

DEFENDER OF THE FAITH: The Life of J. Gresham Machen Part 2: The Battle for the Presbyterian Church

By Rev. Randy Oliver

THE BATTLE FOR THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

"The author is convinced that liberalism on the one hand and the religion of the historic church on the other are not two varieties of the same religion, but two distinct religions proceeding from altogether separate roots."

— J. Gresham Machen

On Sunday May 21, 1922, Henry Emerson Fosdick, supply pastor at First Presbyterian Church in New York City (although he was a Baptist), preached a sermon entitled "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" The [preaching](#) of this now famous sermon "was the signal for a new and public outbreak of the conflict between the forces of historic Christianity and modern liberalism within the Presbyterian Church in the USA."¹ In the sermon, Fosdick pled for tolerance of differing views on the inspiration of Scriptures, the virgin birth, the atonement, and the Second Advent of Christ. It soon became clear that, despite his protestations to the contrary, Fosdick "advocated modernism as the religion for this day and generation."²

Fosdick's [sermon](#) reflected the growing influence of progressivism, ecumenism, and liberal theology in the Presbyterian Church. These tendencies caused the Presbyterian Church, in its General Assemblies of 1910 and 1916, to rule "that biblical inerrancy, the virgin birth, the substitutionary atonement, the resurrection, and miracles were essential doctrines."³ The Presbytery of Philadelphia overtured the General Assembly to "take such action as will require the preaching and teaching in the First Presbyterian

Church of New York City to conform to the system of doctrine taught in the Confession of Faith."⁴ A former classmate of Machen at Princeton Seminary, Clarence E. Macartney, pastor of the Arch Street Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia and a member of Princeton Seminary's board of directors, replied to Fosdick with a series of articles entitled, "Shall Unbelief Win?" The battle was joined.

The 1923 assembly was divided into two groups, one supporting and one opposing Fosdick. Although the candidate for those who opposed Fosdick, William Jennings Bryan, lost the election for moderator, the presbytery supported the overture of the Philadelphia Presbytery. Despite the Bills and Overture Committee opposing it by a vote of 21-1, the minority report was adopted by a plurality of 80 votes in a total of about 900. However, "the Presbytery of New York largely ignored the mandate of the Assembly."⁵

These events renewed interest in an address Machen gave before the Chester, Pennsylvania Presbytery Elders' Association on November 3, 1921. The message was so well received that Machen was asked to have it printed and distributed throughout the denomination. At first, Machen demurred, realizing the considerable effort it would take of drafting a manuscript from his speaking notes. Eventually, he did consent to publication in the *Princeton Theological Review*, under the title, "Liberalism or Christianity?" This article was expanded into the book *Christianity and Liberalism*. In the book, Machen "made a most impressive and persuasive case for his thesis that modern liberalism is essentially different from historic Christianity all along the line."⁶

Beginning in October, 1923, Machen served as stated supply at Princeton's First Presbyterian Church. Soon after preaching a series of messages on the issues dividing liberals and conservatives,⁷ he met opposition in the person of Henry Van Dyke, an old family friend, who surrendered his pew at First Church rather than sit under Machen's "bitter, schismatic and unscriptural preaching."⁸ Van Dyke's tirade was carried by major newspapers throughout the country. Even Machen admitted that Van Dyke had boosted the sales of *Christianity and Liberalism*!

While the book defended the "fundamentals of the faith" over against modernism, it did not read like a "fundamentalist" tract. In fact, Machen was quite wary of the title of "fundamentalist," yet quickly became a champion in their circles. Liberals, however, considered the volume to be slanderous.

In the General Assembly of 1924, despite the election of Clarence Macartney as moderator, the Philadelphia overture, which had been approved in the last Assembly, was struck down as unconstitutional. Earlier in that year, the *Auburn Affirmation* was published, bearing the signature of 150 modernist ministers (eventually, over 1,300 ministers signed the *Affirmation*). The *Affirmation* asserted that the doctrines affirmed in the overture of 1923 were only "theories." While some of the signers would affirm these five points as "satisfactory explanations of these facts and doctrines," all agreed that "these are not the only theories allowed by the Scriptures and our standards."⁹

In response, Machen wrote a letter to the New York Times which blasted the distinctively liberal, heretical, and sacrilegious turn his denomination had taken. From this point on, things went downhill for Machen and those who supported him. Princeton Seminary itself did not escape division. Although a majority of the faculty, the board of the directors, and the student body supported the fight against modernism, the majority of the trustees, the president of the seminary (Joseph Ross Stevenson), a few of the faculty (including Charles Erdman, professor of practical theology) and student body were hesitant vigorously to oppose modernism. Although both parties were conservative in their theology, the group led by Stevenson and Erdman "placed the unity of the church above strict doctrinal orthodoxy and promoted peace and tolerance in the interest of the church's welfare."¹⁰ This stance, however, was not in keeping with the Old School theological heritage of Princeton Seminary. Erdman became pulpit supply at Princeton's First Church after Machen (Van Dyke returned to his pew!) published. The ferment at Princeton (for which, in the minds of many, Machen bore the blame) reflected the battles that were occurring throughout the denomination.

During the Assembly of 1925, the liberals and those who sought toleration maintained the upper hand. Erdman was elected as moderator. During the course of the Assembly,

the Permanent Judicial Committee upheld a complaint against two New York-area ministers who would not affirm the virgin birth. In response, "Henry Sloan Coffin, pastor of New York's Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, read a statement ... arguing that the General Assembly had again over-extended its powers. He threatened that if the ruling of the Judicial Commission stood, liberals would be forced to leave the church."¹¹ In response, Erdman proposed that a special commission be formed to study the reasons behind the unrest in the church. This proposal was approved by the Assembly. In its report during the following General Assembly, the commissioners contented that they did not find any traces of liberalism within the Presbyterian Church. They asserted that diversity did not imply defection from the historic faith, and encouraged the silencing of those who continued to spread distrust and suspicion.

During the period between the constituting of the committee and the delivering of their report, the Board of Directors of Princeton Seminary elected Machen to the chair of apologetics. However, this appointment had to be confirmed by the General Assembly. Usually, this confirmation was a mere formality. However, the Assembly received two reports questioning Machen's qualifications. In one it was noted that Machen refused to vote "yes" on a resolution of the New Brunswick Presbytery supporting the 18th Amendment. While he opposed drunkenness, Machen not only did **not** support Prohibition (in the election of 1928, he would vote for the "wet" and Catholic Al Smith rather than the "dry" and Protestant Herbert Hoover); he believed that it was outside the function of the church to offer such a resolution to the government (this reflected the doctrine of the "spirituality of the church" taught by the Southern Presbyterian Church).

In the second report, Machen was described as "temperamentally defective, bitter and harsh in his judgments of others and implacable to those who [did] not agree with him."¹² Surprisingly, these charges were leveled by Charles Erdman and J. Ross Stevenson of Princeton Seminary!

Because of these reports, the General Assembly did not confirm Machen's election to the chair of apologetics. It established a "Committee of Five" to investigate the

situation at Princeton Seminary. The committee's final report (published April, 1927) not only criticized Machen's unwillingness "to trust the doctrinal [loyalties](#) of its colleagues," but also proposed that the Board of Directors (the majority of whom supported Machen) and the Board of Trustees (the majority of whom opposed Machen) be combined into one governing board. The committee report was adopted by the General Assembly of 1927. As Calhoun reports,

"The special committee was expanded to eleven members and given authority to create a new structure for the seminary — a single board of control to replace the other boards. The report also recommended that approval of the election of Machen to the chair of apologetics and O.T. Allis to the chair of Semitics — appointments that strengthened the conservative cause at Princeton — be deferred pending the reorganization."¹³

The majority of the faculty sought to preserve Princeton as it was, asserting that it was the only institution of the Church which maintained its adherence to Old School theology. They passed a resolution against a single board of control. Machen published a 48-page booklet, *The Attack on Princeton Seminary: A Plea for Fair Play* in support of the faculty's position.

The 1928 General Assembly, however, opted to take no action in response to a petition, signed by over 10,000 people, protesting the reorganization of Princeton Seminary. Yet it received the majority report of the Committee of Eleven, who recommended both a consolidated board and enlarged powers for the president of the Seminary. Final action on the report was postponed for another year. However, reorganization was a foregone conclusion. The report of the [Committee](#) of Eleven was adopted at the 1929 General Assembly. The Boards of Directors and Trustees were merged into a new board containing eleven members from each board along with eleven new members (many of the eleven new members were signers of the Auburn Affirmation). This board was made responsible for hiring and firing faculty — approval of the General Assembly was no longer required.¹⁴

Machen resigned from Princeton Seminary one month after its reorganization. Three other faculty members also resigned: Robert Dick Wilson, Oswald T. Allis, and Cornelius Van Til (who was offered the chair of apologetics that was denied Machen). These professors and their supporters desired to begin a seminary that would continue the heritage abandoned by Princeton Seminary. Several people, including Machen and his mother, contributed funds toward that effort. On September 25, 1929, Westminster Theological Seminary opened with fifty-two students. Classes were held in the Witherspoon Building in downtown Philadelphia. The faculty was composed of Machen, Wilson, Allis, and Van Til as well as Paul Wooley, Allan MacRae, Ned Stonehouse, and R.B. Kuiper. One year later, John Murray, who had remained at Princeton, joined the faculty of the new seminary.

As important as the founding of Westminster Theological Seminary was, it did not ease Machen's unrest with the Presbyterian Church, nor did it ease their unrest with him. He and his colleagues considered withdrawal from the church, yet realized that most conservative were not prepared to leave. The conservative members of the church needed to be mobilized. To that end, in late 1931 Machen wrote a series of articles in the conservative monthly *Christianity Today*, alerting Presbyterians how far their church had drifted from its biblical, confessional, and constitutional moorings. In his first article, Machen criticized the Permanent Judicial Commission — half of its members had signed the Auburn Affirmation — which "had gradually become the highest court of appeal in the denomination."¹⁵ In the second article, he spoke against trials held behind closed doors and "the discouragement of open and free discussion" in church proceedings.¹⁶ The third article protested the church's theological drift.

During the publication of these articles, the situation of the denomination's Board of Foreign Missions came to the fore. The board published *Re-Thinking Missions*, which contended that Christianity was not hostile to other world religions, and "should unite with the other religions, Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism, in a common front against materialism, naturalism, and immorality."¹⁷ The Board of Foreign missions refused to condemn *Re-Thinking Missions*. In fact, it continued to support such missionaries as

Pearl S. Buck who advocated ideas that went beyond the heretical statements of *Re-Thinking Missions*.

Machen and his followers were horrified. They sought to address their concerns via Presbyterian due process. "At the April 1933 meeting of the New Brunswick Presbytery, Machen submitted a four-point overture ... call[ing] for the election of conservative board members and alert[ing] the church to the board's failure to stand for the gospel."¹⁸ At the meeting, it was suggested that the senior secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions Robert E. Speer attend the next meeting of the presbytery and answer Machen's charges.

Machen printed his argument in the booklet *Modernism and the Board of Foreign Missions to the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.*, which he delivered to every member of the presbytery and the Board of Foreign Missions. At the meeting, Speer side-stepped Machen's charges, and the New Brunswick Presbytery voted against Machen's overture. However, the Philadelphia Presbytery as well as [three](#) other presbyteries passed the overture, so the matter had to be considered by the 1933 General Assembly. However, all attempts to address the issues were thwarted. In response, the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions was organized. Machen was elected as president of this board.

The formation of the Independent Board did not sit well with the hierarchy of the Church. "It became increasingly evident that some official action against the organizers of the Independent Board would be taken at the 1934 General Assembly."¹⁹ Before the start of the Assembly, members of the General Council's Administrative committee informed Machen and other members of the Independent Board that "the Independent Board was contrary to the denomination's constitution and that its members had violated either their ordination or membership vows, or both."²⁰ In a committee study — of which Machen requested a copy, but was denied — the assertion was made that "offerings to the denomination were as much an obligation as the celebration of the Lord's Supper and that they had to be given to organizations approved by the General

Assembly."²¹ At the meeting of the general assembly, a mandate was passed, ordering members of the Independent Board to resign or face trial by their presbyteries.

At first, Machen refused to respond to these high-handed tactics. He did respond to a summons by the New Brunswick Presbytery to attend the meeting of a committee appointed to make a preliminary study of the issue. Machen contended that the mandate was not presented to the Assembly in the right manner (little time was provided for study or debate), and that it violated the church's constitution and due process. The New Brunswick Presbytery intended to proceed with a trial, although Machen had transferred to the Philadelphia presbytery. During his trial, "the commission ruled that it could hear no evidence concerning the Auburn Affirmation, the Board of Foreign Missions, the Princeton-Westminster controversy, or the legality of the 1934 mandate." On March 29th, the commission found Machen guilty and recommended that he be suspended from the ministry unless he demonstrated "satisfactory evidence of repentance."²² In response, Machen and a group of approximately 100 ministers and elders formed the Presbyterian Constitutional Covenant Union. The purpose of the union was to seek reformation of the denomination and, should that effort fail, to "perpetuate the true Presbyterian Church ... regardless of cost." This action did not sit well with thirteen of the trustees (including Dr. Craig, editor of *Christianity Today* and Machen's friend Clarence Macartney), or with Oswald T. Allis of the Westminster faculty who resigned from the Seminary.²³

The General Assembly of 1939 upheld the verdict against Machen and all members of the Independent Board. Ten days after the close of this General Assembly, the Presbyterian Constitutional Covenant Union met in Philadelphia. On June 11, 1936, the Presbyterian Church of America was constituted, and Machen was chosen as the moderator. However, in August, 1936, the PCUSA brought suit against the young church, enjoining them from using the name Presbyterian Church of America, deeming it too similar to the name of their old denomination. The court decided in the PCUSA's favor in 1938. The PCA then chose the name Orthodox Presbyterian Church.²⁴

Machen and his colleagues saw themselves as the heirs of the great heritage of the Presbyterian Church. Machen wrote an article for the *Presbyterian Guardian* (an independent periodical designed to fill the void left by the departure of Dr. Craig and *Christianity Today*) entitled, "A True Presbyterian Church At Last!"

However, in the euphoria of forming a new church, the possibility for tensions within the tiny church went unnoticed. Would the church be a true heir of Old School Presbyterianism? There was a party within the church, led by Carl McIntire and J. Oliver Bushwell, whose sympathies were more New School Presbyterian or Dispensational than Old School. His party sought to adopt the Westminster Confession with the "Arminian" additions made by the Northern Presbyterian Church in 1903 (additions made to facilitate their merger with the Cumberland Presbyterian Church). Machen and the majority opted to adopt the pre-1903 edition of the Westminster Confession.

The McIntire group resented this action. They also resented the influence that people like R.B. Kuiper and Cornelius Van Til had over the denomination. Kuiper commented on the young church's stance against the errors which were "so extremely prevalent among American fundamentalists, Arminianism and the Dispensationalism of the Scofield Bible."²⁵ McIntire took umbrage to Kuiper's remark, writing a scathing editorial in his church paper, *The Christian Beacon*, warning of the potential of a "premillenarian uprising." McIntire was true to his word. After the Second General Assembly in November, 1936 (when the pre-1903 Westminster Confession was adopted), McIntire engineered a hostile takeover of the Independent Board of Foreign Missions, ousting Machen from its presidency. "Close associates and family members believed that he was so hurt by the action of the board, an organization upon which he had risked his whole career, that his physical strength was seriously depleted, making him an easy prey for his fatal illness."²⁶ At the third General Assembly, held after Machen's death, the McIntire/Bushwell party threatened to withdraw if the denomination did not adopt a policy of total abstinence. Their overture lost by a large margin, and the McIntire/Bushwell party (fourteen ministers and three elders) withdrew to form the Bible Presbyterian Synod.

Weakened by the strain of battle on so many fronts, Machen looked forward to getting some rest during the Christmas season. However, a pastor a new PCA church in Bismarck, North Dakota, asked Machen to visit the state for the purpose of rallying conservatives to the cause of the new denomination. Machen rarely refused speaking engagements, and desired to do all he could to promote the PCA. So, despite his physical weakness, he left for Bismarck by train on December 28, 1936. He anticipated a short visit, and expected to return home by the first day of the new year. Unbeknownst to him, and to those who saw him off on that trip, the "home" to which Machen returned was not Philadelphia, but heaven.

CONCLUSION

Was J. Gresham Machen a failure or success? He was born into "Southern aristocracy," blessed with wealth, culture, and prodigious intellectual gifts. Some would contend that he wasted these and many other gifts in a failed attempt to champion an "orthodoxy" that was but a delusion. However, I contend that, in the eyes of God's purposes, Machen was a great success. When it seemed that many would capitulate to the modernistic trends of the day, Machen stood boldly for Reformed orthodoxy. The denomination he helped to form yet remains small, but exercises an influence far beyond its size. I dare say that current interest in orthodox Reformed theology would not be as strong if it were not for the God-ordained, God-enabled efforts of J. Gresham Machen.

During the early 1980's, I remember struggling with the theology of Holiness Pentecostalism in which I was raised, feeling that it was less than biblical in certain regards. My pastor's wife worked for the Center for Urban Theological Studies in Philadelphia. I was consider going back to school to complete my interrupted undergraduate education, so I would often stop by CUTS and pick up whatever books, brochures, magazines, I could find. One of the first pieces of literature I read from CUTS was a little magazine entitled *New Horizons in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*. It was through reading that magazine that I discovered J. Gresham Machen. It was through learning of and about him that I moved further in my journey toward a

whole-hearted embracing of the Reformed faith. It was through him that I learned that contending for the faith is right and good, despite opposition. I will remain eternally grateful for the influence J. Gresham Machen, "Defender of the Faith."

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 2. [Ibid.](#), 18.
 3. Hart, "*Doctor Fundamentalis*," 145.
 4. *The Presbyterian* 92 (October 26, 1922), as quoted by Rian, 18.
 5. Stonehouse, 355.
 6. [Ibid.](#), 343.
 7. Hart, "*Doctor Fundamentalis*," 142.
 8. [Ibid.](#) 146.
 9. *Auburn Affirmation*, as quoted by Hart, "*Doctor Fundamentalis*," 238.
 10. Calhoun, 351.
 11. Hart, "*Doctor Fundamentalis*," 241.
 12. [Ibid.](#), 248.
 13. Calhoun, 378.
 14. [Ibid.](#), 393.
 15. Hart, "*Doctor Fundamentalis*," 294.
 16. [Ibid.](#), 294.
 17. Rian, 89-90.
 18. Hart, "*Doctor Fundamentalis*," 302.
 19. Rian, 103.
 20. Hart, "*Doctor Fundamentalis*," 311.
 21. [Ibid.](#), 312.
 22. [Ibid.](#), 316.
 23. "Presbyterian Constitutional Covenant Union Organized," *Christianity Today* 6 (Aug. 1935), quoted in Hart, "*Dr Fundamentalis*," 318-319.
 24. Rian, 244-245.
 25. [Ibid.](#), 355-356.
 26. [Ibid.](#), 359