

**TOWARDS A COMMON EXPRESSION OF THE APOSTOLIC FAITH:
NEVIN'S RECOGNITION
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When attempting to describe John Williamson Nevin, the "Master of Mercersburg," many vivid adjectives come to mind. I would speculate, however, that neither friend nor foe, historian nor contemporary, would dare characterize Nevin as indecisive or wishy-washy. Yet, if he were asked whether or not the Apostles' Creed was apostolic in heritage, he would respond unequivocally with a yes and a no.

The Apostles' Creed was not apostolic (according to Nevin) in the sense that it was penned by one or all of the Twelve. As an early practitioner of historical criticism, Nevin acknowledged that the Creed was probably a fifth century production. He was not to be influenced by folklore or popular wishful thinking.

Nevertheless, Nevin believed in the Creed. The Apostles' Creed is of the Apostles fully and genuinely to the extent that it was in essence fashioned under the hands of the Disciples; fashioned in the sense that this document evolved as the symbol of the unchanging faith from Christianity's very beginning.¹ The Apostles' Creed (hereafter referred to as the Creed) is the very substance of the Christian faith transformed into concrete words. Its origin is in the earliest Christian community. It is historical and divine in form.²

Nevin would agree that the structure of the Creed as it is known to us today did not crystalize until the fifth century. Yet, he would argue that it is possible to trace this same kernel of faith which has always been intact. When discussing the distinctive Roman Creed, he states that this symbol was not indigenous to the Roman world: "We meet it not in the Fourth century, as a new thing; the creation possibly only of that age, or the one going before; it is the old baptismal symbol, as all the world."³ Evidence of this "kernel" can be found in the writings of Cyprian when he speaks of a common creed in the sacrament of African baptism. It can be detected in Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen who all refer to a "Christian Rule" when seeking to justify a theological position. Thus, from the apostolic time, we can find a continuous evangelical tradition which in essence has always been in agreement with later credal development.⁴ Never have articles of the Creed been in conflict. Nowhere can we identify interior disagreement. The Creed is not a result of trial and error, but is rather the organic growth of faith's substance.

Certainly history reveals definite additions. Without a doubt we can tabulate numerous written versions, but because the essence of the Creed is divine. It is immutable, regardless of any changes of expression. It has always been complete in itself. It has always been a unit. It has always represented the dignity and authority of the apostolic witness.⁵

The Creed is not based on the scriptures. It predates the Gospels and the Epistles. Its origin comes not from the account of the faith, but from Christianity itself. Between the two there is no rivalry. In fact, the Creed interprets the Bible and the Bible interprets the Creed. The Bible is not to be worshipped. Unlike some popular opinions, it is not the rock of our faith. The only true basis is the person of Christ, and it is directly from the Incarnation that the Apostles' Creed stems.⁶

Let us delve a little deeper to discover what Nevin means. The Creed is not a lot of things. It is not a theory of religion. A Creed is not a catechism, or a summary of Christian Doctrine.⁷ Neither is it what we think of as a private confession, for it is not the result of an intellectual process or of personal reflection. The Creed was not cranked out by one incredibly precocious person as was the Declaration of Independence created by Thomas Jefferson.⁸ On the other hand, it was not the consensus of a committee, a world council or a convention. There is no proof, no date, no means of pinning down its origin. For Nevin, this fact was a strength and not a weakness. It led him to his conclusion of what the Creed really is. It is not sent to us by God in stone (as we sometimes envision Moses' Sinai tablets), and was not divinely imposed. It is a "spontaneous witness" to the theophany; a reaction to a presence surely known.⁹ That's what faith is. Faith is the ability to perceive those things unseen. It is true and certain knowledge and trust of God's reality.¹⁰ In a way, faith is to the pneumatic as our five senses are to the world of the concrete. Faith, like sensory perception, needs no intermediary.

Consider this example. Dinosaurs are extinct. Yet by scientific research we can be sure that dinosaurs were once a part of the earth's reality. We can track their footprints. We can collect their bones. With the help of research and artists we can get a pretty good idea of their habits, their size, their skin tones. We can process all the evidence intellectually and be sure of their prehistoric existence. Thus, we can say we believe in dinosaurs. Belief differs from experience, however, as when we look at a table, or taste a cool drink. Our senses enable us instantly to apprehend without any previous rational processing. We know that the table is real. We can touch. We can see.

Faith, according to Nevin, can be more easily likened to sensation than it can be to belief. For faith is the ability to apprehend the supernatural instantaneously.

What then does this have to do with the Apostles' Creed? According to Nevin, everything. The Creed of the Apostles, along with the great catholic creeds, is faith in its pure, simple, unadulterated form. It is not mere belief. It begins with the Incarnation, the presence of Christ, the Word becomes Flesh, God materialized. It captures in the form of words both the human and the divine essence of our Blessed Lord. Faith is the means by which we are able to recognize in Jesus, the Christ. The utterance of that faith is contained in the Creed.

The confession of Peter is the first place we can see the Creed take shape. Peter's conviction that "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God"¹² was not reached by what he could deduct, surmise, hear or see. Others could see Jesus as clearly as he. Peter's confession is not a theological dissertation. It is a compulsive, overwhelming response to Christ's presence. It is enlightenment. It is awareness of a glorious reality. By the gift of faith, Christ was perceived. "For," Jesus said, "flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father, who is in heaven."¹³ Faith is not concocted. It is received.

Nevin's understanding of Peter and the rock, I find extremely interesting. He contends that it was not the person of Peter that Jesus referred to as the rock and upon which He intended to build his Church, but the rock was Peter's confession. It was perception of the Incarnation, i.e. the Creed. From this point flows, all aspects of the Christian life and all forms of Christian theology.¹⁴ Although, within time, Peter was sure to grow in his understanding, as well as his ability to grasp the divine, his initial confession was "in its own nature universal and complete."¹⁵ The truth in Peter's confession is not lessened by the later development of the Creed.

Out of the fact of the Incarnation grows our apprehension of the Trinity. It is through our meeting with God the Son that our exposure to God the Creator and God the Spirit gains true dimension. This is not to say that the Second Person of the Trinity predates or has greater standing among the Three. It does affirm, however, that through Christ we come to experience revelation more perfectly. For we will only know the love of God when we can know God personally. Christ's baptismal formula (found in Matthew 28:19), therefore, is the logical outgrowth of the Incarnational reality. And each of these articles, while sufficiently complete in itself, cannot be taken separately.¹⁶

The Creed as we have received it today is the orderly outgrowth of the incarnational reality, of the confession of Peter, of the baptismal decree. Because it is founded in the Incarnation, it is not just any theological document. It is historical. It is spatial. It is growing. Because it is founded in the Incarnation of Christ it is sacramental, catholic and perfect.¹⁷

One of the issues facing the nineteenth century Church, which indeed is still being raised today, is: Is this symbol outdated, restrictive or limited at least in some of its terminology and articles? To this accusation Nevin would bristle and say, "The Creed can't be improved or altered."¹⁸ It must be one not many. Every article is a truth unto itself. You don't tamper with the perfect. Yet our ability to digest its meaning can continually explode and grow. That doesn't mean that the Creed says everything there is to say about Christianity. It doesn't mention the doctrine of justification, the inspiration of the scriptures, or a thing about Jesus' words and work, and personality. Nevin would assure us that's O.K. For the purpose of the Creed is not to explain (like a catechism). It is not the same as doctrine whereby we try to adapt the divine to human reason. It states what we believe, not so much how or why. In its brevity, it gives all that is necessary. Its purpose is to bring Christ and Christianity into consciousness; to kindle faith, from faith.¹⁹

So far we have discussed only the Apostles' Creed for that was the king of all creeds, according to Nevin. He did, however, give high regard to the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian. As far as Nevin was concerned these three were the great ecumenical creeds worthy of our adoration. He even went so far as to admit all three convey the Apostolic tradition. Nevin writes:

The title indeed, was by no means confined originally to this particular symbol as distinguished from others; but was applied frequently also to other symbols, that of Nice for instance, that of Constantinople, and the Creed; since with all their differences they were regarded as alike embodying and representing in a true form, the one Catholic faith of the church as it had been handed down from the Apostles.²⁰

In these various creeds Nevin discovered the same substance of the same faith exhibited in the same general form. This consistency in their basic makeup was seen by Nevin as a strong argument for the apostolic seed and the catholicity of the faith.²¹ Unlike the Apostles' Creed, however, Nevin acknowledged the formation of the Nicene Creed in history. He believed it was a conglomeration of concessions from the East which was elaborated to combat the heresy of Arius.²² Perhaps he would have agreed with T. G. Apple who believed the symbol of Nicea pushed the definition of creed to the brink. In spots, the symbol of Nicea appears to be less like creed and more like doctrine.²³

Outside of these catholic creeds, Nevin viewed creedal innovation cautiously. He would be the first to assert that the creed is vital and growing. This growth occurs, however, out of one

central truth, not by accumulation. The form we now use, though, has reached a point of stability. Lest we be deceived, “its stability was not in the outward letter, so much as in the inward spirit. It was written and preserved as one of the fathers (Jerome) expresses it, not on plates of metal or stone but on flesh tables of the heart, by the Spirit of the living God.”²⁴

Acceptance of the Creed will not stifle our taste for theology. On the contrary, it should encourage the quest so long as we always begin with the Creed as the root, the permanent radix. Acceptance of the Creed will not box in Christian freedom. The Creed is the springboard to innumerable possibilities and expressions.²⁵ The Creed doesn’t preclude the dynamism of the Spirit. It helps us to identify and interpret it.²⁶

For John Williamson Nevin, therefore, the Creed is the banner of the faith, the standard testimony, the answer for Churches seeking unity. Had the Reformers ignored the Creed they would have thrown out the baby with the bath water (so to speak). But they didn’t. They sought to formulate no new religion. Their efforts were to uncover the faith that for years had been drenched in garbage.²⁷ Nevin ordered his priorities when he declared to the first General Synod of the German Reformed Church in 1863, “Our confessionalism starts not in the sixteenth century, but in, the first, not in the Heidelberg Catechism, but in the Apostles’ Creed.”²⁸

Can Nevin help us in our goal of “Confessing the Apostolic Faith today?” The issues raised bare some amazing similarities. All seem to understand that a common confession is imperative to unity. All believe our search must center in a great ecumenical creed.²⁹ (Though no one seeks to bind the church to its letter or cultural idiosyncracies.). No camp has an interest in developing a new and independent expression of the faith. And all are committed to seeing the symbol explicated in service, liturgy, and sacraments.³⁰

Of course the most striking difference between Mercersburg and the World Council’s direction is in its choice of creed. While the World Council study has focused on the Nicene - Constantinopolitan Creed claiming that it is accepted most universally, Nevin definitely prefers the simpler Apostles’ Creed.³¹ Also, we find some variance in understanding of creed and scriptural relations.³² Nevin credits the Creed with existing prior to the New Testament.

One helpful tip I believe we can glean from Mercersburg is the distinction made between doctrine and creed. It allows us to zero in on the essence of our faith without getting roadblocked by human diversity.

Of course the most hopeful aspect of this study for me has been sighting the optimism of John Williamson Nevin. Even though he lived in the fire of rampant sectarianism, Nevin was sure unity was possible, yea even probable, if the Church grounded herself in the Creed.³³ Could it be that the work of COCU, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the World Council of Churches project indicate the first step towards realizing the Mercersburg dream? We pray that the “visible catholic, historical, and life bearing Church” may some day soon be a reality.³⁴

FOOTNOTES

1. Nevin, *The Mercersburg Review*, Volume 1, published by the Alumni of Marshall College (Mercersburg, PA: H. A. Misch, 1849) p. 110.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 217.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 117.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 338.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 204.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 203.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 214.
10. *The Heidelberg Catechism*, Question #21.
11. Nevin, *The Mercersburg Review*, 1849, p. 210.
12. Matthew 16:16
13. Matthew 16:17
14. Nevin, *The Mercersburg Review*, 1849, p. 317.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 316.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 323.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 600.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 336.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 111.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 108.
21. Nevin, "Christ and Him Crucified" *A Concio Ad Clerum*, Preached in Grace Church, Pittsburgh, November 18, 1863, at the opening of the First General Synod of the German Reformed Church in America; (Pittsburgh: McMillan Steam Printer, 1863) p. 25.
22. Nevin, *The Mercersburg Review*, 1849, p. 120.
23. Apple, *The Mercersburg Review*, Volume XXIV T. G. Apple ed. (Philadelphia: Reformed Church Publishing Board, 1877) p. 109.
24. Nevin, *The Mercersburg Review*, 1849, p. 110.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 340.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 597.
27. Nevin, *The Mercersburg Review*, 1849, p. 122.
28. Nevin, "Christ and Him Crucified," p. 27.
29. "Report of the Worship Group," *Towards Visible Unity, Commission on Faith and Order*, Lima 1982, Vol. II; Faith and Order Paper No. 113. (Geneva, WCC) p. 42.
30. Geoffrey Wainwright, "Reception of *BEM* and the Apostolic Faith Study," *The Search for Visible Unity*, Jeffrey Gros, ed., (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984) p. 30.
31. E. Glen Hinson, *Towards a Common Confession of the Apostolic Faith Today*, p. 1.
32. "Report of the Working Group," p. 42.
33. Nevin, *The Mercersburg Review*, 1849, p. 344.
34. James Hastings Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961) p. 67.

This article was published in Number 1, Autumn 1985 of the *New Mercersburg Review*, pages 40 - 46.