

# Dabney Ecclesiology Lectures

Fall 2006

## Lectures #1-2

### Why Mercersburg Matters: Lessons in Ecclesiology for 21<sup>st</sup> Century “High Church Calvinists”

#### I. John Williamson Nevin’s background and career

- Presbyterian family life
  - “Old school”
  - Catechetical background
- Studies at Princeton
- Transfers into German Reformed denomination
  - Like every other denomination in America, the German Reformed were torn over questions of Americanization and revivalism
  - The era of the Jacksonian “common man;” America finding its own identity, utterly distinct from its old world heritage
  - American culture took on a decidedly individualistic bent, rejecting the wisdom of tradition; this produced a voluntaristic ecclesiology and a conversionist theology
- Chief works:
  - *The Anxious Bench*, attacking the new measures of revivalism
  - *The Antichrist*, showing how American Protestants are denying incarnational Christian faith and practice
  - *The Mystical Presence* (and subsequent controversy with Charles Hodge), arguing for Calvin’s view of the “real presence” in the Lord’s Supper
    - Nevin argued that Protestants had fallen away from classic Reformed views of the sacraments (emphasis mine): “As the Eucharist forms the very heart of the whole Christian worship, so it is clear that the entire question of the church, which all are compelled to acknowledge--the great life problem of the age--centers ultimately in the sacramental question as its inmost heart and core. Our view of the Lord's Supper must ever condition and rule in the end our view of Christ's person and the conception we form of the church. It must influence, at the same time, very materially, our whole system of theology, as well as all our ideas of ecclesiastical history. Is it true that the modern Protestant Church in this country has, in large part at least, fallen away from the sacramental doctrine of the sixteenth century? All must at least allow that there is some room for asking

the question. If so, it is equally plain that it is a question which is entitled to a serious answer. For in the nature of the case, such a falling away, if it exist at all, must be connected with a still more general removal from the original platform of the church. The eucharistic doctrine of the sixteenth century was interwoven with the whole church system of the time; to give it up, then, must involve in the end a renunciation in principle, if not in profession, of this system itself in its radical, distinctive constitution. If it can be show no material change has taken place, it is due to an interest of such high consequence that this should be satisfactorily done. Or if the change should be allowed, and still vindicated as a legitimate advance on the original Protestant faith, let this ground be openly and consciously taken. Let us know, at least, where we are and what we actually do believe, in the case of this central question, as compared with the theological standpoint of our catechisms and confessions of faith."

- Brian Gerrish says this book is to be "ranked among the classics of American theological literature."
- Nevin beautifully articulates Calvin's view of Christ's real-yet-mystical presence in the Eucharist; he rooted his understanding of the Eucharist in the Incarnation – the Incarnation is the basic world-changing, history-altering event, which is now celebrated and extended in the communion meal
  - *The Mercersburg Review* journal
  - Liturgical reform
- Nevin's Christocentric approach to theology and history: "Christ is the central fact, from which all other historical facts derive their significance. He is the key that unlocks its mysteries and apparent contradictions."
- Nevin on church and ministry
- First retirement, "dizzy spell," return to work
- Lancaster, administrative work, second retirement

## II. Phillip Schaff's background and career

- German born and educated
- Recruited to Mercersburg
- Key scholar in 19<sup>th</sup> century:
  - *The Principle of Protestantism* (a Protestant answer to John Henry Newman)
  - 8 volume church history and *Creeeds of Christendom*
  - Oversaw translation of church fathers into English; other translation projects; hymnals; devotionals; books; essays
- The "inveterate hoper"
  - Future orientation
  - The Reformation is incomplete
  - An organic ecclesiology

- Late career

### III. Mercersburg distinctives, over against American evangelicalism (or “puritanism,” as Nevin called it)

- The church: divine creation or human organization?
  - Nevin rooted ecclesiology in Christology: “If the fact of the incarnation be indeed the principle and source of a new supernatural order of life for humanity itself, the church, of course, is no abstraction. It must be a true, living, divine-human constitution in the world; strictly organic in its nature--not a *device* or contrivance ingeniously fitted to serve certain purposes beyond itself--but the necessary, essential form of Christianity, in whose presence only it is possible to conceive intelligently of piety in its individual manifestations. The life of the single Christian can be real and healthful only as it is born from the general life of the church, and carried by it onward to the end. We are Christians singly, by partaking (having *part*) in the general life revelation, which is already at hand organically in the church, the living and life-giving body of Jesus Christ.”
- The Reformation: organically connected with the church of the creeds or complete break with medieval catholicism?
  - Where did you get your Bible?
  - How could an apostasy have happened so abruptly and absolutely?
  - Why did the Reformers affirm the bulk of catholic teaching and religion?
  - Does acquiring a historical consciousness mean we have to cease being Protestant?
  - “Puritanism” vs. the classic Reformed vision from the 16<sup>th</sup> century
  - Reformation as “tragic necessity” (Jaroslav Pelikan)
  - Nevin’s conclusion: Either early Christianity was intrinsically false or “puritanism” is an imposter
  - Nevin vs. Newman; doctrinal development and the legitimacy of the Reformation
- The ministry: ambassadors of divine grace and gifts of the Spirit or useful religious counselors?
  - The office of ministry is divine in origin, flowing directly from the office of Christ himself; offices are not merely created by congregations as they call men, but are constituted by God himself, and flow from the new order of things established in Christ’s coming
  - Yet (unlike some other “high” views of office) the ministry does stand independent of the church; Nevin argued that the church and the ministry spring from the same source at the same time, and are “so joined together that they cannot be separated from one another”
  - Insofar as the church is founded on the apostolate, it depends upon the ministerial office; the ministry is thus an indispensable characteristic of the church, and a “necessary” medium of salvation

- The powers of the Ministry of Word and Sacrament do not inhere the man but in the office; Nevin: “[Pastors are] ambassadors of God [who represent the people] in the august court of Heaven itself...There is no position or office in the world of greater significance. Monarchs, senators, scientists, princes, and kings, all stand in less distinction.”
- Nevin’s philosophy of ministry emphasized sound and sincere preaching, catechesis, and pastoral visitation; he feared the “Americanization” of the ministry most of all, since individualistic Americans were prone to seek after private, unmediated experiences of salvation, detached from the church and the work of the pastorate
- Liturgy: historic forms or man made novelties?
  - Nevin: “Sects have no sense for the objective and liturgical in worship; hold all this rather to be at war with the idea of devotion; and aim accordingly, on principle, to clothe the entire service of God as much as possible with just the opposite character. Their hymns, and the tunes to which they are sung, their prayers, and of course also the whole tone of their preaching, bear the same impress of extreme subjectivity. This is supposed, indeed, to constitute their highest excellence and worth; as it seems to place the worshipper in direct personal juxtaposition with the spiritual world itself, and carries with it oftentimes a great show of earnestness and life, in its own form. But the transition here again is most easy, nay, necessary, as all experience proves, from the region of clouds downward to the region of clods. All sect worship, fanatical and extravagant at first, sinks finally into the dullest routine of empty ceremony.”
- The sacraments: instruments of salvific grace or empty symbols/devotional aids?
  - Nevin argued that the modern Protestant conception of the sacraments as bare signs would have been regarded as heretical and Gnostic in the early church; he identified it with the spirit of the antichrist since it came close to denying the real appearance of God in the flesh
  - Nevin: “Sects clearly betray their rationalistic, Gnostic spirit, by making the Lord's Supper to be a simple sign or monument, and denying all power to holy Baptism...”
- The Bible/authority: is biblical interpretation governed by the “rule of faith” embedded in the church’s tradition and teaching office, or by the solitary individual’s private judgment?
  - The Bible was give to *a people*, not to isolated individuals; it has a context and a history
  - The Bible was given to be implemented in the context of the covenant community, not in abstraction from it
  - “Every man his own pope”
  - The American tendency to “reinvent” Christianity

- The view that one can be a good Christian without the church or the ministry or the sacraments is unhistorical and unscriptural; the church is not merely a supplement to one's private relationship with Christ
- Why do we trust isolated individuals to define Christianity more than we trust the time-tested fathers of the church?
- The essence of Christianity: Propositions or life?
  - If the faith is just a matter of propositions, all that matters is which branch of the church affirms the most correct propositions; we can freely divide from one another on the basis of the claim, "My propositions are better than yours"
  - But if Christ lives in his church as the communion of the saints, and if eternal life is not a mere knowledge of propositions but of Christ himself, then we have to take another view of the matter
  - Nevin's Christocentric theology: "An outward church is the necessary form of the new creation in Christ Jesus, in its very nature; and must continue to be so, not only through all time but through all eternity likewise. Outward social worship, which implies, of course, forms for the purpose, is to be regarded as something essential to piety itself. A religion without externals must ever be fantastic and false. The simple utterance of religious feeling, by which the spirit takes outward form, is needed, not for something beyond itself, but for the perfection of the feeling itself. Forms, in this sense--not as sundered from inward life, of course, but as embracing it--enter as a constituent element into the very life of Christianity. As a real, human, historical constitution in the world, the outward and inward in the church can never be divorced without peril to all that is most precious in the Christian faith. We have no right to set the inward in opposition to the outward, the spiritual in opposition to the corporal, in religion. The incarnation of the Son of God, as it is the principle, forms also the true measure and test of all sound Christianity in this view. To be *real*, the human, as such, and of course the divine also in human form, must ever externalize its inward life. All thought, all feeling, every spiritual state, must take body (in the way of word, or outward form of some sort), in order to come at all to any true perfection of itself. This is the proper, deep sense of all liturgical services in religion. The necessity here affirmed is universal. The more intensely *spiritual* any state may be, the more irresistibly urgent will ever be found its tendency to clothe itself, and make itself complete, in a suitable external form. Away with the imagination, then, that externals in Christianity (including the conception of the visible church itself) are something accidental only to its true constitution--a cunningly framed device merely for advancing some interest foreign from themselves. To think of the church--and of Christian worship--as *means* simply to something else, is to dishonor religion itself in the most serious manner."

- Nevin and Schaff both emphasized the cosmic scope of redemption, against the soteriological individualism of the American church; Nevin called the new creation the *telos* of the old

#### IV. Relevance/appraisal

- Theological integrity
  - Nevin and Schaff sought to uphold their tradition in an honest way, even when it cut deeply against the grain of their surrounding culture; they were not afraid of modifying the older theological forms when exegesis called for it, but they knew that if they were going to call themselves “Reformed,” they needed to maintain the Reformed tradition with integrity
  - Nevin and Schaff saw the problems with both revivalism and scholasticism as they emerged on the American frontier and in the seminary classroom; they did not write a systematic theology (that was left to E. V. Gerhart’s work, *The Institutes of Christian Religion*), but they did work to systematically integrate Christology, ecclesiology, sacramental, liturgical, and eschatological concerns into a coherent whole; in many ways, they were well ahead of their time (e.g., the focus on union with Christ, rather than an *ordo salutis*; their desire to focus on the living community rather than bare propositions)
- The structure of church history
  - How does the Reformation fit into the unfolding narrative of church history?
  - Catholic ecclesiology vs. “restorationist sectarians”; Nevin on the “trail of blood view of church history: “Nothing is more common than to hear them talk of the unfailing and enduring character of the church, of its being founded on a rock, and of Christ’s presence with it always for its protection and defense; they are willing to say with the ancient creed, when necessary, “We believe in the church as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.” But by all this they mean in the end, not the church in any outward and visible view, not the historical organization known under this name and claiming these titles from the third century down to the sixteenth, but a supposed succession of hidden and scattered witnesses, in the so called catholic church party, but more generally after a time on the outside of it, handing down what the theory is pleased to call a pure faith”
  - The only way that Protestantism can lay any legitimate claim to being part of the historic Christian church is through connection with the medieval church, and through the medieval church with the early church, and through the early church with Christ and the apostolic church; Nevin on the Reformation’s continuity with the medieval church: “However much of rubbish the Reformation found occasion to remove, it was still compelled to do homage to the main body of the Roman theology as orthodox and right; and to this day Protestantism has no valid mission in the world, any farther

than it is willing to build on this old foundation. Its distinctive doctrines are of no force, except in organic union with the grand scheme of truth, which is exhibited in the ancient creeds and in the decisions of the first general councils. Cut off from this root, taken from the stream of this only sure and safe tradition, even the authority of the Bible becomes uncertain, and the article of justification by faith itself is turned into a perilous lie... The theory is false. It rests on no historical bottom. The Scriptures are against it. All sound religious feeling is at war with it. Facts of every sort conspire to prove it untrue."

- Protestantism has shown itself to be just as susceptible to disease as Roman Catholicism
- Schaff's Hegelian view of history – awaiting a new synthesis
- Accusations of heresy, Romanizing
  - Nevin on Rome (emphasis mine): "If our war against Romanism is to be so managed that it must be at the same time a war against all church antiquity, we may as well give up the contest. But to have any intelligent regard for the ancient church on the other hand, any feeling of religious fellowship with it, is to see that Romanism itself is no fair object for persecution in this radical and ribald style. We may oppose it still; but we will also have some sense of its just claims and merits. We will not spit upon it, nor cover it with spiteful and malignant slang. We will not feel, that love to Christ and hatred of the Pope are precisely one and the same thing."
  - Nevin claimed that Rome and Protestantism are two rivers flowing from the same fountain: "We must hold fast to the divine origin of the church, and to its divine continuity from the beginning down to the present time. We must see and admit, that Protestantism is no return simply to primitive Christianity. Its connection with this is *through* the Roman Catholic Church only, as the real continuation of the older system. In no other view can it be acknowledged, as the historical and legitimate succession of this ancient faith. This implies, however, that the life of Protestantism must be one with the life of the church as it stood previously. It is to be taken as different from this in its rejection of many accidental corruptions, but not in distinctive substance and spirit. Its doctrines must be felt to grow forth, with true inward vitality, from the faith that has been accredited as divine from the beginning, by the promise and miraculous providence of Christ. Puritanism then, by abjuring this historical and organic relationship to the ancient church, does what it can in truth to ruin the cause of genuine Protestantism. It brings another Gospel. It throws us on the terrible dilemma: "Either ancient Christianity was intrinsically false, or Protestantism is a bold imposture"; for it makes this last to be the pure negation and contradiction of the first. But when it comes to this, what sound mind can pause in its choice? To create such a dilemma, we say then, is to fight against the Reformation. Puritanism, carrying upon its hard front

these formidable horns, is no better than treason and death to Protestantism.”

- The heresy trial of 1845; Joseph Berg defeated, leaves German Reformed church
- Church unity/evangelical catholicity vs. American sectarianism
  - Nevin’s “dizzy spell” and the attractions of Rome
  - Schaff’s visit to Trent
  - Nevin on sects: “For one who has come to make earnest with the church question, and who has courage to face things as they are in the way of steady firm thought, the whole present state of sect Christianity is full of difficulty and discouragement. In the first place, it is not possible for him to identify any one sect with the idea of the whole Church. Whether he be a Methodist, or a Presbyterian, or a Lutheran, or of any other denomination, he sees clearly that it is a desperate business to think of making out a full agreement with primitive Christianity in favor of his own body. He owns too, at any rate that other bodies are included in the Church, as it now stands. Of course, his own is but a part of the Church, not numerically only, but also constitutionally. Hence it must be regarded, when taken by itself, as a one-sided and defective manifestation of the Christian life; and so the consciousness, or state of mind, which it serves to produce, and in which distinctively it stands, can never be rested in as evangelically complete. It is not possible thus for a true church consciousness, and the particular sect consciousness - Presbyterianism, Lutheranism, or any other - to fall together as commensurate spheres of life; the first is something far more wide and deep than the second, and cannot be asked to yield to this as ultimate in any way, without the sense of incongruity and contradiction. Then again, it becomes impossible, of course, to acquiesce in the denominational position as final and conclusive. No position can be so regarded, that is not felt to be identical with the absolute idea of Christianity, the true sense of it as a whole. What earnest minded man now seriously expects that his particular denomination - Methodist, Presbyterian, or any other - is destined to swallow up at last all other types of Christianity, and so rule the universal world? Nor is the case relieved at all, by imagining the different sects, as they now stand, to continue collectively in permanent force. It is not possible at all for a truly thoughtful spirit, to settle itself in this as the legitimate and normal state of the Church. 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. And yet the system itself is opposed to every such thought. It cannot will its own destruction. Every sect demands of its members a faith and trust, as we have already seen, which imply that it is to be taken as absolute and perpetual. It plays, in its place, the part of Christ’s one universal Church. Here, then, is a difficulty. To cleave to the sect as an



ultimate interest, in the way it requires, is to be divorced in spirit necessarily, to the same extent, from the true idea of Christ's kingdom, whose perfect coming cannot possibly be in such form. To become catholic, on the other hand, is necessarily to rise above the standpoint of the mere sect, and to lose the power thus of that devotion to its interests, separately considered, which it can never fail to exact notwithstanding, as the test and measure, in such relation, even, of universal Christianity itself. How much of embarrassment and confusion is involved in all this, the more especially as the sect system has no tendency whatever to surmount its own contradiction, but carries in itself the principle only of endless disintegration, many are made to feel at this time beyond what they are well able to express."

- Newman: How can one believe in doctrinal development and organic historical connections, and remain Protestant? Schaff: How can one believe in doctrinal development and the organic historical connections and remain Roman? Whereas for Newman, an understanding of doctrinal development drove him into the arms of Rome, for the Mercersburg men, the development of doctrine was precisely the ground on which the Reformation could be defended
- Baptism controversy (Nevin, Hodge, Horace Bushnell)
  - Nature/grace relationship
  - Status of the covenant child
  - What would Nevin had said about paedocommunion?
- Eucharistic controversy (Nevin, Hodge)
  - Calvin's "mystical presence" view
  - Hodge's unhistorical approach
  - Nevin wins the battle but loses the war
- Liturgical controversy
  - American Presbyterians rediscover continental liturgies
  - Sources for the Provision Liturgy
- The Mercersburg movement and "the Federal Vision": Will "Reformed Catholics" always be misfits on the American religious scene?
- The end of the Mercersburg movement and the loss of the German Reformed tradition

Final assessment: By no means were Nevin and Schaff perfect. They had their flaws, and many of flaws contributed to the failure of the Mercersburg project. Nevertheless, they were the finest American scholars and churchmen of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and left an enduring body of work. Their Reformed-catholic synthesis, their recovery of classical sacramental and liturgical theology and practice, their efforts to promote the visible unity of the church in the face of American sectarianism, their arguments in defense of the Reformation and its organic connection with earlier eras of church history, their desire to center all of theology around the person of Christ, their high view of the ordained ministry and the authority of the church's tradition, and their

attempts to deal squarely with the ecclesiastical evils of their day all make them worthy of study and emulation. Their work is especially relevant in light of the fact that the “church question” has still not been answered by Reformed Christians in a satisfactory way. Given that the same issues confront us 150 years later, we have much to learn from the men of Mercersburg.