

**EUCHARIST/LITURGICAL RENEWAL
OR JOHN WILLIAMSON NEVIN ON *BEM* E #15**

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This is a particularly good time and place in which to consider Mercersburg Theology and liturgy in an ecumenical context. It is a good time because of these recent publications: *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. III published by the World Council of Churches, *Called to Witness to the Gospel Today* published by The World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and *An Invitation to Action, the Lutheran-Reformed Dialogue Series III 1981-1983*. These texts provide us with a truly ecumenical setting.

This is the year when some denominations are making their official responses to *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*. Presently, both the United Church of Christ and the Reformed Church in America have proposed responses drafted. These will be presented and discussed at their General Synods for approval before being sent on to Geneva. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches very early on in the study guide *Called to Witness* asked, “Should the Reformed churches not use this opportunity to reflect together on their understanding and to share responses with one another?”¹ The Mercersburg Society presents an extraordinary opportunity to do just that: share our responses to *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*.

The Lutheran-Reformed Dialogue and its document *Invitation to Action* have contributed to this sharing by, on the one hand, articulating who some of the American Reformed Churches are, and, on the other, passing on statements from churches a bit closer to home than Geneva. Howard Hageman, President of this Society, once commented, “There has to be a connection between the Congregationalists, the German Reformed and the Dutch Reformed.” I believe that he is correct. The three pages describing the participants in the Lutheran-Reformed Dialogue Series III represent a first step in discovering that connection.

I am going to base my remarks on what the World Council calls “The Eucharist,” The Lutheran-Reformed Dialogue, “The Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper,” and John Williamson Nevin named “The Mystical Presence.” I will take, as my departure point, the suggestion made in the World Alliance’s Call to Witness, “With regard to the Eucharist, special attention should be paid to the role of the Spirit in celebration...”²

That is a very telling and Reformed statement. We all have heard that the role of the Spirit in the Eucharist has been particularly significant for our communions from the days of Calvin. Certainly for Nevin, the Spirit is a critical element in *The Mystical Presence*. However, the Benedictine theologian, Kilian McDonnell, and Jesuit theologian, Edward Kilmartin, have pressed us on this very point.

The World Alliance followed up on its leading question in the Study Guide, *Responding to “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry”: A Word to the Reformed Churches*.

There in Question 36, the World Alliance took up *BEM*’s paragraph E15:

It is in virtue of the living word of Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit that the bread and wine become the sacramental signs of Christ's body and blood.³

Then they asked the succinct question:

Does this say too little - or too much? What is the role of the Spirit, and his relation to the Word, in the sacrament?⁴

The second question is the one I would like to address as being consonant with the earlier question in *Called to Witness*. "What is the role of the Spirit and His relation to the Word in the sacrament?" I will do so in terms of Nevin's *The Mystical Presence*, the Mercersburg liturgy of 1866, and the Lutheran-Reformed Dialogue Series III.

The primary issue is the issue of the real presence. Nevin wrote *The Mystical Presence* in part to restore the 16th century Lutheran-Reformed sense of real presence. He lamented the fact that both Lutheran and Reformed communions "have seriously receded, to no inconsiderable extent, from ground on which they stood in the 16th."⁵

Therefore, I am bold to think that the Rev. Mr. Nevin would be glad to read in the Lutheran-Reformed statement:

Both Lutheran and Reformed churches affirm that Christ himself is the host at his table. Both churches affirm that Christ is truly present and received in the Supper.⁶

Moreover, he would be glad to hear the agreement reached in 1977 in the bilateral statement between the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Roman Catholic Secretariat for Christian Unity. In Paragraph 91 of that document, *Christ's Presence in Church and World*, it was stated:

We gratefully acknowledge that both traditions, Reformed and Roman Catholic, hold to the belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist⁷

I am sure that Nevin would be glad to hear the Reformed Churches' original affirmation of the real presence being affirmed in 20th ecumenical dialogues and statements. But I am also sure that those documents would give him pause, especially the second line in the Lutheran-Reformed statement:

Both Lutheran and Reformed churches affirm...that Christ himself is truly present and received in the Supper. Neither communion professes to explain how this is so.⁸

I am not sure he would agree that neither communion professes to explain the real presence. In fact, I think Nevin tried to explain the real presence in terms of Reformed theology beginning with Calvin. And, furthermore, in his explanation Nevin argued that his was a more satisfactory explanation than that of the Lutheran and Roman Catholic theology he knew.

I don't say this to be belligerent or to stir up old controversies. Quite to the contrary. I mention this to move beyond the polite anti-intellectualism which has hampered the systematic theologies of so many American Protestant churches, building upon the agreements that are now in place. I think we can venture forth to articulate and discuss the adequacy of Nevin's Reformed theology of the Lord's Supper.

At this point, the Faith and Order document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* is most helpful, particularly paragraph E15.

It is in virtue of the living word of Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit that the bread and wine become the sacramental signs of Christ's body and blood.⁹

I believe that the Mercersburg Theology, as set forth by Nevin in *The Mystical Presence*, would dare to profess how this is so. To be sure, we would never say that we can fully explain the only way this can be so. The commentary upon Paragraph E15 in BEM refers to the various attempts made "to understand the mystery of the real and unique presence of Christ in the eucharist." The second chapter of Max Thurian's book, *The Mystery of the Eucharist* masterfully sketches in what some of those various explanations are. We will find the Mercersburg Theology among them. To be sure, we can argue and probably undoubtedly will whether we have read Nevin aright and whether we can live with Nevin's explanation today. Of such is the Kingdom of God. Such debate and discussion is the glory of the Church. In its proposed response to *BEM*, the United Church of Christ recognized this breadth of interpretation of the real living and active presence within its own communion. Certainly today no one claims to have all the answers. No ecumenical theologian would claim any rational explanation exhausts the mystery at the heart of the Church.

However, that does not drive us to pious agnosticism. It does not mean we are simply to go through the motions. We are dealing with a reality to which our Reformed tradition, especially at Mercersburg, is bold to witness. Believing that Christ's presence is real in the Lord's Supper and realizing that there are many explanations of how this may be so, I would offer from the writings of Nevin a commentary on the fact that:

It is in virtue of the living word of Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit that the bread and wine become the sacramental signs of Christ's body and blood.

I submit that there are four key phrases in this statement: "the sacramental sign," "the living word of Christ," "Christ's body and blood," and "the power of the Holy Spirit."

First, "sacramental signs."

For us, "sign" is neither a bad nor a weak word. In contemporary discussions with Roman Catholic and Anglicans where the word "symbol" is popular, it is refreshing to hear someone from the Reformed corner of the vineyard speak up in terms of signs. We need to be careful that we do not let words like "sign" be dismissed as empty or base. The word "sign," in terms of liturgy has very deep roots in the Scripture, especially the Hebrew Scriptures. It also is a strong word in our tradition.

Nevin began his attempt to place the doctrine of the Lord's Supper in its proper scientific form by quoting the 92nd question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, wherein a sacrament is defined in terms of signs.¹⁰

Earlier on in his argument, Nevin quoted the Scots Confession, which condemned the vanity of calling the sacraments "mere naked signs."¹¹ He invoked the Belgic Confession as well that "those signs, then, are no means vain or void."¹² Therefore, when the *BEM* document, paragraph 15, describes the eucharist in terms of "sacramental signs" that is more than enough for us.

These signs are not only not naked, vain or void - they are sacramental. Here Nevin and Thurian come together in a most delightful way. Nevin begins Section 24 of Chapter Three in *The Mystical Presence* with the sentence:

Christ communicates himself to us, in the real way now mentioned under the form of the sacramental mystery as such.¹³

The Mercersburg theologian is saying that the real presence of Christ is sacramental. In one of his most helpful quotations Nevin cites the English Puritan John Owen, to the effect that this sacramental presence is "peculiar," that is, distinct. This sacramental presence is, not "in the hearing of the word," nor "any other part of divine worship whatsoever."¹⁴ That quotation is a straightforward testimony to the sacramental piety of English Puritanism which Mercersburg sought to restore.

Nevin goes on to conclude Section 24 with a statement that goes right to Max Thurian. Nevin concludes that the union of the sacramental mystery "is not mechanical or local, but as the old divines say, mystical or sacramental...."¹⁵

The first thought that comes to mind is, could the title of Nevin's book have been *The Sacramental Presence* instead of *The Mystical Presence*? Are the two words, "sacramental" and "mystical" synonymous for Nevin? I think they may well be; a question worthy of study.

The second thought leads to Thurian. The commentary on Paragraph 15 of *BEM* states that "there have been various attempts to understand the mystery of the real and unique presence of Christ in the eucharist."¹⁶ The second chapter of Thurian's book, *The Mystery of the Eucharist*, delineates the different conceptions of the real presence. One of the six is what Thurian calls the "sacramental conception." Was that not the basic conception of the real presence which Nevin had in mind when he spoke of the sacramental mystery? Were not the people Thurian cites - Cyril of Jerusalem, Tertullian, Ambrose, Augustine - "the old divines" Nevin had in mind when he spoke of the sacramental mystery? I believe so. Isn't it striking that two Reformed theologians, Nevin and Thurian, should both speak of the presence sacramentally?

It would be very fruitful for us to take up Thurian's suggestions and follow them out. When we step back for a moment, and realize "the sacramental conception" came before, what Thurian calls "the realistic conception," "the substantialist conception," and "the Conception of the Mystery of the Concomitance," you realize that Nevin may have been reaching back to the Patristic era, doing an end around the early and late Middle Ages' articulations of the real presence.

By taking up what Thurian calls "the sacramental conception," as set forth in the likes of Cyril, Tertullian or *The Apostolic Constitutions*, we very soon find ourselves involved in a critical

discussion and definition of not only the terms, sign and symbol, but terms such as figure and type as well. You will remember that in the Biblical argument of *The Mystical Presence* Nevin discusses the Second Adam. There he takes up the passages in First Corinthians and Romans which speak of types.

Northrop Frye has reminded us that typology is really a mode of thought that both assumes and leads to a theory of history.¹⁸ The discussion of the sacramental in terms of types is a very fruitful discussion indeed.

Thus, Nevin's sense of the sacramental has a great deal of ecumenical potential. In terms of Nevin and Mercersburg, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry's* phrase, "sacramental signs," is firmly rooted in our tradition and filled with potential.

This brings us to "the living word of Christ."

It is in virtue of the living word of Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit that the bread and wine become the sacramental signs of Christ's body and blood.

At this point, the third Lutheran-Reformed Dialogue's joint statement on the Lord's Supper is a genuine blessing. What is "the living word of Christ" that accompanied by the Holy Spirit's power enables the bread and wine to become the sacramental signs of Christ's body and blood? Our initial response might well be the Words of Institution. The surprise is that in our tradition, as well as the Lutheran's, that is not so. Thus, in its proposed response to *BEM* the United Church of Christ was concerned that Christ's presence not be rigidly associated with one particular moment. Before racing to the conclusion that this statement represents some sort of sectarian religious liberalism let loose by memorialist congregationalists who will do anything to avoid the real presence in the name of a free church polity, consider carefully the Lutheran-Reformed statement on the Lord's Supper, with special attention to Footnote 4. This footnote leads to Luther in a new way. Beginning with the importance of affirming real presence and sacramental union in both Lutheran and Reformed tradition, the note acknowledges the controversy on "the mode of Christ's presence in the sacrament."¹⁹ They then report that "in recent times scholars have approached the problems from fresh and helpful directions." As an example, the work of Lutheran scholar Regin Preter is cited. A professor of theology at Aarhus University, Denmark, Dr. Preter wrote a book entitled, *Spiritus Creator*. If you follow the footnote to Preter's book given in the Lutheran-Reformed dialogue, you come up with this startling statement:

...Luther's concept of the function of the sacramental Word has changed. This change consists in this, that the sacramental Word is no longer considered a special Word of consecration but as identical with the gospel itself.²⁰

The Lutheran-Reformed Statement tells us that one of the new approaches to the debate of the mode of Christ's presence is not to speak of the living Word of Christ as a consecrating Word, but as the Word of the gospel itself. In other words, the living Word of Christ is not a formula or even the Words of Institution, but the gospel itself.

This is the basis of the protest against "magic" heard in the Lutheran-Reformed statement as well as Nevin. In a surprisingly polemical turn of phrase, the same footnote speaks of "the magic of transubstantiation."²¹ I think that the Word "magic" here refers to the idea that when the words are

spoken, a change transpires. Prenter claims for Luther it doesn't work that way. The living word of Christ is the gospel itself, not a magical formula.

For Nevin, "the gospel itself" can be stated in one sentence, "The Word became Flesh."

He begins Chapter 4 of *The Mystical Presence* declaring:

"The Word became Flesh!" In this simple but sublime enunciation, we have the whole gospel comprehended in a word.²²

If asked to find one word that would state the whole Gospel for Nevin, I think I would choose the word "life." In the section entitled "Christianity, a Life," Nevin masterfully moves through the scriptures in a way that it would be most instructive to trace. His exegetical moves in Chapter 4, "The Biblical Argument," are beautiful. He goes from the fourth Gospel to Hebrews, as well as the pastoral and Pauline epistles in a way that is marvelous.²³ The thread that runs through those passages is "life." For those of us whose eucharistic piety is informed by Mercersburg, the Faith and Order Commission could not have chosen a better adjective to describe the Word of Christ involved in the eucharist than the adjective "living."

This does not lead Mercersburg down the primrose path to Von Ogden Voigt. Nevin has too much Westminster Catechism in him for such frippery. He had a very decided doctrine of atonement necessitated by a doctrine of sin. Where Nevin does refer to the Words of Institution in Chapter Three; Section 21, he does so not as a formula to consecrate the elements of bread and wine, but as a way to accentuate the atonement. For Nevin, the telling of words in that famous pericope are not "**This is**," nor the word Max Thurian nuanced so well, "remembrance." For Nevin, the crucial words are "my body broken for you" and "my blood shed for the remission of sins." We are not talking about a celebration of Jesus' life, but the body and blood of Christ "as sacrificed and slain for the sins of the world."²⁴ There never is any question but that for Nevin we "are sinners and as such need redemption." His very definition of grace taken from the 33rd question of the Shorter Westminster Catechism turns on a strong doctrine of atonement.²⁵ All of which is to say that even though for Nevin the Word of the gospel itself is "life," that in no way detracts from a strong doctrine of the atonement necessitated by sin.

Consequently, the structure and full form of a eucharistic prayer is very important for Mercersburg theology because it is in the full prayer that the Word of the gospel itself, the Word of Life, is articulated. That Word needs to be present for Christ to be present. In short, there is no magical zap that comes from certain words. That is where the proposed response of the United Church of Christ is speaking a true word when it states:

We are concerned that this presence neither be identified exclusively with the elements of bread and wine nor associated with any one particular moment in the celebration, but that Christ's presence be understood in relation to the entire eucharistic action.

Therefore, we would, I think, be pressed if the *BEM* section on Eucharist were read in such a way as to imply that the Words of Institution serve as a consecration formula. This would come perilously close to a "magical" mode of presence which the Lutheran-Reformed statement on the Lord's Supper rejected.

It is in virtue of the living Word of Christ...that the bread and wine become the sacramental signs of Christ's body and blood.

The living word of Christ and "the power of the Holy Spirit" that is. To the dynamic of the Holy Spirit, we now turn.

Since the days of Calvin we have been noted for our accent upon the Spirit in the eucharist. As is well known, Calvin sought to avoid an inappropriate realism in the eucharist by stressing the role of the Spirit. Kilian McDonnell understands Calvin's theology as well as anyone I know. He knew Calvin was seeking to avoid the "crassest theological materialism, in which God is summoned by a formula and dismissed by digestion."²⁶ Certainly, Nevin shares Calvin's protest.

However, McDonnell, understanding Calvin as well as he does, asks a critical question. In the end of the day did Calvin not "use" the Spirit?

...the theology of the Spirit as applied in Calvin's sacramental theology is not ultimately satisfactory... One has the impression that in a theological embarrassing situation the Holy Spirit is called upon as a *deus ex machina*.²⁷

This is a significant critique and one which Nevin himself voiced. Speaking of "one of the three points under which Calvin's theory seems particularly to labor," Nevin commented:

Bound as he (Calvin) felt himself to be to resist everything like the idea of a local presence, he found it necessary to resolve the whole process into a special supernatural agency of the Holy Spirit, as a sort of foreign medium introduced to meet the wants of the case.²⁸

Such comments give punch to the World Alliance's query, what is the relation of the Spirit to the living Word of Christ?²⁹

Here a question posed by Professor Kilmartin is helpful.³⁰ Does the Spirit have an independent mission in the economy of salvation? I think Nevin would answer, "No, it does not." I think he would say that because for Nevin the Holy Spirit is intimately identified with the person of Christ.

Nevin claimed that "the Spirit was never brought near to men before, as now through the incarnate Word."³¹ To be sure, "We read of the Spirit of God, as present and active, in the world, under a certain form, before the incarnation of Christ."³² But that Nevin warned should not be confounded with the relation in which the Spirit has come to stand to the Church after the Word became flesh.

When speaking of the relation in which the Spirit stands to the Church, the resurrection is decisive. Here distinctions may be drawn between resurrection, exaltation and glorification language. Nevin turns to John 7:38-39 to point out how Christ's glorification "opened the way for the free outflowing of the Spirit."³³

That Spirit is the "very form in which Christ's life is made present in the church, for the purposes of the Christian salvation."³⁴ That Spirit cannot be sundered from the person of Christ. That Spirit is the way real communication springs from the "center of Christ's life" to "the center

of ours.”³⁵ Thus that Spirit is the way Christ is really present in the communion of the Lord’s Supper.

This sense of the Spirit is based on Nevin’s understanding of person. The Spirit is not a mechanical device nor a magical phrase. Rather, it is of the essence. The link between the person of Christ and the person of believers is by the way of the Spirit which is essential to their being.

Therefore, I think we can say that Mercersburg does not “use” the Spirit as a *deus ex machina* coming out of nowhere. The Spirit is poured out in the history of Christ and the Church. Nevin’s understanding of the Spirit is too Christocentric for the Spirit to have an independent mission. The Spirit flows from the Word of the Gospel itself.

This has very real ramifications for the place of the epiklesis in a eucharistic prayer. Thurian has repeatedly observed that the epiklesis can come either before or after the Words of Institution. If it comes after the Words of Institution, as it does in most Protestant liturgies, that signifies the Spirit completing the work of the Father and the Son. That is where it is in the Mercersburg liturgy. That is a way of saying that we know and invoke the Spirit in the context of the history of Christ and the Church. To be sure, that history goes back to the creation. But the heart of that history is in Christ’s incarnation, ministry, death, glorification, resurrection, and exaltation. The Spirit is known in that history as a completion of what was there begun. Therefore, the epiklesis follows the Words of Institution not in any mechanical or marginal way of effecting or bringing about a consecration. Rather, the Spirit provides the link between Christ’s life and our own.

The epiklesis of the 1866 liturgy was an original creation. Nathan Mitchell has called it “a short summary of the Mercersburg eucharistic doctrine.”³⁶

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, send down, we beseech Thee, the powerful benediction of Thy Holy Spirit upon these elements of bread and wine, that being set apart now from a common to a sacred and mystical use, they may exhibit and represent to us with the effect of Body and Blood of Thy Son, Jesus Christ; so that in the use of them we may be made, through the power of the Holy Ghost, to partake really and truly of His blessed life, whereby only we can be saved from death, and raised to immortality at the last day.

There you have a Mercersburg commentary on the words in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*’s paragraph E15:

It is in virtue of the living word of Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit that the bread and wine become the sacramental signs of Christ’s body and blood.

The “sacramental signs” are the bread and wine “set apart now from a common to a sacred and mystical i.e. sacramental use.” The living word of Christ speaks not only of his body and blood but of the word of the whole Gospel: He came that we might have life and that more abundantly. And our partaking “really and truly of His blessed life,” “my life in Thee, Thy life in me,” is by virtue of, that is, through the power of the Holy Ghost known in the Church gathered at the table.

The good news of the Word becoming flesh is founded upon a basic contrast between the world of God and the world of humanity - the light and the darkness. The incarnation bursts forth in the world and the darkness has not overcome it. Together the Word and the Spirit enable us to kindle whatsoever lights we may set upon the hills along the way.

So we sing:

Refresh Thy people on their toilsome way;
Lead us from night to everlasting day;
Fill all our lives with love and grace divine,
And glory, laud, and praise be ever Thine.

FOOTNOTES

1. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches, *Called To Witness to the Gospel Today* (Geneva: World Alliance, 1983), 17.
2. *Ibid.*, 17.
3. World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: World Council, 1982), 13.
4. Alan P. F. Sell, *Responding to "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry A Word to the Reformed Churches"* (Geneva: World Alliance, 1984), 10.
5. John W. Nevin, *The Mystical Presence and other writings on the eucharist* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1966), 28.
6. James E. Andrews and Joseph A. Burgess, editors, *An Invitation To Action The Lutheran-Reformed Dialogue Series III 1981-1983* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 14.
7. Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, "The Presence of Christ in Church and World" *Information Service* 45 (1981), 30.
8. Andrews and Burgess, 14.
9. World Council, 13.
10. Nevin, 176.
11. *Ibid.*, 62
12. *Ibid.*, 63.
13. *Ibid.*, 181.
14. *Ibid.*, 181-182.
15. *Ibid.*, 182.
16. World Council, 13.
17. Max Thurain, *The Mystery of the Eucharist* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmann, 1984), 37.
18. Northrop Frye, *The Great Code, The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 80-81.
19. Andrews and Burgess, 19.
20. Regin Prenter, *Spiritus Creator* (Philadelphia; Muhlenberg, 1953), 138.
21. Andrews and Burgess, 19.
22. Nevin, 201.
23. *Ibid.*, 219-225.
24. *Ibid.* . 178.
25. *Ibid.*, 179.
26. Kilian McDonnell O.S.B., *John Calvin, the Church, and the Eucharist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 168.
27. *Ibid.*, 376.

28. Nevin, 154.
29. Sell, 10.
30. Edward J. Kilmartin S.J., “The Active Role of Christ and The Holy Spirit In the Sanctification of the Eucharistic Elements” *Theological Studies* 45 (1984), 237.
31. Nevin, 174.
32. *Ibid.*, 226.
33. *Ibid.*, 229.
34. *Ibid.*, 156.
35. *Ibid.*, 155.
36. Nathan Mitchell, “Church, Eucharist, and Liturgical Reform at Mercersburg: 1843-1857” (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Notre Dame, 1978), 601.

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