

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

RECURRING PATTERNS IN AMERICAN PRESBYTERIANISM

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THE ORTHODOX Presbyterian Church (hereafter OPC) did not, as Athena from the head of Zeus, appear without precedence on June 11, 1936. Dr. Machen rejoiced in the recovery of true Presbyterianism not because it had never existed here or elsewhere but because it had, by the formation of the OPC, been given a new lease on life. True Presbyterianism has a rich history, rooted ultimately in the Scriptures and the historic Christian Church, going back in its distinctive Protestant forms not to 1936 or even to 1706 but to 1646 at the Westminster Assembly and even to 1536 with the first edition of Calvin's *Institutes*. It is proper to point out these deeper roots because the OPC in 1936 was not merely a church with American or even Scottish roots but one more broadly influenced by the continental tradition. While Mark Noll has for years rightly pointed out the particularly American character of the church in America, E. Brooks Holifield has more recently highlighted that theology in America was not altogether different from European theology, an insight that we can perhaps see preserved in the OPC. But not all were so delighted with the non-American influences in the OPC, and for that and other reasons left in 1937 to start the Bible Presbyterian Synod (BPS). It is that split which George Marsden examined in the *Presbyterian Guardian* more than forty years ago, and in *Pressing Toward the Mark* (PTTM) twenty years ago, the consideration of which brings us here today. We are thankful that Professor Marsden taught us that the 1937 division did not, Athena-like, erupt without precedent; rather, it had important antecedents within American Presbyterianism. The OPC/BPS division of 1937, Marsden argued, is best understood in context, against the broader background of conflict that had characterized much of American Presbyterianism, particularly with respect to certain features of the Old School/New School division of 1837.

Professor Marsden's thesis in the article under consideration—that the OP/BP division of 1937 was a kind of recapitulation of the Old School/New School division of a century earlier in 1837—is, when appropriately qualified, helpful in understanding some of the dynamics of what happened within fundamentalist Presbyterianism in its exodus from the PCUSA. Important qualifications are offered by Dr. Marsden

himself in his revisiting of his thesis in this conference, stemming particularly from his work in the history of American fundamentalism. Perhaps a few modest additional qualifications may be made, as several of us are attempting to do here today. In the perspective that he offers in this conference, as he reflects on his own thesis of earlier years, Professor Marsden essentially reaffirms his thesis with (as just noted) a few additions, though it should be here recognized that Professor Marsden never suggested a one-to-one correspondence between the two divisions, as if that of the twentieth century (in the OP/BP split) was but a replay of the Old School/New School division of the nineteenth century. In that respect, then, I would prefer to see the correspondence between the two divisions, to which Dr. Marsden calls our attention, as involving an *analogy* in which there are similarities and dissimilarities. Marsden, in his PTTM article, points out several striking similarities between 1837 and 1937. And it is this insight, taken together with the further scholarship since then, that yields a more fruitful understanding of the division of 1937 than was possible prior to the Marsden thesis, and all that has followed in its wake.

Marsden did not offer up his thesis about the 1937 division unaware of earlier proposals regarding the causes for the division. In other words, Marsden was mindful of earlier explanations for the division. What he calls the first explanation—"that the division was caused by differences on eschatology, Christian liberty, and church polity"—while not insignificant as a contributing factor to the division, Marsden yet finds lacking on several grounds (PTTM, 321). "The second explanation of the division," Marsden continued, "is that it was not caused primarily by the differences on theological issues, but that it was the result of a contest for ecclesiastical power and the clash of personalities." This explanation too is not without its importance, but Marsden is unsure. He argues that although "these two explanations of the division, if taken together, are helpful," they nonetheless remain "not entirely satisfactory" (PTTM, 322). Thus Marsden offers his "third consideration—that the division represented a conflict of the two major traditions in American Presbyterianism." What Marsden sees, however, as the two major traditions within American Presbyterianism "do not represent two incompatible theological traditions. Rather, they represent two approaches to the same tradition."

Marsden further contrasts the two approaches: "One is the more subjective, less authoritarian conception of Presbyterianism, closely associated with nineteenth-century revivalism and twentieth-century 'fundamentalism' with their strong emphases on the visible signs of faith, especially a conversion 'experience' and a 'separated life.' The other is the more objective and authoritarian conception, closely associated with the European Reformed tradition with its strong emphasis on the place of the objective standards and often associated with exacting scholarship. Each of these traditions has always included many of the traits more strongly characteristic of the other." Insofar as Marsden sees these different emphases not only as two approaches to the same tradition but also as approaches compatible with each other, I agree with him. Whether or not these two approaches are best conceived in terms of the Old School/New

School division is a matter that we might bracket here and consider more fully later. For now, it is perhaps enough to note that some might view the two positions set forth by Marsden as being not merely distinct approaches to the same tradition, but as inherently incompatible, and thus as leading inevitably to conflict, like the view of many in regards to the War between the States. But I think that Marsden is right to see these two approaches not as irreconcilable poles but as visions that “have a legitimate place in the Christian church,” even while appreciating that “the balance between them is always precarious.” And in 1937, the balance was lost and the uneasy union dissolved.

Marsden notes in this division of 1937 a number of similarities with the division of 1837. He argues that in 1837 the Old School excised four synods of the New School for several reasons: doctrinal (the New School was importing the “New Theology” from New England into the church); moral (slavery and alcohol were condemned by the New School); and polity-related (the New School favored continuing the 1801 Plan of Union and engaging in ecclesiastical work in extra-ecclesiastical agencies). A potential problem arises here with Marsden’s thesis, however. While both the 1837 and 1937 divisions, as noted by Marsden himself, have moral and polity dimensions that are, arguably, analogous, the only clear doctrinal problem in 1937 is that of premillennialism, which the OPC GA not only did not condemn but clearly allowed; and the GA made clear that it intended to continue to allow its members to hold that view. The doctrinal errors attendant upon the New England theology or the New Divinity in 1837 were another matter altogether. In other words, while we may identify similarities between 1837 and 1937 in regards to moral and, perhaps, polity issues, we do not discover doctrinal issues in the 1937 division (recognizing some BP support for dispensationalism) comparable to the doctrinal divergences that characterized the 1837 Old School/New School division.

Perhaps a bit of reflection on the rise and development of the New School would be helpful in assessing Marsden’s assertion of a similarity between 1937 and 1837. What came to be called the “New School” entered the Presbyterian Church largely by, and in the aftermath of, the Union of 1801. While there is some overlap between the New Side of the eighteenth century and the New School of the nineteenth century, the latter deriving some of its impetus from the former, the New School developed primarily from the influence of the Congregational New England churches. It was, of course, the 1801 Plan of Union that brought the Presbyterians and Congregationalists together. The effects of this union were seen in several respects, not the least of them being doctrinal. During the early decades of this union, certain tenets of New England theology—a governmental, or moral-influence, theory of the atonement, a denial of the imputation of original sin and human inability, etc.—crept into American Presbyterianism through the emerging New School party. This is not to say that a majority of the New School embraced such doctrinal aberrations. I agree with George Marsden in his assessment of the New School at this point, in which he wrote, in concord with Charles Hodge, that the “New School had been born in New England and grew

out of a strict Reformation tradition ... [that] never strayed very far from that tradition" (PTTM, 297).

While the New School may not have, on the whole, embraced serious doctrinal errors, it did tend to *tolerate* such divergence. That there was a latitude allowed by the New School that proved irksome to the Old School is evidenced, e.g., by the failure to convict Lyman Beecher and Albert Barnes in the 1830s for their departures from orthodoxy. Such New School tolerance of doctrinal divergence galled those in the Old School, and they proved unable to live with it. By the mid-1830s, the willingness of New Schoolers to wink at what the Old Schoolers deemed clear departures from the faith widened the chasm between the two, leading the Old School to excise the New School in 1837.

In the 1937 division, we see no clear analogy to this aspect of the 1837 division. Specifically, the part of the church that remained in the OPC did not expel the part of the church that left to form the BPS. Rather, the BPS withdrew from the OPC, and that not primarily for doctrinal reasons—certainly not doctrinal reasons of the magnitude present in the 1837 division. In fact, shortly before Machen's death (on January 1, 1937) he gave a series of radio talks in which he, among other things, attacked the moral-influence theory of the atonement, the very kind of thing for which the Old School would have condemned some in the New School, either for holding or tolerating. No one imagines, however, that anyone in the BPS held to anything other than a penal substitutionary view of the atonement.

At this point one might well ask that if the 1937 division recapitulates the 1837 division, but does not reflect the sharp doctrinal differences of that earlier division, why this divergence? In other words, if the BPS is to be likened to the New School, why did not the BPS either manifest errors like the New School or tolerate such errors? One might theorize that such error had disappeared in the New School after the 1837 division, manifested in the willingness of the Old School to reunite with it in 1869. The question whether the New School, from 1837 to 1869, dealt with doctrinal error sufficiently to warrant reunion with the Old School has been a source of no small controversy. Evidently, at the time of the reunion in 1869, most of the Old School either thought that the New School had righted itself doctrinally or the Old School did not care too much about doctrinal rectitude, given the union fever that had so many in its grip following the War between the States. Almost all the Old School, save a dozen that included Charles Hodge, voted for the reunion in 1869. That doctrinal problems remained in the New School seems evident from a number of events that transpired in the reunited church, events that had not been at issue during the years of the Old School/New School division.

It should be said at this point that Dr. Marsden has tended to downplay the doctrinal divergences between the Old School and the New School, seen not only in the article under consideration, but also, and more fully, in his doctoral dissertation at Yale, published as *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience: A Case Study of Thought and Theology in Nineteenth-Century America*. I would tend to see,

as would some others—not least among them, Lefferts Loetscher, who saw the story of American Presbyterianism after the 1869 reunion as that of the “broadening church”—the doctrinal differences between Old School and New School as being sharper than Dr. Marsden might see them. The unresolved doctrinal problems were manifested, particularly after the 1869 reunion, in events like the heresy trials of David Swing, William McCune, Charles A. Briggs and Henry Preserved Smith; the 1903 Confessional Revisions; the 1906 reunion with the Cumberland Presbyterian Church; the 1908 Federal Council of Churches; the 1920 Plan of Union; and the whole host of events that comprised the modernist/fundamentalist controversy. The Auburn Affirmation of 1923, for instance, had about it, in its call for doctrinal latitude, a decidedly New School ethos. This is not to say that all liberalism and modernism was simply a development of the New School mindset—far more than that went into the composition of liberalism. But the historic toleration of the New School certainly permitted such to flourish. That doctrinal differences are not present in 1937 like those in 1837 and, even more particularly, in the ensuing years after the 1869 reunion, calls into question Marsden’s thesis, namely, that the 1937 division was a recapitulation of the 1837 division. To the degree that 1937 does reflect some of the issues of 1837, it might be that 1837 shows up in 1937 more by way of reflecting the Old Side/New Side Division of 1741-1758 than the Old School/New School Division of 1837-1869.

One might, then, be warranted in positing that the 1937 division better reflects the 1741 split than the 1837 division. In the 1741 split, we do not find the kind of doctrinal divergences that were present in the 1837 division; and the reunion in 1758 of Old Side and New Side did not witness the kind of doctrinal controversy that followed the 1869 reunion of Old School and New School. Several matters, to list a few, were at issue in the Old Side/New Side division of 1741: the positive, though qualified, assessment of the Great Awakening by the New Side and the practice of free itinerancy by a few New Siders (which most on both sides condemned); the New Side requirement for clergy to testify to experimental religion; the New Side credentialing of ministers who had attended, not a university, but a ministerial academy like Tennent’s “Log College”; Gilbert Tennent’s notorious sermon, “The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry,” which accused the Old Side of being pharisaical; and the consequent Old Side expulsion of certain New Siders for some of these practices. How does this 1741 division correspond to the 1937 division? Marsden’s first and second explanations of the 1937 division—particularly as they involved issues of Christian liberty and personality clashes—find antecedents in the 1741 division. The censoriousness of some of the awakened in 1741 might find an analog in the prohibitionist ethos of a member of the BPS in 1937, and so the unyielding approach of a Gilbert Tennent (especially in resisting the Synod of Philadelphia) might find an echo in the unrelenting authoritarian approach of a Carl McIntire. The reasons for the division of 1741 were not as sharp, and thus more amenable to composure, than the ones of 1837, even as the

differences of 1937 have been admitted by many brothers in the BPS to have been no proper cause for division and thus warranting reunion.

The reunion of the Old and New Sides in 1758 composed differences more fully than did the reunion of Old and New School in 1869, and for that reason was a happier reunion. I would not contend that the Old Side/New Side division of 1741 corresponds precisely to the 1937 OPC/BPS division. There were not polity issues of the same sort in 1937 as in 1741, for example. Rather, some of the issues present in the 1741 division were, in a modified form, revisited in the 1937 division, with the OPC reprising the Old Side, and the BPS, the New Side. I should hasten to add that the 1937 division should not be seen as one in which the New Side tradition left the OPC with the exodus of the BPS. I would argue, moreover, that the OPC retained aspects of the New Side tradition, manifested throughout the history of the OPC in a number of ways, seen in things as varied as the New Life movement and a continuing commitment of some in the OPC to “religious affections.” Unlike some of my colleagues here today, I would see the OPC’s retention of at least some New Side elements as a good thing. So too, I believe, would Dr. Marsden, who sees our Presbyterian heritage, as did Old and New Siders in 1758, as being properly both evangelical and Reformed.

I would apply, then, to the division of 1741 what Marsden applied to the division of 1837: the New Side/Old Side division did “not represent two incompatible theological traditions. Rather, they represent two approaches to the same tradition.” This is, for me, where the legitimate differences lie within American Presbyterianism and within the OPC, i.e., the legitimate differences exist chiefly between *Old Side* and *New Side*. Therefore, I disagree with Dr. Marsden that the legitimate difference in Presbyterianism is understood properly and specifically as between the *Old School* and the *New School*. The doctrinal divergences of the *New School*, insofar as the *New School* embraces or tolerates doctrinal aberrations, reach beyond the pale of legitimate differences. That said, I also disagree with Dr. Hart, who, in a variety of forums, has expressed his view that the differences between *Old Side* and *New Side* are not ones of legitimate disagreement and that the OPC, while perhaps containing both, should do what it can to jettison any *New Side* sympathies in favor of the more stable *Old Side* views. Such a view is nothing short of a rejection of American Presbyterianism since the time of the reunion of 1758, a truly breathtaking stance, in my opinion.

I would agree, as Dr. Hart has elsewhere argued, that the recovery of a vibrant confessionalism and liturgicalism from our Scottish and continental roots is desirable for the ongoing life and health of the OPC, but I would also argue that the rejection of what was at the heart of the Plan of Union in 1758 might bring on its atrophy. Of the eight points in the 1758 plan, most were “wins” for the *Old Side*, with the last point giving only qualified approbation to the Great Awakening, while affirming more generally the necessity of a saving work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts and lives of God’s people. Hodge is so committed to the points in the 1758 Plan of Union that he writes: “Those who adhere to the principles here laid down, are entitled to a standing in our church; those who desert

them, desert not merely the faith but the religion of our fathers, and have no right to their name or their heritage" (*Constitutional History*, Part II, 281). Does Hodge put this too strongly? Whatever our answer to that question is, clearly, we must reject doctrinal error, whether from the New Side or the New School. But to reject everything that the New Side, and even the New School, brought to the table would not only insure our continuing small size but would mean our shrinkage and possible demise. And rightly so, for it would entail a rejection of something that, as represented in the terms of reunion in 1758, we may not safely reject.

I wish to thank Dr. Marsden for reminding us that in the OP/BP division, we were operating out of a richer context than evident by the immediate issues of 1937. The OP/BP division, then, can better be understood placed in the broader context of American Presbyterianism, extending back into the nineteenth century and even to 1706, demonstrating that the OPC is not only the church of Machen and friends but part of the larger Presbyterian church that included Makemie, Andrews, Thompson, Dickinson, Davies, Witherspoon, Alexander, Hodge, Thornwell, Dabney, Peck, Warfield and a host of others. The OPC, along with historic American Presbyterianism, has had and continues to have many problems with which to deal—the worst church, I like to say, except for every other— but we are thankful for the heritage of the OPC and we pray for her blessing in the coming years.