

THE GOOD FIGHT OF FAITH¹

by Dr. J. Gresham Machen

"And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus"-
Phil. 4:7

"Fight the good fight of faith"-I Tim. 6:12

"The Apostle Paul was a great fighter. His fighting was partly against external enemies--against hardships of all kinds. Five times he was scourged by the Jews, three times by the Romans; he suffered shipwreck four times; and was in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by his own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren. And finally he came to the logical end of such a life, by the executioner's axe. It was hardly a peaceful life, but was rather a life of wild adventure. Charles Lindbergh, I suppose, got a thrill when he hopped off to Paris, and people are in search of thrills today; but if you wanted a really unbroken succession of thrills, I think you could hardly do better than try knocking around the Roman Empire of the first century with the Apostle Paul, engaged in the unpopular business of turning the world upside down.

But these physical hardships were not the chief battle in which Paul was engaged. Far more trying was the battle that he fought against the enemies in his own camp. Everywhere his back was threatened by an all-engulfing paganism or by a perverted Judaism that had missed the real purpose of Old Testament law. Read the Epistles with care, and you see Paul always in conflict. At one time he fights paganism in life, the notion that all kinds of conduct are lawful to the Christian... a philosophy that makes Christian liberty a mere aid to pagan license. At another time, he fights paganism in thought, the twisting of the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body into the pagan doctrine of the immortality of the soul.

At another time, he fights the effort of human pride to substitute man's merit as the means of salvation... he fights the subtle propaganda of the Judaizers with its deceiving appeal to the Word of God. Everywhere we see the great apostle in conflict for the preservation of the church. It is as though a mighty flood were seeking to engulf the church's life; dam the break at one point in the levee, and another break appears somewhere else. Everywhere paganism was seeping through; not for one moment did Paul have peace; always he was called to fight.

Fortunately, he was a true fighter; and by God's grace he not only fought, but he won. At first sight indeed he might have seemed to have lost. The lofty doctrine of Divine grace, the center and core of the Gospel that Paul preached, did not always dominate the mind and heart of the subsequent church.

The human instruments which God uses in great triumphs of faith are no pacifists, but great fighters like Paul himself. Little sympathy for the great apostle has the whole tribe of considerers of consequences, the whole tribe of the compromisers ancient and modern. The real companions of Paul are great heroes of the faith. But who are

¹ This is the nearly complete text of "The last sermon preached by Dr. J. Gresham Machen at Princeton (Theological Seminary)" before he left it, due to its failure to separate from & stand against theological error (I have simplified a few of the words). It is reproduced from the book, "*Valiant for the Truth*," by David Otis Fuller (J.B. Lippincott Company: Philadelphia, PA, 1961), pp. 448-455. Dr. Machen, a Presbyterian, was one of the greatest biblical scholars of the 20th century, or any other century. He wrote such classic works as "*The Virgin Birth of Christ*," "*Christianity and Liberalism*," & "*The Origin of Paul's Religion*." He brilliantly defended the orthodox Christian faith against the attacks of liberals & modernists during the first decades of the 20th century. His arguments remain unanswered to this day. Dr. Machen used his vast intellect to courageously contend for the fundamentals of the faith... & ultimately was defrocked (dismissed) by the Presbyterian church (USA) for doing so. It seems everything was tolerated then, except someone who believed in the infallibility of Scripture and would not tolerate error. Machen was the epitome of a gentleman. He also boldly and fearlessly stood up and spoke out for God & His Word against the rising tide of theological darkness, compromise, and evil in his day. He was "politically incorrect" in a time when the pressure was enormous to conform, cave in, or keep your mouth shut, in order to win the acceptance and respect of the intellectual elite. The similarities to today are striking! Machen's words were originally spoken in the late 1920's to students whom he had taught at a seminary that was rapidly going downhill. Reading his words, it's hard to believe he said these things 70 years ago! If anything, his comments, particularly about "tolerance" & the unwillingness of many believers to stand up and speak out against what is unbiblical, outside & inside the Church, are amazingly applicable and relevant to our day! Read this, and be challenged!. Believers today are not the first ones to struggle with the choice of: 1) Being "politically correct" and "accepted," by remaining silent regarding issues the Bible clearly condemns; or, 2) Speaking out, and being labeled "a bigot," or "narrow minded," and receiving the condemnation of the world-and even many professing "Christians!" -Mike Edwards, P.O. Box 456, Goroka, E.H.P., Papua New Guinea. Date: 15 Dec. 1998.

those heroes? Are they not true fighters, one and all? Tertullian fought a mighty battle against Marcion; Athanasius fought against the Arians; Augustine fought against Pelagius; and as for Luther, he fought a brave battle against kings and princes and popes for the liberty of the people of God. Luther was a great fighter; and we love him for it. So was Calvin; so were John Knox and all the rest. It is impossible to be a true soldier of Jesus Christ and not fight.

God grant that you... may be fighters, too! Probably you have your battles even now; you have to contend against sins gross or sins refined; you have to contend against the sin of slothfulness and inertia; you have, many of you, I know very well, a mighty battle on your hands against doubt and despair. Do not think it strange if you fall thus into various temptations. The Christian life is after all a warfare. John Bunyan rightly set it forth under the allegory of a Holy War; and when he set it forth, in his greater book (*Pilgrim's Progress*) under the figure of a pilgrimage, the pilgrimage too, was full of battles. There are indeed, places of refreshment on the Christian way... But just after the descent from the House Beautiful, there was the battle with Apollyon and the Valley of Humiliation, and later came the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

Yes, the Christian faces a mighty conflict in this world. Pray God that in that conflict you may be true men & women; good soldiers of Jesus Christ, not willing to compromise with your great enemy, not easily cast down, and seeking ever the renewing of your strength in the Word... and prayer.

If you decide to stand for Christ, you will not have an easy life... Of course you may try to evade the conflict. All men will speak well of you if, after preaching or teaching no matter how unpopular a Gospel on Sunday, you will only vote against that Gospel in the ecumenical councils of the church the next day; you will graciously be permitted to believe in supernatural, biblical Christianity all you please if you will only *ACT* as though you did *NOT* believe in it, if you will only make common cause with its opponents. Such is the program that will win the favor of the compromising church & the world. A man may believe what he pleases, provided he does not believe anything strongly enough to risk his life on it and fight for it. 'Tolerance' is the great word today. Men even ask for tolerance when they look to God in prayer. But how can any Christian possibly pray such a prayer as that? What a terrible prayer it is, how full of disloyalty to the Lord Jesus Christ!

There is a sense, of course, in which tolerance is a virtue. If by it you mean tolerance on the part of the state, the forbearance of majorities toward minorities, the resolute rejection of any measures of physical compulsion in propagating either what is true or what is false, then of course, the Christian ought to favor tolerance with all his might... and ought to lament the widespread growth of intolerance in America today. Or if you mean by tolerance forbearance toward personal attacks upon yourself, or courtesy and patience and fairness in dealing with all errors of whatever kind, then again tolerance is a virtue. But to pray for tolerance apart from such qualifications, in particular to pray for tolerance without careful definition of that of which you are tolerant, is simply to pray for the breakdown of the Christian religion; for the Christian religion is intolerant to the core. (!)

There lies the whole offense of the Cross--and also the whole power of it. Always the Gospel would have been received with favor by the world *IF* it had been presented merely as *ONE WAY* of salvation; the offense came because it was presented as the *ONLY WAY*, and because it made relentless war upon all other ways. God save us, then, from this 'tolerance' of which we hear so much. God deliver us from the sin of making common cause with those who deny or ignore the blessed Gospel of Jesus Christ! God save us from the deadly guilt of consenting to the presence as our representatives in the church of those who lead Christ's little ones astray; God make us, whatever else we are, just faithful messengers, who present, without fear or favor, not our word, but the Word of God.

But if you are such messengers, you will have the opposition, not only of the world, but increasingly, I fear, of the Church. I cannot tell you that your sacrifice will be light. No doubt it would be noble to care nothing whatever about the judgment of our fellow men. But to such nobility I confess that I for my part have not quite attained, and I cannot expect you to have attained it. I confess that academic preferments, easy access to great libraries, the companionship of cultured people, and in general the thousand advantages that come from being regarded as a respectable person in a respectable world--I confess that these things seem to me to be in themselves good and desirable things. Yet the servant of Jesus Christ, to an increasing extent, is being obliged to give them up.

Certainly, in making that sacrifice we do not complain; for we have something with which all that we have lost is not worthy to be compared. Still, it can hardly be said that any unworthy motives of self-interest can lead us to adopt a course which brings us nothing but reproach.

Where, then, shall we find a sufficient motive for such a course as that; where shall we find courage to stand against the whole current of the age; where shall we find courage for this fight of faith? I do not think we shall obtain courage by any mere desire for conflict. In some battles that means may perhaps suffice. Soldiers in bayonet practice were sometimes, and for all I know still are, taught to give a shout when they thrust their bayonets at imaginary enemies; I heard them doing it even long after the treaty in France. That serves, I suppose, to overcome the natural inhibition of civilized man against sticking a knife into human bodies. It is thought to develop the proper spirit of conflict. Perhaps it may be necessary in some kinds of war. But it will hardly work in this Christian conflict. In this conflict I do not think we can be good fighters simply by being determined to fight. For this battle is a battle of love; and nothing ruins a man's service in it so much as a spirit of hate.

No, if we want to learn the secret of this warfare, we shall have to look deeper; and we can hardly do better than to turn again to that great fighter, the Apostle Paul. What was the secret of his power in the mighty conflict; how did he learn to fight? The answer is paradoxical; but it is very simple. Paul was a great fighter because he was at peace. He who said, *'Fight the good fight of faith,'* spoke also of *'the peace of God which passeth understanding';* and in that peace the power for his warfare was found. He fought against the enemies that were without because he was at peace within; there was an inner sanctuary in his life that no enemy could disturb. There, my friends, is the great central truth. You cannot fight successfully with beasts as Paul did at Ephesus; you cannot fight successfully against evil men, or against the devil and his spiritual powers of wickedness in high places, unless when you fight against those enemies there is One with Whom you are at peace.

But if you are at peace with God, then you will care little what men may do. You can say with the apostles, 'We must obey God rather than men'; you can say with Luther, 'Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise, God help me. Amen'; you can say with Elisha, *'They that be with us are more than they that be with them';* you can say with Paul, *'It is God that justifieth, who is he that condemneth?'* Without that peace of God in your hearts, you will strike little terror into the enemies of the Gospel of Christ. You may accumulate mighty resources for the conflict; you may be great masters of church strategy & political manipulation; you may be very clever, and very zealous too; but I fear that it will be of little avail. There may be a tremendous noise; but when the noise is over, the Lord's enemies will be in possession of the field. No, there is no other way to be a really good fighter. You cannot fight God's battle against God's enemies unless you are at peace with Him.

But how shall you be at peace with Him? Many ways have been tried. How pathetic is the age-long effort of sinful man to become right with God; sacrifice, lacerations, giving of alms, morality, penance, confession! But alas, it is all of no avail. Still there is that same awful gulf between you and God. It may be temporarily concealed; spiritual activity may conceal it for a while; penance or the confession of sin unto men may give you a temporary and apparent relief. But the real trouble remains; the burden of sin is still on the back...the soul is still not at peace with God. How then shall peace be obtained?

My friends, it cannot be attained by anything in us. Oh, that that truth could be written in the hearts of every one of you! Oh, that it could be written in letters of flame for all the world to read! Peace with God cannot be attained by any act or any mere experience of man; it cannot be attained by good works, neither can it be attained by confession of sin, neither can it be attained by any psychological results of an act of faith. We can never be at peace with God unless God first be at peace with us. (!) But how can God be at peace with us? Can He be at peace with us by ignoring the guilt of our sin? By descending from His throne? By throwing the universe into chaos? By making wrong to be the same as right? ...By treating His eternal laws as though they were the changeable laws of man?

Oh, what an abyss would be the universe if that were done, what a mad anarchy, what a wild demon-riot! Where could there be peace if God were thus at war with Himself; where could there be a foundation, if God's laws were not sure? Oh no, my friends, peace cannot be attained for man by the great modern method of dragging God down to man's level; peace cannot be attained by denying that right is right and wrong is wrong (as it often is today-

mwe); peace can nowhere be attained if the... justice of God is not forever sure.

How then can we sinners stand before that Throne? How can there be peace for us in the presence of the justice of God? How can he be just and yet justify the ungodly? There is one answer to these questions. It is not our answer. Our wisdom could never have discovered it. It is God's Answer. It is found in the story of the Cross of Christ. We deserved eternal death because of sin; the eternal Son of God, because He loved us, and because He was sent by the Father Who loved us too, died in our place, for our sins, upon the Cross. That message is despised today; upon it the visible church as well as the world pours out the vials of its scorn, or else does it even less honor by paying it lip-service and then passing it by. Men dismiss it as a 'theory of the atonement,' and fall back upon the popular explanations about a principle of self-sacrifice, or the culmination of a universal law, or a revelation of the love of God... or the similarity between Christ's death and the death of soldiers who perish in... war.

In the presence of such blindness, our words often seem vain. We may tell men something of what we think about the Cross of Christ, but it is harder still to tell them what we feel. We pour forth our tears of gratitude and love; we open to the multitude the depths of our souls; we celebrate a mystery so tender, so holy, that we might think it would soften even a heart of stone. But seemingly all to no avail. The Cross remains foolishness to the world, men turn coldly away, and our preaching seems but vain. But then comes the wonder of wonders! The hour comes for some poor soul, even through the simplest and poorest preaching; the message is honored, not the messenger; there comes a flash of light into the soul, and all is as clear as day. *'He loved me and gave Himself for me,'* says the sinner at last, as he contemplates the Saviour upon the Cross. The burden of sin falls from his back, and a soul enters into the peace of God.

Have you yourselves that peace, my friends? If you have, you will not be deceived by the propaganda of any disloyal church or denomination. If you have the peace of God in your hearts, you will never shrink from controversy; you will never be afraid to contend earnestly for the Faith. Talk of peace in the present deadly peril of the Church, and you show, unless you are strangely ignorant of the conditions that exist, that you have little hint of the true peace of God. Those who have been at the foot of the Cross will not be afraid to go forth under the banner of the Cross to a holy war of love.

Where are you going to stand in the great battle which now rages in the church? Are you going to try to win favor with the world by standing aloof; are you going to be *'conservative liberals'* or *'liberal conservatives'* or *'Christians who do not believe in controversy,'* or anything else so self-contradictory and absurd? Are you going to try to be Christians, but not Christians overmuch? Are you going to stand coldly aloof when God's people fight against church, political, & governmental tyranny at home and abroad? Are you going to excuse yourselves by pointing out personal defects in those who contend for the Faith today? Are you going to be disloyal to Christ in external testimony until you can make everything well within your own soul? Be assured, you will never accomplish your purpose if you adopt such a program as that. Instead, witness bravely to the Truth that you already understand, and more will be given you; but make common cause with those who deny or ignore the Gospel of Christ, and the enemy will forever run riot in your life.

There are many hopes that I cherish for you men, with whom I am united by such ties of affection. I hope that you may be gifted preachers; I hope that you may have happy lives; I hope that you may have adequate support for yourselves and for your families; I hope that you may have good churches. But I hope something for you far more than all that. I hope above all, that wherever you are and however your preaching & teaching may be received, that you may be true witnesses for the Lord Jesus Christ; I hope that there may never be any doubt where YOU stand, but that always you may stand squarely for Jesus Christ, as He is shown to us, not in the experiences of men, but in the blessed written Word of God.

Many have been swept from their foundation by the current of the age; a church grown worldly often tyrannizes over those who look for guidance to God's Word alone. But this is not the first discouraging time in the history of the church; other times were just as dark, and yet God has always watched over His people, and the darkest hour has sometimes preceded the dawn. So even now God has not left Himself without a witness. In many lands there are those who have faced the great issue of this day and have decided it aright, who have preserved true

independence of mind in the presence of the world; in many lands there are groups of Christian people who in the face of church or government tyranny have not been afraid to stand for Jesus Christ. God grant that you may give comfort to them as you go forth... God grant that you may rejoice their hearts by giving them your hand and your voice. To do so you will need courage. Far easier is it to seek to win favor with the world by abusing those whom the world abuses, by speaking against controversy, and by becoming a spectator in the struggle in which God's servants are engaged.

But may God save you from such a neutrality as that! It has a certain worldly appearance of civility, love and charity. But how cruel it is to burdened souls; how heartless it is to those little ones who are looking to the Christian church for some clear message from God! God save you from being so heartless and so unloving and so cold! God grant, instead, that in all humility but also in all boldness, in reliance upon God, you may fight the good fight of faith. Peace is indeed yours, the peace of God which passeth all understanding. But that peace is given you, not that you may be onlookers in love's battle, but that you may be good soldiers of Jesus Christ."