The Enduring Legacy of Mercersburg Theology

In the 1830's and 1840's a daringly innovative theology was forged in the village of Mercersburg's fledgling German Reformed Seminary. In 1840, John Williamson Nevin (1803-1886) was called there to teach theology, biblical studies, and a variety of other subjects. In 1844, Philip Schaff (1819-1893), a native of Switzerland who had studied at the most academically prominent universities of Germany joined Nevin. Accidently (or providentially), the Seminary acquired two of the most innovative theological minds in America.

Of course, the uniqueness of the Mercersburg movement must not be exaggerated. Like all Reformed theologians, the Mercersburg professors and pastors stressed the sovereignty of God in all spheres of life, the enactment of God's redemptive purposes in human history, the priority of divine grace, faith as the grateful response to God's saving acts, sanctification as a necessary concomitant of justification, and the church as the context in which faith is nurtured.

However, in other ways the Mercersburg theology was significantly different from other strands of the Reformed tradition. A unique German Reformed heritage had arisen in western Germany, a region that had been subjected to rival Lutheran, Zwinglian, Calvinist, and Catholic influences. The tensions among these traditions sometimes had erupted in physical violence and political unrest. That destructive conflict of spiritualities had motivated many of the leaders of the territory to search for a unifying theology that was broadly orthodox, congruent with the biblical witness as interpreted through the ecumenical creeds, tolerant of differing opinions about nonessential matters of faith and practice, avoidant of speculation about unknowable mysteries, and passionate about oneness in Christ.

The uniqueness of the Mercersburg heritage was not solely attributable to its rootage in the German Reformed tradition. It was also a response to the idiosyncrasies of early nineteenth century America. During this era the revivalists of the Second Great Awakening were striving to trigger conversion experiences, often by using very sensationalistic and coercive strategies. They would first imbue their audiences with a crushing fear of damnation and then promise them the forgiveness of sins if the terrified individuals could muster up the necessary degree of faith. The Mercersburg theologians were appalled at revivalism's glamorization of the individual's dramatic and sudden spiritual transformation, its legitimation of private and idiosyncratic interpretations of the Bible, its denigration of the nurturing power of the church's worship and catechesis, and its reduction of the church to a voluntary society of reborn but largely autonomous individuals. In opposition to this overheated revivalism, the Mercersburg theologians redirected attention away from the drama of the individual's alleged rebirth to the saga of the Incarnation of God in Christ and the gradual communication of Christ's sanctified life to humanity.

This reorientation of Christian faith had profound theological and spiritual foundations. The Mercersburg theology was motivated by hopes and yearnings that differed from those typical of more traditional Calvinists. While most Reformed theologians insisted upon a sharp Creator/creature disjunction and favored legal concepts and metaphors for God, the Mercersburg theologians imagined the God/human relationship to be more like that of intimate friends to one another. For them the good news of Christianity is that human beings can participate in God's very life and thereby experience reconciliation, harmony, and unity. The essence of the gospel is not primarily the news that our liability to punishment has been removed (although this was a crucial subtheme for them). Rather, the situation from which Christ saves us is isolation from

God and neighbor. In Christ's person the impediments that inhibit the development of a cosmic community of mutual indwelling have been dissolved. The Christian narrative is the story of humanity's gradual growth in godlikeness, stretching from creation to the consummation of all things. They insisted that the entire creation, encapsulated in humanity, is oriented toward the goal of participation in the divine life.

Unlike many revivalists, the Mercersburg theologians maintained that the typical way to become a Christian was to be immersed in the worshiping and teaching life of the church, particularly the celebration of the Eucharist through which believers are spiritually united to Christ. This was articulated most clearly in Nevin's *The Mystical Presence* (1846). The glorified life of Christ has been objectively injected into humanity. That transformative life would spread and develop organically to revitalize the church, the entire human family, and even nature. The Mercersburg pastors gave voice to the extravagant hope that all things will be perfected in God.

In most forms of American Protestantism in the nineteenth century, the sermon was the centerpiece of a worship service, and the Lord's Supper was only celebrated sporadically. The sacraments were usually regarded as commanded rituals that served as memorials of Christ or as pledges of allegiance to God. Reacting to this, the Mercersburg theologians reconceived baptism and the Lord's Supper as objective channels of grace. The two sacraments effectuate union with the person of Christ and communicate the very life of Christ to the congregants. The table, not the pulpit, should be the visual focus. Moreover, the congregation should be active in worship, praying responsively. The liturgies and confessions of the Reformation and the early church should be recovered, not because of antiquarian interest or servile traditionalism, but out of a desire to be guided by the wisdom of the ancestors and the working of the Spirit in the historical development of the church.

This forward-looking orientation, confident that God is working in history to bring about a glorious new age of love, undergirded the Mercersburg ecumenical sensibility. The Mercersburg theologians rejected the more virulent forms of anti-Catholicism then prevalent. They reconceived the Catholic heritage as the soil from which Protestantism had emerged and which still contained much spiritual wisdom. In the history of the church God has been inspiring different spiritual cultures, each of which has a unique gift to offer the church universal. For example, according to Schaff the Roman Catholic church emphasized obedience to God's law (the church of Peter), while the Protestant churches accentuated faith in God's grace (the church of Paul). Both positions are valuable gifts that that will one day be synthesized in a new form of Christianity rooted in love (the church of John). Schaff's *The Principle of Protestantism* (1845) set forth this theology of history. The recognition that God is not yet finished with history gave theologians like Schaff a generous ecumenism and an openness to new movements of the Spirit.

The Mercersburg movement's speculations were a challenge to the more inductive and empirical orientation of much of American theology, particularly the theology of the older established denominations. During the nineteenth century many Reformed theologians were attempting to prove the truth of Christianity from the fulfillment of prophecy, the testimony of biblical miracles, the authenticity of the biblical texts, the trustworthiness of the biblical authors, and, eventually, the evidence of archaeology. These older theologians treated the Bible as a compendium of data about historical and supernatural realities that could be combined to form a system in the way that natural scientists gather data from nature and combine them to generate physical, chemical, and biological theories. For those theologians the truth of Christianity depended upon the validity of the discrete bits of biblical data and the cogency of the inferences drawn from them. Nevin, Schaff, and their Mercersburg colleagues challenged this

understanding of biblical theology. For them, the believer's incorporation into the life of Christ was a self-validating experience. The life of the risen Christ in one's heart, communicated and nourished by the church's evolving understanding of such central themes as the Trinity and the Incarnation, is testimony to the Bible's truth and the key to its interpretation. The primary way to engage the Bible is neither through the assumption of absolute historical accuracy (Fundamentalism) nor through the alleged reconstruction of "what really happened" (Modernism), but rather through the lens of the prayers, creeds, confessions, and sacraments of the church. It is the church's living tradition of worship and service that has shaped and should continue to shape the comprehension of the Good News in Scripture.

Although the word "Mercersburg" is seldom heard in church circles, the legacy of the Mercersburg theology lives on contemporary congregations. Many people may not describe themselves as "Mercersburg types," or even know what the Mercersburg theology is, but they have subliminally imbibed it through prayers, worship services, mutual support, and care for the least of their neighbors. The spirit of Mercersburg lives on in spaces where believers cherish the nurturing power of baptism, the Lord's Supper, the ancient creeds, and historically informed worship, while being open to God's on-going work in the world. This Mercersburg heritage has joyfully highlighted the fact that God draws humanity into union with Christ, and this conviction continues to nurture the church in often hidden ways. Congregants still rejoice in the Good News that not even death can separate us from the love of God.

Lee C. Barrett