

***Christianity and Liberalism*, by J. Gresham Machen
Westminster Book of the Month
February 1, 2023**

I. Introduction

II. Machen the Man

A. Born: July 28, 1881 – Died: January 1, 1937

B. Education

1. *“The first time I heard [Wilhelm] Herrmann may almost be described as an epoch in my life. Such an overpowering personality I think I almost never before encountered—overpowering in the sincerity of religious devotion... I have been thrown all into confusion by what he says—so much deeper is his devotion to Christ than anything I have known in myself during the past few years...”* (Machen to his parents, 1905)
2. *“Without what I got from you and Mother I should long since have given up all thoughts of religion or of a moral life ... The only thing that enables me to get any benefit out of my opportunities here is the continual presence with me in spirit of you and Mother and the Christian teaching which you have given me.”* (Machen to his parents, 1906)



C. Teaching

1. *“Machen was a quiet, kind, modest, and sociable person. He was of medium height, a little bit overweight, and he always had a sparkle in his eyes. He was attentive to his students and did many fine things for them. Occasionally he would have what he called a ‘Checker Club’ on a Saturday evening in his apartment building, Chancellor Hall, a high-rise a few blocks from the [Princeton] Seminary. He set out games (especially checkers and chess) and bowls of fruit and snacks, and he mixed well with the students. He would say, ‘Don’t be a tightwad!’—hoping that we would be generous to ourselves.”* (John Galbraith, student of Machen’s at WTS)

D. Politics

E. Mountain Climbing: “Mountains and Why We Love Them”

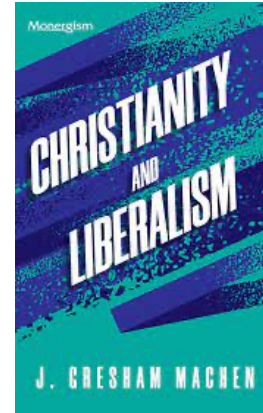
III. Machen the Reluctant Warrior: The Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy

- A. Fundamentalism – a late 19th and early 20th century reaction by British and American Protestants to theological liberalism, evolutionary theories, and cultural modernism. Roots in the Bible itself, the Reformation, and evangelical revivalism.
- B. Modernism – a late 19th and early 20th century movement, stemming from the 18th century Enlightenment, seeking to “modernize” or bring up to date religious beliefs, in line with contemporary philosophical, social, and scientific conclusions.
- C. Liberalism – a school of late 19th and early 20th century Protestant theology loosely united by the belief that the proper response to modern thought is to make radical alterations in Christian doctrine.

IV. *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923)

A. Doctrine

1. *“‘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.”* (23)
2. *“The truth is that when men speak of trust in Jesus’ Person, as being possible without acceptance of the message of His death and resurrection, they do not really mean trust at all. What they designate as trust is really admiration or reverence. They reverence Jesus as the supreme Person of all history and the supreme revealer of God. But trust can come only when the supreme Person extends His saving power to us. ‘He went about doing good,’ ‘He spake words such as never man spake,’ ‘He is the express image of God’—that is reverence; ‘He loved me and gave Himself for me’—that is faith.”* (37)



B. God and Man

1. *“At the very root of Christianity is the belief in the real existence of a personal God”* (50)
2. *“In modern liberalism, on the other hand, this sharp distinction tinction between God and the world is broken down, and the name ‘God’ is applied to the mighty world process itself ... Thus the Gospel story of the Incarnation, according to modern liberalism, is sometimes thought of as a symbol of the general truth that man at his best is one with God.”* (54)
3. *“According cording to the Bible, man is a sinner under the just condemnation of God; according to modern liberalism, there is really no such thing as sin. At the very root of the modern liberal movement is the loss of the consciousness of sin.”* (55)

C. The Bible

1. *“The truth is that the life-purpose of Jesus discovered by modern liberalism is not the life-purpose purpose of the real Jesus, but merely represents those elements in the teaching of Jesus—isolated and misinterpreted—which happen to agree with the modern program. It is not Jesus, then, who is the real authority, but the modern principle by which the selection within Jesus' recorded corded teaching has been made. Certain isolated ethical principles of the Sermon on the Mount are accepted, not at all because they are teachings of Jesus, but because they agree with modern ideas.”* (66)

D. Christ

1. *“Liberalism regards Him as an Example and Guide; Christianity, as a Saviour: liberalism makes Him an example for faith; Christianity, the object of faith.”* (82)
2. *“The real trouble is that the lofty claim of Jesus, if, as modern liberalism is constrained to believe, the claim was unjustified, places a moral stain upon Jesus' character. What shall be thought of a human being who lapsed so far from the path of humility and sanity as to believe that the eternal destinies of the world were committed into His hands?”* (74)

E. Salvation

1. *“Liberalism finds salvation (so far as it is willing to speak at all of ‘salvation’) in man; Christianity finds it in an act of God.” (99)*
2. *“Without its exclusiveness, the Christian message would have seemed perfectly inoffensive to the men of that day. So modern liberalism, placing Jesus alongside other benefactors of mankind, is perfectly inoffensive in the modern world. All men speak well of it. It is entirely inoffensive. But it is also entirely futile. The offence of the Cross is done away, but so is the glory and the power” (104–5)*
3. *“Yet what if it were true? ‘So, the All-Great were the All-Loving too’—God’s own Son delivered up for us all, freedom from the world, sought by philosophers of all the ages, offered now freely to every simple soul, things hidden from the wise and prudent revealed unto babes, the long striving over, the impossible accomplished, sin conquered by mysterious grace, communion at length with the holy God, our Father which art in heaven!” (114)*
4. *“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 combat Bolshevism; but if it is accepted in order to combat Bolshevism, it is not Christianity: Christianity will produce a unified nation, in a slow but satisfactory way; but if it is accepted in order to produce a unified nation, it is not Christianity: Christianity will produce a healthy community; but if it is accepted in order to produce a healthy community, it is not Christianity: Christianity will promote international peace; but if it is accepted in order to promote international peace, it is not Christianity. Our Lord said: ‘Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.’ But if you seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness in order that all those other things may be added unto you, you will miss both those other things and the Kingdom of God as well” (127–8).*

F. The Church

1. *“The liberal preacher says to the conservative party in the Church: ‘Let us unite in the same congregation, since of course doctrinal differences are trifles.’ But it is the very essence of ‘conservatism’ in the Church to regard doctrinal differences as no trifles but as the matters of supreme moment.” (136–7)*
2. *“The Unitarian Church is frankly and honestly just the kind of church that the liberal preacher desires—namely, a church without an authoritative Bible, without doctrinal requirements, and without a creed.” (139–40)*
3. *“Is there no refuge from strife? Is there no place of refreshing where a man can prepare for the battle of life? Is there no place where two or three can gather in Jesus’ name, to forget for the moment all those things that divide nation from nation and race from race, to forget human pride, to forget the passions of war, to forget the puzzling problems of industrial strife, and to unite in overflowing gratitude at the foot of the Cross? If there be such a place, then that is the house of God and that the gate of heaven. And from under the threshold of that house will go forth a river that will revive the weary world” (152).*

V. Lessons for Today

- A. Note the challenges we face (esp. as connected to broader trends).
- B. Beware of cultural accommodationism, in broader evangelicalism, and even in the PCA.
- C. Be clear with our words and mean what we say.
- D. Be ready to bear the cost!