

Mercersburg Theology

Mercersburg Theology is a romantic Reformed theology which during the midnineteenth century stood opposed to the main developments of American religious thought. It was the work of John Williamson Nevin (1803 - 86), a theologian, and Philip Schaff (1819 - 93), a church historian, who taught at the seminary of the German Reformed Church in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, in the 1840s and 1850s.

Nevin had graduated from Presbyterian Princeton, had lectured there briefly, and then taught for a decade at a Presbyterian seminary in Pittsburgh before joining Mercersburg in 1840. He detailed the theological pilgrimage which undergirded his move away from a Princeton form of Calvinism in *The History and Genius of the Heidelberg Catechism*, doctrinal standard of the German Reformed, exhibited the Reformation at its best before its modern decline into a rationalistic and mechanical "Puritanism." Nevin criticized the direction of American Protestantism in *The Anxious Bench* (1843), a work which attacked revivalism for being too individualistic, too emotional, and too much concerned with the "new measures" (such as the anxious bench for souls under conviction) which drew attention to human foibles and away from the work of Christ and the church. To remedy these ills Nevin proposed a return to classic Reformed convictions about Christ and his work.

The Mystical Presence (1846) argued that the views of the Reformers, especially Calvin, provided a means to overcome superficial and subjectivistic Protestantism. It began with the dramatic assertion that "Christianity is grounded in the living union of the believer with the person of Christ; and this great fact is emphatically concentrated in the mystery of the Lord's Supper." Against the view of Communion as a mere memorial, Nevin presented a case for the "real spiritual presence." God, he taught, comes to the church objectively, though not materially, in the Lord's Supper. The Supper in turn should become the focus of worship, and its presentation of the incarnate Christ the center of theology.

When Philip Schaff came to Mercersburg in 1844 from the University of Berlin, he brought along an appreciation for Germany's new idealistic philosophy and for its pietistic church renewal as well. His early work at Mercersburg urged Protestants toward a fuller appreciation of the Christian past. In *The Principle of Protestantism* (1844) he suggested, for example, that the Reformation continued the best of medieval Catholicism. And he looked forward to the day when Reformed, Lutheran, and even eventually Catholic believers could join in Christian union. Such views led to charges of heresy, from which Schaff cleared himself only with difficulty.

The influence of Nevin and Schaff was slight in the 1840s and 1850s. American Protestants were ill at ease with immigrants and with anyone who spoke a good word for any aspect of Roman Catholicism. They were wholeheartedly given to revivalism. They were busy making plans for interdenominational cooperation and did not look kindly on Mercersburg's new reading of history. And America's dominant Protestant philosophy, commonsense realism, had little room for the developmental ideas of Nevin and Schaff.

The two Mercersburg stalwarts were able to work closely together for barely a decade. Nevin, after editing the *Mercersburg Review* from 1849 to 1853, retired because of illness and

disillusionment. Schaff left Mercersburg in 1863 for teaching posts at Andover and Union seminaries, where he participated actively in the general evangelical life of America. Nonetheless, the works of the Mercersburg men remain a guide - post for Christians who share their convictions: that the person of Christ is the key to Christianity; that the Lord's Supper, understood in a classic Reformed sense, is the secret to the ongoing life of the church; and that study of the church's past provides the best perspective for bringing its strength to bear on the present.

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(Elwell Evangelical Dictionary)

Bibliography

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