

# JOHN WILLIAMSON NEVIN'S *THE ANXIOUS BENCH* AND EVANGELICAL PARTY

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## INTRODUCTION

John Williamson Nevin was one of the most important and influential personalities in the German Reformed Church in America in the nineteenth century. He and his colleague, Philip Schaff, were professors at the Theological Seminary of the German Reformed Church at Mercersburg, Pennsylvania. In numerous books, tracts, sermons, lectures, and in the pages of a theological journal, the *Mercersburg Review*, Nevin and Schaff analyzed the malaise of American Protestant theology. In their estimation it possessed a defective view of the church and its sacraments, primarily caused by a faulty Christology. As the progenitors of the Mercersburg Theology, Nevin and Schaff attempted to point the German Reformed Church and the larger Protestant community toward a better way. Their critique of American Protestantism and their suggestions for its reform deserved a wider audience.<sup>1</sup>

Nevin's tract, *The Anxious Bench*, first published in 1843, and in a revised and enlarged second edition in 1844, represented his opening attack on the popular Protestantism of his day. The book created considerable controversy, especially among the German Reformed and Lutherans, and was considered by some to mark the beginning of a new epoch in the history of the German Reformed Church. Theodore Appel observed, "the publication of the *Anxious Bench* in 1843 was a turning point in the history of the Reformed Church which determined in a large degree its subsequent history."<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to describe the circumstances which prompted Nevin to publish *The Anxious Bench*, to trace the main lines of its argument, and to raise the question of its pertinence to our time.

## REVIVALISM AND THE "NEW MEASURES"

The early nineteenth century in America was characterized by a wave of religious excitement which swept across the young nation. Since it appeared in many places almost simultaneously, its exact origin is difficult to chart.<sup>3</sup> Its similarity to the great religious "Awakening" of nearly a century earlier led people to call it the Second Great Awakening. Like its predecessor, the Second Great Awakening placed great emphasis on a transforming personal experience of God's grace and reconciliation. It was expected that sinners would be sensitized to their wickedness, encouraged to trust in God's deliverance through faith in Christ, and be overpowered by the personal assurance of divine salvation. In countless camp meetings and revivals the wayward experienced conversion. Unlike the earlier Awakening, however, where the proponents seemed somewhat content to wait for the working of God to change the sinner, the advocates of the Second Great Awakening created and utilized tactics called "new measures" which were designed to expedite the conversion of the unregenerate.<sup>4</sup>

Probably the best known promoter of "new measures" revivalism was Charles Grandison Finney (1792-1875). Finney, while a young lawyer in Adams, New York, experienced a profound conversion and was moved to enter the Presbyterian ministry. Following a period of theological study, Finney was ordained and proceeded to engage in a notable ministry as an itinerant

evangelist. His unusual success as a traveling preacher, especially in western New York, soon attracted national attention. Invitations for him to conduct revivals were almost more abundant than he could accommodate.<sup>5</sup>

In 1835 Finney published his *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*. This volume clearly marked “the end of two centuries of Calvinism and the acceptance of pietistic evangelicalism as the predominant faith of the nation.”<sup>6</sup> It was also “a textbook on how to promote revivals of religion...[a] perennial classic to which...succeeding generations of revivalists have turned for authority and inspiration.”<sup>7</sup> The volume was designed as a handbook for preachers interested in promoting revivals and converting sinners. In addition to defining what revivals were, Finney advised his readers on the necessity and practice of prayer, how to witness and preach to the unconverted, obstacles to revival, how to instruct the new convert, and the problem of “backsliding.”

One of the chapters in Finney’s book was titled, “Measures to Promote Revivals.” In this section he plainly defined and defended the “new measures” with which his ministry had become associated. He began with a lengthy apologetic statement in which he declared that God had “established no particular system of measures to be employed and invariably adhered to in promoting religion.” Yet, he argued, “there must be some kind of measures adopted” if the minds of people are to be persuaded to attend to the Gospel.<sup>8</sup> Finney then specified a number of innovative measures which were used over the centuries to advance the cause of religion. Just in the area of public worship there were ample illustrations: the dress of the clergy, Psalm-singing in rhyme, “lining” the hymns, choirs, pitchpipes, instrumental music, extemporary prayers, preaching without notes, kneeling for prayer, public prayers by laymen, lay exhortation, and female prayer in public gatherings where both sexes were present.<sup>9</sup> “And who introduced these and other innovations?” Finney inquired. The apostles, Martin Luther and the reformers, John Wesley, George Whitefield, and Jonathan Edwards - all of them accused of producing “new measures.”<sup>10</sup> There were three “new measures” in his day which Finney was especially interested in defending since they were under severe attack: the “anxious meeting” in which each individual present was personally questioned about his or her spiritual condition; the “protracted meeting,” a revival campaign of several days or weeks duration;<sup>11</sup> and the “anxious seat (or bench),” which he described as a “particular seat in the place of meeting where the anxious may come and be addressed particularly, and be made subjects of prayer, and sometimes conversed with individually.”<sup>12</sup> It was the “anxious seat” which forced the sinner to come to grips with the pride and delusion of the human heart. Coming to the “anxious seat” created a crisis of conscience through which the wicked could pass on to the blessings of divine deliverance. In a section which must have deeply annoyed Nevin (if, indeed, he read Finney’s Lectures). Finney wrote:

The church has always felt it necessary to have something of the kind to answer this very purpose. In the days of the apostles baptism answered this purpose. The gospel was preached to the people, and then all those who were willing to be on the side of Christ were called to be baptized. It held the precise place that the anxious seat does now, as a public manifestation to their determination to be Christians.<sup>13</sup>

Finney closed his defense of the “new measures” by observing that the church had never passed through “an extensive reformation” without them. Furthermore, he added,

Without any new measures it is impossible that the church should succeed in gaining the attention of the world to religion. There are so many exciting subjects constantly brought before the public mind, such a running to and fro, so many that cry “Lo here,” and “Lo there,” that the church cannot maintain her ground, cannot command attention, without exciting preaching, and sufficient novelty in measures, to get the public ear.<sup>14</sup>

Although he warned that “new measures” should be “introduced with the greatest wisdom and caution, and prayerfulness, and in a manner calculated to excite as little opposition as possible,” still, “new measures” we must have.”<sup>15</sup>

The spirit of the Second Great Awakening and the employment of the “new measures” affected the life of the German Reformed Church. Not only were a number of its pastors using these revival techniques, but the “new measures” impressario, Charles G. Finney himself was preaching to its people. In 1828 Finney was invited to preach at the Race Street Church in Philadelphia. He later commented that this church was reputed to be “the largest house of worship in the city. It was always crowded; and it was said, it seated three thousand people, when the house was packed, and the aisles were filled. There I preached stately for many months.”<sup>16</sup> There he also made use of the “new measures.” One German Reformed periodical reported on the Race Street revival: “Sinners were urged to immediate repentance and faith, and warned of the awful consequences of procrastination... Arrows of conviction were hurled at the hearts of sinners, and instances of conversion occurred at almost every meeting.”<sup>17</sup>

Soon, despite some vigorous opposition, revivals were appearing regularly in every part of the German Reformed Church. In 1841 the Classis of Maryland celebrated, “copious refreshings from the presence of the Lord,” and noted,

The dead dry bones have been resuscitated from the death of sin and clothed with living beauty. They have become an army of saints in the camp of Israel’s God and many of them are now actively engaged in winning, warming, encouraging, and directing sinners to the Savior.<sup>18</sup>

### **JOHN WILLIAMSON NEVIN AND REVIVALISM**

The revivalism of the Second Great Awakening and the “new measures” touched the life of John Williamson Nevin in several ways. Three of them appear to be of major significance in his assessment of revivalism and the publication of *The Anxious Bench*.

#### **NEVIN’S COLLEGE YEARS**

Nevin first encountered revivalism during his college years. It left him theologically confused because he had been raised with a different understanding of the Christian faith.

Nevin was born on February 20, 1803 in Franklin County, Pennsylvania. His family was Scotch-Irish. He was brought up a Presbyterian and described his parents as “conscientious and exemplary” Christians.<sup>19</sup> Nevin recalled that he was born and reared in “the old Presbyterian faith,” which

was based throughout on the idea of covenant (sic) family religion, church membership by God’s holy act in baptism, and following this a regular catechetical training of the young, with direct reference to their coming to the

Lord's table. In one word, all proceeded on the theory of sacramental, educational religion, as it had belonged properly to all the national branches of the Reformed Church in Europe from the beginning...The system was churchly, as holding the Church in her visible character to be the medium of salvation for her baptized children....<sup>20</sup>

The Middle Spring Presbyterian Church to which his family belonged conducted its ministry with an emphasis on preaching, pastoral visitation, catechetical instruction by the family as well as by the pastor, and the administration of the sacraments. Nevin stated:

It was staid, systematical, and grave; making much of sound doctrine; wonderfully bound to established forms; and not without a large sense for the objective side of religion embodied in the means of grace.<sup>21</sup>

In the fall of 1817 the youthful Nevin was sent to Union College in Schenectady, New York. Although he was the youngest and smallest student in his class, and by his own admission not ready for college, he attained a respectable standing in his academic work and graduated with honors in 1821.<sup>22</sup> Nevin's years at Union were not only critical in his intellectual maturation, but also in his religious development. At Union he had his first taste of revivalism and began to experience the tension between the churchly system of religion in which he had been raised and the revivalism which was becoming more popular.

The celebrated evangelist Asahel Nettleton was invited to the Union Campus to conduct a revival. Although it was not held under the official auspices of the college and was not endorsed by the school's President, Eliphalet Nott, it was supported by the Professor of Mathematics, the Reverend Doctor Macauley and, Nevin remembered,

certain "pious students," previously Christianized *secundum artem*, who now all at once, were found competent to assist him in bringing souls to new birth. Miserable obstetricians the whole of them, as I now only too well remember! For I along with others came into their hands in anxious meetings, and underwent the torture of their mechanical counsel and talk. One after another, however, the anxious obtained "hope;" each new case, as it were, stimulating another; and finally, among the last, I struggled into something of the sort myself, a feeble trembling sense of comfort - which my spiritual advisors, then, had no difficulty in accepting as all that the case required. In this way I was converted, and brought into the Church - as if I had been altogether out of it before - about the close of the seventeenth year of my age. My conversion was not fully up to my own idea, at the time, of what such a change should be; but it was as earnest and thorough no doubt, as that of any of my fellow-converts.<sup>23</sup>

Ill health forced Nevin to return to his father's farm for two years following his graduation from Union. As his health was restored, he resolved to study theology at Princeton Seminary. He was not sure he should enter the ministry, but he believed that the seminary course would clarify that decision. He enrolled at Princeton in the fall of 1823. For the next five years, three as a seminarian and two as a substitute for the Princeton professor Charles Hodge who was on leave in Europe, Nevin experienced an acute theological tension between the "churchly" religion of his pre-college years and his "conversion" at Union. He wrote:

There were in fact two different theories or schemes of piety at work in my mind, which refused to coalesce. One was the New England Puritanic theory, as it had taken possession particularly of the revival system, which was now assuming to be the only true sense of the Gospel all over the country; the other was the old proper Presbyterian theory of the seventeenth century....<sup>24</sup>

He continued,

So it was that I found myself in a sort of strait between these two systems, and knew not how to adjust the one rightly with the other in my religious life. The difficulty was a seriously practical one, and it attended me through all my Princeton years; although my mind, toward the end, began to take in regard of it, more and more, the bent which came to prevail me fully at a later time.<sup>25</sup>

Upon the end of his Princeton years, Nevin was licensed to preach. He accepted an invitation to teach at the recently opened Western Theological Seminary (Presbyterian) at Allegheny, Pennsylvania. From 1829 to 1839 Nevin's position at Western allowed time for theological maturity and a resolution of his ambivalence regarding revivalism of the "new measures" type. His study of the early church fathers, his growing acquaintance with continental theological literature, and deeper consideration of biblical theology and Christology led Nevin to conclude that the popular system of the revivalists was not only defective, it was also dangerous. Later in life he wrote:

Finneyism, as it used to be called, was not to my taste; although I was slow and cautious in my judgements with regard to its exhibitions; because I made large account in fact of experimental piety, and also of religious awakenings in what I conceived to be their proper character. It was not the earnestness of the system that I disliked; but what seemed to me to be too generally the mechanical and superficial character of its earnestness. Its professional machinery, its stage dramatic way, its business like way of doing up religion in whole and short order, and then being done with it - all made me feel that it was at best a most unreliable mode of carrying forward the work and kingdom of God. This was brought home to me with great effect especially by the wonderful revival, as it was held to be, in which the notable Kentucky operator, Mr. Gallagher, figured so conspicuously in the winter of 1835, bewitching all the Presbyterian churches in Pittsburgh for a short time, with what were little better in truth than spiritual juggleries. The condition on which he undertook the work was that pastors should have nothing to do with it, more than to meet by themselves and pray for it; while he should play magnus Appolo in engineering it through all the churches in his own way! ... I just got near enough to him on two or three of these occasions to be well satisfied, that so far as he himself was concerned, at least, the whole business was quackery from beginning to end; and I considered it my duty accordingly to withhold from it my sympathy and confidence altogether.<sup>26</sup>

Nevin was especially appalled by Gallagher's involvement in land speculation and, Gallagher's "memorable sermon on the Christian duty of making money."<sup>27</sup>

By the time of his election to the faculty of the Theological Seminary of the German Reformed Church at Mercersburg in 1840, Nevin's personal acquaintance with revivalism at Union College and his later reflection on it had provided the basis for his attack in *The Anxious Bench*.

### NEVIN AND JOHN WINEBRENNER

A second significant encounter with revivalism, specifically of the "new measures" type, also drew Nevin's criticism and played an important role in the publication of *The Anxious Bench*. It was his controversy with John Winebrenner, the German Reformed pastor who left the church in the 1820s to found the Church of God. In 1842 and 1843 Winebrenner and Nevin exchanged letters regarding the "new measures" which Winebrenner advocated and their tendency, in Nevin's judgment, to create sectarianism as in the case of Winebrenner's Church of God.<sup>28</sup>

The correspondence between Nevin and Winebrenner was the result of an article written by Nevin in August, 1842 in which he alleged that Winebrenner's "sect especially glory in being patrons of ignorance, rail at hireling ministers, encourage all sorts of fanatical unscriptural disorder in their worship, (and substitute) their own fancies and feelings in religion for the calm deep power of faith."<sup>29</sup>

In the charges and countercharges contained in the communications between the two, Winebrenner attempted to defend the formation of the Church of God and challenged Nevin's naming it a "sect." It was the German Reformed Church, Winebrenner said, which deserved the label,

because she is...a sect - and withal a mal-practicing sect. Her mal-practices are, such as Confirmation, Infant Baptism, etc. These are other things, although unsupported by either precept or example in the Bible, are nevertheless rigidly upheld and practiced by her, whilst other things, founded on the authority of both, are discarded or opposed.<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, Winebrenner was forced to deal with Nevin's assault on the "new measures." In his letter of June 29, 1843 Nevin set out as amicably as he could his assessment of the revivalistic techniques employed by Winebrenner and his people:

You must not think that I cherish towards you any personal ill will. I think honestly, you erred in breaking away from the German Reformed Church when you did. Your acknowledged system of religion, practically considered, is to my mind, whether in your hands or in the hands of others, (for under different names it abounds in the country) radically defective and full of danger. In the fire and whirlwind system of converting sinners, I have less confidence the longer I live; I believe four are deceived by it, for every one that is saved.... Such are my views. I not utter them in the way of railing - and it is not necessary at all that in holding them I should hate those who like yourself think differently.<sup>31</sup>

In an earlier letter Nevin had been less inclined to be moderate. He referred to the "new measures" as "sheer fanaticism" and "spiritual quackery."<sup>32</sup> Winebrenner's reply accused Nevin of being "par blind in the things of God" and bitterly stated, "if it really be so, that 'what we consider the life of religion, you hold to be sheer fanaticism,' and 'What we regard as the power of God, you are not afraid to denounce as spiritual quackery,' then may the Lord help you!"<sup>33</sup>

Portions of the correspondence between Nevin and Winebrenner were published in the denominational newspapers of the two antagonists, each paper also publishing comments partial to its respective leader. Nevin was incensed about comments regarding the correspondence printed in the *Gospel Publisher*, a Church of God periodical. In a letter to the *Weekly Messenger* of the German Reformed Church, he expressed his anger about the manner in which he believed his views had been misrepresented and announced a forthcoming book. He wrote:

I mentioned before that I might take up the whole subject of “New Measures,” in a separate publication, without direct reference to Mr. Winebrenner, or “THE CHURCH,” commonly distinguished by his name. I may now add that I have prepared a tract according to this intimation which may be expected to appear under the title of the ANXIOUS BENCH, in the course of a few days.<sup>34</sup>

Nevin’s correspondence with Winebrenner was another spur to the publication of his famous anti-revivalist tract.

### **RAMSEY’S REVIVAL AT MERCERSBURG**

A third confrontation with revivalism also contributed to Nevin’s determination to publish *The Anxious Bench*. Theodore Appel provided a narrative of the event.<sup>35</sup> It took place in Mercersburg in 1842. The German Reformed Church in town was in need of revitalization. Its building was inadequate and its congregational life “forlorn.” That was an especially sad state since the church was located near Marshall College and the Theological Seminary, the denomination’s prominent educational institutions.

It was decided that a capable and energetic pastor should be sought to lead the Mercersburg congregation to improve its ministry and to attract more people to its membership. Accordingly, a number of experienced pastors were invited to become candidates for the position. No one indicated any interest in the pastorate until the Reverend William Ramsey, a Presbyterian from Philadelphia, agreed to conduct Sunday services and to apply for the office. Ramsey was previously a missionary to China and a seminary classmate of Nevin’s at Princeton.<sup>36</sup>

Ramsey’s Sunday morning sermon at Mercersburg was impressive. In the evening he preached to a larger audience and sensed that he should invite “all who desired the prayers of the Church, to present themselves before the altar.”<sup>37</sup> Among others, some of the most pious elderly women in the congregation responded to the invitation. There was “considerable excitement and more or less confusion”<sup>38</sup> as a result of Ramsey’s invitation to the altar. It was clear that he was acquainted with the “modern revival (and) religious excitement.”<sup>39</sup>

Nevin was present at that service and, when asked to make comment at its close, warned the audience not to confuse “outward physical exercises” with “repentance and faith in Christ, which alone could give peace.”<sup>40</sup> While the congregation was generally disposed to elect Ramsey as their new pastor, there were a few with serious reservations. Among them was John Williamson Nevin. Nevin wrote to Ramsey expressing hope that he would accept the call, but candidly informed him that if he did accept it, he would have to relinquish his “new measures” and adopt “the catechetical system.”

When Ramsey received the congregation’s call, he replied that he could not accept it and cited Nevin’s letter as the cause. The incident provoked much discussion and some disagreement

among the members of the church and the students in the seminary. Some were confused by Nevin's discouragement of Ramsey and Nevin's disavowal of those "measures" which they thought would advance the work and ministry of the church.<sup>41</sup>

It was an appropriate time, therefore, for Nevin to make known to the seminarians his views on the "new measures." Since at the time he was teaching a course on pastoral theology, he decided to include some lectures on revivalism. Those lectures were apparently approved by his students and any differences among them caused by the Ramsey incident were reconciled. Nevin enlarged the lectures and published them in 1843 as *A Tract for the Times. The Anxious Bench*.<sup>42</sup> Due to the contention which this book produced in the German Reformed and other Protestant churches, Nevin issued a second edition in 1844 in which he incorporated responses to some of his critics. The analysis which follows is based on the second edition.

### **THE ANXIOUS BENCH**

At the outset of the book Nevin stated that although the focus of his attack was the employment of the anxious bench, his broader intention was simply to use the anxious bench as characteristic of the whole system of "new measures." He wrote:

New measures, in the technical modern sense, form a particular system, involving a certain theory of religious action, and (are) characterized by a distinctive life, which is by no means difficult to understand. Of this system the Anxious Bench is a proper representative. It opens the way naturally to other forms of aberration in the same direction, and may be regarded in this view as the threshold of all that is found to follow, quite out to the extreme of fanaticism and rant.<sup>43</sup>

It was the right time to inquire into the merits of the "new measures" system since, Nevin acknowledged, it had created a crisis, particularly in the Reformed churches in America. If the "new measures" system was permitted to prevail, those German churches would become considerably different from the sound traditions in which they were created and from which they had drawn their life.

Nevin admitted that assailing the "new measures" was risky because many claimed that they were helpful to religion and proceeded from the work of the Holy Spirit. Others held that if the "new measures" were not "positively helpful to the Spirit's work," they were at least harmless and tolerable.<sup>44</sup> That was not so, Nevin asserted.

The very design of the inquiry now proposed is to show that the Anxious Bench, and the system to which it belongs, have no claim to be considered either salutary or safe in the service of religion. It is believed that instead of promoting the cause of true vital godliness, they are adapted to hinder its progress. The whole system is considered to be full of peril for the most precious interests of the Church. And why then should there be any reserve in treating the subject with such freedom as it may seem to require?<sup>45</sup>

It was evident that Nevin did not equate "new measures" revivalism with what he judged to be genuine, authentic and legitimate revivals of religion. Of these he observed,

They are as old as the gospel itself. Special effusions of the Spirit the Church has a right to expect in every age, in proportion as she is found faithful to God's covenant; and where such effusions take place, an extraordinary use of the ordinary means of grace will appear, as a matter of course.<sup>46</sup>

Furthermore, certain "measures" which many deemed to be integral to the system which Nevin was criticizing, he found to be perfectly suited to increase "true vital godliness." Protracted meetings may be required, he asserted. Prayer meetings may be helpful. "Sermons and exhortations may be expected to become more earnest and pungent. A greater amount of feeling will prevail in meetings. It will become necessary to have special conferences with the awakened."<sup>47</sup> But these valid "revival measures" were not to be confused with the spurious "new measures."

If Finneyism and Winebrennerism, the anxious bench, revival machinery, solemn tricks for effect, decision displays at the bidding of the preacher, genuflections and prostrations in the aisle or around the altar, noise and disorder, extravagance and rant, mechanical conversions, justification by feeling rather than faith, and encouragement ministered to all fanatical impressions; if these things in the same line indefinitely, have no connection in fact with true serious religion and the cause of revivals, but only tend to bring them into discredit, let the fact be openly proclaimed.<sup>48</sup>

The popularity and apparent success of the anxious bench, often cited by its supporters as reasons for favoring its use, were inadequate justification for its existence. "Who can behold a congregation of Christians wrestling for an altar full of penitent, anxious sinners, and witness the success of such instrumentality, and say, this is ignorance or fanaticism?"<sup>49</sup> asked one patron of the anxious bench. Nevin's reply was brief and bristling:

Spurious revivals are common, and as the fruit of them false conversions lamentably abound. An Anxious Bench may be crowded where no divine influence whatever is felt. A whole congregation may be moved with excitement, and yet be losing at the very time more than is gained in a religious point of view. Hundreds may be carried through the process of anxious bench conversion, and yet their last state may be worse than the first. It will not do to point us to immediate visible effects, to appearances on the spot, or to glowing reports struck off from some heated imagination immediately after. Piles of copper, from the mint, are after all something very different from piles of gold.<sup>50</sup>

To whom did the anxious bench appeal? Nevin answered, to "persons in whom feelings prevail over judgment and who are swayed by impulse more than reflection."<sup>51</sup> He added, "In an enlightened, well instructed congregation the anxious bench can never be generally popular."<sup>52</sup> And what about the preachers who used the anxious bench? Nevin stated, "The general habit of their lives is worldly and vain, and their religion, apart from occasional whirlwinds of excitements in which they are allowed to figure in their favorite way, may be said to be characteristically superficial and cold."<sup>53</sup> Many pastors were unfortunately tempted to view the "old forms" of religion as dead formalism. They were consequently drawn to an unending succession of "new forms" (*i.e.*, "new measures") to awaken sinners and accomplish their conversion. Those pastors were deceived, Nevin sadly noted.

Let the power of religion be present in the soul of him who is called to serve at the altar, and no strange fire will be needed to kindle the sacrifice. He will require no new measures. His strength will appear rather in resuscitating, and clothing with their ancient force the institutions and services already established for his use. The freshness of a divine life, always young and always new, will stand forth to view in all forms that before seemed sapless and dead. Attention will be engaged; interest excited; souls drawn to the sanctuary. Sinners will be awakened and born into the family of God. Christians will be builded up in faith, and made meet for the inheritance of the saints in light. Religion will grow and prosper. This is the true idea of evangelical power.<sup>54</sup>

The “new measures” system led pastors “to undervalue and neglect the cultivation of that true inward strength without which no measures can be at last of much account. This is a great evil,”<sup>55</sup> Nevin wrote. The use of the anxious bench was a sign of spiritual weakness. It was nothing less than religious “quackery,” one of his favorite labels for the “new measures.” Nevin defined “quackery” as the “pretension to an inward virtue or power, which is not possessed in fact, on the ground of a mere show of the strength which such power or virtue is supposed to include.”<sup>56</sup> While the “new measures” gave the outward appearance of divine power, they lacked the inward power to make them effective instruments of God.

Nevin listed four main arguments against the use of the anxious bench. First, it created “a false issue for the conscience.” While the awakened sinner’s mind should be consumed with the issue of repentance and yielding to God, the sinner was distracted by the decision of going to the anxious bench.<sup>57</sup> Second, the anxious bench obstructed “the action of truth” in the minds of the truly serious. Any genuine religious feeling was apt to be overwhelmed by the momentary excitement of coming to the bench. Calm reflection departed and concern for the outward display of approaching the bench swallowed up the essential inward desire for God’s grace.<sup>58</sup> Third, coming to the bench created a false impression that by so doing, one had made “a real decision in favor of religion.” The notion was conveyed that merely coming to the bench could make one a Christian.<sup>59</sup> Fourth, the anxious bench caused “harm and loss to (human) souls.” The distress and excitement it generated in some was inevitably followed by a reaction of delusion and despair when the “feelings” subsided. Others were guilty of pride and vainglory, believing they had “gotten religion” by coming to the bench, though there was little or no spiritual depth to their experience.<sup>60</sup>

While the advocates of the anxious bench (and “new measures”) cited a number of reasons for its justification, Nevin was unconvinced and sought to show the flaws in the principal arguments they offered. In his judgment there was no possible way to vindicate the bench or the system it represented. In fact, he argued, the “new measures” system was founded on a “false theory of religion.”<sup>61</sup> In the final analysis it was,

characteristically pelagian with the narrow views of the nature of sin, and confused apprehensions of the difference between flesh and spirit; involving in the end the gross and radical error that conversion is to be considered in one shape or another the product of the sinner’s own will, and not truly and strictly a new creation in Christ Jesus by the power of God.... The man gets religion, and so stands over it and above it in his own fancy as the owner of property in any other case. From such monstrous perversion the worst consequences may

be expected to flow. The system may generate action; but it will be morbid action, one-sided, spasmodic, ever leaning toward fanaticism.<sup>62</sup>

Nevin set forth a description of a system vastly superior to the system of the bench. It was altogether different from the “new measures.” Included in it were “sermons full of unction and light; faithful, systematic instruction; zeal for the interests of holiness; pastoral visitation; catechetical training; due attention to order and discipline; (and) patient perseverance in the details of...ministerial work....”<sup>63</sup> He called it the “system of the catechism.”<sup>64</sup> It was a more demanding way. “It produces actions and calls for strength to a far greater extent than the system of the bench. It is the greatest and most difficult work in the world to be a faithful minister of Jesus Christ in the spirit of this system; which might well constrain even an apostle to exclaim, Who is sufficient for these things?”<sup>65</sup>

The system of the catechism was based on a “true theory of religion” which in Nevin’s words,

carries us continually beyond the individual to the view of a far deeper and more general form of existence in which his life is represented to stand. Thus sin is not simply the offspring of a particular will, putting itself forth in the form of actual transgressions, but a wrong habit of humanity itself, a general and universal force which includes and rules the entire existence of the individual man from the very start. The disease is organic, rooted in the race, and not be overcome in any case by a force less deep and general than itself.... (With regard to salvation from sin, man) is the subject of it, but not the author of it in any sense. His nature is restorable, but it can never restore itself. The restoration to be real, must begin beyond the individual...Thus humanity fallen in Adam, is made to undergo a resurrection in Christ, and so restored flows over organically...to all in whom its life appears. The sinner is saved then by an inward living union with Christ as the bond of which he has been joined in the first instance to Adam. This union is reached and maintained through the medium of the Church by the power of the Holy Ghost. It constitutes a new life, the ground of which is not in the particular subject of it at all, but in Christ, the organic root of the Church. The particular subject lives, not properly speaking in the acts of his own will separately considered, but in the power of a vast generic life than lies wholly beyond his will, and has now begun to manifest itself through him as the law and type of his will itself as well as of his whole being. As born of the Spirit in contradistinction from the flesh he is himself spiritual, and capable of true righteousness. Thus his salvation begins, and thus it is carried forward till it becomes complete in the resurrection of the great day. From first to last it is a power which he does not so much apprehend as he is apprehended by it, and comprehended in it, and carried along with it as something infinitely more deep and vast than himself.<sup>66</sup>

In this statement Nevin introduced some of the emphases of the Mercersburg Theology which would be developed in his subsequent published works. For the moment, however, he had set forth his objections to the anxious bench and the “new measures” and stated his preference for the “system of the catechism” as the design by which the German Reformed Church could be thoroughly and authentically renewed.

### **THE PERTINENCE OF *THE ANXIOUS BENCH***

Revivalism of the type that John Williamson Nevin attacked in *The Anxious Bench* has continued to be a major force in American religious life to the present moment and gives no indication of having spent its energy. While the anxious bench has virtually disappeared along with certain other features of the “new measures,” the kind of religion which they represented for Nevin has persisted. Dwight L. Moody and Billy Sunday were among its more notable exponents in the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries. Billy Graham and various personalities of the “electronic church” are among its more renowned apostles. They have not merely been at the forefront of an evolving professional revivalism, but have fine-tuned many of the basic techniques which Finney made popular and which have been used in turn by countless other lesser known preachers.

In his classic study of modern revivalism, William G. McLoughlin perceived some of the same weaknesses in revivalism which Nevin had discerned more than a century earlier. McLoughlin noted that,

all too often the...revivalist turned heart religion into anti-intellectualism, humility into self-righteousness, emotion into irrationality, and piety into religiosity or hypocritical posturing. He even made the process of conversion as ritualistic as the formalities of the lukewarm religion he attacked. His revival machinery was better calculated to grind out impressive statistics than to arouse pietistic ardor. Organization and publicity produced an artificial enthusiasm, costly to generate but more costly not to. The revivalist was caught in a treadmill whose exhausting speed he set himself. The churches which periodically endorsed him and put themselves in his more efficient hands suffered his fate, and emerged from each round of feverish activity exhausted. The temporary boost to church morale was generally followed by apathy and backsliding instead of by increased zeal and dedication.<sup>67</sup>

In another comment with which Nevin would have fully agreed, McLoughlin remarked, “Revivals are not articles for manufacture and retail. As pietists have asserted since the beginning of ..Christendom, the virtues of religion cannot be organized. But vices can.”<sup>68</sup>

Nevin’s *The Anxious Bench* sets before us two types of evangelical piety, both of which continue to struggle for our allegiance and that of those around us. His carefully considered assessment may assist us in a fresh understanding and resolution of the theological options available to us.

### **FOOTNOTES**

1. For a detailed description of the Mercersburg Theology, see James H. Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961).
2. Theodore Appel, *Recollections of College Life at Marshall College, Mercersburg, Pa., From 1839 to 1845* (Reading, PA: Daniel Miller, 1886), 331.
3. Winthrop S. Hudson, *Religion in America*, third edition (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1981), 134-135.
4. Hudson, 134-135.

5. For an excellent commentary on Finney's evangelism and the historical context in which it was developed, see the editorial introduction to Charles Grandison Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, edited by William G. McLoughlin (Cambridge, MA: The Belnap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960), vii-lii.
6. Finney, vii.
7. Finney, vii.
8. Finney, 250-252.
9. Finney, 252-259.
10. Finney, 259-261.
11. Finney, 262-267.
12. Finney, 267.
13. Finney, 268-269.
14. Finney, 272.
15. Finney, 273.
16. Charles G. Finney, *Memoirs of Rev. Charles G. Finney, The American Evangelist* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, nd), 245.
17. Quoted in Bard Thompson, *et al.*, *Essays on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1963), 54.
18. Thompson, 55.
19. John Williamson Nevin, *My Own Life* (Lancaster, PA: Historical Society of the Evangelical Reformed Church, 1964), 2. Hereafter this publication is referred to as *MOL*.
20. *MOL*, 2-3.
21. *MOL*, 4-5.
22. *MOL*, 7.
23. *MOL*, 9-10.
24. *MOL*, 22.
25. *MOL*, 23.
26. *MOL*, 125-126.
27. *MOL*, 126.
28. A more extensive treatment of this correspondence is found in Richard Kern, *John Winebrenner: Nineteenth Century Reformer* (Harrisburg, PA: Central Publishing House, 1974), 55-73.
29. Kern, 57.
30. Kern, 60.
31. Kern, 69-70.
32. Kern, 64.
33. Kern, 65-66.
34. Kern, 71.
35. Appel, 316-331.
36. Appel, 316-317.
37. Appel, 317.
38. Appel, 317.
39. Appel, 317.
40. Appel, 318.
41. Appel, 320-321.
42. Appel, 321-322.
43. John Williamson Nevin, *The Anxious Bench*, edited by Charles Yrigoyen, Jr. and George H. Brickner, in *Catholic and Reformed: Selected Theological Writings of John Williamson Nevin* (Pittsburgh: The Pickwick Press, 1978), 18. This work is hereafter referred to as *TAB*.

44. *TAB*, 25.
45. *TAB*, 25.
46. *TAB*, 29.
47. *TAB*, 120., *TAB*, 27, 119.
48. *TAB*, 30.
49. *TAB*, 35.
50. *TAB*, 36-37.
51. *TAB*, 41.
52. *TAB*, 41.
53. *TAB*, 42.
54. *TAB*, 49-50.
55. *TAB*, 52.
56. *TAB*, 46.
57. *TAB*, 59-60.
58. *TAB*, 62-64.
59. *TAB*. 64-68.
60. *TAB*, 68-71.
61. *TAB*, 100.
62. *TAB*, 105-106.
63. *TAB*, 101.
64. *TAB*, 101.
65. *TAB*, 117.
66. *TAB*, 106-107.
67. William G. McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism; Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (New York: The Ronald Press, 1959), 529.
68. McLoughlin, 530.

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