



J. Gresham Machen, the citizen

One of the searing issues of the day is, "What role, if any, should the Christian Church play in modern politics and social action?" Here there is a sharp division of opinion. In general it may be said that the liberal wing of Protestantism is convinced that the church as an institution should involve itself in economic, political, and social problems facing America.

For example, the *Confession of 1967* of the United Presbyterian Church in the USA says (Part II: A. 4.b):

God's reconciliation in Jesus Christ is the ground of the peace, justice, and freedom among nations which all powers of government are called to serve and defend. The church, in its own life, is called to practice the forgiveness of enemies and to commend to the nations as practical politics the search for cooperation and peace. This requires the pursuit of fresh and responsible relations across every line of conflict, even at risk to national security, to reduce areas of strife and to broaden international understanding. Reconciliation among nations becomes peculiarly urgent as countries develop nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, diverting their manpower and resources from constructive uses and risking the annihilation of mankind...

Over against this position many theological conservatives, perhaps most of them, feel that such activities ought to be restricted to the efforts of Christian citizens acting as individuals or in concert with others. Plainly this is the point of view defined in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Ch. XXXI, Sec. IV):

Synods and councils are to handle, or conclude nothing but that which is ecclesiastical; and are not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth, unless by way of humble petition in cases extraordinary; or, by way of advice, for satisfaction of conscience, if they be thereunto required by the civil magistrate.

Were J. Gresham Machen living today what would be his attitude toward these matters? The answer will be clear when we present a series of quotations from his writings and speeches.

In 1925 the Department of Temperance and Moral Welfare of the Presbyterian Church in the USA advocated passage by Congress of a proposed Twentieth Amendment to the Constitution. Section I of that amendment stipulated that "*Congress shall have the power to limit, regulate and prohibit the labor of persons under eighteen years of age.*"

Writing in *The Presbyterian* of January 22, 1925, Machen said:

We do not think that the Presbyterian Church ought to become a political lobby; we do not think that it has any right to put itself on record as either favoring or opposing political and social measures about which no direct guidance is found in The Scriptures. That does not mean at all that we deprecate advocacy of good political measures and opposition to bad measures on the part of members of the church; on the contrary we think that such activity is a very important Christian duty, and that Christians ought to organize themselves in accordance with their consciences for the furtherance of political and social ends that they think right. But what we do deprecate is such activity on the part of official agencies of the church.

His personal objection to the thrust of the Twentieth Amendment he voiced in an address before the National Union of Christian Schools:

The amendment gives power to Congress to enter right into your home and regulate or conduct or prevent altogether the helpful work of your children without which there can be no moral development of human character and no ordinary possibility of true happiness for mankind.

Machen rejoiced in what he considered such moral victories as

1. The negative ruling of the Supreme Court of the United States on an Oregon State law which tried to wipe out private and church schools;
2. the declaring unconstitutional a Nebraska law which sought to make literary education in private schools a crime; and
3. the outlawing of "the abominable Lusk Law" in New York State, one which placed private teachers under state supervision and control.

His views on these issues came out in a vibrant article in *The Forum and Century*, March, 1931, in which he decried "The materialistic paternalism of the modern state."

His passion for individual freedom is also reflected in an essay printed in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, publication number 2552, January, 1933 (reprinted in the *Guardian*, January 1967). Extracted is one paragraph:

What estimate of the present age can possibly be complete that does not take account of what is so marked a failure of it — namely, the loss of those civil liberties for which men formerly were willing to sacrifice all that they possessed? In some countries, such as Russia and Italy, the attack upon liberty has been blatant and extreme; but exactly the same forces which appear there in more consistent form appear also in practically all the countries of the earth. Everywhere we have the substitution of economic considerations for great principles in the conduct of the state; everywhere a centralized state, working as the state necessarily must, by the use of force, is taking possession of the most intimate fields of individual and family life. These tendencies have proceeded more rapidly in America than in most other countries of the world ... Today we are rapidly becoming one of the most bureaucratic countries of the world.

How, in the light of his open stand against the drift toward the welfare state, men can charge him with being a socialist, as has been done, is indeed a profound mystery.

Some Americans are afraid to spell out their credo unless behind locked doors and stuffed keyholes. Not Dr. Machen. Listen to him as in his personal sketch in *Contemporary American Theology* (Arne, New York, 1933) he pours out his heart:

I am old-fashioned in my belief that the Bible is true, but I am equally old-fashioned in my love of freedom. I am opposed to the attack on freedom in whatever form it may come. I am opposed to the Soviets, and I am opposed to Mussolini. For the same reason also, I am opposed to the rapidly growing bureaucracy in this country. I am opposed to a Federal Department of Education; I am opposed to monopolistic public schools; I am opposed to a standardization that treats human beings as though they were Ford cars.

A Democrat by conviction, he was a consistent contender for States' Rights. In *The New Republic*, December 31, 1924, he argued:

We hold that the local autonomy of the States, far from being a mere matter of expediency, is at the very foundation of American freedom.

In 1926, an attempt was put forth in Washington to establish a Federal Department of Education, with an executive secretary at the head who should function as a member of the President's cabinet. Machen asked for and received permission to appear before a joint committee of the Senate and House of Representatives to protest the plan. Here are some excerpts of his speech, recorded in a pamphlet published by the Government Printing Office, 1926:

Education is essentially not a matter of the State at all...

Standardization, it seems to me, destroys the present character of human life...

People say, "What is going to become of the matter of equal opportunity? Here you have some States providing inferior opportunities to others, and the principle of equal opportunity demands Federal aid." I may say, Mr. Chairman, with regard to the matter of equal opportunity, that I am dead opposed to it — dead opposed to the principle of equal opportunity. What shall be done with a State that provides equal opportunity for its children inferior to that provided by other States? Should the people of that State be told that it makes absolutely no difference, that Washington will do it if the State does not do it? I think not. I think we are encouraging an entirely false attitude of mind on the part of individual States if we say that it makes no difference how responsibilities are met.

Senator Reed of New York asked Dr. Machen this question:

Carrying out your principles, if you had a right to do it, would you be in favor of eliminating Federal aid to the Agricultural Department?

Dr. Machen's answer:

There is a difference between the spheres of education and those other spheres. As I say, I think that when it comes to the training of human beings, you have to be a good deal more careful than you do in other spheres about the preservation of the right of individual responsibility; and I think we ought to be plain about this — that unless we preserve the privileges of liberty in this department there is no use in trying to preserve them anywhere else. If you give the bureaucrats the children, you might as well give them everything else as well. (Applause)

Senator Robinson then asked if Machen did not think that Federal control of public education would contribute to practical efficiency in handling school matters.

Machen replied: I am reminded of the story of the tramp who made his way to the third floor of a large department store. The floorwalker spotted the tramp and promptly threw him downstairs. The floorwalker on the second floor pounced on the poor fellow and hurled him down to the first floor. There another floorwalker seized him and heaved him out on the sidewalk. The tramp picked himself up and said with deep admiration, "My, what a system!" (Laughter)

Instances could be multiplied of what Ned B. Stonehouse calls Dr. Machen's "*strong sense of justice, his aversion to tyranny, his zeal to protect the rights of the weak and the oppressed.*" The same writer in *Memoirs* records a moving incident unknown to most people. It is the story of Das's taking under his wing a poor derelict, an alcoholic, with whom he toiled patiently for years and on whom he expended considerable revenue as well as time and loving attention. And, it should be noted that, unlike some demonstrators who today seem to delight in parading before the public their passion for social and civic improvement, Machen carried on his activities with no blowing of trumpets.

It seems clear, then, that Machen would agree with the position advocated by Paul Woolley in an article in *Christianity Today* (July 7, 1967) that it is the task of the church to teach men "*How to find the spring of the energy for the contest against wrong,*" but it is the Christian citizen, not the church, who must fight the battle against social ills.

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