

Machen's Other Warrior Children: Conservative Presbyterianism in the OPC and PCA

By D. G. Hart

In 2010, around the time that officers in the Presbyterian Church in America were debating the Strategic Plan, Tim Keller gave a talk entitled, "What's So Great about the PCA." However influential the New York City pastor's remarks were for the majority of commissioners who approved the plan to make the PCA missional, Keller's history of American Presbyterianism was instructive for a very important reason. He decided to narrate the history of Presbyterianism as an extension of evangelicalism. Say what you will about the relations between evangelical Protestants and Presbyterians, agreements between them have never come easily if you think that Charles Finney, Dwight L. Moody, and Billy Graham are in any way representative of both groups. But to his credit, Keller followed the history of evangelicalism, warts and all, with ruptures between pro- and anti-revival Presbyterians as part of the story. He also threw in the rise of neo-Calvinism in the Netherlands so that he could use what has become a standard classification of Reformed Protestantism along the categories of doctrinalists, pietists, and culturalists (or transformationalists). This grid allowed Keller to refer to the Neo-Evangelical movement, led by Harold John Ockenga, Carl Henry, and Billy Graham (and related institutions) as the rise of an orthodox culturalist Protestantism. Unlike the Protestant mainline whose transformationalism had turned liberal in the form of the Social Gospel, Neo-Evangelicals had produced a version of Protestantism characterized by sound doctrine, warm piety, and cultural influence.¹

Not only did Keller minimize difference between Presbyterianism and evangelicalism over Arminianism, eschatology, charismatic gifts, sacraments, and church polity, but the diversity of the PCA was precisely a reason to recommend the communion. The PCA had all the branches of Presbyterianism—doctrinalism, pietism, and culturalism—and generally maintained harmonious

relations among them. The PCA's "big tent," according to Keller, did not weaken the denomination's commitments to "Biblical inerrancy and Reformed soteriology" while remaining "open to both Old School and New School emphases."²

At the same time, Keller conceded that the breadth of the PCA was responsible for several controversies in the church, and a factor in ongoing suspicions among the denomination's various constituencies. Even so, Keller believed diversity was a strength. Each of the branches needed the other as a form of ecclesiastical checks-and-balances. Of course, Presbyterian polity is inherently a vehicle for keeping everyone—from the laity to denominational offices—in check. But Keller thought the rivalry between doctrinalists, pietists, and culturalists produced a healthy diversity and also reflected the richness of Reformed Protestantism.³

As much as Keller's recommendation of the PCA adds momentum to the questionable habit of rendering Presbyterianism a subset of evangelical Protestantism, his account also gives ammunition to those who see significant discontinuities between evangelicals and Reformed Protestants. Such differences are no less evident in the PCA's relationship to the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Keller himself nodded in the direction of PCA-OPC relations when he observed that Orthodox Presbyterians were overwhelmingly

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1. Timothy Keller, "What's So Great about the PCA," June 2010, available at <https://scottsauls.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Whats-So-Great-About-the-PCA-Tim-Keller.pdf>. Accessed Sept. 11, 2023.

2. Keller, *ibid.*, p. 12.

3. Keller, *ibid.*, p. 18.

doctrinalist in ways similar to both Old Side and Old School Presbyterians. Keller also acknowledged a pietistic strain in the OPC coming from the New Life movement launched by Jack Miller (with which Keller himself was associated). Keller admitted that New Life churches left the OPC to realign with the PCA (see below) because of frustration with the OPC's reputation for strict doctrine as opposed to the PCA's pietistic ethos.

That way of putting the differences between the two Presbyterian bodies is perhaps as simplistic as it is provocative. It also may not be the best way to frame a historic tension among American Presbyterians from trying to construct a denominational identity that is both Reformed and evangelical. One chapter in this abiding discomfort is the history of perceptions among northern and southern Presbyterian conservatives between the late 1930s and 1990. If southern conservatives took inspiration from Machen and the OPC in the 1940s, followed by Orthodox Presbyterian optimism about the newly formed PCA in the 1970s, by the 1980s the OPC and PCA had settled into separate communions that approached the evangelical-Presbyterian dynamic in distinct ways. However much each communion suffers from ecclesiastical stereotypes, the evangelical struggle in the American Presbyterian soul explains the sometimes warm and other times frosty relations between the OPC and PCA.

SOUTHERNERS TAKE CUES FROM THE NORTH

Sean Michael Lucas finishes his book, *For A Continuing Church* (2015), with a contrast between J. Gresham Machen's assessment of the OPC at its first General Assembly (June 1936) and the vision behind the PCA thirty-five years later. In his sermon at the assembly, Machen announced "we became members, at last, of a true Presbyterian Church; we recovered, at last, the blessing of true Christian fellowship."⁴ After sixteen years of contested General Assemblies, a failed battle to retain Princeton Seminary's theological heritage, and a public fight over liberalism among Presbyterian foreign missions, Machen's declaration was as much a sigh of relief as it was another instance of provocation. He and fellow conservatives no longer had to contend with liberal theology and equivocal denominational

bureaucracies (and their equally cagey bureaucrats). Lucas adds that at the beginning, the OPC was uncomfortable with its membership of 5,000. He writes that Machen thought other conservative Presbyterians would eventually leave the PCUSA for the OPC. But the split between the OPC and Bible Presbyterians (1937—six months after Machen died), left the OPC a "limited, smaller, confessionally particular" Presbyterian church.⁵ In contrast, the PCA at its founding avoided debates over "details in the Reformed system of doctrine." Denominational leaders wanted to continue "the largely evangelical and evangelistic emphases of the southern church while upholding the inerrancy of the Bible and the truth of the [Westminster Confession]."⁶ Never mind that Lucas skirts the potential for protracted debate that often attends parsing a "system of doctrine." Still, Lucas' point is plausible—the PCA either intuitively, and in some cases deliberately, chose a path different than that of the OPC—breadth instead of narrowness, evangelistic outreach instead of Reformed militancy, winsomeness instead of polemics.

Subsequent history of the PCA bears out this contrast, but for PCUS conservatives who contended with a Southern Presbyterian version of liberal Protestantism, Machen and the OPC were admirable examples of combating error and resisting bureaucratic mission creep. The most sustained attention to Machen and the OPC that Lucas includes in his book comes from the period after 1939 when the southern Presbyterian denomination was considering revisions to the Westminster Confession—changes that were designed, as the northern church's revisions of 1903 had been, to facilitate church union. For southern conservatives, the dots were easy to connect—if the PCUS was going to unite with the PCUSA, and if the northern church had just come through a major set of theological and institutional controversies, what sort of church exactly were southern Presbyterians joining?

Some southern pastors—Edward Ford and Robert Fry, for example—who invoked Machen and the OPC were either not alive for the PCA's founding or no longer significant voices in the 1960s controversies. But Lucas does follow their objections to the drift of the PCUS in the 1930s and the parallels they drew between the northern and southern denominations. Ford called attention to the "Auburn Affirmation" as one indication of the PCUSA's theological breadth and he lamented that signers of the statement were filling important positions in seminaries and PCUSA offices.⁷ Fry echoed Ford when he argued that the PCUSA was guilty of ecclesiastical tyranny by forcing Machen and

4. J. G. Machen quoted in Sean Michael Lucas, *For A Continuing Church: The Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 2015), p. 315.

5. Lucas, *ibid.*, p. 315.

6. Lucas, *ibid.*, p. 318.

7. Quoted in Lucas, *ibid.*, p. 140.

other conservatives to support all of the denomination's programs and agencies and threatening with discipline if they did not.⁸

Some PCUS pastors tried to discount the influence of modernism in the PCUSA which in turn gave southern conservatives room to report on developments in the northern denomination. For instance, Dunbar Ogden, a New Orleans pastor, argued that modernism in the PCUSA had been "discredited" and for the "past fifteen years there has been a decided movement toward theological conservatism."⁹ He went as far as to assert that Machen deserved to be tried by his presbytery because the formation of the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions (1934) was "profoundly un-Presbyterian."¹⁰ William Childs Robinson, a conservative professor at Columbia Theological Seminary, replied to Ogden that the PCUSA's trial of conservatives was merely a "legislative exercise of power" to punish dissent. Robinson also faulted the PCUSA's theological laxity. If the southern church were to unite with the PCUSA, she would "be giving away our corporate testimony to the doctrine of the atonement found in our Standards."¹¹ George Summey, a southern Presbyterian theologian who died in 1954 well before the PCA's founding, echoed Robinson when he observed the large presence of the social gospel in the PCUSA as well as the increasingly heavy-handed nature of the church bureaucracy. Machen's trial and suspension from the ministry was the most recent example of such "top-down judicial processes."¹²

If southern Presbyterian conservatives were aware of Machen's role in the Presbyterian controversy, Orthodox Presbyterians were also following debates in the PCUS about confessional revision and church union. OPC attention to the South started with a direct connection to Machen—namely, his brother, Arthur, who brought a complaint to the Presbytery of Potomac to compel Franklin Street Presbyterian Church to refrain from union services with two PCUSA congregations in Baltimore, Brown Memorial and First Presbyterian. These joint meetings were a tradition of summertime congregational life. But after the Machen trial, Arthur W. Machen was not inclined to cooperate with PCUSA congregations. Among Arthur Machen's objections was the prevalence of doctrinal error in the PCUSA as signatures to the Auburn Affirmation demonstrated. Presbytery did not sustain the complaint (28–3). The appeal to the Synod of Virginia also failed (14–1). But the Machen family was still making news among American Presbyterians and the PCUS was now on the OPC's radar.¹³

For the next ten years, the *Presbyterian Guardian* followed debates about confessional revision and church union in the Southern church. John Murray, for instance, directly countered a professor at Columbia Theological Seminary, J. B. Green, who was one of the most vocal defenders of confessional revision. Murray contended that revisions undermined "the witness of the church to the absolute sovereignty of God in His discriminating decree," as well as "placating the enemies of what is one of the pillars of the Reformed Faith."¹⁴ Two years later, Leslie W. Sloat, a lecturer at Westminster Seminary, reported on the place of the Auburn Affirmation in church union debates within the PCUS. What especially caught his eye was Walter L. Lingle's attempt to whitewash the Affirmation by underscoring appeals to the church's constitution. Lingle, who taught at Union Seminary (Richmond) and became president of Davidson College, supported church union and needed to explain away the "Auburn Affirmation" to win over at least moderates in the PCUS. As someone who had witnessed the effects of the "Affirmation" on the northern church, Sloat would not let Lingle ignore the "Affirmation's" equivocation on the Confession of Faith.¹⁵

Editors of the *Guardian* continued to monitor developments in the PCUS. Sometimes they added inspirational appeals to Southern Presbyterian legends like "Dabney, Girardeau, Hoge, and Palmer," who Arthur W. Kuschke referred to as "giants of former days" whose "love for the system of truth" was the chief reason for their "abiding greatness."¹⁶ Other times the editors actually asked for donations to The Southern Church Fund, an agency to support ruling elders in the PCUS who had written and signed a pamphlet that opposed church union.¹⁷ Sometimes the *Guardian* published articles by southern conservatives, such as Garland M. McNutt (not mentioned in Lucas' book), an elder

8. Quoted in Lucas, *ibid.*, p. 141.

9. Quoted in Lucas, *ibid.*, p. 142.

10. Lucas, *ibid.*, p. 142.

11. Quoted in Lucas, *ibid.*, p. 143.

12. Quoted in Lucas, *ibid.*, p. 144.

13. "A Christian's Plea in the Southern Church: An Editorial," *Presbyterian Guardian* (February, 1938): 21–23.

14. John Murray, "Proposed Confessional Revision in the Presbyterian Church in the United States," *Presbyterian Guardian* (November, 1938): 210.

15. Leslie W. Sloat, "The Southern Church and the Auburn Affirmation," *Presbyterian Guardian* (August 10, 1940): 36.

16. Arthur W. Kuschke, "Five Years for the South?," *Presbyterian Guardian* (July, 1948): 172.

17. "The Presbyterian Guardian and the Southern Church," *Presbyterian Guardian* (March 25, 1939): 88.

commissioner to the 1939 PCUS General Assembly. For McNutt, the fact that the same people at the Assembly all favored creedal revision, church union, and joining the Federal Council of Churches was telling of a “decidedly” downward trend in the PCUS that was compromising its status as a bulwark against theological liberalism.¹⁸

The final word on the PCUS from Orthodox Presbyterians before the 1960s came in 1949 from Paul Woolley who compared the recent General Assemblies of the PCUS and PCUSA. The professor of church history at Westminster was actually encouraged by deliberations within the PCUS where commissioners postponed indefinitely discussions of church union and promoted evangelism. Woolley did not think the future for the PCUS was bright if only because of the “non-Christian position taken by evangelicals on the Negro question.” Yet, he also detected more support for evangelism and more grass roots participation than in the northern church.¹⁹

If the example of Machen and the OPC inspired southern conservatives, the lessons learned were ambiguous. On the question of church union, the OPC’s history was a warning to PCUS conservatives about the theological rot and bureaucratic overreach of the northern church. But on the matter of confessional revision, a subject that was part of the OPC’s early history when the communion rejected the 1903 confessional revisions that were virtually identical to the changes before the PCUS, southern conservatives paid no attention. The one figure in the southern church who opposed both creedal revision and church union was William Childs Robinson, professor of biblical theology at Columbia Seminary. He may also have known and followed Machen’s difficulties the most of anyone in the southern church. His comparison of Machen in America to Barth in Germany was certainly one of the most remarkable comments issued during the southern church’s debates:

Those who enjoy a bit of irony may notice that the same General Assembly of 1934 which laid its iron

18. Garland M. McNutt, “Southern Crossroads,” *Presbyterian Guardian* (January, 1939): 3.

19. Paul Woolley, “Assemblies North and South,” *Presbyterian Guardian* (July, 1949): 179.

20. William Childs Robinson, “Which is the Rule of Faith and Life: The Word of God or the Voice of the Church?,” *Christianity Today* (June 1935): 6.

21. The Confession of 1967 is absent from both Lucas, *For A Continuing Church* and David W. Hall, *Irony and the Presbyterian Church in America: The First Fifty Years* (Powder Springs, GA: Covenant Foundation, 2023).

mandate to bind the conscience of Dr. Machen, passed a resolution commending the German Protestants for refusing to obey those actions of the Nazi church which contravene a minister’s exclusive allegiance to the Word of God. With a much more vague and less adequate understanding of what the Word of God is, Karl Barth is indeed challenging the German church with the same issue that the Machen case has raised in the USA church. Is the voice of the church ultimate; or is it only penultimate, with the Word of God ultimate? Is not the Word of God above the church judging her? Barth rightly declares that the material as well as the formal principle of the Reformed Reformation is neither this or that particular doctrine; but a doctrine that is primal for all doctrine, namely, that God is the sole author of doctrine... Shall we stand for the authority of the Word of God in Germany; and the authority of the voice of the church in America? Or shall we return to the sole headship of Christ in His church, and the sufficiency of His Word as a rule of faith and practice?²⁰

PCA INSPIRATION FOR OPC FATIGUE

The triangulation of PCUS-PCUSA-OPC perceptions reemerged in the 1960s when confessional creation supplanted creedal revision. In 1967 the PCUSA produced a new confession of faith, redundantly titled *The Confession of 1967*. For the OPC this profession, which contained a Barthian view of Scripture and gave room for the PCUSA to nod in the direction of social justice in a chapter on “Reconciliation in Society” (i.e., war, poverty, and sex), was momentous. For southern conservatives, the Confession of 1967 was background noise to ongoing talks about church union and women’s ordination.²¹

Why was the new PCUSA confession so important to the OPC? The answer lies in Machen’s belief that the OPC was the spiritual successor to the PCUSA. That claim, not by any means a constitutional provision within the OPC, defined the first three decades of OPC history. By claiming to be the true northern church as it were, the OPC and PCUSA were supposed to be in competition for the soul of American Presbyterianism. This explains why Orthodox Presbyterian leaders kept peppering PCUSA conservatives with reasons why they should leave the mainline denomination and join the OPC. Basic to this denominational competition was a common confession of faith—the Westminster Confession and Catechisms. In the aftermath of the Presbyterian controversy (of the 1920s), one of those

communions genuinely affirmed the Presbyterian confessional heritage and the other equivocated. With the Confession of 1967, however, that competition ended. In the minds of Orthodox Presbyterians, the two denominations were truly distinct because they had different confessional standards.²²

The Confession of 1967 left Orthodox Presbyterians disoriented. After 1967 the OPC entered a period when the denomination fluctuated between Presbyterian and evangelical trends. But while being tempted to make alliances in sectors of American evangelicalism, the emergence of southern conservatives in the PCUS reignited among Orthodox Presbyterians hopes for conservative Presbyterianism. Here were conservatives combating liberalism just as Machen had almost fifty years earlier. Perhaps the cause of true Presbyterianism could embrace both the OPC and southern conservatives. One additional circumstance of note was that by 1972 the OPC's negotiations for union with the Christian Reformed Church had basically stalled. Since its founding, the OPC had always enjoyed good relations with other confessional Reformed communions and sought ways to join in a common ministry. With the battle over the true PCUSA behind and the loss of a longtime friend in the CRC, the OPC was experiencing ecclesiastical loneliness and the PCA looked like a potentially pleasing partner.

Signs of the OPC's good will to the PCA came in the *Presbyterian Guardian* where the new communion's General Assemblies received extensive coverage. Editors devoted the January 1974 issue of the magazine to the PCA's (then National Presbyterian Church) First General Assembly, held at Briarwood Presbyterian Church a month earlier. Paul Settle explained to *Guardian* readers why southern conservatives finally needed to separate (one big reason was that plans for union with the northern church left no room for conservatives to get out).²³ G. Aiken Taylor wrote to compliment the OPC and RPCES for faring well after withdrawing from the mainline denomination.²⁴ W. Jack Williamson wrote a long article to explain the PCA's sense of mission—the Bible, evangelism, and the Westminster Confession.²⁵ The *Guardian*'s editors also printed an epistle from the PCA to "All Churches of Jesus Christ Throughout the World," a statement that echoed Williamson's article but that also appealed to the doctrine of the spirituality of the church when it stated that "We understand the task of the church to be primarily declarative and ministerial, not legislative or magisterial."²⁶ One reason for such extensive treatment of the PCA in the *Guardian* was that the magazine's editor, John J. Mitchell, had grown up in

the PCUS. In the write up of his observations as a visitor to the General Assembly, Mitchell exclaimed delight in beholding the PCA's desire to make "the Reformed faith a real force in American life." As the son of the manse in the PCUS, then ordained as a deacon but rejected as a candidate for ministry, Mitchell was thrilled to feel "thoroughly at home and strongly involved in all that went on."²⁷

By the time of the fourth General Assembly in September, 1976, the *Guardian*'s coverage of the PCA not only summarized the gathering's business but also reported on a matter of direct relevance to Orthodox Presbyterians—namely, turning Great Commission Publications into a joint OPC-PCA enterprise. This prospect occurred precisely when cooperation with the CRC on publishing Sunday school curricula had "waned and effectively ceased."²⁸ The official beginning of GCP as a joint OPC-PCA endeavor was October 20, 1975 with the incorporation of a staff, budget, and offices independent from the OPC's Committee on Christian Education. Its new board of trustees included equal numbers of representatives from both denominations. The original terms of incorporation gave both parties room to leave the agreement. For the OPC, that provision—though never seriously considered—was significant because, in the words of *Between the Times*, "the OPC was committing a major component of one of its oldest standing committees for at least three and a half years. . . to a joint oversight with a new, untested, and relatively unknown Presbyterian communion."²⁹ To underscore this novelty and Orthodox Presbyterian enthusiasm over the formation of the southern denomination, the OPC's Committee on Christian Education instituted the agreement with the PCA "without gaining the approval of the General Assembly."³⁰

22. See D. G. Hart, *Between the Times: The Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Transition, 1945–1990* (Willow Grove, PA: Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2011), ch. 4.

23. Paul G. Settle, "Why We Are Leaving," *Presbyterian Guardian* (January 1974): 2–3.

24. G. Aiken Taylor, "Have the Separatists Done All that Bad?," *Presbyterian Guardian* (January 1974): 3.

25. W. Jack Williamson, "Gathered for the Glory of God," *Presbyterian Guardian* (January 1974): 4–7.

26. "Message to All Churches of Jesus Christ Throughout the World from the General Assembly of the National Presbyterian Church," *Presbyterian Guardian* (January 1974): 9.

27. John J. Mitchell, "A Reborn Testimony in a Reborn Church," *Presbyterian Guardian* (January 1974): 11.

28. Hart, *Between the Times*, p. 218.

29. Hart, *Between the Times*, p. 219.

30. Hart, *Between the Times*, p. 219.

That a Sunday school curriculum publisher would function as the leading wedge of denominational merger is one of American Presbyterianism's surprising moments, but GCP did make union between the OPC and PCA seem inevitable. In 1978, arguably the year of peak Presbyterian optimism, the OPC, PCA, Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA), CRC, and the Reformed Presbyterian Church Evangelical Synod (RPCES) all held their annual assemblies or synods contemporaneously on the campus of Calvin College. This was the first somewhat informal meeting of the newly formed North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council. The meetings in Grand Rapids under the umbrella of a new Reformed and Presbyterian ecumenical body added momentum as well to plans for uniting the OPC, PCA, and RPCES into one large, conservative Presbyterian denomination. Under the name of "Joining and Receiving" (J&R), the plan to merge the three denominations took off two years after the assemblies in western Michigan. To attribute this good will to the cooperation between the OPC and PCA in Great Commission Publications may be simplistic. At the same time, the launch of the PCA, the inspiration which the new southern denomination supplied to a weary OPC, and the amiable relations of both churches within GCP was crucial to raising hopes for church union. The PCA lifted the OPC's spirits and in turn Orthodox Presbyterians' experience in ecclesiastical and ecumenical institutions turned that inspiration into a blueprint for a conservative Presbyterian denomination with national scope and appeal. What could go wrong?

WHAT DO CONSERVATIVE PRESBYTERIANS CONSERVE?

With the benefit of hindsight OPC-PCA relations indicate that Southern Presbyterian conservatives and Orthodox Presbyterians had the most in common in the early 1940s at a time when the excess of theological liberalism and confessional equivocation (i.e., "Auburn Affirmation"), along with heavy-handed denominational policies, reminded conservatives on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line of the virtues of Old School Presbyterianism's commitments to church polity and confessional subscription. By the 1970s, the rigor of Old School Presbyterianism—the outlook that had sustained PCUS and PCUSA conservatives between 1920 and 1945—seemed alien in an evangelical world where Billy Graham, Wheaton

College, and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary gave some coherence to conservative Protestantism. By the 1970s, Orthodox Presbyterians understood that their theology and polity were a hard sell to either the mainline or neo-evangelicals. Sometimes all they heard was E. J. Carnell's dismissal of Machen. In his 1958 book, *The Case for Orthodox Theology*, the president of Fuller Theological Seminary opined that "Machen was a friend of the fundamentalist mentality" because "he took an absolute stand on a relative issue, and the wrong issue at that."³¹ For Carnell, the wrong issue was ecclesiology. Ecclesiology was also important to Southern conservatives who formed the PCA, some of whom identified with Old School Presbyterianism. They were also in the minority of a constellation of generic conservatives for whom evangelism, missions, inerrancy, and even eschatology were as inspiring as the confession, catechisms, and Book of Discipline.

Old School Presbyterianism's declining appeal to conservative Presbyterians North and South may explain why the driving force in the OPC and PCA during the 1970s and 1980s was church union. For leaders in the PCA to switch from opposition to church union while in the PCUS to advocacy for Joining & Receiving once a separate communion was at the very least ironic. How the PCA became the vehicle for a large, national, conservative Presbyterian communion in the United States is a story beyond this historical foray. But deciding whether to join the PCA became the question that the OPC and RPCES, a church with roots in Carl McIntyre's Bible Presbyterian Church, needed to answer. It was, of all things, a way for northern Presbyterians who had persisted on the sideline of the Mainline's Christian America to "come home" to the Southern Presbyterian Church. Who would have imagined? But leaders of both the RPCES and the OPC did imagine, and most accepted the PCA's invitation to become a national Presbyterian church dominated by tall-steeple congregations of the Old South.

Of course, J&R was a lot messier than a simple referendum on forming a national conservative Presbyterian denomination with the PCA as the umbrella organization. In 1975 the OPC and RPCES had already considered a proposal to form a new denomination called the Reformed Presbyterian Church. A majority of OPC commissioners (70%) at the 1975 General Assembly approved the merger but the RPCES Assembly failed to secure a two-thirds majority of votes in favor (only 57% approved). The subsequent 1981 plan for "joining and receiving," approved by the Assemblies of the PCA, OPC, and RPCES was an attempt for many

31. E. J. Carnell, *The Case for Orthodox Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959), p. 26.

in the OPC to recover from the 1975 defeat and join with the young and vigorous Presbyterians in the South. For the plan to succeed, it needed approval in two-thirds of each communion's presbyteries.³²

The process once again left the OPC on the outside looking in. The PCA's presbyteries approved the RPCES but narrowly rejected the OPC. Needing a 19–6 majority in the presbyteries, the proposal received a 17–8 majority (one presbytery voted 20–20 tie, which was considered a “no”). That was not the final verdict on church union. In 1986 the PCA extended another “J&R” invitation to the OPC. At the OPC's 1986 General Assembly, commissioners showed they were well-prepared for deliberation. Sixty-seven different speeches on the floor assessed J&R's risks and rewards. The final vote was 78–68 in favor of union, 20 votes short of a required two-thirds majority. Some Orthodox Presbyterians were upset. Thirty-eight commissioners signed a protest that claimed that the vote was “a serious setback to our hopes for a united, vital, biblical and nationwide Presbyterian church.” The resolution even alleged that the vote revealed an “attitude of [Orthodox Presbyterian] superiority.”³³

All was not lost, however, for Orthodox Presbyterians who wanted to be part of a larger, national conservative Presbyterian denomination. One consequence of the failure of J&R was a NAPARC agreement that allowed congregations to voluntarily realign with a sister denomination. In 1989 the OPC suffered significant membership losses illustrated by the move of two large New Life Presbyterian congregations (Glenside, PA and Escondido, CA) into the PCA. This was partly an expression of frustration that merger attempts had failed. It was also the shift that brought the likes of John M. Frame and Jack Miller into the PCA's orbit. Richard B. Gaffin and Frame actually debated the merits of realignment in the OPC's magazine, *New Horizons*. Gaffin contended that “Biblical presbyterianism has no place for loyalties torn between the denomination and the local congregation.” For Frame, denominational identities were accidents of which true biblical faith was the substance. As such, moving from the OPC to the PCA was merely a practical decision.³⁴

Whether the fallout from J&R was the most important factor, from 1990 on the OPC and PCA moved in different directions (at what rate will depend on the observer's eyesight). What once was an Old School Presbyterian set of convictions (confession, polity, and spirituality of the church) that southern conservatives and Orthodox Presbyterians saw in each other now competed with hopes for national influence, contrasting

understandings of ecumenism, and socio-economic realities. The PCA aspired to be a denominational thought-leader among conservative American Protestants that in turn fueled networks within evangelical parachurch organizations. The OPC's history had conditioned many of its pastors and theologians to be content with a marginal presence in American church life even while carrying on fraternal relations with small Presbyterian and Reformed communions around the world. The PCA benefitted from the wealth of large urban churches in the Sun Belt which in turn gave the communion an air of respectability that the OPC had never even imagined. The OPC's meager financial resources and limited membership meant operating in a more small-scale, perhaps even grassroots, fashion.

Unlike the OPC which in 1937 went through a controversy over denominational identity that led to a split, the PCA's early history went in the opposite direction. It did not have a chance to sort out the evangelistic, dispensational, inerrantist, and confessional wings of southern conservative Presbyterians. Instead, almost as soon as it began, the PCA started to acquire other varieties of American Presbyterianism—from the RPCES to Orthodox Presbyterian New Lifers—even while maintaining convictions about missions and evangelism that made the National Association of Evangelicals (and similar agencies) a ready outlet for ecumenism. Add to this a Christian-America strain of cultural engagement coming from Francis Schaeffer and his disciples or an urban transformationalism from Tim Keller's model of church planting, and the PCA became the twenty-first century embodiment of New School Presbyterianism. Lucas does not discuss the PCA through the lens of Old School-New School distinctions, though he did observe that the PCUS used Old School convictions to oppose church union. As George Marsden tells the history of the New School, it was a communion largely in sync with the Second Great Awakening by supporting revivalism, moral and social reforms, stressing fidelity to the Bible, and arguing for Christianity as the basis for a healthy nation.³⁵

32. See D. G. Hart and John Muether, *Fighting the Good Fight: A Brief History of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia: The Committee on Christian Education and the Committee for the Historian, 1995), ch. 9.

33. Quoted in Hart and Muether, *ibid.*, p. 137.

34. Quoted in Hart, *Between the Times*, p. 317.

35. George M. Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience: A Case Study of Thought and Theology in Nineteenth-century America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 230ff.

Tim Keller more or less followed Marsden when he described New School Presbyterianism as possessing “a very strong sense of responsibility for the reform of society and for deep engagement in national politics,” a “vigorous use of ecumenical evangelical voluntary societies (parachurch organizations) for mission,” and an “emphasis on the ‘religion of the heart’ over doctrinal precision.”³⁶ When pressed to call himself a New School Presbyterian, Keller declined. William H. Smith’s 2009 essay, “Making Sense of the PCA,” had identified three strains of the New School—one from the Columbia Seminary founding generation, one from the RPCES and Covenant Seminary where pietism and revivalism were strong, and a third from a group of urban pastors (including Keller) who were also pietistic, parachurch-friendly, and morally activist.³⁷ Keller declined the label because Smith had failed to see in the urban pastors elements of Kuyperian transformationalism and emphases on liturgy, community, “cultural engagement and social justice.”³⁸ Still, Keller admitted that the pietist/New School wing was the largest group in the PCA, the doctrinalists/Old School were next, and the smallest group were the transformationalists like himself. For what it is worth, James Bratt, the American scholarly authority on Dutch Calvinism, has argued that Kuyper’s transformationalism was closer to the New School’s cultural sensibilities than it was to the Old School’s spirituality of the church.³⁹

On the OPC, Keller judged the denomination to be in the Old School tradition, a plausible reading that also misses a strong dose of Dutch Calvinism in the communion. For the first generation of Orthodox Presbyterians, neo-Calvinism did not directly threaten the spirituality of the church, confessionalism, or church

polity. But taking-every-thought-captive outlooks did not communicate to New Life Presbyterians the best way to finesse the “church as institute” versus the “church as organism” (Kuyperian vernacular for the institutional church in contrast to church members in their vocations). When second-generation Orthodox Presbyterians realized that Reformed convictions (both American Presbyterian and Dutch Reformed) were neither attracting PCUSA conservatives into the OPC nor prompting evangelicals to take conservative Presbyterianism seriously, they became willing to look beyond the institutional church for ways of evangelism and ministry. Of course, most still knew the value of Presbyterian polity thanks to lessons from the 1920s and 1930s. And yet, Machen’s sense expressed on his deathbed—“isn’t the Reformed faith grand!”—faded. Even some of those most opposed to parachurch evangelicalism did so more through inspiration from the Dutch Calvinist side of the OPC (Van Til and Vos) rather than from Old School Presbyterianism.⁴⁰ The perceptive reader will note here that the debate between Kuyper and B. B. Warfield over apologetics was a factor in conservative Orthodox Presbyterians losing allegiance to Old Princeton.⁴¹

Even if the Dutch Reformed influence in the OPC weakened the Old School’s influence, associations with the Dutch-American faculty at Westminster and warm fraternal relations with the Christian Reformed Church gave the OPC a very different ecumenical profile than that of the PCA. Thanks to the CRC’s involvement with international Reformed networks, the OPC looked outside America for a sense of belonging to a large communion. To this day, the queue of fraternal delegates from overseas at OPC General Assemblies is remarkable. That sensibility also explains why the OPC has never been part of the National Association of Evangelicals (too many Arminians was an easy reason to remain separate). That the PCA voted decisively to leave the NAE only in 2022 is one indication of different ecumenical outlooks, and this fact likely echoes New School Presbyterianism’s Americanist spirit. If the OPC merited “cool” points for its international ties, the urban hipster profile of PCA pastors compensates and likely makes it appealing to American evangelicals.

Differing approaches to fraternal relations is just another way of categorizing the PCA as more evangelical than the OPC but in the end the categories are neither fixed nor deep. Both communions bleed evangelical and Reformed even if officers and members in the PCA and OPC take comfort from one of those theological labels more than the other. One indication of

36. Keller, “What’s So Great,” p. 4.

37. William H. Smith, “Making Sense of the PCA,” *Nicotine Theological Journal* (Spring 2009): 4–6.

38. Keller, “What’s So Great,” p. 16, note 19.

39. James D. Bratt, “Abraham Kuyper, J. Gresham Machen, and the Dynamics of Reformed Anti-Modernism,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 75.4 (Winter 1997): 247–58.

40. See, for instance, Charles G. Dennison’s reading of Machen through the lens of Dutch Reformed influences: “Tragedy, Hope, and Ambivalence: The History of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1936–1962, Part II: Hope,” and “Geerhardus Vos and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church,” in *History for a Pilgrim People: The Historical Writings of Charles G. Dennison*, ed., Danny E. Olinger and David K. Thompson, (Willow Grove, PA: The Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2002), chapters 8, 6.

41. See George M. Marsden, “The Collapse of Evangelical Academia,” in Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds., *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 219–64.

that evangelical-Reformed mixed identity comes from the histories of each communion. John Muether and I concluded *Fighting the Good Fight* by summarizing the OPC's history as one of emerging from the Presbyterian controversy as keenly opposed to theological error. But the OPC was not simply combative. It also stood for obedience to "the teaching of God's Word as summarized" in the Confession and Catechism.⁴² To reinforce that identity, we included Machen's brief for the spirituality of the church in a 1933 essay, "The Responsibility of the Church in a New Age" (which for Machen is the same in every age). The concluding pages of the book were perhaps notably silent on differences between evangelicalism and Presbyterianism. That was not the case for Lucas' *For A Continuing Church*. For him, the PCA was a chief example of a blended evangelicalism and Presbyterianism. Lucas writes that the PCA "represents the largest conservative Presbyterian body in North America." He does not argue that size is a function of combining evangelicalism and Presbyterianism but the logic is implicit in the book's last words. Lucas hopes the next forty years of the PCA could see "evangelical Presbyterians and Presbyterian evangelicals—prosper as a witness to the inerrant Bible, the Reformed faith, and the Great Commission," three sets of images with specific resonance to evangelical and Presbyterian audiences.⁴³

At bottom, the reason why neither denomination can claim naming rights to either evangelical Presbyterian or truly Presbyterian is the long history of American Presbyterians' experience with revivalism. Ever since the awakenings of Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield, conservative Presbyterians have tried to harmonize two parts of Protestant devotion that are hard to reconcile—namely, pietism and confessionalism.⁴⁴ This is perhaps a peculiar and idiosyncratic argument, but the dismissals should not obscure a seldom considered point.⁴⁵ Christian devotion that makes the born-again experience definitive for genuine faith inherently disregards formal aspects of Christianity (subscription, ordination, church polity, order of worship, creeds). External observance is and always will be secondary to the real believer's affections. Discounting Christianity's churchly practices comes, to be sure, in different degrees of magnitude. But the history of American Presbyterianism has been a long struggle to use awakened piety as inoculation against dead orthodoxy (or dead Robert's Rules, or dead exclusive psalmody, or dead resistance to parachurch organizations). Even Old School Presbyterians, like Charles Hodge, who was critical of the First 'Pretty Good' Awakening, struggled

to keep pietists like Archibald Alexander happy with strict Presbyterianism.⁴⁶

The OPC and PCA are on a spectrum of a New World Presbyterianism that veers from personal experience to corporate confessional witness. Between 1940 and 1990 Orthodox Presbyterians and conservatives in the PCUS, followed by officers and members of the PCA, sometimes took encouragement from where the other group was on that sliding scale. At other times they were disappointed. Common enemies produced hopes for union and eventually realignment. The results were two communions, each with Old School Presbyterian DNA, but a gene pool seriously diluted by the third decade of the twenty-first century. Both communions still have enough in common to be warm and friendly. Each denomination has also circulated enough in the strange air of American evangelicalism to speak with some equivocation about what it means to be Presbyterian. The lack of clarity is not the same as what plagued the PCUSA at the time of the "Auburn Affirmation." Neither is opposition to Presbyterian modernism, however, as much a part of OPC and PCA identity as it was two generations ago. ■

42. Hart and Muether, *Fighting the Good Fight*, p. 195.

43. Lucas, *For A Continuing Church*, pp. 327–28.

44. This is the theme of D. G. Hart, *The Lost Soul of American Protestantism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002).

45. Carl R. Trueman's review of D. G. Hart and John R. Muether's *Seeking a Better Country: 300 Years of American Presbyterianism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Books, 2007) in *Ordained Servant* (June–July 2009) concludes that the attempt to recover confessional Presbyterianism by an historical approach is a "modern, idiosyncratic" project that lacks "deep, historical, genetic precedents and antithetical categories." Available at https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=156. Accessed September 12, 2023.

46. See Paul Gutjahr, *Charles Hodge: Guardian of American Orthodoxy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011): 192–94.

*In Brief: Personal Remembrances of Dr. J. L. Girardeau from Two of His Students. From *The Life Work of John L. Girardeau, D.D., LL.D.*, ed. George A. Blackburn (1916), pp. 203–205*

Two estimates of Dr. Girardeau as a teacher and as a member of the Thursday Afternoon Conferences, furnished at my request, will close this sketch.

The first is by Rev. Thomas P. Hay, D. D.:

I entered the junior class in the Seminary about a month before Dr. Girardeau entered the institution as Professor of Theology. And it was my privilege to be his scholar during the period of his transition from the eloquent pulpit orator to the professor and teacher. He impressed and greatly helped me by his gift of analysis and of clarifying things by making distinctions, and of logical development of thought; and by the happy faculty of fixing thought and truth, thus elucidated by the illustrations of his imagination and the charms of his eloquence.

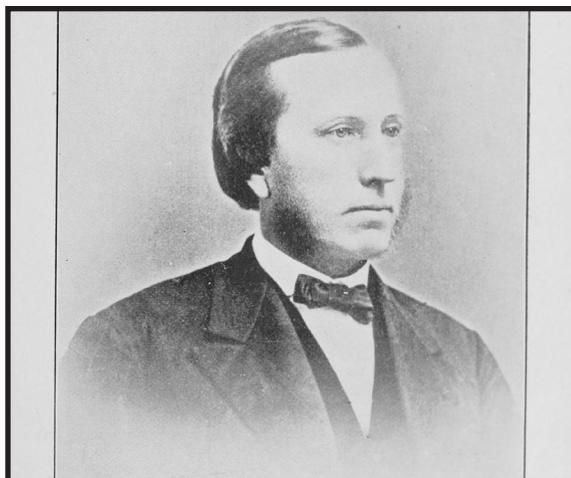
Dr. Girardeau required his students to write out from memory an analysis of his lectures, or a recapitulation of the portion of a text-book gone over in a recitation, embodying any criticism he made on the author's statements. One of these analyses would be read and criticized by the professor at the beginning of the next class-hour. By this exercise, I learned to preach without any notes in six months' time; and the professor's system of theology took full hold of my understanding and memory. I could recall his arguments and reasonings on all theological questions raised, and even his personal opinions on matters on which Calvinists differed. I have often said that, next to my revered father, I owed more to Dr. Girardeau than any other man; and this was due to the above characteristics. He certainly taught me theology, established my convictions in the truth of the Calvinistic system and trained my mind.

Let me add to this my impression of his kindliness to his students and his sympathy and readiness to come down to the student's ground and point of view. He reasoned and argued as an equal; so that a young man was not afraid to raise his questions and difficulties, and felt free to differ with him and argue out his own contention.

He impressed me in the Conferences very much, as doubtless he did the congregations whom he served as pastor. He was spiritual, edifying, earnest, eloquent and loving.

The second is from Rev. B. P. Reid:

Students under Dr. Girardeau got a great deal more from him than a mere knowledge of the truths he taught. This is useful enough as far as it goes, and is about all that is to be gathered from many teachers reputed to be great. But there ought to be more in every teacher than his mere mental machinery. Wonderful as was Dr. Girardeau's mental power, there was something in him far beyond this, because, under



J. L. Girardeau

him, we got an impression of a man which lingers with us as an inspiration in life.

Who could fail to be impressed with his devotion to truth which amounted to an absorbing passion with his soul? The very intensity of his love of it made him so quick and positive in the expressions of his conviction of it, as to cause some to suspect him of a lack of charity to those opposed to his view, which was far from being true. When he discussed the great doctrines of theology, who could fail to be touched by his evident feeling of awe in the presence of these great facts about God, and who could escape the conviction that his soul saw reaches not perceived by the ordinary mind?

Eloquence and wit, both natural to him, enlivened all his class-room lectures and talk. Never have we heard anywhere his equal in the power of apt and original illustration drawn from Scripture incident, and of clothing great thoughts easily and rapidly in their appropriate garments of words.

We admired, necessarily, Dr. Girardeau's great power as class-room lecturer and preacher, and we loved him for his sympathy. This was so deep and so pure as to lead him to be absolutely forgetful of himself in the use of all that he had. His evident joy in the opportunity to help, whether with instruction, advice, or money, is something long to be remembered by those under him. The way in which he followed us out into life with a kindly interest which grew with the years, showed that his sympathy was no passing emotion, but belonged to the very composition of his being. To this hour I can not recall, without emotion, the last time I remember seeing him when he called to me across the crowded street of the city with all the joy of youth in his voice over the sight of a friend. He oft-times refreshed and encouraged us with his sympathy in life, and this made it especially hard when we had to be told that the hour of his departure was at hand. ■