

Symposium: Revisiting the Division of 1937—The Orthodox Presbyterian Church  
in Its American Ecclesiastical Context

## Perspective on “Perspective on the Division of 1937”

by George M. Marsden

It is fascinating to look back again at my first publication of more than forty years ago. I originally wrote this piece at Westminster Theological Seminary for a course with Paul Woolley, who was a wonderful mentor. It was then published in four installments in the *Presbyterian Guardian* of January through April 1964. More than twenty years later I edited it slightly for its publication in *Pressing Toward the Mark*.<sup>1</sup> That is the version that appears here.

Most of the article simply follows pretty closely the debates in the *Presbyterian Guardian* and the *Christian Beacon* that led to the exodus of a minority from the fledgling Presbyterian Church in America (Orthodox Presbyterian Church) and the formation of the Bible Presbyterian Church. My interpretive contribution was to explain that division was in some respects a repetition of the division one hundred years earlier between the Old School and the New School in the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. Both sides in 1937 claimed to be representing “historic Presbyterianism” and I pointed out that the conservative side of American Presbyterianism had more than one “historic” tradition. Each side in 1937 was claiming one aspect of a long-divided heritage.

The point that I was making back then--that the Bible Presbyterian Church had continuities with the New School--had not, to my knowledge, been made before. The reason is that among conservative Presbyterians the canonical accounts of the original disputes that led to the 1936 split from the PCUSA the conservative party always depicted the New School as the source of doctrinal laxity that opened the door to modernism after the Old School/New School reunion of 1869. The reason I noticed a New School analogy in the new Presbyterian Church of America of 1936-37 reflected my academic experience. In 1960-61, between my first and second years at Westminster Seminary, I took one year of graduate study at Yale University. Sydney Ahlstrom, another wise mentor, suggested that if I were to understand my own heritage I should know about nineteenth

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<sup>1</sup>*Pressing Toward the Mark: Essays Commemorating Fifty Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, Charles G. Dennison and Richard C. Gamble, eds. (Philadelphia: Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1986).

century America, and so had me write a paper on the New School Presbyterians. From that study, I learned how the New School Presbyterian Church was shaped largely by the New England heritage of revivalism that grew out of the Great Awakenings. While the New School was not as strictly confessionalist as the Old School, the differences were slight by twentieth century standards. The real dynamic of the New School was revivalism to win America and the world for Christ. In that interest it was more open than was the Old School to promoting social reform and to employing independent agencies for evangelism, missions, and reform. The New School, shaped as it was by New Englanders, represented the more “Americanized” version of Presbyterianism, placing somewhat more emphasis than did the Old School on practical outreach attuned to the times and somewhat less on maintaining doctrinal precision.

My argument was that one could see the similar tendencies in the stances of Carl McIntire and the early Bible Presbyterians. They were more open to doctrinal variety in emphasizing premillennialism and by implication not excluding dispensationalists. They inherited the revivalist tradition of social reform, which in their case had been distilled down to the single issue of total abstinence. McIntire’s later emphases on anti-communism and anti-Catholicism likewise reflected this reforming heritage. Further, the Bible Presbyterians continued to work through the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions rather than being satisfied with a denominationally controlled missions board. (On this last matter my case was admittedly much weaker since everyone involved had supported the Independent Board during the PCUSA controversy.) Despite these continuities, personalities and the church politics of a unique set of circumstances determined much struggle in the division of 1937.

How would I write this differently today?

First of all, while I still think that the Old School/New School distinction is very illuminating for understanding early to mid-twentieth century, I might have said a good bit more about the intervening impact of fundamentalism. As to the continuing usefulness of the Old School/New School distinction, I think I would refine it in the light of what I learned from my subsequent work on Fuller Theological Seminary in *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism*.<sup>2</sup> If one wants to understand the differences between the early Westminster Theological Seminary and the early Fuller Theological Seminary, the difference between the Old School outlook at Westminster and the New School but still Reformed outlook at Fuller is especially illuminating—probably more so than it is for understanding the OP/BP differences. Nonetheless, for understanding the particulars of either of these, one needs to recognize the large impact of trans-denominational fundamentalism. That is especially apparent in the OP/BP split in the centrality of the issues of dispensationalism and total abstinence. Probably in 1963 I did not say much about that *fundamentalist* background not only because I did not know much about it but also because I was taking it for

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<sup>2</sup> (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1987).

granted. At Westminster the standard way to understand McIntire was as a fundamentalist. And when I was at Westminster, students who thought of themselves as truly "Reformed"—a group that coalesced around young men who had studied at Calvin College—typically referred to those who forbade alcohol or tobacco as "fundies." The same for dispensationalists. In any case I had not thought much about precisely how the larger fundamentalist-revivalist ethos of the 1920s might have shaped McIntire and his followers.

Perhaps what strikes me most in re-reading my account are the implications of another sort of factor. That is the role of ethnicity in the schism. As McIntire and his allies pointed out at the time, those who led the Old-School confessionalist party in what became the OPC did not have deep roots the old PCUSA. Rather, most of them were churchly confessionalists from other Reformed heritages. The leaders in 1937 were Stonehouse, Van Til, Kuiper and Murray. These men wanted to invent a new denomination that was in formal respects a reversion to some PCUSA precedents but in spirit was more like the doctrinally exclusivist denominations from which they came. I have subsequently come to appreciate much more the role of ethnicity in shaping such outlooks. Regarding the Christian Reformed Church particularly, my experience of teaching at Calvin College for many years vastly increased my own appreciation of the power of such ethnic-religious loyalties. J. Gresham Machen had a much stronger claim to a genuinely Old School heritage, but it is not incidental to his own position in the PCUSA or to the development of the OPC that Machen was reared in the Southern Presbyterian Church (Presbyterian Church in the U. S.), not the PCUSA. In my view, (shaped by a number of years living in North Carolina), white southern Protestants since the Civil War can be better understood if seen as religious-ethnic groups. I am struck, for instance, by the parallels between the Christian Reformed and Southern Baptists, who are both extraordinarily self-referential in their ecclesiastical outlooks and have been dividing over the similar sets of issues in recent decades.

Perhaps the greatest relevance of this observation to the seventieth anniversary of the OPC relates to the troubling question of why the denomination has remained so small. One has to face the fact that there are a number of individual mega-church congregations that are larger than this whole denomination. It is fine to say that the OPC has remained uncompromisingly dedicated to the truth and that is the price one pays for purity, but there are additional explanations. One is, I think, that the OPC has never had more than a tiny natural constituency. It has been a denomination top-heavy with leaders. It has, as my father (the Rev. Robert S. Marsden) used to say, many chiefs and few Indians. It has one of the most well read clergy of any denomination in the world. But in seventy years, even if it grown if measured in percentage terms, it still remains tiny.

That problem goes back to its origins when the denomination was even tinier. Very few people who had PCUSA backgrounds were attracted to the new denomination in 1936. Already then the new denomination was top-heavy with clergy—largely Machen's recent students. But seldom

were these young men able to bring with them the larger parts of the congregations of their Presbyterian churches. Further, the leadership and the vision for the new denomination were different from anything that even the most dedicated northern Presbyterians had previously encountered. In theological terms, this lack of roots led to an anomaly. The theology of the covenant was fundamental to the ecclesiology of the new denomination, but the churches had very little constituency drawn from covenantal roots—at least from Presbyterian covenantal roots. Starting with only minuscule number of laypeople who were in continuity with their Presbyterian heritage, the new denomination had to look elsewhere for its appeal. Most non-Presbyterians found it far too Presbyterian. So it had almost no natural constituency. Probably the greatest appeal has been to people who had some more conventional fundamentalist backgrounds and who have been attracted to Reformed theology as far more substantial than what they originally learned. But even such constituents have been made up disproportionately of clergy rather than of people in the pews.

My hypothesis that the longstanding lack of popular appeal of the OPC relates, at least in an indirect way, to the ethnicity of those who did most to shape the denomination, might be questioned by looking at the other side of the split in 1937. Here one finds a lineup of apparently older American stock: McRae, Laird, Buswell, Woodbridge, McIntire—it appears, at least, to be mostly people of Scotch-Irish or New England heritage.

Why did they not do any better with such a seemingly more all-American heritage? They were also a little more evangelistic in their outreach, which one would think would lead to more growth. The best explanations that I can come up with for their failure to become a larger denomination are these. First, they were a minority splinter from a splinter and so already had cut themselves off from their natural constituencies. They were too fundamentalist-separatist for most northern Presbyterians and they were too Presbyterian for everybody else. Second, compounding those inauspicious circumstances was that their principal leader, Carl McIntire, had grand visions and often employed rhetoric that went beyond reality. He also had dictatorial tendencies that made him very difficult to work with for long and made it impossible for the denomination to overcome its initial handicaps.

Of course, counting numbers is not the best way to measure the success of a denomination or even its influence. If one looks at the movement first centered around Machen at Princeton Theological Seminary and all its subsequent branches and offshoots, one can view it as a substantial religious force of the past several generations. The impact of Machen's students has been immense and beyond exact calculation. Van Til, Ockenga, McIntire, Francis Schaeffer, Evan Runner, to name only some of the most influential, have each inspired generations of followers all over the world. Even if we look at Machen's impact ecclesiastically, we can see that it has touched some larger groups, such as the current Presbyterian Church in America or some of the churches in Korea.

Finally, the other issue that looms large when we look back at the division of 1937 through the lens of seven decades is the implication of this early division regarding the church and national politics. That was not an issue as such in 1937 and was only indirectly implied in the concern to make "total abstinence" an official church principle. Nonetheless, McIntire had inherited from the New School and New England heritages more of a sense that the church should position itself politically to be a promoter of national righteousness. McIntire's own anti-Communist politics were largely rhetorical—as was most of what he did—but he helped pave the way for the rise of the religious right. Today, in many churches, political stances are virtually confessionalized in the sense of becoming tests of true faith.

The OPC, on the other hand, was far closer to the Old School heritage which was more often prone to eschew political stances. In that respect the OPC has been distinguished both from the most of the leadership of the PCUSA which was and remains inclined to political pronouncements and also from the politicization of many churches that support the political right. I wonder as a matter of inquiry how well the dominant OPC tradition of avoiding politics is surviving in these politicized times. I remember back in the early 1970s Edmund Clowney remarking on how mainline conservative Presbyterians could blithely accept the Confession of 1967 but would get up in arms if there were a national political issue that had to do with family values or sexuality. I wonder how much OP pastors today are able to keep doctrine in the forefront in shaping constituents' loyalties or whether today increasing numbers of them make more concessions to the political turn. Even the Old School Presbyterianism of the nineteenth century included a variety of opinions regarding the relation of church to nation. So it is not surprising that one would find a variety of opinions on such questions as well. In this era when so many Bible-believing churches take for granted that support for conservative politics will be of the main attractions, has the tradition of staying away from politics remained as dominant as it once was? This is an honest question to which I do not know the answer. I ask it because one of the truisms about American churches is that they are market driven and hence pastors are to some extent subject to the will of their constituents--if they want to have constituents. In many respects, the OPC has resisted that trend and preached what they believe is correct regardless of what has been popular. I am wondering though, whether the political turn of the past thirty years among theologically conservative Christians has not been more difficult to resist.

Even though those most strongly committed to a fundamentalistic New School heritage left the denomination in 1937, the OPC itself has always been a coalition of heritages, Dutch, Scottish, and American (Old School, New School, evangelical fundamentalist—each with various subtypes.) Moreover, even the American Old School Presbyterian heritage that predominated had itself been a coalition of heritages. Old School readiness to endorse political stances, especially in the Civil War era, is just one example. Another example is Old School revivalism. That side of the heritage was especially prominent in the great American revivals of

1857-58. These interdenominational “businessmen’s revivals,” were especially distinguished by including Old School Presbyterian leadership and by a dedication to avoiding the divisive political issues of the day. Something like that heritage was always part of the OPC as well. From its earliest days, evangelism was an integral part of its mission.

This point is worth making since sometimes advocates of the Old School heritage of the OPC speak of it as if it were just one thing, when in fact it always included a number of variants. So even though the most strongly fundamentalistic New School types left the Presbyterian Church of America at the start and even though those Bible Presbyterians combined a revivalist heritage with political concerns, the Orthodox Presbyterians who remained were not entirely anti-evangelistic nor necessarily apolitical. Furthermore, if we add to the mix variants that were not mediated primarily through the history of the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A., such as Dutch-American, Scottish seceder, southern Presbyterian, evangelical, and fundamentalist, the coalition becomes even more complex. In other words the history of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, like that of every denomination, is a history of coalitions and divisions and each division is between contending coalitions. So every denomination, no matter how formally homogeneous, is a complex coalition including a variety of heritages.