I

Nevin left little doubt concerning how he felt about the popular revivalistic techniques, known as the New Measures, employed by many American Protestants. His tract, The Anxious Bench, published in 1843, and revised and enlarged in 1844, represented his most vigorous and provocative assault on New Measures revivalism. Although the use of The Anxious Bench was at the center of his dispute, he saw it as the major symbol of the whole system of New Measures. He wrote:

New Measures, in the technical modern sense, form a particular system, involving a certain theory of religious action, and [are] characterized by a distinctive life, which is by no means difficult to understand. Of this system The Anxious Bench is a proper representative. It opens the way naturally to other forms of aberration in the same direction, and may be regarded in this view as the threshold of all that is found to follow, quite out to the extreme of fanaticism and rant.¹

Nevin was aware that his criticism of the New Measures was risky. Even in his own church many claimed that the New Measures aided the cause of bringing people to faith; they were tools of the Holy Spirit. Others asserted that if the New Measures were not “positively helpful to the Spirit’s work,”

¹John Williamson Nevin, The Anxious Bench, edited by Charles Yrigoyen, Jr. and George H. Bicker, in Catholic and Reformed: Selected Theological Writings of John Williamson Nevin (Pittsburgh: The Pickwick Press, 1978), 18. This work is hereafter referred to as TAB.
they were not harmful or intolerable. According to Nevin, that was not the case. He said:

The very design of the inquiry now proposed is to show that The Anxious Bench, and the system to which it belongs, have no claim to be considered either salutary or safe in the service of religion. It is believed that instead of promoting the cause of true vital godliness, they are adapted to hinder its progress. The whole system is considered to be full of peril for the most precious interests of the Church. And why then should there be any reserve in treating the subject with such freedom as it may seem to require?

Nevin felt that there was a place for genuine, legitimate revivals of religion. He wrote:

They are as old as the gospel itself. Special effusions of the Spirit the Church has a right to expect in every age, in proportion as she is found faithful to God's covenant; and where such effusions take place, an extraordinary use of the ordinary means of grace will appear, as a matter of course.

Nevin was even willing to concede that certain "measures" integral to the "system of the bench," his synonym for New Measures, might be suited to advance "true vital godliness." On occasion, protracted meetings might be required. Prayer meetings might be beneficial. "Sermons and exhortations may be expected to become more earnest and pungent. A greater amount of feeling will prevail in meetings. It will become necessary to have special conferences with the awakened." These valid revival "measures," however, were not to be confused with the spurious New Measures.

If . . . The Anxious Bench, revival machinery, solemn tricks for effect, decision displays at the bidding of the preacher, genuflections and prostrations in the aisle or around the altar, noise and disorder, extravagance and rant, mechanical conversions, justification by feeling rather than faith, and encouragement ministered to all fanatical impressions; if these things, and things in the same line indefinitely, have no connection in fact with true serious religion and the cause of revivals, but only tend to bring them into discredit, let the fact be openly proclaimed.

While the popularity and apparent success of the "system of the bench" were cited by its advocates as reasons for its utilization, Nevin remained unconvinced about its ability to bring people to true Christian faith. He wrote:

Spurious revivals are common, and as the fruit of them false conversions lamentably abound. An Anxious Bench may be crowded where no divine influence whatever is felt. A whole congregation may be moved with excitement, and yet be losing at the very time more than is gained in a religious point of view. Hundreds may be carried

\[^{2}\text{TAB, 25.}\]
\[^{3}\text{TAB, 25.}\]
\[^{4}\text{TAB, 29.}\]
\[^{5}\text{TAB, 120, Cf., TAB. 27,119.}\]
\[^{6}\text{TAB, 30.}\]
Methodism Condemned: John Williamson Nevin’s Accusations

through the process of anxious bench conversion, and yet their last state may be worse than the first. It will not do to point us to immediate visible effects, to appearances on the spot, or to glowing reports struck off from some heated imagination immediately after. Piles of copper, fresh from the mint, are after all something very different from piles of gold.7

Nevin alleged that the “system of the bench” appealed to “persons in whom feelings prevail over judgment and who are swayed by impulse more than reflection.”8 He believed that, “In an enlightened, well instructed congregation the anxious bench can never be generally popular.”9 As for the pastors who were deceived by the apparent success of the New Measures, Nevin noted:

Let the power of religion be present in the soul of him who is called to serve at the altar, and no strange fire will be needed to kindle the sacrifice. He will require no new measures. His strength will appear rather in resuscitating, and clothing with their ancient force the institutions and services already established for his use. The freshness of a divine life, always young and always new, will stand forth to view in all forms that before seemed sapless and dead. Attention will be engaged; interest excited; souls drawn to the sanctuary. Sinners will be awakened and born into the family of God. Christians will be builded up in faith, and made meet for the inheritance of the saints in light. Religion will grow and prosper. This is the true idea of evangelical power.10

There were four specific charges Nevin brought against the use of the anxious bench. First, it produced “a false issue for the conscience.” Instead of compelling the awakened sinner to concentrate on repenting and yielding to God, the sinner became preoccupied with the decision to go to the anxious bench.11 Second, the anxious bench obstructed “the action of truth” for those who were serious about their salvation. The momentary excitement of coming to the bench overshadowed genuine desire for God’s forgiving and renewing grace.12 Third, by coming to the bench people were under the false impression that they had made “a real decision in favor of religion.”13 Simply coming to the bench did not make one a Christian. Fourth, the anxious bench caused “harm and loss” to [people’s] souls. When the excitement it generated had subsided people were left with feelings of delusion and despair. For some, coming to the bench would generate a destructive pride because they would believe that they had “gotten religion” when in reality there was virtually no spiritual depth to their experience.14

Nevin could not find any reason to justify the New Measures, the “system

---

7TAB, 36-37.
8TAB, 41.
9TAB, 41.
10TAB, 49-50.
11TAB, 59-60.
12TAB, 62-64.
13TAB, 64.
14TAB, 68-71.
of the bench,” because it was founded upon a “false theory of religion.”\textsuperscript{15} In the final analysis it was,

characteristically pelagian with narrow views of the nature of sin, and confused apprehensions of the difference between flesh and spirit; involving in the end the gross and radical error that conversion is to be considered in one shape or another the product of the sinner’s own will, and not truly and strictly a new creation in Christ Jesus by the power of God. ... The man gets religion, and so stands over it and above it in his own fancy as the owner of property in any other case. From such monstrous perversion the worst consequences may be expected to flow. The system may generate action; but it will be morbid action, one-sided, spasmodic, ever leaning toward fanaticism.\textsuperscript{16}

In contrast to the “system of the bench” Nevin described a more excellent way. He called it the “system of the catechism.”\textsuperscript{17} It included “sermons full of unction and light; faithful, systematic instruction; zeal for the interests of holiness; pastoral visitation; catechetical training; due attention to order and discipline; [and] patient perseverance in the details of... ministerial work. ...”\textsuperscript{18} Nevin was convinced that the “system of the catechism” was based on a “true theory of religion” which in his words, carries us continually beyond the individual to the view of a far deeper and more general form of existence in which his life is represented to stand. Thus sin is not simply the offspring of a particular will, putting itself forth in the form of actual transgressions, but a wrong habit of humanity itself, a general and universal force which includes and rules the entire existence of the individual man from the very start. The disease is organic, rooted in the race, and not to be overcome in any case by a force less deep and general than itself. ... [With regard to salvation from sin, man] is the subject of it, but not the author of it in any sense. His nature is restorable, but it can never restore itself. The restoration to be real, must begin beyond the individual. ... Thus humanity fallen in Adam, is made to undergo a resurrection in Christ, and so restored flows over organically... to all in whom its life appears. The sinner is saved then by an inward living union with Christ as the bond of which he has been joined in the first instance to Adam. This union is reached and maintained through the medium of the Church by the power of the Holy Ghost. It constitutes a new life, the ground of which is not in the particular subject of it at all, but in Christ, the organic root of the Church. The particular subject lives, not properly speaking in the acts of his own will separately considered, but in the power of a vast generic life that lies wholly beyond his will, and has now begun to manifest itself through him as the law and type of his will itself as well as of his whole being. As born of the Spirit in contradistinction from the flesh he is himself spiritual, and capable of true righteousness. Thus his salvation begins, and thus it is carried forward until it becomes complete in the resurrection of the great day. From first to last it is a power which he does not so much apprehend as he is apprehended by it, and comprehended in it, and carried along with it as something infinitely more deep and vast than himself.\textsuperscript{19}
Nevin was not reluctant to identify the source of the New Measures, the "system of the bench." In the opening pages of *The Anxious Bench* he said, "The system in question is in its principle and soul neither Calvinism nor Lutheranism, but Wesleyan Methodism. Those who are urging it upon the old German churches, are in fact doing as much as they can to turn them over into the arms of Methodism." Nevin was obviously concerned about the influence of the Methodist New Measures on the churches of the German Reformation including his own denomination. And not only had Methodism's "system of the bench" introduced an inferior form of Christian faith into the Reformation churches, it was also responsible for the origin of certain religious sects, namely, Otterbein's United Brethren, Albright's Evangelical Association, and Winebrenner's Church of God. Undoubtedly, it was to those three churches that Nevin referred when he wrote, "Already the life of Methodism, in this country, is actively at work among other sects, which owe no fellowship with it in form." Nevin continued:

But is not Methodism Christianity? And is it not better that the German Churches should rise in this form than not rise at all? Most certainly so, I reply, if that be the only alternative. But that is not the only alternative. Their resurrection may just as well take place, in the type of their own true, original glorious life, as it is still to be found enshrined in their symbolical books. And whatever there may be that is good in Methodism, this life of the Reformation I affirm to be immeasurably more excellent and sound. Wesley was a small man as compared to Melanchthon. Oleshausen, with all his mysticism, is a commentator of the inmost sanctuary in comparison with Adam Clark. If the original, distinctive life of the Churches of the Reformation be not the object to be reached after, in the efforts that are made to build up the interests of German Christianity in this county, it were better to say so at once openly and plainly. If we must have Methodism, let us have it under its own proper title, and in its proper shape. Why keep up the walls of denominational partition in such a case, with no distinctive spiritual being to uphold or protect?

Both Schaff and Nevin were very troubled by the "sect system" in American Protestantism for which they believed Methodism bore a major responsibility. Nevin outlined his views on the sects in *Antichrist, or the Spirit of Sect and Schism* in 1848 and in "The Sect System," a two-part article published in the *Mercersburg Review* in 1849. Nevin observed that the sects claimed no creed but the plain meaning of the Bible. But, he asked, if the Bible is so easily read and interpreted, why was there such a proliferation of sects with substantially different theologies

---

20 *TAB*, 12.
21 *TAB*, 13.
22 *TAB*, 13.
24 (New York: John S. Taylor, 1848).
25 See Yrigoyen and Bricker, *Catholic and Reformed: Selected Theological Writings of John Williamson Nevin*, 127-173.
and practices? Furthermore, although the sects declared the right of private judgment and theological freedom for each individual, each sect had its own system of doctrine and was quite inflexible in its expectation that its members would adhere to its body of beliefs.26 The sects were “unhistorical.” They had no appreciation for the historical development of the church, but understood themselves, “aboriginal, self-sprung from the Bible, or through the Bible from the skies.”27 “The idea of a historical continuity in the life of the Church, carries with it no weight whatever for the sect consciousness. It is felt to be as easy to start a new church, as it is to get up a new moral or political association under any other name.”28 The sects were “unchurchly.” They had no real understanding of the church as the Body of Christ and no appreciation of its traditional faith. For example, they had no regard for the use of the Apostles’ Creed. In fact, “wherever the sect spirit prevails the Creed falls into disuse.”29 The sects were also “unsacramental.” “The forms of the sacraments may be retained, but the true inward meaning of them is more or less lost.”30 According to Nevin, sects were theologically unstable, captive to the whims of their leaders, and adverse to theology treated “as a science.” In his treatment of the “sect system,” Nevin frequently cited the churches founded by Otterbein, Albright, and Winebrenner as examples of the sects he so much despised. All three of these church leaders had significant ties to American Methodism. Philip Schaff shared Nevin’s understanding of the relationship between Methodism and the followers of Otterbein and Albright. Schaff wrote:

The influence of Methodism on the Lutheran and German Reformed Church at the close of the last and the 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 . . . .31

As we have mentioned above, John Williamson Nevin made some very severe accusations against John Wesley and Methodism. Some of them appear to have been formed on the basis of accurate information and

---

26John Williamson Nevin, “The Sect System,” in Yrigoyen and Bricker, Catholic and Reformed: Selected Theological Writings of John Williamson Nevin, 135. This work is hereafter referred to as SS.
27SS, 145.
28SS, 146.
29SS, 148.
30SS, 148.
impressions of American Methodist doctrine and practice. But others seem to be based on lack of information and misunderstanding. It would appear, for example, that Nevin's information about the relationship of American Methodism and the New Measures was correct as was his understanding of the relationship between the Methodists and the United Brethren, the Evangelical Association, and Winebrenner's Church of God as we shall see. However, Nevin's knowledge about John Wesley and his interpretation of Wesley's theology appears to be more problematic. For example, it is doubt-ful that the New Measures could be labeled "Wesleyan" Methodism. What did Nevin know about Wesley? Although a significant body of Wesley's writings had been published in England and America by the early 1840s, had Nevin read any of these? Could Wesley be rightly understood as a proponent of the American "sect system"?

There is little doubt that Nevin correctly understood the situation among Methodists regarding their devotion to revivalism and camp meetings. There is hardly a survey of Methodist history that does not emphasize the popularity of revivals among American Methodists.\textsuperscript{32} The diaries and journals of Methodist preachers and laypeople give numerous accounts of revival meetings and the religious excitement they generated.\textsuperscript{33} As Bernard A. Weisberger has observed, "From bishops to exhorters, the Methodists... were wide-ranging salesmen of the revival point of view ...."\textsuperscript{34} Richard Carwardine echoes Weisberger's view: "Methodism was wholeheartedly a revival movement; it had been born of a revival; its churches grew through revivals; its ministers preached revival; its success was talked of in terms of revival."\textsuperscript{35}

While Charles G. Finney is usually given credit for popularizing the New Measures, it is generally agreed that Finney did not invent them. For example, while the Methodists did not make extensive use of the anxious (or mourners') bench, they did employ a similar technique in their services which they termed the "call to the altar." Instead of providing a pew or bench for the sinners who were anxious for their conversion, Methodist preachers invited them to come forward and kneel at the altar rail or at an open area in front of the congregation. This practice began in the early years of the 19th century. Carwardine states that,


\textsuperscript{34}Bernard A. Weisberger, \textit{They Gathered At The River} (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1966), 10.

by the second decade of the century the call to the altar had become a standard feature of Methodist revivals. Indeed it sometimes happened that mourners would anticipate the minister’s call and move to the altar before the invitation was given, so institutionalized had the procedure become.36

Not only was the “altar call” widely utilized by Methodists, but other practices associated with the New Measures, “the system of the bench,” were also common among them. Direct, colloquial preaching, women’s praying publicly in mixed assemblies, and protracted meetings were common among Methodists. Furthermore, they were enthusiastic devotees of the camp meeting. Bishop Francis Asbury, considered by most the principal patriarch of American Methodism, registered his ecstasy about them. In 1809 he wrote: “Campmeetings, campmeetings, Oh Glory, Glory!”37 While camp meetings and revivals were often the occasion for the emotional excesses that Nevin despised, it must be noted that many Methodist leaders had reservations about such practices as “the jerks,” shouting, and other extremes. Nathan Bangs, a very important figure among the early Methodists, was annoyed by the emotionalism he observed at some revivals. He was critical of the “spirit of pride, presumption, and bigotry, impatience of scriptural restraint and moderation, clapping of hands, screaming, and even jumping, which marred and disgraced the work of God.”38 It is Carwardine’s contention that Finney was influenced by the revival practices of the Methodists:

It is even possible that [Finney’s] decision in Rochester in 1830 to adopt the anxious seat as a main feature of his revivals was Methodist-inspired. In the Methodist revival there in 1827-28 the call to the altar had proved “singularly beneficial” and had involved “some of our wealthy and respectable citizens.” When Finney arrived in 1830 he was looking for “some measure that would bring sinners to a stand.” He “had found, that with the higher classes especially, the greatest obstacle to be overcome was their fear of being known as anxious inquirers.” He decided to use the anxious seat, and the response among “the highest classes of society” was good.39

But did American Methodists derive their revivalistic techniques, a “system of the bench,” from John Wesley? Did Wesley himself employ a system of “measures” to bring sinners to conversion? Did he encourage American Methodists to do so?

Nevin’s complaint about the “sect system” among American Protestants and the implication of Methodism’s role in it must also be examined. Nevin was certainly right in his observation that three of the “sects” he most criticized, the Church of the United Brethren in Christ begun by Otterbein and

36 Carwardine, 13.
38 Quoted in Carwardine, 12.
Boehm, Albright's Evangelical Association, and Winebrenner's Church of God, had attachments to American Methodism.

Although Philip William Otterbein, ordained in the German Reformed Church, was nurtured in the tradition of Reformed Pietism in Germany, he was also well acquainted with American Methodism. His relationship with Francis Asbury, the famous American Methodist Bishop, was especially cordial. Their close friendship is noted at several places in Asbury's journal. Otterbein participated in Asbury's ordination to the Methodist episcopacy on December 26, 1784 at the time the Methodist Episcopal Church was formally organized in Baltimore, MD.

The co-founder of the United Brethren, Martin Boehm, also enjoyed a genial relationship with Methodism. Boehm was excommunicated by the Mennonites sometime between 1775 and 1780 for certain doctrinal irregularities. In 1767 he and Otterbein began a close friendship which lasted until Boehm's death in 1812. Boehm read Wesley's published sermons. In 1791 he gave the Methodists a piece of land for the construction of a chapel and a cemetery. When the Methodist building had been erected, Boehm's wife and children joined the Methodists worshipping there. Boehm did not join that Methodist group, but he was often present, sometimes preaching and leading celebrations of the Lord's Supper.

It is plain that the United Brethren preached an evangelical faith very similar to that of the Methodists. And while it is difficult to trace the direct influence of Methodism's revival and camp meeting techniques on Otterbein and Boehm, it is clear that they adopted Methodism's discipline and polity. Nevin was accurate in identifying American Methodism as an important force in the creation of the United Brethren "sect."

Jacob Albright, another of the "sect" leaders subject to Nevin's scorn, was the founder of the Evangelical Association. While a young man Albright, who was raised in a German-speaking family, was affiliated with a Lutheran church in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. In 1791, one year after the death of several of his children, Albright experienced conversion and joined a Methodist class meeting. The Methodists granted him an exhorter's license in 1796 which enabled him to be a speaker in the class gatherings. However, he felt a call to share his testimony more broadly and began preaching. In 1800 he gathered the people who had experienced new birth under his preaching into three classes, organized along Methodist lines. By 1807 his followers had grown to the point that Albright was able to form a new church which later became known as the Evangelical Association. The orig-

---

42 Behney and Eller, 43-45.
nal licenses issued to his preachers read, "the Newly-formed Methodist Conference." Methodist influence in the Evangelicals’ doctrine and practices was evident from the beginning.

The record of Nevin’s disdain for John Winebrenner and the Church of God is well documented. Richard Kern has described the passionate controversy between the two men. Nevin was especially incensed that Winebrenner, a fellow German Reformed pastor, made use of the New Measures revivalism and that he finally broke with his church in order to form a new “sect,” which he called the Church of God. Was there any apparent influence of Methodism in Winebrenner’s theology and evangelistic techniques? A recent article by William A. Sloat, II, traces the role of Methodism and the Church of the United Brethren in Christ in the formation of Winebrenner’s thought and the founding of the Church of God. Sloat contends that, “it was Winebrenner’s contact with the Methodists and United Brethren and participation in their camp meetings that transformed him from a respectable pietist to an unacceptable [from Nevin’s perspective] new measures revivalist” There is also evidence that Winebrenner had contact with leaders of the Evangelical Association. Kern also suggests that the Methodists were an important force in Winebrenner’s ministry:

... on the basis of information available, it would seem that it was Winebrenner’s whole-hearted adoption of “new measures,” probably under the influence of the local Methodists, which led to his eventual separation from the German Reformed Church. After some experimentation, the [German Reformed] Synod decided that it did not have room for such measures or John Winebrenner.

There seems little question that Nevin was correct in citing American Methodism as the major force in the employment of the new measures, especially the anxious bench, or something like it, and in the formation of the “sect system,” which Nevin so much despised. Methodism certainly played an important part in the formation of the Church of the United Brethren, the Evangelical Association, and the Church of God. Nevin seems to have had it right in his analysis of American Methodism. But was he right in calling this “Wesleyan”? Was American Methodism what Wesley envisioned and intended it to be? Did Nevin misunderstand and even misrepresent the founder of Methodism? It would appear so.

The first issue we consider is whether John Wesley ever employed or promoted anything akin to the New Measures. Was the “system of the bench”

---

43Behney and Eller, 81-82.
45Kern, 81-92.
47Sloat, 56.
48Sloat, 63, n.12.
49Kern, 40.
real Wesleyan Methodism, as Nevin alleged? There is no doubt that John Wesley was committed to an evangelical message. It is also apparent that he was willing to utilize what some regarded as radical means in his preaching and organization. For example, he was willing to do some of his evangelical preaching in the open air. He began this on April 2, 1739 in Bristol with the urging of George Whitefield. Wesley wrote: “At four in the afternoon I submitted to ‘be more vile,’ and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation, speaking from a little eminence in a ground adjoining the city, to about three thousand people.” Wesley’s employment of lay preachers, his organization of societies and classes, his allowing women to have an important role in the leadership of the Methodist movement, and his constant focus on bringing people to conversion were certainly unorthodox in the eyes of many church leaders in late 18th century England. However, it is very difficult to associate Wesley with the use of an anxious pen or an altar call, which American Methodists obviously used with some regularity at their revival meetings. Furthermore, the development of the camp meeting was an American invention unknown to Wesley. The “system of the bench” was certainly used extensively among American Methodists, but its origin could hardly be attributed to John Wesley.

The second issue to be considered is Nevin’s citation of Wesley and the Methodists as a chief, if not the chief, culprit in the formation of the “sect system” in American Protestantism. We have already acknowledged that American Methodism was a major influence in the shaping of three “sects” which Nevin often cited as specimens of the sects he so much disliked. But was John Wesley guilty of promulgating the “sect spirit” as Nevin defined it? Perhaps it is helpful to recall three of the major characteristics with which Nevin associated the “sects.” In his article, “The Sect System,” he claimed that they were “unchurchly,” “unhistorical,” and “unsacramental.” Each of these charges must be recalled and examined in light of John Wesley’s theology to see if he could be found guilty of any or all of them.

According to Nevin one of the chief evidences that the “sects” were unchurchly was their neglect of the Apostles’ Creed. He wrote:

Sect Christianity is not the Christianity of the Creed, or at best it is this Christianity under a more mutilated form. Of this proof enough is found in the fact that wherever the sect spirit prevails the Creed falls into disuse. It may still be spoken of respectfully perhaps when spoken of at all; but what sect repeats it, or recognizes [sic] in it the mirror of its own consciousness? The Creed has become almost universally a dead letter, in the religion of the sects. There are, no doubt, thousands of so called evangelical ministers in our country at this time, to say nothing of their congregations, who could not even repeat it correctly, were they called on suddenly to do so.


"SS, 147."
as a test of their Christian knowledge.\textsuperscript{51}

Is neglect of the Creed a legitimate charge to be made against John Wesley? This is a difficult accusation to sustain against an Anglican priest who loved the \textit{Book of Common Prayer} and referred to the Apostles’ Creed in one of his sermons as a “beautiful summary” of the essential truths of the Christian faith.\textsuperscript{52} Perhaps the most important demonstration of Wesley’s reverence for the Apostles’ Creed was his inclusion of it in \textit{The Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America. With other Occasional Services}, a service book he sent to America with Thomas Coke, Richard Whatcoat, and Thomas Vasey in 1784. When Wesley determined that American Methodists should form a new church he published this volume intending it to be the principal guide for the worship of his people in the United States and “the foundation stone for subsequent Methodist worship in this country.”\textsuperscript{53} In Wesley’s order the Apostles’ Creed was to be said at both morning and evening worship “Every Lord’s Day.”\textsuperscript{54} It should also be noted that \textit{The Sunday Service} included a lectionary, litanies, orders for the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, baptism, matrimony, communion of the sick, burial of the dead, the ordination of deacons, elders, and superintendents, and Articles of Religion. The basic pattern of the liturgies in it remained that of the Church of England. Wesley’s \textit{Sunday Service} was never popular with American Methodists and was quickly ignored in favor of a less formal liturgy in which the Apostles’ Creed was not specified as a component.\textsuperscript{55} So, early American Methodists did not follow the use of the Creed prescribed by Wesley.

Nevin also charged that the “sect system” was unhistorical. The “sects” represented,

\ldots a real protest against the authority of all previous history, except so far as it may seem to agree with what is thus found to be true; in which case, of course, the only real measure of truth is taken to be, not this authority of history at all, but the mind, simply, of the particular sect itself. The idea of anything like a divine substance in the life of Christianity, through past ages, which may be expected of right to pass forward into the constitution of Christianity as it now stands, is one that finds no room whatever in this system.\textsuperscript{56}

Several recent studies of Wesley’s theology have shown the very high regard he had for the history of the church. Albert C. Outler was one of the first of the recent writers to call attention to the importance Wesley placed


\textsuperscript{53}White, \textit{The Sunday Service.} 12, 18.

\textsuperscript{54}See Kenneth Bedell, \textit{Worship in the Methodist Tradition} (Madison, NJ: General Commission on Archives and History, 1987), 51-56.

\textsuperscript{55}SS, 145.

on the early theologians of the Christian church. The most thorough analysis of Wesley's respect for the history of early Christianity is Ted A. Campbell's *John Wesley and Christian Antiquity*. \(^5\) Campbell shows that Wesley not only studied the ancient Christian writers, but referred to them in the work of the Methodist movement. Among the early church theologians frequently cited by Wesley were Cyprian, Augustine, Clement of Rome, Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Ignatius of Antioch, and Marcarius of Egypt. Nevin himself was especially interested in the early church period as well. \(^5\)

Wesley was not only interested in the early church, however. He was also a student of the medieval, Reformation, and later periods of church history. He was studied Thomas à Kempis, Theologia Germanica, Martin Luther, and John Calvin. His *Christian Library*, a fifty-volume set of "practical divinity" published between 1749 and 1755, included a variety of selections from early church writers, Catholics, Dissenters, and Latitudinarians, English, Scottish, and continental theologians. It may very well be true that American Methodism and the "sects" related to it did not manifest interest in, and appreciation for, the historical development of the Christian faith, but that accusation was much more difficult to sustain regarding the founder of Methodism.

The "sects" were also unsacramental in Nevin's estimation. He alleged that while they retained the form of the sacraments, they had lost the "inward meaning" of them. \(^6\) As a result, the sacraments were signs or symbols, but they were not the means for conveying divine grace.

Wesley's view of baptism certainly treated it as more than a sign or symbol. He believed that baptism washes "away the guilt of original sin by the application of the merits of Christ's death." \(^6\) He held that, "... the merits of Christ's life and death -- are applied to us in baptism." \(^6\) Baptism is "the ordinary instrument of our justification." \(^6\) It is the initiatory sacrament by which "we enter into covenant with God." \(^6\) By it "we are admitted into the Church and consequently made members of Christ its Head." \(^6\) Receiving baptism, "we who were 'by nature children of wrath' are made the children of God" and hence, we become "heirs of the kingdom of God." \(^6\)


\(^{6}\) SS, 148.


\(^{6}\) Outler, *John Wesley*, 322.

\(^{6}\) Outler, *John Wesley*, 322.

\(^{6}\) Outler, *John Wesley*, 322-323.
that Wesley believed that baptismal grace was usually lost in a person, therefore requiring a subsequent experience of regeneration. Nevertheless, he was quite certain that the sacrament was a primary means for the mediation of saving grace.

American Methodists became increasingly doubtful about Wesley’s view that baptism resulted in the regeneration of the recipient. In her recent study on the theology and practice of baptism, Gayle Carlton Felton has provided an important historical account of its development in American Methodism. She indicates that Methodists in America were embarrassed by Wesley. She observes:

Some [Methodist] writers attempted to deny that Wesley had actually accepted baptismal regeneration, but this position proved difficult to sustain in the face of the explicit evidence in his writings. More commonly, American Methodists tried to argue that Wesley changed his views later in life and that the Treatise [on Baptism] represented an early, transient phase of his thought. Perhaps it was this discomfiture with Wesley’s position that motivated his American followers to deprecate so frequently what they saw as erroneous doctrine in Anglican and Episcopal tradition.  

In the matter of baptism, as in so many other matters, American Methodists did not follow with precision the teaching of their founder. Something very similar can be said about the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.

The Lord’s Supper for Wesley was no empty sign. Wesley wrote, “...it is the duty of every Christian to receive the Lord’s Supper as often as he can.” Why? First of all, because the command of Christ obliged every Christian to do it. Secondly,

... because the benefits of doing it are so great to all that do it in obedience to him -- namely, the forgiveness of our past sins, the present strengthening and refreshing of our souls. In this world we are never free from temptations. Whatever way of life we are in, whatever our condition be, whether we are sick or well, in trouble or at ease, the enemies of our souls are watching to lead us into sin. And too often they prevail over us. Now, when we are convinced of having sinned against God, what surer way have we of procuring pardon from him than the “showing forth the Lord’s death”, and beseeching him, for the sake of his Son’s sufferings, to blot out all our sins?

Furthermore, Wesley wrote that God’s grace given in the Lord’s Supper “confirms to us the pardon of our sins, and enables us to leave them.” It is “the food of our souls” which,

... gives strength to perform our duty and leads us on to perfection. If, therefore, we have any regard for the plain command of Christ, if we desire the pardon of our sins,
if we wish for strength to believe, to love and obey God, then we should neglect no opportunity of receiving the Lord's Supper.  

It is obvious that Wesley's American brothers and sisters strayed far from his intention of frequent communion. Although he advised the ordained preachers in America "to administer the Supper of the Lord on every Lord's Day" and included in the Sunday Service which he sent to America in 1784 an "Order for the Administration of the Lord's Supper," American Methodists were celebrating the sacrament less frequently by the early 19th century.

Furthermore, as a number of scholars have pointed out, Wesley did not intend the Methodist people to understand the Lord's Supper as simply a memorial meal, even though it was a most important means for remembering the sacrifice of Christ. Paul S. Sanders wrote: "Wesley held to a belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the Supper... Wesley's view of the Real Presence [was] essentially that of Calvin as transmitted through the seventeenth-century Anglican High Churchmen." But in the early decades of the 19th century Methodists began to emphasize the Lord's Supper simply as a memorial meal. Sanders commented:

The memorial aspect of the Eucharist, always a legitimate and important element, was probably now pushed to the fore. In common with Presbyterians, Baptists and Congregationalists, the Methodists in America somewhere lost the sense of the vital reality of Christ's presence there.

Again, it appears that Nevin understood better the American Methodist theology and practice of the Lord's Supper than he did Wesley. Wesley's American followers did not follow his path regarding his practice and theology of the Lord's Supper.

III

John Williamson Nevin did understand that New Measures revivalism was widely encouraged and employed by American Methodists in the early 19th century. He also identified the close connection of Methodism to the three "sects" who had intruded into the life of German Christianity in America, namely the Church of the United Brethren in Christ, the Evangelical Association, and the Church of God. Methodism was a central factor in the development of each of them and, to that extent, promoted the "sect system" as Nevin defined it.

It is quite a different matter, however, to make John Wesley the principal

---

7Outler, John Wesley, 336.
8Quoted in Bucke, I, 203.
10Sanders, 453-454.
culprit in the villainies which Nevin abhorred. Although Wesley was the founder of the Methodist movement, it is not correct to brand the New Measures as "Wesleyan" Methodism or to infer that he was a prime instigator of the American Protestant "sect system." Although Nevin claimed that Wesley was a "small man" compared to Melanchthon, it is difficult to determine on what basis he made his judgment. There appears to be little, if any, evidence that he was acquainted with any of Wesley's writings, though we have pointed out that many of them were available and circulated in America.

If Nevin had been better acquainted with Wesley's views he would have been able to understand the differences between what Wesley intended American Methodism to be and what it actually became. Furthermore, he would have been more cognizant of some of the ways in which he and Wesley shared similar interests and concerns. Some of these included a high regard for the history and tradition of the church, the sacraments as means of mediating grace, and the importance of education, nurture and pastoral care. Perhaps Nevin even could have cited Wesley in his attacks on the New Measures and the "sect system." It is true that Wesley and Nevin were sometimes very different from each other in their understanding of the Christian faith, e.g., salvation and sanctification, but each believed he drew his views from the scriptures and classical Christian tradition.