Steve Whitacre
SESSION 3 | Machen on Culture

I.   **INTRODUCTION**

II.   **MACHEN ON CULTURE: BUILDING FOR CHRIST**

- "And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'" (Genesis 1:28).

- "This implies that creation has unrealized potential, latent dimensions that lie beneath the surface... Thus, with the cultural mandate, God gives divine endorsement to the development of the earth's natural resources through science and technology ("Let's go discover all the cool things that hydrogen can do")... Culture, therefore, encompasses more than just "the arts"—painting, sculpting, literature, and music. Indeed, it incorporates all facets of human activity—from the mundane to the skilled, from the lowest to the highest. Both the fry cook at McDonald's and the conductor of the Boston Symphony are engaged in culture, each in his own way. In both cases, they are developing and transforming the world as they find it.

- Culture, then, is a kind of cultivation, a drawing out what God has put in. Or, to change metaphors, culture is an adornment of creation, the further beautification of an already beautiful world. It refers both to the developmental activity of man—or culture making—and to the cultural products that result... In a word, Creation + Man's Creative Efforts = Culture." Joe Rigney, *The Things of Earth*, 138–39.

- What is the relationship of Christianity to culture? According to Machen, three possibilities:

1. **Culture over Christianity.**

    o "That solution really, though to some extent unconsciously, is being favored by a very large and influential portion of the Church today... Christianity becomes a human product, a mere part of human culture. But as such it is something entirely different from the old Christianity that was based upon a direct revelation from God. Deprived thus of its note of authority, the gospel is no gospel any longer..." Machen, "Christianity and Culture" in *What is Christianity*, 158.

2. **Christianity over culture.**

    o "The second solution goes to the opposite extreme. In its effort to give religion a clear field, it seeks to destroy culture. This solution is better than the first. Instead of indulging in a shallow optimism or deification of humanity, it recognizes the profound evil of the world, and does not shrink from the most heroic means for its own salvation... If Christianity is really found to contradict that reason which is our only means of apprehending truth, then of course we must either modify or abandon Christianity. We cannot therefore be entirely independent of the achievements of the intellect. Furthermore, we cannot without inconsistency employ the printing-press, the railroad, the telegraph in the propagation of our gospel, and at the same time denounce as evil those activities of the human mind that produced these things... In its extreme form, therefore, involving the abandonment of all intellectual activity, this second solution would be adopted by none of us. But, very many pious men in the Church today are adopting this solution in essence and in spirit. They admit that the Christian must have a part in human culture. But they regard such activity as a necessary evil—a dangerous and unworthy task necessary to be gone through with under a stern sense of duty in order that thereby the higher ends of the gospel may be attained. Such men can never engage in the arts and sciences with anything like enthusiasm—such enthusiasm they would regard as disloyalty to the gospel. Such a position is really both illogical and unbiblical." J. Gresham Machen, "Christianity and Culture" in *What is Christianity?* 159.

    o "God has given us certain powers of mind, and has implanted within us the ineradicable conviction that these powers were intended to be exercised. The Bible, too, contains poetry that exhibits no lack of enthusiasm, no lack of a keen appreciation of beauty. With this second solution of the problem we cannot rest content. Despite all we can do, the desire to know and the love of beauty cannot be

entirely stifled, and we cannot permanently regard these desires as evil." J. Gresham Machen, "Christianity and Culture" in *What is Christianity?*160.

3. **Christianity consecrating culture.**

- o "Are then Christianity and culture in a conflict that is to be settled only by the destruction of one or the other of the contending forces? A third solution, fortunately, is possible—namely consecration. Instead of destroying the arts and sciences or being indifferent to them, let us cultivate them with all the enthusiasm of the veriest humanist, but at the same time consecrate them to the service of our God. Instead of stifling the pleasures afforded by the acquisition of knowledge or by the appreciation of what is beautiful, let us accept these pleasures as the gifts of a heavenly Father. Instead of obliterating the distinction between the Kingdom and the world, or on the other hand withdrawing from the world into a sort of modernized intellectual monasticism, let us go forth joyfully, enthusiastically to make the world subject to God." J. Gresham Machen, "Christianity and Culture" in *What is Christianity?*, 160.

- o "Furthermore, the field of Christianity is the world. The Christian cannot be satisfied so long as any human activity is either opposed to Christianity or out of all connection with Christianity. Christianity must pervade not merely all nations, but also all of human thought. The Christian, therefore, cannot be indifferent to any branch of earnest human endeavor. It must all be brought into *some* relation to the gospel. It must be studied either in order to be demonstrated as false, or else in order to be made useful in advancing the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom must be advanced not merely extensively, but also intensively. The Church must seek to conquer not merely every man for Christ, but also the whole of man." J. Gresham Machen, "Christianity and Culture" in *What is Christianity?*, 161.

- o "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: Mine!" Abraham Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty," in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt, 488.

- o "What is today matter of academic speculation be gins tomorrow to move armies and pull down empires. In that second stage, it has gone too far to be combatted; the time to stop it was when it was still a matter of impassionate debate. So as Christians we should try

to mould the thought of the world in such a way as to make the acceptance of Christianity something more than a logical absurdity." J. Gresham Machen, "Christianity and Culture" in What is Christianity?, 161.

III. EDUCATION: THINKING FOR CHRIST

- "A man cannot trust a person whom he holds to be untrustworthy. Faith always contains an intellectual element. A very little knowledge is often sufficient if a man is to believe, but some knowledge there must be. So if a man is to trust Christ he must know something about Christ; he may know only a very little, but without some knowledge he could not believe at all." J. Gresham Machen, "Christian Scholarship and Evangelism," in *What is Christianity*, 120–21.

- "What a world in itself the Bible is, my friends! Happy are those who in the providence of God can make the study of it very specifically the business of their lives; but happy also is every Christian who has it open before him and seeks by daily study to penetrate somewhat into the wonderful richness of what it contains." J. Gresham Machen, "Christian Scholarship and Building Up the Church," in *What is Christianity*, 141.

IV. CONCLUSION