

UCC ROOTS

Remembering our History

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John Williamson Nevin: A Man Unappreciated in His Time

In the early 1800s, revivals and camp meetings became very popular on the American frontier. During this so-called “Second Great Awakening,” popular preachers, such as Charles Grandison Finney, challenged past patterns of worship and theology. He invited people seeking salvation to come to an “anxious bench” at the front of the revival tent. This became known as the “altar call.”

Some religious leaders were troubled by these “new measures,” because they emphasized personal piety and emotion – at the expense of some of the traditions of the Church and its time-tested wisdom.

John Williamson Nevin (1803-1886), a professor at a German Reformed seminary in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, spoke out. He believed that certain elements of the Roman Catholic tradition needed to be preserved and could strengthen American Protestantism. In 1843 he wrote a pamphlet entitled “*The Anxious Bench*,” objecting to the “new measures.”



Nevin was born in near Shippensburg, Pennsylvania. His family was of Scotch-Irish heritage, and he was raised in the Presbyterian Church. He attended Union College in Schenectady, New York, and Princeton Theological Seminary. After a brief tenure in ministry, he joined the faculty of Western Theological Seminary in Pittsburgh. He learned German in order to read the newest theological scholarship coming out of Europe. By 1840, he had become part of the German Reformed Church.

Nevin wanted certain traditions of the Roman Catholic Church to be preserved. He focused on Christian unity and was deeply troubled by the splintering among Protestant groups. His views shaped what came to be called Mercersburg Theology. Unfortunately disputes over how Protestants ought to embrace classic church traditions tore the German Reformed Church apart; and anti-Roman Catholic prejudice distorted his effectiveness.

Yet, years later, the formation of the United Church of Christ in the 1950s, and debates at the Roman Catholic Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, led the UCC to rediscover the important ecumenical insights of John Williamson Nevin.

Contributor: Caroline Dunleavy

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