

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

THE MYTH OF OLD SCHOOL PRESBYTERIANISM

by Peter J. Wallace

WAS THE 1937 split between the OPC and the BPC related to the Old School/New School division of 1837? In his essay Marsden notes that “although the details on which the controversies focused were quite different, the essential lines of division were nearly identical” (*Pressing Toward the Mark*, 296). He identifies those lines as focusing on 1) doctrinal/subscription issues; 2) moral issues; and 3) church polity issues. But as Marsden himself seems to admit, once you start looking at the details, the parallels quickly vanish.

Statistics do not tell the whole story, but they provide some information. It is instructive to see what happened to those who withdrew from the PCUSA in the decade that followed. Of the 140 ministers whom I found in the OPC ministerial register from 1937, just over half had graduated from Westminster Theological Seminary (74), while another quarter came from Princeton Seminary (36). What happened to these 110 ministers reveals something about the developing identity of the OPC in the 1930s and 1940s.

Westminster graduates were not fond of the Bible Presbyterian Church. Of the 74 Westminster graduates, 42 (57%) remained in the OPC until their death or 1949 (whichever came first). I chose 1949 because the 1940s were instrumental for the development of the identity of the OPC. But while 57% of OP ministers from Westminster stayed with the OPC, only 8 (11%) went into the BPC, while 22 (30%) went into other Reformed denominations, such as the southern Presbyterian church, the United Presbyterian Church, or the CRC (another one went independent and one went to the PCUSA).

What about the 36 Princeton Seminary graduates who helped found the OPC? If you want to trace Old School influence, Princeton is the place to start! Princeton had remained the bastion of orthodoxy in the Presbyterian Church—a place where Old School theology was inculcated by B. B. Warfield and Caspar Wistar Hodge. But of the 36 Princeton graduates, only 14 remained in the OPC (6 of whom were WTS faculty), while 15 went to the BPC, and another five went to other Reformed churches (1 went independent and Ed Rian went back to the PCUSA). Of the 31 who attended other seminaries, seven remained in the OPC while 18 went to

the BPC, one went to the UPC, while four went independent and 1 went to the PCUSA.

The most interesting statistic is that more Princeton graduates went BP than OP. And if you consider the WTS faculty to be more Westminster than Princeton, then it gets downright startling—because Princeton graduates who were not on the faculty of Westminster would then vote with their feet 2-1 in favor of the Bible Presbyterians (15 to the Bible Presbyterians, and only 8 to the OPC).

An Examination of the Three Distinctives

But of course, statistics don't tell the whole story. Indeed, some might be inclined to say that this is simply evidence of New School influence at Princeton. Therefore we need to look at the distinctive views of the Bible Presbyterians, and compare them to what we know about Old School Presbyterians:

1. Premillennialism (with a dispensational streak). One of the founders of dispensationalism in America was James Brookes, an Old School pastor in Dayton, Ohio, and St. Louis, Missouri. During the Civil War, Brookes was one the chief defenders of James Henley Thornwell's view of the spirituality of the Church, and he served as one of the leaders of the Old School Synod of Missouri (an independent synod from 1867-1874), which united with the southern Presbyterian church in 1874. After the reunion of the Old and New Schools both in the north and in the south, the Synod of Missouri renamed their weekly newspaper, the *Old School Presbyterian*, from 1870-1874, in testimony of their claim to be the last bastion of Old School Presbyterianism. But Brookes was not the first in the Old School to embrace premillennialism of a dispensational stripe. Robert Jefferson Breckinridge, James C. Barnes, and other prominent Old School ministers argued for premillennial views in the 1840s that had some dispensational tendencies. Many of the weekly Old School newspapers published essays endorsing premillennial views (including aspects of dispensationalism). It is true that some Old Schoolers objected strenuously to dispensationalism—but no one suggested that premillennialism was inherently New School.

2. Teetotalism. Most historians have described the temperance movement as a movement rooted in the perfectionist tendencies of New School Presbyterianism and Methodism. In that case you might expect to find Old School Presbyterians arrayed in the anti-temperance camp. But the 1837 General Assembly—the same Assembly that kicked the New School out—declared its dismay that some members (and even, horror of horrors!) some ruling elders “still manufacture and sell ardent spirits.... No church can shine as a light in the world, while she openly sanctions and sustains any practices which are so evidently destructive of the best interests of society.” (Baird, 796-7) By the middle of the 1840s every Old School newspaper was endorsing the temperance cause, and even those who insisted that the moderate consumption of beverage alcohol was not sinful still quickly offered the disclaimer that they themselves abstained for reasons of prudence. Further, in 1842 the Synod of Pittsburgh (ar-

guably the strongest bastion of Old School Presbyterianism anywhere) declared that those who retailed alcoholic beverages should be excluded from the church.¹ When the General Assembly of 1843 reviewed the minutes of the Synod, it decided that there might indeed be cases where the retailing of alcoholic beverages was an offense.

I should add that the Old School remained resolute in its insistence upon the use of wine in communion. In 1841 the Presbytery of Albany rejected the decision of the Ballston Spa congregation to switch to raisin water, and ordered them to return to the use of wine. I suspect that some congregations did make the switch during the Old School period, but the only publicized attempt was blocked.

Nonetheless, this brief overview suggests that the Bible Presbyterian stance, requiring total abstinence of all officers of the church, was very common among Old School Presbyterians—indeed, many Old School Presbyterians even endorsed the two-wine theory that called alcoholic wine “poison.”

3. Polity. Marsden admits that the polity connection is the toughest to maintain. After all, those who went OP and those who went BP had both supported the Independent Board. In contrast, when the New School had blocked a denominational foreign mission board in the 1830s, the Old School responded by developing synodical mission boards—if Machen and his supporters had turned to synods or presbyteries, that would have been the more “Old School” approach—not creating an Independent Board.

Marsden claims that: “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 as opposed to doctrinal and ecclesiastical purity.” (Of course, the irony is that this “practical outreach” of the New School resulted in numerical stagnation between 1840-1855, the same time period when the Old School more than doubled in size.)

But Marsden’s phrase, “somewhat more emphasis,” is the key. Because in fact, a large number of Old School Presbyterians were deeply involved in the tradition of social reform. While they frequently disagreed with New School doctrine, they worked side-by-side in various reform societies, and were every bit as involved as the New School in anti-Catholicism, temperance, and other social reforms. R. J. Breckinridge and Nathan Rice were two of the most prominent Old School ministers in the country, both of whom had fought tooth and nail against the New School, but both were editors of anti-Catholic magazines in the 1830s and 1840s.

¹ Incidentally, the definition of an “offense” in the Book of Discipline at that time was either doing something that was in itself sinful, or doing something that might tempt others to sin. The Synod of Pittsburgh had admitted that retailing alcoholic beverages was not inherently sinful, but since it tempted others to sin, it was itself a disciplinable offense.

With respect to the use of voluntary societies in missions, it is true that the Old School was largely faithful to the Old School Board of Foreign Missions, but at least one Old School missionary remained under the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (South Carolinian John Leighton Wilson—and most of his financial support came from Old School churches), and the leading Old School churchman in the west, Nathan L. Rice, was willing to found an independent seminary in Cincinnati in 1850 outside the oversight of the church. So it was not unheard of for an Old School Presbyterian to use “independent” means (and while the editors of the Old School weeklies condemned the seminary, the church as a whole allowed it to continue for three years before Rice himself gave it up).

So if one looks at the three “distinctives” of the Bible Presbyterians carefully, it is hard to demonstrate that they were actually “New School.”

Fundamentalism and the Fragmentation of the Old School

Does this mean that the Bible Presbyterians were simply a variant of Old School Presbyterianism? Yes and no. If one focuses on doctrine, temperance, and polity, they are certainly within the pale of the Old School. What was new to the Bible Presbyterian movement was its radical separatism.

This separatist mentality is one that is very difficult to find in the Old School. The Old School still sought to put into practice the catholicity of the visible church. Indeed, some Old Schoolers complained that Presbyterians lacked a “denominational” spirit, and were too willing to help other denominations! In this respect, I wholeheartedly concur with Marsden’s reflections this afternoon regarding the impact of fundamentalism and ethnicity.

The division of 1937 was not an Old School/New School split, but rather the dissolution of the Old School movement itself under the acids of the 20th century. The Bible Presbyterian wing of the Old School movement was influenced by American fundamentalism, while the Orthodox Presbyterian wing was led by Dutch and Scottish confessionalists. In truth, we must not forget the third wing of the Old School—those like Clarence Macartney who remained in the PCUSA out of loyalty to the church (and perhaps because they could not identify with either the fundamentalist BPs or the Dutch influence among the OPs).

New or True?

Darryl Hart accurately points out that Orthodox Presbyterians often think of themselves as a “new church” rather than a “true church.” In taking this route we demonstrate that we do not think like Old School Presbyterians—for that matter, we do not even think like New School Presbyterians! Both the Old School and the New School insisted that they were *the* Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. As an example of this “new church” phenomenon in the OPC, a speaker was once

ruled out of order on the floor of the OPC General Assembly for appealing to a “pre-OPC” precedent. The end result is that the only thing that matters to us is what has happened since 1936.

I have entitled this response, “The Myth of Old School Presbyterianism,” because I have noticed that most people seem to think that Old School Presbyterianism is either defined by Charles Hodge and Princeton, or by Dabney and Thornwell (or a combination of both). In reality, the Old School was simply the continuation of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. It was not a new church, but a true church—with all the messiness that one would expect in a body that sought to maintain both the orthodoxy and the catholicity of the visible church.

It seems to me that the OPC’s heritage of (one aspect of) Old School Presbyterianism with a continental twist gives us the opportunity to function as a sort of bridge between American Presbyterianism and the continental Reformed churches. Sure, uniting with the PCA and the BPC would reunite the severed branches of the Old School, but I do not believe that history moves backward. Trying to recapture some “golden age” is a project doomed to failure. It seems that the only way to maintain both the orthodoxy and the catholicity of the visible church is to bring together the Old School heritage with that of the continental Reformed as well as the covenanter and seceder traditions. Otherwise doctrinal idiosyncrasies (in contrast to orthodoxy) and ecclesiastical separatism (in contrast to catholicity) will only continue to grow.