

CHRISTIANITY
AND
LIBERALISM

J. GRESHAM MACHEN

With an Introduction by Douglas Wilson

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INTRODUCTION

J. Gresham Machen was a stalwart defender of the orthodox Christian faith, one who understood the nature of the corruptions that were facing the church of his time. He was also highly educated and intelligent, which means that he was rare enough to be put in a museum, or in a zoo. He was a champion of loving orthodoxy, and of orthodox loving. The way he held them together should be a model for all of us.

The Lord Jesus said that we were to love the Lord our God with all our *minds* (Matt. 22:37), which means we have to use our brains. This does not appear to be optional, which means that if we have any brains, we should certainly be loving God with them.

But this creates a problem. Trouble and confusion enter almost right away. Knowledge puffs up, the apostle Paul taught us, while love builds up (1 Cor. 8:1). This has led some to falsely oppose knowledge and love, as though we had to choose between them the same way we have to choose between going right and going left. But the problem with this should be evident immediately. If someone says that love is to be preferred over knowledge, the first question we ask ought to be “do you *know* this?” The relationship between knowledge and love is not the same as the relationship between wickedness and righteousness.

But as someone acquires some measure of knowledge, if they are also growing in love at the same time, this means that they will have to take certain measures to keep from being puffed up. The way to do this is to only take on knowledge if there is a will to *apply* it, if there is a desire to put it into practice. Doing this is hard work, which is what puts a lot of people off, but it is also a practice that will at some point bring you into hard conflict with others who are not putting the same knowledge into practice.

And this is what happened to J. Gresham Machen.

Theological liberalism was simply unbelief under the veneer of academic sophistication. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a number of Americans with future ministry in mind got their undergraduate education in the States, but then went off to Europe for their graduate studies. Unfortunately, the corruptions of unbelief were already well advanced in Europe and infected not a few of these young men before they came back. There was higher criticism, which wanted to treat the text of Scripture like any other ancient book. There was the incredulity of sophisticated instructors, who did not want to believe that Jesus turned water to wine, or walked on water, or rose from the dead. And of course by this time there was Darwin, who was used to rot out faith in Genesis, the foundation of everything. In short, liberalism wanted to jettison the content of orthodox Christian belief, while simultaneously keeping the forms—the hymns, the soaring religious language, the cathedrals, and, not coincidentally, their jobs.

The central thesis of *Christianity and Liberalism* is that liberalism is not a variant of Christianity, but rather another religion entirely. It is in no way compatible with the historic Christian faith, still less with the Reformed tradition that had shaped the Presbyterian Church—which was the specific terrain where Machen joined battle with the liberals. You will read Machen's arguments for this claim in this book, and if you accept Machen's premises about the "faith once

I. MACHEN'S INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this book is not to decide the religious issue of the present day, but merely to present the issue as sharply and clearly as possible, in order that the reader may be aided in deciding it for himself. Presenting an issue sharply is indeed by no means a popular business at the present time; there are many who prefer to fight their intellectual battles in what Dr. Francis L. Patton has aptly called a “condition of low visibility.”¹ Clear-cut definition of terms in religious matters, bold facing of the logical implications of religious views, is by many persons regarded as an impious proceeding. May it not discourage contribution to mission boards? May it not hinder the progress of consolidation, and produce a poor showing in columns of Church statistics? But with such persons we cannot possibly bring ourselves to agree. Light may seem at times to be an impertinent intruder, but it is always beneficial in the end. The type of religion which rejoices in the pious sound of traditional phrases, regardless of their meanings, or shrinks from “controversial” matters, will never stand amid the shocks of life. In the sphere of religion, as in other spheres, the things about which men are agreed are apt to be the things that

1. Francis L. Patton, in the introduction to William Hallock Johnson, *The Christian Faith Under Modern Searchlights*, [1916], p. 7.

are least worth holding; the really important things are the things about which men will fight.

In the sphere of religion, in particular, the present time is a time of conflict; the great redemptive religion which has always been known as Christianity is battling against a totally diverse type of religious belief, which is only the more destructive of the Christian faith because it makes use of traditional Christian terminology. This modern non-redemptive religion is called "modernism" or "liberalism." Both names are unsatisfactory; the latter, in particular, is question-begging. The movement designated as "liberalism" is regarded as "liberal" only by its friends; to its opponents it seems to involve a narrow ignoring of many relevant facts. And indeed the movement is so various in its manifestations that one may almost despair of finding any common name which will apply to all its forms. But manifold as are the forms in which the movement appears, the root of the movement is one; the many varieties of modern liberal religion are rooted in naturalism—that is, in the denial of any entrance of the creative power of God (as distinguished from the ordinary course of nature) in connection with the origin of Christianity. The word "naturalism" is here used in a sense somewhat different from its philosophical meaning. In this non-philosophical sense it describes with fair accuracy the real root of what is called, by what may turn out to be a degradation of an originally noble word, "liberal" religion.

The rise of this modern naturalistic liberalism has not come by chance, but has been occasioned by important changes which have recently taken place in the conditions of life. The past one hundred years have witnessed the beginning of a new era in human history, which may conceivably be regretted, but certainly cannot be ignored, by the most obstinate conservatism. The change is not something that lies beneath the surface and might be visible only to the discerning eye; on the contrary it forces itself upon the attention of the plain man at a hundred points. Modern inventions and the industrialism

that has been built upon them have given us in many respects a new world to live in; we can no more remove ourselves from that world than we can escape from the atmosphere that we breathe.

But such changes in the material conditions of life do not stand alone; they have been produced by mighty changes in the human mind, as in their turn they themselves give rise to further spiritual changes. The industrial world of to-day has been produced not by blind forces of nature but by the conscious activity of the human spirit; it has been produced by the achievements of science. The outstanding feature of recent history is an enormous widening of human knowledge, which has gone hand in hand with such perfecting of the instrument of investigation that scarcely any limits can be assigned to future progress in the material realm.

The application of modern scientific methods is almost as broad as the universe in which we live. Though the most palpable achievements are in the sphere of physics and chemistry, the sphere of human life cannot be isolated from the rest, and with the other sciences there has appeared, for example, a modern science of history, which, with psychology and sociology and the like, claims, even if it does not deserve, full equality with its sister sciences. No department of knowledge can maintain its isolation from the modern lust of scientific conquest; treaties of inviolability, though hallowed by all the sanctions of age-long tradition, are being flung ruthlessly to the winds.

In such an age, it is obvious that every inheritance from the past must be subject to searching criticism; and as a matter of fact some convictions of the human race have crumbled to pieces in the test. Indeed, dependence of any institution upon the past is now sometimes even regarded as furnishing a presumption, not in favor of it, but against it. So many convictions have had to be abandoned that men have sometimes come to believe that all convictions must go.

If such an attitude be justifiable, then no institution is faced by a stronger hostile presumption than the institution of the Christian

religion, for no institution has based itself more squarely upon the authority of a by-gone age. We are not now inquiring whether such policy is wise or historically justifiable; in any case the fact itself is plain, that Christianity during many centuries has consistently appealed for the truth of its claims, not merely and not even primarily to current experience, but to certain ancient books the most recent of which was written some nineteen hundred years ago. It is no wonder that that appeal is being criticized to-day; for the writers of the books in question were no doubt men of their own age, whose outlook upon the material world, judged by modern standards, must have been of the crudest and most elementary kind. Inevitably the question arises whether the opinions of such men can ever be normative for men of the present day; in other words, whether first-century religion can ever stand in company with twentieth-century science.

However the question may be answered, it presents a serious problem to the modern Church. Attempts are indeed sometimes made to make the answer easier than at first sight it appears to be. Religion, it is said, is so entirely separate from science, that the two, rightly defined, cannot possibly come into conflict. This attempt at separation, as it is hoped the following pages may show, is open to objections of the most serious kind. But what must now be observed is that even if the separation is justifiable it cannot be effected without effort; the removal of the problem of religion and science itself constitutes a problem. For, rightly or wrongly, religion during the centuries has as a matter of fact connected itself with a host of convictions, especially in the sphere of history, which may form the subject of scientific investigation; just as scientific investigators, on the other hand, have sometimes attached themselves, again rightly or wrongly, to conclusions which impinge upon the innermost domain of philosophy and of religion. For example, if any simple Christian of one hundred years ago, or even of to-day, were asked what would become of his religion if history should prove indubitably that no man called Jesus ever lived

II. DOCTRINE

Modern liberalism in the Church, whatever judgment may be passed upon it, is at any rate no longer merely an academic matter. It is no longer a matter merely of theological seminaries or universities. On the contrary its attack upon the fundamentals of the Christian faith is being carried on vigorously by Sunday-School "lesson-helps," by the pulpit, and by the religious press. If such an attack be unjustified, the remedy is not to be found, as some devout persons have suggested, in the abolition of theological seminaries, or the abandonment of scientific theology, but rather in a more earnest search after truth and a more loyal devotion to it when once it is found.

At the theological seminaries and universities, however, the roots of the great issue are more clearly seen than in the world at large; among students the reassuring employment of traditional phrases is often abandoned, and the advocates of a new religion are not at pains, as they are in the Church at large, to maintain an appearance of conformity with the past. But such frankness, we are convinced, ought to be extended to the people as a whole. Few desires on the part of religious teachers have been more harmfully exaggerated than the desire to "avoid giving offence." Only too often that desire has come perilously near dishonesty; the religious teacher, in his heart of hearts, is well aware of the radicalism of his views, but is unwilling