J. GRESHAM MACHEN, INERRANCY, AND CREEDLESS CHRISTIANITY

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When J. Gresham Machen died on 1 January 1937, his former colleague at Princeton Theological Seminary, Caspar Wistar Hodge lamented that the English-speaking world had lost its 'greatest theologian'.[1] Obviously, such sentiments reflected the suddenness of Machen's death and a high regard for his considerable abilities; at the time Machen was only 55 and the widely acknowledged leader of conservative Protestantism in the United States, having written important books in New Testament studies and polemical theology while a professor at Princeton, and then having established amid theological controversies in the Presbyterian Church, USA a new school, Westminster Theological Seminary.[2] Other fundamentalist leaders such as William Jennings Bryan or William Bell Riley may have rivalled Machen's popularity, but his scholarly achievements and thoughtful arguments had earned him respect from secular intellectuals and conservative churchmen alike. Still, seeing how the United Kingdom could also boast of the contributions from her own conservative scholars – from James Orr to Martin Lloyd-Jones – Hodge's encomium may have struck British readers as another example of Yankee braggadocio.

Since Machen's death, however, Hodge's estimate may look even more questionable. To be sure, within certain sectors British evangelicals continue regard Machen highly, as evidenced by the republication of a number of his books by the Banner of Truth Trust. But because of Machen's association with fundamentalism and, particularly because of his defence of the doctrine of biblical inerrancy, his brand of conservative Protestantism appears to raise as many questions as it reinforces historic Christian convictions. This is especially the impression that James Barr created with his critique of inerrancy roughly twenty years ago and given recent

[1] C.W. Hodge quoted in 'Recent Tributes to Dr. Machen', *Presbyterian Guardian* 3 (Feb. 13, 1937) 189.

[2] For biographical treatments of Machen, see Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954); and D.G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1994).

expression in the work of Harriet A. Harris. According to this line of criticism, Machen stands squarely within a theological tradition that unwholesomely appropriated a philosophical position (Scottish Common Sense Realism) that woodenly treats the Bible as a textbook of systematic theology and ignores the book's historical and cultural trappings. What is more, the Princeton doctrine of Scripture, with which Machen identified, turns the Christian faith into a series of scholastic propositions rather than a vital and organic encounter with the true and living God. In Harris' own words, the rationalistic approach to the Bible established by the Princeton theologians and popularised by fundamentalism, 'has resulted in distorted presentations of Christian belief', distortions that gainsay the 'deeper understanding' of the faith that comes through 'participating in the life of the Spirit which has directed the community of believers down the ages'.[3] Such a critique might not turn Machen into the worst theologian in the English-speaking world, but it surely denies him the elevated status conferred by Hodge.

Harris and Barr's estimation of fundamentalism contains an element of truth. In David Bebbington's book on British evangelicalism, debates about higher criticism and the accuracy of the biblical narratives played a crucial role in the developments of the 1920s which divided Protestants into rival camps. To be sure, other factors were also influential, such as premillenialism, holiness teachings, and the social gospel. What is more, according to Bebbington the British Protestants who claimed the Bible was free from error were rare. Still, from the Downgrade Controversy to debates in just after the First World War in the Church Missionary Society, the 'central issue' fuelling division was the infallibility of Scripture.[4] For this reason it was altogether fitting for Machen, given his associations with the Princeton Theology and the fundamentalist controversy, to be invited in 1927 under the auspices of the Bible League to give a series of lectures on biblical scholarship and the defence of the faith.

Tarring Machen with the brush of inerrancy, however, fails to do justice to the profundity of his critique of liberalism, one that won praise from secular intellectuals in the 1920s and from historians since then.[5] In fact, reducing the arguments of conservatives like Machen to the doctrine of Scripture misses the substance of his argument. As it turns out, the authority and infallibility of the Bible were peripheral to Machen's most important writings against liberalism, namely, *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923) and *What is Faith?* (1925). In these books, he staked out the main problems with modernist theology – that is was anti-creedal and anti-intellectual. What is more, stripped of its theological moorings, liberalism became

[3] H. Harris, *Fundamentalism and Evangelicals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 167, 323. Harris leans heavily on James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (London: SCM, 1977).

[4] D. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (1989, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1992), ch. 6, quotation from 217.

[5] For the reception of Machen's polemics, see Hart, *Defending the Faith*, chs. 4 and 5.

an altogether different religion from historic Christianity. What follows is a summary of Machen's objections to modernism, along with British reactions to his arguments. The wide and warm hearing that he received from British writers suggests that the Princeton critique of liberalism has been too easily dismissed as simple-minded defence of inerrancy. In the end, Machen's brand of Calvinism may not escape the charge of rationalism or scholasticism. However his apology for the intellectual and doctrinal character of the gospel suggests that rationalism and scholasticism may not be as bad as their critics allege.

The Origins of Machen's Fundamentalism

Although Machen had been teaching at the Princeton Seminary (a school with an international reputation for Calvinistic orthodoxy), since 1906, and had recently published *The Origins of Paul's Religion* (1921), when he wrote *Christianity and Liberalism* in 1923 he was a relatively unknown figure in American Protestantism. This book argued against naturalistic explanations of Christianity's origins and had been well received in academic and religious circles. In addition, in 1922 Machen came out with a grammar of New Testament Greek, a textbook with wide circulation at liberal and conservative seminaries alike, because of its pedagogical clarity. Still, despite his scholarly accomplishments, Machen was hardly the sort of figure to attract front page coverage in the metropolitan dailies. That changed, however, with the publication of *Christianity and Liberalism*. The book's thesis – that liberalism was an altogether different form of religion than Christianity – was provocative enough, but what added to Machen's celebrity was the book's apparent breach of etiquette. No one within mainstream Protestant circles had had the audacity to suggest that the American churches' accomplishments were hurting the cause of Christ.

A need for greater recognition could possibly explain Machen's motivation to write *Christianity and Liberalism*, but such an explanation ignores his genuine ambivalence regarding the fundamentalist movement with which his book became so closely associated. Machen stood for practically everything that fundamentalism did not. Where fundamentalists were anti-creedal and anti-clerical, Machen's instincts were confessional and churchly; where fundamentalists had the reputation of being rural and anti-intellectual, Machen thrived in urban and academic settings. What is more, he regarded fundamentalist eschatology (i.e., dispensationalism) as bizarre and extreme, avoided altogether the crusade against evolution even though invited to testify at the Scopes trial, and viewed United States' politics in ways remarkably different from fundamentalists – Machen opposed prayer and Bible reading in public schools and the churches' support for Prohibition because he did not believe America was a Christian nation. And yet, *Christianity and Liberalism* earned him the reputation of being one of America's most outspoken fundamentalists even if he spoke with scholarly accents. In other words, had Machen wanted celebrity this book was not the wisest way to gain it.

The reasons for Machen's writing this book, then, have to do with more than just personal ambition or church politics. One explanation commonly employed is the doctrine of inerrancy. Machen may not have shared fundamentalist views about the origins or end of human history, nor may he have had sympathy with fundamentalist politics, but he did affirm the infallibility and authority of the Bible in ways similar to fundamentalists. For that reason, inerrancy has become the chief way to explain the curiosity of Princeton's Calvinists and fundamentalists teaming in the 1920s to oppose liberals.[6] The problem with this explanation is that Machen, Princeton's most active participant in the fundamentalist controversy, pays little regard to inerrancy in *Christianity and Liberalism* or other writings. The chapter on the Bible is the shortest in the book and he devotes only two pages to the topic itself. Compared to the extensive treatments of inerrancy rendered by Machen's Princeton forebears, his relative neglect is stunning and throws into question either the importance of inerrancy to the fundamentalist controversy or the scholarly convention of placing the Princeton Theology on the side of fundamentalism.

The anomalies of Machen's fundamentalism become all the more evident in the light of the historical circumstances that prompted him to write *Christianity and Liberalism*. In 1920 he was a first-time delegate to the General Assembly of the northern Presbyterian Church (PCUSA). One of the bigger items on the denomination's agenda was a plan for organic union with the other large denominations in the United States. These ecumenical plans drew momentum from Protestant inter-denominational co-operation during the First World War, but they also culminated fifty years of mainstream American Protestant ecumenism. Ever since the end of the Civil War when northern Protestants had put aside theological, liturgical and ecclesiastical differences for the sake of political union American Protestantism had been heading down a similar co-operative course in order to maintain Protestant hegemony against the dark forces of Catholicism, materialism, atheism, and secularism.[7] Machen opposed the 1920 plan for church union not so much because he favoured the bogeymen of Anglo-American Protestants but rather because such co-operation disregarded theological conviction in favour of a politicised Christianity. During his time at General Assembly, Machen met other Presbyterians in the Philadelphia vicinity who also opposed the plan. During one of the speaking engagements that resulted from these acquaintances, Machen prepared a talk that became the basis for *Christianity and Liberalism*.

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[6] For the centrality of inerrancy, see Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), ch. 5; and Mark A. Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), ch. 3.

[7] See D.G. Hart, 'The Tie that Divides: Presbyterian Ecumenism, Fundamentalism, and the History of Twentieth-Century American Protestantism', *Westminster Theological Journal* 60 (1998) 85–107.

The denominational context of Machen's critique of liberalism has often been lost on students of fundamentalism. The most common reading of *Christianity and Liberalism* is that it was a part of Princeton Seminary's long tradition of polemical theology, specifically its rejection of liberal Protestantism emanating from Germany.[8] Since Machen studied in Germany and gained first hand knowledge of liberal theological and biblical scholarship, this interpretation is not implausible. What is more, the book provides a definition of liberalism that appears to apply more to the kind of radical conclusions German scholars were reaching rather than the bland and sentimental platitudes that left-of-centre Presbyterian pastors were voicing. For instance, Machen argues that naturalism was at the root of liberal theology.[9] Since the most prominent liberals in the United States, such as Harry Emerson Fosdick or Shailer Mathews, rarely reduced Christianity solely to naturalistic dimensions, the argument runs, Machen must have been thinking more about his student days in Germany than his experience in the United States when he penned *Christianity and Liberalism*.

But even if few American Protestants formulated their convictions in categories imported from Germany, Machen believed that the moralistic and politically activist character of the mainstream Protestant American denominations stemmed from a theology every bit as radical as the European variety and perhaps more dangerous because of its moderate facade. In the first chapter of *Christianity and Liberalism*, in a defence of the gospel's doctrinal character, he made the point that Christianity is fundamentally about a way of life founded upon a message, as opposed to a religious experience irrespective of propositional truth. Here he appealed to Paul's example in Galatia. Machen wrote:

> *What was it that gave rise to the stupendous polemic of the Epistle to the Galatians? To the modern Church the difference would have seemed to be a mere theological subtlety. About many things the Judaizers were in perfect agreement with Paul. The Judaizers believed that Jesus was the Messiah; ... without the slightest doubt, they believed that Jesus had really risen from the dead. They believed, moreover, that faith in Christ was necessary to salvation. But the trouble was, they believed that something else was also necessary; they believed that what Christ had done needed to be pieced out by the believer's own effort to keep the Law. From the modern point of view the difference would have seemed to be very slight ... hardly worthy of consideration at all in view of the large*

[8] See William J. Weston, *Presbyterian Pluralism: Competition in a Protestant House* (Knoxville, Tenn.: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), ch. 11, the most recent case of this argument.

[9] 'The root of the movement is one; the many varieties of modern liberal religion are rooted in naturalism – that is, the denial of any entrance of the creative power of God (as distinguished from the ordinary course of nature) in connection with the origin of Christianity'. Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1923), 2. He adds that he is not using the word, 'naturalism', in its philosophical sense.

> *measure of agreement in the practical realm. What a splendid cleaning up of the Gentile cities it would have been if the Judaizers had succeeded in extending to those cities the observance of the Mosaic law ... Surely Paul ought to have made common cause with teachers who were so nearly in agreement with him; surely he ought to have applied to them the great principle of Christian unity. As a matter of fact, however, Paul did nothing of the kind; and only because he* (and others) *did nothing of the kind does the Christian Church exist to-day ... Paul certainly was right. The difference which divided him from the Judaizers was no mere theological subtlety, but concerned the very heart and core of the religion of Christ.*[10]

Aside from Machen's defence of the rightful place of polemic and dogma in the church's life, it is hard to miss his barb at Protestant ecumenism's agenda of social reform. American Protestantism, and specifically the northern Presbyterian Church, he believed, was reconfiguring its witness by substituting 'the ethical principles of Jesus' for the doctrines of the 'redeeming work of Christ'.[11] And the reason for the churches' move toward the moralism of liberal Christianity was to reinforce the Protestant identity of the United States.

Machen linked liberal theology to a social Christianity more explicitly in his discussion of the afterlife and the worldly character of contemporary preaching. He argued that many Protestant preachers no longer preached an otherworldly gospel, or about the joys of heaven and the agonies of hell, because they had 'very little to say about the other world'. 'This world is really the centre of all [the liberal preacher's] thoughts', Machen concluded. 'Religion itself, and even God, are made merely a means for the betterment of conditions upon this earth'. To prove this point, Machen cited the variety of ways that Americans were turning to the church for help, from Americanising immigrants and resolving the tension between labour and capital, to building a safe and healthy local community. In response to these efforts, Machen wrote:

> *Whatever may be thought of this attitude toward religion, it is perfectly plain that the Christian religion cannot be treated in any such way ... For if one thing is plain it is that Christianity refuses to be regarded as a mere means to a higher end. Our Lord made that perfectly clear when He said: 'If any man come to me, and hate not his father and mother ... he cannot be my disciple' (Luke 14:26). Whatever else those stupendous words may mean, they certainly mean that the relationship to Christ takes precedence of all other relationships, even the holiest of relationships like those that exist between husband and wife and parent and child. Those other relationships exists for the sake of Christianity and not Christianity for the sake of them.*[12]

[10] Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 23–25.
[11] Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism.*, 25–26.
[12] Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 149, 151–52.

Such a defence of Christianity clearly conflicted with American Protestant churches' close identification with the health and well-being of the United States. It also showed that academic forms of liberalism were not so different from the middle-class moralism that prevailed in mainstream American Protestantism.

The antidote to liberalism, then, was not to reassert the infallibility of the Bible, the scientific reliability of Genesis, or the certainty of a literal second advent. In Machen's view, the only proper response to liberalism was to insist upon the historic truths concerning the person and work of Christ. Liberals may have had faulty views about the character of the Bible or unwholesome hermeneutics, but in the end, Machen's most compelling reason for opposing modernism was a general uneasiness with Christ. He wrote,

> *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'.*[13]

Liberalism was a religion of abstractions and principles. But in Machen's estimate, Christianity took concrete form in the historical figure, Jesus Christ, and what he did to redeem sinners. This explains why Machen so emphasised doctrine over against experience or ethics. For liberals doctrine was a temporary symbol of Christianity's essence. For Machen, however, doctrine could not be separated from Christianity because the gospel itself – the statement that Jesus died for sin – was inherently doctrinal because it involved what happened historically and supplied the meaning of the event.[14] By emphasising doctrine this way, Machen was not merely trying to show liberals to be theologically naïve. Something far greater was at stake. If liberals were right that the vicarious atonement was nothing more than the husk of a more abiding truth about God's love and the ideal of self-sacrifice, then the church was without hope since her salvation depended on Christ's perfect obedience, sacrificial death, and dramatic resurrection.

Doctrine, Faith and Salvation

Not too long after the release of Machen's controversial book, the *British Weekly* ran a twelve-part series entitled, 'Fundamentalism: False and True', with contributions from the United Kingdom's leading theological and biblical scholars. The aim of the series was to be constructive and positive; the articles would outline the fundamentals of the Christian religion for the sake of unity rather than division or strife. In the words of the editor, John A. Hutton 'these so-called Fundamentalists will not leave their fellow Christians in peace, but seek to reimpose upon us a yoke which neither we nor our fathers were able to bear'. One of the burdens

[13] Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 6.
[14] See Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 121 ff.

imposed by fundamentalists was the doctrine of the infallibility of Scripture. Here the editor singled out Machen and his defence of the doctrine in *Christianity and Liberalism*. The infallibility of the Bible was a late addition to the teaching of the church, unknown either to the Reformers or the authors of Scripture. The Bible spoke of 'inspiration and profit', not dogmatic infallibility.[15]

Ever alert to rumblings in the press, Machen responded with a letter to the editor that was not printed until the series was finished in early September 1924. His reaction spoke volumes about the relative importance of the doctrine of Scripture to his case against liberal Protestantism. Machen was quick to correct the assertion that the doctrine of infallibility was a 'modern invention'. Jesus, the apostles, the church fathers, and the Reformers all held, in Machen's estimation, to the infallibility of Scripture. Still, as important as this doctrine was to 'any permanency or consistency in Christian belief', to reject it did not make one a modernist. So, for instance, Machen asserted that Bishop Gore denied infallibility but was by no means a modernist. Likewise, Principal Garvie and H.R. Mackintosh, who had written for the *British Weekly*'s series denied the 'full truthfulness' of Scripture but still avoided 'the passionate anti-intellectualism and anti-theism' which was so characteristic of modernism.[16]

Consequently, the real issue raised by modernism was not the authority or truthfulness of the Bible but the nature of Christianity itself. Was the Christian religion fundamentally subjective or objective? To escape the intellectual difficulties raised my modern thought, Machen argued, liberalism relegated Christianity to religious experience, thereby making the Bible as well as Christian creeds the product of this experience. But by distorting Christianity in this way liberalism made the gospel independent of history. 'The outstanding fact about Paul', he wrote, 'is that he had a message or a gospel about something that had happened a few years before, and that he was interested above all things else in getting the message straight'. As such, Christianity, 'from the beginning', was 'not a way of life as distinguished from a doctrine, or a way of life expressing itself in a doctrine'. Rather it was 'a way of life founded upon a doctrine'. Christianity, therefore, depended upon doctrine. Any effort to escape its creedal character was in effect a denial of Christianity. For that reason, the issue with modernism went well beyond questions surrounding the infallibility of Scripture.[17]

Machen's letter may not have persuaded all of the *British Weekly*'s contributors, but he gave a good enough showing to receive an even larger British reception a couple years later in the same publication. In 1926, John A. Hutton solicited a series of essays from British and Canadian theologians to respond to Machen's most recent book,

[15] *British Weekly* (June 19, 1924), clipping in *Christianity and Liberalism* scrapbook, Machen Archives, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, Pa., 116–17.

[16] *British Weekly* (September 11, 1924), from Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 118–19.

[17] Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*.

What is Faith? Part of the reason for this extended treatment was Hutton's introduction to Machen in 1925 at a conference in Grove City, Pennsylvania, where the latter had given the lectures that comprised *What is Faith?* According to Hutton, who compared sections of these talks to passages from John Henry Newman's *Apologia*, readers might agree or disagree with the Princetonian's argument, but they always would 'be moved'. Interestingly enough, the forum demonstrated once again that infallibility of Scripture was a side issue to at least one fundamentalist's understanding of the issue raised by liberalism.[18]

What is Faith? comprised the second part of Machen's critique of liberalism. In *Christianity and Liberalism* his point had been that despite its effort to accommodate modern learning liberal Protestantism was essentially unscientific. This was because it denied basic facts about Christianity, namely, that historically the Christian religion could be defined by a set of doctrines, from the Apostles' Creed to the evangelical creeds governing the Protestant churches. In *What is Faith?* he extended this analysis by arguing that liberalism was fundamentally anti-intellectual. This was no doubt a startling assertion since the programme of Protestant modernism involved nothing less than rescuing the Christian faith for people whose learning made them suspicious of the Bible's claims. Modernism, then, was designed to be the intellectually respectable version of Christianity. Machen countered by arguing that conservatives were truly intellectual because they respected the content of the Christian faith, while modernists were anti-intellectual because they could neither deny nor affirm historic Christianity but merely spiritualised it.

> *Hence, the besetting sin of modernism, according to Machen, was reducing Christianity to experience. On the very first page of What is Faith?, he wrote, 'Religion, it is held, is an ineffable experience; the intellectual expression of it can be symbolical merely; ... theology may vary and yet religion may remain the same'.*[19]

Obviously, such an understanding of religion emptied the Bible and creeds of all definite meaning. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* might mean one thing in the seventeenth century, but the religious experience of modern man could never be content with older 'thought-forms', and so the *Confession* took on an altogether different meaning, depending on the experience of twentieth-century Presbyterians. According to Machen, by making experience prior to doctrine liberals had embraced a form of scepticism that not only prevented ascribing meaning to religious language but also abandoned any notion of fixed truth in religious matters. This strategy might have allowed liberal theologians to dodge the claims of the Bible or the creeds, but it was still intellectually

[18] *British Weekly* (March 4, 1926), from *What is Faith?* scrapbook, Machen Archives, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, Pa., 24.

[19] Machen, *What is Faith?* (New York: Macmillan, 1925), 13.

decadent. For it made superfluous all intellectual labour in biblical and theological studies – not just dogmatics but also higher criticism. Any effort to attach meaning or definition to Christianity was ultimately pointless because what finally counted for Protestant liberals was individual experience.

Machen acknowledged that he was no match for the philosophical origins of liberal Protestantism that extended back to Kant and Schleiermacher, though he did relish the irony of systematic thinkers whose critique of theology ended up destroying philosophy as well. So instead of countering the epistemology of liberalism with a better one, or arguing for the propositional nature of truth, Machen played to his strength, namely the teaching of the New Testament. And here he attempted to show that the Bible did just the reverse of what liberalism claimed; theology preceded experience, not the other way around.

As readers would have expected from a professor at Princeton Seminary, Machen found that the New Testament taught doctrines that Presbyterians had historically affirmed. One of those doctrines was the vicarious atonement, a point that Machen had also defended at length in *Christianity and Liberalism*. The atonement was an important consideration for understanding faith because his larger point was that Christian teaching about faith involved knowledge about the object of faith. So if the Christian believer trusted in Christ, he needed to know something about who Christ was and why he was trustworthy. But knowledge about the person of Christ was not sufficient, according to Machen, because the Bible presented Jesus as much more than an ethical teacher or example. Central to the New Testament message was the idea that Jesus did something to save sinners from guilt and misery. Consequently, the cross and its significance as a sacrifice for sins was crucial to faith in the Christian scheme. In other words, the doctrine of the vicarious atonement was the 'special basis of Christian faith'.[20]

Machen did not elaborate this doctrine because in his mind it was such a simple teaching that even a child could understand it. But he did spend several pages, as he had in *Christianity and Liberalism*, defending the vicarious atonement from its critics. One of the most interesting of those objections, perhaps because it continues to gain a following, was the argument that by making the vicarious atonement so central to Christianity, Machen was actually guilty of making a proposition, as opposed to a person, the object of faith. As he paraphrased this objection, 'the doctrinal message about Christ is often represented as a barrier that needs to be done away in order that we may have Christ Himself'. Machen answered first by pointing out that this way of thinking was at odds with the New Testament where, for instance, Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3–7 established the basis of the Christian church, namely, that Christ died for sins, was buried, and raised again from the dead. From the very beginning, doctrine was crucial to faith. But in the end, the

[20] Machen, *What is Faith?*, 144.

distinction between faith in a doctrine and faith in a person was based on a 'false psychology'. Jesus could not be trusted without knowing something about him. Moreover, Jesus could not be trusted as a saviour from sin unless he bore the penalty for sin. 'The Lord Jesus Christ does us no good', Machen asserted, 'no matter how great He may be, unless He is offered to us; and as a matter of fact He is offered to us in the good news of His redeeming work'.[21]

As Machen tried to make clear in his exposition of Christian faith, doctrine was not something far removed from the personal and practical considerations of believers. Theology was not a creature of professional academics while ordinary Christians revelled in their personal experiences. Rather, theology was tremendously personal because it provided genuine comfort to sinful men and women. The practical nature of systematic theology was especially clear in Machen's exposition of justification by faith. Instead of insisting that this was basis for differences between Protestants and Rome, or the article upon which the church stands or falls, Machen linked it directly to the more intimate question of how an individual becomes right with God. Justification by faith was no abstraction but bore directly upon the eternal destiny of souls. It taught in systematic form that Christ had satisfied all the demands of God's law, thus removing the terror of the law, and that his righteousness was now the possession of the believer through faith. 'We stand', Machen wrote, 'without fear, as Christ would stand without fear, before the judgement seat of God'.[22] In fact, the whole point of writing the book was not simply to expose the anti-intellectualism of liberalism or to show that faith in the New Testament could never be divorced from orthodox doctrine. Machen's purpose was much more practical; it was to offer hope to weary and fragile souls. True faith, even if weak, he concluded, 'will bring a sinner into peace with God'.[23] For this reason, Machen's struggle against liberalism, as much as it might have involved Presbyterian Church politics, differing conceptions of truth, or divergent theological emphases, was finally pastoral. He was concerned that liberals were leading people astray.

That concern was especially evident in Machen's exchange with the British theologians and churchmen who evaluated *What is Faith?* in the *British Weekly*. Reactions were cordial but mixed. The most common objections centred on the nature of theological language and the vicarious atonement. J.T. Forbes, for instance, questioned whether faith was as rational as Machen alleged, arguing instead that Jesus' disciples came to faith in Christ more through 'instinctive' than logical categories.[24] W.M. Macgregor chimed in by taking issue with Machen's diagnosis of mysticism, countering that Machen made 'now allowance for a kind and a way of knowledge with which mere logic has nothing to do'.[25] So too, W.B. Selbie

[21] Machen, *What is Faith?*, 149, 152.
[22] Machen, *What is Faith?*, 164–65.
[23] Machen, *What is Faith?*, 251.
[24] *British Weekly* (June 10, 1926), from *What is Faith?* scrapbook, 87.
[25] *British Weekly* (May 27, 1926), from *What is Faith?* scrapbook, 52.

wondered if Machen could change with the times. Selbie and Machen might agree about the substance of the gospel – and Selbie thought they did – but disagreed about 'the forms and terms in which it is expressed, interpreted and proclaimed'.[26]

A willingness to revise and update theological expressions lay behind questions about Machen's emphasis on the vicarious atonement. But here, rather than formulating a new understanding of the cross, critics generally did exactly what liberals faulted Machen for doing, namely, claiming that they were presenting the right interpretation of the New Testament, thereby affirming implicitly the authority and infallibility of Scripture. For instance, C. Ryder Smith argued that a third way existed between the extremes of the vicarious atonement and the example of self-sacrifice, a way taught by the apostle Paul himself.[27] A.B. Macaulay also wondered about Machen's insistence upon the atonement. It was one thing to 'vindicate the claim of the intellect' in religious experience, but another to put so much weight on a 'particular theory' of the cross.[28] W.M. Macgregor also thought Machen erred by insisting on the vicarious atonement, an error produced by 'his exaltation of the intellect'. This doctrine of the cross might gain the assent of the whole church, it might be the noblest view of God's salvation, but it could 'have no place within the group of things indispensable to Christian faith as such'.[29]

In this exchange Machen had the last word. In his response to all contributors, at the end of the series, he began by expressing gratitude for the 'generous treatment' he had received from his British colleagues. He was especially glad that he had not been misunderstood. Specifically, the debate had centred on sin, redemption, and the nature of religious truth, not the inerrancy of the Bible, and for this Machen was thankful. In his estimation, the nature of biblical authority was obviously important. But of far greater import was Christian teaching about sin and redemption. Machen conceded in his response that 'forgiveness of sins' was 'by no means the only thing that we have from Christ'. Salvation included other benefits and the experience of grace was not uniform among all believers. Still, by conceding these points Machen would not give up the conviction that without the doctrines of sin and grace, Christianity ceased to exist; it was no longer good news and it departed fundamentally from what it had been historically. 'When the great revival of the Church is finally brought about by the Spirit of God', he concluded, 'we shall find that sin and redemption will be the centres about which men's thinking and feeling will move'.[30]

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[26] *British Weekly* (April 1, 1926), from *What is Faith?* scrapbook, 32.
[27] *British Weekly* (April 8, 1926), from *What is Faith?* scrapbook, 45.
[28] *British Weekly* (July 1, 1926), from *What is Faith?* scrapbook, 82.
[29] *British Weekly* (May 27, 1926), from *What is Faith?* scrapbook, 52.
[30] *British Weekly* (September 23, 1926), from *What is Faith?* scrapbook, 101.

Back to the Creed

The substance of Machen's critique of liberalism, as evident in this exchange in the *British Weekly*, turned on the question of how sinners become right with a holy and righteous God. Inerrancy was not so much a side issue as a luxury. Having been educated under Benjamin B. Warfield and having defended the historical reliability of the New Testament in his own scholarship, Machen was hardly unaware of the doctrine of Scriptural infallibility or its importance. But to reduce fundamentalism to a particular understanding of the Bible, as Machen's contemporaries did and later historians have done, is to miss a much more basic point, namely, that conservatives like Machen believed liberalism compromised the Christian doctrine of redemption. That is why he believed liberalism constituted an entirely different religion. A faulty doctrine of Scripture, Machen also believed, could lead to other errors. Yet, he acknowledged repeatedly that a flawed understanding of biblical authority did not make one a liberal. If Machen's example teaches anything, it may be that contrary to post-World War II conservative Protestant leaders inerrancy is not the doctrine by which evangelicalism stands or falls. It is an easy target. But if one of Princeton's finest – a group of theologians who could go to great lengths in defending biblical infallibility – could distinguish between the Bible and soteriology, perhaps critics of inerrancy could mimic Machen's theological nimbleness.[31]

Yet, Machen's example stands not only as a warning to critics of inerrancy but also to certain impulses within evangelicalism itself. One of the legitimate points that Harriet Harris makes in her recent book on evangelicals and Scripture is the disparity between evangelical piety and evangelical views about the Bible. On the one hand, evangelicals rest the case for Christianity on an intellectually elaborate defence of Scripture, while on the other hand advocating practices of reading the Bible that make an intellectual appropriation of Scripture optional. To borrow from David Bebbington's categories, evangelical conversionism is at odds in with evangelical biblicism. If the Holy Spirit blows wherever he will, how important is the word of God, even if inerrant? As Harris notes, the most popular forms of evangelicalism, from daily quiet times to Campus Crusade's Four Spiritual Laws, put far greater weight on the believer's subjective reading of Scripture than on the objective material learned from the Bible.[32]

By defining faith primarily as intellectual than experiential, Machen avoided the tension between word and Spirit that has afflicted evangelicalism since the eighteenth century. In fact, his critique of liberal Protestantism always had revivalistic evangelicalism

[31] On the centrality of inerrancy to post-World War II evangelicalism in the United States, see D.G. Hart, 'Evangelicals, Biblical Scholarship, and the Politics of the Modern American Academy', in David N. Livingstone, D.G. Hart, and Mark A. Noll, eds., *Evangelicals and Science in Historical Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 306–26.

[32] Harris, *Fundamentalism and Evangelicals*, 190–204.

implicitly in view. In a series of talks on Christian scholarship that Machen gave in 1932 under the auspices of the Bible League, he took aim at evangelical and liberal anti-intellectualism. To those who said 'correct opinions about God and Christ' were unimportant compared to simple faith, Machen responded that such simple faith was really not faith in Christ. The pattern of New Testament teaching and example, he argued, was first to 'set forth ... the facts about Christ and the meaning of his death' and then ask the hearer 'to accept the One thus presented' in order to be saved. And to those evangelists who said apologetics was a waste of time compared to the far greater work of saving souls, Machen responded that 'It is useless to proclaim a gospel that people cannot hold to be true: no amount of emotional appeal can do anything against the truth'.[33] The reason for this insistence upon the objective and cognitive character of Christianity was not simply a product of Machen's adherence to Scottish Common Sense Realism, as some of his and the Princeton Theology's critics have alleged.[34] The reason had far more to do with the nature of salvation. Did sinners have anything that they could do to make themselves right before God? Or was salvation entirely from a God who made sinners righteous by sending his Son to live a perfect life, die for sins on the cross, and rise from the dead to defeat the forces of sin and death? Machen obviously believed that salvation depended entirely upon the work of Christ. As such, history, doctrine and the intellectual claims of the gospel could not be avoided by appealing to the work of the Spirit or the experience of individual believers. If the deeds recorded in the Bible were not true, then the hope of salvation was truly an illusion. Machen took this connection one step further and argued that if salvation depended upon the mighty acts of God, then doctrine was not simply an extravagance since theology and creeds were simply efforts to systematise what the Bible taught. A believer's salvation may have depended on the work of the Spirit, thus producing conversion. But that work of regeneration was never independent of what the word of God taught. Word and Spirit, as Machen well knew, worked together hand in hand. For that reason, conversion could never be divorced from doctrine which was a systematic summary of Scriptural teaching.

In the end, Machen's defence of the doctrinal character of Christianity and the Bible raises an important question for those who question the Princeton way of reading Scripture. Several years ago, Richard Mouw argued that twentieth-century Protestantism can be broken down into four different schools of thought regarding the essential nature of Scripture. First are those like Machen who read the Bible as essentially a book of theology. Second, pietists read the Bible in order to cultivate 'certain pious ... experiences and habits fundamental to the Christian life'. Third, moralists conceive of

[33] Machen, 'Christian Scholarship and Evangelism', in *What is Christianity? And Other Addresses*, ed., Ned Bernard Stonehouse, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 121, 129.

[34] For one of the better critiques of Princeton's intellectualism, see George M. Marsden, 'Understanding J. Gresham Machen', in *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 182–201.

Christianity in essentially ethical categories and look to the Bible for right or wrong forms of conduct. Finally, culturalists read the Bible for wisdom about the transformation of society, from politics and economics to education and art. Mouw admits that these impulses are hardly ever distinct and that some movements within recent Protestantism have exhibited all four methods of interpreting the Bible. He also argues that none is completely correct since each position picks up a genuine and helpful insight into biblical teaching.[35]

Had Mouw been forced to reckon with Machen in a more extensive way, however, he might have reconsidered his conclusion. For Machen doctrine was not one option, a way of reading the Bible that worked sometimes but failed to do justice to its complete meaning and message. He insisted that any effort to equivocate about the doctrinal character of Christianity as unravelled in the Bible would introduce a different understanding of how God saved sinners. If the Bible taught ethics, experience or how to change society, the responsibility for redemption lay with human effort. But if the Bible taught how God saved his church and theology was simply the systematisation of God's redemptive activity, then salvation depended on God's power and faithfulness, not on man's conduct, feelings or social engineering. For that reason, Machen's defence of Christianity was critical of both liberalism and evangelicalism in its pietist forms. Whether through the historicising endeavours of liberals or the emotional excesses of revivalistic evangelicalism, to the doctrinally indifferent Christianity became essentially the product of human agency. As Machen told graduates of Westminster Seminary in 1931 who were about to enter the ministry of the word,

> *You alone can lead men, by the proclamation of God's word, out of the crash and jazz and noise and rattle and smoke of this weary age into green pastures and beside the still waters; you alone, as ministers of reconciliation, can give what the world with all its boasting and pride can never give – the infinite sweetness of the communion of the redeemed soul with the living God.*[36]

Without that context Machen's defence of biblical infallibility and creedal Christianity no doubt looks wooden, rationalistic and perhaps outdated. But from the perspective of his larger concern to preserve the good news of the gospel, namely, that Christ really did pay the penalty for sin, Machen's argument emerges as one of the more profound made in the twentieth century.

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[35] Mouw, 'The Bible in Twentieth-Century Protestantism: A Preliminary Taxonomy', in Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll, eds, *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 139–62, quotation on 144.

[36] Machen, 'Consolations in the Midst of Battle', in *What is Christianity?*, 238.