

Machen the Reformer

by Dr. John A. Battle, Prof. of NT at WRS

“For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” –1 Corinthians 2:2

This year we celebrated the 200th anniversary of the founding of Princeton Theological Seminary. The Old Princeton fought valiantly for the infallibility of Scripture and the Reformed faith. Hundreds of graduates flowed from that school into pulpits in America and into the mission fields of the world. The story of a great modern reformer comes from the end of the Old Princeton era.

J. Gresham Machen was Professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary for over twenty years. During those years everyone recognized him as a profound scholar and gifted teacher. His two scholarly books (*The Origin of Paul's Religion*, and *The Virgin Birth of Christ*) firmly established his international reputation. His excellent *New Testament Greek for Beginners* demonstrates his teaching ability; it still is used in schools today—we use it for first year Greek here at WRS!



But Machen was more than a scholar. He brought the message of true Christianity to the people in the churches, and sent forth a call to reformation. His popular books (*Liberalism and Christianity*, *What Is Faith?*, *The Christian Faith in the Modern World*, *The Christian View of Man*) brought the great issues of the theological battle of the day to the attention of thousands of lay people. Protestant churches, including his own Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., were being infiltrated by theological liberals, who denied the fundamentals of the Christian faith.

Many in the Presbyterian Church leadership resented Machen's strong witness. They just wanted peace and harmony, ignoring the unbelief in their midst. In 1929 churchmen who tolerated liberalism took over the seminary, and Machen and several other professors left and started Westminster Theological Seminary. In 1933 he and others started the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions (IBPFM), in order to support only Bible-believing missionaries.

Instead of correcting the faulty theology in their missions and schools, the Presbyterian leaders turned their guns on the reformers, especially on Machen. They issued a command for all the IBPFM members to cease and desist, or else face discipline.

Centuries earlier Martin Luther was told, “Recant your writings, or suffer judgment!” Luther responded, “I cannot recant. Here I stand. God help me.” In a similar way, Machen and the men who stood with him were told the same thing, “Repent your actions, or face the discipline of the church.” They responded in the spirit of Luther, “We will not resign the IBPFM or cease our testimony.” Machen issued a formal printed and carefully documented response, “I cannot obey the order.”

These 20th century reformers endured church trials, whose outcomes were determined beforehand. They gave their strong and unanswerable evidence, and stood unwavering for the truth of the gospel. But the votes were stacked against them. Found guilty, they renounced the jurisdiction of that apostate judiciary and established a new denomination faithful to the gospel and the Presbyterian standards, the Presbyterian Church of American (later the Orthodox Presbyterian Church). It is from that denomination that the Bible Presbyterian Church came after the death of Machen in 1937.

Today Machen's legacy continues in his writings, his great theological influence, in churches and denominations that have come from his reformation, and in colleges and seminaries that look back to this leadership in breaking from compromise with liberalism.

Celebrating Princeton's anniversary we at WRS desire to maintain the solid theology of the Old Princeton and the reforming spirit of J. Gresham Machen. For years to come may the everlasting truth of the gospel be sent forth into the world from the halls of Western Reformed Seminary!



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