

# “Right Reason” and the Science of Theology at Old Princeton Seminary: A New Perspective

By Paul Kjoss Helseth

## I. INTRODUCTION: THE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL CONSENSUS

The word on the streets is that the theologians at Old Princeton Seminary were not who they claimed to be. According to the standard assessment of the Princeton Theology, while the Princeton theologians claimed to be faithful defenders of the Reformed tradition and the champions of Reformed orthodoxy in the context of nineteenth and early twentieth century American culture, in fact they accommodated the assumptions of the age in which they lived and in so doing lost a firm hold on the essential commitments of the tradition they claimed to be defending. Indeed, their insistence upon the objective nature of religious truth, their endorsement of an inductive approach to the interpretation of Scripture, their spirited advocacy of the doctrine of inerrancy, and their commitment to an evidentialist approach to both the defense and the advancement of the faith were all grounded, many of their critics contend,

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1. Paul C. Gutjahr, *Charles Hodge: Guardian of American Orthodoxy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 37. The Scottish philosophers were moderate Calvinists who were “anxious to overcome” (Daniel Walker Howe, *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997], 52) what they regarded as Scotland’s provincial heritage. According to Daniel Walker Howe, “The Scottish Enlightenment . . . consisted of a self-conscious band of programmatic intellectuals, indebted to a provincial Calvinist heritage they were trying to escape, and seeking to enlist private wealth on the side of their country’s public good. Out of the tensions of this cultural matrix, a small and comparatively remote country produced an astonishingly disproportionate share of the eighteenth century’s intellectual achievements” (Howe, 52).

2. Mark A. Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 109. Noll argues that “the beachhead in America for the principles of the Scottish

not in faithfulness to the assumptions of the Reformed tradition, but in an implicit—and at times even explicit—commitment to precisely that kind of Enlightenment philosophy that is largely responsible for the decline and fall of Calvinism as the dominant force in the American church. The problem, these critics insist, is not that the Princeton theologians were rationalists like the more radical thinkers in the Age of Reason were rationalists; to the best of my knowledge no one is claiming that they regarded the human intellect as the ultimate arbiter of what is true, good, and beautiful. Rather, the problem is that they accommodated a form of Enlightenment thinking that subverts the essential assumptions of a consistently Reformed epistemology, and it does so by calling the sacramental nature of the world in which we live into question, by denying that the quality of our knowledge is determined not by the power of our intellects alone but by the disposition, inclination, or moral character of our hearts, and by ignoring the noetic effects of sin and the corresponding necessity for the Spirit to enable fallen sinners to see, know, and act “rightly.”

## II. THE SCOTTISH PHILOSOPHY AND THE PRINCETON THEOLOGY

### *Common Sense Habits of Mind*

So what form of Enlightenment philosophy is thought to be responsible for this subversion? In his recent biography of Charles Hodge, Paul Gutjahr argues that Calvinism and the Scottish Common Sense Realism of philosophers like Francis Hutcheson and Thomas Reid “formed the two central pillars” of Old Princeton’s theological thinking.<sup>1</sup> It was the influence of Hutcheson’s “sentimentalist ethics” and later of Reid’s “realist epistemology,”<sup>2</sup> scholars like Mark Noll contend, that by the

beginning of the nineteenth century had generated an intellectual milieu in which “habits of mind” that were once thought to be antithetical to the epistemological assumptions of the Reformed tradition were being taken for granted by those who should have known better, and with imposing consequences.<sup>3</sup> According to Noll, these “habits of mind” represented what is perhaps best described as “a series of overlapping intellectual commonplaces” that gave the life of the mind in the context of early modern America a distinctly Scottish—to say nothing of a strikingly anthropocentric—flavor:

First was an *ethical* common sense, or the assertion that just as humans know intuitively some basic realities about the physical world, so they may know certain foundational principles of morality by reflecting on their own consciousness. Second was *epistemological* common sense. It was the assertion that under normal conditions, when regulated carefully, human sense impressions revealed the world pretty much as it was.... The significance of this axiom for theology lay in the conviction that impressions from “the moral sense” and simple ideas from the Bible revealed the moral universe as accurately as impressions from the physical senses revealed the physical world. The third commonplace was a *methodological* common sense, or the assertion that truths about consciousness, the physical world, and religion could be authoritatively built by strict induction from the irreducible facts of experience.<sup>4</sup>

In short, for the critics of the Princeton theologians, these distinctly Scottish habits of mind fostered a kind of rationalism in America generally and at Old Princeton specifically because they encouraged both the founders and the heirs of “American republicanism”<sup>5</sup> to presume that the truths of science, religion, and morality are universally and immediately accessible, that finite and fallen human beings have the ability “to detect and be moved by truth” without supernatural assistance,<sup>6</sup> and that certain knowledge of the truth that God had revealed could be obtained through the collection and careful analysis of the facts that are received by our senses and gained through experience.<sup>7</sup> They also generated what one scholar has called an “evidence-based conception of faith”<sup>8</sup> that practically reduced faith to the mere assent of the understanding, a reduction that helps to account for what critics regard as the pronounced “intellectualism” that is at the foundation of nearly all of what they insist are the more troubling aspects of the Princeton Theology and its enduring legacy, including its commitment to the doctrine of inerrancy,

its evidentialist apologetic, and what some contend is its “wooden” approach to what has come to be known as the “propositionalist understanding of the theological enterprise,”<sup>9</sup> an enterprise that, as one critic puts it, turns the Word of God “into something cold and clinical, [something] which *we* possess and which *we* manipulate,” a “set of propositions” that at the end of the day is “under the theologian’s control.”<sup>10</sup>

#### *The Old Princetonians: Common Sense Rationalists?*

So is there any merit to this assessment of the Old Princetonians? In other words, are there grounds for concluding that the theologians at Old Princeton Seminary did in fact accommodate certain elements of the prevailing mindset of the age in which they lived, and that their

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Enlightenment was provided by the sentimentalist ethics of Francis Hutcheson rather than the realist epistemology of Thomas Reid.... When accounts of the Scottish philosophy leap over Hutcheson to concentrate on Reid ... the circumstances under which theistic mental science won its way in American are obscured” (Noll, 109). For more on the relationship between Hutcheson and Reid, cf. Noll, 106–13, 316.

3. Noll, *America’s God*, 236–37. According to Noll, “Reliance on the principles of theistic mental science altered the trajectory of orthodox Protestant theology in at least two ways. It substituted a measure of confidence in natural human powers for traditional Protestant suspicions about what humans could know by nature without God’s aid. It also made confidence in human intuitions and the human ability to construe the data of experience, rather than confidence in the being and revelatory acts of God, the foundation for knowledge about the world and about God. This alteration did not take place to the same degree in other historic Protestant regions. But it did take place in the United States, where Americanized habits of mind guided arguments about the Christian faith, even as they shaped the positive articulation of Christian teaching” (Noll, 236–37).

4. Noll, *America’s God*, 233–34.

5. Bruce Kuklick, *A History of Philosophy in America: 1720–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 28. For an incisive analysis of the synthesis of “American republicanism” with evangelical religion in the American context, see Noll, *America’s God*, chapters 4 and 5.

6. Gutjahr, *Charles Hodge*, 203.

7. Kuklick notes that the American founders “were rationalists in their view that anyone with the perseverance to examine the world carefully and to reflect on this experience could arrive at fundamental truths; these truths could not be honestly gainsaid. But ‘reason’ for them was not defined as intuition or a priori deliberation but as calculating practicality about the present and historical exploration of the past with a view to using the results of the exploration in the present” (*A History of Philosophy in America*, 28).

8. Harriet A. Harris, *Fundamentalism and Evangelicals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 135.

9. For example, see Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 67.

10. Andrew T. B. McGowan, *The Divine Spiration of Scripture: Challenging Evangelical Perspectives* (Nottingham: Apollós [IVP], 2007), 116–17, emphasis added.

accommodation of these elements did in fact lend an aura of rationalism to certain aspects of their theological labors? While one could argue that the Scottish Philosophy fostered a kind of rationalism at Old Princeton because it discouraged the Old Princetonians from embracing a full-blown religious enthusiasm on the one hand and the modern distinction between religious truth and scientific truth on the other—both moves that would have reduced the essence of the faith to an essentially subjective phenomenon and in so doing removed the justification for anything resembling an evidentialist approach to both the defense and the advancement of the faith—such an argument—even if it were true—would simultaneously seem trivial at best and far too ambitious at worst, for it would suggest that anyone who is committed to any form of realism—including those who reject “naïve realism” yet regard themselves as “critical realists”—is really just a rationalist, a suggestion that would reduce even some of the more outspoken critics of Old Princeton’s alleged rationalism to rationalists themselves.<sup>11</sup>

A more accurate and certainly more constructive response to the question would acknowledge that since the Princetonians were the children of their times just as we are of ours, we should not expect that the standard critique of Old Princeton is entirely without merit. Even if we insist—as I believe we must—that in the main, the

11. For a good example of a critical realist who is critical of Old Princeton yet still rejects the “epistemic skepticism” that would “force us into Kantian idealism, arbitrary subjectivism, or theological liberalism,” see Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicalism is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2011), 59; 152–53. For an incisive, thorough, and refreshingly nuanced discussion that challenges the standard assessment of Hodge’s—and by implication, Old Princeton’s—relationship to Enlightenment philosophy in general and Scottish Common Sense Realism in particular, see Michael L. Gurney, “Are the Princetonians Passé? Evaluating the Post-Conservative Critique of Charles Hodge” (Ph.D. diss., University of Aberdeen, 2012).

12. Charles Hodge, “Original Righteousness,” Box 1, File 19:3, in The Charles Hodge Manuscript Collection. Special Collections, Princeton Theological Seminary Library.

13. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989; 1871–73), 1:598, 605.

14. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1.604–605. Note that even though Hodge insists “we originate our own acts,” he does not believe that the will is a self-determining faculty or power. In other words, he rejects the “power to the contrary” that is essential to what he calls the “liberty of indifference” view of freedom (Hodge, 2:282–83). Also note that while Hodge’s doctrine of providence is quite similar to that of Archibald Alexander, Alexander rejects the doctrine of concursus because he is persuaded that it in fact does make God the author of sin. See “Providence,” Box 9, File 31:1–4, in The Archibald Alexander Manuscript Collection. Special Collections, Princeton Theological Seminary Library.

Princeton theologians remained more or less consistently Reformed as they labored to combat the rising tide of religious subjectivism in their day, nevertheless we must acknowledge that in their writings they advanced a number of positions that—especially on a superficial reading—lend plausibility to the charge of accommodation, and thus to the charge that they embraced a form of rationalism that denies both the noetic effects of sin and the corresponding necessity for the work of the Spirit in regeneration. Three examples from the writings of Charles Hodge—whose name is virtually synonymous with the Princeton Theology—will suffice. The first is found in Hodge’s repeated appeals to human consciousness—to what he sometimes calls “the universal judgment of men”<sup>12</sup>—to confirm and sometimes establish the theological positions that he finally embraces. For example, in his discussion of providence in his *Systematic Theology* Hodge rejects the doctrine of concursus—which he notes is grounded in the principle that “no second cause can act until acted upon. Nothing created can originate action”—not just because it attempts “to explain the inexplicable,” or because it raises “at every step the most subtle and perplexing metaphysical questions, which no man is able to solve,” but because it denies what he insists all moral agents *just know* about themselves to be true, namely that they are free agents who have the ability to originate their *own* action.<sup>13</sup> “The objection to the doctrine of *concursum* is not,” Hodge argues,

that it intentionally or really destroys the free agency of man; or that it makes God the author of sin, but ... That it is founded on an arbitrary and false assumption. It denies that any creature can originate action. This does not admit of proof. It is an inference from the assumed nature of the dependence of the creature upon the creator; or from the assumed necessity of the principle in question, in order to secure the absolute control of God over created beings. It however contradicts the consciousness of men. That we are free agents means that we have the power to act freely; and to act freely implies that we originate our own acts.... The power of spontaneous action is essential to the nature of a spirit; and God, in creating us in his own nature as spirits, endowed us with the power to originate our own acts.<sup>14</sup>

If we ignore for now the question of whether and to what extent the position that Hodge defends in his discussion of providence is orthodox or not, what is immediately—some would say disturbingly—striking is the decisive role that a distinctly Scottish understanding of

“the consciousness concept” appears to play in his decision to reject the doctrine of concursus.<sup>15</sup> The self’s ostensible knowledge “of its own operations” and not an explicit appeal either to Scripture or to the Westminster Standards is finally conclusive, it seems, thus suggesting that Scottish Realism—which granted considerable weight to “the [seemingly] incontrovertible evidence of consciousness”<sup>16</sup> and in so doing “threatened theological orthodoxies of every kind”<sup>17</sup>—may have played more than just a supporting role in at least this aspect of Hodge’s theology.<sup>18</sup>

The second example is related to the first and has to do with the fact that Hodge’s writings are filled not just with appeals to the apparent authority of human consciousness, appeals to the decisive nature of what Professor Noll more generally calls “theistic common sense,”<sup>19</sup> but also with references to the activities of the various “faculties” or “powers” of the soul.<sup>20</sup> When Hodge’s references to the activities of these “faculties” or “powers” are considered in the context of his clear insistence upon

the basic reliability of human consciousness—which apparently is essentially unaffected by the disposition or inclination or moral character of the heart—there seem to be grounds for concluding that he embraced an understanding of the faculty psychology that “contrasted sharply”<sup>21</sup> with the “older psychology”<sup>22</sup> of more traditional Calvinists because in such a context, such references lend credence to the notion that he treated the “faculties” or “powers” of the soul as if they were “distinct entities rather than different abilities or functions of a unitary mind.”<sup>23</sup> We will say more about this below, but for now we should note that if it is indeed true that Hodge and his colleagues at Old Princeton “hypo[stati]z[ed] the faculties”<sup>24</sup> by treating them as if they were separate “substances”<sup>25</sup> rather than the functional manifestations of a more organic whole—a move that scholars like Daniel Walker Howe, Bruce Kuklick, James Hoopes, and D. H. Meyer suggest would be clear evidence of substantial indebtedness to the philosophical psychology of the Scottish Enlightenment<sup>26</sup>—then

15. According to James Hoopes, the “consciousness concept” has to do with the notion “that the self is the creator and container of thought and that it therefore has privileged, completely accurate knowledge of its own actions in thinking” (*Consciousness in New England: From Puritanism and Ideas to Psychoanalysis and Semiotic* [Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989], 32).

16. Hoopes, 95, 101.

17. D. H. Meyer, *The Instructed Conscience: The Shaping of the American National Ethic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), 57. Among the theological orthodoxies threatened by “the consciousness concept” were those that had to do with a form of theological determinism that is grounded in the conviction that the soul is comprised of two rather than three faculties or powers. According to Hoopes, “The seemingly undeniable corollary of the consciousness concept was that subjective feeling was not to be denied. If human beings felt free, they were free, morally as well as naturally” (Hoopes, *Consciousness in New England*, 95–96). In short, Hoopes makes it clear that when “the consciousness concept” was combined with a commitment to Scottish Realism, it reinforced the notion that the will—which we experience as a power that is distinct from both the understanding and passion—is an independent faculty that has self-determining power. “The Scots’ substitution of immediate experience for representative ideas may have put the external natural sciences on a safely empirical basis,” he argues, “but rather than resolving the threat posed by the consciousness concept to religious liberty, Scottish empiricism lent all the more weight to the evidence of consciousness for moral freedom. Edwards had built his argument for moral determinism not on introspection but on logical inference from the way of ideas.... If, as the Scots said, the mind perceived things themselves rather than representative ideas, there seemed to be no basis for the startling ratiocination by which Edwards had argued against moral freedom. In rejecting Locke’s epistemology of ideas, Edwards’s successors, ironically, cleared the way for acceptance of Locke’s introspective proof of free will. By dispensing with ideas, some of Edwards’s Congregationalist successors were forced to dispense with his inferential logic and to accept what seemed to them

the incontrovertible evidence of consciousness for moral freedom. Human will was not mere desire but the choice, as Locke had said, to satisfy or deny a desire. The New England theologians helped launch ‘the Victorian orgy with intellectualized will’ in America” (Hoopes, 100–101). For more on the relationship between Scottish Realism and the tripartite faculty psychology that came to dominate the American landscape in the nineteenth century, see footnote 26.

18. For other examples of Hodge’s apparent use of common sense moral intuitions “to guide his interpretation of Scripture,” see Noll, *America’s God*, 316–19.

19. Cf. Noll, *America’s God*, chapter 6.

20. For example, in his discussion of “free agency,” Hodge notes that, “If I desire anything, it is because I apprehend it as suitable to satisfy some craving of my nature. If I will anything because it is right, its being right is something for the understanding to discern. In other words, all the desires, affections, or feelings which determine the will to act must have an object, and that object by which the feeling is excited and towards which it tends, must be discerned by the understanding. It is this that gives them their rational character, and renders the determinations of the will rational. Any volition which does not follow the last dictate of the understanding, in this sense of the words, is the act of an idiot. It may be spontaneous, be just as the acts of brutes are, but it cannot be free, in the sense of being the act of an accountable person” (Charles Hodge, “Free Agency,” *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 29 [January 1857]: 111).

21. Howe, *Making the American Self*, 66.

22. Noll, *America’s God*, 289.

23. James Hoopes, “Calvinism and Consciousness From Edwards to Beecher,” in *Jonathan Edwards and the American Experience*, ed. Nathan O. Hatch, Harry S. Stout (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 207.

24. Hoopes, 207.

25. Kuklick, *A History of Philosophy in America*, 52.

26. Cf. Howe, *Making the American Self*, 63–66; Kuklick, *A History of Philosophy in America*, 52–53; Hoopes, “Calvinism and Consciousness From Edwards to Beecher,” 205–208; idem, *Consciousness*

this would be significant because it would indicate that the Old Princetonians advanced an understanding of rational and moral autonomy that is difficult if not impossible to reconcile with the central epistemological assumptions of the Reformed tradition.<sup>27</sup>

The third example is related to the first seventeen pages of Hodge's *Systematic Theology*, the section of Hodge's *magnum opus* that contains his famous—or as some would put it, his infamous—discussion of theological method. It is now generally assumed in certain quarters of the evangelical camp that Hodge's discussion of the inductive theological method represents one of the best examples of precisely that kind of "Enlightenment biblicism" that sired American fundamentalism and gave rise to the contemporary "scandal" of the evangelical mind.<sup>28</sup> The biblicist heart of this method—which proposes that theology is a "science" that deals with "facts" that are arranged by "induction" into a coherent system by a believing theologian—is stated concisely by Hodge as follows:

The Bible is to the theologian what nature is to the man of science. It is his store-house of facts; and his method of ascertaining what the Bible teaches, is the same as that which the natural philosopher adopts to ascertain what nature teaches.... [T]he duty of the Christian theologian is to ascertain, collect, and combine all the facts which God has revealed concerning himself and our relation to Him. These facts are all in the Bible. This is true, because everything revealed in nature, and in the constitution of man concerning God and our relation to Him, is contained and authenticated in Scripture. It is in this sense that "the Bible, and the Bible alone, is the religion of Protestants."<sup>29</sup>

in *New England*, 95–102; Meyer, *The Instructed Conscience*, 51–59. Meyer notes that, "For nineteenth-century thinkers, steeped in the psychology of Scottish common sense ... the noun 'will' denoted a particular power of the mind, distinct both from the reason and the emotions. The tripartite division of the mind into rational, emotional, and volitional faculties was considered a significant improvement on the Edwardsean psychology. Edwards, it was observed, had failed to separate the will from the feelings and had thus confused choice with desire. Armed with a more useful division of the mind ... [nineteenth-century Christian moralists] expressed confidence that neither the understanding nor the emotions could ever 'lord it over the will.' This new analysis of the human mind at once raised man from the status of mere sinner to that of a fully functioning moral agent, and made explicit what had once been ambiguous and fundamentally mysterious—the act of choice" (Meyer, *The Instructed Conscience*, 54–55). For a helpful discussion of the turn from the psychology of Edwards to that of Reid, see Randy Maddox, "Holiness of Heart and Life," *Asbury Theological Journal* 51, 1 (1996): 151–72.

27. As the note above indicates, the representative of the "older psychology" that is often set in contrast to nineteenth-century theologians

in the discussion that follows we will see that a number of mitigating factors challenge the notion that Hodge—and by implication his colleagues at Old Princeton—embraced an understanding of the theological enterprise that was grounded in the faculty psychology of the Scottish Enlightenment, and that was, as a consequence, naively biblicist. For now, though, we must concede that such statements do lend an air of plausibility to the charge of rationalism, for the apparent reduction of theology to a science that is essentially no different from the natural sciences does lend at least a rationalistic *tone* to the form of biblicism that Hodge commends. In the first place, then, the first seventeen pages of Hodge's *Systematic Theology* suggest that the standard assessment of Old Princeton may have some merit, because on its surface Hodge's discussion of theological method certainly *seems* rationalistic, particularly when it is abstracted from what is arguably the key to understanding his conception of theological science, namely his insistence near the end of the seventeen pages that, "The question is not first and mainly, What is true to the understanding, but what is true to the renewed heart? The effort is not to make the assertions of the Bible harmonize with the speculative reason, but to subject our feeble reason to the mind of God as revealed in his Word, and by his Spirit in our inner life."<sup>30</sup>

In the second place, the charge also *sounds* plausible because, regrettably, some evangelicals who would claim the mantle of the Old Princetonians for themselves *really are*—or at least they *really seem to be*—"Enlightenment biblicists," for they ignore the larger context of Hodge's discussion of the theological method just as much as Old Princeton's critics do. Indeed, like

who embraced "the [faculty] psychology of Scottish common sense" is Jonathan Edwards. For a compelling analysis of Edwards's philosophical psychology that is grounded in the conviction that this contrast—at least as far as the Old Princetonians is concerned—is more imagined than real, see Jeffrey C. Waddington, "Jonathan Edwards' Theological Anthropology and Apologetic" (Ph.D. diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, forthcoming), especially chapter 4.

28. Cf. Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), 97.

29. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:10–11. For an incisive critique of that form of biblicism which divorces the reading of Scripture from tradition and the context of the church, cf. D. G. Hart, "No Creed But the Bible, No Authority Without the Church: American Evangelicals and the Errors of Inerrancy," in *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Authority of Scripture: Historical, Biblical, and Theoretical Perspectives*, ed. Carlos R. Bovell (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 3–27. For an attempt to establish that the best of the Old Princetonians did not embrace this form of biblicism, cf. Paul Kjoss Helseth, "*Right Reason*" and the Princeton Mind: An Unorthodox Proposal (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 2010), chapters 5 and 6.

30. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:16.

the critics of Old Princeton, they fundamentally misconstrue the nature of Old Princeton’s biblicism, and they do so because they mistakenly presume that knowing for the Princetonians is a merely rational enterprise, one that has to do with the intellect alone and not with a kind of whole-souled, aesthetic capacity that is grounded in the disposition or inclination or moral character of the heart and nurtured in the context of the church.<sup>31</sup> As a consequence these evangelicals expose themselves to the charge that they are not just committed modernists who deny that subjective and experiential factors play an important role in knowing God and the truth that he has revealed, but committed modernists who are beholden to epistemological assumptions that, as one critic has recently somewhat harshly put it, “were rightly abandoned by informed thinkers a long time ago.”<sup>32</sup>

### III. “PHILOSOPHY OF MIND” AT OLD PRINCETON SEMINARY

#### *A “Functionalist” or “Three-Substance” View of the Faculty Psychology?*

In an essay that is somewhat dated yet still quite relevant to the study of American church history, the distinguished American historian George Marsden argues that by the middle of the nineteenth century, “American theologians were champions of scientific reasoning and scientific advance. Their own work was modeled on that of the natural scientists, and they had full confidence in the capacities of the scientific method for discovering truth exactly and objectively.”<sup>33</sup> However, these theologians were not “unrelievedly scientific and analytical in their approach to Scripture,” Marsden contends, for “their main interest in Scripture was as a practical book to challenge the heart in matters of life and death. The heart-changing work of the Holy Spirit, they emphasized, *complemented* the objective understanding of Scripture,”<sup>34</sup> though it was not, apparently, essential to it. In this regard, Marsden suggests that Charles Hodge—“who was second to none in stressing the intellectual content of the faith”<sup>35</sup>—was no different from most of his more conservative contemporaries. Indeed, he acknowledged that there is an important place for religious experience and the “truths of the heart” in the doing of theology, but he tended to “subordinate” these “themes” to the “hard facts” of the scientific theological enterprise.<sup>36</sup>

A more recent study by Harriet Harris draws a similar conclusion regarding Hodge and the Old Princetonians

more generally. While Harris insists that there was a pronounced “rationalistic tendency” at Old Princeton because of its emphasis on reason and the primacy of the intellect in faith, nevertheless she acknowledges that

It is ... misleading to accuse the Princeton theologians of rationalism ... [for] They regarded [the] inner testimony [of the Spirit] as crucial for arriving at faith. However, in their apologetics they had difficulty in saying so, because they allowed religious experience to affect only one’s acceptance rather than one’s understanding of faith. It is their insistence on the rational apprehension of faith, even the reasonableness of faith, that invites the charge of rationalism.<sup>37</sup>

What is noteworthy about the analyses of Marsden and Harris is that while both acknowledge—unlike the less judicious interpretations of scholars like Gordon Jackson, Ernest Sandeen, and more recently, Steven Sherman<sup>38</sup>—that subjective and experiential factors play an important role in the theology of the Old Princetonians, both nonetheless insist that the Princeton theologians failed to integrate these factors sufficiently with the more cerebral aspects of their theology. While Marsden recognizes that Hodge stressed the “primacy

31. In his compelling biography of Charles Hodge, W. Andrew Hoffecker establishes that Hodge was a committed churchman who was persuaded that “family and corporate church life” play a vital—indeed a foundational—role in the nurture of Christian faith, which is grounded in the “right” knowledge of God and the truth that he has revealed. For Hoffecker’s discussion of Hodge’s views on “Old School Nurture,” see *Charles Hodge: The Pride of Princeton* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 2011), chapter 17.

32. Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, 60. For related discussion, see Paul Kjoss Helseth, “Carl F. H. Henry, Old Princeton, and the Right Use of Reason: Continuity or Discontinuity?” *Westminster Theological Journal* 73, 2 (Fall 2011): 293–302.

33. George M. Marsden, “Everyone One’s Own Interpreter? The Bible, Science, and Authority in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America,” in *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History*, ed. Nathan O. Hatch, Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 84.

34. Marsden, 84, emphasis added.

35. Marsden, 96.

36. Marsden, 91–90.

37. Harris, *Fundamentalism and Evangelicals*, 133, 134.

38. For example, see Gordon E. Jackson, “Archibald Alexander’s *Thoughts on Religious Experience*, a Critical Revisiting,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 51, 2 (1973): 141–54; Ernest Sandeen, “The Princeton Theology: One Source of Biblical Literalism in American Protestantism,” *Church History* 31 (1962): 307–21; Steven B. Sherman, *Revitalizing Theological Epistemology: Holistic Evangelical Approaches to the Knowledge of God*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series 83. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2008. For my review of Sherman, see *Themelios: An International Journal for Students of Theological and Religious Studies* 34, 3 (November 2009): 427–29.

of ‘heart’ over head” yet insists that he “treated Scripture quite frankly as a compilation of hard ‘facts’ that the theologian had only to arrange in systematic order,”<sup>39</sup> Harris says explicitly that although the Princetonians “were not lacking in personal piety ... they did not adequately incorporate this side of their faith into their apologetics.”<sup>40</sup> Mark Noll—who acknowledges that the theologians at Old Princeton Seminary “were sharply aware of the role of presuppositions in scholarship” and even recognized “that they too came to their academic work with presuppositions ... arising from regeneration and the work of the Spirit”<sup>41</sup>—reaches a similar conclusion in an essay on Charles Hodge’s understanding of the spiritual life. According to Noll, “the difficulty with Hodge’s view of the spiritual life was not a neglect of lived religious experience, of the person, or of the affections. It was rather his predilection for affirming Christianity both as a set of scriptural doctrines and as a living connection with Christ, while yet never finding a way to bring these two affirmations into cohesive unity.”<sup>42</sup>

But did Hodge and his colleagues at Old Princeton utterly fail in this regard, and did they fail because of their largely unacknowledged indebtedness to the intellectual legacy of the Scottish Enlightenment? We have already conceded that critics may plausibly conclude that the Princeton theologians were not perfectly consistent in working out the epistemological implications of their theological commitments. They were, I would argue, more or less consistently Reformed, but not perfectly Reformed. But must we concede that in the main, they failed to integrate the head and the heart, the

objective and the subjective components of their theology, as their critics would have us believe? Moreover, must we grant that this alleged lack of “cohesive unity” was grounded in an understanding of the faculty psychology that separates the understanding and the will and “hypoſtatizes” the faculties of the soul—treats them as if they were autonomous, causally independent substances or powers—so that moral agents think and understand exclusively with the rational faculty and decide and believe exclusively with the will, as the analyses of both Marsden and Harris suggest above? In my estimation, while the standard assessment of the Princeton mind seems plausible in one sense, it is completely implausible in another because it reads the Princetonians in light of a “philosophy of mind”<sup>43</sup> that Hodge and his colleagues at Old Princeton insisted was, to use Hodge’s language, “peculiar” at best.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, it imagines that the Princeton theologians embraced what Bruce Kuklick calls “a three-substance view” of the faculty psychology—which regards the faculties or powers of the soul as distinct “ontological”<sup>45</sup> substances rather than the functional manifestations of a unitary whole—and for this reason its advocates feel justified in concluding that the Old Princetonians were at least unwitting rationalists who presumed, among other things, that: 1) all human beings—whether regenerate or unregenerate—have the ability to reason “rightly,” i.e., to use the scientific method to discover truth “exactly and objectively,” as Marsden puts it above; and 2) that truth is known “rightly”—i.e., “exactly and objectively”—when it is apprehended by a movement of the intellect alone.

### *Grounds for Skepticism*

But were the Princeton theologians in fact rationalists in this sense of the term? In other words, was their “intellectualism”—and thus their understanding of the science of theology—in fact grounded in a philosophical psychology that has a distinctly Scottish provenance? In the remainder of this essay I will argue it was not. For now, though, and in order to lay the groundwork for commending a fresh assessment of Old Princeton’s understanding of the theological enterprise later in this essay, let me propose three distinct yet interrelated reasons for why we should regard the standard assessment of the Princeton mind—which presupposes that the “intellectualism” of Old Princeton was grounded in the faculty psychology of the Scottish Enlightenment—as suspect. First, the published and unpublished writings of the Old Princetonians are filled with references to the unitary operation of the soul, i.e., to the notion that the soul is a

39. Marsden, “Everyone One’s Own Interpreter?” 96, 90.

40. Harris, *Fundamentalism and Evangelicals*, 134.

41. Mark A. Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1991; 1986), 23.

42. Mark A. Noll, “Charles Hodge as an Expositor of the Spiritual Life,” in *Charles Hodge Revisited: A Critical Appraisal of His Life and Work*, ed. John W. Stewart, James H. Moorhead (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002), 191–92.

43. Archibald Alexander, “Lecture on Faith,” Box 10, File 2:27, in The Archibald Alexander Manuscript Collection.

44. After affirming what the Westminster Confession teaches about the extent of the depravity associated with original sin—that every faculty or power of the soul has been corrupted by sin—Hodge notes that, “In opposition to the statement just given, it has been contended by many that the heart, as distinguished from the understanding, is the seat of this depravity. This opinion rests in a peculiar psychology, very different from that which is recognized in SS” (Charles Hodge, “Original Sin,” Box 1, File 31:18, in The Charles Hodge Manuscript Collection).

45. Bruce Kuklick, “The Place of Charles Hodge in the History of Ideas in America,” in *Charles Hodge Revisited*, 72.

single unit that acts in all of its functions—its thinking, its feeling, and its willing—as a single substance. In fact, from the founding of Old Princeton under Archibald Alexander to what more conservative commentators would call the “dying of the light” during the tenure of J. Gresham Machen, the best of the Old Princetonians recognized that the division of the soul into autonomous faculties or powers not only has, as Alexander puts it, “no place in Scripture,” but it is also founded upon what he insists is an “imperfect philosophy,” one that denies the substantial or organic unity of the soul.<sup>46</sup> For example, in an unpublished lecture on the nature of faith Alexander maintains that the act of faith cannot be reduced to a “mere assent of the understanding” on the one hand, nor should it be regarded as simply a “new” act of the will on the other, even if that act of the will is generated by the work of the Spirit.<sup>47</sup> Rather, the act

of faith is a “simple” act that “includes both the understanding and will.”<sup>48</sup> According to Alexander,

in the exercise of saving faith, both the understanding and will concur; for in faith there is included a firm conviction of truth, which is the proper object of the understanding, and a persuasion of the excellence and suitableness of that truth, which is the object of the will; but it must not be inferred from this ... that faith cannot exist, unless there be secured successive acts, different in their nature; for faith is a simple exercise, and all its acts are of the same nature; except so far as they are modified by the object believed, by the circumstances of the believer, or the degree and kind of evidence exhibited.<sup>49</sup>

Second, explicit references in the writings of the Old

46. Alexander, “Lecture on Faith,” 21, 26.  
 47. Alexander, “Lecture on Faith,” 21.  
 48. Alexander, “Lecture on Faith,” 26, 21.  
 49. Alexander, “Lecture on Faith,” 26. Please forgive the length of this quote from Alexander’s “Lecture on Faith,” 21–26, but it provides important context for the quotation above. At this point in his lecture, Alexander is inquiring “whether faith has its seat in the understanding or will, or in both: for all these opinions are maintained by different persons: Some maintaining that faith is purely an intellectual act; a mere assent of the understanding. Others, again, hold, that the understanding which is doctrinally informed, undergoes no change in its views by the gift of faith, but the whole difference consists in new acts of the will. But the common opinion of the orthodox has been, that the exercise of faith includes both the understanding, and will. Now it may be asked to which of these opinions is the description given of faith in this lecture, conformable? To this I answer, that this division of the soul into separate faculties has no place in scripture, and of course ought to have nothing to do with the subject of faith. If I know what faith is, I care not to what faculties you refer it. Indeed, no small confusion, and no little disputation have arisen from making too great a separation between the understanding, and will or heart. For what is the understanding but the soul, which is one and indivisible, acting in a certain way; and the acts of the will, the same soul putting forth exercises of a different kind. (*sic*) But when we attend carefully to our own exercises, we find that the distinction cannot be made consistently between the acts of these two faculties; for they involve one another. For if we refer to the understanding every sort of knowledge, the *good, utility, and beauty*, are objects of the understanding; but these are said to be the peculiar objects of the will, and truth of the understanding; but it may be asked, is not the *good* which is in an object, a truth, is it not an object of intellect? Do we not apprehend it by our cognoscitive faculty, as much as anything else? Again, every act of the will necessarily includes in it, the operation of intellect; for if the will be inclined to an object, or averse from an object, the knowledge of that object belongs to the intellect. If the will did not include the understanding it would be a perfectly blind, and consequently, irrational impulse. And perhaps there is no intellectual act which is not attended with some sensation, more or less perceptible. Even the contemplation of abstract mathematical truth is attended with some degree of pleasure. There

are, indeed, feelings in our nature, which do not require the perception of an object, but these are blind, animal feelings, which we have in common with the brutes; and even in these, there is an exercise of intellect in taking cognizance of them; for we are conscious of all feelings; and no doubt consciousness is an intellectual act. But as it relates to the rational exercises of the mind, the truth seems to be, that the intellect, or mind itself, receives ideas from various sources, which are attended with sensations or feelings, various in kind and degree, but this sensation or emotion cannot in experience be separated from the idea which it accompanies.... Suppose I have before my mind a sublime or beautiful object; I do not first perceive the object, and then feel pleasure. The pleasant sensation or emotion is not a distinct exercise of the mind, but the idea itself is either a pleasant or a painful one: and the pleasure or pain which belongs to our ideas, tho’ called by the same name, differs in kind as much as our ideas. When I contemplate moral excellence, the idea is pleasant; but entirely different from the pleasure which is attached to the idea of a beautiful landscape, or the rainbow; but they both agree in this, that they are pleasant. Now, when I love moral excellence, I have the distinct idea of that excellence in ... my mind, which is a pleasant idea. The pleasure is of a noble kind. I cannot separate this emotion of pleasure ... from the intellectual act. To conceive distinctly of a lovely object is to love it; and therefore, love belongs to the understanding as much as to the will.... The distinction between the understanding and will, in the exercises of piety and of sin, is utterly unknown in the language of SS. They do speak of different kinds of knowledge but a blind mind and a hard heart are the same. To believe with the heart, is to believe with the whole soul. So we read of ‘an understanding heart’; and to have the mind enlightened and will renewed, are not two distinct things, but one and the same. There is indeed an active power in the soul which is more properly called the will, which relates to some change within the body or train of thoughts in the mind. But this is not particularly connected with this discussion; for faith not being the effect of this power, but the gift of God, the will, in this sense, is not exercised in faith. But lest I involve you and myself in those mists which I wish to clear away, I will dismiss this metaphysical discussion. I want no assistance from it to explain the nature of faith. I only wish to remove the confusion, which has arisen from involving this subject in the distinctions of an imperfect philosophy.”

Princetonians not only point to a “functionalist” rather than a “three-substance” view of the faculty psychology, but they also make it clear that the Princeton theologians were aware that subjective and experiential factors play a critical role in the life of the mind.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, these references establish that for the Old Princetonians, subjective and experiential factors are essential to knowing “rightly” because they have a decisive bearing on whether or not a particular moral agent has the moral capacity to see revealed truth more or less for what it objectively is, namely glorious. As we will see in the discussion that follows, this explains why the Princeton theologians insisted that regeneration is essential to knowing “rightly.” As Archibald Alexander puts it, in regeneration the Spirit implants a “principle of holiness” in the soul of a moral agent.<sup>51</sup> It is this principle of holiness that enables the regenerated agent to see revealed truth more or less for what it objectively is, he insists, because it is this principle of spiritual life

50. Two examples from the writings of lesser-known Old Princetonians will serve to illustrate this point. In his *Outlines of Theology* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1991; 1860), 280–81, Archibald Alexander Hodge insists that since “[t]he soul of man is one single indivisible agent . . . it is not true . . . that the understanding reasons, and the heart feels, and the conscience approves or condemns, and the will decides, as different members of the body work together, or as the different persons constituting a council deliberate and decide in mutual parts; but it is true that the one indivisible, rational, feeling, moral, self-determining soul reasons, feels, approves, or condemns and decides.” In an essay titled “Classification and Mutual Relation of the Mental Faculties,” *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* (1860): 57–58, Lyman Hotchkiss Atwater argues that, “It is a cardinal principle, which rises almost to the eminence of a first truth, that the mind or soul of man is one, however diverse its faculties or modes of operation; even as the body is one organism and substance, however various its members and forms of activity. This truth is often forgotten or obscured by modes of reasoning which imply that the will is a separate substance from the intellect, just as independent of it, as one soul is from another: also that the desires and affections are not less separate from the will and intellect; and that all three departments of our nature, the voluntary, the emotional, and the intellectual, are not like the pulse and lungs, and blood, the mutually dependent workings and developments of one common life, but the separate and independent activities of different agents—as it were of an angel, man, or devil. How common is it for men to reason on these subjects as if the same person might be in intellect an angel, in will a man, in feeling a fiend! Now the human soul is no such double or triple essence as this. It is one, indivisible, self-same soul, that knows and thinks, that feels and wills. This is a first truth.”

51. Archibald Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1989; 1844), 62.

52. Archibald Alexander, “A Practical View of Regeneration,” *Biblical Repertory and Theological Review* 8, 4 (1836): 482.

53. Charles Hodge, “God is Light,” Box 24, File 80:4, in The Charles Hodge Manuscript Collection.

54. Charles Hodge, *The Way of Life* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1978; 1841), 14.

that renders the agent “susceptible of impression from divine truth.”<sup>52</sup>

Finally, Old Princeton’s acknowledgement that there is more to knowing “rightly” than merely assenting to propositions that are objectively true is noteworthy because it suggests something significant about the nature of the truth that is being known. What it suggests, in short, is that because God is “the only, the infinite and inexhaustible fountain of all knowledge,”<sup>53</sup> and because all truth therefore bears “the impress of his character,”<sup>54</sup> truth is freighted with a kind of God-centered, sacramental significance, and for this reason “truth is,” as Hodge puts it, “not merely speculative, the object of cognition,” but it has “moral [and spiritual] beauty.”<sup>55</sup> It *just is* aesthetically compelling, in other words, because it *just is* morally and spiritually excellent,<sup>56</sup> and an essential component of its objective truthfulness—the way it “*really is*”<sup>57</sup>—therefore *just is* the fact that it exudes moral and spiritual excellence in some sense.<sup>58</sup>

55. Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1866), 250.

56. Hodge, *Ephesians*, 250.

57. Charles Hodge, “Jesus Christ Whom Thou Hast Sent” (John 17:3), September 20, 1846. Box 20, File 35:1, in The Charles Hodge Manuscript Collection. Emphasis added.

58. Hodge argues in a number of places that, “the truth contains . . . its own evidence” (Charles Hodge, “Your Faith Should Not Stand in the Wisdom of Men” [1 Corinthians 2:5], November 26, 1848. Box 21, file 10:15, in The Charles Hodge Manuscript Collection), or, as he puts it in *The Way of Life* in a discussion of the divine origin of the Bible, truth “contains within itself the proofs of its Divine origin” (Hodge, *The Way of Life*, 14). While Old Princeton’s emphasis upon “internal evidence”—which has to do with the moral and spiritual excellence of what God has revealed—is typically associated with matters more directly related to the character of special revelation and the substance of its teaching, it also plays an important role in the Old Princetonians’ understanding of general or natural revelation. Note the larger context of the brief quote that is noted by footnote 54: “It may not be easy, or perhaps possible, to give any adequate exhibition of the nature of this proof [of the divine origin of Scripture] to those who profess not to see it. Enough, however, may be said to show that it is a rational and adequate ground for implicit confidence. Every work bears the impress of its maker. Even among men, it is hard for one man successfully to counterfeit the work of another. Is it wonderful, then, that the works of God should bear the inimitable impress of their Author? Do not the heavens declare his glory? Does not the mechanism of an insect as clearly evince the workmanship of God? Why then should it be deemed incredible that his word should contain inherent evidence of its Divine origin? If the Bible be the work of God, it must contain the impress of his character, and thereby evince itself to be Divine” (Hodge, *The Way of Life*, 14). This is important because it suggests, among other things, that there is a moral aspect to knowing not just “spiritual” truth, but “all” truth, including that truth which is presumed to be merely “natural.” In this regard, see Gardineer Spring, “God Himself the Ultimate End of All Things,” *Biblical Repertory and Theological Review* (1832): 94–115; Joseph M. Atkinson, “Moral Aesthetics; or the Goodness of God in the

If this is the case, then it follows that not only is there an intellectual or cognitive dimension to the knowledge of God and the truth that he has revealed, but there is a moral or ethical—what some might call an aesthetic—dimension as well, and this dimension must be seen and valued and appreciated in order to have objective or “right” knowledge in the fullest sense of the term. Hodge’s articulation of this point with respect to the knowledge of Christ is striking. According to Hodge, “The knowledge of Christ . . . is not the apprehension of what he is, simply by the intellect, but also a due apprehension of his glory as a divine person arrayed in our nature, and involves not as its consequence merely, but as one of its elements, the corresponding feeling of adoration, delight, desire and complacency.”<sup>59</sup>

For the Old Princetonians, then, knowing something “rightly” entails more than just knowing true propositions about something, for knowing “rightly” has to do with an organic or whole-souled capacity to see revealed truth more or less for what it objectively *is*, and since the truth that God has revealed *just is* beautiful and glorious because it *just is* declaring his glory in some sense, then knowing it “rightly” entails seeing it *to be* beautiful and glorious, for that is what it *just is*. If this is the case, and if the Old Princetonians not only embraced a kind of whole-souled, theological aesthetic but did so because they recognized that the world in which we live is imbued with sacramental significance, then we

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Ornaments of the Universe,” *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* (1852): 38–52. See also footnote 66.

59. Charles Hodge, “The Excellency of the Knowledge of Christ Jesus Our Lord,” in *Conference Papers* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1879), 214. For Hodge, it is one thing for the mind to lay hold of what could be called a “naked” biblical proposition. However, it is an altogether different thing for the mind to lay hold of what could be called the spiritual or aesthetic significance of that proposition. While the unregenerate can lay hold of a “naked” biblical proposition and thus can understand it in a certain—though only partial—sense, only the regenerate can lay hold of the spiritual or aesthetic significance of that proposition, and thus only the regenerate have the capacity to see it more or less for what it objectively is, namely glorious. This tension between the partial knowledge of the unregenerate and the fuller, more objective knowledge of the regenerate is captured by Hodge in a number of places, including in his contentious exchange with Edwards Amasa Park, an influential professor at Andover Seminary whose distinction between the theology of the intellect and that of the feelings was grounded in what Hodge regarded as an “undue dis severing of the human faculties” (Charles Hodge, “The Theology of the Intellect and That of the Feelings,” *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 22, 4 [1850]: 660–61). According to Hodge “the scriptures . . . clearly teach that holiness is necessary to the perception of holiness. In other words, [the Scriptures teach] that the things of the Spirit must be spiritually discerned: that the unrenewed have not this discernment, and therefore, they cannot know the things which are freely given to us of God, i.e., the things which he has graciously revealed

ought to remain skeptical of the standard assessment of Old Princeton’s understanding of the theological enterprise, for it ignores the Princetonians’ insistence that more than merely rational or intellectual factors play a critical role in the life of the mind, and in so doing it imagines that they were so naïve that they were oblivious to how destructive embracing the prevailing philosophy of science—which was grounded in the secular pretension that “truth and piety” belong “to . . . different orders of reality which permit no interaction”<sup>60</sup>—would be. But if what I am proposing here and elsewhere has any merit, then it would seem that in the main, the Old Princetonians were simply not guilty of such a crass accommodation, for they not only recognized that the “true” theologian needs to have “a very sensitive religious nature, a most thoroughly consecrated heart, and an outpouring of the Holy Ghost upon him, such as will fill him with that spiritual discernment, without which all native intellect is in vain,”<sup>61</sup> but they also insisted that there is a right way to look at and assess the world in which we live, and that way is inherently theological because it is grounded in the realization that the world in which we live *just is* the theater of God’s glory. As B. B. Warfield—the most thoughtful expositor of Old Princeton’s understanding of the theological enterprise—puts it:

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there are two ways of looking at the world. We may see the world and absorb ourselves in the wonders of nature. That is the scientific way. Or we may look right through the world and see God behind it. That is the religious way. . . . The scientific way of looking at the world

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in this word. They may have that apprehension of them which an uncultivated ear has of complicated musical sounds, or an untutored eye of a work of art. Much of the object is perceived, but much is not discerned, and that which remains unseen, is precisely that which gives to these objects their peculiar excellence and power” (Hodge, “Theology of the Intellect,” 671). In this regard, it is important to note that the Old Princetonians did endorse an Edwarsean notion of the spiritual sense. For example, see Charles Hodge, “Regeneration, and the Manner of Its Occurrence,” *Biblical Repertory and Theological Review* (1830): 267–69, and B. B. Warfield, “Calvin’s Doctrine of the Knowledge of God,” in *Calvin and Calvinism*, vol. 5, *The Works of Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1991; 1931), 32–33. For more on the “moral aesthetics” that distinguish “speculative” knowledge from “spiritual” knowledge, see Atwater, “Classification and Mutual Relation of the Mental Faculties,” 65–66.

60. Herschel Baker, *The Wars of Truth: Studies in the Decay of Christian Humanism in the Earlier Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), 305, 5.

61. B. B. Warfield, “The Idea of Systematic Theology,” in *Studies in Theology*, vol. 9, *The Works of Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1991; 1932), 87.

is not wrong any more than the glass-manufacturer's way of looking at ... [a] window. This way of looking at things has its very important uses. Nevertheless the window was placed there not to be looked at but to be looked through; and the world has failed of its purpose unless it too is looked through and the eye rests not on it but on its God. Yes, its God; for it is of the essence of the religious view of things that God is seen in all that is and in all that occurs. The universe is his, and in all its movements speaks of him, because it does only his will.<sup>62</sup>

#### IV. "RIGHT REASON" AND THE "NORMAL STATE" OF MAN

##### *Reason As It "Should" Exist*

So what are we to make of Old Princeton's emphasis upon "right reason," and how is it related to the

62. B. B. Warfield, "Some Thoughts on Predestination," in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, 2 vols., ed. John E. Meeter (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 2001; 1970, 1973), 1:108, emphasis added. For a comprehensive and compelling analysis of Warfield's understanding of theological science, see David P. Smith, *B. B. Warfield's Scientifically Constructive Theological Scholarship*, Evangelical Theological Society Monograph Series 10 (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011).

63. Cf. Helseth, "Right Reason" and the Princeton Mind.

64. Warfield, "The Idea of Systematic Theology," 87. Warfield insisted that the science of theology is a progressive science because he was persuaded that there is more "light and truth" yet to break forth from God's Word (cf. Warfield, 75–76). However, he also recognized that there is an important difference between "progressive orthodoxy" on the one hand and "retrogressive heterodoxy" (Warfield, 78) on the other, for he was convinced that the construction of theology is not the same thing as the destruction of theology. According to Warfield, the difference between changes that are constructive and changes that are destructive is found in the relationship of the proposed changes to the history of Christian orthodoxy. Whereas theological developments are constructive when the changes are true and build upon doctrines that have been established as true throughout the unfolding process of church history, theological developments are destructive when the changes are not true and jettison the established doctrinal deposit in some sense. What set Warfield's understanding of progress apart from that of his less orthodox contemporaries, then, was his frank acknowledgement of the "increasing limitation" brought about by the history of Christian orthodoxy (Warfield, 79). "The prerequisite of all progress," he argued, "is a clear discrimination which as frankly accepts the limitations set by the truth already discovered, as it rejects the false and bad. Construction is not destruction; neither is it the outcome of destruction. There are abuses no doubt to be reformed; errors to correct; falsehoods to cut away. But the history of progress in every science and no less in theology, is a story of impulses given, corrected, and assimilated. And when they have been once corrected and assimilated, these truths are to remain accepted. It is then time for another impulse, and the condition of all further progress is to place

Princetonians' understanding of theological science? I have argued elsewhere that Old Princeton's emphasis upon "right reason" is not evidence that the Princeton theologians accommodated the assumptions of the Scottish Enlightenment, but, on the contrary, that they stood in the epistemological mainstream of the Reformed tradition.<sup>63</sup> They recognized, in other words, that only the regenerate have the ability to reason "rightly," and for this reason they insisted that the doing of biblically-faithful, "progressively-orthodox" theology requires that the theologian be, as Warfield puts it, "a divine."<sup>64</sup> Support for this claim—and grounds for commending a fresh assessment of Old Princeton's understanding of the theological enterprise—is found in a number of places, including Charles Hodge's lecture notes on theology. In the first file of the first box of the Charles Hodge Manuscript Collection in the Archives of Princeton Seminary, Hodge argues that although grasping the "true relation of reason to revelation" is made difficult by the ambiguity of the word "reason," nevertheless the word "is ... commonly and properly taken for the whole cognitive faculty in man..."<sup>65</sup> While this allusion to the "whole cognitive faculty in man" is certainly relevant to our present purposes because it substantiates the notion that knowing has to do with more than just the mind or intellect alone,<sup>66</sup> what is especially noteworthy about Hodge's discussion is not just his reference to the concept of "right reason," but his rudimentary definition of the phrase. The word "reason" is sometimes used in the study of theology, he argues, to refer to "right reason—i.e., reason as it *should* exist, or as found in the *normal state* of man."<sup>67</sup>

ourselves in this well-marked line of growth" (Warfield, 76–77). Note that while Charles Hodge was not an explicit defender of "progressive orthodoxy" like B. B. Warfield, nevertheless his commitment to the unity of truth and his willingness to acknowledge that even the best theologians are fallible interpreters of God's Word suggest that he was not entirely opposed to the broad outlines of the project. For example, Hodge concedes, "that theologians are not infallible, in the interpretation of Scripture. It may, therefore, happen in the future, as it has in the past, that interpretations of the Bible, long confidently received, must be modified or abandoned, to bring revelation into harmony with what God teaches in his works. This change of view as to the true meaning of the Bible may be a painful trial to the Church, but it does not in the least impair the authority of the Scriptures. They remain infallible; we are merely convicted of having mistaken their meaning" (Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:59).

65. Charles Hodge, "Nature and Sources of Theology," Box 1, File 1:7, in The Charles Hodge Manuscript Collection.

66. Gurney helpfully and correctly notes that, "Hodge's epistemology in regard to both God and nature does take into consideration the moral aspect to examining and weighing facts" (Gurney, "Are the Princetonians Passé?" 186; cf. 186–87).

67. Hodge, "Nature and Sources of Theology," 7, emphasis added.

It goes without saying that whether or not this definition supports or subverts the assessment of Old Princeton I am advancing depends upon what Hodge believed the “normal state of man” to be. Is the “normal state of man” for Hodge man as created, man in his state of original righteousness, man before the fall enjoying union and communion with God in the garden? Or is it man as he presently is, man as fallen, man in his “natural” and depraved condition, man as dead in sin and alienated from God? While Hodge does not answer this question in the lecture to which I have already referred, he makes it clear in another lecture that the “normal state of man” is *not* the state of man in his present condition, but pre-lapsarian man, man as originally created, man “imbued with . . . holy habits or dispositions” so that all of his acts were both holy and good.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, in a sermon on 1 Corinthians 1:21 entitled the “Foolishness of Preaching,” Hodge argues that one of the many truths that the Bible “assumes” and thereby “authenticates” is that “man, by sin, has forfeited his normal relation to God, and that by no resources of his own, nor by any power of the creature, can he be restored to that relation.”<sup>69</sup> If this quotation is at all suggestive of how Hodge conceived of the “normal state of man” then it would appear that he associated “right reason”—or reason “as it should exist”—with a moral state and an attendant epistemological capacity that was lost when Adam fell. If this is the case and it is therefore true that Hodge anticipated Warfield’s insistence that “Man as we know him is not normal man,”<sup>70</sup> then the problem with man in his “natural” or “not-normal” condition is not that he has no mind, nor is it simply that the faculties or powers of his soul are disordered and he habitually follows the dictates of passion rather than the deliverances of “right reason,” as some would argue. Rather, the problem is that he cannot reason “rightly”—he cannot have “any correct knowledge of God or of divine things”—because he is dead in sin and lacks the moral capacity to discern the “excellence” that is “peculiar” to spiritual truth, the excellence that must be perceived in order to have “true knowledge” of divine things.<sup>71</sup> What this suggests, among other things, is that the epistemological—and therefore the scientific—capacity of fallen man has been significantly compromised, for he cannot see clearly not because his mind has been destroyed, nor because one faculty or power of his soul usurps the primacy of another faculty or power of his soul, but because the disposition or inclination or moral character that governs the activity of his whole soul—including the activity of his whole soul in cognition and in the doing of theology—is corrupt. As Hodge puts it,

That which makes us the children of wrath; that which constitutes a necessity for redemption and regeneration; that which makes us the victims of death; [and that which] assigns us our place in the kingdom of darkness, is not a mere law of our nature as to the order in [which] our faculties unfold [or relate to one another].... [Rather, it] is a deeper, darker, more moral evil, something adequate to the effect of excluding us from the fellowship of God and all holy beings, and which needs for its pardon and removal the incarnation of the Son and the almighty power of the Spirit.<sup>72</sup>

*Spiritual Discernment: The “Design and Effect” of Regeneration*

If it is therefore true that those who are dead in sin cannot reason “rightly” because souls that are governed by a corrupt disposition are “blind” to the “things of the Spirit of God,”<sup>73</sup> then how do those who cannot see clearly come to discern the spiritual significance of what they at present can only rationally perceive? The Princetonians insisted that the only hope for those who cannot see clearly is found in the work of Christ as it is applied to their souls by the “inward operation of the Spirit” in regeneration.<sup>74</sup> The “design and effect” of this operation, they argued, is the kind of knowledge that is “synonymous with true religion” because it has to do not with “the mere intellectual apprehension of its object, but such a perception of its nature as implies and secures conformity to the excellence which it beholds.”<sup>75</sup> The theologians at Old Princeton Seminary recognized that just as there are “two elements in divine knowledge”—“The intellectual apprehension of the object, and [the] spiritual discernment of its excellence”<sup>76</sup>—so, too, the work of the Spirit has to do with both the understanding

68. Hodge, “Original Righteousness,” 1.

69. Charles Hodge, “Foolishness of Preaching” (1 Corinthians 1:21), September 27, 1874. Box 21, File 39: 1, in *The Charles Hodge Manuscript Collection*.

70. B. B. Warfield, “Augustine’s Doctrine of Knowledge and Authority,” in *Studies in Tertullian and Augustine*, vol. 4, *The Works of Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1991; 1930), 156. See also Warfield, “Calvin’s Doctrine of the Knowledge of God,” 32.

71. Hodge, “Jesus Christ Whom Thou Hast Sent,” 2, 1.

72. Hodge, “Original Sin,” 13.

73. Hodge, “Jesus Christ Whom Thou Hast Sent,” 2, 1.

74. Hodge, “Jesus Christ Whom Thou Hast Sent,” 1.

75. Hodge, “Jesus Christ Whom Thou Hast Sent,” 3, 4. Note that knowing “rightly” presupposes a kind of correspondence between the knower and the thing known.

76. Hodge, “Jesus Christ Whom Thou Hast Sent,” 1.

and the will. Indeed, in regeneration the Spirit neither changes the essence of the soul, nor operates on one of its faculties or powers to the exclusion of the others. Rather, the Spirit enters the soul “as a new principle of ... life” and changes “that inward immanent disposition, or spiritual state which is back of all voluntary or conscious activity, and which, in the things of God, determines that activity.”<sup>77</sup> For this reason, the Princeton theologians were consistently opposed to any view of regeneration that confines the work of the Spirit to the will or heart “as distinguished from the understanding” for they were persuaded that such views are founded on a number of mistaken assumptions, including:

1. On a mistake as to the ... [use] of the word heart in SS, which often means the whole soul, and not merely the seat of the affections....
2. On a wrong view of the nature of original sin, as though the intellect was unaffected thereby....
3. [On] ... a wrong psychology assuming too great a distinction between the faculties of the soul, which is an indivisible unity, one part of which cannot be depraved or renewed to the exclusion of the other parts. [And]
4. [on a disagreement] ... with the SS account of the matter ... [for] the Bible speaks of illumination, opening the eyes, [and] turning man from darkness to light.<sup>78</sup>

For the Old Princetonians, then, regeneration has to do with that “immediate and instantaneous” change in the nature of the soul that brings the whole soul “from death unto life.”<sup>79</sup> It consists “not in any one act or series of acts, nor in a change in any one faculty of the soul, but in such a change, effected by the Spirit, in the moral state of the whole soul, as to be a permanent foundation of specifically new moral action, i.e., new apprehensions, new affections, desires, purposes, and conduct.”<sup>80</sup> In short, regeneration is that “change of heart” or “opening [of] the eyes of the mind” or renewal

of the soul “after the image of God”<sup>81</sup> that enables those who were once dead in sin to see revealed truth more or less for what it objectively is, for it enables them to see that the substance of what God has revealed is not just propositionally true, but altogether “excellent, lovely and divine.”<sup>82</sup> Charles Hodge’s summary of the doctrine highlights its relevance to Old Princeton’s understanding of “right reason” and points to its significance for the study of theology at Old Princeton Seminary. The doctrine of regeneration, he concludes, teaches: “1. That the subject of this change is the whole man—the understanding, will and heart. 2. That its author is the Holy Spirit. 3. That man being the subject and not the agent of the change, he is passive in it. It is effected without his cooperation. [And] 4. That its effects and evidences are *right* views, *right* feelings, *right* purposes, and *right* conduct.”<sup>83</sup>

#### V. “RIGHT REASON” AND THE SCIENCE OF THEOLOGY AT OLD PRINCETON SEMINARY

##### *The “Peculiar” Qualifications of the Theological Student*

Given this understanding of the relationship between the work of the Spirit and the ability of the regenerated agent to reason “rightly,” what are we to make of the standard assessment of Old Princeton’s understanding of the theological enterprise? As we have seen, the standard assessment of Old Princeton is that the Princeton theologians accommodated the assumptions of the Scottish Enlightenment and in so doing embraced an understanding of the science of theology that was covertly if not overtly rationalistic. According to Darryl Hart, “Most assessments of Princeton have viewed its allegiance to Common Sense as either incompatible with its commitment to Reformed theology or naïve. According to [Sydney] Ahlstrom, the price Princeton paid for aligning itself so closely with Scottish Realism was that it lost its ‘Reformation bearings,’ its Augustinian brand of piety suffered, and the belief that Christianity had a proclamation to declare lost its vitality. [At Old Princeton,] ‘Doctrine became less a living language of piety than a complex burden to be borne.’”<sup>84</sup>

But did the Princeton theologians in fact conceive of the science of theology in a fashion that was covertly if not overtly rationalistic? To put it differently, did the Princetonians really believe that all moral agents have the ability to reason “rightly” and as a consequence did they really presume that outside of their more explicit pastoral endeavors, subjective and experiential

77. Charles Hodge, “Evidences of Regeneration,” Box 24, File 87:3, 1, in The Charles Hodge Manuscript Collection.

78. Charles Hodge, “Regeneration,” Box 2, File 12:10–11, in The Charles Hodge Manuscript Collection.

79. Charles Hodge, “Regeneration,” 13, 1.

80. Charles Hodge, “Regeneration,” 11.

81. Charles Hodge, “Regeneration,” 11.

82. Hodge, “Evidences of Regeneration,” 3. Note that it is this work of the Spirit that enables the regenerated agent to see that the things that God has revealed are “the proper objects of the religious affections” (Hodge, “Jesus Christ Whom Thou Hast Sent,” 1).

83. Hodge, “Regeneration,” 5, emphasis added.

84. Darryl G. Hart, “The Princeton Mind in the Modern World and the Common Sense of J. Gresham Machen,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 46, 1 (Spring 1984): 2.

factors—including those factors that have to do with the work of the Spirit in regeneration—have little if anything to do with the theological labors of the believing theologian? Again, while there is likely some merit to this charge with respect to some who would claim the mantle of the Old Princetonians, a close examination of the primary sources reveals that not only did the Princetonians recognize that the science of theology is a spiritual enterprise requiring a regenerated nature, but it also demonstrates that their preoccupation with inerrant propositions and systematic precision was grounded neither in excessive confidence in the competence of the human intellect, nor in the astonishing conceit that they—and they alone—saw things with unvarnished objectivity. Rather, it was grounded in their recognition that the ability to see and submit to the truth that God has revealed is a God-given capacity that has important consequences, especially for the study of theology. Indeed, such an examination reveals that the Princetonians rejected the false antithesis between inerrant propositions and systematic precision on the one hand and vital religious experience and progressive theological construction on the other, for they recognized that since human beings are whole persons and there is no substantial distinction between the head and the heart, *both* are essential to the production of biblically-faithful, “progressively-orthodox” theology.<sup>85</sup>

That this is the case, and that the Old Princetonians conceived of the science of theology not as a merely rational enterprise but as an enterprise that involves both the head and the heart and is grounded in the regenerating work of the Spirit on the whole soul of a moral agent, is made clear in a number of places, including two unpublished lectures from the mid-nineteenth century that highlight the requirements for “success” in the study of theology. The first was delivered by Charles Hodge in 1847 and is entitled “The Study of Theology.” In this lecture, Hodge insists that two distinct yet interrelated qualifications, both of which are “peculiar” to the faithful student of theology, are essential to the “successful” study of that “class of truths . . . which confessedly transcend our reason, and which are matters of special revelation.”<sup>86</sup> The first, which relates to “the nature of the subject” itself and distinguishes the study of theology from the study of other academic disciplines, has to do with the “state of mind” that should inform the labors of the theological student.<sup>87</sup> “Reverence and humility” are essential to the “successful” study of theology, Hodge contends, because “Knowledge which is a revelation, a matter of gift, rather than of acquisition,

must be received as a gift, or it will be withheld.”<sup>88</sup> What this suggests, among other things, is that in order for the theological student to study “the things of God” with “success” he must place his mind “in the proper posture” and remember that,

There is an essential difference between an independent investigator and a mere learner, between one who undertakes to discern truth for himself, and one who waits to be told what truth is. The latter is our true position in relating to the word of God. If the Scriptures contain an infallible revelation, then our province is not so much to determine whether what it teaches is true, as to ascertain what it does teach, and to receive its instructions as true because they come from God. Every one sees that the inward state of mind proper for the study of a system of truth, which purports to be a matter of revelation, is different from that which is proper in matters of human research or speculation; and consequently that those make a fatal mistake who come to the Bible, with the same spirit in which they open a book on science, history or philosophy. Our Savior, therefore, tells us that no man can see or enter the Kingdom of God, he can have no right apprehensions of its nature, he cannot see the things of God, nor receive or enjoy them, unless he be converted and become as a little child. Nothing prospers, nothing succeeds that is out of its proper relation, and our souls cannot succeed in attaining divine knowledge, unless they are placed in their proper relation to God, the relation suitable for the weakest and lowest of intelligences to the Infinite mind.<sup>89</sup>

In the first place, then, “success” in the study of theology demands that the theological student handle the Word of God with humility, recognizing that there is “an essential difference” between the study of theology and other academic disciplines. He must come to the Scriptures acknowledging, as Hodge puts it elsewhere,

85. For a good example of Old Princeton’s understanding of the symbiotic relationship between the “head” and the “heart,” see B. B. Warfield, “Authority, Intellect, Heart,” in *Shorter Writings*, 2:668–71. On the difference between “progressive orthodoxy” and “retrogressive heterodoxy,” see footnote 64.

86. Charles Hodge, “The Study of Theology,” Box 11, File 5;5, in *The Charles Hodge Manuscript Collection*.

87. Hodge, “The Study of Theology,” 5.

88. Hodge, “The Study of Theology,” 5. Hodge notes that, “Pride and self-confidence bar the inlets of divine knowledge. They effectually close the only avenue through which it gains access to the mind; they destroy, so to speak, the organ of receptivity” (Hodge, 5.).

89. Hodge, “The Study of Theology,” 5–6.

that “the portal to the temple of divine truth is very low and . . . the high headed find it difficult to enter.”<sup>90</sup>

The second qualification that is necessary for “success” in the study of theology is that which accounts for the humility that must inform the labor of the believing theologian and it has to do with the relationship between “our own moral condition” and the Apostle Paul’s contention that “the natural man cannot receive the things of the Spirit of God.”<sup>91</sup> According to Hodge,

The sincere and practical recognition of this truth is essential to the successful study of theology. If a man comes to the SS either ignorant or unmindful of the darkness of his own mind, and of the natural opposition of the unrenewed heart to the things of God, or who is unconscious of the necessity of divine teaching, *he comes without the key of knowledge*. The Bible is, and will remain to him a closed book . . . [for] He does not take into account facts due allowance for which is essential to success. These are not mere commonplaces; they are real and important truths; truths which have their foundation deep in the very nature of things and in the nature of God. They can not be overlooked or denied with impunity. If it is true that the mind is perverted and darkened by sin, [and] if it is true that the teaching of the Spirit is indispensable in order to produce that

state of mind which [is] necessary to the perception and reception of the things of God, then to be unmindful of these truths, or to make them of no practical account in our religious studies, is the most fatal of all mistakes. It is not, therefore, merely a matter of pious duty, becoming and seemly, but it is of the nature of an indispensable qualification, that we should know and feel that the things of God, are things which he hides from the wise and prudent, and reveals only unto babes. They are things which escape the knowledge of those who think they have no need of divine teaching, but which are disclosed in their truth and beauty to those whose constant prayer is, *Open Thou my eyes that I may see wondrous things out of Thy law.*<sup>92</sup>

In short, what this lecture suggests is that for Hodge, in order to be “successful” in the study of theology the theological student must not only receive what God has revealed with humility, but he must recognize that he has the subjective capacity to do so *only* because he has been given eyes to see by the Spirit of God. It seems, therefore, that subjective and experiential factors—far from having little if anything to do with Hodge’s understanding of the task of theology—in fact are essential to his conception of theological science.

#### *Common Sense and the “Rationalistic Spirit” of the Age*

90. Hodge, “Foolishness of Preaching,” 16. In his comments at the Semi-Centennial Commemoration of his Professorship, Hodge claimed that “Princeton Seminary is what it is, and what, I trust it will ever continue to be, because Archibald Alexander and Samuel Miller were what they were. . . . Their controlling influence is not to be referred so much to their learning, or to their superior abilities, as to their character and principles” (*Proceedings Connected with the Semi-Centennial Commemoration of the Professorship of Rev. Charles Hodge, D.D. LL.D in the Theological Seminary at Princeton, N.J., April 24, 1872* [New York: Anson, D. F. Randolph and Company], 50). Two years later, in a sermon on 1 Corinthians 1:21, Hodge spoke of the character and principles of Alexander and Miller in glowing terms, insisting that it was their humility that informed their “firm and simple faith in the Sacred Scriptures and in the system of doctrine contained in the Standards of our Church” (“Foolishness of Preaching,” 15). Note that for Hodge, it was the “simple faith” of Alexander and Miller that accounts for what he called in his Semi-Centennial comments their “very simple” theological method (*Proceedings Connected with the Semi-Centennial Commemoration of the Professorship of Rev. Charles Hodge*, 52). For an attempt to wrestle with some of the questions associated with this “very simple” method, see Helseth, “*Right Reason and the Princeton Mind*,” Part 2.

91. Hodge, “The Study of Theology,” 5, 6.

92. Hodge, “The Study of Theology,” 6–7, emphasis added.

93. Archibald Alexander, Introductory Lecture, “Humility As an Essential Requisite for the Successful Study of Theology” (June 1840), Box 29, File 6:2, in *The Archibald Alexander Manuscript Collection*.

94. Alexander, Introductory Lecture, 3, cf. 4–5.

95. Alexander, Introductory Lecture, 5.

The second lecture that not only highlights what is necessary for theological “success” but challenges the standard assessment of Old Princeton’s understanding of the theological enterprise was delivered by Archibald Alexander in June of 1840 and is one of the seventeen “Introductory Lectures” that he delivered during his tenure at Princeton Seminary. In this lecture, echoes of which reverberate throughout the lecture by Hodge that we just considered, Alexander argues that, “humility is the proper state of mind with which we should approach the study of theology; and the most indispensable requisite for our success.”<sup>93</sup> But why is humility necessary? According to Alexander, it is necessary for four reasons. First, it is necessary because of the nature of the subject matter itself. “If theology is the study of God” and of his revelation, Alexander asks, “can anything be plainer than that the most profound humility is absolutely essential in the theologian; that he should feel that he can know absolutely nothing of the august being whose nature and ways he presumes to study beyond what is told him?”<sup>94</sup> Second, a “humble frame of mind” is necessary because of the theologian’s “own character both as a creature and as a sinner.”<sup>95</sup> Not only

is man “the lowest of the rational creation,” Alexander argues, but even at his best he remains “in a state of darkness.”<sup>96</sup> Indeed, “this state of moral corruption and consequent blindness, which seals the eyes of the unrenewed, and obscures the vision *even of the sons of God*, affords sufficient reason why we should approach the study of theology with great humility.... Truth itself is holy, and whatever opposition we have to holiness we have to truth.”<sup>97</sup> Third, humility “is the proper state of mind for the theological student” not only because the things of God “cannot be known but as they are revealed,” but more importantly because the substance of this revelation will be “misapprehended, perverted or rejected unless its meaning, truth and glory be unfolded by the Spirit of God.”<sup>98</sup> According to Alexander, “The true theologian ... not only bows down before God as he speaks to him in his word; but feels his need of divine teaching to reveal to him the truth, import and excellent (*sic*) of the things therein contain[ed].”<sup>99</sup> Finally, humility is necessary for the simple reason that “wisdom is a gift.”<sup>100</sup> “We are children...,” Alexander states matter of factly, and “if we refuse to acknowledge our true character; and submit to be taught of God, we shall be left to our own folly.”<sup>101</sup>

While this lecture covers much of the same territory that Hodge covers in his lecture on “The Study of Theology,” what is striking about Alexander’s presentation—and the reason it suggests that a fresh assessment of Old Princeton’s understanding of the theological enterprise is in order—is the unambiguous manner in which he sets the “true theologian’s” posture of humble receptivity<sup>102</sup>—which is grounded in the work of the Spirit on the whole soul of a moral agent—in opposition to what *he* regards as the rationalist’s confidence in “common sense.”<sup>103</sup> In his attempt to establish that the theological student should regard himself as “a mere recipient” and not as an independent investigator of that which comes to him “from a higher source,” Alexander argues that the student of theology should recognize that his “proper position” is like “that of a child to whom his parent makes known the truth, and who receives it not because he has tested it, or proved it, but because he has been told it...”<sup>104</sup> Just as the child should not challenge the authority of the parent by presuming to stand in judgment over what the parent says, so too the theological student should not challenge the authority of God by presuming to stand in judgment over his Word, imagining that *he* and not God is the final arbiter of what is true, good, and beautiful. While commending such a posture is not all that

unusual for a Reformed theologian with what some would call a “high” view of Scripture, what is striking—particularly to those who are familiar with the standard assessment of Old Princeton in the historiography of North American Evangelicalism—is Alexander’s insistence that relying upon “common sense” fosters a kind of rationalism that usurps the authority of God, and it does so by encouraging the theological student to engage in the study of theology not by “bow[ing] down before God as he speaks to him in his Word,” but by relying “on his own understanding, giving more confidence to common sense and human reason than to the declarations of God,” thus requiring that the declarations of God “bend and square to ... [the declarations] of men...”<sup>105</sup>

For those who are familiar with the standard take on Old Princeton, this stance towards “common sense” is nothing if not noteworthy, for it lends credence to the notion that in the main, Alexander and his colleagues

96. Alexander, Introductory Lecture, 5, 6.

97. Alexander, Introductory Lecture, 6–7, emphasis added.

98. Alexander, Introductory Lecture, 7, 8, 9.

99. Alexander, Introductory Lecture, 10.

100. Alexander, Introductory Lecture, 10.

101. Alexander, Introductory Lecture, 11.

102. Alexander, Introductory Lecture, 10.

103. Note that I emphasize the pronoun “he” because Alexander was clearly aware that an overemphasis on “common sense” does in fact betray a form of rationalism that is antithetical not just to commitments that are classically Reformed, but to the “successful” study of theology more generally. According to Alexander, “The loud talk that we hear of the march of mind, of common sense, of the light of the 19th century, of new discoveries and progressive improvement in theology, all show how many are in the wrong path. This language is but the varied expression of confidence in human nature, of forgetfulness of our true relation to God, and of our real character both as creatures and as sinners. If it was but the renunciation of dependence on human authority it would be harmless or praiseworthy; but it is obviously, in most cases, the assertion of self dependence (*sic*). It is the vaunting of common sense, or human reason, as the instructor of men and the arbiter of truth. Humility is not noisy; it vaunteth not itself, and doth not behave itself unseemly” (Alexander, Introductory Lecture, 11–12).

104. Alexander, Introductory Lecture, 7–8. Note that such a posture does not rule out the serious study of Scripture. However, it does speak to what should take methodological priority in the study of theology. According to Alexander, “The man ... who addresses himself to the study of theology as a philosopher, who discards the Bible either entirely, or until he has first wrought out that system which every man is said to have in the constitution of his own nature, has entered on a path which will infallibly lead him into error; and the further he pursues it, the further will it lead him from God and righteousness. It matters little whether this [is] done on principle and of design, or whether it is the unobserved state of the students (*sic*) mind the result is [the] same” (Alexander, Introductory Lecture, 8).

105. Alexander, Introductory Lecture, 10, 8.

at Old Princeton—far from being committed “common sense” rationalists themselves—were themselves explicitly *opposed* to an understanding of the theological enterprise that is grounded not in the work of the Spirit, but in the exaltation of “common sense.” Indeed, they recognized—admittedly with notable and curious exceptions—that childlike dependence upon God and confidence in “common sense” are mutually exclusive, and for this reason they insisted that the “cure” to the “rationalistic spirit” of the age in which they lived is not found in “a blind reliance on traditional theology,” nor is it found in an “assertion of self dependence (*sic*)” or in any kind of “dependence on Human Authority.”<sup>106</sup> Rather, the “antidote” to the kind of rationalism that is grounded in “the vaunting of common sense . . . as the instructor of men and the arbiter of truth” is found in that “rightness” of spirit that only the Spirit of God can produce, for it “requires that form of self renunciation (*sic*) which to most men is the more painful than any other.”<sup>107</sup> As Alexander makes clear towards the end of his lecture,

Your success . . . in the study of theology depends mainly upon the state of mind in which you prosecute your pursuits. If either a secret or obvious pride of understanding lurk in your hearts; if you are insensible to the inconceivable greatness and mystery of the subjects to which you are called to attend, or unmindful of the weakness of your powers, or of the natural blindness of your minds; if forgetful of your need of divine teaching, you will be either nothing or errorists. You will either sink into indifferent and slothful disregard of truth, and retail what you know only as a parrot knows language; or you will be left to demonstrate the truth of the divine declaration that he who trusts to his own understanding is a fool.<sup>108</sup>

For Alexander and his colleagues at Old Princeton, then, the key to “success” in the study of theology—and the only hope for the construction of theology that is, as Warfield puts it, “progressively orthodox” rather than “retrogressively heterodox”<sup>109</sup>—is found

in that spirit which is “a rare and difficult attainment” because it is grounded not in common sense, as the consensus of critical opinion would have us believe, but in the work of the Spirit on the whole soul of a moral agent.<sup>110</sup> This spirit is “the very opposite of self confidence on the one hand, and of subserviency on the other,” for it is

a spirit of profound humility before God, of sincere consciousness of our ignorance, weakness and blindness, [and it entails an awareness] of our need of divine teaching; [it is] a spirit which springs from a desire of knowledge and a right apprehension of the only method in which it can be attained; which animates to constant search and constant prayer, which is ready to believe whatever God is pleased to reveal and simply because he has revealed it.<sup>111</sup>

#### VI. CONCLUSION: A REVOLUTION IN OLD PRINCETON STUDIES?

Professor Alan Strange has recently argued that a “revolution” is currently underway in the academic study of Old Princeton.<sup>112</sup> Indeed, scholars such as Strange are challenging the accepted wisdom on Old Princeton, and they are doing so by returning to the primary sources of the Old Princetonians themselves. In my estimation this is a good thing; the Princeton theologians have become the proverbial whipping boys of much contemporary theological discourse, and not only does the historical record stand in need of correction, but the insights of the Old Princetonians need to be recovered and applied in our day. For whatever it is worth, I hope this revolution is successful. I pray, however, that those of us who are eager to participate in this revolution, and who are jealous for the names and reputations of the Old Princetonians, would not be more jealous for the names and reputations of the Old Princetonians than we are for the name and reputation of the God of the Old Princetonians. That is certainly a danger for those who—particularly in their less guarded moments—imagine themselves to be the last standing defenders of an embattled tradition. Lord, let that not be true of any who read this essay. Please, Lord, let that not be true of me. ■

106. Alexander, Introductory Lecture, 12.

107. Alexander, Introductory Lecture, 12, 11.

108. Alexander, Introductory Lecture, 11.

109. On the difference between “progressive orthodoxy” and “retrogressive heterodoxy,” see footnote 64.

110. Alexander, Introductory Lecture, 11.

111. Alexander, Introductory Lecture, 12–13.

112. Alan D. Strange, Foreword to *B. B. Warfield’s Scientifically Constructive Theological Scholarship*, by David P. Smith, ix.