

MACHEN ON BARTH:  
INTRODUCTION TO A RECENTLY UNCOVERED PAPER\*

D. G. HART

ON December 2, 1929, W. L. Savage of Scribner's publishing house sent J. Gresham Machen a copy of Emil Brunner's recently released *The Theology of Crisis* and asked for some advice on marketing the book. Though Machen had already in the minds of many established his reputation as a cantankerous fundamentalist when he left Princeton for Westminster Seminary, he was still a natural resource for the publisher's request. Machen himself was well acquainted with New York publishers since all of his books to that time had been published with MacMillan, and his newest, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, was ready to go to press at Harper and Brothers. More importantly, Machen had heard Brunner lecture the previous year when the Swiss theologian visited Princeton. On that occasion Brunner had expressed "a special desire" to meet Machen. And according to Douglas Horton, the man responsible for the first English translation of Karl Barth, Brunner spoke of Machen's work "in the highest terms." Furthermore, some at Scribner's probably thought a positive evaluation of Brunner and Barth from Machen, one of the leading spokesmen for conservative Protestantism, would boost sales among fundamentalists. Machen, however, in what became his typical response to inquiries about neoorthodoxy, said that he did not think the theology of crisis was a return to evangelical Christianity, but his limited knowledge made final judgment difficult. So for a fuller assessment Machen referred the Scribner's executive to Cornelius Van Til, Westminster's newly appointed professor of apologetics who eventually became one of America's most outspoken foes of Barthianism.<sup>1</sup>

\* [Editor's note: Among the materials preserved in the Machen Archives, under the supervision of Grace Mullen, a previously unpublished paper by J. Gresham Machen on the theology of Karl Barth recently came to light. Because many of our readers will be interested in this essay, we are including it in the present issue of the journal. Dr. Hart, who first recognized the significance of the paper, kindly agreed to write this introductory article.]

<sup>1</sup> W. L. Savage to Machen, Nov. 22, 1929, and Machen to Savage, Dec. 2, 1929, Machen Archives, Montgomery Library, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, PA. Brunner's remarks about Machen come from Douglas Horton to Machen, Mar. 11, 1929, and J. Ross Stevenson to Machen, Oct. 9, 1928, Machen Archives. In his letter to Machen, Horton expressed surprise that conservatives were not more interested in his translation of Barth's *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, a sentiment perhaps shared by others in religious publishing.

Throughout the thirties, as the Great Depression took its toll upon American society and many Protestants looked to the realism of neoorthodoxy for an antidote to the optimism of theological modernism, Machen received many letters from ministers wondering what to make of the new theology. He continued to plead ignorance and referred all inquiries to Van Til. Though some may have thought Machen guilty of dodging an important issue, his response was appropriate considering his professional commitments. Machen's efforts on behalf of a fledgling seminary, his involvement with the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions, and his unflagging commitment to conservative Presbyterian causes left him little time to keep up with his own field of NT scholarship, let alone reading in another discipline. Even if Machen had not been so busy, he still may have referred inquiries about neoorthodoxy to another colleague because he acknowledged that he did not have a sufficient background in philosophical theology. Unfortunately, then, Machen, whose formidable critique of theological modernism gained a wide hearing in Britain and America, passed through the last years of his life with almost no comment upon the movement in European Protestantism that paralleled the fundamentalist rejection of liberal pieties.<sup>2</sup>

Still, Machen broke his silence on neoorthodoxy once in the spring of 1928, perhaps in preparation for Brunner's visit to Princeton. Well before the works of Barth and Brunner became accessible and a growing concern among American Protestants, Machen prepared the essay which follows, "Karl Barth and 'The Theology of Crisis,'" for a meeting of the Adelphoi Club, a group of Presbyterian ministers in the Philadelphia vicinity. Paul Woolley, then the editor of the *Evangelical Student*, a publication of the League of Evangelical Students, also persuaded Machen to publish the address in his journal. But when Machen finally submitted the essay he admitted he was straining his conscience to put it in print and asked Woolley if he could get along without it. "I really ought to learn far more about a subject before I try to write about it," Machen lamented; "blind leaders of the blind may get into serious trouble." Woolley replied that he would not use it until later that year but insisted that "it would not be fair to the students and the public in general not to publish it at all." In the meantime Machen asked his colleague at Princeton, Caspar Wistar Hodge, professor of systematics, for comments on the paper. During the intervening months Machen became convinced that it was still too early to render a definitive

<sup>2</sup> On Machen's career in the 1930s, see Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954) chaps. 23-25; and D. G. Hart, "'Doctor Fundamentalist': An Intellectual Biography of J. Gresham Machen, 1881-1937" (Ph.D. dissertation; Johns Hopkins University, 1988) chap. 8. For an overview of neoorthodoxy in America, see William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976) chap. 9; and Dennis Voskuil, "Neoorthodoxy," in *Reformed Theology in America: A History of Its Modern Development* (ed. David F. Wells; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 247-62.

judgment because Barth was so difficult to understand. Specifically, he thought "it would be wrong to arouse among these devout Leaguers too much enthusiasm for such dangerous guides." Consequently, Machen turned his attention to Presbyterian concerns and his only essay on Barthianism remained buried under his mounting correspondence.<sup>3</sup>

What makes Machen's thoughts on Barth so interesting are the parallels between the two men's careers. Born within five years of each other, both knew well the history of liberal Protestant theology and had studied, though at different times, at the University of Marburg with Wilhelm Herrmann. Machen and Barth were also the beneficiaries of the radical conclusions of recent German NT scholarship. Since the turn of the century, scholars such as Bousset, Wrede, Brueckner, and Schweitzer had dethroned the older liberal conception of Jesus as the fairest flower of humanity. The newer scholarship implied that Christ's messianic consciousness, the supernaturalism of the Gospels, and Pauline theology were at odds with the moralism and cultural optimism of liberal Protestantism. By pointing out the cracks in the edifice constructed by Ritschl and Harnack, the new German NT criticism provided Machen and Barth with an opening for their full-scale attack.<sup>4</sup>

Closer scrutiny of Scripture also produced in Machen and Barth a similar conviction that special revelation was the only sufficient basis for theology. Barth's effort to recover Reformation theology reaffirmed the primary place that Scripture had held in Protestantism. This perspective was central to both men's indictment of liberalism for its stress upon religious experience and its subjective and anthropocentric theology. By returning to the Word of God Machen and Barth affirmed the inability of humankind to know God truly apart from revelation.<sup>5</sup>

The parallels between Machen and Barth continued in the reception they received from America's mainline theologians. Their pronounced biblicalism and their preference for the theology of the Reformation did not sit well with those in America's Protestant establishment. To be sure, Reinhold Niebuhr's theological realism stressed human sin and divine transcendence

<sup>3</sup> Woolley to Machen, June 5, 1928; Machen to Woolley, July 16, 1928; Woolley to Machen, July 20, 1928; and Machen to Hodge, July 12, 1928, and n.d., Machen Archives. Quotations are from Machen to Woolley, July 16, Woolley to Machen, July 20, and Machen to Hodge, n.d. For Machen's only published reference to Barth, see "Forty Years of New Testament Research," *Union Seminary Review* (Richmond) 40 (1928) 9-11, reprinted in this issue of *WTJ* as an appendix to Machen's paper.

<sup>4</sup> See Sydney Ahlstrom, "Continental Influence on American Christian Thought Since World War I," *CH27* (1958) 256-72; and James M. Robinson's introduction to Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: MacMillan, 1961) xxi-xxvi.

<sup>5</sup> For example, see Barth, *Church Dogmatics 1/2: The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956) chap. 17; Gregory G. Bolich, *Karl Barth and Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980) 129-52; Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) chaps. 1-3; and Machen, *The Christian Faith in the Modern World* (New York: MacMillan, 1937) 13-44, 73-86.

but his interest in theology seemed to extend only to its usefulness for social criticism and reform. Indeed, American neoorthodoxy, like theological modernism before it, expressed itself most often in the practicalities of religious faith and life. Those American theologians who actually applied realism to their formal theology—such as Yale's Douglas Clyde Macintosh, Chicago's Henry Nelson Wieman, and Oberlin's Walter Marshall Horton—relied primarily on philosophy of religion or the social sciences rather than Scripture. Undoubtedly, Machen's associations with fundamentalism limited his influence. But initial reactions to Barth suggest that Americans equated European neoorthodoxy with fundamentalism because of Barth's stress upon the Bible and Protestant dogma.<sup>6</sup>

The similarities between these two opponents of liberal Protestantism may account for Machen's initial reaction to Barth. Though he warned his audience that Barthianism was by no means "a simple thing," he also admitted that it sounded like a refreshing return to evangelical Christianity. Machen also praised Barth and Brunner for stressing the importance of divine revelation to theology, thereby restoring some dignity to systematics. Furthermore, Machen believed that Barth's advice on writing new creeds was one that the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. needed to hear.

Still, Machen criticized Barthianism on philosophical and historical grounds. Of these two lines of criticism, Machen clearly felt more comfortable faulting Barth for disregarding the results of historical criticism than he did trying to pinpoint the flaw in the Swiss theologian's conception of religious knowledge. Though Machen had studied philosophy at Princeton University while attending seminary, the burden of his scholarship had involved historical and textual problems in NT criticism. Even his arguments against liberal Protestantism relied more on the inconsistencies of modernist attitudes to Jesus, the Bible, and the church, than they did on the philosophical roots of modern theology.<sup>7</sup>

What stands out in Machen's criticism of Barth is how closely it resembles his previous opposition to liberalism and American theological realism. Machen believed that Barth's equivocation upon the historical truthfulness of the Bible undermined the Christian religion. Machen had detected a similar fault in liberal Protestant efforts to separate the truths and ideals of

<sup>6</sup> On Barth's cool reception in America, see Dennis N. Voskuil, "America Encounters Karl Barth, 1919-1939," *Fides et Historia* 12 (1980) 61-74; Albert C. Knudson, "German Fundamentalism," *Christian Century* 45 (June 14, 1928) 762-65; and the *Christian Century's* series, "How Their Minds Have Changed," 56 (Oct. 4, 11, 18, 25, and Nov. 11, 1939) 1194-98, 1237-40, 1271-75, 1300-1003, 1332-35, which is usually cited as an index to neoorthodox breezes in America but indicates that the Depression, not Barth, was largely responsible for the shift to theological realism. On theological realism, see Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Scribner, 1932); A. K. Rogers et al., *Religious Realism* (ed. D. C. Macintosh; New York: MacMillan, 1931).

<sup>7</sup> See Machen's *The Origin of Paul's Religion* (New York: MacMillan, 1921); *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1930); and *Christianity and Liberalism* (New York: MacMillan, 1923).

Christianity from the historical details of Scripture. In *Christianity and Liberalism* Machen wrote, "admitting that scientific objections may arise against . . . the Christian doctrines of the person of Christ," the liberal theologian sought "to rescue certain of the general principles of religion" which constituted "'the essence of Christianity.'" Machen detected the same motive behind the reaction against philosophical idealism in theological circles, a movement which foreshadowed the version of neoorthodoxy which took root in the United States. In a review of Douglas Clyde Macintosh's *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1926), Machen criticized the author for ignoring the historical dimension of Christianity. Macintosh's defense of theism, Machen observed, avoided Christianity's basis "upon things that happened, upon something that took place in the full light of history." In each of these cases, Machen maintained that the historical events recorded in the Bible were necessary to Christianity, not merely because they rescued faith from subjectivity, but because salvation from sin depended upon God's miraculous intervention into human history through Christ's life, death, and resurrection. By making the historicity of the miracles recorded in Scripture a litmus test for a proper conception of Christianity, Machen's early reaction to Barthianism suggests that he regarded neoorthodoxy, in both its American and European varieties, as an extension rather than a repudiation of liberal Protestantism.<sup>8</sup>

Interestingly enough, the reactions of Woolley and Hodge to the paper help to explain why Machen never had it published. In their evaluation of Machen's essay, both men sidestepped the issue of historical criticism and focused upon the philosophical roots of Barth's epistemology. For Woolley, the truths of Christianity in Barth's system were objective to man though not "based upon materially objective occurrences of facts." Barth had transferred the subjectivity of Christian truths "from man where it resided in the Schleiermacherian scheme, to God." These facts were fixed and unchangeable from a human perspective, but to God they were subjective because they depended "for their truth and their existence solely upon His nature," not upon "any acts in the objective, physical world outside of Himself." Woolley concluded that perhaps Barthianism "was a touch of Hegel removed from earth to heaven." Though Woolley still wanted to use the piece, he wrote Machen that his general impression of Barth was "more negative" and wondered if "there [was] more danger in the Barthian thesis" than Machen's essay indicated.<sup>9</sup>

Hodge also focused upon the epistemological implications of Barth's dialectic and suggested, contrary to Machen, that Barth's position would remain unchanged even if he believed as conservatives did in the historicity

<sup>8</sup> *Christianity and Liberalism*, 6; and "Yale Professor's Book Which Won Him the 1925 \$6000 Bross Prize" (review of *The Reasonableness of Christianity*), *New York Evening Post Literary Review*, Jan. 30, 1926.

<sup>9</sup> Woolley to Machen, July 20, 1928, Machen Archives.

of the biblical narratives. Hodge's "fundamental criticism" of neoorthodoxy was that Barth's "acceptance of Kierkegaard's assertion of the infinite qualitative difference between God and man" led to "a dialectic of a logical and metaphysical kind" which resulted in skepticism. Just as perplexing to Hodge were the questions that followed from Barth's dialectic.

What does he mean by *sin*? What does he mean by saying that our situation is due to sin? He has *two* views of sin—one Biblical and Reformation, the other due to his philosophy. And what does he mean by *Creation*? Is not Creation swallowed up by Redemption? . . . As to historical facts—what he means by *Urgeschichte & urgeschichtliches Ereignis*—(the Fall of man—the Resurrection of Christ) I do not know. He himself says that it is not super-historical for only God is timeless. Yet it is not our view of supernatural history.

Finally, Hodge raised questions about Barth's conception of revelation and mentioned that he was working on an essay on the "Scripture Principle" of Reformed Theology in which he was trying not only to distinguish the Reformed view from Lutheranism but also from Barthianism. In that piece Hodge reversed his earlier assessment and seconded Machen's judgment that Barth had tried to inoculate the Bible from historical criticism. "While it is true that historical criticism must deal with the Bible," Hodge wrote, "it is not true . . . that the question of the origin of the Bible has nothing to do with its validity as God's Word."<sup>10</sup>

Though Machen's criticism of Barth was telling, the reactions of Woolley and Hodge may have convinced him that an adequate response to Barth required greater philosophical sophistication. Woolley's letter made Machen glad that publication of his paper had been postponed and made him more doubtful about putting it into print. Machen replied to Hodge that

<sup>10</sup> Hodge to Machen, July 14, 1928, Machen Archives; and Hodge, "The Reformed Faith," *EvQ* 1 (1930) 3–24, quotation from p. 13. Hodge asserted: "Barth differs from Calvin and the classic representatives of Reformed Theology in that the latter recognise a *notitia Dei insita* which, through reason and conscience, becomes a *notitia acquisita*, and the reason of man teaches him to see God manifest in the world. This knowledge, it is true, Calvin and the following Reformed Theology believed never results in any adequate knowledge of God even as Creator because man is blinded by sin. Whereas in Barth the idea of Redemption so swallows up that of Creation, that all knowledge of God is through the Word of God, the Logos, as well as in the Bible which bears witness to this primary form of the Word of God" (p. 6). Summing up his objections to the Theology of Crisis, Hodge (p. 22 n. 29) listed three: the opposition of the Infinite and the finite rested upon a dualistic philosophy rather than upon "the fact of sin"; the idea of Redemption "swallowed up" the idea of Creation, Providence, Common Grace, and the revelation of God in man and nature; and it was impossible to explain the origin of the Bible on naturalistic grounds and still hold that the Bible was a supernatural revelation of God to man "breaking into this world," as Barth insisted. "In a word," Hodge concluded, "we do not believe that the world-view which underlies this theological movement is the world-view of the Bible itself, nor that Kierkegaard can be put in the same line with Jeremiah, Paul, Augustine, Luther, and Calvin."

the question of what Barth meant by *Urgeschichte* involved “the fundamentally Christian or fundamentally non-Christian character of the whole teaching.”<sup>11</sup>

Hodge continued to study Barth during the 1930s and shared his thoughts with Machen. But while Hodge monitored Barth’s output closely and revised his opinion somewhat—he admitted to Machen that Barth was the only contemporary theologian who interested him—Machen only had time to sample the first two volumes of Barth’s *Dogmatics*. Indeed, most of Machen’s correspondence with Hodge was filled with details concerning Westminster Seminary and the Independent Board but it did elicit Machen’s only references during the 1930s to Barth. In 1932, Hodge wrote that Barth had helped convince him that the “chief elements” in Christian theology were “Revelation and Faith” and that revelation was “supernatural as well as supernatural.” Four years later in reference to *Credo*, Hodge welcomed Barth’s parting company with Bultmann but wished that the Swiss theologian had attacked “Bultmann’s highly subjective method of historical criticism” rather than merely dismissing it “all as unbelief.” Nevertheless, Hodge did not think Van Til wise to link Barth to the “immanentism” of Schleiermacher and Ritschl. Machen had not read *Credo* but was encouraged to know that Barth had written “one book that was not long-winded.” His estimate of Barth had not changed, however. For Machen, Barth’s hostility to “anything like the notion that the Bible contains a body of revealed truth” was “profound.” Hodge wrote back to assure Machen that even though he appreciated aspects of Barth’s thought he had not become a Barthian. Hodge was especially critical of Barth for calling “apologetics the Trojan horse which let Rationalism into the Church.” But he had read Barth’s articles and sermons, was impressed with his affirmations about the Virgin Birth and the atonement, and wondered again if Barth really meant all that he said. Machen remained unimpressed. Though his reading was less extensive, the second volume of Barth’s *Dogmatics* seemed “to be more clearly contrary to the heart of the Christian faith” than the first. Machen concluded that he could not see “at all that Barth was getting nearer to the faith” but added that he “should love to be instructed.”<sup>12</sup>

Had Machen been promoted to the chair of apologetics at Princeton back in 1926 he may have retooled his professional skills, become more proficient in the philosophical subtleties of neoorthodoxy, and felt more comfortable responding to Barth’s and Brunner’s work. As it turned out, however, the controversy surrounding Machen’s promotion and the removal of Princeton conservatives to Westminster Seminary in 1929 left

<sup>11</sup> Machen to Woolley, Aug. 7, 1928, and Machen to Hodge, n.d., Machen Archives.

<sup>12</sup> Hodge to Machen, Feb. 17, 1932, and Feb. 13, 1936; Machen to Hodge, Feb. 15, 1936; Hodge to Machen, Feb. 17, 1936; Machen to Hodge, Feb. 18, Machen Archives.

Machen with little time for study. Consequently, he turned over the task of charting Barthianism to Cornelius Van Til, ironically the man whom Princeton administrators had secured to fill the post denied to Machen in 1926 and the one whom Machen eventually persuaded to lead instruction in apologetics at the new Philadelphia seminary.<sup>13</sup>

Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals  
Wheaton College  
Wheaton, Illinois 60187-5593

<sup>13</sup> In 1926 Princeton Seminary's directors nominated Machen to become professor of apologetics. When Machen's name was submitted to the 1926 General Assembly, an act required by Princeton's "Plan," he encountered substantial opposition in part because of rumors about his "temperamental" idiosyncracies, but primarily because he opposed a motion in his presbytery which gave the church's blessing to Prohibition. As a result of this controversy, the Assembly formed a committee to investigate affairs at Princeton. This committee eventually issued the report which called for the Seminary's reorganization and which prompted Machen and other conservatives to establish Westminster. For more detail on these affairs, see Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen*, chaps. 21-23; and Hart, "Doctor Fundamentalis," chaps. 6-7.



#### Copyright and Use:

**As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.**

**No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.**

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

#### About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.