

Chapter 8

JOHN WINEBRENNER: FROM GERMAN REFORMED ROOTS TO THE CHURCHES OF GOD

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JOHN WINEBRENNER WAS a German Reformed minister who founded a religious movement known as the Church of God.⁽¹⁾ In the 1820s, as pastor of the Salem German Reformed Church in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, he came into conflict with the vestry over his use of New Measures revivalism and other issues. Eventually this dispute led to his dismissal by the vestry and his removal from the rolls of the Synod of the German Reformed Church. He developed new theological views about the Bible, the church, free will, baptism, the Lords Supper, and foot washing that were in opposition to the beliefs of the German Reformed Church. In 1830 his followers officially organized, forming a denomination known as the Churches of God, General Conference.

In the 1840s he became an antagonist of John Williamson Nevin, a professor at the German Reformed seminary in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania. Winebrenner's activities, letters, and publications were among the precipitating factors that led Nevin to write *The Anxious Bench* and "The Sect System," two important early expressions of what became known as the Mercersburg Theology.

A study of Winebrenner's life reveals that, in addition to being a religious leader, he was an advocate of moral and social reform, a publisher, and a businessperson. His reform activities included antislavery, temperance, and peace.

EARLY LIFE AND MINISTRY

John Winebrenner was born March 25, 1797, in Frederick County, Maryland. He was baptized and confirmed in the Glades Valley Church, part of the Frederick County German Reformed circuit. His father, Philip, a second-generation German-American, wanted him to prepare for a career in business, law, or medicine. But John decided to follow the advice of his mother, Eve, a pious woman of Scotch and German ancestry, who encouraged him to pursue his interest in the ministry.

The German Reformed Church did not develop its own seminary until 1825, so John followed the common practice of persons wishing to enter its ministry and served an apprenticeship under a well-known pastor. After preparatory study at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, he spent three years under the tutelage of Dr. Samuel Helffenstein Sr. of Philadelphia, a pastor who trained twenty-seven persons for the ministry. Helffenstein came from a prominent ministerial family. His father, three brothers, and three sons were all German Reformed pastors. Helffenstein was held in such respect by his peers that he was invited to become the professor of the proposed German Reformed seminary. He declined the invitation.

From Helffenstein, Winebrenner learned Latin, Greek, Hebrew, theology, and the practice of ministry. Like most German Reformed leaders in America in the early nineteenth century, Helffenstein held to a form of Reformed theology that was influenced more by Melancthon and Zwingli than by strict Calvinism. The *Heidelberg Catechism*, not the Westminster Confession, was the foundation of his faith. He also appreciated German pietism, which had widely affected all Pennsylvania religious groups with roots in the Palatinate, and encouraged his members to lead moral and pious lives.²

Winebrenner was influenced by Samuel Helffenstein's theological ideas and a form of ministry that stressed a warm, personal relationship with Christ. On Easter Sunday 1817 he underwent what he later described as a conversion experience, when "the 'Sun of Righteousness' arose, and shone upon my soul, 'with healing in his wings.'"

During his apprenticeship in Philadelphia a controversy over the use of the English language in worship came to a head in Helffenstein's Race Street Church (today known as Old First Reformed Church, United Church of Christ). A German party, who controlled the board, dismissed the pastor because he had promised those favoring English to conduct some services in that language. The board locked the doors of the church against him, forcing Helffenstein and those loyal to him to worship in the nearby parochial school. In a short time the court ordered the board to open the doors and recognize Helffenstein as their pastor. Six years later, when Winebrenner was locked out of his church in Harrisburg, he continued to hold services with those loyal to him at a nearby location. Winebrenner appealed his being locked out to church judicatories rather than to the court, but his refusal to compromise may well have been influenced by Helffenstein's example. Like his mentor, Winebrenner felt that, in the end, he would be vindicated and return in triumph to his church.(3)

Upon completing his studies in 1820 Winebrenner accepted the call to Harrisburg. This charge included the German Reformed church in the capital city of Pennsylvania, and three churches in nearby villages. His ministry went well during the first several years, and he proved to be a popular preacher in his congregations and in community interdenominational meetings. During his pastorate a new church building was erected for the Harrisburg congregation and a Sunday school established. (The building erected during Winebrenner's pastorate at the corner of Fourth and Chestnut Streets is still in use by Salem United Church of Christ.) Winebrenner also published a book, an abridged English translation of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, which he used in instructing the young people of his congregations.

This happy relationship was shattered in the fall of 1822 when the vestry of the Harrisburg parish presented the synod with a document listing ten grievances against the pastor. It contained a list of complaints that Winebrenner had been using a number of practices, later called "New Measures," and associated with the Second Great Awakening revivals of Charles G. Finney. Specifically, Winebrenner was accused of holding

prayer-meetings, denominated anxious meetings, where he divided the members into two classes-first, those that say they have experienced a change, and believe themselves to be Christians; and, secondly, the sinners, those who believe themselves to be mourning sinners. And during all prayer meetings he encourages groaning, thereby disturbing others who might, if the groaning were omitted, receive some benefit. Allows during prayer certain persons to respond 'Amen! Amen!'" thereby drawing the attention of the gazing crowd which usually collect on the outside.(4)

The most sensational allegation was that he kept an “experience meeting” going until four o’clock in the morning, at the conclusion of which he remarked: “This is the way to fan the chaff from the wheat.” The document also charged that Winebrenner invited Methodists and ministers of other denominations to occupy the pulpit, that he worked independently and failed to consult the vestry, and that he was given to intemperate outbursts and derelictions of duty.

Winebrenner answered the charges during a seven-hour meeting with the vestry. He later published his account of that session in a pamphlet entitled *The Truth Made Known*. Winebrenner admitted that most of the actions he was accused of were true, but he denied that there was anything reprehensible about them. He saw nothing wrong with participating in the services of other denominations and holding experience meetings in his own congregation. In his view, the low state of spiritual life in the church and community justified extraordinary measures. However, he denied most of the inflammatory statements attributed to him, or claimed that they were taken out of context.

Much of the friction between vestry and pastor lay in different understandings of their roles. The vestry charged that Winebrenner usurped its responsibilities by admitting members or scheduling guest ministers without its approval. Members of the vestry were particularly upset when he invited the congregation to examine them as to their fitness for office before their installation. They believed that the election itself was all that was necessary for establishing their right to serve. The examination and installation constituted interference by the minister. Winebrenner, in turn, was dismayed that funds collected to pay his salary had been used by the vestry to pay other church debts, even though his pay was already significantly in arrears.

At the end of the meeting each side pledged to be more temperate in their treatment of each other and to seek harmonious solutions to their disagreements. The vestry asked Winebrenner to stop holding prayer meetings in local homes. He declined to do so, saying that many members desired the meetings, but he promised to maintain better order and decorum in all future experience meetings. The agreement was soon shattered, however, when Winebrenner invited a United Brethren minister to speak in his absence and one of the elders refused to allow the sexton to ring the bell or unlock the door. The church split over Winebrenner’s use of extreme revivalistic techniques and the right of the vestry to control the actions and countermand the decisions of the pastor.(5)

CHURCH DISPUTE

Attempts at reconciling the dissident members and the pastor failed. In April of 1823 Winebrenner arrived at Salem German Reformed Church in Harrisburg and found the doors locked. Undaunted, he led the waiting crowd to the shore of the Susquehanna River and held a worship service. By 1824 the synod ordered the four churches on the circuit to hold elections to determine whether they wanted Winebrenner as their pastor. He won all four elections. Whereas he continued serving the three rural congregations, at the Harrisburg church his opponents refused to attend the election or recognize its results. They had called Albert Helffenstein, son of Samuel Helffenstein Sr., to be their pastor six months earlier.

Winebrenner continued to meet with members who were loyal to him at various locations in Harrisburg. Both sides appealed to denominational judicatories. This process was complicated by the fact that the Harrisburg church had been transferred to the newly formed Lebanon Classis, while

Winebrenner still had ministerial standing in the Susquehanna Classis. The Lebanon Classis sided with the vestry, and the Susquehanna Classis with Winebrenner. The synod was called on to arbitrate the dispute. In 1825 the synod sustained the vestry's actions.

Soon thereafter, in 1826 and 1827, the three rural churches also dismissed Winebrenner as their pastor. Winebrenner became an itinerant minister, preaching in many small towns in central Pennsylvania. He also promoted and spoke at a number of camp meetings in the area. His activities continued to upset several German Reformed pastors and churches. Finally, in 1827, the Lebanon Classis requested the synod to expel Winebrenner, since he "rejects infant baptism, holds camp meetings and forces himself into other congregations."

In 1828, when Winebrenner failed to appear to defend himself before a committee appointed to investigate the charges, the synod accepted the recommendation that his name be dropped from the rolls.(6)

After the synod sided with the actions of the vestry and dismissed Winebrenner, his supporters decided to build a permanent house of worship of their own in Harrisburg. A modest building was erected on Mulberry Street in 1826, just two blocks from the German Reformed Church. During this period Winebrenner carried on a correspondence with members of Zion German Reformed Church in Hagerstown, Maryland. They were seeking a new pastor. Winebrenner was elected in January 1826 over two other candidates and continued to negotiate with the church as late as April. The salary offered and his reluctance to leave Harrisburg led him to decline the call.(7)

THEOLOGICAL CHANGE

By 1827 Winebrenner had begun a theological transformation that would have prevented him from staying with the German Reformed Church, even if other differences could have been resolved. Two points became central in his new theological position: first, the Bible is the "only authoritative rule for faith and practice"; and second, every Christian needs to have a personal conversion experience, or "new birth."

In American religious history these two emphases were held by a number of small Protestant groups that came into existence after the Revolution. The most widely known were those movements that became the Disciples of Christ and the Free Will Baptists. Many smaller groups also shared a desire to reinstitute principles of "primitive Christianity," as they discerned them in the scriptures, and a belief in the importance of being "born again." The stress on the individual in this theology was very much in keeping with the emphasis on individualism in American society and politics. The Disciples of Christ, the Free Will Baptists, the United Brethren, and the Evangelical Association expressed a common dissatisfaction with the traditions and spiritual life of churches rooted in Europe. These new groups wanted churches to be informal in worship, less strict in doctrine, and free of ecclesiastical control. They encouraged spontaneity and emotion in worship and stressed human responsibility and personal morality. They aggressively sought the conversion of the unchurched and held to a basic belief system that was simply stated but rigorously practiced. Thus Winebrenner stands among those people who sought to "Americanize" the church by returning to first principles and emphasizing the person over the institution.(8)

Generally speaking, most members of the German Reformed Church would have agreed with the two cardinal principles of John Winebrenner. They had been taught the Reformation principle

that the scriptures were the “authoritative rule for faith and practice.” They believed in the necessity of regeneration, and many of those who favored revivalism stressed the need for a definitive conversion experience. But in practice, Winebrenner interpreted these principles too narrowly for most German Reformed people. When he proclaimed the superiority of divine scriptures as the basis for faith and practice, he condemned the use of all “human creeds.” As a result, he rejected the beloved doctrinal formulations of the German Reformed Church, including the *Heidelberg Catechism*. When he insisted on a conversion experience as the gateway to discipleship, he rejected confirmation as the primary route to church membership.

Winebrenner also repudiated the doctrine of predestination. Most German Reformed in America were mild Calvinists. They maintained belief in God’s election of persons for salvation. Winebrenner argued that God had given each person a free will, the capacity to accept or spurn God’s offer of redemption. He readily accepted the label ‘Arminian’ but was angered when his enemies called him “Pelagian,” being quick to point out that regeneration was made possible by God’s mercy, not by human ability.

The charges of the Lebanon Classis noted that Winebrenner questioned the doctrine of infant baptism. Winebrenner came to the conclusion that a personal conversion experience must precede this important act. Later he decided that immersion, not sprinkling or pouring, was the only proper mode. In 1830 he was rebaptized by that manner in the Susquehanna River by Jacob Erb, a minister in the United Brethren in Christ and coparticipant in area camp meetings. Through association with the United Brethren, Mennonites, and Dunkards in interdenominational revivals and camp meetings, Winebrenner reshaped his theology. He upheld believer’s baptism and saw the Lord’s Supper as a memorial meal, preferring to call both of these acts “Ordinances,” not “Sacraments.” Foot washing, which was also practiced by these groups at camp meetings, became a third ordinance. Winebrenner said that because baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and foot washing were instituted and commanded by Christ, it was mandatory to observe them. However, they imparted no special grace in and of themselves.

In 1829 he summarized his new theology in *A Brief View of the Formation, Government and Discipline of the Church of God*. In this book he declared that the term “Church of God” was the only true scriptural name for both a local church and for the invisible church that was made up of all truly regenerated Christians. “New birth” was the sole requirement for initial membership in the church, and a godly life was the essential requirement for continued membership.

He condemned the practice of forming churches into “sectarian” denominations; however, his solution to the problem of denominationalism was vague. He did not urge all Christians to join his movement, or to combine into one large ecumenical group, as Count Zinzendorf did earlier with his “Congregation of God in the Spirit.” Rather, he implied that every Christian body should reform itself by dropping human names and polity and restoring the use of biblical forms of church government.

By 1830 a number of congregations associated themselves with Winebrenner’s views and felt the need to form some kind of formal association. After studying the Bible, Winebrenner asserted that the correct form of polity was neither the congregational pattern of the Mennonites and Dunkards, nor the episcopal system of the Methodists and United Brethren, but the presbyterian organization of the German Reformed Church. Each local church should have a “teaching elder” (the pastor) and one or more “ruling elders” (elected laypersons). Each year the teaching elders and the ruling elders ought to meet to conduct the affairs of the church at large. Therefore, in

1830, six elders met in Harrisburg for the purpose of establishing the first “General Eldership” of the Church of God. In time this organization became known as the East Pennsylvania Eldership. As Church of God pastors followed the population west, they established many new churches among the settlers. By Winebrenner’s death in 1860, Church of God Elderships were found in Western Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Iowa, and Texas.(9)

REVIVALISM AND NEW MEASURES

Attitudes about the proper conduct of revivals of religion played an important part in German Reformed dissatisfaction with Winebrenner. Some German Reformed leaders were antagonistic toward Methodists and United Brethren, which in past years had taken away a number of their members. German Reformed people maintained a settled ministry and were especially wary of itinerant preachers, who came uninvited to local communities and caused disruption in established churches. Winebrenner’s association with these groups was undesirable. His activities as an itinerant evangelist after 1826 were unacceptable.

But it was his methods that ultimately upset the vestry, the classis, and the synod, not the issue of revivalism. In fact, most German Reformed pastors in Pennsylvania favored and held revivals. What upset Winebrenner’s critics were the methods he used, techniques considered disruptive and excessive.

In the late eighteenth century a “German Revival” swept through German religious groups in the Middle Atlantic states. Rooted in German pietism and influenced by English-speaking groups, like the Methodists, the German Revival featured spirited preaching and an “experiential knowledge” of Christ. One feature of the German Revival was the practice of holding “big meetings” in which ministers from many denominations attracted large numbers of unchurched persons. These meetings stressed pious living and a personal relationship with Christ. They were conducted with a high degree of decorum. Preaching and prayer were emphasized, but no special techniques were used to identify or excite sinners to repentance.

German Reformed ministers and members participated in these revivals, along with Mennonites, Dunkards, Moravians, Lutherans, and Methodists. Two new religious bodies arose among German-Americans: the United Brethren in Christ and the Evangelical Association. Another German Reformed minister, Philip Otterbein, was closely associated with the founders of the United Brethren but never officially joined the denomination. Jacob Albright, a Lutheran layperson, spiritually awakened by the preaching of several German Reformed ministers, founded the Evangelical Association.¹⁰

By the 1820s many German Reformed people felt antipathy toward the “big meeting.” They were ambivalent about association with Methodists, United Brethren, and other divisive groups. Stories about falling, jumping, and other disruptive behavior at frontier revivals, such as one at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, disturbed them. Nevertheless, they continued to promote revivals in their local churches, feeling that the state of religion was at a low ebb and that sinners needed to be converted.

The Helffenstein family leaders in the German Reformed Church of the early nineteenth century, had a favorable attitude toward revivals. J. C. Albertus Helffenstein, father of Samuel Sr., died while conducting a revival service. Jonathan Helffenstein, brother of Samuel Sr., held successful revivals while he was pastor of the Frederick, Maryland, circuit from 1811 to 1829. Samuel Jr.,

Albert, and Jacob Helffenstein, sons of Samuel Sr., all conducted revivals in their churches. The fact that the Harrisburg vestry replaced Winebrenner with Albert Helffenstein, a person known to favor revivals, indicates that their dissatisfaction with Winebrenner stemmed more from personal dislike than from an aversion to revivals.(11)

If revivals were so widely accepted, why were so many people upset with Winebrenner's promotion of them? Generally, they were not upset by his stress on the need for spiritual rebirth, but by his controversial methods. He used techniques that departed from the decorum of previous revivals-techniques later known as "New Measures." New Measures involved using protracted meetings to stimulate greater religious response, praying for sinners by name, allowing women to pray and speak in public, promoting "inquiry meetings" for persons under conviction of sin, and using exceptionally emotional preaching. The most controversial practice was the "anxious bench," designating a place in the church or camp meeting where those seeking a conversion experience went for special prayer and assistance.

New Measures are often associated with the revivals of Charles G. Finney, which began in the late 1820s. Reports of New Measures used in his campaigns in Upstate New York shocked traditional revivalists like Lyman Beecher and Asahel Nettleton. In 1827 they called a meeting at New Lebanon, New York, to question Finney about his methods and motives.(12) Finney always insisted that New Measures existed before his ministry, and that people attending his meetings instigated their use without his encouragement. The complaints against Winebrenner are examples of the use of New Measures before they were popularized by Finney.

Winebrenner's ministry in Harrisburg marked one of the first reported uses of New Measures in the German Reformed Church. In the 1820s the denomination was not ready to accept these innovations. However, by 1840 a large percentage of the ministers in the synod favored the use of such methods. A review of the pages of the German Reformed newspaper, *The Weekly Messenger*, in the late 1830s contains appreciative comments about revivals in which New Measures were used. Not all segments of the church looked with favor on these trends. Areas with large percentages of German-speaking members were generally unwilling to endorse them.(13)

An interesting illustration of the acceptance of New Measures revivalism by the German Reformed Church was a story about Samuel Helffenstein Sr. and Charles G. Finney. When Finney was invited to conduct a campaign in Philadelphia, he was offered the use of the German Reformed Church on Race Street, where Helffenstein was pastor. The congregation was so taken by Finney and the results of his methods that they forced Helffenstein to resign, so that they might secure the great evangelist as their pastor. Finney declined the offer, but a pastor with New Measures leanings was called.(14)

It is ironic that the denomination that had so severely criticized Winebrenner a few years earlier for his use of New Measures later moved to accept those same methods. Eventually, however, new forces gathered to call the German Reformed Church and Winebrenner to task for these practices.

JOHN WINEBRENNER AND JOHN NEVIN

John Winebrenner was a chief spokesperson for revivalism and the Americanization of the German Reformed Church. John Williamson Nevin became the chief critic of revivalism and an advocate for a return to traditional Reformed theology and practice. The encounter between Wine-

brenner and Nevin is an important chapter in the history of the Churches of God, General Conference, and the United Church of Christ.

Nevin was born near Shippensburg, Pennsylvania, in 1803. He was raised a Presbyterian, educated at Union College and Princeton Seminary, and served for a decade as a professor at Western Theological Seminary in Allegheny, Pennsylvania. In 1840 he was called to teach at the German Reformed seminary at Mercersburg, Pennsylvania. In concert with Frederick Rauch and Philip Schaff he developed the Mercersburg Theology.

On a philosophical level, this new theology tried to introduce the insights of German idealism to American Protestantism. On a practical level, it tried to replace the emphasis in American churches on individualism and revivalism with a view of the church and the sacraments that represented a return to the

traditional confessional standards of the Reformed faith. German idealism is best illustrated by Nevin's *The Mystical Presence* (1846), which condemned spiritualistic, subjective, and memorial views of the Lord's Supper and urged an appreciation of the "spiritual real presence" in the Eucharist. A more practical contribution to Reformed theology is seen in Nevin's essays on *The History and Genius of the Heidelberg Catechism*, which he describes as the "crown and glory of the whole Protestant Reformation." Mercersburg theologians stressed the significance of the incarnation, the corporate nature of the church, and a high view of the sacraments. They stimulated liturgical renewal, leading in 1866 to a new Order of Worship for the German Reformed Church.(15)

In the August 10, 1842 issue of the *Weekly Messenger*, as part of an article on the *Heidelberg Catechism*, Nevin spoke out against Winebrenner and the Church of God, saying: "This latter sect especially glory in being the patrons of ignorance, rail at hireling ministers, encourage all sorts of fanatical unscriptural disorder in their worship, institute their own fancies and feelings in religion, for the calm deep power of faith. In doctrine they are of course pelagianistic." This statement, which probably described Nevin's view of all persons who stressed revivals, resulted in a series of ten letters between the two men. The first was written in August 1842 and the last in July 1843. Both Winebrenner's Gospel Publisher and Mercersburg's *Weekly Messenger* reprinted the correspondence.

Winebrenner quite naturally took offense at Nevin's characterization of his movement. He admitted the correctness of the charges that "groaning, crying, shouting, clapping of hands, jumping, falling down, etc." did take place in his meetings, and that women did pray in services in which men were present, but he denied that these things deserved to be called "fanatical." These were all secondary issues to Winebrenner; it was the "true conversion of soul" that was of primary importance.

Nevin was not satisfied with Winebrenner's defense and announced that he was going to "take up the subject of 'New Measures' in a separate publication, without direct reference to Mr. Winebrenner, or 'THE CHURCH,' commonly distinguished by his name.... I have prepared a tract according to this intimation which may be expected to appear under the title the ANXIOUS BENCH, in a few days."(16)

Nevin's pamphlet *The Anxious Bench* was one of the most renowned condemnations of New Measures revivalism ever published. It first appeared in 1843 but was followed the next year by a revised and enlarged edition. Nevin declined to specify which activities he was against but used

the anxious bench as a symbol of the entire New Measures system. He contrasted the weaknesses of the “system of the bench” with the strengths of the “system of the catechism.” He said the anxious bench promoted a vulgar, irreverent style of religion that was unfavorable to earnest piety and even discouraged the serious seeker of religion. Despite his promise not to mention Winebrenner and his movement, he specifically referred to the “spurious conversions” at Winebrennerian camp meetings. Nevin’s consistent use of the term Winebrennerians must have especially irritated Winebrenner. Winebrenner spoke out against the use of human names for religious bodies and insisted that “Church of God” was the only biblical name for churches. Perhaps that was Nevin’s intention.(17)

A lively debate followed the publication of the pamphlet. Many denominations, especially those of Pennsylvania German background, agreed or disagreed with the position taken by Nevin. Years passed before most of the German Reformed Church accepted Nevin’s position. Revivals were still popular with clergy and laypersons in the German Reformed Church.

Winebrenner was indirectly the stimulus for another important statement by Nevin in 1849. In 1848 Winebrenner published a revised collection of essays on American denominations, first issued by I. D. Rupp in 1844. This widely distributed 600-page *History of All the Religious Denominations in the United States* was an impressive reference work. The advertisements spoke of its articles on fifty-three denominations and twenty-four engravings of “distinguished men in different denominations.” Nevin made a two-part review of the book entitled “The Sect System,” in which he lamented the number of “sects” that had arisen in the United States.(18)

Nevin was scandalized by the number of small religious groups that had splintered off larger denominations and held to narrow theological viewpoints. He satirically noted that most of these small groups claimed to have “no creed but the Bible.” How could so many “sects” believe so firmly in the authority of the Bible and yet have so many differing opinions on what it said? The problem, stated Nevin, was the overemphasis that American Christianity placed on private judgment. The “unhistorical” approach of most sects, which gave little credence to the historical judgments of the church over the centuries, made them irrational, tyrannical, and inconsistent.

In the review Winebrenner received numerous jabs from Nevin’s caustic pen. Nevin commented:

Mr. Winebrenner’s portrait may be said to go beyond all the rest, in a certain self-consciousness of its own historical significance and interest. It has an attitude, studied for dramatic effect; an air of independence; an open Bible in the hands; in token, we presume, that Winebrennerism makes more of this blessed volume than any other sect, and that it was never much understood till Mr. Winebrenner was raised up at Harrisburg, in these last days, to set all right, and give the “Church of God” a fresh start, by means of it, out of his own mind.(19)

Both Nevin and Winebrenner lamented the low level of piety in mid-nineteenth-century America, but they had different solutions for its remedy. Winebrenner stressed the importance of individual regeneration through new birth. Nevin stressed a deeper knowledge of what it meant to be a Christian through the traditional system of catechism and confirmation. Winebrenner emphasized the “unity, visibility, sanctity, universality and perpetuity of the Church of God,” believing that the true church derived these attributes from the fact that it was made up only of regenerate people. Nevin stressed the view that the church was established by God through Christ and that its members received Christ only through the church.

A MANY-FACETED PERSON

The story of Winebrenner's relationship with the German Reformed Church, the conflict over New Measures, his role as antagonist to John Nevin, and his founding of the Church of God fails to note that John Winebrenner was also a reformer, a publisher, and a businessperson.

Like many other religious leaders of American history during "the Second Great Awakening," Winebrenner considered moral and social reform a natural concern of the church. He believed that the best way to effect a better society was through moral suasion of persons, not through political action. Among the reform movements he supported were antislavery, temperance, and peace.

His first antislavery activity was supporting the colonization movement, an effort to establish African colonies for freed slaves. Like many other nineteenth-century reformers, he eventually became dissatisfied with this effort and joined the abolitionist movement. He became the manager of the newly formed Harrisburg Anti-Slavery Society in 1836 and later was elected corresponding secretary. Speaking for the Church of God in 1844, he said that it "believes the system or institution of slavery to be impolitic and unchristian."

Temperance reform was also an enduring concern of Winebrenner. He wrote many articles for church publications that condemned the use of "ardent spirits" and tobacco. Although he preached abstinence from hard liquor, like whiskey and rum, he saw nothing wrong with limited use of wine, beer, and cider. Church of God congregations used wine in communion services until the late 1800s, and church periodicals advertised patent medicines that contained considerable amounts of alcohol. He opposed the use of tobacco in all forms, recognizing that it was a potential hazard to one's health.

Winebrenner also associated himself with the aims of the peace movement. His editorials kept readers informed of the activities of the American Peace Society and various international peace congresses. He thought that the war with Mexico (1846-48) was an irrational and immoral venture. One of the principles of the Church of God was a belief that "all civil wars are unholy and sinful, and in which the saints of the Most High ought never to participate."

In his espousal of reform views on slavery, temperance, and peace, Winebrenner often ran counter to the popular opinion of the nation and even the Church of God. It took time before the members of the denomination accepted his reform positions as their own. For example, in 1857, when Winebrenner urged a more tolerant attitude toward slaveholders, with the hope of persuading them of the evils of slavery and preventing a civil war, he was loudly condemned for his views by church leaders.(20)

A significant amount of Winebrenner's time was spent as a publisher. In 1835 he established *The Gospel Publisher and Journal of Useful Knowledge* as the official church paper. He served as both editor and printer, being responsible for both the production and the debts of the newspaper. He turned editorial duties over to others in 1840, only to see the paper go bankrupt. In 1846 he founded the *Church Advocate*, which is still the denomination's official periodical. A number of books were published by Winebrenner. The most successful was his *Prayer Meeting and Revival Hymnbook*. First published in 1825, it went through twenty-three editions. *The History of All the Religious Denominations in the United States* was a modest financial success. He operated a printing establishment in Harrisburg until 1857, as well as a bookstore that carried Bibles, reli-

gious works, hymnals, and schoolbooks.

After 1830 Winebrenner spent only four years as pastor of a local church, usually being appointed as “preacher at large” or “general missionary” of the church. Because he did not have the regular income of a pastor and church periodicals usually operate at a loss, he became involved in a number of business ventures to provide a livelihood for himself and his family. When his first wife died he inherited part-interest in an apothecary shop, which he moved into the print-shop next to the Mulberry Street church. During his travels as an evangelist, he often sold books and patent remedies. The pages of the *Gospel Publisher and Church Advocate* contain advertisements for his books and drug products, fruit trees, seed wheat, and new varieties of corn. Late in his life he sold farm machinery and even won a medal for his harrow at the 1856 Pennsylvania State Agricultural Society Exhibition.

His most infamous business enterprise was the silkworm episode. Convinced that the production of silk would be one of America’s next boom industries, he set up the Harrisburg Silk Agency in the late 1830s. There one could purchase *Morus multicaulis* (mulberry trees) and silkworm eggs, as well as obtain information on how to enter “this valuable branch of home industry.” Winebrenner grew silkworms for a while, assigning to his children the task of keeping the cocooneries warm. This ill-fated venture became a standing joke among friends and enemies alike.(21)

WINEBRENNER IN PERSPECTIVE

Winebrenner’s main contribution to the German Reformed Church was the lesson his disaffection taught that body. His New Measures activities and his theological inclinations helped to establish the boundaries of what was acceptable and unacceptable ministerial practice for the German Reformed Church during the 1820s. Although his banishment from the German Reformed Church did not prevent others from adopting New Measures, it did make people more aware of the importance of maintaining doctrinal purity. In time, persons like Winebrenner made German Reformed leaders more appreciative of the historic creeds and confessions of the church. They could see in him the dangers of departing too far from their traditions. Winebrenner’s theology was a living illustration of what could happen when the *Heidelberg Catechism* was ignored and the formulation of doctrine was left to individual interpretation of the Bible. As one of the antagonists that caused John Nevin to speak out against the excesses of revivalism and individualism, Winebrenner deserves to be recognized as a significant footnote in German Reformed history.

Although Winebrenner wandered far from the traditions and theology of the German Reformed Church, the Churches of God still proudly traces its roots to that religious body. After Winebrenner’s death the Churches of God and the German Reformed Church became less antagonistic toward each other. One former Churches of God pastor played an important part in the history of the German Reformed Church and the United Church of Christ. Dr. James E. Wagner grew up in the Altoona Fourth Street Church of God, served as pastor of St. Peter’s German Reformed Church in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, as president of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, and as one of the two copresidents of the newly formed United Church of Christ.(22)

United Church of Christ members may find themselves a little uncomfortable with the approaches of Winebrenner the evangelist and theologian. But they need to remember that there was another side to this many-faceted person. He was an advocate of social reform. He was not

afraid to speak out against the evils of racial inequality and the immorality of war. He was concerned over social issues like alcoholism and smoking. His business ventures remind us that even founders of denominations are human. John Winebrenner was at times idealistic and unbending, but he was also practical. Perhaps our greatest affinity with him can be that amid all the controversies and problems surrounding his life, he took time to speak out for peace and justice.

Notes

1. The standard modern biography of John Winebrenner is Richard Kern, *John Winebrenner Nineteenth Century Reformer* (Harrisburg, PA: Central Publishing House, 1974). For accounts by a person who knew him see C. H. Forney, *History of the Churches of God in the United States of North America* (Harrisburg, PA: Publishing House of the Churches of God, 1914), pp. 3-118, 130-41, and George Ross, *Biography of Elder John Winebrenner-SemiCentennial Sketch* (Harrisburg, PA: George Ross, 1880).
2. Kern, op. cit., pp. 7-17.
3. John Winebrenner, comp. *The Testimony of a Hundred Witnesses* (Baltimore: J. E. Weishampel, 1858), pp. 29-30; James 1. Good, *History of the Reformed Church in the U.S. in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Board of Publication of the Reformed Church in America, 1911), p. 10.
4. Forney, op. cit., pp. 11-12; John Winebrenner, *The Truth Made Known* (Harrisburg, PA: Michael W. McKinley, 1824), p. 8.
5. Winebrenner, *Truth Made Known*, pp. 4-26.
6. Ross, op. cit., pp. 12-13; Kern, op. cit., pp. 26-33.
7. Daniel Schurbly to John Winebrenner, January 8 and 18, 1825; John Winebrenner to Daniel Schurbly, January 14, 1825; Committee of Correspondence of German Reformed Congregation, Hagerstown, to John Winebrenner, January 10, 1826; John Winebrenner to Consistory of German Reformed Congregation of Hagerstown, April 18, 1825 and April 27, 1826, in Winebrenner Letters, Churches of God Archives, Findlay, Ohio.
8. John Winebrenner, comp., *History of all the Religious Denominations in the United States* (Harrisburg, PA: John Winebrenner, 1848), pp. 78-79, 176-77, 229-30.
9. John Winebrenner, *Doctrinal and Practical Sermons* (Baltimore: John F. Weishampel, 1860), pp. 97-124, 259-402; John Winebrenner, *A Brief View of the Formation, Government and Discipline of the Church of God* (Harrisburg, PA: Montgomery and Dexter, 1829).
10. John B. Frantz, "Revivalism in the German Reformed Church in America to 1850 With Emphasis on the Eastern Synod," Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1961, pp. 32-58, 63-68.
11. Ibid., p. 118; Kern, op. cit., pp. 15, 36.
12. Charles C. Cole Jr., "The New Lebanon Convention," *New York History* 31 (October 1950):385-97.
13. Frantz, op. cit., pp. 81, 95-109, 111-21, 140-41.

14. Marion L. Bell, *Crusade in the City* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1977), pp. 62-67.
15. For a summary of Mercersburg Theology see James Hastings Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).
16. Kern, op. cit., pp. 57-73.
17. The second edition of the *Anxious Bench* has been reprinted in *Catholic and Reformed: Selected Theological Writings of John Williamson Nevin*, ed. Charles Yrigoyen Jr. and George H. Bricker (Pittsburgh, PA: Pickwick Press, 1978), pp. 9-126.
18. *Mercersburg Review* 1 (September and November, 1849): 482-507, 521-39; John Williamson Nevin, *Anti-Christ; Or the Spirit of Sect and Schism* (New York: J. S. Taylor, 1848), passim. The Mercersburg Review articles have been reprinted in Yrigoyen and Bricker, op. cit., pp. 128-73.
19. Yrigoyen and Bricker, op. cit., p. 489.
20. Kern, op. cit., pp. 93-176.
21. J. Harvey Gossard, "John Winebrenner: Founder, Reformer and Businessman." Unpublished manuscript of paper presented at Rose Hill Seminar, Chambersburg, PA, July 15, 1985, pp. 15-20.
22. "James E. Wagner Remembers: An Oral History Interview," *Historical Intelligencer* 3 (Fall 1985):2-7.