
A History of the Presbyterian Church of Sewickley, Pennsylvania

Consisting of Certain Addresses, Delivered February 16-19 1913, on the Occasion of the Seventy-fifth Anniversary of the Permanent Organization of the Church

A Committee of the Congregation

Document electronically transcribed by: Paul S. Krush

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Transcriber's Notes

This was copied from the digital edition of the book. The original book was scanned and published by Google Books.

The numbering of the notes is not consistent, jumping from #53 to #72. I have retained the original numbering and placed the notes in the End Notes section.

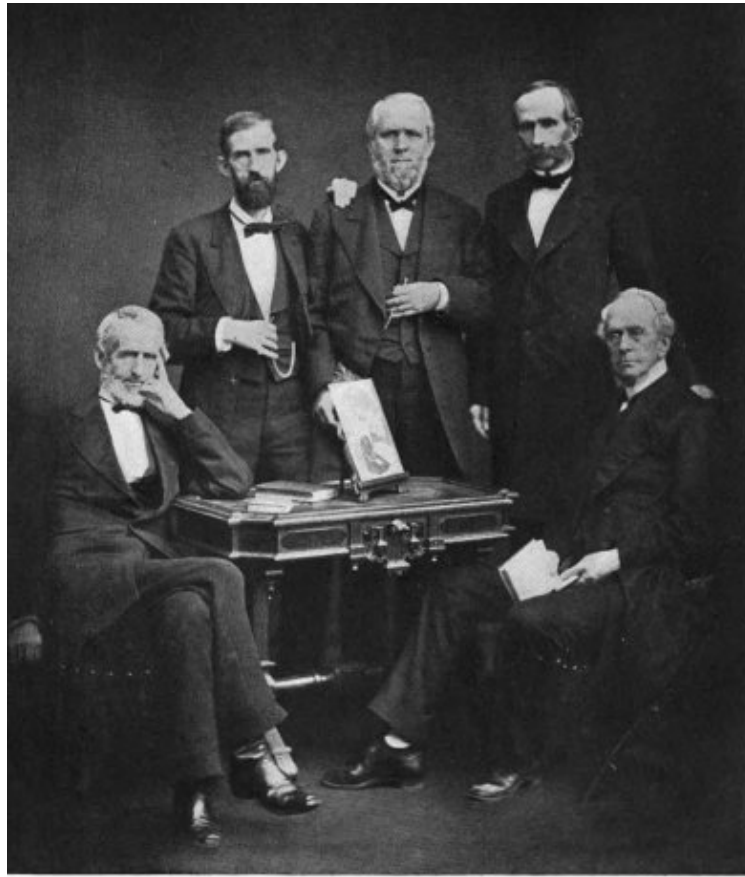
The caption in the photo is unclear. Theodor Hugh Nevin is in the middle of the back row. My father, Christopher Krush has a copy of this photo.

The Elders (selection)

Mr. Bayard H. Christy

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Theodore H. Nevin was born October 28, 1815, and died, at the age of sixty-eight, April 30, 1884. About 1832 Theodore and his brother Daniel, then lads of sixteen and eighteen years, left their home in Shippensburg, Pennsylvania, and came to Allegheny, to pursue their education under the direction of their eldest brother, Rev. John Williamson Nevin, then a member of the faculty of the Western Theological Seminary. Daniel remained in Allegheny, studied theology, and at the age of twenty-five became minister of the Fairmount and Sewickley churches. Theodore, however, after



THE NEVIN BROTHERS: THEODORE HUGH NEVIN, ROBERT PEEBLES NEVIN, PROF. WILLIAM McCracken NEVIN, REV. DANIEL EAGLE NEVIN, REV. JOHN WILLIAMSON NEVIN, D.D. FROM A PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN AT CHRISTMAS, 1875, IN THE POSSESSION OF MR. FRANKLIN T. NEVIN

two or three years, made an end of schooling, and, accompanied by his younger brother, Robert, sought his fortune westward. The two young men had each his share of a modest inheritance; with this they made business adventure in Niles, Michigan, and soon met the defeat of inexperience. They returned to Pittsburgh, Theodore entered business there, and ultimately achieved a success for which the earlier reverse was but preparation. He married in Allegheny and made his first home there; but, on the opening of the railroad, came to Sewickley, where his brother Daniel (whose wife was his wife's sister) was then at the head of the Edgeworth seminary.

Apart from business, Mr. Nevin gave a great deal of time to prison work, to the church, to the affairs of the theological seminary, and not a little to borough government. It is his church work with which we are particularly concerned. He had served for twelve years in the session of the First church in Allegheny, and shortly after his coming to Sewickley was installed in the eldership here. His term of service in this church covers thirty years. Mr. Nevin was the senior elder of the church at the time when my earliest memories were forming. I was a child in the infant class; he, then growing gray, but alert in bearing and fatherly in manner, was the superintendent of the Sunday-school.

In 1853 the church was comparatively small; its membership numbered less than one hundred and fifty. In a peculiar sense Mr. Nevin made the church his care; he was a resolute, clear-sighted, earnest man; at times he proved himself a domineering man; but he was essentially such a man as the church needed. He brought new vigor of action to the session, he made himself responsible for the building of the manse, he shared in the beginnings of a mission Sunday school at the upper end of the valley, in the present Osborne borough.⁵¹ In compensation for his insistent determination, is the grace of a deep friendship which existed between him and his pastor, to which both men testify. For example, in Dr. Bitteringer's diary I find such notes as these:

"Aug. 1 (1866). Rode with Mr. Nevin in his buggy from Pittsburg to Canonsburg. The road is very hilly, but our conversation made the way seem short."

"February 2 (1877). Mr. T. H. Nevin called, and in his own good way had arranged for my pulpit on next Sunday—and as I had nothing to do but to accept, I did so, feeling how true it is that a friend is born for the day of adversity."

"April 30 (1884). Mr. Nevin died this evening. I was there in the afternoon. I would give much to know whether he recognized me, and still more to have seen him before these clouds settled on him. . . . Ah! how much always remains unsaid and undone when it is forever too late."

Dr. Bittinger conducted Mr. Nevin's funeral services (they occurred just one year prior to his own), and some one afterward remarked that Dr. Bittinger could not have described Mr. Nevin better, had he lived inside of him; and upon this Dr. Bittinger said: "I wanted to be true to truth and to Mr. Nevin."

It must be understood that the Sewickley church and all of western Pennsylvania are by inheritance of the old-school or conservative theological party; it must be understood that Dr. Bittinger was a man of most liberal views upon such matters as divide denominations, and that, in consequence, his installation at Sewickley had been strenuously opposed by some members of presbytery, and his continuing here was a grievance which these zealous persons could not forget.⁷² It must be understood also that Sunday newspapers were first published in war time and that after the close of the war publication of many of them was continued. The Sunday Leader was one of these papers, and Mr. Robert P. Nevin, part owner and senior editor of the Leader, was a member of the Sewickley church.

This was the opportunity of the formalists. It was idle to remind them that the member in question did not hold a controlling interest in the paper, and had nothing to do with the Sunday issue; the matter was advertised in presbytery and, after continued agitation, presbytery was induced to request the session of the Sewickley church to take the case up, as one of "common fame," and to proceed to a trial of the member under reproach. The session replied to presbytery that there was no "common fame," other than that created by busybodies; and, as to disciplinary procedure, the affair lay within the cognizance and wholly within the jurisdiction of session, and they deemed it unwise to act. The reasons for the attitude of the church session were soon apparent: they deplored the facts, they extended neither sympathy nor comfort to the one complained of; but they were unwilling, merely because the case was plain, to rigorously enforce against one member a law, some austerities of which they were themselves unable to bear.

The inaction of session produced a storm of protest and outcry, and the case was carried to synod and to general assembly in turn. Though the question of jurisdiction alone was properly appealable, it was only natural that the Sunday question should be debated in the higher courts, to the prejudice of the position which the Sewickley church had taken. General assembly decided (1) that participation in the publication or sale of a Sunday newspaper was inconsistent with Presbyterian church membership, and (2) that a presbytery had the right to require of a constituent church that it proceed to the discipline of one of its own members.⁷³

The case then came back to presbytery, and the committee in charge recommended "that Presbytery express its continued expectation that the Session [of the Sewickley church] will take up the case." At that point in the proceedings Mr. Theodore Nevin (whose brother the offending editor was) rose to his feet, and offered a substitute resolution, which I quote: "Presbytery would hereby reaffirm its former deliverances on the subject of the observance of the Sabbath, and reiterate its often-times expressed disapproval of the many and varied violations of the Fourth commandment on the part of some church members; and as applicable at this time, especially to the publishing, selling and reading of secular newspapers on the Sabbath by professing Christians, and then, having delivered these reaffirmations, would make the following minute in relation to the Sewickley church case. Having full confidence in the integrity and loyalty of the session of the Sewickley Presbyterian church, composed, as we believe it to be, of intelligent, honest, conscientious and Christian gentlemen who have at heart in their official acts the peace and purity of the church, and who would not shrink from the performance of any disciplinary measure, however unpleasant, when, in their judgment, it would be essential in order to promote the cause of Christianity or the best interests of the church, and believing also that the most efficient disciplinary measures we do or can have in the church are those which proceed from and are

confined to the church session (the primary judicatory of the church) and that through this channel, as by the flow of pure water, the purity of the church can be best conserved, therefore presbytery would here return and recommit the case now pending to the said session, with instructions to investigate and issue the same, as in their judgment may best accord with the true principles of religion, the greatest good of the church and the still greater glory of God, and report their action to presbytery. ”

Mr. Nevin followed the reading of his resolution with a speech, in which he said that, during the pendency of the case, he had, because of his relationship to the editor concerned, absented himself from the counsels of session and presbytery; and that, in submitting the resolution which he had read, he was acting entirely on his own initiative and without consultation with or knowledge on the part of the pastor or session of the Sewickley church. He deplored the whole incident as ill-advised from the beginning and calculated to effect no good end but rather the disruption of the church primarily involved; he spoke warmly of the union of the church, in spite of this disrupting tendency, of the disinterestedness and pure motives of the session and pastor, and pled for the adoption of his pacific resolution.

During the three years since the trouble had begun some of the agitators had died, and presbytery had come to realize that it had been made the instrument of petty intolerance. Mr. Nevin's resolution was adopted with scarcely a dissenting voice.

I have spoken of this incident at length because it shows Mr. Nevin at his best, a judicious officer, able to maintain a dispassionate and fair attitude under most trying circumstances; and also because it shows a session at its best, standing earnestly, patiently, and firmly for the right, even when hidden from easy detection by conditions which manifestly were not right. It lies upon an honorable and important page in our annals.

End Notes

51. The Mission Sunday-school at Osborne was begun in November, 1865. Miss Rebecca Davis, daughter of Elder Robert H. Davis and afterward Mrs. L. H. Willard, was the one who began the enterprise, and soon those interested included Miss Davis's mother, her uncle (Captain George W. Cochran), Mr. J. H. Baldwin, *Mr. Theodore H. Nevin*, Mr. William L. Jones, Mr. William Mackown, and Mrs. C. de B. Duncan. The first meetings were held in the district school-house; within a year, a building was erected, on the land of Mr. Park, at the base of the hill, adjacent to the old Park tavern (then a dwelling). Captain Cochran contributed the greater part of the cost, "when he was rich," as afterward he was wont to say. The school was very useful and continued for nearly forty years. In addition to the ones who have been named, those chiefly responsible for its continuance were Mrs. Chambers Miller, the Misses Wilson (Mrs. Charles McKnight and Mrs. William Walker), Mr. M. Swift Davis, Mr. Walter C. Miller, Miss Elizabeth A. McLaughlin (Mrs. P. D. Nichols), Miss Matilda McLaughlin (Mrs. R. T. Kirk), Miss Margaret McGowan, Miss Fannie Travelli (Mrs. Charles A. Paine), Mr. William McGowan, Hon. James W. Over, Mr. Elmer E. Miller (U. P.), Mr. Thomas Bakewell, Mr. Samuel C. Applegate (a member of the Christian church, Allegheny; he attended the M. E. church here), and Mr. W. C. Duncan. The gift of the land was conditioned upon the continuance of the school; and, the school having been closed in 1903, the building has lately (1914) been demolished.

72. An incident, indicative of Dr. Bittinger's freedom from the compulsion of convention is recorded by his daughter: "When Prof. Bittinger met his wife on his return to Middlebury [1853], she inquired whether the Cleveland church [whose call he had just accepted] was Congregational or Presbyterian, to which he replied, 'Indeed, I never asked; it seems to me they did talk of elders, so it must be Presbyterian,' as in fact it was."

73. From Dr. Bittinger's diary, April 10, 1877: "Went to Presbytery. Swift nominated Prof. Lowrie and Laurence as commissioners to General Assembly, giving as a reason their acquaintance with the Sewickley case. I told Presbytery that the Sunday question would not come up, and that if Synod needed defending this Presbytery had no more interest in it than any other Presbytery in the Synod—but if the Sewickley case should be discussed I was as much interested in my church as they were, and I too should be sent to Chicago. I was put in nomination, and to my utter surprise was elected a commissioner to Assembly."

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