

DEFENDER OF THE FAITH: The Life of John Gresham Machen Part 1: Birth to Princeton

By Rev. Randy Oliver

INTRODUCTION

*"I'm so thankful for the active obedience of Christ. No hope without it."
— J. Gresham Machen*

His cohorts warned him that he should not go — the strain of the battles of the last few years was adversely affecting his health. However, he felt it best to take this trip, to encourage the faithful remnant. He wanted to assure them that despite the recent defection of a significant portion of their membership, and despite the fact that "all of his anxieties with regard to the course and future of the movement with which he was associated as the acknowledged leader gave him many sleepless nights,"¹ he intended to "stay the course," and desired them to do likewise. So, he ignored his cold and traveled to North Dakota with its frigid late-December temperatures.

His cold grew worse, yet he decided to visit the groups in Carson and Leith. His condition grew steadily worse, yet he continued "without one single complaint or excuse."² His simple cold became pleurisy. He was implored to turn back, to seek medical help, yet, despite his agony, he would say, "I can't die now, I have so much work to do." Finally, the pain was so great a doctor was called — yet he still continued with his speaking engagement. After that engagement, he was compelled to enter the an area Roman Catholic hospital. His condition had grown yet worse. The diagnosis of pleurisy was changed to a diagnosis of pneumonia. Despite the gravity of his illness, "[h]is mind was on the cause as it centered in Philadelphia and he sent off several

telegrams... The nurses felt that he should be using all of his waning energies in resisting the disease."³

As the new day dawned — in fact, the new day was the first day of a new year — he experienced periods of lucidity and periods of unconsciousness. During one of those periods when he was alert, he dictated a telegram to one of his colleagues, a telegram which would prove to be his final word to his cohorts: "I'm so thankful for the active obedience of Christ. No hope without it."

His body proved unable to withstand the rigors he had recently experienced. At 7:30 p.m. on January 1, 1937, John Gresham Machen departed this life. Many would consider Machen's death the culmination of a life doomed to failure.

EARLY LIFE

"I have finished Mathu, and nearly finished Mark, and then I am going to begin at the very biginning of the whole bible...It seems to me that on Sunday I can never get a nuf of my catercisum."
— J. Gresham Machen, age 7

John Gresham Machen, the second of three sons, was born in Baltimore, Maryland on July 28, 1881. His father Arthur W. Machen was fifty-five years of age when Gresham was born. Mr. Machen was a Virginia-born, Harvard-trained lawyer. The elder Machen's tastes and interests were rooted in the classical tradition of the old South. He read the works of Horace, Thucydides, and Caesar, as well as the Septuagint and the Greek New Testament. He also "read extensively in French and English literature. He dabbled in writing, publishing several detective stories and short novels, some of them prize winners, in order to put himself through law school. His fiction was penned under a pseudonym, however, in order to avoid any suspicion of being a *litterateur* and so hinder his legal career. When eighty years old, he also taught himself Italian 'for the fun of it,' as his son wrote."⁴

Gresham's mother, the former Mary (Minnie) Jones, was born in Macon, Georgia. Nineteen years younger than her husband, she was educated at Wesleyan College and, in 1903, published a book entitled *The Bible in Browning*. Gresham loved both of his parents, but was especially close to his mother.

The Machen home "appears to have exhibited an uneasy alliance between Victorianism and Southern classicism."⁵ His parents were cultured, prosperous, and devout Christians. They were members of the Franklin Street Presbyterian Church in Baltimore, a congregation of the Southern Presbyterian Church aligned with Old School Presbyterianism. Gresham's early religious training was carried out by his mother, who utilized the Bible, the Westminster Catechism, and *Pilgrim's Progress*. The Machen boys were required "to memorize the catechism and all the Kings of Israel."⁶ As an adult, Machen acknowledged that his knowledge of Scripture as a child "surpassed that of the average theological student of his day."⁷ His grounding in the Catechism was thorough, and developed in Gresham a love for the Reformed faith. In one of his earliest preserved letters, written when he was seven years old, he says of his reading and memorization of the Catechism, "I like it verry much and to it verry much."⁸ However, one historian notes that Gresham's comment "may indicate more tedium than pleasure."⁹ Nonetheless, Gresham developed a love for the Lord and the Reformed faith. At age fourteen, he professed faith in Christ and joined the Franklin Street Church.

EDUCATION

*"Of course I realize what an unprofitable servant I must seem to be — two years at Seminary, and still undecided whether I ought to go into the work."
— J. Gresham Machen*

Educated in a private school as a boy, he matriculated to Johns Hopkins University in 1898, entering its three-year undergraduate program in the classics. The University, located a few blocks from his home, was noted for outstanding classical scholarship. He did so well in his entrance examinations that he was awarded a scholarship.¹⁰

One of Machen's professors was Basil Gildersleeve, the leading classical scholar in the country and an elder in the Franklin Street church.¹¹ During his studies, Machen learned Greek, Latin, rhetoric, and English literature. In his lectures, Gildersleeve emphasized the translation and interpretation of texts from their original language. A grounding in such exacting academic standards would prove helpful to Machen in later years. He was so successful in his studies that in 1901 he was elected Phi Beta Kappa, and graduated with highest honors. Machen's grandfather rewarded him with a trip to Europe. Upon his return, he returned to Hopkins for an additional year of graduate study, then took a course in banking and international law at the University of Chicago.

His [graduate](#) studies and inquiries into further areas of study (he considered studying economics at either Harvard or Columbia) betrayed an ambivalence to suggestions by his minister, Harris E. Kirk, that he enter the ministry. Although a committed Christian (he was involved with the YMCA while in college, and also attended the YMCA's Northfield conferences during the summers of 1899, 1900, and 1902), he was repulsed by the maudlin sentimentality of much Victorian Christianity. "The ministry represented to him a way of life and thought at odds with his cultural and intellectual aspirations."¹²

[Despite his](#) misgivings, Machen enrolled at Princeton Theological Seminary, a bastion of Old School Presbyterian scholarship, with such men as B.B. Warfield, Geerhardus Vos, William Park Armstrong, Robert Dick Wilson and Francis Patton on the faculty. While there, Machen approached his studies in a desultory manner. He did not care for his first year courses in Old Testament and homiletics, and "abhorred afternoon classes — 'that evil invention,' he called them."¹³ He won a \$100 fellowship for his work in New Testament exegesis, but [considered](#) returning the prize when he discovered that only two students had entered the contest! However, he soon warmed to his studies, particularly in the area of New [Testament](#). He also came to appreciate the scholarship of B.B. Warfield, noting that Warfield enabled him to "see with greater and greater clearness that consistent Christianity is the easiest Christianity to defend, and that consistent Christianity — the only thoroughly Biblical Christianity — is found in the Reformed Faith."¹⁴

Machen also took classes at Princeton University — in fact, he took enough courses (studying under such scholars as Henry Van Dyke and Woodrow Wilson) to earn a master's degree.¹⁵ He was also quite involved in the social life of the seminary. He took his meals at the Benham Club, where he became known as the best of the "stunters" ("stunting" was the boisterous retelling of humorous stories). "Machen, called by his nickname 'Das' (suggested by the German *Das Mädchen*), was known by his fellow students for liveliness and good humor." In his room at 39 Alexandria Hall, he hosted a "Checkers Club," keeping his fellow students well-supplied with fruits, nuts, and cigars. He was known to be an avid supporter of Princeton's football team, attending most of the campus games, and even traveling to New England, Swarthmore, and the University of Pennsylvania for "big games." He also appreciated Princeton's proximity to New York, often traveling there to catch a play or to browse through bookstores.

The president of the seminary Francis L. Patton and the professor of New Testament William Park Armstrong took notice of young Machen. Patton recommended that Machen, after completion of his degree, remain at Princeton as an instructor of New Testament Greek. However, after graduating with honors in 1905, Machen opted to pursue graduate studies in Marburg Germany. "Though he could have [had] his fellowship from Princeton to finance part of this trip, he refused, fearing that acceptance would obligate him to return to teach at the seminary."¹⁶

In Marburg, Machen studied under such noted scholars as Adolph Jülicher, Johannes Weiss, and Wilhelm Herrmann. Machen was especially captivated with Herrmann, and bewildered by Herrmann's confusing mix of theological liberalism and sincere devotion to Christ, noting in a letter to his mother, "Herrmann affirms very little of that which I have been accustomed to regard as essential to Christianity; yet there is no doubt in my mind but that he is a Christian, and a Christian of a peculiarly earnest type."¹⁷ Machen found it necessary, for the sake of intellectual and spiritual honesty, to explore the claims of theological liberalism and, while he never abandoned his own orthodox position, was nonetheless "profoundly shaken, even overwhelmed, by his encounter with this man [Herrmann] whose fervor and moral earnestness was so impressive."¹⁸ What was particularly attractive to Machen was that the spirituality which

Herrmann espoused was not "the genteel variety that Machen had come to associate with the ministry."¹⁹ He struggled with doubts over the truthfulness of Christianity. He was also troubled by the seeming lack of conservative scholarship to answer the pronouncements of the German liberals. He sought to hide his intense mental and spiritual struggles in letters to his mother and other family members

However, through his studies, Machen came to the conclusion that "he could use his training in philology and the classics to ground orthodox belief in sound scholarship, without resorting to the sentimentalism of Victorian preachers... Conservative New Testament studies could also provide an intellectually satisfying alternative to German biblical criticism and to the liberal theology that accompanied it."²⁰ He also grew in his appreciation of Princeton Seminary, especially of William Park Armstrong, professor of New Testament.

While in the midst of his studies in Marburg, Machen received an offer from Armstrong, again for the position of Instructor in New Testament at Princeton Seminary. This time, Machen was persuaded to accept the position, after being assured that he would not have to pursue ordination to qualify for the position." Nonetheless, Machen felt ill-prepared to undertake the position, and decided that he would, out of respect for Armstrong, accept the appointment for only one year. It was his intention, after that year was completed, to return to Germany and pursue a Ph.D. in classics. However, such ambivalence struck fear in the heart of Minnie, his mother, who thought that her son's indecision was a sign of his abandoning the faith of his childhood. As it turned out, Minnie had nothing to fear. Her dear would not return to Germany to pursue that Ph.D.

LIFE AS AN INSTRUCTOR AT PRINCETON

"In many respects, my work is very enjoyable, for I seem to get on pretty well with the fellows and enjoy the work of instruction as well as my own studies."

— J. Gresham Machen

"In the fall of 1906 Gresham Machen moved back into Alexander Hall and resumed his place in the Benham Club."²¹ Things seemed, at first, to be a bit rocky. He complained to his mother that students were not enrolling in his elective courses. He found faculty meetings to be "long and stupid," although he appreciated his interaction with the faculty, especially with Armstrong, whom he came to call "Army." Despite these struggles, Machen delayed his return to Germany for a year, then for another year. Soon, the pursuit of a Ph.D. in Germany was forgotten.

Machen quickly earned the reputation of being one of the best teachers at the seminary. An extemporaneous lecturer, he "also had a reputation for exacting standards and hard grading."²² At one point, he threatened to fail 75% of those enrolled in one of his classes. He believed that, for many of his students, "true piety, high motives, but deep ignorance"²³ was the rule. Machen's eccentric antics often kept his students in stitches — balancing a book on his head, standing on a chair and bending forward "as though experimenting with the law of gravity ... he would take his stand about two feet from the classroom wall and lean forward slowly, hands at his sides, until his forehead touched the wall. He would remain in this strange position for several minutes, staring at the floor. Rituals like this endeared him to his students and always produced roars of laughter."²⁴

In 1909, several first and second year students complained to the Board of Directors of the seminary about the quality of curriculum and instruction. They desired a more "modern" curriculum, emphasizing courses in English Bible and practical theology. This "rebellion" garnered a great deal of coverage in major newspapers. Machen sided with the senior faculty and the board in refusing to concede to the student's demands. It may seem a bit odd that he would do so; as a student, Machen would often complain about the poor quality of the lectures. His support of the faculty demonstrated that his doubts about the intellectual rigor of the curriculum at Princeton Seminary had been alleviated. His growing maturity as a scholar was reflected in three major articles written by Machen that were published in 1912 in the *Princeton Theological Review*: "The Hymns of the First Chapter of Luke"; "The Origin of the First Two Chapters of Luke"; and, "The Virgin Birth in the Second Century." He also contributed the article "Jesus

and Paul" to a volume published to celebrate the centennial of Princeton Seminary. In these articles, "Machen made little effort to defend the trustworthiness of Scripture or to show the inadequacies of higher criticism. Instead, he wrote as if to prove that conservative scholarship could be just as scientific as that which prevailed in American universities."²⁵ In his articles, Machen, displaying familiarity with recent German, English, and American scholarship, interacted with critical arguments, utilizing historical and literary analysis.

LIFE AS A MINISTER AND PROFESSOR

"The religion of Paul was not founded upon a complex of ideas derived from Judaism or from paganism. It was founded upon the historical Jesus.

But the historical Jesus upon whom it was founded was not the Jesus of modern reconstruction, but the Jesus of the whole New Testament and the Christian faith; not the teacher who survived only in the memory of his disciples, but the Saviour who after His redeeming work was done still lived and could still be loved."

— J. Gresham Machen

On November 3, 1913, at thirty-two years of age, his ambivalence regarding the ministry alleviated, Machen came under care of the Presbytery of the Potomac of the Southern Presbyterian Church (Presbyterian Church of the United States), the presbytery of his home church in Baltimore. It was under the auspices of that presbytery that he was licensed on April 22, 1914. Realizing that it would not be prudent to maintain his membership in the Southern Presbyterian Church, he was ordained by the New Brunswick Presbytery of the Northern Presbyterian Church (Presbyterian Church of the United States of America) on June 23, 1914. The month before his ordination, the faculty of the seminary recommended his election as Assistant Professor of New Testament, a position he would retain, except for his service as a YMCA chaplain during World War I, until his resignation from Princeton Seminary.

In 1915, he was engaged to write a series of Sunday school lessons on the literature and history of the New Testament for the Presbyterian Board of Education. "This was his first exposure to church bureaucracy and raised suspicions about the Presbyterian

leadership's indifference to intellectual matters. The Board of Education's editor, John T. Faris, often 'punched up' Machen's style and revised the lessons in order to make them practical"²⁶ without Machen's permission.

Between 1915 and 1920, Machen prepared a series of lectures on the origin of the apostle Paul's religion, which were published in book form in 1921. The book answered critical scholars, who maintained that Paul distorted the teachings of Jesus, making the Resurrection, rather than the ethical teachings of Jesus, the basis of Christian faith. In response, Machen affirmed the historic character of Paul's message. The book met with a positive response among conservative Presbyterians, who hailed it "as a splendid example of orthodox scholarship and telling argument and as offering evidence of the emergence of a new eloquent spokesman for the truth."²⁷ The book was reviewed in newspapers and magazines throughout the United States and in many countries of the world. Even scholars who were criticized by Machen in the volume respected the book. However, though the book sold quite well, it "made little impact upon professional biblical scholarship. In a field where most scholars avoided the text's theological implications, Machen's volume was regarded as an intelligent curiosity." ²⁸

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1. Stonehouse, Ned B. *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir* (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1954/1978), 506.
 2. Stonehouse, 507.
 3. Stonehouse, 507.
 4. Darryl Hart, "Doctor Fundamentalism" (Ph.D diss., The Johns Hopkins University, 1988), 30,
 5. Hart, "Doctor Fundamentalism," 31.
 6. Hart, D.G. *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 13.
 7. Stonehouse, 40.
 8. Ibid., 41.
 9. Calhoun, David B. *Princeton Seminary: Volume 2: The Majestic Testimony, 1869-1929*(Edinburgh: The Banner or Truth Trust, 1996), 223.
 10. Stonehouse, 48.
 11. Calhoun, 223.

- [12.](#) Hart, *Defending the Faith*, 43.
- [13.](#) Calhoun, 224.
- [14.](#) J. Gresham Machen, quoted in Calhoun, 226.
- [15.](#) Calhoun, 224.
- [16.](#) Hart, 44.
- [17.](#) J. Gresham Machen. Quoted in Calhoun, 229.
- [18.](#) Calhoun, 230.
- [19.](#) Hart, "*Doctor Fundamentalis*," 46.
- [20.](#) *Ibid.*, 50.
- [21.](#) Calhoun, 233.
- [22.](#) *Ibid.*, 235.
- [23.](#) Hart, "*Doctor Fundamentalis*." 57.
- [24.](#) Calhoun, 234.
- [25.](#) Hart, "*Doctor Fundamentalis*," 91.
- [26.](#) Hart, *Defending the Faith*, 44.
- [27.](#) Stonehouse, 330.
- [28.](#) Hart, "*Doctor Fundamentalis*," 121-122.