

ILLUMINATION DESPITE THE ENLIGHTENMENT: SAVING THE HISTORY OF
FUNDAMENTALIST INERRANCY FROM THE HISTORIANS

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Illumination Despite the Enlightenment

The titanic shifts in the cultural conversation from matters of ethics to politics in the last few decades have been surprising both in the speed with which change has occurred and the divergence of Western worldviews from Reformation and even Enlightenment moorings. The data sources are myriad, and the deluge of information seems to be so massive that we cannot keep up with all the pieces. Enter the very helpful historiographer. By giving shape to the many data points through theoretic conjectures, those who explain the flow of history provide needed clarity and assist their readers in making sense out of the cacophony. Historiographical theories, though, are only useful inasmuch as they serve to actually justify a belief in causation and derivation of the phenomena they seek to integrate into their system.¹

The 1970 publication, *The Roots of Fundamentalism* by Ernest Sandeen, has provided just this kind of soothing historiography for the non-fundamentalist community of theological academia. According to Robert L. Thomas, this book's impact on the academic community, including an increasing swath of self-avowed evangelicals, cannot likely be estimated.² Sandeen's thesis regarding the single most important unifying feature common to evangelicals—the doctrine of biblical inerrancy—is that the Enlightenment-tainted Princetonians invented the doctrine of biblical inerrancy out of their adherence to Scottish Common Sense realism. Sandeen says,

¹ As it happens, the optimism of common sense realism about the successful prospect of perceiving real causation is an assumption of this paper.

² Robert L. Thomas, "The Nature of Truth: Postmodern or Propositional?," *Master's Seminary Journal* 18 (2007).

Most Twentieth Century Fundamentalists and many twentieth century historians have mistakenly assumed that Protestantism possessed a strong, fully-integrated theology of biblical authority, which was attacked by advocates of the higher criticism. As we shall see, no such theology existed before 1850.³

Apparently the association with the Scottish Enlightenment that the Princetonians claimed as their philosophical heritage is generally considered a sufficient basis for refuting their development and sophistication of the doctrine of biblical inerrancy.⁴ In the wake of the interchange between Rogers/McKim⁵ and John Woodbridge,⁶ one important Southern Baptist concluded regarding the practical impact of inerrancy on hermeneutics:

We now understand that as attractive as this Old Princetonian approach might seem, it has raised serious problems for the theory and practice of interpretation in America. Because it clings to a myth of neutral observation, it can be used to sanction the beliefs of any group which claims to have discovered the truth of the Scriptures through an exacting study of them.⁷

In these times of the rejection of the correspondence view of truth, this charge that the Princetonian doctrine of inerrancy stands on less-than-biblical grounds needs some close consideration before being incorporated wholesale into one's understanding of historical and systematic theology.⁸ This paper will argue that the Princetonians were biblical in their formulation of the doctrines of inspiration and inerrancy and that many aspects of Thomas Reid's alternative to Hume and Descartes did and should resonate with those who adopt a

³ Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), 106.

⁴ Sydney Ahlstrom, "Scottish Philosophy and American Theology," *Church History* 24, no. 3 (1955): 257. By 1955 Ahlstrom was able to say, "Indeed, few, if any, schools of philosophy have been given such disdainful treatment by historians as Common Sense realism; and few, if any, philosophers have had to suffer such ignominious re-evaluations as Thomas Reid and Dugald Stewart, who were once lionized as the founders of a great and enduring philosophical synthesis." This disdain for the views of Reid was not apparently shared fully by Ahlstrom, who also stated, "First, was the Scottish Philosophy as undistinguished as posterity has judged it to be? (To this I would answer with a qualified negative, but the subject is outside the purview of the present essay.)"

⁵ Jack Bartlett Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible : An Historical Approach*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979).

⁶ John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority : A Critique of the Rogers/Mckim Proposal* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1982).

⁷ John P. Newport, "Representative Historical and Contemporary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation," *Faith and MIssion* 3, no. 2 (1986): 38.

⁸ Randall H. Balmer, "The Princetonians and Scripture: A Reconsideration," *Westminster Theological Journal* 44, no. 2 (1982). Balmer's defense focuses on Sandeen's charges.

biblical worldview. The method of this study will be to examine the charge against the Princetonians and the various defenses raised in their favor. This analysis will be followed by a summary critique and partial endorsement of Thomas Reid's epistemology with a view to points it has in common with a traditional, fundamentalist view of the Scriptures. This study will conclude, based on a biblical perspective on the function of language and its underlying metaphysics, that some of the common sense features of Reid's system are derivative of biblical truth and not merely a conjectured prescription for how to approach the Bible itself.

The Charge: Guilt by Association with Thomas Reid

Historian Sydney Ahlstrom traced the influence of Scottish Common Sense realism from its formulaic context in the Established Church and universities of Scotland of the eighteenth century. An extended quote will paint what seems to be the scholarly consensus:

My theological cross-section is now sufficiently drawn. It began with a brief portrayal of the situation in Scotland and its universities, where Common Sense realism came into being as the Moderate voice of the Enlightenment against a background of violent ecclesiastical strife. We have witnessed the introduction of Scottish thinking into the nerve-center of American Presbyterianism by John Witherspoon and into the Moderate Calvinist tradition then developing at Harvard by David Tappan. We have seen it accomplish the liberation of Channing and nourish the confident Unitarianism of James Walker. It also appeared in the influential lectures of Timothy Dwight, and through his chief disciple, Nathaniel Taylor, came to occupy a central place in the "New Haven Theology." It informed the response to liberalism which was excogitated at Andover, first by the orthodox Hopkinsian, Leonard Woods, and then by his successor, Edwards Amasa Park. Finally, at Princeton the Witherspoon tradition was planted in the new seminary by Archibald Alexander and carried into the vast, polemical system of Charles Hodge. It remains to assay the meaning of this amazingly diverse philosophical conquest.⁹

That one philosophical approach might account for such diverse and indeed contradicting theological perspectives should be a hint that, like fire, the inductive

⁹ Ahlstrom, "Scottish Philosophy and American Theology," 261.

psychological philosophy of Thomas Reid and Dugald Stewart has many possible uses and abuses. Doubtless Ahlstrom's assertion agrees with most commentators of Scottish realism: Reid's *Inquiry into the Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* is the "sine qua non" of the philosophical movement.¹⁰ The freight which Reid's initial statement is said to have borne into the heart of erstwhile orthodox theological conceptions generally appears, to this writer, not to have been informed by a close reading of Reid's *Inquiry* itself.

If Reidian epistemology can be shown to differ with Calvin's view, then the Princetonians who were influenced by Reid through Witherspoon and Archibald Alexander can be considered apostate from Calvin's epistemology as well. The claim, then, is that Charles Hodge and especially B.B. Warfield rejected a Spirit-driven epistemology in favor of reasoned arguments for the inerrancy of the Scriptures. This claim that the Scottish Moderates' philosophy so tainted the American conservatives that their defense of the Scriptures is to be rejected in favor a *fallibility* view reminiscent of Barth and the neoevangelicals is shocking.¹¹ The liberalizing moderates are claiming that a liberalizing influence from eighteenth-century Scotland ultimately resulted in Warfield's reasoned, conservative statements on the Bible's inerrancy, which are to be rejected for a liberal alternative!

Rogers and McKim attempt an historical account of Reid within the same general theses as Sandeen.¹² For them the key issue in the Enlightenment epistemology of Locke, Hume, and Reid is the relationship of faith to reason, with "reason" taking the priority over faith. While their summary of Locke's reaction to Descartes and the other rationalists may

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ John D. Woodbridge, "Biblical Authority: Towards an Evaluation of the Rogers and Mckim Proposal," *Trinity Journal* 1, no. 2 (1980): 214-5.

¹² Rogers and McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible : An Historical Approach*, 235-42.

accurately capture their rationalist-empiricist debate, it seems that their assertions about Reid are less perspicuous.¹³ Correctly identifying Reid's *Inquiry* as a response to his understanding of Humean skepticism, Rogers and McKim assert, "Reid responded by assuming an Aristotelian realism, which based all knowledge on sense experience."¹⁴ This statement is not necessarily a reflection of Reid's *Inquiry* nor of Rogers' and McKim's further analysis of Reid's thought in the successive pages of their argument.

Actually, a better account of Reid's *Inquiry* is the application of Baconian induction to the operation of the human senses on mental processes. To do so Reid had to assume reality. Reid claims that man's universal intuition of reality is simply how things are. Therefore, Rogers and McKim cannot be correct in asserting that Reid argued for sense experience as the basis of all knowledge. Since all people intuit things like cause-effect relations and the reality of memory, Reid's epistemology included a "common sense" body of intuited belief prior to the application of inductive observation via the senses.¹⁵ At this point Reid's oft-quoted definition of "common sense principles" is in order:

If there are certain principles, as I think there are, which the constitution of our nature leads us to believe, and which we are under a necessity to take for granted in the common concerns of life, --without being able to give a reason for them; these are what we call the principles of common sense; and what is manifestly contrary to them, is what we call absurd.¹⁶

In describing the common sense intuitions about reality that become the basis by which we universally conclude that our sense experiences are real, Reid was arguing for the value of Bacon's system of induction. Another way of saying this would be that God's

¹³ Ibid., 236.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 239. "Judgment was the basic unit of knowledge in Reid's inductive scheme. But the judgment itself was not known inductively, but intuitively. It was not the product of scientific inquiry, but of personal faith."

¹⁶ Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind, on the Principles of Common Sense (Kindle Edition)* (Amazon Digital Services, LLC, 2014), 22.

created world and man's created mind-sense interface are so designed that the latter is capable of understanding something true about the former through observation and reason. It is difficult to argue against Reid's view of the workings of the human mind regarding knowledge of the natural environment since his goal was to inductively observe how we deal with the data from our senses.¹⁷

Obviously there are drawbacks to the misapplication of Reid's inductive conclusions about man's access to things-as-they-are through sense experience. Where one draws the line on what kinds of things can be known as "common sense" will likely be a subjective determination. Rogers and McKim helpfully point out that the appeal to general consensus in Reid's notion of common sense is a weakness that made "sense" in Reid's day.¹⁸ For a Presbyterian pastor—and son of a Presbyterian pastor—whose intellectual delivery was apparently too much for the rank-and-file congregation of his day, his theistic metaphysics accorded with the general consensus of his civilization in his day.¹⁹ Reid's optimism about man's perspicuity obviously ignores the traditional Reformed view of the noetic effects of sin. If one is using his sin-damaged instruments to inquire into the use of those instruments, he is not able to detect the deficiency in the devices being used to measure their own effectiveness. While Reid was faithful in acknowledging when he could not know something via induction which he had to intuit in order to function within creation, he was optimistic that such intuitions and sense experiences would provide a sufficient basis for consensus.

¹⁷ Ibid., 17-8. A characteristic statement on the kinds of observations Reid makes from his inductive approach will sufficiently demonstrate his method of inquiry: "Why sensation should compel our belief of the present existence of the thing, memory a belief in its past existence, and imagination no belief at all, is what I believe no philosopher can give a shadow of reason for, but that such is the nature of these operations; they are all simple and original, and therefore inexplicable acts of the mind."

¹⁸ Rogers and McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible : An Historical Approach*, 241.

¹⁹ Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority : A Critique of the Rogers/Mckim Proposal*, 85-99. In discussing the concept of the infallibility of the Bible in the 16th-18th centuries in Europe, Woodbridge demonstrates convincingly a theistic metaphysics as the consensus view.

This optimism about human induction and consequent reason would disarm those who followed Reid's approach into the natural sciences against the greatest attacks on the Bible of the Enlightenment.

These concerns notwithstanding, Reid's Common Sense philosophical works lay the groundwork for modern psychology. The inductive investigation into the inner workings of the human mind through the various senses amounts to an account of general revelation about man's access to real knowledge about his environment. In opposition to his impression of Hume's idealized non-reality, Reid's positing of reality does not necessarily equate to an epistemic justification for fallen man's access to reality. Rather Reid was functioning within his Christian worldview by assuming the created order of reality itself while modestly pointing out that the created senses in man are adequate to perceive that natural environment as-it-is. Reid's scientific inquiry into human sense experience was an ingenious effort to account for man's perception of the world as God made it with the tools God gave him. Reid does not make sense at all without the postulation of design, but neither does anything else in our experience of the world of things-as-they-are, one might argue. Of all the philosophical options available in the late 17th century, the one presented by the Presbyterian pastor turned Baconian philosopher was far and away the best fit for those of a Biblical persuasion, whether or not it omitted reference to the noetic effects of the fall.²⁰ Ahlstrom's sweeping summary of discredit to Reid in the scholarly consensus of his day does not necessarily

²⁰ John D. Hannah, *An Uncommon Union : Dallas Theological Seminary and American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2009), Kindle Location 1377 ~p.54. Hannah states, "In retrospect it is now apparent that the emerging division within American Christianity did not result from one or the other side's embrace of the Enlightenment; both embraced it. Conservatives found in the common sense tradition—as perfected in the insights of Charles Hodge as to method and B. B. Warfield's application of it in the construction of the impregnable fortress of biblical inerrancy at Princeton Theological Seminary—the means to defend the faith against materialist agnosticism, secularism, and liberal concessionism."

undermine Reid's observations of how we know things about our environment from sense experience and intuition.

The Charge in 1970: Guilt by Association with Reid and Darby

Ernest Sandeen certainly made the rejection of the Princetonian view of inerrancy palatable to those of a popular Christian audience in the years which would succeed his original 1970 publication by correctly pairing the views of Darby on eschatology and ecclesiology with those of Warfield on the nature of the Scriptures. Apparently those of a traditional, Princetonian perspective will readily reject the guilt-by-association with "Millenarians."²¹ Of course Warfield flavored his articulation of theological differences with more than a hint of disdain in the case of L.S. Chafer when he dealt with *He That is Spiritual*.²² Though being so very close in views regarding the nature of Scriptures, these vastly different fundamentalist perspectives would seem worlds apart when those common scriptural views were applied in the realms of ecclesiology, sanctification, and eschatology. Pairing dispensationalism with Princetonian inerrancy, while historically correct and methodologically consistent on this one topic, was perhaps an effective way for Sandeen to distance conservative Presbyterians from their views of the Scriptures. Perhaps the theological differences, along with the perceived gap in scholarship that has been traditionally supposed, by many Reformed theologians, to exist between themselves and the lesser-informed dispensationalists would go far in motivating the conservative Presbyterian rank-and-file to rethink their doctrine. Dispensationalists, on the contrary, point to the

²¹ Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 130-1.

²² Randall Gleason, "B.B. Warfield and Lewis S. Chafer on Sanctification," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40, no. 2 (1997): 242; Benjamin B. Warfield, "Systematical Theology. Review of *He That Is Spiritual* by Lewis Sperry Chafer," *Princeton Theological Review* XVII (1919). The nature of Warfield's critique is polemic against Chafer's rather distinctive view of sanctification, and at one point Warfield suggests that the son of a Presbyterian minister should "know better." The accusation amounts to "exegetical virtuosity," and the tone hints at the general attitude Reformed theologians would adopt toward dispensationalists in print.

common ground on the matter of the nature of the Scriptures and suggest a reevaluation of interpretive methodology such that matters of ecclesiology, sanctification, and eschatology benefit from the high view that Reformed theology has traditionally held of the Bible. In any case, Sandeen's use of Warfield's theses regarding inerrancy and inspiration in a larger argument meant to discredit the fundamentalist "millenarian" movement seems to have contributed to the consensus indictment of Princetonian views of the Scriptures.

Sandeen's primary charge against the Princetonians was not intended merely to discredit them by association, however. Rather the indictment of the Princetonians was intended to undermine their doctrine of biblical inerrancy by locating it within its unique historical setting. Hindsight is supposed to reveal what a scholastic and novel doctrine Warfield and Hodge had invented in at least three ways. First the Princetonian inerrancy is seen as an apologetic against the advance of German higher criticism. This notion is certainly true and to be expected given the intellectual climate of the nineteenth Century. Jason B. Hunt has demonstrated as much, by comparing Bavinck's doctrine of inerrancy with that of Warfield.²³ The essence of the doctrine, according to Hunt, is not different, but he sees Warfield's apologetic approach as at odds somewhat with the tendencies of more traditional Genevan epistemology.²⁴

A second charge from Sandeen, which is his greatest problem with Warfield's novelty, is that in appealing to the original autographs as that which was divinely-inspired, the Princetonians were supposedly at odds with the Westminster Confession, which they

²³ Jason B. Hunt, "Bavinck and the Princetonians on Scripture: A Difference in Doctrine or Defense?," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 53, no. 2 (2010).

²⁴ Enter the argument between evidentiary and presuppositional apologetics. This argument is intra-mural within the conservative school of thought which holds to the Warfieldian view of inerrancy. Most of the criticisms of Warfield within conservative evangelicalism follows the lines of presuppositionalism versus evidentialism.

were simultaneously committed to upholding.²⁵ This argument attempts to pit Warfield's strong insistence on apostolicity²⁶ against the intent of the Westminster divines in their formulation of the Confessional statement of the reliability of the Bible. Acknowledging and indeed embracing the polemic tone—if not the apologetic strategy—of B.B. Warfield in his historical setting, a strong case from the Johannine theology of apostolicity will justify Warfield's appeal to authority. The Princetonians' very Johannine assertion was that the biblical concept of inspiration went hand-in-hand with the commissioning of the apostles of Jesus Christ.²⁷ The apostolic authority of the New Testament insists that the message came from those *sent* by Jesus Christ, i.e. *apostles*. Their message would not only be commissioned by Jesus Himself, but He promised they would also receive supernatural enablement in its recall from the Holy Spirit, per John 14:25-26. One expects to find a Spirit-inspired testimony so promised by Christ to bear the soundness of testimony of none less than the Holy Spirit Himself.

From this position regarding authority, which begins with Christ and ends in apostolic testimony reduced to writing, one only has assurance of what the apostles themselves wrote or personally oversaw. From a Johannine and not necessarily Reidian perspective one would, without need for a protracted logical reasoning process, conclude that the original documents penned by the inspired apostles bore the apostolic testimony with its guarantee of divine quality bearing on truthfulness and accuracy. What happened to those documents by way of copying and transmitting, not to mention their translation, would not be part of the

²⁵ Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 118-9.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 120.

²⁷ John 14:26 cf. 1 John 1:1-3, 2:19. These references are meant to summarize the Johannine concept of the apostolic commission to carry forth Jesus' teaching under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Johannine frame of expectation. One might well attempt the inference of a concept of divine *preservation*, but this falls outside the bounds of Warfield's concern for *origination*.

The third charge which Sandeen suggested was that of "monism" regarding the provenance of the authority of the Scriptures. Pointing to the reasoned arguments of Warfield for inspiration and inerrancy, like that proposed above in John 14:25-6, Sandeen asserts that Warfield and Charles Hodge were in denial of the inner witness of the Spirit to the truth of the Scriptures He had inspired.

Theologically, Charles Hodge and the Princeton Theology certainly fit within this categorization as monists—continually insisting that the experiential element, the witness of the Spirit, the mystical strain, be subordinated to the matter of theological science, the Scriptures. This attempt to adapt theology to the methodology of Newtonian science produced a wooden, mechanical discipline, as well as a rigorously logical one.²⁸

Perhaps the Princetonians were naïve realists, or on the other hand, perhaps all of nature works within a realistic, theistically-arranged frame. For all the claims that Princeton was a product of Scottish realism, one might expect their argumentation on the authority of Scripture to actually derive from Reid's doubtless correct assertions about intuitive knowledge of causal relations and sense experience in the real world. However, regardless of the subjective impressions that Warfield did indeed entertain due to the inner witness of the Spirit,²⁹ much of his conversation, to Sandeen's point, happened in a historical context of scientific discovery. In God's rational world, which behaves according to the laws of nature—which Newton discovered and described but could not finally explain without reference to the Creator—the discussion indeed needed to traffic in reason. The accusation

²⁸ Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 118.

²⁹ Paul Kjoss Helseth, *"Right Reason" and the Princeton Mind: An Unorthodox Proposal* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Pub., 2010), 59-65.

that Warfield's arguments fit his historical setting do not sufficiently refute them, for they are indeed rational and are arguably derived from the Bible's statements themselves.

Only by rejecting the logical maxim of non-contradiction and accepting the inevitable skepticism which Hume and later Kant would present regarding actual knowledge of the real world could Sandeen's argument against Warfield's presentation be sustained. Naturally, this is the spirit of the intellectual times today; post-modernism relishes the supposed quantum disruption of Newton's laws³⁰ and denies the possibility of language to refer beyond itself to reality. Rather than attacking the logic of Warfield's argument, Sandeen attempts guilt-by-association with deism.

Although opposed to both these adversaries [deism and mysticism], the Princeton theologians did not stand equidistant from them on some neutral epistemological ground, but as many commentators have noticed, occupied exactly the same stance as their deist rivals. Although Princeton theologians were not ignorant of Kant, and included him in their own private Inferno, no influence of his *Critique of Pure Reason* can be seen in their writings. Their dependence upon reason, though carefully guarded, was complete.³¹

The intellectual ferment of Sandeen's day, as well as ours, seems to assume Kantian epistemology. Evangelicals should come to terms with the ultimate empiricism and skepticism of Kant's theory of knowledge concerning access to the real world. For one thing, a reading of the Bible for authorial intent about the world-as-it-is is impossible if Kant was correct about the "noumenal" world of things-as-they-are versus the "phenomenal" world of things-as-we-organize-them-categorically. Nash helpfully summarizes:

Kant's system had the effect of erecting a wall between the world as it appears to us and the world as it is. Human knowledge is restricted to the phenomenal world, the

³⁰ The tendency in physics to suggest that quantum mechanics, operating at a subatomic level, somehow unhorses the intuitive and straightforward Newtonian mechanics at the macro, life-experience level still cannot contend with Reid and Newton who correctly induced from creation things-as-they-are in the macro-world. For this writer, the quantum behavior of subatomic particles in requiring an "observer" or interaction in order to collapse to a determined state, combines with the lack of quantum uncertainty above the atomic scale in the realm of human experience to makes an evidential argument for the biblical doctrine of divine omniscience.

³¹ Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 117.

world, of appearance, the world shaped by the structure of the knowing mind. Knowledge of any reality beyond the wall, which includes the world of things in themselves, is forever unattainable.³²

If one would see a denouncement of the thought structure behind the entirety of the Westminster Confession, one might start with a Kantian approach to the Bible. The ultimate skepticism about knowing anything beyond inner impressions about sense experiences as filtered into through existing inner categorical structures precludes a traditional reading of an inspired Scriptures to see what God thinks about things-as-they-are. Sandeen's appeal to Kant is not an opening of the Bible but a closing of the mind to know anything from it.

Regarding the charge that the non-Kantian Warfield and Hodge stood on the same footing as the deists, one asks which footing is implied. Perhaps realism instead of Locke's version of idealism? Idealism, to the thinking of Reid and the Princetonians resolved to hopeless skepticism of real knowledge. If these are the two choices, can one really believe anything about the Bible without a realistic epistemology? Does this initial degree of common ground between theists of all stripes amount to a tacit agreement between infidel and orthodox theists? The *a priori* assumption that the world was created as recorded in the Scriptures, by a rational Creator, such that human language could describe that world and the workings of Him who made it may have been held by some deists. Indeed, today those who do not profess a biblical faith but nevertheless accept the conclusions of the intelligent design movement in natural sciences will agree with Christians that there is a Creator. By the same token, the convictions about the relationship between the mind and sense response so well-articulated by Thomas Reid in his *Inquiry into the Human Mind, on the Principles of*

³² Ronald H. Nash, *Life's Ultimate Questions: An Introduction to Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 265.

Common Sense certainly fit well into this *a priori* commitment to theistic metaphysics, regardless of one's stance on the Scriptures.³³

The Charge in 1979: American Evangelicals' Biblical Commitments Could Neither Spot nor Defeat Humanism

In 1979, the historical work *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* by Jack Rogers and Donald McKim thoroughly appropriated Sandeen's derogatory thesis regarding the Princetonian view of inerrancy and inspiration by claiming it was a "Protestant scholastic" consequence of the empiricist epistemology of Thomas Reid through the great Scottish-American theologian and patriot John Witherspoon.³⁴ While one cannot argue that the Scottish Witherspoon was an heir to Reid's reaction against Hume's skepticism, it is interesting that the charge is made without showing a causal relationship between the Reidian realism and the Princetonian inerrancy. The Rogers/McKim analysis of Witherspoon will provide one case study of the dereliction of duty in their historiographic approach.³⁵

John Witherspoon's Adjustment of Reid to Scripture

The flow of thought from Reid to the Princetonians begins not with Princeton Seminary but Princeton University and its president, John Witherspoon. Rogers and McKim summarize Witherspoon's development and theological milieu but do not suggest how

³³ Reid's treatise, as the starting point for the Scottish Common Sense realism epistemology, within its original context of David Hume's skeptical idealism, constantly presupposes a Creator and then explains the kinds of mental processes by which humans apprehend the creation. The assumptions of humanism and liberal denials of the noetic effects of sin as stated in the Bible are not necessarily inherent to Reid's system. Furthermore, adjusting Reidian realism to include the impact of sin on man's epistemology is probably the best account for how we function in the world with our reasoning.

³⁴ Rogers and McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible : An Historical Approach*, 242-8.

³⁵ Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority : A Critique of the Rogers/Mckim Proposal*, 21-3.

Witherspoon's common sense realism impacted his view of the Scriptures.³⁶ To the contrary they note, "Despite all the appeal to induction to lay an evidential foundation for faith, the [American] followers of Scottish realism blithely switched to deduction for developing doctrine."³⁷ This statement directly follows a pair of quotes which are an attempt to show Witherspoon's inconsistency between inductive and deductive reasoning processes. A detailed examination of these quotes, proposed as evidence by Rogers and McKim, will undermine their ultimate thesis about common sense realism and the pedigree of Princetonian inerrancy, at least in Witherspoon's thinking.

On the one hand, Witherspoon is shown to value induction as the best way to reason: "It is always safer in our reasonings to trace facts upwards, than to reason downwards upon metaphysical principles."³⁸ This suggestion occurs in Witherspoon's summary section of Lecture XVI on *Moral Philosophy*. Perhaps Rogers and McKim use this quote because it contains the universal "always." They certainly take Witherspoon's remark out of context. To this quotation Rogers and McKim contrast Witherspoon's statement about deduction when it comes to Christian metaphysics: "From reason, sentiment and tradition, the Being and infinite perfection and excellence of God may be deduced."³⁹ This quote is probably used by Rogers and McKim because it uses the word "deduced." By putting the two out-of-context statements together there is the perceived contradiction that Witherspoon "always"

³⁶ Ahlstrom states, "Witherspoon was not an ideal emissary (of Reid's Common Sense realism), however, even though some have credited him with anticipating Reid's 'discoveries,' because his Evangelical bias blinded him to the real genius of the movement." Ahlstrom, "Scottish Philosophy and American Theology," 261. This view from outside the Evangelical consensus points to a modification of Scottish Common Sense to include the noetic effects of sin.

³⁷ Rogers and McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible : An Historical Approach*, 246.

³⁸ John Witherspoon and John Rodgers, *The Works of the Rev. John Witherspoon... To Which Is Prefixed an Account of the Author's Life, in a Sermon Occasioned by His Death*, 2d ed., 4 vols. (Philadelphia: Printed and published by William W. Woodward, nê. 52, 1802), III, 470. Quoted by Rogers and McKim, 246.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, III, 388. Quoted in Rogers and McKim, *ibid.* This quotation is actually incorrect, in that it omitted the word "contemplation." The correct quote is, "From reason, contemplation, sentiment and tradition, the Being and infinite perfection and excellence of God may be deduced; and therefore what he is, and commands, is virtue and duty."

prefers induction over deduction, while he allows for deduction of God's existence and essence. Happily, the use of these quotations from Witherspoon's *Lectures on Moral Philosophy* showcases Witherspoon's view of the Scriptures and doctrine. It is a view which derives not from Reid but likely from Calvin and the Reformation.

The latter quote about deduction is not in a context that deals with the Scriptures *per se* but rather the subjective nature of the reasoning process based on a Christian metaphysics. The statement is Witherspoon's first salvo in his reasoned *philosophy* of virtue in Lecture IV, introduced by this rhetorical question, "If I were to lay down a few proportions on the foundation of virtue, *as a philosopher*, they should be the following?"⁴⁰ Context is important; Witherspoon is introducing what he considers to be philosophy and relies heavily on reasoning in this discussion. He would not be arguing for a perspective on the primacy of faith over reason in this section because he is entering the arena of what he considered to be philosophy. The question of the primacy of faith does not arise due to the nature of the discussion itself.

In contrast, the first quote, cited by Rogers and McKim from Witherspoon's Lecture XVI, does occur within a context which deals with Witherspoon's view of the Scriptures, though Rogers and McKim do not reference it or apparently include it in their argument:

5. There is nothing certain or valuable in moral philosophy, but what is perfectly coincident with the scripture, where the glory of God is the first principle of action, arising from the subjection of the creature—where the good of others is the great object of duty, and our own interest the necessary consequence.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Ibid. Emphasis mine.

⁴¹ Ibid., 471. This statement would be at home with Michael Stallard's view of systematic theology. In his scheme, systematic theology is a process of tasks in which "level 4" is the task of validation or invalidation of extra-biblical truth claims by the standard of the Bible. That which belonged within the Bible's framework Witherspoon and others rightly appropriated as a consequence of this validation. The realism of Reid, for one thing, derives from the Bible's metaphysic of the preexisting creator and his contingent creation. The inherent validity of human sense perception of the contingent, physical world is likewise an undergirding assumption of the biblical authors.

This elegant statement about the entire enterprise of moral philosophy seems to make it the handmaiden of the Bible and not vice-versa. Witherspoon recognizes the difference between philosophical human reasoning and the biblical special revelation. Not only does he say that the Scriptures are the standard by which moral reasoning will be judged, but he provides an able and thoroughly Reformed view of the Bible's own metaphysics. Rogers and McKim quote from this very lecture a few paragraphs prior, but they do not show how this view of the Bible is a product of Scottish Common Sense. To the contrary, it seems that in light of this statement about moral philosophy as judged by the Scriptures, some of the tenets of Scottish Common Sense were valued because they aligned with the prior metaphysical commitment on which the Scriptures themselves had insisted.

Rogers and McKim further attempt to demonstrate the Scottish conditioning of the Princeton theology by quoting from Witherspoon's Lectures on Divinity. "There are few things more delightful, than to observe that the latest discoveries in philosophy, have never shewn us anything but what is perfectly consistent with Scripture doctrine and history."⁴² Again, context will help steer this quotation out of their stack of evidence and into a correct understanding of Witherspoon's view of Scripture:

It is observed by some when on this subject, that the gospel has introduced the greatest improvements of human as well as divine knowledge; not but that those arts which depend entirely upon the exertion of human talents and powers, were carried to as great perfection before, as since the coming of Christ, in the heathen as in the Christian world, such as poetry, painting, statuary, &c. But natural knowledge, or the knowledge of the constitution and course of nature, began with, and increased by religious light; all the theories of the ancients, as to the formation and preservation of the earth and heavens were childish and trifling. **From revelation we learn the simple account of the creation of all things out of nothing, by the omnipotence of God; and perhaps there are few things more delightful, than to observe that the latest discoveries in philosophy, have never shewn us any thing but what is perfectly consistent with the scripture doctrine and history.** There is one modern class or sect of divines, who affirm that all human science is to be found in the

⁴² Rogers and McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible : An Historical Approach*, 246.

Bible—natural philosophy, astronomy, chronology.—This I am afraid is going too far; but I think it had not been possible for any writer or writers in the age of the sacred penmen, to have wrote so much on the creation of the world, and its history since that, without being guilty of absurdities and contradictions; unless they had been under the direction of an infallible guide.⁴³

Here is a statement of Witherspoon’s interpretation of history. One may excuse his optimism, given the many wonderful advances in discoveries in the realm of “natural philosophy,” i.e. science in his day. At least one historian of science agrees with him that the biblical metaphysics, not the philosopher’s endless epistemic discussions, directed the great scientific revolution between the late 1500s and the early 1800s.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, notice that it is Genesis 1 and not philosophy, revelation and not reason or sense experience, which is the starting point for Witherspoon’s approach to the natural environment. Also, it is valuable to note in passing that Witherspoon’s view is measured and constrained by the Scriptures’ actual contents to specify their discussion of the natural world, as was apparently the bent of some in his day.

Doubtless, this optimism about the hopes of Baconian induction and a failure to fully assert what the special revelation of Scripture must say about the natural environment did eventually have adverse consequences on Princetonian views. The tragic accommodation of the Genesis creation account to historical geology and Darwinian biology was a consequence of not fully appreciating the noetic effects of sin regarding observation and reason when it comes to the evaluation of the data within the general revelation. The acrobatic exegesis which seeks to evade the Genesis 1-2 cosmology arises not from Genesis but the effort to

⁴³ Witherspoon and Rodgers, *The Works of the Rev. John Witherspoon... To Which Is Prefixed an Account of the Author's Life, in a Sermon Occasioned by His Death*, IV, 53. Emphasis mine. For this discussion it is important to remember that “discoveries in philosophy” included all Newtonian scientific breakthroughs. All intellectual pursuits were indeed considered aspects of philosophy then as now.

⁴⁴ Nancy Pearcey and Charles B. Thaxton, *The Soul of Science : Christian Faith and Natural Philosophy, Turning Point Christian Worldview Series* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1994), 19. “On the contrary, [the faith-motivated “scientist’s”] motivation for studying the wonders of nature was a religious impulse to glorify the God who had created them.”

force this accommodation to “science.” It is strange indeed that today’s theologians are increasingly prepared to follow Charles Hodge in the endorsement of Darwin and Lyell but not in his endorsement of the Bible as absolutely inerrant revelation from God.

Rogers and McKim conclude that Witherspoon, “brought from Scotland to America the apologetic approach to Scripture that had led to conflicts between Scripture and emerging science in Switzerland and England.”⁴⁵ This “apologetic approach” is doubtless a reference to how Witherspoon compared the philosophical assumptions of Reid, Newton, and Bacon to the Scriptures. What they were discovering in the natural revelation accorded with what we find in special revelation. Rogers and McKim lay the fundamentalist/liberal conflict at the feet of this apologetic.⁴⁶ At this point one might again inquire what is the alternative to comparing these theorists’ structures with the statements of Scripture, especially in the key places like Genesis where a biblical cosmology is established? Kant proposed an empiricism which denied the possibility of real noetic access to things-in-themselves or the truth out-there which went beyond sense experience. Does this provide a better means of establishing the relationship between the biblical metaphysics and scientific observation? As stated, it is very likely that the Princetonians did not sufficiently employ their biblically-derived view of the Scriptures in the face of opposition from the conjectural claims of evolution and the antiquity of the earth. Perhaps this failure arose from Reid and his followers’ failure to account for sin’s effects on man’s reasoning. Nevertheless, one is not able to successfully convict Witherspoon of deriving his view of Scripture from Reid. To John Woodbridge’s

⁴⁵ Rogers and McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible : An Historical Approach*, 246.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

point, there was already a well-established view of Scriptural infallibility before Witherspoon advocated that the Bible be the standard by which human reasoning should be judged.⁴⁷

The Counterclaims of History to these Charges: Woodbridge's Argument

It seems that the general burden of John Woodbridge's response to Rogers and McKim is to refute their thesis that the doctrine of inerrancy articulated by Warfield was novel with the Princetonians. His procedure is a case-by-case summary refutation of how Rogers and McKim conduct historiography from Origen to the Princetonians. Rogers and McKim theorize that with platonic philosophy interpreters like Augustine and Luther—the leaders prior to the Enlightenment's scientific revolution—agree with their view of “inerrancy.” That is basically a threefold stance. First, the nature of the Scriptures is accommodation, and this means that man's limited capacity with language constrains God's revelation to a salvific authority and not a scientifically or historically rigorous one. Thus the Bible, secondly, is authoritative for salvation in Christ, but not in the words used to convey this overall message. The third plank in the Rogers-McKim view of authority is the mystical testimony of the Holy Spirit and not the logical consequences of the words the Spirit is somehow to have errantly inspired.⁴⁸ Rogers and McKim attempt to demonstrate that this alternative to the Warfieldian view of verbal-plenary inspiration was the general view of the Church until the 17th century.

Woodbridge questions their methods and presents counter evidence from the primary sources in their contexts. At times he shows how the quotations used by Rogers and McKim are taken out of context and that in their respective contexts the quotations actually refute

⁴⁷ Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority : A Critique of the Rogers/Mckim Proposal*.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 21-2.

Rogers' and McKim's views.⁴⁹ He also notes the selectivity of evidence adduced by Rogers and McKim.⁵⁰ The most devastating aspect of Woodbridge's critique of Rogers and McKim, however, is the logical fallacy he calls "inappropriate historical disjunctions."⁵¹ Here Woodbridge very insightfully unpacks the tendency to say that if God accommodates human understanding with the Scriptures, He must make statements counter to the truth.

Woodbridge lists seven "more important" historical disjunctions, which demonstrate the erroneous methods by which Rogers and McKim arrive at their conclusions regarding the views of the various theologians.⁵² This logical fallacy is not that subtle, it turns out, and its pervasiveness in their argument is baffling, considering the respect accorded their work among evangelical critics.

The Argument of Paul Kjoss Helseth: Sandeen et. al. Have Misread the Princetonians

Paul Helseth has argued that the Sandeen and Rogers/McKim perspective has not taken necessary stock of the actual statements of the Princetonians regarding the subjective and experiential factors of the Spirit of God as they bear on their epistemology.

[Helseth's chapter on religious epistemology of Charles Hodge and Archibald Alexander] suggests that the subjective and experiential factors play a critical role in Old Princeton's religious epistemology because Old Princeton's 'intellectualism' is moral, not merely rational. It has to do, in other words, with the 'whole soul,'—mind

⁴⁹ Ibid., 33-4. The example here is the misuse of Origen's words. Actually, Woodbridge demonstrates this tendency as one of his key methods, as I have done in dealing with Witherspoon's words above. Methodologically, Woodbridge the historian calls Rogers' and McKim's historical scholarship into question throughout his treatment of their evidence. In dealing with their cast of Augustine, Woodbridge summarizes: "As we shall see, our authors frequently present citations without the context that permits us to understand them. In this particular attempt [of evidence from Augustine's writing], our authors attempt to establish a form/function dichotomy in Augustine's thought is less than successful (p.42)."

⁵⁰ Ibid., 33. "How do they attempt to establish this perspective in the face of much evidence to the contrary, and against the verdict of notable scholars such as Vawter, J.N.D. Kelley and others? On the one hand authors Rogers and McKim simply do not allude to Clement of Rome, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Theophilus of Antioch, or other church fathers who make statements that counter their hypothesis....Thus Rogers and McKim largely ignore the Roman, legal, and western tradition among the fathers." Woodbridge goes on to show how those fathers like Origen, Chryostom, and Augustine that they do use are misrepresented.

⁵¹ Ibid., 25.

⁵² Ibid.

will, and emotions—rather than the rational faculty alone, and for this reason it is simply wrong to conclude that the orthodoxy of Old Princeton was subverted by the Enlightenment’s Pelagian confidence in the epistemic competence of the human mind.⁵³

Helseth and the Anthropology of the Princetonians

If Helseth is correct, then the argument about Enlightenment reason and the Princetonian inerrancy rationale is nullified because the latter addresses the objective fact of inspiration and inerrancy, while the former is about how one accesses the special revelation of God. Thus one must consider Princetonian anthropology in the “subjective” domain. The knower is logically prior to his faculty of knowing but not necessarily related at all to what is known. Therefore, the question which is logically antecedent to the examination of the Princeton epistemology is the larger issue of the Old Princeton anthropology. Reason, for Warfield et. al. was not common ground between regenerate and unregenerate men because the unregenerate was incapable of reasoning rightly. It is Helseth’s conviction that Alexander, Hodge, Warfield, and Machen did not differ on this premise but were thoroughly Reformed in their anthropology.⁵⁴

The unity of man’s immaterial component, the heart-soul-spirit complex was a major tenet of Princeton anthropology⁵⁵ and therefore a major plank in Helseth’s defense. Helseth attempts to demonstrate that the Princetonians’ Reformed epistemology adjusted Scottish Realism and not *vice-versa*.⁵⁶ This suggestion flows from their insistence that the soul acts as a unit, not merely with the “rational faculty” operating alone. They further held, according

⁵³ Helseth, *“Right Reason” and the Princeton Mind: An Unorthodox Proposal*, 16.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 27-8, 58-60, 112.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 29; George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2nd ed. (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 112.

⁵⁶ Helseth, *“Right Reason” and the Princeton Mind: An Unorthodox Proposal*, 7-9, 21.

to Helseth, “that the acts of the soul are always determined by the moral character or inclination of the acting agent.”⁵⁷

The embrace of the “whole-soul” in Princetonian and earlier formulations of epistemology certainly addresses the reason of man. Helseth shows that Calvin had a first place for enlightened reason, and indeed this enablement by the Spirit of God to embrace the Scriptures and grasp their spiritual content has been part of the Reformed tradition since Calvin.⁵⁸ To Thomas’ point, this spiritual quality of Reformed epistemology does not render knowledge irrelevant or the theological task irrational.⁵⁹ The case for the simplicity of man or the function of the whole “knowing soul” in the reasoning of the Princetonians paves the way for Warfield’s actual view about authority and the Scriptures. Cognitive access to special revelation does not equate to trust in it, just as the authority of objective revelation through divine inspiration does not negate the subjective work of the Spirit on the human soul in the reception of that objective, authoritative truth.

Warfield’s Objective Truth and Subjective Faith

Since B. B. Warfield is most closely associated with the Princeton doctrine of inerrancy, Helseth’s examination of Warfield’s anthropology and epistemology is especially helpful in debunking the charge that pure rationalism in his reasoning delivered an unorthodox view of inerrancy. A first consideration in the examination of Warfield is that his writing is complex and comprehensive. The summaries of others do not necessarily do justice to his arguments, but an attempt is nevertheless incumbent on this writer. Helseth draws a great deal of his understanding of Warfield’s epistemic anthropology from

⁵⁷ Ibid., 27.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 17.

⁵⁹ Thomas, “The Nature of Truth: Postmodern or Propositional?,” 10. J. P. Moreland, “The Rationality of Belief in Inerrancy,” *Trinity Journal* 7, no. 1 (1986).

Warfield's article, "On Faith in its Psychological Aspects."⁶⁰ In sum, Warfield presents a reasoned defense of his definition of faith as the conviction which arises from trust based on sufficient objective evidences within the subjective appraisal of a capable knowing soul. He carefully distinguishes faith and knowledge as different kinds of conviction which have different means by which conviction is accomplished though not necessarily less certainty in the convictions themselves.⁶¹ The most important aspect of Warfield's reasoning, as Helseth points out, is his incorporation of both objective and subjective aspects of the task of coming to "faith, belief" conviction on a given proposition.

The way Warfield parses the distinction between the objective facts and the subjective trust in them presupposes reality as does Reid's psychological empiricism. However, true to his Reformed roots, Warfield holds that the subjective welcoming of the objective facts of the Gospel is the province of the whole "knowing soul" regarding the task of trust—the key factor for Warfield's notion of faith.⁶² In Reformed fashion, Warfield distinguishes between bare cognition of the proposition, one's assent to it, and the trust one places in the that to which he has assented. For Warfield, the soul that trusts in the special revelation of the Gospel must first be prepared by the Holy Spirit through regeneration. This adherence to Calvin's anthropology and soteriology is why Van Til, who wrote against Warfield's apologetics, thoroughly endorsed Warfield's theology.⁶³

⁶⁰ Helseth, "Right Reason" and the Princeton Mind: An Unorthodox Proposal, 50-64; B.B. Warfield, "On Faith in Its Psychological Aspects," in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield: Studies in Theology* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008).

⁶¹ Warfield, "On Faith in Its Psychological Aspects," in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield: Studies in Theology*, 324.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 329.

⁶³ Jack Bartlett Rogers, "Van Til and Warfield on Scripture in the Westminster Confession," in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Nutley, NJ: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1971). Ironically, Rogers makes a strong case for the thoroughly reformed theology of Warfield.

Helseth summarizes, “While the unregenerated sinner cannot escape the knowledge that he is and always will be dependent on God for the entirety of his existence, he is morally incapable of entrusting himself to God because ‘he loves sin too much.’”⁶⁴ The Warfield view is not, then, “bald rationalism” but a careful distinction between the objective facts which can be assessed cognitively and the salvific response to those facts in trust. While Warfield parses these things, he does not think that the fallen “knowing soul” of man has “the moral ability to see revealed truth more or less for what it objectively is, namely glorious.”⁶⁵

Helseth has pieced together a large body of evidence from Warfield’s writings to make the case distinguishing the objective nature of special revelation and the effects of the Fall on man’s subjective receptivity to that revelation.⁶⁶ Attacking Warfield’s view of the Bible by pointing out fallen man’s inability to use “right reason” apart from the Holy Spirit is absurd because of the distinction Warfield made between the concept of objective reality—things-as-they-are—and the human knower’s ability to subjectively access these things. Any argument which replaces the objective authority of the Spirit-inspired Bible with the subjective authority of the Spirit’s gracious working on the human soul as a testimony to the salvific message of the Gospel is reductionistic in Warfield’s thinking because for him both works are true.

Helseth’s historical reconstruction approaches theological influences from a different direction than the Sandeen view. Rather than assuming the rational arguments of the

⁶⁴ Helseth, *Right Reason and the Princeton Mind: An Unorthodox Proposal*, 61.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁶⁶ Helseth especially makes use of Warfield’s examinations of Calvinian and Augustinian epistemology. *Ibid.*, 61-2. He shows that Warfield was in agreement with Calvin on the regenerative work of the Spirit to make reception of the Gospel possible for the fallen human being, as opposed to Augustine’s view that the Church mediated the grace of God.

Princetonians flow from the pressure of Scottish Realism in their origin, Helseth rightly places the Princeton arguments in their context of response to “an age increasingly characterized by religious subjectivism.”⁶⁷ Demonstrating the rationality of God and His Word is, from a biblical viewpoint, a better response to Enlightenment pressure to reject the supernatural than the capitulation of Schliermacher and the liberals. Their collapse to inner religious experience as the locus of Christian epistemic authority, or the realm of the entirely subjective, as history has shown, would not be a sufficient basis on which to build a consistently Christian civilization. The decline of the faith in Europe demonstrates the consequence of ignoring the objective and rational in comparing the Scriptures to the rest of life. Helseth contends that the Princeton insistence on “right reason” is “evidence of...Old Princeton’s conscientious attempt to retain a place for both the objective and subjective components of a consistently Reformed religious epistemology in an age increasingly characterized by religious subjectivism.”⁶⁸

The Princeton Use of “Right Reason”

It is necessary to demonstrate what Helseth has pointed out about the concept of “right reason” in the Princeton intellectual DNA. Archibald Alexander was the first professor of the Princeton Seminary and therefore the beginning of the trajectory that would culminate in the inerrancy arguments of B.B. Warfield. Alexander’s view of right reason opens his 1836 work on apologetics and the Bible, *Evidences of the Authenticity, Inspiration and Canonical Authority of the Holy Scriptures*.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 66.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 25.

It is therefore a great mistake to suppose that religion forbids or discourages the **right use of reason**. So far from this, she enjoins it as a duty of high moral obligation, and reproves those who neglect to judge for themselves what is right.⁶⁹

What, then, is the “right use of reason”? Helseth summarizes that “right reason” for Alexander is reason that leads to correct conclusions because it has not been contaminated with biases that lead it to wrong conclusions.⁷⁰ Indeed, Alexander demonstrated that the world is not governed in general by the right use of reason because it is “overrun with error.”⁷¹ This is so because “an improper use of [reasoning]...is one of the most common faults to which our nature is liable.”⁷² So far from being an endorsement of unaided human reason, Alexander saw a philosophical landscape at the end of the Enlightenment dominated by error. His optimism was not that man was a successful “right reasoner” but that “right reason” was a real thing to which one should turn his aspirations howsoever it might be accomplished. Helseth shows the accomplishment was, in keeping with Reformed epistemology, the operation of the Spirit of God on the intellect, shoring up the noetic effects of sin.⁷³

At this point one must acknowledge the concept of inerrant reasoning in Archibald Alexander’s proposal. Reasoning that is correct is free from error, and this is “right reason.” This reasoning presupposes an objective, realistic view of truth described today as the “correspondence model.” Certainly this relatively optimistic concept that man should ever be able to reason in any way without error aligns, on the surface, with the various attempts to get hold of truth in the Enlightenment, especially among the empiricist realists like Reid.

⁶⁹ Archibald Alexander, *Evidences of the Authenticity, Inspiration and Canonical Authority of the Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work, 1836), 9. Emphasis mine.

⁷⁰ Helseth, *“Right Reason” and the Princeton Mind: An Unorthodox Proposal*, 26.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., 27-39.

This surface agreement does not take into account the noetic effects of sin, however, which Alexander himself argued had led the reasoning world into error.

Perhaps it is this suggestion that reason could be without error that is so incompatible with the intellectual ferment of postmodernism. On the surface, the Reformed Princetonians seemed to share something of Postmodernism's pessimism; they recognized that unaided man was incapable of "right reason," and so in a sense they rejected human certainty of knowledge. However, the reasons for the Princetonian skepticism are diametrically opposed to that of the Postmoderns. For Princetonians, staunchly in the Reformed epistemic tradition, the problem of knowledge was not with the nature of reality or objective truth but with the knower of truth, the sinful man. It is the knower that is broken, not the nature of reality. For the Postmodern epistemology, the only thing not this is certain is the capability of the knower to access or even construct his own version of reality. The attack of "evangelical" scholarship on the Princetonian view of inerrancy aligns with the Postmodern tendency to locate authority in the knower and not that objective truth that he may or may not know. While Warfield held to the subjective work of the Holy Spirit on the human who is otherwise incapable of rightly or fully knowing the things of God, he also believed the Scripture's testimony to its own inspiration and inerrancy. Again, the epistemology problem is not answered so much by methods but by the issues of anthropology and sin.

Helseth has suggested here and elsewhere that Cornelius Van Til and those who have followed him among the conservative Reformed theologians have not correctly understood the Princetonian conception of "right reason."⁷⁴ The presuppositionalist account of Warfield's view of right reason is that it allows for the autonomy of man with some innate

⁷⁴ Paul Kjos Helseth, "The Apologetical Tradition of the Opc: A Reconsideration," *Westminster Theological Journal* 60, no. 1 (1998): 127; Helseth, "Right Reason" and the Princeton Mind: An Unorthodox Proposal, 128.

criterion which enables him to evaluate the truth claims of scripture. However, Helseth argues,

When Warfield's emphasis on 'right reason' is interpreted within a context that regards the soul as a single unit that acts in all of its functions as a single substance, it becomes clear that the ability to reason 'rightly' is not a capacity that human beings possess apart from the work of the Spirit, but a capacity that presupposes the work of the Spirit on the 'whole soul' of the moral agent. Whereas Warfield certainly affirms that a saving, i.e., a 'right,' apprehension of what God has revealed entails the rational appropriation of objective evidence, he nonetheless recognizes that the "rightness" of this apprehension is determined neither by the scholarly prowess of the perceiving mind nor by the objective sufficiency of the evidence presented to one's consciousness, but by the moral or "ethical state" of the knowing soul.⁷⁵

Perhaps at this juncture a summary of Princetonian "right reasoning" is in order. In contrast to the pessimism and skepticism of the postmodern and post-conservative bent which rejects objective truth or the rationality of the historic Christian faith, "right reason" represents the error-free application of the law of non-contradiction in a real world where causation is assumed and human sense perception is basically reliable as a means of accessing information about that real world.⁷⁶ As Helseth points out, for the Princetonians, this right reason is only accessed by fallen and sinful humans through the regeneration of the Holy Spirit, especially in its reception of the divine aspects of general and special revelation. The distinction of "divine aspects" from those that are mundane or merely "natural" begs the question about reason in the cognitive domain without reference to divine enablement. For Helseth, the Princetonians did not allow for the shunting-off of the cognitive domain from the affective, aesthetic, thelemic, or especially fiduciary.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Helseth, "Right Reason" and the Princeton Mind: An Unorthodox Proposal, 129-30.

⁷⁶ R. C. Sproul, John H. Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1984), 73-90.

⁷⁷ Mark B. Chapman, "Review of Right Reason and the Princeton Mind by Paul Kjoss Helseth," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 54, no. 4 (2011). Chapman's sympathetic critique of Helseth suggests an

Scottish Common Sense Realism and Reality

Having explored the tendency to denounce the riches of American Christian intellectualism from the Old Princeton tradition of Hodge and Warfield through guilt-by-association with Scottish Common Sense realism, it seems high time to state where Reid went wrong—and right. Helseth will concede that Princeton was indeed influenced by Scottish Common Sense, but he claims that the thoroughly reformed Princetonians made the necessary adjustments to Reid's system.⁷⁸ While there are reasons to be cautious, there are salutary elements within Scottish Common Sense that explain why so much of American evangelicalism is indeed influenced by it.

First The Critique

What is amiss with Scottish Common Sense? Reformed Christians sympathetic to Reid, a Presbyterian brother, tend to reject his system on epistemic and apologetic grounds. Nicholas Wolterstorff, coming from the "Reformed epistemology" view, appreciates Reid's system as "a non-classical foundationalist theory of rationality,"⁷⁹ but he ultimately rejects it. Three issues with the epistemology of Scottish Common Sense forestall the full endorsement of Reformed epistemology proponents: Reid's system lacks a fully developed criterion for justified belief, there is a limiting of the data to the "noble" reasons for belief, and more specifically, Reid fails to deal with the effects of sin on how humans reason.⁸⁰

Although there is much that we in our situation can appropriate from Reid, we still cannot be simply Reidians. For we have learned to work for the formulation of a criterion of justified belief, and we do not find such a criterion in Reid. We find in him a way of approaching a formulation of such a criterion, and we find some

avenue for more research into Old Princeton in order to ascertain why so many historians of high repute are in agreement against his hypothesis.

⁷⁸ Helseth, *"Right Reason" and the Princeton Mind: An Unorthodox Proposal*, 7-10.

⁷⁹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Thomas Reid on Rationality," in *Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition*, ed. Hendrik Hart, Johan Van Der Hoeven, and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 1983), 64-5.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 66-7.

considerations to keep in mind as we try to formulate a criterion. But we find no more than that.⁸¹

This account of Reid's system indicates a lack of specificity. Not only is there a lack of formulation of criterion, there is no real criterion for what amounts to common sense itself.⁸² The helpful postulation that there exist common sense principles from which all reasoning proceeds does not amount to agreement about what those principles are. Such must be the nature of a system developed out of Baconian induction. Within the spectrum of possible first principles there is plenty of room to argue about the *sensus divinitatus* and the means by which humans come to know God. Over-confidence in human acumen to arrive at a sound account of things-as-the-are is a risk inherent in the system.

When Wolterstorff references the "noble" sources of information as the only aspect which Reid explored, he refers to sense experience without recourse to those ways that self-seeking might influence man to "know" something.⁸³ This is the real weakness in attempting natural theology from a common sense perspective: the knower is corrupted by sinful desires of self-promotion. Thus the great shortcoming in Reid's epistemology is evident to the Reformed thinker:

...Reid nowhere recognizes the ways in which sin inserts itself in the workings of our belief-dispositions. He bases his epistemology on those dispositions with which we have been endowed by our Creator. He hardly recognizes how these dispositions are now intermingled with all sorts of dispositions which we have by virtue of our fallenness.⁸⁴

A consistent stream of criticism from conservative Reformed theologians—
theologians who many in the Sandeen and Rogers/McKim camp would regard as theological

⁸¹ Ibid., 65.

⁸² K. Scott Oliphint, *Reasons [for Faith] : Philosophy in the Service of Theology* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Pub., 2006), 149; George Marsden, "The Collapse of American Evangelical Academia," in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1983), 226-8.

⁸³ Wolterstorff, "Thomas Reid on Rationality," in *Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition*, 66.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

heirs of Reid through the Old Princeton theology—addresses the approach of apologetics which are seen to derive from Scottish Common Sense.⁸⁵ While the argument of Sproul, Gerstner, and Lindsley for the viability of natural theology relies on the Reidian tradition's view about the reliability of sense perception,⁸⁶ it seems that only the presuppositionalists are offended by what they see as an over-borrowing from Reid.⁸⁷ The apologetics dispute centers on the topic of anthropology, which Helseth has suggested was adequately adjusted from Reid's account to a Reformed view by Old Princeton. Obviously, given the reception and resurgence of classical apologetics with their theistic proofs from natural theology, many Reformed theologians are not in agreement with Van Til and his school of presuppositionalism in whether Helseth's proposed adjustment occurred, or that it occurred adequately.⁸⁸ In any case, the dispute in evangelicalism over apologetics is not so much about the shortcomings of Thomas Reid—everyone seems to agree about them. Rather the dispute is about the extent to which Warfield's apologetics absorbed or avoided those shortcomings.

Benefits of Reid's Realism

Thomas Reid and the tradition he began called Scottish Common Sense realism must be considered, with the above stated reservations, sympathetic to a biblical worldview. Such

⁸⁵ Hunt, "Bavinck and the Princetonians on Scripture: A Difference in Doctrine or Defense?"; Oliphint, *Reasons [for Faith] : Philosophy in the Service of Theology*, 146-66. Oliphint represents the heritage of Cornelius Van Til for this discussion.

⁸⁶ Sproul, Gerstner, and Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics : A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics*, 72, 86-7.

⁸⁷ Oliphint, *Reasons [for Faith] : Philosophy in the Service of Theology*.

⁸⁸ Sproul, Gerstner, and Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics : A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics*, 38. "Warfield's position is that the unbeliever can and does gain a natural theology apart from and prior to special revelation. His apologetic moves from general revelation to special revelation, the opposite flow of that maintained by Kuyper. Van Til, in evaluating the Kuyper-Warfield dispute declares, 'I have chosen the position of Abraham Kuyper.' The authors of this book have chosen the position of Benjamin Warfield. The issue remains: Does the unbeliever have factual knowledge about God and His attributes through the creation?"

a declaration may be denounced as circular by those who differ with a biblical worldview and still intend to claim to be evangelical. The circularity would be in the claim that Reid is sympathetic to something that scholars like Sandeen, Rogers and McKim assert he originated. Historically, though, it makes no sense to suggest that a philosopher in the mid-18th century founded the perspective which had been the historic orthodoxy for the Church. The novelty of Reid was his articulation of a philosophical account for epistemology which comported with much inherent to the historic Christian faith. By “biblical worldview” one means a whole life-philosophy based on the special revelation of the Bible and mediated through the agency of the Holy Spirit. Notice that in the very statement of the phrase “biblical worldview” there is the inherent assumption that the Bible is the standard and criterion upon which such a worldview rests. Thus a “Christian” worldview or a “theistic” worldview will not necessarily be the same as a biblical worldview, though they should be if the Bible is indeed inspired of God. Reid’s realism must be considered sympathetic to a biblical worldview for historical and epistemic reasons.

Historically, the *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* is Thomas Reid’s reaction to Hume’s skepticism, as presented in his 1739 *A Treatise of Human Nature* and *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* in 1748.⁸⁹ If a Bible-believing Christian of any age were presented with the option between the epistemology of Hume and Reid, he would inevitably agree with Reid. Any attack on Hume’s rejection of the capability of knowledge⁹⁰ would be a welcome argument for the examination of the Christian epistemologist. Seen in the context of Hume’s towering hopelessness about knowledge that

⁸⁹ Heiner F. Klemme, "Scepticism and Common Sense," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Alexander Broadie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 117-32.

⁹⁰ Wolterstorff, "Thomas Reid on Rationality," in *Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition*, 45.

cannot be empirically justified—a perspective that cannot be lived in the real world—Reid offered a Baconian examination of the human process of knowing which resonates well with common human experience. Hume’s famous observation that causation cannot be empirically concluded is a helpful example of this “armchair” epistemology. While one may not know why one knows that a cause produces its effect, Reid notes that one does indeed know it as a basic principle which undergirds all thought.

In the famous opposition of George Whitefield and John Wesley on matters of grave importance in systematic theology one sees the possible theological diversity inherent in the “biblical worldview.” Regardless of one’s stance on Dortian reasoning or the sequence of last things, certain worldview commitments have historically been common across the Christian theological spectrum. One such conception is the nature of reality itself.⁹¹ Reid assumes epistemic access for humans to things-as-they-are, not an entrapment to inner “ideas” which are mere representations of things-as-they-are. This insistence resonates with those who think the Bible gives an historical account of creation, the fall, and the plan of redemption. For those whose salvation hung between heaven and earth at Golgotha, realism is the only answer.

Marsden describes the impact of Reid’s system on Old Princeton’s view of Scripture thus: “Common sense philosophy assured that throughout the ages people could discover the same truths in the unchanging storehouse of Scripture.”⁹² These words, offered by a critic of Warfield and the impact of Reid on his view of inerrancy describe the historic Christian perspective on the Scriptures. Within a biblical worldview is a fixed philosophy of the function and capability of language. According to the Bible in Genesis 1:3, God originated

⁹¹ Marsden, “The Collapse of American Evangelical Academia,” in *Faith and Rationality*, 226.

⁹² Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 113.

the communication medium of language and so designed man as described in Genesis 2 that he is able to use language to describe and communicate his environment and even predications about his creator. Reid's approach aligns with this kind of biblical rationale (from Genesis 1-2) by positing that man with his senses is by God's design a knower of his environment. It is in the realm of sense perception that Reid's *Inquiry* is focused, not on the subsequent issues of how those sense perceptions reflect the knowledge of God.

Summary

This argument has traced some of the key movements in popular "evangelical" historiography away from the Warfieldian view of the Bible in an effort to relocate the authority for the Christian faith in the subjective inner experience of the Christian. From Ahlstrom to Sandeen to Rogers and McKim, the consensus attack on the evangelical view of inerrancy has been to suggest that the Old Princeton theologians were overly humanistic-rational, merely clinging to the rationalistic arguments of the Scottish Enlightenment epistemology of Thomas Reid. John Woodbridge and Paul Helseth have presented counter evidence to the claims that Warefieldian inerrancy is novel and that it was derived from an overly rationalistic dependency on Scottish realism.

The value of Woodbridge's critique of Rogers and McKim is in his rigorous examination of their errors in reasoning, along with his tracing of the doctrine of the Scriptures through church history. Woodbridge's method of turning their evidence against them using the context in which their quotes arise has proven useful in the examination of John Witherspoon's views of scripture and theology. Helseth's work has been more focused on the actual statements of the Princetonians, in which we find warrant for Van Til's thoroughgoing endorsement of Warfield's theology as properly Reformed. The

anthropological oversights of Reid are not shared by Warfield, though his apologetic approach is indeed to reason the world to belief in Christ. Warfield held that the Spirit must work on the whole soul of the recipient of evidence, or the evidences will be futile.

Finally, a brief look at some of the more prominent features in Thomas Reid's thought, especially in its historical setting, has suggested a tacit endorsement of Reid's worldview and an explanation for why Scottish Common Sense was a fit for the American evangelical intellectual tradition when properly qualified and adjusted to account for a more Reformed anthropology. With certain well-documented reservations, Reformed scholarship has not blindly adopted humanistic rationalism or empiricism by agreeing with Reid; rather Reid's readjustment of Scottish philosophy to the real world in which we live and serve breathed new life into a wasteland of Humean and later Kantian skepticism.

Conclusion

The claim that the powerful reasoning of the Princetonians was novel, at least in its spirit, is easily countered when considering church history. All theological efforts presupposed some sort of rational process by which propositions are advanced, evaluated, and integrated into a system. This trajectory of the theological enterprise was well-established in the early church. Geoffrey Bromiley has well said, regarding the patristic use of reason:

In passing it may be noted that many of the Fathers also found a place for reason in their discussion of authority. The whole enterprise of the Second Century apologists depended in part on an appeal to reason. So, too, did the Alexandrians, as may be seen from Clement's decision to attempt a commendation of the Gospel in non-biblical terms and concepts. Nor did Tertullian abandon reason, as is often supposed, for his authorities included nature and discipline, as well as Scripture, and

reason, although probably in a more specialized legal sense, played an important part in his interrelating of the three.⁹³

The historiographers' assertion that Warfield and Old Princeton were philosophically grounded in Scottish Common Sense realism does not adequately allow for how Scottish Common Sense realism is a product of the Reformed theological tradition. Furthermore, in rejecting foundationalism, the "Sandeemists" tend to make a foundationalist error which disallows the already extant biblical worldview within which Scottish Common Sense was born. Seeking to found Warfield's inerrancy in Reid's epistemology, there is never a consideration of how Reid's epistemology accords with a plain reading of the Bible and compares—often favorably—with that of Calvin.

Perhaps the greatest irony in the conflict between the fundamentalist endorsement of Warfield's inerrancy and the post-conservative revisionism of Sandeen et. al. is the issue of subjectivity. Paul Helseth's thesis that Warfield and Old Princeton were not rationalistic but biblical hangs on his demonstration of the Princetonian view that belief is a matter of the subjective action of the whole knowing soul and not merely its cognitive faculty. The division of objective truth external to man in the Bible from the subjective access of that truth in the power of the Holy Spirit is a fitting answer to those who will ever seek to deny the objectivity of truth and insist on the authority of subjective inner experience.

⁹³ Geoffrey William Bromiley, "The Church Fathers and the Holy Scripture," in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 209-10.

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