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“Arminianism”

## Fire & Water

### A Princeton apologist still helps us see why Calvinism and Arminianism simply don't mix

By Kim Riddlebarger

Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield (1851-1921) was in many minds the greatest American theologian living during the period between the Civil War and World War I. As professor of Polemical and Didactic theology at Princeton Theological Seminary from 1887 until his death 34 years later, B.B. Warfield was the leading advocate and most articulate spokesman of the Old Princeton tradition, which had been established in 1812 by A.A. Alexander, with the opening of what was then a small and virtually unknown Presbyterian seminary in Princeton, NJ.

#### The Old Princeton Tradition

The Old Princeton tradition came to be characterized by both the noted personalities who composed its faculty and by the institution's commitment to the ideal that truth is to be found in the objective world and in the express declarations found in Holy Scripture, with a faculty roster that read like a veritable Who's Who of theological luminaries, including founder Archibald Alexander (1772-1851); Charles Hodge (1797-1878); Charles, son Archibald Alexander Hodge (1823-1886), who was known for his careful and clearly presented theological argumentation; B.B. Warfield, and later J. Gresham Machen (1881-1937), the founder of Westminster Theological Seminary and noted warrior in the fight against Protestant liberalism.

Other Princeton professors to make their marks upon the American church include Robert Dick Wilson, who mastered more than 50 Semitic languages; John Davis of Davis Bible Dictionary fame; Geerhardus Vos, the father of Reformed biblical theology; William Henry Green, and C.W. Hodge, just to name a few. The influence of these men and this institution upon American Christianity cannot be underestimated. Charles Hodge alone trained more than 2,000 students, A.A. Hodge another 400, and B.B. Warfield some 2,700 more,<sup>1</sup> including such noted defenders of Reformed orthodoxy of the next generation as Louis Berkhof and Cornelius Van Til. Church historian Mark Noll gives us an interesting glimpse of the influence of Princeton Graduates upon the life of the American church:

An enthusiastic speaker at the seminary's centennial rejoiced in the fact that "besides theological and college teachers, Princeton has contributed 56 moderators of General Assemblies, and five bishops to the Protestant Episcopal Church." The same speaker went on to note that "she has not,

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<sup>1</sup> Mark A. Noll, *The Princeton Theologian: 1812-1921* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 19.

as yet produced a Pope, but has trained three stated clerks of the General Assembly."<sup>2</sup>

No other theological institution has ever contributed so much to the American church. And no other American seminary ever opposed Arminianism as fiercely. Unfortunately there remains the tragic sense that when Old Princeton died (and some say that it really died with Warfield), the Reformed influence upon American Christianity has since been in constant retreat in the face of Arminian erosion of Calvinism's God-centered religion.

But Old Princeton was more than influential personalities. She is also remembered for her commitment to historic Reformed orthodoxy as expressed in the Reformed creeds, and especially in the Westminster Standards. Princeton was well known as the stalwart bastion of "old school" American Presbyterianism, the defender of Calvinistic orthodoxy. As an institution, she was known for an unwavering commitment to the inerrancy of Holy Scripture in an age when the growing intoxication with higher-critical methodology newly imported from Europe was threatening to cut out the very foundations of Christian supernaturalism. No one even thinks to question Princeton's commitment to her unshakable belief that the Westminster Standards were the clearest and best expression of biblical truth in existence.

To the Princeton mind, truth was objective and inviolable. There was no pressing need to discover new truths, since by and large the Princetonians believed that this is what the Reformation and the 200 year tradition of Reformed scholasticism was all about - the rediscovery of the biblical gospel and its subsequent elaboration in the Reformed creeds and scholastic dogmatic systems. The Princetonians saw their task not as discovering "new truths" but the constant application of existing truth to the specific new situations.

Warfield literally reviewed hundreds upon hundreds of books during his productive career, and it is here, in the course of reviewing the latest volumes that comprise the academic theological enterprise and the on-going debate with Arminianism, that Warfield took opportunity to respond to many a theological opponent, and specifically in the case under review here, to those who advocated the Arminian theological system.

While Warfield reviewed hundreds of volumes, there are two notable reviews that stand out very effectively for our topic at hand. These are Warfield's review of *He That is Spiritual*, written by Louis Sperry Chafer (1871-1952), the founder of Dallas Theological Seminary, and also Warfield's review of Methodist theologian John Miley's two-volume work, *Systematic Theology*.

Before we can look at the specifics of Warfield's treatment of Chafer and Miley, it is important to point out the fact that Warfield firmly believed that Arminianism was "the first serious defection from the fundamental conceptions of the Reformed system... in the early years of the 17th century."<sup>3</sup> Arminianism was therefore a self-conscious rejection of the very first principle of the Reformed system - the "glory of God," which Warfield believed was exchanged in Arminian theology for the fundamental principle of the "freedom of man." Given Warfield's view of truth, such a definition was an attack not only upon specific doctrines of the Reformed system, but upon the very essence of evangelical Christianity itself. This is no

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 20.

<sup>3</sup> See Darryl G. Hart's essay, "The Princeton Mind in the Modern World and the Common Sense of J. Gresham Machen," *Westminster Theological Journal* 46 (1984), 1-25.

intramural debate for Warfield, for as he saw it the very character of the gospel itself was at stake.

John Miley (1813-1895) was professor of Systematic Theology at Drew University in New Jersey, and author of the two-volume *Systematic Theology*, which was perhaps the best of all of the Arminian theologies of the period, serving in effect as a rival to Charles Hodge's famous *Systematic Theology*. Thus the Calvinism of Old Princeton and Charles Hodge had finally met a serious rival. Miley's volume, wrote Warfield, "is altogether a good book, which the Arminian should find rarely satisfying, and with which the Calvinist should count it a privilege to join issue."<sup>4</sup> When giants such as Warfield and Miley cross theological swords, the issues that divide these schools quickly come into view.

Warfield immediately isolates Miley's central premise. "Freedom' Miley says, 'is fundamental in Arminianism. The system holds accordingly the universality and provisional nature of the atonement, and the conditionality of the atonement."<sup>5</sup> Since human freedom is the starting point in the Arminian system, all Arminian doctrines end up being explained in light of an act of the human will (psychology), rather than through the biblical doctrine of the grace and mercy of God (theology). Miley flatly admits that "the cardinal doctrines of Wesleyan Soteriology (i.e. the doctrine of salvation) are that the atonement is only provisory in its character, rendering men savable, but not necessarily saving them." In other words, the death of Christ does not actually save sinners but merely renders people savable if they exercise their freedom to choose and to follow Christ.

Miley even admits the very point with which Calvinists have been charging Arminians since the beginning, "that salvation is conditional in the sense of being a real synergism."<sup>6</sup> Salvation is not something then that God does to or for men and women who are dead in sin and cannot save themselves, but salvation is based upon an act that the sinner must perform himself in exercising the freedom that God has given to all. To this Warfield adds, with perhaps a note of seeming disbelief, "with these facts Dr. Miley remarks the atonement of satisfaction must be excluded (*italics mine*)."<sup>7</sup> If human freedom is our starting point, the doctrine of the substitutionary atonement must be rejected as well, and here Miley himself admits this conclusion. In the Arminian scheme, how can Christ be said to bear the sins of someone else when we must see responsibility for our own actions as paramount? There is no room in the Arminian system for the crediting of the guilt of Adam's sin to us, no room for Christ's righteousness to be credited to us, nor is there any way for our sins to be truly paid for by Christ. In John Miley's *Systematic Theology*, Warfield writes, we have a man who "presents himself here as above all things an Arminian, and as above most Arminians ready to follow his Arminianism to its logical conclusions."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Warfield, "Calvinism" in *Calvin and Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 362.

<sup>5</sup> Warfield, "A Review of *Systematic Theology*" reprinted in *Selected Shorter Writings of Warfield*, vol. 2, ed. John E. Meeter (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), p. 214. Miley's work has recently been reprinted by Hendrickson Publishers.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* Synergism means "working together," here taken in the sense of man and God working together (cooperating) in salvation. This was the position taken by the Roman Catholic Church at the Council of Trent.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

The issue in view here then, is just what are these logical conclusions and where do they lead? Thus here we can see in the clearest contrast the very points that distinguish Reformed orthodoxy from what is indeed at best a very "serious defection."

If human freedom is the central premise in Arminianism, then Miley must reject the doctrine of original sin. God cannot hold any of Adam's descendants responsible for Adam's own actions, since men and women must be free to obey or disobey on their own. "Arminianism, [Miley] says, has no logical place in its system for a doctrine of race sin, either in the sense of the participation of the race in the guilt of Adam's first sin, or in the sense of the infection of the race with a guilty corruption."<sup>9</sup> So if we start from the premise that man must be free if he is to be responsible for his own free actions, we must then reject the biblical (Romans 5:12-19) idea affirmed by Catholics as well as Protestants of original sin and guilt, whereby Adam's descendants are not only seen as guilty for his act of rebellion, but also inherit his moral corruption as well. And what is worse, if Miley is right about human freedom, original sin is not all that must be rejected. Warfield points out:

"If the Arminian principle [of human freedom] is to rule, [Miley] says, the doctrine of race sin must go, and the doctrine of vicarious punishment must go. And as he thinks the Arminian principle ought to rule, he teaches that man are not by nature under the condemning wrath of God, and that Christ did not vicariously bear the penalty of sin (*italics mine*)."<sup>10</sup>

Thus John Miley, as the consistent theologian that he is, quickly reaches the logical conclusion where the first principle of Arminian (human freedom) inevitably leads - the rejection of both the doctrines of original sin (since God cannot hold any of Adam's descendants responsible for Adam's actions) and the doctrine of the substitutionary atonement of Christ (since on this same first principle, God cannot charge anyone's sins to Christ, since we are responsible only for our own actions).

As Warfield sees it, the first principle of Arminianism effectively destroys the very foundation of evangelical Christianity since both its doctrine of sin and salvation are redefined in psychological rather than biblical and theological terms. Warfield laments that "it is far better to be inconsistently Evangelical than consistently Arminian...Evangelicalism stands or falls with Calvinism, and the very proof of Evangelicalism is a proof of Calvinism."<sup>11</sup> In other words, if you follow Miley and the logic of the Arminian system, then you can no longer affirm the two cardinal doctrines historically regarded as essential in maintaining the biblical and evangelical principle that it is God who saves sinners, and not sinners who save themselves with God's help. Thus to follow Miley and Arminianism at this point is to reject the biblical doctrine of original sin and the substitutionary atonement of Christ, and that is not slight denial.

With what does Miley leave us? The death of Christ does not save anyone, but merely makes people savable if they exercise their freedom to believe in Christ. Miley interprets the cross to mean that God forgives sin on the grounds of a "substitute for penalty," for Christ's death does not actually save anyone. Rather, what does save is God's supposed free decision to accept Christ's death as an example of love and

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 314.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 315.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

not as a payment for sin the exact justice upon all infractions of God's law. That Miley's point here is not supported by scripture and is completely arbitrary is noticed by Warfield: "If 'justice,'" Warfield explains, 'must punish sin simply for the reason of its demerit, penal substitution is the only possible atonement.'" Notice for Miley, God need not exercise justice but instead as the moral governor of the universe he can merely decide to accept the sacrifice of Christ as a substitute for the exercise of his justice. Warfield cannot let this point go unchallenged:

That the [governmental] theory of the atonement may be held, and with it the Arminian system, therefore, we must deny to God that moral indignation in view of evil, which we cannot help recognizing as one of the highest endowments of moral beings, and must transmute his 'justice' into merely the public justice of a wise ruler; we must revise, in a word, all our natural notions of the relations of an infinite holy being to sin.<sup>12</sup>

Simply put, John Miley and the Arminian system as he defines it, absolutely rejects the idea that a holy God must punish all sin. If Miley is correct, then, Christ cannot die to bear the sins of the world. Instead Christ dies to merely demonstrate the love of God, as God accepts his sacrifice as the example of love and sacrifice for all of his creatures, and not in any way as a literal payment to propitiate his wrath and to execute his justice. Since God need not punish sin anyway, how can we say any longer that God is holy? God simply accepts the sacrifice of Christ arbitrarily, not punishing sin, but overlooking it. Warfield then asks the obvious question: "If it be 'safe' to forgive sin on the ground of a 'substitute for penalty,' it would seem just as 'safe' to make sincere personal repentance that substitute as to make the suffering of an alien [Christ] such a substitute."<sup>13</sup> In other words, Christ did not have to die on the cross as the substitute for our sin, and God killed his own Son on the cross when he did not really need to carry out such a terrible act. Instead, he could simply have accepted our repentance as sufficient payment. If this is true, we have not only destroyed the idea of a substitutionary atonement, we have killed God himself. For God can no longer be seen as holy, and he cannot be loving, either, since Christ was cruelly punished on the cross for no good reason.

All of this is done, according to Miley and the Arminian system, in the name of human freedom, a "first principle" which has no support whatever in scripture. Viewed from this perspective, Arminianism is not simply an alternative for evangelicals who are uncomfortable with certain doctrinal tenets of Calvinism. Taken to its logical conclusion, Arminianism is not only a departure from historic orthodoxy, but a serious departure from the evangel itself.

### **A Calvinist and Arminian Synthesis?**

Louis Sperry Chafer's book, *He That Is Spiritual* (1918), received the brunt of Warfield's criticism in a second review germane to our topic. Here we do not see the gospel so much at stake; instead we see the confusion and harm that results when someone who should know better tries to synthesize two logically conflicting positions into one, such as when well-intentioned but historically ill-informed evangelicals try to synthesize Calvinism and Arminianism into a *tertium quid* that ends up as neither, and known only by

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 316.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 318.

the dubious title of "Calminianism." Such are Chafer's efforts in *He That Is Spiritual*.

Warfield sets his sights on this biblical and logical inconsistency:

Mr. Chafer is in the unfortunate and, one would think, very uncomfortable condition of having two inconsistent systems of religion struggling together in his mind. He was bred an Evangelical, and as a minister of the Presbyterian Church, South, stands committed to Evangelicalism of the purest water. But he has long been associated in his work with a coterie of "Evangelists" and "Bible Teachers," among whom there flourishes that curious religious system (at once curiously pretentious and curiously shallow) which the Higher Life leaders of the middle of the last century brought into vogue; and he has not been immune from its infection. These two religious systems are quite incompatible. The one is the product of the Protestant Reformation and knows no determining power in the religious life but the grace of God; the other comes straight from the laboratory of John Wesley, and in all its forms--modifications and mitigations alike--remains incurably Arminian, subjecting all the gracious workings of God to human determining. The two can unite as little as fire and water.<sup>14</sup>

Warfield's point must not only be seen as a serious blow to the logic of Chafer's dispensational-evangelical "hodgepodge" view of sanctification, for it applies equally to all of those in today's very popular non-denominational movements who also reject the confessionalism of Protestant orthodoxy and attempt to mix conflicting doctrinal elements into a kind of theological stew that is supposed to have a broader-based appeal for the masses, but instead leads only to doctrinal confusion. And as in Warfield's day, under the quite pretentious guise of rejecting "theology" and "head-knowledge," there are many who end up in a shallow sea of error and confusion. Unfortunately, this error is still with us and in even greater measure than in Chafer's time. Take for an example the subject of Chafer's book: the Christian life. Here, as in all other aspects of our salvation, either God works in our sanctification through means and our part is purely response and gratitude, or we are the prime mover in sanctification by "yielding," "seeking," "making Christ Lord," and so forth. While the Calvinist insists on active, energetic involvement in this process, either God is the one working in us to will and to do of his good pleasure, or sanctification is the product of our striving and yielding.

What Chafer has done is to combine two contrary elements, losing both the activism of human responsibility as well as the gracious character of sanctification by trying to achieve something "in between" the two.

Chafer insists upon the very untenable distinction between "carnal men and spiritual men," which Warfield notes is based upon Chafer's serious misreading of 1 Corinthians 2:9. According to Warfield, Chafer tells us "that the passage from the one [the carnal] to the other [the spiritual] is at our option, whenever we care to 'claim' the higher degree by 'faith.'" Chafer commits the same error as other "victorious Christian life" advocates and it is easy to see that this immediately separates the body of Christ into those "who have it," and "those who don't." This has a divisive effect upon the church everywhere such teaching has gone. In addition, such unbiblical schemes make the human will, instead of the grace of God, the determining power in the Christian life. Thus, sanctification has little to do with the means of grace (Word and Sacrament), but is instead defined in terms of "'engaging' the Spirit (as we

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<sup>14</sup> Warfield, "Review of L. S. Chafer's *He That Is Spiritual*," *Princeton Theological Review* (Vol.XVII, No.2 [April 1919], 322 ff.

engage, say, a carpenter) to do work for us...and we do explicitly hear of 'making it possible for God' to do things, a quite terrible expression"[p. 322].<sup>15</sup>

The Arminian roots of Chafer's system are visible not only when he treats the subject of the Christian life, but when he discusses the doctrine of salvation. Chafer writes that "sinners are not saved until they trust the Saviour, and saints are not victorious until they trust the deliverer. God has made this possible through the cross of his Son. Salvation from the power of sin must be claimed by faith as well (*italics in original*)." Again notice the separation of Christians who are only "saved" from those who choose to be "victorious." Since it depends upon an act of the will to be "saved" it likewise follows for Chafer that it depends upon an act of the will to become "victorious," too. Here Warfield concludes:

No doubt what we are first led to say of this is that here is the quintessence of Arminianism. God saves no one--He only makes salvation possible for men. Whether it becomes actual or not depends absolutely on their own act. It is only by their act that it is made possible for God to save them. But it is equally true that here is the quintessence of the Higher Life teaching, which merely emphasizes that part of this Arminian scheme which refers to the specific matter of sanctification (*italics in original*).<sup>16</sup>

Thus, "A haunting ambiguity is thrust upon Mr. Chafer's whole teaching by his hospitable entertainment of contradictory systems of thought."<sup>17</sup> For those who have struggled to become "victorious Christians," and never knew quite when that moment would arrive, this confusion and ambiguity is no mere academic quarrel, but a serious practical matter. For Reformation Christians, life in the Spirit, no less than justification itself, is a gift for all believers at the beginning of their Christian life, not a state of spiritual attainment reserved for the elite. Chafer's confusion of Calvinism and Arminianism continues to be reproduced in our day, with even higher levels of odd contradictions and ambiguities, demonstrating that the sort of clear-thinking, biblically sound, confessional evangelicalism of the Old Princeton school is in desperate need of being heard again.

### **Recommended Reading:**

Mark A. Noll, *The Princeton Theology: 1812-1921* (Baker); B.B. Warfield, *Collected Works*, 10 volumes (Baker); *Selected Shorter Writings*, 2 volumes (Presbyterian and Reformed); *Studies in Perfectionism* (Presbyterian and Reformed).

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 322.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

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