

## ORTHODOXY AND LOVELESSNESS (1)

We ended the editorial "Profession and Practice" (January 7/96) with the resolve to examine Prof. Van Dam's assertion that Br. Wayne Chase's position toward those "who cannot... in good conscience present their children for baptism" shows a lack of compassion and is insufficiently pastoral. Prof. Van Dam actually said that the Biblical principles which the Synod of The Hague 1914 alludes to "are more compassionate and pastoral than the position of Br. Chase." (Clarion, May 5/95) He refers us to the decision of this Synod to support his claim that "toleration can be exercised toward those who in good conscience err in some point of doctrine", in this case, infant baptism. He notes that such toleration could, by way of exception, extend to admitting someone as a communicant member into the Reformed congregation. The reluctance to show, in certain circumstances, that kind of tolerance, demonstrates a lack of compassion and an unwillingness to be pastoral. Therefore anyone who disagrees with Prof. Van Dam's assertion, and who reminds him of our promise and obligation to uphold and defend "the doctrine of the Old and New Testament, summarized in the Confessions and taught here in this Christian Church" is considered rather uncompassionate and intolerant. The efforts of office-bearers in opposing heresy and error might be regarded as unloving and un-pastoral. Orthodoxy may then be considered synonymous with a lack of love or lovelessness.

It is obvious that Prof. Van Dam did not come to grips with the statements in Br. Chase's article. Br. Chase correctly noted that "a person who condemns or neglects infant baptism is simply incapable of honestly answering the first question in the 'Form for the Public Profession of Faith' in the Canadian Reformed Churches." The relevant point is not the question of a lack of compassion and an unwillingness to be pastoral, but a lack of integrity and the refusal to be honest. We are asked to compromise the truth of the Word of God as the church has confessed it, in order to demonstrate our compassion and pastoral concern. We are encouraged to allow "those who cannot... in good conscience present their children for baptism" to declare, as their response to the question in the Form for the Public Profession of Faith that they "wholeheartedly believe the doctrine of the Word of God, summarized in the confession and taught here in this Christian Church." If we dare to question the integrity and honesty of Prof. Van Dam's position we are reminded that we have neglected to be pastoral; we are lacking in compassion and we have failed to show tolerance.

Prof. Van Dam attempts to defend his compassionate and pastoral position by way of an appeal to the decisions of Regional Synod of Gouda (1620) and "the Biblical principles" referred to by the Synod of The Hague (1914). He therefore provides us with excerpts from the text of the Synods' decision and also some texts from Scripture. He quotes the Scripture passages alluded to by the Synod of The Hague. There we are exhorted to heed "the apostle's command to welcome those weak in faith (Rom. 14: 1) and to bear with the failings of the weak (Rom. 15:1)." We should note that these texts do not specifically speak about "those who cannot... in good conscience present their children for baptism," or "those who cannot assent to a particular point of doctrine," but about people who had a difference of opinion over food and feast days. "Let not him who eats despise him who abstains... One man esteems one day better than another, while another man esteems all days alike. Let every one be fully convinced in his own mind... Do not let what you eat

cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died... Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God... Let each of us please his neighbour for his good to edify him." (Rom. 14:3, 5, 6, 15, 20, & 15:2) The Synod of The Hague rightly concluded from these Scripture texts that we must be tolerant and compassionate towards those who are "weak in faith." We must indeed bear with the failings of the weak and show them our brotherly affection and love. However, these Scripture texts, taken in context, do not substantiate the validity of Prof. Van Dam's assertion that toleration toward those who "err in a point of doctrine" such as infant baptism, extends to tolerating disobedience to God's express command to baptize our children. We may have a difference of opinion about many issues (food and feast days), but we may never differ on the need for all of us, including baptists, to live at all times and in all circumstances of life, in total obedience to God's commands. If these Scripture texts constitute the thrust of Prof. Van Dam's arguments, then it is understandable that the validity of his assertions might be challenged.

Furthermore, Prof. Van Dam's conclusions drawn from the text of the decisions of Regional Synod of Gouda (1620) focus on the possibility of admission to communicant membership of those "who were willing to be instructed in the Reformed doctrine." The proper perspective is that this possibility of admission to communicant membership is not possible unless they agreed "not to make propaganda for their un-biblical views and were to acknowledge the correctness of the Reformed doctrine." How can someone truly "acknowledge the correctness of the Reformed doctrine" when he still "cannot at this time in good conscience present his children for baptism?" Prof. Van Dam has repeatedly responded to those who have critiqued his writings, but he has frequently failed to clearly answer the questions put to him. These unanswered questions continue to bring into question the soundness of his assertions.

When discussing "the possibility of admission to communicant membership" of "those who in good conscience err in some point of doctrine" Prof. Van Dam uses the words "by way of exception," and under "exceptional circumstances." He thereby already acknowledges that we are no longer dealing with what is a normal and accepted practice, but with what is abnormal, exceptional, uncommon and unusual. It is regrettable that he tries to diminish and minimize our differences with the OPC on the matter of confessional membership and those who "err in a point of doctrine" by focusing on our supposed uniformity in dealing with exceptions. No one is served with building an argument on an exception while the norm is relegated to the sidelines. The norm is clear. The Canadian Reformed Churches have and want to maintain the rule of confessional membership, which means that those who are members by baptism and become communicant members through public profession of faith declare that they "wholeheartedly believe the doctrine of the Word of God, summarized in the confessions and taught here in this Christian Church." We so easily lose sight of this norm when we begin to base our discussions on "exceptional circumstances".

Moreover, it is not our business to busy ourselves with the question as to what errors and heresies a person can "at this time and in good conscience" assent to or hold and yet be admitted as a communicant member in the Can. Ref. Churches. We are not called to compromise the truth, but rather to confess it. The truth is that God has commanded that children of believers should be baptized. For, infants as well as adults belong to God's covenant, receive God's promises, and therefore are entitled to the sign of God's covenant promises. (Heidelberg Catechism, LD 27) The rejection of infant baptism is really the rejection of the gospel of God's sovereign grace.

The statements we have made in our examination of Prof. Van Dam's assertions can be readily summarized in some rather pointed questions. Are we really compassionate when we allow someone to hold views (errors and heresies) which may result in their damnation without offering them the exclusive gospel of Jesus Christ? May we tolerate indifference and disobedience to the express command of God to baptize our children in order to show our pastoral care and concern? Shall we hesitate to affirm Biblical truth or doctrine because it isn't deemed to be "nice" and loving, or pastoral and compassionate? In view of what we have discussed and said, the answer to these questions must be a clear and emphatic "No!" Does such an orthodox stance not reflect a lack of love, tolerance and compassion? Is it possible that orthodoxy can be synonymous with lovelessness? Yes, that is certainly possible! The relevant question however is whether there is a likely or necessary connection between orthodoxy and a lack of love. We will answer that question in more detail, the Lord willing, in one of our future editorials. In the meantime it is good to remind ourselves of the fact that it is through truth, and in living in humble obedience to the truth, that God is most ardently honoured.

Ron Dykstra

**NOTE!**

In our continuing effort to present accurate information about the ongoing issues in the Church we have decided to provide our readers with some material from the Orthodox Presbyterian community about the issues that continue to be discussed between our two federations. We believe that a better understanding of how these issues are viewed in the two federations will lead to a better understanding of the issues and one another. This first article will be presented in two installments. Although our format and preference both tend to shorter articles we feel that the importance of the issues at hand prevent us from summarizing this material. We would be interested in hearing response to this type of article from our readers.

The Editors

**Confidence in Our Brethren: Creedal Subscription in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church - Part One**

John O'Sullivan, the Editor of National Review, is fond of citing what he calls "O'Sullivan's Law," which states that any group that is not explicitly right-wing will become left-wing over time. O'Sullivan applies his law generally to political organizations: parties, action groups, think tanks, etc. Students of American church history may be tempted to apply O'Sullivan's Law to ecclesiastical contexts as well, to assert that any church that is not explicitly conservative will become liberal over time. After all, American culture, with its religious pluralism, anti-intellectual populism, and advancing secularization is hardly friendly terrain for Christian orthodoxy. More specifically, conservative Presbyterians may want to frame the principle in this way: a Presbyterian church that is not explicitly Old School will become New School over time, or, alternatively, those who are not explicitly strict subscriptionist will eventually become loose

subscriptionist. The burden of this essay is to survey the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (Hereafter OPC) with respect to its view of creedal subscription. Along the way we wish to test the reliability of an ecclesiastical version of O'Sullivan's Law.

The OPC, throughout its nearly sixty-year history, has established a reputation for rigorous doctrinal orthodoxy. George Marsden, for example, located the OPC within what he calls the "doctrinalist" strand of American Reformed tradition: "Orthodox Presbyterians . . . meant by 'Reformed' strict adherence to Christian doctrine as contained in the infallible Scriptures and defined by the standards of the Westminster Assembly. Only Christians whose creeds were fully compatible with Westminster's and who viewed subscription to them as paramount were fully within the pale."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Mark Noll noted, not very sympathetically, that OPC "has prided itself more on confessional precisionism than on ecclesiastical diplomacy."<sup>2</sup>

As Marsden and Noll indicate, the popular impression is that the OPC has a high level of confessional integrity that results in little diversity of theological expression. What is curious about that image, however, is that for all its reputation for creedal integrity, the OPC is without a history of debate on the nature of creedal subscription. When compared to the public debates in the Presbyterian Church in America over subscription,<sup>3</sup> what is most remarkable about the OPC is its remarkable silence on the topic. The language of "strict" or "full" subscription on the one hand, and "loose" or "system" subscription on the other hand, is virtually absent in the OPC. The question begs itself: Why is this so? We will suggest the answer lies in unique elements in the story of the OPC. Events surrounding the origin of the OPC, and events that took place in its early history established a definite creedal sensibility within the church. Yet, however strong that sensibility is, it is not the product of careful reflection on the part of the denomination, but rather the result of an unarticulated corporate culture.

### **Subscription and the founding of the OPC**

A deep respect for the Westminster Confession pervades the writings of J. Gresham Machen, the New Testament scholar from Princeton who would found both Westminster Seminary and the OPC. He was reluctant to refer to the Confession as a "man-made creed" and referred to it instead as "the creed that God has taught in his Word."<sup>4</sup> As he became involved in the fundamentalist-modernist debates in the Presbyterian church in the 1920s and 1930s, his concern was in defending the Reformed faith as expressed in the Westminster Standards.<sup>5</sup> When over 1300 Presbyterian ministers signed the Auburn Affirmation in 1923, asserting that biblical infallibility, the virgin birth of Christ, his miracles, substitutionary atonement, and resurrection were merely theories that Presbyterians may or may not believe, Machen responded that the Affirmation's skepticism challenged not only the authority of the Bible, but also the confessional character of the church.

In several works Machen lashed out against the brazen dishonesty of the modernists within the church, who were deceptively using traditional language to take control of the church, all the while denying the Confession and the infallibility of the Bible. Revival in the church will come only with the renewal of "just plain old fashioned honesty of speech."<sup>6</sup> In his most popular work, *Christianity and Liberalism*, Machen reflected on the ordination vows in the Presbyterian Church: "if these 'constitutional questions' do not fix clearly the creedal basis of the Presbyterian Church, it

is difficult to see how any human language could possibly do so. . . . [T]he ordination vow declaration is part of the constitution of the Church. If a man can stand on that platform he may be an officer in the Presbyterian Church; if he cannot stand on it he has no right to be an officer in the Presbyterian Church."<sup>7</sup>

In another essay, "The Creeds and Doctrinal Advance," Machen lamented the anti-doctrinal spirit of his age. Modern "church-unionism" sought unity through a watering down of confessional commitments. The goal of ecumenical movements was to "make doctrine as meager and vague as possible," in the name of religious progress. Machen countered that creeds are an expression of the truth, not an expression of the historically-conditioned experience of faith. Creeds of the past were premised on the idea of truth, and ignoring them led not to doctrinal progress but to "doctrinal regression or decadence." While he did countenance the possibility of doctrinal advance within the Presbyterian Church, he also believed that his was not a "creed-making age."<sup>8</sup>

Machen's confessionalism--coupled with his high ecclesiology--led him to champion the "corporate witness" of the church. The church as a whole was a witness to the truth through its constitutional documents. Ministers occupy pulpits in the church only with the endorsement of the church. "The preacher therefore speaks not only for himself but for the church."<sup>9</sup> If he were to preach heresy it would be heresy for which the whole church would be responsible. The church must therefore be a doctrinally strict company through the instruments of its doctrinal standards. Machen saw the corporate witness compromised not only by liberal preachers and the underhanded tactics of the modernist church bureaucracies, but also by the indifference of the "moderates," who sought to stand aloof from the doctrinal controversies. The principle of corporate witness was to be held above institutional loyalty or prestige.

Thus, when the Old School identity of Princeton Seminary was compromised by its 1929 reorganization (the new Board included signers of the Auburn Affirmation), Machen founded Westminster Seminary, announcing at its opening convocation that "Princeton Seminary is not dead, the noble tradition of Princeton Seminary is alive." Westminster would maintain that tradition, "not on the foundation of equivocation and compromise, but on an honest foundation of devotion to God's Word, to maintain the same principles that old Princeton maintained . . . that the Christian religion, as set forth in the Confession of Faith of the Presbyterian Church, is true."<sup>10</sup>

Seven years later, when Machen was defrocked by the PCUSA for opposing modernism in the Foreign Missions Board, he and his sympathizers began what became known as the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in order "to perpetuate the true Presbyterian Church . . . regardless of cost."<sup>11</sup> Its charter proclaimed that the new church would maintain and defend the Bible "as the Word of God" and the Westminster Confession "as the system of doctrine taught in Holy Scriptures." Thus the OPC was the "spiritual successor" to the PCUSA in a way similar to the founding vision of Westminster Seminary. Spiritual succession was understood in terms of fidelity to the theology of the Westminster Confession that had formerly characterized the Presbyterian Church and Princeton Seminary.

### **Doctrinal Divisions in the OPC**

Though he died six months after its founding, Machen had a monumental influence on the new church. The OPC inherited both Machen's confessionalism and his ecclesiology, and saw

itself, like Machen, pitted against two opponents: the modernists who denied the truth, and the moderate indifferentists who refused to leave the church. As founders of the OPC put it: "Modernism and indifferentism have now so grievously silenced" the church's "clear and glorious testimony."<sup>12</sup>

Soon after its founding, the OPC was beset with doctrinal controversies.<sup>13</sup> In 1937, Carl McIntire and other fundamentalists left the young church to form the Bible Presbyterian Church. This split was the result of several issues, including the relation between the Church and its Confession. Among the early issues to resolve was the form of the Westminster Confession that the Church would adopt. McIntire argued that unless the Church adopted the 1903 revisions to the Confession, it could not legitimately claim to be the Presbyterian Church's "spiritual successor." The second General Assembly, however, voted to eliminate the 1903 revisions because they were Arminian in character. Another issue was whether or not to amend the Confession to allow for a premillennial interpretation of the return of Christ. Although the Confession seemed to rule out premillennialism, Machen argued against revisions. A premillennial could still receive and adopt the Confession in good faith: "for the reasonable interpretation of the meaning of the ordination vow, so far as the return of Christ is concerned, we must have confidence in our brethren."<sup>14</sup>

A decade later the church found itself embroiled in the "Clark controversy." In part the debate was procedural: Did the Presbytery of Philadelphia license and ordain Gordon H. Clark properly? It also involved a theological dispute: Did his view of the incomprehensibility of God do justice to the majesty and mystery of God? There were other significant issues lurking in the background as well, having to do with the mission and character of the OPC: Would it be evangelical or conservative as defined by the emerging evangelical movement, or would it be distinctively Reformed as defined by the Westminster Standards? Clark's supporters saw the OPC as an evangelical church opposed to modernism, while his opponents envisioned the church opposing modernism by defending and propagated the Westminster Standards. In the end Clark and his followers left the church, leaving the issues to be framed by the terms of his opponents.

The Clark case was almost immediately followed by the Peniel dispute. Some ministerial members of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church became involved in the Peniel Bible Conference in upstate New York. The Conference began to take on peculiar teachings on new revelations of the Spirit that, according to critics, challenged the sufficiency of Scripture. Peniel's critics in the OPC were frustrated by the selective way in which the movement seemed to embrace the Reformed faith, and found a "serious lack of clarity and precision" in Peniel's formulations. Like Clark's supporters, Peniel's defenders critiqued the direction the OPC was heading. Clark called it a small circumscribed, obscure group. Peniel described it as cold, withdrawn, and inflexible. In both cases debate often focused on the tension between a strong Reformed identity and greater size and influence.

Thus, by its 30th anniversary, with the collective effects of the McIntire exodus, along with the Clark and Peniel controversies, the confessional identity of the church was fairly well established, though not explicit. The boundaries of Machen's movement, vaguely defined at first in the battles against modernism were clarified by these divisions in the direction of traditional Presbyterianism. While none of the debates saw the nature of creedal subscription spelled out, each resulted in the exodus of those yearning for a broader vision of the church: McIntire left for the fundamentalist cause; the evangelicals departed in the Clark and Peniel disputes. The growth of the

church was stymied, and the OPC remained relatively small and, to use Noll's term, firmly established in "confessional precisionism."

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- 1) George M. Marsden, "Reformed and American" in *Reformed Theology in America: A History of Its Modern Development*, ed. David F. Wells (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), p.2. The other two strands in Marsden's taxonomy of American Calvinism are the "pietest" and the "culturalist."
- 2) Mark Noll, "The Spirit of Old Princeton and the Spirit of the OPC" in *Pressing Toward the Mark: Essays Commemorating Fifty Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, ed. Charles G. Dennison and Richard C. Gamble (Philadelphia: Committee for the Historian of the OPC, 1986), p.243.
- 3) For example, the Knight-Barker dialogue in *Presbyterian X* (1984) and the Barker-Smith debate at the 1992 General Assembly.
- 4) J. Gresham Machen, *What is Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), p. 229.
- 5) For a comprehensive study of Machen's involvement in this struggle and his role in the formation of the OPC, see Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954) and D. G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Presbyterianism in Modern North America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).
- 6) J. Gresham Machen, "The Issue Before the Church" in *God Transcendent*, ed by Neb B. Stonehouse (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), p.44.
- 7) J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981 [1923]), pp. 163-164.
- 8) J. Gresham Machen, "The Creeds and Doctrinal Advance," *Scripture and Confession*, ed. John H. Skilton (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), pp.149-157.
- 9) J. Gresham Machen, "The Parting of the Ways," *Presbyterian* 94 (Jan.24, 1924), p.8.
- 10) Machen, *What is Christianity?*, pp. 232-233.
- 11) Ned Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen*, p. 496.
- 12) *Ibid.*, p.495.
- 13) It is not possible to describe the details of these struggles here. For a fuller explanation of the, see *Fighting the Good Fight of Faith: A Popular History of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, by D. G. Hart and John Muether, forthcoming.
- 14) "The Second General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of America" *Presbyterian Guardian* 3:3 (November 14, 1936), p. 43.

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