

AN INTRODUCTION TO J. GRESHAM MACHEN'S CHRISTIANITY AND LIBERALISM¹

by Alan Strange

JOHN GRESHAM MACHEN (1881-1937),² in his classic work, *Christianity and Liberalism*, continues to speak to us in the twenty-first century. This ninety year old book remains relevant because the matters that it addresses do. Machen takes head-on the question of the viability of supernatural religion in an age dominated by anti-supernaturalism, as was the post-World War I era, a “lost generation.” All of us, almost a century later, feel the pressure of the viability of the biblical faith in a plane conversation, for instance, in which a skeptical seatmate demands, upon discovering that we are Christians, “how can such a nice and intelligent person like you believe in such a ridiculous myth?” For this reason we sometimes, shamefully, hide that we are believers in that which alone is our true and only hope, the supernatural gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Machen lived in a modernist era that scorned the Christian faith, that believed in science, not the Bible, and we live in a time that has added post-modernism into the mix, which no less than ever scorns the historic Christian faith, proclaiming a message hated by unregenerate man: we are hopeless sinners, utterly dependent on the grace of God in Christ, which alone saves us, made possible by the Incarnation and the Atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is what Machen defends in this masterwork, against all the attacks of liberalism and naturalism that would argue that Christianity involves nothing more than attempting to be a good person like Jesus was. It is a life, not a doctrine, they claim; our motto, so says liberalism, is “deeds, not creeds.” Liberalism teaches that Jesus is our supreme example, that he trusted in God as none other and that we too ought to live as he lived and love as he loved.

This is not the gospel, however. This is not Christianity, which teaches that we are dead in our sins and have no hope apart from

1. The occasion for this new introduction to Machen's *Christianity and Liberalism* is a fresh Spanish translation of Machen's masterpiece. This introduction has been translated into Spanish by Valentin Alpuche and added to the front of the new translation by Nicholas Lamme: *J. G. Machen, Christianismo y Liberalismo* (Costa Rica CLIR: Latin America Fellowship of Reformed Churches, 2013).

2. A classic biography of Machen remains the one by his admiring friend Ned B. Stonehouse, first published in 1954 and republished recently: *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir* (Willow Grove, Pa.: Committee for the Historian of the OPC, 2004).

Jesus coming down and keeping the whole law for us and dying for our sins on the cross and rising on the third day. Christianity is a divine rescue mission, in which a supernatural Redeemer saves those helpless to save themselves, not, as liberalism would have it, the ultimate form of humanism in which we all seek to be the very best people possible, shown the way in this by the example and ethics of Jesus of Nazareth. The gospel is never, in the first place, something that we do, but something that God did for us in Christ. Indeed, we do seek to obey and follow after Christ, but only as part of our response of gratitude for what he did for us. We endeavor to live Christian lives, in other words, not so that we might gain God's acceptance but because we already have it, because of who Christ was and what he did for us. We are accepted in the beloved because, though we in and of ourselves are miserable sinners, Christ has made up acceptable and we follow after him as those declared righteous in him. This is the burden of this book.

Machen wrote *Christianity and Liberalism* with an assurance and certainty that is bracing and rare in our time. What marks us in our uncertain age is the rising inflection at the end of the sentence as if everything were a question. Everything is not a question to Machen. He has answers, not glib, easy ones, but profound biblical answers to our most perplexing questions, and he delights to share them in joy and humility with his readers. He might come across to our cynical age as too self-assured. He is indeed confident, not in himself, but in his Savior. He wasn't always, however, thus assured. Let's look more closely at Machen and see what led him to the rock solid hope that permitted him to write such a book as this.

It is instructive, and encouraging, to see that Machen himself went through a titanic struggle with doubt and uncertainty before coming to rest in God and his Word as he did, a resting that enabled him to give these lectures before the Ruling Elders' Association of the Chester Presbytery (in late 1921) and publish them in this form.³ The Machen that so many of us have come to know and love as the stalwart defender of the faith against liberalism did not appear on the scene as such a champion fully formed, as Athena sprung from the head of Zeus.

The Machen of the 1920's and 1930's, who was the great defender of God's Word and its certainty, especially as we see in *Christianity and Liberalism*, did not come to such certainty and assurance easily. Before the attainment of certainty, Machen looked modernism in the face, sensed its attraction to sinful flesh and, by the grace of God, rejected it and wholeheartedly embraced the infallibility of God's matchless Word. Machen rejected the modernistic claim that man is the proper judge of the Word and embraced the truth that God in his Word is our

3. That included also published materials from *The Princeton Theological Review* and *The Presbyterian*.

Judge. But for the grace of God, Machen might have gone down the same path as did Harry Emerson Fosdick and delivered a sermon like Fosdick's famous 1922 sermon, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" That sermon followed Machen's lectures that are the basis of this book but preceded the printing of *Christianity and Liberalism*, for which it serves as a kind of foil. This book is, in part, Machen's contribution to this battle (the Modernist-Fundamentalist Controversy) and is his attempt to defeat Modernism, Liberalism and its champions like Fosdick.

Considering the privileged birth of J. Gresham Machen, and his patrician family in post-Civil War Baltimore, it was by no means a foregone conclusion that Machen would prove willing to suffer with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season as a darling of the liberals. Machen, enjoying silver spoon in mouth as he did, may well have rejected any association with the despised fundamentalists of the early 20th century, preferring instead the cultured despisers of Christianity to the old paths of the tried and true faith. Machen partook of an education that may well have moved him in the direction of unbelief were it not for the grace of God and, on the human side, the instruction of his parents and, particularly, the prayers of his mother.

As D.G. Hart wrote, "born the second of three sons to a prominent Baltimore lawyer, Machen was reared in an Old School Presbyterian home of genteel tastes. Remaining in Baltimore for his undergraduate education, Machen majored in classics at Johns Hopkins University and was graduated in 1901. He stayed at Hopkins for another year to undertake graduate study with renowned American classicist Basil L. Gildersleeve."⁴ Even though he enrolled at Princeton Theological Seminary the next year, the only remaining bastion of orthodoxy in the PCUSA, thus securing, as one might think, his own doctrinal soundness, he also earned at the same time a master's degree in philosophy from the university (in 1904), while getting his B.D. in 1905.

Thankfully, Machen did come under the strong influence of Francis L. Patton, president of the College and then the Seminary, and Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, the brilliant professor of didactic and polemical theology, both of whom encouraged him in the direction of orthodoxy. Machen's mentor in New Testament, William Park Armstrong—NT becoming his main discipline—also encouraged him in the truth. Machen, however, remained uncertain and unsure of himself after taking these degrees. He was not sure whether he enjoyed

4. D.G. Hart, "Machen, John Gresham," in *Dictionary of the Presbyterian and Reformed Tradition in America* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP, 1999), 145-46. See also D. G. Hart's *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), recently reprinted by P&R Publishing (2003).

a ministerial call and, at Armstrong's urging in particular, left, in 1905, to study in Germany at Marburg and Göttingen. His most influential teacher there was probably Wilhelm Herrmann, teacher also to Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, and others. Herrmann was himself a pupil of one of the most renowned liberal German theologians, Albrecht Ritschl.

Patton, Armstrong, and Machen's family all wanted him to return from his study in Germany to teach at Princeton. While he did so in 1906, he did not do so without some misgivings and he resolutely refused at that point to seek ordination (which meant that he remained an Instructor until his ordination in 1914, only thereafter entering the professorial ranks) as long as he struggled to attain certainty. Herrmann and others, but Herrmann particularly, shook Machen's complacent faith and forced him to confront his own remaining unbelief.

Machen, after first hearing Herrmann, wrote to his mother: "I should say that the first time I heard Herrmann may almost be described as an epoch in my life. Such an overwhelming personality I think I almost never encountered—overpowering in the sincerity of religious devotion. Herrmann may be illogical and one-sided, but I tell you he is alive."⁵ He wrote shortly thereafter to his father about Herrmann:

"I can't criticize him, as my chief feeling with reference to him is already one of deepest reverence. Since I have been listening to him, my other studies have for a time lost interest to me; for Herrmann refuses to allow the student to look at religion from a distance as a thing to be *studied* merely. He speaks right to the heart; and I have been thrown all into confusion by what he says—so much deeper in his devotion to Christ than anything I have known in myself during the past few years. I don't know at all what to say as yet, for Herrmann's views are so revolutionary."⁶

What precisely was it that Herrmann so effectively represented? What were his "illogical, revolutionary" views? And what was it that Machen found such a challenge to his orthodoxy? It was the still developing position that had gripped Germany in the 1830s, England in the 1860s and America in the 1880s: historicism, which, when applied to the Bible, meant that the Bible was not God's Word to man but man's time-and-space conditioned words about God. Historicism came to reign after the Enlightenment and yielded what we know as Liberalism and Modernism and Neo-Orthodoxy and Post-Modernism, which is simply modernism gone to seed. Historicism is the notion that

5. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen*, 82.

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everything is a product of its time and place so that there are no universal and invariant truths.

The orthodox would agree that the expression of truth in the Bible has a proper historicalness that we must always take into account: God spoke to particular persons in particular times and places to be sure. But by such historically situated speaking, he also communicated verbally inspired, infallible truth to us all, proclaiming to all that he is holy, we are sinners, and that the only way of salvation is in and through his Son, who has done for us what we could never do for ourselves, keeping the law for us and paying the penalty for our law-breaking.

Machen came to realize more and more these gospel truths and dedicated his life to the vigorous propagation and defense of them. But before that, he had to struggle with the historicism that Herrmann and others were promoting. Charles Dennison, then historian of the OPC, at the OPC's semi-centennial in 1986, offered these insights into Machen's struggle: the Presbyterianism of Machen's youth, while possessing a broad cultural vision and enjoying wide societal position and influence, was less distinctly Calvinist than broadly Presbyterian, revering the *idea* of the church, possessing more the aura of respectability than of profound holiness.⁷ In short, the Baltimore Presbyterianism of the Machen household, as Terry Chrisope also discovered in his work on Machen, "likely provided its middle son with the proper cultural associations, a genuine reverence for the Bible along with a solid knowledge of its contents, and a foundation of doctrinal correctness, while perhaps at the same time unwittingly grooming him for the kind of upheaval which he experienced in Germany and for which Herrmann was the catalyst."⁸

The state of the PCUSA, the mainline Northern Presbyterian Church, was itself not in particularly good shape even at the time of Machen's birth in 1881, as Dennison suggests and as a liberal like Lefferts Loetscher celebrates as *The Broadening Church*.⁹ Princeton Seminary was engaged in a full-court press in the defense of the faith, it is true, but many of the other seminaries were beginning to embrace, or had done so already, biblical higher criticism. To be sure, several heresy trials revolving around such critical claims had resulted in ecclesiastical prosecutions (Swing of Chicago in 1874; McCune at Lane

7. Terry A. Chrisope, *Toward a Sure Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Dilemma of Biblical Criticism, 1881-1915* (Fearn, Ross-Shire, GB: Christian Focus, 2000), 92. See also Charles G. Dennison, *History for a Pilgrim People*, ed. Danny E. Olinger and David K. Thompson (Willow Grove, Pa.: Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2002), 27-40.

8. Chrisope, *Toward a Sure Faith*, 92.

9. For an account of the liberalizing church in the late nineteenth into the middle twentieth century from a liberal perspective, see Lefferts Loetscher, *The Broadening Church: A Study of Theological Issues in the Presbyterian Church since 1869* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1957).

in 1877; Briggs at Union in 1893; Smith at Lane in 1894). But ever since the re-union of the Old School and the New School in 1869, a reunion opposed by Charles Hodge, though supported by the rest of the Princetonians, the church had become more and more infected with doctrinal error.

It was not a vigorous, healthy, vibrant church in which Machen was reared but one more interested at times with maintaining the favor of this world than uncompromisingly standing for the truths of the gospel, whatever persecution or opposition may arise to it upon that account. Such compromise manifested itself in a host of ways: in 1903 with the Arminian revisions to the Westminster Confession, in the union with the Arminian Cumberland Presbyterians of 1906, and in the Federal Council of Churches 1908. It is hardly surprising then that Machen, brought up as he was in a kind of attenuated Presbyterianism, had his faith shaken when he encountered Liberalism.¹⁰

Machen emerged from the encounter with Herrmann and the like with a rock solid confidence in the certainty of the Word of God. In addition to *Christianity and Liberalism*, he wrote works on *The Origins of Paul's Religion* (1921) and *The Virgin Birth* (1930). He also staunchly defended the five fundamentals, particularly at the GA's of 1910, 1916, and 1923: (1) the inerrancy of the Bible; 2) the virgin birth of Christ; 3) the vicarious substitutionary atonement of Christ to satisfy divine justice; 4) the physical resurrection of Christ; and, 5) the miracles of our Lord, as "essential doctrines of the Word of God."

But none of this came about without a monumental struggle that lasted far after Machen's return from Germany, until perhaps 1912, after which we see the clear resolution of what had begun in Germany, the conviction that liberalism, attractive and appealing as it may be, was something altogether different from Christianity. After hearing one particularly powerful liberal lecturer in Göttingen, Machen wrote his brother Arthur that while Bousset's teaching was tantalizing, "whether it [such liberalism] is the Christian faith that has been found to overcome the world is very doubtful."¹¹ Here, in seed form, is the great argument that Machen will put forth in *Christianity and Liberalism*: that Christianity and Liberalism are distinct and competing claims, both of which cannot be true. Liberalism is not just an approach to, or a variant of, true Christianity; it is, rather, something else altogether.

Christianity is a supernatural faith that calls us to trust in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the only redeemer of mankind; Liberalism is a naturalistic program that teaches us that we too ought to aspire to the religious insights and developments of Jesus, who

10. For a reliable account of this history see the more recent work by D.G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking a Better Country: 300 Years of American Presbyterianism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007).

11. Chrisope, *Toward a Sure Faith*, 84.

grasped God and His love like none other. Adolf von Harnack, another pupil of Ritschl, like Herrmann, summarized liberalism as teaching the kingdom of God (conceived as the present inner spiritual presence of God's rule and power), the Fatherhood of God and the infinite worth of the human soul (both applied to all humans without distinction), and the higher righteousness and the command to love. In other words, liberalism reduced Christianity to ethics. Christ was the highest ethical ideal and salvation, as such, lay in imitating him. Machen looked this humanism that has a great appeal to sinful human flesh, as did the temptation in the garden, full in the face and came to reject it entirely, recognizing man's plight and the sole remedy for such, not in one who was merely our greatest example, but in One who, by his life and death, did what we could no longer do and undid the consequences and effects of Adam's and our sin.

J.G. Machen noted in *Christianity and Liberalism* that the Jesus of liberal reconstruction is not the supernatural Redeemer set forth in the Bible as the *object* of faith, but rather that he is to be understood and accepted as the pattern of faith—that is, men ought to exercise the same quality of faith in God that Jesus exercised. Machen dedicated every ounce of his energy to striking a fatal blow to such a notion. Today there remain those whose teaching might tend to commend to us the faith of Jesus as much as faith in Jesus. We must, as did Machen, resist the temptation to reduce the faith to the question, "What would Jesus do?"

The Machen of *Christianity and Liberalism* was one who had opposed the moderating efforts of J. Ross Stevenson at Princeton Seminary beginning in 1914 and the plan of Union of 1920 of all Protestant churches. He would, in the same spirit that animated this book, also oppose the Auburn Affirmation of 1924, the recommendations of the Commission of 1925, the Reorganization of Princeton of 1927-9, *Re-thinking Missions* of 1931, the unconstitutional declaration of the GA of 1934, etc—in short, all the liberalizing and modernizing tendencies of his day.¹² It should escape none of us, however, that Machen, the stalwart believer, had earlier felt the attraction of such liberalism in a church that had capitulated to it significantly since the Civil War. Where did Machen get the strength to resist? His study of the Scripture, growing in faith by the power of the Holy Spirit, after he returned to teach at Princeton in 1906, convinced him more and more that the Bible was the very Word of God and that the historicism of his day was wrong.

Here's how Terry Chrisope puts it: "Machen's resolution of the dilemma presented by biblical criticism was to adhere to an approach

12. All of this, leading up to the formation of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, is well chronicled in Edwin J. Rian, *The Presbyterian Conflict* (1940; reprint., Willow Grove, Pa.: Committee for the Historian of the OPC, 1992).

to the Bible that was historical without being historicist.”¹³ Machen came more and more to recognize that historicists had presuppositions that were anti-supernatural and that their rejection of God’s superintendence of the inspiration of his Word was of a piece with their rejection that he actively governed and sustained the world. In other words, Machen rejected historicism because he embraced providence. In Machen’s 1912 essay, “Christianity and Culture,” and his 1915 essay, “History and Faith”, we see that he thoroughly imbibed a view that a sovereign God governed all of history and that such a God could, and did, give us his Word without error.¹⁴ It is by believing the infallible word that Machen attained certainty, the certainty that allowed him to stand Luther-like against the errors of the PCUSA and modernism more broadly in his day and to encourage us to like faithfulness in our day.

Machen’s faithfulness, clarity, and certainty were never more evident than in his justly famous last words telegrammed to John Murray: “I’m so thankful for active obedience of Christ. No hope without it.”¹⁵ What comforted, and gave a certain assurance to, the dying Machen was not reflection on his life but faith in the One who had not only died for his sins but who had perfectly kept the whole law in his place. Here is the only basis for certainty for us all—that we are “accepted in the Beloved,” that we cannot please God by our own efforts; in fact, we could never, even by his grace, please him more than he is already pleased with us in Christ. Here is how one can attain certainty: by believing the testimony that God has given us in his Word to the salvation that we have in him who is the living Word. This is the legacy of John Gresham Machen, imparted to us in distilled form in *Christianity and Liberalism*.

Machen’s work, as noted above, is a compilation of earlier talks and writings. His organization is simple and effective. That the Christian faith is a doctrine and not merely, or chiefly, a life is something for which we must still contend. So Machen starts with the subject “doctrine,” defending the truth that Christianity is a supernatural revealed religion for which doctrine (teaching) is indispensable. Machen then proceeds through the theological encyclopedia setting forth the orthodox faith under the classical theological rubrics: God, Man, the Bible, Christ, Salvation, and the Church. In each of these theological loci, he contrasts what the Bible teaches with what modernism and humanism, in short, what is called here “liberalism,” teach.

13. Chrisope, 187; see also 137-153 *passim*. This writer leans on Chrisope for his treatment of these matters.

14. These two works of Machen can both be found in his *Selected Shorter Writings*, D.G. Hart, ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004), 399-410 and 97-108, respectively.

15. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen*, 451.

Machen's delineation of the vacuity of liberalism, its religious affirmation of naturalism, its inability to account for the human situation, and its rejection of a supernatural Redeemer remain a needed tonic for us a century later. We need to hear the uncompromising defense of orthodoxy that we find herein in our heterodox age and we need to hear the assured and convinced voice in our apathetic postmodern age. Machen's tone is not strident or shrill. Rather it expresses it is the humble yet assured reason for the hope that is within the believer. We are all to be prepared to give such a reason to anyone who asks. Machen's book helped us then and it will help us now to do so with meekness and fear.