

TURNING POINTS IN AMERICAN PRESBYTERIAN HISTORY PART 10: 1936: A CONTINUING PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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"On Thursday, June 11, 1936, the hopes of many long years were realized. We became members, at last, of a true Presbyterian Church; we recovered, at last, the blessing of true Christian fellowship. What a joyous moment it was! How the long years of struggle seemed to sink into nothingness compared with the peace and joy that filled our hearts!"

With those words, J. Gresham Machen announced the formation of the Presbyterian Church of America in the June 22, 1936, issue of the *Presbyterian Guardian*. (The church's name was changed to the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 1939.) *Guardian* readers had followed the progress of the Presbyterian conflict during the previous dozen years: The liberal Auburn Affirmation of 1924 was vindicated by the Special Commission of 1925. Princeton Seminary was reorganized and Westminster Seminary was founded in 1929. The Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions was formed in 1933, and Machen and his associates were tried in 1934 for their involvement with it. The 1936 General Assembly denied his appeal and defrocked him and other ministers.

All of that lay behind the thirty-three ministers and seventeen elders who joined Machen to form the OPC on June 11. "With what lively hope does our gaze now turn to the future!" Machen exclaimed. But the start of a new church was also the continuation of an old church. The Act of Association that formed the new church read:

In order to continue what we believe to be the true spiritual succession of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., which we hold to have been abandoned by the present organization of that body, ... we, a company of ministers and ruling elders, having been removed from that organization in contravention (as we believe) of its constitution, or having severed our connection with that organization, ... do hereby associate ourselves together with all Christian people who do and will adhere to us, in a body to be known and styled as the Presbyterian Church of America.

The PCUSA had become Presbyterian in name only, and the task of the new church was to maintain what the PCUSA had forfeited. As Machen explained later in the pages of the *Guardian*, "We withdrew from the Presbyterian Church in order that we might continue to be Presbyterian." Thus the language of "spiritual succession" was heavily invoked in the rationale for the founding of the OPC.

In what sense would the OPC become the spiritual successor to the PCUSA? Would it mark a return to Old School confessionalism? Would it zealously defend the fundamentals of the faith? Would it become the conservative version of the American Presbyterian establishment? What was a *true* Presbyterian church?

These questions revealed that the Presbyterian controversy was far from over. The battle against modernism had created a small coalition of antimodernists. Now it was left for the new church positively to define the Reformed faith that it intended to maintain. In anticipation of this challenge,

Machen had emphasized (in the *Guardian* in the previous November) that Presbyterian ministers were obliged to maintain their vows both to an infallible Bible and to the Calvinistic interpretation of the Bible. "There is great danger to our Christian testimony," he warned, "if we forget the second part of the ordination pledge in our eagerness to defend the first." If the church failed to defend the Reformed faith, the movement would be reduced to a "vague interdenominationalism."

One minister in the new church who was keenly interested in maintaining continuity with the American Presbyterian past was Carl McIntire. The best case for that continuity could be made, he claimed, if the church stayed within the confessional tradition of the PCUSA. That meant adopting the Westminster Confession with the 1903 revisions. While most commissioners identified those Arminianizing revisions as the beginning of the decline of orthodoxy in the PCUSA, McIntire pressed the pragmatic argument that their inclusion would help congregations in their legal battle to keep their church property.

When the Second General Assembly of the church met in November 1936, Machen privately expressed concern that what lay ahead for the church was a "calamity beyond words." Cornelius Van Til, professor at Westminster Seminary, rose in opposition to the appeals he heard for expediency. "Shall we be Arminians before the courts this year, with the full expectation of being Calvinists next year?" His and similar arguments eventually prevailed, as the church adopted the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms, without the 1903 revisions (with two minor exceptions), by a resounding majority.

Other debates accompanied the definition of spiritual succession. One of them had to do with premillennialism. When John Murray and R. B. Kuiper took on the errors of dispensationalism, they were shocked at the ministers who rose to their defense—including McIntire, who refused to distinguish between dispensationalism and premillennialism.

For his part, McIntire warned that the new church, like the old church, was in danger of being overtaken by an "unpresbyterian machine." That machine was located primarily at Westminster Seminary, whose faculty, including Murray, Kuiper, Ned B. Stonehouse, and Van Til (a Scotsman and three Dutchmen), was out of touch with the American Presbyterian tradition and unable to lead a continuing American Presbyterian church. The charge was pointedly made by Professor Allan A. MacRae. When he resigned from the Westminster faculty, he described his former colleagues as "a small alien group without American Presbyterian background."

There was a sense in which the fundamentalists were right. After all, premillennialism had been part of the American Presbyterian heritage, and had been represented at Princeton Seminary at least since 1905, when Charles Erdman joined the faculty. Van Til especially struggled to understand how premillennialism could command a following in a self-consciously Reformed church. "This is not the historical attitude of the Reformed churches," he wrote to his friend John DeWaard. "In the Dutch tradition at least those holding the premillennial view were merely *geduld* [tolerated]."

After Machen's untimely death on January 1, 1937, the battle for the identity of the church focused on the use of alcoholic beverages. The Presbytery of the Chicago Area presented an overture to the Third General Assembly in 1937 that expanded on the definition of *spiritual succession*: "In maintaining the true spiritual succession to which we have adverted we hold that we are successors not only as to the Calvinistic system of doctrine (to which we earnestly adhere) but as well to all

other elements of that true spiritual succession, including those which related to the Christian life and conduct of all the people of God committed to our care." The overture went on to recommend total abstinence for all members of the church, and it cited ample Presbyterian precedent, including General Assembly deliverances in 1818, 1829, 1837 (New School), 1865 (Old School), and finally an 1877 declaration "that total abstinence from all intoxicating drinks as a beverage is demanded from every Christian by the condition of society, the purity of the Church and the Word of God."

The General Assembly debate was long and passionate. McIntire argued that Machen, himself a teetotaler, would have approved the overture. John Murray countered that Machen would have abominated such a disregard for Christian liberty. Nowhere in Scripture, he argued, was there any authority by which the church could impose total abstinence on all Christians. Eventually the overture was defeated by over two-thirds of the Assembly. McIntire, MacRae, and other fundamentalists then departed to form the Bible Presbyterian Church, persuaded that the OPC's direction was irreconcilable with their vision for American Presbyterianism.

Thirty years later, in his book *The Death of a Church*, McIntire continued to press his claims. He described the Orthodox Presbyterian Church as one with "decided Christian Reformed traditions and desires in contrast to the position and heritage of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A." The OPC had charted a new course and rejected its calling to be a continuing Presbyterian church. The Bible Presbyterian Church, on the other hand, represented a "straight line" of "spiritual succession which they were determined to help maintain and preserve for God's glory."

The early debates in the life of the OPC indicate that its formation raised as many questions about Presbyterian identity as it settled. While dissenters broke fellowship to defend features of American Presbyterianism that had become prominent between 1869 and 1930, the OPC set out in a direction that was not only antimodernist but also militantly Reformed. Its founders were convinced that they needed to recover the nobler part of the Presbyterian Church's heritage. Staying on course, however, would be a constant problem facing the OPC.

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