

After the Breakup, Heartbreak: Conservative Presbyterians without a Common Foe

by D.G. Hart



In the 1930s, conservatives in the PCUSA believed that their cause against liberalism in the denominations' agencies provided a common understanding of what it meant to be a Presbyterian in America. But once these conservatives formed their own communion, they experienced a series of controversies that revealed significant differences about the nature of American Presbyterianism. These conflicts, in fact, led to further divisions among conservatives. This article reviews the difficulties that afflicted the Orthodox Presbyterian Church during the first decade of its existence after 1936 and suggests that having a common foe is insufficient for agreement on a common identity.

On June 11, 1936, J. Gresham Machen declared before the first General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, “We became members, at last, of a true Presbyterian Church.”¹ The fifty or so ministers and elders gathered likely heard in Machen’s pronouncement the relief of a man who had been engaged in denominational disputes and ecclesiastical intrigue for the better part of two decades. “What a joyous moment it was,” he sighed, “how the long years of struggle seemed to sink into nothingness compared with the peace and joy that filled our hearts.”² Although the new church was small and insignificant by American standards, hopes ran high among these conservatives that the new Presbyterian body would be free from controversy to prosecute a truly Reformed witness.



J. Gresham Machen, 1881-1937. Photo by Marceau (RG 414, Presbyterian Historical Society).

Soon after Machen’s reassuring remarks, however, the new denomination’s experience would prove how unrealistic those hopes were. Even without the threat of liberalism, these conservative Presbyterians could not refrain from controversy. In fact, only a year after its founding, the OPC split. Carl McIntire, a former student of Machen’s at

Princeton Theological Seminary, had his own ideas about the correct way to proceed and led a smaller group of conservatives into the Bible Presbyterian Synod. Even this rupture would not relieve the pressures that bedeviled Machen’s followers. Throughout the 1940s, the new denomination lost members and ministers to other communions, thanks to internal disputes over denominational relations with non-Presbyterians. For more than a decade, those who followed Machen could not achieve institutional stability or theological consensus. The conflicts that ensued after Machen’s declaration of independence demonstrated that by becoming a “true” Presbyterian church, these conservatives were leaving only one part of their heritage. They may have been able to disentangle themselves from the theological breadth that afflicted the

D. G. Hart is Director of Academic Programs at the Intercollegiate Studies Institute in Wilmington, Delaware, author of several books, including *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (1994), and co-author, with John Muether, of *Seeking a Better Country: 300 Years of American Presbyterianism* (2007)

mainline church, but they were unable to escape the pattern of controversies that had troubled Presbyterians since 1706.

Opposed We Stand, United We Fall Apart

In its early history, the OPC experienced four distinct controversies that reinforced an important lesson of church history—namely, that having a common foe generates far more agreement than figuring out the basis for fraternity and shared witness. Indeed, in the specific case of conservative Presbyterians, to remove the enemy of liberalism was only to introduce other opponents—perhaps not as grave, but for many, every bit as important for maintaining the health of American Presbyterianism. The first led to the exodus of Carl McIntire and the founding of the BPS. The second, less a full-fledged controversy than a debate, concerned the OPC's relationship to the emerging neo-evangelical movement. The third involved fairly intricate questions of Calvinist teaching regarding the knowledge of God and resulted in Gordon Clark leaving the OPC to join the United Presbyterian Church of North America. The last controversy concerned the OPC's understanding of its own relationship to American Presbyterianism and led to one of the most notable defections of its short history, the departure of Edwin H. Rian to rejoin the PCUSA. The factors that led to the split between the OPC and BPS had actually been building even while conservatives were still battling liberals within the PCUSA. Differences stemmed, ironically, from the very theological breadth in the mainline denomination that conservatives denounced. Although the PCUSA sponsored its own seminaries and committees on theological education, at the congregational level pastors and sessions were generally free to use non-Presbyterian instructional materials, and the doctrinal outlook of individual officers was hardly immune to currents in the broader Protestant world. One of the more popular teachings during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was dispensationalism, an understanding of Christ's second coming that stressed divine judgment upon human apostasy at the end of each period in redemptive history, with Christ's second advent bringing punishment upon the impurity of the Church. This teaching had originated in England and spread to the United States through a series of popular Bible and prophecy conferences. Its most important vehicle was the

Scofield Reference Bible, published in 1909 by Oxford University Press, which supplied a complete set of notes that fit the biblical narratives into a larger dispensational pattern. Many congregations across the Protestant spectrum, Presbyterians included, used the Scofield Reference Bible as their pew Bible.

Dispensationalism was a decisive element of fundamentalism. It was an especially effective appeal for missions and evangelism because its advocates believed that the church "age" was coming to an end. Its proponents tended to view the mainline churches as abandoning the task of soul-winning. Dispensationalists also usually blamed liberalism for the failures of America's churches and argued that the natural consequence of such apostasy was divine judgment. Speculation about Christ's imminent return also prompted warnings about ungodliness and wickedness more generally in the United States.

Conservatives at Princeton Seminary, the epicenter of opposition to liberalism in the PCUSA, were almost completely unaware of dispensationalism or its appeal. For instance, Machen turned down invitations to join the World Christian Fundamentals Association because of the group's belief in a version of premillennialism that closely resembled dispensationalism. In *Christianity and Liberalism*, his best-known work, written at the height of the Presbyterian controversy of the 1920s, Machen wrote that the "recrudescence of 'Chiliasm' or 'premillennialism' in the modern Church causes us serious concern; it is coupled, we think, with a false method of interpreting Scripture which in the long run will be productive of harm."³ Because it was not part of academic theological discourse, because it did not even gain a formal educational outlet until the founding of Dallas Theological Seminary in 1924, Machen and other Princetonians did not take it seriously. Dispensationalism may have centered the curriculum at Bible institutes and colleges, such as Moody Bible Institute in Chicago or the Bible Institute of Los Angeles, but American seminaries were indifferent.

Machen's nonchalance would prove to be costly when controversies over the "end times" surfaced in the OPC. The majority of the faculty at Westminster Theological Seminary, most of whom played significant roles in the creation of the new denomination, held to an amillennial view of Christ's return. Unlike premillennialists, who looked to Christ's second coming as the beginning

of his thousand-year reign, and postmillennialists, who believed the second coming would occur at the end of a thousand-year period of prosperity for the Church, amillennialists held that Christ's second coming would mark the end of this age and the beginning of the final age, which was also the consummation of the kingdom of God. This age would not be a literal millennium, nor would it bring the millennial reign of Christ. Instead, the second coming would bring the dissolution of the present age and inaugurate the new heavens and new earth.

In the fall of 1936, the differences over eschatology came out into the open a few months after the denomination's first General Assembly. In a relatively benign report to his own communion, the Christian Reformed Church, R. B. Kuiper, a professor of practical theology at Westminster, opined that his Dutch Calvinist peers would have been pleased by the OPC's efforts to examine ministerial candidates on errors prevalent among American fundamentalists—namely, the Arminianism and dispensationalism of the Scofield Reference Bible. By Arminianism, Kuiper was referring to teachings that questioned the scope of the fall, divine sovereignty in salvation, and the permanency of faith; these teachings were condemned in 1618 by the Dutch Reformed churches at the Synod of Dort. McIntire, an OPC pastor in southern New Jersey with his own church paper, the *Christian Beacon*, took issue with Kuiper's report. McIntire claimed that the majority of ministers in the new denomination were premillennialists and that no single view on eschatology was acceptable. If Kuiper did not cease his attacks on premillennialists, McIntire predicted that a "premillenarian uprising" would ensue.⁴

Machen thought McIntire's reaction was precipitous and faulted his former student for refusing to publish a response by Kuiper. Machen also worried that McIntire was turning premillennialism into an essential article of the faith. In a letter to another premillennialist, J. Oliver Buswell, an OPC minister and president of Wheaton College who would leave with McIntire to form the BPS, Machen wrote that the Scofield Reference Bible was "profoundly harmful." The "root error" of dispensationalism, he explained, was its "utter failure" to recognize "that anything irrevocable took place when Adam fell."⁵

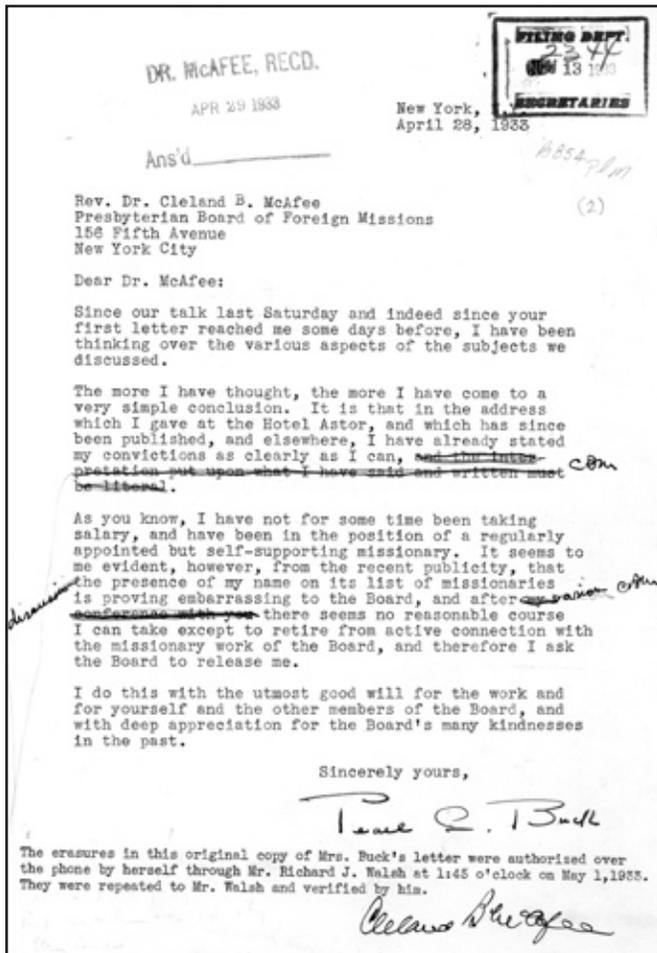
These disputes revealed two distinct groups in the new denomination, both vying for control. Led

by Machen, the Westminster Party consisted of the majority of the seminary's faculty, many of whom came from non-American backgrounds, such as Scottish Presbyterianism (John Murray) and Dutch-American Calvinism (Cornelius Van Til, Ned B. Stonehouse, and R. B. Kuiper). This group was characterized by strict adherence to the theology of the Westminster Standards, a high regard for Presbyterian polity, and a liberal attitude toward activities that fundamentalists deemed sinful, such as smoking, drinking, and viewing movies. McIntire and Buswell led the other group and included one of Westminster's professors, Allan MacRae, who taught Old Testament. They were overwhelmingly premillennialist and defended the use of the Scofield Bible—even while rejecting the moniker *dispensationalist*—used parachurch agencies in carrying out the work of the church, and denounced as worldly liquor, tobacco, movies, dancing, and cards.

The OPC convened for its second General Assembly only five months after its first—a function of trying to organize the new church. The emerging division surfaced, with McIntire threatening to form a new denomination. Machen tried to make peace by nominating and orchestrating the election of Buswell as moderator. Even so, the two sides took opposing positions on two pieces of business.

The first matter concerned whether the OPC would use the Westminster Standards as revised by the PCUSA in 1903 or revert back to the pre-1903 version. The Westminster group opposed the revisions as essentially Arminian in character, an argument that the likes of Benjamin Warfield and W. G. T. Shedd had made during the 1890s debates over updating the confession and catechisms. McIntire and his followers were not particularly friendly to the 1903 version but, for the sake of trying to keep church property in specific court cases, believed that keeping the revised Westminster Standards would bolster the argument that congregations should retain buildings and titles from the PCUSA. The Assembly decided to revert back to the American version of the Westminster Confession before the 1903 revisions.

The second item was eschatology. A number of overtures and reports expressed a desire for "eschatological liberty" within the new denomination. The compromise was simply to allow the confession to define the terms for understanding the second coming. For the Westminster group, such a position may have tolerated historic premillennial-



Pearl S. Buck's resignation letter to the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions, April 28, 1933 (rare documents, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia).

ism, but dispensationalism was still out of bounds. So, even while adopting a position of neutrality, the decision actually kept the controversy alive by giving room for the competing views.

During late fall and winter 1936, two events tipped the precarious balance of the second assembly toward division. First, the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions experienced a dramatic shakeup in its executive committee. This agency had been the catalyst for conservatives to break with the PCUSA. Founded in 1934 in response to failed efforts to pressure the denomination's Board of Foreign Missions to repudiate the modernist affirmations of *Re-Thinking Missions* by William Ernest Hocking and Pearl S. Buck's controversial criticism of the historic basis for foreign missions, the Independent Board was used by Machen and fourteen other elders and ministers to provide an alternative to the PCUSA's Board of Foreign Missions. Controversial in its own right,

the Independent Board alienated important conservatives at Westminster Seminary and in 1935 prompted the resignation of the majority of the school's board of trustees. It was also an affront to the PCUSA's official leadership. The 1934 General Assembly issued a mandate that declared the Independent Board to be unconstitutional and instructed presbyteries to bring its members to trial for violation of their ordination vows. Machen's was the most celebrated and highly publicized trial, but several other members of the Independent Board were also tried, convicted, and suspended from both office and membership in the PCUSA. It was the agency upon which Machen had staked much of his career and credibility.

Yet, at the OPC's annual election of officers in the fall of 1936, McIntire led a coup designed to counter the Westminster faculty's dominance within the OPC. The New Jersey pastor even decided to challenge Machen as president of the Independent Board. McIntire orchestrated the election as president of Harold S. Laird, a former PCUSA minister who had led his congregation out of the denomination to form an independent church in Wilmington, Delaware, and as vice-president, Merrill T. MacPherson, another former PCUSA pastor who had not joined the OPC but remained the minister of an independent congregation. The agency that was supposed to spearhead a Presbyterian witness was now overseen by two ministers who were not even Presbyterian.

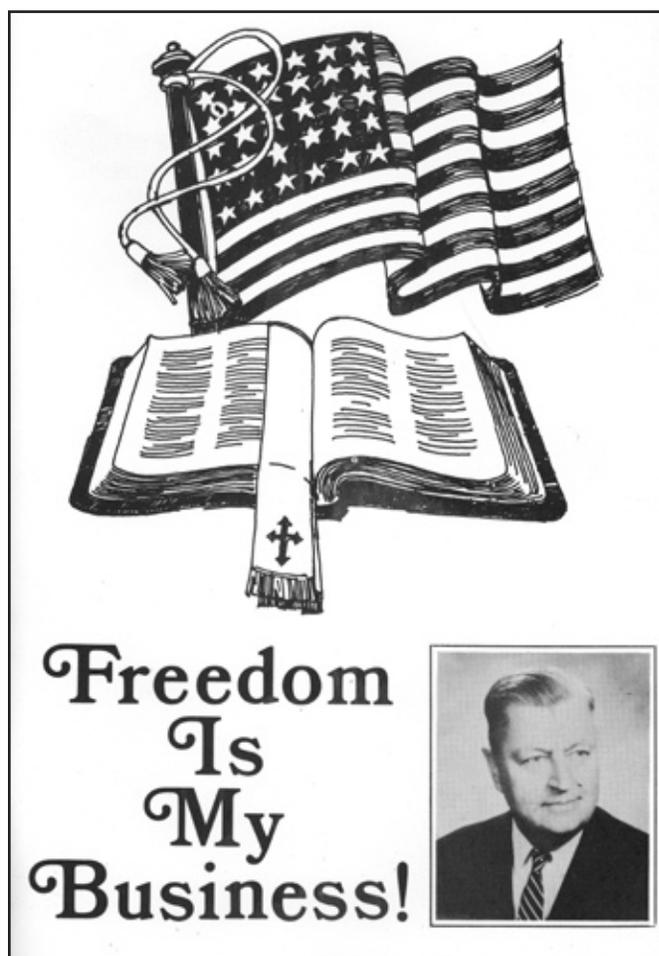
The second event that contributed to division was the untimely death of J. Gresham Machen. He took the rejection of his leadership on the Independent Board badly. Family members even signed affidavits that remarked on his spirits and physical health during the Christmas holidays of 1936. At the end of December, Machen was scheduled to speak to conservatives in North Dakota. During the trip, he contracted pneumonia, and on January 1, 1937, he succumbed to the illness. For PCUSA leaders, the idea that Machen could maintain the unity of any organization or institution may have seemed far-fetched. But to the young denomination, Machen was the obvious leader whose influence could reasonably mollify the differences among most Orthodox Presbyterian ministers.

At their third General Assembly, the patchwork holding these Presbyterian conservatives together finally unraveled. The proverbial straw that broke Orthodox Presbyterians' collective back was the consumption of alcoholic beverages. Only four

years into post-Prohibition era, Protestant opposition to strong drink had not subsided. Within the PCUSA, the denomination's backing of the Eighteenth Amendment and the Volstead Act had enjoyed the broad support of everyone from fundamentalists such as William Jennings Bryan and Billy Sunday to liberals such as Henry Sloane Coffin and Harry Emerson Fosdick. Machen was one of the few Presbyterians to oppose the legislation and the PCUSA's repeated endorsement of it. The idea of Christian liberty on such personal matters should not have surprised those who joined the OPC. But again, because of the growing opposition to the Westminster Party, McIntire and his group decided to make an issue of strong drink. McIntire and Buswell criticized Westminster Seminary's faculty for their unwillingness to condemn liquor. McIntire even circulated rumors that seminary students drank in their rooms with the approval of the faculty. That several Westminster faculty members also smoked did not help, even if ethnic customs would have accounted for such practices.

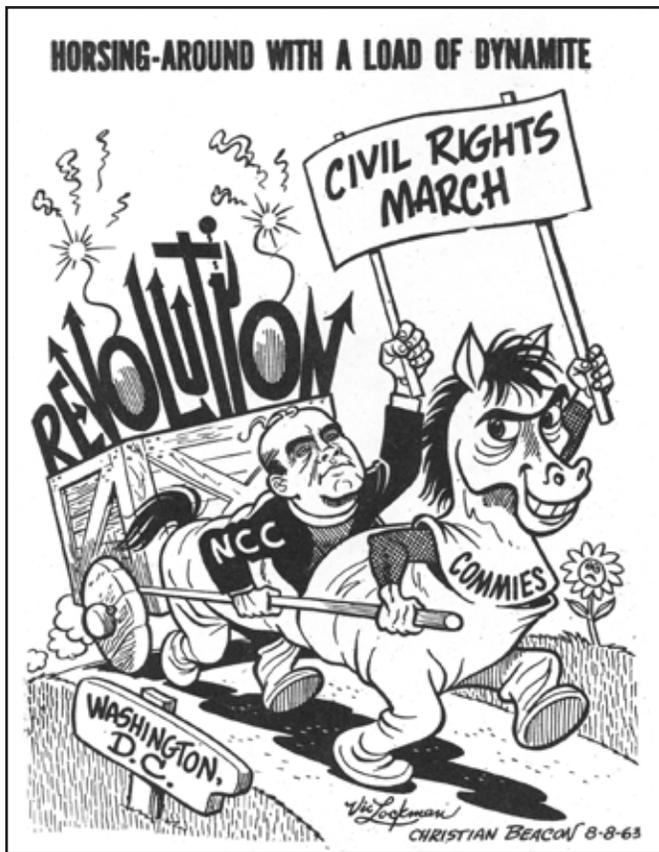
When Buswell threatened to leave if the denomination did not renounce drinking, the third General Assembly was forced to debate two overtures with a proverbial gun to its head. One urged total abstinence. The other argued for Christian liberty in line with the Westminster Confession. Each side appealed to scripture, precedents in American Presbyterianism, and Machen's example and convictions. In the end, the prohibitionist overture lost by a large margin. Immediately following the Assembly, in May 1937, McIntire and Buswell led fourteen ministers and three elders to form the Bible Presbyterian Synod.

The departure of McIntire and Buswell with their supporters calmed the internal life of the OPC—but only for a time. By the early 1940s, the denomination founded by Machen faced a second set of difficulties—all of which concerned the OPC's relationship to the broader American Protestant world. McIntire was again the immediate source of debates. In 1941 he founded the American Council of Christian Churches, an interdenominational fellowship designed to rival mainline Protestantism's Federal Council of Churches. The ACCC's purpose was to rally conservative Protestants into a united agency that opposed modernism and cooperated on a number of endeavors to promote the well-being of member denominations. At roughly the same time, other former students of



This booklet of quotations from Carl McIntire was put together by the Independent Board for Presbyterian Home Missions to honor his fiftieth anniversary in the Bible Presbyterian Church of Collingswood, New Jersey, in 1983.

Machen, such as Harold John Ockenga, led the formation of the National Association of Evangelicals (1942), also created to provide a conservative alternative to the Federal Council. Both the NAE and ACCC wanted to rally conservative Protestants to promote the revival of Christianity in the United States and restore the nation to its Protestant and moral foundation. Unlike McIntire's American Council, however, the NAE would not be hard-line in its opposition to modernism. To be sure, the neo-evangelicals, as they called themselves, were opposed to liberalism as well as secularism, atheism, and Roman Catholicism. But to join the NAE, an individual Protestant or congregation would not, as McIntire required, need to renounce membership in a denomination that belonged to the Federal Council. In other words, while the ACCC demanded separation from any link to liberal Protestantism—what some have



This cartoon by Vic Lockman, which originally appeared in Carl McIntire's *Christian Beacon* newspaper in August 1963 and was reprinted in a book by McIntire called *Eugene Carson Blake: The Chief Church Spokesman for Leftist Causes*, illustrates McIntire's critique of Blake's participation in the March on Washington for civil rights (reprinted with permission from the artist).

called double separation—the NAE was attempting to unite conservatives who were either within or outside the world of mainline Protestantism. Because of the OPC's reputation as a stalwart conservative Protestant denomination, and because of Machen's example and reputation with the founders of the ACCC and the NAE, the young Presbyterian Church received invitations to join both organizations. These proposals also involved expectations that the OPC would naturally want to join other conservatives in opposing liberalism and standing with other conservatives in trying to recover an influential collective witness to American society. The Orthodox Presbyterians' rejection of the NAE was not surprising, even if it was disappointing. Its committee on ecumenicity tripped over the NAE's policy of allowing members from mainline denominations and found its position inconsistent in combating modernism.

The OPC also objected to the NAE as a parachurch organization that was planning to conduct work properly reserved for the church. Even worse, the new evangelical body, which was composed of Calvinist and Arminian denominations, saw no tensions in such different doctrinal accounts. Although the OPC recognized non-Reformed churches as legitimate expressions of Christ's body, it maintained it could only have fellowship with churches of like faith and practice. For this reason, in 1948 the OPC found its initial ecumenical outlet in the Reformed Ecumenical Synod, a body of Reformed and Presbyterian communions from Northern Europe, South Africa, Indonesia, and North America.

The OPC's verdict on McIntire's American Council was harder to execute than the case of the NAE, because of the conservative Presbyterian church's commitment to cooperate with other Reformed and Presbyterian bodies. At the outset, McIntire's effort was more Reformed than evangelical, and the OPC took it more seriously than it did the NAE. But even here, the OPC's committee on ecumenicity determined that the American Council did not strike the right posture. The OPC judged that the council held too low a view of the church, stemming partly from the organization's dispensationalist background, and so allowed parachurch associations to perform the ministry of word and sacrament. Even worse, the American Council engaged in sensational tactics and undignified methods in denouncing modernism, communism, and various other religious and political threats. In fact, the OPC declared that the American Council had embraced "an uncritical identification of the presuppositions of bourgeois capitalism with those of orthodox Christianity."⁶ For these reasons, the OPC also rejected McIntire's overture.

At roughly the same time that the OPC considered its relationship to other Protestants, it experienced a doctrinal contest that had an unlikely connection to the church's decision to remain aloof from either the new evangelicals or McIntire's network. The controversy concerned the teaching of Gordon H. Clark, a professor of philosophy at Wheaton College hired by Buswell and an elder in the OPC. Buswell's involvement with conservative Presbyterianism eventually became controversial for Wheaton's board of trustees. When they asked for Buswell's resignation, Clark lacked Calvinist support within the college administration. In 1943, the president who succeeded Buswell, V. Raymond

Edman, asked Clark to also resign. Without an appointment, Clark sought a post at Reformed Episcopal Seminary in Philadelphia. But he needed to be ordained as a minister for this position—and to that end, he sought the blessing of the OPC’s Presbytery of Philadelphia.

Clark faced one immediate—and large—hurdle: he had no formal theological training. The OPC had provisions for ordaining ministers who lacked a seminary degree, and Clark sought to qualify under those procedures. A majority of the presbyters approved of Clark, but he lacked the three-quarters majority necessary for ordination. The presbytery debated the merits of Clark’s candidacy, a process that opened up some fairly arcane debates within Reformed philosophical theology. The technical point was the knowledge of God. Put simply, do human beings have a knowledge of God that is comparable to God’s own self-knowledge? Clark taught that if human knowledge of God was not similar to God’s own knowledge, the inevitable result was skepticism. Clark’s critics countered that the philosopher’s account of knowledge did not do justice to divine transcendence. If human knowledge were as similar to God’s as Clark alleged, then he jeopardized the distinction between the creator and the creature. If Clark’s critics were guilty of relativism, he was guilty of rationalism. Adding fuel to the fire was the use to which some put the Clark case to raise questions again about the ethnic elements at Westminster and their control of the OPC. In 1944, Robert Strong, a pastor in the Philadelphia region, issued “A Program of Action for the OPC.” It contained four objectives. The first was the ordination of Clark. The second was the OPC’s affiliation with one of the conservative Protestant interdenominational associations. The third called for an official stand against the consumption of beverage alcohol. The last called into question the leadership at Westminster. For those like Strong, the Clark debates signified more about the character of the OPC than they did about the knowledge of God. Strong had a point, because the leading critics of Clark were John Murray, Ned Stonehouse, and Cornelius Van Til, all of whom taught at Westminster, all of whom came from Reformed backgrounds in which total abstinence was foreign, and all of whom had steered the OPC away from alliances with evangelicals. In effect, the Clark controversy replayed the debates that had led McIntire to leave the OPC.

At the contested General Assemblies of 1945, 1946, and 1947, the subject of the dispute over Clark was the knowledge of God, and secondarily, ordination procedures. But the subtext was the denomination’s identity. When the last votes were tallied in 1947, the OPC repudiated Clark’s understanding of the knowledge of God, rejected his candidacy for the office of minister, and stood by the faculty at Westminster. But these decisions came with a cost. Clark took a post at Butler University and transferred his membership to the United Presbyterian Church of North America. Meanwhile, ministers such as Strong sought calls in the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS), while some congregations left the OPC for the Bible Presbyterian Synod.

The last struggle in the early history of the OPC involved Edwin H. Rian and his plans for repositioning the OPC within American Protestantism. Machen’s chief counsel during his trial in the PCUSA and a senior administrator at Westminster, Rian called for the appointment of a General Assembly–level committee to organize the OPC’s efforts to reform American society. The agency would be called the Committee of Nine, and its mandate was “to study the relationship of the OPC to society in general, and to other ecclesiastical bodies in particular” in order to suggest “ways and means whereby the message and methods of our church may be better implemented to meet the needs of this generation.” The ultimate goal was for the OPC to “have an increasing area of influence and make a greater impact on life today.” Instead of joining with the American Council or the National Association of Evangelicals, Rian apparently hoped for the OPC to conduct a social agenda of fairly substantial proportions on its own terms, or at least with other Reformed communions.

Rian clearly identified with Machen, and the former Princeton professor was a major reason for Rian attending Princeton during the 1920s. Rian had followed Machen to Westminster Seminary and the OPC. In his 1940 account of the two-decade long struggle within the PCUSA, *The Presbyterian Conflict*, Rian portrayed Machen as the Presbyterian equivalent of Martin Luther, the church reformer who refused to place the word of man above the Word of God. The problem with American Protestantism under the sway of modernism, Rian believed, was that in abandoning the supremacy of scripture, it also lost its power to

shape civilization. With some justification, Rian could find such sentiments in Machen's writings, but he overlooked the southern Presbyterian background that also shaped his mentor's understanding of the church's relationship to society. As a descendant of the South, Machen held to the doctrine of the spirituality of the church. This view strongly distinguished between the civil and the spiritual, between the temporal and the eternal, and located the church's responsibility distinctly on the side of its religious as opposed to its political or social witness. Consequently, while Rian regarded Machen as a champion of the epic battles of the sixteenth century, he missed the significant limitations his former professor put upon the church's responsibility for the social and moral welfare of the nations. Rian became aware of these differences during discussions of a proposed Committee of Nine at the OPC's 1941 General Assembly. Rian's vision for this committee drew upon his conviction that the OPC was the spiritual successor to the PCUSA—and therefore, the new church should replicate the cultural program of the older communion. He had sided with Westminster's faculty, but he was not pleased by what seemed to be an isolationist tendency. A minority report at the General Assembly, however, faulted the Committee of Nine as a potential source of centralization and tyranny within the church. Although in agreement with Rian's desire to make the OPC more influential, the minority report argued that no need existed for a "super committee" that had power to inspect any aspect of church life. Such superpowers were "bureaucratic and unpresbyterian." The 1942 Assembly found these arguments persuasive and pulled the plug on Rian's newly formed committee. The Committee of Nine had existed for only one year when the General Assembly decided to discontinue it and replace it with a committee of five on local evangelism.

Rian's ambivalence about the OPC would only grow in the following years, as he worked to found a Christian university. The plan had developed among various conservative Presbyterian and Dutch-Calvinist leaders. It originated in 1943, not the most propitious time for any initiative that required capital investment. But for many Dutch-Reformed, the model of the Free University in the Netherlands and Abraham Kuyper's vision for Christian cultural engagement called for a similar American institution. Rian served as general secretary for the association that oversaw fundrais-

ing, cultivating faculty and administrators, and determining a location for the university. By December 1945, the association had secured funds or pledges of gifts that totaled \$50,000, the benchmark for beginning the new school. But during the subsequent year, the project imploded. Conflicts between the board of trustees and the membership of the association surfaced. Several members raised questions about Rian's role in appointing members. Also at issue was an intellectual disagreement between the advocates of Kuyper's understanding of the priority of a Christian worldview in shaping scholarship as opposed to the American Presbyterian tradition, practiced by the likes of Benjamin Warfield, which approached subjects with inductive reasoning. Once again, differences between the American and European outlooks within the OPC collided. At the fall 1946 meeting of the university's association, the membership decided to terminate Rian's appointment. Although the association would persevere until 1948, it decided to sell its property to pay off debts and reduced its plans to an institute for advanced studies in philosophy and history, a project that never materialized. Meanwhile, the OPC Presbytery of Philadelphia initiated proceedings against Rian for his alleged mismanagement of funds. These developments prompted Rian to leave the OPC and seek reordination in the PCUSA. In so doing, he confessed his error in leaving the PCUSA. As reported in the *Christian Century*, Rian admitted that anyone separating from communion that possessed the marks of the church was "disrupting the unity of the Church of Jesus Christ."⁷ Rian later wrote that he left because of "a personal study of Calvin's Book IV of the *Institutes*."⁸ In 1947, Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas, appointed Rian as vice president of institutional advancement.

Conflicting Expectations

With the loss of Rian, the OPC achieved a measure of stability as a small, conservative Presbyterian denomination relatively isolated from other American conservative Protestants. Difficulties about relationships to other denominations would continue to hamper Orthodox Presbyterian efforts to carve out an identity that was neither hopelessly marginal nor naively cooperative. What the first decade of the denomination's history proved was that it had attracted conservative Presbyterians with distinct and antagonistic expectations for the

new communion. Two features stand out—aside from the obvious conclusion that with a common foe removed, these conservatives had difficulty reaching a consensus. One was the prestige and continuing appeal of the mainline. Many of the Presbyterians who left the PCUSA for the OPC wanted to leave behind theological liberalism, but did not want to abandon being part of a church that mattered to the life of the nation. Machen's understanding, partly shaped by his upbringing in the southern church, had developed into one that recognized a fundamental tension between American Protestantism's role as cultural guardian and ministry of revealed truth. In *Christianity and Liberalism*, in fact, Machen credited Protestant modernism with trying to maintain the relevance of Christianity for modern America. The question he raised, however, was whether a relevant Christianity was still orthodox.⁹ Some conservatives only heard Machen's critique of liberalism without considering the relationship between the mainline's cultural influence and its theological declension. They believed it possible to resume the older cultural project of preserving a Christian America while maintaining conservative doctrine. They were unwilling to consider that American Protestantism's public hegemony might contain the seeds of religious compromise. As Machen also understood, the American conception of religious freedom meant freedom for both Protestants and Roman Catholics, believers and unbelievers. For conservatives to try to maintain Protestantism's privileged position alongside the United States's practice of civil and religious liberty was simply to reproduce the dilemmas that had given rise to liberalism. The second notable aspect of conservative Presbyterian life after the mainline was the

inability to accommodate diverse streams of Reformed Christianity. Machen himself represented the Old School Presbyterian tradition of strict Calvinism, careful Presbyterian polity, and the spirituality of the church. This outlook came into open conflict in 1937 during the split with the Bible Presbyterian Synod, a communion that embodied the moralism, millennialism, and revivalism of New School Presbyterianism. The new addition to the Orthodox Presbyterian mix was the contingent of Old World Calvinists—whether from Dutch or Scottish church backgrounds—who taught at Westminster. Some of the conservative Presbyterians, such as Clark and Rian, were not so easy to position in a received tradition. Sorting out these differences proved to be difficult—and the OPC's first ten years were devoted to sorting them out. When all was said and done, the conservatives who left the PCUSA had begun two small denominations, while others found their way into older Presbyterian communions.

Arguably, the most significant feature of the disagreements among conservative Presbyterians was the absence of Machen. There is a temptation to think that had he lived, he might have been able to broker an ecclesiastical and theological peace. That was certainly what he had tried to do in the fall of 1936. But even those pacific gestures had failed to convince the emerging leaders of the Bible Presbyterians to put aside their differences with the faculty of Westminster. Rather than hammering out a compromise, had Machen lived, chances are that he would have had to choose one side or the other. The OPC harbored important differences. Only the common enemy of liberalism had prevented conservatives from recognizing how substantial those differences were. **P**

Notes

¹ The original name of the new church was the Presbyterian Church of America. The PCUSA sued the new denomination over the name, arguing that people would confuse the names of the denominations. The Pennsylvania judge sided with the PCUSA. In 1939, the original PCA changed its name to the OPC.

² J. Gresham Machen, "A True Presbyterian Church at Last," *Presbyterian Guardian* 2 (June 22, 1936): 110.

³ J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1923), 49.

⁴ See Marsden, "Perspective on the Division of 1937." In Charles G. Dennison and Richard C. Gamble, eds., *Pressing*

Toward the Mark: Essays Commemorating Fifty Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (Philadelphia: Committee for the Historian of the OPC, 1986), 259–94. Premillennialism is not synonymous with dispensationalism. Historic premillennialists believed Christ would return to establish a millennium-long reign on earth but differed from dispensationalists by dividing the history of redemption into different eras, with separate covenants defining each period. Defenders of McIntire argued that he was merely a historic premillennialist. But reactions to Kuiper suggest a measure of confusion that alarmed faculty at Westminster, some of whom were historic premillennialists.

⁵Machen's letter to Buswell is quoted in D. G. Hart, "The Legacy of J. Gresham Machen and the Identity of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church," *Westminster Theological Journal* 53 (1991): 215.

⁶"The Church and the American Council" (editorial), *Presbyterian Guardian* 14 (May 10, 1945): 139.

⁷"Rian Reunites with the Presbyterian Church," *Christian Century* 64 (June 25, 1947): 788–89. See his complete statement, "Why I Am Re-Entering the Ministry of the

Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.," reprinted in the *Journal of Presbyterian History* 86 (Spring–Summer 2008): 21–24. For the Orthodox Presbyterian reaction, see "Grist for the Modernist Mill," *Presbyterian Guardian* 14 (July 25, 1947): 215–16.

⁸Edwin H. Rian, "Theological Conflicts of the 1920s and 1930s in the Presbyterian Church and on the Princeton Seminary Campus," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 5, no. 3 (1984): 222.

⁹Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, Introduction.

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