

# Theology Matters

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## Christianity and Liberalism A Centennial Review

by Richard E. Burnett

This year marks the hundredth anniversary of J. Gresham Machen's *Christianity and Liberalism*. It is one of the bestselling religious books ever published in America. Even now it sells more copies annually, is read more widely, and is cited more often than any book if not all the books by all the professors of any seminary if not all the seminaries of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).<sup>1</sup> There is no question about its significance. It set the terms but also the tone of many debates between American liberals, conservatives, fundamentalists, and evangelicals throughout the last century. It would be difficult to overestimate its influence on Christianity in America throughout the twentieth century and even today.

But what has been its impact? How did it shape the thinking of its readers? How effective was it in changing people's minds? To answer these questions requires, among many other things, a basic understanding of the nature of the liberalism that Machen sought to overcome. What sort was it? What was its content? What were its intellectual and spiritual origins? How did it emerge?

### What Sort of Liberalism?

What Machen had in mind was not *political* liberalism that irrupted in France and America in the late eighteenth century. It was *theological* liberalism, namely, Protestant liberalism, which, in his estimation, arose a few decades later because of a broad cultural movement in Western civilization. He states in his Introduction, "modern natur-

alistic liberalism has not come by chance, but has been occasioned by important changes which have recently taken place in the conditions of life. The past one hundred years have witnessed the beginning of a new era in human history, which may conceivably be regretted, but certainly cannot be ignored." Such changes are obvious even to "the plain man at a hundred points. Modern inventions and the industrialism that has been built upon them have given us in many respects a new world to live in."<sup>2</sup>

So, it was the Industrial Revolution, the cotton gin, steam engine, trains, electricity, etc., that changed our political, economic, and social life so profoundly. "But," Machen adds, "such changes in the material conditions of life do not stand alone; they have been produced by mighty changes in the human mind, as in their turn they themselves give rise to further spiritual changes." Without elaborating these changes, Machen asserts what few denied: "The industrial world of today has been produced not by blind forces of nature but by the conscious activity of the human spirit; it has been produced by the achievements of science. The outstanding feature of recent history is an enormous widening of human knowledge, which has gone hand in hand with such perfecting of the

### Table of Contents

<i>Christianity and Liberalism: A Centennial Review</i> ....p. 1
Why Tradition?.....p. 8

instrument of investigation that scarcely any limits can be assigned to future progress in the material realm.”<sup>3</sup>

Machen posits here what is called “the secularist thesis,” the story or idea of modernity as the era in which science has triumphantly advanced as religion has been forced to retreat. Such a retreat, he implies, was not necessary. But Protestant liberalism, he claims, is defined by this retreat.

It is worth asking whether Machen saw Protestant liberalism as responding to challenges beyond those posed by industrialization and science, i.e., whether he saw its origins as older or more deeply rooted?<sup>4</sup> At any rate, he did not think what had happened in the last hundred years was all bad. Rather, he said, “the application of modern scientific methods” has produced manifold benefits.<sup>5</sup> No troglodyte, Machen extolled the virtues of modern scientific inquiry.<sup>6</sup> Still, he recognized that it posed “a serious problem to the modern Church” because many of its claims, not least about the Bible, are now “the subject of scientific investigation” in ways they have never been.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Attempt to Rescue Christianity**

“Religion, it is said, is so entirely separate from science, that the two, rightly defined, cannot possibly come into conflict.” Such a view was held by most theologians throughout the nineteenth century, both conservatives and liberals, from Friedrich Schleiermacher to Charles Hodge. Yet such a view is no longer tenable, Machen claims, because “rightly or wrongly, religion during the centuries has as a matter of fact connected itself with a host of convictions, especially in the sphere of history, which may form the subject of scientific investigation.” And modern scientific investigators routinely call them into question and often draw radical conclusions.<sup>8</sup>

Some scholars claim, for example, that Jesus never existed. Machen states, “If any simple Christian of one hundred years ago, or even of today, were asked what would become of his religion if history should prove indubitably that no man called Jesus ever lived and died in the first century of our era, he would undoubtedly answer that his religion would fall away.” Yet this dilemma, Machen suggests, is today posed to the average Christian. The average, “simple Christian” does not necessarily see religion and science as two separate realms but sees them, increasingly, in conflict and feels compelled to choose between them. “In other words,” Machen says, “our simple Christian, whether rightly or wrongly, whether wisely or unwisely, has as a matter of fact connected his religion, in a way that to him seems indissoluble, with convictions about which science also has a right to speak.” “From every point of view, therefore, the problem in question is the most serious concern of the Church. What is the relation between Christianity and modern culture; may Christianity be maintained in a scientific age?”<sup>9</sup> Machen contends:

It is this problem which modern liberalism attempts to solve. Admitting that scientific objections may arise against the particularities of the Christian religion—against the Christian doctrines of the person of Christ, and of redemption through his death and resurrection—the liberal theologian seeks to rescue certain of the general principles of religion, of which these particularities are thought to be mere temporary symbols, and these general principles he regards as constituting ‘the essence of Christianity.’<sup>10</sup>

Before going further, it is worth asking: Is this an accurate description of what Protestant liberals thought? Certainly, many refused to affirm some, if not many, miracles of the Bible, and some refused to affirm any as historical, and, thus, to this extent, refused to affirm “the particularities of the Christian religion.” But I know only one person at the time who denied the existence of Jesus, the German gadfly philosopher, Arthur Drews, and his claim was deemed absurd even by most radical liberals.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, few Protestant liberals claimed that the life and work of Jesus Christ were mere “temporary symbols.” Even Ernst Troeltsch and many of his fellow historicists affirmed *The Absoluteness of Christianity* (1901). Most liberals did so even more absolutely. Nevertheless, it is true that owing to scientific objections many liberals tried to “rescue certain of the general principles of religion” at the price of abandoning many of “the particularities of the Christian religion.” Such it was for many Ritschlians who affirmed “the fatherhood of God” and “the brotherhood of man” as “constituting ‘the essence of Christianity,’” as did Adolf von Harnack in his famous lectures by this title at the University of Berlin in 1899–1900.<sup>12</sup>

Machen’s point, in any case, was that however well-intended, Protestant liberalism fails as a rescue operation. It fails to save Christianity because its accommodation strategy is doomed from the start: “For after the apologist has abandoned his outer defences to the enemy and withdrawn into some inner citadel, he will probably discover that the enemy pursues him even there.” The “enemy” is the modern materialist who reduces all theological claims to “the realm of psychology,” whether “Biblical doctrines” or those based on “the philosophical idealism of the liberal preacher.” Thus, Machen advocates, “Defend the outposts if you wish to defend the citadel.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, defend the miracles to save the fortress of faith. Defend the historical and supernatural character of “the particularities of the Christian religion” to save Christianity, which is what Protestant liberalism, in Machen’s estimation, fails to do.

It attempts to resolve the conflict between the Christian religion and modern science by granting validity to the latter’s claims at the expense of the formers. Instead of holding its ground, it concedes it. Abandoning the truth

claims of various “particularities of the Christian religion,” it treats them as “mere temporary symbols,” signifying “general principles of religion.” Liberalism, thus, undermines the very thing it seeks to establish. It destroys the very thing it “seeks to rescue.” It denies the very thing it claims to affirm. And the result of such “concessiveness” is that the liberal theologian is eventually forced to retreat to something “which is so entirely different from Christianity as to belong in a distinct category,” namely, “a vague natural religion.”<sup>14</sup>

### A Lack of Logic?

One can dispute whether Machen paints with too-broad-a-brush here. But there is truth in what he says. There were Protestant liberals who treated various “particularities of the Christian religion” as “mere temporary symbols,” signifying “general principles of religion.” And underneath these general principles of religion, there often was “a vague natural religion.” The problem was that few Protestant liberals ever affirmed a vague natural religion.

On the contrary, many liberals not only critiqued natural religion but vigorously critiqued the day’s leading materialist and naturalist philosophies. Almost the entire Philosophy Department at Princeton University, for example, was dedicated to critiquing the day’s leading materialist and naturalist philosophies, and by then few, if any, were considered conservatives. Moreover, many of Protestant liberalism’s most prominent spokesmen still talked a lot about Jesus. And they often did so reverently, lovingly, and passionately, and in ways that struck many people as powerful and persuasive—including many bright, educated, and influential people.

This was, of course, disturbing to Machen not merely because he believed they betrayed the truth of the Gospel, but because he knew how alluring such preaching could be. He knew the power behind it when he encountered Wilhelm Herrmann in the fall of 1905 in Marburg, Germany. Herrmann was like no one he had ever seen. “Such an overpowering personality,” he said, “I think I almost never before encountered—overpowering in the sincerity of religious devotion.” He is “so completely centered in Christ,” “so much deeper is his devotion to Christ than anything I have known in myself during the past few years.” Even at the end of Herrmann’s course, Machen wrote: “He is a Christian not because he follows Christ as a moral teacher; but because his trust in Christ is (practically, if anything, even more truly than theoretically), unbounded. It is inspiring to see a man so completely in Christ, even though some people might wonder how he reaches this result and still holds the views that he does about the accounts of Christ in the New Testament.”

Machen described his encounter with Herrmann as “an epoch in my life,” and it is one I am not sure he ever quite got over. It took him nearly a decade to work through

some of the implications. At the time, he commended to his family Herrmann’s *Communion of the Christian with God* as “one of the greatest religious books I ever read.” His mother, however, was not impressed with what she had heard and was afraid her son was in danger of being corrupted by Herrmann and his like, and so she—bright, sophisticated, “steel Magnolia” that she was—indirectly, gently, but firmly opposed his plan of staying in Germany and earning his doctorate. Minnie Machen’s opposition to her son’s plan caused a bitter disagreement between them and even a momentary break in their relationship.

Given their disagreement, it is ironic how the tables were turned a dozen years later when Minnie heard Henry Sloane Coffin preach. She may not have known that he, too, had been a student of Herrmann. But she knew that her son did not like his preaching and considered him a dangerous “liberal.” Yet after hearing a sermon by Coffin, she wrote to her son on Aug. 29, 1917:

If I had not known what you told me of his “liberal” views, I would never have guessed it from his sermon. True, the Atonement was not in the sermon except by implication but the duty of allegiance to Christ as a divine Person was very forcibly put. Really there was more of *Christ* in the sermon than I have heard this summer from anybody.<sup>15</sup>

Machen responded a week later: “As for Coffin, what you say about him makes me feel that he can deceive almost the very elect by his use of Christian testimony.” Having read “his book,”<sup>16</sup> Machen said,

[I] cannot believe that his speaking of allegiance to Christ as a “divine Person” means what we might wish it to mean. It all depends upon what your definition of “divine” turns out to be. Put that definition low enough and even a thoroughgoing naturalism like Coffin’s can speak of Jesus as “divine.” The original Unitarians held a higher view, for they at least believed in God. The first article of the creed has gone with all the rest in modern liberalism—there men do not believe in “God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.” That is rejected as being theoretical and metaphysical. A dismal pantheism is usually professed—which does away with the free personality of God & obliterates the distinction between God & man.

Thus, if Coffin retained “a certain Christian attitude toward Jesus,” Machen said, it was owing to “a fortunate lack of logic.” “You can’t fool me about Coffin—I have heard him preach a number of times and have read his book, and so I know about where he stands.” Still, he acknowledged his appeal. “I heard one sermon from him in New York that gave me great sympathy for his attitude in these days when people simply can’t accept the New Testament as it stands. . . . The religious fervor of Coffin

and his undoubted talents make him a formidable opponent of the gospel in New York. It is another question whether he is right.”<sup>17</sup>

### **An Idea of God Independent of Jesus?**

Wary of Coffin-like liberals who spoke about the divinity of Christ or “Christ-like God,” Machen was determined to warn against them. He had reason to be circumspect. The idealism of the Ritschlian school—the wholesale discounting of theological claims to moral or ethical claims and their reluctance, if not refusal, to make metaphysical claims—exercised a significant influence on many American Protestant liberals. Therefore, when they spoke about the divinity of Christ, Machen was right to ask if such affirmations were based on “the philosophical idealism of the liberal preacher.” But his own effort to ground orthodox Christology and all truth claims about God, metaphysically or philosophically, is another matter. At a key point in *Christianity and Liberalism*, he asks:

How, then, shall God be known: how shall we become acquainted with Him that personal fellowship may become possible? Some liberal preachers would say that we become acquainted with God only through Jesus. That assertion has an appearance of loyalty to our Lord, but in reality it is highly derogatory to Him. For Jesus Himself plainly recognized the validity of other ways of knowing God, and to reject those other ways is to reject the things that lay at the very center of Jesus’ life.<sup>18</sup>

Machen continues: “As a matter of fact, when men say that we know God only as He is revealed in Jesus, they are denying all real knowledge of God whatever. For ‘unless there be some idea of God independent of Jesus, the ascription of deity to Jesus has no meaning. To say, ‘Jesus is God,’ is meaningless unless the word ‘God’ has an antecedent meaning attached to it.” That antecedent meaning, Machen goes on to elaborate, is provided by “rational theism.” “Rational theism, the knowledge of one Supreme Person, Maker and active Ruler of the world, is at the very root of Christianity.” Jesus’ knowledge of God was not merely “practical,” as modern liberals claim. It was also “theoretical.” It was knowledge based on “a relation to a real Person, whose existence was just as definite and just as much a subject of theoretic knowledge as the existence of the lilies of the field that God had clothed.” That Jesus said, “Consider the lilies of the field” and him who made them, shows that “Jesus was a theist,” indeed, a rational theist, and that “rational theism is at the basis of Christianity.”<sup>19</sup>

Machen’s defense of rational theism as “the very root of Christianity” led him to assert the epistemological primacy of metaphysics, philosophy, and natural religion. His arguments cannot be elaborated here.<sup>20</sup> But he knew subsequently that some of his statements on this topic

needed qualification, not least his statement: “Unless there be some idea of God independent of Jesus, the ascription of deity to Jesus has no meaning.” Two years later, still warning against “popular preachers of the day who use the phrase, the ‘Christlike God,’” and “who tell us that God is known only through Jesus,” Machen said:

If they meant that God is known only through the Second Person of the Trinity, the eternal Logos, I might perhaps agree; and for my agreement I might perhaps find warrant in the eleventh chapter of Matthew. But of course as a matter of fact that is not at all what they mean. What they mean is that all metaphysics having been abandoned or relegated to the realm of unessential speculation—all such questions having been abandoned, the soul of man may be transformed by the mere contemplation and emulation of the moral life of Jesus.<sup>21</sup>

Machen was willing to concede that at least some who said “God is known only through Jesus” might not necessarily be wrong. “If they meant that God is known only through the Second Person of the Trinity, the eternal Logos,” they might be right. His reference to Matthew 11 as a possible warrant is general, but verse twenty-seven makes it specific: “*All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.*” Such a verse—like so many others in the New Testament, e.g., “*No one comes to the Father but by me*” (John 14:6)—would seem to throw a monkey wrench into the idea that “rational theism ... is at the very root of Christianity,” that one must have “some idea of God independent of Jesus” based on metaphysics, natural philosophy, or at some tenets of natural religion, before one has “real knowledge of God.” In any case, Machen did not believe that most liberals who spoke of the “Christlike God” or who said “that God is known only through Jesus” had the Second Person of the Trinity in mind. What they had in mind, he believed, was “a religion of humanity symbolized by the name of Jesus.”<sup>22</sup> And, indeed, this was true of some who considered themselves liberals.

Machen grants that not all liberals embrace an abstract, impersonal deity. “The liberal preacher,” he says, “loves to speak of God as ‘Father.’ The term certainly has the merit of ascribing personality to God.” But the ascription is usually based on some vague concept of the “universal fatherhood of God” not taught in the New Testament. Liberals often employ the term father “because it is useful, not because it is true.” Still, he grants, “some liberals, though perhaps a decreasing number, are true believers in a personal God. And such men are able to think of God truly as a Father.” Nevertheless, Machen insists, “Jesus brought such an incomparable *enrichment* of the usage of the term, that it is a correct instinct which

regards the thought of God as Father as something characteristically Christian.”<sup>23</sup>

Machen’s concerns about the affirmations of some who spoke of the “Christlike God” were legitimate.<sup>24</sup> Some not only reduced all theological claims to moral claims. They rejected even the possibility of metaphysical claims.<sup>25</sup> Equally disturbing to Machen was their flight from history, their attempt to escape history, and to ignore or remain agnostic about the results of historical critical research, especially with the respect to the life of Jesus. Here again, however, not all liberals sought to escape history or ignore the results of historical criticism. Many were as interested in them as Machen was, if not more so, even if such results did not and could not yield the kind of knowledge Machen thought or hoped it could. And herein lies an important question about the approach taken in *Christianity and Liberalism*. Machen claims:

The modern liberal preacher reverences Jesus; he has the name of Jesus forever on his lips; he speaks of Jesus as the supreme revelation of God; he enters, or tries to enter, into the religious life of Jesus. But he does not stand in a religious relation to Jesus. Jesus for him is an example for faith, not the object of faith. The modern liberal tries to have faith in God like the faith which he supposes Jesus had in God; but he does not have faith in Jesus.<sup>26</sup>

This is a clear, clean, and concise description of the difference between liberals and orthodox believers. But, again, is it true? No doubt it was true of some liberals. But it was not true of many and, I suspect, most of them at the time. It was certainly not true of Herrmann, as Machen himself acknowledged (To recall, Machen said: “He is a Christian not because he follows Christ as a moral teacher; but because his trust in Christ is ... unbounded”). So, why did Machen claim that for liberals Jesus was merely “an example for faith, not the object of faith”? Why did he throw them all in the same pot?

The problem with such a sweeping judgment is not only that it mischaracterizes or impugns the faith of others or misses its mark so widely that those for whom Machen was aiming likely thought he was shooting at others and not them, or, more likely, that he was simply firing wildly or taking potshots. The deeper, wider, more serious problem is that it underestimates the power of the figure of Christ, which—whether as an ideal, symbol, or myth—persists to this day as an object of faith for millions throughout the world, regardless of its connection to the historical Jesus. Granted, it may not be an orthodox faith or even Christian faith. But is it true that the figure of Christ persists as an object of faith or trust among so many owing merely to a “lack of logic” on their part?<sup>27</sup>

## Deeper Theological Analysis

Such questions do not betray a lack of appreciation for Machen. He was right in his description of so many features of Protestant liberalism: Its tendency to focus on practice at the expense of theory, life at the expense of doctrine, social transformation at the expense of spiritual transformation, soup and soap at the expense of salvation—as if the former made any sense apart from the latter. Machen was right about the moralistic, finger-wagging, and, even then, virtue-signaling of so many liberals. He was right to warn against theological subjectivism, even if at times he risked a false objectivism. He was right to insist on the question of truth over and against ‘my personal truth’ games, even if at times he risked reducing the question of truth to questions of fact. He was right to warn against the “soul-killing collectivism” of the modern state and its threat to civil liberties, especially in the realm of education. Machen was right about so much. And, unlike many of his critics, I have no basic quarrel with his dystopic vision of Western culture in *Christianity and Liberalism*. Compared to T.S. Eliot’s *Wasteland* written a year earlier, it betrays an unbridled optimism.

Still, many questions remain about Machen’s project. He put a lot of stock in common sense, “Anglo-Saxon liberty,” and “Anglo-Saxon individualism.”<sup>28</sup> He put a lot of stock in the concepts of “supernaturalism” and “supernatural Christianity.” And despite his demurrals, he put a lot of stock in the concept of religion and in what the “modern science of history” could do. He also put a lot of stock in “the simple Christian,” the “plain” or “average man” and his *natural* ability to recognize the truth about himself and about God. Protestant liberalism, Machen thought, was more a top-down than ground-up movement that trickled down from intellectuals. Yet in contrast to Germany, Gary Dorrien makes a strong case in *The Making of American Liberal Theology* that it was in America a more grassroots “preachers’ movement.”<sup>29</sup>

Again, none of these questions should eclipse Machen’s contribution. He was right to question many in his day who spoke with marbles in their mouths about the deity of Christ. He was right to challenge those who rejected the authority of Scripture and assumed they could simply ignore, sidestep, or ‘get beyond’ such doctrines as the virgin birth, the bodily resurrection, and substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ. Machen was prescient—dare I say, prophetic—in predicting the trajectory of thought of many Protestant liberals, and he prepared the way for future critiques. In 1937, H. Richard Niebuhr offered his critique, “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a Kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross.”<sup>30</sup> When Niebuhr said it, it was considered prophetic. When Machen said as much fifteen years earlier, it was considered provocative. Though many Protestant liberals did not recognize themselves in his criticisms, I suspect one reason Machen

was considered so provocative is because so many of his criticisms struck so close to the bone.

Machen was perceptive in describing many features of Protestant liberalism. He was right about its “pantheizing” tendency—that it “tends everywhere to break down the separateness between God and the world, and sharp personal distinction between God and man.” But how did he know of this sharp personal distinction between God and man? Was it on the basis of philosophy, metaphysics, or some general or ‘natural revelation’ apart from and besides the revelation of God in Jesus Christ? If so, then on what basis or authority did he assert “the validity of other ways of knowing God”? Reason? Experience?<sup>31</sup>

I agree about liberal theology’s “concessiveness” and its tendency to abandon the “particularities of the Christian religion” for “general principles of religion.” But why was Machen not *more* particular about the “particularities of the Christian religion,” particularly its starting point? Did he see no other way to true knowledge of God than to begin with “some idea of God independent of Jesus”? Did he simply see no other alternative?

I could not agree more with Machen about the dangers of reducing the Christian faith to “a vague natural religion.” But did he see no danger in trying to overcome natural religion *with* natural religion, even if of a less vague sort? Does the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ according to Scripture merely supplement or “enrich” our “thought of God as Father,” as Machen claims, or does it not more so rather oppose and correct our prior thoughts of God as Father? Does the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ merely complete or confirm what we knew—or thought we knew—about God through “rational theism,” or does it undermine, overturn, and uproot such speculations?<sup>32</sup>

Machen calls “rational theism ... the very root of Christianity.” But is this what the Scriptures teach? Is it what Athanasius, the Nicene fathers, and ecumenical creeds teach? Is it what Luther, Calvin, and our confessions teach? Since when did rational theism become requisite for confessing faith in the God of the Bible? Since when did affirming a ‘god in general’ become necessary before affirming God in his particularity? As if rational theism would be easier for the church to overcome than classical theism, Deism, or Unitarianism. As if one must go to some pagan half-way house or philosophical storehouse of ideas to get the raw materials before going on to the Christian refinery of faith. As if idolatry were a necessary preliminary stage or preparatory school one must pass through before affirming faith in the one Triune God.

It may not be intuitively obvious to the casual observer, but these questions go to the root of Protestant liberalism. Therefore, any assessment of *Christianity and Liberalism* and its impact requires a deeper theological analysis of

these questions. It also requires a broader understanding of Machen’s life and times which is what I have tried to provide in a new biography, *Machen’s Hope: The Transformation of a Modernist in the New Princeton*.<sup>33</sup>

### So, Why Bother?

No one in America challenged Protestant liberalism more vigorously in his day than J. Gresham Machen. No one better understood or articulated many of its most basic beliefs. No one saw more clearly its power, influence, and attraction. No one did more to sound the alarm against its temptations. *However, Protestant liberalism was and is a more complex, varied, powerful, and deeply rooted phenomenon than Machen realized or, for that matter, perhaps any other American in his day realized.*

Today, Protestant liberalism no longer seems relevant to many Presbyterians I know, and I think I understand why. All my life I have heard evangelicals and conservatives within and without the Presbyterian Church say that “Protestant liberalism is dead.” “It’s over.” “Its ideas are bankrupt.” “So, why bother thinking about it?” And, of course, as incontrovertible evidence of its bankruptcy and death, I have heard it said, “Look at their churches.” “They’re empty!” “They’re not in hospice, they’re on ice.” “They’re in statistical free-fall.” I have heard such claims my entire life. And for most of my life, I more or less agreed that Protestant liberalism was dead. But then it finally dawned on me. Growing churches was never a top priority for most Protestant liberals I knew. Their priority was transforming the culture. And here they have been quite successful—more successful in some ways than I believe has been good for the church or the world.

Yes, mainline denominations are dying. But Protestant liberalism is not dead. Its ideas have wide currency in our culture and are embraced today by the children of many evangelicals and conservatives I know. Thus, while some may think that Protestant liberalism is done or that we are done with it, Protestant liberalism is not done with us. It remains a powerful force. Machen warned that we ignore it at our peril. And perhaps one reason it remains so influential is because we underestimated its power and failed to take it seriously enough—or worse, failed to take the faith of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church seriously enough. Protestant liberalism should not be feared or be our focus. But understanding it offers an opportunity to be tested and to grow, to learn our weaknesses and to understand better the truth of Jesus Christ who “is the same yesterday and today and forever.”

*This essay is a slightly revised version of a lecture delivered at the Presbyterian Scholars’ Conference on Oct. 17, 2023, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois.*

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<sup>1</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1923). Still a bestseller according to representatives of William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, which holds the original copyright, *Christianity and Liberalism* is now in the public domain and has many publishers, has been translated into Spanish, and is available as an audiobook.

<sup>2</sup> Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 2–3.

<sup>3</sup> Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 2–3.

<sup>4</sup> Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 17. More so than in Machen's day, the roots of Protestant liberalism are believed today to be older and to go deeper. And in America, Gary Dorrien claims that Protestant liberalism "is nearly as old its storied German counterpart" *The Making of American Liberal Theology I* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), xiv.

<sup>5</sup> "Though the most palpable achievements are in the sphere of physics and chemistry, the sphere of human life cannot be isolated from the rest, and with the other sciences there has appeared, for example, a modern science of history, which, with psychology and sociology and the like, claims, even if it does not deserve, full equality with its sister sciences. No department of knowledge can maintain its isolation from the modern lust of scientific conquest" Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Machen acknowledges: "In such an age, it is obvious that every inheritance from the past must be subject to searching criticism; and as a matter of fact some convictions of the human race have crumbled to pieces in the test." However, this has led to an overreaction such that "dependence of any institution upon the past is now sometimes even regarded as furnishing a presumption, not in favor of it, but against it," that is, traditional claims are now sometimes disbelieved simply because they are traditional. Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Whereas Friedrich Schleiermacher affirmed an "eternal covenant between the living Christian faith, and completely free, independent, scientific inquiry, so that faith does not hinder science and science does not exclude faith" (*On the Glaubenslehre: Two Letters to Dr. Lücke*, trans. James Duke and Francis Fiorenza (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1981, 64), Charles Hodge asserted: "Religion and science are twin daughters of heaven. There is, or there should be, no conflict between them" ("Address of Welcome on Behalf of the Board of Trustees." In *Inauguration of James McCosh, D.D. LL.D., as President of the College of New Jersey, Princeton, NJ*, New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1868, 10–11).

<sup>9</sup> Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 5–6.

<sup>10</sup> Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 6.

<sup>11</sup> Arthur Drews, *Die Christusmythe* (Jena: Eugene Diederichs, 1909). It is noteworthy that Drews's last book was *Deutsche Religion; Grundzüge eines Gottesglaubens im Geiste des deutschen Idealismus*, München, 1935.

<sup>12</sup> Ernst Troeltsch, *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions*, trans. David Reid (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006); Adolf von Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, trans. Thomas Bailey Saunders (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1901).

<sup>13</sup> This was the advice Machen's mentor, Francis Patton, once gave in a different context, "Let me not be misunderstood. I believe there is a common work of evangelization in which the denominations can cooperate. ... But the way to conserve that

which is common to all, is for each to be jealous of the doctrine that is peculiar to itself. Defend the outposts if you wish to defend the citadel." Francis Patton, "The Revision of the Confession of Faith," "The Revision of the Confession of Faith." *Independent*, Dec. 5, 1889, 14–16.

<sup>14</sup> Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 6–7.

<sup>15</sup> Letter from Mary Gresham Machen to J. Gresham Machen, Aug. 29, 1917. J. Gresham Machen Collection, Montgomery Library, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, PA.

<sup>16</sup> Henry Sloane Coffin, *Some Christian Convictions: A Practical Restatement in Terms of Present-day Thinking* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1915).

<sup>17</sup> Letter from J. Gresham Machen to Mary Gresham Machen, Sept. 6, 1917, J. Gresham Machen Collection. He added: "My sympathy, however, is diminished when I think of Coffin's ridicule of the men in New York Presbytery who are faithful to the confession that they have promised to support. That kind of thing is too much for me."

<sup>18</sup> Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 55–56.

<sup>19</sup> Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 55–56.

<sup>20</sup> J. Gresham Machen, "Christian Scholarship and the Building Up of the Church" (1932) in *Selected Shorter Writings*, ed. D.G. Hart (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2004), 156–157.

<sup>21</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *What is Faith?* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1991), 38–39.

<sup>22</sup> Machen, *What is Faith?*, 38–39.

<sup>23</sup> Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 58–59. Italics mine.

<sup>24</sup> Since the Council of Nicea, the church has confessed that there are false ways of understanding God as "Christlike" (e.g., Arius and his *homoiousios*). Nevertheless, as Michael Ramsey, Archbishop of Canterbury, puts it, "God is Christlike and in him there is nothing unChrist-likeness at all." Cited in John V. Taylor, *The Christlike God* (London: SCM Press, 1992), 100.

<sup>25</sup> Immanuel Kant is often charged with undermining metaphysics, but he did not reject *de jure* the possibility of metaphysical claims. He wrote a *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysic* in 1783. It is noteworthy that Machen refers to "the Kantian attack upon the theistic proofs" *Christianity and Liberalism*, 57.

<sup>26</sup> Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 85.

<sup>27</sup> For the logic of how "the image of a god dead on a cross" transformed and continues to exercise a powerful influence on the world, see Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (New York: Basic Books, 2019).

<sup>28</sup> Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 11–15.

<sup>29</sup> Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology I*, 248, 279, and 302. "Liberal theology arose in Germany as a creative intellectual response to these questions, but well before it acquired movement status there, similar religious stirrings began to appear in England, France, and the United States. The gods of the liberal tradition are German academics, but throughout the nineteenth century American Protestantism produced its own vital tradition of liberal religious thinking and piety" (xiv).

<sup>30</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (Chicago and New York: Willett, Clark and Company, 1937), 193.

<sup>31</sup> Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 63.

<sup>32</sup> Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 59.

<sup>33</sup> Richard E. Burnett, *Machen's Hope: The Transformation of a Modernist in the New Princeton* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2024).

# Why Tradition?

By Joseph D. Small

*People are always shouting they want to create a better future. It's not true. The future is an apathetic void of no interest to anyone. The past is full of life, eager to irritate us, provoke and insult us, tempt us to destroy or repaint it. The only reason people want to be masters of the future is to change the past. They are fighting for access to the laboratories where photographs are retouched and biographies and histories re-written.*

Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*<sup>1</sup>

The Reformed tradition, confessions of faith, and John Calvin may seem remote from the realities of twenty-first century North America. Adding to this difficulty, the concept of tradition itself is problematic, conjuring up images of a heavy past that weighs down progress by inhibiting insight and innovation. Especially in American culture, a widespread view that the past is a burden must be shed if we are to live freely in the here and now. Waves of immigrants to “the New World”—from the pilgrims who established Plymouth Colony to recent arrivals from Africa, Asia, and Latin America—have put their religious, political, or economic past behind them in search of a new life. The future, not the past, beckons Americans. In one of Gore Vidal’s novels chronicling America’s social and political history, a character observes, “The past for Americans is a separate universe with its own quaint laws and irrelevant perceptions.”<sup>2</sup>

Disregard for tradition that pervades North American life is conspicuous even among Christians, many of whom believe that the dogmas of the past must be left behind if we are to live faithful lives in the present. Protestant Christians are especially disparaging of tradition. One hackneyed caricature of the difference between Catholics and Protestants is that Catholics grant inappropriate authority to tradition while Protestants look only to the Bible as the guide for Christian faith and life. Like most sweeping generalizations, this notion conceals more than it reveals; yet, it discloses the widespread belief that tradition distorts and obscures truth, and so must be swept away. Evangelical Protestants imagine that we must scrape off the doctrinal barnacles of centuries to return to the pristine Christian community of the New Testament, while liberal Protestants imagine that we must erase centuries of racism, patriarchy, and Eurocentrism to construct the pristine Christian community of a new era. Little wonder that we are unsure

what to do with hundreds of years of Reformed history, not to mention the fifteen centuries of Christian faith and life that preceded the Reformation. Not surprisingly, we doubt the capacity of the Reformed tradition to help build shared faith and faithfulness among us.

Perhaps we should consider a historian’s distinction between tradition and traditionalism: “Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. Tradition is the living faith of the dead.”<sup>3</sup> Traditionalism is an uncritical repetition of an accumulated past, while tradition is a lively conversation with those who have lived and died the faith before us. Traditionalism confines us to the musty archives of a lifeless past, but tradition opens up our place within the communion of saints, putting us together with sisters and brothers in the faith throughout time and space who have lived within the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit. The experience and wisdom of our forebears in the faith are not inferior to our own; we do not stand at the apex of the history of God’s Way in the world. The alternative to traditionalism, an unquestioning reception of the past, is not an unquestioning faith in the present. Rather, tradition flows from our past into our present as a life-giving stream.

## Living Tradition

Wisdom about the nature of Christian faith and faithfulness does not begin with us, with our insights and actions. Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall notes: “By its nature Christian theology requires dialogue with and help from ‘a usable past.’” Hall is not an antiquarian, simply enamored of earlier periods; he expresses theology’s need for a *usable* past. “Theology,” he writes, “unlike popular philosophies cannot be spun out of one’s own or one’s culture’s immediate experience. It requires a tradition, a past, with which to struggle and from which to learn.”<sup>4</sup> Hall’s conviction notwithstanding, a danger looms over any age, surely evident in our own—arrogance toward those who have preceded us as we dispense with their lives and their wisdom in favor of our own experience and perceptions. The peril in turning from the past is particularly acute in the church because we then ignore the rich heritage of Christian tradition that is a formative part of what makes us who we are as believers. The contemporary church is rooted in the beliefs and practices of the communities that preceded it.



If we avoid serious conversation with the past, we are in jeopardy of accepting it mechanically or departing from it frivolously. Only if we engage the tradition thoughtfully can we both receive its fidelity to the gospel and critique its missteps.

It may be instructive to probe the church's deep tradition by listening to Irenaeus, a second-century bishop and theologian. Celebrated for his lengthy work *Against the Heresies*, a comprehensive refutation of mistaken speculations about the Christian faith, Irenaeus appealed to a summary of Christian belief known as the *regula fidei*, the "rule of faith." Rule of Faith refers to the account of Christian faith and faithfulness given by early church bishops to new believers in preparation for their confession of the church's faith at baptism. As a basic digest of the Christian story, these summaries were the focal point of Christian identity for the church and for individual believers, setting forth distinctive Christian convictions and behaviors in the midst of an incompatible culture. "Rule" may be a somewhat misleading term, because the rule of faith was not promulgated by a central authority and its wording was not fixed. But while the exact form of the rule of faith was specific to each bishop's diocese, the summaries were not divergent, for all expressed the central convictions that provided the whole church with norms of Christian faith and practice. Irenaeus himself sets out varying versions of the rule, but they were consistent with each other and with the accounts of other bishops. All followed the same three-part structure that was later developed in the Nicene Creed and Apostles' Creed. After almost nineteen centuries, we can recognize our faith in Irenaeus' version of the Rule:

And this is the drawing-up of our faith, the foundation of the building, and the consolidation of a way of life. God the Father, uncreated, beyond grasp, invisible, one God and maker of all; this is the first and foremost article of our faith. But the second article is the Word of God, the Son of God, Christ Jesus our Lord, who was shown forth by the prophets according to the design of prophesy and according to the manner in which the Father disposed; and through Him were made all things whatsoever. He also, in the end of times, for the recapitulation of all things, is become a man among men, visible and tangible, in order to abolish death and bring to light life, and bring about the communion of God and man. And the third article is the Holy Spirit, through whom the prophets prophesied and the patriarchs were taught about God and the just led in the path of justice, and who in the end of times has been poured forth in a new manner upon humanity over all the earth renewing man to God.<sup>5</sup>

The rule of faith was central expressed the gospel received from the apostolic witness, passed on through subsequent generations, and proclaimed in the church. It did not deal with every element of faith and it did not answer every question; it expressed the *core* of Christian faith, rehearsing the indispensable elements that make Christian faith what it is. A generation after Irenaeus, Tertullian followed his own rendition of the rule with the counsel that "provided the essence of the rule is not disturbed, you may seek and discuss as much as you like."<sup>6</sup>

Irenaeus, Tertullian, Athanasius, the Cappadocians, and others who struggled against false teaching drew the contrast between the church's enduring, commonly held tradition—the heart of Christian faith—and the unprecedented speculations of the heretics. One of Irenaeus' critical strategies was to mock the heretics for their disregard of the church's received tradition in their unseemly rush to outdo one another in devising something original and innovative. Irenaeus derisively notes, "Each one of them, as far as he is able, thinks up every day something more novel ... those of them who are acknowledged as the more modern endeavor to excogitate something new every day and to produce something that no one has ever thought of."<sup>7</sup> Irenaeus's reason for resisting novelties had nothing to do with a conservative fondness for stability, an antiquarian attraction to things from the past, or a fussy interest in scholastic precision. Irenaeus's concern was pastoral: He understood that knowing the truth about God and ourselves was vital if persons were to live fully within the good news of redemption. He knew that the corrosive effects of pagan culture could be resisted only through the reception of new life in the grace of the one triune God. The rule of faith's defense against speculative innovation was, first, essential to the well-being of people. This pastoral purpose was made explicit in the Nicene Creed's formal articulation of the rule, where the truth of the gospel is framed by the declaration that it is all "for us and for our salvation ... For our sake ..."

### **Chronological Snobbery**

Irenaeus confidently contrasted enduring truth with rash error, but we are less sure of our capacity to distinguish truth from heresy. Although we certainly do not wish to be counted among the heretics, we may make a somewhat more modest version of the heretics' mistake by turning our back on the seemingly tedious past as we search for something new, intriguing, exhilarating. Our desire for originality even results in snubbing what was considered "new" in Christian thought and life bare decades ago. Perhaps we are guilty of what C.S. Lewis called "chronological snobbery, the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on

that account discredited.”<sup>8</sup> Twentieth century theologians are now buried with those of previous centuries in the “history of doctrine” graveyard as we look eagerly for the latest proposal in “constructive” theology. Do we really imagine that the issues and problems we face are unique to our time and place? Do we truly believe that our thoughts and actions are at the pinnacle of human achievement, superior to all that has preceded us? Do we actually think that those who have lived and died the faith before us have nothing to tell us?

If we recognize the arrogance of ignoring the voices of our forebears, we may also realize that we have subjected ourselves to unseen limitations that diminish our capacity to know what is true. Our time is a period in time, just like all other eras; our place in history has horizons, just like all other locations. And so, like all places in all periods in time, we have a distinct outlook. We are able to see certain things quite clearly, but we are also blind to some things that people in other times and places saw in sharp focus. Lewis notes that

We may be sure that the characteristic blindness of [our] century—the blindness about which posterity will ask, “But how *could* they have thought that?”—lies where we have never suspected it, and concerns something about which there is untroubled agreement.”<sup>9</sup>

We may be able to detect the illusions of the past, but our own characteristic illusions go unnoticed, lurking in the shared assumptions we take for granted.

Contemporary Christians take for granted a wide range of convictions about God. We live in a culture, and a church, that assumes God’s benevolence. We are certain that, like Mister Rogers, God likes us “just the way we are.” We believe fervently that God is love—accepting, welcoming, hospitable, forgiving love. We are confident that God can be counted on to approve of us, for God understands that we try to be good people. When we slip up, God is always ready to forgive and to give us what we need to improve our lives. Our certainty that God loves us is reinforced by the hymns and praise songs we sing, the sermons we hear in church and on television, the popular media we enjoy, and the devotional literature we read. Confident of God’s benevolent care, we are grateful that we have progressed beyond a remote, austere image of God, such as the one in the seventeenth century Westminster Confession that describes God as “infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty; most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, working all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous will ...”<sup>10</sup>

Westminster’s vision of God seems too severe; we much prefer to think of our God in the words of the late twentieth century’s A Brief Statement of Faith:

We trust in God,  
whom Jesus called Abba, Father.  
In sovereign love, God created the world good  
and makes everyone equally in God’s image,  
male and female, of every race and people,  
to live as one community.  
But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator ...  
Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation.  
In everlasting love,  
the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant  
people  
to bless all families of the earth.  
Hearing their cry,  
God delivered the children of Israel  
from the house of bondage.  
Loving us still,  
God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant.  
Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child,  
like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home,  
God is faithful still.<sup>11</sup>

When we hear the words of Westminster, we wonder, “How *could* they have thought that?” How could the “Westminster Divines” have painted such a somber picture of God? Didn’t they know what we know about the everlasting love of God that will not forsake us, always welcomes us, and constantly develops our potential? Were they blind to the love of God? Actually, they were not blind, for the Westminster Confession of Faith does not stop with words about God’s transcendent power. It goes on to affirm that God is “most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek him.”<sup>12</sup> Although its seventeenth century mode of expression is different from our preferred way of speaking, Westminster appears to give a fuller picture of God than does A Brief Statement of Faith. The Westminster Divines might well ask of us, “How *could* you think *only* that? Where in your articulation of God’s love is there a clear sense of God’s sovereign majesty, God’s holy transcendence, God’s eternal reign over all time and space? Have you no sense that God’s love requires much of you and judges your departures from His ways of love? Where is your sense of holy awe?”

Questioned by Westminster, we may be able to hear more clearly the biblical witness that God is both loving and awe-inspiring, both forgiving and challenging. The psalmist understood: “I sing your love all my days, Lord, your faithfulness, from age to age. I know your love is unending, your fidelity outlasts the heavens” (Psalm

89:1-2) and “Great and dreaded God, you strike terror among the holy ones. Who is like you, Lord of might, clothed in truth, a God of power” (vv. 8-9). Paul understood: “I am convinced that neither death nor life ... nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God” (Romans 8:38-39) and “How unsearchable are [God’s] judgments and how inscrutable his ways” (11:33). Westminster may enable us to understand that the one who is “the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation” (2 Corinthians 1:3) will also require us to “appear before the judgment seat of Christ” (5:10). The point here is not that the Westminster Confession of Faith has it all right or that A Brief Statement of Faith is hopelessly inadequate. Both Westminster and A Brief Statement represent a particular context, and each contains particular insights that the other may not fully appreciate. We may say to Westminster that, while its articulation of God’s love is technically true, its abstract language conceals the rich depth of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit that is captured in the more biblical language of A Brief Statement of Faith. We may also be able to thank Westminster for bringing to light our neglect of the scriptural witness to God’s transcendent holiness. Without the awe of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom, our understanding of God’s love can easily become domesticated, reduced to a trivial expression of sentimental affection. While retaining the insight of A Brief Statement of Faith, we can open our ears to hear the voices of our forebears in faith, and thereby deepen our understanding of who God really is.

### **Voices Long Silenced**

Tradition, the living faith of those who have gone before us, need not be a weight that must be shed to live free and faithful in Christ. Tradition can be liberating, freeing us from captivity to the limited perspective of our time and place. Without the capacity to transcend the taken-for-granted assumptions of twenty-first-century North America, we become prisoners in the tiny cell of “here and now.” Ignoring the church’s tradition because we fear that the past may oppress us only subjects us to the tyranny of the present. A Brief Statement of Faith calls upon the church “to hear the voices of peoples long silenced.”<sup>13</sup> Among the long-silenced voices we need to hear are the voices of all who have gone before us in the living of Christian faith.

Attending to the Reformed tradition, we recognize that our forebears have something to say to us, and that we have something to learn from them. It provides us with conversation partners who can help us to ask questions that might not occur to us, and who can suggest answers that expand our possibilities. The Reformed tradition is not an authority to be accepted simply because it pre-

cedes us, or because we may be part of a denomination that claims its heritage. We do not substitute Calvin, or the confessions, or pronouncements of general assemblies and synods for the witness of the Scriptures. In fact, we measure their words by their fidelity to the Bible. Nevertheless, we listen to their words in the expectation that we will be guided, led, and instructed by their attempts to bear witness to the one Word of God, Jesus Christ.

Feminist theologians and scholars from racial ethnic communities within the church understand the necessity of probing the tradition. “If tradition is the still living and evolving past used to shape the future,” says Letty Russell, “the question immediately arises, What if you do not have a past?”<sup>14</sup> The unpleasant reality is that the central role of women in the church and the vitality of racial ethnic communities of faith often have been ignored by the dominant tradition. Racial ethnic and women thinkers understand the dangers that come with the loss of their traditions and the need to reclaim what has been concealed. “Awareness of their own history and struggles is frequently nonexistent among women as a group,” says Russell. “Yet it is toward such a search for a *usable history* that they must turn to build a still living and evolving past in order to shape their future as partners in society.”<sup>15</sup> Gayraud Wilmore notes, “On the basis of the meaning of Black presence within the denomination and American Christianity as a whole, Black Presbyterians need to make a choice about whether they intend to carry on and enhance the tradition, or abandon it to the archives.”<sup>16</sup> Recovering the pasts of women and racial ethnic communities (as well as recovering the reality of their suppression) is vital—not only for these groups, but for the enrichment of the whole church. There are times when enrichment comes in the form of rebuke that can lead to repentance of a deeply flawed past. South African theologian Allan Boesak reminds us that the evil system of apartheid was based on Christian principles! He lays bare the reality that “Apartheid was born out of the Reformed tradition ... It is Reformed Christians who have split the church on the basis of race and color.”<sup>17</sup> When A Brief Statement of Faith calls upon the church “to hear the voices of peoples long silenced” it also has in mind those who were consigned to the margins of the church’s life. Among the long-silenced voices we are to hear are the voices of *all* who have gone before us in the life of Christian faith.

### **The Circle of Faith**

Calvin was one of the principal leaders of the sixteenth century Reformation, but he did not discard the entire life and faith of the church that had preceded him. Replying to the charge that Reformation teaching was a departure from church tradition, Calvin readily acknowledged that “the ancient fathers” [the tradition of the early centuries

of the church] wrote “many wise and excellent things.” But, Calvin continued, “so-called pious children of theirs ... worship only the faults and errors of the fathers. The good things that these fathers have written they either do not notice, or misrepresent or pervert.”<sup>18</sup> For Calvin, the Christian tradition contained both “faults and errors” and “good things.” Throughout his own thinking of the faith, Calvin took notice of the tradition of the church, receiving from it many wise and excellent things. Calvin was also clear that even good things from the tradition were there “to serve us, not to lord it over us.”<sup>19</sup>

Christian tradition—including John Calvin—must not lord it over us. Christian tradition—including John Calvin—can serve us. As we listen to the questions and insights and answers of our forebears we hear questions we never thought to ask, insights we never imagined, and answers that never occurred to us. Our response to the questions, insights, and answers of our predecessors must be receptive, but also probing and evaluative. How else can we distinguish between “faults and errors” and “wise and excellent things”? Our critique of tradition is not based on our own presuppositions and perspectives, but on Scripture, which nourishes us as it nourished our forebears. Boesak was rightly critical of the faults and errors of the Reformed tradition, but he was also grateful for the tradition’s good things. His indictment of the Reformed approval of apartheid was accompanied by his conviction that “in true Reformed theology ... the recognition of the broken, sinful reality of our world becomes the impulse toward reformation and healing.”<sup>20</sup>

What Jaroslav Pelican calls *traditionalism* is marked by the compulsion “to give a re-statement to that great system which is known as the Reformed Faith or Calvinism, and to show that this is beyond all doubt the teaching of the Bible and of reason.”<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, a truly Reformed understanding of the tradition is evidenced by Jeanne d’Albret, a sixteenth century leader of the Reformed Church in France, who wrote to her cousin, the Cardinal d’Armagnac, “I follow Beza, Calvin, and others only in so far as they follow Scripture.”<sup>22</sup> No element of the Christian tradition may simply be taken for granted. None should be appropriated just because it is ancient or venerable. Each must be assessed by the standard of the original, formative witness of Scripture. Like Jeanne d’Albret, we can appraise our forebears and our contemporaries by the standard of the Scriptures, following them as they are faithful to the biblical witness.

A naïve confidence in “progress” may have conditioned some of us to view the past as a series of deficient steps on the way to the pinnacle of modern wisdom. Elements of our inheritance even encourage this perspective. The Crusades, justifications of slavery, the Inquisition, denigration of women, and other errors are parts of the

Christian tradition we wish to put behind us; we believe we have progressed beyond that. Others of us, in despair about the sad history of the church, may be tempted to leapfrog backward to a presumed golden age of the church, whether the New Testament era, the Reformation, or the 1950’s. Neither romanticism about the present nor nostalgia for the past is true to historical and theological reality. Was the Spirit present and active in the early church, only to abandon succeeding generations of Christians to their own flawed devices? Did the Spirit sit on the sidelines of centuries of church life until becoming present and active in our time?

We stand in lively continuity with a living tradition. We cannot push our forebears aside as we stride back to the days of a pure church. Nor can we stand with our backs to our forebears, ignoring them as we press toward a more enlightened future. Rather, we sit in a circle with Ignatius and Athanasius, Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine, St. Francis and Luther, Calvin and Schleiermacher, Abraham Kuyper and Reinhold Niebuhr, Rachel Henderlite and Karl Barth, Edward Schillebeeckx and Leanne Van Dyk, along with countless anonymous disciples. Jesus Christ is at the center of our circle; our conversation with one another is about God with us, about the story of God’s Way in the world. As contemporary members of the circle, we may speak scathing words to the corrupt Innocent VIII, quarrel with Calvin about predestination, and address skeptical questions to Barth. Yet we will also hear Luther rail against the Babylonian captivity of the church, be challenged by Schleiermacher’s attempts to reach the “cultured despisers” of religion, face up to Calvin’s appraisal of human sin, and wrestle with Elizabeth Johnson’s proposals for language about God. As we sit in the circle of tradition, we are neither immodest judges nor submissive devotees. We are, with those who have gone before us, women and men who strive to know the way and the truth and the life, Jesus Christ, in whom “the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (Colossians 1:19).

Not every Christian must study the history of the medieval church, master Calvin’s *Institutes*, read Schleiermacher, or cope with Schillebeeckx (although some should, particularly ministers). The church’s tradition is not limited to intellectual history, and scholarship is not our only means of access to the tradition. We stand within a Reformed tradition that has shaped our forms of ministry (ministers of the Word and Sacraments, elders, and deacons); the way we govern our common life (consistories/sessions, classes/presbyteries, synods/conferences, and general synods/assemblies); our worship (the Genevan Psalter, the Westminster Directory for Worship, the *Book of Common Worship*); and the trajectory of our mission (Calvin, the Netherlands, Hudson River Dutch and New England Puritans, the

Great Awakenings in America, *The Confession of 1967*). Nothing in the history of the church's faith and life is the epitome of fidelity to the gospel, a pattern to be repeated endlessly. Yet the heritage of the church's faith and life must not be ignored, for it is the path by which we arrived at our present place. We are more likely to stay on the right paths if we know where we've been.

We smile at the witticism: The seven last words of the church are "We've never done it that way before." It's true enough that we get stuck in our ways (even when "the way it's always been done" was an innovation a mere fifteen years ago). Enthusiasm for new ways is not necessarily more faithful than reliance on old ways. Both the faith and life of past generations and new departures in faith and life must be subject to thoughtful critique, assessing the extent of their fidelity to God's Way as it has been revealed in Jesus Christ. Once we lay aside uncritical devotion to the old and uncritical enthusiasm for the new, we will discover that the promise of Jesus is sure: "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:12-13).

### **Teach Your Children Well**

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away" (Deuteronomy 6:4-7). For Israel, and for the church, the Way of God is not an impersonal memory, but a living reality. How is this living reality kept alive in the community of faith? The presence of God, love for God, and fidelity to God's Way in the world are not self-evident truths that will be received and believed by everyone.

Our children are no more likely to incorporate our faith than they are to follow in our occupational footsteps or duplicate our political views. They do not believe precisely what we believe; they may not believe at all. In fact, that seems to be what has happened over the past fifty years. Sociological studies of mainline churches in general and the Presbyterian Church in particular demonstrate that much of the staggering membership losses during recent decades are the result of a steady exodus from the church of the church's children. For too many children of believers, baptism, Sunday school, and confirmation lead not to faithful discipleship within the body of Christ, but to effortless departure from the community of faith. One hundred years ago Christians sang confidently:

We've a story to tell to the nations  
That shall turn their hearts to the right,  
A story of truth and mercy,  
A story of peace and light...<sup>23</sup>

Congregations that use newer hymnals no longer sing that hymn, perhaps because we are unsure that we have a story to tell to our children, let alone the nations. Or perhaps, against all evidence, we hope that the Christian story is self-evidently part of the fabric of American life and so will be absorbed by cultural osmosis.

Unless the community of faith has coherent convictions, shared beliefs, and common ways of being in the world, it will lack the identity necessary to differentiate it from the surrounding culture. The Christian community is not called to be a quaint religious ghetto in the midst of "secular humanism." Neither can the Christian community be content with communal and personal existence that is indistinguishable from the rest of the culture. "The culture" does not refer to opera, ballet, and art galleries, but is simply shorthand for customary social structures of meaning, ways of thinking and being that are integral to a society and its people. Over a generation ago, H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* set forth the enduring Christian problem of the relationship between church and culture.<sup>24</sup> Is the church pitted against a hostile culture? At home in a friendly culture? Serenely transcendent over culture? Separated from culture as a distinct "kingdom"? Or is the church the transformer of culture? Niebuhr was convinced that the culture is not an evil to be avoided or a patron to be embraced, that the church does not live in the heights above culture or in a realm distinct from the culture. Niebuhr thought that culture, as part of God's good but fallen creation, is to be transformed, converted, and brought into closer coherence with God's Way in the world.

Yet, today, an increasing number of Christians suspect that the culture has transformed the church! Has the church bought wholesale the assumptions, approaches, and values of North American culture, losing touch with the distinctive beliefs and practices of Christian faith and life? The American church's accommodation to the culture is not as gross as Christian capitulation to Nazi ideology or as petty as dancing and card playing. It is more insidious, though, for we may not even notice that anything is at stake. As a church, and as members of the body of Christ, we simply accept "the way things are" without imagining that Christian faith gives us an alternative way of looking at the world.

For more than three decades many American denominations have been preoccupied with interminable debates about two major moral issues, abortion and homosexuality. Poll results show that the views of

Christians on these two issues mirror the views of the American population at large. There is little distinction between the range of Christian views and the span of opinion in American society generally, and the disagreements among Christians follow the lines of our society's differences. Furthermore, as the culture's views shift, so do the views of church members. Similarly, the church's concern for poverty, the environment, and race follow the culture's trajectories, with church discussion of these issues little more than mildly religious versions of social discourse. Does the Christian community have nothing to say about abortion and homosexuality that is different from the range of views within American culture? Do Christians have no distinctive contribution to offer on developing discussions about care for the earth? The church/culture question is not confined to large social issues. Our culture's impact on the church may also be felt in easy Christian acquiescence to the norms of a consumer-oriented market economy. Are Christian congregations called to be full-service providers of religious goods and services? Should Christian denominations identify their market, brand themselves, and engage in media advertizing? Do effective management models really define the shape of Christian ministry? The point is not to assert that there is *the* Christian position on large social

issues, or that there is *one right* way to relate to broad social norms. It is only to suggest that when the Christian community has nothing to say that is different from the culture, no ways of living together that are different from the culture, it should not be surprised when its children abandon worship for Sundays at the mall.

Our tradition provides us with the wisdom of sisters and brothers who have preceded us in Christian living. Their convictions, forms of piety, and mission in the world cannot be adopted unchanged. Neither can they be ignored if we are to be faithful to the God who is Lord of all times and places. The Christian tradition, deep and wide, nourishes possibilities for faithfulness that will help us develop the knowledge of God and of ourselves that is true and sound wisdom for us and for our children.

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<sup>1</sup> Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (New York: Penguin, 1981), 22.

<sup>2</sup> Gore Vidal, *The Golden Age* (New York: Vintage, 2000), 445.

<sup>3</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 65.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas John Hall, *Bound and Free: A Theologian's Journey* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 73.

<sup>5</sup> Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, ¶3, trans. Joseph P. Smith. *Ancient Christian Writers*, No. 16 (New York: Paulist Press, 1952), 49.

<sup>6</sup> Tertullian, "Prescriptions Against Heretics," ¶14, *Early Latin Theology*, ed. S.L. Greenslade (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), 40.

<sup>7</sup> Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, I.18.1; I.21.5 trans. Dominic J. Unger & John J. Dillon. *Ancient Christian Writers*, No. 55 (New York: Newman Press, 1992), 72; 80.

<sup>8</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955), 207.

<sup>9</sup> C.S. Lewis, Introduction to *St. Athanasius on the Incarnation* (London: A.R. Mowbray, 1953), 5.

<sup>10</sup> The Westminster Confession of Faith, *The Book of Confessions* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 2002), 6.011.

<sup>11</sup> A Brief Statement of Faith, in *The Book of Confessions*, 10.3.

<sup>12</sup> A Brief Statement of Faith, in *The Book of Confessions*, 10.3.

<sup>13</sup> A Brief Statement of Faith, in *The Book of Confessions*, 10.4.

<sup>14</sup> Letty M. Russell, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective—A Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 80.

<sup>15</sup> Russell, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective*, 81.

<sup>16</sup> Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black and Presbyterian: The Heritage and the Hope* (Philadelphia: Geneva, 1983), 90.

<sup>17</sup> Allan Boesak, *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984), 85f.

<sup>18</sup> John Calvin, "Prefatory Address to King Francis," *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 18. Hereafter cited, "Address to King Francis."

<sup>19</sup> Calvin, "Address to King Francis," 18.

<sup>20</sup> Boesak, *Black and Reformed*, 90.

<sup>21</sup> Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1932), 1.

<sup>22</sup> Roland H. Bainton, *Women of the Reformation in France and England* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1973), 61.

<sup>23</sup> "We've a Story to Tell to the Nations," *The Hymnbook* (Richmond, Philadelphia, New York, 1955) Hymn 504.

<sup>24</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951).

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