

Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield on the Doctrine of the Trinity

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Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield (1851-1921) left his lasting impress on Reformed theology most famously in his careful exposition and defense of the doctrine of inspiration, but he also made important contributions in Christology and other areas of doctrine. With the recent rise of interest in Warfield (indeed, in all things Old Princeton) his understanding and treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity has gained increasing and deserved recognition, not always with complete agreement but consistently with great appreciation. His famous ISBE article on the Trinity¹ repays careful reading always, as does his in-depth contextual analysis of Tertullian's² and Calvin's³ doctrine of the Trinity. His theological exposition of the apostle Paul's common expression, “God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”⁴ reveals the Princetonian's keen exegetical eye and is rich with Trinitarian implications also. Beyond his many studies on God, the Holy Spirit, and especially the person of Christ all constitute a gold mine of exegetical, historical, and theological reflection of value for Trinitarian studies.⁵

WARFIELD ON THE REVELATION OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

Warfield is eager to remind us that the Triunity of God is God's highest and most profound self-revelation. In the created order we see God's wisdom, power, and glory. In the Old Testament revelation we learn, further, that God is one, that he is personal, righteous, sovereign, and merciful.⁶ And of course all this is only heightened and clarified in the New Testament revelation. But in the New Testament the most significant advance on the previous revelation is in regards to the *persons* of God. Here we are faced not with a simple monotheism but an obvious *Trinitarian* monotheism—that there is one God but three Persons who equally share the whole essence of deity.

Exploring the question of just *how* God has revealed himself as Triune is the first contribution Warfield makes to the discussion.

Revelation and Reason

It is important for Warfield to emphasize initially that God's triunity is, in fact, *revealed* truth. It is not something that is discoverable apart from God's own self-disclosure. In fact, it is nowhere discoverable in "general revelation," and there are no analogies to it, even in man himself created in God's image. In fact, the doctrine is incapable of proof from human reason. God is uniquely triune, and our knowledge of him as such depends entirely on his own special disclosure. We can know nothing else and nothing more about the Trinity other than what is revealed in Scripture.⁷

Warfield considers the attempts of "speculative thinkers" to establish rational proof of the doctrine apart from the Scriptures—Bartholomew Keckermann's argument from God's self-consciousness, the argument from the nature of love (Valentinus?, Augustine, Richard of St. Victor, and others), and Jonathan Edwards' ontological proof.⁸ Attractive as some of these attempts may be, the fact remains that no one ever surmised God as Triune before he specifically revealed himself as such. Yet the logic works well, and reflecting on these famous speculations Warfield acknowledges its relative value: this kind of logic cannot prove or establish the doctrine of the Trinity, but once that doctrine has been revealed,

It carries home to us in a very suggestive way the superiority of the Trinitarian conception of God to the conception of him as an abstract monad, and thus brings important rational support to the doctrine of the Trinity.

Warfield explains further:

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 fullness of life for which the conception of the Trinity alone provides.

That is to say, impossible as this doctrine is to discover apart from special revelation, and difficult as it is to comprehend once it is revealed, once we have in fact seen it, it is easier to believe than not! Triunity is found to be “essential to a worthy idea of God,” and once we learn it, it becomes an aid in our understanding of God and our worship of him.⁹

Old Testament Allusions

Warfield cannot quite agree with those who argue that because God is, in fact, triune, it would be impossible to make himself known except as Trinity, and he finds the purported Old Testament “evidence” for this notion often a bit stretched. Yet he sympathizes with this view and even highlights the familiar scattered data found in the Old Testament Scriptures. The otherwise mysterious plural pronouns and plural verbs, the deity of Messiah, the tendency to hypostatize the Word, Wisdom, and Spirit of God—all these considerations and more suggest that God is not a simple monad. The Old Testament never collates all this data for us to form a full doctrine of the Trinity, but Warfield treats them as significant pieces of information that naturally reflect the true, Triune God and yet remain inexplicable until the full revelation is given.¹⁰ His famous summary always bears repeating:

This is not an illegitimate reading of 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. Thus the Old Testament revelation of God is not corrected by the fuller revelation which follows it, but only perfected, extended and enlarged.¹¹

New Testament Clarifications

Even with reference to the New Testament Warfield acknowledges that “the doctrine of the Trinity is given to us not in formulated definition but in fragmentary allusions,”¹² and at times he offers the familiar summary accordingly:

We may content ourselves with simply observing that to the New Testament there is but one only living and true God; but that to it Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are each God in the fullest sense of the term; and yet Father, Son and Spirit stand over against each other as I, and Thou, and He. In this composite fact the New Testament gives us the doctrine of the Trinity ... When we have said these three things, then—that there is but one God, that the Father and the Son and the Spirit is each God, that the Father and the Son and the Spirit is each a distinct person—we have enunciated the doctrine of the Trinity in its completeness.¹³

But of course there is more to be said—and, for Warfield, much more.

In Warfield’s day it had become popular in some circles to claim that the theological distinctives of the Christian faith stemmed from the later influence of Greek philosophical thought. As Christianity spread in the Greek world, it was alleged, it took on philosophical baggage that was not original to the religion of Jesus or the apostles. Of course high on the list of supposed examples of this was the doctrine of the Trinity.

In answer to this B. B. Warfield loved to demonstrate from all available evidence that the traditional, historic faith of the Christian church was indeed the faith of the aboriginal church. He seemed particularly to enjoy presenting compelling evidence of a “presupposed” Trinitarianism in the language of the early church. That is, he would expose the shared Trinitarian convictions of the earliest Christians as reflected in unguarded statements that were not

intended to *teach* Trinitarian theology per se, but which plainly reflected that understanding nonetheless. Their monotheism remains intense: they worship and proclaim the God of Israel and like the prophets of old insist on his unity. Yet without betraying any sense of innovation they continuously refer to this God in a three-fold fashion.

One of the most striking examples of this is found in his detailed analysis of the phrase, “God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (and its slight variations) as it appears in Paul’s epistles (1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1-2; Gal 1:1, 3; 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Rom 1:7; Eph 1:2; 6:23; Col 1:2; Phlm 1:3; Phil 1:2; 1 Tim 1:2; Titus 1:4; and 2 Tim 1:2).¹⁴ 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 was evidently a common way the earliest Christians spoke in reference to God. The precise wording is varied and evidently can as easily be reversed, as in Galatians 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. 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 divine, yet they are distinct persons.

The two, God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, are steadily recognized as two, and are stately 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, the two persons are united under the single governing preposition, “from” —

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” This is normal with Paul. God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ are not for him [Paul] two objects of worship, two sources of blessing, but one object of worship, one source of blessing.¹⁵

Further, this God spoken of in both singular and plural terms. 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.”¹⁶

All this is to say that God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ are essentially one yet personally distinct, and each worthy objects of prayer. Thus, 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 further evidence of this “presupposed” Trinitarianism in 1 Corinthians 8:4-6.

Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is no God but one.” For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

Paul’s argument here, Warfield points out, rests on a firm assertion of monotheism: “there is no God but one” (v. 4) This thought governs Paul’s whole argument: there is only one God. False gods and lords are many (v. 5), but 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 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.¹⁷ Again, the language reflects a firmly established Trinitarian understanding that was shared by the original Christians.

Warfield also surveys the implicit Trinitarianism in the Gospel of John and in particular the upper room discourse, where the distinction of Persons within the unity of God is on display.¹⁸ But it is in the Great Commission (Matt 28:19) 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.” This refers to this as the church’s “guiding principle” in developing a careful statement of the Trinity. 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.’

There is distinction, but distinction within unity. Moreover, the expression “the name,” in Jewish contexts, was understood clearly as reference to God.

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.¹⁹

Echoing Calvin, Warfield comments on the same in connection with the “one baptism” of Ephesians 4:5. “As we are initiated by baptism into faith in the one God and yet baptism is in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit ... it is ‘solidly clear’ that the Father, Son and Spirit are the one God.”²⁰

The Trinity Revealed in Fact

With all this Warfield presses the observation that in the New Testament the doctrine of the Trinity is not argued, as such, or formally presented; it is assumed. And it appears already fully formed, and the simple confidence with which it is stated reflects a document and a community that are already “Trinitarian to the core ... The doctrine of the Trinity does not appear in the New Testament in the making, but as already made.”²¹ This doctrine underlies the whole New Testament as its constant presupposition and determines everywhere its forms of expression.²²

This observation is important for two reasons. First, as we have already seen, it is important for Warfield to establish that Trinitarian thinking was indeed the common property of the earliest Christians. But Warfield finds it significant also in that it reflects just how this new thinking took hold among those first Christians so easily. It is somewhat surprising that religious people so committed to monotheism adjusted so quickly to a distinctly Trinitarian monotheism, and this is best explained, Warfield concludes, by the fact that God’s Triunity was not first revealed in words but in fact. These people 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 they had heard him speak of “Father, Son, and Spirit.” Moreover, they had themselves witnessed and experienced the

outpouring of the Spirit of God himself. 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" 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 God the Trinity.²³ "The advent of Christ involved a clearer revelation of God and therefore a fuller knowledge of the personal distinctions in His being."²⁴

Gospel Revelation

All this leads Warfield to a further observation. He has already emphasized that the doctrine of the Trinity is a truth that is purely revealed. It is not discoverable by human reason but is entirely dependent on special revelation. Its full disclosure awaited the fullness of revelation recorded in the New Testament. The doctrine of the Trinity, in other words, is *gospel* revelation. Indeed, it was only in the outworking of God's saving promise, that his tri-unity came to light also. Important as the doctrine of the Trinity is, in and of itself, it was only in the revelation of his saving purpose that God so made himself known. The promise and long hope of Israel was that God himself would come, bring deliverance to his people, and dwell with them, and it is in the fulfilling of that promise that we learn of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This, God's highest self-disclosure, is a gospel revelation.

Given that God's revelation of himself as triune was given in connection with the outworking of his saving purpose, it is not surprising that the New Testament so often frames and describes salvation "trinitarianly." The apostolic benediction of 2 Corinthians 13:14 may be the most outstanding example, but "it is everywhere assumed that the redemptive activities of God rest on a threefold source in God the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit," and it is this triune God-wrought salvation that shapes Christian devotion accordingly.²⁵

Pressing one step further, Warfield points out that "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. 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. Neither Sabellianism nor Arianism could satisfy the biblical data regarding God's nature and relations. But their problem was deeper: neither could they satisfy the Christian's consciousness of salvation. 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. 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." And again, "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!'"²⁶

WARFIELD'S HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Atop Warfield's concerns with reference to the doctrine of the Trinity is the principle of equalization. That every Christian heart eagerly and instinctively gives worshipful praise to Christ, as well as to the Father, is an oft-repeated given for him. This was so, he insists, from the very earliest days of the church, and this was the driving consideration, along with the church's inherited monotheism, that informed the struggle for theological statement that climaxed at Nicaea, Chalcedon, and the settled Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

Early Efforts

The worship of Christ was preserved in Logos Christology, and Warfield suggests that, deficient though it was, the Logos Christology in its context of the second century may have served to preserve the church's witness both to the unity of the indivisible God and the deity of the historical Jesus. But what it lacked Monarchianism seemed to offer, giving both God and Jesus their just due. Thus, Monarchianism challenged Logos Christianity to "show

itself capable of doing justice to the deity of Jesus, while yet retaining in integrity the unity of God." Warfield presents Tertullian (160-220) as the man of the hour. Hampered though he was with the Logos Christology and the subordinationism inherent in its ideas of divine proлатions, it fell to Tertullian "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 further comments, "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"—even if (Warfield adds) we must also acknowledge that, given his pre-commitments to Logos Christology, "Tertullian was not completely successful in so great a task." The historical Jesus must be acknowledged as more than a mediating being. In the Rule of Faith and Baptismal Formula the Father, the Son, and the Spirit appear as coordinate persons, to whom each is ascribed true deity, and Tertullian's challenge was to give due weight to all this within the constraints of Logos subordinationism. His attempt to do so fell short, yet he did provide a "formula of sameness of essence with distinction of persons," Warfield observes, that elevated Trinitarian discussion to a higher level. Indeed, "in his hands the Logos Christology was stretched "beyond its tether and was already passing upward in his construction to something better." In Warfield's estimation, therefore, "we may fairly call Tertullian the father of the Nicene theology."²⁷

It is the natural Christian impulse to understand God in terms of eternality and equalization of persons. This impulse will be stated for us in Nicene orthodoxy and the "completed Trinitarianism" of Augustine (354-430), "to whom the persons of the Trinity are not subordinate one to another but coordinate sharers of the one divine essence." But in Tertullian we find it, essentially, even if not in its final, mature form.

It is, of course, not the close of this process of thought that we see in Tertullian, but its beginning. But in him already appears the pregnant emphasis on the equality rather than the graded subordination of the personal distinctions in the Godhead, by the logical inworking of which the whole change in due time came about. So far as we can now learn it was he first, therefore, who, determined to give due recognition to the elements of the Church's faith embodied in the Rule of Faith, pointed out the road over which it was necessary to travel in order to do justice

to the Biblical data. Say that he was in this but the voice of the general Christian consciousness. It remains that it was left to him first to give effective voice to the Christian consciousness, and that it was only by following out the lines laid down by him to their logical conclusion that the great achievement of formulating to thought the doctrine of the triune God was at length accomplished.²⁸

Briefly put, it was the church's struggle to shed itself of all subordinationist tendencies, and in Tertullian the principle of equalization of the Persons reached a new level, thus paving the way for Nicene orthodoxy (325).

Warfield notes that in the century following Tertullian subordinationist tendencies persisted until the Logos Christology "ran to seed in what is known as Arianism," and he highlights further milestones in the development and statement of the doctrine. He lauds Athanasius (296-373) for his influence in shaping Nicene Christianity and then "the three great Cappadocians" who carried Tertullian's torch also and through whose influence the principle of equalization was asserted with lasting and definitive effect at Constantinople (381). He praises Augustine for his statement of the doctrine in still greater fullness and which, in turn, informs the so-called Athanasian Creed (5th-6th century) whose statement retains "its place as the fit expression of the faith of the church as to the nature of its God until today."²⁹

Again, it is the principle of equalization that Warfield stresses, and he watches the historical development of the doctrine of the Trinity with this principle continually in view. But he is suspicious that certain standard Trinitarian language such as "begotten," "God of God," "light of light," and "true God of true God," retains traces of subordinationism. And so while he praises the advance of Nicaea and of the Athanasian Creed he also raises caution:

The language in which it [the Athanasian Creed] is couched, even in this final declaration, still retains elements of speech which owe their origin to the modes of thought characteristic of the Logos Christology of the second century, fixed in the nomenclature of the church by the Nicene Creed of 325 A.D., though carefully guarded there against the subordinationism inherent in the Logos-Christology, and made the vehicle rather of the Nicene doctrines of the eternal generation of the Son and procession of the Spirit, with the consequent subordination of the Son and Spirit to the Father in modes of subsistence as well as of operation.

He goes on to note, however, that in the Athanasian Creed,

the principle of the equalization of the three Persons, which was already the dominant motive of the Nicene Creed—the *homoousia*—is so strongly emphasized as practically to push out of sight, if not quite out of existence, these remnant suggestions of derivation and subordination.³⁰

Calvin's Doctrine of the Trinity

Warfield examines Calvin's doctrine of the Trinity carefully, at length,³¹ and (as he would say) *con amore*. Still with an eye on the principle of equalization he extols Calvin's "profound sense of the consubstantiality of the Persons," his "ascription of self-existence (*autoousia*) to the Son," and his attributing of *autotheos* to the Son (and the Spirit), as marking a new epoch in the developing statement of the doctrine. Here, at last, the principle of equalization was given its due.³² "Thus Calvin takes his place, alongside of Tertullian, Athanasius and Augustine, as one of the chief contributors to the exact and vital statement of the Christian doctrine of the Triune God."³³

This of course was the question at issue in the early centuries of the church. With genuine effort to be faithful to the Rule of Faith (which Warfield in this context essentially identifies with the baptismal formula) and the Trinitarian teachings of Scripture their thinking was yet dominated by philosophical pre-commitments that pulled their Christology downward. Moreover, without yet a doctrine of eternal generation ("struggling in the womb" of thought though it may have been³⁴) and still laboring under the influence of Logos subordinationism, men such as Novatian (200-258) and Hippolytus (170-235) could scarcely conceive of the Son as both coming from God and at the same time himself eternally God.³⁵ "Tertullian's formula of sameness of essence with distinction of persons" pointed the better way³⁶ that in Calvin was finally brought to its rights.³⁷

With the principle of equalization primarily in view Warfield analyzes related areas of shaping interest in Calvin's teaching also. First, he characterizes Calvin as holding to a *necessary* Trinitarianism:

The tripersonality of God is conceived by Calvin ... not as something added to the complete idea of God or as something into which God develops in the process

of His existing, but as something which enters into the very idea of God, without which He cannot be conceived in the truth of His being ... According to Calvin ... there can be no such thing as a monadic God; the idea of multiformity enters into the very notion of God ... [I]n Calvin's view a divine monad would be less conceivable than a divine Trinity.³⁸

Warfield emphasizes further that Calvin's interest in the doctrine was not merely speculative but religious: "The nerve of the doctrine was its implication in the experience of salvation, in the Christian's certainty that the Redeeming Christ and the Sanctifying Spirit are each Divine Persons."³⁹ This is a doctrine essential to salvation and to a right understanding of salvation and must therefore be taught diligently even to the newest Christians. He notes with obvious appreciation Calvin's unwillingness to engage in speculation regarding the Trinity. No illustration or "proof" from metaphysical reasoning will do; he cared for Scriptural proof only.⁴⁰ Yet because it was a point of considerable controversy surrounding Calvin Warfield feels compelled at length in this connection to place the Reformer's teaching within the stream of Nicene Christianity and to demonstrate that he (Calvin) understood "the ecclesiastical definitions" of the doctrine of the Trinity "as merely a republication of the Scriptural doctrine in clearer words."⁴¹ Calvin assented fully to the statements as historically given and honored by the church, but—committed as he was to the sole authority of Scripture—he would not allow them a role of tyrannical authority in the church.⁴²

Still, although Warfield understands Calvin as firmly committed to Nicene Christology, he also characterizes him as "sitting rather loosely to the Nicene tradition."⁴³ This discussion pertains to Calvin's understanding of the relations of the Persons of the Trinity and then, in particular, the doctrines of eternal generation and procession.⁴⁴ Warfield confirms that Calvin "departed in nothing from the doctrine which had been handed down from the orthodox Fathers" but places him distinctly—"if distinctions must be drawn"—decidedly in sympathy with the Western rather than the Eastern conceptions, Augustinian rather than Athanasian. "That is to say, the principle of his construction of the Trinitarian distinctions is equalization rather than subordination." Warfield explains:

He [Calvin] does, indeed, still speak in the old language of refined subordinationism which had been fixed in the Church by the Nicene formularies; and he expressly allows an “order” of first, second and third in the Trinitarian relations. But he conceives more clearly and applies more purely than had ever previously been done the principle of equalization in his thought of the relation of the Persons to one another, and thereby ... marks an epoch in the history of the doctrine of the Trinity.⁴⁵

Something of Warfield’s own thinking comes through in this, as we shall examine in due course, but his purpose here is, 1) to place Calvin squarely within the stream of Nicene Christianity, and 2) to demonstrate that though consistent with that stream the Reformer’s own expressions give fuller justice to it.

For Calvin, as with the larger tradition he had received, the doctrines of eternal generation and procession entail an “order and grade in the Persons of the Trinity,” a “doctrine of derivation” that was understood “not with respect of the essence, but the order” of the Persons. The distinguishing properties of the three Persons in their consubstantiality are found precisely and exclusively in their respective generation, begottenness, and procession. The Reformer found only the barest (though sufficient) exegetical support for eternal generation: 1) the implications of “Father, Son (begotten), and Spirit,” and particularly 2) our adoption in Christ which points to a higher sonship that belongs to him. For Calvin this latter argument in particular is “worth a thousand distorted texts.” Warfield points out, however, that Calvin “seems to have drawn back from the doctrine of ‘eternal generation’ as it was expounded by the Nicene Fathers” who understood eternal generation “not as something which has occurred once for all at some point of time in the past ... but as something which is always occurring, a perpetual movement ... always complete, never completed.” Such a concept Calvin found “difficult, if not meaningless.” For Calvin the point to emphasize is “that three Persons have subsisted in God from eternity.” Warfield clarifies that Calvin’s disagreement here is not with the Nicene Creed⁴⁶ and not with the doctrine of eternal generation itself—a point of doctrine that “manifestly was a matter of fixed belief with him”—but with the doctrine “as it was expounded by the Nicene Fathers.” Most importantly—for Warfield and for Calvin (in Warfield’s view)—his doctrine of eternal generation did not enjoy the structural status it had in the Fathers. For Calvin, the principle of equalization ruled,

and it seems that for this reason Warfield can say of Calvin that though his conception of the Trinity included a doctrine of eternal generation and procession, it did not include it “necessarily.” These are “bare facts” only and not matters of structural concern.⁴⁷ We may summarize Warfield’s understanding of Calvin on this point as follows:

1. Calvin affirmed a doctrine of eternal generation, but it was with respect only to the persons, not natures.⁴⁸
2. Calvin found comparatively little exegetical support for the doctrine: 1) the implications of “Father, Son, and Spirit,” and 2) our adoption in Christ points to a higher sonship that belongs to him.⁴⁹
3. Calvin did not follow the Nicene Fathers in their related “speculations” on the doctrine. That is, he did not accept the notion that eternal generation was an eternally continuous act as some of the fathers had argued but that it was simply before all time.
4. The doctrines of eternal generation and procession were not Calvin’s governing concern as it seems to have been with the Nicene Fathers. Equalization remained for Calvin the leading principle of his Trinitarian thought.
5. Calvin’s doctrine of eternal generation, unlike that of the Fathers, was not a “necessary” part of his Trinitarian thought.

Immediately following this discussion Warfield cites Charles Hodge at some length as evidence that Calvin created a distinct “party”—a view that became distinctive of the Reformed churches.⁵⁰

WARFIELD’S FORMULATIONS

In most of these features of Calvin’s doctrine we discover Warfield’s own thinking reflected also. He expresses disagreement only rarely, and most of his analysis is stated as a matter of fact. But on the whole his comments have a sympathetic tone, and his remarks elsewhere bear this out. The most obvious point of agreement with Calvin is in regard to Christ as *autotheos* and its implications—the principle of equalization. Warfield advances this notion not only in his works on the Trinity, specifically, but also in his many works on the deity of Christ—a very favorite theme of the Princetonian. He finds it implicit in the common lingo of the early church, as we have

seen, in the Old Testament prophecies of the divine Messiah,⁵¹ in the many designations and attributions of deity to Christ that underlie virtually every line of the New Testament,⁵² and (as we have seen) in the prayers offered to Christ from the apostle Paul.⁵³ There is in the New Testament a “constant and decisive witness to the complete and undiminished Deity of each of these Persons; no language is too exalted to apply to each of them” in order to express the writers’ recognition of the full deity of each.⁵⁴ Warfield extols Calvin for forcing the church to recognize this, and he everywhere seeks to further it himself.

Warfield notes that the language of the New Testament writers differs somewhat from that of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. Jesus speaks of “Father, Son, and Spirit,” but the apostle Paul more commonly speaks of “God, Lord, and Spirit.” The difference, Warfield surmises, is found in the speakers themselves and their respective relations to the Trinity. “Lord” would not be the most natural term for Jesus to use of himself; “Son” would be more fitting. Paul and the apostles, on the other hand, speak as worshipers, and for worshipers “Lord” is the more natural designation. The significance of this title used of Jesus as acknowledgment of his deity, however, is inescapable.

It is of further significance for Warfield that these appellations hold no necessary order in Pauline usage. It may be “God, Lord, and Spirit” or as easily “Lord, God, and Spirit” or even “Spirit, Lord, and God.” For Warfield all this is just further demonstration of the principle of equalization.⁵⁵

Warfield’s commitment to equalization leads him to criticize some of the language of Nicaea itself. He notes Calvin’s slight reservations with regard to the expressions, “God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God,” verbiage the Reformer found repetitious and potentially confusing. Warfield seems to go further and finds the language “at least verbally contradictory” to the Creed’s larger affirmation of the eternal deity of the Son and with Calvin’s insistence that “He is not of another but of Himself.” Just how much Warfield intends to imply by the words “at least”—“at least verbally contradictory”—is difficult to say, but he does find them misleading and seems clearly to prefer that they had not been employed at all.⁵⁶

This criticism of Nicene language as “refined subordinationism,”⁵⁷ “the remnants of the conceptions and phraseology proper to the older prolationism of the Logos Christology,” “the leaven of subordinationism,”⁵⁸ and unworthy of the Creed’s larger teaching⁵⁹ is a note Warfield sounds several

times over. “The current modes of stating the doctrine of the Trinity left a door open for the entrance of defective modes of conceiving the deity of the Son,”⁶⁰ he writes. Given the teaching of Nicaea and the traditional acceptance of the consubstantiality of the three persons of the Trinity Warfield finds it surprising that Calvin’s doctrine of the Son as *autotheos* teaching was met with such opposition, and the explanation he finds for the conundrum is the Nicene creed itself—its subordinistic terminology.⁶¹ Yet it should be emphasized that this criticism betrays no reservation at all on Warfield’s part regarding the larger Nicene doctrine. Indeed, he argues that the Creed’s own teaching rendered this language “innocuous.”⁶²

In the Athanasian Creed … the principle of the equalization of the three Persons, which was already the dominant motive of the Nicene Creed—the *homoousia*—is so strongly emphasized as practically to push out of sight, if not quite out of existence, these remnant suggestions of derivation and subordination.⁶³

Warfield regards himself—like Calvin—as preserving Nicene doctrine. His concern here is for complete consistency of expression.

When he comes to the doctrine of eternal generation, however, Warfield’s reservations with Nicaea go beyond mere language to substance. He understands that the doctrine of eternal generation originally served to protect the deity of the Son, and his mention of this factor seems to reflect his favorable regard for the doctrine.⁶⁴ He seems in agreement with Calvin’s position that eternal generation concerns Persons and not the nature. And he never explicitly denies the doctrine; in fact, at one point he seems to understand that “orthodoxy” demands it. But he does not find the doctrine reflected in the term *monogenēs*, and he expresses suspicion that the concept itself reflects subordinationist tendencies—that there is a degree of tension between the notions of eternal generation on the one hand and equalization—*homoousios*, *autoousia*, *autotheos*—on the other.⁶⁵

Warfield argues that because the Nicene doctrine affirms that the generation of the Son and the procession of the Spirit are “necessary movements in the divine essence and not voluntary acts of God the Father,” it “carries with it the ascription of necessary existence,” or “self-existence,” and that, therefore, no Nicene Christian should find Calvin’s teaching regarding the Son as *autotheotēs* objectionable. Objection to it (Christ as *autotheos*) would, in

fact, betray “a lurking leaven of subordinationism in their thought.” Warfield manifestly sees Calvin as consistently Nicene and even as making clearer statement of its teaching. And Warfield obviously appreciates Calvin for this “great service.” But his following explanatory remarks further reveal his thinking with regard to Nicaea’s doctrine of eternal generation.

It [the denial of *autotheotēs*] indicates a tendency to treat the Nicene doctrine of eternal generation, not, as it was intended by its framers, as the safe-guard of the absolute equality of the Son with the Father, but rather as the proclamation of the inferiority of the Son to the Father: the Son because generate must differ from the ingenerate Father—must differ in this, that He cannot be, as is the Father, self-existent God, which is, of course, all one with saying that He is not God at all, since the very idea of God includes the idea of self-existence.⁶⁶

It would seem from this that Warfield in fact does not deny eternal generation. However, after noting again Calvin’s slim exegetical grounding of the doctrine, Warfield seems to imply that preferable explanations later became available that do not require holding the doctrine at all,

As, for example, that the terms “Son,” “Spirit” are not expressive of “derivation” (by “generation” or “spiration”) but just of “consubstantiality.” The Son is the repetition of the Father; the Spirit is the expression of God.

Warfield is in fact “astonished at the persistence . . . of the Nicene phraseology” in Augustine and even Calvin, not to mention their successors, given their established commitment to the principle of equalization.⁶⁷ His dissatisfaction is clear: he considers Nicene language inadequate to, even inconsistent with, its actual teaching. And he suspects that eternal generation may be reflective of the same.

This, in turn, leaves Warfield to explain the significance of the “Father-Son” language of the New Testament, and here he also speaks in a somewhat non-traditional tone. His observation of the varied ordering of the Persons of the Trinity in the New Testament, as we have already noted, raises for Warfield a question regarding both the ordering and even the relations of the Persons themselves, and here we find one area in which Warfield appears to depart from Calvin and the general Nicene tradition. Perhaps it would be

more accurate to say that he extends Calvin's thought further than Calvin himself had. First, Warfield questions whether "Father and Son" represent the essence of the relationship of these two persons. Paul speaks as a worshiper, to be sure. "It remains remarkable, nevertheless, if the very essence of the Trinity were thought of by him [Paul] 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."⁶⁸ And this remains true, he says, of the other New Testament writers also. And given the varied ordering of the three Persons in the New Testament Warfield further questions whether "Father, Son, Spirit" (Mt. 28:19) should be considered stable.

The question naturally suggests itself whether the order Father, Son, Spirit was especially significant to Paul and his fellow-writers of the New Testament. If in their conviction the very essence of the doctrine of the Trinity was embodied in this order, should we not anticipate that there should appear in their numerous allusions to the Trinity some suggestion of this conviction?⁶⁹

The apostles' varied terminology and ordering present basic "facts" that for Warfield not only bear strong witness to the unity of the Godhead and the principle of equalization but also raise questions regarding the interrelations of the Persons of the Godhead themselves. Is there among the three persons a necessary ordering of Father, Son, and Spirit? And do the terms "Father" and "Son" express the essence of the relationship of these two? Warfield expresses doubt on both of these scores. Factors contributing to his doubts include the following.⁷⁰

1. The standard terminology of the New Testament writers is not that of Father, Son, and Spirit, but rather God, Lord, and Spirit.
2. The ordering of these designations is altogether varied in the New Testament.
3. Sonship does not suggest subordination or derivation of being but, simply, "likeness" and equality. (Along with this it might be noted that Warfield does not understand monogenēs in terms of generation but of uniqueness.)
4. "Spirit" does not suggest derivation or subordination but is simply the "executive name of God—the designation of God from the point of view of his activity—and imports accordingly identity with God.

In short, Warfield simply finds no exegetical evidence. He sums up his discussion of these latter two points crisply:

If ... the subordination of the Son and Spirit to the Father in modes of subsistence and their derivation from the Father are not implicates of their designation as Son and Spirit, it will be hard to find in the New Testament compelling evidence of their subordination and derivation.⁷¹

With respect to “the modes of operation” and, more specifically, “the redemptive process” and the incarnation of the Son, Warfield very happily allows the notion of subordination, but he is not sure that this is reflective of eternal relations. “It is not so clear that the principle of subordination [in the modes of operation] rules also in ‘modes of subsistence,’ as it is technically phrased; that is to say, in the necessary relation of the Persons of the Trinity to one another.” This, he says, is difficult to discern with any certainty. It may seem natural to assume that the modes of operation are expressive of the modes of subsistence, but this may be just as easily explained in terms of a Trinitarian agreement or covenant. “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.” Warfield does not find this evidence in the language of Father and Son, as we have already seen. Though this terminology does reflect “their eternal and necessary relations” it does not imply any notion of subordination.⁷²

It must at least be said that in the presence of the great New Testament doctrines of the Covenant of Redemption on the one hand, and of the Humiliation of the Son of God for His work’s sake and of the Two Natures in the constitution of His Person as incarnated, on the other, the difficulty of interpreting subordinationist passages of eternal relations between the Father and Son becomes extreme. The question continually obtrudes itself, whether they do not rather find their full explanation in the facts embodied in the doctrines of the Covenant, the Humiliation of Christ, and the Two Natures of His incarnated Person. 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.⁷³

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Warfield is utterly committed to the principle of equalization and protective of the truth—a truth he revels in—that in Christ God himself, and no one less, has come to the rescue of sinners. He lauds the fact that in Calvin all subordinationist tendencies are finally shed and due acknowledgment of Christ is more fully stated. And he is very careful therefore not to allow any notion that potentially threatens the complete equality of the three Persons. In all this Warfield has sought to give Calvin's notion of *autotheotēs* its fullest rights, and, it would seem, has extended his thought even further. Whether his related decisions on this score are both good and necessary, or whether they have gone too far, and how they square with biblical teaching, all are questions for another time.

¹ Works, vol.2 (hereafter W2), 133-172.

² W4, 3-109.

³ W5, 189-284.

⁴ W2, 213-231.

⁵ Other Warfield works that touch this subject include the following: "God" (*Selected Shorter Writings*, vol.1; hereafter SSW1, 69-74); "Godhead" (SSW1, 75-81); "The God of Israel" (SSW1, 76-87); "Antitrinitarianism" (WS, 88-92). Related works that focus on the person of Christ or the Holy Spirit include, first, *The Lord of Glory*, Warfield's book-length treatment of the deity of Christ as presented in the New Testament, and the following articles: "The Foresight of Jesus" (W2, 71-97); "The Person of Christ" (W2, 175-209); "The Christ that Paul Preached" (W2, 235-52); "Jesus' Mission, According to His Own Testimony" (W2, 255-324); "The Divine Messiah in the OT" (W3, 3-49); "Jesus Christ" (W3, 149-77); "Concerning Schmiedel's 'Pillar Passages'" (W3, 181-255); "The 'Two Natures' and Recent Christological Speculation" (W3, 259-310); "The Twentieth-Century Christ" (W3, 371-89); "The Supernatural Birth of Jesus" (W3, 447-458); "The Principle of the Incarnation" (SSW1, 139-47); "John's First Word" (SSW1, 148-50); "The Deity of Christ" (SSW1, 151-7); "The Human Development of Jesus" (SSW1, 158-66); "Incarnate Truth" (SSW2, 455-67); "Why Four Gospels" (SSW2, 639-42); "The Gospel of John" (SSW2, 643-46); "The Spirit of God in the Old Testament" (W2, 101-29; SSW2, 711-17); "On the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit" (SSW1, 203-19); plus many more, including his many sermons published in his *The Power of God Unto Salvation, Faith and Life*, and *The Savior of the World*, as well as many significant reviews of books. This list is by no means exhaustive.

⁶ See especially Warfield's "God" and "The God of Israel"; SSW1, chapters 10 and 12.

⁷ W2, 133-134.

⁸ W2, 234-239.

⁹ W2, 138-139.

¹⁰ W2, 139-41; cf. W2, 101-129; W3, 3-49.

¹¹ W2, 141-2.

¹² W2, 133.

¹³ W2, 146-147; cf. SSW, 1:73.

¹⁴ W2, 213-231; cf. 237-238.

¹⁵ W2, 237-238.

¹⁶ W2, 218.

¹⁷ W2, 227-230.

¹⁸ W2, 149-152, 198.

¹⁹ W2, 153-154, 169; cf. W4, 17-18.

²⁰ W5, 228.

²¹ W2, 143, 145.

²² W2, 147.

²³ W2, 169; SSW1, 88.

²⁴ W5, 227-228; cf. W2, 145.

²⁵ W2, 160; cf. 167.

²⁶ W2, 167-168.

²⁷ W4, 22-25, 35-36, 99-100.

²⁸ W4, 109.

²⁹ W2, 169-70.

³⁰ W2, 170; cf. W5, 233.

³¹ W5, 189-284.

³² W5, 232-233.

³³ W2, 171.

³⁴ W4, 97.

³⁵ W4, 90-98.

³⁶ W4, 99-100.

³⁷ W5, 284.

³⁸ W5, 190-192.

³⁹ W5, 195; cf. 195-197.

⁴⁰ W5, 224-225.

⁴¹ W5, 194; cf. 198, 200-201.

⁴² W5, 205-218.

⁴³ W5, 275.

⁴⁴ W5, 228-

⁴⁵ W5, 229-230.

⁴⁶ Warfield further comments in this vein that Calvin agreed with the language “God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God” as “true and useful” but objected to it only because it was repetitious and potentially confuses the distinction between Persons and nature. W5, 248-250.

⁴⁷ W5, 244-250; 256-258.

⁴⁸ Cf. W5, 258-60.

⁴⁹ Cf. W5, 202, 277.

⁵⁰ W5, 250-252.

⁵¹ “The Divine Messiah in the Old Testament,” W3, 3-49.

⁵² This is Warfield’s thesis, developed in great detail, in his 1907, *The Lord of Glory* (New York: The American Tract Society).

⁵³ W2, 215.

⁵⁴ W2, 162-163.

⁵⁵ W2, 161-163.

⁵⁶ W5, 252.

⁵⁷ W5, 230.

⁵⁸ W5, 233.

⁵⁹ E.g., W5, 279.

⁶⁰ W5, 283-284.

⁶¹ W5, 232-233.

⁶² W5, 233.

⁶³ W2, 170-171; cf. W5, 228-230, 233.

⁶⁴ W4, 97.

⁶⁵ W2, 163-164, 170-171.

⁶⁶ W5, 272-273.

⁶⁷ W5, 277-279.

⁶⁸ W2, 162.

⁶⁹ W2, 162.

⁷⁰ W2, 162-165.

⁷¹ W2, 165.

⁷² W2, 165-166.

⁷³ W2, 166-167.