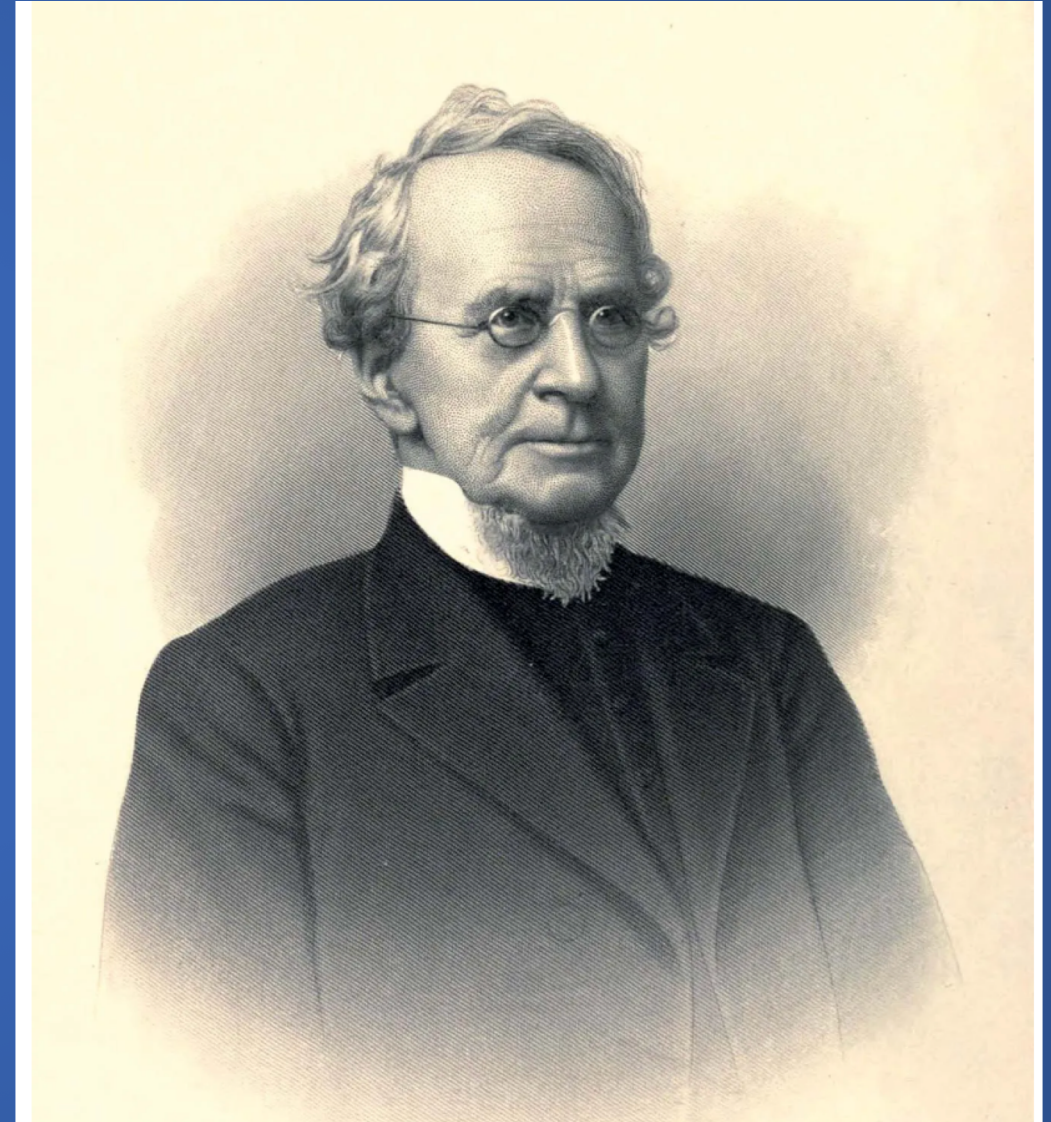


HISTORICAL FOUNDATION

John Williamson Nevin
19th-century American theologian

The Anxious Bench, 1843 (2nd ed., 1844)
The Mystical Presence, 1846

The first book was written as a response to the revivals and “New Measures” of the 19th century; the second as a recovery of the ancient piety of the 16th century.



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Biographical Sketch

- Nevin was raised as a Scotch-Irish Presbyterian in Pennsylvania, brought up on the Westminster Confession of Faith and a high regard for Word and sacrament. He studied at Princeton Theological Seminary and was a professor at Princeton (during Hodge's leave of absence in 1826-1828), Western Seminary (Pittsburg, 1830-1840), and the German Reformed Theological Seminary located in Mercersburg (1840-1851). He also served in a "provisional" manner at Franklin and Marshall colleges in Mercersburg (1866-1876) and contributed to the liturgical reforms for a new order of worship for the German Reformed Church (published in 1866). He was an ordained minister in both the Presbyterian church and in the German Reformed Church.
- Nevin's desire for worship renewal and a robust sacramental practice in the nineteenth century is relevant for Reformed and evangelical churches today.

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Shift from the Presbyterian to the German Reformed Church

- Though Nevin was raised in a Presbyterian home and studied and taught at Princeton Theological Seminary, throughout the 1830s he found himself becoming more resonate with the German Reformed Church.
- On May 20, 1840, Nevin was inducted as the chairman of theology at the German Reformed Theological Seminary and College in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania; shortly after, he also joined the denomination.

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Battling on Two Fronts

- In this context, Nevin found himself “battling on two fronts.” On the one hand, he was fighting for the “traditional faith” of the Reformed church and on the other hand, he was fighting against the “trite and fickle faith” of the revivalist movement. Nevin was troubled by the state of American theology.

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The Anxious Bench (1843)

- In 1843, in his book *The Anxious Bench*, Nevin describes the changes that were taking place as a result of the “New Measures” and states that they “involve consequences that no man can properly calculate. From various causes, a new feeling is at work everywhere on the subject of religion. As usual, the old struggles to maintain itself in opposition to the new, and a strong tendency to become extreme is created on both sides.” (*The Anxious Bench*, 6)

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Earnest Piety and Ancient Church Practices

- Nevin was sensitive to the ecclesial changes around him and was struggling to keep the church on a healthy course. He writes, “In these circumstances, it has not been easy for the friends of earnest piety always in the regular churches, to abide by the ancient landmarks of truth and order.”
(The Anxious Bench, 7)

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The System of the *Bench* and the System of the *Catechism*

- Nevin wrote a 2nd edition of *The Anxious Bench* that was published a year later in 1844. In this edition he adds a seventh chapter and expounds upon the “system of the Catechism” which is opposite from the “system of the Bench.” In this chapter he highlights the depth and extent of original sin; the place of the family; and how believers are nurtured organically in the home and in “the bosom of the Church.” (*The Anxious Bench*, 2nd ed., 129-135).
- *Excerpts from Hart (pgs. 98-99)*

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Lack of a Robust Sacramental Practice and a Bent Towards Rationalism

- Nevin laments how the state of Protestantism in his day (including its sacramental practice) was profoundly different from its Reformed heritage in the sixteenth century. Commenting on mid-nineteenth century practices, Nevin describes the strong and pervasive “tendency to undervalue all that is sacramental.” (*The Mystical Presence*, 122)
- He also describes the changes within the Reformed Church as a dismissal of traditional church practices and a bent towards rationalism.

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The Reformers' View of the Lord's Supper and Our Union with Christ

- According to Nevin, the sixteenth-century Reformers believed there was a vital relationship between the Lord's Supper and our union with Christ. The sixteenth-century, Calvinistic view is “not simply an occasion, by which the soul of the believer may be excited to pious feelings and desires; but it embodies the actual presence of the grace it represents in its own constitution; and this grace is not simply the promise of God on which we are encouraged to rely, but the very life of the Lord Jesus Christ himself.” (*The Mystical Presence*, 82)
- According to Nevin, the eucharistic theology of his day did not allow for a real participation in the life of Christ, only cognitive thoughts and heart-felt emotions.

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The Mystical Presence (1846)

- Against the backdrop of revivalism, New Measures, and the waning of traditional piety in Protestantism, Nevin wrote *The Mystical Presence*. Through it, he sought to recover a correct view of the Lord's Supper by going back to the writings of John Calvin and the catechisms and confessions of the sixteenth century.

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Calvin on the Lord's Supper

“Christ beautifully expresses the whole matter in these words: ‘The bread which I shall give you is my flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world’ (John 6:51). By these words he doubtless means that his body will to us be as bread for the spiritual life of the soul, for it was to be made subject to death for our salvation; moreover, that it is offered to us to eat, when it makes us sharers in him by faith.” (*Institutes*, IV.xvii.5)

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Calvin on the Lord's Supper

“Moreover, I am not satisfied with those persons who, recognizing that we have some communion with Christ, when they would show what it is, make us partakers of the Spirit only, omitting mention of his flesh and blood. As though all these things were said in vain: that his flesh is truly food, that his blood is truly drink (John 6:55); that none have life except those who eat his flesh and drink his blood (John 6:53); and other passages pertaining to the same thing... Rather, I urge my readers not to confine their mental interest within these too narrow limits, but to strive to rise much higher than I can lead them... nothing remains but to break forth in wonder at this mystery, which plainly neither the mind is able to conceive nor the tongue to express.” (*Institutes*, IV.xvii.7)

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Calvin on the Lord's Supper

“Now here we ought to guard against two faults. First, we should not, by too little regard for the signs, divorce them from their mysteries, to which they are so to speak attached. Secondly, we should not, by extolling them immoderately, seem to obscure somewhat the mysteries themselves.”
(Institutes, IV.xvii.5)

Calvin is cautioning us to guard against rationalism, on the one hand, and ritualism, on the other hand.

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Nevin's Interpretation of Calvin's View

“Thus we have the doctrine defined and circumscribed on both sides; with proper distinction from all that may be considered a tendency to Rationalism in one direction, and from all that may be counted a tendency to Romanism in the other. It allows the *presence* of Christ's person in the sacrament, including even his flesh and blood... A *spiritual* real presence, in opposition to the idea that Christ's body is in the elements in a local or corporal manner... The body of Christ is in heaven, the believer on earth; but by the power of the Holy Ghost, nevertheless, so that in the sacramental act, while the outward symbols are received in an outward way, the very body and blood of Christ are at the same time inwardly and supernaturally communicated to the worthy receiver, for the real nourishment of his new life.” (*The Mystical Presence*, 65-67)

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Nevin's Interpretation of Calvin's View

“Two points in particular in the theory now exhibited, require to be held clearly in view. The first is, that the sacrament is made to carry with it an *objective* force, so far as its principal design is conceived. It is not simply suggestive, commemorative, or representational. It is not a sign, a picture, deriving its significance from the mind of the beholder... The signs are bound to what they represent, not subjectively simply in the thought of the worshipper, but objectively, by the force of a divine appointment. The union indeed is not natural but sacramental.” (*The Mystical Presence*, 67-68)

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Nevin's Summary of Calvin's View (*The Mystical Presence*, 63-69)

- It excludes entirely the figment of *transubstantiation*.
- It excludes *consubstantiation*.
- The participation of Christ's flesh and blood in the Lord's Supper is *spiritual* only, and in no sense corporal. His body is not in the elements, but remains constantly in heaven, according to the Scriptures.
- The manducation (eating) of Christ's body is not oral, but only by faith.
- The sacrament is for believers only.
- The sacrament is not merely commemorative, but contains an "objective force." Thus, "the grace goes inseparably along with the signs."

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Questions, thoughts, or comments so far?

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The Belgic Confession (Article 35)

- To represent to us this spiritual and heavenly bread Christ has instituted an earthly and visible bread as the sacrament of his body and wine as the sacrament of his blood. He did this to testify to us that just as truly as we take and hold the sacraments in our hands and eat and drink it in our mouths, by which our life is then sustained, so truly we receive into our souls for our spiritual life, the true body and true blood of Christ, our only Savior. We receive these by faith, which is the hand and mouth of our souls.
- Now it is certain that Jesus Christ did not prescribe his sacraments for us in vain, since he works in us all he represents by these holy signs, although the manner in which he does it goes beyond our understanding and is incomprehensible to us, just as the operation of God's Spirit is hidden and incomprehensible.

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Heidelberg Catechism (Q. 75)

- *How does the Lord's Supper remind you and assure you that you share in Christ's one sacrifice on the cross and in all his gifts?*
- In this way: Christ has commanded me and all believers to eat this broken bread and to drink this cup. With this command he gave this promise:

First, as surely as I see with my eyes the bread of the Lord broken for me and the cup given to me, so surely his body was offered and broken for me and his blood poured out for me on the cross.

Second, as surely as I receive from the hand of the one who serves, and taste with my mouth the bread and cup of the Lord, given me as sure signs of Christ's body and blood, so surely he nourishes and refreshes my soul for eternal life with his crucified body and poured-out blood.

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Heidelberg Catechism (Q. 76)

- *What does it mean to eat the crucified body of Christ and to drink his poured-out blood?*
- It means to accept with a believing heart the entire suffering and death of Christ and by believing to receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

But it means more. Through the Holy Spirit, who lives both in Christ and in us, we are united more and more to Christ's blessed body. And so, although he is in heaven and we are on earth, we are flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone (1 Cor. 6:15-17; Eph. 5:29-30; 1 John 4:13). And we forever live on and are governed by one Spirit, as members of our body are by one soul.

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Nevin's Summary of the Heidelberg Catechism

- Nevin states that it has “all the characteristic positions and distinctions of Calvin’s theory... it affirms a real communion with Christ’s flesh and blood; allows the fact; but refuses to be bound by the Lutheran determination of the mode... not for the mouth, but only for faith... not for unbelievers but for believers only.” (*The Mystical Presence*, 102)
- Thus, according to Nevin, the Heidelberg Catechism is clearly in line with Calvin’s teaching and is a good representation of sixteenth-century sacramental theology.

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Westminster Confession of Faith (Chapter 29.7)

- Worthy receivers, physically partaking of the visible substances of this sacrament, do then also by faith actually and in fact, but not physically or bodily, spiritually receive and feed on Christ crucified and on all the benefits of His death. The body and blood of Christ are not then bodily or physically in, with, or under the bread and wine, but they are actually spiritually present to the faith of believers in the administration of this sacrament, just as the bread and wine are physically present.

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The Westminster Larger Catechism (Q. 168)

- *What is the Lord's Supper?*
- The Lord's Supper is a sacrament of the New Testament, wherein, by giving and receiving bread and wine according to the appointment of Jesus Christ, his death is showed forth; and they that worthily communicate feed upon his body and blood, to their spiritual nourishment and growth in grace; have their union and communion with him confirmed; testify and renew their thankfulness, and engagement to God, and their mutual love and fellowship each with other, as members of the same mystical body.

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The Westminster Larger Catechism (Q. 170)

- *How do they that worthily communicate in the Lord's Supper feed upon the body and blood of Christ therein?*
- As the body and blood of Christ are not corporally or carnally present in, with, or under the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper, and yet are spiritually present to the faith of the receiver, no less truly and really than the elements themselves are to their outward senses; so they that worthily communicate in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, do therein feed upon the body and blood of Christ, not after a corporal and carnal, but in a spiritual manner; yet truly and really, while by faith they receive and apply unto themselves Christ crucified, and all the benefits of his death.

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Nevin's Summary of the Westminster Confession

“This belongs to the middle of the seventeenth century. It has a different character in some respects, from that which distinguishes the older confessions of the Reformed Church; the result, at least in part, of the Puritanic principle, under whose influence, in some measure, it was formed.”

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Contrasting 16th Century Sacramental Theology with Modern Puritanism

- After evaluating the Puritan sacramental theology and practice of the nineteenth century, Nevin offers five themes that reflect the Reformed, Calvinistic view of the Lord's Supper in the sixteenth century:
 - (1) Its powerful place in worship
 - (2) The sense of mystery in the sacrament
 - (3) The “objective force” of the sacrament
 - (4) Our real participation in the person of Christ
 - (5) A believer's communion with the “Word made flesh.”
- These five themes form the heart of Nevin's sacramental belief and, to him, contrast significantly with the sacramental theology of his time. For Nevin, robust sacramental practice is what truly nourishes and feeds God's people and strengthens our union with Christ.

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Our Union with Christ

- In his chapter, “The Mystical Union,” Nevin describes our union with Christ and recalls the illustration of the vine and the branches (John 15:1-8). He writes, “No more apt or beautiful illustration of this union between Christ and the Church can be imagined than that which he has himself furnished, in the allegory of the vine and its branches.” (*The Mystical Presence*, 281)
- He understands this relationship to be organic, with the branches in vital dependence upon the vine.

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Our Union with Christ

- Nevin describes how our life in Christ is not merely of a moral nature, but of a real participation in the life Christ. He writes, “The new human life in Christ reaches over, as a central uncompounded force, *by the Spirit*, into the persons of Christ’s people.” (*The Mystical Presence*, 283)
- For Nevin, union with Christ is a work of the Spirit, transforming the whole person. Nevin also notes the important relationship between John 6 and the Lord’s Supper.

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John 6 and the Lord's Supper

- He agrees with Luther and Calvin that John 6 is not describing the Lord's Supper directly, but only how believers receive Christ in a spiritual way.
- Nonetheless, after quoting John 6:53-57, Nevin writes, "All must feel the close correspondence, that holds between what is here said and the terms afterwards employed in the institution of the Lord's Supper." (*The Mystical Presence*, 292)
- Nevin is articulating the profound connection between a spiritual and sacramental feeding on the body and blood of Christ, a thread throughout the whole book.

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John Williamson Nevin – *The Mystical Presence*

A few takeaways:

(1) Similar to Nevin, we find ourselves on two battlefronts: celebrating *ancient* practices with intelligibility and introducing *new* expressions with wisdom and discernment.

(2) In upholding and practicing a Reformed/Calvinistic view of the Lord's Supper, we have to guard against *rationalism* (mere mental apprehension) on the one hand and *ritualism* (too Anglican/Catholic) on the other.

(3) We can be Reformed and still embrace the mystery associated with the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

(4) There is a vital connection between the Lord's Supper and our union with Christ.