

Incarnation and Sacrament

*The Eucharistic Controversy between Charles
Hodge and John Williamson Nevin*

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Williamson Nevin

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*For my mom and dad,
Elizabeth Bonomo and Jonathan G. Bonomo, Sr.*

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Preface

THIS BOOK is a revised and updated version of the Master's thesis I wrote as a Church history student at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, in 2008. It has as its subject a theological controversy which took place between two Reformed theologians in the United States during the middle of the nineteenth century on the doctrine of the Eucharist. As such, it is most immediately a study in American religious and intellectual history.

But the Eucharistic controversy between Charles Hodge and John Williamson Nevin is more than a purely academic exercise. Hodge and Nevin battled over issues that lie at the heart of Christian faith and piety—issues which have been a bone of contention in the universal Church for many, many centuries, such as: Why, exactly, did God become man? What bearing does the incarnation of Christ have on the redemption of the world? What is the relation between the divine and human natures in the one person of Jesus Christ? How are believers on earth truly united with the ascended Christ in heaven? Is Christ really present in the Lord's Supper? If so, then how is he made to be present? These are questions that most thoughtful Christians in every age of the Church have asked at one point or another. And it was these age-old questions that Charles Hodge and John W. Nevin sought to answer, and over which they came to vigorously contend.

Literature on the Mercersburg Theology has been on the rise in recent years. W. Bradford Littlejohn's excellent work, *The Mercersburg Theology and the Quest for Reformed Catholicity*, published in 2009, is one example of particular worth to which the current volume may prove complimentary, although this was not my original intention. I came to read Littlejohn's book shortly after Wipf and Stock had offered to publish my own thesis, and I was soon impressed by how similar our respective takes on the Mercersburg Theology are. Nevertheless, I trust that the publication of this present work is not a superfluous undertaking. While a good deal of the current literature on Mercersburg has a rather broad scope, this book offers a focused look at one episode in particular. It provides an analysis and assessment of the historical, philosophical, and theological aspects of the Eucharistic controversy between Charles Hodge and John W. Nevin, specifically. The interaction between these two nineteenth century Reformed theologians will, I hope, shed some light on the backgrounds of the sacramental theology (or lack thereof) held by American Christians of the general Reformed persuasion in the twenty-first century. As both Hodge and Nevin were two of the most important thinkers in the history of the American Church, we would do well to listen to their various insights and concerns on these vital matters.

I am regrettably persuaded, as John Nevin was in his own day, that American Protestants in general suffer from historical amnesia. We have a tendency to act in the present without considering the past, because we generally think of ourselves (even if we wouldn't put it in quite these terms) as those who have finally arrived at the point of having figured

it all out on our own. But we do not exist in a historical vacuum. We are greatly indebted to the insights and successes of those who have gone before us, and we have also been shaped by their faults and failures. We therefore neglect our past at our own peril.

Thus, it is my desire that this book would help to provide some illumination on the theological heritage of the Protestant churches in the United States, and in particular the Protestant churches of the Reformed tradition in the United States. The two great nineteenth century theologians who are the subject of this volume provide a mirror, so to speak, in which we might see a reflection of our own ecclesial faces. By looking attentively into their various idiosyncrasies and differences, we may attain greater understanding of who we are as a Church collectively, and also of who we are as particular churches which continue to be separated by many of the same issues Nevin and Hodge argued about a century and a half ago.

There are quite a few individuals who deserve thanks for their help along the way as I researched, pondered, wrote, and re-wrote this book—to be sure, many more than I have opportunity to acknowledge here. But the following people are those who have had their hands most immediately in whatever virtues it may have, though they are not in any way responsible for its remaining deficiencies. The encouragement and guidance of Gordon-Conwell professors Richard Lints, Gwenfair Walters Adams, and Garth M. Rossell was instrumental throughout the initial stages of my research on the thought of John W. Nevin and Philip Schaff, while John Jefferson Davis offered helpful comments during my thesis defense, and encouraged some important

revisions. Further, I wish to thank Dr. Gordon L. Isaac, my thesis advisor, for his initial encouragement to pursue my interest in the Eucharistic controversy between Nevin and Hodge specifically, and for the helpful direction he provided throughout the process of research and writing. The perspective gained during our various conversations while I was working through the issues between Nevin and Hodge was invaluable. In addition, thanks must go to Keith A. Mathison of Ligonier Academy, for reading the original thesis and encouraging me to pursue publication, as well as for his continued help along the way. And I would be remiss if I neglected to also mention the wonderful congregation of Calvary Presbyterian Church in Willow Grove, Pennsylvania—in particular pastors Richard Tyson and Gregg MacDougall—for their constant support, encouragement, and guidance. They have made the presence and love of Jesus Christ tangible to me week in and week out, thus ensuring that my undertaking of a work such as this would not merely be an exercise in intellectual abstraction. Finally, and most importantly, it is a joy to have the opportunity to thank my dear wife, Yvonne. As anyone well acquainted with us already knows, my every endeavor would be utterly hopeless without her wisdom, devotion, and support. This book is no exception.

Jonathan G. Bonomo, Jr.
Glenside, Pennsylvania
January 21, 2010

Introduction

THE NINETEENTH century was a period of dramatic theological development and change. The Reformation of the sixteenth century had given rise to various Protestant theological traditions that, with the passing of centuries, were developing, solidifying, and in some cases splintering. The philosophical movements that came to dominate the thought patterns of the modern world such as Enlightenment rationalism, German idealism, and Scottish Common Sense realism made their way into the life of the Christian church, thereby facilitating the development of corresponding theological systems. Examples of this may be seen in a wide range of movements, such as Friedrich Schleiermacher's theological system and the later mediating theology in Germany, the Oxford Movement in England, and the revitalization of Reformed scholasticism in Scotland and America.

One affect of this changing theological scene on the ecclesiastical shape of nineteenth century America was that it encouraged the establishment of competing theological schools and seminaries throughout the country. Consequently, as E. Brooks Holifield has noted, "as theology moved from the parishes to the seminaries, rivalries among the schools intensified theological disagreements."¹ Two of the most important among these competing seminaries by

1. Holifield, *Theology in America*, 371.

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the middle of the nineteenth century were Princeton, the Presbyterian seminary in New Jersey, and Mercersburg, the German Reformed seminary in Pennsylvania.²

Charles Hodge (1797–1878) and John Williamson Nevin (1803–86) are the two theologians who are most representative of the theology produced at these two institutions (Hodge at Princeton and Nevin at Mercersburg). They were among the most brilliant theological lights to labor in the United States in the nineteenth century. Both were born on American soil, both were reared in old school Presbyterian homes, and both were heirs and advocates of the Reformed tradition. Nevertheless, as their thought developed, they came to differ dramatically in a number of important ways, not the least of these being the topics of Christology, soteriology, and their understanding of the nature and significance of the Church and the sacraments. And beneath all of their particular differences there existed between Hodge and Nevin a fundamental variance at the level of foundational philosophical principles and overall theological method.

The most interesting and revealing of the numerous theological conflicts that took place between these two theologians was occasioned by a literary debate over the

2. Princeton was by far more important than Mercersburg in the nineteenth century with regard to its influence in terms of numbers as well as the respect it garnered from various quarters. However, Mercersburg must also be considered one of the most important theological schools of the nineteenth century because of the unique and profound theological system that was produced there by John Nevin, along with his Swiss-born colleague, Philip Schaff. Through their works, the theology of Mercersburg continues to captivate and instruct the thinking of many theological students to the present day.

doctrine of the Reformed Church on the Lord's Supper. This particular controversy began with the publication in 1846 of John W. Nevin's masterful historical-theological work on the Eucharist, entitled *The Mystical Presence: A Vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist*. And the debate continued as an ongoing literary conflict throughout subsequent years in a variety of publications.

It is the purpose of the present work to offer a historical and theological analysis and assessment of this controversy. In the process, I hope to demonstrate how the diverging theological presuppositions held by these two great Reformed theologians dramatically affected their respective theological systems and led them toward differing conceptions of the person and work of Jesus Christ, his relation to the world in general and his people in particular, the Church and the sacraments, and even the nature of Christianity itself.

Chapter one sets the stage of the controversy by offering an overview of the central tenets of the Princeton Theology of Charles Hodge and the Mercersburg Theology of John Williamson Nevin. This charting out of the general theological trajectories of these two divergent theological systems will provide the historical-theological context for the controversy with which we are primarily concerned.

Chapter two consists of a close analysis of the Eucharistic controversy proper. Beginning with Nevin's *Mystical Presence*, followed by Hodge's critique of this work, and concluding with Nevin's rebuttal of Hodge, we will look at the particular historical and theological arguments provided by Nevin and Hodge in support of their

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different interpretations of the Reformed doctrine of the Lord's Supper.

The third chapter seeks to show how the different conceptions of Hodge and Nevin on the person and work of Christ conditioned the place which the doctrine of the Eucharist held in their respective understandings of the Christian faith. To do this we go back through Nevin's *Mystical Presence*, Hodge's review, and Nevin's response, narrowing the lens this time around on their Christology, specifically.

The fourth and final chapter provides a general evaluation of the controversy in its overarching historical, philosophical, and theological contours. Pulling the lens back, we will revisit the overall theological systems of Princeton and Mercersburg in light of the Eucharistic controversy. After this, some concluding remarks about the controversy as a whole and its importance will be offered.