

The Church as Necessary and Necessarily Derivative: The Gospel and Evangelical Ecclesiology¹

Lane Scruggs
Wycliffe College

Abstract

In recent years the increase among evangelicals who are interested in ecclesiology is noteworthy. Despite this increase in scholarly activity and interest, there is still a lot of confusion around the diversity of options. Is there such a thing as an “evangelical ecclesiology?” Adding to this confusion is the growing realization that younger evangelicals are leaving evangelical churches at an increased rate. This article aims to explore the theological roots of the evangelical exodus of the younger generation in two disparate directions. While some evangelicals have joined the “SBNR” cohort of North Americans, others are seeking higher ground in the Catholic, Anglican, and Orthodox Church. Examining the 19th century thinkers of Charles Hodge and John Williamson Nevin, this article will show the inherent ecclesiological diversity that is coming to full bloom in the 21st century. Using Ephesians 1 as a starting place, this exploration will provide a rationale for the exodus of younger evangelicals, while also arguing that the singularity of an evangelical ecclesiology is a chimera. Finally, it will close with a preliminary proposal for an evangelical ecclesiology that attempts to hold the best of these two ecclesiological proposals in tension, affirming the church as both *necessary* and *necessarily derivative*.

God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above

¹ This article is a revised version of a paper that was presented at the interdisciplinary theology conference, “Evangelical Theology—New Challenges, New Opportunities,” co-sponsored by the Canadian-American Theological Association and Northeastern Seminary, held at Northeastern Seminary, Rochester, NY, on October 21, 2017.

every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. —Ephesians 1:20–23

Young evangelicals are leaving their churches.² Gone are the days when evangelical Christians could scoff at the drastic decline in membership of their mainline brothers and sisters and not-so-humbly reference their growing number among the various flavours of evangelicalism. Why this evangelical growth trajectory has stalled or declined, however, is not so clear. Among other sources for the stagnation are two evident ones: first, there has been a marked increase of young evangelicals who have left the institutional church altogether and now identify as Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR);³ second, and to a lesser extent numerically, there has been an uptick in evangelicals that have found ecclesial homes in Rome, Constantinople, and Canterbury.⁴ If we were to lay these two options out simply, we might identify those who “love Jesus” but find no rationale, value, or salvific compulsion to “go to church” and, on the other end of the spectrum, those who find the ecclesial thinness of the evangelical world unable to correspond adequately to the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church in the Nicene Creed. According to the former, to make a claim that the church is *necessary* is dangerously close to *Churchianity* and, for the latter, to make a claim that the

2 Barna Group, “The State of the Church 2016,” *Barna Group*, September 15, 2016, <https://www.barna.com/research/state-church-2016/>. Barna’s emphasis on the exodus of the millennial generation is noteworthy, if not surprising. See also the most recent Pew Research Center data at <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-not-religious/>; and, further, the recent results of the Public Religion Research Institute, where the decline in “white evangelicals” is particularly noteworthy: <https://www.prri.org/research/american-religious-landscape-christian-religiously-unaffiliated/>.

3 Whether or not there is overlap between the SBNR and the so-called “nones” is debatable. At the very least the ambiguity highlights the complete lack of institutional (ecclesial and otherwise) attachment. For the recent uptick in those millennials who identify with the “nones,” see James Emery White, *The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014); Ed Stetzer, “The Rise of the Evangelical ‘Nones,’” *CNN*, June 12, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/06/12/living/stetzer-christian-nones/index.html>. See also the most recent Pew Research Center data on the rapid rise of the SBNR subset <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-not-religious/>.

4 This is not to say that Roman Catholics, Orthodox, and Anglican Christians cannot or should not also identify as “evangelicals.” Nevertheless, the point being made is the ecclesial identity among these evangelical emigrants—often self-referentially called “post-evangelicals”—is that something is either amiss or lacking (or both!) in their former churchly residence. For the book that some have suggested started this trend away from evangelicalism and toward “higher” options, see Thomas Howard, *Evangelical Is Not Enough: Worship of God in Liturgy and Sacrament* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1984). For more recent offerings, see Christian Smith, *How to Go from Being a Good Evangelical to a Committed Catholic in Ninety-Five Difficult Steps* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011); Douglas M. Beaumont, *Evangelical Exodus: Evangelical Seminarians and Their Paths to Rome* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2016). Cf. Mark Galli, *Beyond Smells And Bells* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2008).

church is *derivative* of some more basic gospel is to miss the logic of the gospel itself.⁵

What if, however, the logic of the evangelical faith was intended to hold these two extremes in tension rather than falling too one side or the other? What if we could affirm the necessity of the church within the logic of the gospel, while also maintaining its necessarily derivative character at the same time? And why are these the seemingly default options within the evangelical world anyway? In order to examine these questions, we will narrow our focus by beginning with one New Testament text and two distinct ways in which evangelicals have interpreted this text ecclesologically. The portion of Scripture to be our launching pad is taken from Paul's prayer at the beginning of his epistle to the Ephesian church. Specifically, 1:23: "And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all." In what follows, I will use the work of two eminent 19th century evangelical theologians as prototypical thinkers of the two interpretations of the church outlined above: Charles Hodge and John Williamson Nevin.

Hodge and Nevin were not only contemporaries but had a lifelong correspondence over various theological issues, the most well-known is their debate over the Lord's Supper, a debate that flows from their more basic ecclesiological differences.⁶ Our historical distance from these theologians offers us better perspective on their proposals and their enduring legacies show that they have staying power in the realm of evangelicalism. In short, I propose that Hodge and Nevin are representative thinkers not simply for 19th century evangelicals, but that the divergence in their ecclesiology, as demonstrated in their explication of Eph 1:20–23, sheds light on the current exodus from evangelicalism by the SBNR and those on the road to Rome, Constantinople, and Canterbury.

My intention in this article is not to denigrate either group of evangelicals who have left. In fact, I believe they have, in many ways, followed the logic of their own sub-tradition of evangelicalism to its proper *telos*. Yet, my conclusion will offer a scripturally and theologically coherent alternative that attempts to uphold the best of these two theological alternatives in tension while avoiding their extremes.

5 The portmanteau *Churchianity* will be explained further below, but is relatively self-explanatory in its proposal that the Church is prioritized over (and perhaps against) the centrality of Christ in the gospel.

6 The core of the dispute is found in the following: John Williamson Nevin, *The Mystical Presence: A Vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1846); Charles Hodge, "Review: The Mystical Presence. A Vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist. By the Rev. John W. Nevin," *Princeton Review* 20.2 (1848): 227–78; reprinted in *The Book Reviews of Charles Hodge* (Logos Bible Software, 2014). For a recent republication with helpful commentary, see John Williamson Nevin and Charles Hodge, *Coena Mystica: Debating Reformed Eucharistic Theology*, ed. Linden J DeBie, vol. 2, Mercersburg Theology Study Series (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013).

Charles Hodge and Ephesians 1

Much has been made of the usage of Rom 5 in Hodge's covenantal theology as undergirding his entire soteriological schema.⁷ Even when Hodge was unpacking Ephesians it is clear that the twofold headship of Adam and Christ in Rom 5 is lurking in the background. This idea of the representational headship of Christ for the elect who have been justified was of primary importance to his theological framework. Yet, as one explores Hodge's writings, it becomes increasingly clear that while Christ's headship dominated his soteriological understanding it was only given lip-service within his ecclesiology.⁸ For Hodge, there was a real difference, if not utter distinction, between soteriology and ecclesiology.

The first and perhaps most telling way this divorce between soteriology and ecclesiology was evinced is in how Hodge concluded his interpretation of Eph 1:22–23. In a surprising move—though perhaps heavily influenced by Calvin's interpretation—Hodge understands the *plērōma* (πλήρωμα) in v. 23 in an active sense, as the Church *filling* Christ.⁹ That is, he read “the fullness of him who fills all in all” as the Church being the fullness of Christ.¹⁰ Still, he is careful to avoid Calvin's slippery language of Christ being, in some measure, *imperfect* until he is completed with the joining of his body. And here is where Hodge begins to explicate this Scripture in a rather unique manner by reading the Spirit into the passage. He writes, “It is the indwelling of the Spirit of Christ, that constitutes the church his body. And, therefore, those only in whom the Spirit dwells are constituent members of the true church.”¹¹ In other words, the Church, as the body of Christ, is able to *fill* Christ because it is, in reality, the Spirit that makes-up the body itself. There is a clear pneumatological shift that occurs in Hodge's exposition of the text

7 For Hodge's expository work on Romans, see: Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1882). See also David H. Kelsey, “Charles Hodge as Interpreter of Scripture,” in *Charles Hodge Revisited: A Critical Appraisal of His Life and Work*, ed. John W Stewart and James H Moorhead (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

8 Holifield, in a comparison of Hodge and Nevin's ecclesiology, lends support to this point: “Nevin and Hodge were not divided over mere questions of polity and organization; their conflict was deeper. . . . Whereas Nevin's ecclesiology was based on his Christology, Hodge's doctrine of the Church rested on soteriology.” E. Brooks Holifield, “Mercersburg, Princeton, and the South: The Sacramental Controversy in the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 54.2 (1976): 249.

9 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: CCEL), 177. Calvin comments on v. 23: “This is the highest honor of the Church, that, until He is united to us, the Son of God reckons himself in some measure imperfect. What consolation is it for us to learn, that, not until we are along with him, does he possess all his parts, or wish to be regarded as complete!”

10 This is not out of ignorance of the options either. Hodge lays out the two most prominent options of interpretation, notes that there is contestation among the scholars as to the preference, even admits that both could be Scripturally coherent, and then chooses the active sense because he believes it fits better with the “New Testament usage of the word πλήρωμα” (89).

11 Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1856), 87.

that cannot easily be supported by its Christological focus. The pneumatological shift in emphasis was not simply a move beyond or away from the Christological explanation, but it also brought into relief the anthropocentrism of Hodge's ecclesial vision.

Let us unpack this further. Hodge's interpretation of this passage in Ephesians accomplished two things within his theological project. First, it protected the asymmetry and irreversibility within the Christ–Church relationship. The Church in no way completed Christ when it *filled* him with the Spirit; rather, Christ existed as a figurehead but remained materially separate from the Church. Building again from Rom 5, this reading was consistent with Hodge's soteriological vision of the federal relationship between Christ and the ones saved in forensic or judicial terms, as sinners declared to be righteous, but not sharing in an imparted righteousness.¹² Second, Hodge's ecclesiology emphasized the spiritual nature of the Church as the body enlivened (or constituted) by the Spirit of Christ, despite the head being materially detached. In this way, Hodge avoided both the need to articulate how the *humanity* of the incarnate Christ “fills” the Body which is His Church or how the *humanity* of the Church's members *filled* Christ as the head.¹³

The risk for Hodge in this biblical exegesis was that he ended up advocating for a theological dualism where the Church appeared to manifest itself as something like a decapitated ghost: a body enlivened by the Spirit with a Head that is all but severed from its host (despite the Spirit's *filling*).¹⁴ This risk appeared to be a conscious and worthwhile one for Hodge, who was more concerned about the theological consequences of what his interpretation avoided: a substantial or material exchange of divinity and humanity between Christ and his Body, which potentially travelled in both directions. His primary concern was to avoid any theological configuration in which the Church was made to be “filling” Christ beyond a purely pneumatological exchange, for this would imply that without the Church, Christ was somehow lacking or deficient.

12 Aubert's study of Hodge and Gerhart is very helpful in disentangling the finer points of this distinction between the two soteriological schemas: Annette G. Aubert, *The German Roots of Nineteenth-Century American Theology*, 2013.

13 This is, in many ways, what was at the root of the debate between Hodge and Nevin surrounding the Lord's Supper. For more recent secondary treatments of the debate, see Linden J. DeBie and W. Bradford Littlejohn, “Reformed Eucharistic Theology and the Case for Real Presence,” *Theology Today* 71.4 (2015); Adam S. Borneman, *Church, Sacrament, and American Democracy*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011); Arie J. Griffioen, “Nevin on the Lord's Supper,” in *Reformed Confessionalism in Nineteenth-Century America: Essays on the Thought of John Williamson Nevin*, ed. Sam Hamstra and Arie J. Griffioen (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow; American Theological Library Association, 1995).

14 Deifell puts it this way, “It seems however that for Hodge the Church is the Body of the Spirit *attached* to its Head”: J. J. Deifell, “The Ecclesiology of Charles Hodge” (Ph.D. Diss., University of Edinburgh, 1968), 392.

Hodge's Spiritual Body

One of Hodge's favourite axioms, used often as a quick riposte to his "ritualist" detractors, was a reworking of an Irenaeus quote from *Against Heresies*.¹⁵ While Irenaeus wrote, "*Ubi enim Ecclesia, ibi et Spiritus Dei; ubi Spiritus Dei, illic Ecclesia et omnis gratia: Spiritus autem veritas*" (III.24.1), Hodge chose to restate only the middle affirmation, "*Ubi Spiritus Dei, ibi ecclesia*," claiming that it was the banner of the early evangelical fathers which "now waves over all evangelical Christendom."¹⁶ Hodge's selective repurposing of Irenaeus was deliberate. While the Bishop of Lyon was joining the Spirit and the Church together in a reciprocal relationship so that they could not be pulled asunder by false teachers, Hodge utilized the Holy Spirit as the material condition of the Church: *if Spirit then Church* (Spirit → Church). The implication was that the logic could not be reversed in Hodge's construction as it was in Irenaeus.¹⁷ After all, claimed Hodge, "the Spirit makes the Church, as the soul makes the man" and "where the soul is, there the body is." However, if there was a body without a soul it would be "a lifeless corpse . . . a dead man."¹⁸

15 Hodge's catchy description of such "ritualists" was: "Popes and Prelatists, Patriarchs and Priests." Charles Hodge, "Presbyterianism (1860)," in *The Church and Its Polity*, ed. William Durant and Archibald Alexander Hodge (London; New York: T. Nelson, 1879), 120.

16 Hodge, "Presbyterianism (1860)," 120; Hodge, "Theories of the Church (1846)," in Durant and Hodge, eds., *Church and Its Polity*, 52. For "*Ubi Spiritus Sanctus ibi Ecclesia*" see Hodge, "Principles of Church Union (1865)," in Durant and Hodge, eds., *Church and Its Polity*, 97. In his May 30, 1979 General Audience address, Pope John Paul II translated the Irenaeus quote in full: "Where the Church is, there is also the Spirit of God; and where the spirit of God is, there is the Church and all grace: the Spirit is truth." See https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1979/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_19790530.html (accessed May 16, 2016).

It is no surprise that Hodge makes no mention of another patristic formulation by Ignatius in chapter 8 of his *Ignatius, "Epistle of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans"*: *ὡς περ οὖν ἀν ἡ Χρῆστος Ἰησους, ἐκεῖ ἡ καθολικὴ ἐκκλησία*. It is noteworthy that in a recent book promoting an evangelical ecclesiology, the quote is Latinized and the *καθολικὴ* is omitted, despite it being the earliest known usage: *Ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia*; see Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 136. It is surprising that like Hodge, as far as I can find, Nevin makes no use of the Ignatian christological formulation either. The surrounding references to the presence of an *ἐπισκοπῶν* (bishop) may be the reason he avoided the reference. Nevin does reference the letter, but only chapter 7, not chapter 8; cf. Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 131.

17 The logic of this material condition is premised on the assumption by Hodge that the opposite construction (Church → Spirit) refers to the visible Church. Hodge would, hypothetically at least, be comfortable with the formulation "True Church → Spirit", if the "True Church" was explicitly equated with the invisible (Spiritual) Church, thus creating a tautology. Another consequence of Hodge employing this dictum has to do with him answering a *what* question with a *where* answer. We know what the Church is by identifying where the Church is (the Church *is where* the Spirit indwells believers). This brings to the fore the issue of whether questions of ecclesial nature are largely subterfuges for the more fundamental act of pointing to *who* or *where* the Church is. This question of *where* or *who* will be delayed until the next section, but it must be noted here that it seems to lurk in the background of every discussion of *what* the Church is.

18 Hodge, "Presbyterianism (1860)," 120. Hodge's clearest summary statement comes a page later: "[Where] it was stated that the indwelling of the Spirit constitutes the Church, so that where the Spirit is, there the Church is" (121).

It must be noted how influential the pneumatological priority of the Church was for Hodge on the democratization and individualization of the Church.¹⁹ The Church was not a Spirit-filled structure, but a collection of Spirit-filled individuals. As he concludes in his reflections on Eph 1 in his commentary, “The Spirit does not dwell in church officers... but in true believers, who therefore constitute that church which is the body of Christ.”²⁰ Hodge was proud to stand with Tertullian, pronouncing, “*Ubi tres sunt, etiamsi laici, ibi ecclesia est.*”²¹ All that the true Church required was “sincere believers” who had a “similar spiritual union with Christ,” a collection of individuals—even as few as three—with “the same Spirit dwelling in each.”²² The Spirit worked internally, invisibly, individually, and immediately in Hodge’s theology, creating a pneumatological foundation for the Church that prioritized the individual and found no value in the Church structures *per se*. The Spirit “organized, animated and controlled” the Church.²³

“Churchianity” vs. Christianity

For Hodge there was a necessary divide between the Church and salvation. The Church was simply the collective result from the individual paths of salvation which was the heart of the Christian faith.²⁴ The image of salvation might be represented by an electric fan, with Christ being the motor that turns the blades, the Spirit being the wind that is generated, and each individual person being a streamer tied onto the cage of the fan, which is the Church. The believer is moved by the Spirit through the benefits of Christ, the “source of its life,” but is tied individually

19 It is not surprising that Hatch has only one reference to Hodge in his seminal work; see Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). On the surface Hodge seemed to dismiss so much of what Hatch focuses on: revivalism, new religious movements, and even full gender and racial egalitarianism. Furthermore, Hatch was right to brand him as one calling the Church back to “doctrinal rigor and confessional roots” (196). However, this was only one aspect of Hodge’s ecclesiology (admittedly a vital one). What Hatch missed, or at least what goes unmentioned in his book, is the role Hodge’s specific doctrinal understanding of the Church played in legitimating a democratization among staid, orderly mainline evangelicals within existing traditional denominational frameworks. Hodge and company at Princeton may not have been as radical as the New Haven New Schoolers, but they worked much more subversively, and arguably more effectively, at undermining the traditional theology of the Presbyterian structure while maintaining the outward order.

20 Hodge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, 87–88.

21 “Where there are three, even if they are [only] faithful laypeople, there the church is”: Hodge, *The Church and Its Polity*. The quote is likely reworked from the original: *Sed ubi tres, ecclesia est, licet laici* (Where there are three, there is the Church, notwithstanding they be laypersons): Tertullian, “On Exhortation to Chastity,” in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. S. Thelwall, vol. 4 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1885), Ch. 7.3.

22 Deifell, “The Ecclesiology of Charles Hodge,” 53.

23 Hodge, “Presbyterianism (1860),” 119.

24 See Kelsey, “Charles Hodge as Interpreter of Scripture,” 244; Evans, *Imputation and Impartation*, 201; Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 42ff.

to the cage of the fan, the frame or body of Christ.²⁵ No streamer is directly tied to the motor of the fan, but experiences union through the breeze that is generated by that motor—the streamers happen to move in the same direction through the working of the Spirit.

“The essential bond of union between the saints, that which gives rise to their communion, and makes them the Church or body of Christ,” claimed Hodge, is not that they are “in Christ” *corporately*, but that “the indwelling of the Holy Ghost” in each of the saints individually affords them a *common* bond under which to gather together as the Church.²⁶ The Church is a *common* society, not a *corporate* reality.²⁷ Hodge’s various references to the Church as a “band of witnesses,”²⁸ a “*coetus sanctorum*,”²⁹ and a “*coetus cultorum Dei*”³⁰ captures that distinction well by grounding itself in the federal theological imagery of a covenant between members.³¹ Making the Church an ingredient in the theology of salvation was “Churchianity,”³² according to Hodge, while in Christianity, “The individual believer gets his life by immediate union with Christ, and not through the Church.”³³ His constant worry was that the Church would be made “so prominent that Christ and the truth [were] eclipsed.”³⁴

There was an irony in this theological concern, however. Though Hodge fretted over the eclipse of “Christ and the truth” by Churchianity, he claimed this was happening through an enlarged rather than diminished construal of Christ within the *ordo salutis*. More specifically, an ecclesiological predicament like Churchianity was only conceivable in a soteriological system that was predicated on the continuation of the incarnation—the extension of the theanthropic person of

25 Hodge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, 87.

26 Deifell noted that Hodge preferred the word *common* rather than *corporate* with reference to the Church because it denoted that the benefits of Christ were “experienced similarly by each and all the saints,” while not connoting that the benefits somehow belonged to the communion itself. Deifell, “The Ecclesiology of Charles Hodge,” 50 n. 2.

27 Here the term “corporate” is intended to connote the coordination and integration of a unified body, as in the Latin *corpus*. It is not, conversely, used in its legal definition as “of or shared by all the members of a group,” which is much closer to “common.”

28 Hodge, “Presbyterianism (1860),” 120.

29 Hodge, “Idea of the Church (1853),” in *The Church and Its Polity*, 18, 22; Hodge, “Visibility of the Church (1853),” in *The Church and Its Polity*, 55; Hodge, “The Church of England and Presbyterian Orders (1854),” in *The Church and Its Polity*, 137.

30 Hodge, “Church Officers (1846),” in *The Church and Its Polity*, 245.

31 Later in his career, Hodge takes up the catchy title of “band of brethren” for a short form of the Church. See for instance Hodge, “The Unity of the Church Based on Personal Union with Christ,” in *History, Essays, Orations, and Other Documents of the Sixth General Conference of the Evangelical Alliance Held in New York, October 2-12, 1873*, by Philip Schaff and Samuel Irenus Prime (Ann Arbor, MI: Making of America, 2000), 142.

32 This is a term he borrows from Dr. [Samuel] Parr, who used it against the “ritualist” school of the Tractarians; see Hodge, “Theories of the Church (1846),” 48. A correlate theological term would be “intrinsist ecclesiology.”

33 Hodge, “History of the Apostolic Church,” 49.

34 Hodge, *The Church and Its Polity*, 48.

Christ—in and through the visible, historical church.³⁵ Hodge was concerned, and here is the irony, that Christ would be obscured by a Church that was an extended embodiment of Christ himself.

Nevin accused Hodge's Christ of being "a Nestorian Christ; in whose constitution, the new creation becomes at best, after the similitude of Peter's vision, a great sheet-like vessel, knit at the four corners, and let down to the earth, only to be received up again soon after into heaven."³⁶ This is what Nevin began calling an "avatar" Christ, claiming it was being proclaimed by many evangelical theologians.³⁷ Hodge's thin Christology, according to Nevin, resulted in a view of humanity as a "vast sand heap" (a pile of individual grains of sand), where the Church is constituted by a "fiat" of the Holy Spirit. This divine decree introduced a new creation into the world that lacked communality, belonging only "in an immediate and exclusive way, to each single believer for himself."³⁸

Hodge was not, however, without ammunition in his counter-attacks on Nevin and the so-called ritualists. He perceptibly saw the direction that Churchianity could lead. Ultimately, for Hodge, if the Church's "supernatural power" is gained by virtue of being a "continuation of the incarnation," then it imbues the officers, sacraments, and structures with an "objective efficiency," something his pneumatological conception of the Church deemed untenable.³⁹ His response was to look to the cross first, as the source of the benefits of Christ gained by the individual saint. The theological logic comes full circle to Rom 5:

For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (vv. 10–11)⁴⁰

Those reconciled were also those in whom the Spirit dwelt, and when they gathered together as the Scriptures claimed the Lord had implored them to do, therein lay the Church, argued Hodge. Evident within this construal is not only the individualization of this pneumatological Church, but perhaps even more fundamentally,

35 Hodge, "History of the Apostolic Church." This will be explored much more in depth with Nevin below.

36 Nevin and Hodge, *Coena Mystica*, 2:173. Throughout their back-and-forth, Nevin and Hodge regularly accuse each other of Christological heresy. Nevin's most common accusations against Hodge are Nestorianism and Sabellianism, while Hodge branded Nevin a Eutychian.

37 Nevin, "The New Creation," *The Mercersburg Review* 2 (1850): 7, 11.

38 *Ibid.*, 2, 7.

39 Hodge, "History of the Apostolic Church."

40 It is not surprising that in his "Commentary" on v. 11, Hodge makes the direct connection to Eph 1:22 and the headship of Christ. See Hodge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 218.

the anthropocentrism of the Church. The Church was for Hodge the mere collection of spirit-filled members.

John Williamson Nevin and Ephesians 1

The ecclesiological rich passage of Eph 1 was also central to Nevin's theology, though in a very different way than that of Hodge. After leaving Princeton, the Mercersburg theologian had progressively shed some of the educational particularity acquired under Archibald Alexander, Samuel Miller, and Charles Hodge.⁴¹ Of primary importance to this theological change in direction was the rejection of what he viewed as an untenable dualism imposed upon the gospel.⁴² One way this dualism was manifest was in a sharp material-spiritual divide that was evident in Hodge's pneumatological ecclesiology outlined above. While Hodge fretted over keeping the humanity of Christ separate from the Spirit-constituted Church, careful not to blur or conflate the two natures of Christ, Nevin, by the mid-1840s, increasingly emphasized the unity of the two natures in one person.⁴³

Thus, Nevin preferred to talk about the *life* of Christ being bestowed onto the Church rather than the "Spirit of Christ" as Hodge had. Adopting the language of Eph 1, Nevin wrote, "*Christ's life rests not in his separate person, but passes over to his people; thus constituting the CHURCH, which is his body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all.*"⁴⁴ While he was quick to dismiss any "pantheistic dissipation" of Christ's divinity into the "general consciousness of the intelligent universe," he maintained:

Just as little does it imply any like dissipation of Christ's personality into the general consciousness of the Church, when we affirm that it forms the ground, out of which and in the power of which only, the whole life of the Church continually subsists. In this view

41 Late in life Nevin reflects on this theological shift, noting that it began particularly with his move to Western Theological Seminary in Allegheny during the 1830s, but that it was accelerated by F.A. Rauch and eventually Philip Schaff at Mercersburg in the 40s; see J. W. Nevin, "My Own Life: Between Princeton and Pittsburgh (V)," *Reformed Church Messenger* (1867-1874) 36.13 (1870): 1; J. W. Nevin, "My Own Life: Retrospective Self-Criticism (VI)," *Reformed Church Messenger* (1867-1874) 36.14 (1870): 1; J. W. Nevin, "My Own Life: Self-Criticism Continued (VII)," *Reformed Church Messenger* (1867-1874) 36.15 (1870): 1; J. W. Nevin, "My Own Life: Ten Years' Work in the West (X)," *Reformed Church Messenger* (1867-1874) 36.18 (1870): 1; J. W. Nevin, "My Own Life: My Call to Mercersburg. Narrative by the Rev. S. R. Fisher, D.D (XVII)," *Reformed Church Messenger* (1867-1874) 36.25 (1870): 1. The trio of Alexander, Miller, and Hodge are usually regarded as the formative theological influences on the so-called Old Princeton School.

42 See David Wayne Layman, "Revelation in the Praxis of the Liturgical Community: A Jewish-Christian Dialogue, with Special Reference to the Work of John Williamson Nevin and Franz Rosenzweig" (Ph.D. Diss., Temple University, 1994), 86ff.

43 This, of course, is what left him open to the charge of Eutyichianism made by Hodge at various times through the 1840s and 50s.

44 Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 167; emphasis original.

Christ is personally present always in the Church. This of course, in the power of his divine nature. But his divine nature is at the same time *human*, in the fullest sense; and wherever his presence is revealed in the Church in a real way, it includes his person necessarily under the one aspect as well as under the other.”⁴⁵

Hodge’s accusation that Nevin’s theology implied that Christ’s humanity (alone!) constitutes the Church was understandable considering the Princetonian’s theological apprehensions. Nevertheless, the indictment was clearly only a half-truth when Nevin’s words are considered.⁴⁶

New Creation and the Church

The key image used by Nevin in describing the connection between Christ and the Church was that the Church was an “extension” of the “new creation.”⁴⁷ This new creation was wrought not only with the coming of the Holy Spirit or even with the death and resurrection of the Christ, but with the very incarnation itself: “The mystery of the incarnation involves in itself potentially a new order of existence for the world.”⁴⁸ With the *Logos ensarkos* a new creation entered the earthly realm that did not pass away with the ascension of Christ but was extended temporally through the continuation of His body, the Church.⁴⁹ “As such a *fact*,” Nevin contended,

45 Ibid., 173–74.

46 Charles Hodge, “Review of Christian Life and Doctrine by W. Cunningham” (1860), in *The Book Reviews of Charles Hodge*.

47 Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 222.

48 John Williamson Nevin, “Catholicism,” *The Mercersburg Review* 3 (1851): 19.

49 Here it is interesting to note that Hodge and Nevin never formally, as far as this author knows, engaged in a debate over the *extra calvinisticum*. With all the Christological heresy-hunting on both sides, and all the Eucharistic debating, there was not a Christological exchange over whether the finite humanity of Christ was capable of “receiving or grasping infinite attributes.” It is surprising simply because it seems to be at the root of much of their Christological differences, yet it goes unidentified. For a general description of the doctrine of the *extra calvinisticum*, see Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 111. Although it is true, as McGinnis notes, that the “nineteenth century saw an extensive realization and solidification” of the 18th century movement away from “traditional Christologies” in service of downplaying difference for “church unity” (best exemplified in the Prussian union of churches [1817]), Hodge and Nevin were notable exceptions (135). McGinnis assigns Hodge to his “counterforces” movement as a Reformed thinker who staunchly maintained his anti-Lutheran Christological bias or, to put it positively, his affirmation of the *extra calvinisticum* (141–43). Nevin, not explicitly mentioned by McGinnis, was more influenced by the continental discussions (and attempts at Protestant rapprochement) than Hodge and clearly was sympathetic to a more Lutheran-leaning emphasis on the *communicatio idiomatum*, where the attributes of both the divine and human natures of Christ were shared fully. It is likely that Nevin followed Isaak Dorner, whom he references often and speaks highly of, in trying to find a “dialectical affirmation” that satisfied both Reformed and Lutheran theologians (138–39). See Andrew M. McGinnis, *The Son of God Beyond the Flesh: A Historical and Theological Study of the Extra Calvinisticum* (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

Aubert notes that Emanuel Vogel Gerhart, a former student of Nevin who is known for “systematizing Mercersburg theology,” never dismissed the *extra calvinisticum* in favour of a more

again drawn back to the Eph 1 passage, the incarnation “includes life-powers which were not in the world before, but cannot be sundered from its history since. These life-powers belong to its very constitution, and as such are lodged in the Church, which is the ‘body of Christ, the fullness of him that filleth all in all.’”⁵⁰

While Hodge qualified his covenantal imagery by ensuring that the “natural” relationship between Adam-and-his-progeny and Christ-and-his-Church was downplayed in favour of their “moral” connection, Nevin made the natural connection even more substantial by borrowing what he called a “beautiful image” from Richard Hooker of the Church as Eve, formed from the very side of Christ:

Lutheran stress on the *communicatio idiomatum*, despite following much more closely Nevin’s theology than Hodge’s; see Aubert, *The German Roots of Nineteenth-Century American Theology*, 145–46. One reason this is so surprising is the tension both outside and inside the German Reformed Church, felt by Nevin and Schaff because of their liberal use of German Lutheran sources. This has also spilled over into the contemporary historiography of the scholars in debating how Reformed they truly were (Nevin particularly), as many of their theological sources were Lutherans. The debate does give insight into Hodge’s anxiety toward Nevin’s talk of the *humanity* of Christ being joined with the *divinity* of Christ in a continuation of the incarnation through the Church. For instance, Nevin’s reprinting of Heinrich Schmid’s “The Person of Christ” in the very first issue of the *MR* was strong evidence of sympathy, if not support, for a robust doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum*. Not to mention that the Lutheran translator, Krauth, like the Anglican Muhlenberg, was strongly influenced by Nevin in leading his church in an “evangelical catholic” direction that became known as Neo-Lutheranism; see Heinrich Schmid, “The Person of Christ,” trans. Charles Porterfield Krauth, *The Mercersburg Review* 1 (1849): 272–306. For an even more direct example in the same volume, see Nevin, “The Lutheran Confession,” *The Mercersburg Review* 1.1 (1849): 468–77. This article is an introduction for *The Evangelical Review*, which was a new Lutheran Quarterly that aligned closely with the Mercersburg School. Nevin’s own take on his Lutheranism, at least at the end of the 1840s, is as follows: “We believe, indeed, that Lutheranism and Reform, the two great phases of the Protestant faith, may be so brought together with mutual inward modification, that neither shall necessarily exclude the other, that each rather shall serve to make the other more perfect and complete; and we earnestly long for this union; but so long as the antithesis, which, in itself, thus far, has been real and not imaginary only, is not advanced to this inward solution and reconciliation, we are in principle Reformed, and not Lutheran” (470). For Nevin’s evolving relationship with Lutherans through his lifetime, see Russ Patrick Reeves, “Countering Revivalism and Revitalizing Protestantism: High Church, Confessional, and Romantic Critiques of Second Great Awakening Revivalism, 1835 to 1852” (Ph.D. Diss., University of Iowa, 2005), 196–213.

Nevin does speak of the *communicatio idiomatum* twice in direct reference to its place in the Heidelberg Catechism, but he does not offer extended commentary. Nor does he tip his hand to his own thinking beyond affirming that he felt it was equally a Reformed doctrine and a Lutheran one; see Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 85; Nevin, *History and Genius of the Heidelberg Catechism* (Chambersburg, PA: Publication Office of the German Reformed Church, 1847), 42. Holifield also provides an excellent window into the debate. However, within his narrative, Hodge and Nevin are supporting cast to the real main characters, Dabney and Adger, who play relatively the same theological roles in the South at the same time. See Holifield, *The Gentlemen Theologians: American Theology in Southern Culture 1795–1860* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 175ff.

50 John Williamson Nevin, “The Church,” in *The Mercersburg Theology*, ed. James Hastings Nichols (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 71. For one of the most explicit connections Nevin makes between the incarnation and the constitution of the Church, see John Williamson Nevin, “Letter to Dr. Henry Harbaugh,” in *Catholic and Reformed: Selected Theological Writings of John Williamson Nevin*, ed. Charles Yrigoyen and George H Bricker (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1978). Not surprisingly, Nevin’s final line of the letter is “the fulness of him that filleth all in all.”

“a true native extract out of Christ’s body.”⁵¹ Using the Gospel of John, and the letters of Paul especially, Nevin could simply not hold to the strict formality of the representational relationship of the covenantal heads of Adam and Christ that Hodge espoused. In an article where he argued for real union with Christ over and against only the image of Christ being impressed upon believers, Nevin wrote at great length of what it meant biblically to be “in Christ.” His conclusion was that it would be foreign to speak of the “patriots of the American Revolution, as being *in George Washington*,” just as it was unfitting to use “in Christ” when only an immaterial, moral representational role was reserved for Adam and Christ.⁵² According to Nevin, for the Church to be “in Christ” meant that Christ was the “foundation of the Church; it [started] in his person,” and its historical unfolding was the revelation of the “full force of the mystery” of the incarnation.⁵³ It is not merely the benefits wrought by Christ but Christ’s very own person that is essential to the constitution of the church. In an accusation that could well have been directed toward Hodge, Nevin maintained that it was only “sectarian, schismatic Christianity” that tended to “make Christ’s actual person of small account, as compared with his doctrine and work.”⁵⁴

The advent of the incarnation introduced a new creation, a new reality into the cosmos, a revelation of “the grace and truth which came by him in the beginning.”⁵⁵ Yet nothing was lost to humanity when Christ ascended in the flesh. Christ was the “alpha and omega,” the head of the Church; but in a very real sense, Christ was not made whole until He was given a body which is the “fullness of him that filleth all in all.”⁵⁶ And so “Christ himself [was] made perfect in the Church” to such a degree that Nevin was comfortable claiming, “There can be no church without Christ, but we may reverse the proposition also and say, no Church, no Christ.”⁵⁷ Quite simply, Nevin appeared unconcerned with maintaining the

51 Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 232. Nevin does not cite Hooker but seems to have taken the quotation from the Fifth Book: *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, 56.7. See also John Williamson Nevin, *The Anxious Bench* (Chambersburg, PA: Publication Office of the German Reformed Church, 1844), 129–30.

52 Nevin, “The New Creation,” 4.

53 Nevin, “The New Creation,” 10. In *The Mystical Presence*, Nevin bolsters this Pauline understanding of being “in Christ” using his preferred gospel, John, and the image of the vine and branches in chapter 15. See Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 229.

54 Nevin, *Antichrist*, 49.

55 Nevin, “The Church,” 59.

56 Nevin, “The Church,” 59.

57 Nevin, “The Church,” 66. To my knowledge, Deifell is the only secondary source to deal in passing (though he does not explicitly site it) with this ecclesiological idea of Nevin’s. It is either theologically unorthodox or confusing in its explication (or both); neither option invites engagement from most scholars interested in re-sourcing Nevin. First, it seems to be an intractable outcome of his understanding of the development of history. Though there is no indication that Nevin would have considered Christ “imperfect” prior to the constitution of the Church, there is a distinct idea of the *perfecting* nature of the development through time. This idea of history as a *perfecting* development underscores Nevin’s understanding of providence as the growing and progressing way

sharp asymmetry between Christ and the Church that Hodge so anxiously fretted about.⁵⁸ In reality, he exchanged Hodge's equation (Christ > Church) for his own (Christ = Church), writing, straightforwardly, "The Church is the historical continuation of the life of Jesus Christ in the world."⁵⁹ It was this "new order of existence which was introduced into the world by his incarnation" that remained the Church's "perennial undying root."⁶⁰

Ephesians 1 and The Church

Let us briefly summarize Hodge's and Nevin's interpretations of Eph 1 and how those explications translate to their markedly different ways of understanding the role of the Church in the economy of salvation. First, they agree on the Scriptural emphasis of Christ as the "Head" of the Church. However, by using his particular covenantal framework of Rom 5, Hodge unpacks the "headship" of Christ in moral, spiritual, and purely representational terms, whereas Nevin leans on the organic connection with body and finds a far more participatory interaction.⁶¹ From these diverging premises, Hodge transposes the text from a primarily ecclesial key to a soteriological key and inserts the Holy Spirit into the final verse as the one who Christ sends as the "fulness of him who fills all in all." Nevin, on the other hand, sees the Church herself as the body that is the "fulness of [Christ], who fills all in all." In the end, it leads to an anthropocentrized Church for Hodge—a collection of spirit-filled individuals—that may well be helpful as a school of discipleship but could hardly be described as essential to the economy of salvation. Nevin, trending

that God is redeeming the world. Yet, despite the argument that this idea was integral to Nevin's understanding of historical development, the actual argument itself is abstracted from history and made on logical grounds. That is, Christ and the Church are not two separate entities, but two ways of speaking about one thing.

58 He never directly used Augustine's understanding of the *totus Christus* but there are obvious echoes of it in Nevin's work. For a helpful introduction to Augustine's ecclesiological usage of *totus Christus*, see Kimberly Baker, "Augustine's Doctrine of the Totus Christus: Reflecting on the Church as Sacrament of Unity," *Horizons* 37.1 (2010): 7–24. It is worthwhile to note that while Augustine formulated his understanding of the whole Christ through the Pauline imagery of the "Body of Christ," like Nevin, it was actually Augustine's reflection on the "speaker" of the Psalms that pushed him to a more radical direction (11–12). This is certainly not to claim that Augustine's understanding of the *totus Christus* was explicated in the same manner as Nevin's extension of Christ in the Church. In fact, amid proposing his understanding of the *totus Christus*, Augustine takes great pains to avoid the kind of statement that Nevin makes about Christ "being made perfect in the Church." Augustine writes, "For indeed head and body form one Christ [*totus Christus*]. Not that he isn't complete without the body, but that he was prepared to be complete and entire together with us too, though even without us he is always complete and entire, not only insofar as his is the Word, the only-begotten Son equal to the Father." Augustine, *Sermons (341–400) on Various Subjects*, trans. Edmund Hill, The Works of Saint Augustine (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 1996), 26 (341.11).

59 Nevin, "The Church," 65. See also Hodge, "Review: The Mystical Presence," 217–18; DiPuccio, *The Interior Sense of Scripture*, 53.

60 John Williamson Nevin, "Hodge on Ephesians: Second Article," *The Mercersburg Review* 9 (1857): 211.

61 See Evans, *Imputation and Impartation*.

in the exact opposite direction, finds an organic connection between Christ and His body, with a kind of ecclesial *communicatio idiomatum* as the extension of the incarnation. Thus, for Nevin, because of this divine ontology, there is an understanding of the Church that presents a certain triumphalism: the impeccability of the Church as salvation in social, historical, and objective form.

This divergence between Hodge and Nevin is seemingly very similar to the respective sensibilities underlying the divergent directions taken among many young evangelicals. For SBNR folk, with the social pressures of denominational affiliation all-but-erased in 21st century North America, the logic of Hodge's interpretation taken to its extreme conclusion is apparent: Weigh the individual benefits of belonging to a Church, if it is not "helpful" to my own spiritual journey of salvation, then it can be sloughed off because of its nonessential nature. The Spirit (or spirituality) of God living within me is the primary point of importance within the gospel. For those in search of "higher" ecclesial options, Nevin's understanding of Paul in Ephesians gives credence to their own trajectory: The Church as a prior and essential divine entity takes priority over any sort of "personal faith" and is nothing short of necessary in the economy of salvation. Having an organic and objective connection to the Church through history becomes vital, quite literally, for the gospel.

These two interpretations of the role of the Church are obviously and intentionally stark. Yet, it is clear they both continue to exist in very similar forms within the contemporary evangelical world.⁶² There are, of course, many evangelical theologians who have attempted to avoid these extremes and have done so in differing ways.⁶³ This paper's primary intent is to offer an ecclesiological rationale for why there seems to be an exodus of younger evangelicals in two very distinct directions and does not intend to definitively resolve the interpretation of Eph 1:20–23, over which John R. W. Stott notes "gallons of printer ink have been spilled."⁶⁴ Nevertheless, there seem to be a two separate moves that Hodge and Nevin make in interpreting the passage that consequentially lead in two disparate ecclesiological directions, which need not be the case.

First, Hodge's insertion of the Spirit into the Eph 1:22–23 that inevitably leads

62 One thinks of groups like The Gospel Coalition as a Hodge-like ecclesiological example and the Reformed group loosely referred to as the Federal Vision theologians as a Nevin-like example.

63 Theologians like Ephraim Radner and the late John Webster have each tried to navigate these extremes in different ways. For Webster, it is resolved best with a pneumatological ecclesiology that begins in similar places to Hodges, but does not result in the same conclusions. For Radner, he begins with a much more thoroughly Christological ecclesiology as with Nevin, but reads this Scriptural image of the body of Christ figurally which leaves Nevin's conclusions untenable. See:

64 John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians: God's New Society* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1979), 61. Commentating on Eph 1:23 specifically, Stephen Fowl even goes so far as to say there is "fruitful ambiguity in the verse." Stephen E. Fowl, *Ephesians: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 65. For an overview of the disputes around 1:23, see Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (Waco, TX: Word, 1990), 72–78.

him to *hyperspiritualism*, as Nevin calls it, is not a tenable reading of the passage.⁶⁵ Not only is the Spirit not mentioned here, but the dramatic image used by the apostle is an explicitly material one, the *body* of Christ. By ruling out this sort of spiritualizing of the passage, the Church cannot be understood as a merely optional “spiritual aid” for Spirit-endowed individuals who choose to associate together, as Hodge supposes on the logic of his interpretation. Contra Hodge, the Church, according to Eph 1, is unavoidably a *necessary* part of being “in Christ.”

On the other hand, Nevin’s leveraging of *plērōma*, interpreted in the active sense as the Church completing, perfecting, or filling Christ, although certainly a possible grammatical construction, is less compelling when considered with the overall weight of the Scriptural witness (save Col 1:24).⁶⁶ And so, though the Church *as the body of Christ* is an inescapable reality for those who are *in Christ*, the derivative character of the Church is maintained by the *primacy of the gift-giving God in Christ who fills the Church*. Gone is the scent of ecclesial triumphalism or the need to differentiate the sinless nature of the Church “as such” from her sinful members. The Church is conceived and sustained not as the life of Christ but by the superabundant self-giving of God, who raises the *body of Christ* up to its necessary place in the economy of salvation. The Church is necessarily derivative because it can only give what it receives, namely, the fullness of God through Christ’s self-emptying. This also happens to be what it means to be *evangelicals*: people of the good news who are formed by God in order to give over what we have received through incorporation into the one body of Christ.

65 Nevin also calls this same move rationalism. Nevin, *Antichrist*, 59. It may seem odd to use *hyperspiritualism* (italics in the original) and “rationalism” synonymously for the 21st-century reader. However, Nevin uses both to explain the aversion among evangelicals toward the material world in general: “For Rationalism . . . has two sides, two opposite poles of unbelief, that are forever playing into each other with wonderful readiness and ease; an abstract naturalism on the one hand, that owns no reality higher than the present world; and then an abstract spiritualism on the other hand, by which the sense of the supernatural is not allowed to come to any real union with the sense of the natural in the way of faith, but is made to float over it fantastically in the way of mere Gnostic imagination.” Nevin, “Natural and Supernatural,” *The Mercersburg Review* 11 (1859): 204.

66 See especially Lincoln, *Ephesians*.