Episode 1,059: Against the Social Gospel: J. Gresham Machen Against the Liberals

Guest: Darryl Hart

WOODS: This book of yours — *Defending the Faith*, I just told people about — I enjoyed this very much. I think you and I have a lot of overlap in our intellectual interests. And I'm particularly interested in the really early part of the 20th century and what was going on among Protestant thinkers at that time. And I'd like to start off actually by focusing on a figure, let's say, who I don't think actually figures into your book, but his ideas nevertheless were very influential, and that's Walter Rauschenbusch, and the whole social gospel movement in American Protestantism. Now, in this book, in the index I see two entries for "social gospel," but there's plenty of reference to liberal Protestantism. So do you conceive of the social gospel as being a subset of liberal Protestantism?

HART: Yes, I think — it's been a while since I worked on this book, obviously, and I've done a lot more work on mainline or mainstream Protestantism since. And I still don't think we have a great handle on the social gospel as something that's necessarily distinct from what the churches were doing. I do believe Rauschenbusch has a distinct voice, if only because of his own background as a German-American working in a certain part of New York City, etc., which was unusual for a lot of the people who were both mainline Protestants and also progressive. I mean, I think there's a huge overlap that I've become more impressed by over the course of my career, even most recently with Walter McDougall's book on civil religion and American foreign policy. He has really connected the dots between a more liberal kind of Protestantism being very useful for the kind of political, both domestic and international, plans of the prominent Protestants who were running most of America's institutions.

So I think Rauschenbusch is one of those guys who gets attention and stands out, but he doesn't need to because I think the social gospel instincts — in air quotes, I guess — "social gospel" instincts go so deep among so many Protestants of Anglo-American background — I mean, the Baptists, the Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists. I think there was a social gospel impulse even in the Second Great Awakening, so-called. I prefer "Pretty Good Awakening" and not great —

WOODS: [laughing] Okay.

HART: My advisor even at Hopkins in graduate school, Timothy Smith, wrote a book about the Second Great Awakening making the case that, in many respects, the seeds for the social gospel came out of the revivals of the Second Great Awakening.

WOODS: Oh, I would never have made that connection.

HART: Yeah. There's a real activist strain there. I mean, it's maybe even more radical than the progressives would be, but there's very much Protestants are trying to — in the middle of the 19th century, I mean, they're trying to civilize the frontier, they're trying to keep back the Mexicans, etc. But there's a political dimension to that kind of evangelicalism, a revivalism even going on I think back there. So this is one of my frustrations, and I don't want to anticipate or forestall questions you might ask, but this is one of my frustrations with current discussions about the religious right or evangelicals, that people don't notice the much longer trajectory of white Protestants engaged with politics. It could change parties somewhat, but still, it's going back way before Jerry Falwell.

WOODS: Well, I'd like to just talk a bit more about the social gospel, and then we'll talk about how Machen and others would have responded to it, because it's not just a matter of there are a lot of social problems in society today and it's up to us as bearers of the message of Christ to go out into the world and address them, because I think that's how all Christian always felt. So there's certainly something different going on here, and it seems as if, when you read some of these people, they are trying to redefine traditional Christian categories in line with a program of social reconstruction. I mean, there was even a book written called *Social Salvation* and the argument being that we can't keep focusing so much on individual sin; we have to think about social sin, we have to — in other words, we have to think a lot more about earthly things but also adapt Christian categories in such a way that they become more earthly, if you follow what I'm saying.

HART: Oh, yeah.

WOODS: Because I think today the social gospel, I don't think it's exactly the way it was a hundred years ago, but it is so permeated the thinking and practice of so much of American Protestantism that we don't even have to talk about the social gospel anymore. It just is what people see in these churches. So is it fair — sometimes you'll hear people being very critical of the social gospel arguing that Christ in effect and salvation as traditionally understood almost disappear in the social gospel message. Am I misunderstanding it?

HART: No, I don't think you are, and I guess part of what makes the social gospel during the Progressive Era different from what may have gone before is that you have institutions, like universities, seminaries, divinity schools — you could think of University of Chicago, William Rainey Harper, the president of the school but who's also overseeing the div school at Chicago — there's in some ways for Protestants to maneuver in the new milieu of the research university and academic specialization, even though I would argue that, again, Finney doesn't talk much about Jesus, really. He talks a lot about the law and obedience to the law and being a good person. And even at the time of the founding when Protestants are supporting independence from Britain and trying to justify this kind of rebellion, whatever you want to call it, I mean, you could even argue that they're cutting and pasting in some ways what churches had traditionally taught about submitting to legitimate authority and the like.

But again, the milieu after the research universities arise in the late 19th century coupled with how large-scale the problems of industrialization and urbanization and immigration were, it's sort of this perfect storm of ways in which, if the crutches of orthodoxy have been kicked away, it's even, *Okay, now we can do it on a much greater scale*, seemingly. And you have also philanthropists like Rockefeller funding the University of Chicago, but he's also funding all sort of social scientific research that becomes an arm of these Protestant endeavors. So I think that is in some ways an answer to your question, but I'm not sure if it's as on-point as it needed to be.

WOODS: No, it's fine; it's fine. It's just such a — it just seems to abrupt and so out of the blue. But I think, as with a lot of things, like either the Second Vatican Council in the Catholic Church, a lot of times things that seem abrupt, the seeds have been planted for years and only at just the right moment in history do they really begin to sprout. So let's talk about then the topic, the man who was at the center of your book, and that is a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary who eventually feels compelled to leave that institution, J. Gresham Machen. So what can you tell us about how he viewed these kinds of changes in mainline Protestantism? I understand that he's a unique figure, and you make that quite clear throughout the book. He's not easily pigeonholed, but it's quite clear what he would have thought of this.

HART: Right, and you could also call him just an odd duck. "Unique" is a nice way of putting it. But I mean, he does have the respectability of — So he's from a prominent attorney in Baltimore, that home in Baltimore, and goes to Johns Hopkins University as an undergraduate, eventually studies at Princeton for his seminary degree. And he does also pick up an MA at both Johns Hopkins in the classics and at Princeton in philosophy while he was at the seminary, and then goes to do some advanced study in Germany, which was fairly common by that point, in New Testament and theology.

And I mean, the seeds of his dissent you could argue in some ways were planted by his carrying the torch for the South and the Confederacy and the lost cause, as it were. Even though he also fit in fairly well, he was not a rabble rouser necessarily, sort of a closet KKK member or something. That was not his style. And he served in the YMCA as a secretary during World War I, and I do think that's when he especially began to question the narrative of progress, to see the kind of destruction on such a massive scale. He was at the Front in France, and his letters are really pretty moving — they were recently published — during the war there. So that's when he begins to abandon any — if he had been part of the progressive narrative, he really begins to abandon it after World War I.

And that's when he also becomes involved in a number of denominational struggles in the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Northern Presbyterian Church, during the 1920s, which then he winds up bumping heads with all sorts of denominational executives over these things that then sort of erupts in a controversy at Princeton, and then he leaves to found Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia in 1929.

And then he has a kind of rearguard struggles in the 1930s, a controversy over foreign missions, a report published by and sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation on why we need to do foreign missions differently, the old rationale for saving people from hell is no longer necessary. The author of this report was none other than a professor of philosophy at Harvard. Ernest Hocking was his name. So Machen has a controversy

over that, and that leads to then another denominational struggle, which produces the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, a split-off denomination, in 1936. Still a very small denomination, of which, full disclosure, I am an officer, an elder in the church. But it's been a small group since then and, in some ways, part of Machen's legacy.

WOODS: I want to try to keep most of our brief conversation on questions that would be of general interest to my audience —

HART: Sure.

WOODS: — because I don't know how — my raw estimate based on nothing is probably 40% of my listeners are Protestant. But that doesn't mean the other 60% don't care. A lot of them are also interested. But I want to focus a little bit on his political views, but at the same time, I feel like I can't resist asking a little bit more about the controversies that he found himself in. He on the one hand favored, apparently, or was a supporter of modern methods of biblical analysis and criticism, but at the same time he found himself fighting with people who practiced these methods. So if you had to just narrow down what is the fundamental core of his disagreement with his opponents, if you had to just narrow it down to one thing, what is it?

HART: Yeah, I would say it is whether the Bible is in fact still the word of God, even while — So there would be disagreement between Machen and much of modern biblical scholarship on trying to study the human aspect of it. But then if it's the word of God, is it still then authoritative or not? And Machen thought that if you used pretty highfalutin methods to try to understand Paul — his source book was called *The Origin of Paul's Religion*, and he thought the best work in biblical studies actually kind of brought someone to the conviction that Paul really was a kind of forerunner of Augustine and the like. And so that's fine. Maybe people could agree with that. His book received fairly good reviews.

But then he was going to take that message of Paul into the Church, and that's where — I mean, this kind of tension between the academy and the Church still goes on to this day, I think both Roman Catholic and Protestant sides of that. So that would be one area, an important point of disagreement, that he was still of the conviction that, no matter how you studied the Bible, you still had to regard it as the word of God. Your interpretations might change as scholarship emerged that might cause reconsiderations of it, but still, this was a book of the Church and it shouldn't be thought of differently because of that.

WOODS: More with Professor Hart after we thank our sponsor.

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Now, one interesting thing I bet to a lot of people would be that he was an opponent of Prohibition, at least a government-enforced prohibition, which is interesting. So I want to get into that. But in general, he does favor a small federal government. I think in recent years there's been kind of an almost boogeyman idea surrounding people who are on the so-called religious right — which is a designation that is increasingly unhelpful, I think — but that they want to take over the country and do this and that.

But Machen was okay with teaching evolution in the schools, so that was not him. But in particular, he was even against the federal government getting involved in matters pertaining to child labor. He did not favor a federal role in education. So these are things that would make him considered an unbelievable extremist to most people today. But let's start with Prohibition. A lot of his colleagues favored Prohibition, so why did he not favor it?

HART: Well, politically it was because he opposed the increased authority and role of the federal government, and his brother, who was another prominent attorney in Baltimore, and heir to the firm that his father helped to start, ran on the Anti-Prohibition Party ticket in the 1926 congressional elections in Baltimore. He lost, but still, that's how sort of deep-seated a kind of libertarian — but this was a Democrat party — you know, anti-federal government impulse there was there.

But when it came to, say, Presbyterianism or Christianity, more generally he thought it was just silly to somehow think that the Bible, where you have win all over the place, would in any way be a dry book, as it were. So on both political grounds he opposed what government was trying to do in regulating or sort of prohibiting it, actually, but also on Christian grounds he thought there was freedom for Christians to drink or not drink and that, you know, you've got to — He actually had a relationship with a man who was an alcoholic and tried to set him up on a farm in New Jersey and tried to send the family money to provide for his needs, but to make sure that he didn't have access to spend it on alcohol. He was aware of the problem of drunkenness, but he still thought that government programs weren't the way to try to address it.

WOODS: So his attitude about government programs — was his attitude basically a practical one, that these programs either won't work or they will be harmful to society or to Christians in particular? Or did he also have a theological justification for having a skeptical view of the state?

HART: I think he did. It was more constitutional, though. I think when he writes about politics, it isn't simply practical. He's trying to hold either the states or the federal government to the Constitution and not straying beyond the powers enumerated, as it were. But when he tries to connect the dots between, say, Christian doctrine and the founding principles of the United States, he gets into terrain like people being fallen and so you want government to be restrained and you want checks and balances and politics is a necessary evil. He quotes Jefferson to that effect a couple times.

You know, and you could argue that that's compatible with an Augustinian, at least part of the Augustinian tradition when it comes to thinking about human nature and then how we regard politicians — though there's plenty of Christian evidence on the other side of kind of a Eusebian view that has a very high view of office and the potential for a Christian magistrate to do wonderful things, and Protestants participated in that as well in the early modern era in Europe. So in that sense, Machen could find support maybe from some parts of the Christian past, but he was also maybe in some ways an outlier. And so his political perspective in many respects was shaped by American small government, as it were, or a states' rights tradition.

WOODS: I'd like to share a passage from page 140 of your book, if I may. You say the following: "He rarely thought in terms of national or federal programs for fear of what

those programs would do to local autonomy and customs. Machen believed the state's principle duty was to preserve the liberty of individuals, families, and private associations. In turn, families, communities, and voluntary organizations performed the lion's share of social services and preserved public order." And you have him talking about Jefferson; you quote him as saying that Jefferson may have been a free thinker, but he held "quite rightly that the least governed people is the best governed." So that's all stuff that would be very congenial to people listening right now. Now, I got that passage from a chapter of your book called "The Responsibility of the Church in the New Age." So in Machen's mind, if the state is going to have a relatively limited responsibility, what is the responsibility of the Church in the new age?

HART: Well, he gave a talk at the American Political and Social Science Association or something like that in 1933 in the context of the Depression. People asked Machen to speak fairly often to give the fundamentalist perspective. And so he was there to represent in a way that side of things before this body of academics, but there was a Roman Catholic representative, there was a Jewish rabbi, etc. And Machen there says the Church's responsibility is to proclaim the gospel, in effect, and the Church shouldn't cooperate with the state in anything using the coercive powers of the state.

But I think he also would have thought that churches in their roles with diaconal work or individual Christians themselves could form philanthropic endeavors of a variety of kinds that could try to address those concerns — which of course was a big part of especially Roman Catholic life during this period when you had all these immigrants coming to America and the bishops and also other agencies are set up to try to address these needs. And I think even though Machen was a very committed Protestant, he would have recognized that as a proper outlet for Roman Catholic churches to respond to their own people and to provide for them. So in that sense, there is a diaconal side to the Church that might allow the Church to do those things, but its chief responsibility, he argued in that 1933 essay, was the spiritual one of proclaiming the good news of the gospel.

WOODS: What would you say is the overall significance of Machen, either in his own right or in terms of what his life tells us about American society?

HART: Boy, that's a really big one. I should have a ready answer because I've thought about this in a number of ways, but because — I mean, Machen does — So for instance, in 20th century Protestantism, he inspires in a way a number of people who are responsible for setting up evangelical institutions in the 1940s. And there's not a direct connection between Machen and Billy Graham, for instance, but people in the Billy Graham circle sometimes looked to Machen for some kind of inspiration. And some of the figures who were leaders in the so-called neoevangelical or evangelical movement had actually studied with Machen because he was such a popular figure in the '20s and '30s.

But having done a history of Calvinism recently and sort of tried to look at trans-Atlantic if not global developments, in some ways, Machen doesn't rank up there, say, with a Karl Barth or a Reinhold Niebuhr or an Abraham Kuyper, who was a Dutch theologian who also became a prime minister and had this remarkable number of institutions that he founded. Or Thomas Chalmers, for instance, in Scotland, who led

the Free Church and a number of institutions that grew up there in Scotland to try to preserve a conservative Presbyterianism. But Machen is in their league. He may not have gained the following. He doesn't necessarily still attract the attention of those men, but when it comes to American Presbyterianism and you want a conservative figure, he's the big guy.

And then, you know, it's really affected the way I look at Church and state or Christianity and politics, his particular version of it, and so there is something out there now today called the two kingdoms theology, which we associate a lot with Lutheranism, and rightly so. But there's a strain of that now in some Protestant circles that people inspired by Machen have also picked up. So it does seem to me that it's a different way of looking at politics than, say, the garden variety conservative Protestants would, but it doesn't always lead to the kind of programs that people might prefer. So again, Machen may have a limited appeal in that way.

WOODS: How can people find out more about your work? You just had a book last year on H.L. Mencken, who's a person of great interest to me, but you've written an awful lot over the years. I know you have a website.

HART: Well, I blog at a place called OldLife.org, but if someone just goes to the Amazon page, all of my books are there. And I guess my faculty page at Hillsdale College also has a personal statement and links to, if not all of them, most of my books. And they probably could contact me as well through that webpage and I'd be glad to interact with people more.

WOODS: Okay, I appreciate that. So obviously we're going to link to the book, we'll link to where you blog, we'll link to your Hillsdale faculty page. All these things will be up at TomWoods.com/1059. Well, I appreciate you coming on and talking about this. Obviously you've written an entire book on it. I was able to just hit some highlights, and frankly, from a selfish point of view, just ask questions that I'm curious about because you and I think about things like this all the time and it's nice to talk to somebody who's a real expert. So best of luck. Do you have anything — you produce so much; are you working on anything book-related these days?

HART: Well, I just finished a manuscript that's been through the reader's report stage. I've got to respond to those. But it's on Roman Catholics, post-World War II intellectuals and defenses of America or their contributions to American conservatism, running from, say, Buckley to Richard John Newhouse. And it gets into some of the debates among even contemporary Roman Catholics about Americanism and whether there's a kind of Whiggish view among some of these people or not. Anyway, I've been in conservative circles for a while and I've known a lot about Roman Catholic contributions, so I wanted to do something with that. So that's one thing.

WOODS: Yeah, that's definitely an interesting topic and it would be interesting to see how Michael Novak fits into that.

HART: Right.

WOODS: So yeah, very interesting topic. All right, well, thanks so much again. I appreciate your time.

HART: Thanks for having me, Tom. It was great to talk to you.