

SONS
OF THE PROPHETS

*Leaders in Protestantism from
Princeton Seminary*

EDITED BY HUGH T. KERR



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IV. JOHN WILLIAMSON NEVIN (1803-1886)

*Evangelical Catholicism**

BY JAMES H. NICHOLS

IN the *History of the Yale Divinity School* Roland Bainton devotes a chapter to Horace Bushnell, the patron saint of romantic liberalism in theology and of the religious education movement. Bushnell launched his new venture by rebellion against Yale and the "New England Divinity" of his professor Nathaniel Taylor. By similar acts of antagonism John Williamson Nevin, Bushnell's contemporary, belongs to the history of Princeton Theological Seminary. He broke from the scholastic orthodoxy which characterized nineteenth-century Princeton and carried on all his life a running theological feud with the Princeton coryphaeus, Charles Hodge. Nevin and Bushnell alike opened up theological perspectives which were to be more fruitful for the future than the doctrinal systems established in their respective alma maters.

I

Nevin's definitive break with Turretin, the Moses of Princeton, did not take place while he was there. His years there as student and instructor (1823-1828) were harmonious and, as he later wrote, "in some respects the most pleasant part of my life." His upbringing in the Cumberland Valley, predisposed him to find at Princeton "a second home." He arrived, to be sure, as a convalescent from a nervous breakdown, and with a painful chronic illness, and throughout his course he felt

* Factual and biographical documentation as well as extensive bibliographical information are provided in *Romanticism in American Theology: Nevin and Schaff at Mercersburg*, by James Hastings Nichols (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961). See especially the Bibliographical Note, pp. 313-316.

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himself spiritually inadequate to the calling of the ministry. President Alexander's probing "conferences" moved him deeply but left him even less assured. Yet he was in his proper element. At first rebellious against the requirement in Hebrew, which was sufficient to be onerous but inadequate for any useful command of the language, he determined to make educational sense of it. He set himself extra assignments and eventually read through the whole Old Testament by himself, while his class labored through the few required chapters. As the best Hebrew scholar in the school he was the obvious choice for an interim instructorship to replace Charles Hodge when the latter went to study in Germany in 1826. When Nevin found he could not make ends meet with the \$200 stipend the Seminary paid him, his father was proud to make up the difference, and equipped him with a good horse and fodder so that he could maintain a suitable style on the classic ground of the Presbyterian Athens.

Nevin left Princeton at Hodge's return but only to engage in a continuation of the Princeton enterprise. A new seminary beyond the Alleghenies was organized near Pittsburgh, modeled on that at Princeton. The two full-time faculty members, Luther Halsey and John W. Nevin, had both taught at Princeton, the one in the College, the other in the Seminary. They did their best to transplant the Princeton conception, curriculum, and textbooks. For a full decade (1830-1840) Nevin thus continued to serve the Presbyterian Church as a theological teacher in the Princeton tradition. At Western Seminary he taught some 160 men, and probably more than that number in his two years at Princeton.

Nevin was perhaps a more militant moral crusader than was typical of Princeton. His father had been a temperance man and an opponent of slavery even before the end of the eighteenth century, and the son improved this heritage. He lashed distillers and purveyors of strong drink from the pulpit and in the press, esteeming the temperance movement a "new Reformation." A sermon at the time of the cholera epidemic of 1832, "The Scourge of God," related the pestilence to the sin of vending and consuming ardent spirits, and unfortunately

he commended to his hearers the fatal advice—drink water. He was threatened with a whipping for his opposition to the frontier theatre in Pittsburgh and antagonized most of the daughters of the Presbyterian Zion by comparing their ladies' fair to a bullfight. From being a colonizationist he was converted to abolitionism, probably by Theodore Weld. Abolitionism was most unpopular in Pittsburgh, and Nevin was forced to relinquish his editing of a weekly newspaper.

He was described by a prominent physician as "the most dangerous man in Pittsburgh." Only the most urgent representations as to the injury he would thereby bring to Western Seminary dissuaded him from speaking for abolition at the Pittsburgh General Assembly of 1835. He was never tempted, however, to be a mere reformer, but remained a devout and active churchman, a doctrinal and Biblical preacher.

On the controversies of the 1830's of Old School and New, Nevin was less militant than some of the fire-eaters would have liked. He took up and developed President Alexander's scheme of an amicable decentralization of the Church into a loose federation of synods. He deplored the bitter factionalism of the Philadelphia Synod and opposed the new creedal test of the "Act and Testimony" clique. Here again he maintained consistently the original position of the Princeton faculty, and he was later glad that he had not permitted himself to be bullied, as they were, against their better judgment. When the "excision" came he elected for the Old School Assembly without hesitation, but was never convinced that the action had been constitutional or that the Old School Assembly was the exclusive continuation of the Presbyterian Church.

Even when Nevin accepted a call in 1840 to the theological seminary of the German Reformed Church at Mercersburg, he went as an Old School Presbyterian of the Princeton stamp. President Alexander encouraged the move as a transfer to another branch of the one Reformed Church. Nevin was merely moving from the Scotch Reformed to the German Presbyterians. His first three years of teaching at Mercersburg were still, on the whole, in the spirit of scholastic predestinarianism.

II

It was in 1843, at the age of forty, that Nevin passed through a radical theological reorientation to a new high-church and sacramental tendency of which he was to be the most significant American spokesman. He now broke sharply with the static unhistorical orthodoxy of Princeton, its individualistic view of the Church, its philosophical predestinarianism, its less than Zwinglian view of the sacraments. Or rather, the sharp break came from the other direction. Nevin and his colleague Schaff at Mercersburg had hoped for at least benevolent neutrality from Princeton. But in 1847 and 1848, at first without mentioning names and then by excommunication in terms, Hodge "lowered the visor" and smote them.

Nevin was not a man to be attacked with impunity. Despite his chronic illness he presented a formidable presence and personality. He was not yet forty when he arrived in Mercersburg, yet he gave the impression of much greater age. "His face was marked with the deep lines of thought, and his gait was that of a person who had been accustomed to carry heavy burdens."¹ Tall, erect, used to command, with a deep remarkable voice, he was a more dominating figure than Hodge. The story is variously told of Orestes Brownson and Isaak Dorner, each of whom had engaged in literary debate with Nevin, that they were at length presented to him in the flesh with the question, "Do you know who this is?" "No," they are supposed to have replied, "but I know that this is a *man*." With the pen also, Nevin was a dangerous polemic theologian. He lacked the adroit thrust and parry of a Newman, but had greater philosophical power. On his chosen territory he was more learned than Hodge. And in fact for the next quarter-century the two men carried on a recurrent debate in which Hodge usually came out a poor second.

Hodge's last testimony to Nevin was the more impressive after these exchanges. When Nevin's seventieth birthday was celebrated in 1873 he recalled with "fond recollection" friend-

¹ T. Appel, *Recollections of College Life* (Reading, Pa., 1886), p. 297.

ships and experiences from the Presbyterian half of his career but observed that this was now for him "like the memory of a dream," while for those now around him it was as if it had never existed. But at his funeral in 1886 Princeton and the Presbyterian Church were represented in the person of Archibald Alexander Hodge. Hodge remembered sitting in Nevin's lap sixty years before in Princeton. He declared that Charles Hodge had always regarded Nevin "as the greatest of his pupils" and had never relinquished his friendship for him. Nevin belonged first to the German Reformed Church, but also to the Reformed community generally and to the whole church.

Did Charles Hodge really regard Nevin as "the greatest" of the three thousand men who had sat under him? There were among these several men of considerable parts who were far more congenial to Hodge's theology. But if Hodge himself would include in the Princeton heritage this maverick who had so mauled him in debate, who else should deny him his place there? And in fact decades later Princeton Seminary would come to prefer Nevin to Hodge on many of their points of difference.

The occasion for Nevin's reorientation of 1843 was his reaction from "new measures" revivalism. Here again, he was able to quote from Professors Alexander and Miller numerous warnings against the religious dangers of popular revivalism; and his tract *The Anxious Bench* was favorably reviewed in the *Princeton Review*. Finney's excesses supplied data for a major portion of the Old School polemic of the 1830's, and Nevin had been disgusted personally by the six weeks' sensation of James Gallagher, the "notable Kentucky operator," in Pittsburgh in 1835. Winebrenner's camp meetings in the German Reformed constituency later brought him to resume in print his objections to the "system of the bench." This tract, and Bushnell's parallel pamphlet, constituted perhaps the two most notable nineteenth-century critiques of manipulative revivalism. Insofar as such revivalism still plays a role in American religion much of the argument is still pertinent and telling. Nevin and Bushnell both insisted, with differing nuances, that painstaking undramatic nurture and education

are the proper and indispensable means of extending the Church and cannot be replaced by cheap excitement without disastrous effects.

Nevin's dislike of more or less illiterate itinerant evangelists on the frontier had early led him toward high views of ministerial authority. Early in his Pittsburgh days he had edited a new printing of Joseph Lathrop's volume, *Christ's Warning to the Churches, to beware of False Prophets who come as Wolves in Sheep's Clothing, and the marks by which they are known*. Herein it was claimed that the state churches of Massachusetts and Connecticut possessed a ministry derived in unbroken succession from the Apostles according to Christ's authority, and that admission to that succession should be only by the approval of existing ministers. While still in his twenties Nevin was moving in a direction in which he was later to stand on Anglican, if not even Roman Catholic, ground.

III

Nevin's churchly conversion of 1843 had been long preparing. From early in his Pittsburgh days he had adopted a philosophical position radically different from the Lockean and Scottish "common sense" camp to which Princeton adhered. Like Bushnell, Nevin was deeply influenced by Coleridge and his Platonist idealism. Coleridge led him back to British Platonists such as Leighton, Scougall, Howe, Shaw but also made him aware of the explosion of philosophical and theological genius in Germany at the turn of the century. When Nevin went to Mercersburg it was in part to help the Germans in America exploit their natural connections with the most powerful theological movements then in existence. It was such theologians as Sartorius, Dorner, Olshausen who helped him most to his new understanding of Christ and the union of the believer with Him, and of the Church.

Nevin himself laid greatest emphasis on the dawning of historical consciousness as the bridge by which he left Princeton scholasticism. At Princeton in his time there had been an utter lack of historical sense. He would have been shocked at

the suggestion that the doctrine of the Trinity, for example, had "developed." There was one timeless body of doctrinal truth, most conveniently arranged in Turretin's *Institutes*.

It was Neander, the greatest Church historian of the day, who broke up Nevin's dogmatic slumbers in "an actual awakening of the soul." Now for the first time the early fathers, and even the medieval schoolmen, made sense to him. Lutherans and Roman Catholics were intelligible and in part respectable expressions of Christian faith when seen in an historical context rather than being ticked off in an index of heresies from the point of view of a static unhistorical confessionism. Princeton had never really taken seriously (apart from the Bible) anything prior to the seventeenth century or outside the Reformed tradition; it lived in intellectual insularity and provincialism. In all this Nevin was well ahead of his alma mater. Hodge explicitly repudiated conceptions of historical development. Not until half a century later and then only grudgingly did Princeton begin to admit the implications of the historical method in the study of the Bible, the Church, and doctrine, and to enter the ecumenical theological conversation which follows such an admission. From the 1840's, however, Nevin had burst the walls of provincialism and was reading and debating with Lutherans, Roman Catholics, and Anglicans, and trying to relate his theologizing responsibility to the early fathers as well as the Reformers.

There is a further range of concerns in which Nevin speaks with startling actuality to the American Church of the mid-twentieth century. The topics which engaged him most passionately, the doctrine of Christ in relation to that of the Church, Church unity, the Lord's Supper, baptism, the ministry, worship and liturgy, Scripture and tradition, these are precisely the topics which, after decades of relatively little attention, have become since the 1930's the agenda of the ecumenical debates on "faith and order." To some of these issues Nevin speaks with more point than any other nineteenth-century American or, in fact, than many twentieth-century theologians. He may be called the chief American

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prophet of the ecumenical movement in matters of faith and order.

In his day Nevin and his supporters were able to dominate the college and the seminary of the Eastern Synod of the German Reformed Church and to maintain a personal and intellectual ascendancy in the courts of the Church. The *Mercersburg Review* was the chief organ of the movement and the medium through which Nevin set forth his case against such opponents as Hodge of Princeton, the Roman Catholic Orestes Brownson, the Anglo-Catholic R. I. Wilberforce, the Congregationalist Horace Bushnell, and the German theologian Isaak Dorner, to say nothing of members of his own denomination. The little German Reformed Church was fiercely attacked on his account, especially by its sister Church, the Dutch Reformed, and by the Lutherans, and it sometimes felt itself to be a beleaguered city. After the Civil War the Church was bitterly torn between the Nevinist camp and their opponents concerning a proposed prayer book, and it narrowly avoided actual schism. The liturgy is still the badge of the Mercersburg wing of the Church, which is, or at least this section is, the most churchly and sacramental of all the Reformed bodies in America. In recent years the Mercersburg tradition has not produced aggressive theological advocates, but the writings of Nevin himself have drawn increasing attention.

IV

A century ago most American Protestants conceived of the Christian religion as a relation with Christ established one by one in individuals who thereafter normally joined the Church. Nevin, on the contrary, held that individuals do not, by association, constitute the Church, rather the Church is the context within which alone men have access to Christ's saving presence. The Church is not an optional apparatus attached to the Gospel, but an essential part of the Gospel itself; that is why Christians confess belief in the Church as an article of the creed. The Church is the sum of all the means by which the living Christ gives himself to his people, and thus consti-



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tutes a kind of continuing Incarnation in human history, the "new creation" begun in Jesus Christ.

For Nevin, thus, the Church is constituted by communion with Christ. Hodge disagreed. The true Church as understood at Princeton was not a communion at all, but simply the sum total of all the predestined, past, present, and future, a speculative inference. Nevin's contrasting conception of a communion is best understood in terms of the sacraments, especially the Lord's Supper. In the mystical participation of the faithful in the life of Christ the Church is most itself, for to Nevin's mind the Church is itself best comprehended as a sacrament. The Mercersburg movement can be defined, on the side of practical religion, as a eucharistic movement. Its distinctive emphases in relation both to the Church and to Christ can be most easily understood from this perspective.

Nevin's first major work dealt with this theme, *The Mystical Presence, a Vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist*. In this work Nevin convicted the American Reformed Churches generally, and for that matter the Episcopalians and Lutherans also, of substantial unfaithfulness to their several classical teachings with regard to the Lord's Supper. He restated Calvin's conception of eucharistic participation in the glorified humanity of Jesus Christ, not just his spirit, or divine essence, but the real whole Person, divine and human.

It was this publication which led to Hodge's first head-on attack, which came in a long article in the *Princeton Review*. Hodge's sacramental theology was at most Zwinglian, better suited by far to Baptists than to Calvinists. He sought to contest with Nevin the teaching of the Reformed confessions on the subject. Nevin demolished him in a magisterial article on "The Reformed Doctrine of the Lord's Supper," which has scarcely been replaced as an historical exposition. A radical challenge was thus posted as to the adequacy of current Princeton representations of the Reformed tradition, to say nothing of those of New Brunswick, Union, Yale, or Andover. As Nevin observed, the Calvinistic view of the sacraments was far more definitely and centrally anchored in the confessional

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structure of the Reformed tradition than was the doctrine of predestination which Hodge took to be the foundation of Reformed theology. American Reformed theology since has generally come to prefer Nevin's Christocentric orientation, if not his sacramental views, to a theology built on the Divine Decrees. And Calvin's doctrine of the spiritual real presence is surely much stronger even in the Presbyterian Church today than it was before the Civil War. Nevin was a pioneer in this reorientation and is perhaps still its most competent theological interpreter.

V

Nevin also distinguished himself as the most conspicuous American heir of the ecumenical passion of Bucer and Calvin for the unity of the visible Church. This Nevin held to be the greatest issue of his day. To many of his contemporaries, the supporters of the Evangelical Alliance, for example, or the exponents of reunion on the "restorationist" program of the New Testament alone, or on the least common denominator basis, he seemed a crabbed critic of ecumenical endeavors. Indeed Nevin's critiques of three or four superficial types of ecumenical strategy are still highly applicable to much current American discussion of the problem. But he was in no way captious; he was wholly serious and constructive. His sermons "Catholic Unity" and "The Church," and the little book *Antichrist, or the Spirit of Sect and Schism* are virtually as pertinent in 1962 as they were in the late 1840's. He knew and demonstrated that there are no administrative short-cuts to Church unity, that the prerequisites are repentance, religious renewal, and faith in the Church as the locus of Christ's continuing presence. Schism, like other forms of sin, will not be perfectly conquered in history; against all of them the Church must wage unending war, seizing occasions as they are presented. The American Reformed Churches have had few sounder counsellors in such matters.

Nevin's whole habit of thought, sacramental, metaphysical, Platonic, reverent of tradition, was especially sympathetic to the fathers. Through his work Irenaeus, Athanasius, Basil,

and the Gregories as well as Augustine and Cyprian came alive theologically among the Puritans and evangelicals of America, or at least new possibilities of understanding them emerged. Nevin insisted on the necessity of a positive Protestant doctrine of tradition. He championed especially the Apostles' Creed as the prime instance of dogmatic tradition. The creed seemed to him less the product of theological reflection than the spontaneous acknowledgment of the Church to the presence of God. The order of doctrines in particular supported his view of the relation of Christ to the Church and its means of grace. It was the explication of what was already implicit in Peter's first confession, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God." As such the creed was eminently suited to bind the generations together in one testimony of faith. Nevin wished the creed used regularly in worship as in the Reformation liturgies. He lamented that in five years at Princeton he had never once heard the creed in Church.

Tradition was also necessary as an authority in the Church in addition to the Bible. Nearly all Nevin's Protestant contemporaries contended for the Bible alone, interpreted by private judgment. Nevin argued that this was not the view of the Reformers, nor the actual practice of the nineteenth-century Protestants. They all read the Bible in the light of a confession or other tradition. The Bible alone was scarcely an adequate guide, for example, as to infant baptism or the doctrine of the trinity. It was to be read, not by individuals abstracted from the Church, but from within the Church and its tradition. The Bible was the last authority, but tradition was also indispensable and the two had a reciprocal relation. There were difficulties here which Nevin did not solve, but he pushed American Protestants to face the inadequacies of the popular solutions.

Nevin also championed the importance of tradition in worship. At first he led in a movement to restore the use of the Palatinate Liturgy along with the Heidelberg Catechism. But he became increasingly dissatisfied with the heavily didactic tone of the Palatinate Liturgy and preferred ancient models. The whole enterprise was uphill work. Most Presbyterians of

the time did not even know that the Reformation Churches all had and used liturgies. By the nineteenth century they had been completely captured by Puritan and evangelical ideas of spontaneity and individuality in worship. Nevin's emphasis was all at the other pole of the corporate sense in worship, calling for set and familiar forms for devotion and praise. When a service book was finally prepared embodying Mercersburg views on the ministry, ordination, the Lord's Supper, baptism, the Church year, and related topics, controversy was heated. But by the early twentieth century nearly every major American Reformed Church had equipped itself with a service book. Almost none of them, to be sure, were for congregational use, like the German Reformed book, and few if any were edited with comparable competence.

From about 1851 Nevin's writings displayed strong sympathies for Roman Catholicism and an emotional alienation from Protestantism. He resigned all his offices in the German Reformed Church and retired to private life to wrestle with the question. Many expected him to follow R. I. Wilberforce, with whom he was in correspondence, and Newman and Manning. His struggle coincided with a psychic collapse in which he felt the need of authoritative support. As in his earlier breakdown, which occurred between college and seminary, he fell into great depression and paralysis of will for months and years. But gradually he recovered health and vigor and resumed his labors still in the German Reformed Church.

The aspect of his teaching which was most problematical from the Reformed viewpoint was his conception of the ministry. He treated ordination as a "third sacrament" and considered that the sacraments of clergy, lacking regular and canonical ordination into the succession from the Apostles, were of dubious "validity." He insisted, for example, on the reordination of ministers who entered the German Reformed Church from such sects as the Evangelical Association or the Church of God. By the same logic, the sacraments of clergy not in communion with the whole ministry were also in doubt, even in "branches" with separated successions. The Anglo-Catholic view was self-contradictory. This was the line of

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thought which inclined him to turn to Rome as the most plausible claimant to the succession of ministry from the ancient church. And if this claim were not allowed, what alternative was there to a view which found *all* in schism and consequently *all* sacraments of dubious validity? Nevin would be definitely on the "Catholic" side in the twentieth-century faith and order debates on the ministry, although he would have difficulty with every concrete embodiment of Catholic sympathies. As was said of him, "he is always instructive, even when he is in error."

Nevin's most significant contributions seem to have been those of his middle or Mercersburg period, before his Romanizing phase. On the program of "evangelical catholicism" he contributed significantly to the deepening and broadening of the Reformed tradition in America for which Princeton stands, bringing again into force high Calvinistic convictions about the Church catholic and the sacraments, and opening channels of communication with the fathers, with Lutheranism, with Anglicans, and with Roman Catholics.