

*Birmingham Theological Journal*  
A Journal of Birmingham Theological Seminary  
Volume 2 | Issue 1 | Book Review 2 | Dec. 2024

---

**Review of J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and  
Liberalism: 100th Anniversary Edition***

Olan Stubbs

**Recommended Citation**

Stubbs, Olan. Review of *Christianity and Liberalism: 100th Anniversary Edition* by J. Gresham Machen. *Birmingham Theological Journal* 2, no. 1 (Dec. 2024): 84–89.

If this book review is accessed online, please add the URL to the citation.

Machen, J. Gresham. *Christianity and Liberalism: 100th Anniversary Edition*. Foreword by Kevin DeYoung. 1923. Reprint, Glenside: PA, Westminster Seminary Press, 2023. 224 pages. Hardcover, \$14.99.

What makes J. Gresham Machen and his work so compelling that Westminster Seminary Press chose to release a special 100-year anniversary edition? Machen was an American theologian, Presbyterian New Testament scholar, and a seminary professor who lived from 1881 to 1937. Machen was ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA) in 1915, and he taught at Princeton Seminary with other great Presbyterian scholars, such as B. B. Warfield (xvii-xviii). As Machen's denomination began to embrace German liberal theology, he sought to fight back and stand for the clear gospel truth as taught in the Scriptures. This book arose from such fights.

As Princeton and his denomination moved away from orthodoxy as represented in the Westminster Standards, Machen led the charge to form a new seminary in 1929.<sup>1</sup> He served as one of the first professors at the newly formed Westminster Theological Seminary. He also helped organize a new denomination, which is now known as the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 1936.<sup>2</sup> He wrote many other significant theological works, including *The Virgin Birth of Christ* in 1930.

Through his fights over doctrine with his original denomination and seminary, Machen became a leader in clearly defining the primary Christian doctrines he covers in *Christianity and Liberalism*. Because this book addresses the most basic and foundational doctrines of Christianity in such a clear and concise manner, it is as relevant today as when it was published over one hundred years ago. The difficulties one faces and the battles believers must fight today

---

<sup>1</sup> "He Took Up Arms against Liberalism: J. Gresham Machen (1881-1937)," Desiring God, accessed October 21, 2024, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/he-took-up-arms-against-liberalism>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

in modern culture are not identical to those Machen fought, yet “there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccles. 1:9).<sup>3</sup> Satan continues to attack the truths of Christianity in various ways. Being experts in the one true orthodox religion is the best way to defend against whatever the latest assault may be. For this reason, among others, Westminster Seminary Press has chosen to re-release the book. Other reasons include celebrating Machen’s timeless work and the seminary he founded.

Machen proposed that “despite the liberal use of traditional phraseology, modern liberalism not only is a different religion from Christianity but belongs in a totally different class of religions. . . . The liberal attempt at reconciling Christianity with modern science has really relinquished everything distinctive of Christianity, so that what remains is in essentials only that same indefinite type of religious aspiration which was in the world before Christianity came upon the scene” (7). According to Kevin DeYoung,

By "liberalism" Machen was not thinking about the classic liberalism of John Locke and Adam Smith or the political liberalism of more recent vintage. He was thinking of the well-established tradition of theological liberalism which grew up in German soil and was blossoming in the mainland denominations of America in the early part of the twentieth century. From Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), who argued that the essence of true religion is a feeling of absolute dependence, to Albert Ritschl (1822–1889), who emphasized the kingdom of God as moral progress, to Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930) who insisted that the development of doctrine marked the abandonment of true Christianity, to Walter Rauschenbusch (1861–1918) who advocated the social gospel of deeds over creeds, liberalism was its own tradition, with its own heroes, its own core beliefs, and its own ecclesiastical vision" (xviii).

Machen describes his methodology as a comparison between liberalism and Christianity on important teachings of the faith to highlight their differences: “An examination of the teachings of liberalism in comparison with those of Christianity will show that in every point the two movements are in direct opposition” (53). The topics of comparison in each chapter include these: In chapter 3, Machen addresses the doctrine of God and the doctrine of man. Chapter 4

---

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced employ the English Standard Version.

addresses the Bible as the Word of God. Chapter 5 is about the person of Christ. In chapter 6, Machen discusses the doctrine of salvation. Machen closes with a discussion of the institution of the church in chapter 7.

Five themes stand out. First, the book was written to address primary doctrines, doctrines of “first importance,” as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:3. This is not a book written to address esoteric, secondary doctrines that can become intramural debates between orthodox believers. Rather, this book transcends cultures because it addresses essential, universal truths.

Machen is helpful in explaining how important the word “only” is in Christian doctrine. *Only* Christ is Lord. *Only* Christ is Savior. He goes as far as to say that if the word “only” had been left off of the early church’s doctrine that “Christ is Lord,” the church likely would have never been persecuted—but neither would it have changed the world (127)! “Christ is Lord” might have fit among the pantheon of pagan gods. “Only Christ is Lord” is offensive and was worthy of death in the Roman empire.

Machen shows the folly of all sin, other world views, and doctrines of salvation apart from Christ alone. Machen asserts, “Emancipation from the blessed will of God always involves bondage to some worse taskmaster” (149). His words carry conviction to snap people out of playing with sin and false doctrine, as though they were merely a game.

Second, Machen’s style is a great model for ministers trying to reach the lost today. Although the book is polemic, it is not angry. Machen treats his opponents with kindness and respect. He knows that the doctrines he professes and defends are true, yet he does not carry an attitude of arrogant triumphalism. He seeks to win his readers and not just the argument itself.

Machen is fair minded to the other side. He takes their arguments seriously. Because he has, he is even more insightful about the dangers of liberalism. Likewise, Machen is strong in

addressing the heresy of his opponents. Machen makes it plain that liberalism is not a mere offshoot of genuine Christianity but a completely different system of thought and belief. Its roots and foundations are fundamentally different (176-177).

Third, the book is applicable. Machen writes as a fellow struggler who has wrestled with some of the tenants of liberalism and felt their appeal. Machen shows the blessings and the curses of free public education. It is a wonderful thing for the government to offer it to those who want or need it. It is a terrible thing once it becomes a tyranny that seeks to enforce its ideals on everyone (14). In some ways his book seems almost prophetic at times for his warnings to the church in many regards and especially with the current system of education in this country (180).

Machen speaks to the tension believers feel between being set free from sin and yet still having to fight the battle daily against indwelling sin (150). He reminds readers there is a danger in only focusing on the large sins of society. He also warns that Satan will often use the seemingly “small” sins to gain a foothold with believers (68).

Machen writes very wisely on how liberalism sought to use Christianity to transform society, but Christianity cannot merely be used or accepted as a means unto the end of social reform (156-157). If this is done, eventually the roots of Christianity are thrown out in hopes of continuing to enjoy its fruits, even while the foundation is gone. History since the Enlightenment has shown that this may seem to work in the short run, but eventually, it is doomed to fail.

Fourth, the book is evangelistic. One of the aims clearly is the conversion of souls. Machen obviously cared about the lost and about getting the gospel in its fullness and clarity to people perishing in their sins. His heart shines through his writing. He makes clear that the church must keep the salvation of souls as the primary focus and see the transformation of society as a secondary, though important, consequence of so many being saved (162).

Fifth, Machen's book is accessible. It is short. It is easy to read, understand, and apply. Some books seem to be written from one academic to other academics. There is a place for that, but this book does not fall into that category. This book can be helpful to the average Christian amid their busy lives. It is not a dry, theological tome.

All five of these themes help Machen's book stand the test of time. Hence, Christians are discussing it and reading it one hundred years later. Machen writes so powerfully about the depths, consequences, and pain of sinfulness. His moving depiction of the utter helplessness of sinners demonstrates the need for the atoning work of Christ (134-136). Machen concludes, "Surely this and this alone is joy. But it is a joy that is akin to fear. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. . . . We, God help us – sinful as we are, we would see Jehovah. Despairing, hoping, trembling, half-doubting and half-believing, trusting all to Jesus, we venture into the presence of the very God. And in His presence, we live" (139). This is the message Christians rejoice to hear, know, experience, and proclaim. This is the message that a dying world is so desperate to hear.