

D. G. Hart

J. Gresham Machen and the Problem of Christian Civilization in America

By most measures the significance of J. Gresham Machen is minor. Few outside the world of conservative Presbyterianism know about the man once recognized as the most articulate and intelligent proponent of historic Protestantism in the United States. Indeed, most assessments of Machen highlight his historical importance, a sure sign of fading significance. As early twentieth-century fundamentalism's lone scholar, Machen is best remembered for his involvement in the ecclesiastical and cultural struggles of the 1920s, the time when the term "fundamentalism" was coined. From 1923, the publication date of Machen's *Christianity and Liberalism*, until his sudden death in 1937 at the age of fifty-five, Machen was the fiercest critic of Protestant liberalism, proving to be especially nettlesome for officials in the Northern Presbyterian Church (PCUSA). Over the course of the fundamentalist controversy Machen founded a new seminary (Westminster Theological Seminary in 1929) to protest theological changes within the administration of Princeton Seminary, the institution where he had taught New Testament since 1906 and established a reputation as one of the leading authorities in the United States in New Testament scholarship. In 1933 he accused the Presbyterian foreign missions establishment of harboring theological modernism, criticized the revered missionary statesman, Robert E. Speer, forced the novelist and missionary,

Pearl Buck, to resign from the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions, and established a rival and independent missions agency (The Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions). In the end, Machen's temerity forced the allegedly tolerant and mild-mannered Presbyterian leadership beyond the limits of Christian unity and good will. In 1935 the church tried and suspended him from the ministry for his renegade ways. Yet, despite the controversial conclusion to his rocky and distinguished career, Machen maintained his reputation as the most articulate, the most consistent, and probably the most ardent proponent of the Christian religion as defined by the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms.

Obituaries written by agnostics and believers alike readily acknowledged Machen's giftedness as a scholar and defender of the faith. For instance, the Unitarian, Albert C. Dieffenbach, religion editor for the *Boston Evening Transcript*, said that Machen was without equal in his estimate of the situation in American Protestantism. Pearl Buck, despite his opposition, wrote a tribute to Machen for *The New Republic*, concluding that he "was worth a hundred of his fellows who, as princes of the church, occupy easy places and play their church politics and trim their sails to every wind." From a different side of the Atlantic and the theological spectrum, W. J. Grier of the Irish Evangelical Presbyterian Church believed that no one else of his generation more resem-

bled John Calvin than Machen. And Machen's old friend and longtime colleague at Princeton Seminary, Caspar Wistar Hodge, wrote that with Machen's passing the church had lost "the greatest theologian in the English-speaking world."

While each of these assessments focuses on Machen as defender of the faith par excellence, they miss the wider significance of his thought and work. The contemporary who came the closest to seeing the broader implications of Machen's career was the unlikely figure, H. L. Mencken—though often it is those farthest removed from the situation who see it most clearly. In his column for the *Baltimore Evening Sun*, Mencken wrote that what had caused Machen to found his own seminary and church "was his complete inability, as a theologian, to square the disingenuous evasions of Modernism with the fundamentals of Christian doctrine" Machen, thus, 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." In words similar to Machen's, Mencken added that modernism was completely incompatible, "not only with anything rationally describable as Christianity, but also with anything deserving to pass as religion in general." For religion, he explained, "if it is to retain any genuine significance, can never be reduced to a series of sweet attitudes, possible to anyone not actually in jail for felony." Mencken was also one of the few observers to see a direct connection between Machen's theology and his opposition to what the journalist called "the Prohibition imbecility." When a multitude of "theological quacks, including not a few eminent Presbyterians, sought to read support for [Prohibition] into the New Testament," Machen "attacked them with great vigor, and routed them easily." He not only "proved that there was nothing in the teachings of Jesus to support so monstrous a folly: he proved abundantly that the known teachings of Jesus were unalterably against it. And having set forth that proof, he refused as a convinced and honest Christian to have anything to do with the dry jihad."

Mencken's observations provide a good vantage from which to evaluate Machen's contribution to American Protestantism and culture. Mencken saw, as few observers did then or historians have since, that the thrust of Machen's

writings, from his criticism of Protestant liberalism to his opposition to the Eighteenth Amendment and the Volstead Act, pointed out the inconsistencies and contradictions in white Protestant hopes for Christian civilization in America. Machen not only defended Calvinist orthodoxy against the sentimentalism and moralism of theological modernism, but, more pointedly, he opposed Protestant strategies designed to preserve a Christian nation which sacrificed doctrinal fidelity for cultural influence. Machen, thus, recognized the implicit tension between the otherworldly message of the gospel and the affairs of this world. This is not to say that Machen ignored earthly matters as he pursued eternal salvation, or that, in anticipation of post-modernism, he thought common cultural standards were merely disguises for power. Rather, having repudiated the mainline Protestant vision of Christian civilization in America—something that endeared Machen to secular intellectuals like Mencken—Machen looked instead to local communities and mediating structures rather than large-scale bureaucratic organizations as the proper basis for constructing a Christian culture. Aside from his accomplishments as a New Testament scholar, professor, and Presbyterian churchman, Machen's genius was to demolish and then recast the Protestant idea of Christian civilization in America. In the end, this feature of his thought makes Machen worthy of closer inspection by those who have some interest in the contemporary culture wars.

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Machen was an unlikely Fundamentalist. Born in 1881, the second son of Arthur W. Machen, a prominent Baltimore lawyer, he was reared in the privileged setting of Victorian gentility. He studied the classics as an undergraduate with Basil L. Gildersleeve at The Johns Hopkins University before going on for advanced training in Greek literature (Johns Hopkins), theology (Princeton Seminary), philosophy (Princeton University), and New Testament (Marburg and Göttingen Universities). He settled in 1906 at Princeton Seminary as a lecturer in New Testament, and after many years of misgivings about the ministry finally sought ordination in the Northern Presbyterian Church and was promoted to Assistant

Professor of New Testament at the seminary considered by many to be the West Point of Calvinist Orthodoxy.

Yet, as unlikely as it was for a man of Machen's learning and status to enter the fundamentalist controversy on the side of the religious right, by 1925 he was one of the best known fundamentalists. The author of numerous scholarly articles on the birth narratives in the gospels, a well-received book on the apostle Paul (*The Origin of Paul's Religion*, 1921), and an introductory grammar on New Testament Greek, still in use at Protestant seminaries, Machen made his biggest mark in 1923 with the publication of *Christianity and Liberalism*, a book which Walter Lippmann called "the best popular argument produced by either side" in the controversy.

Machen's classic indictment of theological modernism is the most useful guide to confessional Presbyterian objections to the leftward drift of the mainline Protestant churches. Part of what made *Christianity and Liberalism* so appealing was its candid, no-nonsense tone. Rather than debating the merits of evolutionary theory or liberal Protestant views of the millennium, Machen contended that Christianity and liberalism were fundamentally different, two distinct religions that were diametrically opposed. To make his point, Machen no doubt used language that was highly offensive to liberals. "The present time," he wrote, "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." "Despite the liberal use of traditional phraseology," he went on, "modern liberalism not only is a different religion from Christianity but belongs in a totally different class of religions." Machen nevertheless displayed sufficient tact for the polite sensibilities of editors at Macmillan. In fact, the author's lengthy exposition of Protestant theology blunted whatever polemical edge the book might have had, thus making the book read more like a primer in Calvinist theology than a fundamentalist tract.

Machen explained within separate chapters the basic tenets of "historic Christianity," devoting special attention to the doctrines of God, man, Christ, and salvation. Under these tradi-

tional topics he attempted to show that Christianity was a religion of grace and redemption, and that liberalism, while using traditional Christian terminology, was essentially a religion of morality and human goodness. For instance, with regard to the doctrine of God, Machen contrasted Christianity's idea of "awful transcendence" with liberal notions about God's fatherhood, which he believed bordered on pantheism. Likewise, Machen's discussion of Christ featured a sharp distinction between Christ as an "object of faith"—the traditional Christian teaching—versus Jesus as an "example of faith"—the liberal conception.

The most obvious difference between Christianity and liberalism, according to Machen, appeared in Protestant teaching on salvation, a topic which filled the book's longest chapter. Christians traditionally held, he argued, that Jesus was a savior, not because he inspired people to lead good lives but because he bore the penalty of sin in his death upon the cross. This distinction provoked a lengthy defense of the vicarious atonement. For liberals the atonement was merely a symbol of self-sacrifice and a model for the Christian life. But for orthodox believers Christ's substitutionary death and resurrection were the only means for satisfying divine justice. These different understandings of salvation, Machen believed, were not the ivory tower speculations of academic theologians but had a direct bearing upon the faith and practice of American Protestants. As one who liked to visit different churches and hear what the other side was saying, Machen was particularly sensitive to the difference Christian and liberal ideas made for preaching. He wrote,

We are shut up in this world as in a beleaguered camp. To maintain our courage, the liberal preacher offers us exhortation. Make the best of the situation, he says, look on the bright side of life. But unfortunately, such exhortation cannot change the facts. In particular it cannot remove the dreadful fact of sin. Very different is the message of the Christian evangelist. He offers not reflection on the old but tidings of something new, not exhortation but a gospel, . . . news of the atoning death of Christ.

The most frequent way of dismissing Machen's argument, both during his lifetime and since, has been to argue that he was too preoccupied with European developments and lacked a sufficient awareness of the American church scene. After all, he had studied with the leading lights of liberal theology in Germany, and as a seminary professor he had little experience as a pastor or in the denominational machinery. The reassurance provided by this religious form of American exceptionalism—the idea that America providentially remained uncontaminated by the sins of European secularism and dogmatism—fails to pay adequate attention to the precise origins of Machen's critique of liberalism. And when those origins are acknowledged, the significance of his argument becomes all the more compelling. For what *Christianity and Liberalism* demonstrated was that Protestant hopes for Christian civilization in America—both on the modernist left and the fundamentalist right—were profoundly flawed and, worse, seriously compromised the Christian religion.

In order to do full justice to Machen's opposition to religious liberalism it is necessary to consider the character of Anglo-American Protestantism in the era between 1870 and 1930. Despite all of the problems surrounding the relationship between church and state throughout American history, this was the period when the Protestant establishment came into its own. Though some historians argue that during the first three decades of the twentieth-century mainstream Protestantism gradually lost influence and stature—what some have called a second disestablishment—more remarkable is how Protestants continued to exert considerable clout in the United States. After all, the period in which Machen lived was the era of the Social Gospel which promised harmony between labor and management, Progressivism which promised a more democratic society, the Student Volunteer Movement which promised to win “the World for Christ in this Generation,” and a world war which promised to make the world, not just the United States, in the words of a Presbyterian president, “safe for democracy.” To be sure, the Protestant establishment did not enjoy the sanction of government. But the personal networks and agencies formed by America's largest de-

nominations comprised an organizational edifice with so much influence and cultural capital that it is possible to contend, according to William R. Hutchison, the preeminent historian of the mainline, that mainstream Protestantism “felt responsible for America: for its moral instruction, for the religious content of national ideals, and for the educative and welfare functions that governments would not . . . carry out.”

The means by which Anglo-American Protestantism adopted a gospel of social reform and civilization are varied. For instance, during the American Revolution the ties that had developed between religion and politics in the wake of the First Great Awakening became stronger. This is especially evident in the way such loaded political terms as liberty, tyranny, virtue and sin carried both profound political and religious significance. Among Calvinistic clergy, namely Congregationalists and Presbyterians, Puritan theology became hard to distinguish from Whig theories of politics. As a result the political cause of freedom from the English monarch became synonymous with Christian liberty from Satan and depravity. Abraham Keteltas, a Presbyterian minister in Massachusetts, spoke for many when he said of American independence that “the most precious remains of civil liberty the world can now boast of, are lodged in our hands.” America's cause was that of “truth, against error and falsehood,” “of pure and undefiled religion, against bigotry, superstition, and human inventions.” In short, the lines were clearly drawn between “the cause of heaven against hell—of the kind Parent of the universe against the prince of darkness, and the destroyer of the human race.”

The close identification of mainstream Protestants with the American nation became even firmer during the Second Great Awakening. Because the revolution did away with the crown and rejected a national church, thus leaving the American republic without any assistance from the institutions chiefly responsible for guaranteeing social order and stability in European culture, a significant cultural vacuum existed in the new nation. Congregationalists, Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians, however, quickly responded and provided what little organization and uniformity obtained in the United States before 1860. The revivals of the Second Great Awakening were especially crucial to the ordering of life

in the United States. These revivals sponsored a host of voluntary agencies whose purpose was to eliminate every kind of evil, from slavery to the consumption of alcohol. While revivalistic evangelicalism has the reputation of encouraging a subjective piety and a privatistic disregard for public life, the demand for evidence of conversion in the evangelical tradition has actually promoted an activist outlook that leads to social and political involvement.

The controversies which led to the outbreak of the Civil War only contributed to the American Protestant confusion of the public and ecclesiastical realms. To say that the war to end slavery and preserve the Union was a religious one is to repeat a truism. And both sides in the struggle were equally guilty. Yankees clearly saw their aims, as Julia Ward Howe's "Battle Hymn of the Republic" demonstrates, as the cause of the Lord in eliminating an evil which prevented America from fulfilling its eternal calling. Thus, the Civil War was, as Mark Noll has written, "the last chapter in the Christian story of the Second Great Awakening." But Protestants in the South were no less squeamish about identifying God with their side. Southern churchmen defended slavery as a God-ordained social arrangement, condoned by Scripture itself, believed that the institution was a fruitful way for evangelizing African-Americans, and contrasted the righteousness of Southern ways of life with the depravity of Northern society.

While some Americans were dubious about deciphering God's purposes in American developments, Protestants, especially those in the North, emerged from the Civil War convinced that America embodied the kingdom of God. Thus, Protestant influence continued unabated into the period in which Machen lived. What is more, the technological and industrial advances accelerated by the war generated the kind of wealth which would fund institutions of considerable strength and which Protestants would use to further Christ's earthly reign. One need only think of the many cultural institutions, from universities and museums to settlement houses, which Protestant philanthropists founded in the post-bellum era to be reminded how the affluence of this expanding economy was used in a way that would further the reign of justice and righteousness in the United States.

The kingdom of God looked no less secure on the eve of the first [sic] World War. We only need to remember the religious language which the 1912 presidential candidates used to appeal to voters. While Teddy Roosevelt declared "We stand at Armageddon and we battle for the Lord," Woodrow Wilson was no less convinced of the righteousness of his campaign and platform. As Gaius Glenn Atkins would later comment, "The people were ready to cry 'God wills it' and set out for world peace, prohibition, the Progressive Party, the 'New Freedom' or 'the World for Christ in this Generation.'" And again, as in the case of the Civil War, the Allied victory in the First World War only added to the momentum of Protestant crusades for Christian civilization in the United States. Indeed, the war promoted a host of ecumenical endeavors as Protestants put aside theological and ecclesiastical differences during the war in order to assist the Allies, and then after the war to extend the blessings of democracy and freedom.

While the Protestant establishment supplied much of the righteous zeal for the reforms of the Progressive Era, its theological identity had become fuzzy at best. Mainstream Protestantism in the early twentieth century was remarkably fluid, requiring little more than general commitments to Jesus and the Bible and the hope of perpetuating a Christian society. This characterization was no less true of biblical studies, the field in which Machen wrote and taught. Though historians have usually stressed that higher criticism broke radically with traditional Protestant understandings of the Bible, little attention has been given to how conventional the application of this scholarship was. Rather than destroying the authority of the Bible, most advocates of the new approaches to Scripture used modern learning to support the social program of the churches. In Machen's particular field of Pauline studies, the scholarly consensus was that Paul's theology and stress upon Christ as a savior was a betrayal of the simple humanitarian teachings of Christ. In other words, Paul was blamed for being the second founder of Christianity. The church's task, and many biblical scholars assisted in the effort, was to go "back to Christ" and recover the simple ethical instructions of Jesus.

Machen's scholarship, even while tackling head on the technical difficulties of New Testa-

ment studies, had in view also the progressive ethos that dominated American Protestantism and culture. He did not merely refute the conclusions of liberal scholars in such books as the *The Origin of Paul's Religion* (1921) and *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (1930) but also went after what he considered the conventional and unthoughtful piety of American Protestantism. From his perspective, establishmentarian motives had prevented Protestants from recognizing how much a middle-class moralism and American nationalism had determined their reading of the Bible and conception of the church. In his inaugural address at Princeton Seminary, for instance, he asked whether Christianity was merely "a means to an end, or an end in itself." Was communion with God "a help toward the betterment of humanity, or itself the one great ultimate goal of human life?" These questions revealed just where Machen thought American Protestantism was most vulnerable. The churches had abandoned Christian convictions about sin and grace for the social program of liberty and democracy. The problem with mainstream Protestantism was that it was too conventional, not that it was too radical.

This is why it is important to recognize the precise circumstances that prompted Machen's critique of liberalism. It was not just that liberal Protestants from Presbyterian pulpits were contradicting the established teachings of the church, or that moderates, the majority of the denomination, lacked the nerve to discipline liberals. Rather, Machen was reasserting the primacy of the spirituality of the church and of the individualism of Christian salvation against the more general American evangelical habit of confusing piety with civilization.

Machen's criticism of liberalism originated during mainline Protestant debates over the InterChurch World Movement, an ecumenical effort of the early 1920s designed to consolidate and centralize the largest Protestant denominations into a federated church, not in reaction to the publication of German New Testament criticism. The kind of indifference to the integrity of distinct Christian expressions exhibited in these ecumenical endeavors was precisely what prompted Machen to oppose liberalism. And part of the reason for mainline Protestant nonchalance about the differences between Presbyteri-

ans, Congregationalists, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Methodists and Baptists was that church leaders no longer thought that the doctrines which distinguished these denominations were important. Instead, what had been significant differences about the nature and means of salvation were now generally thought to be little more than historical curiosities. The constituent members of the then Federal Council of Churches displayed a clubby spirit which implied that they regarded Protestants from other denominations as good and decent folk. And because of that goodness and decency, it didn't make sense to go on competing with each other. In fact, such virtues were exactly what the gospel was all about. What difference did it make whether a Christian attended an Episcopal or Baptist church? So long as they were law-abiding and right-thinking, that was what really counted.

Machen became a highly offensive person in Protestant establishment circles because he had the temerity of insisting that the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms were not just historically influential documents but were actually true. He, like Princeton theologians before him, claimed that the Reformed faith was the best and fullest expression of what God had revealed in Scripture. Now, of course, he recognized that Lutherans and Roman Catholics disagreed with him about the content of the Westminster Standards. But the substance of this disagreement wasn't that Presbyterian theology constituted a threat to the civility and harmony of American society. Rather, Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Roman Catholics disagreed because they believed that their respective traditions were the best and fullest expressions of Christian truth. And because of the truth claims implicit in each Christian tradition, Machen argued, ecumenical Protestant plans for a federation of different denominations were guilty of doctrinal indifference at best and intellectual skepticism at worst.

Not only did the ecumenical endeavors of the post-World War I years betray a disregard of the truth claims of theological statements, but they also, in Machen's estimate, revealed an entirely different understanding of the gospel. He believed that Protestant plans for a federation of denominations were further evidence of Yankee nation-building efforts which plundered Christianity for moral teaching but ignored the meta-

physical and historical claims from which Christian ethics flowed. Liberal Protestantism specifically, and Northern Protestantism more generally, to the extent that it slighted doctrine for morality, had politicized Christianity. As Machen wrote at the conclusion of *Christianity and Liberalism* where he described the standard Protestant service with the preacher's "opinions about the social problems of the hour" and hymns "breathing out the angry passions of 1861," the church, he wrote, no longer offered refuge to the weary soul seeking communion with God. Instead, it was too busy with "the warfare of the world."

Machen was not the only one to see this problem in the Protestant establishment. Fundamentalists, of course, also accused liberals of substituting programs of social improvement for the salvation of souls. But fundamentalists were also unwilling to give up the hope of Christian civilization in America. And while they believed that reaching the lost with the good news that Christ was the only way of salvation, they also suffered from a functional approach to the gospel. Often fundamentalists made remarks which suggested that the reason for remaining faithful was so that the United States would remain a moral and decent land, the sort of place you would like to bring up your kids. As a result, fundamentalists did not come to terms with the idea of religious liberty nor with the fact of religious diversity. Machen, however, recognized that in order to preserve the gospel in America, Christians would have to give up the project of building a Christian America, or at least they would have to make faithfulness to God prior to the social and political consequences of that faithfulness. This recognition made him one of the few American Protestants to see a direct connection between efforts to found a Christian civilization and the Protestant churches' abandonment of historic Christianity.

This is not to say, however, that Machen rejected altogether the notion of Christian culture. For one of his most attractive features was his ability to combine profound Christian conviction with a genuinely refined and cultivated outlook. Reared in a genteel home, 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. Not only was his education first-rate, but religious and family associations allowed Machen to be a part, if only on the periphery, of the social and cultural world of America's political, business and educational leaders, from visits in his parents' home with Woodrow Wilson, being a guest of Henry Van Dyke, professor of English literature at Princeton and Ambassador to the Netherlands during the Wilson administration, to preaching at and worshipping in John D. Rockefeller, Jr.'s church a Seal Harbor, Maine. Machen's social status was clearly one factor in his appeal to the fundamentalist movement.

Machen's understanding of Christianity's relationship to culture went beyond the surface of polite company 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 fundamentalism. His best statement on these matters came in his 1912 address, entitled "Christianity and Culture," where he addressed 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 preaching? Machen's answer 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.

Sentiments like these clearly do not fit with a rejection of Christian civilization. The problem for Machen, then, was not that Christians were too entangled with culture. One couldn't be hu-

man without having culture of some kind. Rather, the problem was the way Protestants, whether liberal or fundamentalist, pursued Christian civilization. Here Machen's argument may be broken down into the two words that constitute the phrase, "Christian culture." On the one hand, Machen took issue with the Christianity which liberals and fundamentalists used as the foundation for their ideal of Christian civilization. Liberalism, he argued, was a denial of the gospel and substituted civilization for grace. Fundamentalism, while preserving supernaturalism, was for Machen a reduced or impoverished understanding of Christianity which could only result in a stunted culture.

On the other hand, Machen was sharply critical of what passed for culture among Northern Protestants, again, whether liberal or fundamentalist. True to the nationalist and assimilationist sentiments of Northern political culture, liberals and evangelicals judged Christian civilization primarily by national criteria. They, like Machen, wanted a uniform or homogenous culture, but unlike Machen looked to implement this unity at the national level, whether through legislation or voluntarism. Prohibition was a classic example of Northern Protestant attempts to maintain Christian culture in the United States. Most people remember that anti-liquor sentiments were rife among fundamentalists. But Prohibition was also the political orthodoxy of liberal and moderate Protestants, so much so that while the Presbyterian General Assemblies of the 1920s were loathe to refuse ministers who did not affirm the virgin birth of Christ, they had no trouble denying Machen's promotion at Princeton Seminary in 1926 because of his rather muted opposition to the church's knee-jerk support for the Eighteenth Amendment and the Volstead Act.

Machen's reasons for opposing Prohibition are indicative of his understanding of culture. While he believed that the church had no business going beyond Scripture in the things it condemned as sin or becoming involved in political matters, he also opposed federal regulations of the sale and distribution of alcoholic beverages because as a man with deep Southern sympathies he believed in states' rights. This is a shorthanded way of saying that Machen believed local communities should decide their own affairs and set their own standards. So, for instance, if citizens in

Evanston, Illinois wanted to restrict the sale and distribution of alcohol, they had that prerogative as members of that community. But there was no sound reason why Evanston's views on alcohol—or the Women's Christian Temperance Union's for that matter—should become national policy.

Still, Machen was far more interested and involved in political affairs than we would expect of a fundamentalist or of a Presbyterian who believed, as he did, in the spirituality of the church. Throughout his writing on national or local politics he displayed a congenital contempt for all things federal. In addition to contesting the Eighteenth Amendment, he opposed the policy of military conscription during the first [sic] World War, the Child-Labor Amendment, the creation of a Federal Department of Education, as well as the New Deal on the grounds that the growth of the federal government made the United States more uniform and prevented local communities and minority perspectives from flourishing. An inveterate opponent of paternalism—the idea that governments would force on their constituents what was "good" for them—Machen believed the nationalism America was experiencing during the 1920s and 1930s would ultimately replace all human and cultural differences with one huge "main street" where spiritual adventure would be discouraged and democracy would be regarded as "consisting in the reduction of all mankind to the proportions of the narrowest and least gifted of the citizens." Hence, he opposed all efforts to silence dissenting voices, from Socialists to Roman Catholics. "What absurdities are uttered in the name of a pseudo-Americanism," he wrote. "The same right of propaganda which I desire for myself I want to see also in the possession of others."

While Machen's opposition to the centralization of the federal government and to the standardization of American culture made him a libertarian, his defense of freedom was designed to preserve the autonomy and integrity not of individuals per se but of mediating structures such as churches, religious schools, and families. Machen was no advocate of liberty for the sake of securing greater rights for individuals to do or become whatever they desired. Rather, he advocated liberty for the purpose, as has been typical of conservatism more generally, of restraining the

coercive and homogenizing powers of the liberal nation-state. What many have had trouble reconciling in Machen is his confessional, dogmatic understanding of the church which tolerates no diversity, with his libertarian pluralistic views about society which appear to result inevitably in chaos. But actually such narrowness in the church is quite compatible with libertarian resistance to centralized government. For the growth of big government has been synonymous with the growth of individual liberties. And the growth of the state and the liberation of the individual has come on the backs of such mediating structures as churches, families, schools and local communities.

In defending the prerogative of the Presbyterian Church to exclude liberals from its communion, Machen was also defending the freedom of association. In opposing the federal department of education Machen was arguing that religious groups and local communities should be able to educate their children according to their own traditions. And in opposing the Child-Labor Amendment Machen was trying to protect families from a paternalistic government intent upon telling parents what to do with their children. In each of these cases, freedom meant refuge from the power of centralized government, not liberation from legitimate authority. And in each case Machen was not defending individual rights as much as he was protecting the freedom of association. As he never tired of arguing, narrowness or intolerance within families, churches, communities, and schools was essential to the liberty and authority of those institutions. To say otherwise was to deny freedom altogether and insist upon a standard of tolerance that would obliterate all differences.

Machen's understanding of liberty was intimately tied to his conception of Christian culture. For, to him, the institutions most responsible for passing on the faith and creating Christian culture were precisely the mediating structures which he defended against the homogenous state. Machen, thus, was not just a political localist. He was a cultural localist as well. For him genuine culture was always local. Culture was first and foremost rooted in the experience of a community at a particular time and place. It was grounded in face-to-face interaction, concrete relationships, common stories, and recognizable lines of ac-

countability and authority. This is only to say that the most important work of socialization, education, and indoctrination occurs in families, small churches which nurture families rather than family values, and schools which are directly accountable to families. Localism of this kind applied as much to churches as it did to governments. Machen was quick to oppose the centralization of the Presbyterian Church in the 1930s on the same grounds that he opposed the policies of the New Deal. Just as it was wrong for national governments to take control of educating children, so it was wrong for denominational agencies to become obstacles to the ministry of word and sacrament in the local church. If the family was the God-ordained means for rearing children, the ministry of the local congregation was the God-ordained means for nurturing and teaching the faithful.

Rather than rejecting the idea and responsibility of constructing Christian civilization, Machen merely reduced the scale of such an endeavor. In fact, the question of scale was crucial to the differences between Machen and other Protestants. While liberals and fundamentalists wanted Christian culture on a national scale, Machen believed that Christian culture with any meaning or integrity could only be local. And though he never argued this way, I suspect that he might have said that the reason for this stems from the order of creation. According to the Reformed tradition in which Machen stood, the spheres of family, church and community were designed to restrain evil and propagate the faith. Large-scale institutions, both corporations and governments, on the other hand, invariably treat mediating structures as barriers to efficiency and uniformity, or as backwaters of ignorance and bigotry.

While Machen's ideas about the church and the state have been criticized as a betrayal of Presbyterian convictions about the transformation of culture, upon further inspection it looks as if his views were far more Calvinistic than his critics acknowledge. For he saw that the effort to build a Christian civilization on the scale of the United States, or any modern nation-state for that matter, would invariably undermine the integrity of both the gospel and genuine culture. Developments since Machen's death would only seem to confirm this perspective, as evangelical Protes-

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tants have gained respectability at the expense of theological integrity, as the old liberal Protestant faith in the United States has apostatized into a convulsive hostility to all things Western, and as various ethnic Christians, from Roman Catholics to Dutch Calvinists, have rushed from their ghettos to the suburbs only to exchange the rich though provincial culture of hyphenated Americans for the banal culture of the therapeutic.

In the end Machen was the rare apologist who added to his defense of Christianity the crucial idea that orthodoxy depended upon more than correct doctrine. Christianity, he tried to argue, also depended upon families, active churches, and the integrity of local communities. And the orthodoxy of the modern world, he also argued, while hostile to the teaching of historic Christianity, also threatened more subtly the mediating institutions upon which Christian faith and practice depended by undermining the institutions that are necessary for passing on and preserving the faith once delivered. These warnings prompted Walter Lippmann almost seventy years ago to write something in *A Preface to Morals* that is no less true today for us, who, whether we embrace Machen's faith, still share his concern for the impoverishment of our culture. "We shall do well to listen to Dr. Machen."

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Historian D. G. Hart is currently Director of Academic Projects and Faculty Development at the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI). He formerly held positions at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia and at Westminster Seminary California in Escondido. He is the author of numerous books, including Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), The Lost Soul of American Protestantism (Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), That Old-time Religion in Modern America: Evangelical Protestantism in the Twentieth Century (Ivan R. Dee, 2002), Recovering Mother Kirk: The Case for Liturgy in the Reformed Tradition (Baker Academic, 2003), and Deconstructing Evangelicalism: Conservative Protestantism in the Age of Billy Graham (Baker Academic, 2004). A pdf file of a lecture given by Dr. Hart for called "Transformed? Protestants and American Culture" is available online at <http://www.isi.org/lectures/text/pdf/bart10-15-04.pdf>. A pdf file of Machen's "Christianity and Culture" (which is cited by Hart) is available at http://www.marshillaudio.org/resources/pdf/Machen_Culture.pdf. The present article is at http://www.marshillaudio.org/resources/pdf/Hart_Machen.pdf.