

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

THE DANGER OF A DRUNKEN MINISTRY: THE DIVISION OF 1937 AND ITS COLONIAL ANTECEDENTS

by *D. G. Hart*

“We became members, at last, of a true Presbyterian Church.” Those were the words J. Gresham Machen used on June 11, 1936 to describe the beginning of the OPC. I sometimes think that Orthodox Presbyterians misheard Machen. Many seem to act as if Machen said, “we became members, at last, of a new Presbyterian church.” Since most of the gathered assembly at the New Century Club in downtown Philadelphia were young, we can’t blame it on being hard of hearing. The reasons for emphasizing the newness as opposed to the verity of the OPC will have to come from elsewhere. Whatever they may be—and I have my theories—Orthodox Presbyterians have had trouble recognizing that their denomination has roots in the not always richly Reformed soil of American Presbyterianism and more specifically the mainline Presbyterian church’s complicated heritage. To George Marsden we owe a great debt for reminding us that the OPC did not begin *de novo* on June 11, 1936. As a student at Westminster Seminary four decades ago Marsden wondered where the split between the OPC and the Bible Presbyterians came from. As much as we might be tempted to look to the larger than life personalities of the players involved, from Carl McIntire and J. Gresham Machen to J. Oliver Buswell and R. B. Kuiper, Marsden argued that the strains the OPC experienced in 1936 stemmed from older tensions between New School and Old School Presbyterianism within the mainline church. Whether or not Marsden was successful in cultivating a greater historical consciousness within the OPC, his series of articles in the *Presbyterian Guardian* as well as his essays in *Pressing Toward the Mark* have inspired and instructed any number of Orthodox Presbyterians to search beyond 1936 for the roots of our communion.

As Marsden suggests in his piece for today’s conference, as helpful as the Old School/New School perspective may be on the division of 1937, it also has certain weaknesses. He admits, for instance, that Old School may not be the best description of the Westminster party since, aside from Machen, so many of the prominent figures—Kuiper, Stonehouse, Van Til, and Murray—had no direct ties to the Old School other

than indirectly through study at Princeton Seminary. Other reasons exist for questioning the parallels between 1837 and 1937. Yes, doctrine, social reform, and church polity were at stake in both divisions, but their proportions were significantly different. In the nineteenth century, Calvinism and Presbyterian polity drove Old School Presbyterians to get rid of their New School counterparts. Slavery was in the background but never mentioned as a reason for division. In contrast, the morality of alcohol was explicitly the reason for the break of 1937. Debates over eschatology had sown the seeds of antagonism, so Reformed theology was a factor. Church polity was not really present in the 1937 divide; like slavery for the Old School/New School division, if a factor Presbyterian polity was tangential to the division of 1937. Nevertheless, Marsden made a very useful point in noticing the significance of New School Presbyterianism and its contribution to the fundamentalist controversy and to the leaders of the BPS.

Lest these concessions confirm Orthodox Presbyterians in their understanding of their denomination as a new Presbyterian Church, let me follow Marsden's lead and try to connect the split of 1937 to an even earlier period of American Presbyterian church history—this time the split between Old Side and New Side Presbyterians during the 1740s. Despite having recently completed with John Muether a survey of the American Presbyterian Church, I am probably least qualified to comment on colonial Presbyterianism since I don't know much before 1881. Still, having written too many essays recently on the colonial church in connection with the tercentenary of the 1706 founding of the first presbytery in Philadelphia, I am struck by the parallels between the divisions of 1741 and 1937.

The Old Side/New Side controversy played out from 1733 and 1745. There were three main issues: first, subscription—the Old Side advocated it, the New Side resisted in favor of liberty of conscience; second, requirements for ordination—the New Side insisted that candidates for the ministry give an account of their conversion experience, the Old Side thought an affirmation of the Westminster Standards sufficient and that more was prying; third, itinerancy—the New Side believed they should be able to proclaim the gospel wherever they went, the Old Side thought touring preachers should be invited by the local congregation. All of these contested points can be reduced to one—freedom vs. order in the church. Convinced that the revivals of the Great Awakening were the work of God, the New Side sought to advance that work no matter what the cost to Presbyterian notions of decency and order. The Old Side, however, believed that the book of church order mattered and that any so-called work of the Spirit that created controversy and disorder, or that challenged the legitimate authority of the church, could not be a work of God. When the disputes reached the breaking point, Gilbert Tennent preached his infamous sermon, "The Danger of An Unconverted Ministry" (1740), in which he accused the critics of the revivals of being unregenerate. The Old Side responded with the Protestation of 1741, a document that enumerated the ways that the New Side flouted church order and rescinded those Presbyterians rights to membership in Synod.

Part of what stands out about the Old Side/New Side controversy was the distrust and suspicion that characterized both sides. The New Side suspected the Old Side of being so spiritually numb as to miss a wonderful outpouring of the Spirit in the Great Awakening. The Old Side distrusted the New Side of being lukewarm Presbyterians, or Presbyterians of convenience, part of the fold as long as it did not restrict their efforts. Each side also believed the other was morally compromised. The New Side seriously believed that the Old Siders were unregenerate, and the Old Side believed that the New Siders were drunk on more than the Holy Spirit, not necessarily distilled spirits, but a form of religious enthusiasm that had similar effects.

The parallels between 1741 and 1937 are striking at least on this level: namely, a morally charged atmosphere that encouraged rash responses. The Bible Presbyterians distrusted the Westminster clique as morally suspect for supporting the consumption of beverage alcohol. This was the straw that broke the uneasy peace of 1937. The Orthodox Presbyterian leaders distrusted the Bible Presbyterians grasp of biblical morality and Christian liberty. And rather than letting the tensions play out for several years, as was the case in the 1830s while Old School Presbyterian frustration simmered, or during the 1920s and 1930s while conservative Presbyterians endured setback after setback within the PCUSA, a seemingly minor issue led to a hasty separation of the two wings of the infant Orthodox Presbyterian church. Marsden suggests ethnicity as a way to account for the split of 1937 and some—including myself—have analyzed the Old Side/New Side controversy along English vs. Scottish and Irish lines. But since Gilbert Tennent shared the ethnicity of his Old Side rivals, a better factor may be a kind of moral perfectionism or immediatism that revivalism encourages and that helps to explain why the more idealistic of American Presbyterians have found the book of church order and the deliberative process of ecclesiastical court proceedings to be so irksome. And yet, it was the moralism of both the New Side and the Bible Presbyterians that ran up against the proceduralism of the Old Side and Orthodox Presbyterian leadership.

Another reason for calling attention to the colonial Presbyterian background to the OPC's division of 1937 is admittedly to ride my own hobby-horse of the importance of the Reunion of 1758 for the rest of American Presbyterian church history. The Plan of Union that brought the Old and New Sides back together was in many respects a compromise document. And of its eight points the Old Side seemed to have most of its concerns written into the terms for communion in the reunited church. But as much as the Old Side scored points on the matters of church polity and subscription, the New Side won the war. The Plan of Union explicitly called the Great Awakening a work of God and baptized the piety of conversionism that the revivals introduced into Presbyterian circles. From 1758 on, the mainstream Presbyterian Church would try to combine both doctrinal and political rigor with the subjectivism of revivalism. To try to prove this point as quickly as possible, even the most conservative of Old School Presbyterians were not critical of revivalism but only of Arminian-based revivals. Practically all the leading Old School

theologians, both northern and southern, underwent a conversion experience before making profession of faith, even though having been reared as a child of the covenant. For the Old School as well as the New, the true mark of genuine faith was a conversion experience, no matter how much a Presbyterian child had inherited the ways of the faith from parents and the local congregation. Because the Plan of Union that reunited the Old and New Side Presbyterians established conversion as the leading indicator of genuine faith, 1758 is the turning point in American Presbyterianism, at least as I read the record.

But what does this have to do with the division of 1937? Toward the end of his remarks Marsden speculates on the relationship between the split within the OPC a year after its founding and the small size of the denomination. He rightly observes that the denomination originally appealed to people without covenantal roots, people who were often fundamentalist in background, and for whom the church's structures, both theological and political, came off as too Presbyterian. I think Marsden is correct to conclude that this has been a longstanding problem in the OPC and contributes directly to its small size.

Here I want to try to connect Marsden's point about the ethnic component of the division of 1937, the non-Americans at WTS and the very Americans in the BPS, to the Plan of Union of 1758. For most intents and purposes, the terms of reunion during the colonial era ended the prospects for understanding Presbyterianism as an ethnicity, that is as a faith primarily inherited by children from parents rather than adopted by rational autonomous individuals during puberty and young adulthood. By making conversion the surest indication of true Presbyterian conviction, the PCUSA and her prodigal daughter denominations made the Damascus-Road experience of the apostle Paul the most effective vehicle for coming to faith rather than that suggested by the covenant child, Isaac, who grew up never having known otherwise than that he was a son of God. Of course, this is not an either/or sort of dichotomy, where a church is either in the mold of Paul or Isaac, because given the desirability of adult converts to the faith no one would ever want to rule out those on the Damascus Road. But the question, as John Williamson Nevin so well understood, is whether the model for covenant children is Isaac or Paul. Since 1758, I would argue, American Presbyterians have answered by saying it's Paul and have not really known what to do with their Isaacs and Isabelles. If the OPC had known better what to do with her covenant children she couldn't help but be larger because procreation would add to church rolls. In fact, had American Presbyterians not followed the logic of 1758, a denomination that accounted for upwards of 20% of the population in 1776 would not be looking at the paltry figure of 2.5 percent of Americans who claim to be Presbyterian (only half of whom regularly attend church).

In 1937 the leaders of the OPC, most of whom came from ethnic backgrounds, Dutch Reformed and Scotch Presbyterian, were more comfortable than the American Presbyterians with Reformed Christianity as an inherited faith. The Murrays, Van Tils and Stonehouses had a theology that made sense of baptism, Christian nurture, and the ministry as

the means to reproduce the next generation of Presbyterians. In that sense they were more like the Christian Reformed than the Bible Presbyterians. The OPC's problem, as Marsden observes, was that its substantial base of support was not an ethnic communion or people the way the Dutch-Americans were for the CRC. Instead, the OPC's primary following generally came from a group of American Protestants who had for close to two centuries been reared on the idea that the rite of passage for membership was the same for insiders and outsiders—both had to convert, though telling a child of the covenant to convert sends obviously mixed signals. This might be one reason why the OPC remained small. But another was that even though the OPC's theology may have made sense of children of the covenant, the church did not have the institutions to reinforce its theology. Here I have in mind specifically a system of day schools and colleges that might cultivate Orthodox Presbyterian culture and pass on OPC identity to church members at that crucial time when children are deciding for themselves what their faith and vocation will be. With only 5,000 members, how could the OPC have seriously entertained the idea of a college? But without some kind of institutional reinforcement, passing on the faith from one generation to the next becomes more difficult, especially if those children are going to colleges where no Orthodox Presbyterian congregation exists.

Let me conclude then by once again thanking Marsden for reminding Orthodox Presbyterians that they have a history before 1936, and by suggesting that this history extends even beyond 1837 back to the very origins of Presbyterianism in America. It is not always the most inspiring story nor does it yield the prettiest features of American Presbyterianism. But if the OPC is going to be smart and faithful in her witness, if she would be a true as opposed to a new Presbyterian church, Orthodox Presbyterians would do well to consider that their roots go back at least to 1706.