John Gresham Machen, Defender of the Faith

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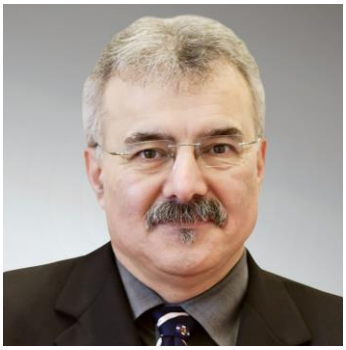

In the early stages of what has come to be known as the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy, John Gresham Machen (1881–1937), then Professor of New Testament Literature and Exegesis at Princeton Theological Seminary, set this struggle in the overall framework of church history. The struggle, he noted,

> is one of three great crises in the history of the Christian church. One came in the second century when Christianity was almost engulfed by paganism in the church in the form of Gnosticism. There was another in the middle ages when legalism was almost dominant in the church, similar to the modern legalism which appears in the Liberal church. Christianity today is fighting a great battle, but I, for my part, am looking for ultimate victory. God will not desert His church.[1]

This third "great battle," of which Machen here speaks, had erupted within the ranks of his ecclesial community, Northern Presbyterianism, in 1922 when Harry Emerson Fosdick (1878–1969), a liberal Baptist minister, trumpeted forth the question from the pulpit of the First Presbyterian Church in New York, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?"[2] Machen's answer to this question, as he looked at the church's victory in the previous "great crises" of her history, was an unequivocal "yes."[3] Here Machen's confidence in a

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[1] J. Gresham Machen, "Christianity vs. Modern Liberalism," *The Moody Bible Institute Monthly* 23 (April 1923): 352. I am indebted for this reference to the late Revd. Jonas G. Shepherd of Burlington, Ontario. For an overview of this controversy, see G.M. Marsden and B.J. Longfield, "Fundamentalist–Modernist Controversy" in Daniel G. Reid *et al.*, ed., *Dictionary of Christianity in America* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 466–468.

[2] On Fosdick, see C.W. Whiteman, "Fosdick, Harry Emerson" in Reid *et al.*, ed., *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, 446–447. For his role in this conflict, see Bradley J. Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy. Fundamentalists, Modernists, and Moderates* (New York, NY; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), *passim*.

[3] The story of his part in this struggle has been told a number of times. See especially Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co.,

sovereign God is abundantly evident. But his deep interest in history is also apparent. In fact, W. Stanford Reid has argued that Machen was above all an historian.[4] For proof Reid appeals to Machen's 1915 address "History and Faith," which Machen gave at his installation as Princeton's Associate Professor of New Testament in May of that year. Machen's opening sentence asserted that the "student of the New Testament should be primarily an historian. The centre and core of all the Bible is history."[5]

Now, whether or not Reid is correct in describing Machen as first and foremost an historian, there is little doubt that Machen was aware that absolutely central to his disagreement with liberalism was the question of the nature of history as it related to Christianity.[6] The liberals, according to Machen, were "impatient of history." From their vantage-point, he went on to observe,

> History … is a dead thing. …The true essence of the Bible is to be found in eternal ideas; history is merely the form in which those ideas are expressed. It makes no difference whether the history is real or fictitious; in either case, the ideas are the same. It makes no difference whether Abraham was an historical personage or a myth; in either case his life is an inspiring example of faith. … It makes no difference whether Jesus really lived and died and rose again as He is declared to have done in the Gospels; in any case the Gospel picture, be it ideal or be it history, is an encouragement to filial piety.[7]

1954), *passim*; W. Stanford Reid, "J. Gresham Machen" in David F. Wells, ed., *The Princeton Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), 93–111; D. Clair Davis, "Machen and Liberalism" in Charles G. Dennison and Richard C. Gamble, ed., *Pressing Toward the Mark: Essays Commemorating Fifty Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia, PA: The Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1986), 247–258; Longfield, *Presbyterian Controversy*, *passim*; John Piper, "J. Gresham Machen's Response to Modernism" (Unpublished paper, Bethlehem Conference of Pastors, January 26, 1993). Darryl G. Hart has discussed Machen's role in this controversy in a superb study, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (1994, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Co., 1995).

[4] Reid, "J. Gresham Machen," 98.

[5] J. Gresham Machen, "History and Faith," *The Princeton Theological Review* 13 (July 1915): 337–351. It can also be found in Ned B. Stonehouse, ed., *What Is Christianity? And Other Addresses* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1951).

[6] Longfield, *Presbyterian Controversy*, 48. In an essay on Machen's view of history George Marsden has written that the "problem of history has arguably been *the* twentieth–century problem" ("Understanding Gresham Machen," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 11, no.1, NS [February 1990]: 48). For an adaptation of this essay, see George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1991), 182–201.

[7] Machen, "History and Faith," 337.

Machen was confident, though, that to give up history is to give up the gospel. For, Machen pointed out, the term "gospel" means "good news," that is, "tidings, information about something that has happened. In other words, it means history. A gospel independent of history is simply a contradiction in terms."[8] Before we examine Machen's approach to the relationship of history and the Christian gospel in more detail, it will be helpful to outline his early career before becoming a defender of the faith.

Machen's Early Years

Machen was born in 1881 in Baltimore, Maryland, then at the crossroads of Northern and Southern life.[9] [9] His father, Arthur Machen (1826–1915), a lawyer, was a Southerner in his sympathies, even though he grew up in Washington, D.C. In the middle of the Civil War, for instance, he began to attend regularly Franklin Street Presbyterian Church in Baltimore, a church which joined the Southern Presbyterian Church just after the War and whose pastor, J. J. Bullock, was a firm supporter of the South.

His mother, Mary Gresham Machen (1849–1931) was, in the words of George Marsden, "indelibly a daughter of the lost cause" of the Confederacy.[10] During the war she had lived in Macon, Georgia, while her brother fought under the Confederate flag. Later, after her marriage to Arthur Machen, she would join the Baltimore chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy. Despite the defeat of the South and the many hardships that this brought, she still managed to grow up a privileged member of ante-bellum Southern aristocracy. Mary passed on to young Gresham the values of this aristocratic elite—in politics, for instance, he would be a radical libertarian and a firm advocate of racial segregation[11]—as well as her robust Calvinist spirituality. As a young boy he was taught the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which, by his teen years gave him a good command of the riches of Scripture and Reformed doctrine.[12]

In 1898 Machen went to Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, graduating three years later with a B. A. in classics. At the urging of his pastor, Harris E. Kirk, he went on to Princeton Seminary in 1902, though at the time he had no intention of entering vocational ministry. Princeton was renowned as "a Gibraltar of orthodoxy," her faculty justly proud

[8] Machen, "History and Faith," 337–338.
[9] For information on Machen's parents and early years, see Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen*, 17–57; George Marsden, "Understanding Gresham Machen," 55–56; Longfield, *Presbyterian Controversy*, 28–41.
[10] Marsden, "Understanding Gresham Machen," 55.
[11] Marsden, "Understanding Gresham Machen," 56–57.
[12] Longfield, *Presbyterian Controversy*, 32.

of the school's "unswerving fidelity to the theology of the Reformation."[13] Since the founding of the seminary in 1812, a noteworthy line of theologians—among them Archibald Alexander (1772–1851), Charles Hodge (1797–1878), Archibald Alexander Hodge (1823–1886), and Benjamin B. Warfield (1851–1921)—had "upheld Reformed confessionalism, … defended high views of biblical inspiration and authority, … organized their thinking with the aid of the Scottish philosophy of common sense, and … had a surprisingly large place for the role of the Holy Spirit in religious experience."[14]

Three years of study at the seminary gave Machen skill as a biblical exegete, particularly with regard to the New Testament, but no clear direction as to his future. In his final year of study, he won a fellowship in New Testament which encouraged him to think of spending a year abroad honing his abilities as a scholar. He decided to spend the academic year of 1905–1906 in Germany studying with such well-known New Testament scholars as Adolph Jülicher (1857–1938), Johannes Weiss (1863–1914), Wilhelm Bousset (1865–1920), and Johann Wilhelm Herrmann (1846–1922). On a previous visit to Germany in the summer of 1904 he had concluded that the two institutions which Germany most needed were the Sabbath and American football![15] This time, though, he would learn that there was something even more basic that was wanting: evangelical scholarship.

Sitting at the feet of these German scholars Machen was exposed to the full force of liberalism. Although Machen had had religious doubts before he ever set foot in Europe, his experience in Germany shook his faith to the core. Fifteen years earlier another American visitor to the halls of German academe, a Michigan student by the name of D. C. Davidson, compared the experience of theological study in Germany to a furnace in which his Christian convictions were tried to the very depths. "I have encountered many a fiery temptation," Davidson later wrote, "but I have never had a temptation cross my pathway so subtle and dangerous as that of German destructive criticism."[16] Machen's experience was similar in many respects, but whereas Davidson was rescued by the preaching of C. H. Spurgeon (1834–1892) only a few months after the trial of his faith, it would be a good while before Machen knew his feet to be planted again on the solid rock of orthodoxy.

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[13] Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen*, 61–62. On Princeton's resistance to change, see Darryl G. Hart, "The Princeton Mind in the Modern World and the Common Sense of J. Gresham Machen," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 46 (1984): 3–4.

[14] Mark A. Noll, "The Spirit of Old Princeton and the Spirit of the OPC" in Dennison and Gamble, ed., *Pressing Toward the Mark*, 238. For a good history of Princeton Theological Seminary, see David B. Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1994, 1996), 2 vols.

[15] Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen*, 84.

[16] D.C. Davidson, "In the Furnace of Unbelieving Theology," *The Banner of Truth* 293 (February 1988): 16–19.

Of all the scholars whom Machen heard lecture during this time in Germany none impressed him so much as Wilhelm Herrmann. Hardly known today, Herrmann was at that time probably the leading liberal theologian in Europe. Among his students were a number who would be well-known figures on the scene of twentieth-century theology, including Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) and Karl Barth (1886–1968). As a lecturer Hermann was captivating. Machen noted in a letter to his father that he "speaks right to the heart," refusing "to allow the student to look at religion from a distance as a thing to be *studied* merely."

In another letter to his father Machen observed that in "New England those who do not believe in the bodily Resurrection of Jesus are, generally speaking, religiously dead," but this was not the case with Herrmann. Though he denied the bodily resurrection he "believes that Jesus is the one thing in all the world that inspires *absolute* confidence, and an *absolute* joyful subjection." Machen was certainly not ignorant of definite flaws in Herrmann's theology, yet he confessed to his father that his chief feeling with respect to him was "one of the deepest reverence."[17]

Herrmann was convinced that historico-critical research into the life of Christ can never provide an unassailable footing for Christian faith. "No historical judgment … ever attains anything more than probability." It is, he averred, "a fatal error to attempt to establish the basis of faith by means of historical [*historisch*] investigation."[18] The assurance that faith needs can only come directly from the person of Christ himself. As a person reads the New Testament the love and moral seriousness that characterized the inner life of Christ shines through its pages, impacting the reader, and transforming his or her life. True faith is rooted in this encounter with the inner life of Christ as it is portrayed in the New Testament. This encounter "sets us free from the mere record [of the Scriptures], because it presses in upon us as a power that is present through its work upon us."[19]

It is thus that the inner life of Christ constitutes for Herrmann the "saving fact" of the New Testament. Since this is the case, the truth or falsity of the historical details of Christ's external life is of little significance. Herrmann admits that the events of Christ's

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[17] Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen*, 106–107.

[18] Wilhelm Herrmann, *Communion of the Christian With God*, ed. Robert T. Voelkel and trans. J. S. Stayton (New York, NY: G. P. Putnam's, 1906), 72, 76. The following account of Herrmann's theology and view of history is indebted to Daniel L. Deegan, "Wilhelm Herrmann: A Reassessment," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 19 (1966): 188–203; Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Historical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1978), 397–404; Claude Welch, *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 1985), 2:44–54, 152–157; and Longfield, *Presbyterian Controversy*, 41–42.

[19] Herrmann, *Communion of the Christian With God*, 74.

life and ministry, by means of which the faith of the early disciples was saved from shipwreck, have immeasurable importance for the church in every era. If they had not taken place, then there would be no written record about Christ. But later readers have no direct access to these events, since the accounts in the gospels are shrouded in myth. Yet such historical errors and myths in no way impede the New Testament's witness to the personal character of Jesus. For Herrmann, the "power of Jesus' inner life breaks through all the veils of tradition and provides the believer with a firmer ground of faith than the determination to accept the resurrection of Jesus by submission to the apostolic witness."[20] [20] Herrmann's thought in this regard is well expressed by the following words of the liberal church historian Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930), which were intended for popular consumption:

> We must not try to evade the Gospel by entrenching ourselves behind the miraculous stories related by the evangelists. In spite of these stories, nay, in part even in them, we are presented with a reality which has claims upon our participation. Study it, and do not let yourselves be deterred because this or that miraculous story strikes you as strange or leave you cold. …The question of miracles is of relative indifference in comparison with everything else which is to be found in the Gospels.[21]

Machen's traumatic, first-hand encounter with German liberalism came to a close in the summer of 1907 when he accepted a one-year appointment at Princeton as an instructor in New Testament. The invitation to return to Princeton may well have been a concerted effort on the part of the faculty, in particular, Benjamin Warfield to rescue Machen from the clutches of liberalism.[22] Machen seriously contemplated returning to Germany at the conclusion of that academic year, but happily his career became steadily entwined with the halls of Princeton. He stayed on, teaching New Testament, seeking to resolve the doubts that plagued him, slowly yielding to scriptural truth and the winsome influence of his colleagues, of whom the chief was Warfield. Thus, by the time that he was formally installed as Assistant Professor of New Testament in 1915 and gave his inaugural address on "History and Faith" he had come to firmly adhere to the Princeton tradition.

[20] Deegan, "Wilhelm Herrmann," 200.

[21] Adolf von Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, trans. Thomas Bailey Saunders, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons; London: Williams and Norgate, 1901), 32. On Machen's contact with von Harnack, see Hart, *Defending the Faith*, 41–42.

[22] Marsden, "Understanding J. Gresham Machen," 50.

"History and Faith" (1915)

This inaugural address makes it abundantly clear that the clouds had lifted and Machen had resolved the doubts that had bedeviled him ever since his time in Germany. "History and Faith" is thus a public reply to Herrmann and the liberal perspective on history and the reliability of Scripture.[23]

Machen begins with the basic assertion, already noted, that a "gospel independent of history is simply a contradiction in terms."[24] Biblical faith and history are inextricably yoked together. For instance, in the scriptural account of the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Christ, various historical assertions are made. He is said to be born of a Virgin; to have lived "a life of perfect purity, of awful righteousness, and of gracious, sovereign power"; to have died a death that is never viewed as a "mere holy martyrdom"—a common assertion in early twentieth-century liberal circles—but seen as "a sacrifice for the sins of the world"; to have been resurrected bodily, which was "a mighty act of God" and a fact of history, not "a vision, an hallucination," as some liberals asserted; to being still alive and ever-ready to help those who turn to him; to be "in mysterious union with the eternal God." This composite picture drawn from the Pauline corpus and the four Gospels is, Machen asserts, the portrayal of nothing less than "a supernatural person."[25]

Liberal scholars, however, seeking to retool Christianity to fit the naturalistic viewpoint of the surrounding culture, wanted nothing to do with a supernatural Jesus. They felt that ancient ideas of God and his supernatural intervention in the world had little to say to men and women living in modern, twentieth-century urban cultures. They thus attempted to separate the natural from the supernatural in the New Testament accounts about Christ, and so "disentangle the human Jesus" from the divinity thrust upon him by the early Church. But, as Machen points out, the supernatural Jesus is the only Jesus that we know. The scriptural record simply does not give us the liberty of separating the divine and the human in the life of Christ. The "divine and human are too closely interwoven; reject the divine," and ultimately, Machen asserted, "you must reject the human too."[26]

Then look, Machen suggested, at the beginning of the Christian movement. What is to account for it? During his life and earthly ministry Christ had won "comparatively few" disciples. Left to their own resources these disciples can hardly be credited with

[23] Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen*, 206; Longfield, *Presbyterian Controversy*, 48.
[24] Machen, "History and Faith," 338.
[25] Machen, "History and Faith," 339–342, 347.
[26] Machen, "History and Faith," 342–343, 347–348.

beginning what we know as Christianity. They were "far inferior" to Christ "in spiritual discernment and in courage" and had not the "slightest trace of originality." They had been "abjectly dependent upon the Master" during his earthly life and had moreover never "succeeded in understanding Him." And "what little understanding, what little courage" they did have was dissolved after his death. "How could such men," Machen asked, "institute the mightiest religious movement in the history of the world?"[27] Simply looking at the historical record, Machen concluded, it is obvious that something extraordinary must have happened between the death of Christ and the bold preaching of the first disciples. Well, Scripture explains the transformation by means of the resurrection of Christ. History is relentlessly plain. The foundation of the Church is either inexplicable, or else it is to be explained by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. But if the resurrection be accepted, then the lofty claims of Jesus are substantiated; Jesus then was no mere man, but God and man, God come in the flesh.

As we have seen with the theology of Wilhelm Herrmann, the liberal remolding of Christianity emphasized Christian experience at the expense of historical truth. Although Machen had a tendency to respond to this distortion of biblical Christianity by focusing on the historical and logical truth of the Christian faith, he was not oblivious to the necessity of experience. Thus, as he drew his address to a close, he stated:

> The resurrection of Jesus is a fact of history; it is good news; it is an event that has put a new face upon life. But how can the acceptance of an historical fact satisfy the longing of our souls? Must we stake our salvation upon the intricacies of historical research? Is the trained historian the modern priest without whose gracious intervention no one can see God? Surely some more immediate certitude is required.[28]

The objection would be valid if history stood alone. But history does not stand alone; it is confirmed by experience.

> An historical conviction of the resurrection of Jesus is not the end of faith but only the beginning; if faith stops there, it will probably never stand the fires of criticism. We are told that Jesus rose from the dead; the message is supported by a singular weight of evidence. But it is not just a message remote from us; it concerns not merely the past. If Jesus rose from the dead, as He is declared to have done in the Gospels, then He is still alive, and if He is still alive, then he may still be found. He is present with us today to help us if we will but turn to Him. … Christian

[27] Machen, "History and Faith," 345–346.
[28] Machen, "History and Faith," 349.

> experience cannot do without history, but it adds to history that directness, that immediateness, that intimacy of conviction which delivers us from fear.[29]

The historicity of the resurrection is substantiated as men and women are led to put their trust in the message that Christ is risen from the dead and find that that trust is not misplaced. Machen was thus very conscious of the fact that there is a subjective side to the Christian life. As he stated in a 1927 address to the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland:

> We cannot tell all that it [i.e. Christianity] is by … merely historical method … we cannot tell all that it is by looking at it merely from the outside. In order that we should tell all that it is, we must ourselves be Christians; we must know Christianity in our own inner lives.[30]

Moreover, it should be noted that Machen did not believe that demonstration of the historicity of the resurrection and other facts about Christ necessarily issued in faith. Contrary to the opinion of some contemporary critics, notably William Owen Carver (1868–1954), a professing evangelical who taught missions at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, for most of his career,[31] Machen was not forgetful that the work of the Spirit is absolutely fundamental for faith. In a later work, *What Is Faith?* (1925), Machen thus asserted that it is only where the Spirit has removed "the blinding effects of sin" that a person will come to "believe in the resurrection of Christ and thus accept the claims of Christianity."[32] And in his *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923), to which we now turn, he affirmed:

> The more one observes the condition of the Church, the more one feels obliged to confess that the conviction of sin is a great mystery, which can be produced only by the Spirit of God. Proclamation of the law, in word and in deed, can prepare for the experience, but the experience itself comes from God. When a man has that experience, when a man comes under conviction of sin, his whole attitude toward life is transformed; he wonders at his former blindness, and the message of the

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[29] Machen, "History and Faith," 349–350.

[30] Gresham Machen, "What Is Christianity?" in his *What Is Christianity? And Other Addresses*, ed. Ned Bernard Stonehouse (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1951), 18. See also Hart, "Princeton Mind in the Modern World," 21.

[31] William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (1976, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 267–268; Hart, "Princeton Mind in the Modern World," 20–21.

[32] Gresham Machen, *What Is Faith?* (1925, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1962), 135, 133.

> gospel, which formerly seemed to be an idle tale, becomes now instinct with light. But it is God alone who can produce the change.

Machen thus pled with his readers: "let us not try to do without the Spirit of God."[33]

Christianity and Liberalism (1923)

In 1923, the year following Fosdick's call for liberals to take up arms against fundamentalism, Machen published his definitive attack on the liberal system, *Christianity and Liberalism*. By this point in time, Machen was conscious that liberalism had moved far beyond the halls of academia, where he had first encountered its destructive force. Its withering effects could now be seen in the everyday life of the church, its "attack upon the fundamentals of the Christian faith … carried on vigorously by Sunday-School "lesson-helps," by the pulpit, and by the religious press."[34] *Christianity and Liberalism* thus sought to engage liberalism at a popular level.

Now, it is noteworthy, as John Piper has pointed out, that Machen did not entitle his book *Fundamentalism and Liberalism*.[35] In his mind liberalism and fundamentalism were not "two varieties of the same religion." Rather, they were "two distinct religions

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[33] J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1956), 67.

[34] Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 17.

[35] John Piper, "J. Gresham's Response to Modernism," 6. Machen, it should be noted, rejected the term "fundamentalist" as an adequate description of his theological position. As he once remarked: "The term fundamentalism is distasteful to the present writer and to many persons who hold views similar to his. It seems to suggest that we are adherents of some strange new sect, whereas in point of fact we are conscious of maintaining the historic Christian faith and of moving in the great central current of Christian life" (cited Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen*, 337). On another occasion he explained his perspective on this term thus: "Thoroughly consistent Christianity, to my mind, is found only in the Reformed or Calvinistic Faith; and consistent Christianity, I think, is the Christianity easiest to defend. Hence I never call myself a "Fundamentalist." There is, indeed, no inherent objection to the term; and if the disjunction is between "Fundamentalism" and "Modernism," then I am willing to call myself a Fundamentalist of the most pronounced type. But after all, what I prefer to call myself is not a "Fundamentalist" but a "Calvinist"—that is, an adherent of the Reformed Faith. As such l regard myself as standing in the great central current of the Church's life—the current which flows down from the Word of God through Augustine and Calvin, and which has found noteworthy expression in America in the great tradition represented by Charles Hodge, and Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield and the other representatives of the "Princeton School"," (cited Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen*, 428). Darryl Hart rightly sees Machen as a "Presbyterian traditionalist who championed Calvinistic creeds and Reformed patterns of church government against the innovations of fundamentalists and modernists alike" (*Defending the Faith*, x).

proceeding from altogether separate roots."[36] Possibly the most powerful of the seven chapters in the book is that entitled "Doctrine." In it, Machen tackles the liberal assertion that experience is the bedrock of the Christian faith and that in its essence "Christianity is a life," not a system of doctrinal truth.[37]

As Machen points out first of all, when one reads the letters of the Apostle Paul it is obvious that he was not "indifferent to doctrine; on the contrary, doctrine was the very basis of his life." His was no "undogmatic religion." He was deeply concerned about the truth of his message and the need to get it exactly right. On the manner of its presentation, though, he could show "magnificent tolerance." For example, in Philippians he was tolerant of those who with bad motives preached to make his imprisonment worse. Why? Because they were declaring what was objectively true about Christ (Philippians 1:15–18).[38]

"But the tolerance of Paul," Machen was quick to point out, "was not indiscriminate." In Galatia, he went so far as to pronounce a curse on his opponents because they were getting the message objectively wrong. They were telling Gentiles that "the believer's own effort to keep the Law" was necessary to complete the saving work that God had begun in their lives by faith and by the Spirit. To twentieth century liberals Paul's action may appear to be fighting over utter trivialities since both he and the Judaizers would have agreed on dozens of precious things, including the necessity of faith for salvation. But it was hardly trivial.

> The difference which divided him from the Judaizers was no mere theological subtlety, but concerned the very heart and core of the religion of Christ. "Just as I am without one plea, But that thy blood was shed for me"—that was what Paul was contending for in Galatia; that hymn would never have been written if the Judaizers had won. And without the thing which that hymn expresses there is no Christianity at all.[39]

Again, if one looks at the first missionaries of the apostolic church, one does not find them exhorting their hearers with such words as the following: "Jesus of Nazareth lived a wonderful life of filial piety, and we call upon you our hearers to yield yourselves, as we have done, to the spell of that life." The great message with which these early disciples were armed was "an historical message": Christ died for our sins and he is risen. Their

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[36] Cited A. Donald MacLeod, *Stanford Reid: An Evangelical Calvinist in the Academy* (Montreal, QC; Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), 331, n.8. This statement was part of an advertising blurb for *Christianity and Liberalism*.

[37] Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 18–20.

[38] Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 21–22, 25.

[39] Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 24–25.

witnessing was not about what "Jesus was doing within the inner recesses of the individual life," but to what he had done once for all in his death and resurrection. Without history and the doctrinal explanation of that history "joined in an absolutely indissoluble union," Machen forthrightly declared, "there is no Christianity."[40] As he wrote two years later:

> We believers in historic Christianity maintain the objectivity of truth… Theology, we hold, is not an attempt to express in merely symbolic terms an inner experience which must be expressed in different terms in subsequent generations; but it is a setting forth of those facts upon which experience is based.[41]

Some liberals, though, were quite prepared to admit that Paul and the apostolic church misunderstood the true nature of Christianity. Thus, they appealed to Jesus as One who taught a "simple, non-doctrinal religion." Again, Machen shows how such an appeal flies in the face of the historical facts about Christ's life and ministry. The teaching of Christ was rooted in doctrine since "it depended upon a stupendous presentation of Christ's own Person": his Messianic consciousness, his placing "His own words on an equality with what He certainly regarded as the divine words of Scripture," his claiming of "the right to legislate for the Kingdom of God."[42]

The liberal desire, then, for "a non-doctrinal religion" is in reality a giving up not only of Paul and the apostolic church, but also Jesus himself. "The liberal preacher is really rejecting the whole basis of Christianity, which is a religion founded … on facts."[43] It is for this reason that Machen can affirm that naturalistic liberalism is not simply a different kind of Christianity. It is not Christianity at all.[44]

Conclusion

In conclusion, Machen's defense of Christianity as an historically verifiable, doctrinally-rooted faith reminds us of a number of vital truths that are inextricably interwoven: God has revealed himself in history—primarily in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ—men and women have access to this revelation in the Scriptures, and the Christian faith is rooted in these specific historical events. As Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:17, "If Christ is not risen, your faith is futile" (NKJV). Machen well knew that Christianity is more than history—as he told the Scottish Free Church Assembly in 1927,

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[40] Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 27, 52–53.
[41] Machen, *What Is Faith?*, 32.
[42] Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 33–36.
[43] Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 45, 47.
[44] Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 52.

"We must know Christianity in our inner lives"—but if the historical affirmations of the Bible are not true, if they are errant accounts clothing inerrant truth, or if, as is commonly affirmed by radical deconstructionists today, we have no access to these historical events, then Christianity is sunk.[45]

It is vital to recognize that this issue is not merely of antiquarian interest. Some contemporary Evangelicals seem bent on reproducing the errors of those whom Machen so ably opposed. John Goldingay, principal of St. John's Theological College in Nottingham, England, and a professing Evangelical, has critiqued the high doctrine of Scripture evidenced in the Princeton tradition. Warfield, in particular, is taken to task for affirming the factual and historical inerrancy of Scripture.[46] Goldingay believes that while the Bible is errant in some of its historical and scientific details, on the whole it is quite reliable. The assertion that the Bible is inerrant is only accurate when it comes to matters dealing with salvation.[47] To be sure, Goldingay's position is not that of Herrmann or Harnack, who regarded much of the historical narrative of Scripture as riddled with myth and error. But the difference appears to be simply one of degree and not of kind.[48]

As Machen reflected on the way that the liberalism of his day was obscuring the gospel, he longed for a "new Reformation," a time when the gospel would "come forth again to bring light and liberty to mankind"; a time when "those upon whom God has laid His hand, to whom the gospel has become a burning fire within them, … speak the word that God has given them and trust for the results to Him alone." When such a time came it would "not be the work of men but the work of the Spirit of God." Nevertheless, he was convinced that the coming of this time "will be prepared for … not by the concealment of issues, but by clear presentation of them; not by peace in the Church between Christian and anti-Christian forces, but by earnest discussion; not by darkness, but by the light."[49]

May we, by God's grace, share both this longing and this conviction.

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[45] Hart, "Princeton Mind in the Modern World," 23–25; Marsden, "Understanding Gresham Machen," 58.
[46] John Goldingay, *Models for Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co.; Carlisle, Cumbria: The Paternoster Press, 1994), *passim*.
[47] Goldingay, *Models for Scripture*, 212–213, 272.
[48] For two significant critiques of Goldingay's book, see Paul Copan, "John Goldingay. *Models for Scripture*," *Trinity Journal* 16 ns, no.2 (Fall 1995): 255–259 and Don Carson, "Slippery slope for Scripture," *Evangelicals Now* 11, no.4 (April 1996): 20–21.
[49] Machen, *What Is Faith?*, 103–104.

Editor's Note: This essay has appeared in Jonathan Bayes, ed., *For God's Glory Alone: A Festschrift in recognition of the service of Dr. Bob Penhearow* (Matlock, Derbyshire: Carey Outreach Ministries, U.K., 2021). It is reprinted here by kind permission.

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