

Rylian D. Fraas

In 1923 when Gresham Machen published Christianity & Liberalism<sup>1</sup>, the Presbyterian Church in the USA was going through a time of turmoil and contention. Conservatives and Liberals were fighting for the soul of the church. While many Presbyterian elders and laypersons yet held to the historic doctrines of the Christian faith, an increasing number of “liberal” intellectuals were coming up with new definitions and new paradigms in which to understand such Christian doctrines as the inerrancy of Holy Scripture, the virgin birth of Christ, and the resurrection. In the process the liberal camp sought to downplay the importance of doctrine, stressing instead a social agenda which sought the benefit of all mankind defined in such broad and secular terms as education, workers' rights, and social welfare. Besides these two groups, there was a great mass of “moderates” in the church who stressed unity above both doctrine and social activism, and were content to continue the *status quo*. They wanted to allow both liberals and conservatives to pursue their agendas within the auspices of the church with the appearance of unity. As his title implies, Machen's intent in this book was to starkly contrast the two camps in the conflict. Machen writes, “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<sup>2</sup>.” Christianity & Liberalism then, instead of proving the conservative case, was intended to bring an honest clarity to the issues that divided conservatives and liberals.

One might be tempted to think at the first glance of the title that this work was a conservative attack at the liberal camp which was redefining Presbyterian doctrine. Yet

---

1 J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity & Liberalism*, (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002).

2 Ibid, 1.

Rylian D. Fraas

the underlying thrust of this historic work was not directed at the liberals. Throughout the book, Machen defines in distinct and plain terms the liberal defection from the Christian Faith, organizing the chapters into an examination of six major themes of the historic Christian faith: Doctrine, God & Man, the Bible, Christ, Salvation, and the Church. It is evident from the tone of these chapters, in starkly contrasting the historic Christian from the liberal conception, that Machen is not appealing to the liberals. One would expect a more conciliatory, generous overture and not so blunt an assessment of the differences that divided the liberals from historic Christianity if Machen wrote this book as an appeal to the liberals. Machen knew that he could hope for but little acknowledgment from that camp.

Although Machen makes no clearly and directly-stated appeal to any group, it is clear from the overall tone and themes of this timely book that Machen was shooting for the moderates. Machen said, “Modern liberalism may be criticized on the ground that it is un-Christian...we shall be interested in showing that despite the liberal use of traditional phraseology modern liberalism not only is a different religion from Christianity but belongs to a totally different class of religions<sup>3</sup>.” Machen, in the book's introduction, begins by addressing some of the main arguments of moderates against making such clear distinction between historic Christianity and the new modernism. As Machen notes, moderates would object that a clearly defined conflict between liberals and conservatives in the church might undermine efforts at church growth and the support of church agencies like the mission boards<sup>4</sup>. Although Machen does not specifically refer to moderates, he takes on the kinds of utilitarian objections right from the start that

---

3 Ibid, 7.

4 Ibid, 1.

Rylian D. Fraas

moderates would raise. By doing so, he shows here that he intends to address moderates' objections to resolving the stark differences that separated liberals from those who held to the historic doctrines of the faith.

Machen sincerely believed that such latitude of doctrine and practice as the moderates preferred was detrimental to the aims of both Bible-believing conservatives and the modernist liberals. He thought that the Presbyterian Church had essentially become a two-headed beast whose two heads could not agree what direction the church should go. To Machen, separation was preferable to this monstrous unity which inhibited both sides from pursuing the courses that their convictions directed. Machen says, "The separation of naturalistic liberalism from the churches would no doubt greatly diminish the size of the churches. But Gideon's three hundred were more powerful than the thirty-two thousand with which the march against the Midianites began<sup>5</sup>." Here Machen reveals his hope that somehow those who held to the historic Christian faith would separate from those who did not. It seemed to Machen that the main hindrance to separation was the massive sedentary body below, not particularly following one head or the other, but holding the two heads together. If he could persuade the moderates that the chief aims and modernist philosophy of the liberal camp were completely antithetical and opposite to that of the Christian faith as it had been believed and practiced for nearly two millennia, he could coax the middle to cleave to one head or the other, and thereby encourage a separation of the historic church from the modernist impostor.

Thus, in six chapters Machen outlines how liberals differed from the historic Christian faith. According to Machen, Liberals downplayed the significance of doctrine

---

5 Ibid, 170.

Rylian D. Fraas

(in the creedal sense) whereas Christianity regarded doctrine as essential<sup>6</sup>. Whereas Christianity regarded God as holy and personal, and man as a fallen sinner without hope except in God's grace, liberalism described God as a kind of impersonal pantheistic oneness pervading all human existence, and man as a universal brotherhood that is capable of improving himself and realize the good that is in him<sup>7</sup>. Christianity is a religion founded on belief in God's revelation to man given in the Holy Scriptures, but the liberals freely picked and chose what they believed of biblical teaching, rejecting anything supernatural and thereby nullifying the great themes of Scripture<sup>8</sup>. Liberals saw the man Jesus Christ as merely a great teacher or an example to follow of self-sacrifice, but Christians believe that Jesus is God in the flesh, the only name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved<sup>9</sup>. According to the Christian faith, salvation is a gift of God to desperate sinners so that they might fully enjoy him and commune with him to all eternity, but liberals see salvation as something to be realized here and now by all people if they will only love one another<sup>10</sup>. Machen says that the Church is an organization founded by Christ to proclaim a message of redemption to a lost and dying world, but the liberal modernists saw the church as little more than an organization of social activists to encourage the full expression of what goodness already resides in all mankind for the temporal benefit of all people<sup>11</sup>.

Machen, then in writing Christianity & Liberalism, set out to prove to the fence-sitting moderates that these were not just competing conceptions of Christianity, but that

---

6 Ibid, 18-20.

7 Ibid, 57, 64.

8 Ibid, 72, 77.

9 Ibid, 80, 85.

10 Ibid, 117, 118.

11 Ibid, 157.

Rylian D. Fraas

they were in fact two competing religions, and that they had no business belonging together in one organization. He says, “Many are indeed seeking to avoid the separation. Why, they say, may not brethren dwell together in unity? The Church, we are told, has room for both liberals and conservatives<sup>12</sup>.” and “But one thing is perfectly plain—whether or no liberals are Christians, it is at any rate perfectly clear that liberalism is not Christianity. And that being the case, it is highly undesirable that liberalism and Christianity should continue to be propagated within the bounds of the same organization. A separation of the two parties in the Church is the crying need of the hour<sup>13</sup>.” Machen believed that the anti-Christian liberals in his day had increased their power through deceit and subterfuge, and were already dominating the councils of the Presbyterian church<sup>14</sup>. He unashamedly advocated separation.

It appears then from this work that Machen was attempting to awaken Presbyterians to the sharpness of the conflict and prod them to take a side. He knew that a split was coming, and from some of his statements, seems to have known that the liberals had already won the struggle for power. It appears that Machen wanted to take as many true believers with him as possible, and so he wrote this appeal to Presbyterians in general, but especially to those who had taken moderate stances on church unity, to prepare them for the coming schism. Although fewer of the “conservatives” were willing to separate than he had hoped, Machen got his separation thirteen years later when he and several Bible-believing presbyters were deposed from office. These then formed the Presbyterian Church of America, later known as the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

---

12 Ibid, 160.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid, 159.