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1

ORTHODOX PRESBYTERIANISM IN AN AGE OF CONFORMITY

Historians remember the 1950s as a time of notable contradictions. On the one hand, post-World War II America returned to a sense of normalcy. After having endured first a sobering economic crisis in the Great Depression and a second war of global proportions among European nations, Americans could finally breathe a sigh of relief. They could even exhale with some extra money in their pockets. The sacrifices of depression and war unleashed a postwar economic boom that enabled millions of Americans to purchase homes in new suburban developments, send their children to unthreatening public schools, and join a variety of voluntary organizations and clubs, including new congregations built to meet the needs of suburb dwellers. Middle-class expansion in turn invited cultural conformity, and the Cold War with the Soviet Union reinforced the ideal of going along to get along. Most Americans interpreted the hostility between Communism and freedom as an essentially religious conflict. The Soviets advocated atheism and regarded Christianity as a relic of a bygone era of capitalism. Meanwhile, Americans added “in God we trust” to all coins and currency, and “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance to demonstrate that their ideals of political and economic liberty stemmed from belief in God. Because the Protestant mainline denominations, which had used liberalism to fashion a generic Christianity, still dominated the religious scene, the American public faith could be remarkably bland. As President Dwight Eisenhower explained, “Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply felt religious faith—and I don’t care what it

is.”¹ For many Americans, it was better to adhere to the consensus than to stand out and become a spectacle.

On the other hand, social conformity in America bred the ideal of individualism and the value of resisting middle-class conventions. Popular movies such as *Rebel without a Cause*, starring James Dean, and *The Wild One*, featuring Marlin Brando, were indicative of adolescent and young adult misgivings about the pressure to fit in. Meanwhile, academics gave credence to the stifling effects of the new social order. Sociologists such as David Riesman in *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and William H. Whyte’s *The Organization Man* (1956) studied the decline of American character whether through the social pressures of suburbia or the corporate culture of American business. According to their analysis Americans were in danger of losing their independence and not many people seemed to mind. The Protestant version of this American concern for individuality came from the unlikely source of revivalism. As much as he would eventually become a mainstream figure readily identified with middle-class piety, in the 1950s Billy Graham was beginning his career as the greatest American evangelist of all time. He did so with a shock of hair, youthful good looks, and music designed to appeal to teenagers and young adults who felt that they could not fit in to the conventional congregations of mainline Protestantism. Of course, Graham’s crusades were highly orchestrated and not designed to cultivate individual expression. At the same time, the personal decision to walk the aisle and pray the prayer gave some converts a religious identity separate from American social norms.

While the United States was vacillating between individualism and conformity, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church was experiencing an uncharacteristic respite from similar tensions. Observers would not have known this from the commemorative reflections that were published in the *Presbyterian Guardian* to mark the twentieth anniversary of the church’s founding. Henry W. Coray defended the OPC’s reputation as a “splinter group,” remarking that the Bible “is full of encouragement” to dissenters like Orthodox

¹ On the significance of Eisenhower’s remark, see Mark Silk, “Notes on the Judeo-Christian Tradition in America,” *American Quarterly* 36.1 (Spring 1984): 65–85.

Presbyterians who refused to go along with the theological breadth of the mainline Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.² Likewise, Robert S. Marsden's talk at Calvary OPC in Glenside highlighted the denomination's history of defending the gospel. As such, the twentieth anniversary of the OPC was both a milestone and a "monument upon the battle field" of the church's constant fight with unbelief and infidelity.³ Despite memories of battle, the 1950s were for the OPC a decade of relative calm.

Since its beginning on June 11, 1936 the young denomination had witnessed a number of controversies, many of which pitted the thought or expectations of individual teachers or pastors against the collective wisdom of the church at large. When the OPC celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 1956 those older conflicts were still fresh in the minds of leaders like Coray and Marsden. Meanwhile, the conflict between the conservative Presbyterianism of the OPC and the liberal variety of the mainline denomination, the PCUSA, was also alive and well. Even so, compared to its infant years, by 1956 the OPC had achieved a measure of stability that reflected its growing maturity. One important reason for the denomination's apparent equanimity was its capacity for addressing disagreements forthrightly and being willing to suffer the consequences of unpopular stands.

The Unity of Opposition

In 1956, if Marsden's and Coray's reflections were any indication, the events that led to the formation of the OPC were still much on the minds of Orthodox Presbyterians. Coray could refer to "the debacle of Syracuse" without having to explain that this city in New York State was the site of the 1936 General Assembly that upheld the Presbytery of New Brunswick's suspension of J. Gresham Machen from the ministry for his involvement in the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions. Marsden too was quick

² Henry W. Coray, "After Twenty Years," *Presbyterian Guardian*, May 15, 1956, 67.

³ Robert S. Marsden, "Set for the Defense of the Gospel," *Presbyterian Guardian*, June 15, 1956, 83.

to refer to the General Assembly of 1933 in Columbus, Ohio, as decisive without having to explain that this was the meeting where the PCUSA whitewashed the liberal theological elements within the denomination's Board of Foreign Missions, a determination that prompted Machen and other conservatives to establish the Independent Board. Church members still knew the history of the 1920s and 1930s in the Northern Presbyterian Church, and even if they were on the losing side, the struggle against modernism created heroes of the faith and inspired faithfulness in the face of opposition and unpopularity.

The controversy in the PCUSA during the 1920s and 1930s went through two phases, the first concerning whether liberalism actually existed within the denomination, the second involving what place conservatives would have in the church. As early as 1920, at the General Assembly held in Philadelphia, Machen, a first-time commissioner, knew that liberalism was a problem and that some of his evangelical colleagues at Princeton were unaware and even giving aid and cover implicitly to liberals. At the 1920 Assembly, J. Ross Stevenson, the president of Princeton Seminary, and a theological moderate, presented a report that advocated the PCUSA's support for a grand plan to unite the largest Protestant denominations into one denomination. This was to be an organic union of the denominations, as opposed to the federal union achieved in 1908 by the formation of the Federal Council of Churches. The advantage of organic union would be greater efficiency, which was a byword among corporations and business leaders during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Another plus was greater strength. Division weakened Protestants. Unity would give them more power to exert a positive influence on America and around the world.

The disadvantage of the plan for union, as Machen and most of his Princeton colleagues pointed out, was that by entering into a united church, Presbyterians would be abandoning those aspects of Protestantism that made them Presbyterian. If predestination, infant baptism, and presbyterian polity, for instance, were actually revealed in God's word as true and necessary for faithful witness, how could Presbyterians give away their teaching and practice to join with Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans, and Episcopalians in a generic Protestant church? The other problem with organic union,

as Machen argued in a series of articles for church periodicals, was that it was based upon doctrinal indifferentism. Union turned away from serious doctrinal and ecclesiastical differences among Protestants and implied that these were less important than the greater good that a united church could achieve by transforming American society. Opposition to this sort of ecumenism, which was directly linked to the Social Gospel's goal of ushering in the kingdom of God, was precisely the impetus for Machen's important book, *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923). Not only did he argue that Christianity and liberalism were two different religions, and so liberalism needed to be excluded from the church. Machen also showed how American Protestant interdenominational cooperation stemmed from an indifference to Christian teaching and so distorted the gospel into a message of works righteousness.

Events in New York heightened an awareness among Presbyterians over a growing division in the denomination. Harry Emerson Fosdick, a liberal Baptist acting as permanent pulpit supply at First Presbyterian Church in New York City, in 1922 preached the famous sermon, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" His argument against the conservative defenders of inerrancy and the virgin birth who, he believed, were driving liberals out of the church, was better suited for controversies in his own denomination, the Northern Baptists, than for Northern Presbyterians. But by preaching in a Presbyterian pulpit Fosdick drew attention to the workings of the most liberal presbytery and synod in the PCUSA. Not only did conservatives like Clarence Macartney, a pastor in Philadelphia, register formal complaints against Fosdick. But when the Presbytery of New York in 1922 ordained two ministers who would not affirm the virgin birth of Christ, the health of New York Presbyterianism became the concern of the entire denomination. In 1923, conservatives prevailed upon the General Assembly to reaffirm that five doctrines—the virgin birth, inerrancy, the deity of Christ, his vicarious atonement, and the miraculous character of his life and work—were essential and necessary for anyone wanting to be ordained in the Presbyterian Church. Liberals retaliated with "The Auburn Affirmation," a statement spearheaded by liberal Presbyterians at Auburn Seminary in New York that declared these doctrines were only theories about the Bible and the person and work

of Christ, not facts to bind the consciences of Presbyterian ministers. By 1923 observers could see that the PCUSA was divided over liberalism, with some conservatives like Machen and Macartney forcefully standing against it, and evangelicals like Stevenson hoping to keep the church united and not be distracted from its more important work of discipling the American nation.

At the 1925 General Assembly the controversy over liberalism came to a head. The moderator was Charles Erdman, another evangelical from Princeton Seminary's faculty who taught practical theology. One of the points at issue again was whether the virgin birth was an essential and necessary article of Christianity. The General Assembly again affirmed this doctrine. Liberals, mainly from the Synod of New York, actually contemplated leaving the PCUSA to form another church. But Erdman intervened and appointed the Special Committee of Fifteen to study the causes of controversy in the church. This committee reported to the following two General Assemblies and found that conservatives, not liberals, were actually responsible for the controversy. The report called upon all Presbyterians to show charity to all officers in the church, and threatened that critics would be disciplined for undermining the unity of the church.

This episode also led to another committee—this time to explore controversies at Princeton Seminary. Indeed, the tensions surrounding the 1920 plan for organic union, which pitted most of the faculty against the president, J. Ross Stevenson, and those involving the General Assembly of 1925, which saw Erdman make concessions to liberals that contradicted what his seminary colleagues believed about the destructiveness of modernist theology, turned Princeton into a microcosm of the church's disagreements about what to do about liberalism. During the course of the committee's efforts to discover the basis of controversy at Princeton, conservatives began to recognize how marginal their views were in the church at large. This committee, like the Special Commission of 1925, again found conservatives to be at fault, and singled out Machen for criticism even though the testimony of students, alumni, and other faculty revealed that Erdman had at several points taken actions or issued statements that purposefully cast Machen in a bad light. The committee to investigate Princeton recommended a

reorganization of the school. The new structures placed conservatives in the minority within the seminary's board, and gave greater power to the president. When the General Assembly of 1929 approved this reorganization, Machen led other conservatives in the Philadelphia area in founding Westminster Seminary.

Although the school gave some reason for hope, the 1920s were a period of overwhelming defeat for conservatives. They saw the rise of liberalism in the church and warned against it. But the bulk of officers and church members saw no reason for alarm. For many, liberalism was simply an effort to make the gospel relevant to modern America. Certainly, its proponents were sincere and never denied Christ. Consequently, instead of determining how to respond to liberalism, the PCUSA acted against conservatives. Two committees appointed by the General Assembly threatened conservatives with retribution if they did not stop their criticisms. And the General Assembly restructured Princeton Seminary to insure that it would not be the institutional basis for conservative opposition to liberalism.

After 1929, the Presbyterian controversy entered its second phase, in which conservatives considered how they should conduct themselves as a dissident minority who believed their church not only contained liberalism but also could not see the problem. At first, the conservative strategy was to train ministers at Westminster who would be a conservative leaven in the church, and to continue to try to convince would-be Presbyterian conservatives to act against liberal teaching and policies. A quiet approach to conservative reform proved to be short-lived. In 1932 a theological tsunami hit the PCUSA in the form of *Re-Thinking Missions*, a report cosponsored by the largest Protestant denominations, including the PCUSA. This report denied the gospel as the basis for evangelism and mission. It recommended that Protestant missionaries cooperate with other religions, and revised the work of missions from one of evangelism to social transformation through education, economic development, and medicine. Adding to the controversy surrounding the report were comments from Pearl S. Buck, a Presbyterian missionary to China, who in several speeches and articles, praised the study for finally bringing the missionary enterprise into the twentieth century.

The question before the church was how the Board for Presbyterian Missions, a standing agency of the PCUSA, would respond to the controversy. Rather than repudiating *Re-Thinking Missions*, the Board tried to finesse the report, suggesting that Presbyterians might say things differently, but it was unwilling to aggravate the other cosponsoring denominations behind the report. Buck made the Board's work somewhat easy by resigning, but the Board accepted her resignation with regret, a sign to conservatives that the Board was more interested in politeness than faithfulness.

Conservatives responded first by sending overtures to the 1933 General Assembly that asked the Board of Foreign Missions to rid its membership, staff, and materials of modernism. Robert E. Speer, another evangelical Presbyterian, who presided over the Board, deflected conservative critics and reassured the Presbyterian rank and file that the Board was sound, basically because Speer himself was. The failure of conservatives to reform the Board after so brazen an indication of infidelity in the realm of foreign missions led Machen in 1933, in consort with others, to form the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions. This agency was the straw that finally broke the camel's back of an already weak denominational unity. Presbyterian officials determined that the Independent Board was illegal and led the 1934 General Assembly to pass a mandate that declared unofficial agencies to be unconstitutional and instructed presbyteries to bring members of the Independent Board to trial for violating their ordination vows. Of the fifteen Independent Board members, ten were tried (eight by presbyteries, two by sessions) but the most celebrated trial was Machen's. In 1935, after a series of maneuvers that revealed the trial was little more than a forum to condemn and sentence Machen, the Presbytery of New Brunswick found him guilty on six counts, from violating his ordination vows to protect the peace and purity of the church to breaking the ninth commandment. Machen appealed to the 1936 Assembly that met in Syracuse, but the verdict of his trial was upheld. In less than two weeks after the 1936 Assembly, on June 11, 1936, he was elected the moderator of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church's first General Assembly.⁴

⁴ The new church's name was originally The Presbyterian Church

The Disunity of Conservatism

As much as opposition united conservatives against liberalism and doctrinal indifference, finding a common understanding of the Reformed faith was another matter. For the better part of its first two decades, the OPC experienced a series of controversies and lost a variety of ministers and elders because of different expectations for the new denomination. These conflicts teach an important lesson of church history, namely, that having a common foe generates far more agreement than figuring out the basis for fraternity and shared witness.

The first controversy began almost as soon as the OPC started and led to the departure of Carl McIntire and his followers into the newly formed Bible Presbyterian Church (BPC). The factors that led to the split between the OPC and BPC had actually been building even while conservatives were still battling liberals in the PCUSA. Differences owed in part to the very theological breadth in the mainline denomination that conservatives denounced. Although the PCUSA sponsored its own seminaries and committees on theological education, at the congregational level pastors and sessions were generally free to use non-Presbyterian instructional materials, and the doctrinal outlook of individual officers was hardly immune to currents in the broader Protestant world. Even though conservatives had been unified in their opposition to liberalism, they were not in agreement on the theological grounds for either opposing theological modernism or understanding Reformed Christianity.

The result was the emergence of two main groups within the OPC's leadership. On the one side were McIntire, an ambitious and indefatigable pastor in Collingswood, New Jersey, and J. Oliver Buswell, the president of Wheaton College. The other side's chief spokesmen were faculty at Westminster Seminary—John Murray, Cornelius Van Til, R. B. Kuiper, Ned Stonehouse, J. Gresham Machen, and Paul Woolley. An important difference between the two parties was that of ethnicity or nationality. McIntire and Buswell, both born and bred in the United States, followed largely in

of America. But a civil suit against the new communion by the PCUSA forced the selection in 1939 of a new name, The Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

a tradition of American Presbyterianism, sometimes called New School, that was especially skilled at adapting Reformed Christianity to American norms, such as conflating the work of the church and nation, advocating policies and legislation of a legalistic variety, and sometimes trimming fine points of Calvinist theology for the sake of building coalitions with non-Reformed Protestants. The other group included four hyphenated Americans. Murray hailed from a Scottish background, while Kuiper, Van Til, and Stonehouse were products of Dutch-American Reformed Protestantism. Machen and Woolley were natives of the United States but their understanding of the spirituality of the church, which was characteristic of Old School Presbyterianism, regarded the church's identity as one that transcended national allegiance or standards. When Machen died suddenly on January 1, 1937, while speaking to Orthodox Presbyterians at Carson and Leith in South Dakota, the leadership of the Westminster group became even more obviously ethnic.

The theological differences that split the OPC and the Bible Presbyterians cannot be reduced to ethnic or national categories but these identities are instructive for understanding what was at stake in the controversy and the character of the OPC. The first issue that came to a head was eschatology, or the doctrine of the end times. The Westminster group tended to be amillennial in their understanding of Christ's return and his millennial reign. Unlike premillennialists who looked to Christ's second coming as the beginning of his thousand-year reign and postmillennialists who believed the second coming would occur at the end of a thousand-year period of the church's progress and extension, amillennialists believed that Christ's second coming would mark the end of this age and the beginning of the final age which was also the consummation of the kingdom of God. As such, the millennium would not be a literal thousand years nor would it usher in the political rule of Christ over the earth's temporal affairs. Instead, the second coming would conclude the present age and inaugurate the new heavens and new earth spoken of in the apostle Peter's second epistle (3:14). The group led by McIntire and Buswell were premillennialists. Even though both sides agreed that eschatological liberty should prevail in the OPC, McIntire was especially critical of Westminster faculty who condemned dispensational premillennialism. In the minds of

some, McIntire's implicit defense of dispensationalism caused grave concern because that system of teaching denied the covenant theology that the Westminster Standards clearly taught.

Ethnic or national backgrounds affected other factors that separated these two parties. At the second General Assembly, Buswell proposed an overture that would have prohibited officers in the denomination from drinking or smoking. This understanding of Christian piety clearly followed the experience of many American Presbyterians whose British and middle-class cultural expectations regarded alcohol and tobacco as vices associated with Roman Catholics or lapsed Protestants. But it was also a direct slap at the practice of many among the Westminster faculty who came from cultures where moderate enjoyment of alcohol and tobacco was common.

Another matter of dispute was whether the OPC would maintain the same confessional standard as the PCUSA. In 1903 the mainline denomination had revised the Westminster Confession to include chapters on the Holy Spirit and the love of God. The debates about revision revealed a serious effort by liberals and moderates in the church to soften the Calvinism of the Westminster Standards. As such, theologians such as Benjamin Warfield and W. G. T. Shedd wrote vigorously against revision. Many in the OPC wanted to return to the pre-1903 version of the confession. But McIntire wanted to maintain the 1903 revisions, if only to support the legal claims of various congregations that were trying to hold on to their church property, that the OPC was the legitimate successor to the PCUSA. The argument was that if the OPC repudiated the creedal revisions, its legal case would be weak. Consequently, the question of which version of the Westminster Confession to use raised the further wrinkle of what kind of Presbyterian church the OPC would be: would it seek to be as consistently Reformed as possible, or would it be content with American modifications?

At the third General Assembly these differences prompted McIntire and Buswell to withdraw and found the Bible Presbyterian Church. Hurting the chances for reconciliation was Machen's unexpected death at the start of the year. But had Machen lived to see the third Assembly his stature and leadership would not have likely been able to bridge the widening breach. The specific matter

was an overture to prohibit the consumption of beverage alcohol by church officers and members. The Assembly's rejection of this motion in favor of Christian liberty was clearly a victory for the theology of the Westminster Standards. But the vote itself revealed the irreconcilability of the two parties in the young church—one side eager to carry on what its leaders believed were the good aspects of American Presbyterianism, the other wanting to emphasize confessional and ecclesiastical ties between the best of American Presbyterianism and other Reformed traditions.

After the exodus of Bible Presbyterians denominational peace was not an option for the OPC. From the left came a suit by the PCUSA over the OPC's name. Originally designated the Presbyterian Church of America, the church would be forced to find a new name in 1939 because Machen's opponents in the mainline church were not content with the departure of the small rump of conservatives. Officials in the PCUSA convinced a judge in the Pennsylvania courts that PCA was too close to PCUSA, and so would confuse Presbyterians in the United States who might unknowingly send checks to the new church instead of the much bigger and older denomination. Once the church settled on "Orthodox Presbyterian Church" at a special 1939 Assembly came further antagonism and controversy from the right side of the American Protestant spectrum.

One issue to antagonize the OPC was the church's refusal to participate in the ecumenical endeavors of other conservatives. Two proposals came before the OPC in the early 1940s from distinct interdenominational organizations. The first in 1941 was from the American Council of Christian Churches founded by Carl McIntire. The second in 1942 came from the National Association of Evangelicals. The OPC knew the important players in both groups; not only had McIntire been part of the OPC for a year, but he and leaders of the NAE, such as Harold John Ockenga, had studied with J. Gresham Machen either at Princeton or Westminster. Indeed, most of the leadership of conservative Protestantism during the World War II era bore the fingerprints of Old Princeton or Westminster if only because conservatives had no other reputable seminary at which to study. (Fuller Theological Seminary, founded in 1947, eventually became the alternative to Westminster.) Both

of the new associations, the ACCC and the NAE, wanted to function as the rival interdenominational organization to the mainline-dominated and modernist-oriented Federal Council of Churches. But they differed over tactics. The ACCC, McIntire's group, was militant and would not permit any compromise with modernism; denominational members, congregations, or individuals would not be permitted to have any ties to the Federal Council. The NAE, however, wanted to be positive rather than militant; its members needed to affirm the core evangelical doctrines but could still retain membership in a modernist denomination or in the Federal Council.

The OPC's decision regarding both invitations puzzled outsiders but made good sense to most of its own members. On the one hand, the OPC was decidedly antimodernist but knew from first-hand experience that McIntire's tactics could be heavy-handed. Orthodox Presbyterians also feared that McIntire's anticommunism could turn the ACCC too much into a political organization rather than a genuinely ecumenical endeavor. On the other hand, the NAE had members as various as Baptists, Pentecostals, and Wesleyans, thus compromising seriously the theological profile of the new evangelical endeavor. For this reason, the OPC turned down both the ACCC and the NAE, and would wait to find an outlet for its ecumenical imperative until 1948 when it joined the Reformed Ecumenical Synod, a cooperative venture among Reformed churches in North America, Europe, and Africa. Once again, the non-American leadership of the OPC at Westminster Seminary had assisted the denomination to look above the parochial concerns of a national Protestantism and recognize its theological ties to Reformed and Presbyterian churches outside the United States.

But for a minority in the OPC, the denomination's refusal to embrace the agenda of either the ACCC or the NAE was a serious mistake. In 1944, Robert Strong, a pastor in the Presbytery of Philadelphia, issued "A Program of Action for the OPC" which was designed again to challenge the non-American leadership of the church at Westminster. It included support for Gordon H. Clark, whose ordination had become a controversial matter within the Presbytery, with one of the side effects being a significant debate between Clark and Cornelius Van Til over the knowledge of God and its implications for apologetics. But support for Clark's ordination

was only the fig leaf of a number of objections: the OPC's refusal to condemn liquor, failure to join either the NAE or the ACCC, and its nonchalance about movement evangelicalism. In effect, "A Program for Action for the OPC" became a way to reconsider the items that prompted the split between the OPC and the BPC. Between 1944 and 1947 the OPC debated Clark's ordination, the knowledge of God, and the denomination's relationship to born-again Protestants. Through it all, the denomination continued in its original identity of being a Reformed church that was not captive to American Protestant expectations. For Orthodox Presbyterians like Clark and Strong, the OPC's identity was too narrow. When Clark accepted a teaching post at Butler University, he transferred to the United Presbyterian Church of North America. Strong sought a call in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. (the Southern mainline denomination). Still others used the outcome of the Clark controversy to leave the OPC and join McIntire in the BPC.

One of the last controversies in the OPC's early history that revealed the problem of uniting around a positive identity after having a common foe was the imbroglio surrounding Edwin H. Rian. The counsel to Machen during his trial for being a member of the Independent Board and a senior administrator at Westminster Seminary, in 1941 Rian called for the formation of a standing committee of the General Assembly to make the OPC a more effective influence on the United States. The responsibility of this body, called the Committee of Nine for its number of members, was "to study the relationship of the OPC to society in general, and to other ecclesiastical bodies in particular," and find "ways and means whereby the message and methods of our church may be better implemented to meet the needs of this generation." Instead of joining with the American Council or the National Association of Evangelicals, Rian apparently hoped for the OPC to conduct a social agenda to reform America on its own terms, or at least with the help of other Reformed communions.⁵

Like many within the ranks of the OPC's original leadership,

⁵ See D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Fighting the Good Fight: A Brief History of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia: Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1995), 183.

Rian identified with Machen as arguably the greatest defender of historic Protestantism in the United States during the first third of the twentieth century. In his 1940 account of the controversy within the PCUSA, *The Presbyterian Conflict*, Rian portrayed Machen as Martin Luther, the church reformer who had refused to place the word of man above the Word of God. In fact, Rian's narrative attributed epoch-making significance to the founding of the OPC and the church's place in the history of the West. One of the most glaring problems with liberal Protestantism was its lack of potency. By abandoning Scripture, the modernist church no longer had the power or will to shape civilization the way the Reformation had.

Rian believed he was carrying Machen's torch with these concerns but he failed to notice his mentor's own understanding of the relationship between church and society. As a member of America's cultural elite, Machen was attuned to the affects of faith on culture. But he was also a strenuous critic of American Protestant efforts, whether in the form of the Social Gospel or fundamentalist legalism, to make the United States Christian. The church's mission was not political or social but spiritual, according to Machen. The secondary effects of this mission would generally be apparent. But trying to put Christianity into political or legal form was to confuse the good news of salvation with the law, or the eternal and imperishable things with the temporal and perishable. Consequently, although Rian regarded Machen as a champion of the epic battles of the Reformation, he missed significant differences between the church as an institution of the state and the church in a liberal democratic republic.

Rian became acquainted with these differences in a firsthand way at the OPC's 1942 General Assembly. The year before, he had led the Assembly in establishing a "Committee of Nine" to explore ways in which the OPC could greater influence the culture. But when the time came for the Assembly to act upon the recommendations of the Committee of Nine at the 1942 Assembly, a minority report from Cornelius Van Til and Murray F. Thompson argued against the formation of a "super committee" that would represent a most unfortunate concentration of power and would disrupt and impede the work of the OPC. This form of General Assembly oversight in the hands of one committee was "bureaucratic and

unpresbyterian.” The minority report carried the day, and Rian’s dream died.

Over the course of the 1940s Rian would come to see the implications of the defeat of the “Committee of Nine” for his understanding of the church. A project to found a Christian university in the United States, comparable to the Free University in the Netherlands, in which Rian played a role as a fund-raiser and administrator, revealed further philosophical differences between him and other Orthodox Presbyterians, especially those more indebted to the Dutch Calvinist heritage. In 1946 the Christian university’s Board decided to end Rian’s work for the organization. Then in 1947 members of the Presbytery of Philadelphia, where Rian was a ministerial member, were threatening to initiate proceedings against him alleging misconduct in the management of gifts to the university project. On the heels of these developments, Rian left the OPC and sought to be reinstated as a minister in the PCUSA. Despite the antagonism that had developed and differences that had surfaced between him and other conservative Presbyterians, Rian chose to portray his denominational switch as an expression of theological fidelity. He admitted that he had been wrong to leave the PCUSA because it still bore the marks of the church. In effect, Rian now believed that the OPC was guilty, and had been since 1936, of “disrupting the unity of the Church of Jesus Christ.”⁶ Rian thought that he was simply following the lessons he drew from reading Book Four of Calvin’s *Institutes*. The perch he found in the PCUSA was another university effort, this time as vice president of institutional advancement at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas.

These different departures from the ranks of the OPC, from McIntire to Rian, show that if the conservative Presbyterians who gathered for their first General Assembly on June 11, 1936 thought their departure from the PCUSA would bring ecclesiastical peace they were seriously misguided. As difficult as the controversies within the mainline church had been, the disagreements in the new denomination were no less vexing, and arguably even more

⁶ “Rian Reunites with the Presbyterian Church,” *Christian Century*, June 25, 1947, 788–89; “Grist for the Modernist Mill,” *Presbyterian Guardian*, July 25, 1947, 215–16.

discouraging because of the friendships and bonds of fellowship at stake. At the same time, remembering the degree to which the mainline church had departed from Reformed faith and practice should have helped Orthodox Presbyterians make sense of their embattled existence. As Machen had argued repeatedly during the 1920s and 1930s, the natural state of the church is one of controversy and militancy. Only such struggles could underscore the hope for the church militant to become one day the church at peace. Knowing that the church faces a constant battle with compromise and faithlessness is one thing. Having to endure those battles was another.

Orthodox Presbyterian Normalcy

The OPC in the 1950s had entered into a time of relative calm, not unlike the nation in which its ministers and its members lived. But what was normal for the United States, or at least the ideal of normalcy, of peace and prosperity, was abnormal for the OPC. The reasons, as commemorative addresses in 1956 at the time of the denomination's twentieth anniversary showed, was that the OPC was part of the church of Jesus Christ, and for the church in this age, not peace and prosperity, but militancy and sacrifice were the norm. This theme may explain why the OPC made so little of its twentieth anniversary; celebrating fighting and hardship, even for a worthy cause, can turn a joyous occasion somber. Of all the news items in the *Presbyterian Guardian* during the middle months of 1956, only one mentioned a congregation's observance of the OPC's turning twenty. Immanuel OPC in West Collingswood, New Jersey, held a weekend of activities, complete with a congregational meal on Friday night, an organ concert on Saturday evening, and the return of two former pastors, Charles H. Ellis and Edward L. Kellogg, to preach on the Lord's day.

Instead of leading to celebration, the milestone of 1956 invited reflection on the OPC's embattled past. In Robert Marsden's address, mentioned at the outset, the reasons for the OPC's combativeness had to do with more than simply its origins during the controversies of the 1920s and 1930s, or even more recently during debates about what kind of church the denomination would be.

War for nations might be hell, but war for the church was its calling. “The church’s life is one long war from which there will be no discharge until what the Apostle calls ‘the day of Christ,’” Marsden wrote, and insisted “that you cannot understand the history of the church unless you recognize this.” A church such as the OPC, if it were to be ready to defend the gospel, would need to endure persecution, the jeers of enemies. It would be “a church that succeeds as God counts success.”⁷ In other words, as Henry Coray also observed in his twentieth-century reflections, the OPC would be a separated church, what many referred to as a “splinter group.” Although disadvantages necessarily followed separation, Coray took comfort in the long line of “splinter groups” that God had used throughout redemptive history, from Noah’s family, Gideon’s band, and Elijah’s followers.⁸

The OPC had certainly experienced the meaning of splintering and had endured those divisions. The battle had enabled the church to maintain a Reformed witness that attempted to preserve the best of Old Princeton and that branch of American Presbyterianism and to combine it with the insights of Reformed traditions outside America. But the OPC was much misunderstood because of this combination, too Reformed for evangelicals, and too non-American for evangelical Presbyterians. Building on a foundation that was not readily grasped by other conservative Protestants was the challenge that the second generation of Orthodox Presbyterians faced.

⁷ Marsden, “Set for the Defense,” 83, 95.

⁸ Coray, “After Twenty Years,” 67.