CHAPTER IX

THEOLOGICAL VIEWS

Dr. Bomberger was a lifelong student of theology. In his large library were found the works of the great theologians of Germany, as well as many of the writings of the English theologians. His reading in theology and church literature was extensive, as is shown by the numerous extended articles from his pen. His own theological views are found in his writings, especially his books and pamphlets, and also in his lectures to his students in the Theological Department of Ursinus College. The following bibliography, beginning with his address at the commencement of Marshall College in 1837 and ending with the address delivered at the dedication of the new building of Heidelberg College in 1886, gives a complete list of his published works:


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4. The Old Palatinate Liturgy. Three articles in the Mercersburg Review, being a translation of a large part of that liturgy together with observations, 1851.


12. The Protestant Theological and Ecclesiastical Encyclopædia. A condensed translation of Herzog’s encyclopædia. (Dr. Bomberger, as editor, had associated with him a number of scholars who translated many of the articles.) Two volumes, Philadelphia, 1858.


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17. Five Years' Ministry in the German Reformed Church, Race Street, Philadelphia, 1860.
19. Articles in the Reformed Church Messenger against the use of the Provisional Liturgy, 1861 and later.
25. Inaugural Address, Ursinus College, 1870.
27. Editor of the Reformed Church Monthly Department in the Christian World, 1877-1879. The same was continued under the heading, The Eastern Department, until December 14, 1882.
28. Address delivered at the dedication of Heidelberg College, June 16, 1886.

The publications that best reveal the theological views of Dr. Bomberger are (1) his articles in the Mercersburg Review, 1849-59, and (2) his articles and pamphlets on the Liturgical Controversy, and his articles in the Reformed Church Monthly and the Christian World, 1861-90. His theological position in the earlier period needs careful study. In the later period his views were distinctly pronounced: he was a Low Churchman and an opponent of Mercersburg Theology.

To understand the earlier period, it must be remembered that Dr. Bomberger entered the ministry before the Rev. J. W. Nevin, D.D., the founder of Mercersburg Theology, had entered the Reformed Church from the Presbyterian. The latter did not show his divergences from the Old Reformed faith until 1844 and later. Dr. Bomberger's ministry began in 1838. His theological professor was the Rev. F. A. Rauch, Ph.D., whose theological position is to some extent revealed in his volume, "Sermons on the Inner Life." But Dr. Rauch knew nothing of the later Mercersburg Theology. As far as his sermons give any hint, his theology was of the simple evangelical type.

It becomes of great interest to see what was Dr. Bomberger's position when later Dr. Nevin formulated the system of theology which became known as Mercersburg Theology. At first Dr. Bomberger seems to have been greatly influenced by Dr.
Nevin; in fact, he was his great defender when in 1853 he wrote his articles in the Mercersburg Review on “Dr. Nevin and His Antagonists.” There he strongly defended him against the charges made by the Rev. J. F. Berg, D.D., and others. He takes up the charges one by one and answers them. These charges made against Dr. Nevin were that he maintained: (1) Tradition is co-ordinate with the Scriptures. (2) The denial of the right of private judgment. (3) The Romish doctrine of the Lord’s Supper. (4) The objective power of baptism, or baptismal regeneration. (5) Justification by impartation instead of imputation; the person of Christ was tainted by sin.

There can be little question, from the tone of the articles, that Dr. Bomberger’s sympathies were then strongly with Dr. Nevin. Another series of articles significant of his theological position at that time were his remarks on “The Old Palatinate Liturgy” as found in his last article on that subject in the Mercersburg Review. His remarks were so favorable to a liturgical service that in 1861, after he had begun to attack the Provisional Liturgy, Dr. Harbaugh charged him with inconsistency, because in 1851 he had been favorable to the liturgy, and in 1861 he was against it. The charge was also made that he had said in 1857, when the Provisional Liturgy was completed, that that liturgy was what the framers of the old Palatinate liturgy would have made it had they been living in our day; yet he afterward attacked this same liturgy. Dr. Bom-
berger in reply to these criticisms made the state-
ment that if he had ever said anything in favor of
responses, baptismal regeneration and sacerdotalism,
he did not mean to do so and now recalled such
statements.

In regard to Dr. Bomberger's theological posi-
tion covering the period from 1849 to 1859, perhaps
the fairest statement to be made is this: Dr. Bom-
berger was in sympathy with Dr. Nevin at that time;
but with this statement several qualifying remarks
must be made. First of all, he was always a Prot-
estant. He had no sympathy with Romanism or
Romanizers. This is clearly shown by what he says
in 1853 in his defense of Dr. Nevin in the article,
"Dr. Nevin and His Antagonists":

"Unquestionably the German Reformed Church
is bound by a most solemn moral guarantee to the
evangelical Protestant church of the land to main-
tain inviolate the sacred treasure of truth, with
which she believes herself entrusted and is acknowled-
ged by others to be entrusted. By the holiest obli-
gations is she pledged not to permit the acknowled-
ged foundations of her faith to be moved or al-
tered." "We think it must be manifest to all that
so far from having given the least occasion for fear
or suspicion, she (the Reformed Church) was per-
mitting herself to be decoyed from 'the old paths
and good ways' of evangelical Protestant orthodoxy.
The true secret of any recent troubles which may for
a season have disturbed her peace is to be found pre-
cisely in her firm refusal to be frightened or frowned
out of those paths." "Let this proof of her firmness,
maintained amid agitations of past trials, be ac-
cepted as a pledge of what may always be confidently expected of this old branch of evangelical Protestantism in the future."

One who writes thus cannot but be a true Protestant, for there is no waver ing in his words. He admitted later that he was mistaken in his judgment of Dr. Nevin when he wrote this, but he did not waver in his adherence to the Protestant faith as did Dr. Nevin in his "Early Christianity" and "Cyprian."

In his booklet "Our Position," which is a sermon preached before the Alumni Association of the Theological Seminary in 1856, he says, "Were we aught else than Protestants and evangelical Protestants, honesty and honor would forbid our continuance in that branch of the catholic church which, as a whole, has continued more firm and faithful than any other, in her adherence to the original principles and customs of the Protestant Church—we mean, of course, old-fashioned, genuine, well-tried Protestantism." While with Dr. Nevin, he was severe against Puritanism, he was, as we see, strictly Protestant.

Perhaps the best explanation of Dr. Bomberger's theological attitude may be given when it is remembered that there were two kinds of adherents of Dr. Nevin in those days,—extreme and conservative. The extremists were led by the Rev. Dr. Gans, who later went into the Roman Catholic Church, Rev. Mr. Hudson, who soon after left the Reformed ministry, and others. But there was also a more
conservative following which later found a leader in the Rev. Thomas G. Apple, D.D. This latter party was distinctly Protestant. The difference between the two types of followers of Nevin is shown in the election and the later passing by of Dr. Gans as Theological Professor. Dr. Gans was provisionally elected a theological professor at Mercersburg after the Tercentenary Celebration, in 1864, but when in 1869 the Eastern Synod was ready to elect another Professor of Theology, it passed by Dr. Gans, for by that time he had become too extreme for the church, and elected Dr. Thomas G. Apple. Dr. Bomberger then belonged to this conservative party, for he never swerved from his Protestantism as did the Rev. Dr. Nevin, who for a period of five years was uncertain about Protestantism, or like a number of followers of the latter who passed over to Rome.

It is also seen that at that time he was a mediating Nevinist,—that is, his state of mind was conciliatory. His aim seemed to be to reconcile Mercersburg theology with Old Reformed theology. In Germany there is always in each theological school a tendency to the right and also one to the left. So here, Dr. Gans went to the left and went Romeward; Dr. Bomberger went to the right and went Protestantward. This appears quite clearly in his book on "Infant Salvation and Baptism." The book had hardly been published when one critic, the Rev. N. Strassberger, called attention to the fact that Dr. Bomberger was diverging from Mercersburg theology. He especially criticized (July, 1860) Dr.
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Bomberger's statement in the book, that all infants were saved. Strassberger, with a strong High Church view of baptismal regeneration, asks, of what use was baptism if all were saved, even those that were not baptized. The truth is that Dr. Bomberger in that book tried to harmonize the Old Reformed view of baptism,—that the children of pious parents were born in the covenant and that baptism was the seal of that covenant,—with the newer Mercersburg view of baptismal regeneration. The Old Reformed view held that children were born in the covenant, while Mercersburg held that they were not in the covenant until baptism. The Old Reformed view held that the covenant existed before baptism; the Mercersburg theology, that the covenant was made at baptism. This book reveals that Dr. Bomberger as early as 1859 was diverging from the extreme views of Dr. Nevin. He thus reveals his irenic disposition in regard to Mercersburg theology by trying to harmonize it with the Old Reformed theology.

Another statement is necessary. It must be acknowledged that Dr. Bomberger changed his views between 1853 and 1860, but this only directs attention to the far more remarkable changes of theological position on the part of his principal antagonist, Dr. Nevin. The latter was first a Presbyterian, then he inclined to Catholicism, and toward the end of his life he leaned to Swedenborgianism. When he entered the Reformed Church in 1840 he was a New School Presbyterian. That was one reason why he
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left the Presbyterian Church, for the Old School Presbyterians were “high in the saddle” at the Allegheny Theological Seminary where he had been teaching. His articles in the Reformed Church Messenger of 1841 on the Heidelberg Catechism revealed that he was an out-and-out Calvinist.* Yet later, after he had formulated the Mercersburg theology, he bitterly attacked that same Calvinism as “Puritanism.” Again he was at first bitter against Rome, as is shown in his review of Berg’s “Lectures on Romanism,” in the Messenger in 1840.† And at first also he opposed baptismal regeneration, and the special presence of Christ’s body in the elements at the Lord’s Supper.‡ Yet later in his Mercersburg theology, he defended all these doctrines. Dr. Bomberger and Dr. Nevin both changed their views, but in opposite directions.

The same fact is true of another leader of the Mercersburg School—the Rev. Dr. E. V. Gerhart. Professor Gerhart, who was later the author of the dogmatics of the Mercersburg theology, was many years before, as Professor of theology at Heidelberg Theological Seminary, Tiffin, Ohio, 1850-1854, an anti-Nevinist. The Rev. Dr. Moses Kieffer told the Rev. Dr. J. H. Good that Dr. Gerhart had at that time considered the propriety of writing a book against Dr. Nevin’s High Church views. Dr. Ger-

* See Dr. Good’s History of the Reformed Church in the United States in the Nineteenth Century, pages 113-115.
† Ibid. page 115.
‡ Ibid. page 116.
hart wrote thus to Dr. Bomberger about that time (July 20, 1853):

"Until within two or three years, I could, whilst condemning Dr. Nevin's unchristian sarcasms and his frequent method of qualification, with a cheerful heart defend our doctrinal position against the aspersions of opponents. I could say 'Dr. Nevin is misunderstood and misinterpreted and misrepresented; he is a warmer and sounder friend of Protestantism than his opponents; and his great labors serve to advance the best interests of the Church of Christ. I could smile at the childish predictions of outsiders, and without any hesitation—what I often did—vindicate his teachings. But now the case is entirely different. I am chagrined and my heart is sad. I do not know what to do. I am under a cloud. No matter how unjust many of the imputations cast upon us have been . . . one thing is painfully true. Dr. Nevin has continued to change and advance (or retrograde, as you choose to call it) until he seriously doubts the whole theory of Protestantism and really sympathizes with the contradistinguishing features of Roman Catholicism and the papacy. Of this I am fully satisfied . . . What the papers say now of the Romanizing tendency of Dr. Nevin is true. Their predictions, whether the result of logical acumen or of a morbid antipopery sensitiveness, have turned out to be correct. The fact is an estoppel to all further vindication. . . . How else but sad can I feel and discouraged too."

He then suggests that a statement signed by all who will, particularly in the East, be published setting forth dissent from Dr. Nevin's views of Rome. But he was not prepared to recommend this course.

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as best. However, he adds, “something must be done.”

Another instance in illustration of Dr. Gerhart’s early position is the following: At one of the general synods Dr. Gerhart found fault with his former students at Tiffin, such as Drs. Klein, Vitz and others, for not supporting him in his Mercersburg theology. They replied that that theology was quite different from what he had taught them when he was a professor at Tiffin. And yet notwithstanding these facts, he later wrote his Institutes of Christian Religion, the most important work of the Mercersburg theologians.

It was therefore with ill grace that Dr. Bomberger was attacked as inconsistent, because he changed somewhat his theological emphasis from that of a conservative, mediating Nevinist to the Old Reformed position that he had held before Dr. Nevin came into the Reformed Church in 1840. Both Dr. Nevin and Dr. E. V. Gerhart were alike inconsistent. And Dr. Bomberger had the better of them, for he was returning to the Old Reformed position, and they were going away from it.

From 1861 on, his opposition to the Mercersburg theology and the High Church position begins to appear. We do not wish to enter into the theological controversy that then so bitterly divided our church. That is now past history. If the reader desires to examine the controversy in detail he may consult the writer’s “History of the Reformed Church in the United States in the Nineteenth Cen-
tury." Suffice it to say that in Dr. Bomberger's later writings, especially in the Reformed Church Monthly, he was a consistent Low Churchman, defending what he considered to be the old doctrines of the Reformed Church. In one of the volumes of that publication (1871, pages 366-370) he gives a contrast between Mercersburg theology and the Old Reformed theology. His statement there of the latter embodied his own views on theology and as such it is here reproduced:

1. Reformed theology is clear and decided—a truly positive theology. It declares plainly and undoubtedly the fundamental doctrines of grace.

2. Reformed theology presents a firm basis of faith and confidence, and begets clear convictions, and a comfortable personal assurance of faith.

3. Reformed theology constantly appeals in support of its doctrines to the Word of God—faithfully and fairly interpreted—and makes all traditions, creeds, and confessions, subordinate to that Word.

4. Reformed theology is unequivocally Protestant, in distinction from all Popish errors in doctrine and worship, and evangelical in distinction from ritualistic high-churchism, and from rationalistic pantheism or atheism.

NATURE OF THE INCARNATION

Reformed theology teaches, so far as the mystery can be explained or stated, that the Eternal Son, the Second Person in the Godhead, voluntarily and graciously took into union with His divine nature a perfect individual human nature, miraculously pro-
vided; that whilst the union between these two natures was mysteriously close, yet there was no fusion of the two, or mixture of them into one nature; and that the Word, thus became flesh, remained as to His Person, one and unchanged, under all the humiliation to which He freely submitted. This union holds only with regard to Him.

THE PURPOSE OF THE INCARNATION

Reformed theology teaches, that the Word became flesh in order to redeem lost man from the punishment of sin, by Christ enduring that punishment, in His Human nature, in man's stead; and to restore man to the favor of God, and to newness of life, through the Holy Spirit.

REDEMPTION APPLIED

Reformed theology teaches, that men are saved through Christ, by their being convinced of sin, by repentance towards God, and faith in the Lord, Jesus Christ. This conviction, repentance, and faith, are wrought, in the heart by the Holy Ghost, through the Gospel; and faith so wrought is confirmed by the Sacraments. All is an immediate personal matter between God and the redeemed. They are justified by faith in Jesus Christ.

THE SACRAMENTS

The Reformed Church teaches, that the Sacraments are divinely appointed signs and seals of grace to those who are in Christ, by which the blessings of redemption in Him are more fully declared and confirmed to them.

BAPTISM

Reformed theology teaches, that Baptism is an external washing with water, appointed by Christ to assure us of the certainty of the forgiveness of
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sin for the sake of His blood, and of our renewal by the Holy Ghost, if we heartily repent, and believe in Jesus Christ as our only Saviour. In regard to Infant Baptism, we are told that it does not make our children Christians, but recognizes and confirms—Sacramentally—their part in the covenant of grace.

THE LORD'S SUPPER
Reformed theology teaches, that the Holy Supper of our Lord is designed to be a sacred and blessed commemoration of the one sacrifice of Christ upon the cross for our redemption—a certain assurance of the efficacy of His passion for every one who heartily believes in Him—and a cheering pledge of our saving interest in His atonement, and of His supplying us with all things needful to our final salvation. Christ is present spiritually in the Supper to all who believe, by virtue of His Godhead. His human nature is in no sense present in the Supper, but is exalted at the right hand of God in glory.

THE CHURCH
According to Reformed theology, the Church is so far the body of Christ as it is made up of all, in all ages, who are gathered, defended and preserved by Christ, through the Spirit, out of the whole human race, and who, by the Spirit, agree in regard to all things essential to the true faith.

THE MINISTRY
Reformed theology teaches, that the ministry of the Word and the Sacraments is appointed, not as a sacerdotal priesthood, to offer sacrifices in propitiation for sin, or to mediate between God and the people, but to preach the Gospel, to administer Church ordinances, and assist in maintaining discipline.
Dr. Bomberger's lectures on theology as given to his students when he was teaching in the Ursinus School of Theology represent the Old Reformed Theology as based on the Heidelberg Catechism, historically interpreted. In them he was evidently Calvinistic. In fact, he once told the writer that he had no difficulty with the doctrine of election as Calvin stated it. But we have been unable quite to decide, to which school of Calvinists he belonged. There are two schools of Calvinists, the Infralapsarian and the Sublapsarian, or as they used to be called in the days of the division of the Presbyterian Church in this country, Old School and New School Calvinists. The Infralapsarians held to the doctrine of the two Covenants and to limited atonement (Christ died for the elect). The Sublapsarians were lower and broader. They differed from the Infralapsarians in these respects: (1) They granted man more ability than the Infralapsarians, though not enough to save himself. (2) They held to universal atonement (Christ died for all men). (3) They gave the human will more activity in conversion.

Although we have been unable to discover from his notes to which school of Calvinism he belonged, we are inclined to believe that he leaned to the Sublapsarian; for he seemed to make predestination to be in Christ,—that is, redemptive Calvinism, which was one of the peculiarities of the New School Calvinists. He did not, like the High Calvinists, emphasize metaphysical election in the mind of God, but election as related to Christ's incarnation and
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atonement,—historical election. In other matters he held to the generally received doctrines as expressed in the symbol of his church—the Heidelberg Catechism.

Holding as he did to these evangelical views, and holding them so tenaciously and boldly at a time when they were under fire from certain directions, Dr. Bomberger may well be named “The Defender of the Faith.” To him these doctrines were not a mere intellectual belief, to which he had given assent; but they were the hearty confidence of his heart. He believed them so intensely, that they existed not merely in his mind, but they became part and parcel of his being. His courage amid opposition, which only seemed to rouse him to greater heights of argument and eloquence at the synods of the Reformed Church, his continued defense of them in the church papers and periodicals, all make this title “Defender of the Faith” most suitable for him. If the pope could in the Reformation name King Henry VIII of England as “Defender of the Faith,” the Reformed Church, as it looks back on Dr. Bomberger’s zeal, courage, and devotion, can also and with greater reason give him the same title.

James I. Good.