

The Benefit of Having a Worthy Opponent

How the Theology of Seventeenth-Century Puritans Can Be Complemented by the Nineteenth-Century German Thought Known as the Mercersburg Theology

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CHAPTER EIGHT (Cont.)

Nevin's Ecclesiology

In a sermon entitled "The Church" Nevin wastes no time identifying a party he saw as a danger to the German way. "Puritanism," he warned, "was not originally, and ought not to be now, the basis of rule of the German church life, whether Lutheran or Reformed." He was appalled as he witnessed among American churches "the want namely of all proper faith in the Church as a real, supernatural, life-bearing constitution in the world."¹

A key plank of the Mercersburg platform was touched upon when he proclaimed, "The only religion that can stand in the end is that which carries the subject out of himself and enables him to rest on something beyond his own individual nature. The sense of the *objective* in the Church lies thus at the ground of all solid piety.² Whereas Owen often had his attention turned toward preserving the freedom of the individual conscience, Nevin was busy defending the Church from those who believed the conscience was so great an authority that the church was barely needed.

Owen had written that the believer needs the Church and not vice versa. He had promoted a reliance on Christ to the degree that nothing in addition to what the Head of the Church had instituted was needed. Nevin used stronger language in order to explain that the subjective alone is deficient. The Christian needs the Church to support his individual life. He cited Luther whose faith "was pre-eminently faith in the objective realness of God's grace in the Church, including particularly the divine virtue of the sacraments."³ This emphasis on the value of the sacraments was not developed by Owen in the arena of ecclesiology, especially not the same way Nevin developed it.

¹ John Williamson Nevin, "The Church: A Sermon Preached at the Opening of the Synod of the German Reformed Church at Carlisle, October 15, 1846," *One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic*, Tome One, Ed. Sam Hamstra Jr., The Mercersburg Theology Study Series, Vol. 5 (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017), 138.

² *Ibid.*, 139.

³ *Ibid.*

Boston's careful and sometimes painfully tedious (and even legalistic) self-examination, his dread of losing his "frame" or His desire to sense the Spirit's "blowing" as he preached, when combined with Nevin's teaching on the importance of being focused on and connected to the objective truth and nature of the Church as Christ's body schools fearful consciences in how to find relief while still preserving the importance of self-examination. Serious self-examination was practiced especially prior to observance of the Lord's Supper in the German Reformed setting. Nevin warned about those who would "believe in their own feelings but count it little better than popery to believe in the sacraments." A liturgy must be engaged which "sinks the individual and particular in the power of what is universal and constant."⁴

The sermon here under review was based on Ephesians 1:23 – "which is his body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all." Nevin saw two aspects as necessary to define the church – the ideal and the actual.⁵ Beginning with the idea of the church, he describes it as the "true sense by which it expresses the very inmost substance of that which exists, as distinguished from its simple phenomenal character in time and space." It is the "truth and soul" of the actual. All life is ideal in that it exists as possibility before manifested as actual. "It is only in the presence and power of this potential life, this invisible, mysterious living nature which lies behind and beyond all outward manifestations, that these last can ever be said to carry with them any reality whatever."⁶

The church is not a product of human devising or imagination or work of a pope, state or school. Of course, Owen with his emphasis on the church instituted by Christ would agree with that sentence. But Puritanism was locked into a fight to justify its existence and did not develop such a philosophical framework for ecclesiology.

When Nevin further develops the description of the church as "the most real of realities that God has established in this world," "the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15) and the basis of the new heavens and new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Peter 3:13), he is alluding to a principle of existence that carries with it a life of its own – the life of Christ to be precise. "The Ideal Church is the power of a new supernatural creation which has been introduced into the actual history of the world by the incarnation of Jesus Christ" which according to 2 Corinthians 5:17 will cause old things to pass away and all things to become new until the world bears its image and glory.⁷ To respect this ideal would be to be drawn outside of self and to find comfort, help, hope, direction and purpose outside of oneself or one's own efforts.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 140.

⁶ Ibid., 141.

⁷ Ibid., 142.

Jesus is the principle of new creation. In Him Word became flesh. Divine nature associated with human nature as never before. Life and immortality were introduced into the fallen world. In Him is all life and salvation needed to fully redeem humanity. The church is the constant repository or hub of everything the ideal carries in it. "The life with which she is filled, the powers that are lodged in her constitution, were all comprehended originally in the person of Jesus Christ and are all still the revelation only of the grace and truth which came by him in the beginning."⁸

Owen's reliance on Scripture and his very able and capable exegesis of it, his powerful intellectual ability to make arguments and apply truth to life, when put next to Nevin's emphasis on the presence of the living Christ in the Church can lend fuller perspective to a disciple of Owen's and perhaps guard him from descending into an overly subjective involvement in the church.

It may prove useful to keep certain questions in the reader's mind when Nevin's work is being digested. Does he see the church and Jesus as so closely aligned that he sometimes looks to the church as if it were God? Is his sermon under consideration here a true explanation of Scripture or a philosophical essay which uses Scripture as a convenient springboard? Is Scripture at the core of what Nevin is, does and believes? If philosophy is instead, then is he any better than the subjective-minded sectarians of which he is so very critical? Is objectivity rooted in the Word or in the life of the Church?

Nevin had spent years preaching sermons about behavior (e.g., during his time in the temperance movement), but his writings later moved to contemplate the philosophical reality that constitutes who a believer is. Perhaps he consciously desired to provide a stronger base of understanding so that practical theology would not become untethered from spiritual reality and wander away from the glory of God. For the Puritans, there was a simple faith that required simple obedience and often was driven by a simple desire to know God's presence. Nevin hungered to know the metaphysical nature of reality which substance then expressed itself in form or behavior. His academic setting removed from persecution as well as the pressures and busyness of parish ministry enabled him the luxury of philosophical contemplation.

The Church is named as Christ's body in Scripture, "the fullness of Him that filleth all in all" (Revelation 21:6; Ephesians 1:23). For Nevin the attributes of ideal Church are the following: a living system, having its parts organically united into one, originating in common ground and sharing throughout a common nature. This description strongly emphasizes catholicity, oneness, universality. "The kingdom of God or the new creation in Christ Jesus must be regarded, in the nature of the case, as the highest possible form of humanity itself."⁹

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 142-143.

He regarded the Church as a single life perpetually flowing from Christ, and so no matter the varying forms it takes in different contexts, it is still in union with itself. Nevin sees the phrase of the Apostles' Creed "I believe in the holy Catholic Church" as being packed with this meaning. Speaking ideally, the Church is absolutely holy and infallible, without error or sin because it is derived wholly from Christ who is truth and righteousness. It serves as the medium by which the world is rescued from powerful error and made holy. It is life-bearing and not merely a system of doctrine or a code of ethics or a record of historical events. Those life powers spring directly and constantly from Christ, just as the vitality of the body comes from the head. The Holy Spirit mediates this vital connection.¹⁰

Human nature is social, so no person can be made complete when isolated from his own race. "In its very conception it is the power of a common or general life which can never appear, therefore, as something isolated and single simply, but always includes the idea of society and communion, under all its manifestations."¹¹

This makes Christ Himself objective reality and each church member must subjectively appropriate it or be appropriated by it. Puritanism rightly emphasizes the Word of God as the access point for humans to ultimate reality. Each person must subjectively appropriate that revelation. Nevin's philosophical approach should be an outworking of the ideal represented in revelation. His philosophy which emphasizes objective reality runs the risk of neglecting a practical yearning to experience God as Boston expressed with nearly mystical tones. Puritan theology in the wrong hands runs the risk of becoming immersed in subjective understanding and becoming shallow and isolationistic, failing to appreciate the mystery of the ideal Church. Nevin's reliance on philosophy raises concern in those who have proper high regard for the Bible. Is he replacing the plain teaching of Scripture with philosophy? Since the Bible represents the ideal, then there should be a way to use philosophy to highlight, demonstrate and illustrate the truthfulness and glory of the ideal.

In this sermon Nevin explains that there is no genuine individual Christian character or salvation if separated from the general (the Church). "Christianity and the Church are identical." The church's ideal character requires a visible externalization or it could not be deemed real.¹² If it remains mere spirit it is then only an abstraction with no power. "The outward must ever be joined to the inward." Recalling that the Puritans saw a sharp distinction between the invisible and visible church and then tried to make the visible to agree with the invisible, note that Nevin tended to treat both together and rejected very much emphasis on the invisible church apart from the visible, saying, "The Church, then, comprehending in itself the inmost, deepest life of humanity, cannot possibly exist in the character of a simple inward and invisible constitution." "An invisible

¹⁰ Ibid., 153.

¹¹ Ibid., 143.

¹² Ibid.

state or invisible family or invisible man is not so great an absurdity and contradiction as an absolutely invisible Church.”¹³

Christianity starts with the inward (cf. Luke 17:21 – “The kingdom of God is within you”), but it must then become visible in the individual and the church. It is not that Nevin thought the church was perfect or that every manifestation of the church was valid and genuine, but his perspective drove him to place far greater emphasis on the visible church as the presence of Christ on earth while the Puritans restricted themselves more to the Word only as their focus regarding God’s presence. For Mercersburg, it was not enough to have individual, visible Christians. There must also be a visible, collective Church in order to make individual Christianity real or complete. When with the Creed one confesses, “I believe in one, holy Catholic Church,” this is not fulfilled by only an invisible unity, catholicity or holiness. If sectarians should happen to make use of the Creed, they would not be confessing a belief in the outward, visible, historical church. Instead, they have in mind only little glimpses of any valid visible church such as the Waldensians, Albigensians, Henricians and Paulicians who were to be revered as the sole preservers of the Christian faith.¹⁴

Nevin’s conception of the Actual Church refers to the Church from the incarnation to the end of the world. It is the kingdom of heaven revealed in actual human life. Seen in this light, it is inappropriate and dangerous to consider the contemporary church apart from the church of previous ages. It unfolds over time as a process, implying direction by sovereign rule and a distinct divine plan being executed. Thus any sect Nevin addressed in his day who considered itself to be the first manifestation of the true church since the time of the Apostles was foolish to think itself to be the whole church. The Actual Church is pressing toward a divinely set goal to appear in the millennium like leaven increasingly advances to affect the whole of humanity (Luke 13:21). At that time the attributes of a new creation will be gloriously and fully manifested, and so the second coming of Christ will flow together with His first. Nevin spoke as follows:

The Church as it now stands is the result of what the same Church has been since the time of Christ; the past is gathered up and comprehended in the present, and the whole is reaching forward to still new developments in the future, that will only cease when the ideal Church and the actual Church have become fully and forever one.

And, “the Church is a new creation for the world, complete, from the first, in Christ but requiring a process of historical evolution, according to the law of all life, to actualize itself with final, universal triumph in the world as a whole.”¹⁵

¹³ Ibid., 144.

¹⁴ John Williamson Nevin, “Early Christianity,” *Catholic and Reformed: Selected Theological Writings of John Williamson Nevin*, Eds. Charles Yrigoyen, Jr. and George H. Bricker, Pittsburgh Original Texts and Translations Series (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 1978), 215.

¹⁵ The Church, 145.

Presently there is imperfection and defect. Should that fact not breed a humble and teachable spirit within the Church? The historical Church may be considered true Church but never pure Church. Thus a desire to return to some pristine remake of the primitive Church would be a mistake because it would ignore centuries of development under God's control, not to mention that the early Church had troubles from its earliest years.

Visible unity is lamentably damaged by denominations and sects, "but we have no right to resort to the violence of unchurching all beyond some favorite communion in order to remedy the evil." "The ideal Church . . . is no abstraction but a living divine constitution which includes in itself, from the beginning, all that is destined to become by development in the end and whose very nature requires it to show itself real in this way." Church history is the "presence and life of the ideal Church itself struggling through a process of centuries to come to its last, full manifestation."¹⁶ The ideal has no reality except in the form of the actual or historical, and the actual/historical has no truth apart from the presence of the ideal.

"The historical Church may be involved in error or sink in corruption, filled with heterogeneous elements, overloaded with all forms of perversion and abuse, but still it is always the bearer of the ideal Church and the form under which it has its manifestation in the world."¹⁷ There is evidence that Owen sought to respect different branches of the church as the true church, but he likewise sought to bring reform where reform was necessary. He saw great benefit to participating in a church that was striving for purity and wanted the invisible and visible to match closely. And Nevin did not rule out any possibility for separation at all. In his criticism of Puritanism, it seems his ire was raised specifically against the version of Puritanism of his own day which he heard expressing the opinion that they were the only true church on earth since before a nearly fifteen-hundred-year hiatus. That sentiment reflects a pursuit of purity run amok with little consciousness of the true nature of the Church. Nevin's distinction between Ideal and Actual was a counter to misappropriation or Pharisaical misuse of the invisible/visible distinction.

Once the Church entered the world by Christ, "it must continue to be in the world always to the end of time" without any break in existence. For Nevin, to say that at some point the visible church was lost for a time in history is like saying that sometime between the formation of the embryo in the womb and full maturity in manhood, a person ceased being a human for a while.¹⁸

What did Nevin mean when he said that the church is the historical continuation of the life of Christ in the world? "By the incarnation of the Son of God, a divine supernatural order of existence was introduced into the world which was not in it

¹⁶ Ibid., 147.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 153.

as part of its own constitution before.”¹⁹ The fact of the incarnation then becomes the central force of history. The new creation must advance as Christ by His Spirit abides with His people in the Church which is His body. Nevin was influenced by his colleague Philip Schaff who was influenced by the philosopher F. H. W. Schelling and adopted the view that history should be interpreted as the revelation of God.²⁰

In holding that there can be no Church without Christ, Nevin feels so strongly about the bond between the two that he said, “No Church, no Christ.” “The incarnation would be shorn of its meaning if the fact were not carried out to its proper world development in the Church.”²¹ The Church should be regarded as the only medium of God’s saving presence, the only form under which grace is brought within reach. Certainly Nevin’s position conflicts with a strong emphasis on faith being strictly individualistic, personal or private. The subjective does not necessarily equal life if it is pursued apart from the objective presence of Christ in the Church. For example, Quakers believed in the possibility of direct, unmediated communion with God and so cared little for ordained pastors, tradition, liturgy or the ancient church.²²

Owen focused on honoring Christ by honoring His Word, Nevin more so by emphasizing the Church. Great strength can result from combining both. Both men felt the tension of the church suppressing or opposing the Word in different ways in their particular eras.

Nevin believed that the church as “pillar and ground of the truth” was not to be understood as its simply being a witness to an external principle. Instead, “she comprehends and upholds the truth in her own constitution as being, in the fullest sense, the depository of the life of Christ himself.”²³ Truth, for Nevin, is presented more strongly as a person than a proposition.

Regarding error in the church Nevin held that “sin can never have domination over her absolutely.” After a season of being overrun with falsehood, divine power will turn its course aright again. No human negotiations can bring about unity. It must happen as an outworking of organic reality.²⁴ This sounds agreeable to Owen’s point that no hierarchical structure or human manipulation of polity can produce unity. It must be created within the heart as the same Spirit conforms believers to the same likeness or standard. Full and complete unity will one day be realized, but even though the Church appears divided presently, she is this power now by which the whole world will become new outwardly as well as inwardly. This forward-looking truth is more, Nevin insists, than abstract

¹⁹ Ibid., 148.

²⁰ Ibid., 148-149, footnote.

²¹ Ibid., 149.

²² Ibid., 150, footnote.

²³ Ibid., 149.

²⁴ Ibid., 151, footnote.

spirituality or only to be experienced when the new heavenly state dawns. Even factions that seem terribly at odds with other factions, if they are genuinely in union with Christ, are organically one with all other believers, even if they deny it.²⁵

Whereas Owen looked at outward holiness as a measure of whether a church was genuine, Nevin set up a standard that judged genuineness based on whether a group believed in the doctrine of the Church as here presented. If they denied the historic Body of Christ, they denied Christ. The tests each developed corresponded to the ills they experienced in their individual contexts. Nevin encountered arrogant revivalism that denied validity to the established Church throughout history, and Owen encountered empty formalism that refused to acknowledge full authority of the Bible within the established Church. Owen had tremendous faith in the person of Christ but would have struggled to identify the Church as closely with Christ as Nevin did. The reader must be careful to not create undue polarization. It is not that Nevin failed to emphasize dependence on Christ nor that Owen was devoid of understanding of the significance of the Church. In defense of his very close association of Christ and the Church Nevin preached “We do not derogate from the glory of Christ by believing and asserting a real historical revelation of his life in the Church. On the contrary, we show, by so doing, the fullness of our faith in his incarnation as a permanent fact for our salvation.”²⁶ This makes the Church into something more than merely the aggregate of individual acts of piety or some voluntary Christian association. “It is the power of a divine constitution which lies at the ground of all individual piety.” The objective, life-bearing character of the Church then “to be of any force, must express itself through its actual visible organization” such as ordinances and institutions.²⁷ This makes ordination to “convey . . . objective virtue or force, such as no man, in the ordinary course of things, can be allowed to possess without it.”²⁸ This concept adds depth of insight to Matthew 18:18 which records Jesus as saying, “Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

The sacraments, likewise have living power, “a divine life . . . actually comprehended in them for the high supernatural ends they are designed to serve.”²⁹ Opponents, namely those Nevin branded Puritans, would reject this teaching, hurling railing accusations of superstition combined with empty rites and ceremonies. Those steeped in heavily subjective spirituality would recoil when Nevin made the proposition that the Church is “the actual organic presence of the new creation in Christ Jesus among men, comprising in itself all the supernatural life powers which were introduced into the world by the

²⁵ Ibid., 152.

²⁶ Ibid., 154.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 155.

²⁹ Ibid.

incarnation.”³⁰ Nevin believes that the Apostles’ Creed is to be received as a single unit. Those unable to confess such a belief in the Church then should be considered suspect regarding their view of the incarnation and the Trinity. He saw an exclusive focus on inward spiritual experience and a rejection of all outward forms as dangerous to spiritual health. Such persons often emphasize repentance and faith but not the Church, liturgy, sacraments and history, reducing the body of Christ, he says, to a phantom bearing a hint of ancient Gnosticism, turning spiritualism into mere idea.³¹ Then the door is opened to conform the Gospel to one’s own dreams. He accuses his Puritan opponents of denying that in the incarnation, the union of divine and human natures, the “origin and constant principle of a new supernatural creation in the Church” began which will act to reclaim the world from vanity and corruption.³²

The optimism of Nevin’s position is encouraging. The manuscript reads, “We must believe that under all this division is working continually a deeper force by which, even now, the apparently sundered sections of the Church are bound together as a single visible reality in the world, and that will not rest till its own unity shall be fully and forever impressed upon the whole.”³³ This does not mean that it is okay to adopt an isolationistic, sectarian mindset which cares nothing for the wider Church and assumes that God will straighten it all out in the end. “To justify the sect system as an order of things right in itself, or to cherish the spirit of sect in any way, is in direct opposition to all true holy faith in the Holy Catholic Church.”³⁴

Sects, many of whom Nevin associated with Puritanism, believed their particular brand of sect was the resurfacing of the true, primitive church from the time of the Apostles after centuries of absence. In a series of articles published in the *Mercersburg Review* during 1851 and 1852 entitled “Early Christianity” Nevin presented the results of his investigation into how the nineteenth century Church compared with the thought and practice of the primitive Church with whom it believed it was of a nearly perfect kindred spirit, bypassing the idolatry of Catholicism that filled the intervening centuries. As these articles were being written, in his disillusionment with the state of Protestantism, Nevin demonstrated a personal interest in the Roman Catholic Church. That period of his exploration resulted in his resignation as Professor of Theology at Mercersburg Seminary. His arguments are pointed as they make a case that Protestants have unfairly criticized certain elements of Rome’s practice. He begins the first article by reviewing an article written by a Protestant who traveled in Europe, and as that traveler discovered Roman Catholic history and especially certain persons in that history, he was amazed to find that it was not one hundred percent abomination

³⁰ Ibid., 156.

³¹ Ibid., 158.

³² Ibid., 158. While there are sentences Nevin uses that could be taken as sounding universalistic, in many places he makes it clear he is not a universalist.

³³ Ibid., 152.

³⁴ Ibid.

and apostasy. Nevin noted that Protestants cautiously and nervously approve of Anselm, Bernard, Thomas á Kempis and Fenelon.³⁵ If the Roman Catholic Church has been the mother of abominations, one should realize it has also been the mother of true saints and martyrs.

Nevin was troubled when he learned that the Presbyterian Church voted to deny the validity of baptism administered in the Roman Catholic Church, thereby

unchurching virtually thus the whole church as it stood at the birth of the Reformation and for at least twelve hundred years before, and making such men as Augustine and Chrysostom, as well as Luther and Calvin of a later day, to be no better than unbaptized heathens, so far as any idea of covenant or sacramental grace is concerned.³⁶

Nevin raises the question which group should be upheld as the correct church since the rejection of Catholicism – Episcopal, Presbyterian, independent or any of the seventy or more American sects each claiming the Bible as their sole authority. His thesis in these articles is that from the start the early church was aimed toward the order which eventually developed, and if Protestantism was to be considered an advancement in the history of the church because it bears some connection with the first period of the church, it must be acknowledged that the only way it is connected to the early church is through the medium of the church of the intervening ages.

Since the revolution in the Church of the sixteenth century was not accompanied by miracles or inspiration, the ground on which it can be justified is the theory of historical development which is working to reveal and manifest the inward sense of the life in the Church which has been present from its inception in Christ.³⁷ The Christianity of Jerome, Basil and both Gregorys was different from nineteenth century Protestantism. In fact, the early centuries bear a greater resemblance to the Roman Catholic Church.³⁸ The early fathers of the Church held to the fundamental truths of Christianity but were discounted in their orthodoxy by many of Nevin's contemporaries who deemed those who have preceded them to have been blinded by and mired in superstition.³⁹

Taking aim at the philosophy of sects who all claimed to rely solely upon the Bible, Nevin wrote that the early church would not have recognized such a formula of the Bible plus private judgment equaling the only rule of faith. Instead, the first centuries were populated with believers who saw Christianity as a supernatural system coming from Christ through the Apostles as a living tradition. They held to a real presence of Christ in the Holy Communion. They held

³⁵ Early Christianity, 190.

³⁶ Ibid., 195.

³⁷ Ibid., 197.

³⁸ Ibid., 198.

³⁹ Ibid., 202.

confession to be a necessity as well as ministerial absolution, even believing in purgatory and prayers for the dead in addition to cherishing and venerating relics and erecting monuments of departed saints, believing that miracles had continued after the days of the Apostles and were accurately to be regarded as a part of the history of some of those memorialized saints.⁴⁰

Applying Nevin's philosophy that the Church is ever maturing, then one should assume there would be errors in the youthful period of the Church. Nevin's contemporaries could not stomach the idea that the early Church was faithful to the Gospel and yet was a mixture of truth and error. In disposing of what they deemed not Biblical, they also disposed of the miraculous nature of the Church as the very power and presence of Christ. Nevin makes a shocking statement that if Athanasius and Ambrose came back from the dead and sought to align themselves with a nineteenth century American Church, they would find themselves much more at home in the Roman Catholic Church than in the Protestant, although one would hope they would realign themselves after discovering the abuses that developed in the Roman Church.⁴¹ On the converse, he said wrote that if Ambrose and Athanasius were to return to his day that Anglicans, Low Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, Congregationalists, United Brethren, Quakers, etc., all would reject them regarding communion or at best accept them as babes needing instruction in theology of Christ. He suspected that the New England Puritans would have rejected Chrysostom and Augustine because of differences especially in outward form.⁴²

Protestantism had come to imagine that the beginning of Christianity looked evangelical according to the nineteenth-century picture of what it means to be Protestant in regard to style of worship, polity, use of the Bible, etc. The assumption was it was driven by democratic right and common sense. But by the third century the direction turned toward prelacy, corruption and abominations, ending finally in the grand apostasy that was the Church of Rome.⁴³ For this group, the Reformation was not the product of the life of the Medieval Church as the Reformers sought necessary change. Puritans went on to reject elements of Luther, Calvin and Anglicanism as still too connected with the Roman Church. Nevin believes that the New England Puritans and Baptists have a faulty view of history in that they fail to see Christ as the central fact of religion "and so of the world's life."⁴⁴

The article chronicles in orthodox fashion the glory of the incarnation, the fact that "Christ died for our sins, and rose again for our justification," and that after having appointed preachers and gifting them with supernatural power from the

⁴⁰ Ibid., 203.

⁴¹ Ibid., 205, footnote, quoted from Newman. See also the Third Article in the "Early Christianity" series, page 259.

⁴² Ibid., Third Article, 260.

⁴³ Ibid., Second Article, 207-208.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 208-211.

Spirit He ascended to rule over His church and oversee its life and cause it to prevail against all opponents. He summarizes,

The whole course of things seemed to show clearly, that the powers of a higher world were at work in the glorious movement, and that it embodied in itself the will and counsel of heaven itself for the full accomplishment of the end toward which it reached.⁴⁵

But in the Puritan theory of his day which purported any certain sect to be the first emergence of the true Church in over a thousand years, Nevin saw a tragic triumph of Satan in that he must've captured the church for that thousand years. He asks,

Will any sober minded man pretend to say, that this, in itself considered, is not a strange and unnatural hypothesis, which it is exceedingly hard to reconcile, either with the divine origin of the church, or with its divine mission, or with the divine presence in it of Him, who is represented as having the government of the world on his shoulders for its defence and salvation?⁴⁶

The Old Testament anticipated a greater fulfilment of the kingdom of God, not a greater captivity ten times worse than that of Babylon and lasting a thousand years.⁴⁷

Considering Nevin's thesis that the development of the Church was meant to include the form that existed in the Middle Ages, he presents evidence that the church of the fourth century was sacramental, liturgical, churchly and priestly. Then he applies an argument by inviting the reader to imagine that New England Puritanism was in fact the true version of the Church and that in a fairly short time would turn into a Romanized system. Would there not be a plethora of writings opposing this departure from the pristine foundation? So why are such documents lacking from the alleged similar revolution in early church history?

He reasons that the early church had within it seeds that germinated and naturally grew into the organization which would center in Rome. What is more, this development toward centralization was universal in that it encompassed the Churches of all lands, from Britain to Africa, Spain to India. If the New England Puritan view of history would be correct, then the entirety of Christendom revolted in unison. It would be curious that in the early centuries the Church could successfully ward off Gnosticism, Manicheanism, Sabellians, Arians, and so on, but easily succumbed unanimously to an alleged Satanic error of polity and order.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Ibid., 211.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 213.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 214.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 222-223.

Next, Nevin takes to task the sectarian practice of claiming to adhere strictly to the Bible alone. Such an approach, this German Reformed scholar believed, disregarded the authority that God had vested in the Church. It was the Church that authoritatively recognized the canonical books and rejected those that were spurious after careful examination. It would make little sense to claim to use the canon to condemn as apostate and unsound that which authoritatively recognized it to be inspired and authoritative. The work of determining the canon began in the second century but was not finally settled until the fourth, Nevin records, by which time the type of order sects despise already was gaining ground within the ancient Church. He asks,

Is it not strange that the very Church, which had still divine tact enough for the delicate function of settling the canon, had at the same time no power to see or feel her own glaring departures from the light of this infallible rule, but actually gloried in it as the oracle and voucher of her claims?⁴⁹

To further offer a defense for the validity of the Church in early ages, Nevin speaks of the age of miracles, martyrdom and heroism, with bishops serving often at great risk to themselves, and thirty Roman popes martyred before Constantine came to power. How could New England Puritanism celebrate this era of the early church while at the same time condemning it as speeding toward apostasy? As the centuries came and went, the church showed great missionary zeal and stood against the culture of barbarous nations. “She was the power of order and law, the fountain of a new civilization, in the midst of its tumultuating chaos.”⁵⁰ How could the Church of any age since not rest on such a foundation related to Rome? “It’s 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.”⁵¹ How can unmystical, unchurchly and unsacramental Baptists boast about being like the early Church? If one were to immerse himself in a study of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, etc., “with any such preparation, no one can be in danger of mistaking the modern fiction for the ancient truth.”⁵²

Nevin determines New England Puritanism in some sense reduced the Church to a school with the divine being mediated solely through doctrine, always wary of supernaturalism apart from that of individual experience and ready to name it superstition. The result, according to Mercersburg, was that as it was void of mystery it settled to the level of a political institution or some merely human institution like a republic where “the voice of the people is the voice of God.” “The

⁴⁹ Ibid., 224.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 225-226.

⁵¹ Ibid., 227.

⁵² Ibid., 231.

divine character of the church is in no sense parallel, for Puritanism, with the divine character of the Bible.”⁵³

Here is an instance where it might become plain how mutually beneficial Owen’s Puritanism and Nevin’s understanding of the Church could be for each other. A high regard for the Church without a close and careful adherence to the Bible and how it applies to everyday life would lead to empty formalism. A close adherence to the Bible without involving a churchly hermeneutic would create runaway subjective apprehensions of truth which are driven by imaginations and fads or “the mind of the present age as distinguished from every age that has gone before.”⁵⁴ Nevin said of Rev. Winebrenner, a revivalist who staunchly opposed Mercersburg theology, that the worship in the Church of God which Winebrenner founded fostered “fanatical disorder” and substituted “their own fancies and feelings in religion for the calm deep power of faith.”⁵⁵ Sects, Nevin made clear, insist on the right of private judgment but sharply exclude everyone else whose private judgment fails to align with their own. For example, in Rhode Island, the haven of Baptists founded by Roger Williams and touted to be the champion of democratic freedom, showed great hostility to the Seventh Day Baptists, sentencing one of their leaders to sit in the gallows for a time with a rope around his neck.⁵⁶ Recall that Owen likewise had confronted New England Congregationalists on similar matters two centuries earlier.

This sectarian mindset promotes a democratic environment, oblivious to how the Church in history may have grappled with a topic, where subjective interpretation is “the fountain of right, and the basis of all order and law.”⁵⁷ Nothing in the New Testament supports a democratically run Church, and Owen did not promote such a form of polity either. Owen called for an ordained clergy to be entrusted with authority which was a point dear to Nevin. Nevin predicted such a system of democracy would invite tyranny.⁵⁸

Nevin alleges that in New England Puritanism, no mystery was regarded as associated with the sacraments. Instead, they were made into something natural and human, void of objective force and power to actually present what they represent. Thus they would only be pictures of grace. Under that system, if there is any power in the sacraments it is imported there from the mind of the participant, induced by his subjective activity. Anything beyond that would be demonized as superstition. Nevin goes so far as to classify the Puritan position

⁵³ Ibid., 232-233.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 284.

⁵⁵ John Williamson Nevin, “The Sect System,” *One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic*, Tome One, Ed. Sam Hamstra Jr., The Mercersburg Theology Study Series, Vol. 5 (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017), 235.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 248-249.

⁵⁷ Early Christianity, 233.

⁵⁸ Sect System, 236.

on the sacraments as “a grand apostacy” since it is so far departed from the view of the historic church.⁵⁹

On the matter of Scripture Nevin acknowledges the Puritans’ high view with this statement:

In this sacred volume, we are told, God has been pleased to place his word in full by special inspiration, as a supernatural directory for the use of the world to the end of time; for the very purpose of providing a sufficient authority for faith, that might be independent of all human judgment and will.⁶⁰

Then he begins to question how the Bible should be interpreted. When Puritanism says that every man must do so for his own use by the Spirit’s guiding through available helps, Nevin fears that this makes private judgment the final authority on exposition and interpretation. Thus while they appear orthodox, they turn toward rationalism.⁶¹ He believes that Puritanism’s war on tradition is unhelpful as fear spreads that it may overrule judgment, reason or conscience. He cautions that this approach could make the Bible into a textbook, the mastery of which could stop short of actually knowing Jesus. No doubt he was frustrated with all the competing and conflicting and clamoring sects of his day who all claimed to be the only group which holds to the Bible.⁶² He referred to them as a “motley mass of protesting systems” who were characterized by disarray and broken communion.⁶³

He explains that every sect which claims it distrusts tradition has developed its own tradition by which it interprets Scripture, just as surely as the Roman Catholic Church has done the same. Instead Nevin prefers to honor a “living authority, which started in Christ and passed over from him to the ministry of the church” (Matthew 16:18-19; 28:18, 20; Ephesians 2:19, 22; 1 Timothy 3:15-16).⁶⁴ The Church existed before the canon was closed. This points to the living reality of Christ’s life coming to fruition in the Church, being more than a system of divinity or a confession of faith. The early Church certainly did own the inspiration of Scripture and honor it as the norm. But they did not “fetch the doctrines and practices of religion as [they] best could with the bucket of [their] own common sense.” They believed the way of interpretation was to receive the Bible within “the living stream of catholic tradition.”⁶⁵ Whatever debate might awaken over exactly what Nevin meant, it seems that he was indicating that the hermeneutical

⁵⁹ Early Christianity, 238-239. Compare here quotes Nevin includes from Ignatius and Irenaeus regarding the Lord’s Supper being a real participation in Christ (pages 240-241).

⁶⁰ Ibid., 243.

⁶¹ Ibid., 278.

⁶² Ibid., 243.

⁶³ Sect System, 245.

⁶⁴ Early Christianity, 244.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 245.

lens and the presuppositions necessary for interpretation were passed on from the apostles. Thus no independent agent who attempts to derive meaning and application from Scripture without consulting church history is in danger of pleasing self above God. Nevin interprets Tertullian to teach that truth is rooted in the life of the Apostolic Church, even going so far as to conclude that he “had no idea of making exegesis the mother of faith.”⁶⁶

Nevin points out that New England Puritans by their individualistic approach to the Bible had come to mostly discard use of the Apostles’ Creed, thinking it to be childish and out of date, too mystical and sacramental. The *Puritan Recorder* even alluded to the Creed as anti-Biblical.⁶⁷

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⁶⁶ Ibid., 246-247.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 248, footnote.