

New Horizons

THE OPC AT 75: WHY WE CELEBRATE

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For the past year, New Horizons has featured historical remembrances in anticipation of the 75th anniversary of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. It has included stories about churches, presbyteries, French Creek, the Boardwalk Chapel, and individuals such as Betty Andrews, John DeWaard, and, of course, J. Gresham Machen.

Not all Presbyterians, however, believe that sustained focus on the past is really healthy for a church. In the judgment of some, celebrations like this are distractions, diverting the church from its true mission. Underscoring how God has blessed a distinctive story is to "major on minors," they say, and promoting the interests of one denomination, even at its best, borders on anti-ecumenical parochialism.

In the estimation of some commissioners to the 1986 General Assembly, the OPC's semicentennial celebration was the cause for the Assembly's refusal to accept the invitation of the Presbyterian Church in America to join it. As an Assembly protest described it, the church had reached a crossroad, and the Assembly in its vote "look[ed] backward instead of forward, inward instead of outward, and is exclusive instead of inclusive." The point of the protest seemed to be that looking backward thwarted the church from marching forward.

This concern was echoed by one recent author who wrote, "The various anniversary celebrations and official histories in the different Reformed denominational bodies have been largely self-congratulatory." He went on to argue that institutional milestones breed narrow-mindedness and chauvinism; they downplay an examination of the sins and weaknesses of a tradition, and they usurp a "spirit of genuine self-criticism."

To be sure, the past can be an impediment to the health of a community. Embracing a perceived golden age of former times may promote a fixation on a frozen past that is largely the product of one's imagination.

But is this the inevitable effect of history? The Word of God suggests otherwise. The book of Psalms, especially, reminds us that the past can point to the future. Geerhardus Vos writes:

The Psalter is wide awake to the significance of history as leading up to the eschatological act of God. It knows that it deals with a God, who spake and speaks and shall speak, who wrought and works and shall work, who came and is coming and is about to come. To no small extent it is the dignity of Jehovah as Creator and Redeemer from which the eschatological necessity springs.... Jehovah cannot

abandon the works of his own hands (Psalm 138:8); he will perfect that which concerns his people. His work must appear unto his servants, his glory unto their children (90:16).

For the people of God, the past is prologue, and reflection on God's faithfulness in history yields, in Vos's words, a "serene confidence and quiet expectation."

Of course, the history of the OPC is not redemptive history. It does not describe the mighty saving acts of God through the person and work of Christ, as recorded by inspired prophets and apostles. OPC history is the story of God's providence in the affairs of one corner of the kingdom of God, as interpreted by fallible observers. So we must concede that it is tempting to misread history, especially on anniversaries.

Still, in looking over the ways in which the OPC has observed anniversaries in the past, it is striking to read how cautiously the church has interpreted these milestones. There has been an absence of boasting and a strong focus on a proper stewardship of our calling. The goodness of God to this small portion of his visible church has not occasioned presumption, but rather has generated appeals for greater faithfulness.

What follows—three reflections on previous anniversaries in the OPC—are particularly eloquent testimonies of history in service of corporate humility and faithfulness. The challenges posed here urge themselves upon the church today. By pointing us to the past they direct our steps toward a genuinely forward-looking faith.

The OPC at Ten ... a Truly Orthodox Presbyterian Witness

"It is the opinion of your historian that all the dominant elements of the church are zealous for the establishment and development of a truly orthodox Presbyterian witness. Opinions differ, indeed, on comparative details concerning what a truly orthodox Presbyterian church is and upon how it can be established and made to grow in our present age. But since the church has shown itself willing to submit itself to the Word of God in all things, there is good hope that the several elements of the church will find their common ground in the Word of God which all confess as their only infallible rule of faith and life. May the God of all grace grant that, if the Lord tarries, those who examine the history of The Orthodox Presbyterian Church at the end of its first hundred years may find there a church that was firmly established in its first ten years!"

—Robert S. Marsden, *The First Ten Years*

The OPC at Twenty-five ... What Mean These Stones?

"Somewhere amid the dust of Jordan's banks are twelve stones that tell a marvelous story. Perhaps by now they are dust themselves—indistinguishable from the myriad grains of sand among which they lie. But in the days of Joshua these stones had a significance that none could miss.

"When the Lord divided Jordan to make a path for Israel into Canaan he commanded that twelve stones, taken from the river, should be set up as a memorial of his deliverance of his people. When children of succeeding generations would ask, 'What mean ye by these stones?' the father in Israel would rehearse the story of God's grace and power. It was a simple memorial, but it was all that was needed. It was not like the proud temples or glorious pyramids of Egypt, giving glory to man more than to God. Rather, like Jacob's pillar or Samuel's Ebenezer, it lacked all marking that could magnify man, and was designed for one single purpose—to recall the mercy of God.

"This year we celebrate the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Although June 11, 1936 marks the beginning of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, it was not really a new church which was born 25 years ago. That faithful few meeting in Philadelphia formed a new church in order to carry on the work and witness of the old one which had turned its back on the faith of their fathers. Over 200 years earlier, when the first presbytery was organized on American soil, the purpose of that body was declared to be 'to take care that the faith once delivered to the saints be kept pure and uncorrupted among us, and so handed down to our posterity.' The memorial raised in 1729 was restored again in 1936.

"Our memorial of these events need not be elaborate to mark the occasion fittingly. Like the stones from Jordan, this anniversary will serve its purpose well if it does but one thing—call men to hear again the faith once delivered unto the saints. And if the day should ever come when that message is no longer heard, pray then what answer shall we give when it is asked, 'What mean ye by these stones?' "

—Committee on Christian Education, Twenty-fifth Anniversary
Bulletin Presbyterian Guardian, June 1961

The OPC at Fifty ... May Jesus Christ Be Praised

"It was June 11 [1986], 10 a.m. on the campus of Eastern College in St. Davids, Pennsylvania. Men and women had been making their way into the auditorium—down and up the hills, through shady woodlands and across sunny lawns, beside streams and lakes—sharing the walks with ubiquitous geese. Now here we were,

perhaps three hundred of us, standing to sing: 'When morning gilds the skies, My heart awakening cries, May Jesus Christ be praised.'

"Whether we had been in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church many years or whether we were new, we were anticipating rich fellowship. Here we were, then, and here were they—these significant others in our lives. So our hearts were awakened and were crying out....

"Against the backdrop of praise and of our need, there was challenge. We were charged to know the Word of God and to proclaim it. We were given a mandate to explore the whole counsel of God—all the while seeing ourselves as having 'darkened vision.' Our task is to be approached with humility.

"How will people 50 years hence speak of us—if they speak of us at all?' asked Don Buchanan. If we lose our first love, he warned us, we will be spoken of in reproach. God's judgment will be upon us.

"It is good to remember the past. It is good to give praise to Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, the answer to all our needs. But unless we respond to the challenge, unless our words and lives—individually and corporately—exemplify the gospel of saving grace, our celebration is hollow."

—Norma Ellis, reporting in *New Horizons*, August-September 1986

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