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the swans are not silent



BOOK FOUR

Contending *for* OUR ALL

Defending Truth and Treasuring Christ
in the Lives of Athanasius, John Owen,
and J. Gresham Machen

JOHN PIPER

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Our upbringing and the whole atmosphere of the world we live in make it certain that our main temptation will be that of yielding to winds of doctrine, not that of ignoring them. We are not at all likely to be hidebound: we are very likely indeed to be the slaves of fashion. If one has to choose between reading the new books and reading the old, one must choose the old: not because they are necessarily better but because they contain precisely those truths of which our own age is neglectful. The standard of permanent Christianity must be kept clear in our minds and it is against that standard that we must test all contemporary thought. In fact, we must at all costs not move with the times. We serve One who said, "Heaven and Earth shall move with the times, but my words shall not move with the times" (Matthew 24:35; Mark 13:31; Luke 21:33).

C. S. LEWIS, "CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS," IN:
ESSAY COLLECTION AND OTHER SHORT PIECES
(LONDON: HARPERCOLLINS, 2000), p. 149



P R E F A C E



The title of this series of books, “The Swans Are Not Silent,” comes from a story about St. Augustine. When he handed over his duties as the bishop of Hippo in North Africa in A.D. 326, his humble replacement, Eraclius, rose to speak and said, “The cricket chirps, the swan is silent.”¹ Therefore, in titling this series “The Swans Are *Not* Silent” I mean to say that great voices like Augustine’s have been heard all through church history, and we will do well to listen.

I am deeply thankful to God that the swans are not silent, and that the list of faith-inspiring heroes in Hebrews 11 did not end with the New Testament. God has worked through the lives of countless saints of whom we should say, “Though they died, they still speak” (cf. Hebrews 11:4).

Some swans are alive and sing in our own day. But not many. And only time will tell if their song will survive the centuries. But time has already rendered that judgment for hundreds of swans. They have died, and their work has stood the test of time. Their song is, therefore, especially valuable for us to hear. You can hear them by studying what they wrote and by reading good biographies about them. This use of your time is probably wiser than staying up-to-date with news that will be forgotten in a fortnight and with ideas that will prove powerless in ten years.

I know of no one who has made a case for the old authors and the old books better than C. S. Lewis (1898-1963). When he

¹Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 408.

neared sixty he confessed with humility and wisdom: “I have lived nearly sixty years with myself and my own century and am not so enamored of either as to desire no glimpse of a world beyond them.”² The “world beyond them” was not future or make-believe. It was the world of the past.

He practiced what he preached by writing an introduction for Athanasius’s *The Incarnation of the Word of God*, written probably in A.D. 318. At the risk of tempting you to put down the book in your hands and read only old books, I will nevertheless tell you what Lewis said about the reading of old books like the classic by Athanasius.

There is a strange idea abroad that in every subject the ancient books should be read only by the professionals, and that the amateur should content himself with the modern books. . . . [Students are directed not to Plato but to books on Plato]— all about ‘isms’ and influences and only once in twelve pages telling him what Plato actually said. . . . But if he only knew, the great man, just because of his greatness, is much more intelligible than his modern commentator. . . .

Now this seems to me topsy-turvy. Naturally, since I myself am a writer, I do not wish the ordinary reader to read no modern books. But if he must read only the new or only the old, I would advise him to read the old. And I would give him this advice precisely because he is an amateur and therefore much less protected than the expert against the dangers of an exclusive contemporary diet. A new book is still on its trial and the amateur is not in a position to judge it. It has to be tested against the great body of Christian thought down the ages, and all its hidden implications (often unsuspected by the author himself) have to be brought to light. . . .

²From C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, quoted in *The Quotable Lewis*, ed. Jerry Root and Wayne Martindale (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1989), p. 509.

It is a good rule, after reading a new book, never to allow yourself another new one till you have read an old one in between. If that is too much for you, you should at least read one old one to every three new ones. . . .

We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period. And that means the old books. . . . We may be sure that the characteristic blindness of the twentieth century—the blindness about which posterity will ask, “But how *could* they have thought that?”—lies where we have never suspected it, and concerns something about which there is untroubled agreement between Hitler and President Roosevelt or between Mr. H. G. Wells and Karl Barth. None of us can fully escape this blindness. . . . The only palliative is to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds, and this can be done only by reading old books.³

In this book I invite you to feel the “clean sea breeze” blowing from the fourth, seventeenth, and early twentieth centuries. Perhaps this will lure you to read what Athanasius, John Owen, and J. Gresham Machen wrote. Their lives are not only pleasant as refreshing breezes from distant times but are also needed as exemplary contenders for the purity and preciousness of biblical truth. I will try to explain why in the Introduction. For now I thank God again that these three swans are not silent and that they were willing to suffer for the sake of safeguarding the gospel for us. They would have all said with Athanasius, “We are contending for our all.”⁴

³Now printed as C. S. Lewis, “On The Reading of Old Books,” in *C. S. Lewis: Essay Collection and Other Short Pieces*, ed. Lesley Walmsley (London: HarperCollins, 2000), pp. 438-440.

⁴“Wherefore . . . considering that *this struggle is for our all* . . . let us also make it our earnest care and aim to guard what we have received.” *Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 4, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (1892; reprint: Peabody, MA: Hendricksen, 1999), p. 234; emphasis added.

*Men tell us that our preaching should be positive and not negative,
that we can preach the truth without attacking error.
But if we follow that advice we shall have to close our Bible and
desert its teachings. The New Testament is a polemic book
almost from beginning to end.*

*Some years ago I was in a company of teachers of the Bible in the
colleges and other educational institutions of America. One of the
most eminent theological professors in the country made an
address. In it he admitted that there are unfortunate controversies
about doctrine in the Epistles of Paul; but, said he in effect,
the real essence of Paul's teaching is found in the hymn to
Christian love in the thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians;
and we can avoid controversy today, if we will only devote
the chief attention to that inspiring hymn.*

*In reply, I am bound to say that the example was singularly
ill-chosen. That hymn to Christian love is in the midst of a great
polemic passage; it would never have been written if Paul had
been opposed to controversy with error in the Church. It was
because his soul was stirred within him by a wrong use of the
spiritual gifts that he was able to write that glorious hymn. So it is
always in the Church. Every really great Christian utterance, it
may almost be said, is born in controversy. It is when men have
felt compelled to take a stand against error that they have risen to
the really great heights in the celebration of truth.*

J. GRESHAM MACHEN, "CHRISTIAN SCHOLARSHIP AND THE
DEFENSE OF THE FAITH," IN J. GRESHAM MACHEN:
SELECTED SHORTER WRITINGS, ED. D. G. HART
(PHILLIPSBURG, NJ: P&R, 2004), PP. 148-149



INTRODUCTION

Sacred Controversy in Scripture, History, and the Lives of the Swans



Controversy, Cowardice, and Pride

Some controversy is crucial for the sake of life-giving truth. Running from it is a sign of cowardice. But enjoying it is usually a sign of pride. Some necessary tasks are sad, and even victory is not without tears—unless there is pride. The reason enjoying controversy is a sign of pride is that humility loves truth-based unity more than truth-based victory. Humility loves Christ-exalting exultation more than Christ-defending confrontation—even more than Christ-defending vindication. Humility delights to worship Christ in spirit and truth. If it must fight for worship-sustaining truth, it will, but that is not because the fight is pleasant. It's not even because victory is pleasant. It's because knowing and loving and proclaiming Christ for who he really is and what he really did is pleasant.

Indeed knowing and loving the truth of Christ is not only pleasant now, it is the only path to everlasting life and joy. That's why Athanasius (298-373), John Owen (1616-1683), and J. Gresham Machen (1881-1937) took so seriously the controversies of their time. It was not what they liked; but it was what love required—love for Christ and his church and his world.

Controversy Less Crucial, But Necessary

There are more immediately crucial tasks than controversy about the truth and meaning of the gospel. For example, it is more immediately crucial that we believe the gospel, and proclaim it to the unreached, and pray for power to attend the preaching of the gospel. But this is like saying that flying food to starving people is more immediately crucial than the science of aeronautics. True. But the food will not be flown to the needy if someone is not doing aeronautics. It is like saying that giving penicillin shots to children dying of fever is more immediately crucial than the work of biology and chemistry. True. But there would be no penicillin without such work.

In every age there is a kind of person who tries to minimize the importance of truth-defining and truth-defending controversy by saying that prayer, worship, evangelism, missions, and dependence on the Holy Spirit are more important. Who has not heard such rejoinders to controversy: “Let’s stop arguing about the gospel and get out there and share it with a dying world.” Or: “Prayer is more powerful than argument.” Or: “We should rely on the Holy Spirit and not on our reasoning.” Or: “God wants to be worshiped, not discussed.”

I love the passion for faith and prayer and evangelism and worship behind those statements. But when they are used to belittle gospel-defining, gospel-defending controversy they bite the hand that feeds them. Christ-exalting prayer will not survive in an atmosphere where the preservation and explanation and vindication of the teaching of the Bible about the prayer-hearing God are devalued. Evangelism and world missions must feed on the solid food of well-grounded, unambiguous, rich gospel truth

in order to sustain courage and confidence in the face of afflictions and false religions. And corporate worship will be diluted with cultural substitutes where the deep, clear, biblical contours of God's glory are not seen and guarded from ever-encroaching error.

It is not valid to contrast dependence on the Holy Spirit with the defense of his Word in controversy. The reason is that the Holy Spirit uses means—including the preaching and defending of the gospel. J. Gresham Machen put it like this:

It is perfectly true, of course, that argument alone is quite insufficient to make a man a Christian. You may argue with him from now until the end of the world; you may bring forth the most magnificent arguments—but all will be in vain unless there is one other thing: the mysterious, creative power of the Holy Spirit in the new birth. But because argument is insufficient, it does not follow that it is unnecessary. Sometimes it is used directly by the Holy Spirit to bring a man to Christ. But more frequently it is used indirectly.¹

This is why Athanasius, John Owen, and J. Gresham Machen engaged their minds and hearts and lives in the Christ-defining and Christ-defending controversies of their day. It was not because the Holy Spirit and prayer were inadequate. It was because the Holy Spirit works through the Word preached and explained and defended. It was because biblical prayer aims not just at the heart of the person who needs persuading, but also at the per-

¹ J. Gresham Machen, "Christian Scholarship and the Defense of the Faith," in *J. Gresham Machen: Selected Shorter Writings*, ed. D. G. Hart (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), pp. 144-145. One should also recall how Paul "reasoned" in the synagogues in order to win converts by the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 17:2, 17; 18:4, 19; 24:25).

suader.² The Holy Spirit makes a biblical argument compelling in the mouth of the teacher and in the heart of the student.

And Athanasius, Owen, and Machen believed that what they were contending for was of infinite worth. It was indeed not a distraction from the work of love. It was love—love to Christ, his church, and his world.

Controversy When “Our All” Is at Stake

In Athanasius’s lifelong battle for the deity of Christ against the Arians, who said that Christ was created, Athanasius said, “Considering that *this struggle is for our all* . . . let us also make it our earnest care and aim to guard what we have received.”³ When *all* is at stake, it is worth contending. This is what love does.

Machen, in his twentieth-century American situation, put it like this: “Controversy of the right sort is good; for out of such controversy, as Church history and Scripture alike teach, there comes the salvation of souls.”⁴ When you believe that *soul-saving* truth (our *all*) is at stake in a controversy, running away is not only cowardly but cruel. These men never ran.

John Owen, the greatest Puritan intellect, took up more controversies than Machen and Athanasius combined, but was driven by an even more manifest love for Christ. Not that he loved Christ more (only God can know that); but he articulated the battle for

² Second Thessalonians 3:1, “Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored.” Colossians 4:3, “Pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word.” Ephesians 6:19, “[Pray] for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel.”

³ Athanasius: *Select Works and Letters*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (NPNF)*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (1892; reprint: Peabody, MA: Hendricksen, 1999), 4:234. Emphasis added.

⁴ J. Gresham Machen, *What Is Faith?* (1925; reprint: Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991), pp. 42-43.

communion with Christ more explicitly than they. For Owen, virtually every confrontation with error was for the sake of the contemplation of Christ. Communion with Christ was his constant theme and goal. He held the view that such contemplation and communion were only possible by means of true views of Christ. Truth about Christ was necessary for communion with Christ.

Therefore all controversy in the defense of this truth was for the sake of worship.

What soul that hath any acquaintance with these things falls not down with reverence and astonishment? How glorious is he that is the Beloved of our souls! . . . When . . . our life, our peace, our joy, our inheritance, our eternity, *our all*, lies herein, shall not the thoughts of it always dwell in our hearts, always refresh and delight our souls?⁵

As with Athanasius, Owen said that “our all” is at stake in contending for the truth of Christ. Then he brings the battle into the closest connection with the blessing of communion with God. Even *in* the battle, not just *after* it, we must commune with God. “When we have *communion with God in the doctrine we contend for*—then shall we be garrisoned by the grace of God against all the assaults of men.”⁶ The aim of contending for Christ is also essential to the means. If we do not delight in Christ through the truth that we defend, our defense is not for the sake of the preciousness of Christ. The end and the means of Christ-exalting controversy is worship.

⁵ John Owen, *Of Communion with God*, in *The Works of John Owen*, 24 vols., ed. William Goold (1850-1853; reprint: Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965), 2:69. Emphasis added.

⁶ Owen, *Works*, 1:lxiii-lxiv. Emphasis added.

A Mistaken Notion About Controversy and Church Vitality

There is a mistaken notion about the relationship between the health of the church and the presence of controversy. For example, some say that spiritual awakening and power and growth will not come to the church of Christ until church leaders lay aside doctrinal differences and come together in prayer. Indeed there should be much corporate prayer for God's mercy on us. And indeed there are some doctrinal differences that should not be elevated to a place of prominence. Machen explained his own passion for doctrine with this caution: "We do not mean, in insisting upon the doctrinal basis of Christianity, that all points of doctrine are equally important. It is perfectly possible for Christian fellowship to be maintained despite differences of opinion."⁷

But there is a historical and biblical error in the assumption that the church will not grow and prosper in times of controversy. Machen said, as we saw above, that church history and Scripture teach the value of right controversy. This is important to see, because if we do not see it, we will yield to the massive pragmatic pressure of our time to minimize doctrine. We will cave in to the pressure that a truth-driven ministry cannot be a people-loving, soul-saving, church-reviving, justice-advancing, missions-mobilizing, worship-intensifying, Christ-exalting ministry. But, in fact, it is truth—biblical truth, doctrinal truth—that gives foundation and duration to all these things.

⁷J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923; reprint: Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 48.

The Witness of Church History to the Place of Controversy

The witness of church history is that seasons of controversy have often been seasons of growth and strength. This was the case in the first centuries of the church. Most Christians today would be stunned if they knew that the battle for the deity of Christ was not a battle between the great force of orthodoxy, on the one hand, and marginal heretics, on the other. It was a battle in which at times the majority of the church leaders in the world were unorthodox.⁸ Yet the church grew in spite of controversy and persecution. Indeed I believe we must say that the growth of the true church in those days was *because of* leaders like Athanasius, who took a stand for the sake of truth. Without controversy there would have been no gospel, and therefore no church.

The Protestant Reformation

The time of the Protestant Reformation was a time of great controversy both between the Protestants and Roman Catholics and between the Reformers themselves. Yet the fullness of the gospel was preserved in these great doctrinal battles, and true faith spread and was strengthened. In fact, the spread and vitality of the Reformed faith in the century after John Calvin's death in 1564 was astonishing⁹ and produced some of the greatest pastors and

⁸The Council of Nicaea did not settle the issue of Christ's deity—it drew the battle lines. The majority of bishops who signed it (all but two) were politically motivated. "In the years immediately following, we find a large majority of the Eastern bishops, especially of Syria and Asia Minor, the very regions whence the numerical strength of the council was drawn, in full reaction against the council." *NPNF*, 4:xxi.

⁹German Calvinist Abraham Scultetus (1566-1624) described the spread of Reformed influence thirty years after Calvin's death. "I cannot fail to recall the optimistic mood which I and many others felt when we considered the condition of the Reformed churches in 1591. In France there ruled the valiant King Henri IV, in England the mighty Queen Elizabeth, in Scotland the learned King James, in the Palatinate the bold hero John Casimir, in Saxony the courageous and powerful Elector Christian I, in Hesse the clever and prudent Landgrave William, who were

theologians the world has ever known¹⁰—all of this born in the controversies of Wittenberg and Geneva.

The First Great Awakening

The First Great Awakening in Britain and America in the eighteenth century was a time of tremendous growth for the church and of profound awakening of thousands of individuals. But it is common knowledge that the two greatest itinerant preachers in this movement were opposed to each other's understanding of God's work in salvation. George Whitefield was a Calvinist, and John Wesley was an Arminian.

J. I. Packer explains the five points of Calvinism in this way:

- (1) Fallen man in his natural state lacks all power to believe the gospel, just as he lacks all power to believe the law, despite all external inducements that may be extended to him.
 - (2) God's election is a free, sovereign, unconditional choice of sinners, as sinners, to be redeemed by Christ, given faith, and brought to glory.
 - (3) The redeeming work of Christ had as its end and goal the salvation of the elect.
 - (4) The work of the Holy Spirit in bringing men to faith never fails to achieve its object.
 - (5) Believers are kept in faith and grace by the unconquerable power of God till they come to glory.
- These five points are conveniently

all inclined to Reformed religion. In the Netherlands everything went as Prince Maurice of Orange wished, when he took Breda, Zutphen, Hulst, and Nijmegen. . . . We imagined that *aurum seculum*, a golden age, had dawned." Quoted in Alister E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), p. 199.

¹⁰When I speak of notable pastors and theologians, I am thinking mainly of the pastoral theologians called Puritans who flourished in Great Britain in the century following John Calvin's death. J. I. Packer called these pastor-theologians the "Redwoods" of church history. "California's Redwoods make me think of England's Puritans, another breed of giants who in our time have begun to be newly appreciated. Between 1550 and 1700 they too lived unfrilled lives in which, speaking spiritually, strong growth and resistance to fire and storm were what counted." *A Quest For Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), p. 11.

denoted by the mnemonic TULIP: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, Preservation of the saints.

And here is how Packer unpacks the five points of Arminianism:

(1) Man is never so completely corrupted by sin that he cannot savingly believe the gospel when it is put before him, nor (2) is he ever so completely controlled by God that he cannot reject it. (3) God's election of those who shall be saved is prompted by his foreseeing that they will of their own accord believe. (4) Christ's death did not ensure the salvation of anyone, for it did not secure the gift of faith to anyone (there is no such gift): what it did was rather to create a possibility of salvation for everyone if they believe. (5) It rests with believers to keep themselves in a state of grace by keeping up their faith; those who fail here fall away and are lost. Thus, Arminianism made man's salvation depend ultimately on man himself, saving faith being viewed throughout as man's own work and, because his own, not God's in him.¹¹

At the human center of the Great Awakening was controversy.

Wesley's disagreement with Calvinism "burst forth in a sermon from 1740 titled 'Free Grace.' . . . For Wesley the Calvinist insistence that God's electing power was the basic element in the sinner's conversion verged dangerously close to antinomianism. . . . Wesley could not be persuaded that the Bible taught Calvinist doctrines."¹²

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

¹² Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), p. 122.

Whitefield responded to Wesley's criticism with a published letter from Bethesda, Georgia, dated December 24, 1740. He knew that controversy between evangelicals would be frowned upon by some and savored by others. Yet he felt compelled to engage in the controversy:

I am very apprehensive that our common adversaries will rejoice to see us differing among ourselves. But what can I say? The children of God are in danger of falling into error. . . . When I remember how Paul reprov'd Peter for his dissimulation, I fear I have been sinfully silent too long. Oh! then, be not angry with me, dear and honored sir, if now I deliver my soul, by telling you that I think, in this you greatly err.¹³

Mark Noll said that Whitefield's response to Wesley "inaugurated the most enduring theological conflict among evangelicals, the conflict between Arminian and Calvinist interpretations of Scripture on the nature, motive powers and implications of salvation."¹⁴ Nevertheless, with controversy at the center, the Great Awakening brought unprecedented life and growth to churches in the American colonies and Britain. Take the Baptists, for example. They were the "primary beneficiaries of the Great Awakening"¹⁵ in America. "In the colonies of North America there were less than one hundred Baptist churches in 1740, but almost five hundred by the outbreak of the war with Britain in 1776."¹⁶ Similarly the Presbyterian churches rose from about

¹³ George Whitefield, "A Letter From George Whitefield to the Rev. Mr. John Wesley, in Answer to Mr. Wesley's Sermon Entitled 'Free Grace,'" (December 24, 1740), in *George Whitefield's Journals* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1960), p. 569ff.

¹⁴ Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism*, p. 122.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

160 in 1740 to nearly six hundred by 1776.¹⁷ The point is that controversy was prominent in the Great Awakening, and God blessed the movement with spiritual life and growth.

The Second Great Awakening

The same thing can be said of the Second Great Awakening. It was “the most influential revival of Christianity in the history of the United States. Its very size and its many expressions have led some historians to question whether a *single* Second Great Awakening can be identified as such. Yet from about 1795 to about 1810 there was a broad and general rekindling of interest in Christianity through the country.”¹⁸ Francis Asbury and Charles Finney were the main leaders of this Awakening. Both were controversial, and both saw amazing growth.

When Francis Asbury came to America in 1771, four Methodist ministers were caring for about three hundred laypeople. When he died in 1816, there were two thousand ministers and over two hundred thousand Methodists in the States and several thousand more in Canada.¹⁹ But his attachment to the Englishman John Wesley and his unorthodox methods of ministry brought Asbury into controversy with American patriots and church leaders. For example, he was banished from Maryland because he would not sign an oath of loyalty to the new state government.²⁰ The blessing of God on his ministry for forty-five years was unbroken by the controversy that swirled around it.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

¹⁸ Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 166.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

Finney, who broke with his Presbyterian background, was unorthodox both in method and theology. He took over the use of the controversial “anxious bench” and made it into a norm of later revivalism.²¹ He was more Arminian than John Wesley:

Wesley maintained that the human will is incapable of choosing God apart from God’s preparatory grace, but Finney rejected this requirement. He was a perfectionist who believed that a permanent stage of higher spiritual life was possible for anyone who sought it wholeheartedly. Following the theologians of New England, he held a governmental view of the atonement whereby Christ’s death was a public demonstration of God’s willingness to forgive sins rather than payment for sin itself.²²

This kind of theology was bound to meet opposition. One example of that controversy can be seen by observing Finney’s relationship with his contemporaries Asahel Nettleton and Lyman Beecher. “Finney was the spokesman for the surging frontier religion which was both speculative and emotional. Nettleton was the defender of the old New England orthodoxy which refused to be shaken from the moorings of the past.”²³ Lyman Beecher was a Congregational pastor in Boston and shared Nettleton’s historic Calvinist views. Both these men had fruitful ministries, and Nettleton’s itinerant evangelism was blessed with so many con-

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 177. Finney also rejected the doctrine of original sin and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. “I insisted that our reason was given for the very purpose of enabling us to justify the ways of God; and that no such fiction of imputation could by any possibility be true.” Quoted in J. F. Thornbury, *God Sent Revival: The Story of Asahel Nettleton and the Second Great Awakening* (Grand Rapids, MI: Evangelical Press, 1977), p. 160.

²³ Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, p. 168.

versions that Francis Wayland (1796-1865), an early president of Brown University, said, “I suppose no minister of his time was the means of so many conversions. . . . He . . . would sway an audience as the trees of the forest are moved by a mighty wind.”²⁴

But the controversy between Finney, on the one hand, and Nettleton and Beecher, on the other, was so intense that a meeting was called in New Lebanon, New York, in 1827 to work out the differences. Numerous concerned clergy came from both the Finney and the Beecher side. It ended without reconciliation, and Beecher said to Finney, “Finney, I know your plan, and you know I do; you mean to come to Connecticut and carry a streak of fire to Boston. But if you attempt it, as the Lord liveth, I’ll meet you at the State line, and call out all the artillery men, and fight every inch of the way to Boston, and then I’ll fight you there.”²⁵

Controversy and Vitality and Growth Are Compatible

The point of these illustrations from church history is to lay to rest the notion that powerful spiritual awakening can only come when controversy is put aside. Though I would not want to press it as a strategy, history seems to suggest the opposite. When there is a great movement of God to bring revival and reformation to his church, controversy becomes part of the human process. It would

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 55. The reason Wayland could say this, in spite of Finney’s amazing success, was that Nettleton’s converts had a remarkable reputation of remaining faithful over time and proving themselves true converts, while Finney’s were more like the converts of mass evangelism in our own day—a large percentage fell away. “Given the extent of his exposure, and the permanence of his converts, he may well have been, next to George Whitefield, the most effective evangelist in the history of the United States. The ratio of his converts to the population of America in his day [about nine million] is very revealing. Although there is no way of knowing how many were brought to salvation through his preaching, a conservative estimate would be twenty-five thousand. Based on the reports of firsthand witnesses, and pastors who labored in the communities where his revivals took place, sometimes examining the situation thirty years later, only a small fraction of these converts were spurious.” *Ibid.*, p. 233.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

not be far off to say with Parker Williamson that at least in some instances the controversy was not just a result but a means of the revitalization of the church.

Historically, controversies that have swirled around the meaning and implications of the Gospel, far from damaging the Church, have contributed to its vitality. Like a refiner's fire, intense theological debate has resulted in clarified belief, common vision, and invigorated ministry.²⁶

J. Gresham Machen came to the same conclusion as he looked over the history of the church and the nature of Christ's mission in the world:

Every true revival is born in controversy, and leads to more controversy. That has been true ever since our Lord said that he came not to bring peace upon the earth but a sword. And do you know what I think will happen when God sends a new reformation upon the church? We cannot tell when that blessed day will come. But when the blessed day does come, I think we can say at least one result that it will bring. We shall hear nothing on that day about the evils of controversy in the church. All that will be swept away as with a mighty flood. A man who is on fire with a message never talks in that wretched, feeble way, but proclaims the truth joyously and fearlessly, in the presence of every high thing that is lifted up against the gospel of Christ.²⁷

²⁶ Parker T. Williamson, *Standing Firm: Reclaiming Christian Faith in Times of Controversy* (Springfield, PA: PLC Publications, 1996), p. 2.

²⁷ Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir* (1954, reprint: Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), p. 148.

Probably the regular presence of controversy in times of revival and reformation is owing to several factors. In these seasons of emerging spiritual life, passions run higher. And when passions are higher, controversy is more likely. Satan too can see the dangers of revival to his cause and will surely work to bring disunity and disrepute on the leaders if he can. But more essentially, awakening and reformation are caused and carried by more clear perception of the glories of Christ and the repugnance of sin; and when these are seen more clearly and spoken of more precisely, division is more likely than when Christ is spoken of in vague terms and people care little for his name. Add to this that in times of revival people see more clearly that eternity is at stake in what we believe, and this gives a cutting edge to doctrine. It really matters when you see that “our all” is at stake.

The Witness of Scripture to the Place of Controversy

In addition to church history, the Bible itself testifies that there is a body of doctrine about God and his ways that exists objectively outside ourselves, and that this truth is so important that preserving it is worth controversy if necessary. The apostle Paul calls this body of doctrine “the standard of teaching to which you were committed” (Romans 6:17). That’s the way it functions. It is a standard, a yardstick, a pattern. You measure all other truth by it. Elsewhere he calls it “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27) and the “pattern of the sound words” and “the good deposit entrusted to you” (2 Timothy 1:13-14). In other words, it doesn’t change.

The importance of this revealed truth about God and his ways can hardly be overemphasized. It awakens and sustains faith;²⁸ it is the source of obedience;²⁹ it frees from sin;³⁰ it liberates from Satan's bondage;³¹ it awakens and sustains love;³² it saves;³³ it sustains joy.³⁴ And most of all—as the sum of all the rest—this body of biblical truth is the means of having God the Father and God the Son: “Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son” (2 John 9).

The reason Christianity has been so uncongenial to the pragmatic mind-set that resists controversy at all costs is that at the core of Christian faith are history and doctrine that do not change. Machen states with characteristic clarity:

From the beginning, the Christian gospel, as indeed the name “gospel” or “good news” implies, consisted in an account of something that had happened. And from the beginning, the meaning of the happening was set forth; and when the meaning of the happening was set forth then there was Christian doctrine. “Christ died”—that is

²⁸ Romans 10:17, “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”

²⁹ John 17:17, “Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth.” Second Peter 1:3-4, “His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust” (NASB).

³⁰ John 8:32, “and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

³¹ Second Timothy 2:24-26, “The Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and *escape* from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will” (NASB).

³² Philippians 1:9, “And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment” (NASB).

³³ First Timothy 4:16, “Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you” (NASB). Acts 20:26-27, “I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God” (NASB). Second Thessalonians 2:9-10, “The coming of the lawless one is . . . and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved.”

³⁴ John 15:11, “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”

history; “Christ died for our sins”—that is doctrine. Without these two elements joined in an absolutely indissoluble union, there is no Christianity.³⁵

This is why controversy comes. Attempts to “reinterpret” the biblical happening or the biblical interpretation of the happening—the history or the doctrine—are a threat to the heart of Christianity. Christianity is not merely a life or a morality. It is God acting once for all in history, and God interpreting the meaning of those actions in Scripture.

The magnitude of what is at stake in preserving the true meaning of Scripture is so great that controversy is a price faithful teachers have been willing to pay from the very beginning. It is fair to say that we would not have the New Testament if there had been no controversy in the early church. If you remove the documents from the New Testament that were not addressing controversy you will, at most, have a tiny handful from the twenty-seven books.³⁶

³⁵ Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, p. 27.

³⁶ Here is a sampling of the controversies we find in the New Testament: Jesus’ controversy over paying taxes to Caesar (Mark 12:14-17), whether there is marriage in the resurrection (Matthew 22:23-32), what the greatest commandment is (Matthew 22:36-40), when divorce is permitted (Matthew 5:31-32; 19:9), who the Son of Man is (Matthew 16:13). The controversy in Acts over the feeding of the Hellenistic widows (6:1-6) and over whether circumcision is required for salvation (15). The controversies of Paul over whether we should do evil, that good may come (Romans 3:8), and why God still finds fault when he is the ruler of human wills (Romans 9:19), and whether all days should be esteemed alike (Romans 14:5), and how to handle immorality in the church (1 Corinthians 5), and whether to go to court before unbelieving judges (1 Corinthians 6), and whether singleness is better than marriage, or whether a believer should marry an unbeliever (1 Corinthians 7), and whether meat offered to idols should be eaten by believers (1 Corinthians 8), and whether women may pray and prophesy in public services (1 Corinthians 14:34-35), and how the gift of tongues and prophecy should be used (1 Corinthians 12—14), and whether the dead are raised bodily from the dead (1 Corinthians 15), and whether one should add works to faith as an instrument of justification (Galatians 3—5), and with those professing Christians who want to make his imprisonment harder and worship their bellies (Philippians 1, 3), and with those who accused him of flattery (1 Thessalonians 2:5), and with those who said that the day of the Lord had already come (2 Thessalonians 2), and with those who demanded that food and marriage be avoided (1 Timothy 4:3), and with those who say godliness is a means of gain (1 Timothy 6:5). And then there are all the controversies referred to in the letters of John and Peter and the book of Revelation. But this is enough to show how the earliest church was riddled with controversy.

The New Testament Summons to Controversy

Not only is the New Testament an *example* of controversy, it is also a *summons* to controversy, when controversy is necessary. Jude, the brother of the Lord, says, “I found it necessary to write appealing to you *to contend* for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).

The apostle Paul rejoices that the Philippians are his partners in “the *defense* and confirmation of the gospel” (Philippians 1:7). He charges Timothy to “preach the word. . . . For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths” (2 Timothy 4:2-4).

Notice that these are church members, not people in the world, who will depart from sound teaching. “*From among your own selves,*” Paul warns the elders of Ephesus, “will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:30). And, as the apostle Peter says, “There will be false teachers *among you,* who will secretly bring in destructive heresies” (2 Peter 2:1). Therefore, Paul concludes soberly, “There must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized” (1 Corinthians 11:19).

So Let Us Learn from Those Who Have Contended Well

In view of the witness of church history and Scripture to the necessity of controversy in this imperfect world, and the compatibility of controversy and revitalization, we will do well to learn as much as we can from those who have walked through controversy and

blessed the church in doing so. Athanasius and Owen and Machen have done that. The lessons they have to teach us are many. Their lives instruct us in the subtleties of how language is manipulated in controversy, and how personal holiness and communion with God is essential in the battle, and how love and patience with our adversaries can sometimes conquer better than argument, and how perseverance through suffering is essential to long-term faithfulness to truth, and how larger cultural issues shape church disputes, and how important it is to out-rejoice the adversary if we claim to contend for good news.

I hope that you will come to love these three brothers who have gone before. I pray that you will count them among the number referred to in Hebrews 13:7, “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.” They are worthy in their own right to be emulated—not without reservation—they are mere men. But time has tested them and their work. And it is worth our attention. It is a bonus—a very large one—that all three are from outside our own century (the fourth, seventeenth, and early twentieth). In this way we see reality through the eyes of a different time. That is a great advantage. It serves to liberate us from the dangers of chronological snobbery that assumes ours is the wisest of times.

And as we learn from the heroes of our faith, let us resolve to renounce all controversy-loving pride and all controversy-fearing cowardice. And with humility and courage (that is, with faith in the sovereign Christ) let us heed Martin Luther’s warning not to proclaim only what is safe while the battle rages around what is necessary:

If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battlefield besides is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.³⁷

³⁷ Quoted in Parker T. Williamson, *Standing Firm: Reclaiming Christian Faith in Times of Controversy* (Springfield, PA: PLC Publications, 1996), p. 5.