

The Reformed Church and Methodist Revivalism: Central Pennsylvania Perspectives

Two of the most significant confrontations between Methodist revivalism and the German Reformed Church took place within the bounds of the Central Pennsylvania Conference. The first of these was the revivalistic preaching of John Winebrenner and his eventual departure from the Reformed Church to found the Church of God.¹ The second was the development of a formal reaction and response to revivalism that became known as the Mercersburg Theology. This paper presents some background material on the encounter of John Winebrenner with Methodist revivalism and then closes with two excellent accounts from the Reformed perspective: the story of Winebrenner's pastorate at Salem United Church of Christ in Harrisburg prepared by Joseph and Eleanor E. Kelley in 1988, and the story of the Mercersburg Theology prepared by George H. Bricker in 1979.

John Winebrenner (1797-1860) became the focal point of the "new measures" controversy in the Reformed Church when he was called to serve Harrisburg and three outlying appointments in 1820. Others before and after him successfully introduced revivalism into the denomination, but the Winebrenner case was different for two important reasons. First, he carried the distinctives of the new measures (altar calls, the mourner's bench, emotionalism, a clear difference between the "saved" and the "unsaved") to their extremes. Secondly, he began to have doubts about and preach against established Reformed practice and theology – such as "indiscriminating" infant baptism, non-practice of foot-washing, permissible use of alcohol and tobacco, tolerance of slavery, etc.

Winebrenner was greatly influenced by the United Brethren, and he counted their future bishop Jacob Erb among his closest friends. Like Otterbein and the United Brethren (and John Wesley and the Methodists before that), Winebrenner's aim was church renewal and he had no intention of starting a new denomination. He was formally relieved of his last pastoral assignment in the Reformed Church in 1826, but he continued exhorting in homes, meeting with "classes," and preaching at revival meetings and camp meetings.

The final break came on July 4, 1830. In 1826, after the first Winebrennerian congregation was established in Harrisburg, Winebrenner began to

¹ The term "Church of God" will be used in this paper to describe the denomination founded by John Winebrenner and headquartered in Findlay OH. While this was the original name used by Winebrenner, it eventually became necessary to distinguish the movement from the unrelated Church of God founded in 1881 and headquartered in Anderson IN, the like-wise unrelated Church of God founded in 1886 and headquartered in Cleveland TN, and other similarly-named religious groups. For many years the denomination was known informally as the Winebrenner Church of God and more properly as the Churches of God in North America (General Eldership) – and until recently the denomination's legal headquarters were in the United Church Center on Arlington Avenue in Harrisburg. The denomination today is officially the "Churches of God, General Conference" and uses the acronym CGGC.

immerse converts, if the convert so desired. After "reading the Bible on his knees," Winebrenner concluded that the only scriptural baptism is the immersion of believers. Having made this decision, he preached his famous "Sermon on Baptism" and was immediately thereafter re-baptized by immersion by Jacob Erb in the Susquehanna River. Now there was no possible reconciliation with the Reformed Church and Winebrenner's renewal movement became a separate denomination later that year.

Following are selected portions from the Kellys' account of the 1820-23 pastorate of John Winebrenner at Salem Church in Harrisburg and from George Bricker's paper on the Mercersburg Theology. While the explanatory footnotes for these sections have been added for *The Chronicle*, the texts presented are the direct words of the authors.

Reverend John Winebrenner (1820-23)

by Joseph J. and Eleanor E. Kelley,² 1988

John Winebrenner, at the age of 23, preached his initial sermon at Salem on October 22, 1820. His duties involved preaching every two weeks in the log church,³ once every four weeks at Wenrich's (Linglestown), Shoop's (a few miles east of Harrisburg), and once every two weeks at Peace Church on the west shore of the Susquehanna. His salary was set at \$1000 a year.

Born in Frederick County, Maryland, on March 25, 1797, Winebrenner studied briefly at Dickinson College before deciding in 1817 to enter the ministry under the tutelage of Rev. Samuel Helffenstein,⁴ pastor of the Race Street Reformed Church in Philadelphia. A powerful preacher, Helffenstein stressed the revivalist movement in the German Reformed Church. Winebrenner was so impressed that he attributed his "conversion" by "personal experience" to a "regeneration" on Easter Sunday, April 6, 1817. He completed his training on October 1820, and Salem, having heard him preach three trial sermons the year before, was so anxious to get him they elected him to the pastorate on December 16, 1819, by a vote of 43-5. However, Winebrenner insisted on finishing his studies and the vestry agreed to wait.

² Joseph J. Kelley (1914-1990) was a lawyer and served as Secretary of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania from 1968 to 1971. Lifelong members of Salem UCC (Reformed) in Harrisburg, he and his wife Eleanor, who resides in Camp Hill,) have done extensive research on Winebrenner's Harrisburg ministry. The material in this section is taken, with permission, from their book [A History of Salem United Church of Christ \(German Reformed\) from 1787 to 1988](#). Joseph J. Kelley is also the author of several other books and articles on Pennsylvania history.

³ In 1820, Salem UCC in Harrisburg was just a log building at the rear of the present church property. The present structure on Chestnut Street was dedicated in 1822 during Winebrenner's controversially successful pastorate.

⁴ Although Samuel Helffenstein was definitely a "new measures man," he supported both revivalism and traditional Reformed theology in such a way that made him a respected leader in the denomination. His father, three of his brothers, and three of his sons were also ministers in the German Reformed Church. More information about the family is given in a footnote in the next section on the Mercersburg Theology.

The young man lost no time putting into practice some of the things he learned from his mentor. He established a Sunday School, modeled on Helffenstein's, and became active in the Bible Association of Harrisburg, which distributed Scriptures to the poor and oversaw an adult Negro Sunday School, which elected him secretary. He also pledged \$100 from his salary to help Salem build a new brick church, and he conducted successfully a campaign to raise funds from others outside the congregation.

The energetic Winebrenner was soon to clash with his vestry and the more conservative members of the congregation. This climaxed in a festering feud between pastor and vestry. On September 22, 1822, alienation had grown so intense, the vestry asked the Synod of the German Reformed Church meeting in Harrisburg to investigate and offered a list of complaints of "some" members (primarily the vestry).

- He proceeds in the affairs of the church as if there were no vestry.
- He holds prayer meetings called "anxious meetings" where he divides the members into two classes:
 - (a) those who say they experienced a change, and believed themselves Christians;
 - (b) the sinners, who believe themselves "mourning sinners." And during the prayer meetings he encourages groaning thereby disturbing others who might, if the groaning were omitted, receive some benefit. He also allows certain persons during prayer to respond 'Amen! Amen!' thereby drawing the attention of the gazing crowd which usually collect on the outside.
- At a conference meeting on the last Monday of July, he encouraged persons to speak to the sinners, he and Rev. Jacob Helffenstein⁵ and others exhorted and continued until James Officer commenced singing a lively tune, which produced a state of confusion. After that, Mr. Winebrenner called out if any persons wished to be prayed for they should come forward. Numbers came forward.
- He held an "experience and conference meeting" the previous May which began at 7 p.m. and lasted until 4 a.m., at the breaking up of which he said, "This is the way to fan the chaff from the wheat."
- His denunciation from the pulpit towards members and others have caused members to withdraw themselves from the church. Officiating at a funeral, he told the mourners, "If I were to judge from Scripture, the majority buried in the neighboring graves must be in hell."
- He has refused to baptize the children of the members when he had been particularly requested.

Despite the understandable wrath of the elders, Winebrenner had his admirers in the congregation. The Synod appointed a committee to hear Winebrenner's rebuttal, and they met with him and his accusers on October 22, 1822. It lasted from 7 p.m. until 2 a.m. Winebrenner prefaced his defense by stating "a

⁵ Jacob Helffenstein is the son of Winebrenner's mentor Samuel Helffenstein.

great portion” of the charges were untrue.⁶ “There are, however, some facts contained in the paper which, when freed from error and misinterpretation, I am not ashamed to confess.”

He said he did not always consult the vestry because there was no chance for cooperation. The vestry would not attend his prayer meetings in private houses, nor come even if he held them in the church. Furthermore the vestry never invited him to their meetings.

His defense of the groaning in his “experience meetings” rankled the vestry. “I am willing to admit,” he said, “there has sometimes been unnecessary noise. And yet it would be hard to say which have sinned the most – those who attend meetings and groan too much, or those who never attend... unless it be with the gazing crowd. The Lord save us from both extremes.” He claimed “the pious and serious part of the congregation have always been my warm and affectionate friends.”

The committee wearily suggested that both vestry and the ministry forgive and forget, but this Christian solution did not appeal to either of the disputants. The winter of 1822-23 found him still conducting his “experience meetings” and the vestry glowering in resolute opposition.

Despite the original agreement, after two and one-half years Winebrenner had received only \$500 – about half of what the vestry had promised annually. They informed him that his salary had been collected, and he would be retained if he abided by several rules – among them: to preach exclusively at Salem,⁷ not to supply the pulpit with unordained ministers,⁸ to limit prayer meetings to once a week and adjourn them by 9 p.m. Winebrenner refused, saying he was a free man, preached a free gospel, and would go where the Lord called him.

The vestry called a meeting in the spring of 1823 of the male members of the congregation to determine Winebrenner’s future as pastor. The question was put whether he should be fired, and his supporters withdrew before the vote. Only 21 votes were cast, all in favor of dismissal. Two other meetings, on April 23 and May 18, produced the same result.

Still, some hoped for a compromise, and on July 16 members who said they were unaffiliated with either Winebrenner or the vestry drew up some “propositions” which Winebrenner, despite five of the seven points explicitly

⁶ All the charges listed in the 1988 History of Salem Church are not reproduced in this paper, and all the charges listed in the 1822 document were not listed in the 1988 history.

⁷ The objection was not so much that Winebrenner was holding regular periodic services at Wenrich’s, Shoop’s and Peace. The vestry objected to him preaching wherever and whenever he was invited, thus limiting his presence at the main church to which he had been called.

⁸ This is a two-fold reference. First, Winebrenner had adopted the Methodist and United Brethren practice of allowing unordained lay persons to fill pulpits. But in addition, the Reformed Church questioned the validity of any so-called ordinations of both the Methodists and the United Brethren. In their mind there was a question as to whether Wesley had authority to ordain, which shed doubts on his empowering Coke to ordain Asbury. They also argued strongly that Reformed clergyman Otterbein had no right to ordain, and so none of the United Brethren ordinations were valid.

criticizing his past actions, seemed willing to accept. Essentially the recommendations called for “views and modes” common among the denomination, that no supply ministers of other denominations should be invited without the vestry’s consent, etc.

The committee asked the vestry to call a congregational meeting to discuss these points, but was refused. The refusal created some sympathy for Winebrenner, and the committee circulated a petition which 134 members (not all of whom had a vote) signed desiring “that Mr. Winebrenner should be continued and supported by the congregation.” But the vestry held the purse strings, and the petition was rejected.⁹

Still, the resourceful Winebrenner got his friends to urge the upcoming Synod of 1824 to pass a resolution: “That the Harrisburg, Shoops, Wenrich’s and Peace congregations hold an election whether Mr. Winebrenner shall be their pastor or not.” The vestry, now representing a minority of the congregation, countered Winebrenner’s strategy by naming Albert Helffenstein, son the Rev. Samuel Helffenstein, as pastor.¹⁰ At last the Winebrenner matter was settled when the Synod of 1825 sustained Salem’s vestry in the firing.

Winebrenner’s post-Salem years found him involved in disputes on a variety of issues, some church related and others on such topics as temperance, abolition of slavery, and the use of tobacco. He denounced the latter with the intensity prevalent today, but chewing tobacco was so prevalent among his fellow ministers and their flocks, including women and children, that his strident attack fell on stony ground.

Winebrenner continued to preach at Peace Church, but irritated that congregation by expressing “difficulty in the administration of the communion in consequence of so many offering themselves for communion who were in an unrenewed and carnal state.” In August 1826 he was dismissed. But he was still in much demand as a preacher, both in Harrisburg¹¹ and the surrounding communities, and in the even broader reaches of the midwest and south where his revivals and camp meeting drew large crowds.

Complaints were brought before the Synod of 1827 charging him with “throwing away infant baptism and holding camp meetings.” A committee was appointed to hear the grievances, but Winebrenner ignored their citation to appear and in their opinion “he ought not to be any longer considered a member of this body.”

⁹ John Winebrenner was officially terminated by the vestry as the pastor at Salem Church on September 8, 1823.

¹⁰ This was a compromise. While Albert Helffenstein claimed to be “a new measure man,” Winebrenner’s supporters declared he was “too unacquainted with vital religion to successfully fill the pulpit” at Salem. His pastorate was marked with continuing strife, and the vestry finally dismissed him in 1829. When the Winebrenner-Helffenstein dust had settled, most of the new measures supporters were gone and the vestry was able to call more traditional Reformed pastors.

¹¹ Harrisburg had become Winebrenner’s permanent home. It was here he remained, settled and raised his family. He is buried in the Harrisburg Cemetery at 13th and Liberty.

So ended Winebrenner's affiliation with the German Reformed Church. With him went a part of Salem's congregation to form the "Church of God," a name he insisted upon to avoid the term already in use, "Winebrennarians." His plan was for each church to be autonomous, with no synods or other hierarchical structure to interfere. He insisted he did not intend to form a new denomination.

Salem's vestry found vindication for their conservative stand in the writings of Rev. John Williamson Nevin. In 1843 he leveled a fierce attack on the "New Measures" in revivalism, issuing a small book entitled *The Anxious Bench*. Nevin, who was joined by Philip Schaff from the University of Berlin, began the "Mercersburg movement" to bring the church back to the traditions of the founders.

A Brief History of the Mercersburg Movement

by George H. Bricker¹², 1979

John Williamson Nevin was born and raised on his father's farm located near Upper Strasburg, not far from Shippensburg. The family were members of the Middle Spring Presbyterian Church. At the age of 37, in the year 1840, he came to Mercersburg, a village only 15 or 20 miles from his birthplace, to be a professor in the theological seminary of the German Reformed (also known as the German Calvinist) Church. He was a seasoned professor, for he had taught in the Western Theological Seminary of the Presbyterian Church in what is now Pittsburgh. He did not feel as though he was changing denominations. As an old-school Presbyterian, opposed to frontier revivalism, he was going to work among Calvinists of German rather than Scotch-Irish background.

The local Reformed congregation at Mercersburg was small, depending on supply pastors or professors to conduct services and preach. Nevin believed that each congregation ought to have a settled pastor. Therefore he urged the congregation to call a pastor. The Rev. William Ramsey whom he had known while he was at Princeton was called to preach a trial sermon. It was the fall of 1842, just two years after he had come to the campus. Ramsey had preached an acceptable sermon that Sunday evening, but at the end of the service he brought out the anxious bench and issued an altar call in the manner of the revivalists. It is reported that two elderly ladies started front in answer to the altar call, and full excitement of "the new measures" broke over the crowded church.

As the congregation quieted down and the service was coming to an end, Dr. Nevin was asked to speak a few parting words. I can see the somber Nevin with his striking granite features rising from his place and saying that while the

¹² George H. Bricker (1910-1981) was born in Mechanicsburg and is the only ministerial son of that town's St. Paul's Reformed Church [now UCC]. He was ordained in 1936 and served congregations in Johnstown, Waynesboro and Lancaster. In 1957 he came to Lancaster Theology Seminary as Professor of Theology, in which position he served the rest of his days. The following material is taken from a paper read by Dr. Bricker at the Mercersburg Academy on November 4, 1979.

congregation had gotten some good exercise they should not assume that they had progressed in piety. Ramsey was greatly offended and declined the call, the congregation was angry, and the students thought that their professor had gone mad. The excitement of the service was over, but the excitement of the congregation and the whole campus was just beginning.

Many of the students came from congregations where their pastors used this technique, and it was successful. It got people into the church, they loved the excitement, and that had to be “spiritual.” Tradition has it that the students badgered Dr. Nevin in class and he began to explain what he meant by what he said and did. The result was a small pamphlet that he published the following fall, in 1843, entitled *The Anxious Bench*. In his first edition he explained the difference between the “system of catechism” and the system of the “bench” – the former informed by sound teaching and pastoral visitation and congregational discipline, and the latter by a moment of emotional excitement neglecting the real and vital issues of the Christian faith such as genuine repentance and faith.

The pamphlet was decisive, for it allayed many of the fears of the troubled people. But Nevin was not quite satisfied. He had more to say, and so the following year he issued a second edition¹³ with a new chapter in which he outlined for the first time the distinctive Mercersburg doctrine of the Church. He saw the Church not as a gathering of converted individuals, but as a holy mother who imparts the new life of Christ to all her children. Salvation comes through this divine institution whose spiritual and sacramental resources mediate the new life of Christ.

Thus the Mercersburg movement began as an answer to a local church conflict. That was the historical incident that started the movement, but the roots had begun much earlier. While at Pittsburgh, Nevin learned German so that he could read the German theologians and historians. From Schleiermacher he learned that religion, the Christian life, needs to be distinguished from just doctrine and ethics. From Olshausen he learned new methods of Biblical exegesis. While at Pittsburgh Nevin was an active defender of temperance, wrote articles against slavery, defended Sunday Schools and missionary societies. We would call him a social activist. Many of his opinions got him into trouble. He never gave up this emphasis, but he learned to see the church as more than just these things. The incident at Mercersburg was the occasion that made him speak out against what he considered to be the impotence of the church of his day.

¹³ The conference archives has an original copy of this 1844 second edition. Nevin states in the preface: “It may be hoped now that the subject of New Measures will be so examined and understood that all shall come to make a proper distinction between the system of the Anxious Bench and the power of evangelical godliness working in its true forms.” He contrasts the theology of the Reformation, and its Augsburg Confession and Heidelberg Catechism, with the shallow emotionalism of revivalism: “And whatever there may be that is good in Methodism, this life of the Reformation I affirm to be immeasurably more excellent and sound. Wesley was a small man as compared with Melancthon.”

Philip Schaff arrived in America in July 1844. He was only 25 years old and had been called to the faculty at Mercersburg fresh from the University of Berlin and other German universities. He was a member of a small circle of scholars in Berlin who believed that the future of Christianity would be “evangelical catholicism.” Just a month after he arrived on the shores of his new home, he heard Nevin preach his sermon on “Catholic Unity” at Salem Church in Harrisburg. The occasion was a joint convention of the German Reformed and Dutch churches. These two bodies were considering a merger, and Nevin was chosen to give the key address. The central theme was the portrayal of the Church in terms of the metaphor of organic life. Christ is mystically imparted to believers through the ministrations of the Church, especially the Lord’s Supper. The unity of the church cannot be attained by administrative stratagems, but rather by the acceptance of the gift of the Christ. Schaff was overjoyed when he heard such words.

And now the two most creative thinkers in American Protestantism were united on one campus in the little town of Mercersburg. Nevin was not just a professor at the seminary, but he had become president of Marshall College.¹⁴ Both wished to awaken the dormant church which they were serving. Schaff observed that modern Protestantism had degenerated into “unchurchly subjectivism”. He meant a type of religion in which the emotional replaces the sacraments, sound teaching, and discipline – and in which there is a vast proliferation of sects. He looked forward to a new and higher stage of Christianity in which Protestantism and Catholicism would be reconciled to form an evangelical Catholic church. He predicted this would occur in the nineteenth century and among the American people.

Many pastors and lay people did not understand what Nevin and Schaff were saying. Joseph Berg, pastor of the Race Street Church in Philadelphia, and Jacob Helffenstein,¹⁵ pastor of the Reformed Church in Germantown, rallied

¹⁴ Mainly through the efforts of Nevin and future President James Buchanan, Marshall College in Mercersburg merged with Franklin College in Lancaster in 1853 to form the latter city’s present Franklin and Marshall College. The seminary remained in Mercersburg (by one vote) until following the college to Lancaster in 1871 and becoming the present Lancaster Theological Seminary. The Mercersburg facility then became the Academy that it is to this day.

¹⁵ Helffenstein is a prominent surname in the German Reformed ministry. Rev. John Conrad Helffenstein (1748-1790) came to America as a missionary in 1771. He had four sons who followed him into the denomination’s ministry: Samuel (1775-1886) [the mentor of John Winebrenner], Charles (1781-1842), Jonathan (1784-1829), and Albert (1788-1869). In addition, three of Samuel’s sons became German Reformed pastors: Samuel Jr (1800-1869), Albert Jr (1801-1870) [who, of course was not really a junior – but used that designation to avoid confusion with his Uncle Albert], and Jacob (1803-c1875). The Reformed Church on Germantown’s Market Square that Jacob Helffenstein pastored in 1845 was one of the most historic in the denomination, the first building having been erected at the site in 1733. It was in that building that Count Zinzendorf preached his first sermon upon arriving in America in 1741 and his last one before returning to Europe in 1742. It was in that building that missionary Michael Schlatter preached regularly during his 1746-51 American tour to assess the state of the Reformed Church in American – whose subsequent passionate plea led to the arrival of Philip William Otterbein and

around them the opponents of Nevin and Schaff. They accused the Mercersburg professor of Romanizing tendencies and heresy. The Classis of Philadelphia brought before the Synod at York in 1845 a bill of six particulars against Schaff. To understand the issues in the controversy, we must understand the religious climate in America in the 1840's. The Second Awakening had swept over the frontier like a wildfire. Revivalism and sectarianism were consuming fires that to some promised to save the religious life – but to others, to totally destroy it. New brands of Puritanism and Methodism, which stressed the “gathered church” and individualistic piety, were riding high. Anti-Roman Catholicism was militantly expressed both in political and in religious circles.

It was a period of American nativism – and it resented and resisted all foreign ideas from Europe, especially from Germany and England. Revivalism came late to the German Churches, especially to the Reformeds and Lutherans, but it was hard to swim against the popular tide. The Germans respected their heritage, but now they were Americans. Should they not adopt American practices, especially the seemingly successful technique of revivalism?

Finally the Synod voted. Schaff was acquitted, 40 to 3. And so the heresy trial of 1845 did not hinder the creative thinking or dull the pen of either man. Nevin was asked to preach the opening sermon at the Synod meeting in Carlisle in 1846. He chose as his theme “The Church” and his text Ephesians 1:21, “*Which is his body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all.*” The same year he preached this sermon, considered to be the keystone that holds Mercersburg thought together, Nevin published *The Mystical Presence: A Vindication of the Reformed Eucharist*. He declared that the Lord's Supper was at the very center of Christian faith and practice, and the very heart of the whole Christian worship.

If Nevin and Schaff were living today, they would be known as church renewalists. They would applaud our ecumenical efforts and decry our sectarian tendencies. They would not long for the “old days.” They would look for the actualization of the full and glorified humanity of the Christ in our humanity and in the history of the actual church.

other Reformed missionaries in 1752. George Washington worshiped regularly here in 1793. The church was served by Jacob's uncle Charles 1806-1810 and by his older brother Albert Jr. [who followed John Winebrenner in Harrisburg] 1830-37. Jacob Helffenstein served the congregation for 27 years – from 1842 to 1869. But it is not the length of his service in this historic church that is nearly so important as what transpired there during his ministry. That church is now Germantown's Market Square Presbyterian Church. Dissatisfied with the failure of the Reformed Church to condemn Nevin and Schaff and to endorse revivalism, Jacob led the church out of the denomination in 1852 and they remained an independent congregation until becoming Presbyterian (within the Presbyterian faction that embraced the “new measures”) in 1856.