

Some Personal Thoughts on B. B. Warfield's Life and Significance: A Lecture

By Carl R. Trueman

INTRODUCTION

The topic of this paper is to speak somewhat on Benjamin B. Warfield. I want to spend the second half of the lecture focusing on a particular aspect of his theology, but for the first part I want to give a brief overview and personal reflection on his life.

I personally first came across the name Warfield having been converted from a non-Christian background in my teens. I was given numerous books to read, and one of the books that I came across fairly early on was the first volume of the biography of Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones by Iain Murray. Iain Murray refers there to Lloyd-Jones being influenced at a particular turning point in his ministry by reading two men. One of them was P. T. Forsyth, the great Scottish theologian, a graduate of my own *alma mater*, the University of Aberdeen, and a distinguished congregational theologian. It was his book, *The Cruciality of the Cross*, that apparently changed Lloyd-Jones' preaching from that which focused on regeneration to that which focused upon the watershed nature of the cross of Christ. The other person was B. B. Warfield.¹ I had never heard of Warfield and, as there was no internet in those days, I had to look him up in *Books in Print*, the great big book kept at the public library which listed all the books that were then available in print. To my delight, I found that certain volumes by this man Warfield were still published by the Banner of Truth Trust. I obtained these volumes and a whole new world of thoughtful theology was opened to me. I suspect I am not the first person to have had his thinking changed in such a significant manner by exposure to the man who was undoubtedly the finest mind of the old Princeton tradition.

WARFIELD'S LIFE

So who was B. B. Warfield? He was born November the

fifth, 1851, near Lexington, Kentucky. He was a scion of two great families, the Breckenridges and the Warfields. The Breckenridges were a distinguished family, and it is noteworthy that the Warfields, too, have an interesting history. Indeed, one piece of fascinating trivia is the fact that Mrs. Simpson, who was the American divorcee who married Edward VIII and precipitated probably the most significant constitutional crisis in 20th century English history, was a distant cousin of B. B. Warfield.

As well as being the scion of two distinguished families, Warfield also grew up in a household of considerable piety. The Warfields were members of Lexington's Second Presbyterian Church. I hesitate to say this here in a Southern context, but this congregation was the only one of the Presbyterian churches in the area to affiliate with the Northern Presbyterians during the Civil War or, if you prefer, the War of Northern Aggression or the War between the States.

The piety of the household was very much shaped by the study of the Catechism. In the Warfield household it was typical that the Shorter Catechism was to be memorized by the age of six. Then the children were expected to memorize the proof texts and then they moved on to the Larger Catechism. It is a reminder to us all, of course, the Shorter Catechism was really designed for those who were, we might say, educationally less able, and that it was intended originally that the Larger Catechism would really be the norm within the Church.

Later in life Warfield reflected on the importance of his early experience of catechesis, and one of my favorite Warfield quotations comes from his short essay, "Is the Shorter Catechism Worthwhile?" You will find

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1. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *The First Forty Years* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), 286–87.

it in the first volume of the *Selected Shorter Writings of B. B. Warfield*.

What is the indelible mark of the Shorter Catechism? We have the following bits of personal experience from a general officer of the United States army. He was in a great western city at the time of intense excitement and violent rioting. The streets were overrun daily by a dangerous crowd. One day he observed approaching him a man of singularly combined calmness and firmness of demeanor whose very look inspired confidence. So impressed was he with this bearing amid the surrounding uproar that when he had passed he turned to look back at him only to find that the stranger had done the same. On observing his turning, the stranger at once came back to him and touching his chest with his forefinger demanded without preface, 'What is the chief end of man?' On receiving the countersign, 'Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever,' 'Ah,' he said, 'I knew you were a Shorter Catechism boy by your looks.' 'Why, that was just what I was thinking of you,' was the rejoinder.²

And Warfield's laconic postscript to that story is, "It is worthwhile to be a Shorter Catechism boy. They grow to be men. And better than that, they are exceedingly apt to grow to be men of God."

B. B. Warfield was not initially a particularly enthusiastic student of divinity. As a youngster, he was far more interested in the sciences. He entered the College of New Jersey, now Princeton University, in the autumn of 1868. We don't know much about his time there except that he was disciplined at one point for being involved in a fist fight on a Sunday afternoon. He excelled at college, particularly in the areas of mathematics and sciences.

In 1862 he was to spend time studying in Edinburgh and Heidelberg. Then, in 1873, he decided to enter the ministry. It was about this time that he had his first experience of being an editor and a writer; not, however, for any theological journal, but rather for the *Farmer's*

Home Journal. He had a very great interest in agriculture, particularly in cattle breeding, and this both reflects and connects to his interest and ongoing interest in science.

After entering Princeton Seminary he studied under men such as Charles Hodge and Casper Wistar Hodge. These men had a profound effect, both personally and intellectually, upon him. Warfield's comment on Charles Hodge was, "I have sat under many noted teachers and Hodge was superior to them all. He was, in fact, my ideal of a teacher, best of all men I have ever known. He knew how to make a young man think."

Warfield was licensed to preach May, 1875, and was then for a time stated supply at the Concord Church in Nicholas County, Kentucky. He graduated in 1876, declining round about that time a call to become minister of First Presbyterian Church in Dayton, Ohio.

On August 3 of that year, 1876, he married the very beautiful, witty and charming Annie Kinkead, and then went to Europe to pursue further study. Here he heard lectures from, among others, the great German liberal Church historian Adolf von Harnack.

Now, Warfield's marriage is an area of some mystery. I will summarize for you what David Calhoun says in volume II of his history of Princeton. Calhoun says that while on honeymoon, Annie had suffered a nervous breakdown when she and her husband were caught in a thunderstorm in Germany's Harz Mountains. She never recovered. Through all the years of their married life Dr. Warfield carefully and faithfully cared for his invalid wife.³

In the biographical chapter of his summary of Warfield's theology, Fred Zaspel notes:

Annie is often reported to have been an invalid their entire married life. But it does not seem that this degree of debilitation came until perhaps 1893. A notice in the *New York Times* dated May the first, 1892 notes that Mrs. Warfield, Mrs. Woodrow Wilson and other prominent ladies of Princeton served as patronesses at a lecture event sponsored by the American Whig Society in Princeton on April the 30th.⁴

Thus, in 1892 his wife is clearly not a house bound wreck, which would be the implications of what Calhoun says. I am thus inclined to think that whatever happened on honeymoon (if, indeed, anything did happen on the honeymoon) this reference in the newspaper is really quite significant for understanding the level of debilitation this lady must have had. It cannot have been quite as catastrophic – at least as late as 1892 – as is traditionally claimed.⁵ Nevertheless, her illness probably

2. From "Is the Shorter Catechism Worth While?" in *Benjamin B. Warfield: Selected Shorter Writings*, 2 vols., ed. John E. Meeter (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970, 1973), I, 381–84.

3. David B. Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994, 1996), II, 315–16. This is an interesting story but the problem is that there does not seem to be any contemporary evidence that confirms it. Calhoun does not, as far as I can see, cite any primary source. I have also talked to Fred Zaspel about this and he offers another read on the situation.

4. Fred G. Zaspel, *The Theology of B. B. Warfield* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 29–31.

5. As an aside, it is also surely fascinating that in the late 1890s

became severe from 1893 and we certainly know that B. B. Warfield was devoted to her and spent a lot of time caring for her.⁶

What a sermon illustration is Warfield's care for his wife. The care that he showed to this lady, who for at least in the mid 1890s was increasingly crippled, was quite remarkable; and one can obviously draw an analogy, as Paul does, of course, between human marriage such as that of the Warfields, and the love that Christ has for the Church. What a beautiful sign of Christ's love for the Church was Warfield's love for his wife, and how much greater, of course, is Christ's love for his Church.

When Annie died in 1915, it was as if Warfield himself had died with her. J. Gresham Machen wrote to his mother at that time, "I think that he will feel dreadfully lost without her. As Mrs. Armstrong said, 'He had only two interests in life, his work and Mrs. Warfield.' And now she is gone there may be danger of his using himself up rather quickly. If so, I do not know who is to take his place. I am more and more impressed with him. He is certainly one of the very biggest men in the Church either in this country or in any other."⁷

One further important impact, which the marriage had on Warfield's life, is that it meant that he did not have a conventional ecclesiastical or academic career. His wife's incapacity meant that he was clearly geographically restricted to Princeton for much of the time. I have also often wondered if the brevity and occasional nature of his writing—the fact that he did not produce any massive monograph—was also a function of the fact that he was not able to get the unbroken time for study and research that academic theologians typically need to produce that kind of work.

This also touches on another area: that of Warfield's biography. I am supposed to be writing a B. B. Warfield biography in the P&R series. One of the problems that one faces writing on a character like Warfield is that his life in the detail is actually rather boring. Put simply, he did not actually *do* very much. He was not like Hodge and Thornwell, slugging it out on the floor of the General Assembly. The excitement in Warfield's life was the excitement within his mind. His public life was not the stuff of which great biographies are made.

In this, he reminds me in some ways—maybe in only this way!—of Immanuel Kant.

If any of you know the life story of Immanuel Kant, who effectively turned western thinking on its head, Kant had a very boring daily routine. He just went from his house to where he worked each day. He went at exactly the same time each day. One day when his clock broke down and he was running late the whole town

of Königsberg was supposed to be running late because everybody set their clock by him. So Kant did nothing, was boring, routine and bookish; and yet he changed the whole way that people think. Warfield's life is very similar. It was not a life full of action other than the action that takes place in the brain here and on the written page. Yet, like Kant, he was no less significant for all that.

To return to our story: while Warfield was in Europe, Western Seminary (now Pittsburgh Theological Seminary) contacted him to offer him the Old Testament position. He turned this down as New Testament had now become his great love. Western approached him again in 1878, this time for a position in New Testament, while he was supplying at First Presbyterian Church of Baltimore. This time he accepted and took up the post in September, 1878.

His time as Professor of New Testament was not without significant fruit. Indeed, in 1886 he became the first American to publish a textbook on New Testament criticism. It grew out of an article published in the *Princeton Review* discussing Westcott and Hort's Greek New Testament, which had been published in 1881. This article so impressed the Mercersburg theologian, Philip Schaff, that he invited Warfield to write on this topic for his own compendium to the Greek testament and the English version.

Warfield's attitude to text criticism is interesting. With typical late nineteenth century optimism, he was convinced that text criticism would allow for a production of a text closer to the original autographs. Thus, his interest in text criticism is not something that stands in opposition to his understanding of inspiration. In Warfield's mind, proper text criticism could only take you closer to the original autographs.

Here is his thinking in his own words:

Princeton theologians were considered the social equals of the wife of president of Princeton and, of course, of the future president of the United States.

6. I had the privilege of taking some Westminster alumni to the cemetery in Princeton. I am guessing that the random pedestrians in the area must have thought we were mad, running from grave to grave with some manic English guy giving these little lectures at each one. But it is very moving to stand at the grave of B. B. Warfield. He is buried next to his wife, the two of them lying beneath a magnificent pair of marble tombstones. It is truly touching to stand there and reflect upon how devoted he was to her. It is quite a contrast to our era where marriage has become such a throwaway thing. Indeed, we flatter ourselves if we think gay marriage is destroying marriage in the West. Marriage was destroyed a long time ago with the advent of no-fault easy divorce. What we are seeing now is the final unraveling of a process that started some time back.

7. David B. Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary. Volume 2: The Majestic Testimony 1869-1929* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1996), 316.

If then we undertake the textual criticism of the New Testament under a sense of duty we may bring it to a conclusion under the inspiration of hope. The autographic text of the New Testament is distinctly within the reach of criticism and so immensely the great part of the volume that we cannot despair restoring to ourselves and the Church of God, his book, word for word, as he gave it by inspiration to men (*An Introduction to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament* (1887) 14–15).

One has to say, of course, Warfield is a man of his time and there is a certain naïveté, a certain optimistic confidence, which marks late 19th century thought, particularly in Britain and America, though not so much perhaps that of the European continent. In retrospect, his confidence in text criticism seems misplaced at best.

In this year (1886) he was offered the position which he would occupy for the rest of his life and where he would do his most significant work: the Chair of Didactic and Polemic Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, the position previously occupied by Charles Hodge and unexpectedly vacated by the premature death of Charles Hodge's successor, his son A. A. Hodge.

All did not greet Warfield's move from New Testament to systematic theology with unalloyed joy. Indeed, it was a very great disappointment to no less a figure than the British scholar William Robertson Nicoll for whom he had agreed to provide a volume for his *Expositor's Bible* series. Nicoll writes to Warfield and says,

Permit me, first of all, to congratulate you on your new position. I do not know if I can do so with unmixed feelings. You will no doubt do a great work in Princeton for us all, but I grudge very much that you should be taken away from the study of the New Testament. I do not release you from the *Expositor's Bible*, though you be a professor of dogmatic theology. You owe this debt to the position you have forsaken (Zaspel, 31).

Warfield himself saw the move to Princeton as the greatest privilege and perhaps professionally the greatest moment in his life. Ethelbert, his brother wrote after B. B. Warfield's death,

He venerated as only a pure and unselfish spirit can the great men and hallowed memories that should make Princeton one of the most notable seats of theological scholarship. His reverence for those who taught him was equaled by his admiration of his colleagues and the love which he delighted to express for those who had taught him was constantly reproduced in his affection

for his younger colleagues and the successive classes of students who thronged his classroom (*Works*, 1.v–ix).

On a personal note, I must say one of the most attractive things about many of the early Princeton professors is that they come across as very delightful human beings. Charles Hodge, for example, gave his children easy and open access to his study. The children had easy and constant access to their father. Now, the Warfields never had children, presumably because of Annie's health issues. But it is said that they always remembered the birthdays of the children of the students who were at the seminary and would always provide gifts for the students' children. About such actions there is a beautiful, delightful humanity. These men were not stuffy and distant. They were emotionally engaged with their wives, their families and the students for whom they had care.

For the rest of his career, Warfield would be based at Princeton and his life would revolve professionally around his study and the classroom. In addition to his colleagues and students, he also had many correspondents over the years, including William Robertson Nicoll, John Broadus, Charles Briggs, Thayer, Kellogg, G. F. Wright, Herman Bavinck and Abraham Kuyper. He was also the recipient of academic honors from other institutions. He received the D.D. and the Doctors of Laws from the College of New Jersey in 1880 and 1892 respectively. He also received an honorary doctorate from Lafayette College and the University of Utrecht. Interestingly enough, Utrecht took the then unprecedented step of awarding his doctorate *in absentia*, due to his inability to travel from Princeton because of his family circumstances.

Death, when it came, came quite suddenly. His final illness started on December 24th, 1920 when he collapsed while walking to see his colleague, Geerhardus Vos, who was one of his closest friends on the seminary faculty. After some weeks of rest, he returned briefly to the classroom the following February, but then, on February the 16th, having taught his class, he went home alone to his house and suffered a fatal heart attack.

As an interesting postscript to his final days, I have by circuitous routes become the fortunate owner of what might well be the very last letter that B. B. Warfield ever wrote, dated December the 21st, 1920. It came into my possession because it was written to Professor Mackay at Free Church College in Edinburgh. Mackay's papers came into the possession of the session clerk of the church in Aberdeen where I served on session before coming to Westminster. As a going away gift they gave me this last letter that Warfield ever wrote.

The letter is interesting because it gives insight into what Warfield was planning as the next phase of his writing career. In it, he tells Mackay that he intends to spend his entire Christmas reading material on Perfectionism in order to re-engage this particular battle once again. He mentions that he spent some weeks reading the *Keswick Week*, which he describes in the letter as a 'waste and desolation' and that this is necessary research for the last phase of his critique of Perfectionism. His ire is clearly up and he even refers to his old enemy John Humphrey Noyes as 'that dreadful man.'

I have often wondered if given the obvious state of his heart at this point, reading all this Perfectionist literature was a great thing to be doing at the end of December in 1920. Could it be that it was the strain put on his heart by getting angry about these Perfectionists that did him no favors in the days to come? Whatever the case, his death robbed the church of an articulate spokesman for Reformed Orthodoxy and, in a sense, marked the death of old Princeton itself.

WARFIELD'S CONTRIBUTION

The most obvious area of Warfield's contribution is to the doctrine of Scripture. Indeed, his famous article that he co-wrote with A. A. Hodge on inspiration was and remains foundational for conservative and evangelical discussions. Love it or hate it, it is a little bit like Augustine's discussion of predestination. Whether one is an Augustinian or not, Augustine sets the agenda of all future debate on the matter and all future theologians must either agree with him, reject him, or critically appropriate him. In a similar fashion, Warfield and Hodge set the terms of debate for discussions of evangelical and Reformed understandings of the doctrine of Scripture.

A second area of major contribution is his work on Perfectionism. This was, of course, originally a series of articles though these are often bound together today as self-standing volumes. In these articles, B. B. Warfield makes important connections between Mysticism and Rationalism and also highlights how there is tendency always to reduce Christianity to Pragmatism.

A third area of significance is his thinking on subscription and confessional revision. Warfield had opposed the founding of the journal, *The Presbyterian Review*, while he was at Western. The journal had been designed to diffuse growing tensions within the Presbyterian Church and was to have two editors, one from the right of the church, one might say, and one from the left. When Francis Landy Patton resigned as editor in 1888, B. B. Warfield found himself appointed to the position as

the conservative voice. His editorial colleague and voice of the left was his long-term nemesis, Charles Briggs.

It is not surprising that this was a problematic relationship and, indeed, Warfield's editorship lasted only a little over year. Tensions with Briggs led to them both resigning and the eventual discontinuation of the journal.

The names Warfield and Briggs symbolize perhaps, as no others, the growing tensions within American Presbyterianism over confessional subscription at the end of the nineteenth century. For Warfield's attitude, the following words from his first inaugural at Western are significant:

I wish to declare that I sign these standards not as a necessary form which must be submitted to, but gladly and willingly as the expression of a personal and cherished conviction and further that the system taught in these symbols is the system which will be drawn out of the Scriptures in the prosecution of the teaching to which you have called me. Not, indeed, because commencing with that system the Scriptures can be made to teach it, but because commencing with the Scriptures I cannot make them teach anything else.

It strikes me that behind this statement of Warfield there is an interesting point that often is not discussed when it comes to confessional subscription. There is a sense in which one can subscribe with integrity and yet still have an attitude that amounts effectively to 'OK, I have subscribed, now what can I get away with?' or one can subscribe with the attitude that Warfield had here. The difference between these two attitudes can actually be absolutely critical to the health of the church and her ministry, and yet it is hard to articulate how one would get at that particular issue.

Warfield was opposed to the movement of the late 1880s and early 1890s for revision, but it is important to note that this was not because he was principally against any revising of the Standards. Rather, it was because the proposed revisions and the motivation for the revisions seemed to involve a weakening of theology and of subscription.

Five important essays in *The Presbyterian Review* laid out his position,⁸ and these are instructive and well worth reading. In the final essay he says this:

8. [Eds. Only the first and fourth pieces appeared in *The Presbyterian Review* (PR). I. "The Revision of the Westminster Confession of Faith," PR, Volume 10, No. 40 (1889): 529-552. II. "What Is the 'Confession of Faith?'" *The Presbyterian Banner* (September 4, 1889). III. "Does the Confession Need Revision?" *Herald and Presbyter* (August 21, August 28, and

The chief reason why I am personally opposed to revision of the Confession of Faith is because I believe its doctrine to be the truth of God and because I believe its formal statements about doctrine to be at once exact and catholic, broad enough to include all soundly Calvinistic thinking and precise enough to exclude all tampering with the Calvinistic truth. I am confirmed in my conviction that the Confession closed the true doctrine in admirably chosen language by the straits and inconsistencies to which those are driven who are trying to point out passages in it which need revision.⁹

A fourth area where Warfield made great contributions (and where he is comparatively neglected) is that of the definition of biblical terms. For a few years, I had the privilege of serving in the faculty at the University of Aberdeen and the head of department was Howard Marshall. Howard is an Arminian Methodist theologian of a conservative evangelical stripe, but certainly no friend of Warfield's view of Scripture. Yet I remember asking him what he thought of Warfield and he said, "Oh, I have no time for his stuff on inspiration, but the essays on the definitions of biblical terms," he said, "they are still worth reading today." So his dictionary articles on biblical terms apparently still have much that is of use.

Another significant contribution is his essay on the emotional life of Christ. This is a very important essay and pretty much unprecedented, certainly in conservative circles. It is a masterpiece and, for theologians and preachers alike, is full of significant insights. If you have not read that, I would recommend it to you.

One genre of Warfield's work which is very much neglected and yet which contains some of his sharpest thinking are his book reviews. For Warfield, the genre of the book review became an opportunity for an exploration of key theological issues that were around at the time. Of course, Warfield's learning is quite obvious and remarkable in these. He is quite comfortable reviewing books in numerous different languages and is clearly very familiar with the breadth of European theological thought in the late nineteenth century.

It is in these book reviews that one actually finds some of the most penetrating and, on occasion, prophetic

September 4, 1889). IV. "The Presbyterian Churches and the Westminster Confession," *PR*, volume 10, No. 40 (1889): 646–657. (retitled *The Presbyterian World and the Westminster Confession*). V. "Confessional Subscription and Revision," *The Presbyterian Banner* (November 13, 1889). Warfield collected and freely revised the pieces and published them as *On the Revision of the Confession of Faith* (New York: Anson D.F. Randolph, 1890).

9. Opening paragraph, "Confessional Subscription and Revision," *The Presbyterian Banner* (November 13, 1889).

insights into the nature of Christian Liberalism. So I would recommend that you spend some time reading the volumes of his reviews in the Oxford University Press edition of his works (now reprinted by Baker).

WARFIELD, CHRISTIANITY AND LIBERALISM

In this final section I want to reflect in more depth on Warfield's critique of Christian liberalism.

First, it is worth clarifying exactly what is meant by the term 'Christian liberalism.' This is most famously associated with the works of Friedrich Schleiermacher whose dates were 1768 to 1834. Schleiermacher lived at a time when Christianity was struggling to be plausible in the wider culture. This plausibility problem really existed on two fronts. First, there was *epistemological plausibility*, which had to face questions such as these: How could it be that the Bible, a particular historical phenomenon, had perennial significance? How could it be that the particular, limited, historically-bounded life of Christ had perennial significance? How could we today even gain access to stable knowledge of the life of Christ?

Second, there was the issue of *ethical plausibility*. Is substitutionary atonement, for example, not simply immoral? Is not the idea that one person could be punished for the sins of another an immoral idea? Is that not unethical? Schleiermacher was a brilliant man and, faced with such questions, mounted a vigorous attempt to make Christianity credible by reconstructing Christian doctrine as part of a broader apologetic exercise. A great example of this is his important and probably most accessible work, his *Speeches on Religion to its Cultured Despisers*, 1799.

His thinking did develop somewhat after this work, but much of it is already there in kernel form in the *Speeches*. Here he famously argues that religion is a sense and taste for the infinite. Religion is the sense and a taste for the infinite? What does he mean by that? What is he doing when he makes that statement?

Essentially he is shifting Christianity from being a religion of doctrine or dogma to a religion of intuition and feeling. There are also personal reasons as well as broader contextual reasons why Schleiermacher does this. The concern for feeling, for example, reflects his roots in German Pietism; but it also reflects a basic acceptance of the critical philosophy of Kant and his followers, which essentially denies that religious language could be understood as referring in a meaningful way to a God 'out there.'

Schleiermacher's major work, *The Christian Faith*

(2nd. Ed. 1821–1822), was a massive systematic reconstruction of the Christian faith which essentially turned doctrinal language into language about human religious psychology. Religion is the feeling of absolute dependence upon God.

When Christianity is defined thus, the question of its superiority to other religions manifests itself in an acute form. Thus, in *The Christian Faith* Schleiermacher argues for the superiority of Christianity on the basis that monotheism was a more perfect form of the religious self-consciousness than polytheism; and that Christianity was the highest form of monotheism because Christ was the supreme example of religious psychology perfected. Christ had this sense of absolute dependence upon God in a way that far exceeded anybody else.

Schleiermacher basically sets the agenda for theology, certainly for the next 100 years, possibly in fact up to the present day. After all, much of Postmodern linguistic theory seems to me to be simply turning an enlightenment view of language away from being understood in individual terms to being understood in communal terms.

Before turning to Warfield's response to liberalism, we should note in particular two things about Schleiermacher. First of all, as mentioned above, there is Schleiermacher's connection to Pietism.

Schleiermacher's parents were involved with the Herrnhut Brethren in Germany. He himself was educated at the Herrnhut College and at the seminary, and thus grew up with a strong experiential focus in his understanding of religion. His family home would no doubt have been a religiously conservative, pious house, but the essence of religion would always have had this strong experiential focus. Indeed, it is surely interesting that when you read some of the German historians of dogma of the 19th century influenced by Hegel, Schleiermacher can be presented, for example, by a man like Heinrich Heppé as the ultimate culmination of the Reformation precisely because of his concern to integrate personal religious experience into Christian theology.

Of course, we find such historiography somewhat shocking. After all, we tend to think of the Reformers and Schleiermacher as being on opposite sides. Surely they are enemies? Well, not if you decide that the essence of the Reformation is a turn to religious experience. Then you can interpret Schleiermacher as the ultimate reformer, if you like. It is, I believe, an utterly wrong approach to the Reformers but here I am simply trying to be as sympathetic as I can with the Heppé approach.

In addition to Pietism, Schleiermacher was also

connected to German Romanticism. In simple terms, Romanticism was a movement focused on intuition and spontaneity, on the emotions, on the feelings. Once again, this kind of influence predisposed Schleiermacher to reconstruct Christianity in terms of human psychology and experience.

As a result of his enormous influence, Schleiermacher left future theology a legacy of seeing doctrinal statements as statements about religious psychology. He also left his heirs wrestling with the problem that such psychologizing of religious truth claims created for claims about the uniqueness and superiority of Christianity among the other religions and philosophies. Indeed, it is that second question that will be so perplexing for theologians in the late 19th century and was in fact intimately connected to two other questions. Who is Jesus Christ and what is the essence of Christianity?

In addition to Schleiermacher's reconstruction of the Christian faith, orthodoxy also came under pressure from increasingly critical approaches to the text of scripture. From the 18th century, textual criticism made dramatic inroads into confidence that the Bible was reliable. This was also combined with this growing philosophical suspicion of connecting history to truth and values. For some value or principle to be true, it was argued that it had to be somehow separated from history, and that history—particular events of history—could give you no transcendent values by which to live. The net result was twofold. It confirmed the Enlightenment disregard for classical Christian orthodoxy, but also led to the belief that the Christian faith was not fundamentally affected because doctrine was never meant to be objectively referential and connected to history, but was rather to be understood as a psychological category.

Thus, for example, the great 19th century German theologian Albrecht Ritschl argued that when the New Testament talks about resurrection it is really talking about the church's experience of the risen Christ. So for us to say that Christ rose from the dead is not to make a claim about an historical event but to express something experiential or psychological. Indeed, we might say it is a psychological statement dressed up in the language of history. It appears to be a historical statement, but in fact its historical referentiality is neither here nor there. Maybe Christ rose physically. Maybe he did not. The important thing is that the believer feels the power of resurrection; and the way you express that power is to talk about Christ being raised.

The net result of all of this was that Christianity became variously an experience, an ethic, a way of life. It

was fundamentally redefined compared to its classic expression in terms of the intentions of the framers of the great creeds and confessions of the Church. This was the primary challenge Warfield faced in his day, and that within the church and her own institutions.

As we look at the liberal challenge, it should be obvious that it is a relatively small step from saying, “Well, it doesn’t really matter whether the resurrection happened or not providing you feel the power,” to saying, “It doesn’t really matter if God became incarnate or not, providing we can learn the lessons of the stories in the New Testament.”

Warfield himself summed up much of the problem in an essay in the *Harvard Theological Review* in 1914 entitled “The Essence of Christianity and the Cross of Christ.”¹⁰ Here he was responding to an earlier essay in the same journal by the Yale Divinity School professor Douglas Clyde McIntosh. McIntosh was wrestling with the connection of faith and history and the problem of connecting the particularity of Christian faith to its claims to universal significance. McIntosh sees the solution to the problem in extracting from the particularities universal truths.

In his review, Warfield says this: “Professor McIntosh feels able to argue that the essence of Christianity is not that in Christianity which makes it this particular thing which we call Christianity, but that in Christianity which he finds it desirable to preserve in what he calls the ideal religion” (*Christology*, 398). Thus, according to Warfield, McIntosh is doing a number of things. He is, first of all, following the Enlightenment pattern of rejecting the particulars of history as in themselves a guide to eternal verities. The particularity of the gospel—the particulars of Christ’s life—do not really matter. It is the universal truths to which they point that are truly significant and true for all times and places.

Warfield also indicates that McIntosh is operating with a framework that assumes values derived from a critical philosophy which itself serves as a grid or Procrustean bed by which to define the gospel. This in some ways is the standard pattern since Schleiermacher who, when he is addressing those cultured despisers of religion, essentially adopts their framework and says, “Okay, for the faith to continue to carry cultural weight, give the intellectuals that which they will find plausible. That is how one can rehabilitate Christianity.”

It is, of course, an age-old story. The Marcionism in the second century balanced the Old Testament and much of the New Testament on the grounds that its

depiction of God was immoral. Socinianism in the 17th century abandoned what we now call penal substitutionary atonement on the grounds it was immoral. And Schleiermacher and subsequent generations of his followers reconstructed dogma and ethics on the basis of an epistemology that really denied the possibility of talking about God “out there.” Indeed, to put it in blunt New Testament terms, we might say we have in Schleiermacher and his followers a variation on what Paul describes in 1 Corinthians, where human wisdom becomes the criterion for judging divine wisdom and, we might add, fails abysmally.

Warfield further outlines McIntosh’s approach as follows. “It is in brief,” he says, “the following. First, by a ‘critical philosophy of values,’ determine independently for yourself what is the true ideal. Next, go to the historical entity in question with this ‘true ideal’ in your hand, and select from this historical entity whatever seems to you fitted to promote the ‘true idea.’ This is the ‘essence’ of that historical entity.” Then he continues:

Applying this method of extracting the essence of historical entities to the Christian religion professor McIntosh has naturally no difficulty in molding Christianity to his own taste. He tells us that the result reached is that the Christian religion must be, in essence, whatever in actual phenomenal Christianity is necessary for the realization of the true ideal of human spiritual life in general and of human religion in particular. Obviously, then, the contents of the Christian religion are not determined by the contents of actual phenomenal Christianity and by this must be understood not merely the Christianity which happens to be actual at any one moment, but any and all Christianity which has ever been actual in the course of its entire history, but by the constants of the “the true ideal of human spiritual life in general and of human religion in particular” (*Christology*, 409).

There are two things to notice here. Warfield sees McIntosh as defining Christianity as a religion of moral deliverance from unChrist-likeness to Christlike morality. In other words, in the hands of McIntosh, Christianity becomes a way of life with Christ as a paradigm of that way of life in his own context. This is entirely consistent with trajectories of theology stemming from Schleiermacher. In non-technical language, McIntosh is effectively saying, “Those bits of Christianity are true which work. Christianity is true because it works. Christianity is true because it shapes people towards a certain ideal.”

This is the reduction of Christianity to pragmatism and that is of great contemporary significance. If you

10. B. B. Warfield, *Christology and Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1929), 393–444.

go into many Christian book shops today or peruse the catalogs of leading evangelical publishers you will find that there may not even be a section on doctrine or theology, but you will almost certainly encounter a lot of books on "how to" do things. That is an interesting phenomenon and gives insight into the outlook of the contemporary evangelical marketplace, which is presumably a function of contemporary evangelicalism.

Now, few if any of the authors of such books would be self-conscious Schleiermacherians, attempting to make Christianity plausible to a post-Kantian intellectual culture. Few, if any, would deny the central truths of the faith. But, given the pragmatism of such books, the question becomes, what difference do these central truths make to such people?

To take an extreme example: Joel Osteen. Now I know that Osteen is a soft target and everybody likes to take a shot at him. Frankly, he seems to me a very likeable guy, or at least to be marketed that way. But he is the poster boy in some circles for all that is wrong in the American church world. I agree; but having said that, I also think we need to be careful in what exactly we think is wrong with Osteen. I doubt very much that his problem is denial of cardinal doctrines of the faith. Quite probably he affirms the Nicene Creed and the Incarnation. But the question I would want to ask him is: what difference does it make? What is the essence of Christianity to Joel Osteen? Is it inextricably Trinitarian? Or is it that it just works? That it makes you happy on a Friday night or a Saturday morning or whatever the title of his new book is? Would it make a difference if the Trinity was not real, if the Creeds were not true, or merely projections of human psychology? Perhaps the difference between Schleiermacher and much modern Christianity of the Osteen variety is that Schleiermacher was sophisticated and self-conscious; our generation is banal and unaware of just how pragmatic we have become.

You may think that this is not a pastoral problem for you because yours is a conservative PCA or OPC congregation. Remember this: if you go and look for any B. B. Warfield book in Barnes and Noble you will almost certainly not find it, but you will find Joel Osteen. And then you have to ask yourself: Well, what are most Christians reading? What are my congregants reading? Are they reading books edited by Warfield or books by Fred Zaspel on the great man? Or are they reading Joel Osteen, T. D. Jakes and Joyce Meyer? Remember, in 1517, indulgences were not being sold in Wittenberg; but Luther still had to address the issue because people in his parish were crossing the river and buying indulgences elsewhere.

To return now to Warfield on McIntosh, the second thing to note about Warfield's response is his use of the language of taste. He is saying that by using these basic Enlightenment principles, McIntosh reconstructs Christianity *according to his taste*. This is critical. Indeed, in some ways I see an unexpected affinity between B. B. Warfield and Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche is, after all the most famous critic of the Enlightenment, making the point that so much of Enlightenment philosophy is really rooted in taste and matters of aesthetic judgment. Religion has become distasteful, that so much of what passes for philosophy is actually an expression of human taste. And here Warfield sees that in McIntosh.

This brings me to my final point, and that is Warfield on Liberalism and the problem of history. The other side of the issue that Warfield is addressing, of course, is the attack on history. In Liberalism, first, the particulars of history are seen as no guide to the transcendent, being replaced in this regard by pure reason; and, second, historical criticism of the Bible shatters faith in the Bible as a basis for faith. That is why you get books written in the 19th century with titles such as Martin Kähler's *The Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith*.

B. B. Warfield sees this rejection of history, at least in the Christian context, as a pious escape hatch and regards those scared by the assaults on the Bible's authority as taking a cowardly refuge in this emphasis on the pure reason and morals. In another review essay, "Christless Christianity", he says this:

It is not so much in pride of pure reason and in contempt of history that these reasoners pronounce faith independent of Jesus, although they fall back on pure reason for a standing-ground, and express a hearty distrust in the trustworthiness of historical data. It is rather in timidity in the face of the processes of historical research, and in panic at the aspect of its results, that they seek and find a sheltered position in the independence of faith from historical entities (*Christology*, 327).

In other words, B. B. Warfield sees the separation of faith and history not as the good thing which Schleiermacher and his followers thought, allowing them to immunize Christianity from the flux of history, but rather as a desperate device designed to maintain Christianity once the Bible has been debunked. It is an attempt, one might say, to make the problem into the solution.

We have then in Liberalism two things, the redefinition of Christianity in terms of moral reformation through moral principles exemplified by Christ and the separation of faith and history in a way that makes

history irrelevant. Indeed, as Christianity becomes simply moral renewal with no necessary ground in history, the historicity of Christ, and not simply his resurrection, becomes negotiable. He functions as a moral example and, as such, there is no need for him to be an historical person; he could just as easily be a character in one of Aesop's Fables or Jane Austen's novels.

This is far worse than Docetism. At least the Docetists thought that God came down even if he may just have had a mere appearance of humanity. On liberal principles, Christ could ultimately be a fictional character and do the same thing. His historicity may not be denied in an absolute sense, but the relevance of his historicity is entirely negotiable.

Warfield does a good job of pointing out that this makes Christianity really a form of Gnosticism. What is important is knowledge of moral principles revealed by Christ. Christianity becomes a knowledge that is

given to some, preeminently to critical German philosophers. The rest of us have simply to hold on to their coat tails and trust that they know what they are doing. In the process, Christ is relativized. To borrow the phrase from Warfield's article, you have a Christless Christianity because it is not his person or his entry into history which is important. The vital things are the timeless ideals and the moral principles which he exemplifies. By contrast, the gospel for Warfield is the historic reality of the incarnation of Christ and the actions that he performs.

Summarizing the liberal position, Warfield declares that "all the great religious forces of Christianity—trust in the Living God, elevated moral self-respect, sincere love of men—are quite independent today of all question of the historicity of Jesus" (*Christology*, 316). I have a fear that the same might well be true of much contemporary conservative American Christianity. ■

In Brief: Revision Or Reaffirmation?

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other than unwise. I cannot believe that the Assembly acted with that regard for the peace of the Church and the integrity of its testimony to the truth which is becoming in our highest court, when it paid such heed to these few discordant and, as I must believe, ill-considered overtures that it ignored the eloquent silence of five-sixths of the Presbyteries of the Church and precipitated an agitation as to its doctrinal standards upon the whole Church. My conviction is clear that, in the circumstances, it was rather the duty of the Assembly, in fulfillment of its high function of guardian of the truth professed by this Church, to reaffirm the doctrines that had been assailed; to quiet the disturbance that had been raised; and, by renewed hearty commendation of our Standards to the churches under its care, to strengthen in them a firm and intelligent attachment to these Standards and their forms of sound words. It is greatly to be feared that the effect of its contrary action, by which on so small an occasion it has invited every Presbytery to subject the fundamental law of the Church to searching inquisition, will be to foment carping criticism and discontents if it be not taken in some quarters as a license to unrebuked assaults upon the very bond by which our churches are held together, and on the very substance of the truth delivered into our keeping by the great Head of the Church. It is my hope and prayer that the Presbyteries may be led by the Divine grace to avert these dangers and to repair the evil already done, by entering an effective protest against this whole movement through a reaffirmation of their hearty loyalty to the system of doctrine brought to such admirable expression in our Standards.

In my own person at least I feel constrained to make this protest and reaffirmation with the utmost emphasis, and I am unwilling to enter into any relations which may seem to any to lessen this emphasis in any degree. I am thoroughly out of sympathy with the whole movement of which the work of this committee is a part. I desire above all things to see the Church pass quietly away from this disturbing agitation concerning its fundamental beliefs, which form the basis of its unity. It is an inexpressible grief to me to see it spending its energies in a vain attempt to lower its testimony to suit the ever changing sentiment of the world about it. I would fain see it, rather, secure in the peaceful possession of its well-assured doctrinal system, and animated by an enthusiastic loyalty to it and to the Standards in which it is expressed with such singular clarity and power, go forth in strength to win the world to the evangelical truth it has drawn from the Scriptures and professed through so many years of struggle and suffering, of progress and triumph. That God may bless the Church through these coming months with a double portion of the knowledge of His truth and of wisdom from on high, and with a double portion of holy courage to believe in its heart and to reassert in the face of whatever unbelief or doubt the whole truth that He has delivered to its keeping, is my constant and fervent prayer.

Will you kindly, my dear Dr. Roberts, communicate to the Moderator of the Assembly this my request to be released from service upon the committee, and make my excuses in whatever manner may be proper.

I am very truly yours,
Benjamin B. Warfield.