

# BENJAMIN B. WARFIELD'S VIEW OF FAITH AND HISTORY\*

## A Critique in the Light of the New Testament

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We evangelicals have drawn heavily upon B. B. Warfield's formulation of the Biblical doctrine of inspiration — and rightly so — in order to construct and maintain our own distinctive evangelical position. However, it is becoming increasingly apparent today that one's theological position is not only determined by one's understanding of the authority of the Bible but also by the way one relates faith to history. Just as Warfield has helped us in formulating our doctrine of inspiration, so he can help us with our understanding of faith and history, for he worked out the doctrine of inspiration within a very basic conviction about the relationship between faith and history.

### *I. Warfield's View of Faith and History*

The sum of Warfield's conviction regarding this relationship was that faith which credits the Bible as the verbally-inspired, inerrant Word of God rests ultimately upon the empirical stuff of history and the world around us. In his essay, "The Real Problem of Inspiration," Warfield said:

It is not on some shadowy and doubtful evidence that the doctrine (of verbal inspiration) is based — not on an *a priori* conception of what inspiration ought to be . . . but first on the confidence which we have in the writers of the New Testament as doctrinal guides, and ultimately on whatever evidence of whatever kind and force (that) exists to justify that confidence.<sup>1</sup>

Just what these evidences are which justify confidence in the teaching of the Biblical writers regarding inspiration, as well as every other doctrine, is clearly stated in Warfield's treatise on Calvin's doctrine of the knowledge of God. It is the marks of the Bible's divinity, or the *indicia*, as Warfield termed them, which in and of themselves convey the inescapable evidence that credits the Biblical writers as trustworthy. A list of these *indicia* was given in the Westminster Confession, chapter I, section 5:

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,

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1. Benjamin B. Warfield, "The Real Problem of Inspiration," *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, Samuel G. Craig (ed.); Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1948, p. 214.

the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the world (which is to give glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, and many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof are arguments whereby (the Bible) doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God.

It will be remembered, however, that Calvin taught that the primary way in which the Holy Spirit leads one to knowledge that the Bible is the Word of God is not by quelling man's rebellion against truth so that he accedes to the overpowering evidences which exist in the historical, empirical realm and which are conveyed by the *indicia*; rather, this knowledge comes as the Holy Spirit immediately gives men the knowledge that God Himself has that the Bible is His Word. In the *Institutes*, I, vii, 5, Calvin said,

They who have been taught by the Spirit feel an entire acquiescence in the Scripture, and that it is self-authenticated, carrying with it its own evidence, and ought not to be made the subject of demonstration and arguments from reason . . . We esteem the certainty that we have received (Scripture) from God's own mouth by the ministry of men, to be superior to that of any human judgement, and equal to that of an intuitive perception of God himself in it . . . It is such a persuasion, therefore, as requires no reasons; such a knowledge as is supported by the highest reason, in which, indeed, the mind rests with greater security and constancy than in any reasons; it is, finally, such a sentiment as cannot be produced but by a revelation from heaven.

But Warfield strove valiantly, if not successfully, to argue that what Calvin really meant by these words was that the Holy Spirit works to convince men of the truth of the Bible only by causing them to own up to the marks of divinity which are already patently evident in Scripture. He said:

It would seem evident that on Calvin's ground the *indicia* would have their full part to play here, and that we must say that, when the soul is renewed by the Holy Spirit to a sense for the divinity of Scripture, it is through the *indicia* that it is brought to its proper confidence in the divinity of Scripture. In treating the *indicia* Calvin does not, however, declare this in so many words. He sometimes even appears to speak of them rather as if they lay side by side with the testimony of the Spirit than acted along with it as co-factors in the production of the supreme effort.<sup>2</sup>

2. Warfield, "The Knowledge of God," *Calvin and Augustine*. Samuel G. Craig (ed.); Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1956. pp. 87 f.

Here we see the strength of Warfield's conviction that knowledge of the trustworthiness of the Biblical writers comes not immediately from God by way of a so-called "testimony of the Holy Spirit" but solely by the evidences already in the *indicia*. The Holy Spirit works to overcome the rebellion of the human heart which otherwise would not believe the things of God even if the supporting evidence were one rising from the dead.

Thus, on the basis of the *indicia* alone, Warfield asserted the truth of many verses in the Bible which have something to say about the nature of the Bible as being the inspired Word of God. An example of these verses — henceforth termed the "doctrinal verses" — would be II Timothy 3:16 f.: "All Scripture is inspired of God . . ." Because the truth of these doctrinal verses came simply by inference from the historical and empirical data of the *indicia*, Warfield declared that the evidence for this truth, while yielding a very high probability, could never lead to the status of absolute demonstrability. Philosopher that he was, Warfield knew that conclusions based on empiricism could have a high probability but never an absolute certainty. According to Warfield,

. . . The evidence for [the] truth [of the plenary inspiration Scripture] is . . . precisely that evidence in weight and amount, which vindicates for us the trustworthiness of Christ and His apostles as teachers of doctrine. Of course this evidence is not in the strict logical sense "demonstrative"; it is "probable" evidence. It therefore leaves open the metaphysical possibility of its being mistaken.<sup>3</sup>

To sum up: Warfield grounded faith purely on the *indicia* of Scripture which are a part of the empirical stuff of the world around us. For Warfield, faith was simply the reflex of history, for he would have joined with Caspar Wistar Hodge in saying, "Apart from the blinding effects of sin, [faith] could not be withheld when the evidence is present."<sup>4</sup>

## II. The Problem in Warfield

But to base faith exclusively upon the empirical can produce the problem described by Kierkegaard in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* when he argued that faith, wanting nothing less than what constitutes eternal happiness, cannot be satisfied with the approximation of even a high probability. Warfield sought to avoid this problem by declaring that the degree of certainty yielded by the weight and amount of evidence in the *Indicia* was always greater than that supporting any

3. Warfield, "The Real Problem," p. 218.

4. Caspar Wistar Hodge, "The Witness of the Holy Spirit to the Bible," *Princeton Theological Review*, XI (1913), p. 64.

difficulty in the phenomena of Scripture which by itself would contradict the Bible's teaching regarding its inerrancy. He argued that any "alleged phenomena contradictory to the Biblical doctrine of inspiration . . . cannot be logically or rationally recognized unless the evidence for it be greater in amount and weight than the whole mass of evidence for the trustworthiness of the Biblical writers as teachers of doctrine."<sup>5</sup> "The possibility of [discovering such phenomena] . . . must, no doubt, be firmly faced in our investigation of the Bible," declared Warfield, but he argued that since "the strength of conviction which [the evidence in the *indicia*] is adapted to produce many and should be practically equal to that produced by demonstration itself,"<sup>6</sup> the chances of this possibility ever happening were excluded for all practical purposes.

But one wonders whether this solved the problem posed by approximation and whether Warfield could really be sure that problems in the phenomena would never possess sufficient certainty at least to counterbalance the certainty advanced by the *indicia*. Apparently Edward J. Young does not feel that his faith would be secure enough in such an understanding of faith and history, for in the paper he read at the 1966 conference at Wenham on the Inspiration of Scripture, he said:

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 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>7</sup>

Through basing the truth of the doctrinal verses "simply and solely upon the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit," as Calvin and the Westminster Confession apparently did, Young is then able to know the truth of these verses with a certainty which, as he stresses in his book *Thy Word is Truth*, cannot depend ultimately upon reasoning from the *indicia* but simply upon obedience to the voice of God. Young declares, "God alone must be the fount of all our knowledge. If therefore he tells us, as he does in the work of the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit, that the

5. Warfield, "The Real Problem," p. 219.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 218 f.

7. 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.

8. Young, *Thy Word is Truth*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957. p. 193.

Scriptures are His Word, we must obey his voice.”<sup>8</sup> With the doctrinal verses thus grounded upon such a certainty, Young’s faith in the trustworthiness of Scripture can never be shaken by any problem in the phenomena of Scripture, since the evidence by which such a problem exists is based on such vastly inferior sources of knowledge as the working of human reason on the basis of empiricism.

Young’s procedure certainly puts faith in a harbor that is safe from all the storms of historical criticism and from the anxiety that the approximation of empiricism brings. But the problem is, Does not this procedure remove the basis of faith from history and thus threaten the Scriptural insistence that revelation is mediated to us wholly through the stuff of history (an insistence summed up in the sublime statement of John 1:14, “The Word became flesh”)? And another related question, “Does not such a dependence simply and solely upon the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit” have to mean that knowledge that the Bible is the Word of God is really not accessible within Scripture itself but must instead be mediated by the Holy Spirit? Young insists that the testimony of the Spirit “is not the communication to us of information beyond what is contained in the Bible,”<sup>9</sup> because he wants, rightly, to avoid the Barthian error of ever regarding the Bible as becoming the Word of God. But how can he say that the testimony of the Spirit imparts no new knowledge and also that we cannot gain this knowledge sufficiently by reasoning and inference from the *indicia*? By themselves the doctrinal verses do not convey knowledge of the truth that God is asserting them any more than similar statements in the Koran convey the truth of those statements. The Bible *itself* can only convey the truth of such statements through the *indicia*, but if, as Young affirms, inference and human reason cannot acquire this knowledge sufficiently from the *indicia*, then such knowledge is not resident in the Bible and must come instead through the Holy Spirit, which is what Barth affirms.

It is also difficult to understand how Kenneth Kantzer can have the Holy Spirit complementing the truth of history in establishing the full authority of the Bible:

In man’s personal response to the Christ whom he meets in the pages of Scripture, the Spirit bears testimony by creating new data, the data of personal experience, which complements and corroborates the truth of history.<sup>10</sup>

*Note.* Evangelicals who reaffirm Calvin’s teaching in I, vii, 5 of the *Institutes* that men come to a knowledge of the Bible as the Word of God solely through the testimony of the Holy Spirit should reflect upon the fact that Karl Barth con-

9. Young, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

10. Kenneth S. Kantzer, “The Christ-Revelation as Act and Interpretation,” *Jesus of Nazareth: Saviour and Lord*. C. F. H. Henry (ed.); Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1966, p. 264.

cludes his section on the inspiration of Scripture with a reaffirmation of this passage as summing up his basic stand with regard to inspiration. (*Church Dogmatics* I, 2, pp. 536 f.)

### III. A Proposed Corrective to Warfield

Like everyone, I want a Bible whose inerrancy provides a sure resting place for faith. But I cannot find such a haven by following the radical change of course that Young suggests for Warfield. It seems to me that Young achieves this rest by removing knowledge of the authority of Biblical revelation from the stuff of history. I prefer to follow Warfield, who keeps the knowledge of this authority in history by asserting that the very historical and grammatical data of the Bible, which is the residue of revelational history, carries with it certain marks of divinity whose existence can only be explained as the result of the supernatural working of God. From this we know that the Bible's doctrinal verses are of God and therefore true in what they assert about Scripture.

These doctrinal verses unmistakably teach that the Bible gives men infallible, inerrant teaching about God, about man's lost condition, and how he comes to full salvation in Christ. Paul said that the Scriptures are able to make men wise unto salvation through faith in Christ (II Tim. 3:15), and this can only mean that all the Biblical assertions which teach or rightly imply knowledge that makes men wise unto salvation are absolutely inerrant, for how could fallible statements yield wisdom?

Warfield, however, inferred from the plenary verbal inspiration, unmistakably taught by the doctrinal verses, that all Biblical statements whether they pertain to knowledge that makes man wise unto salvation or to such subjects as botany, meteorology, or paleontology are equally true. He affirmed "the complete trustworthiness of Scripture in all elements and in every, even circumstantial statement . . ." <sup>11</sup> But I would point out that Warfield also strongly affirmed that our understanding of the nature of the Bible is to be determined simply by the teaching of the doctrinal verses and that we cannot let the phenomena of the Bible correct this teaching without destroying the trustworthiness of the Bible's teaching about inspiration and every other doctrine. However, our inferences from the doctrinal verses are to be "modified" <sup>12</sup> and "corrected" <sup>13</sup> by a constant reexamination of the doctrinal verses and by the phenomena. Therefore I am sure Warfield would agree that if the doctrinal verses explicitly taught only the inerrancy of revelational matter — matters that make men wise unto salvation, and that if the

11. B. B. Warfield, "Recent Theological Literature," *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review*, IV (1839). p. 499.

12. Warfield, "The Real Problem," p. 204

13. *Ibid.*, p. 206.

phenomena bore this out, loyalty to Biblical authority would demand that we define inerrancy accordingly.

Let us observe that when the doctrinal verses teach or imply inerrancy, it is always in connection with revelational knowledge, not in connection with knowledge which makes a man wise to botany, meteorology, cosmology, or paleontology, i. e., to knowledge which is non-revelational simply because it is readily accessible to men. Thus the truth of even the tiniest aspects of the Pentateuch, which truth is asserted in the statement, "Not one jot or tittle shall pass from the law until all is accomplished," is applied in the context of Matthew 5:18 to refer to the inviolability and inerrancy of the commandments of the Old Testament law. To make this verse teach that statements and inferences from Genesis regarding paleontology, cosmology, and meteorology are true is more than what it in its context expressly teaches. Likewise when Jesus said in John 10:35 that "Scripture cannot be broken," the teaching of the Old Testament which he was affirming as true is the revelational matter, set forth in Psalm 82, that men are gods in the sense that they have the right as the ministers of God to judge over their fellow men. Note too how II Timothy 3:16-17 asserts the truth of Scripture in the revelational matters of doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness.

Warfield and many others, however, feel that the inference is inescapable that if God verbally inspired every statement in Scripture then non-revelational statements must be as inerrant as revelational ones. But why is it not at least as reasonable to infer from inspiration that the God who lovingly willed to communicate revelational truth to men deliberately accommodated his language in non-revelational matters to the way the original readers viewed the world about them, so as to enhance the communication of revelational truth, by which alone men could be saved? If communication is possible only by building on what the hearer already knows, how could God have communicated revelational truth without couching it within statements which agreed with the way the original readers were prone to understand their world?

For example, Jesus found it necessary to illustrate the small beginnings from which the kingdom of God would expand and the little amount of faith that could nevertheless remove mountains by referring to what his hearers considered to be the smallest seed (Matt. 13:32; 17:20). Although the mustard seed is not really the smallest of all seeds,<sup>14</sup> yet Jesus referred to it as such because to the Jewish mind of Jesus' day, as is indicated by several passages from the Talmud, the mustard seed denoted the smallest thing the eye could detect.<sup>15</sup> Were Jesus not to have accommodated himself thus to the Jewish mind but

14. *ThWB* VI, 288.

15. Strack-Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum N. T.*, I, 699.

to have drawn instead upon his omniscience to state what was indeed the smallest seed, what he said would then have failed to enhance communication with his hearers about the all-important revelational matters of faith and the kingdom of God, for his statement would have meant nothing to them. In fact, to have gone contrary to their mind on what was the smallest seed would have so diverted their attention from the knowledge that would bring salvation to their souls that they might well have failed to hear these all-important revelational truths.

Surely God and Jesus subserved the interests of truth more by accommodating themselves to the people's understanding of botany than they would have by being as careful to be inerrant in this non-revelation matter as they were in revelational ones. As Bernard Ramm has said:

No objection can be brought against the inerrancy of the Bible because it is a culturally conditioned revelation. The Bible uses the terms and expressions of the times of its writers. Any revelation must be so accommodated to the human mind. . . . When the religious liberal renounces much of the Bible because it is culturally conditioned, he fails to understand that inspiration uses cultural terms and expressions to convey an infallible revelation.<sup>16</sup>

Likewise we can also agree with Calvin's handling of the divergence between Hebrews 11:21 and the Masoretic text of Genesis 47:31:

The Apostle (sic) hesitated not to apply to his purpose what was commonly received: he was indeed writing to the Jews; but they who were dispersed into the various countries had changed their own language for the Greek. And we know that the Apostles were not so scrupulous in this respect, as not to accommodate themselves to the unlearned, who had as yet need of milk; . . . But, in reality, the difference is but little; for the main thing was that Jacob worshipped. . . .<sup>17</sup>

Thus the slight corrective to Warfield which I would propose is to understand that verbal plenary inspiration involves accommodation to the thinking of the original readers in non-revelational matters. It should be noted that in advancing this corrective I have not changed the basic outline of Warfield's hermeneutic in the least, for like Warfield I have based the truth of the doctrinal verses upon the *indicia*,<sup>18</sup> and

16. Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd ed.; Boston: W. A. Wilde Co., 1956, p. 192.

17. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*, trans. by John Owen, reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948, *ad loc.*

18. For a broader discussion of how the *indicia* include the fact of the resurrection of Christ and how one argues from the resurrection to the truth of the doctrinal verses see my *Easter Faith and History*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965, pp. 226 ff.; 237-41.



then have followed all that the doctrinal verses say but nothing more in my consideration of the inerrancy of Scripture.

Slight though this corrective may be, yet the advantages gained are considerable. (1) The possibility that difficulties in the phenomena of Scripture could have sufficient certainty to upset the doctrinal verses and with them, my faith, is much less than it was with Warfield. Such difficulties will lie in those statements of Scripture which refer to areas of knowledge where either scientific or historical control are possible, but since such areas, for the most part, do not deal with revelational truths, what happens there cannot affect faith.

(2) One can be relaxed in the presence of all scientific and historical inquiries, even those which impinge on subjects alluded to in Scripture, for so much of faith is based on statements in the Bible that refer to matters which are outside the reach of scientific or historical control, e.g., "Christ died for my sins," "God is love," "I have a building of God eternal in the heavens." But this is certainly not to make a complete dichotomy between faith and history, for there are revelational statements in the Bible that are subject to historical control, the chief example of which is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Here one must examine this obviously revelational matter as an historian, and if faith is the reflex of history, one should let one's faith stand or fall with the verdict of historical reasoning. Like Paul, one must always say, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (I Cor. 15:17).

(3) By staying with Warfield's empiricism, in the manner just described, revelational knowledge is gained fundamentally in the same way as historical and scientific knowledge. Just as one knows that the teachings of the Bible are true by induction from the *indicia* (or from the historical-grammatical residue from the resurrection of Christ), so one knows about science or history by induction from the world about one. Since the knowledge of revelation and the knowledge of science and history are simply the results of induction from what is, the knowledge of both may be pursued with equal avidity. While revelational knowledge will, by its very nature, provide the overarching world view in which the smaller details of history and science will find their place, yet both may be pursued with the confidence that truth is one. Indeed, if one starts simply with what is, how can there be fear that one will arrive at things which contradict?

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