

## “No Peace without Victory”

J. Gresham Machen’s Non-Calvinistic Epistemology in *Christianity and Liberalism*  
and Its Implications for Conservative, Biblical Preaching and Teaching

Presented by Greg Stiekes, BJU Seminary  
Bible Faculty Summit, July 31, 2018

During the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy, Fundamentalists and Evangelicals in general were eager to count among their ranks J. Gresham Machen, arguably one of the most brilliant minds taking the fight to those who divorced the Christ of faith from the Jesus of history. When William Jennings Bryan was preparing for the Scopes trials, he wrote to Machen, asking him to be on the ready in case the prosecution needed reinforcements.<sup>1</sup> Machen politely declined.<sup>2</sup> Some years later, Machen received an invitation from the Bryan Memorial University (now Bryan College) asking him to accept the presidency. He again declined but took the opportunity to make his position clearer. Machen did not want to be seen as an opponent to the battle against Modernism, but neither did he care to be identified as a Fundamentalist. In his reply to the university’s offer, Machen graciously explains,

... I never call myself a “fundamentalist.” There is, indeed, no inherent objection to the term; and if the disjunction is between “Fundamentalism” and “Modernism,” then I am willing to call myself a Fundamentalist of the most pronounced type. But after all, what I prefer to call myself is not a “Fundamentalist” but a “Calvinist”—that is, an adherent of the Reformed Faith.

As such I regard myself as standing in the great central current of the Church’s life—the current which flows down from the Word of God through Augustine and Calvin, and which has found noteworthy expression in America in the great tradition represented by

---

<sup>1</sup> Bryan’s letter, dated June 23, 1925 read as follows: “My dear Mr. Machen: Please let me know whether you can come to the Tennessee trial if we need you as a witness. The trial commences in Dayton the tenth of July. I enclose a brief statement of the case against evolution. Let me know your opinion on the propositions and any additional suggestions you may have. The statement is confidential and I will ask you not to allow it be seen. As I must leave for Tennessee in less than two weeks, I hope you will reply at once as we would like to know what we can rely on in way of evidence, if we need evidence. With good wishes, I am / Very truly yours, / W. J. Bryan.”

<sup>2</sup> Stephen J. Nichols, *J. Gresham Machen: A Guided Tour of His Life and Thought* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 2004), 101, says that Machen used his “lack of expertise” as an excuse.

Charles Hodge, Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield and the other representatives of the “Princeton School.”<sup>3</sup>

Machen’s refusal to officially join the Fundamentalist ranks was an acute disappointment. After all, Machen had studied in Marburg, Germany under Wilhelm Herrmann (1846–1922), and had wrestled his way through the claims of Protestant Liberalism.<sup>4</sup> Herrmann, whose personality had captivated young Machen had a profound disdain for any attempt to bridge the metaphysical and the scientific. Having mentored students such as Rudolph Bultmann and Karl Barth, Herrmann argued that “the significance of Jesus did not rest upon the accuracy of historical inquiry” and wished to “liberate theology from historical investigation.”<sup>5</sup> What Machen gained from this academic journey, however, was an erudite education that prepared him to combat the conclusions of the very historical-critical theology under which he had trained.<sup>6</sup> Though his *Doktorvater* had argued that “the ‘inner life of Jesus,’ not the scriptural record, is what provides assurance for Christians,”<sup>7</sup> Machen boldly advanced the following counterargument:

---

<sup>3</sup> Machen’s letter is a reply to F. E. Robinson, then president of the Bryan University Memorial Association. The Letter was published in *The Presbyterian* 97 (1927) and is available in full at “This Day in Presbyterian History,” <http://www.thisday.pcahistory.org/2016/07/july-7-3/>. Machen expressed similar views about the term “Fundamentalism” in an article he contributed to *The Presbyterian Guardian*. He said, “The term ‘Fundamentalism’ seems to represent the Christian religion as though it had suddenly become an ‘ism’ and needed to be called by some new name. I cannot see why that should be done. The term seems to me to be particularly inadequate as applied to us conservative Presbyterians. We have a great heritage. We are standing in what we hold to be the great central current of the Church’s life—the great tradition that comes down through Augustine and Calvin to the Westminster Confessions of Faith .... Why then should we be so prone to adopt some strange new term?” J. Gresham Machen, “The Changing Scene and the Unchanging Word: What is Orthodoxy?” *The Presbyterian Guardian* 1:3 (1935): 38.

<sup>4</sup> Terry A. Chrisope, *Toward a Sure Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Dilemma of Biblical Criticism, 1881-1915* (Ross-Shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2000): 81. In fact, when Machen returned from his studies abroad, says Chrisope, Machen was still wrestling with “religious turmoil and intellectual confusion.”

<sup>5</sup> D. G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 21.

<sup>6</sup> By 1912, Machen revealed that he had been formulating an articulate response to scholars such as Herrmann when he released four monumental studies in the *Princeton Theological Review* which became the foundation for his later works, *The Origin of Paul’s Religion* (1921) and *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (1930). These works were Machen’s first published arguments that the integrity of the historic events of the Bible are necessary in order for Christianity have any real meaning. Contrary to Herrmann, proclaimed Machen, “Christianity could not be spiritually true and historically false” (Chrisope, 119).

<sup>7</sup> Bradley J. Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and Moderates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 48.

The student of the New Testament should be primarily an historian. The centre and core of all the Bible is history. Everything else that the Bible contains is fitted into an historical framework and leads up to an historical climax. The Bible is primarily a record of events.<sup>8</sup>

As the address continued, Machen set forth a philosophy for defending the Bible that would become his major contribution to theological hermeneutics: The Bible is verifiable history.

Less than a decade later, Machen published the classic volume that would become his most recognized defense of the historicity of the Bible, *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923).<sup>9</sup> In this volume, Machen posits that theological liberals, when they should have been fighting back against historical-critical claims have rather retreated.<sup>10</sup> But there is no reason for retreat, says Machen, because orthodox Christianity is up for the fight, fully prepared to defend herself against the challenges of rationalism. Just as he had sought to demonstrate in *The Origin* and *The Virgin Birth*, in *Christianity and Liberalism* Machen carefully establishes that the plain truths of the Scriptures, supernatural though they be, provide more cogent answers to the challenges of rational science than does theological liberalism.<sup>11</sup> “[M]ere concessiveness,” which had been liberalism’s response, “will never succeed in avoiding the intellectual conflict. In the intellectual battle of the present day there can be ‘no peace without victory’; one side or the other must win” (*C&L*, 6).

---

<sup>8</sup> J. Gresham Machen, “History and Faith,” *The Princeton Theological Review* 13 (1915), 337.

<sup>9</sup> Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1923; reprint edition). In-text citations of this work will appear as “*C&L*.”

<sup>10</sup> We should note that the title is *Christianity AND Liberalism*, not *Christianity VERSUS Liberalism*. For Machen is laying Christianity and Liberalism side by side in order draw a basic contrast; viz., liberals, “after abandoning to the enemy one Christian doctrine after another” have retained “a religion which is so entirely different from Christianity as to belong in a distinct category” (*C&L*, 6–7). The central point of Machen’s book, therefore, is that liberalism is not merely a different version of Christianity, but an entirely new religion altogether; for example, D. G. Hart, “J. Gresham Machen, Inerrancy, and Creedless Christianity,” *Themelios* 25:3 (2000): 22. However, *Christianity and Liberalism* is better read as a polemic against the naturalistic explanation of Christianity from which the liberals have retreated, setting themselves in stark contrast to conservatives who try to advance the front lines.

<sup>11</sup> George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 189.

But how is orthodoxy to win this fight? In answer to this question, Machen betrays high confidence in the Bible's ability, not only to parry historical attacks, but to wage war against liberalism using the same rationalistic weaponry as the historical critics. For, says Machen, "a thing cannot possibly be true in religion and false in philosophy and science. All methods of arriving at truth, if they be valid methods, will arrive at a harmonious result" (*C&L*, 58). Thus, Machen alleges that when true historical science is conducted on the Bible, the Bible will win the day.<sup>12</sup>

It is Machen's scientific method for defending the Scriptures that I wish to address in this paper. For, while Machen confidently claims the label "Calvinist" his rationalistic epistemology appears to set him at odds with the epistemology of John Calvin. In other words, Machen, as we shall see, appears to wield the apologetic force of natural theology in an effort to convince the human mind of the veracity of the Scriptures, while Calvin taught that such conviction is the work of the Holy Spirit alone, and therefore "it is not right to subject [the Scriptures] to proof and reasoning."<sup>13</sup> This difference between Machen and Calvin is reflected in the writings of Cornelius Van Til when he speaks of "Old Princeton," particularly in his *Christian Apologetics*. In addressing the "point of contact" that the believer makes with the mind of the unbeliever in an apologetic conversation, Van Til argues that "Old Princeton," represented by B. B. Warfield and Charles Hodge viewed reason as a necessary arbitrator in a person's decision to accept or reject the evidence of divine revelation as credible.<sup>14</sup> According to Van Til, however,

It is ... impossible to appeal to the intellectual and moral nature of men, as men themselves interpret this nature, and say that it must judge of the credibility and evidence

---

<sup>12</sup> Machen explains, "[I]t is not the Christianity of the New Testament which is in conflict with science, but the supposed Christianity of the modern liberal church .... [T]he real city of God, and that city alone, has defences [*sic*] which are capable of warding off the assaults of modern unbelief" (*C&L*, 7).

<sup>13</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 1960; repr. 2006), 80.

<sup>14</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, edited by William Edgar (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1976; repr. 2003), 101–06.

of revelation. For if this is done, we are virtually telling the natural man to accept just so much and no more of Christianity as, with his perverted concept of human nature, he cares to accept.<sup>15</sup>

“Old Princeton,” therefore, represents “less consistent Calvinism.”<sup>16</sup>

When Van Til reflects upon “Old Princeton,” does he also have Machen in mind?<sup>17</sup>

Though we cannot be certain of the answer to that question, we can at least acknowledge that Machen appears to stand in the ranks of Warfield and Hodge and thus he is open to the same charge. Machen may have been a Calvinist in most respects. But in his strivings against liberalism and modernism, Machen’s epistemology appears to be at odds with Calvin’s. This paper will demonstrate the ostensive discrepancy between Machen and Calvin by analyzing epistemological statements that Machen makes in *Christianity and Liberalism*, comparing these statements to Calvin’s epistemology as expressed in his *Institutes*. Moreover, because this tension in Machen’s apologetical approach causes us to reflect upon our own methods in preaching and teaching, the paper will conclude with some reflection upon the implications of this study for a conservative hermeneutical approach to the proclamation and defense of the Scriptures.

### **The Tension Between Machen and Calvin**

Throughout *Christianity and Liberalism*, Machen defends the claims of the Bible with the skillful logic and rationalism of a critical historian, while Calvin consistently relies upon the work of the Spirit to open the hearts and minds of the unbelieving. We will note this tension by

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 103–04.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>17</sup> I am indebted to Shane Rosenthal, “Was J Gresham Machen a Consistent Calvinist?: Van Til vs. Machen & the Princeton Apologetic of Common Sense,” *Reformation Ink* (2002) for this question. Rosenthal’s article is available at <http://tartansplace.blogspot.com/2009/06/van-til-vs-machen-princeton-apologetic.html> [accessed on July 30, 2018]. Rosenthal believes that Van Til surely included Machen in his idea of “Old Princeton,” explaining that Machen “affirmed that reliable first principles may be derived from natural revelation,” which in turn could lead one to accept as valid the teachings of the Bible by virtue of common sense.

analyzing two significant aspects of Machen's apologetic approach. First, his defense of the Bible as a historical critic and, second, his use of rational theism.

#### Machen's Use of Historical-Critical Method

Machen treats the New Testament as "genuine products of the first Christian generation" (*C&L*, 21). As such, the NT documents become the "primary sources of the highest possible value" (*C&L*, 81), and are open therefore to scientific historical analysis. For instance, that a handful of weak, helpless disciples turned the world upside down with the message of the gospel suggests that the resurrection was not a hoax (*C&L*, 28). That the apostle Paul does not defend the supernatural Christ but assumes his existence is evidence that such a person was fully believed in by the early church (*C&L*, 98). The uniqueness of the character of Jesus argues strongly for the fact that he could have done miracles (*C&L*, 104).

By comparison, Calvin offers similar arguments for the truthfulness of the biblical record. For example, the Bible contains ideas that could not possibly be conceived by the human mind alone (*Institutes*, 83). The miracles and powerful manifestations of God recorded by Moses are said to have appeared in the sight of the entire nation of Israel, suggesting an accountability which kept the record free from deceit (*Institutes*, 86). Turning to the New Testament, it is evidence of the work of a supernatural force that men such as Matthew, once a worldly tax-collector, Peter and John, crude fishermen, and Paul, a brutal enemy of the church, could compose such documents of spiritual consistency and force (*Institutes*, 91).

However, there is a striking difference between Machen and Calvin. Calvin leaves the reader without a doubt as to the nature of such proofs of reason. The historical evidences are convincing only to those who have already "embraced" the Scripture "devoutly" (*Institutes*, 82).

Moreover, this persuasion comes from a singular source, namely, “the inward persuasion of the Holy Spirit” (*Institutes*, 92). Calvin explains,

[T]hese human testimonies which exist to confirm [the Scripture] will not be vain if, as secondary aids to our feebleness, they follow that chief and highest testimony. But those who wish to prove to unbelievers that Scripture is the Word of God are acting foolishly, for only by faith can this be known (*Institutes*, 92).

By contrast, Machen appears to embrace what Van Til called an Arminian idea, that unbelievers may be persuaded by historical arguments. “It is interesting to observe,” writes Machen, “how the liberal historians themselves, so soon as they begin to deal seriously with the sources, are obliged to admit that the real Jesus was not all they could have liked Jesus to be” (*C&L*, 33). In other words, if these supposed unbelievers will treat the primary “sources” (viz., the New Testament documents) with the seriousness of other historical documents, they will be forced to see more clearly that Jesus must have been who he claimed to be. These historians, although they have a strong prejudice against miracles, would “be obliged to say that no naturalistic explanation of the origin of the Church has yet been discovered, and that the evidence for the miracle is exceedingly strong” (*C&L*, 104). There is in Machen, therefore, what appears to be a belief in the possibility that an unbeliever may be persuaded by virtue of rational arguments.

On the other hand, argues Machen, there is a difference between a person who merely recognizes the truth and one who has known the truth through “experience” (as a believer).

The Christian man receives first the account which the New Testament gives of the atoning death of Christ. That account is history. But if true it has effects in the present, and it can be treated by its effects. The Christian man makes trial of the Christian message, and making trial of it he finds it to be true. Experience does not provide a substitute for the documentary evidence, but it does confirm that evidence (*C&L*, 122).

By “making a trial” of “the Christian message,” Machen appears to mean the act of trusting in the gospel unto salvation.<sup>18</sup> For the name “Christian” in this context seems to refer to a person who “receives” or “makes trial” of the gospel. This line of reasoning suggests that rational proofs can lead unbelievers to investigate Christianity for themselves and thereby embrace the gospel if they deem their investigation to lead them to truth.

This interpretation of Machen is also recognized by George Marsden. Marsden explains that, to Machen, history establishes the probability of truth. “And if we find these probabilities sufficient to make a trial of the Christian faith, the living experience of faith will turn the probability into a conviction of certainty.”<sup>19</sup> Marsden also discerns that, for Machen, “The Bible was a plain book for plain persons, so ... the key to proper understanding of Scripture was ‘to cultivate common sense.’ Only by common sense, by which Machen meant clear, open-minded, and informed thinking, could persons find truth.”<sup>20</sup>

Lest we grossly misrepresent Machen at this juncture, however, he truly did believe that the work of the Holy Spirit is necessary to bring a person to full assurance in Christ.<sup>21</sup> Although he never states *directly* that the Holy Spirit must guide an unbeliever to *truth*, he does strongly assert the necessity of the Spirit’s role in “the conviction of sin,” and that this conviction is vital before an unbeliever recognizes and embraces the supernatural acts of the Godhead (*C&L*, 105–

---

<sup>18</sup> This conclusion is even more evident on page 71, where Machen speaks of “making trial of” the “past event” of the resurrection to “discover that Jesus is truly a living Saviour to-day.” Then he refers to “having a present experience of Christ in the heart.”

<sup>19</sup> Marsden, “J. Gresham Machen, History, and Truth,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 42:1 (1979): 160.

<sup>20</sup> Marsden, 164–5. Marsden continues on page 167, “In Machen’s view nothing could be held true if it did not pass the test of conformity to the rules of empirical scientific inquiry. ...[C]hristianity must meet such empirical tests or it would not be worthy of belief. This was no abstract or merely theoretical issue for Machen. It was as deeply personal as anything could be.” I want to think that Marsden overstates his case here; despite his rationalism, Machen does not read like quite the empiricist Marsden paints him to be. Nevertheless, Marsden’s evaluation of Machen as a serious historian support, at the least, that Machen’s writings suggest an empirical approach.

<sup>21</sup> “But how is the redeeming work of Christ applied to the individual Christian man? ... According to the New Testament the work of Christ is applied to the individual Christian man by the Holy Spirit” (*C&L*, 136).



6). This conviction of sin “is a great mystery, which can be produced only by the Spirit of God” (C&L, 67). Once conviction is granted through the Spirit, a person’s “whole attitude toward life is transformed; he wonders at his former blindness, and the message of the gospel ... becomes now instinct with light. But it is God alone who can produce this change” (C&L, 67).<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, we are not probing Machen’s view of the necessity of the conviction through the Spirit, but whether Machen, contrary to Calvin, suggests that there is a Pelagian use of rational proofs instrumental in moving an unbeliever toward the truth on his way to salvation.<sup>23</sup> In other words, does Machen move Calvin’s “secondary aids” into the realm of primary proofs? Calvin writes that belief in the Scripture “is a conviction that requires no reasons; ... a feeling that can be born only of heavenly revelation” (*Institutes*, 80). But Machen appears to contradict Calvin when he criticizes those who deny that the presence of miracles in the Scriptures are instrumental in leading a person to truth:

The miracles used to be regarded as an aid to faith, it is often said, but now they are a hindrance to faith; faith used to come on account of the miracles, but now it comes in despite of them; men used to believe in Jesus because He wrought miracles [some say], *but now we accept the miracles because on other grounds we have come to believe in Him* (C&L, 102–03; emphasis added).

Nevertheless, is it not specifically upon “other grounds” through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, in Calvin, that the blinded sinner turns to embrace Christ? For Calvin claims,

Let this point therefore stand: that those whom the Holy Spirit has inwardly taught truly rest upon Scripture, and that Scripture indeed is self-authenticated; hence, it is not right to subject it to proof and reasoning. And the certainty it deserves with us, it attains by the testimony of the Spirit. For even if it wins reverence for itself by its own majesty, it seriously affects us only when it is sealed upon our hearts through the Spirit (*Institutes*, 80).

---

<sup>22</sup>This expression is not unlike Karl Barth’s declaration that “men can apprehend their unredeemed condition only because they stand already within the realm of redemption; they know themselves to be sinners only because they are already righteous.” Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed., trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 286.

<sup>23</sup> Again, referring to Cornelius Van Til, Van Til’s criticism of “Old Princeton” epistemology is that it is more Arminian than Calvinistic (cf. Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 101–03).

In another passage, Machen suggests that it was easier for those in Galilee to trust Jesus, for he was with them. Those ancients could touch him and listen to him, whereas people today are separated from him by nearly two millennia (*C&L*, 39–40, 43). But would not Calvin say that in first-century Palestine, even with the Savior present before them, it was only the Spirit who could illumine men and women to the truth? For after Peter’s great confession of the identity of Jesus, “‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,’ ... Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.’” (Matt 16:16–17, ESV). Today, however, in Machen’s words, men and women can come into the very presence of Jesus through “guidance so complete as to remove all doubt, yet so simple that a child can understand,” namely, the historical message of the gospel (*C&L*, 43). But how is this message a guide? “By reading” about the ministry of Jesus, “we learn that He is a person who is worthy of trust” and then “that He is willing to have *us* trust Him” (*C&L*, 43). Having come thus far, Machen continues, a person must trust in that message to come into a relationship with Jesus, in which case “the eighth chapter of Romans” is needed: “Without the eighth chapter of Romans the mere story of the earthly life of Jesus would be remote and dead; for it is through the eighth chapter of Romans, or the message which that chapter contains, that Jesus becomes our Saviour to-day” (*C&L*, 44). Given that there is no other mention of Romans in the entire volume of *Christianity and Liberalism*, the reference appears to be a rather cryptic way of speaking of the ministry of the Holy Spirit necessary to produce saving faith. Nevertheless, one could easily read Machen as if the Holy Spirit enters into the process of saving faith only after the reader, through the exercise of his or her own mental faculties, discovers Jesus through the historical message found in the Bible.

Furthermore, Machen's discussion of Christian experience (i.e., the life of the true believer administered by the Spirit) offers yet another example of his thinking concerning secondary proofs:

Christian experience is rightly used when it confirms the documentary evidence. But it can never possibly provide a substitute for the documentary evidence. We know that the gospel story is true partly because of the early date of the documents in which it appears, the evidence as to their authorship, the internal evidence of their truth, the impossibility of explaining them as being based upon deception or upon myth. The evidence is gloriously confirmed by present experience, which adds to the documentary evidence that wonderful directness and immediacy of conviction which delivers us from fear. Christian experience is rightly used when it helps to convince us that the events narrated in the New Testament actually did occur; but it can never enable us to be Christians whether the events occurred or not. It is a fair flower, and should be prized as a gift of God. But cut it from its root in the blessed Book, and it soon withers away and dies (*C&L*, 72).

Like Calvin, Machen makes a distinction between "evidence" and "experience." He also contends that neither evidence nor experience alone will make a person a Christian, but both are necessary. If by "evidence" Machen may simply mean the witness of the Bible, then he is consistent with Calvin who would agree that one must trust in (by experience) the witness of the Scripture in order to come to Christ. However, it has already been demonstrated that Machen appears to mean more than the mere witness of the Bible, but the witness as confirmed by common sense or historical proofs. Machen cannot be considered a "consistent Calvinist" if the "root" from which the Christian experience blossoms is an engrafting of the biblical witness and the support of rational argumentation. But the major distinction between Machen and Calvin regarding secondary proofs here is that Machen *reverses* the order of evidence and experience found in Calvin. In Calvin, evidence serves to confirm Christian experience, for once "we have embraced" the Scripture by faith, "those arguments—not strong enough before to engraft and fix the certainty of Scripture in our minds—become very useful aids" (*Institutes*, 82). Calvin stands in the stream of epistemology defined by the dynamic of *credo ut intelligam* (I believe so that I

may understand; Augustine) and *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding; Anselm).<sup>24</sup> By serious contrast, Machen appears to hold that the opposite is true, that the *experience* confirms the *evidence*; understanding is verified by faith. An unbeliever hears the gospel presented in such a rational and convincing way that it causes him or her to make further investigation. Moved by this rational evidence, the unbeliever “makes trial” (*C&L*, 122) of the gospel by trusting in Christ, after which the experience as a new believer “gloriously confirms” the truth in which he or she has trusted.

### Machen’s Use of Rational Theism

If Machen’s use of historical criticism to defend the Bible causes us ironically to question the genuineness of his Calvinism, then the theologian’s statements concerning rational offers us even more of a puzzle. While a full treatment of this feature in Machen’s work is beyond the scope of this paper, only a brief examination is necessary to demonstrate the difficulties his writing on this point presents to the question of his Calvinistic epistemology. Machen contends,

How, then, shall God be known...? Some liberal preachers would say that we become acquainted with God only through Jesus. That assertion has an appearance of loyalty to our Lord, but in reality it is highly derogatory to Him. For Jesus Himself plainly recognized the validity of other ways of knowing God,... Jesus plainly found God’s hand in nature; the lilies of the field revealed to Him the weaving of God. He found God also in the moral law; the law written in the hearts of men was God’s law, which revealed His righteousness. Finally Jesus plainly found God revealed in the Scriptures (*C&L*, 55).

Jesus revealed, in a wonderfully intimate way, the character of God, but such revelation obtained its true significance only on the basis both of the Old Testament heritage and of Jesus’ own teaching. Rational theism, the knowledge of one Supreme Person, Maker and active Ruler of the world, is at the very root of Christianity (*C&L*, 56).

Several statements that Machen makes at this juncture cause serious doubts as to the consistency of his Calvinism. Would Calvin agree with the deprecation of knowledge of God exclusively

---

<sup>24</sup> Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 2.

through the Son? The question is not whether men and women are presented with the evidence of God all around them, whether they can read or hear the Scriptures that witness to God, or if they have an internal witness in their consciousness. Rather, the question is whether such evidences can direct their thoughts toward the true knowledge of God. Can rational theism provide steps that are necessary for one to take before appropriation of the gospel?

In an attempt to defend Calvin from misinterpretation, Derek Jeffereys interacts with Alvin Plantinga, a rational theist, on this very question, going into some detail regarding Calvin's teaching on the question of what an unbeliever can know about God.<sup>25</sup> Jeffereys demonstrates that when Calvin speaks of a human being's knowledge of God through the mind, he speaks exclusively of the wonderful human faculty that Adam possessed prior to Genesis 3.<sup>26</sup> But the fallen faculties of the human race are another matter. "In this ruin of mankind," Calvin says, "no one now experiences God either as Father or as Author of salvation, or favorable in any way, until Christ the Mediator comes forward to reconcile him to us" (*Institutes*, 40). Furthermore,

It is therefore in vain that so many burning lamps shine for us in the workmanship of the universe to show forth the glory of its Author. Although they bathe us wholly in their radiance, yet they can of themselves in no way lead us into the right path. Surely they strike some sparks, but before their fuller light shines forth these are smothered (*Institutes*, 68).

In contrast, Machen claims that "the human mind has a wonderful faculty for the condensation of perfectly valid arguments" and that Jesus Christ, because he appealed to this rational faculty, was himself a theist (*C&L*, 57). To offer Machen the benefit of the doubt, perhaps in the larger context of the whole of his writings statements such as these have a benign explanation.

---

<sup>25</sup> Derek S. Jeffereys, "How Reformed is Reformed Epistemology? Alvin Plantinga and Calvin's 'Sensus Divinitatis,'" *Religious Studies* 33 (1997): 419–31.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 424. "When Calvin discusses the *sensus divinitatis*, he speaks from the perspective of fallen man. However, when he turns to God's presence in nature, he shifts to the perspective of Adam before the Fall. He does not describe the human capacity to apprehend God's action in the natural world from the position of a post-fallen human being."

However, in the context of *Christianity and Liberalism*, they suggest that Machen was not consistent with, but was rather at odds with, Calvin on the question of epistemology.

### **Machen's Epistemology and Ours**

As a staunch defender of orthodox Christianity in the early twentieth century, Machen knew few revivals both on the scholarly and popular level.<sup>27</sup> Even those who disagreed with him “came away from his works somewhat awed that anyone with such antiquated views could argue for them so well.”<sup>28</sup> His *Christianity and Liberalism* in particular had a profound impact on the Christian church, selling thousands of copies its first years and establishing Machen's position as a frontline warrior in the debate against modernism.<sup>29</sup> His publications, which are still in print after nearly a century, have greatly edified the church. D. G. Hart even states, “[B]ecause of [Machen's] work and that of others like him, at least there is still a Christian community, no matter how small, which confesses Christ as savior and lord.”<sup>30</sup>

Yet, how should we appreciate the seeming distance between these two epistemological approaches to the proclamation and defense of the Scriptures, represented by Machen and the Reformer whose name defined the Princeton scholar's theological heritage? I offer three observations. First, we must observe that Machen's labor was used by God to bolster the faith of many believers and to provide cogent arguments in defense of Christianity. His scholarship was indeed offered in service for the church. For even if we conclude that our faith cannot be based on rational arguments, our faith is, nevertheless, rationally defensible; and if we are not willing

---

<sup>27</sup> Mark A. Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 54–5.

<sup>28</sup> Marsden, “Machen, History, and Truth,” 157.

<sup>29</sup> Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir*, 3d edition (South Holland, Illinois: Park Press, 1978), 335.

<sup>30</sup> Hart, “*Christianity and Liberalism* in a Postliberal Age,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 56 (1994): 342.

to defend our faith apologetically we give the impression that it is indefensible. We may look askance at the dramatic claim by Hart (above) that it is due to Machen and his colleagues that Christianity actually survives, as if the Lord would no longer be able to build his church without men like Machen. Nevertheless, each of us is indebted to the apologetical heavy lifting that men like Machen were willing to provide for the community of faith, and we still find help and solace in their writings for our own ministries and personal walk with Christ.

It is also informative to appreciate Machen according to his own historical situation. Machen had been armed with an arsenal of tenacious logic, having been schooled in the classics and having inherited in his philosophy the remnants of “Old School” Presbyterianism, Princetonian Calvinism, Scottish Commonsense Realism, and German criticism, not to mention old-fashioned, southern obstinacy.<sup>31</sup> In the early twentieth century Machen found himself on the conservative side of a great fight for orthodoxy. A year before the publication of *Christianity and Liberalism*, Harry Emerson Fosdick preached his sermon, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” which was widely published.<sup>32</sup> Marsden believed that it was important for conservatives to meet fire with fire, to respond to rationalism on its own terms;<sup>33</sup> and his training made him a formidable opponent in the arena of historicism. Indeed, much of *Christianity and Liberalism* is

---

<sup>31</sup> Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, “J. Gresham Machen: The Fundamentalist Defense,” in *The Bible in Modern Culture: Baruch Spinoza to Brevard Childs*, 2d ed, 195–216 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 204–06. Also, Hart notes, “Machen...shared with liberal Protestants a genuine interest in the human aspects of Scripture and strove to use the variety of scholarly methods to understand the Bible better.” Hart, “Machen, J(ohn) Gresham (1881–1937),” in *Historical Handbook of Major Bible Interpreters*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 595.

<sup>32</sup> Stephen J. Nichols, *J. Gresham Machen: A Guided Tour of His Life and Thought* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 2004), 82. Nichols explains the impact of Fosdick’s sermon upon Machen, which adds to one’s appreciation of why Machen was so keen on the *fact* of Christ. “Fosdick preferred devotion and piety over doctrinal accuracy; what mattered was being a ‘devoted lover of the Lord,’ not having right doctrine. This stumped Machen. Not because he was against piety or against devotion, but because Fosdick’s view left him with too many nagging questions. If Christ is not virgin-born and he is not to be taken as the Bible presents him, then who exactly is it that one is to be a lover of in Fosdick’s view? And if his death was not a sacrifice to remove the penalty and consequent judgment of sin, then what exactly was Christ doing on the cross? When Fosdick brushed aside doctrine for piety, he was not talking about tertiary issues; he was obliterating the very center of Christianity” (87).

<sup>33</sup> Noll, 54.

a polemic against specific rationalist attacks. For example, the very insistence that the biblical record is essentially “history” is designed to ward off the blows against Reformed orthodoxy by men such as his German mentor, Herrmann, who taught that one could continue to embrace the Christianity despite the fact that the Jesus of the Bible may never have existed.<sup>34</sup> Also, his insistence of the *fact* of Christianity as an event was to challenge the liberal version of Christianity, which had degenerated to “a religion of moralistic uplift and human goodness.”<sup>35</sup>

As a second observation, when we examine Machen and Calvin side by side it seems to me that the conservative evangelical church in our own time, including those in Fundamentalism take an approach to the proclamation of the Scriptures that is far more Calvinist than “Machen-ist.” The biblical affirmation of the unmatched and unaided work of the Spirit eloquently stated in Calvin’s writings justifiably warms the heart of the conservative theologian and pastor who desire to simply interpret the meaning of the text in its context and let the Spirit do his work. We rest with confidence in the ministry model of Paul who did not proclaim “the testimony of God with lofty speech” or “plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power” (1 Cor 2:1–4), serving a God whose “foolishness” confounds the wise ones of the world (1 Cor 1:20–29). For our faith does not rest in human wisdom but in God’s power (1 Cor 2:5).

Nevertheless, in this observation is an inherent danger. Namely, our hope in the work of the Spirit can lull us into a lack of readiness when it comes to the New Testament commands to be ready to defend our faith with explanation and argumentation (1 Pet 3:15; 2 Cor 10:3–6). These commands imply that we must prepare ourselves to explain the Scriptures and to make cogent arguments in its defense. The promise that God’s word “will not return ... void” (Isa 55:11) is often interpreted to mean that if God’s people simply communicate the message of the

---

<sup>34</sup>Hart, *Defending*, 21.

<sup>35</sup>Hart, “Postliberal,” 334.



Bible then the Bible will go to work on the hearts of the hearers. But not even the apostle Paul, who depended ultimately upon the work of God to produce faith simply proclaimed the word of God with no argumentation.

In the well-documented twentieth-century movement among conservative ministers of the church and seminary to distance themselves from critical higher learning, the call to simply “preach the word” (2 Tim 4:2) has often been taken to mean that we need not bother with the mental acuity needed to wield cogent arguments in defense and advancement of the gospel. This posture manifests itself in much of our preaching and teaching because we rarely sense the need to make arguments for the historic authenticity of the text. Thus, we are far more skilled at explaining the text than defending the authenticity of the text. For example, we do not acknowledge that there is a so-called “synoptic problem.” During the Christmas season we preach random texts from Matthew 1–2 and Luke 1–2 and our congregations rehearse the “Christmas story,” but rarely do we stop to consider, much less to defend the fact that the birth narratives contained in these two Gospels are so dissimilar in their plotlines that they read as different stories. Or, if we ever explain Gospel pericopes in which at least one of the synoptic evangelists, Matthew, Mark, or Luke appear to present a historical detail that contradicts the other two, we offer the simplistic explanation that these are three men merely describing the same event from their own perspective. Never mind the fact that only one of those three men may have even been present at the event.

To the extent that we have indeed rested so much in the ultimate work of the Spirit in our preaching and teaching that we no longer bother with the sheer mental preparation that it takes to argue for the historicity of the text I make a third observation. Because we are living in a time of new historical attacks against the Bible, we cannot afford as stewards of the truth to rest upon the

work of the brilliant apologists of the past or present and allow others to fight on our behalf. There are at least three significant reasons for this charge. First, if we do not bring up the subject of the historicity of the text at appropriate times in the church and in the classroom the members of our congregations and our academies will doubtless hear about it from those who use historical-critical methods to attack the Bible. The History of Religions approach of explaining the biblical text is simply what all young adults are taught if they enter any secular school. The same approach forms the presuppositions of every public media documentary on the Bible or the Life of Jesus or the phenomenon of Christianity. We wrong the body of Christ when we do not disciple the members of our congregation to understand the nature of these attacks and to grow in their own ability to answer back.

Furthermore, if we are not ourselves growing in our ability to defend the faith in a Machen-ist manner, then we are losing opportunities to confront current historical attacks on the Bible. For example, BioLogos is a fast-growing, popular organization whose mission is stated as follows: “BioLogos invites the church and the world to see the harmony between science and biblical faith as we present an evolutionary understanding of God’s creation.”<sup>36</sup> In order to accomplish this mission, the members of BioLogos must launch an attack that is historical in nature against the authentic message of Genesis 1–2. The vigorous debates concerning gender roles and human sexuality are also impacting the church, and the arguments from the proponents of the antibiblical positions on these questions are often aimed at the history of the text. Is this text merely a cultural expression? Did the apostle Paul really write that? And so forth.

Finally, as a philosophical observation, if we are content to preach and teach the Word in reliance upon the Spirit but ignore apologetics, are we not committing the same kind of error that

---

<sup>36</sup> Mission statement available on the BioLogos website at <https://biologos.org/about-us/our-mission/>.

leads to hyper-Calvinism? Just as we would be right to criticize any theological system that cools our desire to actively fulfill the Great Commission on the basis that the elect will be converted without our assistance anyway, we may be open to the same criticism if we rely solely on the work of God in the explanation of the text and marginalize our biblical responsibility to instruct those who are in opposition (2 Tim 2:24). For it is through this instruction that “God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil” (2 Tim 2:25–26). May the Lord raise up within his church those servants who are Calvinist in their affirmation of the indispensable work of the Spirit in gospel preaching, but Machen-ist in their ability to meet the critical attacks of the enemy with courageous force and dexterity.

## Bibliography

Barth, Karl. *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed. Translated by Edwyn C. Hoskyns. New York: Oxford University Press, 1968.

Burnett, Richard. *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004.

Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1. Edited by John T. McNeill; translated by Ford Lewis Battles. The Library of Christian Classics. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 1960. Reprint, 2006.

Chrisope, Terry A. "J. Gresham Machen and the Modern Intellectual Crisis." *Presbyterion* 24:2 (1998): 92–109.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Toward a Sure Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Dilemma of Biblical Criticism, 1881–1915*. Ross-Shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2000.

Harrisville, Roy A. and Walter Sundberg, "J. Gresham Machen: The Fundamentalist Defense." In, *The Bible in Modern Culture: Baruch Spinoza to Brevard Childs*, 2d ed, 195–216. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002.

Hart, D. G. "Christianity and Liberalism in a Postliberal Age." *Westminster Theological Journal* 56 (1994): 329–44.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1994; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995.

\_\_\_\_\_. "J. Gresham Machen, Inerrancy, and Creedless Christianity." *Themelios* 25:3 (2000): 20–34.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Machen, J(ohn) Gresham (1881–1937)." In *Historical Handbook of Major Bible Interpreters*, ed. Donald K. McKim, 594–98. Downers Grove, IL, 1998.

\_\_\_\_\_. "When Is a Fundamentalist a Modernist? J. Gresham Machen, Cultural Modernism, and Conservative Protestantism." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65:3 (1997): 605–33.

- Hodge, Charles. *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3. Michigan Historical Reprint Series. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 2001.
- Jeffereys, Derek S. "How Reformed is Reformed Epistemology? Alvin Plantinga and Calvin's 'Sensus Divinitatis.'" *Religious Studies* 33 (1997): 419–31.
- Longfield, Bradley J. *The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and Moderates*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Machen, J. Gresham. *Christianity and Liberalism*. Reprint edition. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1923.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "History and Faith." *The Princeton Theological Review* 13 (1915): 337–51.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Origins of Paul's Religion: A Defense of Supernatural Christianity*. New York: Macmillan, 1923. Reprint, Birmingham: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2006.
- Marsden, George M. "J. Gresham Machen, History, and Truth." *Westminster Theological Journal* 42:1 (1979): 157–75.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism*, 2d edition. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Understanding J. Gresham Machen." In *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*, 182–201. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991.
- Migliore, Daniel L. *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2d ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004.
- Moore, William G. "J. Gresham Machen: The Power of Theological Reflection." *Trinity Journal* 22 (Fall, 2001): 157–77.
- Murray, Iain H. *Evangelicalism Divided: A Record of Crucial Change in the Years 1950 to 2000*. Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2000.
- Nichols, Stephen J. *J. Gresham Machen: A Guided Tour of His Life and Thought*. Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 2004.
- Noll, Mark A. *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986.

Rogers, Jack Bartlett. "Christianity and Liberalism, by J. Gresham Machen, D.D., 1923." *American Presbyterians* 66:4 (Winter, 1998): 304–08.

Rosenthal, Shane. "Was J Gresham Machen a Consistent Calvinist?: Van Til vs. Machen & the Princeton Apologetic of Common Sense." *Reformation Ink* (2001). <http://homepage.mac.com/shanerosenthal/reformationink/srmachen.htm> [accessed May 5, 2008].

Stonehouse, Ned B. *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir*, 3d edition. South Holland, Illinois: Park Press, 1978.