet for all his confidence in reason, he argued that human reason is essentially flawed by sin, and in fact, "conscience is less liable to err than reason," yet neither is ultimately trustworthy.²⁴ This preeminence of the moral sense over the rational is often reflected in his comments on what "all (or most) good and pious men" believe or sense. But note the qualifier. Hodge believed that one's moral intuitions could be damaged by sin—and repaired by grace. Scholars have often neglected Hodge's dual emphasis on Word and Spirit: "we find in the Bible the norm and standard of all genuine religious experience. The Scriptures teach not only the truth, but what are the effects of the truth on the heart and conscience, when applied with saving power by the Holy Ghost."²⁵ Indeed, "all the truths taught by our nature or by religious experience, are recognized and authenticated in the Scriptures....The goal is] to subject our feeble reason to the mind of God as revealed in his Word and by his Spirit in our inner life."²⁶ The objective word of God is understood through the subjective work of the Holy Spirit: "As only those who have a moral nature can discern moral truth, so those only who are

²²Ibid., 183-8.

²³Ibid., 10.

²⁴Ibid., 6.

²⁵Ibid., 11.

²⁶Ibid., 16.

spiritually minded can truly receive the things of the Spirit.”²⁷ Hence Hodge’s objectivist theological method did not rule out the subjective work of the Spirit in the process of the assimilation of the Scriptures’ content.²⁸

This is precisely what John Nevin would have learned from Alexander, Miller, and Hodge at Princeton, but his thought gradually shifted as he examined the philosophical and theological trends stemming from Germany. The turning point came when he arrived at Mercersburg and encountered Friedrich A. Rauch during the first year of his tenure. Rauch introduced Nevin to Hegelian psychology, stoking Nevin’s increasing passion for German idealism. When Rauch suddenly died the following year, Nevin succeeded him as president of Marshall College, and served as his literary executor.²⁹

Rejecting Hodge’s inductive approach to theology, Nevin argued that the Bible is not the substance of revelation, rather it is the record of it. It cannot be made into the first principle of theology, but instead is the standard by which our theologies must be judged.³⁰ This challenged both Turretin and Hodge by denying that Scripture is the formal or objective source of revelation. The formal principle of theology for Nevin is not Scripture, but Christ. While this sounds fine on the surface, it leaves open the door for theologizing about anything that we think points us to Christ.³¹

Nevin argues that everyone approaches the Scriptures from a

²⁷Ibid., 187-88; 67-68.

²⁸Ibid., 187.

²⁹James Hastings Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology: Nevin and Schaff at Mercersburg* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961), 46-7. cf. Howard J. B. Ziegler, *Frederick Augustus Rauch: American Hegelian* (Lancaster: Franklin and Marshall College, 1953).

³⁰Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 63.

³¹There are two kinds of relativism that are rooted in the nineteenth-century. One is the relativism of Taylor and Finney which allows individual common sense to attain to infallibility in the private interpretation of Scripture. The other is the relativism of German historicism that, once detached from the normative authority of the Word of God, results in the infallibility of every age. Hodge and Nevin both strive to avoid the respective relativisms of their philosophical views, but neither provides a completely satisfactory solution.

certain theological stand-point, which determines the result of all exegesis. In order to come up with the right exegesis, therefore, one must already have the right theology, which is only attained by those who have an inner sympathy with the Biblical writers, which, he claimed, only Christians can have.³² Further, Nevin insisted that a theology consists of a coherent whole, a unity which cannot be partially accepted and partially rejected. Either one enters into the life of the whole, or else one simply perverts and distorts it into an entirely different system.³³

This deductive method was built upon Nevin's conception of Christianity as a Life. Christianity is not a doctrine, but a fact. It is a new creation in Christ, not merely the *image* of Christ formed in believers, but Christ himself.³⁴ The Bible contains "a glorious system of facts, organically bound together and growing out of each other, as a single supernatural whole."³⁵ While the language of "facts" resonated with Hodge's doctrine, this approach took precisely the opposite route from the inductive method advocated by Hodge.³⁶ Nevin formulated his doctrine, and then tested it to see if Scripture agreed. In his mind, this was the only method of exegesis possible. He argued that Hodge read his own ultra-Calvinist views into the text of Ephesians, but this did not surprise him, because "our theology, or want of theology, must always rule our exegesis." Nevin insisted upon a Romantic "inward correspondence and sympathy of mind on the part of the expositor, with the world of truth which he is called to expound." Objective, detached exegesis, for Nevin, could never exist. "It may sound well, to talk of coming to the Scriptures without any theory or scheme; but there is not in fact, and cannot be, any such freedom from all

³²Hence Nevin objected strenuously to the modern "Puritan" insistence that the Bible and private judgment could provide an adequate foundation for the church, cf. "Puritanism and the Creed," MR 1:6 (1849): 585-607.

³³"Sartorius on the Person and Work of Christ," 165.

³⁴"The New Creation in Christ," MR 2:1 (1850): 1-11.

³⁵*Mystical Presence*, 244-5.

³⁶Nevin has an essentially German notion of science which is reflected in several articles: "Puritanism and the Creed," 597, 601; "Wilberforce on the Incarnation," 164, 166; "Catholicism," MR 3:1 (1851): 22.

prepossession.”³⁷

Nevin’s presuppositionalism and historicism led him to reject the objectivist theories of Hodge and the common sense school. Yet he did not fall into relativism because he was convinced, not only that it was possible to have the proper “inward sympathy” with the Biblical authors, but that he had enough of it to determine the truth of Christianity. He did not fault Hodge for building upon his own preconceived system and theory; indeed he applauded him for being so consistently unashamed of his own theological tradition and chastised those who thought they could escape such biases. Instead, he argued that Hodge did not have a proper sympathy with the New Testament authors, and therefore missed the heart of what they were trying to say. Nevin believed that while everyone looks through a framework, it was still possible to come to a true understanding of biblical teaching.³⁸

These philosophical and theological differences ultimately rest upon different conceptions of history. Hodge and Nevin approached history with entirely different questions and presuppositions. Hodge sometimes had a difficult time understanding the nuances of historical development because he believed that one could examine the past objectively. He recognized that words changed meaning in different contexts, but he tended to treat the documents in a rather ahistorical manner. He therefore was guilty at times, as Nevin put it, of “lumping the authorities to suit his own mind, and ruling their testimony thus to such results as the investigation in his judgment is felt to require.”³⁹ Still, he seemed to understand the desire for unity that penetrated the Reformers better than Nevin, and he clearly perceived that confessions often entailed compromises, where Nevin tried to find the embodiment of the church’s organic life.

It would be unfair to suggest that Hodge did not know the

³⁷“Hodge on the Ephesians,” MR 9:1 (1857): 48-9. Cf. “Cur Deus Homo?” MR 3:3 (1851): 226.

³⁸Ibid., 49; cf. “Noel on Baptism” 242.

³⁹Nevin, “Doctrine of the Reformed Church on the Lord’s Supper” MR 2:4 (1850): 433.

Reformers. His detractors have usually been so enamored of the Mercersburg theologians that they take Nevin's every criticism for granted. Hodge's writings on church history reveal a competent knowledge, especially from the Reformation onwards. Since he had an objectivist stand-point on history, he frequently read nineteenth century meanings into the past, but he was often aware of the effects of one's world-view. He often assumed that he knew what the Reformers meant, in part because they frequently used "his" language, and he thought that they occupied the same ground that he did. He believed that he was simply proclaiming traditional Reformed doctrines in his contemporary setting, not altering or correcting them, but restating them, hopefully in a clearer manner.

At the same time, Hodge's experience in Germany had taught him that foreign-sounding concepts were not necessarily wrong-headed. For instance, not every German who sounded pantheistic was so in fact. Their different "modes of thought and expression" would naturally result in differing mental processes, which Americans might not readily comprehend. "[Also] the reigning philosophy of any age or nation not only impresses itself upon the minds of those who consciously adopt its principles, but to a certain extent modifies the language and modes of thought of the public generally, and even of its opponents." Hence foreigners could easily misunderstand what was actually intended.⁴⁰ While certainly not an historicist, Hodge at least sympathized with the difficulty of understanding the German mind, and usually relied upon German interpretations of German theologians, rather than venture into muddy waters. But when dangerous German ideas floated over to his side of the Atlantic, Hodge took the plunge.

Hodge himself held to a weak form of the historical development of doctrine. The system of doctrine supernaturally revealed cannot change, but rather, there has been a "continual and gradual progress...in theological knowledge."⁴¹ Hodge claimed to see this in the history of the Church. Doctrines that were confused and poorly stated came into greater light over time. "It is true then,

⁴⁰"Dr. Schaff's Apostolic Church" BRPR 26:1 (1854): 150.

⁴¹*Systematic Theology* I, 117.

as an historical fact, that the Church has advanced.”⁴² Yet advance is not the only option. “A later age may be inferior to a previous one...there are often periods of backsliding....[But] the Church is always equally near to Christ and to the holy Scriptures as the source of life.”⁴³ Even as a Christian grows gradually in the knowledge of the Bible, so also does the Church collectively grow. While false views might also creep in from time to time, a gradual progress of true knowledge should result.⁴⁴

But Hodge explicitly formulated his view of historical development to oppose Nevin’s “theory of the organic development of the Church....With them the universe is the self-manifestation and evolution of the absolute Spirit.”⁴⁵ Hodge adequately understood what the German school taught; he simply rejected it. In their view, he said, “Christianity is not a form of doctrine objectively revealed in the Scriptures. Christian theology is not the knowledge, or systematic exhibition of what the Bible teaches. It is the interpretation of this inner life [the theanthropic life of Christ as evidenced in its natural process of development in the Church].” Hence, for the Romantic view, all forms of thought, whether Greek or Roman or Protestant in their multifarious expressions are true and proper for their time and place, but not permanent, and will be superseded by even higher forms of Christianity.⁴⁶ Hodge objected to such a statement, because (as he saw it) it overthrew revelation “as the supernatural objective communication of divine truths” leaving only “the elevation of human nature to a higher state, by which its intuitions of spiritual objects become more distinct.”⁴⁷ While this criticism went further than the Mercersburg theologians wished to go, it nonetheless was a fair statement of the more radical German theologians whom Hodge despised, and whose philosophy he heard echoed in the

⁴²Ibid., 118.

⁴³“Dr. Schaff’s Apostolic Church,” 162.

⁴⁴*Systematic Theology* I, 118.

⁴⁵Ibid., 118.

⁴⁶Ibid., 119.

⁴⁷“Dr. Schaff’s Apostolic Church,” 180.

voices of the Mercersburg school. From his treatment of historicism, it appears that Hodge misunderstood what the Mercersburg theology was trying to do, yet recognized that its mode of thought was antithetical to his whole project for the extension of Reformed theology in American culture. Hodge required a commonly accessible truth that would spread throughout society, conforming all of life to the Word of God. Dialectical logic seemed to him to destroy truth, for if a thing could be true for the Medieval Church, but not true now, what guarantee was there of any real truth? Hodge believed that the only possible solutions for the dilemma which Nevin posed were the authority of Rome and the skepticism of Rationalism. Hodge wanted neither.⁴⁸

Nevin, on the other hand, wanted nothing to do with the individualism and empiricism of American revivalism and realism and found himself completely at home among the German theologians. We have already seen Nevin's insistence upon an "internal sympathy" with the spirit of an age in order to understand the history of that age. In 1849, Nevin wrote a short note in the *Mercersburg Review* on "Historical Development," especially with regard to the history of doctrine, and of the Church itself. Historical development consists of "growth, evolution from within, organic expansion....It is the revelation of an idea, or spiritual fact, in *time*." This is the case of individuals, of nations, and therefore also the church. The church "is historical...because it is the power of a divine fact, which is forever growing itself more and more into the consciousness, the interior life of the world." The church always remains "one, holy, catholic and apostolic, from the beginning onward to the last day."⁴⁹ Nevin saw that under the organic model, he could only deny that the Reformation was a corruption of Christianity if he affirmed a doctrine of historical development that recognized the validity and reality of the church throughout all ages.⁵⁰

⁴⁸Ibid., 189-192.

⁴⁹Nevin, "Historical Development," MR 1:4 (1849): 512-3.

⁵⁰Compare, "Early Christianity," MR 4:1 (1852), reprinted in *Catholic and Reformed: Selected Theological Writings of John Williamson Nevin*, edited by Charles

Nevin conceived of history in Hegelian terms as the process of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. Throughout his work there is a constant conception of earlier forms of thought being subsumed under the newer and higher idea, without the loss of the first. Hence in the new Protestantism, “the interest of Romanism is not so left behind, as to be no longer of any account; it must come in hereafter to counterbalance and correct again the disorder and excess of the other system.” The future of Christianity will finally come to fullness when “the life of Catholicism is to pour itself as a wholesome qualifying power” into the Protestant stream, though yielding to Protestantism “the palm of superior right and strength.”⁵¹

Another example of his dialectical reasoning surfaces in his treatment of the controversy in the Reformed church over the Lord’s Supper. The sacrificial aspect of Zwingli’s thought was incorporated in Calvin’s view, but the more perfect synthesis of Calvin’s system revealed the sacrificial aspect in relationship to union with Christ. The Incarnation, for Nevin, was the ultimate dialectic, as all history and nature together moved towards the union of God and Man. This was the goal of history even before the fall: as nature found its highest expression in Man, so Man finds his highest expression in a union with God. “What is history, but the process by which this idea is carried forward, according to the immanent law of its own nature, in the way of a regular development towards its appointed end?” Sin merely added a foreign element that needed to be eradicated by the suffering of the God-Man.⁵²

But since the chief end of history consists of the union of God and Man in Christ, therefore the church stands as the centerpiece of

Yrigoyen, Jr., and George H. Bricker (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1978), 288-295.

⁵¹Ibid., 305.

⁵²Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 201. Nevin wrestled with the question of the necessity of the incarnation. He affirms it in the *Mystical Presence*, and in two early articles, “New Creation in Christ,” MR 2:1 (1850): 3-4; and “Liebner’s Christology,” MR 3:1 (1851): 70-71; but then rejects it two months later in “Cur Deus Homo?” MR 3:3 (1851): 238. I have not found any references to the subject after 1851.

history as the continuation of the incarnation in history. As such, Nevin argued that the church stands between Christ and the individual as the necessary instrument of “visible *organization*, common *worship*, a regular public *ministry* and *ritual*, and to crown all especially grace-bearing *sacraments*. To question this is to give up to the same extent the sense of Christ’s Mediation as a perennial fact.”⁵³ This should create no opposition between “individual piety...and sacramental grace,” but rather “personal experience is made solid and real, only as it rests on grace offered and appropriated from abroad.”⁵⁴ All of his historical work proceeds from this theological standpoint.

So just as Nevin argued for the inevitability of one’s theological stand-point influencing his exegesis, he also took that same perspective into his historical work. For this reason he viewed Hodge’s theological stand-point on history as ridiculous. In his response to Hodge’s review of the *Mystical Presence*, he says “The Princeton view, as we have seen, bases this representation not so much on history as on its own sense of theological propriety.” Yet while Nevin’s own “sense of theological propriety” may have led him into some ahistorical assertions, on the whole he was by far the better historian. He did more historical work than Hodge, but attempted to enter into the world he studied and “feel with” his subject. He saw the past as inherently different from the present, and therefore worked hard to understand the different thought forms and perspectives in the past.

A good example of Nevin’s historical work, his brief biographical sketch, “Zacharias Ursinus,”⁵⁵ examines the life and work of the Palatine theologian. Nevin claims that Ursinus’ Heidelberg Catechism “was the product, truly and fully, of the religious life of the Reformed Church, in the full bloom of its historical development.... No creed or confession can be of genuine force, that has not this inwardly organic connection with

⁵³“Wilberforce on the Incarnation,” 187.

⁵⁴*ibid.*, 189.

⁵⁵*MR* 3:4 (1851): 490-512.

the life it represents.”⁵⁶ Yet, true to his German Idealism, Nevin saw the individual as a part of the whole, able to embody and express the mind of the whole: “the single mind [who frames it], in such a case, must ever be the organ and bearer of the general life in whose name it speaks; otherwise it will not be heard or felt. . . . Ursinus, in the preparation of it, was the organ of a religious life, far more general and comprehensive than his own.”⁵⁷ These streams of organic connectedness and historicism flow throughout Nevin’s historical writings.

But while Nevin established himself as one of the better historians in the early nineteenth century, he did not see that confessions and catechisms were usually compromises of some sort. Since he saw the Reformed Symbols as expressions of the common religious experience or life, admitting only one proper interpretation, he did not always understand the true blend of opinion that comprised the Reformed Church, and therefore the Reformed Symbols, of the sixteenth century.

Both Nevin and Hodge utilized their historical positions for theological advantage. Nevin argued that Calvin’s sacramental theology should guide the Reformed church, but rejected Calvin’s doctrine of predestination; Hodge claimed that Calvin’s doctrine of election was central, but that his sacramental views were not essential to his system of doctrine.⁵⁸

⁵⁶Nevin, “Zacharias Ursinus,” MR 3:4 (1851): 500.

⁵⁷Ibid. Cf. his treatment of Calvin in *Mystical Presence*, 67, where he says that Calvin “is clearly the organ and interpreter of the mind of the church, in whose bosom he stood. It will not do to speak of his view of the Lord’s supper as the private fancy only of a single man.” Of course, Nevin will sharply reject the notion that Calvin’s doctrine of election played the same role—so this romantic historiography is used in a particularly limited fashion.

⁵⁸For Nevin’s argument on this point, see “Hodge on the Ephesians,” MR 9:1 (1857): 47-82; “Hodge on the Ephesians, Second Article” MR 9:2 (1857): 192-245. This is Nevin’s clearest statement of his utter rejection of the Five Points of Calvinism, on the grounds that its doctrine of predestination vitiates an “objective, historical, organic, and concrete [church] . . . the necessary organ and medium of . . . salvation.” (226). As explained below, Hodge had already tossed out Calvin’s doctrine of the Lord’s Supper.

Sacrament and Culture

What drove these competing historical claims? I suggest that Nevin and Hodge both recognized that the unsacramental character of American church life could only result in disaster for American Christianity. They believed that the combined forces of governmental/constitutional theology, revivalism, and false philosophy (of course they disagreed as to the nature of that false philosophy) would undermine the church. This may explain why both of them took the ensuing debate over the Lord's Supper so seriously. Throughout his work, Nevin pointed out that Calvin's doctrine was a *via media* between the Lutheran and the Zwinglian doctrines, and that "the sacramental doctrine of the primitive Reformed Church stood inseparably connected with the idea of an inward living union between believers and Christ, in virtue of which they are incorporated into his very nature, and made to subsist with him by the power of a common life."⁵⁹ Nevin focused on four basic points of contention where he believed that the true Reformed doctrine had been watered down. (1) The union of believers with Christ is not simply that of a common humanity, derived from Adam, but rather rests upon our participation in his own nature as a higher order of life.⁶⁰ (2) The relationship is more than a moral union of inward sympathy or agreement. The Supper is more than a sign which reminds us of Christ, or a pledge of service to Christ, it embodies the actual presence of the grace it represents in its own constitution; namely, the very life of the Lord Jesus Christ himself, made present to us by the power of the Holy

⁵⁹*Mystical Presence*, 54. Nevin's reference is to *Inst.* III, xi, 10. Calvin says that the mystical union (or indwelling of Christ) "makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed.... We put on Christ and are engrafted into his body—in short, because he deigns to make us one with him. For this reason, we glory that we have fellowship of righteousness with him." This was a statement written against the charge that he made naked faith the basis of imputed righteousness, and does not seem to speak of subsisting with Christ by the power of a common life.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 55.

Ghost.⁶¹ (3) The relation is also more than a legal union. While Christ is truly the representative of his people, the external imputation rests at last on a real, internal unity of life, without which it would have no meaning. “We partake of his merits and benefits only so far as we partake of his substance.”⁶² (4) This communion is not only with Christ’s divine nature, or with the Holy Spirit, but rather, through the Holy Spirit we have a real communion with the Word made flesh; both with his deity and his humanity. This union is real, substantial, and essential.⁶³ This participation in Christ’s flesh and blood in the Lord’s Supper is not corporeal, but spiritual; nonetheless it is real. The power of the Holy Ghost overcomes all spatial boundaries and unites things separated by great distance. The sacrament carries an *objective* force. Grace is presented, or offered to all, but it may only be apprehended by faith. This invisible grace is the “substantial life of the Saviour himself, particularly in his human nature. He became flesh for the life of the world, and our communion with him, involves a real participation in him as the principle of life *under this form*. . . . Such is the proper sacramental doctrine of the Reformed Church as it stood in the Sixteenth century.”⁶⁴

Nevin exerted a great deal of energy to demonstrate that the modern “Puritanical” theory has no basis in history. He examined the early Fathers and concludes, relying greatly on Neander’s work, that they taught some form of mystical union, neither in a Roman nor a Lutheran sense, but in a general Reformed sense (because of his sensitivity to an ahistorical reading backwards, he avoids saying it quite so bluntly). He viewed the Reformers as springing from the bosom of the Catholic Church in order to preserve that which was good and right, but that later Protestants (whom he calls “Puritans”) had rejected the substance of the faith of the Church Universal concerning the sacraments from the first days through the Reformation. His most savage blows were aimed at the late

⁶¹Ibid., 56-7.

⁶²Ibid., 57.

⁶³Ibid., 58.

⁶⁴Ibid., 60-2.

eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Reformed theologians, whose views he hacks apart as anti-sacramental, rationalistic, and sectarian.⁶⁵

But after stating the Reformed doctrine, Nevin was willing to say that it “is embarrassed with some difficulties...[in] the defective form in which it was attempted to bring it before the understanding.”⁶⁶ Not, indeed, that the substance of the doctrine was in error, but that it was connected with a false psychology that affected both the understanding of Christ’s person and the persons of his people.

Nevin identified three points that he believed needed to be rethought in light of the advances of modern psychology. First, Calvin “does not make a sufficient distinction between the idea of the organic *law* which constitutes the proper identity of a human body, and the material volume it is found to embrace as exhibited to the senses.”⁶⁷ Matter must be transfused with the active presence of the organic law in order to form the medium of the invisible law’s true outward existence. As he later states, “The soul to be complete to develop itself at all as a soul, *must* externalize itself, throw itself out in space; and this externalization is the body.”⁶⁸ Rejecting all forms of body/soul dualism, Nevin asserts the inseparable unity of persons utilizing the language of Hegelian anthropology, though attempting to soften its impact. Second, Calvin has too much dualism in his anthropology, and does not emphasize the unity of persons with enough vigour, whether in the case of Christ, or in the case of his people. Christ’s person is one and indivisible, and therefore to convey his life into the lives of his people, they must receive the entire life of Christ, both human and divine. It is not enough to say, as Calvin did, that the Holy Spirit imparts the vivific virtues of Christ’s flesh to our souls. Rather, Christ’s whole Person (i.e., the organic law of his life) is communicated to our entire persons by the power of the Holy Ghost, who “is the very form in

⁶⁵*Mystical Presence*, 148-152.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 155.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 156.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 171.

which Christ's life is made present in the Church, for the purposes of the christian salvation."⁶⁹ Finally, Calvin makes no distinction between the individual personal life of Christ, and the same life in a *generic* view.⁷⁰ Every man has both his individual life and his general life, in which he lives both in his own person, and in his descendants. This is certainly true of Adam, who is both *a* man and *the* man, in whom the entire human race is included. In fact, all individual personalities form, in a deep sense, one and the same life. Adam lives in his descendants as truly as he lived, and lives, in his own person. This is true also of Christ. He is both *a* man, Jesus of Nazareth, the incarnate Word made flesh, but also, he is *the* man, "emphatically the SON OF MAN, in whose person stood revealed the true idea of humanity, under its ultimate and most comprehensive form."

Nevin thought that these three "scientific determinations" provided a much needed modification and improvement of Calvin's doctrine. He felt the need to defend them by appealing to "the actual science of the present time....No such inquiry can deserve to be considered scientific, if it fail to take them into view....We hold fast to the substance [of the old doctrine], while, for the very sake of doing so, we endeavor to place it in a better form."⁷¹ Convinced of the scientific truth of Hegelian anthropology, he insisted that a refusal to accept these principles would consist of a rejection of true science. Consistent with his stated theological method, Nevin took the scientific truths of modern psychology, as expounded by Rauch, applied them to the traditional Reformed doctrine, and then tests them by the Scriptures to see if they fit.⁷² Some have argued that Nevin's views are more patristic than Hegelian. Certainly Nevin was strongly influenced by his reading of the early Fathers—as was Hegel⁷³—but he nonetheless chose the language of Hegelian

⁶⁹Ibid., 160.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Ibid., 162.

⁷²Ibid., 163.

⁷³Laurence Dickey, *Hegel: Religion, Economics, and the Politics of Spirit, 1770-1807* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

anthropology to express his views. He insists that these “improvements” to the Calvinist doctrine are based on scientific determinations rooted in contemporary German discussions of anthropology.

Throughout his argument, Nevin makes no pretense of objectivity. He has a clear agenda which drives his research and writing: to restore and reform the eucharistic doctrine of the church for the purpose of establishing a piety and spirituality which will bind together the fragmented body of Christ. Revivalism, rationalism, and reformism were—as far as he could see—tearing the church apart. The older doctrine of the church, the sacraments, and the mystical union with Christ, he hoped, would restore order and peace to God’s people.

Hodge did not take lightly the charge of rationalism, which he saw being aimed at the American Reformed Churches. He too was attempting to fight off the same enemies. He agreed that American theology was surrendering to the forces of ultraism in its doctrine of church and sacrament. But he still hoped to pull a large portion of American Protestantism—or at least Presbyterianism—with him, and Nevin’s adoption of Hegelian and romantic language was inimical to his designs. He firmly believed that the tools of common sense realism and moderate revivalism (intellect and spirit) were sufficient to persuade the church to refrain from going to extremes. In other words, Hodge attempted to hold the middle ground between the extreme Zwinglianism of most Americans, and Nevin’s high Calvinism.

Hodge insisted upon a vital union in the Supper. We are partakers of Christ’s life, for it is not we that live, but Christ that lives in us. This union, Hodge asserted, is based upon Christ’s participation with our nature in his incarnation, and our participation with the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of Christ, which unites us bodily and spiritually as members of Christ, who is our head. Yet we do not partake of Christ’s human nature. The Reformed Church, Hodge insisted, taught “that by receiving the body and blood of Christ, is meant receiving their virtue or efficacy. Some of them said it was their virtue as broken and shed, *i.e.*, their

sacrificial virtue; others said, it was a mysterious, supernatural efficacy flowing from the glorified body of Christ in heaven.”⁷⁴

Hodge saw that Reformers like Bucer and Calvin were trying to unify the Protestant churches, and therefore he suggested that they spoke in stronger terms when attempting to meet the Lutherans, less strong when they joined with the Zwinglians. He also found the statements of the Reformers to be confusing, as terms were used interchangeably and “out of their ordinary sense.” Nevin accused Hodge of “lumping” authorities, and of not understanding the Reformation, but rather picking and choosing his quotes to agree with his position.⁷⁵ While this rings true in many places, Hodge did bring out some points that Nevin had conveniently “forgotten.”

Hodge argued that the true Reformed doctrine of the Supper should be sought in the merger between the Calvinist and Zwinglian strands of thought. Zwingli had taught that the “natural substantial body of Christ in which he suffered” was eaten not “corporally, or as to its essence, but spiritually only,” which for Zwingli meant feeding on him with the mind and the spirit by faith.⁷⁶ To believe, therefore is to eat, and to eat, is to believe.

Hodge admitted that Calvin had a more extreme view, but said that the Genevan Reformer had utilized both views and could be quoted by either side. What interested him more was the Consensus Tigurinus which Nevin had omitted from his survey. As the union of Geneva and Zurich on the Sacraments, Hodge saw it as one of the most representative documents, along with the Heidelberg Catechism and the Second Helvetic Confession. These last two, the standards of the German Reformed Church, had been influenced by Calvinist, Zwinglian, and Melancthonian strands of thought, and therefore Hodge agreed with Nevin that they well represented the Reformed doctrine.

While Hodge allowed that the entire Reformed Church saw

⁷⁴Hodge, “Doctrine of the Reformed Church on the Lord’s Supper,” *Essays and Reviews*, (hereafter, *Essays and Reviews*) (Robert Carter & Brothers, New York, 1857), 342-3.

⁷⁵Nevin, “Doctrine of the Reformed Church,” 433.

⁷⁶Hodge, *Essays and Reviews*, 345.

nothing essentially erroneous with Calvin's view, he claimed that, as it was not a congenial element to the Reformed system, it slowly died out. Here Hodge used organic, developmental language against its proponents with perhaps a bit of glee. "The fundamental principles of Protestantism are the exclusive normal authority of Scripture, and justification by faith alone. If that system lives and grows it must throw off every thing incompatible with those principles."⁷⁷ More importantly, in Hodge's eyes, the Consensus Tigurinus, the Second Helvetic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism all teach the sacrificial view, and carry more symbolical weight than Calvin, or the "dubious expressions" of the other Confessions. Hodge did not understand Calvin's more covenantal understanding of the Lord's Supper because he was part of an intellectual world that was shifting into more constitutional and governmental modes of thought.

Hodge was disturbed by Nevin's teaching that the Supper had an "altogether extraordinary power." It contradicted his understanding of the Reformed doctrine that the Supper does not convey anything that cannot be received elsewhere. For proof he turned to the Consensus Tigurinus, claiming that, "what is figured in the sacraments is granted to believers *extra eorum usum* (without the use of the sacraments)." While admitting that the sacraments have an objective power, Hodge repudiated Nevin's attribution of the source of that power and efficacy to the service itself.⁷⁸ Hodge attempted to argue that while the Reformed church taught that Christ is presented to us in the Supper, but cannot be appropriated by us without the work of the Holy Spirit *in us* to create faith, Nevin seemed to remove the work of the Holy Spirit from us, and placed it objectively in the sacrament: "where the way is open for it to take effect at all, it serves in itself to convey the life of Christ into our persons."⁷⁹ Hence, Hodge claimed, Nevin taught a doctrine of *ex*

⁷⁷Ibid., 367

⁷⁸Ibid., 388. Hodge quotes Nevin: "[the efficacy] belongs to the institution in its own nature. The signs are bound to what they represent...objectively by the force of a divine appointment." [MP, 61].

⁷⁹Ibid., 389, quoting Nevin, MP, 182.

opere operato—the sacraments convey grace to all, regardless of faith.

Since Nevin had already done a considerable amount of historical work, Hodge's quick response appeared haphazard to him. Nevin saw it as a "violently forced" interpretation, lacking in any historical sensibility. Hodge's statement that the terminology of the Reformation was confused demonstrated, in Nevin's mind, that "the writer has no sense, apparently, of anything like an inward unity or wholeness in the Reformed doctrine... [and robs] it of every sort of objective immanent reason and law, for the very purpose of feeling himself at liberty thus to construct from its chaotic material an answer to please his own taste."⁸⁰ Ironically, Nevin himself was guilty of the same error when he stated that Philip Melancthon was "in a certain sense, the author of the *German Reformed church*,"⁸¹ and asserted that the German Reformed church had never assented to Calvin's doctrine of the decrees. But not merely with respect to the German Reformed, "the doctrine of the decrees, as held by Calvin never belonged at all to the constitution of the Reformed church as such; whereas the sacramental doctrine entered in truth into its distinctive character as a confession."⁸² While Melancthon certainly was one influence in the German Reformed church, Nevin overstepped himself by claiming that the Reformed church as a whole never assented to Calvin's doctrine of the decrees. Nevin himself was attempting to recreate a history that would befriend his own distinctive theological and cultural endeavors.

Nevin utterly rejected Hodge's understanding of the Reformed doctrine of the spiritual presence of Christ, which Hodge located solely in the mind, and to faith. It seems as though on this point the two theologians were simply talking past one another. Both conceived of spiritual presence in opposition to physical presence, but while Hodge thought of this as a presence to the mind, or soul, Nevin eliminated the dualism and spoke of it as a presence to the whole person, spiritually, and therefore saw Hodge's doctrine as mere intellectual apprehension (Calvin probably would have found

⁸⁰Nevin, "Doctrine of the Reformed Church," 434.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 521.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 523.

both views unappealing, Hodge's for being too simplistic in its conception of mind, and Nevin's for its Hegelian notion of generic persons). Hodge, of course having no generic persons to fall back on, could only speak of Christ's presence to the immaterial part of man, and therefore was not conceiving of a mere intellectual presence, but a real and true presence of Christ in the best terms he could think of, without utilizing Calvin's doctrine of mysterious effluence. Nevin, on the other hand, because he saw the very essence of reality as spiritual, could not help but see Hodge's view as woefully incomplete. Indeed, it appeared to make everything dependent upon the believer's mind whether or not any spiritual transaction takes place, leaving the Holy Spirit as the only objective force in the sacrament, and making the grace of the Supper no different from the grace elsewhere obtained.

To Nevin, Hodge appeared to have no understanding of the inward connection of the doctrines of the Reformed Church. That Calvin's doctrine of the mystical presence of Christ in the Supper should have no root in the organic unity of his theology seemed absurd to Nevin.⁸³ Nevin took issue with Hodge on six points. *First*, the Reformed doctrine was not divided into two camps, but rather it taught that, "the life of Christ is the true and real basis of his sacrifice, and so the natural and necessary medium of communication with it [is required] for the remission of sins."⁸⁴ Therefore the "development" of doctrine to the exclusion of this concept can only be for the worse. *Second*, Hodge posits a mental presence only, which is contrary to the Reformed emphasis that Christ is present, "not simply as an object of thought or intelligence on the part of men, but in the way of actual communication on the part of Christ;...a presence, not material, but dynamic."⁸⁵ *Third*, Hodge denies a true participation in the human side of Christ's life, contradicting the Reformed teaching on the participation in the vivific virtue of Christ's life. *Fourth*, the notion that the work of the Holy Spirit excludes the proper presence of Christ's humanity is

⁸³Ibid., 442.

⁸⁴Ibid., 450.

⁸⁵Ibid., 451.

false and wrong.⁸⁶ *Fifth*, the Reformed approved “a real conjunction between the outward form of sacraments and their inward grace. The latter was taken to belong to their very constitution as truly as the first....Sacramental grace...lay with objective force in the solemnity itself.”⁸⁷ *Sixth*, Hodge robs the Reformed doctrine of this conception of objective grace in the sacraments, stripping it at the same time of all mystical character. The faith of the Reformed church, no less than the Lutheran church, saw in the Lord’s supper the presence of a heavenly mystery that was actually different from the word.⁸⁸

In order to show the essential difference between Hodge’s understanding of the Reformed doctrine and his own, Nevin presented Hodge’s summary statement, filled in with his own supplements. As this is the simplest presentation of their doctrines, it is worth reproducing the whole paragraph (plain text is Hodge, italics are Nevin’s additions):

“Christ is really present to his people, in this ordinance, not bodily, but by his Spirit,” *as the medium of a higher mode of existence*; “not in the sense of local nearness, but of efficacious operation,” *nullifying miraculously the bar of distance and bringing the very substance of his body into union with their life* “They receive him not with the mouth, but by faith,” *as the organ by which only the soul is qualified to admit the divine action now noticed*; “they receive his flesh, not as flesh, not as material particles,” *but dynamically in the inward power of its life, (so that the clause “nor its human life,” is not correct)*; “his body as broken and his blood as shed,” *the value of that sacrifice carried in the vivific virtue of the same body now gloriously exalted in heaven*. “The union thus signified and effected between him and them, is not a corporeal union, nor a mixture of substances,” *in the Roman or Lutheran sense, “but spiritual and mystical;” not merely mental, but including the real presence of Christ’s whole life under an objective character, and reaching on our side also through the soul into the body*; “arising from the indwelling of the Spirit,” *not as the proxy only of an absent Christ, but as the supernatural bond of a true life connection, by which his*

⁸⁶Ibid., 452.

⁸⁷Ibid., 452-3.

⁸⁸Ibid., 453.

*very flesh is joined to ours, more intimately far than the trunk to the branches, or the head to the members, in the natural world. "The efficacy of this sacrament, as a means of grace, is not in the signs," separately taken, "nor in the service," outwardly considered "nor in the minister, nor in the word, but solely in the attending influence of the holy Ghost," as the necessary complement or inward side of the divine mystery itself of whose pledge, and whose mirific action can never fail to take effect objectively where the subject is in a state to admit it by faith. "This we believe," so filled out with positive contents, "to be a fair statement of the doctrine of the Reformed church."*⁸⁹

Most historians agree that Nevin won the historical debate, but have often neglected to mention that Nevin did not even attempt to defend his "improvements" of the Reformed doctrine. Nevin's historical presentation remains one of the finest surveys of Reformed sacramental doctrine. His own theological additions have considerably less significance.

Conclusion

If one accepts Hodge's belief in objective theological truth, and a realist epistemology, then it is difficult to find fault with his position. He was simply defending what he considered to be the essence of Christianity. His article "What is Christianity,"⁹⁰ makes it clear that he saw Mercersburg as a terrible threat to the integrity of Christianity in America. On the other hand, if one rejects Hodge's starting point, then Hodge appears to be a theological dinosaur who refused to lay down and die. His whole position was founded upon an epistemology that combines two streams of thought that gave high priority to the Aristotelian concept of antithesis, Scottish realism and Reformed confessionalism.

Nevin, on the other hand, found the Scottish realist conception of the world vapid. He passed through at least two spiritual crises; the first when he abandoned the common sense program for idealism, and the second when he wrestled with the lure of the

⁸⁹Nevin, 538-9.

⁹⁰"What Is Christianity?" BRPR 32:1 (1860): 118-161.

Roman church. His churchly mentality, though, proved too traditional for the majority of Americans, who were still averse to any “Old World” thinking, and had found the plain common sense approach to religion far more appealing. His emphasis on standpoint made him stand out in an era infatuated with scientific “objectivity,” but it served him well, because he could tolerate the ways of the masses, recognizing that understanding would only come in time, as the spirit of the American nation developed and grew.

As opposed to Hodge’s static concept of being, Nevin appropriated the Hegelian logic of dialectic—of becoming. Forsaking objectivity as not only impossible, but undesirable, Nevin insisted that all theology grows and changes in an historical unfolding of the Incarnation in the church. Yet, while doctrine continually grows and changes, —it always retains its inner vitality. It grows according to the logic of its inner life, actualizing the potential inherent in the theanthropic life of Christ himself.

Most scholars of American religion have ignored nineteenth-century American sacramental theology. The Hodge-Nevin debates are the only significant exception. But by failing to place the Hodge-Nevin debates within the context of the hotly contested sacramental world of the antebellum era, I believe historians have neglected a fascinating window into the changing world of American Protestantism, as the emergent culture of consumption, sentimentality, and democratization overwhelmed those who attempted to stem the tide. Ironically, both Hodge and Nevin participated in that transformation: Hodge, perhaps more obviously, by championing the realist epistemology which, divorced from his confessional theology, promoted science over revelation; Nevin, by advocating a view of historical development which, cut off from his traditional use of it, called into question all traditions.

Hodge understood the importance of a truth that is outside us and above us, but his common sense hermeneutic is inadequate to our apprehension of that truth. Nevin understood the role of presuppositions—that we always come to Scripture with a theology—but his view of historical development seems to leave the

door open to a relativizing historicism. A more satisfactory position will learn from both Hodge and Nevin. Our hermeneutic must recognize with Nevin that there are no brute facts. All facts are interpreted facts. But with Hodge we must insist that these facts are outside of us and above us. The only way to hold these two together is to say that all facts are God-interpreted facts; and that our task as creatures in the image of God is to receptively reinterpret these facts in the light of God's own interpretation of them revealed in Christ Jesus through holy scriptures.⁹¹

⁹¹I am indebted to Cornelius Van Til for this solution. The simple version can be found in Van Til's *The Defense of Christianity & My Credo* (Westminster Theological Seminary, n.d.). His more thorough treatment can be found in *Apologetics* (Presbyterian & Reformed, n.d.) and *The Defense of the Faith* (P&R, 1955).