

The Orthodox Presbyterian Church is a small denomination which dates its beginning in 1936. The natural question arises in inquiring minds: What is the justification for its founding and its continued existence? After all, are there not several much larger presbyterian churches? If it is a question of conservatism or evangelicalism, are there not other conservative and evangelical churches today with much greater resources and memberships? Various OPC authors have attempted to answer the question of why the OPC does and ought to exist. The intent of this short essay is to examine four sources from the OPC, two articles and two church websites, comparing their answers to this important question. Each makes use of various points concerning OPC doctrine and history. Many of the arguments and conclusions are the same, but each has different emphases.

Both Galbraith and Kellogg describe at length the history of the Presbyterian Church in the USA, most notably its decline in doctrine and practice which led to the formation of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Their intent is to show that the PCUSA had left its historical roots in doctrine and practice before the founding of the OPC. Jason Wallace touches only briefly on the formation of the OPC, mentioning the denomination as one that was founded as a biblical alternative to the liberal modernism that plagued the mainline Presbyterian Church by the early 20th century¹. The website of Park Hill Presbyterian Church makes no mention of the OPC's founding, only noting that she is “confessionally presbyterian...abid[ing] by the full teaching of the Holy Bible, which we believe is faithfully summarized in the Westminster Confession and Larger and Shorter Catechisms².” The amount of information given on the specific history of the formation of the OPC in the case of each of these sources depends largely on their intended

¹ D. Jason Wallace, “What we believe”, www.christpres.net, online.

² “Park Hill Presbyterian Church”, www.parkhillpresbyterian.org, online.

audience. It appears that Galbraith and Kellogg wrote their articles for an audience that took more interest in the historic particulars of the PCUSA and the OPC than the two church websites' intended audience. The Christ OPC and Park Hill OPC websites appear to have in view a general evangelical audience which takes little interest in the roots and history of American Presbyterianism or the OPC.

Galbraith and Kellogg both trace the decline of the PCUSA, but to very different points in history. Galbraith goes back to the 1801 “plan of union” as an example to mark the beginning of the PCUSA's decline in biblical doctrine, and continues with the examples of the “New School” controversy and merger with the Cumberland Presbyterian Church³. Kellogg, on the other hand, praises the PCUSA for her faithfulness even up to the “early twentieth century”⁴. The first example Kellogg cites to show the decline of the PCUSA is in the liberal modernism that plagued the Presbyterian seminaries at the turn of the century⁵. Galbraith's intention here is to show that the doctrinal decline in the PCUSA with regard to the Calvinist distinctives set the stage for later compromises regarding the authority of Scripture and the person of Christ, doctrines foundational to historic Christianity of any stripe. Kellogg makes no mention of any decline involving Arminian doctrines, even claiming that the PCUSA had been faithful until the rise of modernism⁶. I think this discrepancy can be explained by considering that Kellogg intended with this article to leave broader evangelicals with a positive image of the OPC. A church which claims to adhere to the Calvinist tradition does not have the same popular appeal as one which simply claims to hold to Bible-based Christianity in the minds of the

³ John P. Galbraith, “Why the Orthodox Presbyterian Church?”, *Orthodox Presbyterian Identity: An Anthology*, ed. John R. Muether (2005), 18-20.

⁴ Edward L. Kellogg, “There is Good Reason”, *Orthodox Presbyterian Identity: An Anthology*, ed. John R. Muether (2005), 45.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

majority of evangelicals. Kellogg chooses his terminology carefully for a broader audience. Yet I do think that Galbraith's take leaves the reader, whether unbeliever, evangelical, or reformed, with a more complete picture of exactly what defines the OPC than does Kellogg's. Both Galbraith and Kellogg summarize the events which more immediately led to the formation of the OPC, including the 1923 declaration, the Auburn Affirmation, the reorganization of Princeton Theological Seminary, the foundation of Westminster Theological Seminary, J. Gresham Machen's overture concerning the Board of Foreign Missions, the formation of the Independent Board, Machen's trial, and the 1936 formation of the Presbyterian Church of America⁷. This chronology in both articles does much to explain the reason why the OPC was originally founded as a distinct entity from the PCUSA.

Each of the works under examination refers to the Bible as the only infallible authority for faith and practice as a belief of the OPC which warrants its continued existence. Galbraith, in his article, "Why the Orthodox Presbyterian Church?", says, "The chief characteristic of this new denomination is, then, that is unequivocally, unashamedly, and positively Christian. In this day of the popularity of Modernism, which rejects the divine authority of the Scriptures, and so necessarily the finality of the things which those Scriptures teach, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church stands firmly upon both."⁸ Kellogg states, "By God's grace the Orthodox Presbyterian Church continues to be a church which is being built upon the Word of God."⁹ The Park Hill website says, "Park Hill Presbyterian Church, as part of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, is a confessionally presbyterian church. That means we abide by the full teaching of the Holy

⁷ Ibid, 45-51.
Galbraith, 22-27.

⁸ Ibid, 14.

⁹ Kellogg, 52.

Bible¹⁰...” The website of Christ OPC points to the Reformation and its doctrine of “Sola Scriptura¹¹”. All of these sources point to the word of God as the only ultimate authority, and maintain that this article of faith is the foundational reason for the OPC's existence. But for many readers this answer would seem insufficient because there are many other particular churches which make the same claim, and many are much larger and may seem more influential than the OPC. Galbraith goes a little farther to explain the OPC's understanding of the Westminster Confession and Catechisms to be the truest summary of biblical doctrine known to man¹². This sheds some light for the non-OPC reader as to why the OPC ought to have been founded, since the Westminster Standards do a great deal to flesh out in detail exactly what the Bible's doctrine is on many foundational theological questions. In addition, Galbraith goes on to summarize the “five points of Calvinism” as an explanation of a few main points of what biblical doctrine is according to the OPC¹³. Beyond these five points Galbraith does little to describe that system of doctrine revealed in the Scriptures and summarized in the Westminster Standards.

Kellogg on the other hand, while making mention of the Westminster Standards, and continuing the heritage of the Reformers and the historic Presbyterian Church in the USA, says very little to expound upon what it is exactly which sets the historic reformed and presbyterian tradition apart from the other evangelical churches which claim to hold the Bible as their only infallible authority. While juxtaposing the OPC's sense of authority against modernism and other forms of unbelief, he does not give much explanation as to why the Bible's teaching justifies the OPC vis a vis other evangelical churches. The non-OPC reader is left to assume that there is something worth preserving

¹⁰ Park Hill Presbyterian Church, Ibid.

¹¹ Wallace, Ibid.

¹² Galbraith, 14.

¹³ Ibid, 16.

in the heritage of the Reformers and the presbyterian tradition, but is not told exactly what that may be. Perhaps Kellogg's intention is simply to leave evangelical readers with the impression that the OPC is in fact a biblical and evangelical church, without going into the details which distinguish it from other churches that claim to be such. If the OPC stands against unbelief and modernism, why did it not join with one of the larger evangelical denominations or go independent, (as many other former PCUSA congregations did in the 20th century)?

On the website of Christ OPC in Salt Lake City, Utah, Jason Wallace illustrates a biblical church with an analogy of a three-legged stool¹⁴. The three legs of the stool are biblical doctrine, worship, and church government, the removal of any of which causes the church to fall. Here Wallace says more than either Galbraith or Kellogg as to what makes a church truly biblical. With this more comprehensive approach, any reader can understand what it is that makes the Orthodox Presbyterian Church unique and justifies its continued existence, at least in the minds of Orthodox Presbyterians. Not only do the details of biblical doctrine, worship, and church government put forth on the website do a good job of distinguishing the OPC from apostate churches, or broadly evangelical churches, they also provide an implicit yet effective answer to the question of why the OPC has not merged with larger churches such as the PCA which hold to much of the same doctrine as the OPC. This latter question goes unanswered by Galbraith and Kellogg.

Articles by Galbraith and Kellogg and the church websites of Christ OPC and Park Hill OPC attempt to define the church and offer reasons for the existence of the OPC amid the myriad of denominations today claiming the title “Christian”. Each of

¹⁴ Wallace, Ibid.

these sources makes clear the OPC's faithful witness regarding the supreme authority of the word of God in all matters of faith and practice. This point itself sets the OPC apart from all liberal mainline denominations. The “five points of Calvinism” serve to distinguish the OPC from most evangelicals in Kellogg's article. Wallace offers the most coherent and enlightening explanation to the reader, citing the biblical model for doctrine, worship, and church government as that which sets the OPC apart from other denominations, and justifies its continued existence as a body holding to the Holy Scriptures as the only infallible rule of faith and practice in a way that few others do.