

# **Guest Editorial: Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, 1851–1921**

**PAUL HELM**

**T**his year 2021 marks the centenary of the death of the theologian Benjamin B. Warfield.<sup>1</sup> He was a son of the Southern Presbyterian Church. John Meeter summarizes Warfield’s life as follows:

Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield was born into a godly Presbyterian home at “Grasmere,” near Lexington, Kentucky, November 5th, 1851. When only nineteen years of age he was graduated from what is now Princeton University, with the highest honor of his class. After two years of further study and travel abroad he entered Princeton Seminary, graduating in the class of 1876. In 1878 he was appointed instructor, and in 1879 installed as professor of New Testament Exegesis and Literature at Western Theological Seminary, Allegheny. In 1887 he received and accepted, the appointment to the Charles Hodge Chair of Didactic and Polemic Theology at Princeton Seminary; and for thirty-three years, from 1887 to the time of his death in 1921, he served Princeton Seminary and the Presbyterian Church U. S. A. in the Chair made famous by the Alexander-Hodge succession.<sup>2</sup>

Warfield’s middle name “Breckinridge” stood for his ancestor Robert Jefferson Breckinridge (1800–1871), who seemed rather unruly when young but was later the author of *The Knowledge of God, Objectively and Subjectively*

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<sup>1</sup> For more of Paul Helm’s view on Warfield, see Paul Helm, “B. B. Warfield on Divine Passion,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 69 (2007): 95–104, and “B. B. Warfield’s Path to Inerrancy: An Attempt to Correct Some Serious Misunderstandings,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 72 (2010): 23–42.

<sup>2</sup> John E. Meeter, foreword to *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, ed. John E. Meeter (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970, 1973), 2:viii.

*Considered*, 2 vols. (1857, 1859) and a Professor at Danville Seminary, Kentucky. So, Warfield was bred in the Southern Presbyterian Church, the church of James H. Thornwell and of Robert L. Dabney. While from the South, with a Southern drawl, Warfield went north for his further education, to Princeton, New Jersey, and stayed there. After a spell at Western Theological Seminary, the young Warfield visited Germany in 1872 as part of his theological education, and in their exactness and thoroughness his published articles were formed in the German manner. It seems that his entry into theology was prompted by a love for biblical exegesis.

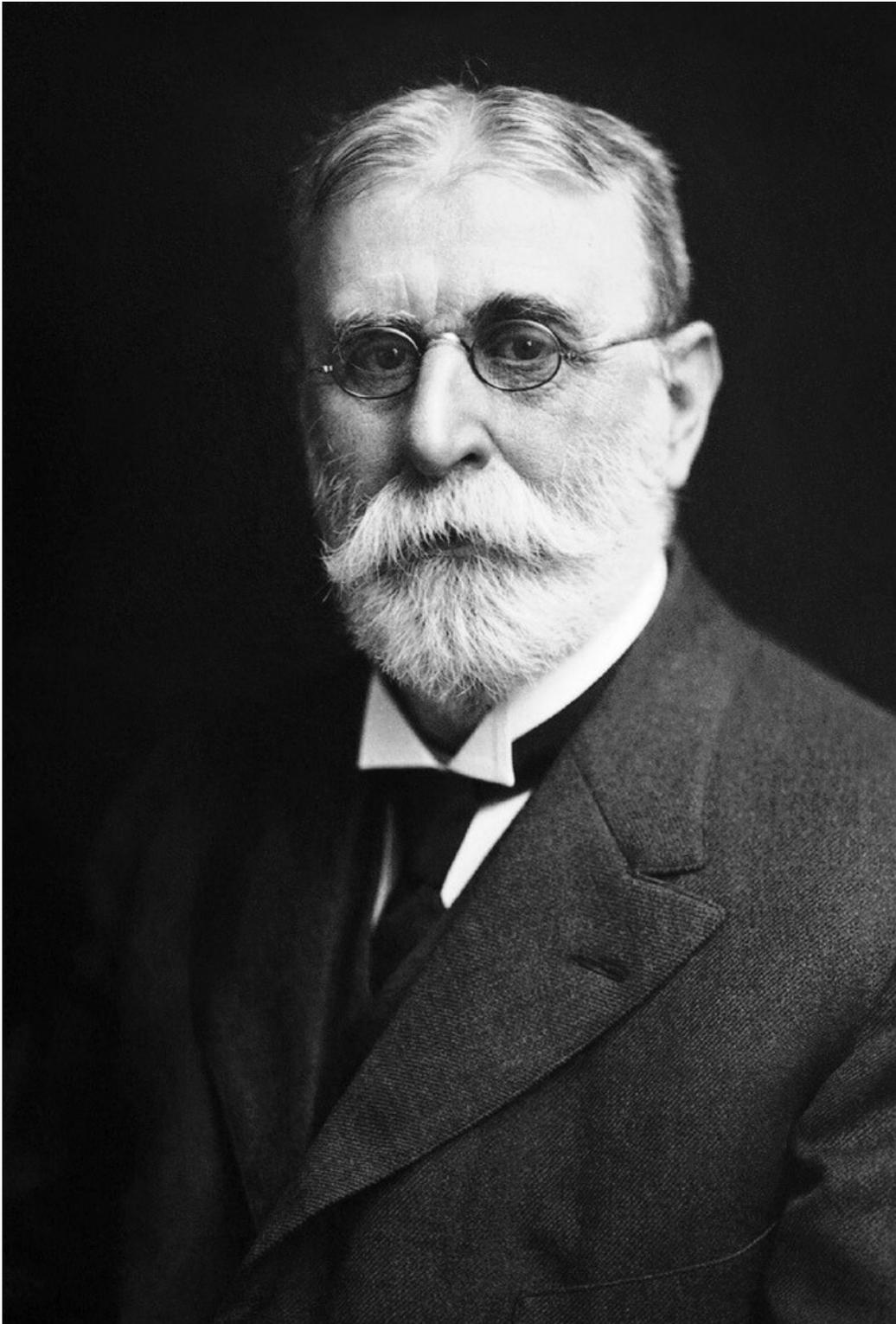
I first encountered his writings through the five volumes of his collected papers published in the 1950s. In the years after World War II, American theological books were hard to come by in the United Kingdom, but some could be obtained via the Evangelical Bookshop in Belfast. The five-book set was more or less a distillation of the ten volumes published by the American Oxford University Press with fresh introductory essays. In his selection of Warfield's papers entitled *Biblical Foundations* around the same time, David Martyn Lloyd-Jones recounted that on "discovery of them in a library in Toronto in 1932 [my] feelings were similar to those of 'stout Cortez' as described by Keats."<sup>3</sup> He was disappointed that what was for sale in Canada was not for sale in England. The ten volumes are available again.

The ten volumes were surely a splendid testament to Warfield's life's work.<sup>4</sup> They each consist of his writings with their dates of publication and works of reference in scholarly journals. The earliest paper that I could locate was 1880, and the two volumes on perfectionism were the latest, made public in the last decade of his life. The articles were organized by the editors, even though as far as Warfield himself was concerned, he usually put pen to paper because of some interest he had in Christian theology in America or abroad. The style of all of them is of painstaking, serious scholarship, occasionally leavened by a lighter glint of amusement. The breadth is noteworthy. In our contemporary world, academic theology has become one of specialism—everything seems to have its "theology"—but Warfield seems equally at home in Christology and in perfectionism, in Calvin and in contemporary German theologians, in Finney and in others, with developments in England and in Germany or the Midwestern states of the United States. They are

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<sup>3</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, introduction to B. B. Warfield, *Biblical Foundations* (London: Tyndale Press, 1958), 7; cf. Iain H. Murray, *David Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The First Forty Years, 1899–1939* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 285–86. Lloyd-Jones is referring to Keats' sonnet "On first looking into Chapman's Homer."

<sup>4</sup> See B. B. Warfield, *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, 10 vols. (1932; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).



**BENJAMIN BRECKINRIDGE WARFIELD**

1851-1921

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characterized by a certain anonymity, in that he does not let his reader know why he chose the material he deals with, but the readers should not be surprised at being filled with awe at his theological scope and exactness. The set of ten volumes is a fitting testament for a man whose adult years were lived exclusively in theological institutions, who traveled rarely, and whose wife was sickly for many years, the pair being childless; he devoted hours daily to reading to her, and as a person, he was industrious and private and modest in manner.

In the 1970s, Meeter, who had helped with the original set of Warfield's writings,<sup>5</sup> turned his hand to editing two volumes containing over a thousand pages of the *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield* (1970, 1973) drawn chiefly from Warfield's accumulated papers. These give another side to Warfield, that of his journalism.

These writings were the source of his theological influence in his church, and they reveal a different side to Warfield, his way of dealing with doctrine for a popular, literate audience. He did not wrestle with any problems that were personal to himself. Many of the pieces were distilled from his front-line publications and communicated by his quiet, competent personality. This collection is of his more popular material and is more likely to have content for the student or the general reader. So, if you cannot afford the ten volumes, try the *Selected Shorter Writings*.

"Shorter," by the way, does not mean "elementary." Many of the shorter writings first appeared in journals or encyclopedias. They are divided into sections, "On Christ" (1:139–202), "Religion" (1:365–25), accounts of men whom he had met, such as Abraham Kuyper (1:447–54), and questions, such as "Why Four Gospels?" (2:639–42), and catechetical topics, such as "Doubt" (2:655–59), "Regeneration" (2:321–24), and "Sanctification" (2:325–28).

Warfield's inner self may likely come alive for readers of his shorter books of sermons, *Faith and Life* (1916), and his "Conferences" for his students in the Oratory of Princeton on Sunday afternoons, a Princeton tradition going back to Archibald Alexander and Charles Hodge, who also edited a collection of conference addresses.<sup>6</sup> There are other publications: a separate books of sermons, *The Plan of Salvation* (1915), a comparative study of different conceptions of salvation that is still in print, and *The Lord of Glory: A Study of the Designation of our Lord in the New Testament with Especial Reference to His Deity* (1907).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Arthur W. Kuschke Jr., introduction to *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, 1:xiv–xv.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Benjamin B. Warfield, *Faith and Life: "Conferences" in the Oratory of Princeton Seminary* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1916), ix.

Turning from his history and writings, I want to say a little about those views that have struck me over the years. The first is to say that as far as I can judge from what is available to me, Warfield had little or no interest in natural theology. If so, this is a little odd since the Westminster Confession upholds “proofs,” and Paul used them as part of his preaching to Gentiles, as in Lystra and Athens (Acts 14; 17). At most, Warfield seems to have committed himself to the view that God’s existence is an “intuition.” His “Calvin’s Doctrine of the Trinity” makes no effort to protect Christ’s deity by emphasizing his eternal generation as the Son, though he concurs with Calvin, as did John Murray.<sup>7</sup> In Warfield’s treatment of Jonathan Edwards in “Edwards and the New England Theology,” in his *Studies in Theology*, the ninth of the ten volumes, Edwards is free from any of the panentheistic tendencies that scholars of Edwards nowadays attribute to him.<sup>8</sup>

There is reason to think that Warfield did not venture to write a volume or volumes on systematic theology because he preferred instead to give prominence to Charles Hodge’s *Systematic Theology or the Outline of Theology* (1878) by the son of Charles, A. A. Hodge.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, some of his published papers are the size of a big book, especially the two volumes on *Studies in Perfectionism*, over 1200 pages in total. It is also reasonable to argue that his articles on Christology or on Scripture could be regarded as addenda to the Hodges’ books, but his output on perfectionism is greater in bulk than both of the Hodges’ publications on systematic theology put together.

There is nothing of Warfield’s writings that tell us what moved him to publish what he did, and his personal reserve is such that it is difficult to understand their context other than from what the articles themselves indicate. At whatever level he wrote, he was not inclined to express Christian truth by application of the first person singular; he stated not, “Eternal life is the prospect of my union with Christ,” but “He gives unending life to people.”

In general, his articles are not directly polemical, except for one or two instances. Two features, as compared to the twenty-first century, stand out. One is the sheer volume of printed commentaries and theological treatments today as compared to his day. Second, he does not always seek to engage with arguments in contemporary American literature, nor are there comments on the culture of secularism. His shorter writings give more away than do

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<sup>7</sup> Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, “Calvin’s Doctrine of the Trinity,” in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, 5:189–284; John Murray, “Systematic Theology,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 4:7–8.

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, “Edwards and the New England Theology,” in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, 9:515–38.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Lloyd-Jones, introduction, 7.

his pieces on religious and theological issues, and he is silent on what may have been fads of the day.

As liberalism grew among the members of the faculty of Princeton Theological Seminary it would have been difficult for a senior member such as Warfield to give a strong reaction, let alone a published critique. When the break came, had he lived to suffer its occurrence, would he have remained in the Seminary as did his friend Geerhardus Vos? Some comments on Warfield must include more of his reactions to the onset of liberalism in the bulwark of conservatism at Princeton. Ned B. Stonehouse's biographical memoir of Machen contains references to Warfield through the eyes of Machen as the days darkened. Machen thought that Warfield did not favor a split in the church ("You can't split rotten wood"), and by temperament Warfield was not in favor of taking a leading role against liberalism. Some thought that the spirit of liberalism would soon scatter. According to Machen, Warfield thought that the wave of naturalism would soon be spent, as people concerned with their spiritual life would not be attracted by the naturalism of liberalism. Machen's view was that Warfield "was a man of the study rather than a man of the ecclesiastical arena": "With all his glaring faults he was the greatest man I have known," was Machen's verdict at the time of Warfield's death.<sup>10</sup>

We can bring this memory of Warfield to an end by a quotation from *Faith and Life*. Here, he is with students and less formal, less impersonal in the orientation of his words. Here in this "conference," if anywhere, he is rather informal. Recognizing that teacher and students have one common calling, he can be more personal. He closes the theme of help in our praying as follows:

Thus, then, the Spirit helps our weakness. By His hidden, inner influences He quickens us to the perception of our real need; He frames in us an infinite desire for this needed thing; He leads us to bring this desire in all its unutterable strength before God; who, seeing it within our hearts, cannot but grant it, as accordant with His will. Is this not a very present help in time of trouble? As prevalent a help as if we were miraculously rescued from any danger? And yet a help wrought through the means of God's appointment, that is, our attitude of constant dependence on Him and our prayer to His aid? And could Paul here have devised a better encouragement to the saints to go on in their holy course and fight the battle bravely to the end?<sup>11</sup>

May the Lord continue to use the example and output of B. B. Warfield for the glory of God.

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<sup>10</sup> Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 310–11.

<sup>11</sup> Warfield, *Faith and Life*, 200–201.