

**TOWARDS A COMMON EXPRESSION OF APOSTOLIC FAITH**  
**Reverend Harry G. Royer**  
**Pastor of St. John's United Church of Christ Reading, Pennsylvania**

In the conclusion to his third article on the Apostles' Creed published in 1849 in the *Mercersburg Review*, John Nevin called for a return to the common catholic and apostolic faith symbolized in the Creed:

All sound doctrine and true church life, must proceed forth from a common faith there, as their only sure ground, and it is vain to dream of their being prosperously advanced in any other way....The first condition of all sound theology is, active sympathy with historical Christianity, with the idea of the Church, with the catholic mystery of the Creed....What we need... is a general hearty return to the catholic life of the Creed, as the necessary point of departure for coming to a true solution of all church questions. This we believe is something that can take place extensively long before we are able to see at all to the end of the of the perplexing difficulties with which we are surrounded; and that must take place, indeed, before a single step can be successfully made towards their proper practical resolution.<sup>1</sup>

Dare we believe that Nevin's call is materializing in the present project of the World Council of Churches which summons the churches to a recognition, explication, and confession of the common apostolic faith?

I think we may engage in the cautious hope that such is the case. Contemporary documents such as *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, *The COCU Consensus*, and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches's *Called To Witness and Confessing and Confessions In the Reformed Tradition Today* appeal to a recovery, recognition, and confession of the apostolic faith.

This may be a sign that the Church's struggle and quest for "visible unity in one faith and in eucharistic fellowship expressed in worship, and in common life in Christ...in order that the world may believe"<sup>2</sup> is realizing a new state of maturation. We dare entertain the cautious hope that the call for a "Common Expression Of The Apostolic Faith" is a sign -a sign that unity shall be sought, in the words of Nevin, "not as something which results first from the thought and purpose of the vast membership of which it (the Church) is composed," but will arise out of the "ground out of which the membership itself springs, and in which perpetually it stands, and from which it must derive evermore all its harmony, and stability, and activity, and strength."<sup>3</sup>

I use the phrase "cautious hope" purposely. The very direction and focus of the World Council's project will determine whether or not we hope in vain. The conditions are pregnant with possibility as well as with danger.

In this introduction, let us consider (a) the nature of the Apostolic Faith project, (b) the possibility and danger alive within the project, and (c) insights we may receive from Mercersburg.

**THE APOSTOLIC FAITH PROJECT**

The Apostolic Faith project and growing convergence in our understanding of baptism, eucharist, and ministry are part of the World Council's effort to fulfill its purpose of calling the

church to the goal of visible unity. The roots of this Apostolic Faith project are found in the first meeting of Faith and Order which reported in 1927:

Notwithstanding the differences in doctrine among us, we are united in a common Christian Faith which is proclaimed in the Holy Scriptures and is witnessed to and safeguarded in the Ecumenical Creed, commonly called the Nicene, and in the Apostles' Creed, which Faith is continuously confirmed in the spiritual experience of the Church of Christ.<sup>4</sup>

Geoffrey Wainwright suggests that this is ideal language which looks forward to the time “when we shall be able to confess with one mind and one voice the common scriptural faith to which the classical symbols of the church bear testimony.”<sup>5</sup> The actualization of this ideal, he suggests, has been underlying the work of Faith and Order from its inception. The present project is a response to the 1975 Nairobi Assembly of the WCC which called on the churches to “undertake a common effort to receive, reappropriate, and confess together, as contemporary occasion requires, the Christian faith and truth, delivered through the apostles and handed down through the centuries.”<sup>6</sup>

The project began to take shape through a series of meetings. In June, 1978 a Working Group from the World Council and Roman Catholic Church met in Venice and produced the document *Towards a Confession of the Common Faith*. In August, 1978, the Faith and Order Commission meeting in Bangalore wrestled with the starting point of the study: should it be the classical creeds or the life issues of today? It was concluded that the two sets of data need to be mutually illuminating and the scriptural base or reference for the study should be Ephesians 1:3-14. The title for the project emerged from the January, 1981 meeting in France; while the 1981 meeting at the Orthodox Center outside of Geneva decided that the study should focus upon the original Greek text of the Nicene Creed as the Ecumenical Symbol of the apostolic faith. A consultation in Odessa, Russia, in October, 1981 raised the question of the relationship between the Scriptures and the Nicene Creed.<sup>7</sup> The Commission's meeting in Lima in 1982 reformulated the Nairobi mandate and outlined the three major steps: recognition, explication, and confession. The Lima working group reported:

We are convinced that any real progress among the divided churches toward the common expression of the apostolic faith today will require a twofold movement, towards unity in faith with the early Church, and toward unity in mission with the Church of the future. The word “towards” is important; both movements are actually, from our present divided situation, movements towards the future. Our hope then is that we can initiate a threefold study project, aiming:

- a) to ask the churches to make a common recognition of apostolic faith as expressed in the Ecumenical Symbol of that faith: the Nicene Creed;
- b) to ask the churches how they understand its content today in their own particular situations of worship, fellowship and witness; and
- c) to ask the churches “to undertake a common effort to confess together, as contemporary occasion requires, the Christian truth and faith, delivered through the Apostles and handed down through the centuries”.

We believe that this project will guide the churches to confess Christ in their life, and lead them towards the common celebration of the eucharist where “we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes” (I Cor. 11:26).<sup>8</sup>

The October, 1983 meeting in Rome of the working group produced a fourfold working method:

1. The exegetical task of determining by means of the scriptural witness the Christian faith concerning God, Christ, the Spirit, the Church, the present life of believers, and the world to come;
2. The historical task of tracing how and why that faith came to find expression in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, and of determining the relations between the Creed and other formulations of the faith;
3. The hermeneutical task of reading scriptures and Creed in our present situations in such ways that the one faith may illuminate our contemporary world; and
4. The ecumenically constructive task of finding means and forms by which the faith may be confessed in praise before God and in witness before our fellow human beings.<sup>9</sup>

What is envisaged is not the creation of a new Creed, but “a common frame of reference - including Scripture, tradition, and basic creedal elements - which, within this comprehensive framework., will help us to acknowledge the common ground of apostolic faith”<sup>10</sup> in contemporary confessions, worship, life and witness. The Ecumenical Symbol becomes the standard testimony which directs us to the source of our faith from which all commonality and unity flow. The study project looks forward to a Council of Reconciliation which would be a preparation for a truly ecumenical Council of the whole Church in the future.<sup>11</sup>

### **POSSIBILITY AND DANGER**

The possibility which produces “cautious hope” in us is the possibility that the recognition, explication, and confession of the apostolic faith will direct the Church to the very source from which all Christian faith, life, celebration and witness flow. Thus the hope exists that this project will direct the church to the ontological source of unity: the new Creation, - the Word made flesh.

In recognizing the Nicene Creed as the ecumenical symbol of the apostolic faith, the Church needs to ask: What is the apostolic faith? Where does it originate? How is it expressed, shared, experienced, celebrated? How is this communicated through the ages? Recognition and explication of the apostolic faith involves all that the ecumenical creeds set forth and more!

It is precisely at this point that we discover the possibility and danger. The apostolic faith project offers the hope that the Church will be directed from the letter to the spirit, from the external to the internal, from the form to the substance, from the surface or verbal witness to the very heart and source of her faith and life.

On the other hand, the danger exists that the Church will fix upon the external, the form, the letter, the surface and accept formulas and propositions in place of life-giving faith. In doing so, the Church would miss the very opportunity this project affords.

Mercersburg offers insight at this point. Nevin and Schaff insisted that a balance must be maintained and that the breaking of such balance was cause for the abuses and distortions in the faith and Church.

Nevin understood the Apostles' Creed to be the external symbol of the conscious and immediate response of the Apostles and the Apostolic Church to the fact of the Incarnation, the Word made flesh! Recovery, recognition, and explication of the apostolic faith directs us to this ontological reality.

Nichols points to this in his introduction to Nevin's conclusion to the three articles on the Apostles' Creed and crowns his point by directing us to a Latin motto from Anselm which is printed on the cover of the *Mercersburg Review*:

Most of Nevin's opponents...held a view of revelation as a body of "truth received on testimony" - propositions whose authority was external... For Nevin this contention was a form of rationalism... For him the content of revelation was no body of propositions, but God, his "being, and presence, and glory." A revelation demonstrated by rational arguments was not revelation. "Jesus Christ authenticates himself." Faith was less an assent to propositions and arguments than it was a recognition, analogous to sense experience, of the divine reality. The motto on the cover of *The Mercersburg Review* came from Anselm: "Neque enim quaero intelligere ut credam, sed credo ut intelligam (For I do not seek to know that I may believe, but I believe that I may understand)."<sup>12</sup>

The direction and substance of the World Council's project will determine whether or not the balance is maintained and our hopes are realized or shattered. The struggle is already at hand.

The danger of unbalance is seen in the cries of those who dismiss the project as a short-sighted retreat into classical formulas and doctrines not related to the third and fourth worlds, the women's movement, nuclear threat, and the issues of justice and peace. One United Church of Christ Conference Minister has suggested that he feels these concerns are ignored and that the ecumenical focus upon *BEM* and apostolic faith is a rehash of classical formulas which could produce a union he likened to dinosaurs coming together only to die in the same tar pit.

Hope bursts forth in the signs of those who wrestle with language issues to move beyond the limits of language, and those who see the project directing us beyond written statements. Hans-Georg Link writes:

the "expression" of faith to which the title of the study refers is not limited to written statements: it also includes spoken words and action, the content of what is confessed just as much as the act of confessing itself. Acts of worship and the situations in which people live their daily lives are all part of the "expression" of the apostolic faith.<sup>13</sup>

Hope is to be found in the directions to which the literature points. Faith and Order Paper 100: *Towards A Confession of the Common Faith* states that the call to a common confession is a return to the source, Christ Himself, and

implies a special insistence on the connection between Christian salvation and the realization in our world of a state of justice and peace, abolishing discriminations and thus announcing the reign of God inaugurated in Jesus....The confession of Christ through action is, in fact, the logical outcome

of adherence to the fundamental articles of faith in God the Creator and in the Incarnation.<sup>14</sup>

Hope is also seen in the other project of the World Council - Unity of the Church and the Renewal of the Human Community - which places the classical concern for unity on a broadened horizon with a specific assignment: "to work out the implications of Christian unity in relation to some of the most critical challenges confronting us in the broken communities of the world."<sup>15</sup>

### **INSIGHTS FROM MERCERSBURG**

As the Church continues her quest for visible unity and engages in the process which leads to consensus and a common expression of apostolic faith, the teachings of Mercersburg provide helpful insights and deserve our attention. The themes of Mercersburg Theology sound like the ecumenical agenda and promise to point us in the right direction.

The controlling principles of the Incarnation and the historical development of this new creation through the Church speak directly to the task at hand, for they teach us the fact that true unity rests within and is actualized from the very root and origin of the church.

True unity is not a product of merger or verbal formulation, but the result of the development of the common life and ground of the church, the Word made Flesh, Christ himself. Nevin and Schaff looked to the historical development of the Church of the future which would produce a reconciliation of Protestantism and Catholicism in an evangelical Catholic church. It was faith in this future of the Church, as Nichols indicates, that Nevin and Schaff were enabled to "put up with the, imperfections in the present which would otherwise have been unendurable."<sup>16</sup>

The ontological implications of the Incarnation are realized and experienced through the Church. They are celebrated and realized in the Liturgy and Sacraments. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Mercersburg Theology produced a liturgical tradition which stands in communion with the Church catholic and through which the catholic and apostolic faith and life is confessed, celebrated, and communicated. I wonder if Nichols fully understands the implication of his low-key observation:

The spirit of the movement survived mainly in the liturgy it had molded. The Order of Worship embodied a sense of continuity at once with the Reformation and with ancient Catholicism, along with the characteristic views of its compilers concerning Church, ministry, sacraments. In some congregations it remains to this day the vehicle of a living tradition.<sup>17</sup>

This "living tradition" teaches and celebrates the fact that the Church originates in the Incarnation and is the historical continuation of the life of Jesus Christ. It is through the church that the "new creation which revealed itself originally in (Christ's) person is here made a constant among (us), with all its resources, as a real historical process, reaching forward to the end of time."<sup>18</sup> The event of the Incarnation flows over from Christ to his people. It involves a mystical union. Christ lives in the Church and through the Church in its particular members.<sup>19</sup> In the *Mystical Presence*, Nevin wrote "we do not simply bear his name, and acknowledge his doctrine. We are so united with him as to have part in the substance of his life itself."<sup>20</sup> In "Catholic Unity," he wrote, "whatever the Church becomes in the way of development, it can never be more in fact than it was in him from the beginning... The unity of the Church, then is the cardinal truth in the Christian system.... We are not Christians, each one by himself and for himself, but we become such

through the Church. Christ lives in his people, by the life which he fills his Body, the Church, and they are necessarily one before they can be many.”<sup>21</sup>

This sense of Church and the relationship between Christ and the Church, Nevin maintained, is what we confess in the Creed. And the Creed is “no summary of Christian doctrine primarily for the understanding.”<sup>22</sup> It is “what the Universal Church in past ages held it to be, the one only true radix and ground type of Christian faith and doctrine.”<sup>23</sup> It is symbol of the apostolic witness to the fact of Christianity; the “necessary form of the gospel, as this is first apprehended by faith; a direct transcript, we may say, of what the gospel is to the contemplation of the believer, turned wholly upon the Person of Christ.”<sup>24</sup> Allegiance to the Creed for Nevin was not subscription to rationalized doctrine, but communion with the apostolic witness and the catholic Church through the ages.

The Creed directs us to the source of our life and unity. It is not surprising that the heirs of Mercersburg should look to the ecumenical developments with hope and wonder whether the tasks at hand might bring recovery and progress as the Church seeks to actualize in visible unity her catholic and apostolic faith and life.

The first step in the apostolic faith projects calls us to a common recognition of the apostolic faith as expressed in the ecumenical symbol. Let us turn our attention to a closer examination of Nevin’s recognition.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. John Williamson Nevin, “The Apostles’ Creed”, *Mercersburg Review*, Vol. I, 1849, pp. 344-346.
2. “Report of The Working Group,” *Towards Visible Unity, Commission on Faith and Order*, Lima, 1982, Vol. II, Faith and Order Paper, No. 113 (Geneva: WCC), p. 28.
3. Nevin, “Catholic Unity,” *The Mercersburg Theology*, James H. Nichols, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 36.
4. Geoffrey Wainwright, “Reception of BEM and The Apostolic Faith Study,” *The Search for Visible Unity*, Jeffrey Gros, ed., (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984), p. 28.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
6. Hans-Georg Link, “Staff Report,” *Towards Visible Unity*, p. 3.
7. Cf. Wainwright, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 72-73; Hans-Georg Link, “Confessing Faith Together: Not Just a Matter of words;” and E. Glenn Hinson, “Towards A Common Expression of Apostolic Faith.”
8. “Report of The Working Group,” *op. cit.*, p. 32.
9. Wainwright, *op. cit.*, pp. 75-76.
10. Hans-Georg Link, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
11. Cf. *Towards A Confession Of The Common Faith*, Faith and Order Paper 100, (Geneva! WCC, 1980), pp. 10-13.
12. James H. Nichols, ed., *The Mercersburg Theology* (New York, Oxford University Press: 1966), pp. 308-309.
13. Hans-Georg Link, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
14. *Towards A Confession Of The Common Faith*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
15. “Report of The Working Group”, *Towards Visible Unity*, Part 2, *op. cit.*, p. 134.
16. Nichols. *op. cit.*, p. 28.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
18. Nevin, “The Church,” *op. cit.*, pp. 65-66.
19. Nevin, *The Anxious Bench*, (Chamberburg, 1844, 2nd ed.), pp. 125-126.

20. Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, (Philadelphia: SR. Fisher & Co., 1867), p. 218.
21. Nevin, "Catholic Unity," *Mercersburg Theology*, pp. 40-41.
22. Nevin, "Theology of the New Liturgy," *Mercersburg Review*, 1867, p. 34.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

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