TURNING POINTS IN AMERICAN PRESBYTERIAN HISTORY

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Americans, let us admit, have a problem with history. History is bunk, said Henry Ford. A disdain for the past is a long-established feature of the American temperament. Ours is a culture that achieved political independence and evolved into a world power by jettisoning old-world values.

American evangelicals also have a problem with history. For most of them, history is bunk too. The American religious experiment was conceived in nearly Edenic terms: the New Adam and the New Eve starting afresh in a new world. Moreover, American evangelicals are activists and not contemplatives, crusaders and not pilgrims, which only adds to their disregard for the past.

In contrast, Orthodox Presbyterians have a far better appreciation for history. It is impressive to see how many members of our churches are familiar with the events surrounding the founding of our church. They know about the Auburn Affirmation and the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions. Some can even identify Eritrea on a map of Africa and know how to pronounce *Peniel*.

Still, we in the OPC have our own problem with history. While well-versed on the life of Machen, his struggles in the Presbyterian church, and the controversies that gave birth to our denomination, we may know little of the history before Machen. The events surrounding the founding of our church are so central to our identity, that the tendency is to reflect less on our American Presbyterian antecedents. The impression is left that the story of Presbyterianism in American was one of orthodoxy and stability until the turbulent events of the early twentieth century.

Consider this example, from an OPC brochure: "In the 1800s and early 1900s the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. was, for the most part, a strong and faithful church. One could point to able theologians on its seminary faculties and gifted preachers in its pulpits. It was definitely holding forth a light in this world." While historical shorthand is necessary in a brief evangelistic tract, such a simplistic overview may generate confusion and misunderstanding about our Presbyterian past.

Historical amnesia in the OPC also arises from two surprising sources: Geerhardus Vos and Cornelius Van Til. Among their followers, there is a great appreciation for their exegetical and apologetical insights, which made deep impressions on the history and identity of the OPC. We share that respect and admiration. However, a strong temptation exists, especially among students and younger ministers within the church, to regard the insights of these men as so Copernican that developments in the church prior to Van Tillianism and redemptive history become an unusable past. It is as if Vos and Van Til have rendered Charles Hodge and B. B. Warfield passé—a sentiment, of course, that Vos and Van Til did not share.

So there is a form of OPC exceptionalism which may not say that history is bunk, but implies that history before 1936 is bunk. We are writing this series of articles to challenge that mind-set, by surveying key events or "turning points" throughout three centuries of American Presbyterian history. These events include unions and divisions, from colonial times to contemporary times. We believe that it is important for OPCers to remember that we are American Presbyterians. We must

locate ourselves within Presbyterian developments in North America, understanding that our denomination's history is part of a larger story. We need, in short, to put the "Presbyterian" back in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

Of course, the nature of that larger American Presbyterian tradition is strongly contested, even within the OPC. At its founding, the OPC sought very self-consciously to identify itself with its American Presbyterian past. It was, according to J. Gresham Machen, the "spiritual successor" of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. But what did Machen mean by those words? What inheritance was the OPC claiming? Many voices in our church's past have left the OPC because of their perception that it had abandoned the American Presbyterian tradition. For example, Carl McIntire insisted that the young church had to keep the 1903 revisions to the Westminster standards if it was to lay legitimate claim to American Presbyterian succession. And Gordon Clark and his sympathizers argued that the OPC had to be culturally engaged with other evangelicals in fighting modernism if it was to "preserve the American tradition in Presbyterianism."

The church had forsaken its inheritance, in the eyes of McIntire, Clark, and others, because of the un-American leadership within it, especially from the faculty of Westminster Seminary, including Van Til, R. B. Kuiper, and Ned Stonehouse (all Dutchmen) and John Murray (a Scotsman). This influence, they feared, diverted the church from its mission to America and into a narrow sectarian oddity. For their part, these men, though equally committed to Machen's ideal of "spiritual succession," pled innocent of that charge, and they turned their opponent's argument around. They saw in the Americanism of McIntire, Clark, and others merely a more subtle form of sectarian provincialism. The Old School Presbyterian of the American past that they sought to preserve provided a grander, richer, and more glorious expression of Reformed faith and life.

In reflecting on its American Presbyterian heritage in these and other debates, the OPC continues to wrestle with the question of how the adjective *American* relates to the noun *Presbyterian.* Where have Presbyterians carefully adapted to ("contextualized") their American environment? Where have they foolishly assimilated? What features of American culture either support or undermine the church's cultivation of self-consciously Reformed piety? These are questions that a close study of history will help to answer and which we want to explore in our study.

We cannot speak intelligently of the American Presbyterian tradition unless we know that tradition better. In describing that tradition, this series is designed to interpret its significance for Orthodox Presbyterians. Our aim is less to win readers over to our interpretation of these events (although that would be nice), than to get Orthodox Presbyterians to focus more carefully on Presbyterian history.

The chart of Presbyterian family connections portrays the diversity within American Presbyterianism. This will be an important theme in our study. Presbyterians came to the new world at different times for different causes. Some immigration, such as the Covenanters and the Seceders, owed to particular circumstances in Scottish Presbyterian history. The tensions among these groups, the unions and divisions that they generated, the willingness of some to Americanize, and the insistence of others to cling to old-world values—all of this sheds important light on the present picture of American Presbyterian diversity in which the OPC is located.

Finally, in presenting these studies, we want to make a case for memory and not nostalgia. Nostalgia, as the American historian Christopher Lasch argued, creates an idealized and frozen past that serves to undermine a proper use of the past. Memory, on the other hand, draws lessons from the past in order to enrich an understanding of our times. That will be our goal for these studies. Our desire is not to return to 1936 or to 1861 or to 1789, nor to restore any "golden age" of American Presbyterianism. American Presbyterianism cannot be reduced to a Thomas Kincaid landscape. Rather, what will unfold is three centuries of Presbyterian struggles over strikingly familiar issues, such as biblical interpretation, ecumenicity, social activism, confessional subscription, and worship.

We may discover that the very debates that our church is presently engaged in are old debates, and that they are part of a perennial challenge to be Reformed and Presbyterian in American culture.

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