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J. Gresham Machen, the Reformed Tradition, and the Transformation of Culture

J. Gresham Machen was one of the most influential evangelical scholars of the twentieth century; his work on The Virgin Birth of Christ remains an outstanding piece of scholarship, but he was more than an academic scholar and played an important part in church politics. Dr Hart, who is librarian at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, discusses Machen's contribution to understanding the relationship between the church and contemporary culture.

One of the sadder aspects of J. Gresham Machen's accomplished and stormy career was his untimely death. On January 1, 1937, he succumbed to pneumonia at the relatively young age of 55. For at least 14 years, since the publication of *Christianity and Liberalism* in 1923, Machen, a gifted New Testament scholar who taught at Princeton Seminary from 1906 to 1929, had been a leading spokesman for conservative Protestantism. Indeed, this book, which earned praise from secular intellectuals such as Walter Lippmann and H. L. Mencken, alerted other Christians to the dangers of liberal Protestantism and became what Sydney Ahlstrom has called 'the chief theological ornament of American fundamentalism.' Then in 1929 with the founding of Westminster Theological Seminary, Machen became the leading conservative in the Northern Presbyterian Church (PCUSA). His decision to start a new seminary was only a rehearsal for the debates and actions which would lead to the creation in 1936 of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (hereafter OPC). Though other prominent conservatives questioned his decision to start a new denomination, Machen's scholarly reputation as well as his influence upon young men training for the ministry at Westminster contributed to his stature as one of the more important religious leaders within both the Reformed and fundamentalist folds. His unexpected death, however, created a vacuum that forced Machen's

followers to consider the identity and purpose of their movement and sparked rival claimants for Machen's mantle.¹

In the early 1940s two visions for preserving Protestant orthodoxy emerged, the first represented by Machen's successors at Westminster who were also leaders in the OPC, the second by those who founded Fuller Theological Seminary and were active in broader evangelical circles. Both sides sought to emulate Machen's scholarly defense of Christianity and yet produced significantly different approaches to the relationship between Christianity and culture. For those at Westminster, such as Cornelius Van Til, John Murray, and Ned Stonehouse, Machen's departure from the mainline church to form a new denomination crystallized their mentor's efforts and they, in turn, directed their energies toward cultivating the OPC. For the leaders of the neo-evangelical movement, such as Harold Ockenga, Carl Henry, Wilbur Smith, and Edward J. Carnell, Machen's scholarship and engagement with the broader culture served as a model for evangelical efforts to restore Christian civilization in America. The crucial difference between these different agendas for conservative Protestantism was the doctrine of the church. For OPC leaders, church polity and confessional standards took priority in questions concerning evangelism and outreach and so made them hesitant to join interdenominational programs that obscured their Presbyterian convictions. The architects of the neo-evangelical movement, in contrast, took a more pragmatic stance and minimized ecclesiastical and some doctrinal matters in order to reach the wider culture with the gospel.²

Examining these different approaches to the task of Christian witness is important not to discover which side was truer to Machen but rather to explore the particular problems that confront Reformed believers living at the end of the twentieth

¹ S. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, 1972), 912. On these developments, see Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir* (Grand Rapids, 1954); Bradley J. Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and Moderates* (New York, 1991); and D. G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (Baltimore, 1994).

² On the differences between evangelicals and Reformed in the 1940s, see Mark Noll and Cassandra Niemczyk, 'Evangelicals and the Self-Consciously Reformed,' in *Varieties of American Evangelicalism*, eds. Robert K. Johnson and Donald Dayton, (Knoxville, 1991), 204–221; and D. G. Hart, 'The Legacy of J. Gresham Machen and the Identity of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church,' *WTJ* 53 (1992), 209–25.

century. A hallmark of Reformed thought is the idea that Christianity involves the transformation of culture as well as the proclamation of the gospel. According to this view, the gospel does more than prepare the soul for life after death. Indeed, because God deemed his creation to be good, Christians need not renounce so-called 'secular' pursuits in politics, education, business or art in order to be witnesses to the gospel. Furthermore, the Protestant idea of the priesthood of all believers teaches that all lawful vocations, whether in the church or in society, are significant in God's sight because he is the Lord of all aspects of life and works his redemptive purposes through them. Salvation in this view is not a rejection of the world but is rather a restoration of the fallen world to its original goodness. The church and individual Christians further the redemptive process by consecrating all areas of life to the glory of God.³

The irony of recent evangelical history in the United States, however, is that conservative Presbyterian and Reformed denominations, such as the OPC, the Presbyterian Church in America, and the Christian Reformed Church, have been relative late comers in the effort to establish a Christian voice in American cultural life. Indeed, evangelical groups, who have been less constrained by the doctrine of the church, have been more visible in American public life than the Reformed whose ecclesiology and theology has often proven cumbersome to cultural engagement. To be sure, those in the Reformed tradition have been engaged with and have offered perceptive critiques of modern intellectual and cultural trends. But they have not been the ones gaining media coverage or visiting with the president of the United States. Instead, the neo-evangelical movement has been much more visible and active in the last fifty years, whether through the learned writings of Carl Henry, the evangelistic crusades of Billy Graham, or the therapeutic ministry of Bill Hybels. The lesson of recent evangelical history seems to be that traditional Presbyterianism is ill-suited for achieving the very

³ For a cogent expression of these ideas, see John Murray, 'Common Grace,' in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 2 (Carlisle, 1976), 253-259. For an extension of these insights to political and cultural concerns, see Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., 'The Concern of the Church in the Socio-Political World: A Calvinist and Reformed Perspective,' *Calvin Theological Journal* 18 (1983), 190-205; and Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (Downers Grove, 1984).

thing that made the Reformed perspective distinctive, namely, the transformation of culture.⁴

Part of the blame for this ironic twist may be that the chief interpreter of the Reformed tradition on culture is H. Richard Niebuhr's classic work, *Christ and Culture*.⁵ In this little book Niebuhr contrasts five different ways in which Christians have reconciled the claims of Christ and culture. Perhaps the most significant aspect of Niebuhr's argument for our purposes is his distinction between the Lutheran and Reformed traditions on Christianity and culture. In contrast to the Lutheran teaching of the two kingdoms which sees Christ and culture in tension this side of Christ's second coming, Niebuhr argues that Calvinists do not endure the suffering of this age only to wait for salvation in the next. Rather, the Reformed tradition seeks to transform culture, endeavoring to save human nature and society, thus establishing God's kingdom on earth. Even though theologians in the Reformed tradition ever since Calvin have made sharp distinctions between the spiritual and the temporal, linking the kingdom of God clearly with the church as opposed to a political or social order, Niebuhr has become the last word for many on the transformationist impulse of Reformed theology.⁶ Yet, as the thought and career of Machen show, Niebuhr's exposition of the Reformed understanding of Christianity and culture is not the only option. For Machen articulated a conception of the transformation of culture that did full justice to Reformed teaching on the ministry of the church while also paying serious consideration to the realities of modern culture.

The purpose of this essay is to explore Machen's attitudes toward the church and its relationship to culture in an effort to think through the difficulties that modern culture poses for the Reformed tradition. The issue is not which of Machen's followers were true to his ideal. Nor is the intent here to present Machen as a standard from which conservative Presbyterians and evangelicals have sadly departed. Machen was undoubtedly a gifted and exemplary thinker. But what makes his views on Christianity

⁴ On evangelical resurgence since World War II, see the perceptive essays by Joel Carpenter, 'From Fundamentalism to the New Evangelical Coalition,' and Grant Wacker, 'Uneasy in Zion: Evangelicals in Postmodern Society,' in *Evangelicalism and Modern America*, ed. George Marsden, (Grand Rapids, 1984), 3-16, 17-28.

⁵ (New York, 1951).

⁶ See, for instance, Walsh, *The Transforming Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: 1984), which has become required reading at many American evangelical colleges and seminaries.

and culture worth studying is that he had a high regard for the ministry of the church. Perhaps even more important, Machen grappled realistically with the nature of the culture that Christians are supposed to be transforming. He was especially sensitive to the particular problems that cultural diversity and religious freedom pose to Reformed notions about the transformation of culture. For him the disestablishment of the church, the secularization of modern society, as well as the historic dominance of Protestants in the United States meant that Reformed Christians would have to be more diligent in their commitment to the visible church and more circumspect in their desire to be cultural guardians. To be sure, Machen's views may strike some as just another form of fundamentalist separatism and others as a clear departure from the Reformed understanding of culture. But a closer reading may still prove beneficial for contemporary discussions about the transformation of culture.

The Consecration of Culture

Machen was certainly well-positioned to apply the cultural insights of the Reformed faith. The son of a prominent Baltimore lawyer, Machen attended the best schools, read widely in classical and English literature, was fluent in French and German, and had a good knowledge of Victorian art and drama. He did his undergraduate work and a year of graduate study in the classics at Johns Hopkins University where he graduated first in his class. He received his theological education at Princeton Seminary, during which time he also earned an MA in philosophy from Princeton University. He eventually pursued advanced study in New Testament at Marburg and Göttingen universities. His parents reared him in Franklin Street Church, a prominent and wealthy Old School Presbyterian congregation in Baltimore. Machen's ecclesiastical and educational associations allowed him to rub shoulders with Northeastern elites throughout his life, from president Woodrow Wilson in the home of his youth, to John Rockefeller, Jr. at the family summer cottage at Seal Harbor, Maine. A large aspect of Machen's appeal to many of the fundamentalist students who studied with him at Princeton Seminary was clearly his social status.⁷

Interestingly, Machen's genteel demeanor was evident even in some of his sharpest strictures of liberal Protestantism. Throughout his biblical scholarship, where he challenged the conclusions

⁷ For biographical details on Machen, see Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen*.

of higher critics, Machen was always respectful of his foes' erudition and breadth of learning. He thought it especially harmful for conservatives to underestimate the force of liberal arguments and 'dismiss the "higher critics" *en masse* with a few words of summary condemnation.' So too, in *Christianity and Liberalism* where he argued that liberal Protestantism was an altogether different religion from historic Christianity—he declared that liberalism was 'un-Christian'—Machen did not want this criticism to be misconstrued. He explained that the word 'un-Christian' was primarily a technical one, meaning that liberalism departed from traditional Christian understandings of God, the Bible, sin and grace. It did not mean, however, that liberals were scoundrels unworthy of respect. Machen's understanding of common grace allowed him to see that the regenerate and unregenerate alike were capable of valuable insights and worthy endeavors in a variety of human activities. Socrates and Goethe, Machen noted for example, were not Christians but still deserved respect from Christians because they towered 'immeasurably above the common run of men.' If Christians were greater than such figures, it was certainly not because of any inherent superiority as humans but by virtue of God's saving grace, 'an undeserved privilege' that ought to make the believer 'humble rather than contemptuous.'⁸

Neither did Machen's efforts to exclude liberalism from the church prevent him from working with liberal Christians and non-believers in a number of humanitarian and social causes. In *Christianity and Liberalism* he stated that the differences between liberals and conservatives should not result in personal antagonism. 'Many ties,' he wrote, 'ties of blood, of citizenship, of ethical aims, of humanitarian endeavor—unite us to those who have abandoned the gospel.' As a result, Machen followed political affairs and participated as much as possible in the political process. He was an active member of the Sentinels of the Republic, a lobbying group organized by Massachusetts business men to oppose the Eighteenth Amendment, and gave testimony before Congress against the Child Labor Amendment and the formation of the Federal Department of Education. Machen's political concerns were not limited to national affairs. Toward the end of his life while a resident of Philadelphia he took an active

⁸ Machen, 'Christianity in Conflict,' in *Contemporary American Theology*, vol. 2, ed. Vergilius Ferm, (New York, 1932), 258; and idem, *Christianity and Liberalism* (New York, 1923), 8.

interest in city politics and during public debate over proposed jay-walking legislation testified before the City Council.⁹

Machen's understanding of Christianity's relationship to culture went beyond the surface of polite manners and privileged social standing. Throughout his writings and scholarship he expressed a vision of Christian involvement in cultural and intellectual life that was clearly different from the pietistic and revivalistic otherworldliness of many fundamentalists. Machen articulated this vision in an address before the 1912 school year at Princeton Seminary, entitled 'Christianity and Culture.' There he considered the problem of the gospel's relationship to learning. Were scholarly and artistic endeavors distractions from—if not hindrances to—the much more important task of evangelism and soul-winning? Machen's answer, one in keeping with the Reformed tradition, was the consecration of culture.

Instead of destroying the arts and sciences or being indifferent to them, let us cultivate them with all the enthusiasm of the veriest humanist, but at the same time consecrate them to the service of our God. Instead of stifling the pleasures afforded by the acquisition of knowledge or by the appreciation of what is beautiful, let us accept these pleasures as the gifts of a heavenly Father. Instead of obliterating the distinction between the Kingdom and the world, or on the other hand withdrawing from the world into a sort of modernized intellectual monasticism, let us go forth joyfully, enthusiastically to make the world subject to God.¹⁰

This vision no doubt had tremendous appeal to Machen's students at Princeton and Westminster, many of whom came from pietistic backgrounds where intellectual and cultural matters were tainted by worldliness. His defense of Christian supernaturalism was one of the ablest in the early twentieth-century and so his conservative credentials were above reproach. Yet he leavened his forthright defense of the gospel with an understanding of and a participation in cultural endeavors that attracted bright and ambitious conservative Protestants who wanted to bring their faith to bear on areas other than evangelism or missions. For this reason, Machen was a significant influence upon a generation of conservative leaders who in the post-fundamentalist era played leading roles in the educational

⁹ For Machen's political views, see Hart, *Defending the Faith*, ch. 6.

¹⁰ 'Christian and Culture,' reprinted in *What is Christianity?*, ed. Ned Bernard Stonehouse, (Grand Rapids, 1951), 160.

and parachurch institutions that continue to dominate the evangelical landscape.¹¹

The Separateness of the Church

As much as Machen's understanding of culture encouraged active engagement with culture, his ideas about the church and its ministry appeared to condone vigorous withdrawal from the very same culture. Despite his reputation as a New Testament scholar and the common association of Princeton Seminary with the doctrine of biblical inerrancy, a significant component of the fundamentalist controversy concerned the doctrine of the church. In fact, Machen's criticism of Protestant modernism in *Christianity and Liberalism* grew out of his strong commitment to the Westminster Standards as the Presbyterian Church's doctrinal foundation. In the early 1920s Protestant church leaders from various mainline denominations had proposed a plan for a federated union of the major Protestant communions that would have resulted in a consolidated church not unlike the United Church of Canada which was formed in 1925. Machen's opposition to liberalism was as much the product of his desire to preserve a distinct Presbyterian witness as it was his defense of the Bible's historical reliability.

Machen believed that the church's primary task was to witness to Christ and he cited the risen Christ's instructions to his followers—'Ye shall be my witnesses'—as a correct summary of the church's purpose. As he never tired of observing, Christianity was not a religious experience that transcended doctrine nor was it an inward feeling of which doctrine was a manifestation. Rather, Christianity was 'a life founded upon a doctrine . . . a life produced not merely by exhortation, not merely by personal contacts, but primarily by an account of something that happened, a piece of good news, or a gospel.' This good news was that 'Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day.' Its propositional and informational nature meant that Christian faith could not be severed from intellectual assent. Indeed, because the gospel depended upon historical events it could not be located in the realm of ethical or philosophical ideas. Still, the message of the Bible did not end with history. According to Machen, the narrative of redemption was always expressed in doctrinal terms;

¹¹ Hart, 'Legacy of J. Gresham Machen,' 209–212.

it did not merely state that 'Christ died' but that 'Christ died for sins.' The gospel told about an event and also provided an interpretation of that event. By its very nature, then, the gospel was doctrinal and the church's task of proclamation required careful attention to theology.¹²

Machen turned from the abstract to the concrete when he argued that the kind of witness-bearing done by the Presbyterian Church was circumscribed by the Westminster Standards. In fact, for a minister to be ordained and preach in a Presbyterian pulpit he had to answer a series of questions, two of which concerned belief in the Bible as 'the only infallible rule of faith and practice' and acceptance of the Westminster Confession of Faith as 'containing the system of doctrine taught in Scripture.' These ordination vows, Machen argued, put explicit limits upon what a Presbyterian minister could or could not preach. To be sure, American Presbyterians throughout their history had been divided over what this 'system of doctrine' was precisely. But whatever the exact meaning, the minister's subscription vows made doctrine essential to the church's witness and the Presbyterian message different from the Baptist, Methodist, or Episcopalian. Indeed, all evangelical churches, according to Machen, were committed by their constitutions to a particular creed. This doctrinal basis not only determined the content of preaching and instruction but also restricted the church's financial resources. The Presbyterian Church's funds were held under a trust that obligated the church to propagate the gospel as taught in the Bible and the Westminster Confession. To use those funds for any other purpose was a violation of that trust.¹³

Machen's severest criticisms of Protestant liberalism stemmed from this understanding of the Presbyterian church's identity. Liberal ministers, he charged, were violating the church's trust by denying and contradicting from Presbyterian pulpits the very creed that they affirmed in their ordination vows. Often they did not speak against the church's theology directly, but referred to the Confession of Faith as merely an expression of a deeper Christian experience. In Machen's biblical scholarship and apologetics he pointed out the exegetical and theoretical flaws in this line of reasoning. Still, a significant component of his critique,

¹² 'The Parting of the Ways,' *Presbyterian* 94 (April, 1924), 7; and *Christianity and Liberalism*, 121.

¹³ *Christianity and Liberalism*, 163-166.

one which appealed to secular intellectuals as well as fundamentalists, concerned the question of intellectual honesty. He conceded that not everyone would agree that creeds were valuable. But the desirability of the Westminster Confession for Presbyterians was not at issue. Rather the problem was whether a minister or church official was faithful to his ordination declaration. If a man preached and acted in accordance with the church's creedal basis then he could hold special office; if not, then he had no business acting in an official capacity in the denomination.¹⁴

Machen's arguments were convincing to many conservatives but failed to gain the assent of the entire spectrum of evangelicals within the Presbyterian Church because they believed that liberalism was a relatively isolated phenomenon that did not threaten the entire denomination. For these churchmen, liberalism was certainly problematic but was confined largely to a select number of pulpits or presbyteries. Consequently, because the majority of the church was still loyal to historic Christianity drastic measures were not needed. Machen battled this attitude toward the church's witness for the last ten years of his life and these struggles led to the founding of Westminster Theological Seminary in 1929, the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions in 1933, and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 1936. In each case, the issue was not whether liberalism was flawed but whether the church remained sound even if it tolerated a degree of liberalism.¹⁵

Throughout these debates Machen forged the idea of the corporate witness of the church. This notion was already present in his understanding of the church's creedal basis. The Presbyterian Church stood for a particular version of theology summarized in the Westminster Confession and this theological outlook was the one that the denomination's preachers were bound to propagate. In other words, the church's commitment to the confession guaranteed that the church spoke uniformly through its many voices. The idea of the church's corporate witness became clearer as Machen pleaded with other conservatives to champion doctrinal regularity throughout the denomination, not merely in local churches. According to Machen, the Presbyterian Church's witness was not individual but collective. When a man

¹⁴ 'The Parting of the Ways,' 7-8.

¹⁵ Charles Erdman and Robert Speer were prominent moderate evangelicals in the PCUSA. For their views, see Longfield, *Presbyterian Controversy*.

occupied a pulpit of the Presbyterian Church he spoke for the denomination.

The preacher therefore speaks not only for himself, but for the church . . . [This] means that if a man is to speak in a Presbyterian pulpit, and obtain the endorsement which is involved in that position, he must be in agreement with the message for the propagation of which the church, in accordance with its constitution, plainly exists.¹⁶

The idea of the church's corporate witness also heightened the responsibility of individual members for denominational affairs, especially in a Presbyterian form of government. Unlike Congregationalism, Presbyterianism rests upon a system of church courts (from the session to the General Assembly) to insure uniformity of teaching and practice. In this system of government, according to Machen, Presbyterians could not merely be content with the soundness of their own minister or their own congregation. In fact, he thought that ministers, elders and church members who failed to follow denominational affairs and discipline those ministers who violated the church's confessional standards were a greater danger than liberal ministers themselves. For by tolerating liberals while continuing to be faithful to the Westminster Confession conservatives were helping to obscure the true state of the church. Heretical or heterodox views expressed in one pulpit, then, could not be viewed in isolation.

The constitution of the [Presbyterian] church plainly regards the preacher as a representative of the whole body, as a man who sets forth the system of doctrine taught in the Word of God, and it plainly gives the courts of the church power to remove any preacher who is preaching what is contrary to that. But with power goes responsibility . . . Every individual member of the church—to say nothing of minister who are members of church courts—has a vital responsibility for what is done in the pulpits and still more plainly in the agencies and boards. Individuals must witness for Christ, but the church must also witness in its corporate capacity; and no individual is walking uprightly according to the truth of the gospel if he acquiesces in a corporate witness that is false.¹⁷

This principle served as the basis for Machen's decision in 1936 to form the OPC, but it also cost him the support of other conservatives along the way. Indeed, the events and debates that led to the establishment of a new denomination proved especially

¹⁶ 'Parting of the Ways,' 8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

painful because they resulted in significant differences between friends and respected colleagues. One such case was that of Clarence Macartney, minister of Arch Street Church in Philadelphia and later at First Church in Pittsburgh. Machen and Macartney had labored together to oppose Harry Emerson Fosdick in the mid-1920s, to preserve Princeton Seminary as a bastion of Calvinism, and failing that, to perpetuate Princeton's ideals at Westminster Seminary. But when in 1933 Machen founded the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions, a rival to the mainline denomination's own agency which Machen believed had succumbed to liberalism, Macartney began to distance himself from the conservative movement. Eventually Machen was brought to trial and suspended from the Presbyterian ministry in 1936 for refusing to sever his ties to the Independent Board. Macartney, on the other hand, while opposed to liberalism, did not think the rival missions board was a proper method for promoting the conservative cause and so remained in the mainline Presbyterian Church for the rest of his career.

For Machen, the church's decision to expel him and other conservatives was a clear sign that the denomination had become apostate, that its corporate witness was no longer faithful to the Westminster Standards and that there was no hope of reforming the church. Macartney was no less displeased by Machen's trial but made his peace with the mainline Presbyterian Church primarily by abandoning his commitment to the Presbyterian form of government and the notion of corporate witness. In 1939 he wrote,

I value less the whole ecclesiastical structure, and feel that more and more for the true witness to the gospel and the Kingdom of God we must depend upon the particular local church, the individual minister and the individual Christian.

In other words, for Macartney the truthfulness of the church's witness was evident in congregations like his own, whereas for Machen the preaching and ministry of conservatives like Macartney were compromised by the presence of liberal ministers and the denomination's corporate decisions.¹⁸

¹⁸ Macartney, 'Warm Hearts and Steady Faith,' *Christian Century*, March 8, 1939, quoted in Edwin H. Rian, *The Presbyterian Conflict* (Grand Rapids, 1941), 273-274.

The Church Against Culture?

After Machen's death, his colleagues in the OPC carried on Machen's sedulous attention to the significance of denominational rulings and activities. The principle of the church's corporate witness came up with particular force in the context of the newly formed National Association of Evangelicals in 1942 and had implications not only for the OPC's relations with conservatives still working in mainline denominations but also for cooperation with evangelicals in non-Presbyterian communions. By the early 1940s neo-evangelical leaders thought the time was right to bring together conservative Protestants from all denominations into a fellowship that would promote evangelism more effectively and restore a Christian voice within American society. The OPC decided not to join the NAE for reasons that bore directly on the denomination's commitment to preserving its corporate witness. On the one hand, the NAE, even though opposed to modernism, accepted ministers and congregations from mainline denominations that had not repudiated liberalism. This was an inconsistency that the OPC's very existence had called into question. On the other hand, the NAE's membership consisted of Calvinist and Arminian congregations and denominations. Leaders of the OPC quite naturally worried that they would be unfaithful to their ordination vows by participating in evangelistic campaigns with those who did not share their theological commitments.¹⁹

The OPC's concern for the doctrine of the church virtually removed the denomination from the more visible aspects of the post-World War II evangelical resurgence. To be sure, Westminster Seminary continued to provide education for theologians and church leaders from a variety of denominational backgrounds. But many evangelicals interpreted the OPC's isolationist stance as one further example of fundamentalist separatism. This perspective even began to color assessments of Machen, such as when Edward J. Carnell, a prominent evangelical theologian and president of Fuller Theological Seminary in the late 1950s declared that Machen had exhibited fundamentalism's worst feature, a cultic mentality. Machen, according to Carnell, had taken 'an absolute stand on a relative issue' and was thereby unable to see how his 'subjective criteria' for Christian fellowship had planted the seeds of anarchy among conservatives. Given his assumptions, of course, Carnell had a point. If what evangelicals

¹⁹ See Hart, 'Legacy of J. Gresham Machen.'

needed was greater unity in order to promote more effective outreach, then Machen's loyalty to Presbyterian polity and doctrinal standards was excessive and threatened evangelical cooperation.²⁰ But what Carnell and many evangelical leaders did not see was that Machen and the OPC had a different understanding of outreach, one that was rooted in the historic Protestant conception of the church. According to the Protestant Reformers, the marks of a true church were proclamation of the gospel, administration of the sacraments, and correction of faith and practice through discipline. Modern day evangelicals, these conservative Presbyterians believed, were pursuing evangelism outside the means that Christ had appointed. From the OPC's perspective, the basis of evangelical unity was equally subjective because it failed to take into consideration how the creedal commitments of individual denominations squared with the larger aim of evangelical cooperation. The issue was not separatism but discipline and integrity. While remaining separate from the NAE may have looked particularly narrow if not self-righteous, the idea of the church's corporate witness taught Orthodox Presbyterians that joining a interdenominational enterprise would undermine their commitment to uphold and preserve Presbyterian polity and theology. Thus while evangelicals in the 1940s and 1950s worked through the NAE to minimize doctrinal and ecclesiastical differences in order to further evangelism, the OPC made the doctrine of the church central to its ecumenical considerations.²¹

The breach between the OPC and the NAE in the 1940s points out the irony noted at the outset. Machen's understanding of the church, one that was rooted in the Reformed tradition, apparently functioned as a barrier to greater cultural involvement by the denomination he helped to found. For attention to the corporate witness of the church prevented the OPC from joining the NAE, an organization that served to make evangelical Christianity more prominent and influential in public debates and cultural life. Consequently, evangelicals, who have paid less heed to ecclesiastical regularity, have been actively attempting to transform the culture, while Reformed believers like Orthodox Presbyterians, who have often been scrupulous in their adherence to Presbyterian polity and Calvinist theology, have had little influence outside their denomination. Machen's broad and comprehensive perspective on the Christian's involvement in

²⁰ Carnell, *The Case for Orthodox Theology* (Philadelphia, 1959), 115–117.

²¹ See Hart, 'Legacy of J. Gresham Machen.'

culture, thus, appears to have been foiled by his conception of the church.

A resolution to this conundrum may finally be difficult to find. Reformed believers may have to concede that evangelicalism, with its populist and pragmatic orientation, is better adapted for success in modern society than Presbyterianism, with its formal and procedural character. Indeed, Presbyterians may be forced to compromise their theological and ecclesiastical traditions if they are to be more effective and influential. Machen certainly did not think these were the only alternatives. But the recent history of Reformed and Presbyterian denominations compared to that of evangelical parachurch organizations does suggest that the structure and discipline of the visible church are ill-suited for the transformation of culture.

The Modern Predicament

While their ecclesiastical and theological traditions may not be as effective as evangelical pragmatism, Presbyterians need not choose between either a Reformed understanding of the institutional church or the Reformed idea of transforming culture. Rather than mimicking evangelical church growth strategies or political lobbying in order to transform American society, contemporary Reformed believers may need to arrive at a different understanding of cultural transformation. Here is where Machen's thought on the relationship of church and culture is particularly instructive. For he drew upon and represented a tradition of Reformed thought in America that offers an alternative, if not a corrective, to the current evangelical quest for cultural prominence.

In recent years the notion of cultural transformation among evangelicals has been difficult to distinguish from aspirations for political clout. Though the New Christian Right has attracted much attention since the Reagan era through Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority, James Dobson's Focus on the Family, and the recently formed Christian Coalition, a significant number of evangelicals can be counted among Christian activists on the left, believers who identify with Evangelicals for Social Action and read *Sojourners* and *The Other Side*. What these Protestants on the political left and right reveal is a striking phenomenon, namely, the politicization of evangelicalism. After decades of political inactivity, much of which stemmed from fundamentalist

suspicious about and disdain for the political process, evangelicals have returned to public debate with a vengeance.²²

Significantly, both the evangelical left and right in the United States look to American Protestant social reforms of the pre-Civil War era as a precedent for political involvement. For the left this period reveals a pattern of evangelical political activity that championed the cause of black slaves, women, the poor, the illiterate and the oppressed. For the right the evangelical crusades of the antebellum era show the positive results of a nation where Christianity was the dominant social force.²³ Interestingly enough, both parties offer rationales that appear to be compatible with a Reformed outlook. Evangelicals correctly point out that Christ's lordship extends to all areas of life, including the public square, and that the Christian idea of salvation involves not just the individual soul but all aspects of what it means to be human. This is the reason why evangelicals often speak about the need to go beyond fundamentalism and its narrow conception of Christianity.

When modern evangelicals have looked to the American past for examples of political involvement, moreover, they often follow the example of believers who worked in the Reformed tradition. The evangelicals who actively engaged in the crusades of the early nineteenth century were heirs to the New England Puritan tradition that stressed the involvement of the church and the Christian magistrate in remedying moral and social ills. Indeed, the Puritan conception of the godly commonwealth has been a major source of the Christian nationalism that has regularly surfaced among white Protestants throughout the United States' history. For a variety of complex reasons, American evangelicalism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries became closely identified with the dominant political traditions of the new nation. The legacy of this identification has been that twentieth-century Protestants, whether liberal or conservative, have viewed themselves as proprietors of American society. Whether voting for Abraham Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Jimmy Carter, or Ronald Reagan, American Protestants

²² For a sampling of evangelical political perspectives, see *Piety and Politics: Evangelicals and Fundamentalists Confront the World*, eds. Richard John Neuhaus and Michael Cromartie, (Washington, 1987); and *Salt and Light: Evangelical Political Thought in Modern America*, eds. Augustus Cerillo, Jr. and Murray W. Dempster, (Grand Rapids, 1989).

²³ Douglas Frank, *Less Than Conquerors: How Evangelicals Entered the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids, 1986), 1-5, makes this point.

have generally thought about politics in religious terms and have assumed that true religion is the foundation for public virtue.²⁴

Machen, however, worked out of the Southern Presbyterian tradition that took a different attitude to social matters than the one held by Northern evangelicals. One of the distinctive ideas of Southern Presbyterianism was the doctrine of the spirituality of the church. Machen, whose parents both came from the South, echoed this tradition when he made sharp distinctions between the spiritual and physical, or eternal and temporal aspects of human existence. According to this doctrine, the church's functions and tasks are strictly spiritual. Because its responsibilities are to preach the word, administer the sacraments, and nurture believers sanctification, the church as an institution has no means for, nor does its ministry involve, intervening in cultural or social affairs. In other words, the church's power and weapons are spiritual, not corporal. Machen found precedent for this view in chapter thirty-one, article four of the Westminster Confession of Faith, which reads, 'Synods and councils are to handle or conclude nothing, but that which is ecclesiastical; and are not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth.' Of course, this principle does not mean that individual Christians cannot be involved in cultural and political life, as Machen's own life indicates. Rather, for Machen this idea taught that the church in its corporate capacity, whether at the denominational or congregational level, should not stray from its proper task of witnessing to Christ.²⁵

The Southern Presbyterian version of this principle has a distinctly modern ring. The idea of distinguishing between spiritual and temporal affairs obviously comports well with notions about the separation of church and state which the eighteenth-century revolutions in France and the United States forged. Moreover, the legal implications of the separation of civil and ecclesiastical powers are fully evident in Machen's constitutional conception of the church. Just as the Constitution of the United States obligates the American government to certain principles about freedom and representative democracy, so, Machen argued, the constitution of the Presbyterian Church

²⁴ For an overview of the evangelical political tradition, see George M. Marsden, 'Afterward: Religion, Politics, and the Search for an American Consensus,' in *Religion and American Politics: From the Colonial Period to the 1980s*, ed. Mark A. Noll, (New York, 1990), 380-390.

²⁵ On southern Presbyterianism, see Ernest Trice Thompson, *The Spirituality of the Church: A Distinctive Doctrine of the Presbyterian Church in the United States* (Richmond, 1961).

commits its members to a particular system of theology, church polity and a specific spiritual task.

Just as the spirituality of the church has important implications for Machen's understanding of the church, it was also significant in shaping his attitudes about society. What is especially interesting to note is how his ideas about the church were bound up with a strong endorsement of religious freedom and cultural pluralism. Rather than conceiving of the state as a means for implementing and enforcing Christian norms and values, as many in the Puritan tradition have, Machen thought that the state's chief business was to protect individuals, families and other private associations from government interference. The state is an 'involuntary organization; a man is forced to be a member of it whether he will or no.' It was, therefore, 'an interference with liberty for the state to prescribe any one type of opinion' for its citizens. For this reason, Machen took great exception to the government's attempts to regulate private education or to set the number of hours that children could work. These were matters for parents to decide and Machen believed that the state should not paternalistically require all families to conform to one standard. Thus, Machen rejected the Constantinian paradigm of church-state relations which had dominated Christianity, whether Orthodox, Roman Catholic or Protestant since the fourth century.²⁶

Machen was particularly zealous in his defense of civil liberties because of their close relationship to religious freedom. In fact, he repeatedly argued that the kind of intolerance he wanted the Presbyterian Church to practice was not only compatible with but predicated upon civil liberty. Within the involuntary association of the state, Machen reasoned,

individual citizens who desire to unite for some special purpose should be permitted to do so. Especially in the sphere of religion, such permission of individuals to unite is one of the rights which lie at the very foundation of our civil and religious liberty. The state does not scrutinize the rightness or wrongness of the religious purpose for which such voluntary religious associations are formed—if it did undertake such scrutiny all religious liberty would be gone.

According to this view, the church was one type of voluntary organization. It was composed of 'a number of persons who have come to agreement in a certain message about Christ and who

²⁶ *Christianity and Liberalism*, 168. For his defense of civil liberties, see *Christianity and Liberalism*, 10–16.

desire to unite in the propagation of that message.' Because no one was forced by legal means to join the church, the principle of religious liberty was not violated by requiring ministers and church official to assent to certain theological views. Machen applied this logic to the family and the school, two institutions that he thought were fundamental to nurturing Christian faith. Indeed, he thought civil liberties were so important for preserving a Christian witness that he defended the rights of non-Christians to found schools and rear children in a manner consistent with their beliefs. Religious liberty, he maintained, should be extended not just to Protestants, but to all religions. Once the state had the power to decide which religions (or even opinions) were acceptable then it could also outlaw Christianity.²⁷

If the principle of religious freedom meant that the state could not interfere in religious affairs, it also followed for Machen that religious bodies could not interfere in public matters. Two examples show how Machen applied this argument. One was the Eighteenth Amendment to the U. S. Constitution which abolished the sale and consumption of alcohol. When voting on whether the Presbyterian Church should endorse Prohibition Machen cast a negative vote. By involving itself in such political matters he thought the church was losing sight of its proper function which was to proclaim the gospel. Machen also opposed Bible reading and school prayer in public schools because these practices violated the liberties of non-Christians. These positions stood and continue to stand in marked contrast to many evangelicals and fundamentalists who look to government to preserve Christian influence.²⁸

An even greater objection to Christian interference in public matters was that such activity compromised the message of the gospel. For instance, Machen opposed Bible reading in primary and secondary schools because many educators were arguing that such reading would reinforce common notions about good and evil. He countered that the central theme of Scripture, and indeed the core of Christianity, was redemption. 'To create the impression that other things in the Bible contain any hope for humanity apart from [grace] is to contradict the Bible at its root.' This did not mean that schools should not enforce some kind of morality. But efforts to ground that morality upon the Bible had to be avoided. A secular moral education, Machen admitted, was

²⁷ *Ibid.* 168, and 13–14, note 2.

²⁸ For an example of Machen's reasoning, see 'The Necessity of the Christian School,' in *What is Christianity?*, 288–303.

by no means sufficient because 'the only true grounding of morality is found in the revealed will of God.' Indeed, a secularized education, 'though perhaps necessary, is a necessary evil.' But, at least it avoided the greater harm of confusing the Bible's central teaching. And the precise harm that religious activity in public affairs could produce was to remove Christian understandings of virtue and morality from first order considerations about human depravity and grace.²⁹

Thus Machen clearly saw and accepted the fundamentally secular character of modern public life. Of course, he recognized that secularism was potentially as harmful as it was beneficial. On the one hand, by taking religion out of the public sphere and protecting civil liberty, Christians, at least in the ideal, had the opportunity to establish churches and organizations for the promotion of their own beliefs and values without the oversight of the state. On the other hand, the principle of the separation of church and state removed large areas of culture from formal Christian influence. In either case, Machen's thought is an important reminder that the notion of transforming culture does not occur in a vacuum, and even more, that it involves implicitly the involvement of religion in politics to a degree at odds with modern notions of liberty and pluralism. While modernists and fundamentalists in Machen's day wanted to preserve Christian civilization in the United States and were willing to use the state to do so, Machen perceived the dangers of such a strategy. For him these dangers were as harmful to the church and its mission as they were to the civil liberties of citizens and communities.

The Responsibility of the Church in Our New Age

In conclusion, it might be helpful to consider some words of advice from Machen about the church's responsibility in light of this predicament. His emphasis on the corporate witness of the church led him to distinguish, first of all, between the church's and the individual believer's duties. His thoughts on these matters were forcefully expressed late in his career before a gathering of the American Academy of Political and Social Science. On that occasion he spent more time spelling out what these social scientists should not expect from the church than addressing the church's positive tasks. Nevertheless, those tasks—that the church was to be 'radically doctrinal,' 'radically intolerant,' and

²⁹ 'Reforming the Government Schools,' in *Education, Christianity, and the State*, ed. John W. Roberts, (Jefferson, 1987), 64, 63.

'radically ethical'—restated Machen's ideas about the witness-bearing nature of the church. What is more interesting, however, are the limitations he put upon the church. First of all, 'you cannot expect from [the church] any cooperation with non-Christian religion or with a non-Christian program of ethical culture.' 'There is no such thing,' he insisted, 'as a universally valid fund of religious principles upon which particular religions, including the Christian religion, may build.' Secondly, it was improper to look to the church for 'any official pronouncements upon the political or social questions of the day, and you cannot expect cooperation with the state in anything involving the use of force' because the church's weapons against evil 'are spiritual, not carnal.' The responsibility of the church in the new age, then, according to Machen, was 'the same as its responsibility in every age.'

It is to testify that this world is lost in sin; that the span of human life—nay the length of human history—is an infinitesimal island in the awful depths of eternity; that there is a mysterious, holy, living God, Creator of all, Upholder of all, infinitely beyond all; that He has revealed Himself to us in His Word and offered us communion with Himself through Jesus Christ the Lord; that there is no other salvation, for individuals or for nations, save this, but that this salvation is full and free, and that whosoever possesses it has for himself and for all others to whom he may be the instrument of bringing it a treasure compared with which all the kingdoms of the earth—nay, all the wonders of the starry heavens—are as the dust of the earth.³⁰

The profound responsibility of the church, however, did not exempt individual Christians from transforming or consecrating culture. Machen recognized the especially important role that families, schools and colleges, and communities play in nurturing and sustaining Christian fellowship and witness. Indeed, these institutions and associations along with the church provide believers with a sense of community and a culture of a distinctly Christian variety. In this culture, even one dominated by believers, not every item would be explicitly Christian because through common grace believers share much with unbelievers. But in a culture which allowed Christians to flourish in their various callings, God would be recognized as the giver and sustainer of all, and as such, every aspect of human life would be pursued by Christians to give honor and glory to him. Machen's

³⁰ 'The Responsibility of the Church in Our New Age,' in *What is Christianity?*, 283, 285, 286, 287.

ideas about Christian schools are instructive here because they were grounded in this vision of Christian culture.

It is this profound Christian permeation of every human activity, no matter how secular the world may regard it as being, which is brought about by the Christian school . . . A Christian boy or girl can learn mathematics, for example from a teacher who is not a Christian; and truth is truth however learned. But . . . the bearing of truth, the meaning of truth, the purpose of truth, even in the sphere of mathematics, seem entirely different to the Christian from that which they seem to the non-Christian.³¹

Clearly, this conception of Christian culture cannot be applied to a society dedicated to civil liberty and comprised of citizens of different religious traditions. Most modern nations embody a lacuna of diverse ethnic, religious and political cultures. Throughout the history of the United States, however, Protestants of British descent had tried to force this diversity into a mold compatible with their own beliefs and values, usually through political but also through evangelistic means. Machen's understanding of the church and culture spoke against this pattern. Rather than resisting cultural pluralism in the hope of building a national Christian culture, Machen encouraged a full-fledged pluralism in which Christians established their own Christian enclaves. He was not concerned with whether these local expressions of Christian culture would return America to its so-called Christian past or put Christians in political office. Rather, the purpose of such ghettos dominated by the family, church, and school was to train generations of believers who would take a Christian understanding of culture into all walks of life and who would recognize the importance of the church, the family and schools for sustaining Christian culture.³²

Machen's ideas about Christianity and culture were indeed anomalous. They were grounded in his larger convictions about the integrity of the church while they also accommodated social and political realities. His understanding of cultural transformation was not premised upon cultural uniformity or Protestant triumphalism. No doubt, many evangelicals and Reformed Christians today will take issue with the particulars of his perspective. But perhaps the way he addressed the relationship

³¹ 'Necessity of the Christian School,' 301.

³² A full expression of a Reformed perspective on cultural pluralism can be found in Gordon J. Spykman, 'The Principled Pluralist Position,' in *God and Politics: Four Views on the Reformation of Civil Government*, ed. Gary Scott Smith, (Phillipsburg, 1989), 78-101.

between Christianity and culture will be a reminder about the real problems posed by modern society for Christians who desire to transform the culture. Above all, Machen's ideas about the church and culture should be a warning about the ways in which cultural and political aspirations may obscure the weighty matters of the gospel and the church's duty to proclaim it.

Abstract

A world and life view which makes all of life subservient to the Lordship of Christ—sometimes called 'the transformation of culture'—has become the chief way among North American Evangelicals of distinguishing the Reformed tradition. While there is some justification for this perception, contemporary understandings of the Reformed outlook betray important aspects of Reformed theology and perhaps, more important, neglect real intellectual and social difficulties in current discussions about transforming culture. This paper features the thought of J. Gresham Machen on the nature and task of the church as a way of understanding better the cultural implications of the Reformed tradition. Though often dismissed as a fundamentalist, this paper argues that Machen's conception of the relationship between Christianity and culture perpetuated the Reformed tradition's teaching about the work of the church while offering a realistic assessment of the perils and possibilities of modern society.