

## **A Contrary Christianity:**

*J. Gresham Machen's Opposition to Concessive  
Liberalism in the Early Twentieth Century*

*Presented to The Academy by*

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*The things about which men are agreed are apt  
to be the things that are least worth holding.*

- J. Gresham Machen

Today, in thinking of a scholar, and more particularly, a Christian theologian, the last thing we might suppose of him would be that he was a man of culture and of wide education. But, J. Gresham Machen, an accomplished academic in every sense, was exactly that. He was raised as a Southern aristocrat, the son of Arthur, a prominent Baltimore attorney, a man who adored learning. Machen's upbringing was, by his own admittance, deeply affected by his father, who had a firm grasp of Latin and Greek, and of English and French literature (and who for amusement set himself to learn Italian in his eighties).<sup>1</sup> Aside from being an accomplished attorney and a man of letters, he also was a "profoundly Christian man...[whose] Christian experience was not of the emotional or pietistical type, but was a quiet stream whose waters ran deep."<sup>2</sup> This model of a man who was deeply devoted to both learning and piety—who in fact did not see them as separate things— would prove to be a powerful influence for the rest of Machen's life.

His mother Mary as well was a considerable influence, also characterized by both substantial intellect and deep faith. Machen said that her "most marked intellectual characteristic...was the catholicity of her tastes."<sup>3</sup> From a considerable interest in nature and a deep love of poetry to the publication of a book, *The Bible in Browning*, she was much like her husband both in intellect and in influence upon their son. Her book was actually a fusion of her interests, being a defense of that poet's Christian faith.<sup>4</sup> His mother's faith was much like his father's. "Beneath my mother's love of nature and beneath her love of poetry that was inextricably intertwined with that other love, there lay her profound reverence for the author of all beauty and all truth. To her God was all and in all."<sup>5</sup> He gave her credit for the fact that at age twelve he had acquired a deeper familiarity with Scripture than many of the theological students of his day.

Machen's early education, then, by virtue of his parent's intellectual inclination, was classical in nature. Both his high school and university training were in the classics. But his upbringing with both sincere faith and intellectual rigor was ironically what discouraged him from the thought of pursuing a life of ministry in the church.<sup>6</sup> The attitude he saw in the mixture of Victorianism and Southern aristocracy was one primarily characterized by sentimentality. This manifested itself in preaching that

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<sup>1</sup> J. Gresham Machen, "Christianity and Conflict," in *J. Gresham Machen: Selected Shorter Writings*, ed. D. G. Hart (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2004), 548.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 549.

<sup>4</sup> D. G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1994) 13.

<sup>5</sup> Machen, "Christianity and Conflict", 550.

<sup>6</sup> Hart, *Defending the Faith*, 17.

pushed optimism in social change through both belief in God and a strict moralism. This split between knowledge and emotion made its way into the pulpit of the church where Machen and his family were members.<sup>7</sup> The Victorian sentimentality in spiritual matters was a severe hindrance for him when trying to discern what path he should take towards a career.

Along the way during his education there were small things that pointed him towards a career oriented around the New Testament that did not have to meet the stereotype of his upbringing. He said later in life that after studying Plato's dialogues at Johns Hopkins, "I could not help reflecting that there [were] certain other ancient Greek books whose detailed interpretation [was] of profound interest not merely to scholars or philosophers but to the rank and file of mankind."<sup>8</sup> The advice of the family minister, after finishing his course at Johns Hopkins, was to spend a year at Princeton seminary, which Machen did hesitantly in 1902, and only with the assurance that such a decision would not commit him to the ministry. He did not thrive there, initially, and showed no more inclination toward work in the church than before. Even in his nonchalance, however, his considerable capabilities were noticed and he was enlisted to teach Greek. Even in view of this, Machen was unsure about his future, and decided to pursue study in Germany.<sup>9</sup>

In another breakthrough toward Machen's acceptance of a career in the service of the gospel, he was deeply impacted at Marburg by Wilhelm Hermann, a professor of theology. Hermann defeated for Machen the stereotype of "corpse-cold liberalism" and demonstrated a vibrant faith unlike he had experienced previously, and stressed an active piety that still seemed to befit a university professor. According to D. G. Hart, "For Machen, Hermann represented a model for reconciling the seemingly divergent worlds of religion and academic rigor."<sup>10</sup>

While in Germany he began to see a vacuum of conservative scholarship that could rise to meet German liberalism. Upon returning to Princeton in 1906 to take a teaching position in the New Testament Department (but still without commitment to ordination), he gained more of an intellectual respect for the faculty, especially in its

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Machen, "Christianity and Conflict", 552.

<sup>9</sup> Hart, *Defending the Faith*, 21.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 22. Interestingly enough, much later in life when giving his autobiographical account of his experience with Hermann, Machen expressed some interesting reflection: "W. Herman was a deeply religious man; no one who came into contact with him can doubt that. But was the religion of which he was so noble an adherent really the Christian religion? That may well be doubted. If Hermann was a Christian, he was a Christian not because of but despite those things that were most distinctive of his teaching." See Machen, "Christianity in Conflict", 556.

tradition, founded to combat skepticism and Deism.<sup>11</sup> Charles Hodge, one of Princeton's former leading theologians, had seen theology as a science that ought to be attended to with the same care as one would approach chemistry or astronomy<sup>12</sup> and this intellectualism had great appeal for Machen. So, at Princeton he remained (except for a brief period of service in the first World War in 1918-1919) until 1929, finally receiving ordination in 1914<sup>13</sup>. But unfortunately, what was so grand was not to last for the rest of his life. Said Machen, "The old Princeton Seminary first resisted, then succumbed to, the drift of the times."<sup>14</sup> The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church removed Princeton's governing board that was devoted to the "old ideas", and put another in its place. "Thus, the future conformity of Princeton Seminary to the general drift of the times was ensured."<sup>15</sup> This led to Machen's permanent departure from Princeton, and then to the founding of Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia that same year.

Machen's departure from Princeton was a decision he made without external compulsion. His departure from the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (PSUSA), however, was much less than his own decision. When the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions embraced liberal policy, or rather failed to condemn a popular publication that put forth such policy, Machen decided in a move much like his founding of Westminster, to begin a new missions board that would have missionaries dedicated to preaching a gospel consistent with orthodox Presbyterian theology.<sup>16</sup> In doing so, however, he was found guilty of insubordination by church authorities and stripped of his ordination as a minister in the PCUSA.<sup>17</sup> Thus were the circumstances of the founding of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 1936. Machen and his colleagues would start afresh a denomination that would from its inception seek to continue the old ways of Princeton theology in specific, and Presbyterian life in general.

With all of the busyness and stress of founding the new seminary (much of which was funded with his own wealth<sup>18</sup>) and denomination, his health began to suffer. Contrary to the advice of his friends, he decided during the Christmas break after the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>14</sup> "Christianity in Conflict", 565.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Hart, *Defending the Faith*, 146-151.

<sup>17</sup> John Piper, *Contending For Our All: Defending Truth and Treasuring Christ in the Lives of Athanasius, John Owen, and J. Gresham Machen*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 117.

<sup>18</sup> Hart, *Defending the Faith*, 134.

first fall semester to preach in a few churches in North Dakota at the request of a friend, Samuel Allen. As John Piper relates the story,

He had pneumonia and could scarcely breathe. Pastor Allen came to pray for him that last day of 1936, and Machen told him of a vision that he had had of being in heaven. “Sam, it was glorious, it was glorious,” he said. And a little later he added, “Sam, isn’t the Reformed Faith grand?”

The following day—New Years Day, 1937—he mustered the strength to send a telegram to John Murray, his friend and colleague at Westminster. It was his last recorded word: “I’m so thankful for [the] active obedience of Christ. No hope without it.” He died about 7:30 P.M.<sup>19</sup>

Such was the end of the life of a man who was a warrior for Christian orthodoxy and an academic of international stature—he died in a blisteringly cold winter in North Dakota, in a Roman Catholic hospital, alone and isolated from most of his friends, and enraptured with the glorious Savior who would soon welcome him into the Kingdom.

#### *A SON OF THE REFORMATION*

Since the primary purpose of this paper is to examine Machen’s theology, it is probably most appropriate to first demonstrate his foundational theological commitments. He was well known as an apologist for the New Testament documents, as well as defending against the proposition that Paul’s Christianity was a hijacking of the faith of the early church into a religion he created. But this was not his most basic belief. To let him speak for himself: “I have come to see with greater and greater clearness that consistent Christianity is the easiest Christianity to defend, and that consistent Christianity—the only thoroughly biblical Christianity—is found in the Reformed Faith.”<sup>20</sup> To get a simpler idea of his theology, I think Machen would say that, rather than turn to *Christianity and Liberalism* or *The Origin of Paul’s Religion*, one should turn to the Westminster Confession. There you would learn that, as Machen deeply believed, “the very center and core of the whole Bible is the doctrine of the grace of God—the grace of God which depends not one whit upon anything that is in man, but is absolutely undeserved, resistless and sovereign.”<sup>21</sup>

In all of his defense of the intellect in Christian piety and apologetics, as we shall see later, he almost always reiterated that the decisive factor was in the moving of the

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<sup>19</sup> Piper, *Contending For Our All*, 116.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 554.

<sup>21</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *What Is Faith?* (1921, reprint: Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth, 1991), 174.

Holy Spirit to regenerate a lost man. He recognized and embraced the Reformed understanding of the nature of human depravity and bondage, and that intellectual objections were rooted in hardness of heart. This vision of the Reformed faith, accompanied by a love for the simple gospel, was the focus of Machen's life and work. The Calvinistic view of life and God is one that Machen believed he shared with Jesus, who "placed at the very centre, not merely of His thinking but of His life, the heavenly Father, Maker and Ruler of the world."<sup>22</sup> This Jewish doctrine of God, which Jesus embraced, "laid great stress on the sovereignty of God, the absolute power of the Creator over His creatures, and it laid great stress upon the awful severity of God rather than his love."<sup>23</sup> Recognizing the terrible guilt of the human heart and the absolute bondage of the law, Machen asked of his Christian readers, "Is God for us, despite our sin?"<sup>24</sup> The answer to that question for Machen was a definite 'yes'. But the larger question, in view of what he acknowledged about God's creator status and awful severity, is '*why*'? His answer, standing firm in the tradition of Westminster, is that "[God] is for us simply because he has chosen to be."<sup>25</sup>

From these Calvinistic convictions flowed his ambition in defending the faith and propagating the gospel. Though differing from him in the arena of politics, Machen's vision of Christian life and mission was much in line with Abraham Kuyper's. The resounding statements from Kuyper that have still endured till today speak of a risen Christ whose reign over all of creation and culture is absolute and indisputable. Machen embraced this vision (though he might have worked it out in different ways), and one of the primary ways this can be seen is in his view of Christianity and culture.

#### *PIETY AND MIND: DESTROYING THE DISTINCTION*

On September 20, 1912, ten years after his (hesitant) enrollment in the Princeton seminary, a much different Machen, now a distinguished professor, delivered an address at the opening of the fall semester. The title of his address was *Christianity and Culture*, and it succinctly represents one of the main thrusts of Machen's life message. In the opening sentence, he remarked, "One of the greatest of the problems that have agitated the church is the problem of the relation between knowledge and piety, between culture

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

and Christianity.”<sup>26</sup> The primary problem laid out in this address is one of how Christianity relates to the culture in which it resides. He gives the example of his own education in high school and college, where Greek was studied, to be sure, but without reference to the New Testament; history was studied without the mention of the historical movement started by Jesus Christ; and on Sundays, religious instruction was of a sort that ignored significant exercise of the intellect. “Religion seemed to be something that had to do with the emotions and will, leaving the intellect to secular studies.”<sup>27</sup> After giving this brief autobiographical account of his education, Machen mused, “What wonder that after such training we came to regard religion and culture as belonging to two entirely separate compartments of the soul, *and their union as involving the destruction of both?*”<sup>28</sup> The problem, then, for him and his colleagues at seminary, was that suddenly a scientific spirit was applied to studying the arena of religion.

To this problem Machen saw three prospective solutions. The first was to make Christianity subordinate to culture. The second solution was the opposite extreme: culture is essentially destroyed in the pursuit of religion. Machen’s third solution was very simple: consecration. From an orthodox, biblical perspective, Machen saw the third option as the only viable one. Operating in the vein of Kuyper, Machen wrote,

The Christian cannot be satisfied so long as any human activity is either opposed to or out of all connection with Christianity. Christianity must pervade not merely all nations, but also all of human thought. The Christian, therefore, cannot be indifferent to any branch of earnest human endeavor. It must all be brought into *some* relation to the gospel. It must be studied either in order to be demonstrated as false or else in order to be made useful in advancing the kingdom of God. The kingdom must be advanced not merely extensively, but also intensively. The church must seek to conquer not merely every man for Christ, but also the whole of man.<sup>29</sup>

Here is how Machen saw the solution to the problem of Christianity and culture. So, his reason for seeing the Christian mission this way was not simply so he could have his highbrow intellectualism dominant in the life of the church, but also in seeing its centrality in evangelism.

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<sup>26</sup> J. Gresham Machen, “Christianity and Culture”, in *J. Gresham Machen*, ed. Hart, 399.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 400.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 401, emphasis added.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 403.

Considering this hindrance to evangelism, he wrote, “false ideas are the greatest obstacles to the reception of the gospel.”<sup>30</sup> For Machen, in wide preaching of the simple gospel, we might win a few stragglers here and there to the faith, but as long as a society’s prevailing ideology is controlled by notions that logically exclude the possibility of Christianity being true from the outset, then the claims of Jesus and the apostles can never even be considered; in a naturalistic, Modernistic society, Christianity is assumed out of the question before it really even gets a hearing. Therefore, for Christians to truly seek the fulfillment of Christ’s Great Commission to the church, they must not simply aim for the soul – they had work to do in the realm of the intellect, and not merely of the individual, but in addressing the widely held ideology of the day. Christians are obligated to “mold the thought of the world in such a way as to make the acceptance of Christianity something more than a logical absurdity.”<sup>31</sup> In a culture where the prevailing notion is that miracles are impossible, a religion that is based on a miracle is similarly impossible. But, rather than shunning the questioner, and merely offering him a reprimand and telling him to believe in spite of the apparent logical contradiction, or the opposite extreme of denying that the resurrection really occurred or really is central, Machen would have us really dig to the root of the problem. We first question, and prove false, the notion that miracles are impossible. We show the lost man that his way of looking at the world is flawed at its foundation, and that *that* is the reason why he rejects Christ as he is offered to us in the gospel.

These ideas of consecration are most definitely in conformity with the biblical view of the world and culture. According to the Scriptures, the reason that men reject God and his gospel is not because the evidence for either is insufficient. In fact, they teach the opposite. According to Romans 1 and the 19<sup>th</sup> Psalm, creation itself is always loudly testifying to the existence, nature, and glory of God. No fact in the universe is plainer than these. But in their wickedness, men suppress the truth and trade belief in God for any other false ideology they can create. Natural men have “exchanged the truth about God for a lie,” (Rom 1:25), and it is this lie that Christians must expose, and defeat. In Acts 14 and 17, when Paul is preaching to people who are polytheists, he emphasizes a sovereign God, who is one, over against the prevailing religious ideas of the day. There can be no preaching God as one among many; he must be presented as he reveals himself, as the maker of heaven and earth and all that is in them. This is the same methodology that Machen embraced.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 404.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

Not only did Machen consider consecration the only solution, but he also considered grievous the idea that Christianity needed no defense, and saw such apologetic endeavor as an *inevitable obligation*. He said that anyone who was propagating true Christianity would in fact be forced to defend it at some point, it being at so basic a level so contrary to natural man. Of people who claimed Christianity needs no defense, he said,

When men talk thus about propagating Christianity without defending it, the thing that they are propagating is pretty sure not to be Christianity at all. They are propagating an anti-intellectualistic, nondoctrinal Modernism; and the reason why it requires no defense is simply that it is so completely in accord with the current of the age.<sup>32</sup>

So for Machen, the Christianity that needs no defense is one that has already fatally capitulated, is one that is already lost. To those who would say that the essence of the New Testament teaching (and especially that of Paul), is not found in doctrinal controversy but in the glorious hymn of 1 Corinthians 13, Machen would quickly point out that that chapter is in the middle of a polemical passage in which Paul was addressing the severe problems in the way that the Corinthians were approaching the gifts of the Spirit. “So it is always in the church. Every really great Christian utterance, it may almost be said, is born in controversy. It is when men have felt compelled to take a stand against error that they have risen to the really great heights in celebration of the truth.”<sup>33</sup> He held that any true Christian was under compulsion to argue, albeit in a charitable spirit, to contend for the faith that was once for all handed down to the saints (Jude 3). As Machen powerfully stated it, “Of course the gospel of Jesus Christ, in a world of sin and doubt, will cause disputing; and if it does not cause disputing and arouse bitter opposition that is a fairly sure sign that it is not being faithfully proclaimed.”<sup>34</sup>

Thus, in Machen’s thinking, Christian apologetics, both internal and external to the church, needed a unity of faith and knowledge. But his attempted destruction of the Modernist barrier between those two things was not something he sought only in apologetic endeavor; it was also at the very core of personal Christian life. In fact, he wrote an entire book dedicated to the task of “[breaking] down the false and disastrous

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<sup>32</sup> J. Gresham Machen, “Christian Scholarship and the Defense of the Faith”, in *J. Gresham Machen*, ed. Hart, 144.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>34</sup> Machen, *What Is Faith?*, 41.

opposition”<sup>35</sup> between knowledge and faith, aptly titled, *What is Faith?*. Machen’s concern was with the pervasive division between intellect and religious life, both in his upbringing in a Victorian aristocratic setting, as well as his encounters with liberals who had a more mystical view of Christian piety. In Machen’s day, the primacy of the intellect had been severely undermined in matters of truth and epistemology, and one of the main ways this happened was in the separation of religion (or what we might call devotional life) and theology. Liberals saw theology as merely “the clothing of religious experience in the forms of thought suitable to any particular generation,”<sup>36</sup> and the last part of that statement is the most important: it was not only permissible for theology to drastically change throughout time and culture, but it was, in fact, necessary. Theological understanding had to be *suitable*. It was not to be regarded as good or bad by how closely it conformed to an “eternally persisting norm of truth,” but rather in how it proved to be helpful to mankind and promote some abundance of life.<sup>37</sup> But the damage this does to theological pursuit is obvious. “For if theology is not even intended to be permanently and objectively true, if it is merely a convenient symbol in which in this generation a mystic experience is clothed, then theologizing, it seems to me, is the most useless form of trifling in which a man could possibly engage.”<sup>38</sup>

As Machen saw, and was careful to articulate, there is a distinct difference between the degree to which theology is to be more clearly and carefully formulated for a new day, or where new ideas are brought to bear against older ones, but the essential part of this exercise is that they are all judged according to the *truth*, and truth is understood to be something unchanging and external to the human mind and its religious experience. Machen saw mysticism as the inevitable result of the dethroning of the intellect in religious life, and most certainly it seemed that Modernist Christianity was more and more mystical in nature; they happily seemed to trade thought for the exaltation of experience. But the problem here, and the reason for Machen writing *What Is Faith?*, was the fact that liberals fatally misunderstood what faith really was. It could not be independent of doctrine, but in actuality depended on doctrine for its very existence.

To prove this, Machen gives a brief exposition of Hebrews 11:6, which says, “Whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” As Machen explained it, “The one who comes to God must not only

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<sup>35</sup> Machen, *ibid.*, 26.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

believe *in* a person, but he must also believe *that* something is true: faith is here declared to involve acceptance of a proposition.”<sup>39</sup> According to a basic understanding of Hebrews 11:6, faith simply cannot be independent of an intellectual basis. Liberal mysticism was trying to do the impossible—it was trying to place faith in a person in exclusion to the facts about that person. But, in God’s revelation of himself, he has excluded that possibility from the beginning. Not only does one have to believe God exists in order to please him, but he must believe something wonderfully revealing about the personality of God—his nature as a God who rewards a sincere seeker.

In Machen’s insistence on the intellect, however, he was not saying that we could somehow reason our way to God, that we could find him out by our own searching. But, he did believe that we are capable of receiving the information that God chooses to give. God has given us reason, but because that reason is clouded by sin, “our reason is insufficient to tell us about God unless He reveals himself.”<sup>40</sup> Machen’s exaltation of the intellect went only so far as the Bible did. I don’t believe he intended to have Christendom bowing at the altar of the mind, but was only insisting on the proper place in faith for which God had *given* the mind.

Liberalism had assumed an extremely pragmatic view of truth, a “broad eclecticism”, as Machen called it. Essentially, they believed that one should believe whatever is most helpful to him, and that he should not interfere with whatever helps his neighbor. The only real obstacle to this sort of idea, as Machen saw it, was the truth. Liberals believed faith to be essentially a favorable quality of the soul, that faith itself was the necessary virtue. But Machen saw that actually: “The whole trouble is that faith is being considered merely as a beneficent quality of the soul without respect to the reality or unreality of its object; and the moment faith comes to be considered in that way, in that moment it is destroyed.”<sup>41</sup> Faith cannot be the end of itself. For faith to be saving, it has to be reposed in a person; it has to be placed in Christ. It is the object of faith, and not faith itself, that is the essence of Christianity.

### *CONFRONTING A NEW RELIGION*

Machen’s problems with liberalism ran far deeper than their view of faith, however. Instead, what he saw was a problem at the very basis of liberalism. The title of one of his

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 47

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 174.

most popular works, *Christianity and Liberalism*, is very telling. He didn't see liberalism as a faction of Christianity that had erred on a few points, and needed correction. Instead, he saw a religion that called itself Christianity, but had really capitulated to Modern thought, as a different religion altogether. It was not Christianity. In his own words, liberalism was a "totally diverse type of religious belief" that was "rooted in naturalism".<sup>42</sup> By "naturalism", what is meant is "the denial of any entrance of the creative power of God (as distinguished from the ordinary course of nature) in connection with the origin of Christianity."<sup>43</sup>

When faced with the Modernist presupposition of naturalism, adherents of the Christian religion were almost certainly intimidated. Christians today can identify with the feeling felt ninety years ago, when the prevailing thought of the day was, and still is, hostile to Christian claims. When those that society considers "learned" treat your entire philosophy of life as a joke, worthy of ridicule, it can be difficult to stand strong. So, when a scientific establishment balked at the idea of miracles, Christians felt pressure. Since everyone *knew* that miracles were impossible, the Bible began to be reinterpreted. And thus, Machen wrote. He said the purpose of *Christianity and Liberalism* was "to show that the liberal attempt at reconciling Christianity with modern science [had] really relinquished everything distinctive of Christianity...In trying to remove from Christianity everything that could possibly be objected to in the name of science, in trying to bribe off the enemy by those concessions which the enemy most desires, the apologist [had] really abandoned what he started out to defend."<sup>44</sup>

And herein was the most significant problem. To be sure, events like a virgin birth and the resurrection of a dead man—not to mention that this same man was, somehow, God—sounded like abject foolishness. So in an attempt of rescuing faith from logical execution by a naturalistic world, those things were given up. But, in doing so, liberal Christians would not only have to somehow deny the plain meaning of particular portions of Scripture, but would have to do so to the entire Bible. For example, it would be one thing to somehow reinterpret the narratives of the resurrection as some sort of spiritual existence of Jesus beyond the grave, if one could take the gospels in isolation from one another. But when Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 that if the bodily resurrection of Christ has not actually occurred, Christians "are of all men most to be pitied," that

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<sup>42</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, (1923, reprint: Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 2.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

interpretation of the gospels is ruled out. In denying the supernatural events on which Christianity is based, one denies Christianity.

Consistent liberals were aware of this fact. And so in denial of the long-held traditions, they realized they needed something to be the essence of their belief. If they no longer could hold to the supernatural claims of historic Christianity, then some other Christianity needed to be laid out. And so, liberal Christianity became primarily a belief centered on the ethical teachings of Jesus. In a way, Jesus was considered the first Christian, and now to be a Christian, one shared the faith in God that Jesus had and lived according to his moral teaching. Contained within this claim was the idea that Christianity was not a doctrine, but instead a life; it was not a theological system that needed adherence, but instead a moral code that needed to be followed. But obviously, as Machen did his best to point out, this claim is contrary to everything contained in the New Testament. Christianity contained both history and doctrine.

From the beginning, the Christian gospel, as indeed the name “gospel” or “good news” implies, consisted in an account of something that had happened. And from the beginning, the meaning of the happening was set forth; and when the meaning of the happening was set forth then there was Christian doctrine. “Christ died”—that is history; “Christ died for our sins”—that is doctrine. Without these two elements, joined in an absolutely indissoluble union, there is no Christianity.<sup>45</sup>

So to hold to a thing that was not a union of history and doctrine (redemptive events and their corresponding interpretations), was to hold to something other than Christianity. But not only is it laid out in the interpretation of the events after they occurred, but it is also contrary to what Jesus himself taught. When disclosing his own purposes in coming to earth, Jesus said that he came to give his life as a “ransom for many,” (Mark 10:45). He did not say that he came to formulate an ethical system to be emulated, but placed *himself* at the center of his teaching, and not only himself, but also something he would *do*. So even in ignoring everything besides the gospels, the liberal concept of Christianity could not hold together.

Further excluding the idea that Jesus was simply the first Christian, and came to inaugurate a line of people who believed in the Father as he did, Machen points out the authority with which Jesus spoke. He repeatedly put his own words on the same level as that of divine Scripture, and claimed the right to legislate for the kingdom of God.<sup>46</sup> “The

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 36.

Jesus spoken of in the New Testament was no mere teacher of righteousness, no mere pioneer in a new type of religious life, but One who was regarded, *and regarded himself*, as the Saviour whom men could trust.”<sup>47</sup>

Most of Machen’s other qualms with liberalism were along these same lines. They would claim a lot of things belonging to historic Christianity, but then would define the terms differently, or not at all.

Obviously this temper of mind is hostile to precise definitions. Indeed nothing makes a man more unpopular in the controversies of the present day than an insistence upon definition of terms...Men discourse very eloquently to-day upon such subjects as God, religion, Christianity, atonement, redemption, faith; but are greatly incensed when they are asked to tell in simple language what they mean by these terms. They do not like to have the flow of their eloquence checked by so vulgar a thing as definition.<sup>48</sup>

In this is probably the explanation for how liberalism could have been so pervasive in churches that for centuries had followed the tradition of Reformation theology. They would use all the same terms, and maybe even affirm historic confessions, but would define those same terms differently, and do what they could to avoid precise definition. In this way, liberal Christianity proved itself to be very slippery. But in some cases, the affirmation of historic creeds was not done in a way that was imprecise and with guile, but rooted in other problematic beliefs of liberalism.

Not only were liberals averse to precise definition, but as was noted in the previous section, liberalism had embraced a pragmatic theory of truth that came as a result of the depreciation of the intellect and embrace of naturalism that encouraged other tendencies that Machen saw as destructive. He saw in this embrace of multiple theories of truth what was one of the most troubling things about Modernist Christianity: its concessiveness. For Machen, it didn’t matter if part of the Westminster Confession was denied, and the rest affirmed, or even if all of it was affirmed, because it was all denied if it was thought to simply be useful or symbolic. Liberals would conceivably grant the truth of many different—even self-contradictory—traditions, and say that perhaps the old ways were better for some people, that it wasn’t for them to criticize the faith of simple people. “Such assertions,” said Machen, “are perhaps intended to be concessive; but in reality they are to the believer in historic Christianity the most

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 85, emphasis added.

<sup>48</sup> Machen, *What Is Faith?*, 13-14.

radically destructive assertions that could possibly be made.”<sup>49</sup> Basing truth on “usefulness” simply couldn’t work; what might be useful for some would not be useful for others. “But a thing that is true remains true for all people and beyond the end of time.”<sup>50</sup>

Machen regretted in all of this that he and those like him who clung to Christian orthodoxy were dubbed “Fundamentalists”. As he said it, “I cannot see why the Christian religion, which has had a rather long and honorable history, should suddenly become an ‘-ism’ and be called by a strange new name.”<sup>51</sup> This shows how wide were the problems of liberalism already in Machen’s time of writing. It had long ago taken over in the university, and had made its way pervasively into much of American culture. So, when men like Machen came along and outspokenly protested against the new trends in American religious life, they were given a *label*. And, as laid out above, this wasn’t about a difference in theological convictions. It was a difference of even what the definition of theology *was*. Machen, would have preferred those with whom he disagreed to preach from conviction, and do what they could to root out of everyone else’s minds the convictions they believed to be false. Of course, Machen would have disagreed with them, and radically; but at least discussion would be possible. The depreciation of the intellect and the favorable attitude toward nebulous language made opposing liberalism difficult work indeed.

#### *SEVENTY YEARS PASSED AND STILL SPEAKING LOUDLY*

Though isolated from us by almost a century, the crisis of conservative Protestantism is by no means irrelevant, and is most assuredly not over. J. Gresham Machen’s writings are filled with arguments (both from liberals and from conservatives) that are parroted again and again even today. This generation of Christians says things like, “We believe in God, beauty, future, and hope – but you won’t find a traditional statement of faith here. *We don’t have a problem with faith, but with statements.*”<sup>52</sup> This is nothing new! As Machen wrote eighty-six years ago in describing Modernist Christianity, “Clear-cut definition of terms in religious matters, bold facing of the logical implications of religious views, is by many persons regarded as an impious proceeding.”<sup>53</sup> Granted, differences exist between a modern and a postmodern in matters of epistemology and other basic

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>51</sup> Machen, “Christianity in Conflict”, 566.

<sup>52</sup> <http://www.emergentvillage.com/about-information/faqs>, accessed 5-8-07, emphasis added.

<sup>53</sup> Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 1.

philosophical presuppositions, but the problems end up the same. The rationality and empiricism of Modernity failed, and broke its promise of provision of truth and meaning. But, in a vacuum of philosophical foundation left by Modernity, and with a Church that was unable to fill that void, Postmodernity gained ascendancy as a prevailing ideology. The basic problems, though, have essentially remained the same. Still plaguing the postmodern is the same skepticism, but now he finds validation of his epistemological nihilism by commiserating about it in communal settings.

Machen's solution for this, and the same one that abides today, is found in the local church and in the family. The wall between knowledge and devotion must be shown to be destructive and self-contradictory. Children must be educated, and must be shown examples of vibrant faith embracing careful theology. Adult Christians need the same. As Machen pointed out, false ideas are one of the main barriers to the gospel. The church must do its job in engaging a lost culture that is already established and heavily fortified, and do its best to raise its children to think in a way that conforms to Scripture and runs up against the currents of the day. Machen's example, as well as the New Testament, calls us into winsome argument with a lost culture that is opposed to the gospel.

Opposition, however, is rarely ever considered a positive thing, and especially so in today's pluralistic America. The same was true for Machen, and even more, his personality may not always have found him in a spirit of gentle controversy. But the overall impression I get of Machen is one I feel myself when dealing with similar tendencies toward what I consider orthodox, historic Christianity. When convictions you hold very dearly—the deep-seated convictions of life that you see as the foundation for all meaning—are attacked, a response in severity is hard to restrain. In fact, it seems that such a response is sometimes necessary even if it causes controversy. Towards the end of his life, he said that “a man who is really on fire with a message never thinks of decrying controversy but speaks the truth that God has given him to speak without thought of the favor of men.”<sup>54</sup> To be sure, some of his strong statements could be interpreted to say that he held Modernists with contempt. But based on the above quotation, I don't get the impression that Machen opposed liberals because he despised liberals. In both of his books that I read of his opposition to Modernist Christianity, they are structured almost as gospel expositions. He would write on subjects as foundational as God, Christ, Scripture, Law, and a host of other salient theological issues, and most of his exposition tended to be refutation of Modernist *interpretation* of these categories. In *What is*

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<sup>54</sup> Machen, “Christianity and Culture”, 567.

*Faith?* especially he builds on that concept of belief from the very basics of God and Christ, throughout the law and the gospel in particular, and in all of this is preserving for us the essentials of Christian faith, something in the end he considered “so simple a child can understand.”<sup>55</sup>

David Wells said of Machen and his fellow opponents of liberalism that they falsely assessed that the “[Modernist] intent was actually to destroy the Church,” and that Machen and his allies “were correct in terms of the *results* of Modernism, but they were less accurate in characterizing the *intentions* of the modernists. Modernists were, in fact, trying to preserve the faith, not destroy it.”<sup>56</sup> Perhaps Machen did misunderstand and mischaracterize the Modernist intention; it probably isn’t for me to disagree with an eminent scholar on that issue. But, as before, I don’t think Machen opposed liberals because he despised liberals. I think Machen opposed liberals because he loved the gospel. For Machen, the gospel allows Christians to boldly say, “Come on now ye moralists of the world, come on ye hosts of demons with your whisperings of hell! We fear you not; we take our stand beneath the shadow of the cross, and standing there, in God’s favour, we are safe.”<sup>57</sup> Even though much of Machen’s writing was polemic in nature, I do not see here a man who simply enjoys being an opponent. As he said, “We who are reckoned as ‘conservatives’ in theology are seriously misrepresented if we are regarded as men who are holding desperately to something that is old merely because it is old and are inhospitable to new truths.”<sup>58</sup> So controversy in Machen’s eyes was not simply for the sake of opposing what was new; I don’t see in him an ardent traditionalism. Instead, I see a man who enjoyed being a champion and a warrior for the gospel that is contained in the New Testament. This same spirit, with even stronger conviction and deeper patience, is needed today.

#### *LESSON FROM A LEGACY: CONTRARIETY NEEDS COMPASSION*

John Frame tells the story of the conflict that existed almost from the beginning in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) that Machen and his colleagues founded. He relates that Machen, though in his youth plagued by doubt, that “in time he became a vigorous and cogent defender” of confessional Presbyterianism, and that though he left

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<sup>55</sup> Machen, *What Is Faith?*, 165.

<sup>56</sup> David Wells, *No Place For Truth or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993) 116-117.

<sup>57</sup> Machen, *What Is Faith?*, 83.

<sup>58</sup> Machen, “Christianity in Conflict”, 566.

no biological children, he left many spiritual ones.<sup>59</sup> The Orthodox Presbyterian Church was conceived in controversy, and its founders (among whom were Gordon Clark, John Murray, and Cornelius Van Til) were all of that same spirit. So, not only were the founders all veterans of theological disputation, but they had a strong influence on the younger members of the OPC who followed in that tradition.

The problem with this was that after so much facing of combat with the PCUSA, upon the foundation of the OPC, its members, still geared for conflict, turned on each other. Now that on many foundational issues they were agreed and had a much closer unity than had been the case in the decades passed, the warriors persisted in fighting on the inside. Apologetics, philosophy, eschatology, politics, and a host of other issues were under contention. As Frame tells it, “Machen died of pneumonia in 1937, disappointed that his new denomination was already showing signs of division.”<sup>60</sup> He had set an example for and given training to these men, but regretted that they weren’t able to peaceably disagree on issues that weren’t directly spoken to in the historic confessions.

As John Piper has said, “Oh, how rare are the Christians who speak with a tender heart and have a theological backbone of steel.”<sup>61</sup> This lesson is one we are compelled to learn from J. Gresham Machen’s legacy. His mission through much of his later life was in destroying the division between knowledge and piety; he wanted to see in Christendom people carefully articulating their beliefs, and from them deriving vibrant faith and trust in Jesus. In the book of 1 John, the author gives the occasion for writing: “That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us,” (1:3). What John was doing was refuting Gnostic heresy, sometimes in an incredibly severe fashion (referring to false teachers as of the spirit of the antichrist!), and the purpose of his writing was to build *fellowship*. Strong words about important issues, rather than being of necessity a divider between Christians, when done in a proper spirit, are what actually bind us together. I think this is what Machen would have us learn. We cannot have fellowship unless we share biblical doctrine, and for that reason, we should with all our hearts, and with all available gentleness and respect, fight for that doctrine.

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<sup>59</sup> John Frame, “Machen’s Warrior Children”, in *Alister E. McGrath & Evangelical Theology: A Dynamic Engagement*, ed. Sung Wook Chung, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003) 113.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>61</sup> John Piper, *The Roots of Endurance: Invincible Perseverance in the Lives of John Newton, Charles Simeon, and William Wilberforce*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 42.

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