

CHAPTER ELEVEN: ROMANTICISM

A new spirit swept through Western Civilization in the Nineteenth Century, called *romanticism*. This movement had a variety of expressions, some contradictory, in music, art, literature and philosophy as well as religion. The following characterized religious romanticism:

1. Romanticism emphasized *feeling*. It reacted against the Enlightenment, for which *thinking* was everything. Romanticism did not reject *thinking*, but insisted that *feeling*, in particular religious feeling, was real and needed to be considered in one's *thinking*. Intuitive thinking was also valued.
2. Romanticism valued beauty – in music, art, architecture, in the spoken word and in the drama of liturgy.
3. Romanticism affirmed continuity with the past. In a day when many were vehemently anti-Catholic, Protestant romanticists affirmed continuity with positive values of the medieval Roman and ancient Greek Church.
4. Romanticists held an *organic* view of the church. It was not a voluntary society of individuals, but an organism created by Christ and the apostles. Membership in the church placed a person in spiritual unity with Christians of all places and times. As an organism the church, and its doctrine, were not static, but evolving through time.
5. Romanticists looked upon a person's relationship with God as a life long process of development, not one sudden ecstatic experience (although experiences were valued), and as a relationship lived out in the community of the church, not as an isolated individual.
6. Romanticists believed in the *supernatural*, which could never be fully comprehended by human reason. However the supernatural and natural worlds were not antagonistic, but organically related. They were comfortable with *mystery* – with the finitude of human knowledge. They saw *value* and *beauty* in many different doctrines and practices.

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who became the principal theologian of the new Evangelical Union Church of Germany, established

romanticism as a significant factor in German Protestantism. In America, Romanticism produced the Mercersburg movement in the German Reformed Church, where theological controversy was followed by a war over liturgy. Congregational pastor and theologian Horace Bushnell introduced romanticist concepts into that community. Romanticism influenced church architecture, music and liturgy in all branches of American Protestantism.

PART A: THE MERCERSBURG MOVEMENT

John Williamson Nevin

A Presbyterian candidate for the pulpit of the Reformed Church in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, preached impressive sermons Sunday morning and evening in the Fall of 1842. At the close of the evening service he brought out the “anxious bench,” and invited those wishing prayers to come forward. The small Reformed church had not experienced such excitement and confusion before. Sitting in the chancel that evening was John Williamson Nevin (1803-86), professor at the Reformed seminary in Mercersburg. He was invited at the end of this service to address the congregation. Nevin criticized the Bench, and contrasted true and false revival. In the days that followed, congregants and students debated, and Nevin gave a series of lectures to elaborate his position. He published them in 1843 as *The Anxious Bench* (LTH 5:11). A conflict that would agitate the Reformed Church for over three decades had begun.

John Williamson Nevin, from south-central Pennsylvania, was raised on the *Westminster Catechism* and the Bible in a devout Scotch-Irish Presbyterian family and church. As a student at Union College, Schenectady, New York, after attending meetings conducted by “anti-New Measures” Congregational revivalist Asahel Nettleton, Nevin professed faith and joined the Presbyterian church. After attending Princeton Seminary, Nevin taught at Western Seminary, in Pittsburgh, from 1829 to 1840. In 1840 the Reformed Church elected him professor at their seminary in Mercersburg,¹ and he transferred his affiliation to the Reformed Church.

In *The Anxious Bench* Nevin condemned “new measures” as superficial and individualistic. The church as a *community* has a relationship with God, Nevin argued, and was not simply a collection of individuals, each with their own individual relationship with God. He contrasted the system of the *Bench* with the

¹The German Reformed Church founded a seminary at Carlisle, Pennsylvania in 1825, which in 1829 moved to York, Pennsylvania, and moved again in 1837 to Mercersburg.

system of the *Catechism*. Healthy evangelism could take place through the life of the church, where persons nurtured by the catechism, family worship, Biblical preaching, pastoral visitation, and church discipline, came into relationship with God.

On 8 August 1844, Nevin preached at the first triennial convention of the Eastern and Ohio Synods of the German Reformed Church and the Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church. In his sermon, *Catholic Unity*, Nevin spoke of the believers' spiritual unity with Christ that bound them to one another, and the duty to work for unity.

Philip Schaff

In July 1843, two representatives of the Eastern Synod of the German Reformed Church went to Europe to recruit a German professor to join John Nevin on the faculty of the seminary at Mercersburg. In July they interviewed and recommended Philip Schaff (1819-93). Schaff was born in the first week of January, 1819, in Chur, canton Graubünden, Switzerland. His mother, married to a man who was not Philip's father, was fined for adultery and ordered out of the city. His father, fined for wanton behavior, died within a year. The local pastor saw that this orphan got a good education. When young Philip got into trouble and was expelled, the pastor recommended him to a school in Kornthal, Würtemberg. This homesick fifteen-year-old boy went into the woods, about three one morning, to cry and to pray. There "he began to realize for the first time what it is to have peace with God."

Attending the University of Tübingen for two years, and Halle and Berlin his third year, Schaff encountered the whole spectrum of German intellectual thought. From Ferdinand Christian Baur he gained a dialectic view of history.² From Isaac Dorner he saw how the highest scientific culture could be combined in simplicity and humility with Christian faith. From Johann A. W. Neander he acquired an organic understanding of history. From the Prussian Union Church he gained a spirit of "evangelical catholicity."

The Synod in America confirmed the invitation to Schaff in October, 1843. He was ordained at Elberfeld, 12 April 1844, and arrived in America just in time to hear Nevin's sermon on *Catholic Unity*. Baptized Reformed, confirmed Lutheran and ordained in the Evangelical Union Church, Schaff's respect for the Reformed

²Dialectic view of history was developed by the philosopher G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831). He saw progress coming through conflict. A thesis would be opposed by an antithesis; the two would eventually be resolved in a synthesis.

tradition was genuine, but his spirit of evangelical catholicity was much broader. Schaff was received into the German Reformed Church in the U. S. on the basis of his assent to the *Heidelberg Catechism*.

Philip Schaff's inaugural address at Reading, Pennsylvania, 25 October 1844, stirred up controversy. Delivered in German, *The Principle of Protestantism* (LTH 3:26) affirmed the continuity of Protestantism with medieval Catholicism, criticized the individualism and subjectivity of contemporary American Protestantism, and looked forward to a day when Protestants and Catholics would be reconciled.

Schaff had arrived in a state with deep-seated hatred between Protestants and Catholics, where anti-Catholic riots had recently taken place. Joseph F. Berg (1812-71),³ pastor of First Reformed in Philadelphia, and publisher of an anti-Roman Catholic periodical, criticized Schaff's "romanizing" address. Berg's Philadelphia classis resolved to condemn *The Principle of Protestantism* and what the classis perceived to be its heresies. The Synod of 1845 thoroughly examined the Philadelphia classis charges in a virtual heresy trial, and after four days of debate overwhelmingly vindicated and affirmed Schaff.

Mercersburg Theology

Nevin and Schaff worked together effectively to define and promote their "Mercersburg Theology" and to train in it ministers for the Reformed Church (see LTH 4:88,90). In 1846:

- Nevin published *Mystical Presence*, in which he advocated for Calvin's view of the sacrament over Zwingli's. Nevin affirmed that the sacrament is not just commemorative or figurative. but has objective force. He also affirmed the "spiritual real presence" of Christ was received through faith by the receiver of communion.
- Schaff presented his understanding of the organic development of the church in *What Is Church History?*
- Seminary classes were canceled on Good Friday and worship services held – the beginning of greater acknowledgment of the Church Year.

Nevin and Schaff continued writing against individualistic religion and for a corporate and developmental understanding of the church (see LTH 3:27,28) and

³Berg withdrew from the German Reformed Church in 1852, joined the Dutch Reformed Church, and taught at their seminary in New Brunswick, N.J.

in 1849 Nevin began publishing the *Mercersburg Review*, which he edited for three years. Nevin resigned from the seminary in 1851, but continued active in the church and its college. Schaff continued training ministers at Mercersburg until 1863. He accepted a position at Union Theological Seminary in New York in 1870, and transferred his membership to the Presbyterian Church. Former students of Nevin and Schaff succeeded them on the faculty of the seminary for several decades (See *LTH* 4:98). The most significant in promoting Mercersburg Theology was poet and theologian Henry Harbaugh (1817-67), previously pastor in Lancaster and Lebanon, who taught from 1863 to 1867 (See *LTH* 4:96).

Reformed Church in the South On Its Own

The seminary provided Reformed Churches with a steadily increasing supply of pastors sympathetic to Mercersburg theology. Opposition led to schism in one area. The North Carolina Classis withdrew from the German Reformed Church in 1853, “until we are satisfied that said synod has not held or defended the heresies of Mercersburg” (*LTH* 3:29).

The North Carolina Classis approached the Dutch Reformed Church in 1855, concerning affiliation. The proposal became a debate over slavery because three pastors in the North Carolina classis owned slaves. The Dutch Reformed Church said no. In 1857 the Presbyterian Synod of North Carolina proposed union. In this case, as the German Reformed churches would have to replace the *Heidelberg Catechism* with the Westminster standards, and would be scattered into several presbyteries, the classis said no.

The German Reformed Church continued to propose reconciliation with the classis. In 1867 the North Carolina Classis returned to the German Reformed Church.

Liturgical Controversy

Ever since German Reformed churches began using the English language, they had been requesting Synod to provide an English language liturgy. Most favored a translation of the *Palatine Liturgy* with modifications. A committee appointed to the task did not act until Philip Schaff became chairperson in 1852. This committee in 1857 presented Synod with a *Provisional Liturgy* to be used experimentally in the churches. The *Provisional Liturgy* went much further than originally intended and was shaped by the following principles:

1. Continuity with the church in all times and places was expressed through the use of materials from the ancient, medieval and Reformation churches, and several denominations.

2. Congregational participation increased through use of responses and the Creed.
3. Worship, as the sacrifice of the people, focused on the “altar.” The words of worship were to be expressions of praise addressed to God rather than calls to conversion addressed to the people.
4. The Church Year was used extensively, with a lectionary, and collects for each Sunday.
5. God was to be worshiped in beauty, in the words of individual prayers as well as in the drama of the liturgy.

Approved for provisional use, the liturgy received sharp criticism for the following reasons (See *LTH* 4:93):

1. The service was too liturgical and left insufficient room for free prayer.
2. The theology behind the liturgy assumed a high view of the ministry and the effectiveness of the sacraments. The use of the word “altar” for “table” implied a doctrinal change.
3. The questions used in the Confirmation service differed from those mandated by the church’s constitution.

Eastern Synod appointed a committee to make changes in the *Provisional Liturgy* in response to the criticisms. In 1866 this *Revised Liturgy* was approved for use in the churches. Substantially the same as the *Provisional Liturgy* (See *LTH* 3:32-33), the *Revised Liturgy* did make changes to satisfy the constitutional question.

Very few congregations adopted the *Revised Liturgy* in its entirety. However pastors increasingly used material from it in their leadership of worship. Reformed people, many of whom worshiped on alternate Sundays with a Lutheran service in Union Churches, witnessed a similar struggle over liturgy in that denomination. Gradually people of the two denominations became accustomed to a more liturgical service.

Opposition

In February, 1867, opponents of the *Revised Liturgy*, calling themselves “Old Reformed,” developed a strategy: (1) call a general conference of opponents of the *Revised Liturgy*; (2) found a college and teach theology, providing an alternative to the denomination’s college and seminary; and (3) start a monthly journal.

The well attended convention at Myerstown, Pennsylvania, 24-25 September 1867 (*LTH* 4:94), gave the Old Reformed the opportunity to consult and to formulate their position. The *Reformed Church Monthly* began publishing in 1868 (for Old Reformed views see *LTH* 4:89,91,92,95). A committee named by the convention purchased property in Collegeville, Pennsylvania, and in 1870 opened Ursinus College. In 1871 the Old Reformed organized the Ursinus Union to aid new Old Reformed congregations and students for the ministry.

John H. A. Bomberger (1817-90), who had served on the liturgical committee, joined the opposition in 1861 and soon became its leader, serving as president and professor of theology at Ursinus and editor of the *Monthly*. The conflict over liturgy became bitter and personal, as Eastern Synod in 1868 publicly humiliated Bomberger, accusing him of slander and ordering him to retract statements.

The Mercersburg group made efforts to censure Bomberger for teaching theology without the authorization of synod. They also tried to overrule the actions of congregations in supporting Ursinus College instead of the church's college and seminary. However at the General Synod of 1872 the Old Reformed had a majority and these actions were prevented. In spite of the depth of bitterness in this theological war, at no point did the leaders of either side seriously contemplate schism.

Peace Commission

Weary of a quarter century of conflict, General Synod in 1878 created a Peace Commission, which developed a consensus theological statement and presented it to General Synod in 1881 (*LTH* 3:34; See Chapter 12, Part B, Peace Commission Report). General Synod accepted their report and reappointed them a Liturgical Commission. This commission presented a *Directory of Worship* to General Synod in 1884. The *Directory* was a compromise, containing much of the *Revised Liturgy*, without theologically objectionable passages, and without using the word "altar." Referred to the classes, it received sufficient approval to be authorized for use in the churches in 1887. Now the Reformed Church had three liturgies acceptable for use: the *Revised Liturgy* of 1866, the *Directory* of 1884, and less liturgical worship favored by the Old Reformed.

PART B: HORACE BUSHNELL

"The Kingdom of Heaven as a Grain of Mustard Seed," an article in the *New Englander* in the Fall of 1844, contrasted the Biblical concept of growth with

the revival concept of conquest. This article criticized missionary and benevolent institutions (“bustle cannot save the world”) and called for the cultivation of inner piety as the only sure source of Biblical (slow, steady) growth.

The Hartford Central Association asked the author to speak further on the subject, which he did in 1846. This association of Congregational ministers voted unanimously to have the talks published. In 1847 the Massachusetts Sabbath School Society (MSSS) published *Discourses on Christian Nurture*⁴ (LTH 3:17; 5:11). The author, Horace Bushnell, was plunged into controversy that would surround the rest of his ministry.

Raised on a farm in New Preston, Connecticut, Horace Bushnell (1802-76) attended Yale College and Divinity School, and served North Congregational Church in Hartford from 1833 to his retirement in 1858. Like the Mercersburg theologians, Bushnell had been influenced by European romanticism, in particular by Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Aids to Reflection*, and translations of works of Schleiermacher.

In *Christian Nurture* Bushnell argued that a person could be raised from birth to be a Christian, and never need be “converted.” Bushnell’s thesis ran against the whole revival system of the churches. Critics questioned his belief in the doctrine of original sin and the need for new birth. After the storm of criticism arose, the MSSS ceased distribution and returned the copyright to Bushnell.

Bushnell plunged into even greater controversy with his 1849 publication *God in Christ*. Bushnell rejected the “substitutionary atonement” theory in favor of “moral influence” – the beautiful love of God demonstrated in the Cross can move a person to faith. Perhaps most significant of Bushnell’s writings was a long preface to *God in Christ*, titled “A Dissertation on Language.” Bushnell saw words as symbols which could only approximate the reality they represented. All language was therefore limited; no creed was final.

In 1849 charges of heresy were brought against Bushnell. According to the Saybrook Platform, only after the Ministers’ Association arraigned a minister could he be tried for heresy by the Consociation. The Hartford Central Association, after thorough examination, voted in support of Bushnell, 17-3. Conservatives in Fairfield West Association complained to the General Association of Connecticut. The General Association refused to act on their complaints. Fairfield West ministers continued to agitate for four years. In 1852

⁴revised, expanded and republished in 1859 as *Christian Nurture*.

North Church withdrew from its Consociation and became independent, thus removing Bushnell from any possible action against him.

Bushnell, like the Mercersburg theologians, understood the church as an organism, and conversion as a process nurtured in community. Unlike the Mercersburg theologians, he did not become involved in liturgical issues. Bushnell laid the foundation for the development of Liberal Theology.

PART C: THE AESTHETIC IN RELIGION

Romanticism's appreciation of beauty reached local congregations in the Nineteenth Century. Clapboards and bricks were replaced by stone; the straight lines of colonial meetinghouses by gothic arches. Clear glass windows were replaced by stained glass; the light of the knowledge of God by the cloud of the mystery of God. A cross and candles appeared on many communion tables, which in some cases became an altar. The song leader was replaced by the organ. These changes occurred not all at once, but slowly and unevenly.

The Evangelical Synod brought to America the tastes of Nineteenth Century German Protestantism. They used liturgies from the beginning; pastors preached from a lectionary; the Church Year gave structure to life; organs were purchased as soon as they could be afforded.

The Reformed Church battles over liturgy have already been described. Old Reformed Churches opposed all of these aesthetic changes. Mercersburg theologians also prepared hymnals with hymns of every age of the church's history, and material usable with the Church Year. The Reformed Church published *Hymns of the Reformed Church* in 1874. Philip Schaff in 1859 published *Deutsches Gesangbuch*, which was the basis of the Kirchenverein's *Evangelische Gesangbuch*. Henry Harbaugh prepared a songbook for children, and wrote, "Jesus I Live to Thee" (*LTH* 4:97).

Congregational churches slowly adopted innovations. Old South Church in Boston acquired an organ in 1820, First Church of Hartford in 1822. By century's end they were commonplace. Congregational Churches appointed a Committee on the Improvement of Worship in 1886, which reported in 1889. About one-third of the nation's Congregational churches responded to a survey sent out by this committee, and reported the following innovations:

Innovation	% of churches
Have choir	85%
Read Psalm responsively	73%
Receive Offering as a religious exercise	67%
Open worship with Doxology	65%
Say Lord's Prayer in unison	38%
Follow Responsive Reading with Gloria Patri	26%
Frequently use chants	13%
Recite Apostles' Creed	4%
Pastor uses written prayers	4%

The report observed that the use of unison prayer in Sunday Schools had pioneered the way for the churches. The report encouraged these innovations as ways of increasing congregational participation in worship. Concerning the Church Year, the survey found the churches observing the following:

Holy Day	% of churches
Christmas	88%
Easter	100%
Good Friday	21%
Palm Sunday	10%

Children's Day (97%) and Thanksgiving (85%), not part of the liturgical Church Year, were high days in Congregational Churches.

Affirmation of the aesthetic in religion, living in continuity with the church of the past, viewing spiritual growth as an ongoing process, and stillness before the mystery of God, were all characteristics of romanticism. The influence of romanticism was steadily growing in the groups that would become part of the United Church of Christ.