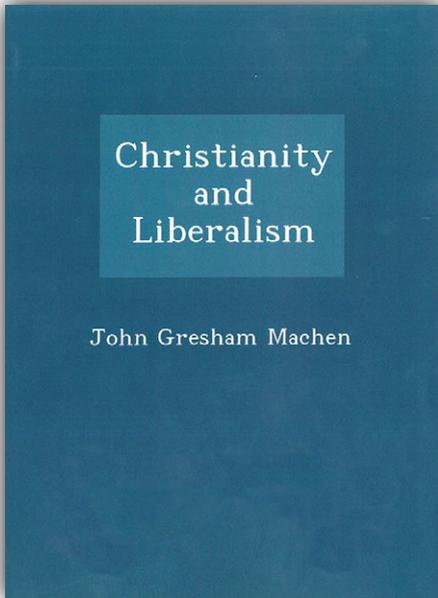




*“In this brilliant defence of Christian truth Machen argued that liberalism was really a new religion and not Christianity at all.”*

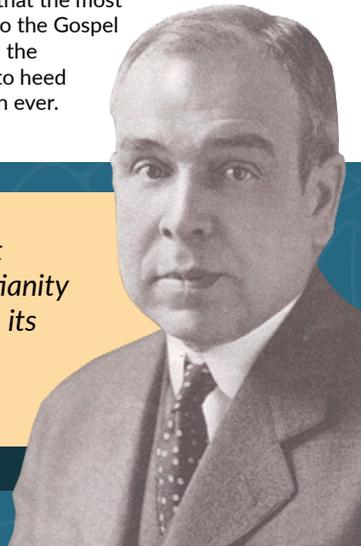
FRANCIS SCHAEFFER



Gresham Machen's book *Christianity and Liberalism* has been called “one of the most important books of all times”.<sup>1</sup>

Machen contrasts the true Christian Faith with the false claims of ‘liberal Christianity’. He shows how liberals wrap up worldly thinking in Christian language. He demonstrates that Liberalism is not simply one form of Christianity, but another religion altogether.

Gresham Machen (1881-1937) was a Presbyterian minister in the USA and published his classic work in 1923, which remains in print. Sadly the Liberalism he opposed in the professing Church a century ago is still rampant today. Machen warns us that the most dangerous threat to the Gospel comes from within the Church. We need to heed this now more than ever.



*“It is no wonder, then, that liberalism is totally different from Christianity, for the foundation is different. Christianity is founded upon the Bible. It bases upon the Bible both its thinking and its life. Liberalism on the other hand is founded upon the shifting emotions of sinful men.”*

J. Gresham Machen



## The glory of God and the sinfulness of man

Before the Gospel can be understood, argues Machen, “something must be known (1) about God and (2) about man”. But on both points “modern liberalism is directly opposed to Christianity”.<sup>2</sup>

Machen contends that: “The very basis of the religion of Jesus was a triumphant belief in the real existence of a personal God.”<sup>3</sup> Yet Liberalism has a tendency to pantheism, which sees all of life somehow as part of God. It ignores “the awful transcendence of God. From beginning to end the

Bible is concerned to set forth the awful gulf that separates the creature from the Creator. It is true, indeed, that according to the Bible God is immanent in the world. Not a sparrow falls to the ground without Him. But he is immanent in the world not because He is identified with the world, but because He is the free Creator and Upholder of it. Between the creature and the Creator a great gulf is fixed.”<sup>4</sup>

Liberalism denies the reality of human sin, believing that people are basically good: ‘man

at his best is one with God’. Machen says: “According 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.”<sup>5</sup>

In response, Machen calls on all Christians to do their part in proclaiming the law of God by their lives, while remembering that conviction of sin comes only from the Spirit of God.

## Doctrine explains what Christ’s work means

Liberals promote experience as the basis of religion and downplay Christian doctrine. Machen explains why doctrine is essential: “We shall never have vital contact with Jesus if we attend to His person and neglect the message; for it is the message which makes Him ours.”<sup>6</sup>

The meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has been at the heart of Christian

doctrine since the first days of the Church. Machen begins his book by calling for an honest look at the Cross and the Resurrection as facts of history, and why the Bible records them. He shows why the message of Christ must be believed personally, saying that liberals cannot really trust in Christ “without believing the message”.<sup>7</sup>

# The Bible is the Word of God

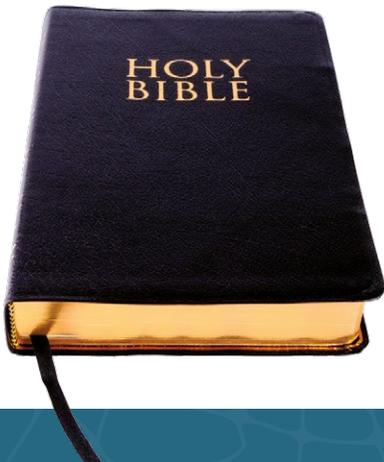
Machen explains: "According to the Christian view, the Bible contains an account of a revelation from God to man, which is found nowhere else."<sup>8</sup>

Whereas Scripture is the supreme authority in Christianity, "The real authority, for liberalism, can only be 'the Christian consciousness' or 'Christian experience'.<sup>9</sup>

The Bible explains the central event in history, when "the eternal Son was offered as a sacrifice for the sins of men".<sup>10</sup> And the doctrine of the plenary inspiration of the Bible means "the account itself is true, the writers having been so preserved from error, despite a full maintenance of their habits of thought and expression, that the resulting Book is the 'infallible rule of faith and practice'.<sup>11</sup>

Machen points to the life-giving power of the Word: "The Reformation of the sixteenth century was founded upon the authority of the Bible, yet it set the world aflame... The Bible, to the Christian is not a burdensome law, but the very Magna Charta of Christian liberty."

"It is no wonder, then, that liberalism is totally different from Christianity, for the foundation is different. Christianity is founded upon the Bible. It bases upon the Bible both its thinking and its life. Liberalism on the other hand is founded upon the shifting emotions of sinful men."<sup>12</sup>



Sea of Galilee

## The Jesus of the New Testament

In Matthew 22:42 Jesus asks his hearers: "What do you think about the Christ?" Machen lays bare two conflicting answers: "Liberalism regards Him as an Example and Guide; Christianity, as a Saviour: liberalism makes Him an example for faith; Christianity, the object of faith."<sup>13</sup>

The whole New Testament presents Jesus as a supernatural Person in whom we must place our trust. Yet Liberalism treats Jesus simply as the first Christian. Machen responds: "The truth is that if Jesus be merely an example, He is not a worthy example; for He claimed to be far more."<sup>14</sup> See the miracles of the New Testament (e.g. Mark 2:9-11), which point to Christ dealing with sin: "Without the miracles we should have a teacher; with the miracles we have a Saviour."<sup>15</sup>

Machen says, "the witness of the New Testament is everywhere the same; the New Testament everywhere presents One who was both God and man."<sup>16</sup>

Modern critical methods have sought to eliminate the supernatural from Jesus' life, but, "The Jesus of the New Testament has at least one advantage over the Jesus of modern reconstruction - He is real. He is not a manufactured figure suitable as a point of support for ethical maxims, but a genuine Person whom a man can love."<sup>17</sup>

# Salvation is an act of God

Machen shows that Liberalism “differs from Christianity in its account of the gospel itself... it presents an entirely different account of the way of salvation. 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”.<sup>18</sup>

The modern view does not accept the vicarious sacrifice of Christ and his resurrection as events in history with implications for today. Liberals talk about the Cross of Jesus merely as an example of

self-sacrifice and redefine sin to diminish its offensiveness to God.

In contrast, Machen outlines “the liberty of the gospel” which “depends upon the gift of God by which the Christian life is begun – a gift which involves justification, or the removal of the guilt of sin and the establishment of a right relation between the believer and God, and regeneration or the new birth, which makes of the Christian man a new creature”.<sup>19</sup>



## THE CROSS REVEALS THE LOVE OF GOD

Machen wrote: “the modern objection to the doctrine of the atonement on the ground that that doctrine is contrary to the love of God, is based upon the most abysmal misunderstanding of the doctrine itself. The modern liberal teachers persist in speaking of the sacrifice of Christ as though it were a sacrifice made by some one other than God. They speak of it as though it meant that God waits coldly until a price is paid to Him before He forgives sin. As a matter of fact, it means nothing of the kind... The fundamental thing is that God Himself, and not another, makes the sacrifice for sin – God Himself in the person of the Son who assumed our nature and died for us, God Himself in the Person of the Father who spared not His own Son but offered Him up for us all.”<sup>20</sup>

## Liberalism is the enemy within

Christians belong to the body of Christ, the Church. This is “the brotherhood of the redeemed”, which far surpasses “the brotherhood of man” so beloved of liberal teachers.<sup>21</sup>

But Machen charges the Church with being “unfaithful to her Lord by admitting great companies of non-Christian persons, not only into her

membership, but into her teaching agencies.”<sup>22</sup>

He goes on to issue a heartfelt warning against Liberalism: “The greatest menace to the Christian Church today comes not from the enemies outside, but from the enemies within; it comes from the presence within the Church of a type of faith and

practice that is anti-Christian to the core.”<sup>23</sup>

So every true Christian must speak out against the false religion of Liberalism; yet many do not. Machen warns: “It is strange how in the interests of an utterly false kindness to men, Christians are sometimes willing to relinquish their loyalty to the crucified Lord.”<sup>24</sup>

# The threat of Liberalism

Gresham Machen uncovers that unbelief is at the root of Liberalism and so identifies that "Christianity is being attacked from within by a movement which is anti-Christian to the core."<sup>25</sup>

This may not be immediately obvious because Liberalism employs a Christian vocabulary, but in fact "traditional language is being strained to become the expression of totally alien ideas."<sup>26</sup>

Machen shows that Liberalism actually: 1) denies the supernatural nature of Christianity; 2) rejects the Bible as the

inerrant Word of God; 3) focuses on this world and refuses to contemplate eternity.

A century after Machen penned *Christianity and Liberalism*, the liberal threat to the Church is more widespread. The Liberalism of Machen's day rejected Christian doctrine, but retained Christian teaching on how people should live (ethics). However, since the sexual revolution of the 1960s, liberals now reject Christian ethics as well. And these liberal notions are now taught within some evangelical churches.

# Common grace

Machen commends the doctrine of common grace, which "restrains the worst manifestations of evil" in the world.

He shows that our faith "involves no withdrawal from the battle of this world; our Lord Himself, with His stupendous mission, lived in the midst of life's throng and press."<sup>27</sup>



# Christianity is a supernatural religion

At the heart of modern Liberalism is a denial of the supernatural. So liberals reject the fundamental beliefs of Christianity, including the deity of Christ. As Machen says: "The conception of Jesus as a supernatural Person runs all through the New Testament."<sup>28</sup>

The Bible teaches that God's redemption plan also transcends anything in this world: "At the very centre of Christianity are the words, 'Ye must be born again.' These words are despised today. They involve supernaturalism, and the modern man is opposed to supernaturalism in the experience of the individual as much as

in the realm of history. A cardinal doctrine of modern liberalism is that the world's evil may be overcome by the world's good; no help is thought to be needed from outside the world."<sup>29</sup>

Machen explains that: "A supernatural event is one that takes place by the immediate, as distinguished from the mediate, power of God... In the events called natural, God uses means, whereas in the events called supernatural He uses no means, but puts forth His creative power... a miracle is a work of creation just as truly as the mysterious act which produced the world."<sup>30</sup>





## Christian education is “most important”

How should Christians respond to the threat of Liberalism? The most important thing of all, argues Machen, is to promote Christian education: “primarily by the renewal of Christian education in the family, but also by the use of whatever other educational agencies the Church can find. Christian education is the chief business of

the hour for every earnest Christian man. Christianity cannot subsist unless men know what Christianity is; and the fair and logical thing is to learn what Christianity is, not from its opponents, but from those who themselves are Christians.”<sup>31</sup>

Machen concludes: “The present is a time not for ease or pleasure, but for earnest and prayerful work.”<sup>32</sup>

## Parental rights must be protected

Gresham Machen, writing in the early twentieth century, warned of the increasing encroachment of the state into family life: “Modern life is tending more and more toward the contraction of the sphere of parental control and parental influence”, for example, he says “the choice of schools is being placed under the power of the state”.<sup>33</sup>

Machen said: “the lives of children are no longer surrounded by the loving atmosphere of the Christian home, but by the utilitarianism of the state. A revival of the Christian religion would unquestionably bring a reversal of the process; the family, as over against all other social institutions, would come to its rights again”.<sup>34</sup>

## J. Gresham Machen (1881-1937)

A Presbyterian Minister and seminary professor, Gresham Machen was one of the leading evangelicals contending for the Christian Faith in the early 20th century.

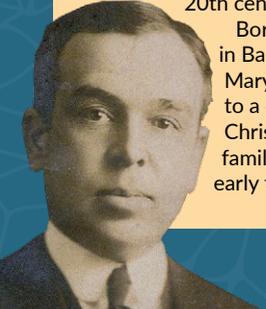
Born and raised in Baltimore, Maryland, USA, to a committed Christian family, in his early twenties

he attended Princeton Theological Seminary. After Machen studied for a year in Germany with leading liberal theologians, he developed a settled opposition to their views.

Gresham Machen returned to Princeton and became a member of the Seminary’s faculty, robustly defending the historicity of the Bible and publishing works including *The*

*Virgin Birth of Christ*. Francis Schaeffer called *Christianity and Liberalism* a “brilliant defence of Christian truth”.<sup>35</sup>

Machen was a key founder of Westminster Theological Seminary in 1929. Ejected from the northern Presbyterian church in 1936 for resisting the invasion of Liberalism, he was the first Moderator of what became the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.<sup>36</sup>



References available at [christian.org.uk/CANDL-ref](http://christian.org.uk/CANDL-ref)