The Reformed community in North America will be celebrating the 75th anniversary of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) in 2011. While 75 years is not a long time in light of the whole span of church history, confessional Reformed Christianity has suffered its share of hardships over the past century. Thus to see a Reformed church remain faithful to its biblical moorings, while growing from the original 130 people who constituted the church in June 11, 1936 to some 30,000 members today is cause for gratitude to God.

We at Westminster Seminary California (WSC) are among those with special reason for thanksgiving. The same man, J. Gresham Machen, was the leading figure in the foundation both of the OPC and WSC’s parent, Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia). From WSC’s origins in 1980 it has served and been served by the OPC. Today one-third of the faculty are OPC ministers and, according to a recent article by the OPC historian, WSC now trains more ministers for the OPC than any other seminary.

As one who is privileged to serve as both an OPC minister and a WSC professor, I write this article in gratitude for the years past and good hope for strong relations in the years to come. I first recount some important events in the founding of the OPC and note how these events helped to shape the character of the OPC as a presbyterian, gospel-centered, and doctrinally orthodox church. I conclude with reflections on the importance of WSC remaining faithful to its task of training ministers for the OPC and other Reformed churches.
goal of Westminster was to serve the PCUSA by providing a place for its ministerial candidates to receive a theological education that remained faithful to the original vision of Princeton Seminary.

The string of events that would compel Machen and many of his allies to form the OPC began in 1932 and centered around foreign missions. In that year the publication of a new book, *Rethinking Missions*, generated a storm of discussion. Many liberal missionaries lauded the book. A notable example was the famous novelist, Pearl Buck, who worked for the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions in China. Buck publicly repudiated the value of preaching and advocated spreading “the spirit of Christ” by one’s “mode of life.” Machen was alarmed by such developments. He recognized that missions stood at the center of the church’s task, and that proclamation of the truth of the gospel was absolutely essential to its faithful fulfillment. Machen asked his presbytery to overture (that is, to petition) the PCUSA General Assembly and urge it to elect to the Board of Foreign Missions only those who steadfastly held to orthodox biblical doctrine and promoted the preaching of the gospel. His presbytery refused to send such an overture. Other presbyteries did send similar overtures, but these were defeated at the PCUSA General Assembly of 1933.

Machen, with many conservative allies in the church, responded by forming the Independent Board of Foreign Missions, to serve as an alternative body where liberal theology was rejected and preaching orthodox doctrine promoted. Not standing idly by, the 1934 General Assembly declared that members of the PCUSA must support the official board and that the independent board should be disbanded. Machen believed that this was a tyrannical act, since the General Assembly had no right to bind the conscience of its members beyond its constitutional powers. When Machen therefore refused to heed the Assembly’s orders, his presbytery brought him to trial on charges that he had been disobedient to the mandate of the church. When the trial took place in 1935 his presbytery would not allow Machen to present the argument that the Assembly’s mandate had been unlawful and hence tyrannical. This argument was to be the heart of his case, and hence the presbytery essentially prohibited him from offering a defense against the charges. The presbytery ruled against him and suspended him from the ministry.

On January 14-15, 2011, almost 300 people attended the annual faculty conference held in the chapel on the WSC campus.

This year’s theme was “Christianity and Liberalism Revisited” and celebrated the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church by J. Gresham Machen. The conference focused on Machen’s work and its relevance for the church today.

Conference speakers and topics featured were:
- “Christianity and Liberalism Today” by Michael S. Horton
- “The Perennial Machen” by D.G. Hart
- “Machen and the Bible” by Joel E. Kim
- “Machen and the Gospel” by J.V. Fesko
- “Machen and Ethics” by David VanDrunen
- “Machen, Christianity, and the Church” by W. Robert Godfrey

Audio and videos of each plenary session are available at www.wscal.edu/news-and-events/annual-conference.
Machen and his allies in the PCUSA had firmly rejected any precipitous action in forming a new denomination, but the persistent doctrinal apathy and repeated tyrannical action in its presbyteries and General Assembly finally compelled them to constitute the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in June of 1936 (it was originally called the Presbyterian Church of America). Its first General Assembly elected Machen as moderator. He commented shortly thereafter: “We become members, at last, of a true Presbyterian Church. What a joyous moment it was.”

The Character of the OPC

It is obviously impossible to describe adequately in a few short paragraphs the character of the OPC over its 75 years. I believe, however, that the history recounted above highlights several characteristics of the OPC that are worth noting on this anniversary year and which the WSC community should readily appreciate.

First is the desire of the OPC to be a presbyterian church, a church where all ministers and elders stand on equal footing and the church’s work is done above board and only according to the authority given to it in the Scriptures. The foreign missions controversies of the 1930s instilled in the OPC a fear of tyrannical, extra-biblical actions by its assemblies and a commitment to allowing every presbyter at its assemblies to speak if he desires. Those who have attended meetings of OPC presbyteries or General Assemblies know that this can mean at times very long debates—and hearing essentially the same speech many times by different people in various forms!—but the OPC has always valued presbyterian principles more than raw efficiency.

Second, the OPC has always made missionary work a high priority. It is no coincidence that disputes about foreign missions were the breaking point in the events that led to the founding of the OPC. Despite pitifully meager resources, the OPC eagerly embraced home and foreign missions from the beginning, and made proclamation of the gospel its central task. Today the OPC is planting churches around the United States and has missionaries in North America, South America, Europe, Africa, and Asia. And though resources continue to be very modest, it fully funds all home and foreign missionaries it sends.

Third and finally, the OPC has been committed to being a Reformed church. While the OPC has never believed that sound doctrine is all there is to Christianity, it has known that without sound doctrine all the rest is worthless. In its early years there were leaders within the OPC that wished to make it very broad theologically (even permitting ministers to hold Dispensationalist views of Scripture) or to unite around extra-biblical moral causes (such as abstinence from alcohol). These things caused some painful debates and divisions, but the OPC has remained committed to teaching the “whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27) as found in the Scriptures and summarized in the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, and has tried to avoid imposing anything beyond this. It is interesting to note that after the PCUSA sued and forced the fledgling church to give up its original name (the Presbyterian Church of America), it adopted the name Orthodox Presbyterian Church. It would be a church known first of all not by where it is located geographically but by its commitment to sound biblical doctrine.

The OPC and WSC

Any church that prioritizes sound doctrine and the missionary preaching of the gospel depends critically upon a learned and faithful ministry. The OPC has therefore valued seminary education as a crucial component in the training of its ministers. In God’s providence WSC has been privileged to play an important role in training ministers in the OPC and numerous other churches through its 30+ years of existence.

I believe there is little point in WSC’s existence apart from its continuing service in educating ministers and other leaders for Reformed churches. Machen, simultaneously a seminary professor and dedicated churchman, desired a seminary in which future ministers would be made “experts in the Bible,” for this is precisely what the church needed. Believing that this is what the church still needs today, WSC has embraced the vision of producing experts in the Bible through professors who are both scholars and churchmen. This is probably an even less attractive ideal in the contemporary world than it was in Machen’s day, but WSC’s usefulness depends on being faithful to it.

WSC gives thanks for 75 years of the OPC. We look forward to many more years of supporting the great cause of training future generations of faithful ministers for the OPC and Reformed churches around the world.