

Machen, Liberalism and Personal Insights into the “Hungarian” Lands

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The name of the American Presbyterian theologian, J. Gresham Machen (1881-1937), is not so well known in Hungary. But this should not be the case since it is of such importance to know those in recent times who belong to the “cloud of witnesses” spoken of in Hebrews 12:1. We hope that the publication of this book will be of valuable help in this regard. We will see that J. Gresham Machen was not a common gardener theologian. The hope of this publisher is that as a result of the clarity of his distinct message, the Hungarian reader will be enabled to step out of obscurity and hold this theologian in high esteem as one of their favorites.

The book is striking and convincing in its simplicity, consistency and Biblical application. Even Walter Lipmann, a contemporary critic, who was no friend of Biblical Christianity, could not do anything but confess: “It is an admirable book... a cool and stringent defense of orthodox Protestantism... We shall do well to listen to Dr. Machen.”¹ We can look upon the book as an apologetical piece, but it is also an important theological tool providing a reference point for those who want to understand the

¹ Walter Lipmann, *A Preface to Morals* (New York, 1929), p. 32.

fundamental differences between *conservative, Biblical Christianity* and *Liberalism*. Machen is outspoken in regard to everything and a true modern reformer, worthy of that theological heritage which once was represented by Princeton Theological Seminary and later carried forward by Westminster Theological Seminary.



Our book and its introduction deal with a topic which, until now, was mostly treated as a taboo in Hungary. By this we mean that very few writings or books have ever been published with the specific goal of unmasking liberalism. Thus the goal of this introduction is to present in a brief and cogent form the problem of liberalism, by drawing attention to its existence and spiritually detrimental consequences. We also desire to instill within the reader a reformational way of thinking, for this is the burning need of the hour. Paradoxically, many professing Hungarian Christians do not know anything about the existence of liberalism, nor are they able to recognize it. Unfortunately, this is so even among those more seriously-minded. They have grown up on liberalism's poisonous diet which has inevitably been built into their spiritual bodies as "biblical teaching." Liberalism is so endemic that we can hardly perceive it. In a way, "we live and move and have our being" in it. That is why it is extremely important to be acquainted with its characteristics, language, the

factors which helped its propagation and the lessons to be drawn from it in church history. We will try to help in this by using more quotations than usual. In this way we should understand more easily Machen's message for his era, and for today.

Therefore, using Dr. Machen's biography as our blueprint, we will deal with a number of important features of liberalism and the factors which helped its propagation. This will be followed by a brief survey of the American situation. Then we will say a few things about the Hungarian situation. We ask our readers to join us and participate in this spiritual "circuit."

Brief Biography of J. Gresham Machen

J. Gresham Machen was born in 1881 in Baltimore, Maryland. He commenced his higher education at Johns Hopkins University and continued it at Princeton Theological Seminary. After earning degrees at these places, he spent one year in Germany at the universities of Marburg and Göttingen. Among the Americans, three great Presbyterian theologians of the 19th century: Charles Hodge, James H. Thornwell² and Benjamin B. Warfield made a significant impression upon him. Warfield was also his professor. Between 1906 and 1929 Machen was professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary. With all his strength he opposed the intended reorganization of Princeton Seminary by the liberals. Unfortunately, he was not successful in this. Following this reorganization he resigned from his professorship at Princeton. From 1929 until his death, he taught at Westminster Theological Seminary where he undertook a lion's share of the work in establishing this institution. Furthermore, he was a founding member and president of the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions, established in 1933. He had a decisive role in starting two famous periodicals. We have in mind here *Christianity Today* and *The Presbyterian Guardian*. In December of 1936 he set out on a preaching tour in the state of North Dakota when he suddenly

² For a more detailed account of the interesting influence of James H. Thornwell upon Machen see: Bradley J. Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1991), pp. 31-36.

became seriously ill. In spite of this he held strictly to the agreed schedule. Over the next four days his health rapidly deteriorated as a result of severe pneumonia and, on January 1, 1937, departed to be with his Savior. At this time J. Gresham Machen was not in the ministry of the Presbyterian Church.³ By the use of “church discipline” the liberals who had by this time taken control of the church, “rewarded” his faithfulness to the Word and the Confessions by removing him from the ministry. Of course, this was due to his firm stand for the Word of God. One of his favorite sayings was: “There is no such thing as presenting truth without attacking error.”

In spite of his outspokenness, Dr. Machen was known as a humble Christian by his contemporaries. This was clearly seen by his submissive attitude towards the long and often humiliating “disciplinary” procedures. He endured the most unimaginable gossip concerning himself and his family, for example, that he had become wealthy by distributing liquor. That is why he was even called a “beer baron” behind his back.⁴ Needless to say, such gossip had no basis whatsoever. He was very fair with everyone; no one ever heard a hurtful remark from him. That is why even his theological adversaries counted his death a loss and spoke with much appreciation concerning him in their statements. His remarkable testimony was recognized mostly by his posterity.

This is how they wrote about him in a Baltimore journal following his death:

What caused Dr. Machen to quit the Princeton Theological Seminary and found a seminary of his own was his complete inability, as a theologian, to square the disingenuous evasions of Modernism with the fundamentals of Christian doctrine. He saw clearly that the only effect that could follow diluting and polluting Christianity in the

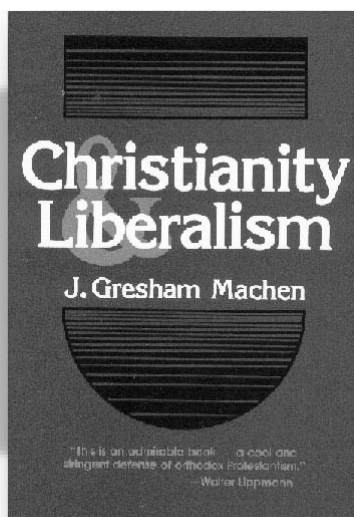
³ Here, and in what follows, when the term *Presbyterian Church* is used, this always refers to the *Presbyterian Church in the USA*, unless otherwise stated.

⁴ William White Jr., *Van Til—Defender of the Faith* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville-New York, 1979), p. 55.

Modernist manner would be its *complete abandonment* and *ruin*. Either it was true or it was not true. If, as he believed, it was true, then there could be *no compromise* with persons who sought to whittle away its essential postulates, however respectable their motives.

Thus [Machen] fell out with the reformers who have been trying, in late years, to convert the Presbyterian Church into a kind of literary and social club, devoted vaguely to good works... His one and only purpose was to hold [the Presbyterian Church] resolutely to what he conceived to be the *true faith*. When that enterprise met with opposition he fought vigorously, and though he lost in the end and was forced out of Princeton it must be manifest that he marched off to Philadelphia with all the honours of war.⁵ (*italics mine*)

Machen's main published works in chronological order are: *The Origins of Paul's Religion* (1921), *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923), *New Testament Greek for Beginners* (1923), *What is Faith?* (1925), *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (1930), *The Christian Faith in the Modern World* (1936), *The Christian View of Man* (1937), *God Transcendent* (1949).



⁵ H. L. Mencken, "Dr. Fundamentalism" *Baltimore Evening Sun*, Jan. 18, 1937.

The Distinctive Characteristics of Liberalism⁶

What is characteristic about theological liberalism? What are the factors promoting its spread? How can a church which has become liberal be recognized? We are looking for answers to these questions. In what follows we only wish to list some basic viewpoints which we trust, in the course of reading this book, will become all the more crystallized. Let us see, then, the main distinctive characteristics to be attributed to liberalism.

First and foremost, there is the destruction and then replacement of the Bible's authority. In this regard liberals take aim at many things (inspiration, inerrancy, authenticity), but very especially, the supernatural origin and historicity of the Bible. When liberals first made their appearance, they made a wrong presupposition as a starting point. They thought that if the Bible needs to be defended, then let this be in just a few areas. This way the task will be easier. If we do not insist upon the trustworthiness of the Bible, if we do not emphasize the authenticity as well as the historicity of the biblical stories and miracles, then Christianity may become a more saleable product in the intellectual marketplace. Possibly mission will also become easier. However, this presupposition proved to be completely false. According to *J. I. Packer*, Christian revelation—although supernatural from beginning to end—proffers and mediates a complete worldview, which constitutes a connecting and intelligible whole.⁷ To upset this by accepting certain parts and doctrines, while on the other hand marginalizing others, is folly. But liberalism goes further. While on the one hand it destroys the authority of the Bible, it works hard at building its own new central system of authority. Therefore, in the liberal church, the determinative factor substituting the Bible will be the authority of a kind of Protestant “teaching office.” This may be

⁶ This section takes into consideration the peculiar characteristics of the Hungarian situation. While these marks may be common knowledge to the Western Christian reader, it is by no means obvious to Hungarian pastors and Christians to whom they minister.

⁷ J. I. Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God* (William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1964), p. 162.

the authority of the synod, the episcopacy, the theological professor(s) or some other constituted ecclesiastical forum.

The *second* distinguishing characteristic of liberalism is the redistribution or reformulation of Christian truths. Let us acquaint ourselves with this liberal language by looking at the following brief extract from the work of one liberal within the Hungarian Reformed Church (HRC):

Let us accept with *openness* the new challenges and allow these to *question* our knowledge to date. He who confesses, however, that his faith and life philosophy does not require supplementing, or he who does not desire to step beyond established fundamental truths is a fundamentalist and dogmatic... This also means, however, that *he must redistribute the truths of faith in every age...* It would not be good if we bound our faith to the text since, by this we would come into conflict with the Reformation. That is to say, the Reformation acknowledged that *the Holy Spirit is He who makes the Scripture revelation for us*. Here the following question comes up: Does the Scripture itself in its every part contain the eternal message? To this *we must answer no...* *It makes no sense* to regard those expositions and applications which Paul held to and viewed, simply as *eternal rules*.⁸ (italics mine)

Here it is suggested that, in place of eternal truths, something new must be sounded out. Furthermore, it is taught that the truth is not unchangeable and eternal in essence, but something new. This thought, taken from Heidegger, is very much built into the liberal world-view. Consequently, since the Reformation there has never been so much confusion and uncertainty in the Protestant camp with regard to what to believe and in which direction to progress. According to J. I. Packer, further negative implications and consequences in relation to the

⁸ Sándor Szathmáry, *A Reformáció Alapkérdései* [*Basic Questions about the Reformation*], *Református Egyház* [*Reformed Church*], Vol. XLVII, No. 10, 1995. Szathmáry is a famous HRC “research professor” who has written and translated a number of liberal books. Ironically, most of these works have been published by John Calvin Publishing.

church include the undermining of preaching, weakening of faith, a shallow spiritual life and a falling away from systematic Bible reading.⁹

We name as the *third* important distinguishing characteristic, the effective obsolescence of the Confessions. This has essentially three outcomes: the *outright rejection* (on occasions concealed) of the Confessions, the *substitution* of a new Confession and the “*revision*” or “*new interpretation*” of the old Confessions.¹⁰ The liberal churches certainly submit orally to an insistence upon the Confessions, but they are far from accepting them in their hearts. They pay only lip service to the Confessions. They treat the Confessions merely as *historical documents* which are not normative for today and whose stipulations are not authoritative. A contemporary theologian exposes this erroneous outlook thus:

The old doctrinal affirmations, the confessions of faith from the period of classical orthodoxy as well as the creeds from the patristic period that sought to summarize biblical truth, are now typically considered *naive and completely out of date*. They do no longer serve as the means of defining what should be confessed, even if they are retained for liturgical purposes. The whole idea of confession, in consequence, has shifted from truth with an *external and objective* referent to intuition which is *internal and subjective*.¹¹ (italics mine)

We only note here as an unfortunate example that the theological approach to foundational principles used in, and the language of the Hungarian introduction to, the Second Helvetic Confession are coloured by the liberal mindset.

⁹ J. I. Packer, *God Speaks to Man: Revelation and the Bible* (The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1965), pp. 18-19.

¹⁰ Allan Harman, *The Place and Significance of the Reformed Confessions Today* (Banner of Truth Magazine, January, 1973), pp. 29-30.

¹¹ David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology* (W. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1992), p. 118.

We emphasize as the *fourth* distinguishing characteristic, the trap of terminology, i.e. that cunning use of words with which well-meaning Christians are misled. Liberalism, in a similar way to the sects, makes use of a storehouse of devices in which is found linguistic diversion. Just as a Jehovah's Witness can look us in the eye and say that he believes that Jesus is the Son of God (but by this he understands that Jesus is a created being who has a beginning and is not of the same substance of and equal with the Father, but a created archangel, etc.), similarly, liberal theology can also speak about Jesus Christ (the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith), but this Jesus is not the Jesus of the Bible. This deceptive language has become obvious in the case of a good number of liberal theologians. Dr. Bernard Ramm has also pointed out that, for example, Paul Tillich in the process of radically redefining theological language, has caused complete confusion.¹² We need to keep in mind, therefore, that liberal theologians certainly speak about the Word, revelation, redemption, and the resurrection, but with them these theological concepts possess a completely different meaning and content. If we are not aware of this, a casual acceptance of their sermons and lectures will continue unchallenged. For the reality is that such lectures speak of something entirely different from what we think.

Liberalism's *fifth* distinguishing characteristic is related to its spread. This always percolates from the top downwards into the church. Liberalism appears under the label of scholarship so that first of all, the theological institutions submit to it. This is then followed by the clergy and later by the entire church. Harold Lindsell states his view on this as follows:

In almost every case, unorthodoxy has its beginnings in the *theological seminaries*. They are the fountainhead of the churches. *As the seminaries go, so go the churches*. Almost inevitably, graduates of a theological institution reflect the viewpoints of their teachers. More than that, they usually go beyond their teachers, and carry their

¹² Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Bethany House Publishers, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1985), p. 18.

aberrant viewpoints to the farthest extreme. Once the theological seminaries go liberal, it does not take long for the denominations they represent to follow them.¹³
(italics mine)

The spread of the later theological literature also reflects this. It is worth giving some attention to such literature on offer from official ecclesiastical publishers, since the dominant viewpoint with regard to the church can be deduced from this.

With regard to the *sixth* characteristic, we see that liberalism and ecumenism go hand in hand. If the Word does not possess absolute authority, then perhaps other denominations are also right. The *World Missionary Conference* set up in Edinburgh in 1910, already proved to be a bad sign in this direction. For the emphasis there was already upon *unity*, and not biblical *teaching*. If however, we sail forward under the flag of religious pluralism, the Roman Catholic–Lutheran “*Joint Declaration*,” signed on October 31, 1999, should not surprize anyone. If ecumenism is the goal, then what is the purpose of mission? Rather, let us continue with *dialogue*. In other words, as they (the liberals) word it, “Let us waken up, and discover in other religion(s) the hidden and sleeping Christ.” By this they call into question the entire *raison d’être* of Christian mission resting on Biblical foundations.

Let us now examine two factors which promote the spread of liberalism:

We would name as the *first* factor, indifference towards systematic theology (dogmatics). The Presbyterian theologian, Gordon H. Clark, writes concerning this phenomenon as follows: “Theology, once acclaimed ‘*the Queen of the Sciences*,’ today hardly rises to the rank of a scullery maid; it is often held in contempt, regarded with suspicion, or just ignored.”¹⁴ Earnest Christians are saying: “No one is interested in doctrine. Doctrines only divide, there is no need for confessions, only Christ.” Of course, for us there is mystery surrounding the question of who

¹³ Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1976), p. 197.

¹⁴ Gordon H. Clark, *In Defense of Theology* (Mott Media, 1984), p. 3.

this Christ is, what he is like and what he teaches. Unfortunately, there are those who would like to separate the person of Christ from his teachings. Christianity without doctrine, however, is not Christianity at all. Perhaps today's Christians are marked most of all by spiritual infancy and lack of knowledge. That is why it is easy to mislead them, and so frequently they fall into the trap of following persuasive leaders. It is also because of this that they are not fit for the task of filtering out false teaching, or recognizing gradual theological diversion and liberalism. Ultimately, this is why they are incapable of bringing about reformation. They simply do not see the significance of these things.

Secondly, the passive attitude and wait-and-see policy of small evangelical groups within the liberal churches almost promotes the progress of liberalism. This is also betrayed by the inactivity of a quiet pietism and subjective Christianity. Thus liberalism is permitted to spread practically unchallenged in any way. This phenomenon, as we shall see, was most conspicuous in the case of American Presbyterianism.

Let us put forward the question: What is a liberal church like? If we examine such a church we would find that the characteristics and factors discussed above will *always* be present, but for now we consider it beneficial to give attention to a few other points:

1. The church saturated by liberalism slowly becomes a *social institution* oriented to serving. Social work is the determining factor and the general make-up of the church in society, not the fulfillment of a mandate received from Christ. It becomes important to be identified in every dignified secular program. The salient questions for such a church are as follows: What do they think of us? To what degree are we present in society?¹⁵ Thus the goal, through more and more statistical indicators, is to maintain relevance in society. But how many believers could God count in such a church?

¹⁵ See for example, the recent Hungarian census where the material level of interest with respect to state subsidies is by no means negligible.

2. Such a church, being tuned in to the humanistic spirit of the age, specializes in emphasizing *unity and tolerance*. It “fittingly” backs this up with selected portions of Scripture. We, however, would remind the dear reader of the testimony of Luther as he spoke to those who, on the basis of love towards one’s neighbor, wanted to dissuade him from representing Biblical teaching: “Cursed be that love and unity for whose sake the Word of God must be put at stake.”¹⁶ Such a church has long since given up on the exclusiveness of the gospel of Christ.

3. From these latter two observations it follows that in such a church there is no, nor can there be, a place for *church discipline*. The building blocks of the social-nominal church typify the one we are describing, one which cannot submit to the distinguishing characteristics of the true church.

4. Finally, as a Reformed theologian from Holland put it, “In place of *exegesis popularis*, it is rather, *exegesis scholastica* which characterizes preaching in the church.” Instead of the clear, simple preaching and exposition of the gospel, often lofty, scholarly sermons are delivered. The meek listener ponders over these to discover what they are, whether philosophical meditation, or a literary or historical lecture. At such a time, of course, the flock goes home hungry. (C. H. Spurgeon, the great Calvinistic Baptist preacher, condemned this particular brand of preaching thus: “Our task is not to entertain goats, but to feed sheep.”) Let no one misunderstand! The preacher should be a learned person, but we do not want the kind of scholarship which results in the dishonor of God’s Word and leaves the flock without nourishment. Such preaching which is neither Christ-centered nor personal, has no application, and does not call sin by its proper name. Nor does it address the need for repentance or build upon the whole counsel of God’s Word (Acts 20:27).

“Just what is being sketched out here?” the reader may ask. “What is happening in such a church?” Well, it is just what Calvin drafted up in clear details a few hundred years ago. He wrote the following in connection with the false church:

¹⁶ David Hedegard, *Ecumenism and the Bible*, p. 22.

But, as soon as falsehood breaks into the citadel of religion and the sum of necessary doctrine is overturned and the use of the sacraments is destroyed, *surely the death of the church follows*—just as a man’s life is ended when his throat is pierced or his heart mortally wounded.¹⁷ (italics mine)

Although it is rather gruesome to read such comparisons, it is not by chance that Calvin chose these. He wanted to point out that Christians in every age should actively confront those who are cutting the throat of, and inflicting a deadly wound upon, the church. Such people bring about the death of the church, i.e. *the death of the Biblical church*. Liberalism, dear reader, in a similar way to the false church, has done just that. Of course, in the meantime the liberal church as a social institution lives on and is “blossoming.” But let us hear more from the great Reformer:

If the *foundation* of the church is the teaching of the prophets and apostles, which bids believers entrust their salvation to Christ alone—then *take away that teaching*, and how will the building continue to stand? Therefore, the church must tumble down when that sum of religion *dies* which alone can sustain it. Again, if the true church is the pillar and foundation of truth (1Tim. 3:15), it is certain that no church can exist where lying and falsehood have gained sway.¹⁸ (italics mine)

It is important to understand that liberalism perilously affects the essence of Biblical Christianity. Liberalism proclaims another Word, another Christ and another gospel (2 Cor. 11:3-4), and not the eternal gospel (Rev. 14:6). Thus, liberalism is not some insignificant form of methodological exchange of views, but is something completely different. It is concerned with what autonomous *man* thinks about the doctrinal system of the Bible, God, man, revelation, Christ, salvation, the Church, etc. Biblical

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1960), Vol. II., p. 1041.

¹⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, pp. 1041-1042.

Christianity, on the other hand, is concerned with—and stands for—what *God* has revealed about these things. Man’s thinking changes, but what God has revealed is eternal. In this regard, these points are at one with the chapters of this book.

Finally, one more quotation which is also relevant in regard to its timeliness:

For if they are churches, the power of the keys is in their hands; but the keys have an indissoluble bond with the *Word*, which has been *destroyed* from among them... Finally, instead of the ministry of the Word, they have *schools of ungodliness* and a sink of all kinds of errors.¹⁹
(italics mine)

Liberalism has successfully driven out the Word from the church in spite of its continual boasting to be a theology of the Word. The “theology of the Word” rejects the truth that God’s Word, in the objective sense, is the Holy Scriptures. This is one of the roots of the problem, and that is why there is no church discipline. That is why relativism is reigning at every level, and the citadels of liberalism are precisely those theological institutions which Calvin very fittingly describes. Let us not be surprised then at what Christ on one occasion said: “However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:8)

As a final thought, let us not forget that while God will later judge individuals *in eternity*, here and now he is judging churches. The Scottish theologian, Maurice Roberts says in this regard, when referring to the letters to the churches in the Book of Revelation: “If these epistles early in the Book of Revelation teach anything, they surely teach us that Jesus Christ *does not dwell* for very long in churches where sin is left undealt with.”²⁰ (italics mine) For Christians in every era “[it is their] constant and continual duty to keep pure the church of God. It is a perpetual

¹⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, p. 1051.

²⁰ Maurice Roberts, *The Christian’s High Calling* (The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 2000), p. 197.

problem, and no church can afford to be indifferent to it, if it is to expect God's blessing."²¹ In a similar vein, the late professor of Westminster Seminary, R. B. Kuiper, declares:

The church that has grown indifferent to the truth is, to put it mildly, *on its way out*. And a church that knowingly tolerates in its midst denial of the basic truths of the Word of God is itself *guilty* of such denial and by that very token has *ceased being a true church*.²² (italics mine)

Let us understand that it is primarily the church of every age—and not society—that will be divinely assessed and judged in the light of the cross of Christ. This assessment however, is taking place now and not in eternity.

The Battle of American Christianity against Liberalism and Modernism. Machen's Role. Lessons. New Faithful Presbyterian Churches.

In our short historical survey we will just be touching upon some of the more important stages and incidents. In any event, we consider it necessary to mention these in order to better appreciate that world and church background in which J. Gresham Machen lived and labored.

The Presbyterian Church for almost two centuries was a faithful steward of the gifts entrusted to it. In 1729 the synod of this Presbyterian Church received the Westminster Confession of Faith as the subordinate standard by which its practice in matters of faith was to be regulated (this was the so-called *Adopting Act*). By adopting this confession, the ministers of the church were bound to an acceptance of its teaching. The end of the 19th century, however, brought gradual but assertive changes.

²¹ Roberts, *The Christian's High Calling*, p. 201.

²² R. B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ* (The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1987), p. 108.

Liberalism akin to that in Europe arrived to the American continent also.

The sliding away of a church from a confessional to a liberal standing is the result of a long process of erosion. We can see this very clearly in the case of the Presbyterian Church. Let us look at how it happened. As a consequence of his liberal views, the synod of the Presbyterian Church in 1893 suspended Dr. Charles A. Briggs, a professor at Union Theological Seminary, from the gospel ministry.²³ Briggs rejected the inerrancy of Scripture and, among other things, believed that in questions of faith the Bible is not the final and only authority. He taught that human reason possesses the same authority as the Scriptures. Briggs imbibed these new doctrines while studying in Germany. He confidently proclaimed:

The Presbyterian Church as a church tolerates *contra-confessional doctrines*... in large numbers of its teachers and pastors... The Westminster System has been virtually *displaced* by the teaching of the dogmatic divines. It is no longer practically the standard of faith of the Presbyterian Church. The *Catechisms are not taught* in our churches, the *Confession is not expounded* in our theological seminaries... There have been *so many departures* from the Standards in all directions, that it is necessary for all parties in the Presbyterian Church to be generous, *tolerant*, and *broad-minded*.²⁴
(italics mine)

In response to the decision of synod, Union Theological Seminary withdrew and suspended itself from the jurisdiction of the Presbyterian Church. By this means Briggs could retain his professorship and continue to sow the seeds of heresy. Another interesting development was that the Presbyterian Church continued to accept and ordain Union's graduates, so that Briggs

²³ Edwin H. Rian, *The Presbyterian Conflict* (The Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, 1992), p. 9.

²⁴ George P. Hutchinson, *The History Behind the Reformed Presbyterian Church Evangelical Synod* (Mack Publishing Company, Cherry Hill, N. J., 1974), p. 152.

in an indirect way poisoned the church with the teachings of liberalism. (Aside from these events, it is a thought-provoking concept as to what would become of those churches in which questions of discipline and doctrine are not addressed as part of the theological training!)

The seriousness of the situation is illustrated to an even greater extent by the Princeton theological professor, Benjamin B. Warfield (1851-1921) who, in a closing conversation with Machen, compared the church to *rotten, decayed wood*²⁵ which falls and crumbles to pieces where it attempts to imitate the Reformation. Warfield's words have proved to be prophetic. Machen, later writing in a letter to his mother, said that Warfield at that time had hoped that believers would see the dead condition of the church and its cold spirituality and would recognize that a full Christian life could only be lived/worth living outside the then-existing church, in a new Reformed church. The words of our Lord come to mind:

No one tears a patch from a new garment and sews it on an old one. If he does, he will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. (Luke 5:36-38)

The first assault from the liberal camp came in May, 1922. The famous sermon of Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick (a Baptist pastor) titled: "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" circulated the country and was part of an intentional propaganda campaign. The point worthy of note is that Fosdick was a Baptist who was a minister in a Presbyterian church (by this time the liberal way of thinking had already made room for such an anomaly). A gradual response and long and uncertain disciplinary procedures ensued. Finally, after fairly long delays, Fosdick was dismissed from his Presbyterian congregation. In his declarations

²⁵ Ned. B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham. Machen: A Biographical Memoir* (William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1954), p. 310.

his liberal convictions were laid open to all. For example, he said this about the Scriptures: “We know that every concept in the Bible has a *primitive* and *simplistic* origin.”²⁶ Elsewhere, in connection with Christ, he urged the conservative camp to “give up your *theological* Christ and give us back our *ethical* mentor.” So much for the convictions of Fosdick.

The Fosdick affair, on the other hand, proved to be only the tip of the iceberg. The publication of the so-called *Auburn Affirmation* (January 9, 1924) was the event which truly shocked Presbyterian believers. The message of the document is worth calling attention to, since a plain reading of it demonstrates both doctrinal confusion and an emphasis on the acceptance of those with differing theological world-views. The declaration was signed by 1,293 ministers of the Presbyterian Church. This is an ornate document of dogmatic slothfulness because those who signed the declaration attacked the teaching of their church in five areas. The debate broke out around questions of the *inspiration* and *inerrancy* of the Bible, the *virgin birth* of Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ’s *propitiation* and sacrificial work of *reconciling* us to God, Christ’s *bodily resurrection* and *ascension*, and *supernatural miracles*. The outcome was a draft declaring that it was not necessary to confess these teachings in order to be an entirely lawful minister of the Presbyterian Church. Now, what does the dear reader think? That some among those who signed the draft were disciplined? *No, not one!* Indeed, the 1924 synod did not even bother to deal with the affair!²⁷ (It is worth noting that in the liberal church there is no doctrinal disciplining! At most it is confessional Christians who are “disciplined!”)

²⁶ Jenő Sebestyén also mentions this in his course on Apologetics (*Korszellem és Kálvinizmus* [The Spirit of the Age and Calvinism], A Budapesti Református Teológia Segélyegylete [The Benevolent Society of the Budapest Reformed Theology], Budapest, 1938, pp. 52-53.)

²⁷ If we take only a glance at the Hungarian Protestant literature, an abundance of material stands at our disposal for compiling a Hungarian version of the *Auburn Affirmation*. The above views have long since been popularized without any hint of disciplinary procedure.

In another regard it is illuminating to know that prior to, and during these events, the Presbyterian Church in a succession of declarations repeated in refrain-like manner, her faithfulness and commitment to the historic confessions (in their case, the Westminster Confession and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms). Such were for example, the 1910, 1916 and 1923 declarations of Synod. Of course, by this time it was mere formality. The only thing these declarations were good for was to pacify the consciences of believers.²⁸

The next station for the propagation of the new ideas of liberalism was the “*reorganization*” of Princeton Seminary. Up to this time Princeton had been on record as the main stronghold of conservative Presbyterianism. But this “reorganization” was, unfortunately, nothing other than the transition from the confessional to the liberal outlook. The reference point in the history of this institute is the year 1929, since this year marks the milestone between the old conservative and the new liberal Princeton. This is how today’s church historians and theologians still refer to it.²⁹

²⁸ Perhaps these phenomena are well known to the reader, for in the Hungarian context, this can also be seen. On the one hand, great emphasis is placed upon the importance of holding to the confessions; on the other, upon spreading the most liberal teachings. In the same breath reference is made to the confessional church and to the state/nominal church. This interesting duality is a typical characteristic of liberalism. In the liberal dialectical theology these opposing viewpoints can be reconciled. The Psalmist says in relation to such an idea: “They speak idly everyone with his neighbor; with flattering lips and a double heart they speak.” (Psalm 12:2)

²⁹ For anyone who would like to know more about the “reorganization” of Princeton as well as the personal and theological tensions which ensued there, we recommend the following: David B. Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary: The Majestic Testimony 1869-1929*, Vol. 2 (The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1996). The battle surrounding the “reorganization” did not only occur between the conservative and liberal camps but, unfortunately, between various strains of conservative groups also. For example, Machen’s greatest opponent was Charles Erdman who, although belonging to the Confessionalists, still did not agree with that Reformational way of thinking represented by Machen. According to Erdman, a much more moderate and tolerant attitude should have been expressed towards the liberals. In Machen’s judgement, however, this meant nothing less than giving

What was about to take place would have been unimaginable only a few years earlier. In the academic year 1938-39 for example, Emil Brunner was appointed to the chair of dogmatic theology at Princeton. It is difficult to imagine, after the famous Hodge family (Charles Hodge, A. A. Hodge, Casper Wistar Hodge) and Benjamin B. Warfield, that now Brunner had become the leading theologian of Princeton. This is the same Brunner who cast out the inerrancy of the Bible and the virgin birth. He taught, for example, concerning the Bible that it can *become* the Word of God, but only in a very limited sense. For this he used the illustration of a phonograph record. If, for example, a recording of Caruso³⁰ is played back, he said, then the wonderful Caruso voice flows out of the loudspeaker, but in addition to this, the crackling of the phonograph needle and other foreign noises can also be heard. These *cracklings* and *foreign noises* are the contradictions of the Bible and human errors.³¹ One dreads to think what will happen if this record gets a little old—such as the Bible is! What will be the quality of the play-back? How much of Caruso's voice will be heard? Likewise with regard to the message of God's Word. It is regrettable that believers who remained in the Presbyterian Church were not able to prevent his appointment.

Professors unwilling to compromise left the Princeton institute. Who were they? Four very famous professors were: Dr. Robert Dick Wilson, Dr. J. Gresham Machen, Dr. Oswald T. Allis and Dr. Cornelius Van Til. Twenty-nine students from the upper grades followed them.

The reorganization of Princeton (1929) made necessary the establishment of Westminster Theological Seminary. The four professors who had left Princeton were joined by R. B. Kuiper (a former student of Warfield), Allan A. MacRae, Ned B.

up the most important doctrines. I have found D. G. Hart's study: *J. Gresham Machen, the OPC and the Problem of Christian Controversy* also a very helpful presentation of the situation.

³⁰ Enrico Caruso was a world-famous Italian tenor.

³¹ Emil Brunner, *Our Faith* (Charles Scribner Publishing, London, 1936), p. 10.

Stonehouse and Paul Wooley. The latter three had studied in the old Princeton. They formed the teaching department of the new theological institute. One year later John Murray arrived. He, also, had taught at Princeton. Westminster Seminary, as an institution, was independent of the church. The Presbyterian Church certainly tried to put pressure on this institute by not accepting its graduates, but ultimately it could not successfully exclude them.³²

Liberalism and modernism gradually penetrated the ranks of the Board of Foreign Missions also. Consequently, a new concept of missions was born. The church's missions committee also published a book dealing with relevant questions. Its title was *Re-thinking Missions*. It was particularly scandalous in the way it sketched Christian missions along with the new ideology. It urged that Christians must unite with the representatives of other religions (Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims) so that they can more effectively fight against materialism and immorality. Common points of contact and common truths must be found upon which to build. At this time more and more liberals appeared among the leaders of the Board of Foreign Missions. There were also missionaries operating under the direction of the Board who did not believe in the doctrine of original sin. Some from the conservative camp gave vent to their indignation because of these developments. Three names are worth emphasizing: Robert Dick Wilson, J. Gresham Machen and Carl McIntire. In their writings they criticized the contemptible condition and liberal outlook of the Board of Foreign Missions and urged immediate changes. The most thorough analysis came from none other than Dr. Machen who, in a 110-page treatise,³³ commented on the situation. He once again set out his viewpoint in the course of an open debate with Dr. Robert E. Speer who was the leading light of the Board of Foreign Missions. Speer, however, did not answer Machen's questions. Instead, he read out

³² The majority of Presbyterian theological seminaries—to this very day—have remained institutions independent of the church.

³³ The title of this document is: *Modernism and the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.*

a viewpoint from an already prepared manuscript. The meeting came to an end without any concrete conclusion. The only option left was separation, and so in 1933, the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions was founded. This new mission board wanted to return in its entirety to the old biblical, confessional principles.

Meanwhile, legal proceedings were conducted against Machen. On March 29, 1935, he was found guilty. Throughout the proceedings the church court did not give him an opportunity to defend himself. He lodged an appeal which was rejected.³⁴ The church press and the religious columns of secular newspapers expressed indignation at the resolution passed against Machen. Even the Unitarians understood the removal of Machen as a dramatic turn of events and a regrettable tragedy. It is important to note here, however, that at this time those in the position of moderatorship in the church courts were, in the majority, liberals, and among these moderators were some who had signed the Auburn Declaration. Machen at that time had sternly criticized the declaration, saying that it was none other than a recent revelation of destructive modernism which is the deathly enemy of Christianity.³⁵

Of course, in many ways the option of inner reformation was broached since a significant part of the church membership was comprised of converted confessional Christians. Among the leaders of this camp Dr. Clarence E. Macartney, Dr. Walter D. Buchanan and Dr. Samuel G. Craig are worth mentioning. (It is a sad fact that these men, to a certain degree, were supporters of Machen but later backed down.) A question was put forth to them: "What are these advocates of 'reform from within' doing to alter the *serious doctrinal defections* in the church and to return it to the control of those who believe that the Bible is the Word of

³⁴ Margaret E. Harden ed. *A Brief History of the Bible Presbyterian Church and Its Agencies*, pp. 33-34.

³⁵ Chalmers W. Alexander, *Shall we Unite with the Northern Presbyterian Church?* (The Southern Presbyterian Journal Company, Weaverville, North Carolina, 1954), p. 19.

God?”³⁶ (italics mine) Unfortunately, this camp was defeated in every battle. According to Edwin H. Rian there are three reasons for this: 1. Those in favor of reforming from within were not in possession of a comprehensive plan with regard to the reformation of the church; 2. Church history shows that there is no hope for inner reform if the organization of the church and its leading bodies have come under the influence or supervision of liberals; 3. There was not a single confessing seminary within the church which could have been depended upon for support.³⁷ Instead, they employed professors who denied the very essentials of the Christian faith. (By the way, all three of these marks in regard to liberalism are true of Hungary and the Hungarian Reformed Church.)

What was the motto of those espousing *inner reform*? “Avoid premature conflicts.”³⁸ Of course, it was always too premature! 1926, 1929, 1934, 1936 and even 1965 still proved to be a premature time. In this latter year a new confession gained acceptance. During this time the conservative powers were rapidly crumbling to pieces and becoming even more isolated. The liberal camp, however, was firmly entrenched and strong.

One final station to which we must turn is the so-called *1967 Confession*, which was accepted in Columbus, Ohio. The Presbyterian Church (its name at this time was already changed to the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.) for practical purposes substituted the Westminster Confession for an acceptance of this new confession. The new confession—to mention but a few of its deficiencies—reduces the Bible to a human work containing errors, and makes Jesus Christ appear as

³⁶ Edwin H. Rian, *The Presbyterian Conflict* (The Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, 1992), p. 182.

³⁷ Rian, *The Presbyterian Conflict*, pp. 189, 193.

³⁸ Through today’s evangelical groupings, certain accepted principles proffer a similar goal: “While it is possible to preach the gospel in the church, there is no reason for anxiety!” or “Let the unbelievers get out of the church! We as believers are staying in—whatever happens!” This mentality is especially true for Hungary. That is why no one espousing Reformed convictions left the Hungarian Reformed Church in the last 450 years.

a social reformer and moral ideal. The conservative ministers, who were an insignificant minority, could not prevent an acceptance of the new confession. Their representative, William T. Strong, did everything to achieve this. In his remarks he criticized the work of the committee assigned the task of drafting the confession, and requested a rejection of the confession draft. But the vote determined everything. By this time only one more option remained. The popular Christianity Today magazine commented as follows: “The only recourse left to conservatives at this assembly was *to register a protest*, which Strong did and to which the assembly replied.”³⁹ (italics mine) Of course, this protest could not stop the process of compiling the new confession. The Auburn Declaration—among other things—had by this time already caused irreparable damage.

What are the lessons to be learned? Neither in the theological seminaries, church bodies, nor in the mission societies did inner reform make any progress. We can put forward the question: “Why?” Gary North tersely diagnoses the problem in his more than one thousand-page analysis. Let us hear his answer to this question:

The liberals had a *systematic, comprehensive, consistent* strategy. The conservatives did not. The liberals had tactics that were integrated into their strategies. The conservatives did not. The liberals had the advantage of being part of a self-confident Progressive movement that saw itself as the wave of the future. The conservatives did not... *You can't beat something with nothing*. Strategically, the conservatives had nothing. The liberals had a great deal. Most of all, they had the climate of respectable intellectual opinion on their side. They were historicists in an era of historicism. They were social reform Darwinists in an era of social reform Darwinism (post-1890). They were dogmatically anti-dogmatic, in an era of dogmatic anti-dogmaticism. They were for ecclesiastical pluralism in an age of political pluralism. Their spiritual accomplices outside the Church controlled the major institutions of higher learning, and

³⁹ “Presbyterian Discoveries in Columbus”, *Christianity Today*, Vol. IX., Num. 19., June, 1965.

the Presbyterian Church required its ministerial candidates to graduate from these institutions. Above all, they were men who had rejected the doctrine of hell in a culture increasingly dominated by an educated elite that had rejected the doctrine of hell.⁴⁰ (*italics mine*)

In large measure, the irresoluteness of the *indifferent* camp as well as the “ecclesiastical pacifists” in the church, contributed to all these liberal strategies. It is sad that in both these camps there were also quite a number of Christians. These were Christians who did not perceive the danger or, who even though they knew about it, did not want to stand up for the truth. These were Christians who were not interested in those weighty questions which they should have confronted. They were Christians who, above all else, forsook everything on the altar of peace, including the truths of God’s Word.

J. Gresham Machen did not live to see it, but after his death a number of new confessional churches were formed. We would not want to weary the reader with a long list, and so we would just mention three of these new churches. These are: the *Bible Presbyterian Church*, the *Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (OPC) and later, the *Presbyterian Church in America* (PCA).

A. General Survey of the Hungarian Setting

The Hungarian reader may with all justice ask: “What is all this to us? What concern do we have with the battle of American Christianity and liberalism? Let everyone get on with sorting out his own problems!” All right then, let us do precisely that since Hungarian and neo-Protestantism are also suffering from liberalism. Hungarian Protestantism for now well over one and half centuries has been under the influence of liberal German theology. It is for this reason Sándor Makkai lamented in 1916: “There will be no Hungarian theology *until we cease reciting the*

⁴⁰ Gary North, *Crossed Fingers—How the Liberals Captured the Presbyterian Church* (Institute for Christian Economics, Tyler, Texas, 1966), pp. 798-799.

German theology.”⁴¹ (italics mine) Indeed, the influence and fruits of German liberal theology became all the more obvious. A list could be drawn up of those theologians who were preachers of these viewpoints. There are also many present-day preachers who could be added to that list. Certainly, anyone who takes only a cursory look at the changing events of theology and church history, very quickly becomes aware of the startling similarity between the American and Hungarian situation. “There is nothing new under the sun,” says the Preacher in Ecclesiastes, and it is no different in our case.

Machen’s book, which was published in 1923, brought about a kind of second Reformation in America. This book is still very timely for us here in Hungary, since we were left out of that Reformation. Hungary was left out of that second wave of reform initiated by the Machen camp eighty years ago. The time has long since been ripe for it.

What is the Hungarian situation like? We just offer a little sample of what really happened. We will clarify some of the relevant aspects and show some of the scenarios and similarities with the American scene. The task of evaluating rests with the reader, for whom this is also a responsibility. If you read this book, try to form your own opinion. Proceed with open eyes and an open Bible, since the two are inseparable. Walk with open eyes and an open Bible into the Hungarian churches and seminaries and see what is going on.

What happened in Hungary and Transylvania? The same thing. Liberalism and modernism penetrated and then became the accepted views. It was present early on in the Hungarian theological seminaries. In the first wave the doctrines of Revelation and the Word were affected in just the same way as has been previously mentioned. Later, however, it demolished the entire theological system. Let us look, for example, at the homiletical course of Lajos Gönczy. He taught practical theology in Kolozsvár (Cluj) from 1924. Already at that time he wrote this:

⁴¹ Károly Fekete, *Ötven éve halt meg Makkai Sándor [Sándor Makkai Died Fifty Years Ago]*, Református Egyház [Reformed Church], Vol. LIII, No. 9, 2001.

“The very first thing which must not be forgotten in relation to a text is that the Scripture and the Word are not *adequate* concepts. The Word is *more*, something *other* than Scripture. Scripture *just points towards* the Word. Consequently, every text can be treated as a *simile*”⁴² (italics mine). What kind of a sermon is it which considers a text to be a simile? Gönczy continues: “The Word is not locked into the Scripture in such a way *that, anyone taking the Scripture into his hand receives the Word of that Scripture also*. The Word is more, other than, greater than Scripture. The speech of Scripture is always fragmentary, stammering speech.”⁴³ (italics mine)

Although the liberal viewpoints were already present by the turn of the 20th century and thereafter increased in strength, the ultimate thrust in their spread was brought about by the visits of Emil Brunner and Karl Barth and the growing respect for the viewpoints of their “disciples.” Emil Brunner came to Hungary in 1935. Later Barth followed him. In January 1936, Barth was elected as “*honoris causa*” professor of theology at Kolozsvár. He himself came on a tour to Hungary and Transylvania (today’s Western Romania) in autumn of 1936, and in the spring of 1937, visited Hungary once again. During his visits he was in Debrecen, Sárospatak and Kolozsvár.⁴⁴ From these visits a number of papers and studies have been published. But who was this Karl Barth? What kind of viewpoints did he confess? Let’s just see what Barth says in connection with the Word and the Bible?

If God *has not been ashamed* to speak through the Scriptures with *its fallible human words, with its historical and scientific blunders, its theological contradictions, with the uncertainty of its transmission* and above all with its Jewish character, but rather accepted it in all its fallibility to make it serve Him, we

⁴² Lajos Gönczy, “Homiletika” [Homiletics], (Typed Manuscript Lecture Notes, delivered in Cluj, 1924), p. 64.

⁴³ Lajos Gönczy, “Homiletika”, p. 65.

⁴⁴ There are HRC seminaries in all these places.

ought not to be ashamed of it when with all its fallibility it wants anew to be to us a witness; it would be *self-will and disobedience* to wish to seek in the Bible for infallible elements.⁴⁵ (italics mine)

A brief critique of Barth was translated into the Hungarian language and summarized thus:

Is the Word of God the Bible for Karl Barth? First of all we must answer this question with a plain “no”. According to him the Word of God is not separated from God... The Bible, according to Barth is a *human work*. Historically, it is like every other book which appears on the market, entirely *conditional*... Revelation and Scripture according to him are *two different things*.⁴⁶

Furthermore, “since Scripture according to Barth is not in a direct way but *indirect* way the Word of God... we are not at all assured that when we read the Word of God we are in reality hearing the Word of God and not something entirely different.”⁴⁷ (italics mine)

In spite of this, Barth’s effect and influence has been the determinative factor in Hungarian theology to this very day. In his prize-winning thesis at Debrecen seminary, Balázs Sándor says this about him: “We are glad to say of him that *since Calvin, he is the greatest mentor of Reformed theology*.”⁴⁸ Indeed, “that is why it was necessary—not just for our people—that Karl Barth could visit our country and assess the state of

⁴⁵ Edward J. Young, *Thy Word Is Truth* (The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1991), p. 227.

⁴⁶ Heinrich Jochums, *A nagy csalódás* [*The Great Delusion*] (Primó Kiadó, Budapest, 1986), p. 30.

⁴⁷ Heinrich Jochums, *A nagy csalódás*, p. 31.

⁴⁸ Balázs Sándor, *Barth Károly és a Magyarországi Református Egyház* [*Karl Barth and the Hungarian Reformed Church*], (Debreceni Református Kollégium Sokszorosító Irodája [The Duplicating Office of the Debrecen Reformed Theological Seminary], Debrecen, 1993), p. 7.

affairs in our church and that this problem solver, in a *more authentic way* could *provide direction* to our leaders.”⁴⁹ (italics mine) Amidst this problem solving, these leaders unfortunately did not make use of the best compass. If the Bible did not serve as a compass, no other solution remained—they turned to men.

Lajos Imre, a theological professor at Kolozsvár, appraised Barth’s visit as follows:

It is clear that this is not dialectic theology but a message which God has given to the Reformed churches and to the entire world *through* Barth.... Paul writes to the Galatians that they receive him as an angel of God, like Jesus Christ and with joy. If he wrote this about himself, we can also say that *God’s true messenger has walked among us in the person of Barth*; we ask God that He will make his sojourn here *fruitful* for our church.”⁵⁰ (italics mine)

“God’s messenger?” we might well ask. By all means, Lajos Imre should have examined this claim on the basis of Galatians 1:6-12. With regard to the fruits of Barth’s theology, these have already become ripe.

We have read in one very thorough work how it came that slowly, but surely, the working team (so-called *Coetus Theologorum*)⁵¹ of theological professors under the leadership of Béla Vasady, “revealed entirely the effect of Barthian theology and the trend it represented.”⁵² Zoltán Gálfy, analyzing the theological situation of the Hungarian Reformed Church of

⁴⁹ Balázs Sándor, *Barth Károly és a Magyarországi Református Egyház*, p. 9.

⁵⁰ Lajos Imre, *Barth professzor látogatása [Professor Barth’s Visit]*, *Az Út [The Way]*, 1936, pp. 260-261.

⁵¹ The so-called “*Coetus Theologorum*” was composed of professors from all the theological seminaries of the HRC (Budapest, Debrecen, Sárospatak, Pápa and Kolozsvár). Each seminary represented Barth’s viewpoint.

⁵² Zoltán Gál, *A “dialektikai teológia” hatása [“The Effect of the Dialectic Theology”]*, *A Magyar Protestantizmus [Hungarian Protestantism] 1918-1948* (Kossuth Könyvkiadó [Kossuth Book Publishers], 1987), p. 347.

Transylvania before the Second World War, reasons: “The task of Transylvanian theological thought has achieved its purpose in these years in that the teaching of *Barth and Calvin alluding to one another, complementing one another and enlightening one another have become a unified Reformed doctrine.*”⁵³ (italics mine) Therefore, everyone appears to be a great cultivator of the “Theology of the Word”. The concern is justified: “Was this trend an epigone of Barth? Far from it! As László Ravasz said: The direction is the same but the footprints are different.”⁵⁴ (italics mine) This is a revelation of their own “confession”. Whoever has ears, let him hear. Since this time the churches have come a long way in following this trend—a long way from the Bible and Christ.

Jeno Sebestyén, who was a professor at Budapest, was the only theologian who wrote articles against Barth saying that we have nothing to learn from him. Sebestyén spoke of Barth as someone who misrepresented himself as a Reformed theologian. As a representative of Historical Calvinism he writes this in an address entitled “Is Karl Barth Reformed?”:

Since from the beginning we have preached that *we do not believe in the German theology which, long ago betrayed the spirit of Reformed theology*, naturally, from the beginning we were distrustful of every kind of future theological trend emanating from Germany, thus mistrustful of Barth too... If we want to learn *Reformed* theology from foreigners then *we will not go to the school of Barth.*⁵⁵ (italics mine)

⁵³ Zoltán Gálfy, *100 éves a Kolozsvári Református Teológia* [100 Years of Reformed Church Theology at Kolozsvár Seminary], *Erdélyi Református Naptár* [The Almanac of the Transylvanian Reformed Church] 1995, (Erdélyi Református Egyházkerület [The Reformed Church District of Transylvania], 1994), p. 122.

⁵⁴ Zoltán Gálfy, *100 éves a Kolozsvári Református Teológia*, p.122.

⁵⁵ Tibor Bartha ed., *Studia et Acta Ecclesiastica*, Vol. 5 (A MRE Zsinati Irodájának Sajtóosztálya [The Press Division of the Synodical Office of the HRC], Budapest, 1983), p. 366.

What a pity that so few Hungarian theologians thought like this. Jenő Sebestyén also said something else in the columns of *Hungarian Calvinism* in 1936:

Theological thought in the life of the Hungarian Reformed Church (indeed even more so in Lutheran church life) has long since, in *exceeding great measure*, stood under the effect of German Protestant theology... From this it follows that before Barth ever came, among the bishops and professors of the Hungarian Reformed Church, there were for the predominant part believers of the non-Reformed trends, whether Ritschlians, or believers of the school of Historical Religion, or religious psychologists, or modernists or some other German Protestant theological trend or school. *However, they were not willing to stand upon a determinative confessional Reformed theological foundation because they did not consider it sufficiently scholarly.* Then Barth came and his arrival carried great appeal to souls raised up on German Protestant theology so that he enticed into his own camp those who at this time were, for the most part, modern theologians, believers of the school of Historical Religion, religious psychologists, Ritschlians, Schleiermacherians, etc. and gave them the *illusion* that at one and *the same time* they could be Reformed theologians and theologians operating on a scholarly basis.⁵⁶ (italics mine)

In 1938 the Theological Department of Debrecen University appointed Cornelius Van Til, professor of Apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary, as honorary professor (*honoris causa*). Van Til was not able to be present personally in Debrecen, but prepared a short salutatory speech.

We quote some portions from this unspoken address prepared for Debrecen. We do this because he makes mention of the significance of the stand maintained by J. Gresham Machen. It is obvious from the speech that Van Til was not aware of the real Hungarian situation. He believed that he was coming into the

⁵⁶ Jenő Sebestyén, *A Barthianizmus a Magyar Református Egyházi Életében* [Barthianism in Hungarian Reformed Church Life], *Magyar Református Önismereti olvasókönyv* [Hungarian Reformed Church Primer] (MRE [HRC] Kálvin János Kiadó [John Calvin Publishing], Budapest, 1997), p. 150.

midst of heroes of the Reformed faith, although at this time it was rather a liberal atmosphere similar to that on the American scene, which was reigning. (Of course, this was not his fault. He simply did not have accurate information about Hungary.) Let us then hear Van Til:

...Your institution has had a great and notable career. For hundreds of years you have held aloft the banner of the Reformed Faith in the *midst of unbelief and half-hearted Christianity*. No words that I could find would sufficiently extol the glory of your past. As one stands in awful silence before the statues of great men, so I stand in your midst admiring what has here been done...

...Has the Reformed Faith flourished in the New world as it has flourished in the old? Indeed it has. The Reformed Faith came early to our shores. It has had a large influence in our history. Many great institutions of learning have sponsored its cause. But alas, all this is now largely a matter of the past. Colleges and Seminaries that once were proud to honor Calvin now spurn him or *pay mere lip service* to his name.

You ask, no doubt, how this has come to pass. The answer is not far to seek. Men have listened to *false philosophy and the traditions of men* instead of to the Word of God. Not that there has been a sudden and open denial of the Faith. The change came gradually through the substitution of *Arminianism for Calvinism* in our institutions of learning and the pulpits of our land. Thus the soil was prepared for a philosophy of which man and not God forms the center and end. When that philosophy came, it was not in the form of Pragmatism and Materialism that it sought to gain control of the Church. Pragmatism and Materialism make an open attack. No one can mistake their colors. But Satan came as an angel of light. He came in the form of Idealism. After the manner of the Samaritans of old, the Idealists claimed identity with the people of God. Do we not all stand for high ideals? they asked. Do we not all serve the same God? Shall we not unitedly wage war against Materialism and Secularism? Thus the Idealists reasoned and thus they flattered. Many of the watchmen on Zion's walls, weary of constant struggle, heard this siren voice and yielded to temptation. They preached on

high ideals, on righteous causes and on noble aspirations, but they *forgot the offence of the Cross*...

...In more recent days, dialectical theology has come to Princeton... For Dialecticism as for Idealism the Homo Noumenon is the final court of appeal. Accordingly, for Dialecticism as for Idealism there is no final revelation given unto us in the Scriptures. For the Reformed Faith the believer should think of himself as subject to the Scriptures; for Dialecticism the believer should think of the Scriptures as subject to himself. *The Reformed Faith holds to objective truth revealed in history; Dialecticism is subjective through and through*...

...We shall not despise the day of small things. *We shall give special honor to the late **Professor J. Gresham Machen***, who more than any other man was used of God in this return to the Faith of the Fathers. We shall rejoice before God that He has raised up a testimony to the Reformed Faith *among those who had forsaken it*.

Idealist philosophies of one sort or another will continue to offer their compromises. They will use *language scarcely discernible* in form from the *mother tongue* of historic Calvinism. Yet in the name and in the strength of God we shall defy them. By the grace of God we shall build alone to the salvation of sinners and to the glory of our covenant-keeping God.

Now as in closing I again pay my tribute of respect and praise to your honored institution I plead with you and with all my brethren here present to pray for us that our labor be not in vain in the Lord. As you are much older than we and can rightfully claim the glories of the past, lead us, we beseech you, in the future. *Go before us* in the battle for historic Calvinism. *Help us identify and combat* the subtle enemies that come in the guise of friends. Then we shall follow gladly and together we shall labor till He comes.⁵⁷ (italics mine)

⁵⁷ Cornelius Van Til, *Debrecen Address*, (typescript manuscript on deposit in the archives of Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, U.S.A.), 1938. Note: Appended to the manuscript in the author's writing are these words: "Not delivered. The celebration was not held on account of the war-scare." Also, "I was invited to attend their 400th Anniversary."

It is a mark of great grace that ultimately, Van Til did not follow in our footsteps. Where would American Reformed Christians be today?

More than 60 years ago the above admonitions and exhortations were clearly proclaimed. It is as though we had read the script for the Hungarian scenario. Did these harmful events not happen in Hungary and Transylvania as well? Is what Van Til said not well worth taking to heart? But what Hungarian today is prepared to be expelled in a similar way to Machen from a denomination? Who is willing to accept this “discipline”? Who are those today who are taking the lead in the continuous battle for historic Calvinism? Who today can say with David: “You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing”? (Psalm 16:2)

Poor Cornelius Van Til received this great honor from those whose department of dogmatics was a few years later directed by István Török, a former disciple of Karl Barth and faithful successor of his theology. Without a doubt, in Debrecen they forgot about which side Van Til stood on. (But Van Til’s true sentiments with regard to their theology can be found in his popular critique of Barth and Brunner called: *The New Modernism*⁵⁸). Why did the theologians at Debrecen award him with such an honor? Perhaps it was because of certain considerations pertaining to church politics. It is possible. At any rate, it is interesting that after this, István Török was invited as professor. Let us familiarize ourselves with the viewpoints Török held concerning revelation, the Word and the Bible, as he expressed them in a conference at Pápa in 1936:

Through feeble men a book was written which visibly bears the marks of *human febleness*: the historian *can point out errors* in it and exert his criticism upon it, the scientist *can smile at the primitiveness of the Bible’s world-view*... How can this human word be the Word of God?.. If God speaks through the human word, then a *miracle* is taking place. This miracle, however, does not occur in every place in the

⁵⁸ Entire title: *The New Modernism, An Appraisal of the Theology of Barth and Brunner* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1st ed., 1946).

Bible; the Word speaks here and there in words... *but the Word of God is never a certainty in the Bible but only a possibility.* The Word is there within the human words of the Bible just as a telephone message is in a telephone cable or as the glow of heat is in the iron: two kinds of expressions are “distinguishable” and “to be distinguished” (quotation marks mine), but they cannot be separated from each other. This was for me the second great teaching of today’s theology. From this I got to know of the error of *yesterday’s theology.* The error was that that theology *identified* the human word of the Bible with the divine Word.⁵⁹ (italics mine)

The problem with this way of reasoning is that miracles become evermore rare as fewer and fewer people take the teaching of the Bible seriously. Török teaches that it is possible for some people to hold the Bible in their hand, and yet this does not at all mean that they are also holding the Word of God. Moreover, how is anyone going to distinguish between the human word and the Word of God and on what basis? Let us observe what István Török calls “yesterday’s theology”! According to our Confessions the Word of God is a *certainty* and is itself the Bible. We quote the Second Helvetic Confession: “We believe and confess *the canonical Scriptures* of the holy prophets and apostles of both Testaments *to be the true Word of God,* and to have sufficient authority of themselves, not of men.”⁶⁰ (italics mine) Sad to say, this passes for a theology of yesterday, or a naive theology. Let us hear the cynicism of one HRC theologian in this regard:

From *the naive theological period* right up to the Enlightenment, Bible stories about Jesus Christ are taken as *historical facts in their entirety...* But with regard to the

⁵⁹ István Török, *A mai teológia és a Biblia [Today’s Theology and the Bible]*, Magyar Református Önismereti Olvasókönyv [*Hungarian Reformed Church Primer*] (MRE [HRC] Kálvin János Kiadó [John Calvin Publishing], Budapest, 1980), p. 436.

⁶⁰ 2nd Helvetic Confession, Chapter 1., in John H. Leith ed., *Creeds of the Church* (John Knox Press, Louisville, 3rd ed., 1982), p. 132.

New Testament stories about Jesus it *is not important* to know whether these *actually took place or not*; it is their message that matters and the *kerygma* inherent within that message which is of vital significance to our existence...⁶¹ (italics mine)

Elemér Kocsis stated this more than 20 years ago. It is startling to read such things, but it is also a sad reality and no different today. A present-day example of this thinking is the professor of theology at HRC's seminary in Kolozsvár (Cluj), Tamás Juhász who teaches the following concerning inerrancy and inspiration of Scripture: "*It is a cheap thing* to claim something for which there is no evidence... For mistakes were not only committed by the copyists—*the holy writers themselves were feeble men who could err*... The Bible is *not a literally inspired book* but, *inspired according to its meaning*."⁶² We ask, in what sense can its meaning be inspired? Who determines this? How do we determine what the "inspired" meaning is of a particular passage? We hope it is becoming clear to the reader that this kind of liberal approach to the Bible leads us into a cul-de-sac.

In the final analysis, it is those who have recognized this afresh who have attempted to sound the alarm bell. Let us look at an example of this. It may be that this alarm signal is ringing late, but in any event, let us observe it:

If in church government the emphasis is not on the *Bible and Confessions*, man will grow in increased measure--it may be the role of a body or an office-bearer--in the church. But if *man* will be the *main authority*, then in corporate or personal decisions, *individual lobby* interests will thrive... The present structure of the Hungarian Reformed Church makes provision for either individuals or smaller bodies, for

⁶¹ Elemér Kocsis, *Hirdesd az Igét—Az igehirdetok kézikönyve* [*Preach the Word—The Handbook of Preachers*], (A Magyar Ref. Egyház Zsinati Irodájának Sajtóosztálya [The Press Division of the Synodical Office of the Hungarian Reformed Church], Budapest, 1980), p. 98.

⁶² Tamás Juhász, *Üzenet, Az Erdélyi Református Egyházkerület Gyülekezeti Lapja* [*Message, The Congregational Weekly of the Transylvanian Reformed Church District*], Vol. 9, No. 9, May 1st, 1998.

example, the Presidency of Synod or the Courts of the Synod or the Presidencies of Presbyteries to make certain decisions which *do not agree with the Bible or our Confessions*, without any consequence or control... Throughout the past ten years a new concentration of strength and power has come into existence in our church whose authority is assured by a *law-book* with a non-Biblical foundation and *by money* granted as funding from the State, *not by the Bible and our Confessions.*⁶³ (italics mine)

Now if this is all true, then what should be the next practical step? Or is it still untimely to speak about this? We ask, “Will there be a new biblical reform?” We hope that there will be. We trust that this reform will become evident through the formation of *new confessing* Reformed denominations. We hope, furthermore, that the example of the American Presbyterian “reformers from within” as well as the “indifferent camp” have clearly shown us that such methods of reform are not feasible.

Closing Thought

I would encourage the reader to study this book so that he may focus exclusively on the status and condition of Hungarian Protestant Christianity. Forget about the fact that an American theologian wrote this book eighty years ago. Imagine rather, that the writer is someone who has seriously appraised today’s Hungarian situation, and a sense of responsibility to the Word has motivated him to write the book. If we read the book in this way, I believe we can learn a lot from J. Gresham Machen. We will understand that we must fight for the cause of God—by word and deed. Especially in an age when there are so few committed warriors and when the terms *Reformation* and *Confessionalism* have become hackneyed clichés. Above all else, it is necessary at

⁶³ Álmos Ete Sípos, *Hangsúlyeltolódások a MRE teológiájában a rendszerváltás után* [*The Shifting of Emphasis in the Theology of the HRC after the Change of Political Regime*], delivered on October 14, 2000, Cegléd. (Sípos is an evangelical minister of the HRC. His comment above and in other sources confirm the reality of the present situation of Hungarian Protestantism.)

such a time to confront prejudices and be willing to accept the inevitable scorn. Let us not try to close our eyes to everything, since in the Christian life there is no golden middle road. There is only a narrow road on which we must walk. And God's blessings are attached to that road. The *hard battle* undertaken by Machen was also marked by an extraordinary *spiritual vitality*. I hope that it has become clear that, for us also these two characteristics go hand in hand. We cannot take part in one without the experience of the other. And remember, no one can fight the battle in our place.

Machen warned that in addition to the proclamation of the gospel, Christians of every age have one other important task. They must keep guard over the faith, "that was once for all entrusted to the saints." (Jude 3) Let us take note then that Christianity which behaves indifferently to liberalism nurses a viper in its bosom. Unfortunately, our forefathers did not manage to escape the snakebite or find a cure for it in good time. Consequently, the lamentable condition of today's Hungarian Christianity is not so much to be attributed to the spread of *Communism*, but rather of *Liberalism*. We should take note of this.⁶⁴

If you read this book and reflect upon the demands it is making of you, I ask that you remember the summons of two great Reformers. One of these is from Luther and the other from Machen. Luther, at one time said this:

If I profess with loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at the moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. *Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved*, and to be steady on all the

⁶⁴ Very few people realize the seriousness of the effects of Liberalism upon Hungarian Christianity. From the middle of the 19th century it had begun to cripple the Protestant Churches long before Communism arrived. So it is a misrepresentation of the truth to say to Western Christians that the present church situation is due mostly to the bleak 45-year Communist era. By the time Communism arrived, Liberalism had already done its job well.

battlefield besides, is merely flight and disgrace if he
flinches at that point.⁶⁵ (italics mine)

J. Gresham Machen in his usual quiet determination attempted to induce those gathered together in Princeton Chapel to action in this way:

What are you going to do, my brothers, in this great time of crisis? What a time it is to be sure! What a time of glorious opportunity! *Will you stand with the world? Will you shrink from controversy? Will you witness for Christ only where witnessing costs nothing? Will you pass through these stirring days without coming to any real decision? Or will you learn the lesson of Christian history? Will you penetrate, by your study and your meditation, beneath the surface?...* Will you hope, and pray, not for a mere continuance of what now is, but for a rediscovery of the Gospel that can make all things new?... God grant that some of you may do that!⁶⁶ (italics mine)

Let us pray then, that God will have mercy upon us and work in us, and give us clear theological vision so that, as mature Christians, we will undertake the battle against those who are the “enemies of the cross of Christ” (Phil. 3:18).

⁶⁵ Clark Pinnock, *A New Reformation: A Challenge to Southern Baptists* (Jewel Books, Tigerville, S.C., 1968), p. 5.

⁶⁶ J. Gresham Machen, “The Separateness of the Church”, John Robbins ed., *The Church Effeminate* (The Trinity Foundation, 2001), p. 600. This sermon was preached on March 8, 1925.