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# 1

## The Significance of Paul Woolley Today

*John R. Muether*

In a 1969 tribute to his colleagues at Westminster Theological Seminary, Cornelius Van Til looked back over four decades and recalled with fondness his memories of Machen, Allis, Kuiper, Stonehouse, Murray, and Young. But when it came to his colleague in church history, Van Til confessed: “It is difficult, in conclusion, to say what should be said about Paul Woolley.”<sup>1</sup>

This is not because Van Til lacked for stories. Everybody at Westminster Seminary in the first half century of its history had plenty of Paul Woolley stories. Woolley could recite train schedules from memory. He read the *New York Times* during faculty meetings, even those he was chairing, paying enough attention often to cast a lone dissenting vote, sometimes on incidental matters.

Van Til’s dilemma was assessing the scope and significance of Woolley’s life and work. Where should he begin? Woolley served as the secretary of faculty for over thirty years. At various times he was also registrar, dean of students, director of admissions, and chairman of the faculty. In the early years he was active in the development of the seminary’s library. Though he would take pride at the democratic character of the seminary governance in its early years, he served, in effect, as its president as well. (It was only natural, when Westminster eventually appointed Edmund Clowney as its first president in 1966, that Clowney was often found consulting with Paul Woolley.)

<sup>1</sup> Cornelius Van Til, “A Tribute to My Colleagues,” *Presbyterian Guardian* 38 (May 1969): 68.

In sum, Woolley was a remarkable administrator. It was said of Woolley that he never failed to reply to a letter on the very day that he received it. That habit serves to explain the curious case of the Arminian evangelist Percy Crawford and how he found himself at Westminster. When Crawford applied to seminaries, he pledged to attend the school that responded first to his application inquiry. Woolley easily beat the competing schools with his timely response.

All of these duties were added to his primary task of teaching church history. Until D. Clair Davis joined the faculty to assist him in 1966, Woolley taught the full gamut of church history: Ancient Church, Medieval Church, Reformation, and Modern Age, along with several electives. And so Van Til was not exaggerating when he observed that “through many a storm he was largely responsible for keeping the Seminary on an even keel. The good name of the Seminary, academically and otherwise, is largely due to his tireless labors.”<sup>2</sup> Another colleague, Ned Stonehouse, described Woolley as “indefatigable and efficient” in “conducting the correspondence and doing a hundred other necessary tasks.”<sup>3</sup>

None of this was the calling which Woolley anticipated when he was graduated from Princeton University (1923) and Princeton Theological Seminary (1925). After he was ordained by the Moody Church in Chicago in 1926, the twenty-four-year-old planned to go to China under the auspices of the China Inland Mission. However, international warfare would derail his hopes to become a foreign missionary. J. Gresham Machen sent him a note of consolation: “No doubt it is a great disappointment to you that you cannot go into your chosen field at once; but sometimes such dispensations of Providence lead a man only into greater service.”<sup>4</sup>

The following year, Woolley married Helene von der Pahlen, whom he met while traveling in Germany, and he returned to Princeton, earning a Masters in Theology in 1928. Then he honed

<sup>2</sup> Van Til, “Tribute to My Colleagues,” 68.

<sup>3</sup> Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 449.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Murray F. Thompson, “The Independent Man,” *Presbyterian Guardian* 41 (March 1972): 35.

his administrative gifts by serving as secretary for the League of Evangelical Students, an interdenominational ministry that sought to strengthen student resistance to modernism in the college and seminary classroom. A year later he accepted Machen's invitation to become the registrar and secretary of the newly established Westminster Theological Seminary. Ned B. Stonehouse later described this appointment as "one of the most felicitous decisions" at the founding of the school.<sup>5</sup> In 1932, Woolley was received into the Presbytery of Philadelphia of the Presbyterian Church in the USA.

Like his mentor, Woolley was called to suffer for the gospel in a humiliating defeat in the church. Both he and Machen were suspended from the ministry by the PCUSA general assembly in 1936 because of their membership in the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions. Unwilling to countenance such tyranny in the church, Woolley then became a constituting ministerial member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (so named in 1939) on June 11, 1936. He shared Machen's devotion to Christian liberty and commitment to see the new church follow in the spiritual succession of the church from which they were displaced (concerns that we will address shortly).

Just as impressive as his seminary labors were the many ways in which he served the Orthodox Presbyterian Church for forty years. He was the first clerk of the general assembly, he moderated the Seventh General Assembly in 1940, and he served on the Home and Foreign Missions Committees of the general assembly for many years. As President of the Presbyterian Guardian Publishing Corporation, Woolley announced, in the pages of the *Guardian* on May 29, 1937, that the magazine would go forward even after the death of Machen earlier that year. This was yet another indication of the way in which Woolley carried the torch for the institutions that Machen helped to found, and he was organizationally as responsible for their survival as anyone else.

In the end, Van Til summed up Woolley's life and work succinctly when he concluded: "In all these respects Woolley has a vision and a program of action similar to that which Machen had in his day."

<sup>5</sup> Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen*, 448.

## Discontent!

The way this vision shaped the identity of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church is evident from the article “Discontent!” that he wrote for the *Presbyterian Guardian* in 1944. Woolley challenged a broader evangelical coalition in the eight-year-old church that claimed the OPC had abandoned the vision of its founder, J. Gresham Machen. The “malignant discontents,” as Woolley called them, sought to narrow the aim and purpose of the church. His language here is revealing because this was precisely the charge leveled at the so-called “non-American elements” at Westminster Seminary (read: Murray, Kuiper, Stonehouse, and Van Til) that were allegedly exercising undue influence in the young church. Woolley argued, in effect, that the beleaguered faculty at Westminster Seminary was guiding the new church into a more genuinely cosmopolitan expression of the Reformed faith, one that was not restricted to the preoccupations and prejudices of American fundamentalism and evangelicalism.

Woolley went deeper than the common description of the OPC as a combination of Dutch Reformed and Scottish Presbyterian elements (represented, preeminently, by Van Til and Murray respectively). Instead, he saw these two streams merging with the American Presbyterian tradition that was over two centuries old. Of course, that was a contested tradition, and the discontents, from Carl McIntire to Edwin Rian, claimed to represent the American Presbyterian tradition as well. So the question became, which of the variant expressions of American Presbyterianism should the OPC embrace? Woolley encouraged the church to identify with the American Presbyterian past that could welcome the leavening of outside voices.

To become broad-minded in this sense required the church to part ways with the obsession for rapid growth (a phenomenon that he identified, four decades before the church growth movement, as a “national sport” in America). Woolley put this choice before the church in the strongest possible way:

The question is really a very simple one. Does the Orthodox Presbyterian Church want to have a growing revival of the preaching, teaching, and application of the Biblical and

Reformed Faith in these United States in the year 1944? Or does the Orthodox Presbyterian Church want to have many members and much money and read about itself often in the newspapers? It can have one, but it cannot have both.<sup>6</sup>

Woolley was hardly embracing a remnant mentality that encouraged the church to relish its small size. Rather, his point was that the true signs of a healthy church would elude simple quantitative measurement. He reiterated this concern many years later:

Large Churches are generally much more closely oriented to money and power than Jesus was. It raises the question of whether an increase in the size of a Church is always a blessing. The people who are running things become tremendously interested in their authority and in the means by which they can realize their dreams.<sup>7</sup>

Still, Woolley readily acknowledged that a healthy church would manifest *some* growth. Three decades later, Woolley lamented: “The annual growth of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church has become dangerously infinitesimal. This is a signal not to be disregarded.”<sup>8</sup>

Woolley himself was no stranger to ecclesiastical discontent. A decade after his *Guardian* article, he wrote a letter expressing his own deep concerns about the OPC. “I love the Orthodox Presbyterian Church,” he wrote. “However, I am very unhappy in the present-day Orthodox Presbyterian Church.”<sup>9</sup> The three page letter

<sup>6</sup> Paul Woolley, “Discontent!” *Presbyterian Guardian* 13 (July 23, 1944): 213–14.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Woolley, foreword to *The History behind the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod*, by George P. Hutchinson (Cherry Hill, NJ: Mack Publishing, 1974), xv.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Woolley, “True Spiritual Succession,” *Presbyterian Guardian* 45 (June 1976): 4.

<sup>9</sup> A copy of this typewritten letter, dated August 3, 1954, is in the Paul Woolley archives at the Westminster Seminary library. It does not have an addressee, and so it is uncertain to whom he sent it. Perhaps it was circulated to a few close friends. Or possibly it was written simply to get some concerns off his chest and not delivered to anyone. Whatever the

goes on to suggest that the OPC was becoming “isolationist,” and thus creating “the impression of a self-confidence in our superior intelligence and holiness.”

Woolley would continue to warn the church against the inroads of “un-Biblical fanaticism.” In subsequent articles for the *Guardian* Woolley further pressed his hope that the OPC maintain what he considered to be the noblest of the American Presbyterian tradition. Responding to developments in the Presbytery of Philadelphia in 1956, he warned that the OPC was cultivating “exotic theological specialties.”<sup>10</sup> Woolley’s precise concerns went unidentified, but it seems clear that he saw threats to the OPC beyond theological liberalism. Woolley was equally alert to the ways in which modern evangelicalism would tempt the church away from a robust Presbyterianism.

His fears for the church were enough to warrant a close friend, Edwards Elliott, to respond in 1956 with these words of encouragement: “Don’t give up the OPC ship just yet, Paul. There is life and godliness in it, for all its failings. And it does commend itself on the American scene, when the tumult and the shouting dies.”<sup>11</sup>

### An Enigmatic Colleague

Former student and colleague John Frame remembered Paul Woolley as a “brilliant and urbane teacher, more like a Princeton professor than were any of his Westminster colleagues.” Frame continued: “His independence of mind was legendary: in faculty meetings and church courts, he was often a minority of one, and it was rare that anyone could guess in advance on which side Woolley would come down.”<sup>12</sup>

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destination, it is significant that Woolley kept a copy of this letter, which he maintained in a file he entitled “Alarums and Excursions.”

<sup>10</sup> Paul Woolley, “Are We Forsaking a Tradition?” *Presbyterian Guardian* 25 (1956): 27.

<sup>11</sup> Edwards Elliott to Woolley, August 28, 1956 (Woolley archives, WTS library).

<sup>12</sup> John M. Frame, *Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010), 577–78.

As Frame's comment suggests, Woolley was known as something of a political renegade. He held membership in organizations such as the ACLU and Protestants and Other Americans United for the Separation of Church and State. (To be sure, this was before either of these organizations became stridently antireligious.) In Moisés Silva's words, Woolley was an example of the "hermeneutical flexibility" of the seminary faculty as he stood out for his "rather 'liberal' position on a wide variety of social and political issues." Silva adds that Woolley's "devotion and commitment to biblical authority was never called into question" by his Westminster colleagues.<sup>13</sup> Nor were his Reformed convictions ever cast into doubt.

A certain contrariness also seemed to characterize his voice in the church. But upon closer inspection there was always method to his madness. An example can be found in two letters he wrote to Robert Marsden on May 15, 1939. The first was a formal communication, which he signed as secretary for the Home and Foreign Missions Committee, wherein he informed Marsden that the committee voted to extend Marsden's position as general secretary. The second, a personal note which he signed as registrar and secretary of the seminary, provided an explanation to his friend why this invitation did not come as a unanimous vote:

No expression of opinion adverse to your continuing was made in the Committee at all, but it was my personal conviction that we were acting far too hastily in having such a matter proposed and finally settled all within the space of three or four hours. Hence I, personally, was opposed to making a decision at the time and felt, therefore, obliged to object to any implications of unanimity.<sup>14</sup>

In this and many other episodes, Woolley's commitment to due process and deliberation took priority even over personal friendship.

Woolley's omnicompetence was not lost on observers even beyond the seminary and church. George Marsden noted that when

<sup>13</sup> Moisés Silva, "Old Princeton, Westminster, and Inerrancy," *Westminster Theological Journal* 50 (1988): 77n15.

<sup>14</sup> Woolley to Robert S. Marsden, May 15, 1939 (WTS Archives).

Harold Ockenga was assembling his faculty at the founding of Fuller Theological Seminary he pursued Woolley's services. However, Woolley's deep loyalty to Westminster kept him from accepting Ockenga's invitation.<sup>15</sup>

Yet, Woolley's administrative gifts did not render him an "organization man." Rather, he resisted many forms of academic bureaucratization as dehumanizing. For example, he was in the habit of sending a letter to his Westminster advisees at the beginning of the academic year that explained how he conceived his role as a faculty member, and his students as responsible adults:

I have always enjoyed personal discussions with students. I find them challenging and informing. I hope that I may continue to have many such. But I shall not impose myself upon you. Contrary, therefore, to the genius of the present plan, it is not my intention to force any invitations, requirements or other impositions upon you. I hope that whenever you find it attractive, you will come and have a talk with me in my library study or anywhere else that is convenient to you. I should be glad to be a party to any common or group activity that interests you. But it must be clear that it does interest you.<sup>16</sup>

### Woolley the Author

Woolley once described a former Princeton Seminary professor in this way: William Park Armstrong was "almost forgotten, largely because he published little."<sup>17</sup> One might be tempted to say the same of Woolley himself. The common perception is that Woolley's administrative duties kept him from the writing that his colleagues produced. Yet Woolley wrote more than most realize. He contributed over fifty articles to the *Presbyterian Guardian*. He wrote other materials that were published anonymously, such as brief but substantive devotions for Great Commission Publications' church

<sup>15</sup> George M. Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 27.

<sup>16</sup> Woolley archives, WTS library.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Woolley, *The Significance of J. Gresham Machen Today* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977), 12.

bulletins.

Though he never composed an article for the *Westminster Theological Journal*, he contributed ninety-five book reviews, a total that exceeds any other contributor.

These reviews demonstrated Woolley's breadth of interest and his eagerness to engage with those of different viewpoints. A characteristic sentiment is found in a review of a title from an unorthodox perspective that Woolley was able to appreciate because "it provokes cogitation and brings ideas to birth."<sup>18</sup>

Another review is worth citing for what it reveals of the reviewer. In commending a biography of Henry Sloane Coffin, Woolley lavished praise on the subject, who was among his and Machen's antagonists in the conflict that gave birth to the OPC. Moreover, in *Dr. Coffin*, Woolley was encountering his liberal counterpart. Coffin, Woolley wrote, "exhibited in the Madison Avenue Church and in Union Seminary an administrative talent which is rarely equaled in religious circles....The ability in administration was coupled with a wealth of warm Christian charity. He knew how to encourage and cheer the ill or despondent student or the overburdened professor. He could deal both kindly and effectively with the church member who was a champion of ancient custom for its own sake. How well he knew that a congregation must be educated slowly." Woolley lauded the biography for revealing Coffin's many virtues, and he concluded on this charitable note: "Coffin intended to serve Christ. We wish that he might have executed that intention on a different and more solidly grounded basis."<sup>19</sup>

Among the works that Woolley never wrote was a history of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. That should not surprise us: those who live the history are not the best to record it. Still he was eager to see the narrative carefully recorded, especially after Edwin Rian's *Presbyterian Conflict* went out of print. A concern that escalated throughout his career was a sense that the OPC was forgetting its history. He commended George Hutchinson's history of the

<sup>18</sup> Paul Woolley, review of *The Clue to History*, by John Macmurray, *Westminster Theological Journal* 2 (1940): 141.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Woolley, review of *Henry Sloane Coffin*, by M. P. Noyes, *Westminster Theological Journal* 27 (1964): 80, 81.

Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod, to a publisher, describing it as a “useful and readable work,”<sup>20</sup> and he eventually composed a brief foreword to the book.

What did emerge from his pen were two short monographs. *Family, State, and Church: God’s Institutions* was an expanded version of lectures Woolley delivered at Conservative Baptist Seminary in Denver in 1963. In outlining the authority of these three ordinances, Woolley made “no apology for discussing controversial subjects,” and he delivered on that threat, especially in the last chapter, “Modern American Problems.” Here he drew provocative conclusions on issues, including Sunday closing laws, Presidential Thanksgiving day proclamations, military chaplaincy, censorship, divorce laws, and religion in public schools.<sup>21</sup>

After his retirement from full-time teaching at Westminster in 1972, Woolley wrote *The Significance of J. Gresham Machen Today*. As slim as this book was (a mere eighty-four pages), it was a timely response to some unfounded rumors. Machen, Woolley felt, suffered from a bad press, and he was zealous to correct the record about particular episodes in Machen’s life. One surrounded the Machen family’s alleged involvement in illegal liquor traffic. Machen himself was puzzled by the constant rumor that his family’s fortune was secured from the liquor trade, and he searched his father’s investments thoroughly on the matter. A variant of this story, that spread even to the classrooms of Harvard Divinity School, had to do with a distillery that was located somewhere in the basement of Westminster’s original campus on Pine Street in Philadelphia.

However fanciful, the origin of these tales lay in Machen’s conviction that the church should not engage in political acts. When the New Brunswick Presbytery of the PCUSA debated a resolution to support the Volstead Amendment, Machen spoke out strongly against the resolution. From that point on, Machen was dismissed as a “wet” by liberals and even by some fundamentalists, both of

<sup>20</sup> Woolley to Charles H. Craig, October 1, 1970 (Woolley archives, WTS library).

<sup>21</sup> Paul Woolley, *Family, State, and Church: God’s Institutions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965).

whom were eager to promote the cause of Prohibition.

The book was also designed to respond to claims by Carl McIntire, the leader of the 1937 Bible Presbyterian exodus from the OPC. Woolley underscored that even before Machen's death in January 1937, McIntire and his associates, including J. Oliver Buswell, thoroughly repudiated Machen and undermined his leadership, "even though no such admission would be made verbally."<sup>22</sup>

As Woolley explained, Buswell and McIntire hijacked the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions, moving it away from its Presbyterian convictions by lobbying for two priorities within the Board: a commitment to total abstinence from alcohol and support for a premillennial interpretation of Scripture. When Machen lost reelection to the office of Board President by a narrow vote in the fall of 1936, Woolley immediately resigned from the Board, reckoning that it had fallen under the domination of non-Presbyterian interests that were contrary to its founding purposes.

Woolley's defense of Machen may have come as a surprise to some, given his own premillennial convictions. Yet this serves to underscore his insistence that the church resist the temptation to pursue any special interests, even his own. Woolley hoped that his small book would invite further reflection on Machen's life. Reviewer Robert Churchill praised it as full of "detailed and vital sketches" of the life of Machen, and he confidently predicted that Woolley's hope would be realized: "It will no doubt be source material for more definite works yet to come."<sup>23</sup>

If McIntire represented an exotic expression of idiosyncratic Presbyterianism, how did Woolley propose that the church avoid sectarianism and obscurantism? It was essential, he argued throughout his career, for the OPC to embrace the doctrines of Christian liberty and spiritual succession.

<sup>22</sup> Woolley, *Significance of J. Gresham Machen Today*, 45.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Churchill, review of *The Significance of J. Gresham Machen Today*, *Westminster Theological Journal* 40 (1977): 167. Churchill's prediction came true in the renaissance of interest in Machen in the past quarter century.

## Civil Liberties and Christian Liberty

As Woolley observed with Machen, there was no area where Woolley himself was more misunderstood than his defense of civil liberties. Throughout his career Woolley projected a vigorous voice against tyranny of any sort, civil or ecclesiastical. This shaped his interpretation of John Calvin. Woolley took exception to the prevailing stereotype that Calvin was the tyrannical dictator of sixteenth-century Geneva; he saw Calvin as a model of toleration for his day. In a 1959 Calvin Anniversary lecture at Calvin College, he said, "Calvin's toleration toward persons was unlimited so long as he was not convinced that those persons were firmly committed to making propaganda for error."

Yet Calvin was not above Woolley's criticism, because civil liberties did not come to their fullest expression in the work of Calvin. While he respected Calvin's commitment to the truth, he dissented from the Reformer's means of safeguarding the truth. True to the spirit of his age, Calvin used the power of the state to enforce Christian orthodoxy. Woolley described this strategy as misguided: "It was ... a lamentable mistake to allow the boundaries of [theological] error to be policed by civil servants and to be enforced by civil sanctions."<sup>24</sup>

Woolley's corrective to Calvin's position was a more self-conscious "two kingdom" approach (though he did not use that term). He saw this perspective emerging in Scottish church history, and he commended these words of Andrew Melville before King James VI:

Sir, as I have told you before, so I must tell you again: there are two kings and two kingdoms in Scotland. There is King James, the head of the Commonwealth, and there is Christ Jesus, the head of the Church, whose subject James VI is, and in whose kingdom he is not a king, nor a lord, nor a head, but a member.

Woolley went on to comment: "Here speaks the true voice of the Scriptures, and of their application to human history. Each kingdom is God's kingdom, but each has its own sphere of operation. When both perform their duties faithfully, the result is thorough

<sup>24</sup> Paul Woolley, "Calvin and Toleration," in *The Heritage of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Calvin College and Seminary, 1973), 157.

harmony in principle and in operation.”<sup>25</sup>

The proper measure of Woolley’s insight here is lost if we fail to draw the connection between civil liberties and Christian liberty. Political freedom is not an end in itself; rather, it serves the higher interest of preserving Christ’s rule over his church and the freedom Christ has secured for the believer. Political freedom grants to the church the liberty to worship and serve God in the way he has appointed in Scripture. The offense of the PCUSA that led to the formation of the OPC was specifically a violation of Christian liberty. The mandate of the 1934 General Assembly against the members and supporters of the Independent Board “was one of the most vigorous attacks ever made by a Presbyterian Church upon the principles of Christian liberty and Biblical obedience.”<sup>26</sup> By demanding obedience to a directive that lacked biblical support, the general assembly had, in effect, allowed the word of man to usurp the Word of God. Woolley could abide this un-Christian mandate no more than Machen could.

It amazed Woolley that this point was lost on fundamentalists, who failed to rally behind a commitment to civil and Christian liberties, even though “their own existence, humanly speaking, depends upon the guarantee of civil liberties.” Woolley noted how their conflation of politics with theology led to profound confusion. Fundamentalism corrupted the unique witness of the church to the gospel into an uncritical defense of American culture. In his eagerness to distinguish the mission of the church from the cause of America, Woolley foresaw the changing social conditions in which the OPC was called to minister. And so he insisted that it would not do, in our age, to refer to the United States as a “Christian nation” even if that made sense in the past (itself a debatable point for Woolley).

For this reason, Woolley challenged causes such as “prayer amendment” campaigns at the height of their popularity. These efforts were not only misguided; they were downright dangerous,

<sup>25</sup> Paul Woolley, “Reinforcing the Wall between Church and State,” *Christianity Today* 9, no. 20 (July 7, 1967): 14.

<sup>26</sup> Woolley, “1932–1937,” *Presbyterian Guardian* 3 (January 23, 1977): 168–69.

because they threatened the religious liberty that Christians already enjoyed. “The only guarantee of freedom for Christianity is for the civil government to keep out of the teaching of religion,” he wrote in the *Presbyterian Guardian*.<sup>27</sup>

### Spiritual Succession

More particularly, civil liberty gave the Orthodox Presbyterian Church the freedom to embrace the robust Presbyterianism of its founding. Woolley frequently called the church to remember its founding vision. It was proclaimed to be, on June 11, 1936, “a true Presbyterian church at last” because it was self-consciously founded as the “spiritual successor” to the Presbyterian Church in the USA. Of course, it was plain to any observer that the OPC hardly stood in any physical or cultural succession to mainline Presbyterianism. And so “spiritual” was the key modifier. As Woolley saw it, there were four key ingredients to the character of “spiritual” succession:

1. Loyalty to the Bible and the subordinate standards (Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms);
2. A sense of confessional subscription true to Old School spirit expressed by Charles Hodge (and distinct from either loose or strict subscription);
3. Understanding of the principle that Christian experience flows out of doctrine, contrary to the liberal impulse to reverse that order;
4. The sufficiency of Scripture for the Christian life, contrary to the fundamentalist temptation to add extra-biblical commands to the Christian life.<sup>28</sup>

Together, these were the “distinctive principles” of American Presbyterianism that the OPC must preserve to fulfill the church’s unique calling. This would eliminate the “riding hobbies,” and it would distinguish true religious progress from passing fads.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Woolley, “Do We Need a ‘Prayer Amendment?’” *Presbyterian Guardian* 41 (March 1972): 39.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Woolley, “The Spiritual Succession,” *Presbyterian Guardian* 44 (February 1975): 28.

Furthermore, spiritual succession equipped the church to embrace its essential spirituality. This doctrine was as unpopular in Woolley's age as it is today, and his concerns about the social witness of the church speak directly to our age. Here is how he expressed this in the *Westminster Theological Journal*:

How far did the preoccupation with reform, from slavery to alcohol, prevent the church and the minister from giving adequate attention to the biblical and doctrinal foundations upon which the church is built? Without ceasing to proclaim the ethical principles from the Scriptures, would not the church have been in a healthier position in 1920 if it had left the political campaign for prohibition to the citizenry? And is not the same true for other reforms? The church states the principles, the Christian in the pew implements them on the lecture platform, in the public arena, at the ballot box, wherever he might be.<sup>29</sup>

In urging restraint on the social ambition of the church, Woolley also reviled a social "quietism" in the worst sense of the term. It was irresponsible "to retire into the shell of a false type of Christian piety and to adopt the attitude that a sanctified Christian will not soil his hands with the political and social evils of the world."<sup>30</sup> The vital difference to be honored was between the role of the church and the duty of the Christian. It was the Christian citizen, Woolley wrote, not the church, who "goes out to do battle with the social ills of men. The Christian must battle social ills. The church tells him so. They must be fought, and fought on Christian principles. But it is the citizen, not the church, who goes to war."<sup>31</sup>

The matter of spiritual succession came closer to home toward the end of Woolley's career. When the OPC considered a merger with the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod, beginning in 1969, Woolley was dismayed at the way the discussion revealed a corporate failure to remember the church's past.

He expressed his concerns by authoring an overture that was

<sup>29</sup> Paul Woolley, review of *Religion in America*, by W. S. Hudson, *Westminster Theological Journal* 29 (1966): 93.

<sup>30</sup> Woolley, review of Macmurray, 141.

<sup>31</sup> Woolley, "Reinforcing the Wall between Church and State," 14.

presented to the General Assembly from the Presbytery of Philadelphia. Among the concerns of the overture was the contemplated name of the united church. “The Reformed Presbyterian Church” was particularly objectionable to Woolley because it was deceptive and discourteous. The deceit lay in suggesting loyalty for “Covenantan” principles that the Old School Princeton tradition (which Machen and the OPC inherited) had never embraced. The discourtesy owed to the seeming disregard for the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (popularly known as the “Covenanters”) who employed that name.<sup>32</sup>

Equally objectionable was the plan of union’s interpretation of the division of 1937. By calling both parties to confess the sinful course of action that led to the division, it implied that the OPC sinned in its “firm adherence to the teaching of its doctrinal standards.” Woolley insisted that devotion to “spiritual succession” was nothing that demanded repentance.

For these reasons, when the plan of union came to a vote in 1975, Woolley at the age of seventy-three (attending the General Assembly for the thirty-second and last time as a commissioner), cast a negative vote for union. Despite his efforts, the plan secured the approval of the general assembly, but the RPCES turned down the plan because it failed to reach the required two-thirds super majority. (Six years later, the RPCES merged with the Presbyterian Church in America.)

## Conclusion

Paul Woolley fully retired from the faculty in 1977 and he died on March 17, 1984, in Athens, Ohio, at the age of 82. In a remarkable way, Woolley’s life and work came to resemble that of Charles Hodge in the previous century. Both careers began with a significant Presbyterian division (in Hodge’s case, the Old School–New School divide of 1837), which served to solidify a high Presbyterianism in their denominations. By career’s end, both watched their communions engage in merger discussions that sought to bury the hatchet of the previous division (and which was consummated, for

<sup>32</sup> Woolley, “True Spiritual Succession,” 3.

Hodge, with the Northern Old School–New School reunion of 1869).

“The Old School had surrendered everything,” Hodge thundered, and the New School was “willing to receive us as repentant sinners.” Such terms would cost Old School Presbyterians their theological identity for the sake of “sentiment and expedience.” Finally, he warned that “if truth be lost, all is lost. Our numbers, wealth and influence will avail nothing.”<sup>33</sup> In retrospect, Hodge’s fears were well-founded as his church departed significantly from Reformed orthodoxy within two generations of his death.

Woolley never expressed his dismay at the prospect of union in the drastic rhetoric that Hodge employed. Although his historiography did not yield a version of American Presbyterianism that was any more cheerful than Hodge, Woolley’s communion has not undergone a similar trajectory. But Woolley would not have us delude ourselves in imagining that the OPC was the last word for Reformed orthodoxy in America. At seventy-five, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church survived as a denomination far longer than Woolley himself imagined; he often suggested to his Westminster students that the life span of a modern denomination does not generally exceed fifty years.<sup>34</sup>

In his tribute to Paul Woolley in the *Presbyterian Guardian* in 1972, longtime friend and OPC ruling elder Murray F. Thompson may have been too hopeful when he wrote that “Paul Woolley is one of the names that men will remember.”<sup>35</sup> Again and again, Woolley warned the church that it stood at risk to lose its sense of the issues that led to the founding of the church. If the life and witness of Woolley recedes from our corporate memory, it will be to our great disadvantage. For this reason, we must be constantly alert to the significance of Paul Woolley today.

<sup>33</sup> Charles Hodge, *The Reunion of the Old and New Schools* (New York: Scribner, 1867), 35.

<sup>34</sup> Charles G. Dennison, *The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1936–1986* (Philadelphia: Committee for the Historian of the OPC, 1986), 3.

<sup>35</sup> Thompson, “The Independent Man,” 37.