

AlbertMohler.com

Machen on Christianity as a Way of Life 'Founded Upon a Doctrine'

Wednesday, July 27, 2005

There is much conversation these days about the role of doctrine in the Christian life. I was recently reminded of how J. Gresham Machen addressed this issue in the context of the controversies of his day. On September 11, 1924, Machen responded to a reviewer who had published a negative review of *Christianity and Liberalism* in *The British Weekly*. Here is the essential section of Machen's response:

Apparently you assume...that doctrine springs from experience, dogmas being divided into grades according to the degree of directness with which they come from the religious experience of the community. If that be correct, then, of course, the whole debate is over—what is primary in that case is a mystic experience which clothes itself in new intellectual forms in every generation, no one of those intellectual forms being of permanent validity. And that means simply that a thoroughly skeptical mysticism has been substituted for the Christian religion.

[Christianity] was certainly not a way of life as distinguished from a doctrine, or way of life expressing itself in a doctrine, but it was a way of life founded upon a doctrine. It was founded more especially upon a proclamation of something that happened. The primitive Church proclaimed that happening after the first great act in it had occurred; Jesus proclaimed it by way of prophecy, but the primitive Church and Jesus were alike in proclaiming an event.

Thus, Machen insisted that Christianity *is* a way of life, but a way of life that is established upon a claim to truth — a claim that is essentially and irreducibly doctrinal in form and substance. The doctrine is not itself the way of life, but the way of life that is true Christianity requires an affirmation of the truth claim. Otherwise, it inevitably devolves into “a mystic experience which clothes itself in new intellectual forms in every generation.”

SOURCE FOR MACHEN QUOTE: Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir*. A 50th anniversary edition of this influential book is available from the Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia and can be ordered [here](#).

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

