MERCERSBURG'S QUARREL WITH METHODISM

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The first half of the nineteenth century was a fascinating and exciting period in the history of American religious life. It was the time of the Second Great Awakening, that unusual wave of revivalism which swept back and forth across the nation for at least fifty years after 1800. There is little doubt that this Awakening left a significant mark on the nation's social and religious life long after its excitement was apparently spent.

Like the Great Awakening of almost a century earlier, the Second Awakening emphasized a religious experience of salvation. Unlike its predecessor, however, it had two distinctive features: the camp meeting and the use of techniques, known as the New Measures, to bring the wayward to their rebirth. Camp meetings were not only particularly important for frontier social and religious life, but they also became popular means for evangelizing in areas where the population was not as widely scattered. The New Measures were revivalistic means used by pastors and evangelists to provoke sinners to conversion. If not invented by the famous Presbyterian evangelist Charles Grandison Finney (1792-1875) they were certainly popularized by him. The New Measures included intense revival campaigns sometimes called "protracted meetings," public mention of the unconverted by name, meetings of inquiry to determine a person's state of salvation, and, perhaps most controversial, the use of the "anxious bench," seats to which were brought during a revival service those anxious for their salvation experience.1

It is not surprising that Methodists, very sympathetic to experiential religion, were much involved in the Second Great Awakening. They were ardent supporters of the camp meeting and effectively employed the New Measures.2 During the course of the Awakening Methodism realized large numerical growth. Between 1800 and 1850 the membership of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South rose from 65,000 to over 1.4 million.3

1Winthrop Hudson, Religion in America (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), 141-145.
Other Protestant denominations in America were also affected by the pervasive influence of the Second Great Awakening. Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Lutherans, the Dutch Reformed and the German Reformed churches, to name a few, felt its effects.

The Second Great Awakening did not go without challenge. It was opposed by those who were convinced that its religion was too superficial and emotional. Some opponents felt it was not sufficiently rational. Others claimed that its methods, especially the New Measures, were dangerously innovative and manipulative. In some churches there developed pro-Awakening and anti-Awakening parties. One denomination which was caught up in internal debate about the Awakening and the New Measures was the German Reformed Church.

The Mercersburg Theology

New Measures revivalism had become an important force in the early 1840s in the German Reformed Church, a comparatively small denomination in America. While its excesses were not as keenly visible in the German Reformed Church as in Lutheranism, this form of revival spirit was present. Many German Reformed congregations were conducting protracted meetings regularly. The prestigious Race Street German Reformed Church in Philadelphia invited Charles G. Finney to hold a New Measures crusade in their building as early as 1828. Through the next two decades this type of religious excitement spread into every quarter of the denomination.

Many German Reformed Church leaders were skeptical about the consequences of the New Measures. They believed that this approach to the Christian faith was a betrayal of the Reformed tradition upon which the denomination was historically founded. Furthermore, revivalism was blamed for two schisms in the church, both led by German Reformed pastors whose religious experiences and sympathies for revivalism resulted in the creation of new churches. Philip William Otterbein (1726-1813) had founded the Church of the United Brethren in Christ. John Winebrenner (1797-1860), alleged to have been one of the first pastors in the denomination to utilize the New Measures, had organized the Church of God.

Opposition to revivalism, especially of the New Measures variety, came to be centered at the Theological Seminary of the German Reformed Church located at Mercersburg, a little town in southcentral Pennsylvania. This small institution gave birth to one of the most celebrated theological movements in American Protestantism. The movement is generally referred to as the Mercersburg Theology.

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5 For more about Winebrenner see Richard Kern, John Winebrenner: 19th Century Reformer (Harrisburg, PA: Central Publishing House, 1974).
The Theological Seminary was originally located at Carlisle, Pennsylvania. In 1829 it was moved to York and in 1837 it was relocated at Mercersburg where it was situated with Marshall College, another educational institution of the German Reformed Church. By modern standards the Theological Seminary was tiny. The student body was never large and two professors comprised the faculty. Despite its size, however, the Theological Seminary, as might be expected, was an important force in the life of the denomination.

In the 1840s and 1850s two exceptionally gifted individuals occupied the faculty chairs at Mercersburg. They were John Williamson Nevin (1803-1886) and Philip Schaff (1819-1893). More than any other persons, these two men may be considered the progenitors of the Mercersburg Theology. Their sermons and public statements, their writings, and their leadership in denominational committees and organizations defined the main thrust of the movement.

John Williamson Nevin was born and raised in a Scotch-Irish family in the Cumberland Valley of Pennsylvania. He was a graduate of Union College near Schenectady, New York, and Princeton Theological Seminary from which he received a degree in 1826. Nevin was licensed to preach by the Carlisle (Pennsylvania) Presbytery in 1828. From 1829 to 1839 he taught at the Western Theological Seminary (Presbyterian) near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In 1839 he was elected Professor of Theology at the Theological Seminary of the German Reformed Church at Mercersburg. He had become well versed in the tradition of the German Reformed Church and highly respected the life and thought of the German people. Nevin arrived in Mercersburg in the spring of 1840 prepared to take up his teaching duties.

When Nevin began his professorship at Mercersburg he became alarmed at the drift of the German Reformed Church and American Protestantism away from genuinely biblical faith, the spirit of the early church, and the insights of the Reformation. Much of the blame for this departure from authentic Christian belief and practice rested with revivalism, especially New Measures revivalism, which he characterized as false religion and “quackery.” In his first major work, The Anxious Bench...
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(1843),\(^7\) and in subsequent books and pamphlets such as *The Mystical Presence* (1846),\(^8\) *The Church* (1847),\(^9\) *Antichrist, or the Spirit of Sect and Schism* (1848),\(^10\) and *The Apostles’ Creed* (1849).\(^11\) Nevin set forth his analysis of the malaise of American Protestantism and the German Reformed Church and offered correctives. His views were also circulated in a large number of essays and articles published in the *Reformed Church Messenger* and the *Mercersburg Review*.

The second principal figure, Philip Schaff, was a native of Switzerland. He was educated at the universities in Tübingen, Halle, and Berlin. While serving as an instructor at the university in Berlin, Schaff was visited by two clergymen from the United States who were authorized to issue him a call to teach in the Theological Seminary at Mercersburg. He had been recommended for the post by German church leaders and several of the professors at Halle and Berlin. Schaff accepted the call probably hoping “to bring German scholarship and theology to an America lacking in intellectual and theological depth.”\(^12\) He arrived in Mercersburg in 1844 and immediately found in John Williamson Nevin an amiable associate who shared his high regard for continental historical and theological ideas.

Like his colleague, Schaff was horrified at the state of American Protestantism. He was particularly disturbed by its anti-intellectualism, its lack of understanding concerning the historical development of Christianity and the widespread “sectarianism” which plagued American religion. Schaff expressed his distress and proposed reform in *The Principle of Protestantism* (1845),\(^13\) *What is Church History?* (1846),\(^14\) *History of the Apostolic Church* (1853),\(^15\) and *America: A Sketch of the Political, Social, and Religious Character to the United States of North America* (1855).\(^16\) From 1848 to 1853 he also served as the editor of *Der Deutsche Kirchenfreund*, the first American theological journal in the German language. Schaff published a large number of articles in other journals including the *Mercersburg Review*. He left the Mercersburg school in 1863. His distinguished career continued later in New York where he served as

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\(^{7}\) See especially the second edition (Chambersburg, PA: Publication Office of the German Reformed Church, 1844).

\(^{8}\) (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1846).

\(^{9}\) (Chambersburg: Publication Office of the German Reformed Church, 1847).

\(^{10}\) (New York: Taylor, 1848).

\(^{11}\) (Mercersburg: Mish, 1849).


\(^{13}\) (Chambersburg: Publication Officer of the German Reformed Church, 1845).

\(^{14}\) (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1846).

\(^{15}\) (New York: Scribner, 1853).

\(^{16}\) (New York: Scribner, 1855). Hereafter referred to as *America*. 
Mercersburg’s Quarrel with Methodism

Secretary of the New York Sabbath Association and subsequently as a professor at Union Theological Seminary. Schaff was the premier church historian in America in the nineteenth century.

The Mercersburg professors’ criticism of American Protestantism, including the German Reformed Church, was composed of three basic accusations.

First, they complained that American Protestantism was unchristological. Both Nevin and Schaff were convinced that a faulty Christology was abroad in the churches. It tended to concentrate either on Jesus’ ethical teachings or his varcarious death. Although Jesus’ words are important, Nevin claimed, his mission was not simply to point people to salvation by correct instruction.\(^{17}\) People cannot be brought to God through doctrine or example. Likewise, Jesus’ death, offered in obedience to God, was not the singularly important event in his life. James H. Nichols observes that Nevin “laid his emphasis on the Person rather than the work of Christ, the Incarnation rather than the atoning death, and thus ran counter to prevailing evangelical theology.”\(^{18}\) Sound Christology emphasized the Incarnation, which Nevin said was “the key that unlocks the sense of all God’s works, and brings to light the true meaning of the universe.”\(^{19}\)

Nevin drew on the Pauline concepts of the first Adam and the Second Adam (I Corinthians 15) to make clear the significance of the Incarnation. The whole human race was included in the life of the first Adam. His posterity were born into his fallen nature and participate in it. Estrangement from God results. The answer to this predicament is the incarnate Christ, the Second Adam, who assumed human nature in order to take upon himself the burden of sin, to conquer sin and death, and to lift the fallen nature of the human into eternal union with God.\(^{20}\) The true meaning of Christ is found in the whole of his incarnate life which encompasses his birth, ministry, death, descent, resurrection, ascension, and glorification.

Christianity is participation in the divine-human life of the Second Adam, a mystical union between the incarnate Christ and his people. The work of the Holy Spirit complemented by the believer’s faith creates the mystical union by which God and the person are united in Christ.

Second, Nevin and Schaff charged that American Protestantism was unchurchly. It was permeated by a revivalism which emphasized the salvation of the individual. In their ecclesiology American Protestants, es-

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\(^{18}\)The Mercersburg Theology, 78.

\(^{19}\) Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 201.

especially of the Reformed tradition, had surrendered to "Puritan and Methodist modes of thought." The church was not a human creation nor was it incidental to Christianity in Nevin’s estimation. Salvation didn’t lie beyond the church and outside it, but directly in its bosom. In his landmark sermon, "The Church," preached in 1846, Nevin stated, "Out of the Church... or as separated from the general life of Christ in his people, there can be no true Christian character and no Christian salvation. Christianity and the Church are identical..." George H. Bricker summarized Nevin’s view of the church as follows:

He saw the Church not as a gathering of converted individuals but as a holy mother who imparts the new life of Christ to all her children. Salvation comes through his divine institution whose spiritual and sacramental resources mediate the new life of Christ. Christ lives in the Church and the particular members receive Christ through her... What he saw in American Protestantism of his day, and especially in revivalism, was a denial of this position, which he considered fundamental in the New Testament.

The Mercersburg professors were persuaded that the weak ecclesiology of most American Protestants was, at least in part, due either to their neglect or misunderstanding of the church’s historical development. Schaff proposed that the history of the church be viewed organically. Each of its epochs had a place if its total life was to be apprehended. In each period God was at work governing and guiding the church according to His wisdom. Protestants should, therefore, cast aside that notion of church history which assumed there was no genuine Christianity between the early church and the Reformation.

Nevin and Schaff abhorred the multiplicity of religious “sects” in America. They denounced the subjectivistic religious experiences of persons such as Jacob Albright, Philip William Otterbein and John Winebrenner which were the foundations upon which new “sects” were established. This sectarianism divided the Body of Christ. Nevin and Schaff, on the other hand, counselled the outward and visible unity of the church. They envisioned an “evangelical Catholicism.”

The New Measures promoted a very weak understanding of the church. In The Anxious Bench Nevin fired his initial blast at the New Measures which he referred to as “the system of the bench.” It was an inferior, shallow, and superficial approach to Christianity as compared to “the system of the catechism” which included sound Christian instruction, pastoral visitation and nurture, order, discipline, and the sacraments.

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22Nichols, The Mercersburg Theology, 60.
23A Brief History of the Mercersburg Movement (Lancaster: Lancaster Theological Seminary, 1982), 13.
25Yrigoyen and Bricker, Catholic and Reformed, 89-126.
Third, Schaff and Nevin denounced American Protestantism for being unsacramental. They were exceedingly distressed by interpretations which made the sacraments “mere outward signs, in the case of which all proper efficacy is supposed to be previously at hand in the inward state of the subject by whom they are received.” The sacraments were more than empty signs or ceremonies. They were objective transactions in which “a real spiritual energy” was conveyed to the recipient, the benefits of which are appropriated by him/her through faith. The sacraments, instituted by Christ, were the chief means by which he conveyed his life and benefits to his people. They were crucial to the life of the church and to the life of the believer.

Nevin attributed the defective understanding of the sacraments to the sect system. He wrote, “Our sect system must be considered in its very nature, unfavorable to all proper respect for the sacraments. This may be taken, indeed as a just criterion of the spirit of sect, as distinguished from the true spirit of the Christian church.” The sects undervalued the “sacramental and objective in religion” in favor of the subjective element. Nevin was especially concerned about the Lord’s Supper. If the essence of Christianity was the vital mystical union between Christ and his people, the Lord’s Supper strengthened and invigorated that union. The Lord’s Supper made possible a real participation in the vitality of Christ’s life. Concern for the Lord’s Supper was an important consideration in the formation of a liturgy for the German Reformed Church in which Nevin and Schaff had a significant role. They “championed the renewal of corporate worship to make it less subjective, less privatized, more objective, more communal, and more sacramental.”

Mercersburg’s Quarrel with Methodism

The Mercersburg professors were not reluctant to identify one of the culprits which had led American Protestantism astray. It was Methodism. In fact, they asserted that Methodism may well have been the chief offender in the deterioration of Protestant church life in America, at least in the first half of the nineteenth century. Therefore, in various places in their writings they levelled their criticisms against the Methodists and two “sects” to which Methodism had given life, i.e., the followers of Philip William Otterbein and those of Jacob Albright. Nevin stated, “Already the life of Methodism, in this country, is actively at work among other sects, [for example, the United Brethren and the Evangelical Association] which owe no fellowship with it in form.”

86Nevin, The Mystical Presence, 92.
88Nevin, The Mystical Presence, 92.
91Yrigoyen and Bricker, Catholic and Reformed, 13.
Nevin and Schaff had reservations about John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. Both of them felt that Wesley was not much of a theologian. In contrast to the giants of the Reformation he was a theological lightweight. Nevin mentioned one Reformation leader along side of whom Methodism’s founder appeared grossly inferior. He wrote, “Wesley was a small man as compared with Melanchthon.” Schaff was not inclined to be more complimentary concerning John Wesley’s theological skills. Compared to German Pietism, Methodism was deficient in spiritual depth and lacked a vigorous, fruitful and profound theology. Undoubtedly, Wesley was responsible for this situation. Schaff described him as “a pungent preacher,” “a legislative genius,” and “an exceedingly shrewd, skillful business man.” When assessing spiritual vitality and reflection, however, Charles Wesley was more gifted than his older brother in Schaff’s opinion.

The Mercersburg theologians considered Methodism “the chief author and promoter of revivals” and camp meetings. Methodism’s energy and organization were devoted to this work, even to proselytizing among other churches, “thinking that it alone [could] really convert.” For sometime this revivalistic approach prompted the Methodists to disparage education for its preachers. Schaff observed:

appealing to the apostles and evangelists of the primitive church, [Methodism] used to condemn learning and theology from principle, as dangerous to practical piety; and to boast, that its preachers had “never rubbed their backs against the walls of a college,” and yet knew the better how to catch fish in the net of the kingdom of God.

Schaff admitted, however, that Methodism had begun to change by the early 1850s and had established colleges, seminaries and periodicals to encourage its clergy to be more cultured. Parenthetically, he wondered, “whether they will not thus lose more in their peculiar character and influence with the masses, than they will gain in the more cultivated circles.”

Of course, a principal criticism of Methodism was its employment of the New Measures. Schaff wrote:

In worship, Methodism is not satisfied with the usual divinely ordained means of grace. It really little understands the use of the Sacraments, though it adheres traditionally to infant baptism, and four times a year celebrates the Lord’s Supper, as a simple commemoration. It has far more confidence in subjective means and exciting impressions, than in the more quiet and unobserved but surer work of the old church system of educational religion. The main point with it is always effect on the sinner by

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32Yrigoyen and Bricker, Catholic and Reformed, 13.
33Schaff, America, 170.
34Schaff, America, 166-167.
35Schaff, America, 167.
36Schaff, America, 168.
special efforts of the preacher; and with this a machinery for the purpose, altogether foreign to [German] Pietism—the system of what is called new measures. 38

Schaff then listed the main features of these New Measures:

This includes not only prayer-meetings—an institution as old, by the way, as Christianity, and only invested by Methodism with a peculiar meaning and importance; but also and especially camp-meetings, commonly held in forests or under tents, often for weeks together in a good season of the year; protracted meetings, which may be held also in the church and in the winter season, and church festivals rejected by the Methodists, as by the Puritans; class-meetings, anxious or inquiry meetings on appointed week days for the interchange of religious experience, and a special personal conversation with anxious sinners (a kind of substitute for the Roman Catholic confessional); and finally, the anxious-bench, a genuine modern American invention, i.e., a seat before the pulpit, to which after sermon the penitent hearers are invited, and where they are pressed with special exhortations, and wrought up to the most intense nervous excitement, till the new life "breaks through," and then the sense of forgiving grace often vents itself in a jubilee of ecstasy, as boisterous as the violent lamentations, groans, and not rarely convulsions, in which the sense of sin had just before found utterance. 39

While these New Measures may have proven themselves to be powerful means to awaken sinners and promote religious life, Schaff claimed that,

in reality very much that is human and impure, mingles itself in, and these new measures have led to the most injurious outbreaks of religious fanaticism; above all they have nourished a dangerous distrust of the ordinary means of grace, the calm preaching of the Word, the sacraments, and catechetical instruction. The Methodists reject not only confirmation, as a useless or hypocritical form, but also the idea of objective baptismal grace; and they often dreadfully neglect all religious training of children, in the vain, presumptuous expectation that some exciting revival-sermon in a camp meeting or a few hours on the anxious-bench, will answer the purpose of the tedious process of parental discipline and care, and regular pastoral visitation. No wonder that, under such influences, and that in many districts where the quick straw fire of Methodistic revivals has burned brightly, it has left a complete desolation; with frivolous mockery of all religion. 40

John Williamson Nevin's appraisal of the New Measures was virtually the same as Schaff's. The "system of the bench" was "neither Calvinism nor Lutheranism, but Wesleyan Methodism." 41 It was vastly inferior to the "system of the catechism" which possessed a much better comprehension of salvation, the Christian life, and the church.

Writing in 1855 Schaff acknowledged that New Measures revivalism was declining. He said,

The flourishing period of new measures is now, in general, pretty much past, and even among the Methodists the swollen stream of religious excitement seems to be again

38Schaff, America, 173.
40Schaff, America, 175.
41Yrigoyen and Bricker, Catholic and Reformed, 12.
seeking its natural, fixed channels, especially in the more cultivated city congregations, which have never really approved those unwholesome excesses.\footnote{Schaff, America, 176.}

Whether or not New Measures revivalism had crested, it had already spawned a “sect system” which contradicted the unity of the church and supported unsound religion. In addition to Winebrenner’s Church of God, Nevin and Schaff often cited two “sects” which had been conceived in the womb of Methodism, the Church of the United Brethren in Christ and the Evangelical Association, two of the denominations now incorporated into The United Methodist Church. Schaff reported:

The influence of Methodism on the Lutheran and German Reformed Church at the close of the last and beginning of the present century, produced several new sects, in doctrine, government, and worship entirely conformed to the Methodist Episcopal model. Such are the United Brethren in Christ, founded about 1800, by William Otterbein, a pious Reformed Minister from Germany; [and the] Evangelical Communion (Evangelische Gemeinschaft), commonly called the Albrecht Brethren, founded somewhat later by Jacob Albrecht, a Lutheran layman of Pennsylvania.\footnote{Schaff, America, 204.}

For the Mercersburg theologians a “sect” was a religious group which had been founded mainly on the subjective religious experience of one or more individuals. They objected to sects on the grounds that they were “unchurchy, unhistorical and untraditional.” Schaff cynically described the founding of a sect as follows:

Anyone who has, or fancies that he has, some inward experience and a ready tongue, may persuade himself that he is called to be a reformer; and so proceed at once, in his spiritual vanity and pride, to a revolutionary rupture with the historical life of the church, to which he holds himself immeasurably superior. He builds himself of a night accordingly a new chapel, in which now for the first time since the age of the apostles a pure congregation is to be formed; baptizes his followers with his own name, to which he thus secures an immortality, unenviable it is true, but such as is always flattering to the natural heart; rails and screams with full throat against all that refuses to do homage to his standard; and with all this though utterly unprepared to understand a single book, is not ashamed to appeal continually to the Scriptures, as having been sealed entirely, or in large part, to the understanding of eighteen centuries, and even to the view of our Reformers themselves, till now at last God has been pleased to kindle the true light in an obscure corner of the New World! Thus the deceived multitude, having no power to discern spirits, is converted not to Christ and his truth, but to the arbitrary fancies and baseless opinions of an individual, who is only of yesterday. Such conversion is of a truth only perversion; such theology, neology; such exposition of the Bible, wretched imposition. What is built is no church, but a chapel, to whose erection Satan himself has made the most liberal contribution.\footnote{Schaff, The Principle of Protestantism, 149-150.}

Nevin’s examination of the “sect system” in America in which the churches founded by Albright and Otterbein were frequently cited as “sect” examples, was equally as condemning as Schaff’s. Nevin outlined his views in Antichrist, or the Spirit of Sect and Schism (1848) and in two
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articles published in the *Mercersburg Review* in 1849. According to Nevin the sects claimed no creed but the plain meaning of the Bible. But, if the Bible is so clear, why were there so many sects with substantially different theologies? The sects asserted the right of private judgment and theological freedom for the individual, but in reality each sect had a system of doctrine and practiced an intolerance which made a mockery of this declaration. The sects had no regard for history; each held that it was “self-sprung from the Bible, or through the Bible from the skies.” The sect

hates church tradition; will hear of no binding force in church history; but straightway manufactures a long chain of authority in the very same form, out of the little yesterday of its own life, which it binds mercilessly on the neck of all its subjects. It will have no saints or fathers; but forthwith offers us instead its own founders and leaders and makes it well nigh blasphemy to speak a word in their dispraise.46

The sect splits the Body of Christ. The sect spirit was theologically unstable, subject to the whims of its leaders, and unfriendly to the cultivation of theology “as a science.” It was a plague of unchurchly and unsacramental religion. It had no place for sacramental grace or for the biblical concept of the holy catholic church. The sect system carried in itself only the principle of “endless disintegration.”46

The Mercersburg theologians had a quarrel with Methodism. They charged that Methodism was responsible for much of the malaise they detected in American Protestantism prior to the Civil War. New Measures revivalism and rabid sectarianism were evidence of the unchristological, unchurchly and unsacramental nature of Methodist theology and practice.

**Statements From The Defense**

It is difficult to measure the effects of the Mercersburg critique within Methodism itself. The least we can observe about it is that it was not completely ignored. *The Methodist Quarterly Review*, the primary theological journal of the Methodist Episcopal Church, dealt with some of the issues raised by Nevin and Schaff in reviews of two of their books.

Nevin’s *Antichrist: or the Spirit of Sect and Schism* was reviewed in *The Methodist Quarterly Review* in 1848. Unfortunately, the review is brief and tantalizing. It reads:

> That we differ from Dr. Nevin almost *toto coelo* in regard to church questions, is no reason why we should not acknowledge him as a profound thinker and an earnest man. He grapples with great questions vigorously and directly: he is no trimmer, no juste-milieu man, but an able, thoughtful, honest, and fearless Christian teacher. We hope to be able to give a general and careful review of his writings hereafter, and shall feel, in doing it, that we are dealing with a man and a scholar.47

Regrettably, the promised “careful review” never appeared.

46Yrigoyen and Bricker, *Catholic and Reformed*, 164-165.

47Yrigoyen and Bricker, *Catholic and Reformed*, 173.

Schaff's views were treated with more than the passing mention shown Nevin. Before examining the responses to Schaff's thoughts on Methodism, however, it should be pointed out that at least the editor of *The Methodist Quarterly Review* was not totally alienated by his remarks about his church. Between 1849 and 1858 five articles by Schaff appeared in its pages. All of them were devoted to church history and were not polemics against the denomination.

*The Methodist Quarterly Review* carried two major articles which sought to answer the criticisms of Methodism made by Philip Schaff. The first was an extensive book review of Schaff's *America*. It was written by B. H. Nadal, a professor at Indiana Asbury University. Nadal claimed that Schaff either deliberately misrepresented Methodism or sadly misunderstood it.

Nadal, first of all, dealt with Schaff's accusation that Methodism exerted great influence over the lower classes, particularly among blacks, and that in its zeal it exercised "impure motives of proselytism." The reviewer held the former criticism to be a compliment. It was "a great pity that every church [was] not fitted for the work of saving the poor and unlettered." Was not Christ especially concerned for them! The charge of proselytizing, however, was reckless, false and slanderous. Methodism had simply tried to preach the Gospel and nurture the committed in places where the Christian faith was not present or where it was languishing. Methodism had "ever scorned to decoy Christians of other communions into their own. Indeed, [Methodists] have suffered more from proselytism than any other Church in the land: thousands converted among us and formerly belonging to us are now members of other Churches," he wrote.

Concerning Schaff's complaint that Methodism condemned learning and theology as impairing practical piety, Nadal was startled. How could anyone familiar with the Wesleys or Methodist history make such a statement? From the beginning Wesley urged his preachers to read and learn. The first Discipline directed the preachers to spend at least five hours each day in study. Coke, Asbury, Emory, Hedding and Bangs were hardly leaders with a dislike for education and theology. And how could one account for the birth of Cokesbury College among a group of people

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48 The articles were "The Preparation For Christianity in the History of the World, A Proof of its Divine Origin," XXXII (July, 1849), 429-447 and (October, 1849), 542-552; "The Government and Discipline of the Apostolic Church," XXXIII (July, 1851), 429-445 and (October, 1851), 574-600; and "The Oldest Opposition to Christianity, and Its Defense," XL (October, 1858), 605-624.


so hostile to education? Nadal concluded that Methodism had “always insisted with equal earnestness, that those who are called to the work of the ministry are bound to do their utmost to cultivate their minds and to acquire knowledge, especially that which pertains to their holy calling”.

Furthermore, contrary to Schaff’s allegations, Methodist clergy were no more prone to conceit and vanity when they acquired “a little learning” than the clergy of other churches. Not conceit and vanity, but “earnestness and simplicity” were the characteristics which qualified a person for the Methodist ministry.

Next Nadal took up Schaff’s disparagement of the Methodist emphasis on “experimental Christianity.” Nadal’s comment was brief:

We do indeed, with Jesus and the apostles, insist on experimental Christianity, repentance and the new birth; we labour to bring on the battle of repentance, and rejoice in the pangs of the spiritual birth, but we teach nothing in regard to the specific amount of any kind of feeling whatever—just the reverse indeed—we pretend to have no mystical thermometer by which to determine the spiritual temperature either of the renewed or the penitential state.

Schaff had distorted Methodist attitudes toward the “ordinary means of grace.” Methodists, Nadal replied, revered baptism and the Lord’s Supper, even if they had not shown their “practical religious respect for Rome’ and Mercersburg, by adopting the doctrines of baptismal regeneration and the real spiritual presence.” Methodists used no means of grace which was substantially new. Camp meetings, prayer meetings and class meetings simply employed the ancient practices of preaching, praying, singing and counseling. Even the mourner’s bench was merely a place to sing, to pray and to point the struggling sinner to the Savior. Nadal said,

Substantially, then, the Methodists use the means of grace instituted by Christ, and them only; and the objections brought against them in this connexion, relate exclusively to non-essential circumstances, such as, that the preaching, the praying, the singing, &c., are done in a grove, in a private house, or at a certain bench or altar, or on a weekday. Concerning these circumstances the apostles and the private Christians of their day were as little careful as the Methodists.

Likewise, counter to Schaff’s assertion, the Methodists did not neglect the religious education of the young. Their preachers were required by the Discipline to instruct the children, to organize Sunday schools wherever possible, to catechize, and to counsel youth on “experimental and practical godliness.”

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53Nadal, “Schaff on America,” 139.
54Nadal, “Schaff on America,” 139-140.
55Nadal, “Schaff on America,” 141.
56Nadal, “Schaff on America,” 141-142.
57Nadal, “Schaff on America,” 142-143.
In his review Nadal was not content merely to defend Methodism from Schaff’s attack. His response also contained a few caustic comments about the Mercersburg Theology which Nadal described as “mystical and metaphysical.” He noted that the clergy of the German Reformed Church were having difficulty mastering “this new system.” He said,

most of her ministers seem to move like a man bearing about him a concealed treasure, of which he knows neither the value nor the exact whereabouts, though he is pretty sure he has it somewhere. The general impression is, that however clearly Drs. Nevin and Schaff may be able to see in this newly-imported, hazy, German, doctrinal atmosphere, the great body of their ministers are befogged by their “too little learning,” and hence with a discretion scarcely to be expected in this country of independent thought, they have mostly yielded themselves in unreasoning and dutiful silence to the guidance of authority, and by tacit consent have left both the promulgation and defence of the new theology to their two great leaders. But while with the majority the effect of the new teaching has been thus repressive and sedative, with a considerable number who think they see bottom through the deep or muddy waters, it has been far otherwise; and where a learned professor might have presented to his audience a body of smoke in a robe of moonshine, and supplied by rhetorical and metaphysical gymnastics what was lacking in solid doctrine, these poor fellows only grope and flounder. 58

Nadal’s review stirred a published response by John McClintock, former editor of *The Methodist Quarterly Review*. McClintock reproved Nadal for misjudging Schaff’s interpretation of Methodism. Schaff did not mean to vilify Methodism as Nadal had charged. 59 In reply to McClintock, however, Nadal reinterated his persuasion that Schaff’s description of Methodism in *America* was intentionally designed to injure his church. 60

A second article which appeared in *The Methodist Quarterly Review* was written by William Nast (1807-1889), prominent Methodist and editor of *Der Christliche Apologete*, a German language Methodist publication. Nast was troubled by Schaff’s “repeated assaults upon German Methodism,” particularly in *Der Deutsche Kirchenfreund*. 61 He resented the injurious and unfair comments about Methodism which Schaff permitted to be printed in this theological monthly. Nast complained that Schaff had unjustly made two attacks on Methodism.

First, Schaff had singled out German Methodists as an example of “barbarous Christianity.” Schaff alleged that their worship was “fanatical and chaotic,” especially at camp meetings. Furthermore, the German Methodists were characterized in Schaff’s words as,

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an opposition to culture of mind and learning, an opposition which springs not from humility, but mostly from an overbearing contempt of others, and from intellectual imbecility, and which results too often in the ruin of a practical religious life, and trains up a wild, unrestrained youth; then the uncharitable anathematizing of the denominations, as if there was no piety at all to be found in them, because they have not adopted the new measures; again the perversion of justification by faith into a justification by feeling; in short, the one-sided conception of Christianity as an indistinct matter of feeling, while true Christianity aims to pervade equally and harmoniously the whole man and all the faculties of the soul; the extravagant importance put upon self-invented means of conversion, and a conscious or unconscious depreciation of the regular, divinely ordained means of grace, especially of the sacraments, which in their system become empty signs and ceremonies; finally, the doctrine of the attainability in this life of a moral perfection, which rests on a Pelagian basis ignoring the deep abyss of sin and nourishing the most dangerous kind of pride, spiritual vanity, [and] pharisaisism. 82

Second, Schaff had personally assailed Nast and Der Christliche Apologete in his Kirchenfreund. Schaff referred to Nast and his publication as "a spiritless (insipid) paper, full of unsalty piety and vain praises of camp meetings and awakenings, ... ignoble and Jesuitical in his polemics, robbing his colleagues frequently of articles without giving credit, but otherwise caring little for what takes place in Christendom, except where it suits his purpose." 83

Nast's reply to Schaff's charges asserted that by Schaff's admission he had little first-hand knowledge of German Methodism. Schaff's caricature was misleading. Citing one Methodist doctrine which Schaff had mentioned, Nast wrote,

How much more worthy of a theological professor and of the editor of a learned theological periodical would it have been, if Professor Schaff, instead of making groundless and ignominious charges against the Methodists, had thoroughly reviewed, examined, and refuted that Methodistical doctrine of Christian perfection, which appears to him so unsound and dangerous, ... or, indeed, any of our doctrines and usages, as they are set forth in our books and tracts. 84

Nast judged that Nadal's critical review of Schaff's America was a fair assessment of Schaff's bias against Methodism. Although Schaff was a man of great learning, Nast lamented his misinformation about Methodism and his distorted judgments of it. 85

The charges of the Mercersburg theologians were not unnoticed and unanswered. A few Methodist writers issued responses, but their replies did not result in any further apparent theological argument between Methodism and Mercersburg. Perhaps one reason for this was the Mercersburg professors' preoccupation with addressing attacks on their views within their own church. Their christological, ecclesiological,
liturgical and sacramental ideas stirred considerable controversy within the German Reformed Church.\textsuperscript{66}

**Conclusion**

There was a real and serious quarrel between the Mercersburg theologians and Methodism. Nevin and Schaff were the proponents of views which were much different from those of American Methodists, especially with regard to ecclesiology and evangelism. Methodism did make effective use of the campmeeting and revivalistic techniques of a type which the Mercersburg professors found entirely unacceptable. By the close of the 19th century there were many Methodists who found these evangelistic measures equally detestable.

There were, however, some points at which Nevin and Schaff seemed to be uninformed critics of Methodism. For example, their knowledge of John Wesley's life and theology appears to be weak. There is little, if any, evidence that they are acquainted with his writings. Their judgments about the Wesleyan movement were formed on their observations of American Methodist thought and practices and, even then perhaps, on a limited sampling of Methodist customs. If they had possessed a deeper knowledge of Wesley they might have been positively impressed with his love and respect for the early church fathers which they too shared, with his understanding of the sacraments as more than "empty signs and ceremonies," and with his high regard for the church, its unity and liturgy. Obviously, they would not have agreed with Wesley at every point, but they would have softened their critique of his life and thought. In fact, their quarrel with American Methodism would have been considerably strengthened by showing how it had strayed, sometimes widely, from some of the theological emphases of its founder.

There were other areas where their sweeping condemnation of Methodism was in error. While some Methodists, for example, did have serious misgivings about the value of education for lay people and clergy, there were many others who advocated the church's active leadership in educational endeavors. The early and sustained activities of Methodists in this area are well documented.

Recent history has proven that while Nevin and Schaff correctly assessed the role of Methodism in the spawning of some "sects" such as the Evangelical Association and the Church of the United Brethren in Christ, they did not foresee the ecumenical spirit which would result in the Evangelical United Brethren union of 1946 and the United Methodist union of 1968. It is, of course, impossible to fault them for their inability to predict these expressions of ecumenicity, but the seeds for these unions had

\textsuperscript{66}See Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology*, for a description of the debate.
already been planted when Nevin and Schaff issued their bitter diatribes against Methodism.

Mercersburg's quarrel with Methodism is an interesting chapter in 19th century American religious history. It shows that amidst the apparent statistical success and influence of American Methodism during that time there were important voices questioning some of its most cherished theological assumptions and practices.