

Introduction

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As one of the last great expositors of orthodox and classical Calvinism in the modern world, B. B. Warfield faced a double burden. It was obvious in nearly all his work that he was trying to present the doctrines of sovereign grace and gracious sovereignty with faithfulness to the traditions of high Calvinist theology that he had learned at Princeton Theological Seminary from Charles Hodge and, even before that, in his own household through the influence of his grandfather, Robert Breckinridge. But it was also obvious that Warfield was trying to articulate those doctrines as exactly what his contemporaries needed for both a proper foundation of Christian piety and a proper framework of Christian thinking. Despite his formidable gifts as biblical exegete, biblical theologian, and biblical apologist, it is not clear that Warfield's dual effort has been appreciated as it should have been. To modern thinkers he has seemed old-fashioned, to active revivalists overly Calvinistic, to some Calvinists too much a rationalist. Yet Warfield has never lacked readers who appreciated the clarity with which he maintained traditional Calvinist doctrines or ventured forth from his Calvinist foundations to address new problems, and the numbers of those readers seem to be growing. It is, thus, all to the good that this book is being published in order to stimulate closer attention to who Warfield was and what his theological contributions actually mean.

Among the following chapters, several attempt to resuscitate one aspect or another of Warfield's theology. Readers who follow in Warfield's train will read these chapters carefully, critically, and charitably, but they will also be making up their own minds about the success of those efforts. At the very least, all who follow the authors as they

track Warfield through thickets of theological complexity will be amply rewarded for their efforts.

Other chapters in what follows are more strictly biographical, and from these all readers will benefit. Warfield's reputation as a thinker is well deserved, but that reputation has also obscured how interesting the life of this thinker actually was. As that life is brought alive by the biographical studies in this book, new dimensions will open into the significance of this theological champion as well as the character of what he championed.

But first, as an introduction to both theological and biographical considerations, it may help to present a brief overview of the man and his main concerns. Such a sketch, if only an aperitif, should help prepare the way for the solid and nutritious fare found in the chapters themselves.



Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield was the most widely known advocate of confessional Calvinism in the United States at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries.¹ Warfield continues to exert an influence today mostly through his defense of biblical inerrancy, although, as chapters below by Paul Helseth indicate, his convictions about the role of reason in apologetics also stimulate ongoing discussion. Now nearing a century after his death, many of his works remain in print. And his opinions continue to count, not only among conservative Presbyterians and modern advocates of biblical inerrancy, where such attention could be expected, but also with Southern Baptists, Wesleyans, some neoorthodox theologians, and still others whose interest in Warfield's views might be regarded as a surprise.

Warfield was born on November 5, 1851, at Grasmere, his family's estate in the vicinity of Lexington, Kentucky. His father, William

1. This introduction adapts and abridges material on Warfield by Mark A. Noll in *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians*, ed. Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 26–39; and by Noll and David N. Livingstone in “Introduction: B. B. Warfield as Conservative Evolutionist,” in B. B. Warfield, *Evolution, Science, and Scripture: Selected Writings* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 13–44.

Warfield, a prosperous gentleman farmer, served as a Union officer in the Civil War. It was pertinent for Warfield's later writings on scientific questions that his father bred livestock and was the author of *The Theory and Practice of Cattle Breeding* (1888). It is also significant for his later epistemological and ethical views that Warfield's entrance into the sophomore class at the College of New Jersey (later Princeton University) in 1868 coincided with the installation of James McCosh as president. McCosh had been called to Princeton from his post as professor of moral philosophy at the Queen's University of Belfast in Ireland, where he was one of the last great exponents of the Scottish philosophy of common sense. Even more significantly, McCosh also advocated full and frank dialogue between traditional Christian faith and the best modern science, philosophy, and ethics.

After graduating from college in 1871, traveling in Europe for a year, and serving briefly as an editor for the *Farmer's Home Journal* in Lexington, Warfield entered Princeton Seminary to prepare for the ministry. During his time at the seminary, he was particularly impressed with the piety and theological comprehension of the elderly Charles Hodge. After graduating from the seminary, Warfield married, once again visited Europe, served for a short time as an assistant minister in Baltimore, and then in 1876 accepted a call to teach New Testament at Western Theological Seminary near Pittsburgh. In 1887, upon the death of Archibald Alexander Hodge, son of his own teacher, Warfield returned to Princeton Seminary as professor of didactic and polemic theology. During thirty-four years in that position, he instructed more than 2,700 students. Warfield died at Princeton late in the evening of February 16, 1921, after meeting his classes earlier that day.

Warfield's incredibly prolific output of books, learned essays, and reviews (which were frequently sophisticated monographs in their own right) was a product of his devotion to the confessional standards of Presbyterianism and, behind those standards, to his conception of classic Christian faith. Even in the long line of outstanding conservative theologians from "old Princeton" that stretched from Archibald Alexander (the founding professor in 1812) to J. Gresham Machen (who left Princeton Seminary in 1929), Warfield stands out. In that distinguished company, he was the most widely read, had the greatest skill in European languages, displayed the most patience in

unpacking arguments, and wrote more clearly on a wider range of subjects. Some of Warfield's convictions—especially his conception of the inerrancy of Scripture in its original autographs—have generated a great quantity of polemical attack and defense. Yet despite helpful work by John E. Meeter, Roger Nicole, and now the authors who contribute to this volume, there exists no comprehensive account of Warfield's theology.² Bradley Gundlach's contributions to this book are the first real steps to an adequate biography.

One reason for the absence of such work may be directly related to Warfield's conception of his task. He was, in the strictest sense of the terms, a polemical and a conserving theologian. Despite comprehensive learning, he never attempted a full theological statement, primarily because he found Charles Hodge's *Systematic Theology* generally satisfactory for himself and his students. Because he was content with the positions of the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, he devoted an enormous amount of patient writing to explicating traditional Calvinism, fending off misreadings, and defending it against the modernizing, enthusiastic, or naturalistic tendencies of his day.

Warfield was also content with what had been handed down to him by his Princeton predecessors on questions concerning the larger framework of thought. He did not delight in speculation (and so would mildly criticize Jonathan Edwards for his "individualisms," while praising Edwards for being "a convinced defender of Calvinism").³ Rather, he gave himself wholeheartedly to Princeton's deeply ingrained commitment to theology as a scientific task (with "science" defined in conventional terms). In so doing, he thus shared fully in Princeton's equally long-standing confidence in a philosophy of common-sense realism. That philosophy owed something to its formal statement by the cautious savants of the Scottish Enlightenment such as Thomas Reid and Dugald Stewart. But it owed even more to a concrete, anti-speculative turn of mind that the "old Princeton" theologians liked to describe as a simple inductivist Anglo-Saxon inheritance. From the

2. See especially John E. Meeter and Roger Nicole, *A Bibliography of Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, 1851–1921* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974).

3. B. B. Warfield, "Edwards and the New England Theology" (1912), in *Studies in Theology*, vol. 9 of *The Works of Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield* (1932; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 530–31.

perspective of the late twentieth century, the philosophy of common sense at Princeton looks mostly like a gentlemanly, Victorian, and dignified Presbyterian adaptation of the practical bent so common at all levels in nineteenth-century American culture. Again, chapters below represent some of the best work on how Warfield approached such basic philosophical questions.

Warfield's stance as an ardent defender of confessional Calvinism, combined with his positions on the issues that engaged Presbyterians around the turn of the century, have led to a curiosity. Warfield seems to have regarded his work as a coherent effort to maintain the theology of Calvin and the Westminster divines. Later attention, however, has focused more on his exposition of individual topics, like the inerrancy of Scripture, counterfeit miracles, or the place of apologetics in theology more generally. The result has been that, although several of Warfield's positions continue to exert considerable influence among theological conservatives, the defense of Calvinism that loomed large in his own work receives far less attention today.

By the early 1880s, American Presbyterians were being drawn more directly into European debates over the Bible.⁴ Presbyterian leaders realized that new higher critical proposals touched the heart of their faith as it had developed in Britain and America. They also knew that the controversies raging over modern criticism in Scotland during the 1870s, especially concerning the work of William Robertson Smith of the Free Church, would soon arrive in America. Smith's acceptance of Old Testament higher criticism was especially significant for Princeton Seminary because Princetonians had championed the Free Church since its founding in 1843. So it came about that A. A. Hodge of Princeton and Charles Briggs of Union Seminary in New York agreed that the journal they jointly edited, the *Presbyterian Review*, should consider these matters. Briggs, who was predisposed toward the newer opinions, enlisted several colleagues to write in favor of adjusting traditional views. Hodge too sought assistance in supporting his conviction that the new views were mostly a threat to the church. For this purpose

4. See Mark A. Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 27–31.

his first recruit was B. B. Warfield, then still a young New Testament professor at Western Theological Seminary.

The essay, titled simply “Inspiration,” which Hodge and Warfield published in the April 1881 issue of the *Presbyterian Review*, both recapitulated many of the themes that had been prominent in previous Princeton writing and anticipated most of the points about the Bible that Warfield would make over the next forty years in a wealth of publications. What was new about the doctrine of Scripture in this essay was its precision of statement and its detailed response to modern theories. The essay’s burden was to show that proper scholarship on Scripture and its background supported, rather than undercut, a high view of verbal inspiration. The doctrine this essay defended was the belief that “God’s continued work of superintendence, by which, his providential, gracious and supernatural contributions having been presupposed, he presided over the sacred writers in their entire work of writing, with the design and effect of rendering that writing an errorless record of the matters he designed them to communicate, and hence constituting the entire volume in all its parts the word of God to us.”⁵

Throughout the essay, as indeed throughout his entire career, Warfield took great care to qualify the doctrine of plenary verbal inspiration. Hodge and Warfield stated, almost at the outset, that this doctrine was not “a principle fundamental to the truth of the Christian religion” as such, nor was it the case “that the truth of Christianity depends upon any doctrine of inspiration whatever.”⁶ They also maintained at length that such a view of inspiration did not rule out a full, active participation of Scripture’s human authors in its production. They held that these biblical authors “were in large measure dependent for their knowledge upon sources and methods in themselves fallible, and that their personal knowledge and judgments were in many matters hesitating and defective, or even wrong.”⁷ They insisted that the Bible must be interpreted after the intent of its authors, an intent that often required careful study to discover. They held that supposed errors in Scripture

5. Archibald A. Hodge and Benjamin B. Warfield, *Inspiration*, ed. Roger R. Nicole (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 17–18.

6. *Ibid.*, 8.

7. *Ibid.*, 28.

must be located in “some part of the original autograph,”⁸ rather than haphazardly drawn from what might be corrupted transmissions of the text. And they acknowledged that this doctrine, which they held to be the plain teaching of many scriptural passages themselves, needed to be confirmed by full attention to all possible objections arising from the study of the Bible itself (e.g., questions concerning mistaken history or geography, inaccurate quotations from the Old Testament in the New, internal lack of harmony, and the like). Yet once having made these qualifications, Hodge and Warfield insisted that the Bible was fully inspired, absolutely without error, and legitimately to be regarded not just as a bearer of the Word of God but as that Word itself.

As critics responded to this position paper, and as the Princeton theologians themselves fleshed out their conception of biblical inerrancy in scores of works, Warfield made crucial statements about Scripture that would also shape his response to questions of science. Of particular importance was his response to the charge that his view of inspiration amounted to a mechanical view of divine dictation. In response, Warfield repeatedly argued that he was advocating not dictation, but what he called “concursum.” For example, in an 1894 article on “The Divine and Human in the Bible,” Warfield was at pains to defend the fully human character of the Bible *in addition to* its fully divine character. As he phrased it in this discussion of the Bible, “concursum” meant that “the Scriptures are the joint product of divine and human activities, both of which penetrate them at every point, working harmoniously together to the production of a writing which is not divine here and human there, but at once divine and human in every part, every word and every particular.”⁹ The importance of this way of thinking for Warfield’s scientific views was great. In simple terms, the products of natural history could be the consequence—at the same time—of both natural forces and divine action.

The main points of Warfield’s defense of an inerrant Bible, if not necessarily the details of his position, eventually became major

8. *Ibid.*, 36.

9. B. B. Warfield, “The Divine and Human in the Bible” (1894), in Benjamin B. Warfield, *Selected Shorter Writings*, 2 vols., ed. John E. Meeter (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970, 1973), 2:547.

guideposts for the American fundamentalist movement.¹⁰ The rise of fundamentalism, however, placed Warfield and other confessional conservatives in an ambiguous situation. While they applauded the fundamentalists' adherence to biblical infallibility and their defense of a supernatural faith, they found fundamentalism theologically eccentric and methodologically suspect. Many later fundamentalists would employ Warfield's formulation of biblical inerrancy as a definition of their own beliefs about Scripture, but Warfield himself maintained several important positions that set him apart from fundamentalism. In the first instance, Warfield held that fundamentalist proof-texting represented a retrograde step in studying the Bible.¹¹ In addition, Warfield was unimpressed by the dispensationalism that became so important in American fundamentalism. Modern theologies associated with John Nelson Darby, C. I. Scofield, or other promoters of dispensationalism were suspect to Warfield for faulty exegesis, questionable theological construction, and errors on the work of the Holy Spirit.¹² Finally, like his college teacher James McCosh and his senior colleague, A. A. Hodge, Warfield found little difficulty in thinking that, if scientific facts called for such a move, it would be a straightforward theological task to align historic confessional Calvinism with non-naturalistic forms of evolution.¹³ This, of course, was a move that fundamentalists were unwilling to make.

In his views on dispensationalism, evolution, and the use of the Bible, therefore, Warfield was not a fundamentalist as the label came to be used. A carefully qualified view of biblical inerrancy, like the one Warfield developed, did not necessarily entail the particulars of fundamentalist theology, but could in fact ground judgments on nature, the

10. See George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); George W. Dollar, *A History of Fundamentalism in America* (Greenville, S.C.: Bob Jones University Press, 1973).

11. See, for example, his review of *What the Bible Teaches* (1899), by R. A. Torrey, *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 39 (July 1899): 562–64.

12. See, for example, B. B. Warfield, "The Millennium and the Apocalypse" (1904), in *Biblical Doctrines*, vol. 2 of *The Works of Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield* (1929; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 643–64.

13. See, for example, A. A. Hodge, review of *Natural Science and Religion*, by Asa Gray, *Presbyterian Review* 1 (July 1880): 586–89; or his "Introduction" to Joseph S. van Dyke, in *Theism and Evolution* (New York: A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1886), xv–xxiii.

character of biblical theology, and approaches to biblical scholarship very different in tone, and significantly different in substance, from what was found among fundamentalists.

Important as Warfield felt it was to contend for the truthfulness of the Bible, he exerted even more energy throughout his long career expounding the truths of the Bible. Warfield, in other words, was concerned to secure the Bible as the ground of theology and to protect reason as a prime theological tool, but he was characteristically more interested in the theology he felt the Bible taught and reason supported.

Warfield was not embarrassed to say what that theology was and where he felt it had been best represented in the history of the church. Time and again throughout his historical, exegetical, and polemical works (and it was never easy to disengage these categories from each other), Warfield defined true Christianity as the pure religion of the Reformation; or, in phrases that to him meant the same thing, as the Augustinian grasp of human sin and divine grace recovered by Luther and especially Calvin; or, even more fully, as the Pauline summation of the biblical gospel passed on especially to Augustine and then renewed by the magisterial Reformers. “Calvinism,” he wrote in 1904, “is just religion in its purity. We have only, therefore, to conceive of religion in its purity, and that is Calvinism.”¹⁴

Five years later Warfield spelled out explicitly what he meant by Calvinism—“a profound apprehension of God in His majesty, with the inevitably accompanying poignant realization of the exact nature of the relation sustained to Him by the creatures as such, and particularly by the sinful creature.” In the same place, Warfield suggested that he was not using “Calvinism” as a narrow label for those holding a certain theological position. Rather, “Calvinism” meant a way of life before God that, in the course of history, had been most satisfactorily described by the Protestant Reformers, who recovered an Augustinian understanding of the biblical message. If Warfield’s theological labeling was narrow, his conception of the thing for which the label spoke was broadly catholic.

14. B. B. Warfield, “What Is Calvinism?” (1904), in *Selected Shorter Writings*, 1:389.

He who believes in God without reserve, and is determined that God shall be God to him in all his thinking, feeling, willing—in the entire compass of his life-activities, intellectual, moral, spiritual, throughout all his individual, social, religious relations—is, by the force of that strictest of all logic which presides over the outworking of principles into thought and life, by the very necessity of the case, a Calvinist.¹⁵

The comprehensiveness of this kind of Calvinism—its picture of a God who pervaded all aspects of existence—was critical for Warfield’s stance in general.

Although Warfield is today better known for his views on the Bible, a solid case can be constructed on the basis of his own works that his commitment to classic Protestantism was deeper and more comprehensive than even his commitment to biblical inerrancy as such. By this classic Protestantism, Warfield meant commitment to an Augustinian view of God, the sinful human condition, and salvation in Christ, but also a broadly open acceptance of the world as the arena of God’s creative activity. For Warfield, the heart of both theology and active religion was the glory of God, who rescued sinful humans from self-imposed destruction and who enabled them to share his work of the kingdom in every sphere of life, including the natural world.

Even Warfield’s defense of biblical inerrancy, which often seems to be undertaken on behalf of a bare notion of biblical veracity, was also a product of his overarching Calvinism. The point of defending traditional views of the Bible was not so much the Bible itself as what the Bible taught. When Warfield in 1910 reviewed the autobiography of William Newton Clarke, a Northern Baptist who over the course of a long career moved from believing in the Bible as inerrant revelation from God to considering it a refined record of religious encounter with God, Warfield rehearsed the arguments he had made many times before concerning Jesus’ own testimony to the infallibility of Scripture. But in the end the critical matter was not just Scripture: “He who no longer holds to the Bible of Jesus—the word of which cannot be broken—will be found on examination no longer to hold

15. B. B. Warfield, “Calvinism” (1908), in *Calvin and Calvinism*, vol. 5 of *The Works of Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield* (1931; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 354–56.

to the Jesus of the Bible.” This Jesus, who communicates forgiveness to needy sinners, is the one “to whom it [Scripture] bears consentient witness.”¹⁶ Historian L. Russ Bush has made the important observation that Warfield’s understanding of the Bible follows his more general conception of theology as a whole.¹⁷

It is that theology, and the man who held it, that are opened up in an unusually helpful way by the chapters that follow.

16. B. B. Warfield, review of *Sixty Years with the Bible*, by William Newton Clarke, *Princeton Theological Review* 8 (Jan. 1910): 167.

17. L. Russ Bush, “The Roots of Conservative Perspectives on Inerrancy (Warfield),” in *Proceedings of the Conference on Biblical Inerrancy, 1987* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987), 280–81.