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## Briggs vs Warfield & Hodge: Inspiration and the Challenge of Higher Criticism

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GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY

BRIGGS VS. WARFIELD & HODGE:  
INSPIRATION AND THE CHALLENGE OF HIGHER CRITICISM

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF CHURCH HISTORY  
FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTERS IN THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

BY

JILL ASHLEY

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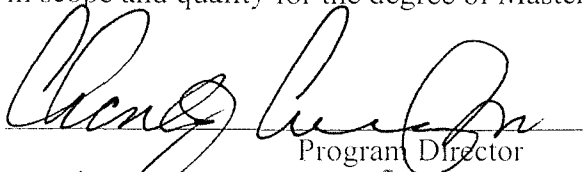


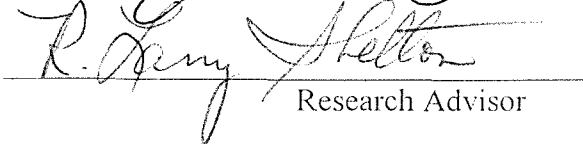
## THESIS ACCEPTANCE CERTIFICATE

Title: BRIGGS VS. WARFIELD & HODGE: INSPIRATION AND THE CHALLENGE  
OF HIGHER CRITICISM

Presented by: JILL ASHLEY

We, the undersigned, certify that we have read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree of Master of Arts in Theological Studies.

  
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Program Director

  
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Research Advisor

## ***Introduction***

At the end of the nineteenth century an important debate took place in the Presbyterian Church in the United States over the nature of the authority of Scripture and its inspiration and a new biblical studies discipline known as higher criticism. Many saw higher criticism as a threat to orthodox Protestant faith. Others viewed it as an inevitable and positive entrance for the Church and theology into “modern” times. Notable among those who were apprehensive about this new criticism was an influential school of thinkers at Princeton Seminary who developed what came to be known as the “Princeton School” of theology. On the other side, most notable among those who were proponents of higher criticism in the United States was Charles Augustus Briggs, a Presbyterian minister and professor at Union Theological Seminary.

Briggs, co-editor of *The Presbyterian Review*, and Benjamin (B. B.) Warfield, a Princeton professor, agreed to co-publish a series of articles addressing the topic of German higher criticism in the *Review*, a forum which had been designed to provide a means of reconciliation between the recently reunited Old and New School Presbyterians in the North.<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Warfield and Archibald Hodge published the first article in the series, entitled *Inspiration*. In it they present a fully developed expression of the Princeton School theology of Scripture.<sup>2</sup> Briggs then responded to their article with his

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<sup>1</sup> Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), 349.

<sup>2</sup> Archibald A. Hodge and Benjamin B. Warfield, *Inspiration* (Presbyterian Board of Publications, 1881; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979).

rebuttal and a defense of critical methods in an article entitled *The Right, Duty and Limits of Biblical Criticism*.<sup>3</sup>

Among the issues these men discussed in their written debate was the nature of the inspiration of Scripture and the place, if any, of employing historico-critical methods of investigation in biblical study. These were primary areas of disagreement in the debate as well as key areas of disagreement in subsequent American Church history. Throughout the Briggs/Warfield debate, each side held fast to the idea that its doctrine aligned with the historic position of the Reformed church, particularly with the Reformers themselves and the Westminster Standards. What led to these diverse understandings of Scripture and their respectively different theological methods within the same denominational tradition? This study attempts to discern the cause of these differences through an exploration of the historical, cultural, and philosophical influences behind each theological perspective, along with the perspectives themselves as expressed in the articles written for the *Review*.

### ***The Princeton Position***

The Princeton Theology provides the first touchstone for understanding Hodge and Warfield's article *Inspiration*. The men who contributed significantly to this school before and at the time of the debate include the Seminary's founder, Archibald Alexander, his pupil, Charles Hodge, Charles Hodge's son, A.A. Hodge, and B.B. Warfield, who came to the seminary after the death of A. A. Hodge. The Princeton men are accurately grouped together not only by the physical institution of Princeton, but also

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<sup>3</sup> Charles A. Briggs, "Critical Theories of the Sacred Scriptures in Relation to Their Inspiration: The Right, Duty, and Limits of Biblical Criticism," *Presbyterian Review* 2 (July 1881): 550-79.

by the common vision held by its scholars, who recognized the school and its work as a keeper of traditional Reformed faith in the midst of a changing theological and cultural landscape. The men influenced each other in many ways. Because of this, the theological work of Benjamin Warfield and A.A. Hodge must be considered within the broader framework of the Princeton school. The article *Inspiration* should be considered as a document produced not just by Hodge and Warfield, but as a product of Princeton's own brand of the Presbyterian theological tradition.

As a school, Princeton was unified from its outset in vision and purpose. Mark Noll points out that Princeton Seminary was founded in response to a perceived crisis--namely, to keep clergy safe from the problem of burgeoning secularization.<sup>4</sup> Its purpose was "to fit clergymen to meet the cultural crisis, to roll back what they perceived as tides of irreligion sweeping the country and to provide a learned defense of Christianity generally and the Bible specifically."<sup>5</sup> Smith agrees with Noll that the seminary was designed to harbor future ministers from secularization. It was also becoming more important for the Presbyterians to create a school designated for training ministers, as Presbyterian colleges, such as the College of New Jersey, began to focus more energy and time on the sciences than on studying the classics. This particularly hindered the study of Latin, which was directly necessary for ministers to read the key orthodox texts. Additionally, Princeton was founded to meet the needs of a westward growing population

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<sup>4</sup> Mark Noll, ed., *The Princeton Theology, 1812-1921: Scripture, Science and Theological Method from Archibald Alexander to Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 36.

<sup>5</sup> Mark A. Noll, "The Princeton Theology," in *The Princeton Theology: Reformed Theology in America*, ed. David F. Wells (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), 24.

for which the numbers of Presbyterian ministry candidates was not increasing rapidly enough.<sup>6</sup>

Princeton Seminary founders took measures to ensure Presbyterian orthodoxy among the ministers it produced. For example, the entire faculty was required to subscribe completely to the Westminster Confession of Faith, and the Presbyterian Catechism.<sup>7</sup> It is not surprising, in light of this, that the Princeton men felt strongly that Calvinist Reformed theology was the correct theology, and the type of religion that they must uphold. In a telling statement from his work “What is Calvinism?” Warfield writes, “Calvinism is just religion in its purity. We have only, therefore, to conceive of religion in its purity and that is Calvinism.”<sup>8</sup>

As Calvinists, the Princeton Theologians saw themselves as upholders of pure religion. Dr. Charles Hodge affirmed the importance of the Reformed tradition to the Princetonians in his semi-centennial address to the seminary. He stated proudly, “I am not afraid to say that a new idea has never originated in this seminary.”<sup>9</sup> The Princeton men neither claimed nor desired to be theological innovators. Instead of new ideas, these men wished to subscribe to, teach, and defend the orthodox Calvinism of the Westminster confession.

In addition to their common ideologies, according to Noll, circumstances served to institutionalize their shared conservatism. Among these circumstances, Noll writes,

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<sup>6</sup> Elwyn Allen Smith, *The Presbyterian Ministry in American Culture* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, MCMLXII), 114-20.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 121-22.

<sup>8</sup> B.B. Warfield, ‘What is Calvinism?’ in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, ed John E Meeters, 2 vols (Nutley NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing company); quoted in Noll, “The Princeton Theology,” 18.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Hodge; quoted in Lefferts A. Loetscher, *The Broadening Church; a Study of Theological Issues in the Presbyterian Church Since 1869* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1957), 25.

“The lengthy tenures of the Princeton professors were themselves conservative phenomena, not to speak of the filiopietistic debts which accumulated as the chair passed from father to spiritual son, to actual son, to spiritual son once more,”<sup>10</sup> from Archibald Alexander, who can be considered the first theologian in the Princeton school, down through Benjamin Warfield. One mentored, another taught, and another wrote, each providing a formative influence on the theology of the next.

The Princeton Theologians were united in their convictions about the nature of truth and common methods of reason.<sup>11</sup> They also treated their Reformed tradition with the same unified vision as their theology, and in doing so were prone to pull bits and pieces of theology from very different contexts together. According to Noll they did this because they “regarded theology as a static entity not affected to any appreciable degree by historical development...[as a] dogmatic whole.”<sup>12</sup> As a result, traditional influences in their theology are varied and yet sometimes difficult to trace.

A generally high esteem of reason, as well as the self-appointed task of defending traditional Calvinism, contributed to an apologetic tone in much of their theology.

Warfield’s classic statement is exemplary:

It is the distinction of Christianity that it has come into the world clothed with the mission to reason its way to dominion.<sup>13</sup>

His commitment to this stated task is unmistakably evident in the apologetic tone that permeates Warfield’s *Inspiration* article.

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<sup>10</sup> Noll, *The Princeton Theology, 1812-1921*, 37.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>12</sup> Noll, “The Princeton Theology,” 19.

<sup>13</sup> Warfield. *Shorter Writings*, 2:234; quoted in W. Andrew Hofferger, “Benjamin B. Warfield,” in *The Princeton Theology: Reformed Theology in America*, ed. David F. Wells (Grand Rapids: MI: Baker Book House, 1989), 83.



True to its pursuit of defending Reformed Christianity, Princeton also produced important theological journals, such as the *Princeton Review*, which according to Noll were a forum for some of the greatest theological debate of the time. Among other things, their influence was broad because of the “Princeton ability to enlarge a parochial controversy into a full-blown defense of Reformed doctrines.”<sup>14</sup> The Princeton school understood clearly that its task as theologians included fiery defenses of Reformed faith.

Several underlying convictions mingled within the Princeton School and carried through from one theologian to the next. These include a consistently high view of Scripture, an empirical, scientific understanding of how the Bible should be used to generate doctrine, the influence of Scottish Common Sense Philosophy, and the importance of religious experience, though the latter does not appear to have factored into the debate about Scripture.<sup>15</sup> All of these convictions influenced Hodge and Warfield to varying degrees and can be seen in *Inspiration*.

In light of the influence that the Princeton School had on the theology of its members, this study will next attempt to further understand its influence on the Warfield/Hodge article by delineating the unique contributions of each of the Princeton Theologians leading up to Warfield and by exploring how Warfield himself appropriated these contributions.

## **The Princeton Men: Archibald Alexander**

Archibald Alexander, the first of the Princeton Theologians, taught at Princeton from its inception as a seminary in 1812 to 1851. According to Loetscher, it was

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<sup>14</sup> Noll, “The Princeton Theology,” 25.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-24.

Alexander who defined the Princeton Theology, while the later three merely refined and sharpened it.<sup>16</sup> According to Noll, Alexander also relied strongly on the Reformed Scholastic, Francis Turretin.<sup>17</sup> He assigned Turretin's *Institutio Theologiae Enlecticae* as the primary theological text at the Seminary. This was used until the introduction of Hodge's *Systematic Theology* in the 1870s.<sup>18</sup>

Alexander also played an important role in bringing Scottish Common Sense Philosophy to the seminary. This is particularly apparent in his *Outlines of Moral Science*, which Ahlstrom calls a "mediation on the views" of the Common Sense philosophers, Butler, Reid and Price.<sup>19</sup> The Scottish Common Sense philosophy will be treated in greater detail later in this paper.

Alexander had great confidence in reason generally, and specifically in reason as a tool for Biblical interpretation.<sup>20</sup> Sandeen argues that Alexander defined the reason-based methodology that would become a trademark of the Princeton theology.<sup>21</sup> Alexander defined for Princeton a method of doing theology that treated the facts of Scripture as a storehouse to be mined to produce sound doctrine. Throughout the nineteenth century this played directly into the Princeton doctrine of inspiration, which

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<sup>16</sup> Loetscher, *The Broadening Church; a Study of Theological Issues in the Presbyterian Church Since 1869*, 23.

<sup>17</sup> Woodbridge points out that scholars like Rogers and McKim have inaccurately construed Archibald Alexander as having placed too much emphasis on Turretin, when in reality he often dissented from Turretin but wanted his students to study his work and do their own critical investigation. John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 135.

<sup>18</sup> Noll, *The Princeton Theology, 1812-1921*, 28-29.

<sup>19</sup> Sydney E. Ahlstrom, "The Scottish Philosophy and American Theology," *Church History* XXIV, no. 3 (September 1955): 266.

<sup>20</sup> Loetscher, 23; Jack B. Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession: A Problem of Historical Interpretation for American Presbyterianism* (Lincoln, Netherlands: J.H. Kok and N.V. Kampen, 1966), 26.

<sup>21</sup> Ernest R. Sandeen, "Toward a Historical Interpretation of the Origins of Fundamentalism," *Church History* 36, no. 1 (March 1967): 73.

would be set in stone by the Hodge/Warfield article. According to Sandeen, Alexander's influence here persisted. He writes,

Their doctrine of inspiration, as it developed during the century, never wavered from this fundamental tenet—that if the Bible was to be proven God's inspired word, the demonstration must be on the basis of reason through use of external marks of authenticity—never convictions.<sup>22</sup>

In *Inspiration*, Hodge and Warfield demonstrated that their reasonable study of the facts contained in the Bible lead to the conclusion that the Bible claims its own errorlessness and therefore must be inerrant.

Another very important contribution of Alexander to the Princeton School is that he appears, according to Loetscher, to have placed the canonicity of the New Testament on the criteria of the its' Apostolicity. This became a very significant factor in the later debate over higher criticism, because to the extent that higher criticism questions a book's apostolic authorship, such a foundation for biblical authority is weakened.<sup>23</sup> So at least at this point, Alexander left the later Princeton men in the precarious position of broadening or defending his argument for New Testament canonicity.

Finally, Alexander was a precursor to the "inerrancy" position of Hodge and Warfield. According to Rogers, "Alexander sought by the use of reason to make the Bible Base of the Princeton theology objectively secure." As he did this, it became important for Alexander to defend the Bible's own claim to inspiration by defending its errorlessness, because admitting error would contradict the completeness of its

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<sup>22</sup> Sandeen, 74.

<sup>23</sup> Loetscher, 23.

inspiration.<sup>24</sup> Loetscher agrees with Rogers on this point, noting out that Alexander would not admit error in Scripture because doing so would compel one to admit that some parts of the Scripture had not been inspired.<sup>25</sup> Some scholars, such as Woodbridge, go further, calling Alexander a Biblical inerrantist. Woodbridge argues that perhaps Alexander held an early view of the inerrancy of the original autographs. He cites Alexander's 1831 review of Wood's "Lectures on the Inspiration of the Scriptures," where Alexander notes copyist errors and says that the Scriptures used during Christ's lifetime were "entire and uncorrupted, and were an infallible rule."<sup>26</sup> Whether or not this evidence supports the view that Alexander held to such a strict view of biblical inerrancy, there is sufficient evidence that he established a conceptual basis for the early Princeton position on the inerrancy of Scripture. This doctrinal position would continue to be solidified and developed within the Princeton school until its clear definition by Hodge and Warfield in *Inspiration*.

### Charles Hodge

According to Ernest Sandeen, Charles Hodge was also a key figure in structuring the theological methodology of the Princeton school, which he calls its most characteristic aspect.<sup>27</sup> Hodge's theological method relied heavily on reason and empiricism. Sandeen quotes from Hodge's *Systematic Theology*:

As natural science was chaos until the principle of induction was admitted and faithfully carried out, so theology is a jumble of human speculations, not worth a

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<sup>24</sup> Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession: A Problem of Historical Interpretation for American Presbyterianism*, 26.

<sup>25</sup> Loetscher, 23.

<sup>26</sup> Alexander, "Review of Woods on Inspiration," *The Biblical Repertory and Theological Review* 3(January 1831), 10; quoted in Woodbridge, 132.

<sup>27</sup> Sandeen, "Toward a Historical Interpretation of the Origins of Fundamentalism," 73.

straw, when men refuse to apply the same principle to the study of the Word of God.<sup>28</sup>

For Charles Hodge, as for Alexander, the Bible was the storehouse of facts to which the scientific method should be applied in order to produce good theology.

Hodge appealed to the Bible's inspiration, as a means of establishing its veracity in all manner of thought, from science, to geography and historical detail. Rogers claims that so complete was Hodge's reliance on the factuality of biblical data that,

Hodge separated belief in Christ as the personal object of faith from belief in the Biblical data, which is the rational object of faith. In general Hodge referred to the whole revelation of God in scripture as the object of faith, making Christ an additional special object of faith.<sup>29</sup>

In this system, the factual detail of biblical data was also a matter of faith.

According to Loetscher, as he affirmed the inspiration of the biblical fact-data, Hodge at least implied the errorlessness of the original manuscripts. He writes, "Dr. Hodge intimated a distinction between the existing text of Scripture and the original text or autographs, which was to be more emphasized by his son."<sup>30</sup> According to scholars like Sandeen, Charles Hodge was more relaxed about the possible presence of errors in the Bible than the later Princeton men would be, though belief in the factuality of Biblical data was important.<sup>31</sup> This appeal to the Bible's factual truthfulness is passed down to the later Princeton Theologians like Hodge's son, A.A. Hodge, and B.B. Warfield.

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<sup>28</sup> Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, I, 14ff; quoted in Sandeen, "Toward a Historical Interpretation of the Origins of Fundamentalism," 73.

<sup>29</sup> Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession*, 27.

<sup>30</sup> Loetscher, *The Broadening Church*, 24; Woodbridge, 126-7. In his refutation of the Rogers and McKim proposal, Woodbridge argues based on the fact that he published Beck's essay "Monogrammata Hermeneutics NT" in the first issue of the *Biblical Repertory*, that Charles Hodge distinguished the original autographs of scripture from copyist errors. Rogers and McKim on the other hand claim that inerrancy of the original autographs was an innovation of A.A. Hodge and Warfield.

<sup>31</sup> Ernest R. Sandeen, "The Princeton Theology: One Source of Biblical Literalism in American Protestantism," *Church History* 31, no. 3 (September 1962): 315.

However, as these later men faced the spread of higher criticism, they would meet new obstacles in defending Biblical fact-data that Charles Hodge had not faced and would thus be forced to strengthen his position.

According to Sandeen, Charles Hodge also had a formative influence on the Princeton doctrine of Inspiration, by substituting an understanding of biblical authority based on the Reformed doctrine of the witness of the Holy Spirit with biblical authority based on a doctrine of inspiration.<sup>32</sup> This means that the Bible's authority is not attested to so much through the Holy Spirit speaking and acting through the biblical message, but by the fact that the Bible was truthfully, factually, and infallibly inspired. This understanding can be clearly seen as a critical step towards Warfield's ultimate inerrancy position in that it makes inerrancy a necessary criterion of biblical authority. Sandeen argues that by basing authority on infallible biblical inspiration Charles Hodge took an irreversible step:

This crucial distinction was perpetuated by every other Princeton theologian, and, in fact, the later history of this doctrine of the Scriptures becomes the story of the desperate dilemma into which the Princeton professors were thrust by this distinction and the manner in which they attempted to reconcile the problem.<sup>33</sup>

Sandeen goes on to say that though Charles Hodge based authority on inspiration rather than the witness of the Spirit, he later lets the Spirit in "by the back door." In this vein Hodge's reliance on errorless inspiration was not his only basis of authority. Nevertheless, Hodge advanced a conception of biblical authority that would be refined by later Princeton theologians, as evidenced in the Hodge/Warfield article, which placed

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 311.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

even less emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit. According to Sandeen, it is this conception of biblical authority that eventually forced the Princeton men to argue so vehemently for total biblical inerrancy in defense of the Bible's authority.<sup>34</sup>

### A.A. Hodge

Archibald Alexander Hodge, co-author of *Inspiration*, drew from the contributions of the earlier Princeton Theologians and his own doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture fell in line with theirs. VanderStelt says that while Archibald Alexander was the founder of the Princeton Theology, and Charles Hodge was its "systematizer," it was A.A. Hodge who served as its "popularizer."<sup>35</sup> *Inspiration* is a good example of a "popular" statement from the school. Like his predecessors, A.A. Hodge relied heavily on basic assumptions about religious truth provided by Common Sense Philosophy.<sup>36</sup>

A.A. Hodge highly valued reason as a key factor in receiving and interpreting revelation. In his *Outlines of Theology* he writes:

Reason is the primary revelation God has made to man, necessarily presupposed in every subsequent revelation of whatever kind. Hence Reason, including the moral and emotional nature, and experience, must be the organ by means of which alone all subsequent revelations can be apprehended and received.<sup>37</sup>

This emphasis on reason is clearly seen in the *Inspiration* article he co-authored with Warfield as well as his other theological works.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> John C. VanderStelt, *Philosophy and Scripture: A Study in Old Princeton and Westminster Theology* (Marlton, NJ: Mack Publishing Company, 1978), 156.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>37</sup> A.A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 62; quoted in VanderStelt, 160.

According to Loetscher for A.A. Hodge the canonicity of biblical books was established on the basis of authorship.<sup>38</sup> This hearkens back to the contribution of his name's sake Archibald Alexander. A. A. Hodge also accorded special status to the original autographs of Scripture. In his *Outlines of Theology* A.A. Hodge wrote,

The Church has never held the verbal infallibility of our translations, nor the perfect accuracy of the copies of the original Hebrew and Greek Scriptures now possessed by us. These copies confessedly contain many 'discrepancies' resulting from frequent transcription... And it is moreover reassuring to know that believing criticism, by the discovery and collation of more ancient and accurate copies, is constantly advancing the Church to the possession of a more perfect text of the original Scriptures than she has enjoyed since the apostolic age.<sup>39</sup>

The younger Hodge admitted that errors had crept into Scripture after the original manuscripts were completed. With this in mind, it is not surprising that he also emphasized the study of the extant original-language texts of Scripture.<sup>40</sup> Textual criticism, however, was not to be confused with higher criticism, as he pointed out in *Inspiration*.

## **B. B. Warfield**

Even though he was not at Princeton when *Inspiration* was composed, Benjamin Warfield was a thoroughly Princeton School theologian. Like his predecessors, scientific methodology was important to him. According to Noll, Warfield's devotion to science began when he was only an adolescent. Noll describes his scholarship as "precise,

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<sup>38</sup> Loetscher, 24.

<sup>39</sup> A.A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*. *Outlines of Theology* (rev. ed. 1879; reprinted, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1972), 75.

<sup>40</sup> John Battle, "Charles Hodge: Inspiration, Textual Criticism, and the Princeton Doctrine of Scripture," *WRS Journal*, <<http://www.wrs.edu/journals/jour897/text.html>>.



careful, wideranging, penetrating and especially well-grounded in scientific literature.”<sup>41</sup>

Rogers and McKim describe Warfield’s theological methodology as even more refined than the scientific methodology of his predecessor, Charles Hodge. While Hodge’s methods could be compared to a science, “Warfield refined it to a technology. Conclusions were drawn on the basis of technical definitions, minute word studies, and scholastic refinements of language.”<sup>42</sup>

Also consistent with his scientific interests, Warfield placed heavy emphasis on the importance of facts as they relate to knowledge and to faith. VanderStelt describes Warfield’s understanding of knowledge as it appears in his “Augustine’s Doctrine of Knowledge and Authority.” His “intellectualistic view of faith” is grounded in the facts or evidence that a person comprehends. While knowledge is based what a person witnesses him or herself, faith is based on that which was witnessed by others and attested to in the Bible. It follows that for Warfield, “The idea of inspiration is not an ‘inductive conclusion,’ derived from the facts of Scripture; it is only ‘one of the facts’ upon which the induction as to the truth of the contents of Scripture is to be based.”<sup>43</sup>

Warfield relied heavily on the work of the earlier Princeton men for his doctrine of inspiration. According to Sandeen, an important addition Warfield made to the approach of his predecessor, Charles Hodge, on whom he relied heavily, was to base his confidence in the Bible’s authority on apostolic authority in addition to prior biblical reverence.<sup>44</sup> This reflects the influence of the earlier Princeton Theologians like

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<sup>41</sup> Noll, *The Princeton Theology, 1812-192*, 15.

<sup>42</sup> Rogers and McKim, 326.

<sup>43</sup> VanderStelt, 170-71, 177.

<sup>44</sup> Sandeen, “The Princeton Theology,” 312; Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism 1800-1930* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago, 1970), 120.

Archibald Alexander. Sandeen argues that Warfield took the implications of the earlier Princeton position on Scripture and brought them to their logical conclusion. For Warfield, “the veracity of the biblical authors, their skill as historians, their accuracy as scientists--all these fell within the compass of ‘whatever evidence’ and were to be used to defend the credibility of the apostles as teachers of the doctrine.” As Warfield did this, according to Sandeen he made the definitive shift from Charles Hodge’s basis for biblical authority, which had left room for some internal substantiation and religious experience, to a complete dependence on external authority.<sup>45</sup> Noll does not completely agree with Sandeen on this point. He argues that while Warfield often construed the Bible’s authority in terms of reason and factual substantiation, he also followed the Princeton tradition before him by speaking on occasion of Scripture’s authority arising from the internal power of the word.<sup>46</sup>

In addition to comparing Warfield to his predecessors, it is also valuable to evaluate B.B. Warfield’s position as it related to his late nineteenth-century context. For example, as demonstrated by pieces like his article, “The Century’s Progress in Biblical Knowledge (1900),” Warfield was keenly aware of developments that were occurring in biblical and theological studies. The series of articles he published with Briggs in the *Presbyterian Review* on the topic of higher criticism also demonstrates this. Warfield also appreciated advancements made by fellow conservative scholars of his century.<sup>47</sup>

True to Princeton Theology, Warfield was aware and concerned with how developments in theological and biblical studies impacted traditional Reformed faith. As

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<sup>45</sup> Sandeen, “The Princeton Theology,” 312.

<sup>46</sup> Noll, *The Princeton Theology, 1812-192*, 33-34.

<sup>47</sup> Hoffecker, 76.

chair of Didactic and Polemical Theology at Princeton, this was part of his job, which Hoffercker describes as producing ministers who had been trained so well in the traditional Reformed faith that they could successfully refute any teaching that fell short of this standard.<sup>48</sup> Rogers and McKim point out that Warfield was a genuine apologist for the Reformed faith who felt that the principle doctrines of Christianity were under attack and his job was to defend them.<sup>49</sup>

Warfield did not lose sight of his job as an apologist, defender of the tradition of Reformed faith to a changing culture. Hoffercker quotes what he calls Warfield's "most telling rejoinder:"

[Because every age] has a language of its own and can speak no other...Instead of stating Christian belief in terms of modern thought, an effort is made, rather, to state modern thought in terms of Christian belief.<sup>50</sup>

He believed that sometimes the need to interpret faith to culture causes theologians to lose sight of the true relationship between Christianity and the contextual expression of it. Warfield understood that it was important to remember this tendency, and guard against it. Much of his theological work clearly reflected this.

## **Influences: Nineteenth Century Context**

The end of the nineteenth century saw America teetering on the brink of a cultural shift. Princeton was not oblivious to the changes. Mark Noll writes, "The modern historian...may look outward to the Princetonians' culture and draw the conclusion that they were...Reformed theologians of the Bible intimately involved with the crosscurrents

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<sup>48</sup> Hoffercker, 65.

<sup>49</sup> Rogers and McKim, 325.

<sup>50</sup> Benjamin Warfield, Review of Foundations. A Statement of Christian Belief in Terms of Modern Thought, by Seven Oxford Men, Critical Reviews, 173; quoted in Hoffercker, "Benjamin B. Warfield," 76-77.

of nineteenth century intellectual life.”<sup>51</sup> This was no less true for Benjamin Warfield and A.A. Hodge. There were many cultural and intellectual crosscurrents of the nineteenth century, including various scientific, philosophical, and religious movements. Historians also describe some general prevailing attitudes with which theologians must obviously contend in order to practice their discipline.

An interesting point when situating the Princeton theologians in their century is to notice that though there were many developments in nineteenth-century American Christianity that did not accept Reformed theology as a whole, much of what the Princeton men believed regarding biblical authority was accepted by the larger Protestant church. Noll writes:

Princeton was confident about the authority of the Bible because for most of the century almost all evangelical Protestants were. To be sure, developments in the last third of the century constrained A.A. Hodge and Warfield to refine a widely shared view of biblical authority until it bore distinctive Princeton features. Yet before that time, Princeton affirmations concerning the complete authority of Scripture were not distinctive, but in fact only part of a great theological chorus sung by representatives of many denominations.<sup>52</sup>

However, in the context of the broader American Protestant church, there was a wide variety of things that stood out as a unique in the Princeton approach to theology.

According to Loetscher, the post civil-war society in which the later Princeton Men did their theology was both optimistic and self-confident. Growth in industry and technology had added to the optimism, and a smug, wealthy class was also on the rise.<sup>53</sup> As a result of the general feeling of optimism, historic Calvinism in its American form

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<sup>51</sup> Noll, 27.

<sup>52</sup> Noll, *The Princeton Theology, 1812-1921*, 35.

<sup>53</sup> Loetscher, 8-9.

was suffering among men who “could not forever bow as wretched sinners on Sunday and swell with self-confidence on the other six days of the week.”<sup>54</sup> In the midst of optimism and faith in human potential, one task of Calvinist theologians like Warfield and Hodge was to hold fast to a traditionally Calvinist understanding of humanity and its fallenness.

In this context Warfield was an apologist for a distinctly Calvinist and Augustinian brand of Christian doctrine. Accordingly, he challenged a flood of contemporary perfectionist movements within Protestantism. Mark Noll points out the importance for Warfield of defending Calvinist orthodoxy against perfectionism, which he regarded as “impossible in the presence of a deep sense or profound conception of sin.”<sup>55</sup> Warfield and the Princeton theologians were self-consciously anti-Arminian. They considered the doctrine of predestination axiomatic to orthodox Reformed faith. In an article entitled “Predestination” Warfield declares:

The hope of the world, the hope of the Church, and the hope of the individual alike, is cast solely on the mercy of a freely electing God, in whose hands are all things, and not least the care of the advance of His saving grace in the world.<sup>56</sup>

Warfield’s convictions about God’s sovereign election caused him to disagree with the Second Great Awakening’s flood of Arminian revivalism and its leaders, such as Charles Finney. He also opposed other Holiness teachers, such as Robert Pearsall Smith and

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>55</sup> B.B. Warfield, “The Higher Life Movement,” in *Works*, 8:554-55; quoted in Mark Noll, “B.B. Warfield,” in *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993), 37.

<sup>56</sup> B. B. Warfield, “Predestination,” in *Works*, 2:66; quoted in Noll, “B.B. Warfield,” 38.

William Boardman, and nineteenth-century perfectionist movements like the Victorious Living movement.<sup>57</sup>

In addition to perfectionism, relativism was on the rise, spearheaded by the now-universalized principles of evolution.<sup>58</sup> Loetscher describes the gravity of the changes saying, “Now critical reason was tearing down even the pseudo-absolutes of the Enlightenment. The ultimate stage of metaphysical disintegration was being reached.”<sup>59</sup> Marsden points out that as a result of this disintegration, groups typically made adjustments in one of two ways. One side responded by “toning down” the supernatural and emphasizing a person’s God-given human potential. The other side planted itself firmly in the fundamentals and emphasized God’s supernatural workings in history.<sup>60</sup>

B. B. Warfield and the Princeton school did the latter. This can be clearly seen in Warfield’s description of how the Bible is supernaturally inspired:

There were divine voices, appearances, covenants, supernatural communications and interventions—the introduction of new institutions, and their growth under special providential conditions. The prophet of God was sent with special revelations and authority... The Scriptures were generated through sixteen centuries of this divinely-regulated concurrence of God and man, of the natural and supernatural, of reason and revelation, of providence and grace.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Noll, “B.B. Warfield,” 37.

<sup>58</sup> Warfield himself did not completely reject Darwin’s evolution. In fact, David N. Livingstone and Mark A. Noll observe that Warfield’s understanding of the divine and human process of biblical inspiration provides a parallel for his understanding of evolution and creation: “This doctrine had immense philosophical potential for Warfield’s understanding of science: simply, the products of natural history could be the consequence—at the same time—of both natural forces and divine action.” David N. Livingstone and Mark A. Noll, “B.B. Warfield (1851-1921): A Biblical Inerrantist as Evolutionist,” *Isis* 91 (2000): 289.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.

<sup>60</sup> George M. Marsden, “Introduction: Reformed and American,” in *The Princeton Theology: Reformed Theology in America*, ed. David F. Wells (Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, MI, 1989), 7.

<sup>61</sup> Archibald A. Hodge and Benjamin B. Warfield, *Inspiration* (Presbyterian Board of Publications, 1881; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 14.

For Warfield and Hodge, the supernatural element could not be dismissed. It was a presupposition behind their entire theology.

Philosophical trends of the time, many of which were in opposition to the Princeton theology, played a role in solidifying it. According to VanderStelt, German philosophy, such as that of Kant, played a large role in shaping the intellectual climate of the time and in indirectly inspiring broader movements such as transcendentalism.

VanderStelt gives an example of an address by transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson at Harvard Divinity School where Emerson affirmed, among other things, that “the age of inspiration is past” along with the Bible’s canonicity and the understanding of Jesus as divine.<sup>62</sup> Transcendentalists denied the supernatural and minimized empirically based knowledge, which generated criticism from the Princeton theologians.

Transcendentalism was, however, quite a strong, broad, cultural movement between the 1870s and 1890s. It was during this time that Hodge and Warfield composed their article on inspiration.<sup>63</sup> In the face of this movement, writes VanderStelt,

many orthodox denominational schools,...especially PTS [Princeton], strenuously resisted, well into the twentieth century—by means of their traditional appeal to the indubitability of objective facts and the reliability of subjective reason—this ominous move towards German idealism, infidelity and agnosticism.<sup>64</sup>

As many theologians of the time began to embrace neo-Kantian idealism, Princeton remained a stronghold of resistance and held fast to its reliance on the older loyalties.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> VanderStelt, 150-51.

<sup>63</sup> VanderStelt, 152.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

Sandeen points out that in addition to separating from philosophical trends of the time the Princeton theologians' wished explicitly to separate themselves both from deism and from the "enthusiasm" of nineteenth-century revivalism. For example, at the very beginning of his *Systematic Theology*, Hodge defines and defends proper use of reason in theology, refuting both the deist and mystic's use of it.<sup>66</sup> In the face of earlier English mysticism and more recent American revivalism of the second Great Awakening, the Princeton theologians were very careful to subordinate the mystical and experiential elements of religion, to reason-based theological science. Ironically, as they did this, according to Sandeen, they "did not stand equi-distant from them on some neutral epistemological ground, but as many commentators have noticed, occupied exactly the same stance as their deist rivals.... Their dependence upon reason, though carefully guarded, was complete."<sup>67</sup> The Princeton reliance upon reason is a thread not uncommon to other groups in their theological context.

Other movements in the late eighteenth century also challenged traditional Calvinism. These include the rise in comparative study of religions, psychology, and Americans who became influenced by studies in Germany by the German idealistic philosophy and biblical criticism.<sup>68</sup> Also the advances in natural science made by individuals such as Darwin and Herbert Spencer, and its resultant impact on liberal theology cannot be overlooked.<sup>69</sup> These two forces played a pivotal role in the tasks undertaken by the Princeton Theologians at this time. As VanderStelt observes:

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<sup>66</sup> Sandeen, "The Princeton Theology," 310.

<sup>67</sup> Sandeen, "The Princeton Theology," 310.

<sup>68</sup> Loetscher,, 11.

<sup>69</sup> VanderStelt, 153.



The frontal attacks of English Darwinism upon the content of Scripture and of German Higher Criticism upon the nature of the Bible profoundly disturbed orthodox Presbyterianism in its belief that God created the world in six days, that He made man instantly from the dust, and that the infallible Scriptures confirmed the fundamental intuitions of CSP [Common Sense Philosophy] and sanctioned the principle of private property.<sup>70</sup>

As a result of the rise of German higher criticism, much discussion arose, such as that between Briggs, and Warfield and Hodge, along with many resulting heresy trials.<sup>71</sup>

All of these influences were felt in the Academic Institutions at the end of the nineteenth century. According to Noll, one of the more important changes that occurred was that people began viewing history in a new light, “as the product of what had gone before. Minds were always a function of cultures, and divinity (where it existed) was always immanent in human experience.”<sup>72</sup> These influences will be described more fully in relationship to Charles Briggs. There was a tension between transcendentalism like that of Emerson, and this new understanding of immanence. Hodge and Warfield, in contrast, did not wish to align themselves with either one.

No doubt that the Princeton men felt the tug of these crosscurrents as each wave made the job of defending traditional, orthodox Calvinism more difficult. In this context they should certainly be considered apologists of the Reformed faith. However, as Noll points out, the Princeton men were not only reacting and defending against negative cultural tides. They were also joining in agreement with some broader Christian and cultural trends, which they borrowed and wove together into a unique and maintainable

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Mark A. Noll, *Between Faith And Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1986), 13.

system.<sup>73</sup> One of the more important elements the Princeton theologians drew from the philosophical climate of the nineteenth century was the Scottish Common Sense Philosophy.

### Scottish Common Sense Philosophy

Scottish Common Sense Philosophy, (CSP), wove throughout the Princeton Theology just as it had influenced many American evangelicals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The philosophy itself began at King's College in Aberdeen, Scotland, in the eighteenth century as Thomas Reid's critical answer to the philosophy of David Hume.<sup>74</sup> Reid argued that humans are not limited only to the idea of what they perceive—"the ideal hypothesis." Instead, common sense affirms and verifies what the physical senses seem to communicate.<sup>75</sup> The human mind "is constituted by God as to know reality (not only the external world but also cause and effect and basic moral principles) directly by 'common sense.'"<sup>76</sup> Reid's CSP argues that real knowledge of things is possible. Another figure, Francis Hutcheson, was also important in the CSP school of thought. He developed teachings, which corresponded to Reid's, about persons' inherent moral senses and abilities to distinguish good from evil.<sup>77</sup>

CSP can be broadly divided into three categories, as Mark Noll has illustrated in his piece, "Common Sense Traditions and American Evangelical Thought." Each category had some influence among the Princetonians. These categories are: *epistemological common sense*—the belief, counteracting Hume's skepticism, that what a person perceives is more or less "real" rather than simply an idea of it, *ethical common*

<sup>73</sup> Noll, *The Princeton Theology, 1812-1921*, 36.

<sup>74</sup> S. A. Grave, *The Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense* (London: Oxford University, 1960), 1.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>76</sup> Hoffecker, 81.

<sup>77</sup> Ahlstrom, 260.

*sense*—the belief that people inherently know good from evil and have innate moral principles, and most importantly for the Princeton men, *methodological common sense*—which states that the truths a person knows consciously about the world and religion are derived inductively from the facts of experience.<sup>78</sup>

In terms of the history of philosophy, Noll calls CSP “the chrysalis from which Princeton Theology emerged.”<sup>79</sup> Broadly, the influence of CSP on the Princeton Theology can be seen in its reliance on and trust of the empirical method of gathering truth, which according to CSP is static and available to every person, and its reliance on common sense and sensory data, and reason to draw conclusions from there.<sup>80</sup>

Scottish CSP came to Princeton originally via John Witherspoon when he left Scotland to become the President of the then College of New Jersey, in 1768. He began his lectures there with a prophetic statement for Princeton’s relationship with CSP. He asserted:

If the Scripture is true, the discoveries of reason cannot be contrary to it. ...It is true that infidels do commonly proceed upon pretended principles of reason...the best way is to meet upon their own ground and show from reason the fallacy of their principles.<sup>81</sup>

His statement reveals the reliance he would encourage at Princeton on methodological Common Sense, which understands the importance of facts methodologically working together to create a coherent system.

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<sup>78</sup> Mark A. Noll, “Common Sense Traditions and American Evangelical Thought,” *American Quarterly* 37 (Summer 1985): 220-23.

<sup>79</sup> Noll, *The Princeton Theology, 1812-1921*, 31.

<sup>80</sup> Noll, 31.

<sup>81</sup> John Witherspoon; quoted by Rogers, 25; from Elwyn A Smith, *the Presbyterian Ministry in American Culture: A Study in Changing concepts, 1700-1900* (Philadelphia 1962) 133 *Scripture in the Westminster Confession*, 25.

According to Noll, the influence of CSP found its way back to Princeton after Witherspoon through Archibald Alexander, who had studied with Witherspoon's student William Graham and incorporated CSP into his theology. For Alexander, common sense can verify both physical and non-physical reality, thus giving a basis for belief in God's existence and for the reality of biblical revelation.<sup>82</sup> Alexander offers a good example of a theological conclusion, which was heavily influenced by reliance on epistemological CSP in his "Nature and Evidence of Truth" lecture when he states,

To prove that our faculties are not so constituted as to misguide us, some have had recourse to the goodness and truth of God, our creator, but this argument is unnecessary. We are as certain of these intuitive truths as we can be... Besides, we must be sure that we exist, and that the world exists, before we can be certain that there is a God, for it is from these data that we prove his existence.<sup>83</sup>

Here the influence of epistemological CSP is clear: certain knowledge of our existence leads to certain knowledge of the world's existence, which leads to knowledge of God's existence.

However much CSP might have influenced the early Princeton theologians, methodological CSP carries the most influence further down the line of Princeton men. This is particularly so, according to Noll, in the case of theological debates relating to Scripture.<sup>84</sup> For Charles Hodge, who was influenced both by Alexander, and by Ashbel Green, CSP became useful in his theological method and use of Scripture.<sup>85</sup> Common Sense method is apparent at the beginning of Hodge's *Systematic Theology* where he writes,

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<sup>82</sup> Noll, "The Princeton Theology," 21.

<sup>83</sup> Archibald Alexander, "Nature and Evidence of Truth," in *The Princeton Theology 1812-1921*, 65; quoted in Noll, "Common Sense Traditions and American Evangelical Thought," 228.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>85</sup> Noll, "The Princeton Theology," 22; Hoffecker, 81-82.

The Bible is to the theologian what nature is to the man of science. It is his store-house of facts; and his method of ascertaining what the Bible teaches is the same as that which the natural philosopher adopts to ascertain what nature teaches.<sup>86</sup>

This illustrates not only Hodge's reliance on CSP, but CSP's own interconnectedness with Baconian empiricism, which I will further discuss shortly. In this framework, the Princeton men could treat the Bible as a storehouse of facts, to be scientifically organized and structured into a coherent system of theology, as it was by Hodge and Warfield in *Inspiration*.

Additionally, according to Noll, CSP also influenced the way American theologians spoke of the nature of the inspiration and trustworthiness of the Bible. This is particularly true in reference to the Princeton Men. Their Common Sense approach to Scripture, illustrated above in the words of Charles Hodge, had the effect of changing their focus from plenary to verbal inspiration. Factual truthfulness became overwhelmingly important, and according to Noll, "they have tended to speak as if the Bible's saving truthfulness rested on its factual truthfulness, instead of assuming—with both reformers and Protestant dogmaticians until the eighteenth century—the reverse."<sup>87</sup>

The Princeton men each incorporated CSP into their theology. Warfield was influenced in Scottish CSP by both Alexander and the Princeton School, and under school president, James McCosh, also a proponent of the philosophy. Relying on the CSP conclusions of both of these men, according to Hoffecker, Warfield refined their work into a complete rational system.<sup>88</sup> A good example of this is his article *Inspiration*.

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<sup>86</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, I: 10; quoted in Noll, "The Princeton Theology," 22.

<sup>87</sup> Noll, "The Princeton Theology," 230.

<sup>88</sup> Hoffecker, 82.

## Scientific Influences

As important as their use of CSP was the corresponding influence on Warfield and his predecessors by the scientific advancements of the Enlightenment and the subsequent reliance on scientific empiricism.

In *Protestants in an Age of Science*, Theodore Dwight Bozeman provides a clear summary of the developments in scientific thought that influenced the Princeton men. He begins with the science of Francis Bacon. “Baconianism,” as it is called, is empirical method that draws its conclusions from an inductive study of observable particulars. Its emphasis is on objective fact rather than hypothesis or even reason.<sup>89</sup> Important for a theologian such as Warfield and his predecessors, Baconianism applied to biblical study opens “science,” or scientific method of study to the non-scientific lay person because the reliable data is available to anyone who can read the biblical text.<sup>90</sup> Bacon himself began with the gathering and interpretation of sense-data.<sup>91</sup> One can see the influence of this method on the Princeton theologians. A good example appears in the earlier-cited beginning of Hodge’s *Systematic Theology* where he speaks of the theologian mining the Bible as a storehouse of facts.

Baconian empiricism was joined hand in hand with Common Sense philosophy at Princeton. In fact, the former thoroughly influenced the latter. According to Bozeman, CSP figure Dugald Stewart wrote of the heavy influence of “Lord Bacon” on Thomas

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<sup>89</sup> Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *Protestants in an Age of Science: The Baconian Ideal and Antebellum American Religious Thought* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 1977), 3.

<sup>90</sup> Bozeman, xiii.

<sup>91</sup> Here we see an important connection between the scientific and philosophical beliefs, because CSP allows one to trust sensory data as real rather than falling into the skepticism of Hume, (as he is sometimes evaluated,) which has no such trust in one’s perception of reality.

Reid that literally “may be traced in every page.”<sup>92</sup> Bozeman summarizes the dependence of CSP on Bacon in four points that include CSP’s enthusiasm about natural science, its empiricism that construes perceived facts about the world to be “real”, a heavy dependence upon facts and a distrust of hypothesis or abstraction, and noted reverence for ‘Lord Bacon’ and his contribution to science.<sup>93</sup> In Princeton theology, we see the confluence of these two streams of Baconianism and CSP, particularly in Hodge and Warfield’s *Inspiration*.

### **The Reformed Tradition, Turretin and Scholasticism**

In addition to their commitments to Baconian empiricism and Common Sense philosophy, Princeton theologians Warfield and A. A. Hodge were also avid protagonists of their Presbyterian and more broadly Reformed tradition. Princeton valued its Calvinist heritage and saw itself as holding fast to the creeds and confessions of Presbyterianism and its tradition. They believed that a principle role of this tradition was to uphold a high view of the Bible and its inspiration.

As Presbyterians, as well as Calvinists, Princeton theologians asserted both the authority of Scripture and their duty to defend it. This can be seen in the first of five questions that candidates for the Presbyterian Ministry were obliged to answer: “Do you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, to be the word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice?”<sup>94</sup> Though this question does not encompass all the finer points made by Warfield and Hodge in *Inspiration*, it clearly illustrates that Presbyterianism of their day reinforced a high view of Scripture.

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<sup>92</sup> Dugald Stewart, *Account of the Life and Writings of Thomas Reid*, 9; quoted in Bozeman, 5.

<sup>93</sup> Bozeman, 21.

<sup>94</sup> The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America...Ratified...1788, Philadelphia, 1879, 158; quoted in Loetscher, 4.

Scholars debate the exact source of Warfield and Hodge's "inerrancy" view and whether they had received this as part of the earlier Reformed tradition. Many, such as John Gerstner, D. Clair Davis, John Delivuk, and John Woodbridge do not believe that their doctrine of verbal inerrancy was theologically innovative for them or for their more recent predecessors.<sup>95</sup> Such scholars understand Delivuk's point that the terminology can be misleading: Though the term "inerrancy" may have come out of Warfield's work, it should be equated with the earlier use of the term "infallible." Delivuk offers a thorough discussion of this in his article "Inerrancy, Infallibility, and Scripture in the Westminster Confession of Faith."<sup>96</sup> On the other side, those such as Jack Rogers, Donald McKim, and Ernest Sandeen believe "inerrancy" was not the historical doctrine of the church but a later innovation.<sup>97</sup> Finding a conclusive answer to this question is not within the scope of this paper. However, investigating the potential sources for the Princeton doctrine of inerrancy in their Reformed predecessors sheds some light on this discussion.

Clearly the Princeton theologians shared a common ideology as well as common commitments to reason, CSP and Baconian empiricism. Their nineteenth-century context also provided the backdrop for the culmination of their doctrine of biblical inspiration in the Princeton statement on biblical inerrancy that is found in *Inspiration*. B.B. Warfield thoroughly espoused the Princeton theology, and as its greatest apologist, he undertook the burden of defending it in the academic arena. As he did so, he revealed Princeton's debt to these historic and contemporary influences.

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<sup>95</sup> Delivuk, *Inerrancy, Infallibility and Scripture in the Westminster Confession of Faith*, Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal*, Gerstner, *The Contributions of Charles Hodge, B.B. Warfield, and J. Gresham Machen to the Doctrine of Inspiration*.

<sup>96</sup> John Allen Delivuk, "Inerrancy, Infallibility, and Scripture in the Westminster Confession of Faith," *Westminster Theological Journal* (Philadelphia, PA) 54, no. 2 (Fall 1992): 350f.

<sup>97</sup> Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession*, Rogers and McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible*.



One more indisputable influence on Warfield and the Princeton school is the theology of Francis Turretin. Davis traces the formation of Turretin's theology through his offensive tack against a movement called Amyraldianism, which among other things used ancient Hebrew Old Testament texts and explored the possibility of repointing them. Turretin argued that the vowel points in the received Masoretic text, regardless of their newness, were of divine origin and therefore authoritative and inerrant.<sup>98</sup> Turretin's formula, the Helvetic Consensus, "specifically rejected all attempts to amend the inspired Hebrew text from the translations or from conjectured repointing as an attack on the supernatural care and preservation God had given the Bible, and affirmed the inspiration of the (unwritten) vowels or their 'power.'"<sup>99</sup> Loetscher asserts that the view of the Helvetic Consensus reflected a commitment "to rational, syllogistic amplification," which relied on a very literal use of the Bible. He calls this the beginnings of the "inerrancy" position. He quotes Turretin's *Institutes* and argues that he was in fact an inerrantist in the strictest sense:

It is asked whether in writing they [i.e. "the sacred writers"] were so moved and inspired by the Holy Spirit...that they were free from all error ["ab omni errore immunes"] and their writings are truly authentic and divine? Opponents deny; we affirm.<sup>100</sup>

The Princeton men, in particular Archibald Alexander, came to rely heavily on Turretin's *Institutes*. Noll cautions that though Turretin's influence on the Princeton men is indisputable, the scope of his influence can and has been overstated. Additionally,

<sup>98</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae*, II, 11, 13; quoted in Rogers and McKim, 180.

<sup>99</sup> D. Clair Davis, "Princeton and Inerrancy: The Nineteenth Century Philosophical Background of Contemporary Concerns," in *Inerrancy and the Church*, ed. John D. Hannah (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1984), 360-61.

<sup>100</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae*, I (Geneva, 1688), 7-10, 26-39, 49-53, 61-62, 70-71; quoted in Loetscher, 20.

Warfield rarely refers explicitly to Turretin in his writings.<sup>101</sup> However, other scholars, such as Loetscher, argue convincingly for some certain influence.

Warfield and Hodge relied heavily on the arguments of Francis Turretin as they engaged in critical debate with German higher criticism says Loetscher:

Needless to say, the theology represented by the Helvetic Consensus and by Turretin was uncompromisingly opposed to the embryonic critical studies of their day. Nor is it strange that heirs of these views in nineteenth-century American Presbyterianism also formed themselves inevitably arrayed against all negative conclusions of the by then fully weaned Biblical Criticism.<sup>102</sup>

Warfield and Hodge took up a defense against German higher criticism in the same way that Turretin had opposed biblical critics two hundred years earlier.

Another important influence that impacted Princeton theologian's doctrine of inspiration is the Westminster Confession. According to Delivuk, the authors of the Westminster Confession were the equivalent of modern-day inerrantists without the name. He summarizes the Westminster view of the Bible in five points: (1) God is its author and it therefore contains God's authority, (2) every word of the original document was inspired by the Holy Spirit, (3) the Bible contains attributes of its author, God, such as errorlessness, (4) mistakes that are present occurred in its transmission, and (5) it is free from errors as it extends to matters of faith.<sup>103</sup> However, it will be interesting to see that Hodge and Warfield are not the only ones who claim to rely on the Westminster Standards.

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<sup>101</sup>Noll, *The Princeton Theology, 1812-1921*, 29-30. Noll observes that the difficulty behind determining the exact scope of influence had by Turretin on the Princeton theology rests in the Princeton tendency to "regard theological truth in static categories which were not influenced by historical developments." Accordingly, the Princetonians tended to treat arguments from various contexts "as if they were articulated parts of a general framework."

<sup>102</sup> Loetscher, 20.

<sup>103</sup> Delivuk, 355.

## Inspiration

Warfield and Hodge published their resounding statement on inspiration, as the first in the series of the eight-article *Presbyterian Review* debate about biblical higher criticism in April of 1881. Their article, published now under the simple title *Inspiration*, sets out to formulate a bulletproof doctrine of the plenary verbal inspiration of Scripture, and lays the burden of proof for differing opinion squarely on the shoulders of the opponent, in this case Charles Briggs. The importance of this piece should be stressed. According to Rogers and McKim, “this essay stood as the classic statement of the scholasticized orthodoxy of the Princeton school.”<sup>104</sup> It provided a conclusion to much of the Princeton work that had preceded it and added fuel to the controversy which, according to Rogers and McKim, “in many ways set the terms for the fundamentalist-modernist controversy that preoccupied the whole country in the 1920s and 1930s.”<sup>105</sup>

Warfield and Hodge begin *Inspiration* by discussing terms. They clarify “inspiration” from “revelation”, making the important distinction that “inspiration” is “the constant, attribute of all the thoughts and statements of Scripture,” and that it applies to all of Scripture.<sup>106</sup> From the very outset of the essay the authors reveal their assumptions. They explicitly outline the necessary presuppositions behind the theology of inspiration, which include acceptance of the general truth claims of Christianity about God’s existence, God’s government of and relationship to the world, and the fallen

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<sup>104</sup> Rogers and McKim, 350.

<sup>105</sup> Rogers and McKim, 348.

<sup>106</sup> Hodge and Warfield, 6-7.

human condition, and the general truth claims of the Bible.<sup>107</sup> They further clarify the extent of their presuppositions when they write:

Nor should we ever allow it to be believed that the truth of Christianity depends upon any doctrine of inspiration whatever...Christianity would be true and divine—and, being so, would stand—even if God had not been pleased to give us, in addition to his revelation of saving truth, an infallible record of that revelation absolutely errorless by means of inspiration.

The latter point—the infallible and errorless Bible—is the crux of their argument. The former—the reality of the divine claims of Christianity, is one dramatic, underlying assumption. To proceed with this theology, God’s existence and his relationship to the world is assumed to be true—accepted on the basis of “common sense.” Noll makes the case that for the early Princeton theologian Archibald Alexander, CSP had provided the basis for the existence of God and the reality of biblical revelation.<sup>108</sup> In their nineteenth century context, Warfield and Hodge did the same.

VanderStelt also cites common sense assumptions at the heart of the *a priori* argument for God’s existence. He writes “...as far as knowledge is concerned in the epistemology of the anthropocentric philosophy of CSP, particularly in its belief that there is a first truth which can, by virtue of its self-evident character, neither be proved nor disproved. All one can do is simply posit such a (self-evident) truth.”<sup>109</sup> This CSP framework is where Hodge and Warfield begin.

After setting out their assumptions, Hodge and Warfield describe the divine-human event of inspiration. In this process of inspiration, the theologians allow for

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>108</sup> Noll, “The Princeton Theology,” 21.

<sup>109</sup> VanderStelt, 165.

human agency on the part of the Bible writer, including logic, mental and spiritual discernment, drawing on natural sources, feeling, thought, intuition, memory, and imagination.<sup>110</sup> However, they argue that God was ultimately the controlling and predetermining force. They clarify that “superintendence” and not “influence” is the proper term to identify God’s role in the genesis of biblical inspiration:

Each sacred writer was by God specially formed, endowed, educated, providentially conditioned, and then supplied with knowledge naturally, supernaturally or spiritually conveyed, so that he, and he alone, could and freely would, produce his allotted part. Thus God predetermined all that matter and form of the several books largely by the formation and training of several authors.<sup>111</sup>

God’s role in inspiration, according to Hodge and Warfield, did not violate human freedom. However, the Holy Spirit’s presence was so strong that it caused “his energies to flow into the spontaneous exercises of the writer’s faculties, elevating and directing where need be, *and everywhere securing the errorless expression in language of the thought designed by God.* This last element is what we call ‘Inspiration.’”<sup>112</sup> This statement shows that for Warfield and Hodge, inspiration descends to the level of the language and the words of the Biblical texts, which flawlessly express the thoughts of God. In these statements, Warfield and Hodge also distinguish themselves from the naturalism of the time, as believers in the supernatural and divine and God’s intervention in the world.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Hodge and Warfield, 12-13.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 6, 14.

<sup>112</sup> Hodge and Warfield, 16. Italics added.

<sup>113</sup> Marsden, 7.

Hodge discusses the terms “plenary,” meaning full or complete, and “verbal”—including the details of the language, with regard to inspiration. He affirms that both are accurate descriptors:

The divine superintendence, which we call inspiration, extended to the verbal expression of the thoughts of the sacred writers, as well as to the thoughts themselves, and that hence the Bible, considered as a record, an utterance in words of a divine revelation, is the word of God to us. Hence in all the affirmations of scripture of every kind there is no more error in the words of the original autographs than in the thoughts they were chosen to express.<sup>114</sup>

Modern writers have sloganized this into “What the Bible says, God says.”<sup>115</sup> The clear conclusion Warfield and Hodge draw from this is essentially if God “wrote” it, it cannot contain error because God is never wrong. Put another way, error would provide empirical evidence counteracting their truth claims about the Bible and therefore about its author.

Defending the logical conclusion stated above, Hodge and Warfield refute several theological positions that contradict plenary verbal inspiration. One of the dissenting theological positions that they refute holds to plenary inspiration almost as the Princeton theologians do, but refuses to affirm errorless verbal expression because of the fallibility of human language. Warfield and Hodge respond by saying, “It is self-evident that, just as far as the thoughts of Scripture relating to any element or topic whatsoever are inspired, the words in which those thoughts are expressed must be inspired also.”<sup>116</sup>

They go on to make a philosophical case for the necessary connection between language

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<sup>114</sup> Hodge and Warfield, 19.

<sup>115</sup> John H. Gerstner, “The Contributions of Charles Hodge, B.B. Warfield, and J. Gresham Machen to the Doctrine of Inspiration,” in *Challenges to Inerrancy: A Theological Response*, ed. Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce Demarest (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1984), 349.

<sup>116</sup> Hodge and Warfield, 21.

and thought, and conclude that such a view leaves no room for any certainty of faith.<sup>117</sup>

This argument reflects the influence of Common Sense philosophy on their theology.

Before turning to “proofs” of their doctrine, the authors conclude their definition of inspiration with the key issue in the debate. With the entry of higher criticism into the Universities in the United States, more and more questions were being raised about the accuracy of certain details in Scripture, including in many cases, apostolic authorship. As this happened, proofs based on inerrant Scripture became questionable. It is at this point that Warfield and Hodge add to their argument the proviso that “inerrancy” in the strictest sense is limited to the original autographs. They claim that errors may exist incidentally in the copies of the Scriptures that we have today, but argue that any of these mistakes are a result of textual transmission:

Such apparent inconsistencies and collisions with other sources of information are to be expected in imperfect copies of ancient writings...we affirm that a candid inspection of all the ascertained phenomena of the original text of Scripture will leave unmodified the ancient faith of the church.<sup>118</sup>

Though not all scholars agree, some like Sandeen say that Hodge and Warfield here introduced a distinction between extant documents and the originals “just at the time that the number of Biblical errors or discrepancies turned up by the critics was growing too large to be ignored.”<sup>119</sup>

The argument for inerrancy that Warfield and Hodge present is twofold. First, if errors exist in our copies, they are incidental and do not hinder the communication of God’s truth. Second, the errors can and must be logically explained by errors in

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>119</sup> Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 128.

transmission of the documents. There must not have been errors in the original documents themselves. This conclusion lies at the heart of the Warfield/Hodge doctrine of inspiration and stands at the end of the long line of cultural, historical and philosophical influences, which led them to this point.

In *Inspiration* Hodge and Warfield self-consciously draw on what they consider the historical, Reformed tradition. They write:

Nevertheless, the historical faith of the Church has always been that all the affirmations of Scripture of all kinds, whether of spiritual doctrine or duty, or of psychological or philosophical principle, are without any error when the *ipsissima verba* of the original autographs are ascertained and interpreted in their natural and intended sense.<sup>120</sup>

Here they demonstrate the importance to them of traditional Reformed faith, which both revered and honored Scripture's authority, and in cases such as that of Francis Turretin and some of the Westminster divines, even maintained its inerrancy.

Later in the article, in the section entitled "Proof of the Doctrine," the authors state the historicity of their doctrine again, citing Dr. Westcott's study of the Ante-Nicene Fathers, and mentioning forbearers such as Luther, Calvin and Wesley.<sup>121</sup> As spokespersons par excellence for the Princeton school, who arose to defend orthodoxy in changing times, Hodge and Warfield saw historical continuity as important grounds for their theological position.

The "Proof of the Doctrine" section of *Inspiration* presents a rational, point-by-point argument in defense of the doctrine. From this systematic statement the authors conclude that they have sufficiently defended their position so that the burden of proof

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<sup>120</sup> Hodge and Warfield, 28.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 32-34.



rests on the proponents of “the other view.”<sup>122</sup> Much of their case is based on internal evidence from the Bible, such as its claims of its own inspiration.<sup>123</sup> They also state that “The prima facie evidence of the claims of Scripture is assuredly all in favor of an errorless infallibility of all scriptural affirmations.”<sup>124</sup> Later in the article the authors use many more detailed arguments from scripture to support their claim of its inerrancy. They emphasize their position by saying, “A proved error in Scripture contradicts not only our doctrine, but the Scripture claims, and therefore its inspiration in making those claims.”<sup>125</sup> Clearly, they find much of the proof of their doctrine within Scripture itself. A. A. Hodge and Warfield treat the Bible just as Charles Hodge had recommended at the outset of his *Systematic Theology*, as the storehouse of facts to be studied just as a scientist studies nature. In doing so, they demonstrate not only their reliance on the earlier Princeton men, but also their commitment to Baconian empiricism and Common Sense philosophy.

Before concluding their argument for inerrant inspiration, Hodge and Warfield address three facts, which would disprove their thesis. These are: (1) proof that an error exists in the original autograph, (2) proof that the interpretation which demonstrates an error in Scripture is the correct interpretation, and (3) proof that the alleged error is truly an error—that it is inconsistent with a known fact of science, history, or other part of Scripture.<sup>126</sup> Here the authors sound surprisingly like scientists, who, having demonstrated a discovery, systematically outline what would be needed to prove them wrong.

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 36.

So here and throughout the case they make for the inerrant inspiration of the Bible, Hodge and Warfield reveal the many influences that informed their theology, including CSP, Baconian empiricism, the Reformed tradition, and a reaction to cultural trends.

### ***Charles Briggs***

The relentless figure on the other side of the debate with Princeton was Charles Briggs, a man who was later removed from the Presbyterian ministry by the General Assembly after a long series of heresy trials in the 1890s. Briggs has been described as a fine biblical scholar, and one who was committed to his convictions to the strongest degree.<sup>127</sup> Though he debated with Princeton about their concepts of revelation and divine inspiration, he was deeply convinced of the truth of Christianity and the fact of God's revelation. Robert T. Handy cites a letter from Briggs, written in 1867:

The Christian Church ever contains the body of truth. At times, when God wishes to lead them into higher truth, he reveals the truth to certain men chosen of him...I now stand firm on the received doctrines of the Church, & I defy any man to show that I do not.... I shall remain in & with the Church until it takes the sin upon itself of casting me out, which God grant may never happen. I feel assured that the world needs this light.<sup>128</sup>

Briggs was not only convinced of the Church's possession of truth, he was also convinced of his duty to communicate that truth openly. This significantly included his commitment to higher criticism. Many influences stood behind this commitment, which he articulated in his 1881 article "The Right, Duty, and Limits of Biblical Criticism."

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<sup>127</sup> Robert T. Handy, *A History of Union Theological Seminary in New York* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1987), 63-64.

<sup>128</sup> Charles A. Briggs to Marvin Briggs, Jan. 8, 1867, Briggs Transcripts, 1:39, #3170; quoted in Handy, 63.

## The Right, Duty and Limits

Briggs defines inspiration differently than Warfield and Hodge. He speaks of “full,” or “plenary” inspiration, but refuses to include the term verbal. He distinguishes his position from plenary verbal inspiration by stating that the inspiration lies behind the text, and that it is not merely a property of the original manuscripts:

Inspiration lies back of the external letter, it is that which gives the words its efficacy, it is the divine afflatus which enlightened and guided holy men to apprehend the truth of God in its appropriate forms; assured them of their possession of it, and called and enabled them to make it known to the Church by voice and pen.<sup>129</sup>

One of the main problems he sees with Warfield and Hodge’s plenary verbal definition of inspiration is that it does not benefit the modern person. He asserts:

If the external words of the original were inspired, it does not profit us. We are cut off from them forever. Interposed between us and them is the tradition of centuries and even millenniums.<sup>130</sup>

Briggs is concerned by the lack of any benefit to the Christian offered by Hodge and Warfield’s doctrine of inspiration.

Briggs is also clearly convinced that biblical criticism has truth on its side. He understands first, that it is backed by historical and inductive investigation.<sup>131</sup> He also believes that the biblical material itself supports such study. He writes:

We should not fear as evangelical Biblical scholars to accept the challenge of our adversaries and go forth from the breast works of our symbols to meet them in fair and honorable warfare in open field with the biblical material itself on the principles of Scientific Induction. The Word of the Spirit alone will conquer in this warfare.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Briggs, “The Right, Duty, and Limits of Biblical Criticism,” 574.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 556.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 558.

Briggs also claims to have the Reformation on his side, and asserts that the Princeton men have cast their lot with the deists and rationalists.

For this is a conflict after all between true criticism and false criticism; between the criticism which is the product of the evangelical spirit of the Reformation, and critical principles that are the product of deism and rationalism.<sup>133</sup>

In support of his claim about the Reformers, Briggs points to the critical study that began around the time of the Protestant Reformation and is exemplified by Erasmus and Levita and Reuchlin, who had done critical work and publishing in the original languages of the New and Old Testaments respectively. He writes,

The Reformers took their stand as one man for the critical study of the Sacred Scriptures and investigated the original texts under the lead of Erasmus, Elias Levita, and Reuchlin, and laid down what must be regarded as the fundamental principle of Biblical Criticism.<sup>134</sup>

Briggs cites examples of the biblical critical strain of the Reformers over and against tradition or dogmatism. Key to his argument here was the Reformer's reformulation of the canon, excluding the apocrypha and pseudipigrapha, as well as questioning some other books like Esther and Jude, which remained in the canon.<sup>135</sup>

Briggs appeals to the Reformers themselves in support of plenary rather than plenary verbal inspiration. After giving examples in which Calvin and Luther apparently were not bothered by error in the text, Briggs argues:

The Reformers laid down no theory of Inspiration, such as would cover accent and letter, word, logic, and grammar. They regarded the external word as the instrument; they

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 559.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 560.

sought the sense, the infallible Divine Word contained in the Scriptures applied by the Divine Spirit to their souls.<sup>136</sup>

Briggs thus concludes that the Reformers themselves held to a form of plenary rather than plenary verbal inspiration, contrary to what Hodge and Warfield claimed.

Briggs goes on to recount how scholasticism arose after the Reformation and how this led to the first movement against biblical criticism, claiming that it was Ludwig Capellus, part of the French school of Saumur, who carried on true Reformation principles. For example, Capellus denied the inspiration of the pointed Hebrew texts, referring back to the unpointed originals. The scholastics like Heidegger and Turretin rallied against this and for the first time, according to Briggs, formulated the doctrine of verbal inspiration, as described in the Zurich consensus.<sup>137</sup> “Thus the formal principle of Protestantism was straitened, and its vital power destroyed by the erection of dogmatic barriers against Biblical criticism.”<sup>138</sup>

Briggs moves into a short study of the Bible’s use of its own texts, particularly in the Old Testament, and with the New Testament’s use of the Old Testament. He concludes that verbal inspiration cannot be supported on this basis. He summarizes:

Looking at the doctrine of Inspiration from the point of view of Textual Criticism we see at once that there can be no *inspiration* of the *written letters* or *uttered sounds* of our present Hebrew text, for these are *transliterations* of the originals which have been lost and the sounds are uncertain, and whilst there is a general correspondence of these letters and sounds so that they give us *essentially* the original, they do not give us *exactly* the original. The inspiration must therefore lie back of the *written letters* and the *uttered sounds* and be sought in that which is *common*

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 563.

<sup>137</sup> The Zurich Consensus, drawn up in 1549, was a joint venture between Jean Calvin and Heinrich Bullinger, and was written after negotiations to create consensus between the Zwinglian and the Geneva (Calvinist) reformers. Among other things, it established agreement on the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 565.

to the old characters and the new, the *utterance* of the voice  
and the constructions of the *pen*, namely, in the *concepts*,  
the sense and meaning that they convey.<sup>139</sup>

So Briggs defends his case against plenary *verbal* inspiration, as laid out in Hodge and Warfield's *Inspiration*. In its stead, he offers an understanding of inspiration that reaches beyond the text itself and is not threatened by developments in historical criticism. He also provides both historical and biblical support for the discipline of higher criticism, encouraging its use and demonstrating its profit.

### **Influences: Union Theological Seminary**

Carl E. Hatch portrays Briggs as one who, from the time of his return from Germany in 1870, was burning with the desire to modernize American Theology.<sup>140</sup> He accepted a position in 1874 at Union Seminary. At Union, though he was given some freedom, he was still prohibited from carrying out the theological reform he desired. According to Hatch Union was officially a Presbyterian seminary, but was less controlled by the Presbyterian government, which was officially opposed to higher criticism, than seminaries like Princeton. Nevertheless, Briggs still had to guard himself in the classroom and in his publications.<sup>141</sup>

Before Briggs was appointed to the faculty at Union, he had been deeply influenced in his own studies there by Henry Boynton Smith, whose retirement opened a position on the faculty for him. Though he did not assume responsibility for the specific courses that Smith had taught, in a certain sense, as Mark S. Massa points out, Briggs felt as though he should carry on as the “hero of reunion” that Smith had been. This meant

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 571.

<sup>140</sup> Carl E. Hatch, *The Charles A. Briggs Heresy Trial* (Jericho, NY: Exposition Press, 1969), 23f.

<sup>141</sup> Hatch, 26.

expounding a theology that mediated between more traditional orthodoxy and intellectually innovating studies such as historical criticism.<sup>142</sup>

According to Rogers and McKim, one of Briggs' motivations in encouraging the use of higher criticism in American seminaries was his desire for evangelicals to have a chance to interpret the new scholarship rather than surrendering the last word to the "enemies of Historic Christianity."<sup>143</sup> He believed that Christians would profit more from implementing an evangelical approach to the new criticism than from simply defending against the threat of non-evangelical higher critics.

### **Westminster Standards**

In *Whither? A Theological Question for the Times*, which Briggs wrote following the series of articles in the *Presbyterian Review*, the defense of higher criticism continued against the Hodge/Warfield position on inerrancy. Specifically Briggs argued against the necessity of apostolic authorship to prove a biblical books' authenticity.<sup>144</sup> In many cases, biblical authorship was the very thing coming under strong attack by higher criticism. In *Whither?* Briggs relies on the Westminster Confession, among other sources to defend his position.

Rogers and McKim explore Briggs' reliance on Westminster in *Whither?*<sup>145</sup> They point out that in the text Briggs includes the following quote from the Westminster Confession: "The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and

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<sup>142</sup> Mark S. Massa, S.J., *Charles Augustus Briggs and the Crisis of Historical Criticism* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990), 45.

<sup>143</sup> Rogers and McKim, 349.

<sup>144</sup> Rogers and McKim, 356.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 356.

obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man.”<sup>146</sup> This, he says, indicates that authority is not determined by human authorship.

According to Rogers and McKim, Briggs’ reliance on the Westminster Divines, came through careful study. They note that while in Germany, Briggs pursued studies in the history of doctrine under professor Dorner. Specifically, Briggs compared the Westminster Confession to the theology of the Reformers and found that both differed from the American Presbyterian theology he had been taught. Then, later as professor at Union, he traveled extensively in his search to assemble a school collection of the Westminster Divines.<sup>147</sup> Briggs was indebted to Westminster in his theological work.<sup>148</sup>

## Modernism

Charles Briggs was clearly a supporter of the modernist movement. He has been identified by Catholic scholar William J. Hynes as the leading Protestant Modernist.<sup>149</sup> In a book written later in his career, Briggs explicitly identified himself as a modernist and wrote of the movement as, in some respects, “the most important religious movement since the great Reformation of the Church, but is world-wide in its sweep, influencing more or less all Christian Churches.”<sup>150</sup> Hynes identifies five key indications of

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<sup>146</sup> *Westminster Confession*, I., 4; quoted in Charles A. Briggs, *Whither? A Theological Question for the Times* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1889), 82.

<sup>147</sup> Rogers and McKim, 356.

<sup>148</sup> Rogers and McKim discuss Warfield’s claim to follow in the footsteps of the Westminster Divines. They argue that while Briggs took a studied approach to his reliance, Warfield picked and chose from disconnected sources that made his point. Rogers and McKim also argue that Warfield assumed a consistent position among the Divines and assumed that their position was the same as that of the Reformed Scholastics like Turretin upon whom they relied so heavily. They write, “Warfield, the apologist, never responded to the real issue, which was whether, on historical grounds, the Princeton theology had been faithful to the Westminster Confession and the sixteenth-century Reformation confessions. Warfield, as an apologist, took the normativity of his position for granted and then read it back into those sources of which he approved.” 357-358.

<sup>149</sup> William J. Hynes, “A Hidden Nexus Between Catholic and Protestant Modernism: C.A. Briggs in Correspondence with Loisy, von Hügel and Genocchi,” *Downside Review* 105 (July 1987): 193.

<sup>150</sup> Charles Briggs, *Church Unity* (1909), 436; quoted in Hynes, 219.



modernism's influence on Briggs, as reflected in his work: (1) the enthusiastic embracing of Biblical criticism (2) the use of historical criticism in the study of church history (3) the study of church dogma in light of modern philosophy, (4) the acceptance of scientific discovery, and (5) his advocacy for church reform according to modern governmental methods and scientific and social principles.<sup>151</sup> Though Briggs wrote his "definition" of modernism significantly later in his career than the series of articles published in the *Presbyterian Review*, elements of modernism like these appeared much earlier in his career.

Briggs' identification with modernism first becomes apparent to the broader public in his famous 1891 inaugural address and the heresy trials in the Presbyterian Church that followed. Much has been written about this series of events and its effect of catapulting the issues surrounding a modernist view of the Bible into the public eye. Doug Hill has called Briggs' address "a declaration of war—modernism against traditionalism."<sup>152</sup> However, even in his earlier works, including the articles written in 1881 for the *Presbyterian Review* Briggs strongly advocates modernism.

The evolutionary work of Charles Darwin, and then that of Herbert Spencer deeply influenced the Modernists of the latter nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Edwin A. Burt insightfully traces this intellectual movement. The modernists, or more conservative liberals, as he calls them, were those who among other things were able to reconcile their Christian theology with the expanding evolutionary view of history,

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<sup>151</sup> Charles Briggs, *Church Unity*, 439-40; quoted in Hynes, 219.

<sup>152</sup> Doug Hill, "Charles Augustus Briggs, Modernism, and the Rise of Biblical Scholarship," in *The Bible and the American Myth: A Symposium on the Bible and Constructions of Meaning*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1999), 75.

science, and even psychology and religion, as Herbert Spencer established.<sup>153</sup> They were able to do this for two primary reasons. First was the general conviction held about the validity of empirical method to deduce truth. Burt writes:

They [the modernists] knew that the major concern of the scientists who were engaged in building up the theory of evolution was not hostility to religion, but loyalty to empirical truth, and they felt that theology was doomed if it set itself in irreconcilable opposition to their results or methods. Religion itself demands loyalty to truth, hence it must adjust itself to truth wherever discovered and also to the most efficient ways of establishing truth. Otherwise, intelligent and honest men would have to abandon it.<sup>154</sup>

Theologians and scholars like Briggs were similarly convinced, and did not wish to defend religious doctrine that scientific method had apparently disproved.

Doug Hill observes that Briggs felt he could make the Christian faith more credible to the modern world by remaining loyal to the “proven facts of science,” including those of biblical criticism.<sup>155</sup> In his 1891 inaugural address Briggs openly recognized that changing times required this. He said, “Probability might be the guide of life in the superficial eighteenth century, and for those who have inherited its traditions, but the men of the present times are in quest of certainty.”<sup>156</sup> Briggs represented modernism both in his acceptance of change and his embrace of the scientific method as a means of deducing truth.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Edwin A. Burt, *Types of Religious Philosophy* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1951), 301-03.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

<sup>155</sup> Hill, 76.

<sup>156</sup> Charles Augustus Briggs, *The Authority of the Holy Scripture: An Inaugural Address* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1891) 23-24; quoted in Hill, 76.

<sup>157</sup> Hill also points out that contemporary critics of Briggs, such as the atheist Col. Robert Ingersoll, viewed Briggs as unsuccessfully embracing science while still holding to unscientific religious commitments. Hill quotes Ingersoll as saying that Briggs' writings contain “too much science for a churchman and too much superstition for a scientist.” Hill, 80; Quoted from Robert G. Ingersoll, “Professor Briggs,” in *The Works of*

In addition to an acceptance of scientific discovery, according to Burt, modernists were also convinced that the readjustments needed to cope with an evolutionary worldview would not compromise the central truths of religion. Individuals like Friedrich Schleiermacher had been important in pointing to religious experience as central. Burt argues that modernist theologians realized the centrality of values like peace, hope, and divine guidance. They also recognized that because theology is a human attempt to explain religious truth, it is not unchangeable and may need to be revised from time to time. He also notes subordinate factors influencing the modernist viewpoint, such as the possibility of viewing God as superintendent over the evolutionary process, or the less-orthodox possibility of viewing the Bible as a story of the faith's own evolutionary growth to the high ideals of Paul and Jesus.<sup>158</sup>

As a modernist, Briggs has also been classified by William R. Hutchison with a group he calls the theologians of the New Theology, or liberalism. Among other things this theology stressed the incarnation and God's presence in the world.<sup>159</sup> Massa traces this element of nineteenth-and twentieth-century liberalism back to the stronghold of historicism in the modern mind. Historicism will be discussed elsewhere specifically as it relates to higher criticism. Suffice it here to say that for liberals, a historicist understanding of culture viewed God as an immanent and interactive figure within human history as opposed to the transcendent and impassible God of the Princeton school.<sup>160</sup>

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*Robert G. Ingersoll in Twelve Volumes*, vol 12, ed C.P. Farrell (New York: C.P. Farrell: Ingersoll Publishers, 1900) 312.

<sup>158</sup> Burt, *Types of Religious Philosophy*, 305-06.

<sup>159</sup> William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1976), 85.

<sup>160</sup> Massa, *Charles Augustus Briggs and the Crisis of Historical Criticism*, 8.

Notable New Theologians, such as Briggs' teacher Isaac Dorner, focused specifically on the person of Christ as the one in whom the divine and human perfectly coexisted. For Dorner, as for other proponents of New Theology, science played an important role in verifying these propositions.<sup>161</sup> Hutchison writes about Dorner that: "He rejected with impatience the idea that theologians should forego what some were calling the 'vain and empty' project of verifying Christian truth scientifically. The data of faith, he argued, stand on an equal footing with those of natural science."<sup>162</sup> Briggs, Dorner's student, took this one step further and thought of theology itself as a science. Accordingly, where Dorner might "fall back on orthodox views of biblical inspiration and infallibility," Briggs would not.<sup>163</sup> As a science, Briggs felt that theology must be self-critical, and excruciatingly truthful. He writes:

[Theology is truthful] only in so far as theology as a whole is true to the spirit and character of its fundamental discipline, is open-eyed for all truth, courts investigation and criticism of its own materials and methods, and does not assume a false position of dogmatism and traditional prejudice, or attempt to tyrannize over the other sciences in their earnest researches after truth.<sup>164</sup>

As the previous statement shows, Briggs clearly represents modernism in another important manner. He was self-consciously anti-traditionalist and felt that all theologians should be so without excuse. The foregoing quotation shows that Briggs felt traditionalism could obscure or even outrightly deny facts in order to uphold traditional dogmas. This seems to have played into his argument against the Princeton doctrine of inspiration. He also believed that theology's task involved reinterpreting the final source

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<sup>161</sup> Hutchison, 85.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 91, 86.

<sup>164</sup> Charles Briggs, *Biblical Study*, 16; quoted in Hutchison, 91.

of religious truth—the Bible—for each generation. He colorfully states: “Systematic theology will not satisfy the demands of the age if she appear in the worn-out armor or antiquated costume of former generations. She must beat out for herself a new suit of armor from the Biblical material which is ever new.”<sup>165</sup> These convictions about theology undoubtedly fed Briggs’ enthusiasm in his debate with the conservative Princeton school. As Hutchison observes, “Conservatives, in other words, stood accused in Briggs’ indictment of practicing a culture-religion that was the more pernicious for its obliviousness to its cultural conditioning.”<sup>166</sup> Briggs stands out as a modernist in his clear anti-traditionalism and also in his call for theologians to be self-consciously aware of their traditional, cultural, and philosophical conditioning.

### Higher Criticism

The evolutionary worldview, which arose in the nineteenth century, undoubtedly assisted the rise of higher criticism and its proponents like Charles Briggs. However, another movement, which Massa calls “Historismus” or “historicism,” intertwined with an evolutionary understanding of the world and history and was perhaps even more influential in forming modernist thought and commencing the rise and acceptance of higher criticism.<sup>167</sup> Historicism has its early philosophical roots in the eighteenth century philosophers, however, its methodological founder was the nineteenth-century figure Leopold von Ranke, who insisted that the historical study of humanity should first be based on primary evidence, and from there description, rather than judgment, should be

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<sup>165</sup> Charles Briggs, *Biblical Study*, 11; quoted in Hutchison, 92.

<sup>166</sup> Hutchison, 93.

<sup>167</sup> Massa, *Charles Augustus Briggs and the Crisis of Historical Criticism*, 3. Massa understands historicism as even more influential than an evolutionary understanding of history and culture. In any case the two are clearly parallel movements and expressions stemming from the same general conviction about history. Historicism may be a foundation for understanding evolutionary thought and vice versa.

formulated.<sup>168</sup> What resulted is what Massa calls the “mark of the modern intellect,” a “temporalistic” view of culture that saw every expression rooted in its historical context, including sacred tradition.<sup>169</sup> As a result, the Bible, the Christian source of sacred tradition, was itself subject to the historical and critical analysis of the new discipline, higher criticism.

Unlike the more conservative traditionalists at Princeton, modernists such as Charles Briggs, accepted higher criticism, which itself was influenced by an evolutionary worldview.<sup>170</sup> Edwin A. Burt defines higher criticism as that discipline which attempts to discover a text’s meaning and truth in its historical context by using the same scientific methods that had also been used in analyzing non-sacred writings. Questions asked of a text by the higher critic pertain to matters of authorship, date, linguistic style or features, its reliance on earlier or contemporary materials. Finally, based on these answers, the critic draws conclusions about the historical and factual competence of the text in question.<sup>171</sup>

Conclusions that are drawn from such critical study of the Bible do not ignore discrepancies where they are found, including questions of claimed-or traditionally-accepted authorship. The critical scholar seeks to discover and acknowledge the process that went into the composition of the biblical text in question. For Briggs, one of the more significant results of higher criticism was to call into question a traditionalist understanding of revelation and inspiration—such as that held by Warfield and Hodge—

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>170</sup> This view can be considered “evolutionary” because as it is studied historically and critically the Bible is interpreted as a product of historical evolution. Massa includes this element in his definition of higher criticism. Massa, 9.

<sup>171</sup> Burt, 312.

that could not allow for discrepancy or error without compromising its foundation of authority. Having already acknowledged the possibility of error, however, one of the benefits of higher criticism is that biblical authority must have a different and less-perilous foundation.<sup>172</sup> Briggs, a conservative modernist, takes the step to “re-interpret” inspiration in light of the higher critical discoveries, though he claims that in fact it is not a “re-interpretation” at all, but that authority and inspiration follow from the traditional Reformed doctrine of the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit in the text.<sup>173</sup>

### **German Higher Education**

Shortly after his marriage to Julie Valentine Dobbs in 1865, and his ordination in early 1866, Briggs began his studies at the University of Berlin.<sup>174</sup> Massa points out that Briggs went to Germany at a good time, early enough to avoid the crisis of historicism in the United States that left many evangelicals resorting to dogmatism. Massa also attributes some of the influence on Briggs to the fact that he studied under “mediating evangelicals” in Germany who did not wish to destroy traditional religious beliefs, but wished to unite them with scientific and historical method.<sup>175</sup>

In his exposure to the discipline of biblical higher criticism during his studies at the University of Berlin, Briggs also discovered a method of study that helped him—“shift away,” as it were, from Baconian empiricism and CSP.<sup>176</sup> Another characteristic of the German academy that appealed to Briggs was the degree of rigor and specialization that scholars brought to their respective areas of expertise. According to Hill, in the United States during the 1800s most higher education was conducted by professors who

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 317.

<sup>173</sup> Briggs, “The Right, Duty, and Limits of Biblical Criticism,” 576.

<sup>174</sup> Massa, *Charles Augustus Briggs and the Crisis of Historical Criticism*, 36.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 37.

could be described as “Generalists.” This contrasted gravely to the specifically trained and well-researched scholars in the German schools where the “motivating ideal” was an “unobstructed search for truth.” The rigor and depth of training he received in Berlin appealed to Briggs, despite what he called its “coldness.”<sup>177</sup>

In a letter written from Germany to Henry Boynton Smith, Briggs writes, “Here every great theologian is an Exegete...in spite of their coldness in handling Scripture, it is more satisfactory to the student than a devotional spirit without thought.”<sup>178</sup> This excerpt from Briggs’ letter demonstrates what Hill has stated about Briggs—that despite a revivalistic conversion earlier in life, Briggs tended towards a more scholarly or academic perspective on the Christian faith.<sup>179</sup>

In Germany Briggs was also exposed to and greatly influenced by the historical understanding of Isaac Dorner. Massa describes Dorner’s main theological goal as achieving “scientific knowledge of religious truth” through the use of historical criticism. Dorner felt that this would enable him to scientifically legitimate orthodox Protestant doctrine.<sup>180</sup> He had been influenced greatly both by Hegel and Schleiermacher. By the former, according to Massa, Dorner gleaned a concern for objectivity along with an understanding of the “ideal” incarnating itself *within* history. From the latter he understood faith as a starting point for scientific knowledge, though Dorner allowed more for objective fact than simply subjective knowledge.<sup>181</sup> These influences made their way

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<sup>177</sup> Hill, 84.

<sup>178</sup> CAB to H.B. Smith, 24 January 1867, *CAB Ledger* 3:320; quoted in Richard L. Christensen, *The Ecumenical Orthodoxy of Charles Augustus Briggs (1841-1913)* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1945), 14.

<sup>179</sup> Hill, 85.

<sup>180</sup> Massa, *Charles Augustus Briggs and the Crisis of Historical Criticism*, 39.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-40.



into Briggs' own historico-critical paradigm, which he understood as a mediating position between the sterility of purely academic, modernist constructs and the ill-informed zeal of traditionalist apologetics.

According to Richard L. Christensen, Briggs was particularly excited by Dorner's process-oriented view of human knowledge and growth, including a linkage between faith and history. This influenced him to encourage the ongoing growth and movement of the Church and theology.<sup>182</sup> In a letter to his Uncle Marvin, which he wrote from Germany, Briggs states,

When a new light dawns from above the most of men—the majority of the established Church, especially the old, cling to the old and can't believe any new light possible...So it is today. The world needs new views of truth. The old doctrines are good but insufficient. They need the light that must dawn on them from a more advanced Christian truth.<sup>183</sup>

Briggs believed that when one accepts such change with a positive attitude, the insights afforded by higher criticism are greeted as opportunities for greater growth instead of being rejected as threats to orthodoxy.

## Studies at Union

Before Briggs had traveled across the Atlantic to study theology in Berlin, he spent years of formative study at Union Theological Seminary in New York. According to Massa, Briggs' relatives were surprised that he selected a New School institution, but he did so out of a desire for academic rigor mingled with piety as well as a longing to expand his horizons beyond Old School confessionalism.<sup>184</sup> While at Union, Briggs was

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<sup>182</sup> Christensen, 16.

<sup>183</sup> CAB to Marvin Briggs, 8 January 1867, CAB Ledger 1:317a; quoted in Christensen, 16.

<sup>184</sup> Massa, *Charles Augustus Briggs and the Crisis of Historical Criticism*, 28-29.

influenced significantly by Professor Edward Robinson and Henry Boynton Smith.

Briggs greatly respected Robinson, who encouraged honest biblical scholarship that squarely faced textual details and problems without sacrificing reverence for the text.<sup>185</sup> It was in fact under Robinson that Briggs had been introduced to the discipline of biblical study.<sup>186</sup>

Scholars agree that H.B. Smith was an even greater influence on the young Briggs, and became a mentor and colleague.<sup>187</sup> Smith himself had been an early “New School” theologian who studied in Germany under Isaac Dorner and become an interpreter of his “mediating theology.” This theology sought to mediate between extreme rationalists and traditionalists, much like Briggs sought to do in his own pursuits. Christensen aptly describes the mediating theology that Smith first introduced to Briggs:

Christianity according to the mediating theologians was not primarily doctrine but rather act and life, and event (*Geschehen*) in the center of which stood Jesus and the life which made appearance in him. Doctrine was only a matter of secondary importance or consideration. Revelation was viewed as being delivered or released from the Scripture and connected to the living and life-creating *Geschehen*.<sup>188</sup>

Significantly, this theology which values a life or event of faith more than a system of doctrine gives one freedom in interpretation because one is not required to conform to an existing system of dogma. As Christensen points out, it also allows one to accept an evolutionary or historicist understanding of the faith story. Smith influenced the young Briggs with these thoughts before he ever journeyed to Berlin for further study.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Christensen, 8.

<sup>186</sup> Massa, *Charles Augustus Briggs and the Crisis of Historical Criticism*, 31.

<sup>187</sup> Christensen, 31.

<sup>188</sup> Christensen, 9.

<sup>189</sup> Christensen, 9-10.

## Northern Presbyterian Church

One can devise a persuasive argument that the Presbyterian Church was a logical channel for introducing higher criticism to the United States, and as such, that Charles Briggs served an inevitable role in the process. Massa makes this case for the northern Presbyterians, offering several reasons for which this denomination was the context of the debate over historical criticism. Among these he includes their tradition of valuing education—Presbyterians were one of two leading denominations to found institutions of higher education in North America. The Presbyterian clergy were traditionally educated, making them both a “cultured and cultural elite.” Also, this denomination held a wide range of theological opinions, making it ripe for theological discussion. Finally, Calvinists had always balanced detailed and rational investigation into matters of faith with more pious concerns. As a result Massa concludes that, “Far out of proportion to its numbers, the northern Presbyterian church enjoyed a cultural and intellectual hegemony built on its willingness to act as preceptor for the American mind, thus making its confrontation with historicism all but inevitable.”<sup>190</sup> Charles Briggs fit appropriately into this northern Presbyterian paradigm.

## Other Nineteenth Century Elements

Not unlike the Princeton theologians, Briggs had also been influenced by Baconian empiricism and commonsense realism.<sup>191</sup> It was during his undergraduate studies at University of Virginia, according to Massa, that Briggs was immersed in such a worldview. Massa calls University of Virginia a “bastion of commonsense realism,” which had attempted to refute the deists and other philosophers who viewed scientific

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<sup>190</sup> Massa, *Charles Augustus Briggs and the Crisis of Historical Criticism*, 15, 16.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

progress as being opposed to religious truth. This meld of philosophy and science, which has been more thoroughly described above, argued that scientific method could be applied to the spiritual realm just as it had been applied to natural things, and religious reality could therefore be investigated factually and empirically.<sup>192</sup> Briggs felt its influence made the University of Virginia a school where

students...were taught that the goal of their education was that of educating the evangelical mentality, so that American Protestants would be humiliated out of their acquiescence to Methodist anti-intellectualism. Baconian science offered a vision wherein both heart and mind cooperated for the glory of God....<sup>193</sup>

Briggs took this conviction with him from his education in the South and continued to work towards educating American evangelicals, even after he replaced the method with another.

The last half of the nineteenth century saw the rise of naturalism and the corresponding general decline of supernaturalism. Merle Curti describes the influences behind this general trend. These influences include, not surprisingly, the evolutionary worldview propagated by Darwin and Spencer, as well as urbanization. Problems such as the rapid spread of disease in urban areas, for example, became the focus of scientific innovations. Scientists discovered that bacteria-caused disease could be treated by neutralizing the bacteria. According to Curti, this “served in the popular mind to steady if not control God’s hand in disease and death.”<sup>194</sup> Discoveries applying to rural

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 25-26.

<sup>194</sup> Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought*, 1943, Second Edition (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), 538, 539.

contexts, such as scientific weather-prediction, also provided impetus behind a more a naturalistic world-view.<sup>195</sup>

The growth of higher criticism, which ultimately viewed the Bible as a naturally rather than supernaturally evolved document, applied a similar scientific approach to its canonical texts. Its results are strikingly similar to Briggs' more conservative conclusions. Professor William N. Clark of Colgate University made a characteristic statement when he said, "I may describe my forward step by saying that hitherto I had been using the Bible in light of its statements, but that now I found myself using it in light of its principles..."<sup>196</sup> Briggs' definition of inspiration recognizes the message rather than the words as infallibly inspired. This sounds more like a conservative statement of the principle espoused above by William Clark.

Along with the trends towards urbanization and scientific inquiry, the end of the nineteenth century saw an America that was caught up in the idea of Progress. Hill points out that Briggs saw biblical criticism as another promising vehicle of progress of which America should take advantage.<sup>197</sup> He quotes Briggs in *Biblical Study* where he writes,

Eternal vigilance is the price of truth as well as of liberty. Criticism improves its methods with the advancement of human learning. In the infancy or growth of a nation, or of an individual, or of the world, we do not find criticism. It belongs to the manhood or maturity of a nation and the world's civilization.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Curti, 540.

<sup>196</sup> Clarke, William N. *Sixty Years with the Bible* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909): 97-98; quoted in Curti, 542.

<sup>197</sup> Hill, 91.

<sup>198</sup> Charles Briggs, *Biblical Study*, 80; quoted in Hill, 92.

Briggs saw the country on the verge of coming into maturity and thought that the introduction of criticism would be an appropriate counterpart to this development.

### Robertson Smith

Arguably, Charles Briggs was an early, outspoken proponent of higher criticism in the United States who was influenced by many cultural and denominational factors—not the least of which was the career and trial in the Scottish Free Church of Robertson Smith, a proponent of higher criticism, and Professor of Old Testament studies at Aberdeen's Free Church College.<sup>199</sup> Smith actively encouraged Briggs as he worked for the acceptance of higher criticism in America.<sup>200</sup> In fact, it was Briggs' subtle remarks in a *Review* editorial, in which he defended Smith's "legitimate differences" with the Scottish Free Church, that prompted the series of eight articles over the topic of higher criticism.<sup>201</sup>

The similarities between Briggs' theological and scholarly convictions and those of Smith are clearly seen. Similar to Briggs' argument in his *Presbyterian Review* article, Smith had argued that historico-critical methods were consistent with the Reformers, especially Calvin. Smith had also demonstrated in his work that scientific and historical investigation would strengthen and not threaten Christian faith.<sup>202</sup> In a lecture given a few years before Briggs' article, Smith said,

The Spirit of God works in and through human nature, and so the relation of the redeemed to God becomes a genuine element *in history*, of which historical science is bound to take cognizance, and which is as capable of historical

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<sup>199</sup> Massa, *Charles Augustus Briggs and the Crisis of Historical Criticism*, 17; Warner M. Bailey, "William Robertson Smith and American Biblical Studies," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 51 (Fall 1973): 289.

<sup>200</sup> Bailey, 298.

<sup>201</sup> Massa, *Charles Augustus Briggs and the Crisis of Historical Criticism*, 58-59.

<sup>202</sup> Bailey, 289.

appreciation as any other psychological element in the annals of our race. Accordingly, modern theological science is altogether right when it insists that the Bible must be studied by the same principle of historical continuity which is employed in the examination of other records of the past. The evolution of God's dealings with man cannot be understood, except by looking at the human side of the process.<sup>203</sup>

This statement is a clear defense of historical criticism, and reinforces the position that Briggs himself adopted in his own endeavor to promote acceptance of biblical criticism.

Briggs demonstrated his support of Smith when, in the first year of the publication of the *Presbyterian Review*, he published a summary of the Robertson Smith Case in which he praised Smith for both his talent and his contributions to the cause of biblical criticism.<sup>204</sup> He also specifically upheld Smith's doctrine of plenary inspiration, as distinct from the Princetonian's plenary *verbal* inspiration, in his first article for the debate in the *Presbyterian Review*.<sup>205</sup> Ultimately Briggs credited Smith for three key points that he incorporated into his work for the acceptance of higher criticism in America. These were,

- (1) Critical views of the Bible, not in conflict with the Westminster Confession should be decided by discussion by competent scholars.
- (2) Evangelical men should take pains not to make loose and unguarded statements and give offense and anxiety to brethren in the Church.
- (3) Higher Criticism under the affirmation of the divine authority of inspiration, (assured by the testimony of the Holy Spirit), can remove troublesome difficulties [and can enhance] the majesty and glory of the Bible as the eternal Word of God.<sup>206</sup>

<sup>203</sup> William R. Smith; quoted in Massa, *Charles Augustus Briggs and the Crisis of Historical Criticism*, 19.

<sup>204</sup> Bailey, 291.

<sup>205</sup> Briggs, "The Right, Duty, and Limits of Biblical Criticism," 551.

<sup>206</sup> "The Robertson Smith Case," *Presbyterian Review*, 1 (1880), 737-45; quoted in Bailey, 291.

Briggs incorporated these points into his own work surrounding the promotion of higher criticism in America, and in doing so, according to Bailey, he was probably Smith's most outspoken supporter in the United States.<sup>207</sup>

## Protestant Evangelicalism

Though Briggs may appear to be the less evangelical in the context of the debate with Princeton, it is important to recognize that he was ultimately a defender of Protestant evangelicalism in the midst of the broader cultural crisis of historicism, advancing America into the modern world.<sup>208</sup> According to Massa, "Briggs recognized the fragility and vulnerability of the evangelical world view in light of historicist claims, and sought to incorporate the new criticism into the arsenal of apologetic methods for the older religious vision."<sup>209</sup> This is exactly what he did in his inaugural address of 1891 and in works such as *Whither?*<sup>210</sup> With this in mind, Briggs' debate with the Princeton theologians about higher criticism might be viewed, among other things, as a stepping-stone in his defense of evangelical Protestantism to the modern world.

## Ecumenism

An emerging theme in Briggs' later works is that of ecumenism. By the latter half of his career he was intent on seeing a unity of the Church that spanned Protestant and Roman Catholic denominations alike. This conviction was closely tied to his pursuit of the acceptance of the historical critical worldview. Briggs may not have realized the overt connection between these causes in the early 1880s. However, according to Massa, he was aware of this by the time of his trial ten years later. In "The Advance Towards

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<sup>207</sup> Bailey, 299.

<sup>208</sup> Massa, *Charles Augustus Briggs and the Crisis of Historical Criticism*, 23.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*



Church Unity,” written the same year as his Inaugural Address, Briggs writes of a perceived connection between progressivism and church unity:

The conservatives are, for the most part, denominationalists, but the progressives are indifferent to denominational differences. The progressives have broken through barriers and are removing the obstructions more rapidly than the conservatives can restore them.<sup>211</sup>

In a much earlier work, Briggs gives an example of some of the reasons he sees as to why “progressives,” specifically those who accept historical criticism, may be more apt to promote church unity:

In exhibiting the diversities of view in the apostolic church, it will enable churches representing different phases of human nature, corresponding more or less with the scripture differences, to come closer together in the spirit of Christian charity, according to the example given in biblical theology.<sup>212</sup>

Briggs saw a connection between a historical understanding of the development of faith and tradition and an acceptance of other perspectives.

William J. Weston describes Charles Briggs as an active voice for unity within the Presbyterian Church around the turn of the century. Though he continually raised his voice against the strong conservative wing, he vied for a church that would be broad enough to encompass the mass of believers in the middle and on the fringes. As an example of this, and at the same time as his recurring heresy trials, Briggs was a prominent voice in the effort to modify the Westminster Confession to make it newer and

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<sup>211</sup> Charles Briggs, “The Advance Towards Church Unity,” *Independent* (1 January 1891), 1; quoted in Mark S. Massa, S.J., “Mediating Modernism: Charles Briggs, Catholic Modernism, and an Ecumenical Plot,” *Harvard Theological Review* 81 (October 1988): 416-17.

<sup>212</sup> Charles Briggs, *Biblical Study, Its Principles, Methods and History* (New York: Scribner's 1883) 306; quoted in Massa, “Mediating Modernism: Charles Briggs, Catholic Modernism, and an Ecumenical Plot,” 415-16.

simpler and hopefully more inclusive of the majority of Christian churches.<sup>213</sup> Then, even after he had been removed from the Presbyterian Church, Briggs remained an active voice devoted to the cause of church unity.

Briggs was not only a proponent of unity within his denomination, but was in every sense an ecumenicist. Hutchison describes two camps within the ecumenical movement. The first he calls the “federalists,” who supported denominations but opposed sectarianism, rigid creeds, and duplication of effort among denominations when a task could be shared. The other, in favor of organic unity in the churches, desired a deeper unity among all the churches. Briggs fit into the latter group.<sup>214</sup> In fact, Briggs himself spanned the denominational divide when in 1899 he was ordained into the Protestant Episcopal Church, becoming the first faculty member at Union who was not Presbyterian. Briggs also had the rare honor later in his life to stand before Pope Pius X and discuss with him the need for freedom to explore differences in the Church.

Afterwards, Briggs gave a lecture in which he recounted:

In a conversation with the present Pope, two years ago, we were talking of the obstacles to the reunion of Christendom. I said to him that, if the obstacles were to be removed, there must be freedom to investigate the difficulties. He said that all reasonable freedom of investigation should be given.<sup>215</sup>

Briggs’ interest in Church unity and his involvement in the ecumenical movement reinforced the need he saw openly to investigate and critically study the Bible and the

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<sup>213</sup> William J. Weston, *Presbyterian Pluralism: Competition in a Protestant House* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 7.

<sup>214</sup> Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism*, 177.

<sup>215</sup> Charles Briggs, “The Great Obstacle in the Way of a Reunion of Christendom,” 200; quoted in Hynes, “A Hidden Nexus Between Catholic and Protestant Modernism: C.A. Briggs in Correspondence with Loisy, von Hügel and Genocchi,” 79.

Church's dogma.<sup>216</sup> It is impossible to say whether Briggs' commitment to church unity influenced his commitment to the historical critical method, or vice versa. However, the two ideologies were inextricably linked.

### ***A Brief Comparison***

#### **Science**

Contemporary scholars have at times highlighted the similarities between Briggs and the Princeton school. It is true after all that, despite their differences, both were coming out of the same broader cultural context. Doug Hill makes such a comparison between the two sides, pointing out that both were essentially responding to the challenges of Enlightenment rationalism, which claimed that objective truth could be reached by means of scientific method. Accordingly, both theologians apparently felt that they were defending scientifically-justified truth claims. Hill describes the context out of which this struggle emerged:

The conviction that truth was attainable, and that the application of inductive reasoning and democracy would attain it, was one of the prevailing American mythologies of the late nineteenth century. Given enough freedom and enough facts, the thinking went, the truth would always emerge.<sup>217</sup>

Hill's point is well made. Clearly both Warfield and Hodge on the one hand and Charles Briggs on the other saw themselves and their theological positions in light of this nineteenth-century assumption.

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<sup>216</sup> Christensen, 2. Christensen argues that this theme was an important one for Briggs and had an impact on all elements of his scholarly career.

<sup>217</sup> Hill, 79.

## History

One of the most important differences between Briggs and Hodge and Warfield can be seen in the context of their understanding of biblical revelation. Both sides agreed that God revealed himself to the world in a process of divine revelation. Both sides agreed that the Bible is a significant instance of divine revelation. Both sides even embraced scientific method as a means to analyze the facts of God's revelation and deduce theological conclusions. However, the main difference rests on their view of history and how God reveals himself in history. Christensen describes the crucial difference saying that, "For Hodge and other conservative theologians, the facts were given to human beings directly from the Bible, while for Smith they were mediated through the lens of historical circumstance."<sup>218</sup> In this regard Briggs followed his colleague Smith. The difference in historical paradigm played an important role in the different definitions these two groups gave for inspiration, and their opposing views on historical criticism.

## Reason

Reason played an important role for both sides of the debate. The Princeton men constructed a system in which reason told them higher criticism was a threat because it pointed out errors and discrepancies in the biblical text. As Warfield stated, "A proved error in Scripture contradicts not only our doctrine, but the Scripture claims, and therefore its inspiration in making its claims."<sup>219</sup> For Warfield and Hodge "reason" dictated an error-free Bible.

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<sup>218</sup> Christensen, 12.

<sup>219</sup> Hodge and Warfield, 41.

For Briggs, it would be unreasonable blindly to deny the historical and scientific discoveries of higher criticism in order to support a human doctrine, when in fact it was only the Princeton *doctrine* of Inspiration that was on the line, not the *fact* of inspiration itself. The Bible and the historical faith of the church can hold up under higher criticism and it is “unreasonable” to suppress honest inquiry for truth:

It will not do to antagonize Critical theories of the Bible with Traditional theories...for the critic appeals to history against tradition, to an array of facts against so-called inferences, to the Divine Spirit speaking in the Scripture against external authority. History, facts, truth, are all Divine products and must prevail.<sup>220</sup>

Briggs felt reasonably compelled to support serious, honest, critical study of the Bible.

## **Tradition**

It has also become apparent in this study that an appeal to the Protestant traditions was important for both parties. Both defended their position as true to the work of the Reformers. Warfield and Hodge based their arguments on specific phrases and passages, treating the work of those theologians in much the same fashion as they treated the Bible—as a warehouse of scientific facts. Briggs appealed to the spirit of the Reformers and pointed to their own biblical-critical work in support of the principles and practice of higher criticism. Neither party wished to separate themselves from the orthodox traditions of the Protestant faith, particularly those of the Reformers.

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<sup>220</sup> Briggs, “The Right, Duty and Limits of Biblical Criticism,” 557.

## **Conclusion**

The debate between Charles Briggs and the Princeton theologians was a sign of the times. The tides of modernism had begun sweeping into American religious thought during the nineteenth century, carrying with them a requirement for scientifically proven and factual bases of authority. To stand, an authority must submit to the scrutiny of the secular sciences. Accordingly, questions arose about the traditional Scriptural foundation of Protestantism.

Warfield and Hodge viewed Briggs and his commitment to higher criticism as a threat to the historical Scriptural foundation of the Protestant Reformed tradition. In fact Briggs' understanding of the Bible did threaten their doctrine of biblical inspiration. The Princeton school, from Archibald Alexander to A.A. Hodge and B.B. Warfield had developed a doctrine of Scripture that ultimately relied on the facticity of all biblical data to support its claims. Though they believed that the biblical data was factually verifiable, they viewed higher criticism as trying to undermine its facticity. The Princeton correlation between biblical authority and its verbal inerrancy was influenced by their Baconian empiricist worldview and Common Sense Philosophy as well as by cultural trends and movements. It also had strong roots in the conservative, orthodox Presbyterian, dogmatic tradition centralized at Princeton in the nineteenth-century, as well as roots in earlier Reformed scholasticism. None of these influences were themselves the determining factor, but all worked together to help produce the doctrine of Scripture articulated in *Inspiration*. It is this doctrine that was threatened by higher criticism and that Warfield and Hodge fought to defend.

In contrast to the Princeton position, Briggs believed that the biblical foundation for the Christian faith would be strengthened if it were reinterpreted in light of historical-critical discoveries and the demands of a modernist worldview. He also believed that the inevitable cultural trend towards modernism would require such reinterpretation. He viewed the truth claims of the Bible differently than the Princeton men did, and he did not believe either the Bible or the Protestant Reformed tradition claimed verbal, biblical inerrancy. Without inerrancy at stake, Briggs was able to embrace higher criticism as a tool to strengthen biblical authority in the nineteenth-century modernist context. His perception of the situation led Briggs to dedicate his academic career to advancing the discipline of higher criticism in American schools and informed the argument he posited in “The Right, Duty and Limits of Biblical Criticism.”

Ultimately, both sides in this debate wished to strengthen the biblical foundation of their faith. Charles Augustus Briggs viewed higher criticism as a tool that would conclusively strengthen the Protestant position, especially if committed Protestant theologians implemented it. He wanted American Christian theologians to take this opportunity before secular academia took its own course. B.B. Warfield and A.A. Hodge were unable to see the advantage of introducing higher criticism into the theological schools in the United States because its findings threatened the foundation of biblical facticity that was necessary to their doctrine of inspiration. They felt that the best affirmation of biblical authority was a strong commitment to the Bible’s verbal inerrancy—inerrancy that they believed was scientifically and historically supported by the biblical facts and located in the original autographs of Scripture.

The Princeton theologians, and Charles Augustus Briggs knew that they must embrace the task of affirming the Bible in a modernist context that demanded scientific veracity. Both sides were committed to upholding the Protestant foundation of biblical authority, but the end results were different. The unique outcomes produced by each party reflect their own creative and faithful response to the nineteenth-century theological task of affirming biblical authority in the face of historical criticism.



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