

**MERCERSBURG  
THEOLOGY INCONSISTENT  
WITH PROTESTANT AND  
REFORMED DOCTRINE**

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Mercersburg theology inconsistent with Protestant and Reformed doctrine by B. S. Schneck

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**B. S. SCHNECK**

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# MERCERSBURG THEOLOGY

INCONSISTENT

WITH PROTESTANT AND REFORMED  
DOCTRINE.

BY

B. S. SCHNECK, D.D.

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Be not carried about with divers and strange doctrines. For it is a good thing that the heart be established with grace.—Hnn. xiii. 9.

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## INSTEAD OF A PREFACE.

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[THE following letter from an esteemed ministerial brother tells all that is necessary to be said in the way of motive for preparing the following work. This letter and its author, therefore, must be regarded as sharing the chief responsibility in an undertaking which, in itself, had no attractions for me in any view of the case.]

“REVEREND AND DEAR BROTHER:

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“Like yourself, I have taken no part in the unfortunate controversies which have been going on for years in our Church. Honestly believing that matters were not so grave and serious as some supposed, and confiding in the oft-repeated declaration that our professors and others were misunderstood, I was led to exercise to the utmost that charity which ‘hopeth all things and believeth all things.’ And so I was even disposed to defend these brethren. In ecclesiastical affairs I also stood by them. Yet I had to acknowledge to myself all the while that in defending their teachings—for instance, against Messrs. Bomberger, Good, Williard, etc.—there was often a want of manly candor and an effort to avoid meeting the weightier points in dispute. Thus, when proofs were furnished from history by those brethren against some of the doctrinal teachings by the professors, those proofs were as often not noticed. When Reformed standards were quoted as against the professors on some of the gravest questions, that was quietly passed by. But when a little flaw in an opponent was thought to be discovered, then there was a loud trumpet sounded in regard to it, winding up with what looked very much like gauzy cunning, by telling the reader that ‘such was the way with every thing which came from that side, and hence it was not worth while to notice the opponents.’ Thus, some Western writer, it seems, had said something in reference to the present or revised Liturgy

(‘Order of Worship’), and called it the ‘new Order of Worship’ (or perhaps ‘New Order of Worship’). That was a life-and-death question! To put the word *new* before the title was an offense of very grave magnitude; and so the Western man is pounced upon with ludicrous ferocity, and duly informed, ‘as in such cases made and provided,’ that if a man does not study and duly know the proper and authorized *title* of a book, he is incompetent to write on the *subject* of the book, or for that matter, I suppose, on any other subject. Now look at it. The *revised* Liturgy (‘Order of Worship’) is the ‘new,’ as compared with the former or first Liturgy by the committee, and has been so called over and over again by its own friends in the *Messenger*, and has been so called even by Dr. Nevin himself, the chief author of the book! (See *Vindic. of Lit.*, p. 51, etc.) Now, such and similar things have all along been noticed by myself and others with pain, but I refrained from dwelling upon them. So also the late effort to cast reproach upon Dr. B., Dr. G., and others, in connection with the conversion of several of our ministers to the Roman Catholic Church, had a most painful effect upon my mind; and several others, ministers and laymen, I found, were impressed in the same way. I looked at it in this way. Here are several men who were among the *leaders* of the Mercersburg theology. They wrote fiery articles about it, and some of them bitter articles against some of the best and most useful men in our Church,—men whom, although I differed from them in some things, I could not but respect and honor. For years it had been believed that those recent converts were traveling towards Rome, but when it was sometimes hinted at, not only those men themselves denied it but our professors and others publicly denied that the theological system of Mercersburg *could* lead any one to that ‘citadel of safety.’ But one and another at last *did* get there, and then they said, frankly and openly, that the teaching at Mercersburg led them step by step thitherward. And when now the opponents of Mercersburg pointed to these confessions (Geo. D. Wolff’s confession, for instance), the professors et al. raise the *mordio* cry of: Our opponents (Dr. B. et al.) are ‘leagued with the perverts’—‘Wolff writes articles *for* the anti-Liturgical men,’ etc. I confess to you,



dear, brother, that such disingenuous treatment, even of *my opponents* as well as theirs, is more than I could stand, and made me hesitate—falter. I now concluded to examine more closely into the merits of the general question at issue, to endeavor to get, if possible, to the bottom of things. I said to myself, You have not *studied* these subjects as you should have done; you have taken things on trust. And I had not fairly gotten into the matter before my paper brought me the bold—I feel like saying *daring*—attacks upon the most precious and consoling truth in the Christian system, and which is so fully and clearly set forth in our Catechism. You know to what I refer,—to the doctrine of the Atonement. . . .

“On further reading, I found that the same antagonism had also been shown against other cardinal truths,—justification by faith, for instance; but not so boldly, more negatively than positively. I began now also to understand the frequent thrusts, innuendoes, and slighting remarks in regard to the *Scriptures* (making an ‘idol of them,’ and saying that, apart from the living minister (priest), they were of no more account than the Koran!); to *doctrines*, etc., as if they were of very little account; and speaking of others, who believe that they are justified by faith, that they believed in what was ‘justification by fancy or feeling,’ and more than insinuating that all real inward operations of the mind were *shams* in a religious way,—the experimental piety, in other words, ‘of reigning Protestantism’ was branded as a ‘false spiritualism,’ as ‘Phrygian Montanism,’ ranting, demented ‘fanaticism’—as an order of ‘nature,’—in short, *bad* as Sinbad the Sailor. . . .

“My heart is full as I write. I think of the glorious truths which you and I have preached, and without which we would not know what preaching was for, or of what worth it was. I think of the dying Christian whom I have seen clasping these truths to his heart as the only balm for his spirit, the only cordial for his fears. I think of the blessed martyrs, not only in Apostolic times, but in later centuries, who, rather than bow down and worship saint and crucifix, chose rather to go to the stake or the fire, warmed within and armed for the ordeal by the *experimental truth* of Christ and Him crucified as a living

power in their hearts; and I rose up from my study-chair, and, whilst pacing the room in the dead silence of night, I solemnly vowed to be bound by personal and social ties no longer in this matter, but, if need be, brave the unfriendly looks of some otherwise dear brethren; for truth is higher than friendship.

“For at least ten years had I waited to find out where exactly those new views would lead us,—ten years trying to understand these brethren, fondly hoping, like not a few others, that the fog would clear away and bring us a brighter day. But the day came not. ‘You do not understand them,’ had been iterated and reiterated until I became wearied with the phrasing. I said at last, ‘Why cannot Dr. Nevin and his pupils write in such a manner that intelligent men *can* understand them?’ We can understand Neander (awkwardly as he often did express himself). We can understand Hengstenberg, and De Wette, and Ebrard, and Dorner, and Nitzsch, and Hodge. We can understand the teaching of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and of the Apostles. Why, then, after a practice of more than twenty years, can these men not write so that other mortals can understand them? If a man has something to say and wants others to know it (without any reserve on his part), he generally can make himself understood. It is said not to be learning, but the *want* of learning, that renders men unintelligible. Dr. Hodge had to say of his old friend Dr. Nevin (on the appearance of the latter’s introduction to Dr. Schaff’s ‘Principles of Protestantism,’ and that was as long ago as A.D. 1845), that he found it difficult to understand him. Surely, if such a man could not, it is not to be wondered at if men of ordinary calibre cannot. If a preacher of the gospel cannot make himself understood, it is usually said, either that the truth is not clear to his own mind, or that he does not venture to speak out courageously what is in him. Is it not so?

“But I think that of late we *do* understand these men tolerably well. When the articles on ‘Early Christianity,’ ‘Cyprian,’ etc., appeared, Dr. Nevin was merely attacking the *form* of Protestantism, pulling down, ignoring (I cannot help being reminded of ‘*Ich bin der Geist der stets verneint*’); then came the attack against the ‘Sects’ (Dr. Schaff called it ‘*eine Sektenschlacht*’), harsh, bitter, as if the pen had

been dipped in bitter fluid: so I thought when I first read it, with all my respect for the writer. Such thoughts as these came into my mind: Doctor, who gives thee authority to strike thy fellow-servant, redeemed by the precious blood of the same Saviour? Is it not the spirit of the two disciples whom the Divine Master rebuked for calling down fire upon their fellow-sinners? And then, art not thou a sectarist thyself? Where is thy apostolical succession, unbroken down to this present? And where is thy 'Church'? . . . Then came the tinkering with the 80th Question of the Catechism, which also at that time affected me adversely. It was pronounced 'unfortunate' that the 'mass' should be called an 'idolatry,' and of course all 'we boys' took up the refrain, according to the German couplet,—

*'Wie die Alten sangen  
Zwitschern die Jungen.'*

Next the 'Creed' had to be tinkered; the Greek word *hades* must be put in the place of *hell*. *Cui bono?* The universal Church, Catholic and Protestant, have used this last term. Every intelligent layman knew its import. Who gave, moreover, a few men the authority to produce a dissonance in the repeating of the Creed? A synodical president must tell us, too, that the Reformers went too far in their work, etc., etc. . . .

"Now, my dear brother, all these things have been much on my mind; and, to bring the matter to the point which is the aim of this long epistle, let me say that I regard it as the duty of *some one* to speak forth calmly, but decidedly and intelligibly, so that all may understand *what are the doctrines of the Church and what are not*. And I have it in my mind to say, you are the person. Your age and experience, your former position as a public man, and your known conservatism, seem to single you out before others to do just this work. Besides, although you were the first man who, twenty odd years ago, sounded the first 'bugle-blast,' as 'Irenæus' lately told us in the *Messenger*, yet you have not taken any part, so far as I know, in the controversies for years. You are known, moreover, to have been the friend personally of our professors; known to have first mentioned, and had proposed through another, the name of Dr. Nevin as professor in our seminary