

# BENJAMIN BRECKINRIDGE WARFIELD

The Defense of the Word of God Written

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Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield has been called “one of the last great expositors of orthodox and classical Calvinism in the modern world.”<sup>1</sup> In a letter to his mother dated February 19, 1921, J. Gresham Machen described the funeral of Warfield as the end of a theological tradition: “It seemed to me that the old Princeton—a great institution it was—died when Dr. Warfield was carried out.”<sup>2</sup> Warfield graduated from both Princeton University (1871) and Princeton Seminary. (1876) His first teaching position was landed later that year at Western Theological Seminary, which is now Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Upon the death of A. A. Hodge (1887) Warfield returned to Princeton Seminary as professor of “Didactic and Polemic Theology,” where he remained until his own death. (1921) Warfield’s many books, essays and reviews upheld confessional Calvinism and the “Old School” Presbyterianism. He never wrote a systematic theology of his own because he believed that Charles Hodge’s work was satisfactory.

The bulk of Warfield’s writings had to do with an explanation and defense of the Calvinism of the Westminster Confession of Faith. However, the Presbyterian Warfield was also engaged in defending the basic tenets of faith that he shared with American Evangelicals, such as the inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures. European liberalism was beginning to make an impact in America and Warfield readily engaged in the battle against these enemies of the Christian Faith. Along with Machen, Warfield was involved in the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy of the day. “Both in content and methodology, Warfield and Machen mirrored each other” in a vigorous intellectual scholarship in their defense of orthodoxy.<sup>3</sup> Warfield contributed to *The Fundamentals*, a series of articles written by a variety of authors to combat liberalism and

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Noll, “Introduction” in *B. B. Warfield: Essays on His Life and Thought*, ed. by Gary L. W. Johnson (P & R Publishing, Phillipsburg, NJ, 2007) 1.

<sup>2</sup> Stanley W. Bamberg, “Our Image of Warfield Must Go,” *JETS* 34/2 (June 1991) 229-241.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen J. Nichols, “The Vital Processes of Controversy: Warfield, Machen, and Fundamentalism,” in *B. B. Warfield: Essays on His Life and Thought*, ed. by Gary L. W. Johnson (P & R Publishing, Phillipsburg, NJ, 2007) 171.

modernism. However, he could not be identified with many of the teachings found in fundamentalism in his day. In fact historian Mark Noll calls him a “non-fundamentalist.”<sup>4</sup> Warfield and Machen both rejected premillennialism and dispensationalism. And, contrary to many fundamentalists, they did not see biological evolution as being in conflict with the biblical account of creation.

One of the first essays Warfield wrote was a pamphlet on “The Divine Origin of the Bible.” (1880) Thus at the beginning of his teaching career Warfield set the stage for what became his most significant contribution to the history of biblical interpretation, his defense of the Bible as God’s inspired and inerrant Word. The purpose of this paper will be to give an overview of Warfield’s view of the nature of Scripture as verbally inspired and inerrant, and to demonstrate that his view is not an innovation, but is indeed the traditional protestant and orthodox view.<sup>5</sup> This will be demonstrated primarily by comparing Warfield’s writings with the teaching of John Calvin and the Westminster Confession of Faith as being representative of the traditional protestant view of Scripture. Cornelius Van Til, in his introduction to Warfield’s book *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, states boldly that “The rejection of the traditional view of Scripture involves the rejection of Christianity as orthodoxy holds to it.”<sup>6</sup> If that is the case, and I believe it is, then Warfield’s masterful work in defense of the Bible will be a tremendous help to us today as we seek “to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.” (Jude 1:3)

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 172.

<sup>5</sup> *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*, (International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, Chicago, Illinois, 1978) Article XVI states: “We affirm that the doctrine of inerrancy has been integral to the Church’s faith throughout its history. We deny that inerrancy is a doctrine invented by Scholastic Protestantism, or is a reactionary position postulated in response to negative higher criticism.”

<sup>6</sup> Cornelius Van Til, “Introduction” to *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, by B. B. Warfield (P & R Pub., Philadelphia, PA, 1948) 14.

Warfield's inaugural address given at Western Seminary in 1880 was titled "Inspiration and Criticism," in which he showed that he was ready to respond to the "challenge of the times." While Warfield was still teaching at Western, along with A. A. Hodge he wrote an essay titled "Inspiration" which was published in the April 1881 issue of the *Presbyterian Review*. According to John A. Battle, "This article has become the 'definition' of the Princeton doctrine of inspiration. It defends the autographs as being without error of any kind, when properly interpreted, as the authors intended."<sup>7</sup> The material was a precise statement and rebuttal of modernist views of the day. Warfield understood the Bible as not merely a bearer or the Word of God, or a witness to the Word of God, but as that Word itself.<sup>8</sup>

Warfield observed that Christ and the apostles believed in an inerrant Scripture and that the Church ought to do so as well. In 1893 Warfield wrote an article titled, "The Real Problem of Inspiration."<sup>9</sup> Wilber Wallis states that for Warfield "the old orthodox doctrine is so clearly evident in Scripture that even opponents who are only bent on explaining it away must and do admit that Christ and the apostles held it. No, the 'real problem' was not, do Christ and the apostles teach that Scripture is inerrant, but, shall we believe them?"<sup>10</sup> In 1915 Warfield wrote what is probably his most well-read article, an entry titled "Inspiration" published in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. In this important article Warfield produces eighteen subsections which address what the Bible itself teaches with regard to its own inspiration.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> John A. Battle, "Charles Hodge, Inspiration, Textual Criticism, and the Princeton Doctrine of Scripture," *WRS Journal* 4/2 (August 1997) 36.

<sup>8</sup> Mark A. Noll, in *B. B. Warfield: Essays on His Life and Thought*, ed. by Gary L. W. Johnson (P & R Publishing, Phillipsburg, NJ, 2007) 7.

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield, "The Real Problem of Inspiration," in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, (P & R Publishing, Philadelphia, PA, 1948) 169-226.

<sup>10</sup> Wilber B. Wallis, "Warfield: Didactic and Polemic Theologian," *Presbyterion*, 3 no 2 Fall 1977, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield, "Inspiration," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. III, Edited by James Orr, (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI) 1473.

In “Inspiration” (ISBE) Warfield is careful to define the term *inspiration*. He concludes that the English words *inspire*, *inspired* and *inspiration* have for English-speakers “virtually ceased to be Biblical terms.”<sup>12</sup> He points out that in 2 Timothy 3:16 the Greek word *theopneustos* “very distinctly does not mean ‘inspired of God.’”<sup>13</sup> Rather than *inspired* or *in-breathed* the Greek word here means *breathed-out* by God. “God’s breath is the irresistible outflow of His power” therefore, “the Scriptures are a Divine product.”<sup>14</sup> Though Warfield did not believe that the English word *inspiration* is the best term to use for God’s giving of the Scriptures, he was convinced that it was “too firmly fixed, in both theological and popular usage... to be replaced.”<sup>15</sup> After defining this important term, Warfield carefully examines three key passages of Scripture which teach the Divine origin of Scripture.<sup>16</sup> From this exegesis he concludes that the Scriptures assert their Divine origin; they came about through the instrumentality of men, yet by the operation of the Holy Spirit; they are therefore trustworthy and of “indefectible authority.”<sup>17</sup> Warfield goes on to explain that Christ and the apostles held that God is the author of whatever is written in Scripture and that the Bible is “in all its parts and declarations Divinely authoritative.” It was the apostles’ conviction that “the word of Scripture is the Word of God.”<sup>18</sup>

In “Inspiration” Warfield examined such Biblical expressions as “the oracles of God” and “it is written,” deducing that the New Testament writers in all their usage treat Scripture as “a God-breathed document, which, because God-breathed, is through and through trustworthy in all its assertions, authoritative in all its declarations, and down to its last particular, the very Word of

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<sup>12</sup> Warfield, “Inspiration,” 1473.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 1473.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 1474.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 1480.

<sup>16</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:19-21; John 10:34ff.

<sup>17</sup> Warfield, “Inspiration,” 1474-1476.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 1477.

God.”<sup>19</sup> He writes that Scripture is a Divine book with a human side, or aspect. He explains that the presence of these human qualities does not take away from Divine inspiration. We might say with author Raymond Cannata “Like the Word of God Incarnate (Jesus Christ), the Word of God written is fully divine and at the same time fully human, yet perfect.”<sup>20</sup> Though Warfield thought this analogy to be helpful, he was careful to note that it “may easily be pressed beyond reason.” He said, “We cannot exactly parallel the ‘inspiration’ of the Holy Spirit and the incarnation of the Son of God.”<sup>21</sup> Warfield made the case from Scripture that the New Testament writers bore testimony in their writings that both the Old and New Testaments “stood in their minds as a unitary body of books, throughout the gift of God through His Spirit to His people.”<sup>22</sup>

Another important feature of Warfield’s doctrine of inspiration was the qualification that it applied only to the creation of the original autographs of the biblical texts. Warfield was criticized for this view since the original autographs were no longer in existence. Thus liberals referred to the “lost Princeton Bible” and “Scriptures that have disappeared forever.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 1478.

<sup>20</sup> Raymond D. Cannata, “Warfield and the Doctrine of Scripture,” in *B. B. Warfield: Essays on His Life and Thought*, ed. by Gary L. W. Johnson (P & R Publishing, Phillipsburg, NJ, 2007) 99.

<sup>21</sup> “Inspiration,” 1482. Warfield clarifies that “Even so distant an analogy may enable us, however, to recognize that, as, in the case of Our Lord’s person, the human nature remains truly human while yet it can never fall into sin or error because it can never act out of relation with the Divine nature into conjunction with which it has been brought; so in the case of the production of Scripture by the conjoint action of human and Divine factors, the human factors have acted as human factors, and have left their mark on the product as such, and yet cannot have fallen into that error which we say it is human to fall into, because they have not acted apart from the Divine factors, by themselves, but only under their unerring guidance.” I would add that we cannot separate the living Word from the written Word, though we must distinguish the two. The living Word is the source of the written Word. The written Word is the product of the living Word. It is only through the written Word that we can know the living Word. 2 Timothy 3:16 teaches that the written Word has been breathed-out by God, thus this written Word is “living and active”, though its effects are not alike in all. The Spirit always works with the written Word, which cannot return void.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 1483.

<sup>23</sup> Greg H. Bahnsen, “The Inerrancy of the Autographa,” *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman Geisler (Zondervan Pub. House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1979) 189. Some have posited that an appeal to inerrant “original autographs” is to introduce speculation into this discussion. Greg Bahnsen states that, “There are those who would attempt to make much of the unprovable character of original inerrancy because the autographa are now gone. Since the original biblical manuscripts are not available for inspection, it is thought that taking them to have been without error is

Warfield's rebuttal was to say that the autographic text had not disappeared but that "practically the whole of it" was found in the best texts in circulation.<sup>24</sup> In other words, though we do not have the original codex, the copies we have are faithful to the originals. The Scriptures are not lost to us, since they have been copied many times over with great care. Despite not having the originals, we can be assured of exacting correspondence between the manuscripts and the originals. Textual criticism has established with great certainty the content of the autographs, and where there is dispute, the discrepancies are acknowledged.

Some would ask how an appeal to "original manuscripts" or "autographs" does anything to establish Scripture's authority. First, we must recognize that Warfield was not appealing to the autographa *primarily* in order to establish Scripture's authority. He was responding to the attacks of liberals against the traditional doctrine of Scripture. He was defending the Bible's own view of itself as inspired and inerrant. Second, however, I would ask that if Scripture as originally given by God contained error, how could it be authoritative? To attribute error to the autographa makes it difficult to avoid charging God with being guilty of lying or of being incapable of producing an error-free text. (Numbers 23:19) That we do not possess any of the original autographs of Scripture does not mean we are ignorant of the fact that they ever existed. Neither does it take a speculative leap to believe that the autographs were inerrant. This we may

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groundless speculation. After all, nobody today has actually seen these allegedly inerrant autographa. This criticism, however, misunderstands the nature and source of the doctrine of original inerrancy. It is not a doctrine derived from empirical investigation of certain written texts; it is a theological commitment rooted in the teaching of the Word of God itself. The nature of God (who is truth Himself) and the nature of the biblical books (as the very words of God) require that we view the original manuscripts, produced under the superintendence of the Holy Spirit of truth, as wholly true and without error. To the charge that the errorless autographa have not been seen we can reply that neither have errant autographa ever been seen; the view that the biblical originals contained errors is just as much divorced from direct empirical proof as the opposite view. The basic question remains biblically oriented and answered. What is the nature of Scripture as it came from the very mouth of God? Evangelicals do not believe that their answer to that question is unprovable, but rather that it is fully demonstrated from the Word of God itself."

<sup>24</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield, "Inerrancy of the Original Autographs," in *Selected Shorter Writings, Vol. 2*, Edited by John E. Meeter (P & R Pub. Co., Phillipsburg, New Jersey, 1973) 584.

readily deduce from Scripture itself.<sup>25</sup> For this we only need to believe Jesus who said that “the Scripture cannot be broken.” (John 10:35)<sup>26</sup> Scripture itself teaches its own inspiration by God, and surely, as Warfield notes, we are not expected to think that the Bible means to include copyist’s errors as part of this inspiration.<sup>27</sup> No, we must infer that Scripture as originally written was immediately inspired, and any changes to that text were not inspired, and therefore not authoritative. When the Westminster Confession of Faith states that the Old Testament Hebrew and New Testament Greek were “immediately inspired by God” we are to infer that copies and translations are excluded from such immediate inspiration. Yet, as the Confession says, these Hebrew and Greek Scriptures have been “kept pure in all ages,” and “are therefore authentical (i.e. authoritative).” (I, 8) According to the Confession the copies we have carry the full authority of God and not a relative authority.<sup>28</sup> Greg Bahnsen maintains that:

The *message* conveyed by the words of the autographa, and not the physical page on which we find printing, is the strict object of inspiration. Therefore, because that message was reliably reflected in the copies or translations available to the biblical writers, they could be used in an authoritative and practical manner. Because Christ raised no doubts about the adequacy of the Scriptures as His contemporaries knew them, we can safely assume that the first-century text of the Old Testament was a wholly adequate representation of the divine word originally given. Jesus regarded the extant copies of His day as so approximate to the originals in their message that He appealed to those copies as authoritative.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture.” (WCF I, 6)

<sup>26</sup> Calvin said that this means “Scripture is inviolable.” (CC)

<sup>27</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield, “Inerrancy of the Original Autographs,” 582. Warfield says, “Everybody knows that no book was ever printed, much less hand-copied, into which some errors did not intrude in the process; and as we do not hold the author responsible for these in an ordinary book, neither ought we to hold God responsible for them in this extraordinary book which we call the Bible. It is *the Bible* that we declare to be ‘of infallible truth’ – the Bible that God gave us, not the corruptions and slips which scribes and printers have given us, some of which are in every copy.”

<sup>28</sup> *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*, International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, Chicago, Illinois, 1978, 13. The section *Transmission and Translation* states: “The Hebrew and Greek text appears to be amazingly well preserved, so that we are amply justified in affirming, with the Westminster Confession, a singular providence of God in this matter and in declaring that the authority of Scripture is in no way jeopardized by the fact that the copies we possess are not entirely error-free.”

<sup>29</sup> Bahnsen, “The Inerrancy of the Autographa,” 161.



Another point that needs to be made is that if we do not accept that the original autographs of Scripture were divinely inspired so as to be inerrant to begin with, then we are left with the task of not only distinguishing the original text from copyists errors, but of the impossible enterprise of distinguishing truth from error in the original, inspired text. As Greg Bahnsen states, “If the *original* manuscripts of Scripture were errant, then we could not possibly know the *extent* of error in them. The range of possible faults is virtually unbounded, for who can say at what point an errant God stops making mistakes? Who could presume to know how to set God’s ‘mistakes’ in order? (Compare Romans 3:4; 9:20; 11:34; 1 Corinthians 2:16.) On the other hand, errors in *transmission* are, *in principle, correctable* by textual criticism.”<sup>30</sup>

Warfield admits that there are errors in our copies of Scripture, but that they are few and are attributed to copyist error. In his article “Inerrancy of the Original Autographs,” Warfield asks, “But what is it that distinguishes ‘the Bible as it is’ from the original autographs? Just scribes’ corruptions and printers’ errors; nothing else.”<sup>31</sup> He began his career as a textual critic and held that our copies of biblical texts “were quite good and well attested.”<sup>32</sup> Therefore, he was confident that the work of the textual critic would over time narrow the gap between the originals and the later manuscripts. Warfield was indignant that his teaching of the distinction between the original, genuine text of Scripture and imperfect manuscripts was attacked as a new idea. “What! Are we to believe that no man until our wonderful nineteenth century, ever had acumen enough to detect a printer’s error or to realize the liability of hand-copied manuscripts to occasional corruption?”<sup>33</sup> He found his view in the Reformers and was conscious of defending

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<sup>30</sup> Bahnsen, “The Inerrancy of the Autographa,” 183.

<sup>31</sup> B. B. Warfield, “Inerrancy,” 583.

<sup>32</sup> Cannata, “Warfield and the Doctrine of Scripture,” 102.

<sup>33</sup> B. B. Warfield, “Inerrancy,” 585.

the view of Scripture set forth in the Westminster Confession of Faith.<sup>34</sup> He would have surely agreed with John Gerstner's statement that "Inerrancy has been the classic view of Scripture throughout church history. To view it as the brain child of seventeenth-century Protestant scholasticism or the *de novo* creation of the 'Old Princeton' school is to distort history."<sup>35</sup>

Warfield acknowledges that even Augustine understood the same distinction between an inerrant autograph and a copy of that original. The original was without error, while copies were not. Warfield quotes Augustine who says,

I have learned to defer this respect and honor to the canonical books of Scripture alone, that I most firmly believe that no one of their authors has committed an error in writing. And if in their writings I am perplexed by anything which seems to me contrary to truth, I do not doubt that it is nothing else than either that the manuscript is corrupt, or that the translator has not followed what was said, or that I have myself failed to understand it.<sup>36</sup>

Warfield states that Calvin and Luther also held to these same kinds of distinctions and upheld an inerrant autographic text. "In exactly similar manner Calvin and Luther repeatedly assign special difficulties to the corrupt form of transmitted Scripture as distinguished from the genuine text."<sup>37</sup>

A good example of this would be Calvin's comments on Acts 7:14 which says, "Then Joseph sent and called his father Jacob and all his relatives to him, seventy-five people." (NKJV) The Hebrew in Genesis 46:27 mentions seventy persons who were of the house of Jacob that went down to Egypt. Calvin comments on this discrepancy saying that "It is uncertain whether the Greek interpreters set down this number of set purpose, or whether it crop [crept] in afterward through negligence, [mistake;] which (I mean the latter) might well be, forasmuch as the Grecians used to set down their numbers in letters." (*Calvin's Commentaries*) Calvin understood

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<sup>34</sup> Cornelius Van Til, "Introduction," in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, 3.

<sup>35</sup> John H. Gerstner, "The View of the Bible Held by the Church: Calvin and the Westminster Divines," in *Inerrancy*, edited by Norman L. Geisler (Zondervan Pub. House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1979) 385.

<sup>36</sup> B. B. Warfield, "Inerrancy," 586.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 586.

that the original Hebrew, being directly inspired by God, had the correct number. Therefore the discrepancy for Calvin must have been due to copyist error.<sup>38</sup> Richard A. Muller writes that Calvin “recognized and dealt with a wide variety of variant texts, emendations, and scribal errors in the conviction that the *underlying inviolability* and coherence of God’s Word enable the faithful exegete to penetrate to the meaning of the passages in question.”<sup>39</sup> For Calvin, as well as Warfield, Scripture was originally inspired and therefore without error. Warfield states, “In point of fact, Calvin not only asserts the freedom of Scripture as given by God from all error, but never in his detailed dealing with Scripture allows that such errors exist in it.”<sup>40</sup> Calvin might not have ever used the exact phrase “original manuscripts,” but he certainly taught that all Scripture as originally given by God was inspired and inerrant. John Gerstner states that:

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<sup>38</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield, “Calvin’s Doctrine of the Knowledge of God,” in *Calvin and Calvinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1931) [http://www.lgmarshall.org/Warfield/warfield\\_calvinknowledge.html](http://www.lgmarshall.org/Warfield/warfield_calvinknowledge.html) Warfield writes more about Calvin’s handling of possible corruptions in the text of Scripture: “As a Humanist he was familiar with the processes employed in settling the texts of classical authors; and naturally he used the same methods in his determination of the text of the Biblical books. His practice here is marked by a combination of freedom and sobriety; and his decisions, though often wrong, as they could not but be in the state of the knowledge of the transmission of the New Testament text at the time, always manifest good sense, balance, and trained judgment. In his remarks on the pericope of the adulteress (John viii. 1-11), we meet the same circle of ideas with which we are familiar from his remarks on the Antilegomena: ‘because it has always been received by the Latin Churches and is found in many of the Greek copies and old writers, and contains nothing which would be unworthy of an apostolical spirit, there is no reason why we should refuse to take our profit from it.’ He accepts the three-witness passage of I John v. 7. ‘Since the Greek codices do not agree with themselves,’ he says, ‘I scarcely dare reach a conclusion. Yet, as the context flows most smoothly if this clause is added, and I see that it stands in the best codices and those of the most approved credit, I also willingly adopt it.’ When puzzled by difficulties, he, quite like the Humanist dealing with a classical text, feels free to suggest that there may be a ‘mendum in voce.’ This he does, for example, in Mat. xxiii. 35, where he adduces this possibility among others; and still more instructively in Mat. xxvii. 9, where he just as simply assumes ‘Jeremiah’ to be a corrupt reading as his own editors assume that the ‘Apius’ which occurs in the French version of the ‘Institutes’ in connection with Josephus is due to a slip of his translators, not of his own - remarking: ‘It is evident that it cannot be Calvin who translated this passage.’ His assurance that it cannot be the Biblical writer who stumbles leads him similarly to attribute what seems to him a manifest error to the copyists. It is only, however, in such passages as these that he engages formally in textual emendation. Ordinarily he simply follows the current text, although he is, of course, not without an intelligent ground for his confidence in it. As we cursorily read his commentaries we feel ourselves in the hands of one who is sanely and sagely scrutinizing the text with which he is dealing from the point of view of a scholar accustomed to deal with ancient texts, whose confidence in its general integrity represents the well-grounded conclusion of a trained judgment. His occasional remarks on the text, and his rare suggestion of a corruption, are indicia of the alertness of his general scrutiny of the text and serve to assure us that his acceptance of it as a whole as sound is not merely inert acquiescence in tradition, but represents the calm judgment of an instructed intelligence.”

<sup>39</sup> Richard A. Muller, “The Foundation of Calvin’s Theology: Scripture as Revealing God’s Word,” in *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism: Calvin and Hermeneutics* (New York: Garland Pub. Co., 1992) 402.

<sup>40</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield, “Calvin’s Doctrine of the Knowledge of God.”

To be sure, Calvin wrote no major formal treatise on Scripture. That is not at all surprising inasmuch as the doctrine was not an issue of his day. His debate with Rome was not over the inspiration or inerrancy of Scripture. Both sides tacitly assumed the position. When Calvin does speak explicitly on Scripture, his view is asserted unambiguously. He refers to Scripture as:

“The sure and infallible record”  
“The inerring standard”  
“The pure Word of God”  
“The infallible rule of His Holy Truth”  
“Free from every stain or defect”  
“The inerring certainty”  
“The certain and unerring rule”  
“Unerring light”  
“Infallible Word of God”  
“Has nothing belonging to man mixed with it”  
“Inviolable”  
“Infallible oracles”<sup>41</sup>

Warfield wrote an important article titled “Calvin’s Doctrine of the Knowledge of God” in which he ably demonstrates that Calvin’s view of Scripture is the traditional protestant and orthodox view that Warfield himself held to. Here Warfield expounds Calvin’s doctrine of natural revelation and Holy Scripture. Under the section on *Holy Scripture* Warfield treats Calvin’s general view of the Bible, the canon, inspiration and the testimony of the Spirit. He writes, “Under the designation of ‘Scripture’ or ‘the Scriptures’ Calvin understood that body of writings which have been transmitted to us as the divinely given rule of faith and life.”<sup>42</sup> Calvin believed these Scriptures to be the very word of God. Though written by men, Calvin said that the Scriptures have “come down to us from the very mouth of God.” (*Calvin’s Institutes* 1.8.5.) Scripture has “come down from heaven as if the living words of God themselves were heard in it.” (1.7.1) Referring to the Bible Calvin says, “We owe it therefore the same reverence which

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<sup>41</sup> Gerstner, “The View of the Bible Held by the Church: Calvin and the Westminster Divines,” 391. Gerstner writes on p. 395 that “Calvin’s textual criticism has also provoked charges of practice inconsistent with theory. Calvin allows for scribal errors by copyists of original manuscripts. Yet Calvin never made the leap of logic of some of his interpreters, who conclude that the practice of various forms of textual and canonical criticism implies a denial of inspiration or inerrancy.”

<sup>42</sup> Warfield, “Calvin’s Doctrine of the Knowledge of God.”

we owe to God Himself, since it has proceeded from Him alone, and there is nothing human mixed with it.”<sup>43</sup> (CC on 2 Tim. 3:16) Warfield states of Calvin,

Accordingly, he cites Scripture everywhere not as the word of man but as the pure word of God. His “holy word” is “the scepter of God;” every statement in which is “a heavenly oracle” which “cannot fail” (Dedicatory Epistle to the “Institutes,” *Opp.* ii. 12): in it God “opens His own sacred mouth” to add His direct word to the voice of His mute creatures (1.6.1). To say “Scripture says” and to say “the Holy Ghost says” is all one.<sup>44</sup>

Calvin frequently used “dictation” to refer to the inspiration of the writers of Scripture.

Warfield remarks,

It is not unfair to urge, however, that this language is figurative; and that what Calvin has in mind is not to insist that the mode of inspiration was dictation, but that the result of inspiration is as if it were by dictation, viz., the production of a pure word of God free from all human admixtures. This being allowed, it is all the more unfair to urge that, Calvin's language being in this sense figurative, he is not to be understood as teaching that the effect of inspiration was the production of a pure word of God, free from all admixture of human error.<sup>45</sup>

Following Calvin, Warfield holds that the Scriptures are verbally inspired and free from error because this is the teaching of Scripture itself. This is not to be confused with the *ground* of Calvin's faith in the divine origin of Scripture as a revelation from God, which was by the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti*. Calvin understood that the Scriptures as special revelation were like spectacles by which our vision might be corrected, yet sinful man also needs the power of sight in order to benefit from the spectacles. Warfield says that for Calvin, “The spectacles are provided by the Scriptures: the eyes are opened that they may see even through these spectacles, only by the witness of the Spirit in the heart.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Gerstner, “The View of the Bible Held by the Church: Calvin and the Westminster Divines,” 392. Dr. Gerstner says, “When Calvin speaks of the reverence we owe to Scripture, why do not modern critics of inerrancy rise up and accuse the Reformer of bibliolatry?”

<sup>44</sup> Warfield, “Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God.”

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* Warfield writes in agreement with Calvin, “Calvin does not present special revelation, or the Scriptures as special revelation documented, as the entire cure, but places by the side of it the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti*. Special revelation, or Scripture as its documented form, provides in point of fact, in the view of Calvin, only

Warfield understands that the teaching of the Westminster Confession of Faith (I, 8) “distinguishes between translations of Scripture and the originals, and with reference to the originals between the transmitted and the original text.”<sup>47</sup> In agreement with the Confession, he held that the original autographs were “immediately inspired by God,” and “by his singular care and providence” the manuscripts, which have been “kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentic.”<sup>48</sup> In Warfield’s thinking the doctrine of inspiration requires the doctrine of inerrancy. His critics claimed that the doctrine of inerrancy was invented by Warfield and other Princetonians. They said that Warfield went beyond the teaching of the Westminster Confession of Faith in teaching inerrancy. Giving specific examples from the writings of the Westminster divines Warfield argues that, “Nobody in that circle doubted the plenary inspiration and absolute errorlessness of the genuine text.”<sup>49</sup> In faithfully explicating and defending the doctrines of inspiration and inerrancy, Warfield builds on what he found in that first chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith. Warfield’s contention is that Westminster’s view of Scripture is only a restatement of what earlier Reformers had taught. A more recent tribute to Warfield’s excellent work in this area is seen in *The International Conference on Biblical Inerrancy’s*

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the objective side of the cure he finds has been provided by God. The subjective side is provided by the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti*. The spectacles are provided by the Scriptures: the eyes are opened that they may see even through these spectacles, only by the witness of the Spirit in the heart. We perceive, then, that in Calvin's view the figure of the spectacles is a perfectly just one. He means to intimate that special revelation alone will not produce a knowledge of God in the human soul: that something more than external aid is needed before it can see.” Warfield says for Calvin “the testimony of the Spirit concerns the accrediting of Scripture, not the assimilation of its revelatory contents.”

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 580. On p. 586 Warfield states, “It is already apparent how seriously erroneous it is to say, as has been recently said, that the Westminster divines never ‘thought of the original manuscripts of the Bible as distinct from the copies in their possession.’ They could not help thinking of them.”

<sup>48</sup> *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter One, “Of the Holy Scripture,” Section VIII.

<sup>49</sup> B. B. Warfield, “Inerrancy of the Original Autographs,” 587. Warfield also states that, “The declaration of the Presbyterian Church that her Standards teach that ‘the inspired Word as it came from God is without error,’ is a simple affirmation of the obvious meaning of those Standards, and certainly is accordant with the teachings of the Bible and within the limits of common sense.” See also “Inerrancy, Infallibility and Scripture in the Westminster Confession of Faith,” by John Allen Delivuk, *WTJ* 54 (1992) 349-55. Delivuk presents evidence showing that the authors of the Confession believed that there were no errors in the Bible. *Infallible* and *Inerrant* were synonymous terms in the seventeenth century as Delivuk documents.

nineteen article “Chicago Statement” of 1978, which has been referred to as “basically a modern reaffirmation of the Old Princeton view as articulated by Warfield.”<sup>50</sup>

If B. B. Warfield were asked to assess the strength of his insights concerning the doctrine of Scripture he would likely say that if there were any strengths they lay in that he taught nothing new here. He saw himself following Calvin and the Westminster divines. He was a thorough exegete of what the Bible taught about itself. After reading Warfield there can be no doubt for the discerning believer that the Bible itself claims to be inspired of God and inerrant. Warfield has helped the Christian church by answering “the objections raised to this doctrine in the areas of the authenticity of the books of the Bible, the accuracy of the Bible in incidental details, and its historical and geographical reliability, as well as the claim that the books and theologies of the Scriptural writers are contradictory.”<sup>51</sup> Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones notes that concerning the doctrine of Scripture, Warfield had answered critical exegesis so decisively that opponents, instead of rebutting his arguments, chose to ignore them, and shifted the attack against the Person of Christ.<sup>52</sup>

What about the weaknesses of Warfield’s insights? First, Warfield was influenced by a philosophical view known as Scottish commonsense realism, which taught that “our perceptions of the world reveal the reality of the world – that is to say, what we see and sense is what is.”<sup>53</sup> This reliance upon the trustworthiness of empirical knowledge seems at times for Warfield to cause him to overlook the noetic effects of sin. Warfield held that “the supernatural origin and contents of Christianity...always are vindicated prior to any question of the inspiration of the

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<sup>50</sup> Cannata, 97f.

<sup>51</sup> Bamberg, “Our Image of Warfield Must Go,” 236.

<sup>52</sup> Wilber B. Wallis, “Warfield: Didactic and Polemic Theologian,” 15. Warfield ably took up the challenge of defending the person and work of Christ in his day as well. He wrote numerous articles and books dealing with such topics as the deity of Christ, the historical Christ, the resurrection of Christ and “the Christ that Paul preached.”

<sup>53</sup> Roy A. Harris and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture* (William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., Grand Rapids, MI, 2002) 198.

record.”<sup>54</sup> For Warfield the historicity of the Bible and the trustworthiness of its writers must be proven before one goes on to defend inspiration from Scripture itself. According to Kim Riddlebarger, “Warfield's defense of the doctrine of inspiration amounts to establishing the resurrection of Christ on a factual, historical footing. Then one can go to the gospel record to discover what Jesus and the apostles believed about the Bible. Thus, the evidential, historical arguments become the foundation for the doctrine of inspiration as well.”<sup>55</sup>

Though some would disagree with Warfield’s evidentialist approach to apologetics, nevertheless he remains a Calvinist as to man’s inability and maintains that “mere reasoning cannot make a Christian” and “before he (the sinner) can thus believe there must intervene the atoning work of Christ canceling the guilt by which the sinner is kept under the wrath of God, and the recreative work of the Holy Spirit by which the sinner’s heart is renewed in the love of God.”<sup>56</sup> He understands that faith is the gift of God, and yet faith is not given apart from the evidence and use of right reason. Hence, those who charge Warfield with being a “bald rationalist” are going too far in their assessment. And even if we differ with Warfield’s evidentialist apologetic, all Christians should find his teaching on the inspiration, authority and inerrancy of the Scriptures to be sound doctrine which is able to strengthen one’s faith. (Titus 1:9) The reflections of Edward J. Young are appropriate:

It is then with the apologetic of Warfield that we should express a difference of opinion. We believe that his presentation of his position would be far stronger if he grounded it upon something more than the conviction that the Scriptural writers were reliable

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<sup>54</sup> Kim A. Riddlebarger, *The Lion of Princeton*, <http://kimriddlebarger.squarespace.com/b-b-warfield-the-lion-of-pr/edited-lionofprinceton.pdf>, 25.

<sup>55</sup> Riddlebarger, *The Lion of Princeton*, 342.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 96. Warfield states, “Though faith is the gift of God, it does not in the least follow that the faith which God gives is an irrational faith, that is, a faith without cognizable ground in right reason. We believe because it is rational to believe in Him, not even though it be irrational. Of course mere reasoning cannot make a Christian; but that is not because faith is not the result of evidence, but because a dead soul cannot respond to evidence. The action of the Holy Spirit in giving faith is not apart from the evidence, but along with the evidence; and in the first stage consists in preparing the soul for the reception of the evidence.”



teachers of doctrine. They are that without a doubt, and because we believe that they are, we believe them also when they teach us about the Bible. Our conviction that they are trustworthy teachers, however, rests not upon our own unaided investigation and reason but simply and solely upon the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit.<sup>57</sup>

Though Warfield's apologetical ground might be considered soft by some, he did have a developed doctrine of the witness of the Holy Spirit. Riddlebarger explains the tension between Warfield's doctrine of the witness of the Holy Spirit and his apologetic stance:

Those who accuse Warfield of supposed "Arminian" tendencies construe his stress on an intellectual priority in faith as an implicit denial of monergism. This despite his express references to monergism, and the consistency with which he works this out in his doctrine of the witness of the Holy Spirit. There is nothing in Warfield's apologetic which is inherently "Arminian," for the Princetonian placed no confidence in the abilities of the fallen will. His confidence was in the sufficiency of the objective evidence that God had given, as well as in the power of the Holy Spirit to create the subjective conditions for belief. Warfield will forever remain, "the Calvinist Professor." Whatever one may think of B. B. Warfield's evidential apologetic, it is difficult to criticize him for any lack of consistency or vigor in defending the absolute truth of the Christian faith.<sup>58</sup>

Warfield's teaching on the Scriptural doctrines of inspiration, authority and inerrancy, must be considered an accurate exposition of Scripture. His faithful proclamation of what Scripture teaches about Scripture will become a means, according to God's wise providence, by which the inward testimony of the Spirit is given, which alone is able to convince the elect that Scripture is the Word of God.

This paper has attempted to demonstrate that Warfield's view of Scripture is not an innovation, but is the traditional protestant and orthodox view. Concerning the inspiration, inerrancy and authority of Scripture, Warfield's position was shown to be essentially that of John Calvin as well as the Westminster Confession of Faith. Warfield did not merely repeat what Calvin or the Confession of Faith said on these matters. First and foremost Warfield studied Scripture itself, grounding his doctrine of Scripture in Scripture. He did a detailed study of the

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<sup>57</sup> Edward J. Young, "Some Remarks on Dr. Benjamin B. Warfield's Doctrine of Scripture." Paper read at the Seminar on the Authority of Scripture, Wenham, Mass., June 25, 1966. pp. 29 f.

<sup>58</sup> Riddlebarger, *The Lion of Princeton*, 98.

writings of both Calvin and the Westminster Confession of Faith where each dealt with the doctrine of Scripture. Warfield saw himself as following the traditional protestant position established at the outset of the reformation. After reading Warfield's exposition of Scripture, Calvin's teaching and the Westminster Confession of faith, my conviction is that Warfield's own view is indeed the traditional protestant and orthodox view. Those who are skeptical of the merit of this proposal are encouraged to read Warfield himself thoroughly on these matters. The serious student of Warfield will be greatly rewarded and will be built up in "the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints." (Jude 1:3)

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