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# Warfield and Scripture

**Mike Parsons.**

This article started with a desire to understand the roots of conservative doctrines of Scripture, as I sympathise with the conservative high regard for Scripture, but am unhappy about some of its doctrinal formulation. A preliminary investigation of the subject suggested that B.B. Warfield played a major role in the developing of a main stream of conservative doctrine and so it seemed wise to concentrate exclusively on Warfield's formulation, leaving aside (with considerable reluctance) the crucial issues of hermeneutics and biblical understanding that his formulation raises. To have included these topics would have detracted from the main purpose, which is to understand Warfield's formulation, and would have involved making statements that could neither be properly substantiated, nor adequately explored.

Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield was professor of Didactic and Polemic Theology in the Theological Seminary of Princeton, New Jersey, from 1887 to 1921, and is probably best known for his theological writings on the inspiration and authority of the Bible. His importance is twofold. First, after the critical onslaught on the status of the Bible of the nineteenth century, he was the first to produce a reasoned theological justification for the conservative position: secondly, Warfield is an authority often quoted by conservatives to this day, and his works are referred to by, among others, G.E. Ladd in *Theology of the New Testament* and by J.K.S. Reid in *The Authority of Scripture*. He is even given careful attention by D.H. Kelsey in *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*.

## Historical Introduction.

The Princeton Theological Seminary was founded in 1811 by its first professor, Archibald Alexander, and from the first was committed to the model of scholastic Calvinism – the seminary's first students undertook a study of the *Institutes* of Frances Turretin, a Genevan theologian of the seventeenth century. It maintained an amazingly consistent position, due in part to the fact that Charles Hodge, Alexander's successor, was a voluminous writer, working all his life to produce his statement of the Princeton Theology in his three volume *Systematic Theology*. The influence of this work, and the fact that two sons and a grandson of Hodge held chairs in the seminary ensured a consistent position.

In the eighteenth century the advance of modern science had provided an alternative explanation to the biblical cosmology, and empirical methods and mechanical models left little room for revelation. On the organisational front the influence of the church had declined, toleration gradually gained ground and the power and prestige of the clergy fell drastically. The fear of the unknown and the hope for a better life in eternity gave way to the hope of a better life now. According to Newtonian physics, God might as well have taken leave of his world, and philosophers such as Hume established that he had, as far as rational demonstration of his existence went. This was the era that produced from the church a great body of evidences, demonstrating that the Bible was a trustworthy record of God's dealings with men. The most popular of these was William Paley's *Evidences of Christianity* (1822). It was just such a work as this that led to the conversion of Princeton's first principal, Alexander.<sup>1</sup>

The nineteenth century saw the rise of extensive scholarly criticism of the Bible. The conservative camp, already forced back upon the authority of the Bible in the face of science and rationalism, now had to defend themselves in theological terms. Not all Evangelicals found themselves so assailed however, being able to accommodate themselves to a new idea of the Bible while still preaching strongly the necessity of personal conversion (e.g. Harry Emerson Fosdick); just as not all Christians were outraged by Darwin's evolutionary theory (e.g. F.J.A. Hort, R.W. Church, J.H. Newman). Some, however, had staked their all on biblical infallibility, well expressed by G.S. Bishop in one of the booklets called *The Fundamentals* (whence 'Fundamentalism').

'Verbal and direct inspiration is therefore the 'Thermopylae' of Biblical and Scriptural faith . . . No book, no religion.'<sup>2</sup>

Historically, the rise of such a movement can be accounted for in American society of that time. The nineteenth century was a time of tremendous change and unrest, society was rapidly becoming urbanised, old values were disappearing, and the political stability, particularly in Europe, was distinctly shaky. Not surprisingly there were reactions against this in some quarters, and in the church they were represented by a reaction in favour of the old order, and by the use of the bible to explain the present. In both cases biblical literalism was central, and in the latter the Millennialist movement got off the ground, with its strong appeal to the Bible as having prophesied the present distress. As change was merely hastening the day to the ultimate cataclysm, the millennialists were by and large reactionary in their political views, but commanded considerable support in that they could point to a text relevant to most situations. In their own ranks they could find no one able to combat the manace of the biblical critics, but in the

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theologians of Princeton innerancy did find qualified defenders, and principally in B.B. Warfield.

Princeton was always at pains to emphasise that there was no such thing as a 'Princeton Theology'

'Princeton's boast . . . is her unswerving fidelity to the theology of the reformation'.<sup>3</sup>

It will become clear later, as E.R. Sandeen has pointed out,<sup>4</sup> that this was by no means totally accurate: such statements may perhaps be seen as yet another manifestation of the almost hysterical quest for certainty seen in the works of Warfield and others of the period. In a famous passage where Warfield admits the possibility of the Christian religion being true without an inspired revelation (by which he means *infallibly* inspired) he concludes:

'But to what uncertainties and doubts would we be the prey! — to what errors, constantly begetting worse errors exposed! — to what refuges, all of them of lies driven'.<sup>5</sup>

and again

'The authority that cannot assure of a hard fact is soon not trusted for a hard doctrine'.<sup>6</sup>

(where 'hard' in this context means 'reliable')

This search for absoluteness is found throughout his writings, most frequently in his insistence that if Scripture cannot be trusted for even one incidental detail, it cannot be trusted.

Warfield and the other Princeton theologians were well-read men, as is clear from their acquaintance with a wide range of theological opinion, and Warfield certainly was acquainted with the work of Kant, yet his dependence upon reason, although cautious, was absolute. Charles Hodge, in the introduction to his *Systematic Theology* clearly regards the theologian working with the scriptures as analogous to the scientist working with facts and laws of nature.<sup>7</sup> That the Princeton theologians should feel compelled to regard their theology in this manner is not surprising, considering the prevailing culture. Science, after all, had made tremendous strides forward by putting superstition aside and employing reason and empirical investigation. What was more natural than that the theologians should take this as a challenge, show that they could use the same tools, and in the same way establish the claims of the Christian faith? Yet anyone who reads more than a little of the writings of the Princeton school soon realises that they were not merely pursuing the path of reason for its own sake. They were deeply concerned at the spiritual dryness of much contemporary theology, and it was more than anything their pastoral concern, both to the future ministers they were training and to the wider Christian church, that led them in the path they took. That the path was not the unique path can be seen

in that F.D.E. Schleiermacher had a very similar motivation with such different results. It is the expression and justification of this pastoral concern, using the path of reason, that provides some interesting contrasts and tensions in their theological method, and in no one is this more apparent than in Warfield.

#### The Scottish Connection.

Where had this wholehearted commitment to reason come from, and with it Warfield's insistence on an inerrant Bible? It seems reasonably certain that the philosophical basis for this position is to be found in the Scottish 'common sense' philosophy that was introduced to Princeton by John Witherspoon, who in 1768 went from Scotland to the president of the college of New Jersey at Princeton (the seminary had not yet been founded). Witherspoon was well versed in the Scottish philosophy, and in particular with the writings of Thomas Reid (1710-1796), who succeeded Adam Smith in the chair of moral philosophy at Glasgow. Reid's *Inquiry* had been published in 1764 and so Witherspoon was probably the first Scot to go to a teaching post in America fully acquainted with this work.

Witherspoon and his philosophy were welcomed at Princeton, and in the Seminary Reid supplanted Berkley; due, as Ahlstrom has argued, to the advocacy of Alexander and Hodge.<sup>8</sup> This philosophy had a pedigree that seemed to pass unnoticed at Princeton, in that it stemmed from the severe difference of opinion between moderates and Evangelicals in the Scotland of the early eighteenth century, and as Ahlstrom observes:

'it is more accurate to see the Scottish philosophers as a liberal vanguard, even as theological revolutionaries, than to preserve the traditional picture of genteel conservatives bringing reason to the service of a decadent orthodoxy.'<sup>9</sup>

The reason for the adoption of this philosophy is not hard to find: Locke and Berkley were seen by many to lead inevitably to the 'skepticism' of David Hume, or even worse, to the materialism of Condillac. So orthodox theology had to be defended, and the weapon chosen was the Scottish 'common sense' philosophy. It is worth noting in passing that Princeton was not the only school in America to adopt this philosophy with open arms — there were also Harvard, Yale and Andover. By 1810, under the guidance of the Scottish philosophy, Harvard was almost entirely Unitarian: the emphasis of the philosophy on reason, and its views on ethics and natural theology made it, one would have thought, a more natural companion to liberal Unitarianism than to Princeton's orthodox conservatism.

Ahlstrom has produced four points that are typical of the Scottish philosophy, all of which are to be found in Reid.

1. Philosophy depends on scientific investigation, with the primary

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object of observation being self consciousness and not the external behaviour of other men.

2. The observation of the consciousness establishes principles which are anterior to, and independent of, this experience. Some principles, like that of substance or cause and effect, are necessary, others like the existence of beings are contingent, but all are in the very constitution of our mind and not the product of our experience.
3. Nothing can be an efficient cause in the proper sense but an intelligent being; matter cannot be the real cause of anything, but only an instrument in the hands of a real cause (this notion of agency, or power, is revealed by self-consciousness).
4. The first principles of morals are self-evident intuitions; moral judgments, therefore, are not deduced from non moral judgements: they are not deductions at all.

It barely needs pointing out how close some of this is to Kant's writings.<sup>10</sup>

This philosophy was welcomed at Princeton precisely because the Princeton theologians were keenly aware of the religious decadence of the Revolutionary Epoch, and the fear that French infidelity was engulfing the universities. This produced a need for an apologetic spirit and the Scottish philosophy provided the means to fulfill that need. Added to this, it countered those intellectual currents that the educated church-goer encountered in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – for example, Hume's 'skepticism'.

However, the price paid was a high one. The new philosophy was a humanistic creation, and Calvin's theocentricity was sacrificed to be replaced by a new principle of doctrinal interpretation – self-consciousness. Man's need, rather than God's word became the guide in doctrinal formulation. Ahlstrom observes that anyone reading Alexander's *Outline of Moral Science*, which was accepted by C. Hodge and Warfield, knowing nothing of Alexander's background, would conclude that it was written by:

some mild English latitudinarian bent on mediating the views of Butler, Reid and Price.<sup>11</sup>

The realisation of this later brought some sharp criticism of the bringing in of the 'stains of humanism' by an ultra conservative author.<sup>12</sup>

It might seem grossly unfair to accuse Warfield of substituting man's need for God's word as a guide in doctrinal formulation, but he does just this in insisting upon our need to be assured of 'hard facts' by scripture. Man's need is the eternal (and unfulfillable) quest for absolute certainty, and in bowing to this need Warfield, and C. Hodge before him, inserted the Scottish philosophy between themselves and Calvin. The irony, of course, is that

Princeton saw herself as the upholder of the pure teaching of Calvin in the midst of apostate theologians.

This Scottish philosophy accelerated the trend towards rational theology, and hence

'rendered the Christian paradoxes into stark logical contradictions that had to be either diguised or swept away. Reformed theology was thus emptied of its most dynamic element'.<sup>13</sup>

That Warfield was firmly in favour of this trend (but not the above conclusion!) can hardly be doubted with reference to his works. Warfield writes

'Christianity has thus from the beginning ever come to man as the rational religion making its appeal primarily to the intellect'<sup>14</sup>

and explores this theme at length in his article 'On Faith in its Psychological Aspects'.<sup>15</sup> A recent conservative commentator, sympathetic to Warfield, comments that:

'Precisley because of this primacy of reason to faith, Scripture must first be authenticated to provide a rational basis for its acceptance. This sentiment is expressed throughout Warfield's works, but it is the special point of his "Introductory Note" to Beattie's *Apologetics* to argue that a person "must first have the Scriptures authenticated to him as such, before he can take his starting point in them".'<sup>16</sup>

J.J. Markarian comments in his Ph.D. dissertation on Warfield's theology of revelation, that he was blind to the fact that Calvin did not wait to prove the Bible before he trusted it.<sup>17</sup> Exactly what Warfield meant by 'authenticated' will be discussed below in detail. It is sufficient here to note that in the present context he refers to a rational authentication, and not an emotional or existential experience of God through the Scriptures.

An interesting corollary of Warfield's views on revelation and reason is seen in his attitude to miracles. To Warfield, miracles are for the sole purpose of ratifying God's revelation to men. Hence the biblical miracles are the 'proof' of the biblical record, and any other non-biblical miracle must, of necessity, be counterfeit: God has revealed himself only through the biblical documents to those of us living in post-biblical times. In *Counterfeit Miracles* he undertakes an investigation of the alleged post-biblical miracles and declares them counterfeit.<sup>18</sup> Warfield is obliged to take this position, not only for the sake of this theology but also his philosophy. His theology cannot allow that there is any other source of supernatural revelation to men than the Bible: and, if miracles are admitted, then by the same argument as he uses to verify the revelation of God in scripture, extra-biblical miracles could be used to verify extra-biblical revelation. His philosophy, both in its Scottish origins, and probably in the cosmology underlying writers like

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Paley, cannot allow the possibility of reason being ousted from its primacy by the special actions of an interfering Deity.

### Authentication.

It is often claimed that Warfield produced a significant modification of the teaching of his predecessor Charles Hodge in establishing the authority of scripture by reason alone, and in doing so departed from the Reformation tradition, so proudly owned by Princeton, and from the contemporary reformed creed, the Westminster, Confession of Faith. The argument is over whether either Warfield or Calvin taught that the inner witness of the Holy Spirit was the primary authentication; in neither case are their writings totally unambiguous. J.K.S. Reid, in *The Authority of Scripture* admits that opinion is divided as to whether Calvin taught that the Bible was verbally inspired and infallible or not,<sup>19</sup> and this is not the place to investigate the matter further. Reid notes that those who deny that Calvin taught such a doctrine note that he nevertheless had a strong doctrine of inspiration, and that all Scripture issues from the Holy Spirit's inspiring of the biblical authors – but leaving open the possibility of human error in the transcription and correct realisation of this inspiration.

Before entering an investigation of Warfield's own views on the role of the Holy Spirit in authenticating Scripture, it is profitable to note briefly Calvin's own view: not least in the light of the Princeton school's professed allegiance to the Calvinistic principles of the reformation. Calvin is quite clear on the matter:

'. . . it remains that what the mind has imbibed be transcribed to the heart.

For the Word of God is not received by faith if it floats on the surface of the brain; but when it has taken deep root in the heart, so as to become an impregnable fortress to sustain and repel all the assaults of temptation.'<sup>20</sup>

and

'The testimony of the Spirit is superior to all reason. . . It is necessary therefore that the same Spirit who spoke by the mouths of the prophets should penetrate into our hearts, to convince us that they faithfully delivered the oracles that were divinely entrusted to them.'<sup>21</sup>

It is against this background that the controversy over Warfield's position needs to be read.

In following the path of reason Warfield seeks to demonstrate that the biblical writers were reliable teachers of history and doctrine. Having established this, he then points out that they also taught their own inspiration and hence it is inconsistent to accept one and reject the other. It would seem from such an argument as this, that again his dependence on reason, as opposed to the internal testimony of the Spirit, is absolute. This, indeed,



is the conclusion to which Sandeen comes in considering how far Warfield stood in the tradition of the Reformers and in submission to the Westminster Confession of Faith.<sup>22</sup> Sandeen compared the relevant portion of the Westminster Confession with Hodge's view, and Hodge with Warfield, and sets out his case that the Westminster Confession was clearly in favour of the internal witness of the Spirit, whereas both Hodge and Warfield progressively modified this teaching to arrive at Warfield's position that it is the credibility of the apostolic authors that provides the authentication.

This conclusion of Sandeen has, however, provoked a vigorous, and in some cases intemperate, response from at least one conservative scholar. To J.H. Gerstner of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary the very suggestion that Warfield, Hodge and the Westminster Confession mutually disagree is anathema, and so in his article 'Warfield's Case for Biblical Inerrancy' Sandeen is accused of misrepresentation, unsubstantiated remarks, manufacturing non-existent differences and, finally, slanderous statements!<sup>23</sup>

The only statement that both parties seem to be in agreement on is that of Warfield's own position. It is agreed that Warfield taught that the bible was rendered authoritative by the 'externally verified credibility of the apostles as teachers of doctrine'.<sup>24</sup> Sandeen deduces Hodge's position from this extract from his *Systematic Theology*:

'The infallibility and divine authority of the Scriptures are due to the fact that they are the word of God; and they are the word of God because they were given by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost.'<sup>25</sup>

arguing that this shows that, for Hodge, the scriptures are the Word of God because they are inspired. This is then contrasted with the statement of the Westminster Confession which reads:

'We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to an high and reverent esteem of the holy scripture; and the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God; yet, notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of infallible truth, and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.'<sup>26</sup>

Sandeen concludes from these two passages that the Confession clearly teaches that only the witness of the Holy Spirit can convince a man that the Bible is the Word of God, which is not Hodge's view above. Gerstner accuses Sandeen of misrepresenting the text of the Confession by ignoring the fact that this statement is preceded by a recital of scripture proofs that the Bible

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is the Word of God. Now this is a particularly inept argument. First, no amount of mere cataloguing of texts can ever establish the authority of Scripture anyway, and Warfield himself was careful not to fall into that trap. Secondly, the 'Proofs from the Scripture' were not part of the original confession, but added later, and in any case are marginal to the text and cannot be regarded as part of the argument of the Confession. Thirdly, unless one accuses the Confession of internal inconsistency, the statement 'yet, notwithstanding, our full persuasion. . .' is quite unequivocal. So despite Gerstner's protestations, Sandeen's observation that the confession teaches the inner witness of the Spirit stands.

Hodge is not, however, totally consistent, as he later writes:

'If the sacred writers assert that they are the organs of God . . . then, if we believe their divine mission, we must believe what they teach as to the nature of the influence under which they spoke and wrote.'<sup>27</sup>

Gerstner argues that 'if we believe their divine mission' must be equivalent to Warfield's 'externally verified credibility of the apostles as teachers of doctrine'<sup>28</sup> whereas Sandeen takes the same words to indicate the witness of the Spirit that enables men to believe the divine mission.<sup>29</sup> It seems quite amazing that Gerstner can so beligerently make this case, particularly as read in the context of the other quotation from Hodge above, it seems almost overwhelmingly probable that Sandeen is correct. It appears that Gerstner is here engaging in an exercise of 'argument weak here, shout louder'.

From the above discussion it would seem clear that Warfield's position had significantly moved from that of Calvin, The Westminster Confession and Hodge to a reasoned position that did not depend on the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. This does, in fact, accurately reflect his methodology in constructing a doctrine of Infallibility, but it does not completely reflect his own thinking on the nature of scripture. In a most illuminating passage in his essay 'The Church Doctrine of Inspiration' (overlooked, it seems, by both Sandeen and Gerstner) he writes the following.

'We know how, as Christian men, we approach this Holy Book — how unquestionably we receive its statements of fact, bow before its enunciations of duty, tremble before its threatenings, and rest upon its promises. Or, if the subtle spirit of modern doubt has seeped somewhat into our hearts, our memory will easily recall those happier days when we stood as a child at our Christian mother's knee, with lisping lips following the words which her slow finger traced upon this open page, — words that were her support in every trial, and as she so fondly trusted, were to be our guide throughout life. Mother church was speaking to us in that maternal voice, commending to us her vital faith in the Word of God. . . . In such scenes as this is revealed the vital faith of the people of God in the surety and trustworthiness of the Word of God.'<sup>30</sup>

Here we see that Warfield is appealing to basically the same experience as Hodge — we know the Bible is the Word of God because of our experiences of it; the essentially numinous element that speaks to our heart and experience. Warfield never actually uses such an argument to provide authentication for a statement, but there are numerous instances throughout his work where he is clearly presuming the reader to be such a Christian man as he describes, and one is entitled to ask the question ‘How should a person *not* falling into this category react?’. If such a reader were so minded to reject the evidence of the trustworthiness of the apostles as teachers, and indeed of Jesus himself, then clearly the case will fail. Hence it is not unreasonable to argue that, notwithstanding the later development of his argument, his case is in practice, if not in theory, founded on the same basis as Calvin and the Westminster Confession — that of the inner witness of the Holy Spirit that enables one to assent to the basic truths of the gospel as revealed through Christ in the scriptures.

It is interesting to note that a recent writer, D.H. Kelsey, in *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* makes this same point, and also notes that in this instance, of the theologians that he considers, Warfield stands closer to Paul Tillich than to any of the other theologians he examines. To them both ‘. . . scripture is authoritative in virtue of the fact that what it says confronts men as a numinous and holy object.’<sup>31</sup>

### The Case Presented.

As has been mentioned before, Warfield was by no means unaware of the contemporary critical climate concerning the Bible, and is well aware of the bearing that this would have on questions of critical scholarship. In the first few pages of his article ‘The Real Problem of Inspiration’, first published in *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* vol. iv of 1893, he shows evidence of having read, among others, that seminal publication *Lux Mundi*, and also Driver’s *Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament*.<sup>32</sup> This critical situation is part of Warfield’s cultural matrix, and it would be a remarkable man indeed who, intent on showing the errors of prevailing critical views, did not succeed in rejecting some of the sound insights along with the speculation. In fact, Warfield is ready to admit that there are some men to whom a critical treatment of scripture does not mean abandoning a theory of inspiration. He quotes approvingly from Driver: ‘Criticism in the hands of Christian scholars does not banish or destroy the inspiration of the Old Testament; it presupposes it.’<sup>33</sup> However, he begs to differ from Professor Driver’s own view of inspiration.

Warfield is careful to let others know that he does not join with those who recoil in horror at the mere mention of ‘biblical criticism’, in fact he

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welcomes it as a discipline for:

'... it is important to keep ourselves reminded that the doctrine of inspiration which has become established in the Church, is open to all legitimate criticism, and is to continue to be held only as, and so far as, it is ever anew critically tested and approved.'<sup>34</sup>

Despite the fact that even to this day the sort of position that Warfield seeks to uphold on Scripture is shared by many who seem to glory in a fundamentalist anti-intellectualism, Warfield wishes it to be known that he believes that church dogma, while important as such, must ever be rethought and re-evaluated by the church in the light of its increasing critical knowledge. This is a position that Karl Barth was to enunciate clearly half a century later.<sup>35</sup> In fact, Warfield admits that to him the Bible is not fundamental to the Christian faith, but merely derived from it. In a well known open minded passage he says:

'Let it not be said that we found the whole Christian system upon the doctrine of plenary inspiration. We found the whole Christian system upon the doctrine of plenary inspiration as little as we found it upon angelic existences. Were there no such thing as inspiration Christianity would be true, and all its essential doctrines would be credibly witnessed to us in the generally trustworthy reports of the teaching of our Lord and of his authoritative agents in the founding of the Church, preserved in the writings of the apostles and their first followers, and in the historical witness of the living Church.'<sup>36</sup>

This gives us a clue as to the way in which he is going to develop his argument: first he will attempt to show that the biblical documents are 'generally trustworthy', and develop his doctrine from there.

Towards the end of his major article on the subject, Warfield points out that there are, in general, two ways in which one can approach the subject of the inspiration of the Bible. He makes the point that it is very easy to fail to see the wood for the trees, and to be all the time concerned with isolated aspects of biblical phenomena while failing to appreciate the overall impression given by scripture as a whole. His two ways are to either take as a starting point the Bible as 'innocent until proved guilty', discover from it that it teaches its own inspiration, and then to test the facts obtainable from biblical criticism and exegesis: or, critical factors, structure and content can all be treated as equal, and the biblical doctrine of inspiration sought through a comprehensive induction from these facts. He argues that if the latter course is adopted then we are in danger of modifying the teaching by the facts without a clear recognition of what is being done; for then it would be all too easy to dismiss the Scriptures' claim to inerrancy as just one of a group of erect factors, thereby vitiating the whole result. He makes a methodological plea for putting to one side the special claims scripture

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makes about itself, which should be judged against whether the rest of scripture can be seen to be without error. Or rather, as Warfield does not pretend to be able to untangle every critical problem, until it seems likely that every 'error' will be solved, given the time and the information.<sup>37</sup>

Now this would seem to be fair comment. If the Bible does claim a unique status for itself, and the church at least has certainly accorded it such a status, then the factor that gives it this status must be taken into account in critical investigation. For Warfield, who comes to the conclusion that scripture is inerrant, theology will be conducted on quite a different methodological basis as a result of his conclusion. It is adopting such a methodology that leads him to say:

'Scripture is conceived, from the point of view of the writers of the New Testament, not merely as the record of revelations, but as itself part of the redemptive revelation of God; not merely as the record of the redemptive acts by which God is saving the world, but as itself one of these redemptive acts, having its own part to play in the great work of establishing and building up of the kingdom of God.'<sup>38</sup>

For Warfield, there is no distinction between revelation and inspiration.

As has been commented on above, Warfield does not attempt to make the truth of the Christian faith subject to the inspiration of scripture, which he regards as more a matter of apologetics than one that is of much importance to the average Christian believer, and it is with such a believer in mind that he puts forward three reasons why the Bible must be trustworthy:

*First*, as not everyone is a scholar the truth of the Christian faith cannot be grasped only by the learned. The Word of God must be available in a form that all can grasp and be grasped by.

*Secondly*, we would have no complete assurance of our faith if we had to trust to critical scholarship to elucidate details of the faith – details that often change: hence that which we now believe may at a later day that which we have to ask the scholars for an opinion.

*Thirdly*, as the bible must be trustworthy (for reason two above) and as it teaches its own infallibility, then it is infallible.<sup>39</sup>

The argument, as it is shown here, is found in a short article entitled 'The Church Doctrine of Inspiration', originally published in 1894. Nowhere in this article (although it can be found in others) is there any attempt to establish the general trustworthiness of the Bible, except by referring to the tradition of the church and quick comments on Schleiermacher (to whom he somewhat suprisingly gave the epithet 'great'), Sanday and Rationalistic theology. The three points in the paragraph above is his argument. It is quite clear, seeing them isolated like this, how much it is the need for certainty that is being expressed – which is man's need, as was noted above.

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His first point is certainly true of the Christian faith, but it is not a necessary truth of religion, but only derived from the particular nature of the Judaeo-Christian concept of God. It is both the glory and the scandal of the cross that a believer may know that it is by no means on account of his intellect that he has been saved – rather it is despite any effort that he might make, and the grounds of his assurance rests not in a book, but in faith in Christ, through the Holy Spirit. Our experience of God's love and grace is not confined to a book, but witnessed to in our hearts. And Warfield himself is aware of this, as was seen in the passage quoted earlier concerning ' . . . standing as a child at our Christian mother's knee': and that passage actually appears at the start of this very article that has been referred to. The second point, and the third which is dependent on it, is entirely a plea for certainty. Commenting on our natural human search for certainty and security Barth says:

"The victory and fulfilment and presence of the Truth is only ours by hope. The truth would not be the truth, if we, as it were, could apprehend it directly. How could the truth be God, if it were for us one option among others? . . . . . "hope that is seen is not hope." Direct communication from God is no divine communication"<sup>40</sup>

### The Teaching of Scripture.

Warfield uses a large number of biblical texts to support his case, but most of these are not developed in a systematic manner. In fact, in one article Warfield contends that it is not necessary formally to demonstrate that the church's historic doctrine of plenary inspiration is the Bible's own doctrine, arguing that it is quite obvious, admitted even by those who would deny its truth.<sup>41</sup> There is, however, one article where he does make a systematic attempt at such a proof, entitled 'The Biblical Idea of Inspiration', which first appeared in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, (ed. James Orr, vol. 3 [Chicago 1915]), under the title 'Inspiration'.<sup>42</sup> Here Warfield develops three major biblical texts.

2 Timothy 3:16 'All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness. . .'

Warfield starts off with the very valid point that the word *theopneustos* should not be translated 'inspired by God', but rather 'breathed out by God', the usual English translation arising out of the Vulgate 'divinitus inspirata'. This, as he points out, is the only instance of the word 'inspired' in the bible, and 'inspiration' only occurs once, in Job 32:8(AV) and here it is better translated as 'breath', as in the RV and RSV. Hence he declares that a doctrine of inspiration is misleading, as it is

not that (scripture) is breathed into by God or is the product of the

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Divine inbreathing into its human authors, but it is breathed out by God, God breathed, the product of the creative breath of God'.<sup>43</sup>

Having made this point, he does not then go to advocate the removal of 'inspiration' from the conservative vocabulary but happily uses it extensively, both in this article and others. It is a feature of many conservative users of the word that it is used as a synonym for 'inerrant', 'inspiration' for some reason being preferred, perhaps because it indicates that the content is of more than a purely human contribution. In view of Warfield's observations on *theopneustos* it is a pity that 'inspiration' cannot be firmly declared a non-biblical concept: this would helpfully clear the ground for constructively discussing the role of scripture as a theological norm.

What is important to Warfield in this verse is that the scripture proceeds direct from God, and he contrasts the *hiera grammata* and *pasa graphē* with the oral tradition that Timothy has 'learned and firmly believed', maintaining that this shows the supremacy of scripture. The text will not really bear this, and in addition it begs the question of what this oral tradition was — it was probably to a large extent made up of the traditions that were later enshrined in one or other of the gospels.

The question of the exact translation of this verse is not at all easy to solve, and Warfield is aware of the possibility of either a predicative or an attributive role for *theopneustos*, and claiming that it is essentially immaterial which is taken, prefers the attributive. Is it so immaterial, however? There is a long history of the predicative role, from Barrett back to Theodore of Mopsuestia, and it ought to be given some consideration. If we translate this verse as 'every God-breathed scripture'<sup>44</sup> and take it in the context of the verse, that of instruction of the church (it being unlikely that Timothy was meant to keep it to himself, on a conservative view of the authorship: on a more usual critical view it was probably written to a congregation in part anyway), and keep in mind that in the church the only way that the majority would get any instruction was orally, then this verse could refer to the activity of God in teaching the church through the scriptures being taught and applied to them. This has the advantage of being in excellent apposition to the traditions that Timothy has believed and learned: the point of the verse being that Timothy should not neglect the Old Testament, as it also contains all that is necessary to salvation and ethical conduct when 'God-breathed'. So *both* scripture and the oral tradition are authoritative theological norms. To Warfield, because scripture comes with divine power then it must be infallible; but this is again an appeal to certainty.

2 Peter 1:19-21 'And we have the prophetic word made more sure . . . First you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulses of man,

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but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

The words translated by 'came' and 'moved' in the last verse both have the root verb *phero*, and Warfield here points out that it is the Holy Spirit that bears the word of prophecy, not the prophet.

'What is borne is taken up by the bearer, and conveyed by the bearer's power, not its own, to the bearer's goal, not its own. The men who spoke from God are here declared, therefore, to have been taken up by the Holy Spirit and brought by His power to the goal of His choosing.'<sup>45</sup>

This he interprets as meaning that, although spoken by the instrumentality of men, it is, by virtue of the fact that it is borne by the Holy Spirit, a divine word.

'It will be observed that the proximate stress is laid here, not on the spiritual value of scripture (though that, too, is seen in the background), but on the Divine trustworthiness of scripture.'<sup>45</sup>

This is, in some ways, the most interesting of the verses he interprets, not least for some of the assumptions implicit in his exegesis.

'Prophetic word' is interpreted to mean scripture in its entirety, on the basis that 'the entirety of scripture is elsewhere conceived and spoken of as prophetic.'<sup>46</sup> There is no attempt to justify this sweeping statement, which is almost certainly an impossible task anyway. In the context of the passage it seems clearly to refer to those passages of the Old Testament that could be interpreted as being specifically prophetic, not scripture in its entirety. Warfield is also somewhat equivocal in his use of 'trustworthiness', as at one level it means that as God is trustworthy, so must be his word, whereas for Warfield it also must mean that the word must be inerrant. This equivocalness can perhaps be seen most clearly in his treatment of the role of the Holy Spirit. For if the prophetic word is borne by the Holy Spirit via the instrumentality of men, it cannot then rest enshrined in words; it must also be borne by the Holy Spirit to its destination in the hearts of men – and it is this latter step that Warfield declines to take. It is then a work of the Holy Spirit that enables men to apprehend the prophetic word of God, and hence the words of scripture as well as the prophet are instruments to the attaining of that end. Here again we see the inner witness of the Holy Spirit, as testified by the Westminster Confession, that both Warfield and Gerstner are trying to eliminate as grounds of authority.

*John 10:34ff* "Jesus answered them 'Is it not written in your law, "I said, you are gods?" . . .'"

The important aspect of this passage is not any claim of Jesus for himself, but his use of scripture. His defence is an appeal to scripture, and according to Warfield, Jesus adduces the scriptures as law on the basis that the quotation was not from the Law, but the Psalms. 'In other words, He



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ascribes legal authority to the entirety of scripture.<sup>47</sup> This on its own seems a weak argument, as Jesus could be seen as arguing from the position of the Pharisees and not necessarily endorsing their view, but pointing out that his position is consistent with their source of authority. From these verses alone, it cannot be deduced that Jesus ascribed legal authority to all scripture, and Warfield admits that it could be an *ad hominem* argument. He insists, however, that this must be seen in the light of Jesus' cumulative use of Scripture, particularly his frequent citation with the formula *gegraptai*. This is without a doubt Warfield's strongest point, and has been considered at length by a recent conservative author, who fully endorses Warfield's view.<sup>48</sup> There is not opportunity here to investigate this issue more fully, but it is worth noting that Warfield was not unaware that Jesus could hardly have had any other view of scripture than that of his time.

'The view of scripture He announces was, no doubt, the view of His day and generation as well as His own view. But there is no reason to doubt that it was held by Him, not because it was the current view, but because, in His divine-human knowledge, He knew it to be true; and even in His humiliation He is the faithful and true witness. And in any event we should bear in mind that this was the view of the resurrected as well as the humiliated Christ.'<sup>49</sup>

Warfield does not comment on the times when Christ could be held to have a more radical view of scripture. In, for example, Jesus' treatment of the Mosaic view of marriage it could be argued that Jesus was pinpointing an *ad hominem* element in the Law, and the pericope of the woman taken in adultery, which can be seen as an abrogation of the Mosaic Law, is also ignored. Admittedly, this pericope has failed to secure reliable primitive attestation, but nevertheless it has a strong claim to be the *ipsissima vox* of Jesus<sup>50</sup> – which is probably why scribes have never been inclined to drop the passage. J.W. Wenham in this case is compelled to admit that it should 'probably not be treated as scripture.'<sup>51</sup>

### Mechanical Inspiration.

As has been seen, the Princeton doctrine was a doctrine of verbal inspiration: the Bible is externally verified as a reliable source of history and doctrine, and its inspiration must therefore rest in the words. However, on the basis of the texts expounded above, one can ask whether this concept of verbal inspiration was not foreign to the biblical writings. The concept of the Word of God in the Old Testament is supremely active and creative (or destructive) and only exists in verbal form as the means of achieving its end – God's purposes. It is a living thing, and its interaction with men proceeds from God to man, and it seems to be a somewhat improper question to ask what exactly is its status in the journey between the two. A doctrine of

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verbal inspiration leads inevitably to accusations of a mechanical theory of inspiration, but Warfield and the Princeton school were quite explicit in their denial of such a theory. Such a charge is frequently made against modern defenders of the doctrine, and yet is unfounded. The mode of inspiration is carefully distinguished from its effect: 'the mode of inspiration . . . is inscrutable' and is to be left 'draped in mystery'.<sup>52</sup> Warfield was well aware of the differences in style and emphasis of the biblical writers, holding that the miracle of the effect of inspiration is that God had so prepared the human writers through their personality and style for the very emphasis and colouration that he required in scripture – and that these were all part of God's revelation, not an impurity to be separated out.<sup>53</sup> As far as the charge of mechanical inspiration is concerned, Warfield and the Princeton school are innocent, although other proponents of verbal innerancy have not been so careful.

### Dealing with Difficulties.

Warfield provides a statement of that which scholarship must show if his doctrine is not to stand in his inaugural address on induction to the Chair of New Testament Literature and Exegesis at Western Theological Seminary.

'In order, therefore, to shake this doctrine, biblical criticism must show: either, that the New Testament writers do not claim inspiration; or that this claim was rejected by the contemporary church; or, that it is palpably negatived by the fact that the books containing it are forgeries; or, equally clearly negatived by the fact that they contain, along with the claim, errors of fact or contradictions of statement.'<sup>54</sup>

Leaving aside any reservations about the use of the word 'inspiration' as a biblical concept, and the undoubted fact that the traditional teaching of the church has been that the bible is the fully inspired word of God, we find that Warfield's case rests on historical verification and self-consistency. Now on the matter of historical verification, he had surprisingly little to say, and does not attempt to tackle in any systematic manner the many points of seeming contradiction. It should be remembered that he writes out of an age where historical and archaeological discoveries were producing evidence that the bible was more reliable than critical scholars had been prepared to admit, and he views such progress – in particular the rehabilitation of Luke as a historian – as a sign that other points would be cleared up in due time. 'We do not need to have closed up every little critical point before being able to accept a doctrine as true'<sup>55</sup> – which is reasonable enough, or no-one would ever be able to get anywhere.

His view of history, and hence of hermeneutics, is curiously flat,

governed by his insistence that divine teaching cannot be subject to critical judgement. For example, he discusses at some length the problems of accommodation theories, using contemporary theologian James Stuart's work as an example.<sup>56</sup> Stuart, in an exercise in hermeneutics, rejects the view that there was any knowing accommodation in the biblical writers on the grounds that this would destroy our confidence in them, and opts for the involuntary assimilation of Jewish and Hellenistic concepts in the New Testament writings. The job of the scholar is to try and isolate any such purely contemporary colouration from the biblical teaching. Warfield totally rejects such an approach, but appears quite blind to the initial quest of separating true from false: to him it must all be true, as critical judgement can play no part in faith, claiming that 'to correct the teaching of scripture is to preclaim scripture untrustworthy'.<sup>57</sup> By 'correct' we need to understand 'modify' or even 'explain', and we see here the nature of the hermeneutic he proposes. For on this basis as soon as we admit just one instance – for example, Paul's teaching on women having their heads covered in church – that is of purely local or temporal significance, then Warfield's whole structure is in danger. To their credit, Warfield and the more strict of his followers are aware of this and will insist that such rules are binding, but many modern followers display their inconsistency in such areas.

Not only is his view of history flattened, but he also appears to make no distinction between history and dogmatics. He confidently asserts as a paradigm to the doctrine of Scripture the doctrines of the Trinity, original sin, total depravity, the dual nature of Christ and eternal punishment, commenting:

'Who doubts [such doctrines] . . . raise objections in the natural heart? We accept these doctrines and others . . . such as God loves sinful man . . . because our confidence in the New Testament as a doctrinal guide [is so compelling] that we believe its teachings despite the difficulties they raise.'<sup>58</sup>

If we believe these doctrines, he asks, we surely ought to believe what scripture teaches about itself; even if we cannot understand it fully. What Warfield does not seem prepared to admit is that these deductions are systematisations *from* scripture, and not the sole result of the exegesis of the text.

It was noted before that Warfield does not, very reasonably, expect to answer every little question that crops up. He is content to wait for the answers to some. However, his methodology is rapidly driving him into an unassailable position. He claims that in assessing the evidence for and against the biblical doctrine of inspiration we must recognise the fact that the evidence for is far greater than the evidence against, and hence, on balance the argument goes in the doctrine's favour. But this is quite contrary to his

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own plea that the teaching of scripture regarding itself should be taken separately: which plea we allowed. If such teaching is taken as a special class of phenomena, then the doctrine we deduce from it must be in accord with *all* the evidence, not just the majority of it. This is analogous to the procedure in establishing a 'law' of science, where all the facts must be considered and capable of explanation: any one piece of evidence that will not fit the theory requires the rethinking of the whole theory. Warfield actually uses this argument in reverse in the same article, where he asserts that we do not give assent to a doctrine in proportion to the frequency of its occurrence: to be asserted once is sufficient.<sup>60</sup> Warfield is trying both to have his cake and to eat it.

His methodology is seen to be complete when, after admitting that if we had a clear contradiction of the biblical doctrine of inspiration,

'. . . we would, no doubt, need to give up the Biblical doctrine of inspiration; but with it we must also give up our confidence in the Biblical writers as teachers of doctrine. And if we cannot reasonably give up the latter, neither can we reasonably allow that the phenomena apparently inconsistent with the former are real, or really inconsistent with it.'<sup>61</sup>

Warfield has here brought the Princeton apologetic to a triumphant conclusion by so defining the problem that no possible error could be discussed, and this is a direct result of the centrality to the Princeton position of the *a priori* belief that God could not, would not, convey truth through an errant document.

### Conclusion.

It was stated in the preface that the argument of this article would be confined to Warfield's own work, leaving aside the many opportunities for further comment. It remains now to point out more clearly the areas that have been shown to be in need of further consideration.

The essential role of hermeneutics in biblical interpretation has been touched on in considering Warfield's use of Scripture, and reference could here be made to the works of Kelsey and Nineham, and the WCC 'Faith and Order' papers of 1967 and 1971 (see bibliography), where this on-going debate can be fruitfully explored. We have also seen clearly how the anti-deist stance, based on the Scottish common sense philosophy, led Princeton to assert the complete primacy of reason, and set them off on a totally illegitimate quest for certainty. This primacy of reason had to be allied with an infallible Bible or there was no way of obtaining certainty.

This exposes a major area for future study, that of reason, revelation and the scriptures. Probably the most damning charge that can be laid against the Princeton school is that, to reverse a phrase of Kant's, by making

infinite room for reason, they made no room for faith.<sup>62</sup>

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– a collection of various papers on the subject, with an introduction by C. van Till. The great majority of Warfield's works were published posthumously under the terms of his will by OUP, New York, in 1932. Many have been re-published by the Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., of which this is one. They have, however, been re-edited into different volumes and so care is needed in referring to editions. In all cases I refer to the Presbyterian and Reformed edition of 1948.
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9. *loc. cit.*, p. 259.
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However, I do not wish to underestimate Calvin's rational basis for trusting scripture. 'Scripture bears upon the face of it as clear evidence of its truth as white and black do of their colour, sweet and bitter of their taste.' (*Inst.* I vii. 2) This is very like Thomas Reid on moral judgement.
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21. *op. cit.*, I vii 4.
22. E.R. Sandeen, *op. cit.*, p. 118.
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24. *op. cit.*, p. 118; E.R. Sandeen, *op. cit.*, p. 120.
25. C. Hodge, cited in Sandeen, *op. cit.*, p. 118.
26. *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, I.V.
27. C. Hodge, cited in Sandeen, *op. cit.*, p. 119.
28. J.H. Gerstner, *op. cit.*, p. 118.
29. E.R. Sandeen, *op. cit.*, p. 119.
30. B.B. Warfield *Inspiration and Authority*, p. 107 This is the work to which all the following Warfield citations refer.  
It is very interesting to see in this passage that Warfield is appealing not to his own experience but to his mother's, which transmits to him the teaching of Mother Church. He is appealing not to direct inspiration by the Holy Spirit so much as the witness of the Spirit through the church.  
I part company with Kelsey (*q.v.*) on the interpretation of this passage when he claims that as such an experience is no longer in any way part of our culture, it cannot provide any basis for authentication. While Warfield has written in a rather quaint style, it is still true that in many circles there is still a healthy and reverent respect for the Bible.
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33. *op. cit.*, p. 172, n.8.
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42. *op. cit.*, p. 131-166.
43. *op. cit.*, p. 133.
44. For example, see C.K. Barrett *The Pastoral Epistles*, p. 114 (London 1963).
45. B.B. Warfield, *op. cit.*, p. 137.
46. *op. cit.*, p. 135f.
47. *op. cit.*, p. 138f.
48. J.W. Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (London 1971).
49. B.B. Warfield, *op. cit.*, p. 143f.
50. B.M. Metzger *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (1971).  
p. 219-221.
51. J.W. Wenham, *op. cit.*, p. 182.
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53. *op. cit.*, p. 155f.

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54. *op. cit.*, p. 423.
55. *op. cit.*, p. 214.
56. *op. cit.*, p. 190.
57. *op. cit.*, p. 204.
58. *op. cit.*, p. 215f.
59. *op. cit.*, p. 219.
60. *op. cit.*, p. 209.
61. *op. cit.*, p. 220.
62. However, one way of reading the preceding citation is that, for Warfield, faith was involved precisely in that they were unable to contemplate giving up their position, and trusting that seemingly inconsistent phenomena could be ultimately reconciled. See also the citation in ref. 30 above.

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