

# J. Gresham Machen's Response to Modernism

1993 Bethlehem Conference for Pastors

[Listen](#)

---

January 26, 1993

By John Piper

---

## The Tragic End and the Institutions

On New Year's Eve, 1936 in a Roman Catholic hospital in Bismarck, North Dakota J. Gresham Machen was one day away from death at the age of 55. It was Christmas break at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia where he taught New Testament. His colleagues said he looked "deadly tired." But instead of resting, he took the train from Philadelphia to the 20-below-zero winds of North Dakota to preach in a few Presbyterian churches at the request of pastor Samuel Allen.

Ned Stonehouse, his New Testament assistant said, "There was no one of sufficient influence to constrain him to curtail his program to any significant degree" (see note 1). He was the acknowledged leader of the conservative movement in Presbyterianism with no one to watch over him. His heroes and mentors, Warfield and Patton were dead. He had never married, and so had no wife to restrain him with reality. His mother and father, who gave him so much wise counsel over the years, were dead. His brothers lived 1500 miles to the east. "He had a personality that only his good friends found appealing" (see note 2). And so he was remarkably alone and isolated for a man of international stature.

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

The following day—New Year's Day, 1937—he mustered the strength to send a telegram to John Murray his friend and colleague at Westminster. It was his last recorded word: "I'm so thankful for [the] active obedience of Christ. No hope without it." He died about 7:30 p.m.

So much of the man is here in this tragic scene. The stubbornness of going his own way when friends urged him not to take this extra preaching trip.

His isolation far from the mainline centers of church life and thought. His suffering for the cause he believed in. His utter allegiance to and exaltation of the Reformed Faith of the Westminster Confession. And his taking comfort not just from a general truth about Christ, but from a doctrinally precise understanding of the *active* obedience of Christ—which he believed was his own obedience in Christ and would make him a suitable heir of eternal life, for Christ's sake.

And so Machen was cut off in the midst of a great work—the establishment of Westminster Seminary and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. He hadn't set out to found a seminary or a new church. But given who he was and what he stood for and what was happening at Princeton, where he taught for 23 years, and in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., it was almost inevitable.

Westminster Seminary was seven years old when Machen died. The Presbyterian Church in America (which was forced under law to change its name, and became the Orthodox Presbyterian Church) was six months old, and Machen had been elected the first Moderator on June 11, 1936.

The occasion for starting a new Presbyterian church over against the huge Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. was that on March 29, 1935 Machen's Presbytery in Trenton, N.J. found him guilty of insubordination to church authorities (see note 3) and stripped him of his ordination. An appeal was taken to the General Assembly at Syracuse in the summer of 1936 but failed.

The reason for the charge of insubordination was that Machen had founded an independent board of foreign missions in June of 1933 to protest the fact that the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions endorsed a laymen's report (called *Rethinking Missions*) which Machen said, was "from beginning to end an attack upon the historic Christian faith" (see note 4).

He pointed out that the board supported missionaries like Pearl Buck in China who represented the kind of evasive, non-committal attitude toward Christian truth that Machen thought was destroying the church and its witness. She said, for example, that if some one existed who could create a person like Christ and portray him for us, "then Christ lived and lives, whether He was once a body and one soul, or whether He is the essence of men's highest dreams" (see note 5).

How serious was it that Machen could not give or endorse giving to this board? The General Assembly gave answer in Cleveland in 1934 with this

astounding sentence:

A church member ... that will not give to promote the officially authorized missionary program of the Presbyterian Church is in exactly the same position with reference to the Constitution of the Church as a church member ... that would refuse to take part in the celebration of the Lord's Supper or any other prescribed ordinance of the denomination (see note 6).

Thus Machen was forced by his own conscience into what the church viewed as the gravest insubordination and disobedience to his ordination vows, and removed him from the ministry. Hence the beginning of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

A few years earlier Machen had left Princeton Seminary to found Westminster Seminary. This time he wasn't forced out, but chose freely to leave when, the governing boards of the seminary were reorganized so that the conservative Board of Directors could be diluted by liberals (see note 7) more in tune with President Stevensen and with the denomination as a whole (see note 8).

Machen said,

If the proposed ... dissolution of the present Board of Directors is finally carried out ... [and] the control of the Seminary passes into entirely different hands—then Princeton Theological Seminary as it has been so long and so honorably known, will be dead, and we shall have at Princeton a new institution of radically different type (see note 9).

Well Princeton Seminary did die, in Machen's eyes, and out of the ashes he meant to preserve the tradition of Charles Hodge and Benjamin Warfield. So when he gave the inaugural address of Westminster Seminary on September 25, 1929 to the first class of 50 students and guests, he said,

No, my friends, though Princeton Seminary is dead, the noble tradition of Princeton Seminary is alive. Westminster Seminary will endeavor by God's grace to continue that tradition unimpaired (see note 10).

The title of this paper is J. GRESHAM MACHEN'S RESPONSE TO MODERNISM. What we have seen so far is, I believe, the most enduring

response he made: namely, the founding of these two institutions: Westminster Seminary (which today is a major influence in American evangelicalism) and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (which now, 56 years later, has only 188 churches and about 19,000 members, but may have a witness more significant than its size (see note 11)).

### **Where Did this Warrior for the Faith Come From?**

Who was J. Gresham Machen? Where did he come from? What shaped and drove him? More important than the mere fact of founding institutions is the question of the world-view that carried him through that achievement. And what was this thing called "Modernism" that engaged his amazingly energetic opposition? And what can we learn from his response today?

John Gresham Machen was born in Baltimore, Maryland on July 28, 1881, sixteen years after the civil war. His mother was from Macon, Georgia and was educated and cultured enough that she published a book in 1903 entitled *The Bible in Browning*. His father was a very successful lawyer from Baltimore. The family hobnobbed with the cultural elite in Baltimore, and had a vacation home in Seal Harbor and traveled often. Machen sailed to Europe and back some six times. In a word Machen was a well-to-do southern aristocrat.

He went to the private University School for Boys where classics were stressed, like Latin from the time he was 11. The family were devoted members of Franklin St. Presbyterian Church which was a part of the Southern Presbyterian Church.

This cultural atmosphere shaped Machen's views and sentiments in various ways. For example, he shared the southern paternalistic attitudes toward African Americans. In an essay for his first year at Johns Hopkins University when he was 17 he wrote of his home: "The servants are the real, old-fashioned kind-hearted Southern darkies" (see note 12). His view of the southern cause in the Civil War, still fresh in everyone's mind, was the same as his favorite professor's at John Hopkins:

That the cause we fought for and our brothers died for was the cause of civil liberty and not the cause of human slavery ... It was a point of grammatical concord that was at the bottom of the Civil War—"United States are," said one, "United States is," said another" (see note 13).

When he was 21 he inherited \$50,000 from his maternal grandfather. To

put that in perspective his first *annual* salary at Princeton was \$2,000. So he inherited 25 times an annual salary when he was 21 and when he was 35 he inherited a similar amount when his father died. When he died his assets totaled \$250,000 (see note 14). This explains why we can read time after time of Machen's funding ministry and publishing efforts with his own money.

As with most of us, therefore, the level at which Machen engaged the culture of his day was being powerfully shaped by the level of his upbringing and education. He went to Johns Hopkins University and majored in Classics, and then, with the urging of his pastor, went on to Princeton Seminary, even though he was not at all sure he would enter the ministry. And after seminary he spent a year in Germany studying New Testament with well known German scholars.

Here Machen met Modernism face to face and was shaken profoundly in his faith. Almost overpowering was the influence of Wilhelm Herrmann, the systematic theologian at Marburg, who represented the best of what Machen would later oppose with all his might. He was not casting stones over a wall when he criticized Modernism. Machen had been over the wall and was almost lured into the camp.

In 1905 he wrote home:

The first time that I heard Herrmann may almost be described as an epoch in my life. Such an overpowering personality I think I almost never before encountered—overpowering in the sincerity of religious devotion ...

My chief feeling with reference to him is already one of the deepest reverence ... I have been thrown all into confusion by what he says—so much deeper is his devotion to Christ than anything I have known in myself during the past few years ... Herrmann affirms very little of that which I have been accustomed to regard as essential to Christianity; yet there is no doubt in my mind but that he is a Christian, and a Christian of a peculiarly earnest type. 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 ...

Herrmann represents the dominant Ritschlian school ...

Herrmann has shown me something of the *religious* power

which lies back of this great movement, which is now making a fight even for the control of the Northern Presbyterian Church in America. In New England those who do not believe in the bodily Resurrection of Jesus are, generally speaking, religiously dead; in Germany, Herrmann has taught me that is by no means the case. He believes that Jesus is the one thing in all the world that inspires *absolute confidence*, and an *absolute*, joyful subjection; that through Jesus we come into communion with the living God and are made free from the world. It is the faith that is a real experience, a real revelation of God that saves us, not the faith that consists in accepting as true a lot of dogmas on the basis merely of what others have said ... *Das Verkehr des Christen mit Gott* is one of the greatest religious books I ever read. Perhaps Herrmann does not give the whole truth—I certainly hope he does not—at any rate he has gotten hold of something that has been sadly neglected in the church and in the orthodox theology. Perhaps he is something like the devout mystics of the middle ages—they were one-sided enough, but they raised a mighty protest against the coldness and deadness of the church and were forerunners of the Reformation (see note 15).

What Machen seemed to find in Herrmann was what he had apparently not found either in his home or at Princeton, namely, passion and joy and exuberant trust in Christ. At Princeton he had found solid learning and civil, formal, careful, aristocratic presentations of a fairly cool Christianity. He eventually came to see that the truth of the Princeton theology was a firmer ground for life and joy. But at this stage the spirit in which it came, compared to Herrmann's spirit, almost cost evangelicalism one of its greatest defenders. There is a great lesson here for teachers and preachers: that to hold young minds there should be both intellectual credibility *and* joyful, passionate zeal for Christ.

This experience in Germany made a lasting impact on the way Machen carried on controversy. He said again and again that he had respect and sympathy for the modernist who could honestly no longer believe in the bodily resurrection or the virgin birth or the second coming, but it was the rejection of these things without declaring yourself that angered Machen.

For example, he said once that his problem with certain teachers at Union Seminary was their duplicity:

There is my real quarrel with them. As for their difficulties with the Christian faith, I have profound sympathy for them, but not with their contemptuous treatment of the conscientious men who believe that a creed solemnly subscribed to is more than a scrap of paper (see note 16).

He wanted to deal with people in a straightforward manner, and take his opponents' arguments seriously if they would only be honest and up front.

His struggle with doubt gave him patience and empathy with others in the same boat. Twenty years later he wrote,

Some of us have been through such struggle ourselves; some of us have known the blankness of doubt, the deadly discouragement, the perplexity of indecision, the vacillation between "faith diversified by doubt," and "doubt diversified by faith" (see note 17).

Machen came through this time without losing his evangelical faith and was called to Princeton to teach New Testament which he did from 1906 until he left to form Westminster in 1929. During that time he became a pillar of conservative reformed orthodoxy and a strong apologist for Biblical Christianity and an internationally acclaimed New Testament Scholar with his book, *The Origin of Paul's Religion* published in 1921 (still a text at Fuller when I went there in 1968), and then his most famous book, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* in 1930.

### **Machen's Response to Modernism and to Fundamentalism**

Machen's years at Princeton were the two decades which are known for the ongoing modernist-fundamentalist controversy. We will see Machen's distinctive response to Modernism if we contrast it with what was known most widely as fundamentalism. In the process of defining his response the meaning of Modernism will become clear.

He was seen as an ally by the fundamentalists; and his ecclesiastical opponents like to make him "guilty" by association with them. But he did not accept the term for himself.

In one sense fundamentalists were simply those who "[singled] out certain great facts and doctrines [i.e., Fundamentals] that had come under particular attack, [and] were concerned to emphasize their truth and to defend them" (see note 18). But there was more attached to the term than that.

And Machen didn't like that. He said,

Do you suppose that I do regret my being called by a term that I greatly dislike, a "Fundamentalist"? Most certainly I do. But in the presence of a great common foe, I have little time to be attacking my brethren who stand with me in defense of the Word of God (see note 19).

What he didn't like was

- 1) the absence of historical perspective;
- 2) the lack of appreciation of scholarship;
- 3) the substitution of brief, skeletal creeds for the historic confessions;
- 4) the lack of concern with precise formulation of Christian doctrine;
- 5) the pietistic, perfectionist tendencies (i.e., hang ups with smoking (see note 20), etc.);
- 6) one-sided other-worldliness (i.e., a lack of effort to transform culture); and
- 7) a penchant for futuristic chiliasm (or: pre-millennialism).

Machen was on the other side on all these things. And so "he never spoke of himself as a Fundamentalist" (see note 21).

But none of those issues goes to the heart of why he did not see himself as a Fundamentalist. The issue is deeper and broader and gets at the root of how he fought Modernism. The deepest difference goes back to Machen's profound indebtedness to Benjamin Warfield who died February 16, 1921. Machen wrote to his mother, "With all his glaring faults he was the greatest man I have ever known" (see note 22).

In 1909 at the 400th anniversary of Jon Calvin's birth Warfield gave an address that stirred Machen to the depths. Warfield made plea that the Reformed Faith—Calvinism—is not a species of Christian theism along side others, but IS Christianity come to full flower.

Calvinism is not a specific variety of theistic thought, religious experience, [or] evangelical faith; but just the perfect manifestation of these things. The difference between it and other forms of theism, religion, [and] evangelicalism is

difference not of kind but of degree ... it does not take its position then by the side of other types of things; it takes its place over all else that claims to be these things, as embodying all that they ought to be (see note 23).

So he says Lutheranism is "its sister type of Protestantism" and Arminianism is "its own rebellious daughter" (see note 24). Calvinism's grasp of the supremacy of God in all of life enabled Machen to see that other forms of evangelicalism were all stages of grasping God which are yet in process of coming to a full and pure appreciation of his total God-centeredness.

What this came to mean for Machen was that his mission in defense of super naturalistic Calvinism was nothing more or less than the defense of the Christian faith in its purest form. So his biggest problem with the term fundamentalist was that,

it seems to suggest that we are adherents of some strange new sect, whereas in point of fact we are conscious simply of maintaining the historic Christian faith and of moving in the great central current of Christian life (see note 25).

He was invited to the presidency of Bryan Memorial University in 1927—a move that would have aligned him with fundamentalism outside the Reformed tradition. He answered like this:

Thoroughly consistent Christianity, to my mind, is found only in the Reformed or Calvinist Faith; and consistent Christianity, I think, is the Christianity easiest to defend. Hence I never call myself a "Fundamentalist" ... What I prefer to call myself is not a "Fundamentalist" but a "Calvinist"—that is, an adherent of the Reformed Faith. As such I regard myself as standing in the great central current of the Church's life—the current that flows down from the Word of God through Augustine and Calvin, and which has found noteworthy expression in America in the great tradition represented by Charles Hodge and Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield and the other representatives of the "Princeton School" (see note 26).

So Machen moved in a different world from most Fundamentalists. And when he took on Modernism he took it on as a challenge to the whole of

Reformed Christianity. His most important book in the debate was *Christianity and Liberalism*, published in 1923.

The title almost says it all: Liberalism is not vying with Fundamentalism as a species of Christianity. The book is not entitled Fundamentalism and Liberalism. Instead Liberalism is vying with *Christianity* as a separate religion. He wrote the blurb for the book:

Liberalism on the one hand and the religion of the historic church on the other are not two varieties of the same religion, but two distinct religions proceeding from altogether separate roots (see note 27).

Stonehouse tells us that Machen's only regret is that he had not used the term "Modernism" rather than "liberalism" in the book, since the word "liberalism" seemed to give too much credit to the phenomenon (see note 28). The words refer in Machen's vocabulary to the same thing.

Now what was that?

Here again Machen did not move quickly with the Fundamentalists to show that the modernists were people who denied certain fundamental Christian doctrines. That was true. But his analysis was wider and deeper. He approached the phenomenon of Modernism first through an analysis of modern culture and the spirit of the age. He tries to think through the relationship between Modernism and modernity (see note 29). He wants to understand it from the inside as it were, on its own terms.

### **The Roots of Modernism in Modernity**

He admits from the outset that "Modern culture is a tremendous force" (see note 30).

Modern inventions and the industrialism that has been built upon them have given us in many respects a new world to live in ... [and these material conditions] have been produced by mighty changes in the human mind ... 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 (see note 31).

The problem of modernity is that it has bred forces which are hostile to Biblical faith and yet produced a world that believers readily embrace.

Machen is exactly right to skewer us in this dilemma when he says,

We cannot without inconsistency employ the printing-press, the railroad, the telegraph [we would say computers, jets and fax machines] in the propagation of our gospel, and at the same time denounce as evil those activities of the human mind that produced these things (see note 32).

So he calls for a critical assessment of modernity (see note 33). The negative impulses he sees that all lead to Modernism are 1) a suspicion of the past that is natural in view of the stunning advances of recent decades; it does seem as if the past is of relatively little value; 2) skepticism about truth and a replacement of the category of *true* with category of *useful* (pragmatism, utilitarianism); the question what works seems to be more scientifically productive; 3) the denial that the supernatural, if there is any such thing, can break into the world.

Machen credits Modernism—the theological response to this challenge of modernity—with trying to come to terms with the real problem of the age. "What is the relation between Christianity and modern culture; may Christianity be maintained in a scientific age? It is this problem which modern liberalism attempts to solve" (see note 34).

In trying to solve the problem, Liberalism, or Modernism, has joined modernity in minimizing the significance of the past in favor of newer impulses; has accepted the utilitarian view of truth; and has surrendered supernaturalism. All three compromises with the spirit of modernity work together to produce the modernist spirit in religion.

And it is a spirit more than a set of doctrines or denials. That is why Machen never tired of pointing out the dangers of what he called "indifferentism" and "latitudinarianism" (see note 35) as well as the outright denials of the resurrection or the virgin birth or the inspiration of Scripture. The spirit of Modernism is not a set of ideas but an atmosphere that shifts with what is useful from time to time.

One of their own number, John A. MacCallum, an outspoken Modernist minister in a Philadelphia, said in a newspaper article in 1923,

[The liberals] have accepted the enlarged view of the universe which has been established by modern astronomy, geology and biology. Instead of blindly denying scientific facts as the

obscurantists have always done, they have adjusted themselves to them, and in so doing have increased their faith and unity and consequently extended their influence, particularly with the educated classes ... Liberalism is an atmosphere rather than a series of formulas (see note 36).

When the preference for what is new, combines with a naturalistic bias and a skepticism about finding abiding truth the stage is set for the worst abuses of religious language and the worst manipulations of historic confessions. In essence what the modernists do is not throw out Christianity but reinterpret the creeds and give old words new meanings. That is, they make them into symbols for every changing meaning.

Thus the Virgin birth is one theory of the incarnation. The bodily resurrection is one theory of the resurrection. And so one. The old "facts" don't correspond to anything permanent. They symbolize general principles of religion. And those symbols are arrived at by what is useful or helpful, not by what is true. If they are useful for one generation, good; and if not for another then they may be exchanged.

This meant that in the Presbyterian Church of Machen's day there were hundreds who would not deny the Confession of Faith, but by virtue of this modernistic spirit had given it up even though they signed it. One of the most jolting and penetrating statements of Machen on this issue goes like this:

It makes very little difference how much or how little of the creeds of the Church the Modernist preacher affirms, or how much or how little of the Biblical teaching form which the creeds are derived. He might affirm every jot and tittle of the Westminster Confession, for example, and yet be separated by a great gulf from the Reformed Faith. It is not that part is denied and the rest affirmed; but all is denied, because all is affirmed merely as useful or symbolic and not as true (see note 37).

This utilitarian view of history and language leads to evasive, vague language that enables the modernist to mislead people into thinking he is still orthodox.

This temper of mind is hostile to precise definitions. Indeed

nothing makes a man more unpopular in the controversies of the present day than an insistence upon definition of terms ... Men discourse very eloquently today upon such subjects as God, religion, Christianity, atonement, redemption, faith; but are greatly incensed when they are asked to tell in simple language what they mean by these terms (see note 38).

Machen's critique of the spirit of Modernism that flows from its marriage to modernity comes from two sides. First internally—does this modern culture really commend itself? Second externally—does the history of Christ and the apostles really allow for such a modernistic Christianity? Or is it not an alien religion?

### **The Critique of Modernism as Part of Degenerate Modernity**

Machen asks: granted we are better off in material things because of modernity, are we better off in the realm of the spirit, and the distinctly human aspects of life?

The improvement appears in the physical conditions of life, but in the spiritual realm there is a corresponding loss. The loss is clearest, perhaps, in the realm of art. Despite the mighty revolution which has been produced in the external condition of life, no great poet is now living to celebrate the change; humanity has suddenly become dumb. Gone, too are the great painters and the great musicians and the great sculptors. The art that still subsists is largely imitative, and where it is not imitative it is usually bizarre (see note 39).

He argues that a "drab utilitarianism" destroys the higher aspirations of the soul and results in an unparalleled impoverishment of human life (see note 40). When you take away any objective norm of truth, you take away the only means of measuring movement from lesser to greater or worse to better or less to more beautiful. One doctrine is a good as any contradictory doctrine "provided it suits a particular generation or a particular group of persons." All that's left without truth are the "meaningless changes of a kaleidoscope" (see note 41). Without a sense of progress in view of an objective truth life becomes less and less, not more and more.

In view of these, and other observations about the effects of modernity and Modernism Machen asks modern man if he can be so sure that the past and the truth and the supernatural are really as cheap and expendable as he

thought?

In view of the lamentable defects of modern life, a type of religion certainly should not be commended simply because it is modern or condemned simply because it is old. On the contrary, the condition of mankind is such that one may well ask what it is that made the men of past generations so great and the men of the present generations so small (see note 42).

Thus Machen seeks to understand and critique modernity and Modernism from the inside—and this set him off by and large from the Fundamentalists of his day.

### **Critique of Modernism from New Testament History**

Then from the outside Machen wields his powers as a historian and a student of the New Testament. He argues on historical grounds that from the beginning the church was witnessing church (Acts 1:8) and a church devoted to the apostles' teaching. In other words her life was built on events without which there would be no Christianity. These events demand faithful witnesses who tell the objective truth about the events since they are essential. And the life of the church was built on the apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42), the authoritative interpretation of the events.

He argues powerfully in the chapter on "Doctrine" in *Christianity and Liberalism* that Paul made much of the truth of his message and the need to get exactly right, even if the messenger was not exactly right. For example, in Philippians he was tolerant of those who with bad motives preached to make his imprisonment worse—because they were saying the objective truth about Christ.

But in Galatians he was not tolerant but pronounced a curse on his opponents —because they were getting the message objectively wrong. They were telling gentiles that works of the flesh would complete God's saving action in their lives which had begun by faith and the Spirit. It may seem like a triviality since both the Judaizers and Paul would have agreed on dozens of precious things including the necessity of faith for salvation. But it was not trivial. And with this kind of historical observation and argument from the New Testament Machen shows that truth and objectivity and doctrine are not optional in grasping and spreading Christianity.

As over against ... [the pragmatist, modernist] attitude, we

believers in historic Christianity maintain the objectivity of truth ... Theology, we hold, is not an attempt to express in merely symbolic terms an inner experience which must be expressed in different terms in subsequent generations; but it is a setting forth of those facts upon which experience is based (see note 43).

Therefore his response to Modernism stands: it is not a different kind of Christianity. It is not Christianity at all. "The chief modern rival of Christianity is 'liberalism' ... at every point the two movements are in direct opposition" (see note 44). The foundational truths have been surrendered; or worse the concept of truth has been surrendered to pragmatism so that even affirmations are denials, because they are affirmed as useful and not as true.

I don't think the structure of the Modernism of Machen's day is too different from the postmodernisms of our day. In some churches the triumph of Modernism is complete. It is still a menace at the door of all our churches and schools and agencies. One of our great protections will be the awareness of stories like Machen—the enemy he faced, the battle he fought, the weapons he used (and failed to use), the losses he sustained, the price he paid, and the triumphs he wrought. If we do not know history we will be weak and poor in our efforts to be faithful in our day.

Our hope for the church and for the spread of the true gospel lies not ultimately in our strategies but in God. And there is every hope that he will triumph.

That Church is still alive; an unbroken spiritual descent connects us with those whom Jesus commissioned. Times have changed in many respects, new problems must be faced and new difficulties overcome, but the same message must still be proclaimed to a lost world. Today we have need of all our faith; unbelief and error have perplexed us sore; strife and hatred have set the world aflame. There is only one hope, but that hope is sure. God has never deserted his church; his promise never fails (see note 45).

### **Lessons We Might Learn from Machen**

Machen's life and thought issue a call for all of us to be honest, open, clear, straightforward and guileless in

our use of language.

He challenges us, as does the apostle Paul (2 Cor. 2:17; 4:2; Eph. 4:25; 1 Thess. 2:3-4) say what we mean and mean what we say, and repudiate duplicity and trickery and shame and verbal manipulating and sidestepping and evasion.

Machen alerts us to the dangers of the utilitarian uses of moral and religious language. For example, in *Christianity Today*, Nov. 9, 1992, (36/13) p. 21, Roy Beck quotes Gregory King, spokesman for the Human Rights Campaign Fund, the nation's largest homosexual advocacy group, who told the *Washington Times* in August, "I personally think that most lesbian and gay Americans support traditional family and American values," which he defined as "tolerance, concern, support, and a sense of community."

This is an example of how words with moral connotations have been co-opted by special interest groups to gain the moral high ground without moral content. They sound like values, but they are empty: "Tolerance" for what? All things? Which things? the standards are not defined. "Concern" for what? Expressed in what way? Redemptive opposition, or sympathetic endorsement? The standard is not defined. "Support" for what? For the behavior that is destructive and wrong? Or for the person who admits the behavior is wrong and is struggling valiantly to overcome it? The object is not defined. "Community" with what standards of unification? Common endorsements of behavior? Common vision of what is right and wrong? Common indifference of what is right and wrong? Again the standards are not defined.

Yet the opposite of each of these four family values (intolerance, unconcerned, oppressive, self-centered) all carry such negative connotations that it is hard in sound bites to show why the four "values" asserted by the homosexual community are inadequate and even may be wrong as they use them.

All you have is words driven by a utilitarian view of language where honesty and truth are not paramount. Machen shows us that this is not new and that it is destructive to the church and the cause of Christ.

Machen alerts us to the utter doctrinelessness of our day and the fact that we almost take it for granted that utilitarian thinking is the only hope for success, and that preaching or teaching doctrine is a prescription for failure.

This skepticism about the value of doctrine is owing to bad preaching that is not passionate and clear and interesting and suspenseful and authentic about the glories of God and his way of salvation, and how it all connects with real life. The Dogma is the Drama Dorothy Sayers said and the reason we can't show this to people in our preaching and teaching and writing is that we have not seen and felt the greatness of the glory of God and all his teachings. Preaching doctrine should not be confusing or boring, Machen says:

That error, unquestionably, should be avoided. But it should be avoided not by the abandonment of doctrinal preaching, but by our making doctrinal preaching real *preaching*. The preacher should present to his congregation the doctrine that the Holy Scripture contains; but he should fire the presentation of that doctrine with the devotion of the heart, and he should show how it can be made fruitful for Christian life (see note 46).

### Machen's life teaches us the importance of founding and maintaining institutions in the preservation and spreading of the true gospel.

Visions of truth and world-views like Machen's are preserved not just in the minds of a few disciples but in the charters and covenants and enclaves and durable organizations and with long term official commitments. Mark Noll observes that "The genius of Old Princeton had been its embodiment of confessional Calvinism in great institutions: the school itself, the *Princeton Review*, Hodge's *Systematic Theology*, and the Old School party among the northern Presbyterians" (see note 47).

Founding and maintaining institutions are, of course, not the only way of spreading the truth of Christ in the world. And in the name of preserving the truth they often come to stand in the way of spreading the truth. Nevertheless they are not necessarily bad and are probably a good tension with the more charismatic, spontaneous focus on individualism in ministry.

I personally give God thanks with all my heart for the institutions of the family that I grew up in, and for Wheaton College, and for Fuller Seminary, and for the church that I now serve. By God's grace these institutions preserved and embodied for me the forces of truth and righteousness in such a way that I have been deeply shaped by them. I think, if each person gives serious thought to how he came to have the convictions and values

and dreams that he has, he will see that virtually all of us owe much of what we are to institutions, without denying or minimizing that it has been individual teachers, friends, authors in and around those institutions that have been the immediate mediators of truths and goodness and beauty.

### Machen's experience calls us to have patience with young strugglers who are having doubts about Christianity.

Machen was saved for the kingdom and the church by Faculty and parents who gave him the room to work it through. Machen says that he finally found victory and tranquility of spirit "because of the profound and constant sympathy of others" (see note 48).

This is illustrated especially from his mother and father who responded with love and patience to his fears that he could not enter the ministry because of his doubts. His mother wrote on Jan. 21, 1906 while Machen was in Germany,

But one thing I can assure you of—that *nothing* you could do could keep me from loving you—*nothing*. It is easily enough to grieve me. Perhaps I worry too much. But my love for my boy is absolutely indestructible. Rely on that whatever comes. And I have faith in you too and believe that the strength will come to you for your work whatever it may be, and that the way will be opened (see note 49).

His father wrote on Jan. 26, 1906,

None of the years of study you have had can ever be properly considered "wasted" no matter what field of work you may ultimately enter upon ... The pecuniary question you need not bother about. I can assure you on that point (see note 50).

Machen credits the power of his parents in his life in a letter to his father dated Feb. 4, 1906:

Without what I got from you and Mother I should long since have given up all thoughts of religion or of a moral life ... The only thing that enables me to get any benefit out of my opportunities here is the continual presence with me in spirit of you and Mother and the Christian teaching which you have

given me (see note 51).

But not only his parents but also his colleagues at Princeton in the first several years steadied his hand and preserved his orthodox faith. He gives amazing tribute to his closest colleague, William Armstrong, in his installation address as Assistant Professor of New Testament May 3, 1915: "The assistance that he has given me in the establishment of my Christian faith has been simply incalculable (see note 52).

On July 14, 1906 Armstrong wrote to Machen with an offer to teach that was flexible enough to allow him to begin at Princeton on a trial basis even with some of his doubts unsettled.

You do not have to be licensed, or ordained or even come under the care of the presbytery. You can start upon the work just as you are. And in regard to your theological opinions you do not have to make any pledge. You are not expected to have reached final conclusion on all matters in this field. Only in your teaching will you be expected to stand on the broad principles of Reformed Theology and in particular on the authority of the Scriptures in religious matters—not that your teaching should be different from your personal convictions—but simply that in matters not finally settled you would await decision before departing from the position occupied by the Seminary. The whole matter reduces itself in simple good faith. Should you find after trying it that you could not teach in the Seminary because you had reached conclusions in your study which made it impossible for you to uphold its position you would simply say so (see note 53).

Machen would not have been allowed to stay at Princeton if he had come out on the wrong side or stayed indefinitely on the fence. The compromise of an institution's fidelity and the misuse of academic freedom happens when doctrinal and ethical doubts are kept secret, or, worse, when lurking denials are put forward as affirmations. Honest, humble struggles can be sustained for some season. But the duplicity that hides secret denials will destroy an institution and a soul.

Machen alerts us to the danger of indifferentism – the attitude that says "affirming or denying truth is not a matter of great import . . . just leave the doctrines aside and unite on other bases."

This is the atmosphere in which false teaching flourishes best. It was not the open modernists who led Princeton away from evangelicalism, it was men who did not think the issues were worth fighting about.

**Machen's interaction with Modernism shows the value of a God-centered vision of all reality – a worldview, a theology that is driven by the supremacy of God in all of life.**

This gives balance and stability in dealing with error. It enables us to see how an error relates to the larger issues of life and thought.

Machen was set off from the fundamentalists by this consistently God-centered view of all things. His critique of Modernism went deeper and farther because his vision of God caused him to see the problem in a deeper and broader context. The sovereignty of God and his supremacy over all of life, causes you to see everything in relation to more things because they all relate to God and God relates to all things.

**Machen's careful expressions of disagreement show the necessity and fruitfulness of controversy.**

In a lecture delivered in London on June 17, 1932 Machen defended engagement in controversy:

Men tell us that our preaching should be positive and not negative, that we can preach the truth without attacking error. But if we follow that advice we shall have to close our Bible and desert its teachings. The New Testament is a polemic book almost from beginning to end.

Some years ago I was in a company of teachers of the Bible in the colleges and other educational institutions of America. One of the most eminent theological professors in the country made an address. In it he admitted that there are unfortunate controversies about doctrine in the Epistles of Paul; but, said he in effect, the real essence of Paul's teaching is found in the hymn to Christian love in the thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians; and we can avoid controversy today, if we will only devote the chief attention to that inspiring hymn.

In reply, I am bound to say that the example was singularly ill-chosen. That hymn to Christian love is in the midst of a great polemic passage; it would never have been written if Paul had

been opposed to controversy with error in the Church. It was because his soul was stirred within him by a wrong use of the spiritual gifts that he was able to write that glorious hymn. So it is always in the Church. Every really great Christian utterance, it may almost be said, is born in controversy. It is when men have felt compelled to take a stand against error that they have risen to the really great heights in the celebration of truth (see note 54).

### We learn from Machen the inevitability and pain of criticism, even from our brothers.

His colleague, Charles Erdman publicly accused Machen of "unkindness, suspicion, bitterness and intolerance" (see note 55). When he voted against a church resolution in favor of the national Prohibition and the 18th Amendment, he was criticized as a secret drunkard and promoter of vice (see note 56). Sine he was single he was criticized as being naive and unaware of the responsibilities of the family (see note 57).

There is in all of us the desire to be liked by others. If it is strong enough we may go to unwise lengths to avoid criticism. We may even think we can be kind enough to everyone so as to avoid criticism. This will not work, especially if we have any public role. It is true that the Bible says that we are to let our light shine that men might see our good deeds and give glory to God (Matt. 5:16). And it is true that we are to silence the ignorance of foolish men by our good deeds (1 Peter 2:15). But there is also the truth that the world called the most loving Master of the house Beelzebub (Matt: 10:25).

You cannot be kind enough and merciful enough that no one will criticize you. Consider this: feminist Germain Greer recently criticized even Mother Teresa saying she is a "religious imperialist."

At my convent school, the pious nuns who always spoke softly and inclined their heads with a small, patient smile were the ones to fear. They became the mother superiors. Mother Teresa is not content with running a convent; she runs an order of Mother Teresa clones, which operates world-wide. In anyone less holy, this would be seen as an obscene ego trip ... Mother Teresa epitomizes for me the blinkered charitableness upon which we pride ourselves and for which we expect reward in this world and the next. There is very little on earth

that I hate more than I hate that (see note 58).

### Machen teaches us the necessity of differentiating levels of error.

He did not focus his energies mainly on fighting eschatological issues, or sacramental issues, or church polity issues, or Arminianism per se, or even Roman Catholicism. He focused on the naturalistic threat to supernatural orthodox Christianity (see note 59).

### His tragic death at the age of 55 reminds us to find the pace to finish the race.

God is sovereign and works all our foolishness together for his good. But our duty and Biblical responsibility is to work in such a way as not to allow less important demands of the present to steal our strength, and our life, which might serve some greater demand in the years to come. It is hard to believe that Machen made a wise decision to go to North Dakota in the Christmas break of 1936-37, when he was "deadly tired" and needed rest so badly. It is also a rebuke that he was about 30 pounds over weight (see note 60).

The lesson we should learn is to be accountable to a group of friends who will have the courage and the authority to tell us, if necessary, to work and eat less. Machen was not accountable in this way. Ned Stonehouse, his fellow teacher at Westminster at the end said, "There was no one of sufficient influence to constrain him to curtail his program to any significant degree" (see note 61). Who knows what a great difference it would have made for the whole cause of Evangelicalism if Machen had lived and worked another 20 years?

### Machen's struggle to maintain his faith in the face of passionate Modernism and dull orthodoxy calls us to blend passion and vitality and zeal with intellectual labor and serious thought and rigorous study.

People want to be taught the deep and great things about God, but it must be real and living and life-giving.

Finally, Machen's approach to apologetics raises for us the question whether our labors for the sake of the lost should not only involve direct attempts to present the gospel, but also indirect attempts to remove obstacles in the culture that make faith more difficult.

One of the most provocative aspects of Machen's thought is his contention that apologetics involves preparing a culture more congenial to the gospel.

It is true that the decisive thing is the regenerative power of God. That can overcome all lack of preparation, and the absence of that makes even the best preparation useless. But as a matter of fact God usually exerts that power in connection with certain prior conditions of the human mind, and it should be ours to create, so far as we can, with the help of God, those favorable conditions for the reception of the gospel. False ideas are the greatest obstacles to the reception of the gospel. We may preach with all the fervor of a reformer and yet succeed only in winning a straggler here and there, if we permit the while collective thought of the nation or of the world to be controlled by ideas which, by the resistless force of logic, prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion. Under such circumstances, what God desires us to do is to destroy the obstacle at its root ... What is today matter of academic speculation begins tomorrow to move armies and pull down empires. In that second stage, it has gone too far to be combated; the time to stop is when it was still a matter of impassionate debate. So as Christians we should try to mold the thought of the world in such a way as to make the acceptance of Christianity something more than a logical absurdity ... What more pressing duty than for those who have received the mighty experience of regeneration, who, therefore, do not, like the world, neglect that whole series of vitally relevant facts which is embraced in Christian experience— what more pressing duty than for these men to make themselves masters of the thought of the world in order to make it an instrument of truth instead of error (see note 62)?

Is there Biblical warrant for this goal in 1 Peter 2:15—we are to silence the ignorance of foolish men by our good deeds, that is, we are to stop the spread of falsehood by a powerful evidence to the contrary? Or is there evidence for Machen's view in Ephesians 5:11 where we are to expose the fruitless works of darkness? Or should we consider Matt. 5:14-16 where we are light and salt, which may perhaps include spreading the preservative idea that there is truth and beauty and valid knowing? Or, perhaps most

plainly we should find support for Machen's view in 2 Cor. 10:3 where we are to take every thought captive to Christ?

In one sense this teaching of changing culture so that the gospel is more readily believed may sound backward. In world missions the gospel comes first before the culture is transformed. Only then, after the gospel is received is there set in motion a culture-shaping power that in a generation or two may result in changing some world-view issues in the culture that make Christianity less foreign even to the non-believer so that there are fewer obstacles to overcome.

But this process is not a straight line to glory on earth (some saved culture altered more saved culture more altered, etc.). The process seems to ebb and flow as generations come and go. Being born and living in that ebb and flow one must ask: is it a crucial ministry to engage in debate at foundational levels in order to slow the process of deterioration of gospel-friendly assumptions, and even perhaps even hasten the reestablishing of assumptions that would make Christianity objectively conceivable and thus more capable of embracing?

The New Testament is a first generation document. It is not written into a situation where the gospel has been known and believed for centuries and where the culture may have been partially transformed, degenerated and now in need of another movement of transformation. But there is an analogy to this kind of cultural situation in the Old Testament with people of God who did indeed experience the ebb and flow of being changed by the Word of God and drifting away from it. So we might see in some of the reforming actions of the Old Testament an analogy to what Machen meant by preparing the culture to make it more receptive to the truth of God. For example, one might think of the removal of the high places by the king, or the putting away of foreign wives by the post-exilic Jews.

We need to think long and hard about the relative priority of such culture shaping effort as preparatory for the gospel in view of the Biblical missionary pattern of the reverse.

### **Possible Weaknesses of Machen**

#### **Personal Prayer and Devotional Life**

It is strange that Machen's friend and close associate, Ned Stonehouse, in 500 pages of sympathetic Memoir, said nothing about Machen's prayer life. And in the complete 24-page list of Machen's writing in *Pressing Toward the Mark: Essays Commemorating Fifty Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, I

found no essay or book on the subject of prayer, though there is a section on prayer in *The New Testament: An Introduction to its Literature and History*, (pp. 319-329).

Nor is there any reference to his devotional life—meditating on the word for his own encouragement and strength. Nor is there any reference to personal worship and rarely to corporate worship as a driving force in his life. It seems as though all was swallowed up in the intellectual defense of faith. One wonders whether some ground may have been lost by fighting instead of praying. Of course, he may have had a vital personal prayer life. But that in all his writings he would not take up that topic, and that Stonehouse would not consider it worthy of highlighting as one of the powerful nerve-centers of his life and thought, is disconcerting in view of Machen's being a Biblically-saturated warrior for the word that commands: "watch and pray" as the heart of the warfare.

## Humility and Teachableness

He worked himself to death it seems and was not open to the counsel of his friends when they cautioned his slowing down and resting. This is not a mark of the humility and teachableness that we long to see even in the strongest and most rugged defenders of the faith (See above.).

## Personality

He seemed to have a personality that alienated people too easily. The committee that did not recommend him to the chair of apologetics at Princeton referred to his "temperamental idiosyncrasies" (see note 63). He seems to have had "a flaring temper and a propensity to make strong remarks about individuals with whom he disagreed" (see note 64).

## Renaissance and Revival

He may have put too much hope in the intellectual power of the church to transform the mindset of a nation and make evangelism easier. In his speaking of renaissance and revival coming together (see note 65), he may have put "renaissance" in too prominent a position. I only say this as a caution which others have seen too (see note 66), not as a final judgment. It may be that in our even more anti-intellectual world of the end of the 20th century we would do well to listen to Machen here rather than criticize him.

## Wealth

He may have lived at a level of cultural wealth and comfort (See above.) that made it hard for him to see and feel the painful side of being poor and

living without the freedom and luxury to travel to Europe repeatedly and go to hotels in order to have quiet for writing. The privations and pressures of the urban poor were so far from Machen's experience that the issue of how to minister more immediately did not press him as hard as it might others and so left him perhaps to develop his apologetic in a world cut off in good measure from the questions of how it relates to the uneducated.

Again I say this with some hesitancy, because almost all of us are limited by the cultural level at which we live. We see only so many hurts and problems. There are a thousand blind spots for every insight. Machen did give significant thought to the whole issue of education for children, whether or not he faced the complexities of how to tackle the problems of the cities.

The overwhelming lesson to be learned from his weaknesses and strengths is that God reigns over his church and over the world in such a way that he uses the weaknesses and the strengths of all in creating the mosaic of his purposes. His overarching plan is always more hopeful than we think in the darkest hours of history, and it is always more intermixed with human sin and weakness in its brightest hours.

Thus we do well to take our stand with one foot in James 4:13-15, to protect ourselves from triumphalism and the other in 1 Corinthians 15:58 to protect ourselves from resignation.

James 4:13-15

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and get gain"; whereas you do not know about tomorrow. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and we shall do this or that."

1 Corinthians 15:58

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

\* \* \*

## APPENDIX

## A Chronological Outline of Key Events in Machen's Life

- July 20, 1827 Father, Arthur Webster Machen, born
- June 17, 1849 Mother, Mary Jones Gresham, born
- 1876 Brother, Arthur, born
- July 28, 1881 Machen born in Baltimore
- 1881 Francis Patton comes to Princeton as professor
- 1886 Brother, Thomas, born
- 1888 Francis Patton becomes president of Princeton
- Jan. 4, 1896 Machen became confessing member of Franklin St. Presbyterian Church
- 1897 William Park Armstrong graduates from Princeton
- Nov. 3, 1898 - Machen enters Johns Hopkins on three-year program
- 1889, 1900, 1902 Machen attended the Northfield Conference
- 1901 Machen editor of *The Hullabaloo*, the school annual, the Banjo Club and the Chess Club
- April 15, 1901 Machen elected Phi Beta Kappa
- Fall, 1901 Machen began a year of graduate studies in Classics at Johns Hopkins
- Summer, 1902 Machen took a course in banking and international law at U. of Chicago
- Fall, 1902 Machen entered Princeton Seminary
- 1903 His cousin, LeRoy Gresham, left law in Baltimore to study at Union Seminary in Richmond
- 1903 Mary Machen published *The Bible in Browning*
- 1904 Machen won the Middler Prize in NT Exegesis with paper on John 1:1-18
- Spring, 1904 Patton confers with Machen about preparing for a professorship at the Seminary in NT
- Summer, 1904 Machen goes to Germany to learn German better
- 1905 Machen won the senior essay contest with "A Critical Discussion of the NT Account of the Virgin Birth of Jesus"
- Spring, 1905 Machen's graduation from Princeton
- Oct., 1905 and Jan. 1906 Publication of senior essay in the *Princeton*

*Seminary Review.*

- 1905-1906 Machen studies in Germany (Marburg and Goettingen)
- Mar. 11, 1906 Armstrong asks him to join faculty of Princeton.
- June 13, 1906 Machen is invited by Warfield's brother, the president of Lafayette College to come and teach Greek and German.
- August 21, 1906 Machen arrives back in America.
- Fall, 1906 Machen accepts a year's appointment to Princeton to assist Armstrong in NT.
- Feb., 1909 "Student rebellion" at Princeton
- 1907-08 Machen announced a course on the birth narratives. His magnum opus, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* appeared in 1930.
- 1909 Machen began to supplement Huddlestone's *Essentials of New Testament Greek*, an effort which became, *New Testament Greek for Beginners* in 1923.
- 1909 Warfield's message on Calvinism at the 400th anniversary of John Calvin's birth stirred MACHEN deeply.
- 1910-1915 Publication of *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*
- Sept. 12, 1912 Machen gave address "Christianity and Culture" at opening of 101st session of Princeton.
- Jan. 4, 1913 Machen got his first major recognition as a scholar of international attention when Adolf Harnack reviewed in *Theologische Literaturzeitung* Machen's articles on the first chapters of Luke.
- Nov. 1913 Machen came under the care of his Presbytery at age 32.
- April, 1914 Machen was licensed.
- June 23, 1914 Machen was ordained at Plainsboro, NJ.
- May, 1914 Machen was elected to Assistant Professor of NT
- 1914 J. Ross Stevenson elected President of Princeton.
- January, 1915 Machen hears Billy Sunday
- 1914 Machen wrote the weekly lessons for the Board of Christian Education Senior Course of Sunday School.
- April, 1915 Machen turns down invitation to Union in Richmond.
- May 3, 1915 Machen installed at professor at Princeton.
- December 19, 1915 Machen's father died at the age of 88.
- April 6, 1917 America declared war.

- Nov. 11, 1918 War ended.
  - May 6, 1919 Address to alumni and then published the address in the *Presbyterian* under the title "The Church in the War"
  - Summer, 1920 Controversy at General Assembly over the Plan of Union
  - Feb. 16, 1921 Benjamin Warfield died.
  - Summer, 1921 General Assembly sees the Plan of Union was defeated in the Presbyteries.
  - Jan. 1921 Machen delivered Sprunt Lectures at Richmond on the Origin of Paul's religion.
  - Oct. 9, 1921 *The Origin of Paul's Religion*
- 

© Desiring God

**Permissions:** You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that you do *not* alter the wording in any way, you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and you do not make more than 1,000 physical copies. For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be explicitly approved by Desiring God.

**Please include the following statement on any distributed copy:** By John Piper.  
© Desiring God. Website: [www.desiringGod.org](http://www.desiringGod.org). Email: [mail@desiringGod.org](mailto:mail@desiringGod.org).  
Toll Free: 1.888.346.4700.