

John Williamson Nevin on the Atonement: How the Eucharist Brings Atonement Home
Through Union

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Some theologians find the atonement theology of American “high church Calvinist,” John Williamson Nevin (1803-1886), deficient.¹ This charge arose in debates with Charles Hodge (1797-1878) over the theology of the Lord’s Supper. Nevin defended Calvin and the Reformed tradition’s sacramental understanding of the Supper; Hodge argued for a basically Zwinglian memorialist position.² As both men detailed their understandings of the eucharist, the argument drew in the entirety of their respective theologies.³ Each one’s understanding of communion was ultimately based on what he considered to be the centre of Christian faith: the satisfaction theory of the atonement for Hodge, and the incarnation for Nevin.⁴ Nevin characterizes the conflict: “What [Hodge] is offended with is the conception of sacramental religion, as distinguished from a religion of mere individual spirituality....Justification by faith and sacramental grace are, in his view, incompatible conceptions.”⁵

Because Nevin disagreed that the satisfaction theory of the atonement was the central principle of the Christian faith, Hodge and others have judged his theology of the atonement, and by implication his entire theological system, as dangerously deficient if not outright heretical. However, Nevin’s theology of the atonement must be considered within his overarching

¹ D. G. Hart, *John Williamson Nevin: High Church Calvinist* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2005), “high church Calvinist” is Hart’s description.

² W. Bradford Littlejohn, *The Mercersburg Theology and the Quest for Reformed Catholicity* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2009), 40-55. See John Williamson Nevin, *The Mystical Presence and The Doctrine of the Reformed Church on the Lord’s Supper*, Linden J. DeBie, ed. (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 40-91 for historical evidence of Reformed position.

³ Littlejohn, *Mercersburg Theology*, 56-87.

⁴ B.A. Gerrish, *Thinking with the Church: Essays in Historical Theology* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2010), 183 and 201 respectively.

⁵ Linden J. DeBie, *Speculative Theology and Common-Sense Religion: Mercersburg and the Conservative Roots of American Religion* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2008), 88.

incarnational theology. His critique of the American Protestantism of his day was essentially a critique of its insufficient doctrine of the incarnation and the believer's union with Christ, which resulted in an unbalanced atonement theology, and erroneous views of the church and sacraments. Nevin's own doctrine of the atonement must be understood in light of his efforts to correct the severely deficient Christology, and through it the ecclesiology and sacramentology, of his interlocutors rather than viewed as a systematic, comprehensive and nuanced statement of everything he believed on the atonement. In this light, Nevin's theology of atonement, even if not articulated exhaustively, may be understood as orthodox and broadly Reformed. Because of the centrality of the incarnation and union with Christ for his entire theology, it is impossible to isolate the atonement from everything else Nevin discusses.⁶ After outlining Nevin's incarnation-centric theology for context, I will examine some of his specific statements on the atonement. We will discover that Nevin sought to restore the atonement to its proper place in the economy of redemption and the life of the church by grounding it upon the enduring incarnate God-man, Jesus Christ, and the church's union with him. We will further see that Nevin views the eucharist as the main (though not only) place where the incarnate Christ actualizes his atoning work in the church through communication of his own life and person.

John Williamson Nevin's views of the atonement must be considered within his doctrine of the incarnation of Christ, the center and ground of his entire theology. “*The Word become flesh!*” In this simple, but sublime enunciation,” Nevin declares, “we have the whole gospel comprehended in a word.... The incarnation is the key that unlocks the sense of all God's

⁶ Christianity is a “life,” not a “doctrinal system”; Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 186-87.

revelations.”⁷ The incarnation is “the principle” and “true measure and test” of Christianity, the “fact of all facts” and the “centre and hinge of all history.”⁸ For Nevin, all Christian theology is a subset of Christology; every aspect of theology must be related to the hypostatic union of the eternal Logos and humanity in the person of Christ. It is the “absolute *unity of the divine and the human in his person*” which is the “last ground of Christianity” and to which it owes “its distinctive character.”⁹

Nevin recognized in American Protestantism a “failure to afford the incarnation its proper place as the nexus for...all genuine Christian theology.”¹⁰ Indeed, this was the spirit of Antichrist, causing all kinds of sectarian divisions in the American church.¹¹ He further discerned that “behind all doctrinal aberrations and heresies in the history of the Christian Church is a failure to reckon fully with the all-embracing reality of God assuming flesh in and as Jesus Christ.”¹² “Christ’s embodiment” has “massive *mediatorial and redemptive implications*”¹³ to which neither the revivalist Arminian theology of Charles Finney, nor the moralism of New England Calvinism, nor the scholastic federal Calvinism of Hodge, all based

⁷ Quoted in Marcus Peter Johnson, *One With Christ: An Evangelical Theology of Salvation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 82.

⁸ Quoted in Richard J. Mouw and Douglas A. Sweeney, *The Suffering and Victorious Christ: Toward a More Compassionate Christology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 21. See also William DiPuccio, *The Interior Sense of Scripture: The Sacred Hermeneutics of John W. Nevin* (Macon: Mercer, 1998), 25-26.

⁹ Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 27.

¹⁰ Marcus P. Johnson, “The Word Became Flesh: John Williamson Nevin, Charles Hodge, and The Antichrist,” vol. 2 of *Evangelical Calvinism: Dogmatics and Devotion*, ed. Myk Habets and Bobby Grow (Eugene: Pickwick, 2017), 60.

¹¹ John Williamson Nevin, “Antichrist,” in *The Anxious Bench* (second edition), *Antichrist, and the Sermon Catholic Unity*. Edited by Augustine Thompson, OP (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, no publication date).

¹² Johnson, “The Word Became Flesh,” 60.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 61-62,

upon individualistic common sense rationalistic philosophy, does justice. Against these, Nevin proposed a robust incarnation-centred ecclesial and sacramental theology in which “the invisible Word became flesh, and through that flesh brings God to us and us to God.”¹⁴ For Nevin, the incarnation is the central fact in all reality.

Against the prevalent individualist and “nonchurchly” views of “relationship with Christ in external and contractual terms,” Nevin proposed a theology of union with Christ.¹⁵ This union is not merely moral or legal, but the “reception of [Christ’s] life,” expressed in and mediated through the church in its ministry of the Word and sacraments. In this way, “the life of Christ [is] located in his people, the church.”¹⁶ This new life is spiritual and mystical; it is “a real communion with the person of Christ...effected by the Holy Spirit through faith.”¹⁷ This living-union with Christ is sustained, through faith, by receiving Christ’s own “life-giving flesh.” This union is ever more deeply actualized in believers through the eucharist. Although figural or spiritual, it is nevertheless real. For Nevin, “there is an ‘efflux’ from Christ that lodges itself in the inmost core of our personality and becomes the ‘seed’ of our sanctification.”¹⁸

Nevin saw a vacuum at the center of American Protestant theology where he believed the incarnation ought to be. He lamented that many presentations of the gospel would not be

¹⁴ Ibid., 66.

¹⁵ Robert Letham, *Union with Christ: In Scripture, History, and Theology* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2011), 121.

¹⁶ Ibid., 121-122.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ B.A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock), 4.

“materially affected if Christ were not presently incarnate.”¹⁹ People focussed on Christ’s saving work and benefits but neglected his person.

Where Hodge viewed the incarnation as a necessary condition for accomplishing atonement and justification, Nevin believed that the incarnation was the true basis of our relationship with God, and the atoning death of Christ was necessary because the divine Logos had become incarnate into a fallen world and a sinful humanity.²⁰ Following the Church Fathers and Aquinas more than scholastic reformed theologians, Nevin believed that “Jesus’ incarnation is not simply a compulsory mechanism of the atonement” but “the fundamental need and longing of creation itself...to be raised into a higher order of existence...the moral and ontological ascension of humanity into the life of God.”²¹ Salvation is not merely transactional, therefore, but relational, mystical, ontological. “Christ communicates his own life substantially to the soul on which he acts, causing it to grow into his very nature. This is the mystical union; the basis of our whole salvation...”²² The atonement and justification were not ultimate, in other words, but stood on the incarnation and served the greater end of our union with God in the incarnate Christ.

This doctrinal arrangement troubles some of Nevin’s interpreters. Some think Nevin denied forensic, imputed righteousness by his insistence on real, organic union with Christ and a resulting principle of growth in inherent righteousness – this was a charge leveled by Hodge and others in his day. However, Nevin merely grounded legal righteousness on organic union with,

¹⁹ Johnson, “Word Became Flesh,” 64.

²⁰ Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 147-48.

²¹ Adam S. Borneman, *Church, Sacrament, and American Democracy: The Social and Political Dimensions of John Williamson Nevin’s Theology of Incarnation* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 94. See also James Hastings Nicols, *Romanticism In American Theology: Nevin and Schaff at Mercersburg* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 159: “[Nevin] had made himself at home with Irenaeus, Athanasius, Basil, and the two Gregories.”

²² *Ibid.*, quoting Nevin’s *Mystical Presence*.

and therefore actual righteousness through, Christ. Nevin saw Adam's guilt as being reckoned to the human race forensically *because* we participated in it organically. Christ, the second Adam, remedies this as both our federal *and* real head, both our representative *and* organic source (as root to branches).²³ Nevin saw the church's union with Christ in realistic terms, and believed the exclusively legal view, that "imagination that the merits of Christ's life may be sundered from his life itself, and conveyed over to his people in abstract form, on the ground of a merely outward legal constitution," was contrary to Scripture and reason.²⁴ Nevin could not see how "any who hold to the Augustinian view of Adam's organic union with his posterity, as the only basis that can properly support the doctrine of original sin, should not feel the necessity of a like organic union with Christ, as the indispensable condition of an interest in his salvation."²⁵

Along with a diminished ecclesiology, Nevin believed "a depreciation of the full and abiding significance of the incarnation leads inexorably to a depreciation of the inner logic of the atonement."²⁶ As Marcus Johnson notes, such theology tends

to reduce Christ to an Intermediary, rather than *the Mediator*, of salvation between God and humanity. As the incarnation...demonstrates, Christ is far more than an intermediary...who brokers an 'outward and mechanical' contract or covenant between two others ... [Christ] mediates God to humanity as truly and fully *God*, and he mediates humanity to God as fully and truly *human*—he is as fully the one side of the mediation as he is the other.... The at-one-ing mediation that Christ secures between God and men is an ontological reality defined by his person—he is the saving union between God and humanity—and so all depends on who Christ *is*.... Christ constitutes, rather than merely

²³ Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 183-85. See also Oliver Crisp, *Retrieving Doctrine: Essays in Reformed Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2010), 168-173. Nevin follows Augustine here.

²⁴ William B. Evans, *Imputation and Impartation: Union with Christ in American Reformed Theology* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock/Paternoster, 2008), 171, quoting Nevin.

²⁵ Crisp, *Retrieving Doctrine*, 170, quoting Nevin.

²⁶ Johnson, "Word Became Flesh," 67.

performs, the atonement.... the embodied Christ himself is, rather than merely secures, the covenant of grace.²⁷

Christ's saving work cannot be separated from his person. Thus, one should not speak of a legal imputation of Christ's righteousness without speaking of prior union with Christ's person. Nevin believes that "righteousness, like guilt, is an attribute which supposes a subject in which it inheres, and from which it cannot be abstracted without ceasing to exist."²⁸ "The union between divinity and humanity accomplished in Christ cannot be merely a contractual mediation...but must be a true life-union." In contrast to Nevin's theology of union, Hodge's Christology may provide an atonement, "but fails to bring us to a true 'at-one-ment.'"²⁹

Although acknowledging many helpful elements of his theology, both Letham and Evans believe Nevin separates imputation and impartation,³⁰ subordinating the forensic to the realistic.³¹ For them, Nevin's theology of union fails to "integrate these two elements."³² But Nevin does not deny or belittle the legal declaration, but rather bases the forensic/external righteousness on the real/internal,³³ like with Adam's guilt.³⁴ It was scholastic Reformed theology which Nevin believed separated these elements. Both critics, though fair-minded, seek to reconcile Nevin's Christology and soteriology within a *system*, the very system with which he

²⁷ Ibid., 61-62, Johnson's excellent summary of Nevin's thinking regarding the relationship of incarnation to atonement.

²⁸ Evans, *Imputation and Impartation*, 171. Here, Nevin follows Augustine.

²⁹ Littlejohn, *Mercersburg Theology*, 59.

³⁰ Letham, *Union*, 122.

³¹ Evans, *Imputation and Impartation*, 169-72; Letham, *Union*, 122.

³² Evans, *Imputation and Impartation*, 171-72, 183. In fairness to both authors, they find much more to appreciate in Nevin than to criticize in these works. However, it is these brief statements of critique that I want to examine in light of Nevin's overall project.

³³ Gerrish, *Thinking*, 219,

³⁴ Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 146.

took issue. Nevin himself held them together, reconciled within the mystery of Christ's incarnate person and work, believing both to be taught in Scripture and affirmed by the tradition.³⁵

Nevin's thought was influenced by romanticism and German idealism. Some blame this for Nevin's "mystical elements of union with Christ" supposedly "at the expense of the atonement, justification, and election."³⁶ This assessment, however, ignores a careful gleaning of several of Nevin's actual theological qualifications and clarifications, as well as specific affirmations he made, and as we will see, proves Nevin's own point that American Reformed theology was (and in many cases still is) at variance not only from the Fathers but from the sixteenth-century reformers themselves. Nevin saw this doctrine of union clearly taught in Calvin. Hodge, however, attributed Nevin's theology of mystical union to an uncritical reception of Schleiermacher's views and his eucharistic doctrine to Romanism.³⁷ This critique is at least partially guilty of the genetic fallacy, for Nevin did not borrow Schleiermacher's views uncritically. Although appreciative of Schleiermacher's Christocentrism through the lens of German mediating theologians, Nevin critiqued him precisely for his atonement theology, believing Schleiermacher did not take sin seriously enough. Schleiermacher's concept of

³⁵ Gerrish, *Thinking*, 219-220; Letham, *Union*, 122. Regarding holding aspects of biblical/confessional truth in tension through faith, see J.W. Nevin, *History & Genius of the Heidelberg Catechism* (Chambersburg, PA: Publication Office of the German Reformed Church, 1847), 137.

³⁶ Letham, *Union*, 122. Letham notes Evans' agreement with this conclusion.

³⁷ Gerrish, *Thinking*, 211; Littlejohn, *Mercersburg Theology*, 40.

redemption needed to be joined with another concept of “at least equal importance...the idea of atonement.”³⁸

Nevin questioned his critics in return, for where they detected deficiencies in his Protestantism or Calvinism, he discerned weakness in their Christology and corresponding ecclesiology. Nevin contends for the ongoing mediatorial work of the incarnate Christ through the institutional church against Finney’s individualistic conversionism. Regarding New England’s moralism, Hodge’s scholastic federalism, and even Schleiermacher’s redemptive ‘feeling’, Nevin was clear: the “specific, distinctive character of Christianity is not its doctrine nor its morality, nor even its power of redemption; but the peculiar constitution and religious significance of its founder as uniting divinity and humanity truly and perfectly in his person. Doctrine, law and redemption rest on this as their basis.”³⁹

Considering the preceding discussion of his theological project, we will see that Nevin’s doctrine of the atonement is both orthodox and broadly Reformed. Nevin does not merely collapse the work of Christ into his person or the atonement into the hypostatic union. Gerrish notes that Nevin never simply equates the incarnation with “*at-one-ment*,” instead reserving the “word ‘atonement’ for what was accomplished by the death and resurrection of Christ.” Nevin sought “to set the atoning death of Christ in the frame of his life, not to diminish it.”⁴⁰ From Nevin’s perspective, “justice is done to the atonement precisely when we see it in the context of

³⁸ Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 25-26. German mediating theologians sought to reconcile and integrate Schleiermacher’s Christocentric insights within traditional Protestant confessional formulations; see Evans, *Imputation and Impartation*, 150-55.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴⁰ Gerrish, *Thinking*, 214.

the incarnation.” Once union with the incarnate Christ through the church is established, Nevin gladly uses the atonement language of his critics.⁴¹

The importance of the atonement is evident in Nevin’s seminary instruction. He told students that “God’s justice must be satisfied, and that either the sinner” or a substitute “must be punished.”⁴² Nevin instructed future pastors to preach all biblical truths “in their proper relations and proportions,” including essentials such as “Sin and guilt, as revealed by the Law” and “Christ and his Cross—the Alpha and Omega of the Gospel...”⁴³ Lecturing on the “Evangelical Motives” of pastoral ministry, sub-headed “A proper confidence in the doctrine of the cross as the only help for a ruined world,” Nevin warned that many are “ignorant of the true glory of the cross” failing to “understand the power of it for all the great purposes of the gospel salvation, and the relation in which it stands to gospel holiness, as well as to the pardon of sin...”⁴⁴ For Nevin, that the atonement and justification are not the grounding principles of Christianity, but rather themselves rest upon the incarnation, does not diminish their importance. In fact, seen as necessary saving works of the person of Christ to bring us to our ultimate *telos*—complete union with God—Nevin believes their importance is restored, rescued from individualistic, privatized, hyper-spiritualized and systematized Christianity. Nevin’s hearty endorsement of the Heidelberg Catechism, particularly its statements about “satisfaction,” “the great cardinal doctrine of justification by faith alone, through the imputation of Christ’s satisfaction, righteousness and

⁴¹ Ibid., 209. Thus, Nevin may be seen as concerned with the forgiveness of sins precisely toward the end of union with God in Christ. See Lee C. Barrett, “The Distinctive World of Mercersburg Theology: Yearning for God or Relief from Sin?” *Theology Today* 71, 4 (2015): 381-392.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ John Williamson Nevin, *The Reformed Pastor: Lectures on Pastoral Theology*, Sam Hamstra Jr., ed. (Eugene: Pickwick, 2006), 56.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 47; he highlights Paul’s gospel as nothing but “Christ and him crucified.”

holiness,” and of Christ “sustain[ing] in body and soul, the wrath of God against the sins of all mankind,” is sturdy evidence of his orthodox Reformed atonement theology.⁴⁵

Nevin affirms the absolute necessity of the atonement for salvation, but argues that the atonement stands upon the incarnation rather than the incarnation merely enabling the atonement. For Nevin, “the race starts in Adam” and “is recapitulated...or gathered into a new centre and head in Christ.”⁴⁶ Thus, “the incarnation [is] not merely a means to mediation.”⁴⁷ Expositing Luke 24:13-33, Nevin locates the atonement at the heart Christ’s saving work. “Why must the Redeemer...die to fulfil his heavenly mission?” Nevin asks. Christ’s death is necessary to “make satisfaction for sins of men,” to open the way to restoration to God’s favour, to provide “propitiation for the sins of the world,” and to cleanse believers from sin, for death must atone for sin. “[T]he whole Gospel centres in the idea of sacrifice,” and apart from Christ’s shed blood, he could not be a “true Saviour for sinners.”⁴⁸ Through his death and resurrection, Christ reached “the glorious consummation of his mediatorial office” and was “qualified...to impart life and immortality to the world.”⁴⁹ Nevin goes on to argue that the Christian faith is “rooted in the mystery of the incarnation,” upon which the atonement is based, but it is clear he intends his incarnational grounding of the atonement in no way to minimize its necessity or importance.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Nevin, *Heidelberg Catechism*, 134-36.

⁴⁶ John Williamson Nevin, Philip Schaff and Daniel Gans, *The Incarnate Word: Selected Writings on Christology*, William B. Evans, ed. (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 64. The editors note Nevin’s nod to Irenaeus.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 141-158.

Nevin's atonement theology is multifaceted. He believed his incarnational grounding of the atonement made it "compatible with *any* theory of atonement."⁵¹ Some discern an identification aspect of the atonement, in which Christ experiences and participates in the deepest suffering of the world in solidarity with the least.⁵² Nevin observes a moral influence to Christ's atoning work, an "exemplification of the highest moral truth for the saving benefit of men."⁵³ Evans cautions that Nevin's "positive presentation of the atonement includes a variety of themes, not all of which cohere comfortably."⁵⁴ While recognizing traditional Reformed themes such as Christ's death propitiating divine wrath, satisfying divine justice, and the infinite value of Christ's death because of his "hypostatic union with the Godhead," Evans discerns a prevalent *Christus Victor* theme in Nevin—"in which Christ's death and resurrection constitute the triumph of humanity over the forces of sin and death." For Evans, this is further proof that the forensic is subordinated to the realistic in Nevin's atonement theology.⁵⁵ Nevin certainly does view Christ as coming into the world "to do battle with this prince of darkness and his kingdom in the most real way."⁵⁶ But where Evans sees themes struggling to cohere, Nevin sees necessary and complementary aspects of salvation, cohering in the incarnate God-man. For Nevin, God's forensic declaration of righteousness is analogous to "that word in the beginning when God said

⁵¹ Gerrish, *Thinking*, 209; the following are *some* of the aspects Nevin sees. There is a theme of organic recapitulation (not merely federal), or perhaps a *vicarious humanity* view of atonement, congruent with Ross Hastings, see class notes, "APPL/THEO 725: Atonement Seminar: Lecture 2" (Regent College: Fall, 2018), 16-21.

⁵² Mouw and Sweeney, *Suffering and Victorious*, 19-24.

⁵³ Nevin et al., *Incarnate Word*, 141.

⁵⁴ Evans, *Imputation and Impartation*, 174.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* Littlejohn believes Evans sees Nevin in "close continuity with the early Reformed theologians on the central points of his soteriology," although the centrality of the incarnation was relatively distinctive to him; *Mercersburg Theology*, 127.

⁵⁶ Nevin et al., *Incarnate Word*, 144. See also Gerrish, *Thinking*, 210.

let there be light, and light was. It not only proclaims him righteous for Christ's sake, but sets the righteousness of Christ in him as part of his own life."⁵⁷ "We need holiness as well as pardon," says Nevin, "and the gospel clearly represents Christ to be the fountain of the first, no less than he is the author of the second."⁵⁸ Put differently, Nevin understands salvation to involve both imputation and infusion of grace; both declaration and impartation, justification and sanctification, all possible because of union.

Expositing Hebrews 10:10, Nevin notes that "the whole Gospel centres in the death of Christ," which is the "ground of our redemption" since "here only we have the atonement—the sacrifice which takes away sin, and through this the victory, at the same time, which makes room for life and immortality."⁵⁹ Christ's death is "an absolute and all sufficient sacrifice for the sins of men," requiring "no addition or supplement," and is "the only and whole ground of our justification before God." Although already accomplished, the "once for all" does not mean "once and no more" but "once and always." Christ's atoning death is effectual for all time, appropriated by the church as Christ communicates himself to her. Nevin rejects the sacrificial mass of Roman Catholicism, for it reduces the significance of the once-for-all nature of Christ's atonement. Yet, the well-intentioned Protestant "once and no more" conception of Christ's sacrifice, while it attempts to "magnify...the oneness of Christ's sacrifice," it unwittingly "turns the atonement...into an abstraction, and robs it of all its living power." Nevin places the ongoing

⁵⁷ Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 167-68. Similar to the concept "deliverdict", Peter J. Leithart, *Delivered from the Elements of the World* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016), 179-214.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 169, following Calvin's *duplex gratia*.

⁵⁹ This paragraph summarizes Jonathan Bonomo and quotes Nevin's words unless otherwise noted: "Against Theological Abstraction: John Nevin on the Enduring Force of the Atonement" accessed October 17, 2017; <https://evangelicalcatholicity.wordpress.com/2008/02/11/against-theological-abstraction-john-nevin-on-the-enduring-force-of-the-atonement/>

efficacy of the atonement within the incarnation, “rooted in his divine-human life, and not as an abstraction or something wrought solely by divine decree.”⁶⁰ He spells out the once-for-all atonement in its everlasting effect for believers through the communication of Christ’s divine-human life:

[O]nce as absolute; once, as final and conclusive; once, as needing no repetition; yet not once, as over and gone—but once, as coming to no end; because resident forever in the “power of an endless and indissoluble life” (Heb. vii. 16); even the life of Him, “that liveth and was death, and is now alive for evermore.”

Nevin rejects once-for-all views of the nature of the atonement if they function as a set of beliefs and historical facts to affirm, believing rather “in a living Savior and the reality of a true, mystical union with him.” Of course, we must never “neglect the historical facts of our redemption,” but what those facts accomplished is only accessible through union with Christ. The benefits of the atonement are communicated to us by the “living presence” of Christ, “in the Church through the Holy Spirit.”⁶¹ Christ’s atonement is actualized for/in us via the sacraments, as we participate in the life of the Godhead, in mystical union with Christ.

Nevin’s most detailed treatise was on the eucharist, which for him is all about living union with the incarnate Christ. Yet his eucharistic theology does not neglect atonement and justification:

Only through the medium of Christ’s sufferings and death can we come to have any part in his glory. He must be our righteousness in order that he may be our life. Hence our first relation to him as believers is that which is formed in our justification; that ‘act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.’⁶²

⁶⁰ Bonomo’s words.

⁶¹ Bonomo, “Against Theological Abstraction.”

⁶² Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 159, quoting the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*.

Although “our justification...rests on the objective merit of Christ by whose blood alone propitiation has been made for the sins of the world.... this justification, to become ours in fact, must insert us into Christ’s life.” Justification is a gift of “God’s free grace,” yet more than a “mere declaration”:

It makes us to be in fact, what it accounts us to be, *in Christ*. The ground of our justification is a righteousness that was foreign to us before but is now made to lodge itself in the inmost constitution of our being. A real life-union with Christ, powerfully wrought in our souls by the Holy Ghost, is the only basis...[for] any true imputation to us of what he has done and suffered on our behalf.⁶³

While affirming that the “VALUE of Christ’s sufferings and death...springs wholly from...the incarnation,”⁶⁴ Nevin states that “[t]he sacrament of the Lord’s Supper has reference directly and primarily to the ATONEMENT wrought out by Christ’s death on the cross.” Understanding the Christian life as one of “constant return to it and dependence upon it,” Nevin clarifies: “We need no new atonement; but we do need to fall back perpetually on the one sacrifice for sin which Christ has already made upon the cross, appropriating the power of it more and more to our souls, as the only ground of our salvation.”⁶⁵ This happens in word, worship/prayer and sacrament, but especially in the eucharist. Properly considered, the eucharist is a participation, in faith, of Christ’s own life and person; it is communion.

Nevin objected to the “symbolic memorialism” view of the Lord’s Supper, which merely commemorated “past grace.” He wanted to restore the full participatory theology of Calvin and the sixteenth-century reformers, wherein the eucharist communicates a true, vital union with

⁶³ Ibid., 159-60, emphasis added.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 148.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 159.

Christ,⁶⁶ where “Christ himself was sacramentally present to the faithful in the fullness of his divine human unity.”⁶⁷

[B]y the act of Christ objectively through his wonder-working Spirit and not simply by our act, we are made to participate...mystically, dynamically and substantially through the inmost soul-centre of our being, in the divine life that springs up perpetually through the fountain of [Christ’s] humanity...for the use of our dreary and dying nature....⁶⁸

The eucharist does not merely apply the saving benefits of Christ’s death, made efficacious by the recipient’s faith. It makes present, by the Holy Spirit, his person in all the fullness of the hypostatic union. This was decidedly not the American Reformed view of the eucharist.

Hodge viewed the union of Christ and believers, figured in the eucharist, as “arising from the indwelling of the Spirit”; “The efficacy of this sacrament is...solely in the attending influence of the Holy Ghost.” It is not communication of Christ’s life, but a memorial of his broken body and shed blood which are the matter of the eucharist.⁶⁹ Hodge sees Christ, only in his divinity and only by the Spirit, sacramentally present in the mind of the partaker; believers are united to Christ in a federal/legal way rather than mystically.⁷⁰ For Hodge, the Spirit is a “representative,” “present to us *in lieu* of Christ, rather than the means of making Christ, body and soul, divine and human, present to us.”⁷¹ This stands in stark contrast to Nevin, for whom

⁶⁶ Keith A. Mathison, *Given For You: Reclaiming Calvin’s Doctrine of the Lord’s Supper* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002), 139.

⁶⁷ George Hunsinger, “The Heidelberg Catechism in America: A Snapshot from the History of its Reception” *Theology Today* 70.3 (2013): 265. For Nevin’s historical survey of the Reformation view of the eucharist, see “The Doctrine of the Reformed Church on the Lord’s Supper,” in *Mystical Presence*, 244-313.

⁶⁸ Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 306, expositing Calvin’s view.

⁶⁹ Jonathan G. Bonomo, *Incarnation and Sacrament: The Eucharistic Controversy between Charles Hodge and John Williamson Nevin* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 41, quoting Hodge.

⁷⁰ Hunsinger, “Heidelberg Catechism,” 265.

⁷¹ Littlejohn, *Mercersburg Theology*, 54.

the eucharist is active communication of and participation with “the living saviour himself in the fullness of his glorified person, which means: not only with his Spirit or divine nature, but with his flesh and blood.”⁷²

Nevin sees the atonement—Christ’s substitutionary satisfaction of God’s just wrath against sin, *and* Christ’s victory over sin, death and hell—as standing at the very heart of the gospel of salvation. The atonement is essential for sinners to be forgiven of sin and reconciled to God. Yet the atonement itself is penultimate, receiving its value because of its aim—humanity’s union with God—and because it was accomplished through the incarnate eternal Logos. Christ is the archetype and first-fruits of the new creation/redeemed cosmos, the spiritual and ideal externalized in space and time;⁷³ the basis upon which our current, and one day complete, union with God rests. We grow into this union through the incarnate Christ’s communication of his own divine-human life to us, not exclusively yet especially, in the eucharist. Nevin believed “Christianity is grounded in the living union of the believer with the person of Christ; and this great fact is emphatically concentrated in the mystery of the Lord’s Supper....”⁷⁴ As Christ is not an intermediary between God and humanity, but, as fully God and fully man, both *accomplishes* and *constitutes* true mediation, so the eucharist is not merely a desacralized ritual transaction between Christ and his church, but actually makes Christ present to his people; his incarnate mediating body made present to his body on earth, the church. Indeed, in the eucharist, the two are mystically united.

⁷² Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 4.

⁷³ William DiPuccio, *The Interior Sense of Scripture: The Sacred Hermeneutics of John W. Nevin* (Macon: Mercer, 1998), 25-26.

⁷⁴ Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 40.

Christ's eucharistic presence is real, albeit spiritual; in the eucharist we have active union with the one who has life in himself, the risen divine-human Redeemer. Individual believers always have union with Christ because they are part of Christ's body, the church, which has union with Christ through the Spirit, through whom he feeds and nourishes her, caring for her even as his own body.⁷⁵ Indeed, for Nevin, "*In Christ* is only another expression for *Christian* itself."⁷⁶ Nevin notes that Paul sometimes appears to "lose sight of the distinction between Christ and the Christian, in the overwhelming sense he has of their oneness."⁷⁷ And Christians cannot be identified apart from their incorporation as Christ's mystical body, the church. This is where individuals participate in Christ. "Christ's presence in the world is in and by his mystical body, the Church.... To be in Christ, is to be a member also necessarily of his mystical body."⁷⁸ Nevin thought of the church as a "perennial article of faith," positioning it within and integral to his Christology or "Christocentric" theology.⁷⁹ Nevin considered the church as "a unity, the body of Christ. Thus, it is a continuation of the Incarnation, the mode of Christ's presence on earth."⁸⁰ Nevin does not conflate Christ and the church, but his theology of union is so strong that at times the line blurs.⁸¹ Christ mediates God's divine life to us and draws our humanity to God, thus fulfilling the end for which humanity was created: union with the triune God. Christ's

⁷⁵ Ibid., 201-02. In this, Nevin follows Calvin.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 203, drawing on Eph. 3:16-19; Col. 2:6-10.

⁷⁷ Ibid., referencing Rom. 6:3-11; 7:4; 8:11; Gal. 2:20; Phil. 3:9-12; Col. 2:12; 3:1-4.

⁷⁸ Nevin, *Incarnate Word*, 75.

⁷⁹ Gerrish, *Thinking*, 203.

⁸⁰ Evans, *Imputation and Impartation*, 163, quoting Nevin.

⁸¹ Ibid., 163n.83. In private correspondence, Peter Leithart notes that the line blurs for the Apostle Paul as well. No wonder: when on his way to persecute Christians, Saul was first confronted by Christ on the Damascus road, he was told it was Christ himself that Saul had been persecuting (Acts 9:5).

atonement, and the church's union with Christ, is nowhere more intimately pictured and more effectually actualized than in the eucharist.

Unlike Hodge, Nevin never wrote a systematic theology. Instead, Nevin attempted to correct what he viewed as serious errors in American Protestantism.⁸² His project was pastoral rather than systematic, corrective rather than comprehensive. Nevin attempted to shift American theological focus “from revival to church, from conversion to sanctification...from [merely] expiation to incarnation.”⁸³ To properly understand Nevin, one must recognize that, in his subordination of the atonement to the incarnation, he was actually grounding the atonement upon the abiding incarnate life of Christ and thus, deepening soteriology, as well as strengthening ecclesiology, liturgy, and the sacraments—points of particular communion between Christ and his church. The incarnation of the perfectly holy divine-human Christ coming into the fallen world to bring a new, higher life of union with God, required the atonement in order to deal with sin and its penalty. Nevin believed that Christ's atoning work was magnified when properly related to the central fact of Christ's enduringly incarnate person.

By not grounding the atonement upon the incarnation—the work of Christ based upon the person of Christ—Nevin believed American Protestants were placing their faith in an abstract experiential, moral, or doctrinal system, rather than living in true mystical union with the real, abiding, incarnate, risen, and actively redeeming person of Christ.⁸⁴ “Christianity is not a

⁸² He also wrote against conversionism—Finney's “revival machinery,” the low view of church authority, sacraments and tradition—individualist spirituality, and perpetual church division and new denominations—what he called the “sect system”; See Nevin's *The Anxious Bench, Antichrist, and the Sermon Catholic Unity*, Augustine Thompson, O.P. ed. (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, no publication date).

⁸³ Mouw and Sweeney, *Suffering and Victorious Christ*, 24.

⁸⁴ Bonomo, *Incarnation and Sacrament*, 15.

Doctrine to be...learned like a system of philosophy.” The Word that spoke previously through mediators now speaks immediately in the unified incarnate divine-human Christ, who is “the absolute truth itself, personally present among men and incorporating itself with their life.”

Nevin says “Christianity...is a LIFE.”⁸⁵ Indeed, it is a union with and participation in Christ’s own life, and through him a participation in the triune life of God.⁸⁶ Jesus does not give life, he *is* life; he gives himself.

Nevin perceived everything “through the Person of the crucified and risen Savior.”⁸⁷ His “Christological interest” is in “the organic union between the incarnate Christ and the human race,...the mystical union of Christ with his people,” and particularly in “the incarnation of the eternal Logos.”⁸⁸ The atonement was a necessary condition for accomplishing God’s ultimate purpose of at-one-ment. Atonement is applied, realized, or actualized as we participate in Christ, the One who in his very constitution *is* eternal union of God and humanity.⁸⁹ In word and sacrament, we receive the ongoing life-giving communication of Christ. In the eucharist, the church grows in union with and into the life of God and is thus the objective (albeit imperfect and as-yet partial) extension of Christ’s presence and saving power in history. The eucharist is

⁸⁵ Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 186-87.

⁸⁶ Littlejohn, *Mercersburg Theology*, 124-46, similar to *theosis*.

⁸⁷ Bonomo, *Incarnation and Sacrament*, 16, 105.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁸⁹ On the notable similarities between Nevin and T.F. Torrance’s views of incarnation and union, see William B. Evans, “Twin Sons of Different Mothers: The Remarkable Theological Convergence of John W. Nevin and Thomas F. Torrance,” *Haddington House Journal* (2009): 155-73. In personal conversation with Ross Hastings, he notes that sometimes with Torrance’s stress on reconciliation coming from and grounded in the incarnation’s uniting God and humanity, where one sometimes is not sure how the cross is necessary for Torrance, Nevin retains a clear, prominent and necessary place for a substitutionary, sacrificial satisfaction theory of the atonement as fitting within and complementary to his prioritizing of the incarnation.

the visible, objective manifestation of the church's mystical union with Christ through his atoning death and resurrection; it is the church's participation in Christ's resurrection-life; it is the appropriation by the church of Christ's atoning work as Christ communicates his own life-giving presence to his people dynamically, mystically, truly. Where Hodge judges that "justification by faith and sacramental grace are...incompatible conceptions,"⁹⁰ Nevin sees them as not merely compatible but inseparable, cohering in the person of Christ in union with his people.

⁹⁰ DeBie, *Speculative Theology*, 88, previously quoted.

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