

B. B. Warfield on the Trinity

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Trinitarian concerns loom large in B. B. Warfield.¹ First and foremost a “Christologian,” yet as an heir of the best of reformed orthodoxy, Warfield manifests throughout his works an enthusiastic and robust Trinitarianism. He acknowledges his indebtedness to the tradition—e.g., Tertullian, Augustine, the Nicene Creed, Calvin, and the Puritans—but Warfield does not merely rehash the work of those who went before him. Both in method of exposition and in substance, Warfield offers substantive contribution to the discussion.

Biblical Approach: The Revelation of the Trinity

Progressive Revelation

The common approach to the doctrine of the Trinity involves a successive examination of the following propositions: (1) There is but one God; (2) the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God; (3) the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct persons. These more traditional propositions, found commonly with slight variations in the standard theological texts, are useful for Warfield, and he summarizes them at various points.² But he gives comparatively little attention to them. His treatment of these familiar lines of argument are relatively brief and not of primary interest for him. For Warfield, the Trinity is a mysterious truth about God that was progressively revealed with and because of the unfolding of his purpose in grace. Full benefit from the doctrine is not found in a systematic presentation of its static, constituent elements but in

observing its progressive revelation in gospel history. Accordingly, Warfield’s primary method of treating this doctrine is exegetical and redemptive-historical.

Warfield takes this approach in his article entitled “God,” written for the *Bible Dictionary* (1898). But here he states his case only concisely and in broad strokes. It is spelled out more fully in his article “Trinity,” written originally for the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (ISBE, 1915).³ Warfield emphasizes that the doctrine of the Trinity is purely revealed truth. It is a truth about God that is neither discovered nor discoverable by natural reason. Nor is it provable by human reason. Nor are there any analogies to it in nature or even in man himself who is created in God’s image. “In His trinitarian mode of being, God is unique; and, as there is nothing in the universe like Him in this respect, so there is nothing which can help us to comprehend Him.”⁴ This truth we know solely on the grounds of divine self-disclosure.

Warfield rehearses the attempts of those theological worthies of the past, including Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), to establish God’s tri-unity on rational grounds. But he concludes that they all have failed to achieve their goal. Their contributions lie at most in lending rational “support” to the doctrine and are of value only “once that doctrine has been given us.” These attempts are an aid to our understanding once the truth itself is conceived. Indeed, they enrich our understanding of God and prove very satisfying to the believing human mind.

Difficult, therefore, as the idea of the Trinity in itself is, it does not come to us as an added burden upon our intelligence; it brings us rather the solution of the deepest and most persistent difficulties in our conception of God as infinite moral Being, and illuminates, enriches and elevates all our thought of God. It has accordingly become a commonplace to say that Christian theism is the only stable theism. That is as much as to say that theism requires the enriching conception of the Trinity to give it a permanent hold upon the human mind—the mind finds it difficult to rest in the idea of an abstract unity for its God; and that the human heart cries out for the living God in whose Being there is that fulness of life for which the conception of the Trinity alone provides.⁵

For Warfield, only divine revelation can establish and demonstrate this doctrine.

Further, God's tri-unity is not evident merely on the plane of general revelation. This "ineffable truth" requires special revelation. General revelation teaches us that God is, and it teaches us many of his necessary attributes, such as his power and glory. But to know this high truth requires more specific and more detailed information than available in the created order.

Moreover, if God is triune it would be expected to see at least hints of this even in his self-disclosure throughout the Old Testament dispensation. "It is a plain matter of fact that none who have depended on the revelation embodied in the Old Testament alone have ever attained to the doctrine of the Trinity." But for one "already acquainted with the doctrine," it is entirely reasonable to expect to find indications of it in that older revelation. At this point Warfield briefly summarizes the Old Testament Trinitarian evidences that are found commonly in the standard theological works: the plural form of the

divine name, the use of plural pronouns and plural verbs in reference to God, those passages which seem to distinguish between God and God, the threefold liturgical formulas, the personification of the Wisdom and Word and Spirit of God, and the "remarkable phenomena" connected with the appearances of the angel of Jehovah.⁶ In light of all these factors, Warfield argues,

[T]he Trinitarian interpretation remains the most natural one. This is not an illegitimate reading of the New Testament ideas back into the text of the Old Testament; it is only reading the text of the Old Testament under the illumination of the New Testament revelation. The Old Testament may be likened to a chamber richly furnished but dimly lighted; the introduction of light brings into it nothing which was not in it before; but it brings out into clearer view much of what is in it but was only dimly or even not at all perceived before. The mystery of the Trinity is not revealed in the Old Testament; but the mystery of the Trinity underlies the Old Testament revelation, and here and there almost comes into view.⁷

Warfield gives only this passing attention to the Old Testament evidence for the doctrine. He acknowledges that all this remains inconclusive and cannot by itself establish firmly the doctrine of the Trinity. The Old Testament reflects the doctrine that is more clearly revealed by the New Testament writers, but it does not establish it so clearly on its own. However, in separate articles he discusses the Old Testament teaching regarding the deity of the Messiah and the deity and distinct personality of the Holy Spirit, essays in which he lays out impressively the basic evidence for Trinitarianism provided in the Old Testament Scriptures.⁸

Still he observes that when we

approach the New Testament we notice that its inspired writers speak more freely of the one God as Father, Son, and Spirit. That which was latent and discernable in the Old Testament becomes patent in the New Testament. The New Testament writers betray no sense of caution, no hint that they are presenting any new truth, much less a new “god” or two new “gods.” Their monotheism is intense (John 5:44; 17:3; 1 Tim 1:17; 2:5; 6:15). They worship and proclaim the God of Israel, and their insistence on the unity of this God is as strong as that of the older prophets. And yet when they proclaim this same Jehovah as Father, Son, and Spirit, there is clearly no lurking suspicion on their part that they are innovators. They freely apply Old Testament passages equally to Father, Son, and Spirit and feel no distance between themselves and their Jewish forebears. “The God of the Old Testament was their God, and their God was a Trinity; and their sense of the identity of the two was so complete that no question as to it was raised in their minds.”⁹

This confidence on the part of the New Testament writers is significant. If they feel no sense of novelty in speaking of this one God in three persons, it is at least in part because this was, in fact, *not* a new doctrine to them or to those who heard them. In other words, we witness in the New Testament writings not the birth of a new conception of God but a firmly established conception of God underlying and giving its tone to the whole fabric. This explains why in the New Testament we do not find the doctrine of the Trinity established merely by select verses here or there; rather, we find a document and a community which is Trinitarian to the core. God’s tri-unity is presupposed throughout. Allusions meet us without

controversy at every turn, allusions that reveal no problem in affirming God’s triune identity. From the earliest New Testament writings to the last, religious adoration and worship is freely given to one God who exists in three persons. “The doctrine of the Trinity does not appear in the New Testament in the making, but as already made.”¹⁰ Just as this truth was not revealed but only alluded to in the Old Testament, so it is established by allusion in the New Testament, even if these allusions are more frequent and more clear. But it is not a doctrine taught, as such, so much as it is a doctrine presupposed and already universally accepted in the Christian community.

It is important for Warfield, for polemical reasons, to establish that Trinitarianism was part and parcel of the theological consciousness of the primitive church. In his day Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930), his disciple Arthur C. McGiffert (1861-1933), and others had argued influentially that the primitive faith of Christianity had undergone great change until the fifth century, by which time it had become a dogmatic and philosophical religion.¹¹ Trinitarian and incarnational theology were the result of Greek philosophical thought in the church in contrast to the simple ethical religion of Jesus and the early church. The original church, so it was taught, knew nothing of such metaphysical dogmas. Warfield saw all this as striking at Christianity’s heart and as threatening its very character as a redemptive religion, and it was important to him to demonstrate that the notion of plurality in unity—Trinitarianism—was already the settled, common faith of the aboriginal church, even if that common faith had not yet achieved formal statement.

Warfield develops this notion in detail in his “God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,” in which he examines the phrase (“God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”) and its slight variations as they appear in Paul’s epistles (Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:1, 3; Eph 1:2; 6:23; Phil 1:2; Col 1:2; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1-2; 1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2; Titus 1:4; and Phlm 1:3).¹² Warfield notes first that this phrase, so commonly employed by the apostle, appears to be one already in long use among Christians generally. “All the articles have been rubbed off, and with them all other accessories; and it stands out in its baldest elements as just ‘God Father and Lord Jesus Christ.’” This mode of speaking of God evidently can as easily be reversed, as in Gal 1:1, where Paul describes the divine origin of his apostleship as “through Jesus Christ and God the Father.” What is striking here is that God is referred to as “Jesus Christ and God the Father,” and for Warfield the Trinitarian overtones are unmistakable. Similarly, in each occurrence of this phrase, the apostle is invoking divine blessing. He is praying that “grace, mercy, and peace” will be given “from God our Father and Lord Jesus Christ.” Again, the divine source of blessing is spoken of in terms of both Christ and the Father. His prayer is not merely that the grace of God will come channeled through Jesus Christ. No, his prayer is that this grace will come from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ together, as the conjoint object addressed in his petition.” The God of blessing is freely spoken of in terms of a plurality. Two persons are brought together in closest possible relation, yet they are not absolutely identified. They both are God, yet they are distinct persons. “The two, God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, are

steadily recognized as two, and are steadily spoken of by the distinguishing designations of ‘God’ and ‘Lord.’ But they are equally steadily envisaged as one, and are stately combined as the common source of every spiritual blessing.” Accordingly, they are united under the single governing preposition, “from”—“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Further, this God spoken of in plural terms is yet spoken of in singular terms also. Warfield cites four passages (1 Thess 3:11; 5:23; 2 Thess 2:16; 3:16) in which the pronoun “himself” (*autos*) is employed and determines that “the *autos* is to be construed with the whole subject”—“God” and “Lord.” Both the plurality and the unity are maintained as God is referred to as “our Lord Jesus Christ and God our Father Himself.”¹³

All this is to say, simply, that God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ are essentially one, yet personally distinct, and, thus, that Trinitarianism is embedded in the very language of the earliest of Christian slogans. It is not formally taught in the pages of the New Testament as much as it is presupposed everywhere. It was the very natural and universal mode of reference to Him, and the language reflects a doctrine that was common property to Christians everywhere, a firmly established understanding of the being of God.

Warfield finds all this summarized nicely in 1 Cor 8:4-6 where Paul’s argument rests on his firm assertion of monotheism: “there is no God but one” (v. 4). This assertion governs Paul’s point: there is only one God. False gods and lords are many (v. 5), but there is only one God. But Paul reaffirms this statement of monotheism in language that reflects a settled Trinitarian understanding of God: “yet for

us there is but one God, the Father . . . , and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ" (v. 6). Two are mentioned, but his point in it is to refute pagan polytheism: "there is but one God—the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the only God who exists." Paul could hardly be understood as saying that these two Gods demonstrate that there is only one God. His point, clearly, is that these two who are God, are one God, the only God who is.¹⁴ Again, the language reflects a firmly established Trinitarian understanding that was shared by Christians universally.

The explanation for this "presupposed Trinitarianism" is evident. God's tri-unity was not revealed merely in word but in fact and in deed. The apostolic company and that first generation of Christians did not learn of the Trinity in a book or an apostolic letter. No, they had been personally acquainted with the incarnate Son; they were deeply convinced of his absolute deity, and on this pivot "the whole Christian conception of God turned." Their "eyes had seen and their hands had handled the word of life" (1 John 1:1) and had heard Him speak of "Father, Son, and Spirit." Moreover, they had themselves witnessed and experienced the outpouring of the Spirit of God. At Christ's baptism, they heard the Father speak and saw the Spirit descend as a dove. They heard the Father on the Mount of Transfiguration. They had seen first-hand that God had sent his Son to redeem and his Spirit to replace him. "In the missions of the Son and Spirit"¹⁵ God's tri-unity had been specially revealed. It was revealed personally and in fact, and the New Testament bears witness to this experience, not only in its recording of the events but also in its very natural, frequent, unguarded, and unchallenged

allusions to the Triune God.

Gospel Revelation

All this brings Warfield to the point that for him is most significant: God's tri-unity is a matter of gospel revelation. This explains why the Trinity is not disclosed in the general revelation of the created order—"nature has nothing to say about redemption." This explains further why the Trinity was not clearly revealed in the Old Testament—God's redemptive program was not yet ready to be fulfilled. It had been revealed clearly that God was a saving God who would Himself come to the rescue of his people, but it had not been so clearly revealed that this God is one with the anointed King who was to come or that this anointed King is one with the atoning Servant. "It required the fulfilment to weave together all the threads of the great revelation into one marvelous portraiture."¹⁶ In short, the revelation of the Trinity awaited the revelation of the gospel.

More specifically, it was the gospel of grace, the outworking of God's saving plan, that God was first concerned to reveal; and it is only in the revelation of this saving purpose that God's tri-unity is made known also. In this sense, the doctrine of the Trinity, important as it is in itself, is "incidental" to the gospel. Its revelation became necessary only in the outworking of redemption. The promise and long hope of Israel was that God himself would come and bring deliverance to his people and dwell with them, and it is in the fulfilling of that promise that He reveals Himself and we learn of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In other words, God's highest self-disclosure is a gospel revelation. God the Father sends his Son. The Son willingly obeys

his Father as he comes to redeem. And the Spirit is sent from the Father and Son to apply the merits of Christ's work to his people. From beginning to end, salvation is a work of the Triune God, and in the fulfilling of this divine purpose of grace God's tri-unity is disclosed. Indeed, apart from this there is no need for such revelation. "The doctrine of the Trinity, in other words, is simply the modification wrought in the conception of the one only God by his complete revelation of Himself in the redemptive process."¹⁷

Accordingly, the bulk of the apostolic Trinitarian statements and allusions are soteriological both in form and in substance. For example, in his hymn of praise Paul traces the Christian's soteric blessings back to the Father who chose and predestined us, Christ who redeemed us by his blood, and the Holy Spirit who seals us for our final inheritance (Eph 1:3-14). The Ephesian hymn is Trinitarian, to be sure, for the God who is thanked is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But the structure is soteriological. God's tri-unity is a redemptive truth, a gospel revelation.

Similarly, in the apostolic benediction (2 Cor 13:14) "the three highest redemptive blessings are brought together, and attached distributively to the three Persons of the Triune God." Again, Paul "habitually thinks of this Divine source of redemptive blessings after a trinal fashion." So also when the apostle traces to the source of the "spiritual gifts" given to each believer, he sees standing behind them "the same Spirit," "the same Lord," and "the same God" (1 Cor 12:4-6). The benefits of grace stem from the workings of the triune God. The apostle Peter follows a similar pattern. In greeting his fellow pilgrims he designates them, "elect according to the foreknowledge of God

the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet 1:2). Warfield treats a few of these passages as samples, and he references many others. His purpose is primarily to demonstrate that the New Testament writers spoke of God as tri-une with an "unstudied naturalness and simplicity" and that this presupposition underlay all of their thinking.¹⁸

"Accordingly, the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of redemption, historically, stand or fall together." It is no surprise to Warfield that Unitarianism would teach a Pelagian anthropology and a Socinian soteriology. Drawing again from his acquaintance with the history of theological progress, Warfield observes that in the absence of a doctrine of the Trinity, there is an absence of a doctrine of redemption also. "It is in this intimacy of relation between the doctrines of the Trinity and redemption that the ultimate reason lies why the Christian church could not rest until it had attained a definite and well-compacted doctrine of the Trinity. Nothing else could be accepted as an adequate foundation for the experience of the Christian salvation."¹⁹ Sabellianism and Arianism, for example, could not satisfy the biblical data regarding God's nature and relations. But their problem goes further—they could not satisfy the data of the Christian's consciousness of salvation. Thus, Warfield finds it only natural that it was as the discussions of the early Christian theologians and apologists shifted "from the cosmological to the soteriological aspect of Christian truth," that the early Logos speculations were supplanted by a clearer doctrine of the Trinity. Playing off Augustine's famous quote, Warfield states, "Here too the heart of man was restless until it found its rest

in the Triune God, the author, procurer and applier of salvation.”²⁰

For the Christian a Trinitarian concept of God is a necessary one, if this concept of God is to correspond to our own experience of salvation. This, at bottom, is what gives the doctrine its significance to the Christian. For Calvin and all the Reformers, as for every Christian since the very beginning of Christianity, “the nerve of the doctrine was its implication in the experience of salvation, in the Christian’s certainty that the Redeeming Christ and Sanctifying Spirit are each Divine Persons.”²¹ As Warfield summarizes,

The Trinity of the Persons of the Godhead, shown in the incarnation and the redemptive work of God the Son, and the descent and saving work of God the Spirit, is thus everywhere assumed in the New Testament, and comes to repeated fragmentary but none the less emphatic and illuminating expression in its pages. As the roots of its revelation are set in the threefold Divine causality of the saving process, it naturally finds an echo also in the consciousness of everyone who has experienced this salvation. Every redeemed soul, knowing himself reconciled with God through His Son, and quickened into newness of life by His Spirit, turns alike to Father, Son and Spirit with the exclamation of reverent gratitude upon his lips, “My Lord and my God!” If he could not construct the doctrine of the Trinity out of his consciousness of salvation, yet the elements of his consciousness of salvation are interpreted to him and reduced to order only by the doctrine of the Trinity which he finds underlying and giving their significance and consistency to the teaching of the Scriptures as to the processes of salvation. By means of this doctrine he is able to think clearly and consequently of his threefold relation to the saving God, experienced by Him as Fatherly love sending a Redeemer, as redeeming love executing redemption, as saving love applying redemption: all

manifestations in distinct methods and by distinct agencies of the one seeking and saving love of God. Without the doctrine of the Trinity, his conscious Christian life would be thrown into confusion and left in disorganization if not, indeed, given an air of unreality; with the doctrine of the Trinity, order, significance and reality are brought to every element of it.²²

The Teaching of Christ

As we might expect, a strong sense of Trinitarianism pervades and underlies the teaching of Jesus, and it is here that those first Christians, no doubt, learned most precisely how to speak of God as triune. But as with his apostles, the Trinitarianism of Jesus’ teaching *reflects* more than *teaches* the doctrine. Nonetheless, the Trinitarianism that is reflected in Jesus’ teaching is a fully-developed Trinitarianism. Warfield cites evidence primarily from the Gospel of John, chiefly the upper room discourse (John 13-17), and from the great commission of Matt 28:19-20.

In Jesus’ teaching in the Gospel of John, Warfield finds all the essentials of Christian Trinitarian theology. “I and the Father are one,” Jesus declares (10:30). There is a plurality of persons (“are”) and singleness of being (“one,” neuter singular). Christ is “one” with the Father (10:30; 17:11, 21, 22, 25) and shares a “unity of interpenetration” (16:10-11), an essential oneness (8:58), and co-eternality in glory (17:5) with the Father. “His eternal home is in the depths of the Divine Being,” and yet He and the Father are personally distinct (8:42). All this is true in relation to the Spirit also. “It would be impossible to speak more distinctly of three who were yet one.” The Son makes request of the Father. The Spirit is “another comforter”—another like Jesus, granted, but “another” nonetheless. These three are kept distinct. “And yet the

oneness of these three is so kept in sight that the coming of this 'another Advocate' is spoken of without embarrassment as the coming of the Son Himself (14:18, 19, 20, 21), and indeed as the coming of the Father and the Son (14:23)." Warfield summarizes, "There is a distinction between the Persons brought into view; and with it an identity among them; for both of which allowance must be made."²³

In the great commission Warfield finds "the nearest approach to a formal announcement of the doctrine of the Trinity which is recorded from our Lord's lips, or, perhaps we may say, which is to be found in the whole compass of the New Testament." Specifically, of course, Warfield refers to the baptismal formula, "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt 28:19). Just as the "determining impulse" in the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity in the early church was "the church's profound conviction of the absolute Deity of Christ," so also the baptismal formula was its "guiding principle." Here the Lord Jesus does not speak of "the names" (plural), as though the three were entirely separate beings. Nor does he speak of "the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," as though these were three designations of the same person. "With stately impressiveness it asserts the unity of the three by combining them all within the bounds of the single Name; and then throws up into emphasis the distinctness of each by introducing them in turn with the repeated article: 'In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.'"²⁴ There is distinction, but distinction within unity. Further significance is seen in the expression "the name." "The name," in Jewish contexts, was understood clearly as reference to God—so also in the bap-

tismal formula.

When, therefore, Our Lord commanded His disciples to baptize those whom they brought to His obedience "into the name of . . .," He was using language charged to them with high meaning. He could not have been understood otherwise than as substituting for the Name of Jehovah this other Name "of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost"; and this could not possibly have meant to His disciples anything else than that Jehovah was now to be known to them by the new Name, of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost. The only alternative would have been that, for the community which He was founding, Jesus was supplanting Jehovah by a new God; and this alternative is no less than monstrous. There is no alternative, therefore, to understanding Jesus here to be giving for His community a new Name to Jehovah and that new Name to be the threefold Name of "the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost." . . . This is a direct ascription to Jehovah the God of Israel, of a threefold personality, and is therewith the direct enunciation of the doctrine of the Trinity.²⁵

In another context Warfield summarizes crisply that the baptismal formula alone, in continued use, would guide Christians everywhere to Trinitarianism. It keeps before them the notions of the unity of God and the deity and distinctness of both Christ and the Spirit.²⁶ The Three are the one God.

Theological Formulations: The Christian Doctrine of the Trinity *Historical Development*

Due to the complexity of the questions involved in the issue and the uniqueness of the doctrine itself, Warfield assumes, Trinitarian theology achieved its full, formal statement only slowly. He notes the struggle of the early Christian theologians

to give full weight to both the distinction of Persons in and the unity of the God-head. In his lengthy three-part article, "Tertullian and the Beginnings of the Doctrine of the Trinity," Warfield sets out to delineate the "inestimable service" that Tertullian (ca. 155–225) rendered to the church in this regard,²⁷ and he observes,

[N]o one earlier than Tertullian and few besides Tertullian, prior to the outbreak of the Arian controversy, seem to have succeeded in giving anything like a tenable expression to this potential Trinitarianism. If Tertullian may not be accredited with the invention of the doctrine of the Trinity, it may yet be that it was through him that the elements of this doctrine first obtained something like a scientific adjustment, and that he may not unfairly, therefore, be accounted its originator, in a sense somewhat similar to that in which Augustine may be accounted the originator of the doctrines of original sin and sovereign grace, Anselm of the doctrine of satisfaction, and Luther that of justification by faith.²⁸

Warfield acknowledges that Tertullian was never quite free of the Logos speculations that so dominated the Christian world of his day, but he labors to show how Tertullian pushed the contents of these speculations to their limits and beyond. "The Logos Christology, in other words, was stretched by him beyond its tether and was already passing upward in his construction to something better."²⁹

Tertullian was forced to "establish the true and complete deity of Jesus, and at the same time the reality of His distinctness as the Logos from the fontal-deity, without creating two Gods." Warfield comments that "this is, on the face of it, precisely the problem of the Trinity. And so far as Tertullian succeeded in it, he must be recognized as the father of the

Church doctrine of the Trinity." But he also acknowledges that Tertullian was not entirely successful in this task. Warfield notes five areas of thought that Tertullian held in common with Logos speculations, all of which mar his doctrine of the Trinity to some extent. First, he held with them the "fundamental conception out of which the Logos doctrine grows—the conception of the transcendence of God above all possibility of direct relation with a world of time and space." That is, "the invisible God," as He is in Himself, cannot be manifested in this world. His "invisibility," or what we might call transcendent majesty, precludes such revelation. Second, Tertullian held "with equal heartiness" that the Logos is "the world-form," a "prolation" or mediating form of the invisible God. This mode of thinking had been inherited from earlier Gnostic influences and tendencies. Third, Tertullian also held "the consequent view that the Logos is not God in His entirety, but only a 'portion' of God—a 'portion,' that is, as in the ray there is not the whole but only a 'portion' of the sun." The difference between the Father and the Son is one of both mode and measure. The Father is "the entire substance," but the Son is a derived portion of the whole. Fourth, Tertullian held in common with Logos Christology that the prolation of the Logos was a voluntary act of God and not a necessary one. "The prolate Logos is dependent on the divine will." Finally, Tertullian shared the subordinationist tendencies inherent in Logos theology.³⁰

These defects notwithstanding, Tertullian marks a significant advance in Trinitarian theology. Tertullian preserved Logos speculations, but in facing the Monarchian controversy he was compelled to "enlarge and modify" them

and bring them into closer conformity to the biblical data. He insisted, against the Monarchians, that unity of the Godhead does not necessitate unity of Person. Indeed, Tertullian was the first to speak of three in one and one in three—one in substance and yet three in number or Persons—and this he emphasized with vigor. Warfield demonstrates that despite the defects of his Logos influence, Tertullian taught a real distinction of persons in the Godhead, that *in some way* these distinct Persons were essential to the divine existence, that within these distinctions is an essential unity of God, that full and equal deity belongs to Christ, and that to the Holy Spirit also belongs eternal distinctness of personality and absolute deity. Indeed, in the course of his defense of the doctrine, “Tertullian’s organizing principle had become no longer subordinationism but equalization,” even if some subordinationist notion remained. And so Warfield asks, “What, then, lacks he yet of Nicene orthodoxy?” In answer to the question Warfield demonstrates in some detail that Tertullian is, indeed, “the father of Nicene theology,” even if his statement of the doctrine is only germinal and not fully developed.³¹

Warfield observes that the doctrine of the Trinity received its “completed statement” in Augustine (354–430), but he notes also that this articulation “came too late to affect the Greek construction of this doctrine, and accordingly gave form on this great topic only to the thought of the West.” Accordingly, while the Trinitarianism of the Eastern church was marked by a subtle subordinationist tendency, as allowed by the famous *theos ek theou* (“God of God”) of the Nicene formula, Western Trinitarianism following Augustine, by contrast, was dominated

by the principle of equalization. This principle of equalization, in turn, “found its sharpest assertion in the ascription of *autotheotes* (“self-deity”) to Christ by Calvin, whose construction marks the only new (subordinate) epoch in the development of the doctrine of the Trinity after Augustine.”³²

Warfield examines at length Calvin’s contribution to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. He admires the way Calvin “prepares” his readers to “expect depths in the Divine Being beyond our sounding” as he turns to speak of the Trinity. We should not expect God to be more or less like us; we should, rather, expect in learning of his essence to be struck with new facets of his greatness. This greatness of God’s being is nowhere more evident, Warfield agrees, than in God’s “tripersonality.” The leading characteristics of Calvin’s Trinitarian teaching are its simplicity, its consequent lucidity, and its final elimination of any remnants of subordinationism—“simplification, clarification, equalization.”³³ It is to the last of these that Warfield devotes his attention. To stress the absolute deity of Christ (as well as the Spirit) Calvin insisted on his self-existence and self-deity (*aseity*, *autoousia* and *autotheotes*). To say anything less of Christ, he argued, would be sacrilege. This, Calvin demanded, is evident simply in the many occasions in Scripture in which the Holy Spirit names Christ Jehovah, the self-existent God.

Calvin clarified (albeit inconsistently, in Warfield’s judgment) that all this is in reference to Christ’s being or essence, not his person. The person (not the essence) of the Father begets the person (not the essence) of the Son, and it is from the persons (not the essence) of the Father and Son that the person (not the

essence) of the Spirit proceeds. It is the distinguishing property of the Son that is begotten, and it is the distinguishing property of the Spirit that is the product of the procession. The essence is common to all three persons. Calvin, then, did allow a doctrine of generation and procession and a proper order of Father, Son, and Spirit. But he had no use for the doctrine of eternal generation “as it was expounded by the Nicene Fathers.” The Nicene theologians speculated that the Son’s generation both “occurred once for all at some point of time in the past” and that it was “always occurring, a perpetual movement of the divine essence from the first Person to the second, always complete, never completed.” This concept Calvin found meaningless. The Nicene Creed he accepted; these speculations of the Nicene theologians he did not. *Theos ek theou* is acceptable but confusing, given that a “non-natural personal sense” must be understood, and it is open to the abusive implication of a created God.³⁴

The cornerstone of Calvin’s Trinitarianism was that of equalization—a principle already well established in the Nicene Creed and especially dominant in the Athanasian Creed, even if certain subordinationist tendencies had survived. Warfield determines that Calvin “adjusted everything to the absolute divinity of each Person, their community in the one only true Deity; and to this we cannot doubt that he was ready not only to subordinate, but even to sacrifice, if need be, the entire body of Nicene speculations.” He therefore incurred the unyielding opposition of all who held to any variety of subordinationism. Furthermore, those whose Trinitarianism is described along the lines of the traditional Nicene orthodoxy have, since Calvin, been thrown more or less

into confusion, now feeling “compelled to resort to nice distinctions in order to reconcile the two apparently contradictory confessions of *autotheotes* and *theos ek theou* of our Lord.” Warfield traces at length Calvin’s influence and the opposition of his critics and concludes that Calvin’s Trinitarianism created not only a theological stir but a theological party, a party which, despite its continued differences on various points, has shaped Reformed Trinitarianism ever since. Calvin raised the bar of theological discussion, and in his assertion of Christ’s *autotheotes* “the *homoousiotes* (“of the same substance”) of the Nicene Fathers at last came to its full right.”³⁵

Thus Warfield credits Tertullian, Augustine, and finally John Calvin as the chief contributors “to the exact and vital statement” of this Christian doctrine.³⁶ Warfield nowhere delineates Augustine’s completed Trinitarianism; on the historical development of the doctrine he writes only on its early formulation in Tertullian and its most fully-developed statement in Calvin.³⁷ Warfield himself follows self-consciously, even enthusiastically, in this tradition but never slavishly and always with a close eye on the biblical text. His exposition of these respective presentations of the doctrine is exhaustive, and throughout he tests them on exegetical grounds.

Warfield’s Formulation

The question of the Trinity turns on the twin issues of God’s unity and diversity. Warfield affirms with all of orthodox Christianity that in terms of “essence,” the Son is “exactly like” the Father. That is, the “Divine Being” is shared with absolute equality by all three Persons. They share “identical essence.” They are “numerically

one in essence, and can be represented as distinct only in person.”³⁸

Warfield is not inclined to affirm that the very essence of the Trinity is enshrined in the language of “Father, Son, and Spirit.” To be sure, “Father” and “Son” are the terms regularly employed by our Lord and the apostle John, but the regular language of Paul is, rather, “God” and “Lord.” The difference no doubt, in part at least, is one of perspective. For Christ, “Lord” would not be the most natural way to speak of his position in relation to the other two Persons of the Trinity; “Son,” however “expresses his consciousness of close relation, and indeed of exact similarity, to God.” But from the perspective of Paul, speaking as a worshiper, Christ is “Lord,” and so this becomes for him the divine name for the second Person. “God” and “Lord” he consistently places side by side in reference to what may otherwise be designated “Father” and “Son.” Thus Warfield comments, “It remains remarkable, nevertheless, if the very essence of the Trinity were thought of by him as resident in the terms ‘Father,’ ‘Son,’ that in his numerous allusions to the Trinity in the Godhead, he never betrays any sense of this.”³⁹

Further, and somewhat startling, Warfield observes that the order, “Father, Son, Spirit,” is not necessarily essential to the relationships described by the terms, given that this order is not preserved but variable in Paul and the other New Testament writers. Indeed, the reverse order occurs in 1 Cor 12:4-6 and Eph 4:4-6, and in 2 Cor 13:14, the apostolic benediction, it appears, Lord, God, and Spirit. Warfield therefore suggests, on exegetical grounds, that the order of designations does not express the essence of the doctrine of the Trinity.⁴⁰

Ultimately, Warfield does not deny that the terms “Father, Son, and Spirit” reveal to us the mutual relations of the Trinity. In fact he acknowledges that these designations specify the “distinguishing properties” of each personality and that it is by these designations that the Persons of the Godhead are differentiated from each other.⁴¹ But he does caution that we must take into consideration two attending factors: first, that neither these terms nor their order—Father, Son, Spirit—are strictly followed in the New Testament; and second, that the *implications* of these designations may be other than commonly assumed. Although the designations “Son” and “Spirit” may to us naturally intimate subordination and derivation, Warfield questions whether this is even remotely suggested by the biblical usage of the terms. Sonship rather denotes likeness and equality with the Father, not subordination. Similarly, the term “only begotten” conveys the idea of uniqueness, not derivation. So also, “Spirit of God,” as used so frequently in the Old Testament, does not convey the idea of derivation or of subordination; it is simply the executive name of God, “the designation of God from the point of view of His activity.” It “imports accordingly identity with God.” In fact, Warfield finds in the New Testament what resembles a formal definition of these terms. In John 5:18 Jesus’ claim to Sonship is taken as a claim to equality with God, and for this assumed blasphemy, he is opposed. And in 1 Cor 2:10-11 “the Spirit of God” is more or less defined as “just God Himself in the innermost essence of His Being.” Warfield concludes that these terms do not imply any notion of subordination or derivation and that if these terms do not convey such notions, then there is no evidence in the

New Testament for such notions at all.⁴²

To speak of subordination or derivation, we must note the distinction between the economic and ontological or immanent Trinity, or, in Warfield's preferred terminology, the "modes of operation" and the "mode of being" or "modes of subsistence."⁴³ That is, we must not assume that the order by which the Triune God works toward the salvation of his people reflects the "necessary" relation of the three Persons to one another. The order of "Father, Son, and Spirit" has always in view the operations of God in redemption.

It may be natural to assume that a subordination in modes of operation rests on a subordination in modes of subsistence; that the reason why it is the Father that sends the Son and the Son that sends the Spirit is that the Son is subordinate to the Father, and the Spirit to the Son. But we are bound to bear in mind that these relations of subordination in modes of operation may just as well be due to a convention, an agreement, between the Persons of the Trinity—a "Covenant" as it is technically called—by virtue of which a distinct function in the work of redemption is voluntarily assumed by each.⁴⁴

Then Warfield advises, "It is eminently desirable, therefore, at the least, that some definite evidence of subordination in modes of subsistence should be discoverable before it is assumed."⁴⁵ This evidence Warfield cannot himself discover. For him, all "subordinationist passages" have in view the attending doctrines of the covenant of redemption, the incarnation, humiliation, and two natures of Christ.

Certainly in such circumstances it were thoroughly illegitimate to press such passages to suggest any subordination for the Son or the Spirit which would in any manner impair that complete identity with the Father in Being and that complete

equality with the Father in powers which are constantly presupposed, and frequently emphatically, though only incidentally, asserted for them throughout the whole fabric of the New Testament.⁴⁶

In Warfield's commitment to the principle of equalization, then, it would seem that he has given Calvin's notion of Christ's *autotheotes* a fuller expression than did Calvin himself. This is perhaps his most outstanding contribution to Trinitarianism. If in Calvin's assertion of Christ's *autotheotes* "the *homoousiotes* of the Nicene Fathers at last came to its full right,"⁴⁷ then in Warfield Calvin's *autotheotes* has itself come to its own.⁴⁸

ENDNOTES

¹Warfield's primary writings that treat Trinitarian themes include the following: "The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity," in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield* [hereafter cited as *Works*] (10 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 2:133-72; "Tertullian and the Beginnings of the Doctrine of the Trinity," in *Works*, 2:3-109; "Calvin's Doctrine of the Trinity," in *Works*, 5:189-284; "God," in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield* [hereafter cited as *SSW*] (2 vols.; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1970-73), 1:69-74; "Antitrinitarianism," in *Works*, 5:88-92; "God Our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ," in *Works*, 2:213-231; "The Divine Messiah in the OT," in *Works*, 3:3-49; *The Lord of Glory* (Grand Rapids: Guardian Press, n.d.; repr., American Tract Society, 1907). Warfield also wrote numerous other articles and sermons on the person of Christ and of the Holy Spirit.

²*SSW*, 2:73

³*Works*, 2:133-172.

⁴*Ibid.*, 2:135.

⁵*Ibid.*, 2:135-139.

⁶Ibid., 2:140-141.

⁷Ibid., 2:141-142.

⁸Ibid., 3:3-49; 2:101-29; SSW, 2:711-17.

⁹*Works*, 2:143.

¹⁰Ibid., 2:143.

¹¹Harnack was a German scholar at (in turn) Leipzig, Giessen, Marburg, and Berlin whose views cost him official ecclesiastical recognition. Harnack's primary area of study was patristic thought, and his views, confessedly shaped by Ritschlian liberalism, later brought him into conflict with his former pupil, Karl Barth (1886-1968). Harnack, whose brilliant scholarship Warfield firmly opposed yet held in high esteem, is widely regarded as the most influential church historian and theologian prior to World War I. McGiffert was a Presbyterian and Congregational church historian and educator at Lane Theological Seminary and Union Theological Seminary. His *A History of Christianity in the Apostolic Age* (1897) led to heresy charges in the Presbyterian Church and resulted in his move to the Congregationalists in 1900.

¹²*Works*, 2:213-31; cf. 235-52.

¹³Ibid., 2:213, 237, 238, 219.

¹⁴Ibid., 2:227-30.

¹⁵Ibid., 2:169; SSW, 1:88.

¹⁶SSW, 1:87.

¹⁷*Works*, 2:144.

¹⁸Ibid., 2:159-161.

¹⁹Ibid., 2:168.

²⁰Ibid., 2:88, 169.

²¹Ibid., 5:195.

²²Ibid., 2:167-68.

²³Ibid., 2:149-52, 198.

²⁴Ibid., 2:153, 169; cf. 4:3-109.

²⁵Ibid., 2:153-4.

²⁶Ibid., 4:17-18.

²⁷Ibid., 4:4.

²⁸Ibid., 4:18-9.

²⁹Ibid., 4:25.

³⁰Ibid., 4:24, 30-2.

³¹Ibid., 4:34, 36, 99, 100-9.

³²Ibid., 4:116.

³³Ibid., 5:230.

³⁴Ibid., 5:247, 249.

³⁵Ibid., 5:257, 251-1, 284; cf. 272-3.

³⁶Ibid., 2:171.

³⁷Ibid., 4:3-109; 5:189-284.

³⁸Ibid., 5:214-5.

³⁹Ibid., 2:161, 162.

⁴⁰Ibid., 2:162.

⁴¹Ibid., 5:214.

⁴²Ibid., 2:163-5.

⁴³Tertullian speaks of "that dispensation *which we call the oikonomia*" (emphasis added). Warfield interprets this as signifying "which is commonly so called." This, coupled with Tertullian's own assertion that his teaching is the traditional teaching of the Church, leads Warfield to conclude that although this term is found first in Tertullian it quite clearly predates him (ibid., 4:15).

⁴⁴Ibid., 2:166.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid., 2:167.

⁴⁷Ibid., 5:284; cf. 272-3.

⁴⁸Since the time of Warfield, the question of subordination between the persons of the Godhead within the immanent Trinity has been hotly debated. Specifically, the debate has been thrust into the Egalitarian-Complementarian disagreement over the role differences between males and females and the issue of male headship. Egalitarians have appealed to the doctrine of the Trinity in order to argue that the role differences or the subordination of the

Son to the Father is only in terms of the economic Trinity, not the immanent. As applied to male-female relations, Egalitarians have argued that the "egalitarian" role relations within the immanent Trinity serve as a model for male-female relations thus arguing that there is no male headship in marriage, the family, and the church. Conversely, many Complementarians have argued the opposite, namely that the role relations within the Godhead are found in the immanent Trinity and thus this serves as a model for how there can be equality between the sexes in regard to value and dignity, but role differences in marriage, the family, and the church. Regardless of how one resolves the question of subordination within the immanent Trinity as it pertains to the persons of the Godhead, it is imperative that the texts of Scripture that teach male headship and the outworking of that in the family and church, must not be marginalized or bypassed by an appeal to the doctrine of the Trinity. In the end, we must deal with the texts that address male-female relations on their own terms and let them say what they say (e.g., 1 Cor 11:2-16; Eph 5:21-33; 1 Tim 2:11-15, etc.). For an excellent discussion of one of the most crucial texts in terms of the male-female issue see Andreas J. Köstenberger and Thomas R. Schreiner, ed., *Women in the Church: An Analysis and Application of 1 Timothy 2:9-15* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005).