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The One Year Book of Christian History

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January I

He fought for the faith.

BORN IN 1881, J. Gresham Machen grew up in an educated, well-to-do Presbyterian family in Baltimore. He majored in classics at Johns Hopkins University and graduated first in his class in 1901. He then entered the graduate program but after one year enrolled in Princeton Seminary. Following his graduation in 1905, he studied in Germany for a year and then returned to Princeton Seminary as a professor of New Testament in 1906.

Gresham Machen was known for his serious research and scholarly writing on various New Testament topics. He also became known for his defense of conservative theology, especially the authority of Scripture. After publishing *Christianity and Liberalism* in 1923, he became a nationally recognized figure. He maintained that liberalism was not a variety of Christianity but was instead an entirely different religion.

“Liberalism appeals to man’s will, while Christianity announces, first, a gracious act of God.” He argued that historical Christianity had always been rooted in the saving acts of Christ’s death and resurrection, whereas liberal Protestantism reduced Christianity to a set of general religious principles regarding the moral teachings of Jesus.

These beliefs caused Machen to become a controversial figure both at Princeton Seminary and within his denomination, the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., as these institutions were beginning to shift toward a more liberal theological stance. Princeton’s drift into liberalism was heartbreaking for Machen, who fought hard to keep the seminary committed to the creeds of the Presbyterian Church. He pleaded with the seminary faculty to stand for “the full truthfulness of the Bible as the Word of God and for the vigorous defense and propagation of the Reformed or Calvinistic system of doctrine, which is the system of doctrine that the Bible teaches.”

It was a losing battle. Princeton officially reorganized in 1929 to ensure a more inclusive theological curriculum. This left Machen and other Reformed professors worried about the lack of evangelical training for future Presbyterian ministers. In response, Machen and other Reformed faculty members left Princeton and founded Philadelphia’s Westminster Theological Seminary, an institution that would stand for theological orthodoxy and academic excellence. Gresham Machen was a professor of New Testament there until his death.

At Westminster, Machen continued to fight liberalism within the Presby-

STANDING FOR “THE FULL TRUTHFULNESS” OF THE BIBLE

terian Church. In 1933 he helped form the conservative Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions in order to counteract the liberalism that was infiltrating Presbyterian foreign missions. The Presbyterian General Assembly rejected this new mission board, and in 1935 Machen was tried and suspended from the ministry of the Presbyterian Church for refusing to break his ties to the Independent Board.

Machen then played a central role in founding a new denomination, the Presbyterian Church of America (later the Orthodox Presbyterian Church), which over time continued to uphold theological orthodoxy.

While speaking in Bismarck, North Dakota, in December 1936, Machen came down with pneumonia, yet he continued preaching even though it was extremely cold and he was very sick. Finally he was hospitalized. When a friend visited him New Year’s Eve, Machen told him about a vision of heaven he had had in the hospital: “Sam, it was glorious, it was glorious.” He died the next day on **January 1, 1937**.

Reflection

Respond to Gresham Machen’s statement that “liberalism appeals to man’s will, while Christianity announces . . . a gracious act of God.” Where does your church or denomination stand on the conservative/liberal theological continuum? Where do you stand?



Yes, by God’s grace, Jesus tasted death for everyone in all the world. And it was only right that God—who made everything and for whom everything was made—should bring his many children into glory. Through the suffering of Jesus, God made him a perfect leader, one fit to bring them into their salvation.

HEBREWS 2:9-10

January 2

He wept with those who wept.

EDWARD D. GRIFFIN resigned his pastorate at the Newark Presbyterian Church, one of the largest churches in the nation, to become professor of pulpit eloquence at the newly established Andover Theological Seminary in Massachusetts.¹ When Griffin moved from New Jersey to Boston to assume his new position, he was accompanied by five students who would attend the new seminary. One of them, Lewis LeCount Conger, soon fell seriously ill, and Griffin, who had grown to love the young man deeply, sought to inform and comfort the family of the ailing seminary student. Griffin's poignant correspondence with those who loved Lewis Conger began:

January 2, 1810

My Dear Sir,

How often have you and your dear family said, "The Lord reigneth, let the earth rejoice." What a blessing it is that he has the appointment of all our changes and trials. . . . You have given a son to Christ, and if he has work for him on the earth, he will preserve him and make him a blessing to the church; but if he has other designs, he will, I doubt not, take him to himself. . . . Lewis has the typhus fever. His mind is weak; but he loves to hear of the name of Christ, and will listen with deep interest and tender affection to every thing that is said about that blessed Savior. . . . I beseech you, my dear friends . . . Prepare for every thing which God has in store for you. . . . May God Almighty support you, my dear friends, under this trial, is my prayer.

January 3, 1810

We do little else but pray for him; and the whole college is crying with tears, "Spare him, spare him!" . . . I cannot but humbly and earnestly pray that God will spare him for your sakes, and for ours, and for the sake of Christ.

January 6, 1810

The Almighty God support you, my dear friends, under the trials you must feel. I wish with all my heart that I had something agreeable to communicate. And I have—Jesus of Nazareth reigns. The infinite God is happy. And our dear Lewis is happy. Ah, my heart, why this aching and trembling? The will of God is done. Lewis himself wished that the will of God might be done. And

AN APPOINTMENT IN HEAVEN

I am confident that he does not wish to oppose it now. . . . Lewis left these abodes of pain this morning at 10 o'clock. . . .

No young man was ever more beloved. . . . He has not lived in vain. . . . He has been the means of good to some souls; and by his influence on the college, has probably been indirectly the means of some good to thousands. . . .

January 7, 1810

My friends, it is all the appointment of heaven. Eternal wisdom fixed it that he should die at this time and place. . . .

Think not my dear friends, that you have lost your pains in giving him an education. No, you have been fitting him for more than a pulpit—for a higher throne in heaven. . . . There he is! Think not of him on a bed of sickness, in a land of strangers. . . . Think of him on Mount Zion. There is all that is Lewis. The rest is mere dust. We have not lost him. He is only gone a little before us. . . . There we shall soon find him and enjoy him again, and forever—far more than we ever did in this world. . . .

Your afflicted and affectionate friend,

E. D. Griffin

Reflection

Have you lost a friend or loved one in the prime of life and wondered why God took that person? Can you think of any reasons why he took Lewis Conger? Is it really necessary for us to know why?



The righteous pass away; the godly often die before their time. And no one seems to care or wonder why. No one seems to understand that God is protecting them from the evil to come. For the godly who die will rest in peace.

ISAIAH 57:1-2

January 3

Some choices have high stakes.

DELIVER US, Lord Jupiter!" shouted Trajanus Decius, emperor of Rome, as stones and arrows showered around him. "Deliver us, Lord Jupiter, for I have delivered all of Rome into your hands and the hands of our ancient gods!" cried the beleaguered monarch, as his horse stumbled forward through the dark waters of the tangled marshes of Dobruja. His men followed grimly, fighting as they fled.

Pressed violently on their left, assaulted mercilessly on their right, and pursued from behind, Decius's Roman troops bowed wearily and gradually succumbed to the fatal blows of the barbarian Goths of King Kniva. Decius fell at last, one dark form among so many, trampled underfoot by panic-stricken horses and pulled down by the sucking waters of the steaming swamp. His body was never found.

Decius had been emperor for fewer than three years. Coming to power in a time when political turmoil, military crisis, and economic instability threatened the Roman Empire, Decius sought to unite his subjects through forced submission to the ancient Roman gods. "Perhaps," he reasoned, "the gods will favor us once more, give us final victory over the pestilent Goths, and restore the glory of the empire."

On **January 3, 250**, he published an imperial edict commanding all citizens of the empire to sacrifice to the Roman gods. Those who did so were given certificates as evidence of their compliance while those who refused were imprisoned or executed.

Decius's edict initiated the first universal Roman persecution of the Christian church. Untold numbers of believers suffered the loss of family, freedom, and life itself. Among those martyred over the next two years were the bishops of Rome, Antioch, and Jerusalem.

When Decius died in battle against the Goths in June of 251, the pogrom ended, but the lull revealed a spiritual war within the ranks of the Christian community itself.

Many believers had sacrificed to the gods to save their lives, and others had illegally obtained certificates without sacrificing. And now thousands of lapsed Christians begged to be received back into the fellowship of the church.

A great controversy ensued. Some of those who had been imprisoned for

CHOOSING WHOM YOU WILL SERVE

their faith wrote letters of pardon to large numbers of those who had denied Christ. Some dishonest individuals produced amnesty papers in the name of dead martyrs.

Bishops were divided over how to treat the lapsed Christians. Some called for rigid excommunication. Some demanded a general amnesty. Eventually, they agreed that those who actually sacrificed to the gods should be readmitted to communion only when dying. Those who obtained a false Roman certificate but had not actually sacrificed to the gods could be readmitted upon repentance and penance. Without sorrow for their unfaithfulness, they would receive no grace. However, bitter dissensions over the matter continued with resulting schisms.

When another great persecution arose under Emperor Valerian in 257, a wider amnesty was offered to those who had defected during the days of Decius. This was not the sign of a weakened standard but rather a gracious opportunity for the shunned to stand where once they had fallen. Many returned to the fold. Many, in turn, sacrificed their lives for Christ.

Reflection

How do you feel the church should have dealt with Christians who sacrificed to the Roman gods or who obtained counterfeit certificates of compliance? How should churches today deal with members engaged in egregious sin?



Dear brothers and sisters, if another Christian is overcome by some sin, you who are godly should gently and humbly help that person back onto the right path. And be careful not to fall into the same temptation yourself.

GALATIANS 6:1