

# REFORMED FORUM

S P R I N G  
**2023**  
M A G A Z I N E

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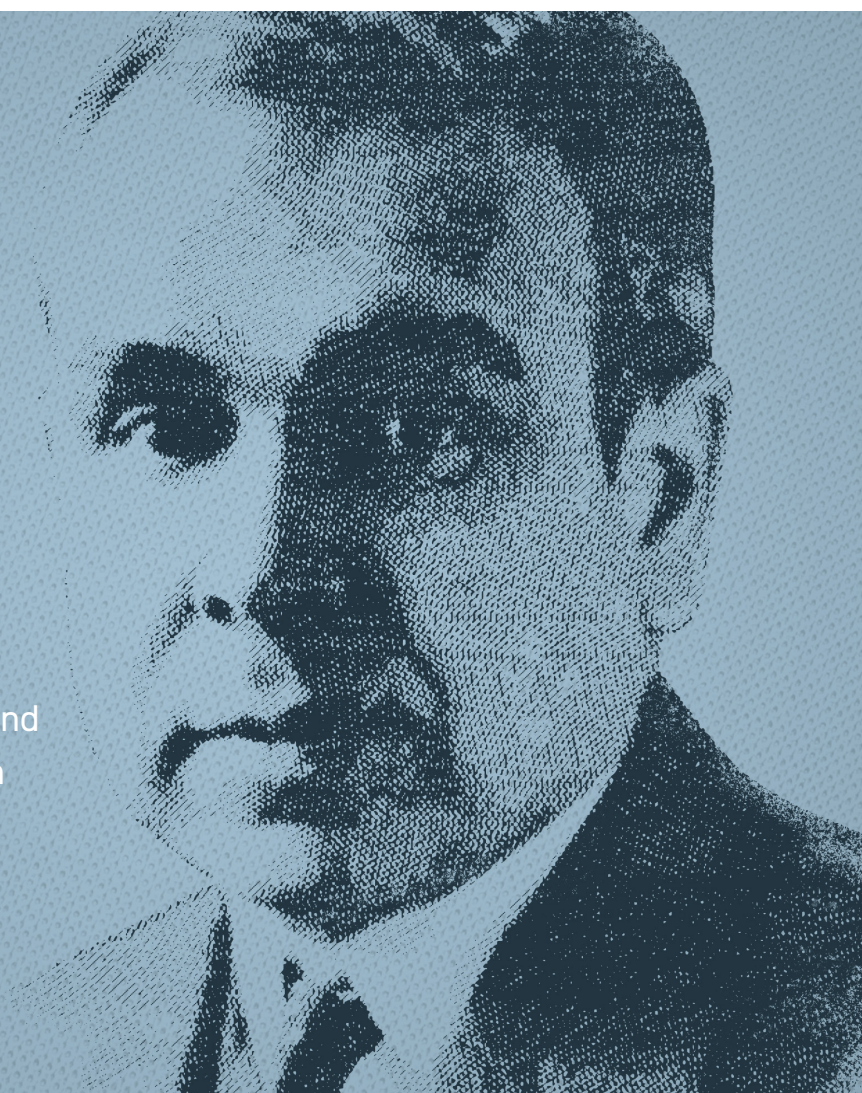
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I am humbled and encouraged by the support and generosity that was shown to Reformed Forum at the end of 2022. Thank you for participating in our “Every Person Mature” campaign through your prayers and gifts. I am happy to report that we surpassed our goals for both total giving amount and total givers with \$159,192 from 179 donors. Praise be to God!

As we look forward to 2023, we feel that the work of Reformed Forum has only just begun. We are actively engaged in an ambitious plan to develop confessionally Reformed and redemptive-historical resources for people around the world. You can read more about these efforts in the report from Ryan Noha, Director of Education and Advancement.

A major focus this year will be celebrating the one-hundredth anniversary of the publication of J. Gresham Machen’s classic book, *Christianity and Liberalism*. In several of his own books, Cornelius Van Til continued Machen’s principal argument that liberalism was not merely a deficient form of Christianity but a different religion altogether. Van Til realized that the issues Machen was fighting were still present, though in modified form, in his day. The same is true for us.

We are fighting a fight against theological ignorance just as much as against theological error. I hope you enjoy this issue, which explores Machen’s enduring legacy. May you be stirred up to love and good deeds (Heb. 10:24) and to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3).

Camden Bucey  
Executive Director

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# REFORMED ACADEMY UPDATE

RYAN NOHA

Reformed Academy exists to support the church's mission to present all of God's people mature in Christ. We strive with the firm conviction that Christian discipleship must deepen as saints go from grace to glory, even unto conformity to the image of the man from heaven, the risen and exalted Christ (1 Cor. 15:47). Moreover, we take heart that God's promise to glorify his people is not just for a select few, but rather all who look to Christ by faith are being changed and shall be changed (2 Cor. 3:18; 1 Cor. 15:51). Every person will be presented *mature* in Christ, and *every* person in Christ will be presented mature. Committed to supporting the church as she labors unto this intensive and extensive growth of God's people, Reformed Academy serves more than 4,400 students and their churches in 84 countries with biblically grounded, confessionally faithful resources.

## **Every Person Mature**

Since the fall of 2022, we have continued to expand our free online theological curricula to support the church's ministry of the Word. To this end, we have published our first three Bible study courses: *Zephaniah's Protology in Eschatology*, *Exploring 2 Peter*, and *The Book of Job*. Rich but accessible, simple yet profound, these courses are designed to equip laypersons and church officers to better hear Christ speaking through all of Scripture and also to lead their families and flocks in the same. We are committed to recording several Bible study courses each year until all 66 books have been covered from a redemptive-historical perspective. Next up, we have recordings scheduled for the *Gospel of John*, *1 Peter*, the *Pentateuch*, and the *Gospel of Mark*. Lord willing, some of these classes will include an in-person component where pastors, students, and anyone interested in growing in their knowledge of Christ may gather face-to-face for discipleship and fellowship.

Just as we lay a new foundation with our Bible study curriculum, so we are poised to mark a significant milestone for our Reformed Academy with the completion of Dr. Lane G. Tipton's eight-part curriculum in our Fellowship in Reformed Apologetics—consisting of

more than 40 hours of free ThM/PhD-level instruction in the theology and apologetics of Cornelius Van Til! This spring, he will record the final module on *Van Til and Idealism*, putting the capstone on a sustained theme throughout this series—namely, Van Til's classical Reformed Trinitarianism and federalism as the foundation of his apologetic method and the most consistent critique of all forms of correlativism. To close out the year, Dr. Tipton is scheduled to record two classes on Colossians 1:15–20 before moving on to a projected ten-year march through each of the *loci* of systematic theology.

## **Every Person Mature**

Serving Christ's church with a keen awareness to the global scope of her mission is paramount to our work at Reformed Academy. For this reason, we continue to provide Spanish and Chinese subtitles for all of our courses. We have especially prioritized these languages because they are aligned with our existing relationships in home and foreign missions. Join us as we pray that other frontiers for translation may develop along the lines of our burgeoning partnerships with confessional Presbyterians in Asia, South America, and the United States who are actively translating courses into Korean, Portuguese, and Indonesian.

As a complement to our work of translation, we have sought to expand the reach of Reformed Academy through the use of new media platforms. Since August 2022, we have released a new lesson from our Reformed Academy every Monday on our podcast feed so that students may work through entire classes in serialized fashion. It has been a great joy to hear from even longtime listeners our flagship podcast, *Christ the Center*, who are now accessing our courses for the very first time. We have also cast our bread on the waters by publishing courses on YouTube, trusting that the proclamation of God's word will not return unto him void but will indeed accomplish for his own glory and the good of his people that which is far greater than all that we ask or think (Eph. 3:20).

Maturity in Christ is not only the church's mission, but also her God-appointed destiny. "Knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Cor. 15:58), join us today as we come alongside the church in her Spirit-empowered work to present *every* person *mature* in Christ.



Ryan Noha is Director of Education and Advancement for Reformed Forum.



*Donate today to support the church in presenting every person mature.*



# MACHEN AND THE PRESBYTERIAN CONTROVERSY

DARRYL G. HART



Taught by Dr. Darryl G. Hart, this course in church history explores the life and legacy of J. Gresham Machen, fighter of the good fight of faith during the Presbyterian controversy of the 1920s and 30s. What formed Machen as a fighter? What did he fight against? How should we remember him? Drawing upon a myriad of primary sources, Dr. Hart paints a multi-faceted portrait of Machen from which Christians of all backgrounds may draw encouragement as they self-sacrificially contend for the faith once delivered to the saints. In addition, he brings the mature fruit of his own 40 years of reflection on Presbyterian history to address matters of perennial importance to the church—for example, the relationship between Christ and culture, the significance of creeds and confessions, and the spirituality of the church.

This **free on-demand** course includes twelve video lessons totaling six hours of instruction. Course handouts with lecture outlines, discussion questions, and extended quotations are available for download under “Course Materials.” While this course is ideally suited for a quarter-long adult Sunday School or

group study, individuals may engage all of these resources on their own schedule and at their own pace from their computer or mobile device.



## VIDEO LESSON TITLES:

### WHAT FORMED MACHEN AS A FIGHTER

- J. Gresham Machen: Fighter of the Good Fight
- What Prepared Machen to Fight?
- Machen and the Crisis of Western Civilization

### WHAT MACHEN FOUGHT AGAINST

- Ecumenism and Intolerance
- Liberalism: The Different Religion
- The Fight against False Optimism
- The Fight against Tyranny
- The Fight against Liberalism, Round Two: Foreign Missions
- The Fight against Sentimentality

### THE BASIS FOR MACHEN'S FIGHT

- The Basis upon which Machen Fought: The Bible
- The Basis for the Fight: Creeds and Polity

### ASSESSING MACHEN

- How We Assess Machen

**ACCESS THE FULL COURSE HERE.**



# REFLECTIONS ON AN IN-PERSON COURSE

BOB HOLDA

## EXPLORING 2 PETER

THE PROMISE AND THE PATH

Last December, I had the privilege of attending Reformed Forum's first hybrid event in-person at their studio-classroom in Libertyville, Illinois. This course, *Exploring 2 Peter: The Promise and the Path*, was taught by the Rev. Dan Ragusa (URCNA) over twelve 30-minute lectures and two Q&A sessions, all in less than 24 hours. It was well worth the drive down and back from Oshkosh, Wisconsin, where I serve as the pastor of Resurrection Presbyterian Church (OPC), not only because Dan is a personal friend with whom I graduated from Mid-America Reformed Seminary, but because of his faithful, clear, and inspiring teaching of Scripture, as well as the opportunity for thoughtful Christian fellowship this event provided in Reformed Forum's new facility.

In his teaching, Dan opened up some of Peter's fundamental thought structures. For instance, Dan demonstrated a fundamental aspect of Peter's anthropology by noting how frequently one's identity is depicted as the ground of one's behavior, which, in turn, determines one's destiny. This is an interpretive grid that shows up in Peter's treatment of Christ (1:16–18), the scoffers and false teachers (2:1–3, 10–22; 3:3), and the saints (3:11–18). This insight also enabled Dan to deftly unpack Peter's initially odd-sounding warning about both nearsightedness and blindness in 1:9,

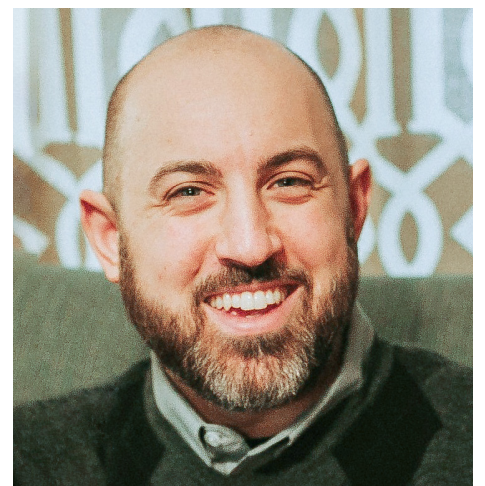
and illuminate Peter's vision-based metaphor in 2:14.

Dan also brought out the eschatological error of the false teachers and scoffers in wrongly attributing eternality to the temporal. This error underwrote their rejection of the gospel's call to holiness and patience since they denied Christ's future return and judgment. Dan then demonstrated how Peter took the opposite tack when appealing to his readers, by reminding them of the eschatological changes on the horizon and calling them to live faithfully in light of such.

We then saw how this eschatological discrepancy related to the hermeneutical divergence between Peter and the scoffers. Whereas the scoffers ignored the patterns in Scripture regarding the Lord's past execution of the covenant, and therefore did not apply them to themselves or the future (3:4–6), Peter did precisely that (2:1–10), taking a redemptive-historical reading of the Scriptures (i.e., Mal. 3:13–4:3), which enabled him to confidently approach the future.

I highly recommend this course to anyone interested in learning how to apply a redemptive-historical hermeneutic to the Scriptures or how to live faithfully in this age with their heart set on the age to come. I plan to review this material again before preaching through

2 Peter (something I plan to do sooner than I previously imagined), while enjoying the slower pace that the online Reformed Academy version offers.



Rev. Bob Holda is the pastor of Resurrection Presbyterian Church in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, and a long-time, avid listener to Reformed Forum's podcast Christ the Center.



# MACHEN AND THE PCA TODAY

R. CARLTON WYNNE

This year is the centennial anniversary of the release of J. Gresham Machen's classic work, *Christianity and Liberalism*, a most opportune time for all in Reformed denominations, not just Machen's own Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC), to reflect on the still relevant insights Dr. Machen has left us. My own denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), celebrates its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. So PCA folks are providentially poised not only to give special praise to God for his grace to our expression of Christ's kingdom, but also to assess how we can grow as a church that is "faithful to the Scriptures, true to the Reformed faith, and obedient to the great commission."<sup>1</sup> With Machen's famous book in hand, then, let us dare to ask: What can Machen teach the PCA that is useful in current days?

Asking this question requires that we first dig down to the varying roots of the OPC and the PCA. At the first General Assembly of the OPC in 1936, Machen described the thirty-four ministers and some five-thousand brave souls who had joined him as "members, at last, of a true Presbyterian Church."<sup>2</sup> By claiming to represent a "true" Presbyterian church, Machen implicitly declared the northern Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A, infected as it then was with the rife spirit of modernism and liberal Protestantism, to be a false church. Over a decade earlier in *Christianity and Liberalism*, Machen had already been urging liberal ministers of the mainline denomination to withdraw from it in the interests of honesty, going so far as to suggest that the Unitarian Church is "just the kind of church that the liberal preacher desires—namely, a church without an authoritative Bible, without doctrinal requirements, and without a creed."<sup>3</sup>

By contrast, the southern Presbyterian conservatives who founded the PCA nearly four decades after the birth of the OPC styled their



J. Gresham Machen. Photo courtesy of the archives of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

new denomination a "continuing Presbyterian church loyal to Scripture and to the Reformed faith."<sup>4</sup> That is, while the founders of the PCA observed that the southern Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) was traveling a liberal course that made division inevitable, many of them envisioned the PCA to be "distinctly mainline in orientation."<sup>5</sup> Like Machen and the OPC, they wanted the PCA to preserve confessional Presbyterianism in America, but to do so in a way that could also achieve "the larger goal of evangelizing and

renewing American culture."<sup>6</sup> Notably, the PCA has not always trumpeted this dimension of its origin story, and there have always been those within its ranks who have resisted the mainline desire for cultural influence in favor of a more thoroughly Reformed identity.<sup>7</sup> This

1. "Presbyterian Church in America," accessed February 2, 2023, <https://pcanet.org/about-the-pca/>.

2. J. Gresham Machen, "A True Presbyterian Church at Last," *Presbyterian Guardian* (June 22, 1936): 110; emphasis added.

3. J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, new ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 139–40.

4. G. Aiken Taylor, "For a Continuing Church," *Presbyterian Journal* (November 3, 1971): 7; emphasis added.

5. Sean Michael Lucas, *For a Continuing Church: The Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2015), 3.

6. Lucas, *For a Continuing Church*, 3.

7. E.g., in his sermon at the first General Assembly of the PCA, Jack Williamson declared, "We have committed ourselves to the rebirth and continuation of a Presbyterian Church loyal to Scripture, the Reformed faith, and committed to the spiritual mission of the Church as Christ commanded in the Great Commission." W. Jack Williamson, "To the Glory of God," *Presbyterian Journal* (December 26, 1973), 11. It is odd that Lucas cites this sermon as evidence that those who formed the PCA were "profoundly interested in preserving American civilization through their efforts" (Lucas, *For a Continuing Church*, 2,

fact helps to explain the tension and, at times, the struggle, over the PCA's identity and direction over the half-century since its founding.<sup>8</sup>

The PCA's ambivalent relationship with the broader culture also gives glimpse into the first lesson the PCA can learn from Machen: to be on guard, as a church, against using the Christian faith to achieve allegedly higher this-worldly goals. To be clear, this caution does not oppose Christian influence for cultural betterment *per se*. When Christ characterized his followers as "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world," he was hardly calling them to a separatistic or quasi-monastic lifestyle.<sup>9</sup> What Machen warned against was regarding the Christian gospel more as a means for worldly influence than a message directing sinners towards the realm of heaven through faith in Christ. The danger, Machen believed, lay in the fact that the former orientation inevitably replaces the glory of God in Christ with the rehabilitation of this "present evil age" (Gal. 1:4) as the chief end of man. As Machen puts it in *Christianity and Liberalism*,

[I]f 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' (Lk. xiv. 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 exist for the sake of Christianity and not Christianity for the sake of them. Christianity will indeed accomplish many useful things in this world, but if it is accepted in order to accomplish those useful things it is not Christianity . . . Christianity will

cf. 313–14), since nowhere does Williamson call for this goal. Williamson did describe the visible church as "an institution in society," but only to note that, like other institutions, the church possessed certain "distinguishing characteristics" or "marks," namely, "the pure preaching of the Gospel; the Scriptural administration of the sacraments; and the exercise of discipline." Williamson, "To the Glory of God," 19.

8. This struggle was recently evident in the contested decision of the 49<sup>th</sup> PCA General Assembly to withdraw from the National Association of Evangelicals. See Emily McFarlan Miller, "Presbyterian Church in America votes to leave National Association of Evangelicals," *Religion News Service*, accessed February 4, 2023, <https://religionnews.com/2022/06/23/presbyterian-church-in-america-votes-to-leave-national-association-of-evangelicals/>.

9. See Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, *The New American Commentary* 22 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 102.

produce a healthy community; but if it is accepted in order to produce a healthy community, it is not Christianity.<sup>10</sup>

Many PCA churches come dangerously close to instrumentalizing the faith in directions Machen decried. PCA church vision statements routinely announce the aim of bringing "spiritual, social, and cultural renewal" to a neighborhood and to the world. One PCA church even seeks to "build a great city through a movement of the gospel that brings personal conversion and transformation, community formation, social justice, and cultural renewal." Again, as common grace blessings pursued through sanctified Christian living—even as Spirit-wrought effects of the church's efforts to gather and perfect the saints—certain cultural fruits are to be welcomed. But history testifies that when the institutional church puts the gospel of Christ into the service of worldly goals, evangelism becomes social work, preaching becomes cultural commentary, and Jesus becomes a partner in the pursuit of an earthly kingdom. At the very least, the desire for cultural influence reminiscent of the older mainline Presbyterians has affected how the PCA often articulates the faith to the world, which leads to a second lesson from Machen.

When it came to specific trends in American Protestantism, Machen stood as a paragon of theological clarity and unabashed conviction that the PCA would do well to emulate today. When his fundamentalist allies were scatter-shooting criticisms of religious modernism, Machen's *Christianity and Liberalism* came in like a laser, cutting through the fields of distortion from which confessional Christianity has always struggled to escape. As he explained in the book's introduction, Machen's purpose was "to present the issue as sharply and as clearly as possible."<sup>11</sup> At "issue" was the chasm of differences between the orthodox Reformed faith and theological liberalism. Machen uncovered those disparities, in part, by recognizing how liberalism employed the same religious terminology as the orthodox but filled those terms with un-Christian content. For example, for the liberal, "God" had become synonymous with a world process, the incarnation was a symbol of man's oneness with the divine, and the statement "Jesus is God" meant only that Jesus was and remains a most inspiring personality.<sup>12</sup> Such "double use" of words, Machen argued, violated the fundamental principle of truthfulness in language, promoted a false unity in the church, and, most importantly, sapped

the ordinary Christian of the joy that the true gospel brings to the broken heart.

By calling my denomination to heed



J. Gresham Machen, 1929. Photo courtesy of the archives of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

Machen's concern for theological clarity, I am not suggesting that the same liberal practices and lamentable effects as Machen observed are widespread in the PCA today. The PCA as a denomination remains committed to the inerrant Scriptures and the Westminster Standards as containing the biblical system of doctrine for faith and life. And one will look in vain to find a PCA minister today who flaunts an unbiblical gender and sexual ethic. Nevertheless, there is a discernable tendency in the PCA to avoid (what many see as) unnecessary clarity when it comes to pressing challenges within the church. In my view, one recent example is the PCA presbyteries' failure to ratify by two-thirds majority an overture (i.e., a proposed amendment to the *Book of Church Order*) designed to prohibit self-described homosexuals from ordained office in the PCA.<sup>13</sup> Arguments against this overture at the presbytery level have been varied, but many have emphasized the deleterious relational and psychological consequences that would be inflicted on the sexually struggling candidate were the overture to pass into the *Book of Church Order*. Another

13. The full overture, proposed to the floor of the 49<sup>th</sup> PCA General Assembly through a minority report of the Committee of Commissioners on Overtures and subsequently approved by a majority of commissioners, reads, "Men who describe themselves as homosexual, even those who practice celibacy by refraining from homosexual conduct, are disqualified from holding office in the Presbyterian Church in America."

10. Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 127–28.

11. Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 1.

12. See Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 54, 94–95.



suggested reason for rejecting the overture has been terminological. It has been offered in print that the language of “describing” oneself or “identifying” as a homosexual is too unclear to be enshrined in an ecclesiastical standard delimiting ordination requirements.<sup>14</sup> Whether or not this alleged linguistic obstacle plagues the PCA, most observers of and participants in the LGBTQ+ revolution would have little problem discerning the meaning of the phrase “I am a homosexual.” Could it be that now, a century after Machen’s day, those in the world are able

14. For an earlier example of this argument, see @timkellernyc (Timothy Keller). *Twitter*, 23 Nov. 2021, <https://twitter.com/timkellernyc/status/1463177436653395975>. It should be noted, however, that a 2020 PCA ad interim report on sexuality, co-authored by Keller, observed, “Even if ‘gay,’ for some Christians, simply means ‘same-sex attraction,’ it is still inappropriate to juxtapose this sinful desire, or any other sinful desire, as an identity marker alongside our identity as new creations in Christ.” The same report also argued that “Christians should not identify with their sin so as to embrace it or seek to base their identity on it.” Presbyterian Church in America, “Report of the Ad Interim Committee on Human Sexuality to the Forty-Eighth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (2019–2020),” May 2020, 11–12, <https://pcaga.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/AIC-Report-to-48th-GA-5-28-20-1.pdf>.

to express their convictions on sexual morality more clearly than those within the church?

There is much that the PCA can learn from J. Gresham Machen. But the two lessons surveyed above—to prioritize the gospel of Christ for its own sake and to express clearly one’s confessional convictions on pressing matters within the church and the world—rise to the top. Machen believed the first of these tasks was (and is) vital to the existence of the church and the second was (and is) critical to the church’s long-term health. And he did so with firm resolve to submit his every engagement in the church and in the world to the law of love. After all, what kind of man can “contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3) in such a way that even his ardent opponent praises him at his death for his convictions and his grace?<sup>15</sup> Only one who follows in the footsteps of the King and Head of the Church, united to him in life, in death, and into glory. Perhaps, in the end, a whole-souled commitment to do just that is the greatest legacy that Machen leaves to the PCA today.

15. See Pearl S. Buck, “A Tribute to Dr. Machen,” *The New Republic* (January 20, 1937): 355.



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## REFORMED FORUM EVENTS FROM MAY TO OCTOBER 2023

- **May 16–18** | OPC Ministerial Training Institution (MTIOPC), South Holland, IL (Camden Bucey and John Muether co-teaching OPC history course)
- **June 2–3** | B. B. Warfield Memorial Lecture Series, Oklahoma City, OK (Lane Tipton speaking)
- **June 7–13** | OPC General Assembly, Palos Heights, IL (Reformed Forum exhibiting)
- **June 13–16** | PCA General Assembly, Memphis, TN (Reformed Forum exhibiting)
- **August 24** | Symposium on Reformed Moral Theology, Reformed Forum AirMeet event
- **August 31** | Early Bird Registration ends for Reformed Forum Theology Conference.
- **October 6–7** | “100 Years of Christianity and Liberalism: J. Gresham Machen’s Theological Legacy,” Reformed Forum Theology Conference at Hope OPC, Grayslake, IL (Darryl Hart, Jim Cassidy, Camden Bucey, and Lane Tipton speaking)
- **October 17–18** | Presbyterian Scholars Conference, Wheaton, IL (Camden Bucey speaking)



# THE FIGHT CONTINUES: CHRISTIANITY AND LIBERALISM AFTER 100 YEARS

CAMDEN M. BUCEY



This year marks the one-hundredth anniversary of the publication of J. Gresham Machen's book, *Christianity and Liberalism*.<sup>1</sup> Written to address an existential threat to Christianity, this book issued no uncertain sound regarding the thinly disguised enemies of Christ and his kingdom.

Theological liberalism was a theological movement that re-considered Christianity according to modern knowledge, science, and ethics. It emphasized the importance of reason and experience over doctrinal authority. It denied many fundamentals of the faith, including the inspiration of the Scriptures, the death of Christ as an atonement for sin, and the bodily resurrection of our Lord. Machen viewed liberalism not merely as a deficient form of Christianity but as an entirely different religion, because without these foundational events—the transcendent God working in history—we have no hope (1 Cor. 15:1–8).

## SUPERNATURALISM VS. NATURALISM

Theological liberalism rejected supernaturalism. It asserted that Christianity is a way of life and not a doctrine. Liberalism attempted to circumvent the specificity and strictures of explicit doctrinal expressions by considering each of them as merely particular expressions of a singular shared human experience. Creeds and confessions merely gave historical and contextual shape to something greater and deeper. Liberalism emphasized the universal fatherhood of God, the universal brotherhood of man, and an admiration for Jesus' character. For liberals, Christianity concerned ethics and social change. What happened two-thousand years ago is really of no consequence. All that mattered was how we live in response.

J. Gresham Machen was quick to express that as an historical phenomenon, Christianity was absolutely concerned with facts and doctrine. While liberals were only concerned with Jesus'

ethical teachings and moral examples, Machen's basic concern was the identity of Jesus of Nazareth and what he accomplished in history.

But if any one fact is clear, on the basis of this evidence, it is that the Christian movement at its inception was not just a way of life in the modern sense, but a way of life founded upon a message. It was based, not upon mere feeling, not upon a mere program of work, but upon an account of facts. In other words it was based upon doctrine.<sup>2</sup>

For orthodox Christianity, what happened two-thousand years ago is of utmost importance. If Christ did not die and if he has not been raised from the dead, we of all people are most to be pitied (1 Cor. 15:19). Machen continued:

And from the beginning, the meaning of the happening was set forth; and when the meaning of the happening was set forth then there was

1. Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1923).

2. Machen, 20.





J. Gresham Machen in Ireland at W. J. Grier home.  
Photo courtesy of the archives of the Orthodox  
Presbyterian Church.

Christian doctrine. “Christ died”—that is history; “Christ died for our sins”—that is doctrine. Without these two elements, joined in an absolutely indissoluble union, there is no Christianity.<sup>3</sup>

## VAN TIL AND THE FIGHT AGAINST A NEW MODERNISM

Cornelius Van Til understood the significance of this battle, even drawing a comparison to the *Afscheiding*, an historical event critical to his Christian Reformed heritage.<sup>4</sup> In 1947, ten years after Machen’s death, Van Til wrote *The New Modernism*.<sup>5</sup> By this time, liberalism (often called “modernism” in the early twentieth century) encountered a new enemy in Karl Barth. While many conservatives concluded that the enemy of their enemy must be their friend, Van Til sounded an alarm, identifying the “crisis theologies” of Barth and Emil Brunner as a new form of the theological liberalism of the 1920s. He declared, “The new Modernism and the old are alike destructive of historic Christian theism and with it of the significant meaning of human experience.”<sup>6</sup> He called for a continuation of Machen’s fight against liberalism:

If the late J. Gresham Machen spoke of the necessity of making a choice between liberalism and Christianity, we should be doing scant justice to his memory if we did less today with respect to the new Modernism and Christianity.<sup>7</sup>

Van Til’s stiff appraisal of Barth’s theology did not relax in subsequent years. In 1962, he committed an entire volume to Barth, titling it in

homage to Machen’s classic work. *Christianity and Barthianism*<sup>8</sup> shared the same basic thesis with its progenitor. Barthianism, like liberalism, is not another form of Christianity; it is an entirely different religion.

Van Til continued this argument in the introduction to *The Case for Calvinism*<sup>9</sup>, explaining that when Machen wrote *Christianity and Liberalism* in 1923, he “found only two theological positions in the Protestant world.”<sup>10</sup> In subsequent years, Van Til’s own critics would claim he was reductionistic, forcing complicated theological and philosophical matters into a simplistic antithesis. Certainly, Machen was aware of the varieties among Protestant traditions, but he thought there was one difference that mattered above all. It was the difference between naturalism and supernaturalism, which separated liberalism from historic and orthodox Christianity.

Liberalism attacked the Scriptures and their inspired, inerrant, and infallible record of God’s acts in history in favor of ethical teachings and aspirations. Machen wrote, “our religion must be abandoned altogether unless at a definite point in history Jesus died as a propitiation for the sins of men.”<sup>11</sup> Liberalism rejected the grace of God, leaving us in slavery to the law, because on its own terms we are left to fend for ourselves. The supernatural has not entered history, and therefore we face “the impossible task of establishing [our] own righteousness as a ground of acceptance with God.”<sup>12</sup> Without the historic work of Christ—his life, death, and resurrection for our salvation—we are left in our sins.

Machen thought that liberalism was particularly pernicious because it used “traditional phrases.” Van Til identified the same feature in the theology of Barth.<sup>13</sup> While the issues ostensibly are complex, they reduce to this basic question:

Is Christ truly God as well as truly man, and did he die for sinners on the cross on a definite date

3. Machen, 27.

4. In October 1935, a forty-year-old Cornelius Van Til wrote to his Dutch brethren of the strife in the Presbyterian Church (USA). He referred to the *Afscheiding*, the 1834 Seceder movement in the Netherlands, which reacted to, among other things, a change in the church’s Form of Subscription. Van Til wrote, “Will a secession [*afschieding*] have to come in 1936? Some say that is almost inevitable. Others say, no, that is not necessary and should not yet be done. Here is a difference of opinion that divides various orthodox in the Presbyterian Church from one another in their efforts.” Cornelius Van Til, “Afscheiding in 1936?,” *De Reformatie* 16, no. 4 (October 25, 1935): 30. This translation of the original Dutch is courtesy of Dan Ragusa. The full translation of this and related articles is being prepared for publication.

5. Cornelius Van Til, *The New Modernism: An Appraisal of the Theology of Barth and Brunner*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, PA: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1947).

6. Van Til, 364.

7. Van Til, 376.

8. Cornelius Van Til, *Christianity and Barthianism* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1962).

9. Cornelius Van Til, *The Case for Calvinism*, International Library of Philosophy and Theology (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1964).

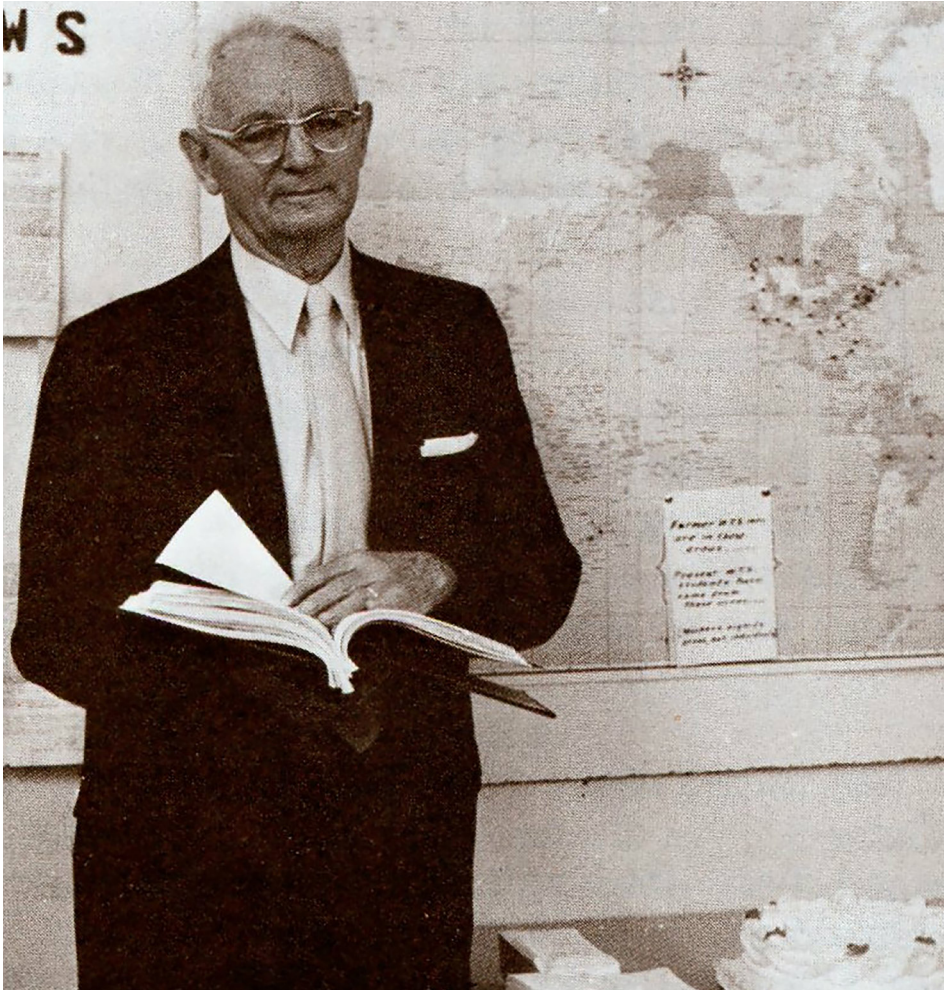
10. Cornelius Van Til, *The Case for Calvinism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1979), xi.

11. Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 121; Quoted in Van Til, *The Case for Calvinism*, 1979, xii.

12. Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 144; Quoted in Van Til, *The Case for Calvinism*, 1979, xiv.

13. Van Til, *The Case for Calvinism*, 1979, xv.





Cornelius Van Til, 1970. Photo courtesy of the archives of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

in history to save them from the wrath to come and to present them spotless before the throne of God at last? And has he told us who he is and what he has done for us sinners in a way that we can understand? Or are we without God and without Christ in the world?<sup>14</sup>

Theological liberalism rejected supernaturalism. For them, Christianity was not a doctrine; it was a way of life. Barthianism did not take issue with supernaturalism. However, Barth rejected natural revelation. For him, the eternal Son of God did not accomplish redemption in history. The supernal “Christ event” occurs in another time dimension, which Barth called “God’s time for us.” This doctrine has no significance for life. Orthodox Christianity, however, retains both the supernatural and the natural without compromising either. The Creator and the creature commune without becoming one another.

## CONTINUING THE FIGHT

Van Til realized that the issues Machen was fighting were still present, though in modified form, in his day. The same is true for us. Barth’s

14. Van Til, xv.

influence has not diminished. It is perhaps deeper and greater than it was in the 1960s. And in the last decade, we have witnessed the advance of theologies that compromise the Creator-creature distinction. An increasing number of evangelicals and even conservative Reformed theologians have rejected the doctrines of divine immutability and impassibility.<sup>15</sup> Others reconsider salvation in terms of Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox doctrines of deification, substituting an orthodox doctrine of the glorification and perfection of the image of God in resurrection for a mystical merger between God and man’s being. As in Machen’s time, the core problem existing in the relationship between God and man is forgotten. For many, the problem is not man’s sin and need of redemption; the fundamental problem is man’s finitude.

But we must always maintain that God is wholly other. Father, Son, and Spirit are not merely the perfect and greatest example of our

15. For a detailed treatment of this issue, see “Fearless Pantheism in Contemporary Scholarship,” the eighth lesson in Lane G. Tipton’s video course, *Common Grace and the Antithesis*, available at <https://reformedforum.org/courses/common-grace-and-the-antithesis/>.

being, they are the transcendent, self-contained, immutable, and *a se* Trinity in his essence, in his persons, and even in relation to his creation. Our salvation involves neither the deity becoming a creature nor the creature becoming deity. The mystery of our salvation is that the eternal Son became man while retaining his divinity. Christ possesses two distinct and inseparable natures in the unity of his one eternal and immutable person. In the person of Christ, our transcendent God has entered history and accomplished redemption without compromising his transcendence. The supernatural and the natural have met. This is orthodoxy.

Will the Reformed and Presbyterian church stand idly as her enemies attack? Will the faithful remain mute when others reject orthodoxy? Will she even attempt to join hands with those who profess a compromised faith in service of greater cultural significance through increased numbers and a unified voice? Such would secure our defeat. Let us contend for the faith, which was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3), speaking the truth boldly and unashamedly (Rom. 1:16) with full confidence that the gates of hell will not prevail against his church (Matt. 16:17–19).



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J. Gresham Machen's Theological Legacy

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