

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

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## INTRODUCTION

*by John R. Muether*

2006 WAS A year of anniversaries for American Presbyterians. The Evangelical Presbyterian Church turned twenty-five. The mainline Presbyterian Church (PCUSA) celebrated fifty years of ordaining women to the ministry. The biggest commemoration was the tercentenary of American Presbyterianism itself, as the Presbytery of Philadelphia conducted its first meeting in 1706.

For Orthodox Presbyterians, it was also the seventieth anniversary of the founding of their denomination. In observation of its seventieth and the American Presbyterian milestone, the Committee for the Historian of the OPC hosted a seminar preceding the 72<sup>nd</sup> General Assembly of the OPC in Palos Heights, Illinois, in June 2006, inviting Dr. George M. Marsden as the featured speaker.

The seminar directed participants back to June 11, 1936. On that date the long battle that J. Gresham Machen and his associates fought with modernism in the Presbyterian Church in the USA ended with the formation of a new church, one committed to being the spiritual successor to the PCUSA and determined to continue in the American Presbyterian tradition.

Machen's goal for the new church proved to raise as many questions as it answered. What, after all, did it mean to follow the American Presbyterian tradition? How did the two modifiers, American and Presbyterian, relate? As soon as the new church was constituted, conflicts arose over the question of the identity of the OPC. In debates that ranged from premillennial dispensationalism to parachurch missions work to the use of alcoholic beverages, opposing parties in the church made frequent appeals to "historic American Presbyterianism."

Over forty years ago, George Marsden, then a student at Westminster Seminary, explored that struggle in history paper for Professor Paul

Woolley. Subsequently appearing as a series of articles for the *Presbyterian Guardian*, Marsden's "Perspective on the Division of 1937" became a standard interpretation of that early episode in the history of the denomination.<sup>1</sup> It has shaped much of the church's subsequent understanding of its struggles for identity as it sought faithfully to proclaim the Reformed faith in its American context.

In examining the 1937 split of the Bible Presbyterian Church from the OPC (or the Presbyterian Church of America, as it was then called), Marsden noted that the issues provoking that division (questions of theology, morality, and church polity) bore remarkable resemblance to the division of 1837. That earlier controversy between Old School and New School Presbyterians also involved a series of issues regarding theology, morality, and polity. More than a striking coincidence, the division in the second year of the life of the OPC revealed that the new church was not immune to tensions and debates that have plagued American Presbyterianism from its earliest days. As Marsden concluded, "the division represented a conflict of the two major traditions in American Presbyterianism."

Following his studies at Westminster Seminary, Dr. Marsden earned his PhD in American Studies at Yale University. In his doctoral work Marsden continued his explorations in New School Presbyterianism. Arguing against the prevailing consensus that New School Presbyterianism was merely a form of proto-modernism, Marsden demonstrated that the New School was part of the evangelical revival of early nineteenth century America, and thus not only a precursor to Protestant liberalism but just as much a forerunner to twentieth century American fundamentalism.<sup>2</sup>

Since that time Professor Marsden has become one of the leading interpreters of American Protestantism, through such works as *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford, 1980), *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), and *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale, 2003). After tenures at Calvin College and Duke University, he was appointed the Francis A. McAnaney Professor of History at the University of Notre Dame in 1992, from which post he has recently retired.

Forty-three years after he wrote his analysis of the "Division of 1937," Dr. Marsden agreed to reexamine his first published work at the 2006 pre-assembly seminar. His reflections were followed by presentations by three Orthodox Presbyterian historians. The first, Darryl G. Hart (ruling elder at Calvary OPC in Glenside, Pennsylvania) has taught at Westminster Seminary (Philadelphia and Escondido), and he presently serves as the Director of the Honors Program at the Intercollegiate Studies Institute in Wilmington, Delaware. He is the author of several books

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<sup>1</sup> *Presbyterian Guardian* 33 (1964): 5-8, 21-23, 27-29, 43-46, 54-56.

<sup>2</sup> Marsden eventually published his dissertation in *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience: A Case Study of Thought and Theology in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Haven: Yale, 1970), and a summary of his argument can be found in his "The New School Heritage and Presbyterian Fundamentalism" *Westminster Theological Journal* 32 (1970): 129-47.

including *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

The second, the Rev. Alan D. Strange is a frequent contributor to these pages as Librarian and Professor of Church History at Mid-America Reformed Seminary. Mr. Strange also serves as associate pastor of New Covenant Community Orthodox Presbyterian Church in New Lenox, Illinois.

The third respondent, Dr. Peter J. Wallace, earned his Ph.D. at the University of Notre Dame under Dr. Marsden, complementing the scholarship of his mentor by writing a dissertation on Old School Presbyterianism.<sup>3</sup> Dr. Wallace is currently serving as stated supply of Michiana Covenant Presbyterian Church (PCA) in South Bend, Indiana.

What follows are the papers of that seminar, including the original study by Professor Marsden. The Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church expresses its gratitude to Messrs. Marsden, Hart, Strange, and Wallace for their contributions to a thought-provoking seminar, and we are delighted that the *Mid-America Journal of Theology* has made these presentations available to a wider audience. May this study of the past sharpen the reader's understanding of the calling of Presbyterian and Reformed confessionalists faithfully to witness and serve in modern American culture.

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<sup>3</sup> Peter J. Wallace, "The Bond of Union: The Old School Presbyterian Church and the American Nation, 1837-1861." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 1964.