Theology Matters

A Publication of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry Vol 18 No 4 • Sep/Oct 2012

Darryl Hart's article, "The Relevance of J. Gresham Machen" explains that the current controversies in the church are between two different faiths: liberalism (progressivism) and historic Christian faith. The next two articles by Machen detail those differences and their implications for the church.

The Relevance of J. Gresham Machen

by Darryl G. Hart

Outside the small sectors of conservative Presbyterianism, J. Gresham Machen is known primarily as the lone scholar of the fundamentalist movement. Textbooks on American religion regularly cite Machen's *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923) if only because he wrote from a powerful position within the Protestant establishment, i.e. Princeton Theological Seminary, the oldest seminary of the Northern Presbyterian Church. But such recognition by historians derives not simply from Machen's status but also from the merits of his argument. When Sydney Ahlstrom, historian of American Protestantism at Yale University, called *Christianity and Liberalism* the "chief theological ornament" of fundamentalism he was simply confirming what 1920s intellectuals had already observed.[1] For instance, Walter Lippmann praised Machen for his "acumen," "saliency," and "wit," adding that his analysis of theological liberalism was "the best popular argument" produced by either side in the controversy.[2] Even the irreverent H. L. Mencken admitted that if Machen's arguments had any flaw in them then the science of logic was a "hollow vanity signifying nothing."[3]

Still, whatever notice Machen attracted during his relatively short life—he died in 1937 at the age of 55—interest in him has been harder to sustain with the passage of time. For instance, the issues that engaged Machen's learned studies in the New Testament are virtually passé in biblical scholarship today. What is more, his defense of the truth of the New Testament narratives appears to be irrelevant in an academic world where Enlightenment norms of objectivity are philosophically naive. Even in Protestant circles, Machen's arguments against modernism appear to be anachronistic since the points of contention between evangelicals and liberals no longer bifurcate Protestant institutions. In virtually every arena in which Machen labored, his efforts would appear to be of little value.

Still, when seen from a different perspective than simply that of fundamentalism versus modernism, Machen's significance for Presbyterians living at the beginning of the twenty-first century becomes more apparent. For he not only defended historic Christianity but couched that argument in the context of the church's relationship to modern culture. Indeed, historians who look at Machen strictly as an example of sectarian Protestantism miss what he had to say about the difficulties confronting Reformed churches committed to being faithful in a post-Christian culture. After giving an overview of Machen's life the following essay reflects on his relevance for the contemporary church.

The Anomalous Fundamentalist

Born on July 28th, 1881, Machen grew up the son of a prominent Baltimore lawyer, Arthur W. Machen. From his father Machen inherited a keen logical mind and a

Table of Contents

The Relevance of J. Gresham Machen…….. p. 1
Christianity and Liberalism: The Bible……. p. 9
The Separateness of the Church…… p.12

deep interest in classical literature. Machen's organic exposure to law would later become especially evident during the Presbyterian controversies of the 1920s when he devoted considerable time to constitutional and procedural questions. Through the influence of his mother, Mary Gresham, Machen acquired a thorough knowledge of the Bible and the Westminster Shorter Catechism. Machen's father, who hailed from Virginia, had been reared an Episcopalian. But his mother, a devout Old School Presbyterian from Georgia, insisted upon the family's membership in Baltimore's Franklin Street Presbyterian Church where Machen experienced the awkward amalgam of conservative Calvinism and genteel culture.

Machen chose the newly founded Johns Hopkins University for undergraduate study. As a classics major his interest in ancient literature deepened. Machen was graduated in 1901—first in his class—and continued at Hopkins for a year of graduate work with one of the leading classicists in the United States, Basil L. Gildersleeve, who was also an elder at Franklin Street Church. While Machen's studies in Baltimore enhanced his considerable language skills, the university ethos at Johns Hopkins stimulated his academic interests more generally. Hopkins was the first university in the United States dedicated to graduate study and specialized research. It was also the first major university to be founded without ecclesiastical ties, a sign of the birth of American higher education's secularization. Still, Machen had nothing but good to say about his experience at Hopkins and became a strong advocate of university work.

Nevertheless, during the summer of 1902 Machen considered a career in banking and international law before finally enrolling at Princeton Theological Seminary. His ambivalence to seminary stemmed partly from doubts about a career in the ministry. Victorian culture enforced informally sharp distinctions between the intellect and the emotions, between materialism and idealism, and between science and faith. Christianity, accordingly, was located in the ideal realm. In fact, religion had little to do with science, not because science was irreligious, but because scientists studied the material world, while ministers and theologians were concerned with the world of spirit. Romantic and evangelical influences furthered the divorce between religion and the world of science by placing a premium on experience and heart-felt religion. Because religion appeared inherently anti-intellectual and sentimental, Machen was reluctant to go into the ministry. Still, he persevered in his studies at Princeton Seminary, and in 1905 completed his course of study there. (Along the way he also received an M.A. in philosophy from Princeton University.)

Thanks to a fellowship from Princeton Machen studied in Germany for the academic year 1905-1906. At Marburg, the main attraction was Adolph Juelicher, well known for his *Introduction to the New Testament* and *The Parables of Jesus*. But the teacher who captivated Machen was Wilhelm Herrmann, professor of theology and a disciple of Albrecht Ritschl. At Goettingen Machen studied with the New Testament scholars, Wilhelm Bousset and Wilhelm Heitmueller. Rather than having his faith shaken, however, Machen saw in German universities that religious scholarship held a prominent place. Unlike America where popular preachers were marginal to the university, Germany's church leaders were members of the academy. To be sure, Machen spotted defections from Protestant orthodoxy in German professors' instruction. But the fact that religion was not isolated from the world of learning gave Machen hope for an academic career that could overcome the polarities of science and religion.

While a student in Germany Machen accepted an offer to become an instructor at Princeton Theological Seminary beginning in the fall of 1906. His initial duties included instruction in elementary Greek, a class in exegesis, and an introductory course on the New Testament. Courses in elementary Greek prepared Machen well to compose his *New Testament Greek for Beginners*, a textbook originally published in 1922 and still used widely at seminaries and divinity schools. Machen's ambivalence about church work continued. But by 1914 he had resolved his doubts sufficiently to be ordained, an action that allowed the Seminary's trustees to promote him to the rank of assistant professor.

An important factor in Machen's vocational resolve during the 1910s was his scholarship on the apostle Paul which he first presented in 1920 as the Sprunt Lectures at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond (VA). These lectures were eventually published under the title, *The Origin of Paul's Religion* (1921). Most of Machen's early research, both as a seminarian and then as a professor, had concerned Christ's virgin birth. This subject, in fact, was the topic for his second scholarly work, *The Virgin Birth* (1930). But his study of Paul was pivotal for his critique of liberal Protestantism.

Within the history of New Testament scholarship the early dates of the Pauline corpus had proved immensely difficult for liberal Protestants who wanted to retain the teachings of Jesus but had little sympathy for the particulars of Paul's theology. As a result, many critics had argued that Paul was the second founder of Christianity who had in a sense perverted Christ's teachings. Machen knew, however, that the most recent scholarship on the epistles made such an argument dubious. If Paul deviated from Christ, for example,

why did his epistles make up such a large part of the New Testament? Machen also drew upon the conclusions of more radical biblical scholars who had concluded that it was impossible to separate the ethical teachings of Jesus from the supernaturalism of the New Testament. Consequently, Machen argued that Pauline theology was not a deviation from Jesus but rather reflected the faith of the early church. Implicit in this conclusion was the warning that if liberal Protestants were not willing to own up to the original Christians' faith, they should think about calling themselves by a different name.

The nature and character of early Christian doctrine, according to Machen, was remarkably plain and accorded well with conservative Protestant beliefs. According to Paul, Jesus Christ was a heavenly being who came to earth, died on the cross for the sins of believers, rose again from the dead, and was present with the Christian church through the Holy Spirit. Notably important for Machen was the apostle's stress upon the historical nature of the gospel. Liberal scholars maintained that Christ's significance resided in the realm of ideals; Jesus' ethical teachings were eternally and absolutely true, but his miracles, death, and resurrection were only symbols of his superiority as a moral exemplar. In Machen's reading of Paul, however, the works of Christ, especially his death and resurrection, were not merely the product of the church's nostalgia for their deceased leader. Rather, Christ's death and resurrection were fundamental to the gospel. Without Christ's vicarious sacrifice the Christian gospel became a totally different religion.

The Origin of Paul's Religion anticipated most of the arguments Machen would use during the fundamentalist controversy. It strongly affirmed the exclusiveness of Christianity, the centrality of Christ's death and resurrection and the truthfulness of the Bible while also admonishing liberals for reducing Christianity to humanitarianism and for minimizing the importance of traditional theology. These were positions that Machen popularized in *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923), a book written at the height of the fundamentalist controversy. Yet, Machen was a reluctant fundamentalist. Indeed, his views on a number of significant issues were at odds with the aims and methods of fundamentalism. Machen himself did not like the term because it sounded like a sect.

One obvious point of dissimilarity concerned Machen's cultural and educational background. Fundamentalism was by no means as socially backward and anti-intellectual as often portrayed. But its leadership was marginal within American's cultural establishment because it was in effect a religious expression of popular resentment against social elites. Fundamentalists did value education and established institutions, usually Bible institutes and colleges, to perpetuate their views. Yet, fundamentalists were a world removed from mainstream academic life. Machen was much more a product of the nation's universities and colleges than he was comfortable in Bible institutes.

He departed from fundamentalism on theological matters as well. Two important issues were dispensational premillennialism and evolution. Most fundamentalists were committed to a dispensationalist understanding of Christ's second coming which divided history into different epochs of human faithlessness followed by divine judgment, including the church age which would see Christians apostacized before Christ's return in judgment. Dispensationalist pessimism about the future of American churches and society contrasted sharply with liberal Protestant optimism about God's active involvement in the progress of human civilization. Machen was by no means enamored of liberal estimates about the progressive development of society. But he was quite critical of dispensationalism and would not join any fundamentalist organization that included it in its statement of faith. For Machen, dispensationalism displayed a faulty method of interpreting the Bible and a poor understanding of the pervasive effects of the fall upon all of humanity throughout all periods of history.

Fundamentalism was also defined by opposition to evolution. Indeed, the most widely publicized event of the fundamentalist controversy was the showdown in 1925 between Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan during the Scopes Trial. Fundamentalists believed that evolutionary theory and the scientific establishment that had nurtured it were responsible for the decline of Christian civilization in the United States. Opposition to teaching evolution in public schools followed logically from this perspective. Fundamentalists did not want schools to undermine the faith and morals of their children. In contrast, Machen believed that evolution was a conceivable way for God to create the earth. He had questions about the possibility of the human species evolving from lower forms of animals and insisted that God intervened in the process of natural development to create the human soul. Yet he believed it was possible to reconcile Christianity with aspects of evolution.

The one doctrine upon which Machen and fundamentalists agreed was biblical inerrancy. Yet even here the commonalities do not explain Machen's involvement in the fundamentalist controversy. This doctrine was, according to many, the link between the learned theology of Princeton Seminary and revivalistic preaching of popular fundamentalism. A concern for

the truthfulness of the Bible supposedly drove Machen to identify with a movement that otherwise gave him pause. A closer reading of his most important book reveals an argument concerned not simply with doctrinal fidelity but also with the mission and nature of the church.

The Menace of Modernism

At the time that Machen wrote *Christianity and Liberalism* the Presbyterian Church was an important member of the Protestant establishment. To be sure, this establishment did not enjoy the sanction of government. But the personal networks and agencies which America's largest denominations formed amounted to an organizational edifice with considerable influence and enormous prestige, so much so that it is possible to contend that the Protestant establishment "felt responsible for America: for its moral instruction, for the religious content of national ideals, for the educative and welfare functions that governments would not…carry out."[4]

Presbyterians in particular had an influence on American culture disproportionate to their numbers. For instance, before the Civil War Presbyterians established as many institutions of higher education as any other Christian body during the entire nineteenth century. Princeton Seminary itself, educated more graduate students than any other college, university, or seminary during the nineteenth century. Undoubtedly, a commitment to a learned ministry as well as the Reformed understanding of culture gave Presbyterians impeccable establishmentarian credentials.

Other factors are also responsible for Presbyterian influence upon American culture. Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Episcopalians, Methodists, and Baptists, the principal denominations of Anglo-American Protestantism, gained a strong foothold in the United States, ironically, because of the disestablishment of religion. One of the catalysts of the War for Independence was hostility from dissenting Protestant denominations to the possibility of the Church of England asserting itself as the established church in the colonies. The American Revolution, as we all know, did away with the crown and rejected a national church. Thus, the American republic began without any assistance from the institutions chiefly responsible for guaranteeing social order and stability in European culture.

Into this social and political vacuum stepped the Protestant denominations of British descent. In fact, the churches provided what little organization and uniformity existed in the new nation before 1860. The revivals of the Second Great Awakening were especially crucial to social order in the United States. These revivals sponsored a host of voluntary agencies whose purpose was to eliminate every kind of evil, from slavery to the consumption of beverage alcohol. Because of the decentralization of political life in the early United States and the reformist agenda of those Protestants who promoted revivals, the churches assumed the role of cultural guardian. This influence was the foundation for the institutions and networks in which the Protestant establishment thrived.

Protestant dominance expanded in the period in which Machen was born. What is more, the economy of the new industries and urban centers generated wealth which could fund institutions of considerable strength. One need only think of the Baptist, John Rockefeller, and the Presbyterian, Andrew Carnegie, to be reminded of the enormous affluence of this era and how this affluence was used to finance developments in education, science, medicine, technology, art, and religion. What many Protestants thought, Presbyterians included, was that the United States was moving into a period of justice and righteousness associated with the kingdom of God. This was the era of the Social Gospel, which promised harmony between labor and management, Progressivism, which promised a more democratic society, the Student Volunteer Movement, which promised to win the world to Christ "in this generation," and a war that was fought to make the world, not just the United States, in the words of a Presbyterian president, Woodrow Wilson, "safe for democracy."

While Princeton Seminary's Old School Theology still informed aspects of Presbyterian life, the denomination as a whole had departed Calvinism well before the 1920s. This is the point aptly made in Lefferts Loetscher's history of the Presbyterian Church, *The Broadening Church*. Several crises during the period between 1890 and 1915 indicated that the church was losing its Reformed identity. Conservatives may have won the battles against Charles Briggs and other liberal biblical scholars during the 1890s, but they were losing the larger war. The Presbytery of New York, the source of much liberalism, continued down on its broad path. The revision of the Westminster Confession in 1903 also undermined the work of conservatives. Meanwhile, the Presbyterian Church in 1908 led American Protestantism in the organization of and support for the Federal Council of Churches, the embodiment of the Social Gospel. While the Protestant establishment may be credited with supplying moral fervor and humanitarian earnestness to many of the political and social reforms of the Progressive Era, its identity was increasingly bound by cultural norms rather than biblical imperatives.

In this context Machen wrote *Christianity and Liberalism* less as a brief on behalf of fundamentalists

and more as a chastisement of cultural Christianity. Rather than debating evolutionary theory or Christ's return, Machen contended that the task of the church was not to advance western civilization but to save souls. The book emerged directly out of Machen's own opposition to plans for a union of the largest Protestant denominations. What Machen objected to specifically in the plan for church union was indifference to doctrine for the sake of promoting social justice and good will. The plan relegated to the background all the essentials of the Christian faith such as the deity of Christ, the atonement, the virgin birth, favoring instead vague generalities about ethical ideals and the kingdom of God. Machen thought Presbyterians should not be content with the doctrinal platform of the proposed union because it treated the Westminster Confession of Faith as merely one expression of the progressive Christian consciousness. Those who believe the Westminster Confession to be true should insist on its truth for everyone.

In effect, *Christianity and Liberalism* was not an abstract argument about theology or biblical scholarship but a response to important developments in the nation's churches. In fact, the confusion of evangelism and political activism or social reform was symptomatic of American Protestantism going back to the Second Great Awakening. From Machen's perspective, the churches were more interested in the health of society than they were in their own faithfulness. Protestant designs for church union only proved the point.

If the church's task was not to transform culture, then what was it? Machen's answer in *Christianity and Liberalism* involved the point that the ground of the church's identity was not its own good deeds as exemplary as they might be, but rather, in its preaching and teaching. One of the most striking features of the book on first perusal is its straightforward presentation of the teachings of historic Protestantism concerning God, man, Christ, the Bible, salvation and the church. Though *Christianity and Liberalism* earned Machen the reputation of being a theological bully, with the exception of the first chapter, the book reads more like a primer in Christian theology. In fact, the second longest chapter in the book is itself a defense of the importance of doctrine. In that chapter Machen repeated the argument of his book on Paul to show that at its founding the church's identity rested upon doctrine, not good deeds or religious experience.

If doctrine was the foundation of the church, exclusiveness was its cornerstone. Machen labored uneasily under the label "fundamentalist." But he did see the necessity of maintaining clear and definite boundaries between the church and those outside the household of faith. He also recognized that it was impossible in the American context to hold on to historic Christian truths without seeming sectarian and intolerant. Because religion had been so widely used to rally support for the common good and social improvement, to say that Christianity was first and foremost about eternal life—no matter what the public implications—was to be deemed dogmatic, narrow-minded, backward looking, and ultimately un-American.

Machen looked the charge of intolerance squarely in the eye and defended the church's exclusivity. His defense ran along two lines. The first was civil or legal. The church, as a private and voluntary organization, as opposed to an involuntary and public association like a state or commonwealth, had every right to exclude from membership and office those who would not subscribe to its teaching. This kind of intolerance was actually fully compatible with American ideals of religious liberty. If ordinary citizens could not band together for particular purposes, such as the propagation of the Westminster Confession of Faith, then they did not enjoy genuine political freedom.[5]

The second way that Machen defended exclusiveness was to point to Scripture itself. Especially significant was the example of the apostle Paul's confrontation with the Judaizers in Galatia. Machen argued that Paul's "stupendous" polemic became in the hands of the modern church nothing more than an obscure "theological subtlety," especially since the apostle agreed with the Judaizers that Jesus was the Messiah, that he had risen from the dead and that faith in Christ was necessary to salvation. But the Judaizers also were convinced that believers needed to keep the law in order to be saved. "From the modern point of view the difference would have seemed to be very slight," Machen wrote, "hardly worthy of consideration at all in view of the large measure of agreement." He observed what "splendid" reforms could have been undertaken in "Gentile cities" if the Judaizers had succeeded in implementing the observance of the Mosaic law. "Surely Paul ought to have made common cause with teachers who were so nearly in agreement with him; surely he ought to have applied to them the great principle of Christian unity." Yet, Paul did not. The difference that separated him from the Judaizers was no mere theological abstraction but "concerned the very heart and core of the religion of Christ." The lesson, according to Machen, was that "Paul was no advocate of undogmatic religion."[6]

Machen's defense of Christianity was sectarian and ran directly counter to the aspirations of the Protestant Establishment. He accented the church's identity as a separate and segregated people, rather than regarding the church as an agency of social harmony and civic improvement. As Machen concluded his chapter on salvation in *Christianity and Liberalism*, social utility is

not the purpose of the gospel. This was becoming particularly true, he felt, in the sphere of missions where liberal missionaries traveled to various parts of the world for the sake of spreading "the blessings of Christian civilization (whatever that may be)" but were uninterested in "leading individuals to relinquish their pagan beliefs." In contrast the "chief business" of the Christian missionary was the saving of souls "not by the mere ethical principles of Jesus but by His redemptive work."[7]

Of course, Machen did not like to think of himself as sectarian. He came from a prominent family, had access to the elite institutions of American learning and Protestantism, and was an active citizen. Yet, he also understood that by twentieth-century standards the church was sectarian if she maintained her mission of proclaiming the gospel. As the mainline Protestant churches knew, the great creeds of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were virtually useless when it came to the work of progressive reform and building the kingdom of God. That is why the creeds proposed for church union were vague and abstract. In the end Machen believed that the church had obscured the gospel for the sake of greater influence in society. "Christianity refuses to be regarded as a mere means to a higher end," he wrote. "Our Lord made that perfectly clear when He said: 'If any man come to me, and hate not his father and mother…he cannot be my disciple' (Luke xiv. 26). Whatever else those stupendous words may mean, they certainly meant that the relationship to Christ takes precedence of all other relationships, even the holiest of relationships like those that exist between husband and wife and parent and child." Machen admitted that Christianity could accomplish many useful things in this world but if it was accepted only for the sake of greater utility then it was not really Christianity.[8]

The Responsibility of the Church

The understanding of the church implicit in Machen's critique of liberalism is the greatest difference between his outlook and fundamentalists (or later evangelicals). As much as Machen's argument rested upon a wealth of knowledge, his conception of the church differed significantly from many conservatives who assumed the church had a responsibility to maintain Christian civilization. Machen's ideas about the task of the church have also proved to be unappealing to Protestants committed to transforming culture.

Machen believed that the church's primary task was to witness to Christ and he cited the risen Christ's instructions to his followers—"Ye shall be my witnesses"—as a correct summary of the church's purpose. As he often observed, Christianity was not a religious experience that transcended doctrine nor was it an inward feeling of which doctrine was a manifestation. Rather, Christianity was "a life founded upon a doctrine…. a life produced not merely by exhortation, not merely by personal contacts, but primarily by an account of something that happened, a piece of good news, or a gospel."[9] Machen turned from the abstract to the concrete when he argued that Presbyterian witness-bearing was circumscribed by the Westminster Standards. Specifically, the denomination's ordination vows put explicit limits upon a Presbyterian minister. The Presbyterian Church's funds were held under a trust that obligated the church to propagate the gospel as taught in the Bible and the Westminster Confession. To use those funds for any other purpose was a violation of that trust.

Machen's criticisms of Protestant liberalism followed in part from this understanding of the church. Liberals, he charged, were violating the church's trust by contradicting from Presbyterian pulpits the very creed that they affirmed in their ordination vows. A significant component of this critique concerned intellectual honesty. Machen conceded that not everyone would agree that creeds were valuable. But the desirability of the Westminster Confession for Presbyterians was not at issue. Rather the problem was whether a minister or church official was faithful to his ordination vow. If a man preached and acted in accordance with the church's creedal basis then he could hold special office; if not, then he could not speak for the church.[10]

Machen's arguments were convincing to many conservatives but failed to gain the assent of evangelicals within the Presbyterian Church. For them, liberalism was certainly erroneous but confined largely to a limited number of pulpits or presbyteries. Consequently, because the majority of the church was still loyal to historic Christianity drastic measures were not needed. Machen battled this attitude toward the church's witness for the last ten years of his life and these struggles led to the founding of Westminster Theological Seminary in 1929, the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions in 1933, and finally the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 1936. In each case, the issue was not whether liberalism was flawed but whether the church compromised its witness by tolerating liberalism.

Arguably the most forceful expression of Machen's conception of the church came in a 1933 address he gave at a meeting of the American Academy of Political and Social Science. In this setting he actually spent more time on what social scientists should not expect from the church than he did addressing the church's positive tasks. Nevertheless, those tasks—that the church was to be "radically doctrinal," "radically intolerant," and "radically ethical" —restated Machen's

ideas about the witness-bearing nature of the church. At the same time he explained the limitations that constrained the church. First of all, "you cannot expect from [the church] any cooperation with non-Christian religion or with a non-Christian program of ethical culture." "There is no such thing," he insisted, "as a universally valid fund of religious principles upon which particular religions, including the Christian religion, may build." Secondly, it was improper to look to the church for "any official pronouncements upon the political or social questions of the day, and you cannot expect cooperation with the state in anything involving the use of force" because the church's weapons against evil "are spiritual, not carnal." The responsibility of the church in the new age, then, according to Machen, was "the same as its responsibility in every age." It was,

> to testify that this world is lost in sin; that the span of human life—nay the length of human history—is an infinitesimal island in the awful depths of eternity; that there is a mysterious, holy, living God, Creator of all, Upholder of all, infinitely beyond all; that He has revealed Himself to us in His Word and offered us communion with Himself through Jesus Christ the Lord; that there is no other salvation, for individuals or for nations, save this, but that this salvation is full and free, and that whosoever possesses it has for himself and for all others to whom he may be the instrument of bringing it a treasure compared with which all the kingdoms of the earth—nay, all the wonders of the starry heavens —are as the dust of the earth.[11]

The profound responsibility of the church, however, did not exempt individual Christians from cultural responsibilities. Machen recognized the especially important role that families, schools and communities play in nurturing and sustaining Christian fellowship and witness. Indeed, these institutions and associations along with the church provided believers with a sense of community. In this culture, even one dominated by believers, not every item would be explicitly Christian because through common grace believers share much with unbelievers. But in a culture which allowed Christians to flourish in their various callings, God would be recognized as the giver and sustainer of all, and as such, every aspect of human life would be pursued by Christians to give honor and glory to him. Machen's ideas about Christian schools grew out of this vision of Christian culture. What made the Christian school so valuable was its effort to bring about the "profound Christian permeation of every human activity, no matter how secular the world may regard it as being." "A Christian boy or girl can learn mathematics, for example, from a teacher who is not a Christian; and truth is truth however learned." But the "bearing of truth, the meaning of truth, the purpose of truth, even in the sphere of mathematics," he insisted, "seem entirely different to the Christian from that which they seem to the non-Christian."[12]

Clearly, this conception of Christian culture could not govern an entire society with a religiously diverse population. Throughout the history of the United States Protestants of British descent had tried to impose cultural uniformity on an increasingly diverse people. As an outspoken defender of political and religious liberty, Machen objected to efforts designed to yield a national culture. In fact, he embraced a cultural pluralism in which Christians would create their own institutions and associations. The purpose of Christian institutions had less to do with constructing or maintaining a Christian society than training generations of believers who would take their faith into all walks of life.

Machen was particularly zealous for civil liberties because of their close relationship to religious freedom. He repeatedly argued that the kind of intolerance he believed essential to the church's faithfulness was not only compatible but predicated upon civil liberty. Within the involuntary association of the state, Machen reasoned,

> individual citizens who desire to unite for some special purpose should be permitted to do so. Especially in the sphere of religion, such permission of individuals to unite is one of the rights which lie at the very foundation of our civil and religious liberty. The state does not scrutinize the rightness or wrongness of the religious purpose for which such voluntary religious associations are formed—if it did undertake such scrutiny all religious liberty would be gone.[13]

According to this view, the church was a kind of voluntary organization. It was composed of "a number of persons who have come to agreement in a certain message about Christ and who desire to unite in the propagation of that message." Because no one was forced by law to join the church, requiring ministers and church officials to assent to certain theological views was not at odds with religious liberty. Machen thought civil liberties were so important for preserving a Christian witness that he defended the rights of non-Christians to found schools and rear children in a manner consistent with their beliefs. Religious liberty, he maintained, should be extended not just to Protestants, but to all religions.[14]

If the principle of religious freedom meant that the state could not interfere in religious affairs, it followed that religious bodies should not interfere in public matters. One example of this argument was his opposition to Bible reading and school prayer in public schools. Not only did such practices infringe upon the liberties of non-Christians, but they also compromised the message

of the gospel. For instance, many educators held that Bible reading would reinforce common notions about good and evil. Machen countered that the central theme of Scripture, and indeed the core of Christianity, was redemption. "To create the impression that other things in the Bible contain any hope for humanity apart from [grace] is to contradict the Bible at its root." This did not mean that schools should not enforce some kind of morality. But efforts to ground that morality upon the Bible had to be avoided. A secular moral education, Machen admitted, was by no means sufficient because "the only true grounding of morality is found in the revealed will of God." Indeed, a secularized education, "though perhaps necessary, is a necessary evil." But, at least it avoided the greater harm of confusing the Bible's central teaching. And the precise harm that religious activity in public affairs could produce was to remove Christian understandings of virtue and morality from first order considerations about human depravity and grace.[15]

Thus Machen recognized and accepted a diminished role for the church in a secular society like the United States which not only had abolished religious establishments but also included groups of people from a variety of religious backgrounds. While modernists and fundamentalists wanted to preserve Christian civilization in the United States and were willing to use the state to do so, Machen warned about the dangers of such a strategy. The goal of transforming culture was potentially as harmful to the church as it was to civil and religious liberty.

An Otherworldly Faith?

Machen's understanding of the church, of course, implies an otherworldly faith that does not sit well with efforts to transform the culture and redeem politics. From the perspective of many who laud a Christian world-and-life-view, Machen's distinction between salvation and grace on the one side, and human relationships and cultural matters on the other, seems to betray a fundamentalist outlook which denies the goodness of the created order.

Yet Machen's convictions are not far removed from the Protestant Reformers. Indeed, the distinction between the temporal and spiritual, between the calling of the church and secular vocations, is also prominent in the work of John Calvin, who wrote in Book 4 of the *Institutes*,

> there are two governments to which mankind is subject,…the first of these, which rules over the soul or the inner man, and concerns itself with eternal life….the second, whose province is the establishment of merely civil or external justice, a justice in conduct….Anyone who knows how to distinguish between body and soul, between this present transitory life and the eternal life to come, will not find it difficult to understand that the spiritual kingdom of Christ and civil government are things far removed from one another. It is a Judaic folly to look for the kingdom of Christ among the things that make up this world, and to shut it up among them; our opinion, which is supported by the plainest teaching of Scripture, is that on the contrary, the fruit we reap from grace is spiritual fruit.[16]

This distinction between spiritual and temporal affairs in no way denies the goodness of creation or the Lordship of Christ in all spheres of life. But as Machen argued the church needed to be clear in its distinctions between its ministry and ordinances, and the other good but nevertheless non-salvific aspects of creation. This is still true since churches continue to be tempted to look to cultural or political means rather than the ministry of word and sacrament for advancing God's kingdom. The problem with the Protestant establishment, as Machen saw it, was that it had blurred the distinctions between special and general revelation, between particular and common grace, between the supernatural and the natural. To be sure the church was trying to do things that were laudable and showed genuine concern for those in need. Still, Machen believed the church had substituted the task of improving social and cultural affairs with the work of proclaiming the gospel.

In the end, Machen teaches an important lesson for Presbyterians. He reminded the church of a lesson taught by the Reformation. The church's responsibility was not to improve this world. The truth of the gospel does not depend on a strong economy or social harmony. Rather the church's health rested on its trust in God and proclamation of his word. This was the question that Machen posed to the church of his day and it continues to be one that contemporary believers must ponder.

1. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, 1972), 912.
2. Lippmann, *A Preface to Morals* (New York, 1929), 32.
3. Mencken, "The Impregnable Rock," *American Mercury* 9 (1931), 412.
4. William R. Hutchison, "Preface: From Protestant to Pluralist America," *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900-1960*, ed. William R. Hutchison, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), viii.
5. *Christianity and Liberalism*, 166-72.
6. Ibid., 23-25.
7. Ibid., 156.
8. Ibid., 151-2.
9. "The Parting of the Ways," *Presbyterian* 94 (April, 1924), 7.
10. Ibid., 7-8.
11. "The Responsibility of the Church in Our New Age," in D. G. Hart, *J. Gresham Machen: Selected Shorter Writings* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2004), 377.
12. "The Necessity of the Christian School," in *J. Gresham Machen: Selected Shorter Writings*, 170.
13. *Christianity and Liberalism*, 168.
14. Ibid.
15. "The Necessity of the Christian School," 170.
16. Excerpted in *Luther and Calvin on Secular Authority*, ed. Harro Hoepfl, (New York, 1991), 47-48.

Darryl G. Hart, Ph.D. is visiting professor of history at Hillsdale College, MI. He is author of, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America*. He was the winner of the PC(USA) Historical Society's Francis Makemie Award. He serves on the editorial board of the *Journal of Presbyterian History*.

Christianity and Liberalism: The Bible

by J. Gresham Machen

Modern liberalism, it has been observed so far, has lost sight of the two great presuppositions of the Christian message—the living God, and the fact of sin. The liberal doctrine of God and the liberal doctrine of man are both diametrically opposite to the Christian view. But the divergence concerns not only the presuppositions of the message, but also the message itself.

The Christian message has come to us through the Bible. What shall we think about this Book in which the message is contained?

According to the Christian view, the Bible contains an account of a revelation from God to man, which is found nowhere else. It is true, the Bible also contains a confirmation and a wonderful enrichment of the revelations which are given also by the things that God has made and by the conscience of man. "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork"—these words are a confirmation of the revelation of God in nature; "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"—these words are a confirmation of what is attested by the conscience. But in addition to such reaffirmations of what might conceivably be learned elsewhere—as a matter of fact, because of men's blindness, even so much is learned elsewhere only in comparatively obscure fashion—the Bible also contains an account of a revelation which is absolutely new. That new revelation concerns the way by which sinful man can come into communion with the living God.

The way was opened, according to the Bible, by an act of God, when, almost nineteen hundred years ago, outside the walls of Jerusalem, the eternal Son was offered as a sacrifice for the sins of men. To that one great event the whole Old Testament looks forward, and in that one event the whole of the New Testament finds its center and core. Salvation then, according to the Bible, is not something that was discovered, but something that happened. Hence appears the uniqueness of the Bible. All the ideas of Christianity might be discovered in some other religion, yet there would be in that other religion no Christianity. For Christianity depends, not upon a complex of ideas, but upon the narration of an event. Without that event, the world, in the Christian view, is altogether dark, and humanity is lost under the guilt of sin. There can be no salvation by the discovery of eternal truth, for eternal truth brings naught but despair, because of sin. But a new face has been put upon life by the blessed thing that God did when He offered up His only begotten Son.

An objection is sometimes offered against this view of the contents of the Bible.[1] Must we, it is said, depend upon what happened so long ago? Does salvation wait upon the examination of musty records? Is the trained student of Palestinian history the modern priest without whose gracious intervention no one can see God? Can we not find, instead, a salvation that is independent of history, a salvation that depends only on what is with us here and now?

The objection is not devoid of weight. But it ignores one of the primary evidences for the truth of the gospel record. That evidence is found in Christian experience. Salvation does depend upon what happened long ago, but the event of long ago has effects that continue until today. We are told in the New Testament that Jesus offered Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of those who should believe on Him. That is a record of a past event. But we can make trial of it today, and making trial of it we find it to be true. We are told in the New Testament that on a certain morning long ago Jesus rose from the dead. That again is a record of a past event. But again we can make trial of it, and making trial of it we discover that Jesus is truly a living Savior today.

But at this point a fatal error lies in wait. It is one of the root errors of modern liberalism. Christian experience, we have just said, is useful as confirming the gospel message. But because it is necessary, many men have jumped to the conclusion that it is all that is necessary. Having a present experience of Christ in the heart, may we not, it is said, hold that experience no matter what history may tell us as to the events of the first Easter morning? May we not make ourselves altogether independent of the results of Biblical criticism? No matter what sort of man history may tell us Jesus of Nazareth actually was, no matter what history may say about the real meaning of His death or about the story of His alleged resurrection, may we not continue to experience the presence of Christ in our souls?

The trouble is that the experience thus maintained is not Christian experience. Religious experience it may be, but Christian experience it certainly is not. For Christian experience depends absolutely upon an event. The Christian says to himself: "I have meditated upon the

problem of becoming right with God, I have tried to produce a righteousness that will stand in His sight; but when I heard the gospel message I learned that what I had weakly striven to accomplish had been accomplished by the Lord Jesus Christ when He died for me on the Cross and completed His redeeming work by the glorious resurrection. If the thing has not yet been done, if I merely have an idea of its accomplishment, then I am of all men most miserable, for I am still in my sins. My Christian life, then, depends altogether upon the truth of the New Testament record."

Christian experience is rightly used when it confirms the documentary evidence. But it can never possibly provide a substitute for the documentary evidence. We know that the gospel story is true partly because of the early date of the documents in which it appears, the evidence as to their authorship, the internal evidence of their truth, the impossibility of explaining them as being based upon deception or upon myth. This evidence is gloriously confirmed by present experience, which adds to the documentary evidence that wonderful directness and immediacy of conviction which delivers us from fear. Christian experience is rightly used when it helps to convince us that the events narrated in the New Testament actually did occur; but it can never enable us to be Christians whether the events occurred or not. It is a fair flower, and should be prized as a gift of God. But cut it from its root in the blessed Book, and it soon withers away and dies.

Thus the revelation of which an account is contained in the Bible embraces not only a reaffirmation of eternal truths—itself necessary because the truths have been obscured by the blinding effect of sin—but also a revelation which sets forth the meaning of an act of God.

The contents of the Bible, then, are unique. But another fact about the Bible is also important. The Bible might contain an account of a true revelation from God, and yet the account be full of error. Before the full authority of the Bible can be established, therefore, it is necessary to add to the Christian doctrine of revelation the Christian doctrine of inspiration. The latter doctrine means that the Bible not only is an account of important things, but that the account itself is true, the writers having been so preserved from error, despite a full maintenance of their habits of thought and expression, that the resulting Book is the "infallible rule of faith and practice."

This doctrine of "plenary inspiration" has been made the subject of persistent misrepresentation. Its opponents speak of it as though it involved a mechanical theory of the activity of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit, it is said, is represented in this doctrine as dictating the Bible to writers who were really little more than stenographers. But of course all such caricatures are without basis in fact, and it is rather surprising that intelligent men should be so blinded by prejudice about this matter as not even to examine for themselves the perfectly accessible treatises in which the doctrine of plenary inspiration is set forth. It is usually considered good practice to examine a thing for one's self before echoing the vulgar ridicule of it. But in connection with the Bible, such scholarly restraints are somehow regarded as out of place. It is so much easier to content one's self with a few opprobrious adjectives such as "mechanical," or the like. Why engage in serious criticism when the people prefer ridicule? Why attack a real opponent when it is easier to knock down a man of straw? [2]

As a matter of fact, the doctrine of plenary inspiration does not deny the individuality of the Biblical writers; it does not ignore their use of ordinary means for acquiring information; it does not involve any lack of interest in the historical situations which gave rise to the Biblical books. What it does deny is the presence of error in the Bible. It supposes that the Holy Spirit so informed the minds of the Biblical writers that they were kept from falling into the errors that mar all other books. The Bible might contain an account of a genuine revelation of God, and yet not contain a true account. But according to the doctrine of inspiration, the account is as a matter of fact a true account; the Bible is an "infallible rule of faith and practice."

Certainly that is a stupendous claim, and it is no wonder that it has been attacked. But the trouble is that the attack is not always fair. If the liberal preacher objected to the doctrine of plenary inspiration on the ground that as a matter of fact there are errors in the Bible, he might be right and he might be wrong, but at any rate the discussion would be conducted on the proper ground. But too often the preacher desires to avoid the delicate question of errors in the Bible—a question which might give offence to the rank and file—and prefers to speak merely against "mechanical" theories of inspiration, the theory of "dictation," the "superstitious use of the Bible as a talisman," or the like. It all sounds to the plain man as though it were very harmless. Does not the liberal preacher say that the Bible is "divine" —indeed that it is the more divine because it is the more human? What could be more edifying than that? But of course such appearances are deceptive. A Bible that is full of error is certainly divine in the modern pantheizing sense of "divine," according to which God is just another name for the course of the world with all its imperfections and all its sin. But the God whom the Christian worships is a God of truth.

It must be admitted that there are many Christians who do not accept the doctrine of plenary inspiration. That doctrine is denied not only by liberal opponents of Christianity, but also by many true Christian men. There are many Christian men in the modern Church who find in the origin of Christianity no mere product of evolution but a real entrance of the creative power of God, who depend for their salvation, not at all upon their own efforts to lead the Christ life, but upon the atoning blood of Christ—there are many men in the modern Church who thus accept the central message of the Bible and yet believe that the message has come to us merely on the authority of trustworthy witnesses unaided in their literary work by any supernatural guidance of the Spirit of God. There are many who believe that the Bible is right at the central point, in its account of the redeeming work of Christ, and yet believe that it contains many errors. Such men are not really liberals, but Christians; because they have accepted as true the message upon which Christianity depends. A great gulf separates them from those who reject the supernatural act of God with which Christianity stands or falls.

It is another question, however, whether the mediating view of the Bible which is thus maintained is logically tenable, the trouble being that our Lord Himself seems to have held the high view of the Bible which is here being rejected. Certainly it is another question—and a question which the present writer would answer with an emphatic negative—whether the panic about the Bible, which gives rise to such concessions, is at all justified by the facts. If the Christian makes full use of his Christian privileges, he finds the seat of Bible, which he regards as no mere word of man but as the very Word of God.

Very different is the view of modern liberalism. The modern liberal rejects not only the doctrine of plenary inspiration, but even such respect for the Bible as would be proper over against any ordinarily trustworthy book. But what is substituted for the Christian view of the Bible? What is the liberal view as to the seat of authority in religion? [3]

The impression is sometimes produced that the modern liberal substitutes for the authority of the Bible the authority of Christ. He cannot accept, he says, what he regards as the perverse moral teaching of the Old Testament or the sophistical arguments of Paul. But he regards himself as being the true Christian because, rejecting the rest of the Bible, he depends upon Jesus alone.

This impression, however, is utterly false. The modern liberal does not really hold to the authority of Jesus. Even if he did so, indeed, he would still be impoverishing greatly his knowledge of God and of the way of salvation. The words of Jesus, spoken during His earthly ministry, could hardly contain all that we need to know about God and about the way of salvation; for the meaning of Jesus' redeeming work could hardly be fully set forth before that work was done. It could be set forth indeed by way of prophecy, and as a matter of fact it was so set forth by Jesus even in the days of His flesh. But the full explanation could naturally be given only after the work was done. And such was actually the divine method. It is doing despite, not only to the Spirit of God, but also to Jesus Himself, to regard the teaching of the Holy Spirit, given through the apostles, as at all inferior in authority to the teaching of Jesus.

As a matter of fact, however, the modern liberal does not hold fast even to the authority of Jesus. Certainly he does not accept the words of Jesus as they are recorded in the Gospels. For among the recorded words of Jesus are to be found just those things which are most abhorrent to the modern liberal Church, and in His recorded words Jesus also points forward to the fuller revelation which was afterwards to be given through His apostles. Evidently, therefore, those words of Jesus which are to be regarded as authoritative by modern liberalism must first be selected from the mass of the recorded words by a critical process. The critical process is certainly very difficult, and the suspicion often arises that the critic is retaining as genuine words of the historical Jesus only those words which conform to his own preconceived ideas. But even after the sifting process has been completed, the liberal scholar is still unable to accept as authoritative all the sayings of Jesus; he must finally admit that even the "historical" Jesus as reconstructed by modern historians said some things that are untrue.

So much is usually admitted. But, it is maintained, although not everything that Jesus said is true, His central "life-purpose" is still to be regarded as regulative for the Church. But what then was the life-purpose of Jesus? According to the shortest, and if modern criticism be accepted, the earliest of the Gospels, the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark x. 45). Here the vicarious death is put as the "life-purpose" of Jesus. Such an utterance must of course be pushed aside by the modern liberal Church. The truth is that the life-purpose of Jesus discovered by modern liberalism is not the life purpose of the real Jesus, but merely represents those elements in the teaching of Jesus—isolated and misinterpreted—which happen to agree with the modern program. It is not Jesus, then, who is the real authority, but the modern principle by which the selection within Jesus' recorded teaching has been made. Certain isolated ethical

principles of the Sermon on the Mount are accepted, not at all because they are teachings of Jesus, but because they agree with modern ideas.

It is not true at all, then, that modern liberalism is based upon the authority of Jesus. It is obliged to reject a vast deal that is absolutely essential in Jesus' example and teaching—notably His consciousness of being the heavenly Messiah. The real authority, for liberalism, can only be "the Christian consciousness" or "Christian experience." But how shall the findings of the Christian consciousness be established? Surely not by a majority vote of the organized Church. Such a method would obviously do away with all liberty of conscience. The only authority, then, can be individual experience; truth can only be that which "helps" the individual man. Such an authority is obviously no authority at all; for individual experience is endlessly diverse, and when once truth is regarded only as that which works at any particular time, it ceases to be truth. The result is an abysmal skepticism.

The Christian man, on the other hand, finds in the Bible the very Word of God. Let it not be said that dependence upon a book is a dead or an artificial thing. The Reformation of the sixteenth century was founded upon the authority of the Bible, yet it set the world aflame. Dependence upon a word of man would be slavish, but dependence upon God's word is life. Dark and gloomy would be the world, if we were left to our own devices and had no blessed Word of God. The Bible, to the Christian is not a burdensome law, but the very Magna Charta of Christian liberty.

It is no wonder, then, that liberalism is totally different from Christianity, for the foundation is different. Christianity is founded upon the Bible. It bases upon the Bible both its thinking and its life. Liberalism on the other hand is founded upon the shifting emotions of sinful men.

_____

1. For what follows compare *History and Faith,* 1915, pp. 13-15.
2. It is not denied that there are some persons in the modern Church who do neglect the context of Bible quotations and who do ignore the human characteristics of the Biblical writers. But in an entirely unwarrantable manner this defective way of using the Bible is attributed, by insinuation at least, to the great body of those who have held to the inspiration of Scripture.
3. For what follows, compare "For Christ or Against Him," in The Presbyterian, for January 20, 1921, p. 9.

The Separateness of the Church

by J. Gresham Machen

Matthew 5:13: *Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men.*

In these words our Lord established at the very beginning the distinctness and separateness of the Church. If the sharp distinction is ever broken down between the Church and the world, then the power of the Church is gone. The Church then becomes like salt that has lost its savor, and is fit only to be cast out and to be trodden under foot of men.

It is a great principle, and there never has been a time in all the centuries of Christian history when it has not had to be taken to heart. The really serious attack upon Christianity has not been the attack carried on by fire and sword, by the threat of bonds or death, but it has been the more subtle attack that has been masked by friendly words; it has been not the attack from without but the attack from within. The enemy has done his deadliest work when he has come with words of love and compromise and peace. And how persistent the attack has been! Never in the centuries of the Church's life has it been altogether relaxed; always there has been the deadly chemical process, by which, if it had been unchecked, the precious salt would have been merged with the insipidity of the world, and would have been henceforth good for nothing but to be cast out and to be trodden under foot of men.

The process began at the very beginning, in the days when our Lord still walked the Galilean hills. There were many in those days who heard him gladly; he enjoyed at first the favor of the people. But in that favor he saw a deadly peril; he would have nothing of a half-discipleship that meant the merging of the company of his disciples with the world. How ruthlessly he checked a sentimental enthusiasm! "Let the dead bury their dead," he told the enthusiast who came eagerly to him but was not willing at once to forsake all. "One thing thou lackest," he said to the rich young ruler, and the young man went sorrowfully away. Truly Jesus did not make it easy to be a follower of him. "He that is not with me," he said, "is against me." "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife and

children..., he cannot be my disciple." How serious a thing it was in those days to stand for Christ!

And it was a serious thing not only in the sphere of conduct but also in the sphere of thought. There could be no greater mistake than to suppose that a man in those days could think as he liked and still be a follower of Jesus. On the contrary the offence lay just as much in the sphere of doctrine as in the sphere of life. There were "hard sayings," then as now, to be accepted by the disciples of Jesus, as well as hard commands. "I am the bread which came down from heaven," said Jesus. It was indeed a hard saying. No wonder the Jews murmured at him. "Is not this Jesus," they said, "the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How is it then that he saith, I came down from heaven?" "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" Jesus did not make the thing easy for these murmurers. "Then Jesus said unto them, 'Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.'" At that many even of his disciples were offended. "This is a hard saying," they said, "who can hear it?" And so they left him. "From that time many of his disciples went back and walked no more with him." Many of them went back—but not all. "Then said Jesus unto the twelve, 'Will ye also go away?' Then Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life.'" Thus was the precious salt preserved.

Then came the gathering clouds, and finally the Cross. In the hour of his agony they all left him and fled; apparently the movement that he had initiated was hopelessly dead. But such was not the will of God. The disciples were sifted, but there was still something left. Peter was forgiven; the disciples saw the risen Lord; the salt was still preserved.

One hundred and twenty persons were gathered in Jerusalem. It was not a large company; but salt, if it truly have its savor, can permeate the whole lump. The Spirit came in accordance with our Lord's promise, and Peter preached the first sermon in the Christian Church. It was hardly a concessive sermon. "Him being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain." How unkind Peter was! But by that merciful unkindness they were pricked in their hearts, and three thousand souls were saved.

So there stood the first Christian Church in the midst of a hostile world. At first sight it might have seemed to be a mere Jewish sect; the disciples continued to attend the temple services and to lead the life of Jews. But in reality that little company was as separate as if it had been shut off by desert wastes or the wide reaches of the sea; an invisible barrier, to be crossed only by the wonder of the new birth, separated the disciples of Jesus from the surrounding world. "Of the rest," we are told, "durst no man join himself to them." "And fear came upon every soul." So it will always be. When the disciples of Jesus are really faithful to their Lord, they inspire fear; even when Christians are despised and persecuted and harried, they have sometimes made their persecutors secretly afraid. It is not so, indeed, when there is compromise in the Christian camp; it is not so when those who minister in the name of Christ have—as was said in praise some time ago in my hearing of a group of ministers in our day—it is not so when those who minister in the name of Christ "have their ears to the ground." But it will be so whenever Christians have their ears, not to the ground, but open only to the voice of God, and when they say simply, in the face of opposition or flattery, as Peter said, "We must obey God rather than men."

But after those persecutions, there came in the early Church a time of peace—deadly, menacing, deceptive peace, a peace more dangerous by far than the bitterest war. Many of the sect of the Pharisees came into the Church—false brethren privily brought in. These were not true Christians, because they trusted in their own works for salvation, and no man can be a Christian who does that. They were not even true adherents of the old covenant; for the old covenant, despite the Law, was a preparation for the Saviour's coming, and the Law was a schoolmaster unto Christ. Yet they were Christians in name, and they tried to dominate the councils of the Church. It was a serious menace; for a moment it looked as though even Peter, true apostle though he was at heart, were being deceived. His principles were right, but by his actions his principles, at Antioch, for one fatal moment, were belied. But it was not God's will that the Church should perish; and the man of the hour was there. There was one man who would not consider consequences where a great principle was at stake, who put all personal considerations resolutely aside and refused to become unfaithful to Christ through any fear of "splitting the Church." "When I saw that they walked not uprightly," said Paul, "according to the truth of the gospel, I said unto Peter before them all...." Thus was the precious salt preserved.

But from another side also the Church was menaced by the blandishments of the world; it was menaced not only by a false Judaism, which really meant opposition of man's self-righteousness to the mysterious grace of God, but also by the all-embracing paganism of that day. When the Pauline churches were planted in the cities of the Graeco-Roman world, the battle was not ended but only begun. Would the little spark of new life be kept alive? Certainly it might have seemed to be unlikely in the extreme. The converts were for the most part not men of independent position, but slaves and

humble tradesmen; they were bound by a thousand ties to the paganism of their day. How could they possibly avoid being drawn away by the current of the time? The danger certainly was great, and when Paul left an infant church like that at Thessalonica his heart was full of dread.

But God was faithful to his promise, and the first word that came from that infant church was good. The wonder had actually been accomplished; the converts were standing firm; they were in the world but not of the world; their distinctness was kept. In the midst of pagan impurity they were living true Christian lives. But why were they living true Christian lives? That is the really important question. And the answer is plain. They were living Christian lives because they were devoted to Christian truth. "Ye turned to God," says Paul, "from idols to serve the living and true God; and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come." That was the secret of their Christian lives; their Christian lives were founded upon Christian doctrine—upon theism ("the living and true God"), upon Christology ("his Son…whom he raised from the dead"), and upon soteriology ("which delivered us from the wrath to come"). They kept the message intact, and hence they lived the life. So it will always be. Lives apparently and superficially Christian can perhaps sometimes be lived by force of habit, without being based upon Christian truth; but that will never do when Christian living, as in pagan Thessalonica, goes against the grain. But in the case of the Thessalonian converts the message was kept intact, and with it the Christian life. Thus again was the precious salt preserved.

The same conflict is observed in more detail in the case of Corinth. What a city Corinth was to be sure, and how unlikely a place for a Christian church! The address of Paul's first epistle is, as Bengel says, a mighty paradox. "To the Church of God which is at Corinth" —that was a paradox indeed. And in the First Epistle to the Corinthians we have attested in all its fullness the attempt of paganism, not to combat the Church by a frontal attack, but to conquer it by the far deadlier method of merging it gradually and peacefully with the life of the world. Those Corinthian Christians were connected by many ties with the pagan life of their great city. What should they do about clubs and societies; what should they do about invitations to dinners where meat that had been offered to idols was set before the guests? What should they do about marriage and the like? These were practical questions, but they involved the great principle of the distinctness and exclusiveness of the Church. Certainly the danger was very great; the converts were in great danger, from the human point of view, of sinking back into the corrupt life of the world.

But the conflict was not merely in the sphere of conduct. More fundamentally it was in the sphere of thought. Paganism in Corinth was far too astute to think that Christian life could be attacked when Christian doctrine remained. And so pagan practice was promoted by an appeal to pagan theory; the enemy engaged in an attempt to sublimate or explain away the fundamental things of the Christian faith. Somewhat after the manner of the Auburn "Affirmationists" in our day, paganism in the Corinthian church sought to substitute the Greek notion of the immortality of the soul for the Christian doctrine of the Resurrection. But God had his witness; the apostle Paul was not deceived; and in a great passage—the most important words, historically, perhaps, that have ever been penned—he reviewed the sheer factual basis of the Christian faith. "How that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures." There is the foundation of the Christian edifice. Paganism was gnawing away—not yet directly, but by ultimate implication—at that foundation in Corinth, as it has been doing so in one way or another ever since, and particularly in the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America just at the present time. But Paul was there, and many of the five hundred witnesses were still alive. The Gospel message was kept distinct, in the Pauline churches, from the wisdom of the world; the precious salt was still preserved.

Then, in the second century, there came another deadly conflict. It was again a conflict not with an enemy without, but with an enemy within. The Gnostics used the name of Christ; they tried to dominate the Church; they appealed to the epistles of Paul. But despite their use of Christian language they were pagan through and through. Modern scholarship, on this point, has tended to confirm the judgment of the great orthodox writers of that day; Gnosticism was at bottom no mere variety of Christian belief, no mere heresy, but paganism masquerading in Christian dress. Many were deceived; the danger was very great. But it was not God's will that the Church should perish. Irenaeus was there, and Tertullian with his vehement defence. The Church was saved—not by those who cried "Peace, peace, when there is no peace," but by zealous contenders for the faith. Again, out of a great danger, the precious salt was preserved.

Time would fail us to speak of Athanasius and of Augustine and the rest, but they too were God's instruments in the preservation of the precious salt. Certainly the attack in those days was subtle enough almost to deceive the very elect. Grant the Semi-Arians their one letter in *homoiousios*, the smallest letter of the Greek alphabet, and Christ would have been degraded to the level of a creature, mythology would have been substituted for the living God, and the victory of

paganism would have been complete. From the human point of view the life of the Church was hanging by a hair. But God was watching over his own; Athanasius stood against the world; and the precious salt was preserved.

Then came the Middle Ages. How long and how dark, in some respects, was the time! It is hard to realize that eleven centuries elapsed between Augustine and Luther, yet such was the case. Never in the interval, indeed, was God altogether without his witnesses; the light still shone from the sacred page; but how dim, in that atmosphere, the light seemed to be! The Gospel might have seemed to be buried forever. Yet in God's good time it came forth again with new power—the same Gospel that Augustine and Paul had proclaimed. What stronger proof could there be that that Gospel had come from God? Where in the history of religion is there any parallel for such a revival, after such an interval, and with such a purity of faithfulness to what had formerly been believed? A Gospel that survived the Middle Ages will probably, it may well be hoped, never perish from the earth, but will be the word of life unto the end of the world.

Yet in those early years of the sixteenth century how dark was the time! When Luther made his visit to Rome, what did he find—what did he find there in the centre of the Christian world? He found paganism blatant and triumphant and unashamed; he found the glories of ancient Greece come to life in the Italian Renaissance, but with those glories the self-sufficiency and the rebellion against the God and the moral degradation of the natural man. Apparently paganism had at last won its age-long battle; apparently it had made a clean sweep over the people of God; apparently the Church had at last become quite indistinguishable from the world.

But in the midst of the general wreck one thing at least was preserved. Many things were lost, but one thing was still left—the medieval Church had never lost the Word of God. The Bible had indeed become a book with seven seals; it had been buried under a mass of misinterpretation never equaled perhaps until the absurdities indulged in by the Modernism of the present day—a mass of misinterpretation which seemed to hide it from the eyes of men. But at last an Augustinian monk penetrated beneath the mass of error, read the Scriptures with his own eyes, and the Reformation was born. Thus again was the precious salt preserved.

Then came Calvin and the great consistent system which he founded upon the Word of God. How glorious were even the by-products of that system of revealed truth; a great stream of liberty spread from Geneva throughout Europe and to America across the sea. But if the by-products were glorious, more glorious by far was the truth itself, and the life that it caused men to live. How sweet and beautiful a thing was the life of the Protestant Christian home, where the Bible was the sole guide and stay! Have we really devised a substitute for that life in these latter days? I think not, my friends. There was liberty there, and love, and peace with God.

But the Church after the Reformation was not to have any permanent rest, as indeed it is probably not to have rest at any time in this evil world. Still the conflict of the ages went on, and paganism prepared for an assault greater and more insidious perhaps than any that had gone before. At first there was a frontal attack—Voltaire and Rousseau and the Goddess Reason and the terrors of the French Revolution and all that. As will always be the case, such an attack was bound to fail. But the enemy has now changed his method, and the attack is coming, not from without, but in far more dangerous fashion, from within. During the past one hundred years the Protestant churches of the world have gradually been becoming permeated by paganism in its most insidious form.

Sometimes paganism is blatant, as, for example, in a recent sermon in the First Presbyterian Church of New York, the burden of which was, "I Believe in Man." That was the very quintessence of the pagan spirit—confidence in human resources substituted for the Christian consciousness of sin. But what was there blatant is found in subtler forms in many places throughout the Church. The Bible, with a complete abandonment of all scientific historical method and of all common sense, is made to say the exact opposite of what it means; no Gnostic, no medieval monk with his fourfold sense of Scripture, ever produced more absurd Biblical interpretation than can be heard every Sunday in the pulpits of New York. Even prayer in many quarters is made a thinly disguised means of propaganda against the truth of the Gospel; men pray that there may be peace, where peace means victory for the enemies of Christ. Thus gradually the Church is being permeated by the spirit of the world; it is becoming what the Auburn Affirmationists call an "inclusive" church; it is becoming salt that has lost its savor and is henceforth good for nothing but to be cast out and to be trodden under foot of men.

At such a time, what should be done by those who love Christ? I think, my friends, that they should at least face the facts; I do not believe that they should bury their heads like ostriches in the sand; I do not think that they should soothe themselves with the minutes of the General Assembly or the reports of the Boards or the imposing rows of figures which the church papers contain. Last week it was reported that the churches of America increased their membership by 690,000. Are

The Rev. Dr. Kari McClellan is President of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry (PFFM). Rev. Susan Cyre is Executive Director and Editor of *Theology Matters* ™. The Board of Directors of PFFM includes 12 people, clergy and lay, women and men. PFFM is working to restore the strength and integrity of the PC(USA)'s witness to Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Savior, by helping Presbyterians develop a consistent Reformed Christian worldview. *Theology Matters* is sent free to anyone who requests it. Please donate today to this vital ministry. **We can be contacted at scyre@swva.net; phone 540-898-4244;**

Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry
P.O. Box 3940
Fredericksburg, VA 22402-3940

---

you encouraged by these figures? I for my part am not encouraged a bit. I have indeed my own grounds for encouragement, especially those which are found in the great and precious promises of God. But these figures have no place among them. How many of these 690,000 names do you think are really written in the Lamb's Book of Life? A small proportion, I fear. Church membership today often means nothing more, as has well been said, than a vague admiration for the moral character of Jesus; churches in countless communities are little more than Rotary Clubs. One day, as I was walking through a neighboring city, I saw not an altar with an inscription to an unknown god, but something that filled me with far more sorrow than that could have done. I saw a church with a large sign on it, which read somewhat like this: "Not a member? Come and help us make this a better community." Truly we have wandered far from the day when entrance into the Church involved confession of faith in Christ as the Savior from sin.

The trust is that in these days the ecclesiastical currency has been sadly debased. Church membership, church office, the ministry, no longer mean what they ought to mean. But what shall we do? I think, my friends, that, cost what it may, we ought at least to face the facts. It will be hard; it will seem impious to timid souls; many will be hurt. But in God's name let us get rid of shams and have reality at last. Let us stop soothing ourselves with columns of statistics, and face the spiritual facts; let us recall this paper currency and get back to a standard of gold.

When we do that, and when we come to God in prayer—with the real facts spread before Him, as Hezekiah spread before him the letter of the enemy—there will be some things to cheer our hearts. God has not left himself altogether without his witnesses. Humble they may often be, and despised by the wisdom of the world; but they are not perhaps altogether without the favor of God. In China, in Great Britain, and in America there have been some who have raised their voices bravely for their Savior and Lord.

True, the forces of unbelief have not yet been checked, and none can say whether our own American Presbyterian church, which we love so dearly, will be preserved. It may be that paganism will finally control and that Christian men and women may have to withdraw from a church that has lost its distinctness from the world. Once in the course of history, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, that method of withdrawal was God's method of preserving the precious salt. But it may be also that our Church in its corporate capacity, in its historic grandeur, may yet stand for Christ. God grant that it may be so! The future at any rate is in God's hand, and in some way or other—let us learn that much from history—the salt will be preserved.

What are you going to do, my brothers, in this great time of crisis? What a time it is to be sure! What a time of glorious opportunity! Will you stand with the world? Will you shrink from controversy? Will you witness for Christ only where witnessing costs nothing? Will you pass through these stirring days without coming to any real decision? Or will you learn the lesson of Christian history? Will you penetrate, by your study and your meditation, beneath the surface? Will you recognize in that which prides itself on being modern an enemy that is as old as the hills? Will you hope, and pray, not for a mere continuance of what now is, but for a rediscovery of the Gospel that can make all things new? Will you have recourse to the charter of Christian liberty in the Word of God? God grant that some of you may do that! God grant that some of you, even though you be not now decided, may come to say, as you go forth into the world: "It is hard in these days to be a Christian; the adversaries are strong; I am weak; but thy Word is true and thy Spirit will be with me; here am I, Lord, send me."

Donate now to this important ministry:
Theology Matters
P.O. Box 3940, Fredericksburg, VA 22402