

John De Waard: A Quiet Hero



Editor's Note: The Orthodox Presbyterian Church will be celebrating its seventy-fifth anniversary in June 2011. In anticipation of that milestone, *New Horizons* is running a yearlong series of historical remembrances.

Brian De Jong

In 1925 a fresh face appeared in the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. John J. De Waard had recently graduated from Princeton Seminary and was being examined for ordination by the Presbytery of Milwaukee. Rather than continue his studies at Princeton, De Waard pursued a call to the First Presbyterian Church in Cedar Grove, Wisconsin. Dr. Geerhardus Vos had recommended his young student, and the congregation in Cedar Grove was eager for his arrival.

Initial impressions were altogether positive. One Presbytery examiner reported to the committee as follows: "I heartily recommend for approval all the parts of trial submitted to me: and bespeak for our brother a life of great usefulness in the ministry of the church, which in time I think will be in a professor's chair, perhaps the one once occupied by Dr. Charles Hodge." A second examiner was equally enthusiastic, saying, "I am personally glad that this young brother is seeking a part and place in the ministry of our Church."

And so John De Waard was ordained to the gospel ministry and installed in Cedar Grove on July 9, 1925. Just ten years later, the same presbytery would forcibly remove him, dissolving the pastoral relationship despite objections from over three hundred members.

What was De Waard's offense? Like many others, he began to detect modernism in the church boards. Theological modernism was a religion without redemption—a counterfeit of Christianity. Although modernists commonly



employed orthodox terminology, they denied central Christian doctrines. In documents such as the Auburn Affirmation of 1924, the virgin birth, the deity, the miracles, the atoning death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ were all called into question.

This dangerous drift became unavoidably obvious one Saturday evening at the church manse in Cedar Grove. One of the Sunday school teachers showed up with troubling questions about the lesson she was to present the next morning. When Rev. De Waard examined the denominational materials, he knew that modernism was taking over the PCUSA.

As a man of courage and conviction, he warned his people both privately and publicly about the growing unbelief

in their church boards. This criticism, together with a decision to withhold financial support for the PCUSA's foreign missions program, drew the ire of the church hierarchy.

De Waard explained in a statement released in 1936:

I was told to keep still and give them the money or leave my pulpit. When God commands speech, silence becomes impossible, and to support in the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. anything save only the Reformed faith, so beautifully expressed in the Confession, is wrong. For refusing to obey this command, which the church according to its constitution has no authority to give, and for that reason alone, my pulpit was taken from me.

The struggle was a matter of biblical principle for John De Waard. He rightly reasoned that the PCUSA had no biblical basis for demanding his silence, nor for compelling his congregation to financially support the spread of modernism through the church boards.

In the statement previously quoted, De Waard explained:

According to the constitution of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., 'all church power, whether exercised by the body in general or in the way of representation by delegated authority, is only ministerial and declarative'; that is to say, that the Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and manners; that no judicatory ought to pretend to make laws, to bind the conscience in virtue of their own authority, and that all their decisions should be founded on the

revealed will of God; the Presbyterian church is today not only ignoring this part of the constitution, but is setting the whole constitution aside while offering lip service to orderly government.

As DeWaard saw it, if he had obeyed the edict and desisted from criticizing the modernism of the church boards, he would have violated his own ordination vows. Worse still, he would have allowed ecclesiastical tyranny to go unchallenged. DeWaard felt so strongly about this tyranny that he referred to it publicly as “fascism in the church.”

Being a good Presbyterian, DeWaard took a complaint against the Presbytery’s action first to the Synod of Wisconsin, and then appealed to the 1936 General Assembly. At the same Syracuse Assembly where Dr. Machen was deposed, John DeWaard’s complaint was denied.

When the Presbytery of Milwaukee followed through and declared the pastoral relationship dissolved and the pulpit vacant, over 350 members walked out of the sanctuary in support of their pastor. Many of them became charter members of Calvary Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Cedar Grove.

DeWaard served as pastor of Calvary OPC for another four years before taking a call to Memorial OPC in Rochester, New York. There he served until his retirement on January 1, 1959.

In addition to his pastoral duties, John DeWaard was an active member of his presbyteries and of the General Assembly, filling numerous committee posts. In 1937 DeWaard served ably as moderator of the Third General Assembly. He presided over contentious debate during that Assembly concerning the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions and the “alcohol abstinence overture” from the Presbytery of Chicago.

In a memorial published after DeWaard’s death, John Clelland and Calvin K. Cummings said of him:

The church of Christ owes a debt of gratitude to this faithful servant of the Lord in his stand for the historic Christian and Reformed faith within the new

church of which he had become a member. There were those who wished to place the American Presbyterian tradition on a par with and above the teaching of Scripture. Though it was an unpopular thing to do at the time, John DeWaard stood with those who dared to stand upon the authority of Scripture for all the teaching and practices of the church. Mr. DeWaard contributed substantially to the leadership of those who set the course of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in the direction of a commitment to the Word of God and the whole counsel of God. Apart from the stand of Mr. DeWaard and others like him, the witness of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church might well be a diluted witness today.”

Over his years of ministry, John DeWaard staunchly supported Westminster Seminary. He served on the Board of Trustees for twenty-three years, including eleven years as vice-president.

The DeWards frequently entertained house guests, including Dr. Machen, Professor Murray, and especially Dr. Van Til. DeWaard’s daughter, Elsie Greydanus, recalls, “Dad and Van Til were close friends. They read the same books, they read the same articles, and they discussed them at length. They were best friends—very best friends mentally and spiritually.” When Van Til experienced difficulty and frustration in his work, he could always turn to his longtime friend, John DeWaard.

John DeWaard was also a devoted husband and father. He lovingly cared for his wife, Hattie, and their six children, Leona, Elsie, John, Harriet, Murray, and Mary. Leona writes of her father, “I remember him with great love. He was a caring, sensitive, and idealistic man.”

For his courageous stand against modernism, Rev. DeWaard was pub-

John DeWaard (left) and Cornelius Van Til at the burial of Geerhardus Vos



licly maligned. The *Milwaukee Journal* reported that this “ultra-fundamentalist” had been ousted for “insubordination” and “disobedience.” Even after he renounced the jurisdiction of the PCUSA, his old presbytery continued to attack him as a schismatic.

Yet despite the unfair treatment he received, DeWaard refused to feel sorry for himself. In one account, he wrote:

Don’t think I am a martyr. We have lost the church we were in for 15 years. My family and I have lost the home we lived in. But I am happy now—happier than I have ever been.

Daughter Leona Klooster writes in a family history,

I can see my father in his chair on the porch, looking up from whatever book he was reading to say to my mother, “The lines have fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage.”

Following his retirement, Rev. DeWaard continued to proclaim the gospel of Christ. His ability to preach in the Dutch language kept him in constant demand. On August 9, 1959, he was in Ottawa, Canada, to preach. That night this faithful servant fell asleep in peace and awoke in glory with his Savior.

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