

Introducing the issue

Quote: "Modern liberalism in the Church, whatever judgment may be passed upon it, is at any rate no longer merely an academic matter. It is no longer a matter merely of theological seminaries or universities. On the contrary its attack upon the fundamentals of the Christian faith is being carried on vigorously by Sunday-School "lesson-helps," by the pulpit, and by the religious press. If such an attack be unjustified, the remedy is...[is to be found] in a more earnest search after truth and a more loyal devotion to it once it is found. At the theological seminaries and universities, however, the roots of the great issue are more clearly seen than in the world at large; among students the reassuring employment of traditional phrases is often abandoned, and the advocates of a new religion are not at pains, as they are in the Church at large, to maintain an appearance of conformity with the past. But such frankness, we are convinced, ought to be extended to the people as a whole. Few desires on the part of religious teachers have been more harmfully exaggerated than the desire to 'avoid giving offence.'"

Question: Restate Machen's argument. What does he mean by religious teachers desire to "avoid giving offence"?

Is doctrine avoidable?

Quote: "At the outset, we are met with an objection. "Teachings," it is said, "are unimportant; the exposition of the teachings of liberalism and the teachings of Christianity, therefore, can arouse no interest at the present day; creeds are merely the changing expression of a unitary Christian experience, and provided only they express that experience they are all equally good. The teachings of liberalism, therefore, might be as far removed as possible from the teachings of historic Christianity, and yet the two might be at bottom the same." Such is the way in which expression is often given to the modern hostility to "doctrine." But is it really doctrine as such that is objected to, and not rather one particular doctrine in the interests of another? Undoubtedly, in many forms of liberalism it is the latter alternative which fits the case. There are doctrines of modern liberalism, just as tenaciously and intolerantly upheld as any doctrines that find a place in the historic creeds...These doctrines are, as we shall see, contrary to the doctrines of the Christian religion. But doctrines they are all the same, and as such they require intellectual defense. In seeming to object to all theology, the liberal preacher is often merely objecting to one system of theology in the interests of another. And the desired immunity from theological controversy has not yet been attained."

Question: What is the objection Machen is addressing and why does that objection fail?

Christianity is historical

Quote: "It is perfectly conceivable that the originators of the Christian movement had no right to legislate for subsequent generations; but at any rate they did have an inalienable right to legislate for all generations that should choose to bear the name of "Christian." It is conceivable that Christianity may now have to be abandoned, and another religion substituted for it; but at any rate the question what Christianity is can be determined only by an examination of the beginnings of Christianity."

Question: According to Machen, how do we understand what Christianity *is*?

Paul the innovator?

Quote: "Certainly with regard to the fundamentally doctrinal character of Christianity Paul was no innovator. The fact appears in the whole character of Paul's relationship to the Jerusalem Church as it is attested by the Epistles, and it also appears with startling clearness in the precious passage in I Cor. xv. 3-7, where Paul summarizes the tradition which he had received from the primitive Church. What is it that forms the content of that primitive teaching? Is it a general principle of the fatherliness of God or the brotherliness of man? Is it a vague admiration for the character of Jesus such as that which prevails in the modern Church? Nothing could be further from the fact. 'Christ died for our sins,' said the primitive disciples, 'according to the Scriptures; he was buried; he has been raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.' From the beginning, the Christian gospel, as indeed the name 'gospel' or 'good news' implies, consisted in an account of something that had happened. And from the beginning, the meaning of the happening was set forth; and when the meaning of the happening was set forth then there was Christian doctrine. 'Christ died' — that is history; 'Christ died for our sins' — that is doctrine. Without these two elements, joined in an absolutely indissoluble union, there is no Christianity."

Question: Restate Machen's argument. Why is this so controversial for liberalism?

The Historical Jesus

Quote: "It is interesting to observe how modern men have dealt with the Messianic consciousness of Jesus. Some, like Mr. H. G. Wells, have practically ignored it. Without discussing the question whether it be historical or not they have practically treated it as though it did not exist, and have not allowed it to disturb them at all in their construction of the sage of Nazareth. The Jesus thus reconstructed may be useful as investing modern programs with the sanctity of His hallowed name...But what ought to be clearly understood is that such a Jesus has nothing to do with history. He is a purely imaginary figure, a symbol and not a fact... Others, more seriously, have recognized the existence of the problem, but have sought to avoid it by denying that Jesus ever thought that He was the Messiah, and by supporting their denial, not by mere assertions, but by a critical examination of the sources."

Question: If Machen is correct in his summary how does the liberal view of Jesus differ from the Christian view?

Quote: "But even in the Sermon on the Mount there is far more than some men suppose. Men say that it contains no theology; in reality it contains theology of the most stupendous kind...it contains the loftiest possible presentation of Jesus' own Person. That presentation appears in the strange note of authority ...it appears in the recurrent words, "But I say unto you." Jesus plainly puts His own words on an equality with what He certainly regarded as the divine words of Scripture; He claimed the right to legislate for the Kingdom of God. Let it not be objected that this note of authority involves merely a prophetic consciousness in Jesus, a mere right to speak in God's name as God's Spirit might lead. For what prophet ever spoke in this way? The prophets said, "Thus saith the Lord," but Jesus said, "I say." We have no mere prophet here, no mere humble exponent of the will of God; but a stupendous Person speaking in a manner which for any other person would be abominable and absurd."

Question: How does the way Jesus spoke undermine the liberal view of our Lord?

Quote: "At this point, an objection may arise. May we not — the modern liberal will say — may we not now return to that simple trust of the disciples? May we not cease to ask how Jesus saves; may we not

simply leave the way to Him? What need is there, then, of defining 'effectual calling,' what need of enumerating 'justification, adoption and sanctification and the several benefits which in this life do either accompany or flow from them'? What need even of rehearsing the steps in the saving work of Christ as they were rehearsed by the Jerusalem Church; what need of saying that 'Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he has been raised on the third day according to the Scriptures'? Should not our trust be in a Person rather than in a message; in Jesus, rather than in what Jesus did; in Jesus' character rather than in Jesus' death?"

Question: What liberal argument is Machen summarizing here?

Quote: "Certainly we shall remain forever in the gloom if we attend merely to the character of Jesus and neglect the thing that He has done, if we try to attend to the Person and neglect the message. We may have joy for sadness and power for weakness; but not by easy half-way measures, not by avoidance of controversy, not by trying to hold on to Jesus and yet reject the gospel. What was it that within a few days transformed a band of mourners into the spiritual conquerors of the world? It was not the memory of Jesus' life; it was not the inspiration which came from past contact with Him. But it was the message, "He is risen." That message alone gave to the disciples a living Saviour; and it alone can give to us a living Saviour today. We shall never have vital contact with Jesus if we attend to His person and neglect the message; for it is the message which makes Him ours."

Question: What are ways we attend to the person of Jesus but neglect His message in our own day?

The fundamental difference

Quote: "As a matter of fact, however, in the modern vituperation of 'doctrine,' it is not merely the great theologians or the great creeds that are being attacked, but the New Testament and our Lord Himself. In rejecting doctrine, the liberal preacher is rejecting the simple words of Paul, 'Who loved me and gave Himself for me,' just as much as the *homoousion* of the Nicene Creed. For the word 'doctrine' is really used not in its narrowest, but in its broadest sense. The liberal preacher is really rejecting the whole basis of Christianity, which is a religion founded not on aspirations, but on facts. Here is found the most fundamental difference between liberalism and Christianity — liberalism is altogether in the imperative mood, while Christianity begins with a triumphant indicative; liberalism appeals to man's will, while Christianity announces, first, a gracious act of God."

Question: Restate Machen's argument. What does he mean by doctrine "in its broadest sense"?

What Machen is *not* saying

1. "That if doctrine is sound it makes no difference in life"
2. "That all points of doctrine are equally important. It is perfectly possible for Christian fellowship to be maintained despite differences of opinion."

Quote: "Christianity is based, then, upon an account of something that happened, and the Christian worker is primarily a witness. But if so, it is rather important that the Christian worker should tell the truth. When a man takes his seat upon the witness stand, it makes little difference what the cut of his coat is, or whether his sentences are nicely turned. The important thing is that he tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

Next Week (September 18): Read Chapter 3, "God and Man"