

# CHRISTIANITY *and* LIBERALISM

J. Gresham Machen

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# Christianity and Liberalism



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J. GRESHAM MACHEN



LIGONIER MINISTRIES



*Christianity and Liberalism*

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## General Introduction

When Harry Emerson Fosdick preached his sermon “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” in 1922, it resounded like a thunderclap through the Presbyterian Church in the USA (PCUSA). In this sermon, Fosdick—a Baptist pastor filling the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church in New York City—laid bare the modernist objections to traditional Christianity. He spoke of the fantastic scientific discoveries of the preceding decades and of “multitudes of reverent Christians who have been unable to keep this new knowledge in one compartment of their minds and the Christian faith in another.” The fundamentalists, he argued, were striving to mark out strict boundaries of what could be taught in the church and in so doing were alienating other Christians and “quarreling over little matters when the world is dying of great needs.”

Fosdick argued that modern men cannot accept the traditional view of matters such as the virgin birth of Christ, the inspiration of the Bible, and the second coming of Christ. Rather than driving men out who could not embrace the church’s traditional understanding of these doctrines, the church should understand the time-bound character of Christianity as it has been received and should embrace the doctrines’ underlying spiritual messages rather than the doctrines in and of themselves.

Fosdick did not create the controversy, but he brought to it a

new clarity and urgency that demanded a response. *Christianity and Liberalism* was J. Gresham Machen's answer to Fosdick's challenge.

Machen (1881–1937) was well equipped for the task. He was raised as an orthodox Presbyterian by his devout mother in Maryland, and he also received significant exposure to theological liberalism. In 1905–6, he studied in Germany under Wilhelm Hermann, one of the leading exponents of liberalism. While he was impressed with Hermann's piety, Machen was repulsed by the ease with which he and his colleagues could discard traditional Christian understandings. Machen returned to the United States in 1906 with a strong commitment to a robust intellectual defense of the orthodox faith.

Upon his return, Machen took a post teaching New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary, where he had studied just a few years earlier. He soon made a name for himself as a first-rate scholar and a committed Presbyterian churchman. This reputation lent weight to his critique of the liberal project. *Christianity and Liberalism* commenced with an address to the Chester Presbytery Elders' Association on November 3, 1921. By the summer of 1922, Machen devoted much of his energy to completing the book and submitted the manuscript to the publisher in November 1922. The book's first publisher, Macmillan, expedited its production so that the book was published by February 1923.

*Christianity and Liberalism* took on the sentimental, pietistic religion of the Victorian age and stripped away its pretense of faithfulness. While men such as Fosdick saw themselves as excavating the essence of Christianity from the unhelpful and unnecessary accretions of human tradition, Machen laid out—clearly, exhaustively, and yet winsomely—how liberalism was in fact a different faith altogether from orthodox Christianity.

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In exposing this contrast, Machen necessarily took a side in what is now known as the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy. The term *fundamentalist* originated in 1910 from two separate streams. The first was a doctrinal deliverance of the General Assembly of the PCUSA that defined five doctrines as “necessary and essential”: the three that Fosdick named in his sermon, along with the penal substitutionary atonement of Christ and the historical reality of miracles. These doctrines became known as “the Five Fundamentals.” The second stream was a pamphlet series called *The Fundamentals*, which defended historic Protestant belief from liberal critiques but also took on targets including socialism, evolution, and cults.

Machen, however, was no fundamentalist as the term is commonly understood today; he was instead a confessional Presbyterian, and this informed his approach to the controversy. Machen saw the faith as all-encompassing and its various aspects as mutually reinforcing. This view, based on the Westminster Confession of Faith, led him to resist attempts to boil down Christianity to a few essential doctrines and instead to present a full-throated defense of the fullness of historic Reformed Protestantism. This impulse later resulted in Machen’s exit from Princeton and the PCUSA and his founding of Westminster Theological Seminary and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

As he defended the traditional theological views in *Christianity and Liberalism*, Machen pleaded with his ideological opponents for honesty. He perceived that they wanted the name of Christianity without being saddled with what they saw as its embarrassingly outdated and barbaric ideas. Yet, what they called Christianity bore little resemblance to what had always been called by that name. This was dishonest, Machen said; they could believe whatever they want,



but they should come up with a new name for it rather than calling it Christianity.

Machen wrote at a time when the landscape of American Christianity was changing rapidly. We might imagine that it was a time very different from our own. But the challenges then are much like the challenges we face today: the culture points to facets of our faith, denounces them as outdated or unloving, and demands that we renounce them. The theological liberals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries did just that in the hopes of gaining the approval of the culture. Today the danger is less that churches will negotiate fundamentals of the faith such as penal substitutionary atonement or the virgin birth. The issues now are frequently more cultural, and the temptation is to soft-pedal our beliefs for fear of causing offense and losing our hearing with the culture or with our neighbors.

Machen's call for honesty does not apply only to others; it applies to us as well. Nothing is gained—either for our neighbors or for the effectiveness of our witness—when we hold back on what we believe or when we shrink from the defense of the faith. As followers of the God who loves truth and who is truth, we must love the truth without shrinking back. May we, like Machen, have the courage to stand for the faith that was once delivered to the saints.

## Preface

On November 3, 1921, the author of the present book delivered before the Ruling Elders' Association of Chester Presbytery an address which was subsequently published in *The Princeton Theological Review*, vol. xx, 1922, pp. 93–117, under the title "Liberalism or Christianity." The interest with which the published address was received has encouraged the author to undertake a more extensive presentation of the same subject. By courtesy of *The Princeton Theological Review*, free use has been made of the address, which may be regarded as the nucleus of the present book. Grateful acknowledgment is also due to the editor of *The Presbyterian* for kind permission to use various brief articles which were published in that journal. The principal divisions of the subject were originally suggested to the author by a conversation which he held in 1921 with the Rev. Paul Martin of Princeton, who has not, however, been consulted as to the method of treatment.



# Introduction

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

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

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

The rise of this modern naturalistic liberalism has not come by chance, but has been occasioned by important changes which have recently taken place in the conditions of life. The past one hundred years have witnessed the beginning of a new era in human history, which may conceivably be regretted, but certainly cannot be ignored, by the most obstinate conservatism. The change is not something

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that lies beneath the surface and might be visible only to the discerning eye; on the contrary it forces itself upon the attention of the plain man at a hundred points. Modern inventions and the industrialism that has been built upon them have given us in many respects a new world to live in; we can no more remove ourselves from that world than we can escape from the atmosphere that we breathe.

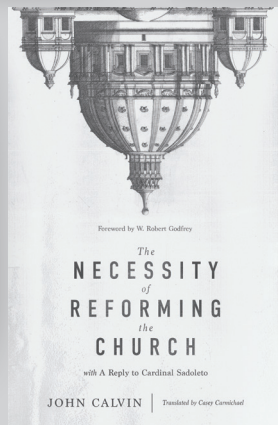
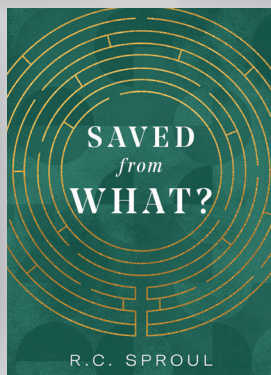
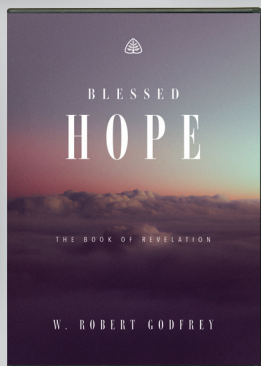
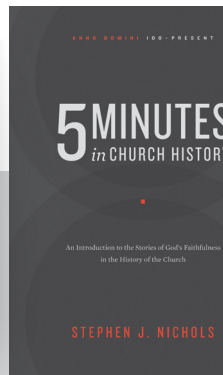
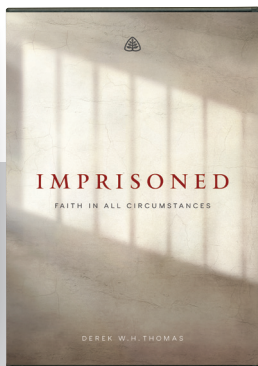
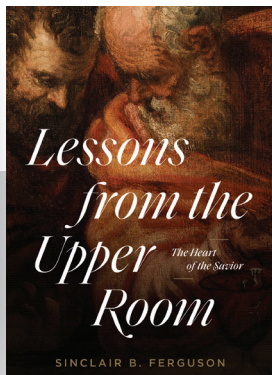
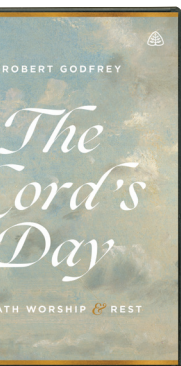
But such changes in the material conditions of life do not stand alone; they have been produced by mighty changes in the human mind, as in their turn they themselves give rise to further spiritual changes. The industrial world of to-day has been produced not by blind forces of nature but by the conscious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

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

In such an age, it is obvious that every inheritance from the past must be subject to searching criticism; and as a matter of fact some



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