

## BOOK REVIEW

of

J. Gresham Machen,  
*Education, Christianity, and the State*,  
The Trinity Foundation, 2004.

This book is in the Evangel Library,  
and this review is presented by Larry D. Paarmann.

J. Gresham Machen lived from 1881 to 1937. Majoring in classical literature, he graduated from Johns Hopkins University in 1901. He entered Princeton Theological Seminary in 1902 and graduated in 1905. After a year of study in Europe, he joined the faculty at Princeton in 1906. He was ordained in 1914. After Princeton began to depart from “Old Princeton Theology,” that is, Calvinism, Machen, along with others of like mind, founded Westminster Theological Seminary in 1929. Within a few years it was seen that Westminster graduates would not be welcomed in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., which resulted in the founding of The Presbyterian Church of America (not the current PCA), later renamed The Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Machen was known for his critical thinking, Calvinism, and adherence to the Westminster Standards. At the time of his death, Caspar Wistar Hodge, Machen’s colleague and friend at Princeton, characterized him as “the greatest theologian in the English-speaking world” and “the greatest leader of the whole cause of evangelical Christianity.” Machen’s published books include *Christianity & Liberalism*, *What is Christianity?*, *The Witness of Paul*, *The Origin of Paul’s Religion*, *Christianity & Faith*, and *Jesus and Paul*. This book, *Education, Christianity, and the State*, is a collection of Machen’s essays, speeches, and testimony before the U.S Congress, on issues concerning education.

The book has nine chapters: Faith and Knowledge, The Importance of Christian Scholarship, Christianity and Culture, Reforming the Government Schools, The Necessity of the Christian Schools, Shall We Have a Federal Department of Education?, Proposed Department of Education, The Christian School: The Hope of America, and Westminster Theological Seminary: Its Purpose and Plan. The scope of the book includes elementary education in Christian schools as well as public schools, higher education, government involvement in education, and seminary education.

What strikes me most about this book is how up-to-date it is. Parts of this book are eighty years old, but many of the issues are very current. Machen was very interested in and concerned about education, and had strong opinions about it. Some of his ideas may initially seem elitest, perhaps especially to modern ears, but others (John Robins and Gordon Clark for two) share his opinion that in spite of technological advances, our society has gone through a significant dumbing down, and that little real education is accomplished in many schools.

In chapter one, discussing how faith is related to knowledge, Machen bemoans that faith is frequently described in mostly experiential terms and that doctrine is almost scorned. “Such objections are only one manifestation of a tendency that is very widespread at the present day, the tendency to disparage the intellectual aspect of the religious life. . . . This anti-intellectual tendency in the modern world is no trifling thing; it has its roots deep in the entire philosophical development of modern times. Modern philosophy since the days of Kant, with the theology that has been influenced by it, has had as its dominant note – certainly as its present-day result – a depreciation of the reason and a skeptical answer to Pilate’s question, ‘What is truth?’ This attack upon the intellect has been conducted by men of marked intellectual power, but the attack upon the intellect it has been all the same. . . . The depreciation of the intellect, with the exaltation in the place of it of the feelings or of the will, is, we think, a basic fact in modern life which is rapidly leading to a condition in which men neither know anything nor care anything about the doctrinal content of the Christian religion, in which there is in general a lamentable intellectual decline.”

This general theme is continued in chapter two. “There was a time when the raising of the question as to the importance of Christian scholarship might have seemed to be ridiculous; there was a time when a man who does so much talking as a minister or Sunday school teacher does – and as no doubt every Christian ought to do – in the propagation of the Faith to which he adheres, would have regarded it as a matter of course that he ought to know something about the subject of which he undertakes to talk. . . . It never seems to occur to many modern teachers that the primary business of the teacher is to study the subject that he is going to teach. . . . This substitution of methodology for content in the preparation of the teacher is based upon a particular view of what education is.” Machen insists that content should be the focus of education. Probably most of us would agree, but probably most of us have reason to question whether or not the education system in the USA agrees. Machen continues, “Christian scholarship is important in order that we may tell the story of Jesus and his love straight and full and plain. . . . It is useless to proclaim a Gospel that people cannot hold to be true: No amount of emotional appeal can do anything against the truth. The question of fact cannot permanently be evaded. Did Christ or did he not rise from the dead; is the Bible trustworthy or is it false? . . . The opponents of Holy Scripture do not become less dangerous, but they become far more dangerous, when they are within ecclesiastical walls.”

In chapter three, Machen writes “The real difficulty amounts to this: that the thought of the day, as it makes itself most strongly felt in the universities and from them spreads inevitably to the masses of the people, is profoundly opposed to Christianity – or at least, what is nearly as bad, it is out of all connection with Christianity.” This sets the stage for much of what is in the remainder of the book. If you want your children to be properly educated, or if you yourself would like to be properly educated, either specific education must be supplied, or remedial education, to offset and supplement public education.