

John Williamson
NEVIN

AMERICAN REFORMED BIOGRAPHIES

D. G. HART AND SEAN MICHAEL LUCAS
Series Editors

John Williamson
NEVIN

High-Church Calvinist

D. G. HART


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To Bruce Kuklick

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Series Preface



All history is biography,” Ralph Waldo Emerson once remarked. Although the wayward Unitarian may not be the best source to justify a series of biographies on the most influential proponents of Reformed Christianity in the United States, Emerson’s aphorism still contains a good deal of truth. History is the memory and record of past human lives, thus making biography the most basic form of historical knowledge. To understand any event, period, or text from the past, some acquaintance with specific persons is crucial. The popularity of biography among contemporary book buyers in America supports this insight. Recent biographies of John Adams and Ben Franklin have encouraged many, who fear for America’s historical amnesia, to believe that a keen and formidable interest in history still exists among the nation’s reading public. To be sure, the source of this interest could be the stature and influence of the subjects themselves—the founding fathers of the United States. Still, the accessibility of biography—its concrete subject matter, intimate scope, and obvious relevance—suggests that the reason for the recent success of these biographies is in the genre of writing itself.

American Reformed Biographies, coedited by D. G. Hart and Sean Michael Lucas, seeks to nurture this general interest in biography as a way of learning about and from the past. The titles in this series will feature American Reformed leaders who were important representa-

tives or interpreters of Reformed Christianity in the United States and who continue to be influential through writings and arguments still pertinent to the self-understanding of Presbyterian and Reformed theologians, pastors, and church members. The aim is to provide learned treatments of men and women that will be accessible to readers from a wide variety of backgrounds—biography that is both sufficiently scholarly to be of service to academics and those with proficiency in American church history and adequately accessible to engage the non-specialist. Consequently, these books will be more introductory than definitive, with the aim of giving an overview of a figure's thought and contribution, along with suggestions for further study. The editors have sought authors who are sympathetic to Reformed Christianity and to their subjects, who regard biography as not merely a celebration of past accomplishments but as a chance to ask difficult questions of both the past and the present in order to gain greater insight into Christian faith and practice. As such, *American Reformed Biographies* is designed to make available the best kind of historical writing—one that yields both knowledge and wisdom.

John Williamson Nevin, the subject of this volume, may seem like an odd pick for this series because he is not well known to many Reformed Christians. A son of American Presbyterianism, Nevin during the middle of his career switched denominations to teach theology for the German Reformed Church. He served in German Reformed circles throughout the rest of his life, chiefly at its educational institutions, teaching theology and history and performing administrative duties at Mercersburg Theological Seminary and Franklin and Marshall College. Although Nevin is better known to church historians and theologians because of his introduction of German theology and philosophy to intellectual life in the United States, D. G. Hart argues that this theologian's significance may be greater for the nonacademics who are unaware of this man, for while carrying out his many responsibilities as a theological educator, first for the Presbyterian Church and then for the German Reformed, Nevin discerned fundamental changes in American religious life that were undermining the vitality of Reformed Christianity in the United States. His articulation of a "high-church" Calvinism was a unique response to the dilemmas posed

by religious enthusiasm on the one side and the growing presence of Roman Catholicism on the other. Hart argues that, even though Nevin's theological and liturgical proposals were not fully embraced within the German Reformed Church or by other Reformed or Presbyterian denominations, his critique of the trends of popular Protestantism in the nineteenth century was prophetic for both Nevin's day and all Protestants since then. This book, the first biography of Nevin in over a century, remedies the neglect of arguably the nineteenth century's most creative theologian and provides a persuasive case for renewed attention to his high-church Calvinism.

Acknowledgments



The year 2003 was the bicentennial of John Williamson Nevin's birth. Most American Protestants failed to mark the anniversary with appropriate fanfare. It is likely just as well, because celebrations of Nevin's birth would have had to compete with the tercentenary of Jonathan Edwards. And that would have been a match for which no theologian would have wished. Just as Nevin thought, wrote, and taught during the middle decades of the nineteenth century in the shadow of New England Calvinism and the reputation of its most famous proponent, so even in death on the half-century and century anniversaries of his birth he will always be eclipsed by the theological prodigy that was Jonathan Edwards.

This book is not intended to correct this historical imbalance. For good reasons, Edwards and Nevin each deserve their relative rankings in the annals of American church and intellectual history. But an important contention of this biography is that Nevin understood better than Edwards the nature of Reformed Christianity and the obstacles it faced in the modern world. Unlike Edwards, who devoted his obvious brilliance to a philosophical defense of Calvinist doctrine, Nevin recognized that, without the nurture of the institutional church through its worship and pastoral care, Calvinist theology would not survive as a vibrant expression of the Christian religion. For that reason, Nevin deserves the nickname "high-church Calvinist."

While writing this book I have acquired a number of debts. Bruce Kuklick, R. Scott Clark, and Charles Hambrick-Stowe offered valuable comments after reading a first draft of the manuscript. Sally F. Griffith graciously allowed me to see her manuscript on the history of Franklin and Marshall College, which shed light on Nevin's college teaching and career. The coeditor of this series, Sean Michael Lucas, and my P&R editor, Allan Fisher, encouraged me to take on a project from which I have learned a great deal. Finally, the staff at the Evangelical and Reformed Historical Society in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, was helpful in making available its resources and in granting permission to use the picture of Nevin that graces the cover.

This book is dedicated to Bruce Kuklick, a fellow Pennsylvanian of German heritage who, although not thinking as highly of Nevin as I, has been a thoughtful guide to me on American religious and intellectual history, a valued friend and neighbor, and a source of hope during the dog days of August when the Philadelphia Phillies' futility is as obvious in the standings as it is on the field.

The old Presbyterian faith, into which I was born, was based throughout on the idea of covenant family religion, church membership by God's holy act in baptism, and following this a regular catechetical training of the young, with direct reference to their coming to the Lord's table. In one word, all proceeded on the theory of sacramental, educational religion.

—John Williamson Nevin

Introduction: Romantic or Reformed?



John Williamson Nevin should matter to American Presbyterians and Reformed Christians more than he does. For starters, he has Princeton Theological Seminary's seal of approval, having graduated from the young school in 1826. So impressive was Nevin as a seminarian that when Charles Hodge, who was a classmate of Nevin, went to Germany for further study, Nevin filled in for the third professor at the first theological seminary of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. In addition to teaching at Princeton, Nevin trained Presbyterian ministers in the fine points of exegesis and Calvinism at Western Theological Seminary, an institution established in 1825 to serve the presbyteries of western Pennsylvania and Ohio, a region of Presbyterian vitality comparable to the vicinity of Philadelphia and Princeton. In 1840 Nevin advanced to his third teaching post when he assumed instructional duties at Mercersburg Theological Seminary, a school located in south central Pennsylvania close to the Nevin family's home. At Mercersburg, Nevin's reputation grew not simply because as he matured he came to and articulated convictions that gained a national audience. Nevin's prominence within Calvinist circles increased also because Mercersburg was an agency of the German Reformed Church, a denomination with historic ties to the Palatinate

region of Germany, the site of the Heidelberg Catechism's composition and greatest influence, and a church with close ties to Dutch Reformed congregations and their synod. That sort of pedigree should qualify Nevin as a theologian of some significance to Calvinists from Great Britain (Presbyterians) and the Continent (Reformed).

But since Nevin's death in 1886 he has been a neglected figure among American Calvinists. For Presbyterians in the mainline denomination, Nevin has had occasional appeal but usually as a historical oddity or one who helped to break down the tight grip of Scholastic orthodoxy at Princeton. His call for a churchly and sacramental Calvinism has occasionally been useful in undoing the alleged austerity of Puritan piety, but it has provided little assistance to the project of social justice. For conservative Presbyterians, Nevin's use of German idealism to enhance Calvinist teaching on the church and worship smacked of the same sort of German theological innovations upon which liberal Protestants would later rely in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In addition, Nevin's high-church sensibility was at odds with the revivalist-friendly forms of devotion among those Presbyterians outside the mainline. Dutch Reformed believers, who were in the process of assimilation themselves, had little to gain from Nevin, whose circle of reference was largely circumscribed by the ethnic provincialism of the German Reformed. Dutch Calvinists preferred a system of theology more precise and less abstract than the one that Nevin produced. Finally, among German Reformed themselves Nevin was damaged goods, having been a major player in a church conflict over worship in the late nineteenth century. What is more, the German Reformed Church itself vanished over the course of the twentieth century, going through a series of mergers and church unions that landed the denomination in which Nevin labored for over half of his life in the United Church of Christ. The United Church of Christ does exhibit minor ongoing interest in Nevin. A small group of United Church of Christ ministers, largely situated in eastern Pennsylvania, established the Mercersburg Society and founded a journal, the *New Mercersburg Review*, to recover and promote Nevin's teaching. Otherwise, so complete has been the disappearance of a German Reformed tradition and along with it Nevin's legacy that when David Wells, professor of theology

at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, assembled a collection of essays on the Reformed tradition in America, none of the contributors remembered that the Reformed faith had been confessed and practiced outside American Presbyterian or Dutch Reformed circles.¹

As limited as contemporary interest in Nevin may be, he is a figure about whom Presbyterians and Reformed (whether North American or otherwise) should know. Some historical figures are worthy of study simply because their lives encapsulate the issues or tenor of an era. Others bear scrutiny because their ideas or actions have enduring significance beyond their own times. In Nevin's case, his significance qualifies on both counts. First, he was not the sort of historical subject who by virtue of popularity and recognition in his time may provide a basis for generalizations about a period, region, or institution. In fact, Nevin's instincts ran precisely counter to those of mainstream American Protestantism, and he was one of a few critics who recognized the difficulties attending Christianity in the New World and tried to defend and propagate Old World (even ancient Christian) teachings and practices. But because Nevin was a dissenter from the revivalist-inspired Protestant mainstream, to study him and his critique is to understand better the peculiar predicaments that confronted and continue to bedevil historic Protestant traditions in the United States (i.e., Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Reformed) since the early nineteenth century.

Second, because of his critique and because the circumstances that he faced are still enormous, Nevin's ideas and arguments not only possessed relevance for his own age but also for contemporary Protestantism. In many respects the sociocultural environment confronting Protestants in the early nineteenth century was historically unprecedented. Not since the days before Constantine's conversion had Christianity been forced to leave the corridors of power without the blessing of emperor, monarch, or magistrate. At the same time, Protestants confronted a novel form of Christianity in the revivals of the Second Great Awakening that were directly linked to the sociopolitical transformations of the American republic and that threatened to eradicate older Protestant beliefs and practices. Nevin's arguments and solutions were certainly not always convincing. In fact, Charles Grandison

Finney, for example, Nevin's contemporary and foil, rode the wave of religious enthusiasm and social reform to preside over the period. But however offbeat Nevin's thought may sometimes appear, his assessment of popular Christianity in the United States was arguably the most astute from the perspective of historical Protestantism that any American Reformed or Presbyterian theologian ever formulated.

The Church and Democratic Christianity

Novus ordo seclorum ("a new order for the ages") is a Latin phrase that many Americans overlook when using United States currency. Yet, it is not only part of the nation's official rhetoric but was an inspiring ideal for the eighteenth-century political leaders who sought liberty for thirteen British colonies in North America. Although the secular millennialism suggested by this Latin phrase encouraged a historical ignorance that today takes no notice of the classical republican Greek and Roman roots of the American experiment, when it came to religion the new nation of the United States did represent something truly novel in the history of the West. When the original state legislatures adopted and ratified the Sixth Article and the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, which declared respectively that religion would not be a condition for holding national office and that the new nation was freed from a government-sanctioned church, they were indeed embarking on a new era of politics. Since the fourth century, Christianity had been the official religion of those kingdoms, city-states, and nations that eventually supplanted the Roman Empire. Even before Christianity's endorsement from the emperor, public leaders and political philosophers believed that religion was essential to a well-ordered society. With the disestablishment of religion, the United States was in fact engaging in an innovation of historic proportions, even if individual states continued to support ecclesiastical establishments. (For instance, Massachusetts did not disestablish what was left of the old Puritan Standing Order until 1833 and thus became the last state to uncouple the official connections between church and state.)

Of course, for churches accustomed to tax support, the break with government could mean a serious threat to survival. And one of the

prominent features of American Christianity ever since the early nineteenth century has been the principle of voluntarism—meaning that for churches to exist they would have to attract members, donors, and clergy on the basis of voluntary assent; the state would not and could not force anyone to be baptized, belong to a parish, or participate in public worship services. But the hardship to churches was not as great as it might have seemed since most of the denominations in the new nation were of English descent and in the Old World had been religious dissenters. In other words, with the exception of Congregationalists in Massachusetts and Connecticut, Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, and Quakers had ever since their arrival in the New World been dependent upon a voluntary principle of religious association. Without the assistance of the state, most Protestants in the British colonies in North America needed to generate their own support, recruit new members and hold on to them, and find and train worthy church officers. In this respect, the reality of religious disestablishment that came with the American nation was not a complete shock to the way that many Anglo-American Protestants participated in the life of the church.

What was new with the American experiment in religious liberty (and implicitly in religious diversity) was the rationale used by both secularists and the devout for this new arrangement of religion and public life. For the former, such as Thomas Jefferson (a theist whose religious views were uniquely heterodox) and James Madison (a deist with great respect for historic Christianity), faith was such a delicate part of human life that entanglement with the state was sure to crush it. In other words, the instruments of statecraft were far too crude to regulate or oversee faith in all of its personal and affective dimensions. Government and law were inherently coercive, but for religion to be genuine it needed to spring freely from the human spirit. According to Madison, who studied with the Presbyterian John Witherspoon at the College of New Jersey (later Princeton University), religion would actually benefit from the loss of government support. This Enlightenment understanding of Christianity was not too distant from one commonly used by Baptists and Presbyterians in New England and Virginia, the two sites of the most entrenched religious establishment

(Presbyterian arguments were strong in Virginia, nonexistent in New England). Here the argument involved the notion that governments and their religious establishments sanctioned a formal or nominal version of Christianity, one that was merely external or civil but not personal and genuine. As Sidney E. Mead aptly puts it, “During the eighteenth century rationalists [i.e., secularists] and pietists [i.e., the devout] could easily combine forces on the practical and legal issue of religious freedom against the defenders of Establishment who took the traditional view of the matter.”²

Perhaps the most significant consequence of the American Revolution was its hidden and ironic religious agenda. The First Amendment makes the United States government (specifically Congress) a neutral party in matters of faith. But unintentionally the disestablishment of religion gave the upper hand to informal expressions of Christianity over formal ones. The most obvious example of this unexpected support for religious informality was the growth of Protestant denominations for whom seminary training, ecclesiastical protocol, and prayer books were signs of bad faith—namely, Baptists and Methodists. In the nineteenth century, these two denominations outgrew Congregationalists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Lutherans at an unprecedented rate, prompting one American historian to claim that evangelicalism was *the* religious establishment of the new nation.³ What accounted for the expansion of these denominations was the reliance upon the techniques of revival, from fairly routine practices of itinerancy to more novel examples such as Finney’s new measures, among which were the anxious bench, a seat designed specifically to intensify (some said manipulate) the experience of guilt and heighten the need for faith and repentance. Equally important to the success of these revivalists was the conception of genuine religion that undergirded America’s founding principles. For those who promoted revivals, true faith was ultimately a question of the heart, not something that depended upon religious formalities—whether matters of doctrine, church government, or worship. By assuming that religion flourished most when free from the oversight and nurture of government, the American founders, although aiming to free the state from faith, implicitly paved the way for the advance of heartfelt faith, while frowning

on those forms of religion for which external expressions and practices were crucial.

This is not to suggest that the rationale behind the disestablishment of religion was inherently opposed to Christian communions for whom word and sacrament were central in their self-understanding and practice. The point instead is that the American settlement of church-state relations gave greater plausibility to religious informality, thereby granting an advantage to forms of faith with fewer formal constraints. By making religion unofficial, Christianity became disentangled from notions about ministerial office, corporate practices and ceremonies, and formal teachings of creeds and catechisms. In other words, with religious disestablishment came a host of unofficial forms of faith, with the revivalist varieties of Protestantism taking the early lead in the new nation. Consequently, the new environment in which all churches competed on an even playing field for congregants, support, and leaders generated statistics of church growth—both in the number of denominations and in the numbers of religious adherents. The religious free market of the United States also privileged a specific kind of piety. This publicly plausible faith was spontaneous, informal, and enthusiastic because the logic behind the idea of religious liberty presumed that religion flourished when freed from formal constraints.

Of course, revivalism and its democratic and informal manner of piety was not new to the United States. The First Great Awakening of the 1740s had achieved widespread support from various Protestant communions thanks in part to the leadership and notoriety of the likes of George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards. Religion of the heart or faith that plumbed the affections was thus a religious reality in the British colonies before they gained independence to form a new nation. What was different about revivalism during the Second Great Awakening (i.e., the 1820s and 1830s) in contrast to that of the First Great Awakening was that the older ecclesiastical establishments could no longer mount any form of suppression. In the new environment of religious freedom, churches would have to attract support and membership, and revivalism proved to be especially effective in doing so. In addition, the democratic or populist character of religion prompted a severe reduction in clerical status. If faith was a matter of the heart, a

question of the individual's own experience and appropriation of Christianity, and so dependent on the mysterious workings of the Holy Spirit, ministers and church officers were merely supplemental. They might be useful at certain occasions and could sometimes provide worthwhile assistance. But the real action in American religion was among the people and the efforts to corral them into a cohesive religious public, not within the often stuffy walls of the church, where ministers held sway.

Any number of scholars have studied the effects of this reorientation of American Protestantism during the first half of the nineteenth century. The work of Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll is especially fruitful. Hatch's award-winning *Democratization of American Christianity* (1989) examines precisely the war for independence within the churches in which the laity achieved a coup for popular sovereignty in religious matters. Between 1780 and 1830, he argues, American Protestantism emerged with a peculiarly democratic and egalitarian ethos. "Many humble Christians," Hatch writes, "began to redeem a dual legacy. They yoked strenuous demands for revivals, in the name of George Whitefield, with calls for the expansion of popular sovereignty, in the name of the Revolution."⁴ This democratic mix in turn toppled centuries-old order within the churches. Hatch demonstrates, first, how the new form of Christianity liberated the people from the oversight of clergy and the theological norms of creeds or confessions and, second, how this religious revolution took the spiritual insights and longings of the laity at face value, imbuing them with a worth and significance previously unimagined in settings dominated by ministers and the creedal statements to which they subscribed. Finally, the ideals of democracy and equality among Christians generated any number of utopian and millennial dreams of establishing heaven on earth. Although these changes yielded impressive statistics—more people professed faith than had done so during the colonial era—they fundamentally altered the character of Protestantism. No longer a faith led by ministers, priests, or pastors, it had become a religion dependent upon the consent of church members.

Where Hatch observes the outworking of American political ideals in the relations between ministers and laity, Noll sees similar results

in the way that American Protestant ministers and theologians conducted the enterprise of theology. In *America's God* (2003), he argues that the transformation of American Protestant doctrine, owing to the influence of the political views that triumphed in the American Revolution, fundamentally altered the course of Protestantism. "It is not an exaggeration," he writes, "to claim that this nineteenth-century Protestant evangelicalism differed from the religion of the Protestant Reformation as much as sixteenth-century Reformation Protestantism differed from the Roman Catholic theology from which it emerged."⁵ This new brand of theological reflection combined older Protestant convictions about the authority of Scripture with republican or Whig political ideals about the good society. The result was a theological orientation that "shared both a mistrust of intellectual authorities inherited from previous generations and a belief that true knowledge arose from the use of one's own senses." Americans thus assumed that "people had to think for themselves in order to know science, morality, economics, politics and especially theology."⁶ Noll concludes that this outlook was responsible for giving Protestant theology a distinctly American accent. Most ministers and theologians continued to study questions that had animated their predecessors, such as the nature of sin, the work of Christ, and the duties of faith. But because of the imperative of independent thinking, the answers to such questions echoed less the classic utterances of Christian truth and sounded more like the idiom of American public officials.

But the Americanization of Protestantism in the United States did more than recast theological discourse or establish a new relationship between clergy and laity. These were clearly important factors that accompanied the changes that Nevin witnessed and tried to resist. But arguably the more significant alteration was one in which clergy and the services they performed were no longer considered central to the Christian life. The shift toward a democratic or informal Christianity, nurtured by revival and revolution, turned American Protestants' piety from forms and routines oriented around the church and the ministry of its officers to religious practices geared toward the experience of the individual, the reformist activities of voluntary associations, and small groups of zealous converts. Some who have written on Nevin

assumed that this change was much older, starting with the introspective and arduous piety of the Puritans. But in fact Puritan piety, along with the devotion of the major branches of the Protestant Reformation (i.e., Lutherans, Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Reformed), was distinct from the revival-inspired faith that became the dominant form of Protestantism in the United States during the first half of the nineteenth. Noll well describes the difference between Puritanism⁷ and evangelical Protestantism:

Although Puritans stood against Catholic and Anglican formalism, salvation for the Puritans was still mediated by institutions—family, church, covenanted society; in evangelicalism (at least in American forms), salvation was in principle unmediated except by the written Word of God. Puritans protested against nominal ecclesiastical life, but they still treated institutions of church and society as given; American evangelicals created their own communities, at first ecclesiastical, then voluntary. Puritans accepted authority from designated leaders; American evangelicals looked to authority from charismatic, self-selected leaders. Puritans fenced in enthusiasm with formal learning, respect for confessions, and deference to traditional interpretations of Scripture; American evangelicals fenced in enthusiasm with self-selected leaders, individualistic Bible reading, local grassroots organizations, and intuitively persuasive reason.⁸

In effect, American Protestantism entered a new phase during Nevin's lifetime. It is not an overstatement or caricature to say that, no longer regulated by the state and no longer administered by ordained officers, Protestant Christianity in the United States became a religion of the people, by the people, and for the people.

One way to illustrate the transformation of American Protestantism is to look at the difficulties faced by communions for whom clergy and church life were central, namely, the Lutherans and Episcopalians. The American Lutheran controversy took place during the 1840s and 1850s, and it concerned whether the ministry and witness of Lutheranism in the New World could legitimately accommodate the newer forms of Protestantism emanating from the Second Great Awakening. On the one side stood Americanizers such as Samuel Schmucker,

who taught at Gettysburg Seminary and whose book *The American Lutheran Church* (1851) stripped down Lutheran teaching and practice to make it conform to the more generic form of Protestantism promoted by revivals. Schmucker advocated the development of a Lutheran Church with an American character, and this included a communion in which the importance of sacraments, creeds, and clergy diminished considerably. One of Schmucker's chief opponents was William Julius Mann, born in Germany and pastor of one of American Lutheranism's oldest congregations in Philadelphia after his emigration to the United States. Instead of adapting Lutheran teaching and practice to the most popular forms of American Protestantism, Mann insisted upon the importance of Lutheran confessions, sacramental teaching, formal worship, and the office of minister. In the context of the 1840s and 1850s, when immigration patterns brought to the United States large numbers of Roman Catholics, the confessional Lutheran defense of the church and its ministry sounded to some revivalist Protestants like Romanism. But Mann and other conservative Lutherans believed and argued that Roman Catholic views of the church or revivalist distrust of official or churchly Christianity were not the only options. In between Rome's emphasis upon apostolic succession and the Great Awakening's altar call rested historic Protestantism's delicate balance of the church as God's ordained means of salvation.

Similar tensions between a churchly regard for creed, sacrament, and church office and a utilitarian search for effective methods to win large numbers of converts plagued the Episcopal Church in the United States. For the New World descendants of the Church of England, the danger that evangelical revivalism presented had more to do with church order and polity than with sacraments and creed, as in the case of Lutherans. In addition, fewer ties existed between revivalism and Episcopalianism, thanks to the formation of the Methodist Church, which drew away many pro-revival Protestants formerly in the Episcopal Church. For these reasons the question of Episcopalian identity in the mid-nineteenth century did not take on the proportions of a controversy. Even so, the emergence of revivalism and a low-church evangelical party in the Episcopal Church did raise the issue of Episcopalian

essentials. In this context, what Robert Bruce Mullin calls the Hobartian synthesis became the position of a high-church party that challenged efforts to conform Episcopalianism to American (read: evangelical) realities. Named after New York Bishop John Henry Hobart, the Episcopal high-church outlook placed great emphasis upon the mediated character of the Christian faith and as such on the necessity of the church and its ministry. According to Mullin, this high-church position was characterized by the attempt to locate the reality of redemption not in the Christian state, as many evangelicals did, but in the “church as a visible society, ‘made by Divine appointment the regular and ordinary channel by which the blessing of mercy, and grace, and eternal life, in Jesus Christ, are conveyed to a fallen world.’”⁹ Like confessional Lutherans, high-church Episcopalians held out for a self-understanding that stressed the particular features of their Protestant tradition as opposed to the evangelical tendency to submerge historic Protestant differences for the sake of greater influence and efficiency. For those who followed the Hobartian synthesis, the Episcopal Church, because of its theology but especially its polity, “was an alternative to evangelical theology and culture and not part of it.”¹⁰

In the second fifty years of the United States’ existence, then, Protestantism faced a significant crisis of identity. On the one hand, a new form of Protestantism emerged that not simply adapted the faith to American realities but that also saw the new society as affording a tremendous opportunity for evangelism and mission. For neo-Protestants, revival and the altar call were symbols of the new form of faith. Accordingly, the appeal of revival was to rational autonomous individuals who could not simply vote for local and federal politicians but also choose for themselves whether to accept Christ. In contrast stood paleo-Protestants, such as the high-church Episcopalians and confessional Lutherans, who insisted on maintaining Protestantism’s older ways and habits. For them creed, ecclesiastical office, and sacrament were symbols of an older and truer form of faith that depended less on the sovereignty of individual choice than on patterns of inheritance and nurture that embodied and shaped church members up in the faith. The trouble facing paleo-Protestants, however, was the very significant change from religious establishment to

free-church system. Now that the people were sovereign politically, and so religiously sovereign as well, would they choose the paleo-Protestant ways? Could an older form of Protestantism persist without the patronage of the state, especially if its leaders could not secure the interest and support of the people?

Presbyterians and Reformed Christians did not escape these difficulties, and they also manifested a similar turn to the past for sustenance and guidance. One example is the case of the Old School Presbyterians, the branch of the mainstream Presbyterian Church that in 1837 broke with theological and parachurch developments trickling down to their communion from the Second Great Awakening. The Old School arguably exhibited a degree of theological reflection that has never been matched among Presbyterians in North America through the writings of figures such as Samuel Miller, Charles Hodge, Robert Louis Dabney, James Henley Thornwell, Benjamin Morgan Palmer, John L. Girardeau, and John B. Adger. They distinguished themselves for defending with great acumen the central tenets of Calvinist soteriology, the dignity of Reformed worship, and the wisdom of Presbyterian polity. What was not as evident in Old School Presbyterianism as it was in Nevin's corpus was an understanding of the mediated character of grace and of the church's centrality in dispensing the blessings of the gospel. To be sure, Old School Presbyterians could offer almost airtight exegesis for the special character of the minister's office or for the necessity of elders to church order. But less agile were these Presbyterians when it came to what might be called ecclesial Christianity or a sacramental view of the church.

Some blame Old School Presbyterian awkwardness with liturgical matters on the influence of Puritanism and its reaction against Anglicanism's formalism. Scottish Presbyterianism's liturgy and prayer books, however, might temper this argument. A better explanation for Old School Presbyterianism's reluctance to fall in line with high-church sentiments might be that these Presbyterians were heirs of New Side Presbyterianism, the colonial branch of the church that had favored revivalism and sought evidence of conversion experience for membership and ordination. Although the division among colonial Presbyterianism was healed in 1758, the terms on which both sides reunited

clearly favored the revivalist experimental piety that would eventually dominate nineteenth-century American Protestantism. As such, Old School Presbyterians were not as critical of revivals as Nevin came to be. For them, good revivals needed to be distinguished from the excesses of bad ones; the sheep of Whitefield needed to be separated from the goats of Finney. Old Schoolers believed that the revivals of the 1820s and 1830s were seriously flawed, but that revivalism per se could be a boon for serious Presbyterianism. Unlike Nevin, high-church Anglicans, and confessional Lutherans, then, the Old School did not regard the populist Christianity sweeping the United States after the Second Great Awakening as fundamentally at odds with the churchly forms of devotion practiced by the historic Protestant churches.

This contrast between Old School Presbyterianism and Nevin's own evaluation of American Protestantism highlights the significance of the man mainly responsible for the Mercersburg Theology. Nevin represents a Reformed version of high-church Protestantism. Two aspects of his understanding of the church were especially important. The first was his recognition that the official ministry of church officers through worship was crucial to Reformed devotion. Participation in the formal ministry and instruction of the church was not a luxury, something that could supplement activity in parachurch agencies or small groups of devout believers. Membership and participation in the elements of worship and adherence to church teaching were in fact measures of genuine piety. This conception of Reformed piety clearly ran against the grain of mainstream American Protestantism. But because of its antithetical character it produced one of the most forceful critiques ever written of Christianity assimilated to American tastes and customs. Second, Nevin's thinking about the importance and necessity of the church was significant because it yielded an interpretation of the Reformed tradition that accurately reflected Calvinism's churchly and liturgical character. Nevin's project was not one of trying to include the Reformed faith in some form of high-church movement because it was fashionable. If Nevin were simply interested in becoming high-church, he could have left the Reformed faith for other communions—and for a time in his life he considered this alternative. But Nevin's study of the Reformed tradition indicated that churchly and sacra-

mental concerns were not foreign to the Presbyterian or Reformed communions. What was odd, in his view, was a version of the Reformed faith in which questions of ecclesiology and worship had been jettisoned to fit better the sensibility of a popular and democratic Christianity taking hold in the United States. As such, Nevin became an effective critic not only of revivalism's subjective and individualistic faith but also of Reformed and Presbyterian expressions that minimized his tradition's inherently churchly outlook.

This work as critic turned out to be a difficult role to play. A man plagued throughout his life by dyspepsia, Nevin suffered constantly both physically and psychologically. His greatest years of anguish came after his most fruitful decade of theological reflection. After teaching at Western Seminary during the 1830s, he moved from Pittsburgh to Mercersburg to join the faculty of the German Reformed Church's seminary in that small Pennsylvania town. There he witnessed firsthand the oddities of the Second Great Awakening within his own congregation, an experience that prompted one of his most important works, a small pamphlet entitled *The Anxious Bench* (1843), in which he worked out the fundamental difference between church-based faith and revival-driven devotion. Nevin soon acquired help in his struggle to expound and defend the Reformed faith's churchly character when Philip Schaff joined him on the faculty at Mercersburg. Properly fortified, Nevin followed his critique of revivalism with *The Mystical Presence* (1846), a book that employed Calvin's own teaching and new currents in German philosophy to defend the real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. Nevin's tapping of historic Reformed wellsprings continued apace in 1847 with the *History and Genius of the Heidelberg Catechism*. His outpouring of writing on the church swelled with *The Anti-Christ; or, The Spirit of Sect and Schism* (1848), another critique of American Protestantism's novelty. Along the way Nevin continued to teach divinity at the seminary and moral philosophy at the German Reformed Church's Marshall College. The latter duties help to account for his many articles and essays on philosophical questions as well as the variety of articles he wrote for the *Mercersburg Review*.

The pace of activity during the 1840s and the controversy that ensued took a marked toll on Nevin. During the 1850s he retired from

his duties at both the seminary and the college. Part of the explanation was poor health. But Nevin's theological explorations had also generated spiritual afflictions. As a result, his literary output slackened, and Nevin would never resume his former productivity. During the 1860s he came out of retirement to teach and preside over Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster and to teach at the denomination's seminary across the street. His resumption of teaching and administration notwithstanding, the only notable literary achievement of the last thirty years of Nevin's life was *A Vindication of the Revised Liturgy* (1867), a book written to defend the work of the committee on which he had served to bring the German Reformed Church's worship into line with the churchly devotion for which he had argued during the 1840s. But the controversy in the denomination over those revisions indicated that Nevin's efforts had not been entirely successful. The case for a churchly brand of the Reformed faith had proved to be as unsettling for the German Reformed Church as Nevin's stomach was for him.

Assessing Nevin

In an essay on Charles Hodge's place in the history of ideas, University of Pennsylvania historian Bruce Kuklick concludes that the Princeton theologian has failed to interest intellectual historians because Hodge did not sufficiently "juxtapose the sacred texts of his tradition with his own life experience and the knowledge of his culture."¹¹ For Kuklick, Jonathan Edwards clearly meets this criterion, thus explaining the wide and ever-growing scholarly interest in the eighteenth-century revivalist-philosopher. Using roughly the same standard upon Nevin, religious historians generally evaluate the Mercersburg professor as a theologian who began to employ German philosophical and theological insights in what otherwise might have been a fairly dull intellectual task—namely, training Reformed ministers and serving an ethnic Protestant denomination. Hints of this approach come from Kuklick himself in his book *Churchmen and Philosophers*, where he asserts that the most significant piece of Nevin's legacy was his work in founding the *Mercersburg Review*, a journal that "gave

learned credibility to Hegelian theology.”¹² Kuklick well summarizes the standard treatment of Nevin: he was an intellectual innovator, breaking outside the predictable ranks of Scotch-Irish philosophy and the theological categories of Reformed Scholasticism.

To be sure, other assessments of Nevin have looked beyond questions of philosophical innovation to his contributions as a theologian and churchman. For instance, Sydney E. Ahlstrom contends that Nevin and Schaff “participated in one of the most significant movements of theological renewal and church reform in nineteenth-century America.”¹³ But in the Yale historian’s estimation, what made the Mercersburg Theology significant was its introduction of German ideas into American Protestantism, thus prompting Ahlstrom to call Nevin the “Romantic Church Reformer.” For James Hasting Nichols, a mainline Presbyterian church historian who often searched the history of American Christianity for a past to use against the rationalistic dogmatism that continued to bedevil his Presbyterian communion, Nevin’s “broad perspectives,” “interdenominational friendships,” and “passion for ecumenical unity” offered Protestantism in the United States an attractive alternative from the domination of British theology and philosophy. Nevin’s use of German thought particularly placed him in a “romantic current” that broke down “American intellectual provincialism” and opened “communications with the live currents of European theology.”¹⁴ In a similar fashion, historical theologian B. A. Gerrish sees in Nevin an American Protestant who wrestled more (and perhaps more attractively for Gerrish) with Friedrich Schleiermacher than with John Calvin. According to Gerrish, “for both Nevin and Schleiermacher, the church was not—as rationalism and sectarianism had come to suppose—a voluntary human association, but a divine organism, the locus of the continuing life of Christ.”¹⁵ The impressions left by many who have studied Nevin, then, is one of an intellectual ahead of the curve of American religious and philosophical development.

As accurate as interpretations are that stress Nevin’s innovative views, they slight his fundamental identity and contribution as a Reformed theologian. As such, he was constantly in dialogue with a doctrinal tradition begun by Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin, refined

in creedal and catechetical standards such as the Heidelberg Catechism and the Westminster Confession of Faith, and perpetuated in those communions formed by Nevin's own Scotch-Irish Presbyterians and the German Reformed in which he served for most of his distinguished career. In fact, most of his original insights were forged in the context of developments within his own denomination, from the rise of Finney's new measures in his local Mercersburg congregation to his rationale for the revised liturgy of the German Reformed Church. Even his use of German philosophy is hard to disconnect from his work as a churchman since part of what made German sources more attractive to him was the very present reality of the German-Americans with whom he lived and worked. To look to German intellectual life for insights was not necessarily a highbrow endeavor to form the cutting edge of American religious and philosophical thought; instead it was simply one of the intellectual tools at Nevin's disposal by virtue of his work for an ethnically German communion.

To be sure, Nevin's application of German philosophy to Reformed faith and practice in North America may have generated theological novelties such that his significance may appear to be more creative than conservative. Clearly, ministers in his own denomination thought this, as well as any number of his critics from other churches. Still, what is important to grasp about Nevin is his genuine contribution to American Protestantism generally and to the Reformed tradition specifically. For the former he identified the fissure dividing historic Protestantism from a novel form that was dominating religious life in the United States. For the Reformed world Nevin recovered the older Calvinist regard for the church as a mediator of divine grace. These were no small accomplishments, and exploring their emergence, development, and significance is the aim of this book.