

B.B. Warfield on Creation and Design

By [Fred G. Zaspel](#)

The advances of various creationist groups and of the intelligent design movement indicate that Christians are still considerably interested in the creation-versus-evolution controversy. Yet we would be mistaken to think that the advance is on the creationist side only. Renowned professor of OT Dr. Bruce Waltke recently made headlines with his remarks that evolution is entirely compatible with Christianity—indeed, with conservative evangelical, even inerrantist Christianity. Waltke warns further that if Christians do not concede the point they will be relegated to the academic ghetto and find that society at large will never take them seriously.¹ Clearly, there are no signs that interest in the topic will soon fade.

Within this debate appeal is sometimes made to our Christian forebears, and we are never far into this discussion before we hear of Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield (1851-1921) of Old Princeton. Warfield, we are often assured, the theologian of the doctrine of inspiration whose conservative credentials are unquestioned, is one who held both to the inerrancy of Scripture and theistic evolution. David N. Livingstone and Mark A. Noll have led the way in advancing this characterization.² Some of Warfield's writings on this question have been republished in *Selected Shorter Writings* and *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*.³ But others of his related writings had remained difficult to find, languishing primarily in century-old periodicals. Livingstone and Noll have remedied this for us in *Evolution, Science, and Scripture*, which collects virtually all of the creation-evolution writings of this giant Princetonian.

Livingstone earlier claimed that Warfield “had been a key advocate of evolutionary theory at least since his student days at Princeton” and “remained enthusiastic” about the Darwinian theory throughout his theological career.”⁴

¹ For the original webpage (but with Waltke's video now removed), see <http://biologos.org/blog/why-must-the-church-come-to-accept-evolution> and <http://biologos.org/blog/why-must-the-church-come-to-accept-evolution-an-update/>. On the controversy, see <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2010/04/09/video> and <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2010/04/12/updates-from-waltke-and-from-rtf/> (accessed 6/25/10).

² B. B. Warfield, *Evolution, Science, and Scripture: Selected Writings* (ed. David N. Livingstone and Mark A. Noll; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), hereafter, *ESS*.

³ *Selected Shorter Writings* (2 vols.; ed. John Meeter; Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970-73); *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield* (10 vols.; 1927-32; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), hereafter, *Works*.

⁴ “B. B. Warfield, the Theory of Evolution, and Early Fundamentalism,” *EQ* 58 (1986): 78-79.

More recently, Livingstone and Noll have argued that Warfield abandoned the theory of evolution temporarily but that over the course of his career came increasingly *again* to embrace it.⁵ Their title of a more recent article asserts their conclusion with confidence: “B. B. Warfield (1851-1921): A Biblical Inerrantist as Evolutionist.”⁶ The article begins with the same confident note: “One of the best-kept secrets in American intellectual history is that B. B. Warfield, the foremost modern defender of the theologically conservative doctrine of the inerrancy of the Bible, was also an evolutionist.”⁷ In an earlier version of the article, they imply that reconciling evolution with biblical Calvinism was a “constant goal” of Warfield’s throughout his time at Princeton.⁸

This view of Warfield is widely accepted, perhaps the “canonical” understanding, and Livingstone and Noll are often cited, uncritically, in support.⁹⁹ I am persuaded, however, that this understanding is mistaken. Warfield did claim to have accepted the theory of evolution in his youth, but he then rejected it early in his career. Thereafter he remained open to the possibility of it and affirmed that Scripture could accommodate it, if it were to be proven true, but he himself continued to reject the theory. To demonstrate this, we will survey Warfield’s writings first for his foundational assumptions and basic distinctions about creation and evolution, second for his skepticism about evolution as a scientific theory, and third for how Christians specifically should evaluate and respond to evolution. We will then be in a position, finally, to reevaluate the argument and evidence that Livingstone and Noll propose.

1. Survey of Warfield on Evolution

1.1. Naturalism vs. Supernaturalism

The foundation for Warfield is the essential, necessary distinction between naturalism and supernaturalism. Thoroughly convinced of the supernatural character of Christianity, Warfield is always alert to expose theories with naturalistic tendencies. His own interest in the topic of evolution seems to have begun while breeding cattle with his father in Kentucky, but this—his concern for supernaturalism—was the driving concern behind his continuing interest in the subject. The Darwinian philosophy was sharply on the rise in Warfield’s day, and it increasingly demanded hearing. But its essential naturalism—“atheism,” as his mentor Charles Hodge had famously characterized it—was blatantly anti-

⁵ See their comments in *ESS*, 26, 29, 34, 41, 66, 183, 237.

⁶ David N. Livingstone and Mark A. Noll, “B. B. Warfield (1851-1921): A Biblical Inerrantist as Evolutionist,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 80 (2002): 153-71.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 153. See also *ESS*, 14.

⁸ David N. Livingstone and Mark A. Noll, “B. B. Warfield (1851-1921): A Biblical Inerrantist as Evolutionist,” *Isis* 91 (2000): 291.

⁹ See for example, Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 309.

Christian.¹⁰ Warfield often stated that it may be possible to hold to biblical Christianity and some form of evolution, but he also complained that evolutionism had become more a philosophy than a science, a philosophy based on the presupposition of anti-supernaturalism and that explained the whole of existence in specifically naturalistic terms.¹¹ This would never do. The physical universe, the animals, and humanity itself were all the result of the creative work of God.

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” That is the first sentence in the Christian revelation. That God alone is the first and the last, who changes not; that all that exists is the work of his hands and depends on his power for both its existence and its continuance in existence—this is the unvarying teaching of the whole Bible. It is part of the very essence of Christianity, therefore, that the explanation of the universe is found in God; and its fundamental word is, accordingly, “creation.”¹²

Whatever common ground might be discoverable between Scripture and the various scientific hypotheses of the day, this much Warfield insisted on throughout his career: “I believe in God almighty, maker of heaven and earth.” “The fundamental assertion of the biblical doctrine of the origin of man is that he owes his being to a creative act of God.”¹³ By contrast, he remarks,

Over against the Christian conception there has arisen in our day, however, a movement which has undertaken to explain the world and all that it contains without God, without any reference to any unseen, supernatural, spiritual element. The watchword of this movement is “evolution.” And its confession of faith runs, “I believe in an eternal flux and the production of all things out of their precedent conditions through the natural inter-workings of the forces intrinsic to the changing material.”¹⁴

Warfield takes opportunity on several occasions to expose and even scorn this note of naturalism. One of his favorite themes is the folly of assigning to chance what can be accomplished only by cause and design. This sarcasm from 1903 is representative:

Aimless movement in time will produce an ordered world! You might as well suppose that if you stir up a mass of type with a stick long enough, the letters will be found to have arranged themselves in the order in which they stand on the

¹⁰ Interestingly, in Warfield’s personal copy of Charles Hodge’s *What Is Darwinism?*, pencil markings (presumably by Warfield) highlight Hodge’s remarks as to the naturalistic character of Darwinism, including Hodge’s famous conclusion that Darwinism is atheism. Of course, we cannot know whether Hodge was instrumental in formulating this conviction in Warfield, but it was an emphasis in Hodge that Warfield noted and an emphasis that he himself maintained throughout his career.

¹¹ *ESS*, 159-63; cf. *Works*, 9:27-29.

¹² *ESS*, 198.

¹³ *Works*, 9:235.

¹⁴ *ESS*, 198; *Works*, 9:235.

printed pages of Dante's *Inferno*. It will never happen—though you stir for an eternity. And the reason is that such effects do not happen, but are produced only by a cause adequate to them and directed to the end in view. . . . Assuredly, what chance cannot begin to produce in a moment, chance cannot complete the production of in an eternity. . . . What is needed is not time, but cause.¹⁵

At bottom the debate over origins was for Warfield the struggle of naturalism versus supernaturalism. That God is the maker of all that exists is the fundamental postulate of biblical Christianity. And what is meant by "God" is "a *supematural* God" who is above and beyond nature and not entangled in it, one who is not just "another name for nature in its coordinated activities, or for that mystery which lies beneath and throbs through the All." The Christian God is immanent indeed, but before all else he is the transcendent God who rules and directs as God above all. This God, "the *supematural* God," is our maker.¹⁶

1.2. How the World Came About: Creation, Mediate Creation, and Evolution

Linked to this foundational truth that God has supernaturally created, Warfield conceived of creation and evolution as mutually exclusive concepts. That is, creation connotes the bringing into existence of something new, something that is not already "in" previously existing forms. Evolution, by contrast, speaks of a development and improvement of previously existing matter. Evolution, by definition, originates nothing; it only modifies. To say "evolution" is to deny creation, and to say "creation" is necessarily to deny evolution. "Whatever comes by the one process by that very fact does not come by the other. Whatever comes by evolution is not created; whatever is created is not evolved." To speak as some do of evolution as "creation by gradualism" or "creative evolution" is nonsense. Each excludes the other. "You cannot modify by originating; you cannot originate by modifying." This is not to say that there cannot have been both creation *and* (subsequent) evolution, Warfield often concedes, but it is to say that evolution by the very nature of it cannot explain origins. Warfield at times expresses frustration that this basic distinction is not recognized. Evolution, if it occurred at all, is a secondary and later phenomenon. These two issues must not be confused. In his view, evolutionists often completely overlook this fundamental distinction and problem. Even the theistic evolutionist cannot explain ultimate origins in terms of evolution: evolution originates nothing. And so far as Christian theology is concerned, Warfield insists that humanity is not merely improved organic matter but a new being resulting from the creative power of God.¹⁷ At these points there is no middle ground between evolution and the Christian faith.

Christianity demands and must demand also the direct supernatural interference

¹⁵ *ESS*, 228-9.

¹⁶ *Works*, 9:27-29, 31-33.

¹⁷ *ESS*, 201-4; *Works*, 10:380; N. W. Harkness (unpublished class notes, 1900), 2. In his review of Darwin's biography, Warfield highlighted Darwin's own frustration that evolution cannot account for origins. See *ESS*, 103-6.

and immediate production by which something new is introduced which the existing matter and forces are incompetent to produce. At this point there is absolute conflict which cannot be compromised. One or the other must be overcome, and in being overcome must be so far discredited.¹⁸

A third possible category is mediate creation. Immediate creation differs from evolution in that it speaks of origination *ex nihilo*. It is an altogether miraculous act of God in which he brings into existence from nothing. Mediate creation differs from both in that it speaks of God miraculously bringing about something *new* out of previously existing matter. In mediate creation God does not merely guide a process of development in such a way that new forms emerge out of the potential already inherent in older forms; that is evolution—modification pure and simple, or perhaps providential guidance. Mediate creation is the truly creative acts of God occurring in the course of his providential government by virtue of which something absolutely new is inserted into the complex of nature—something for the production of which all that was previously existent in nature is inadequate, however wisely and powerfully the course taken may be led and governed—something for the production of which there is requisite the immediate “flash of the will that can.”

These, then, according to Warfield, are the three means by which God may have brought about the world order: creation from nothing, mediate creation, and evolution.¹⁹

1.3. The Credibility of Evolution

If these, then, are the necessary distinctions and beliefs for considering evolution, what should a Christian—or anyone—make of the scientific theory? In his classroom lecture on evolution, “Evolution or Development,” prepared originally in 1888 but used repeatedly thereafter, Warfield describes three general positions that can be taken in reference to the question of evolution. First, we may take it as “an adequate philosophy of being” and “as supplying a complete account of the origin and present state of the universe.” That is, we may take the evolutionary theories at face value as an explanation of the facts. This position is tantamount to atheism with a new form of expression.

Second, “we may consider the evolutionary hypothesis as a discovery by science of the order and conditions under which the various living forms have as a matter of fact come into existence” and by which forms have been produced. In this way theism is presupposed, and evolution is viewed only in terms of second causes. This was the position of Warfield’s earlier mentor at Princeton College, James McCosh—evolution is thoroughly consistent with Christian theism and in fact constitutes the method through which God accomplished the creation. This was evidently the view Warfield himself held in the days of his undergraduate work.

¹⁸ ESS, 125, 200-204, 214-15.

¹⁹ ESS, 204-9.

Looking back in 1916 to the 1868 arrival of McCosh at Princeton, Warfield claimed that he himself was already “a Darwinian of the purest water.”²⁰

Third, we can view the evolutionary hypothesis “as a more or less probable, or a more or less improbable, conjecture of scientific workers as to the method of creation,” postponing final verdict on the question while scientists continue to test the theory against the facts. This is the position Warfield takes for himself and recommends to others, and he further advises that we not make any adjustments to our theology to accommodate “what is as yet a more or less doubtful conjecture.” Evolution is still on trial, and Warfield says that when McCosh claims that we have the same proof for evolution that we have for Newton’s theory of gravitation, “he has allowed his enthusiasm to run away with his judgment.” As of yet evolution cannot give account of the facts, and thus it is not yet a scientific theory but a hypothesis. Moreover, if evolution can finally give an account of the facts, it will still be left to determine if it gives a *true* accounting of the facts. “I do not assert that [evolution] cannot account for [the facts], but anyone who asserts that it can has certainly overstepped the boundary line of determined fact and made overdue use of his scientific imagination.” In short, Warfield argues that so much support is yet lacking in this theory that we simply cannot build any theology around it.²¹

Warfield refers to himself as a layman in scientific matters, but throughout his life he maintained a high level of interest in the subject. He had clearly read very widely and carefully, and he was able to speak freely of the varying evolutionary theories, analyzing their differing claims and weighing their respective merits. It is not necessary to survey all his thinking in this regard, but we should note that he did criticize evolution on grounds of the geological record, which, “when taken in its whole scope and in its mass of details is confessed as yet irreconcilable with the theory of development by descent.” Likewise he finds the appeal to embryology unable to account for the fact that supposed later stages of development retain a transcript of previous stages. Similarly, Warfield makes much over the seemingly limitless and impossible demands the evolutionary theory makes on time. This, he notes, had become more a problem recognized within the evolutionary-scientific community itself. “The matter of time that was a menace to Darwinism at the beginning thus bids fair to become its Waterloo.” So also the evolutionist faces difficulty with the “limits to the amount of variation to which any organism is liable.” Warfield concludes, “On these and similar grounds I should therefore venture to say that any form of evolution which rests ultimately on the Darwinian idea is very improbable as an account of how God has wrought in producing species.”²²

Warfield speaks often in this vein, insisting throughout his career that evolution

²⁰ ESS, 115-16; B. B. Warfield, “Personal Recollections of Princeton Undergraduate Life IV—The Coming of Dr. McCosh,” *Princeton Alumni Weekly* 16:28 (April 19, 1916): 652.

²¹ ESS, 67, 115-22, 164-69.

²² ESS, 122-25; cf. 165-69; *Works*, 9:245-51.

remains an unproven hypothesis, and it may be helpful to demonstrate this at some length, precisely because the Livingstone-Noll thesis is that Warfield was an evolutionist himself. Warfield insists, for example, that evolutionary scientists have “not yet made the first step” toward providing sufficient evidence for the theory. “In an unprejudiced way, looking over the proofs evolution has offered, I am bound to say that none of them is at all, to my mind, stringent.” Laymen have the right to affirm with confidence that the evolutionary hypothesis remains “far from justified by the reasoning with which it has been supported.” If the facts are with the evolutionist they “have themselves to thank for the impression of unreality and fancifulness which they make on the earnest inquirer.”²³ In 1895 he wrote mockingly,

Students of logic might obtain some very entertaining examples of fallacy by following the processes of reasoning by which evolutionists sometimes commend their findings to a docile world. . . . Because a possible genealogy can be constructed for a number of forms, chiefly in the upper strata, for which evolution might possibly supply an account, it does not follow that evolution is shown to be the true account of the whole series of forms presented to us in the crust of the earth.²⁴

In 1898, he said of evolutionists under review, if their writers did not put evolution into their premises, they would hardly find so much of it in their conclusions. They all start out with the assumption of evolution as a thing “as universally acknowledged as is gravitation” (p. 2), and supplied long since with “demonstrative evidence” (p. 4); but they oddly enough appear to be still on the outlook for evidence for it, and cannot avoid speaking now and again of valuable material for its establishment (p. 4). This varied attitude toward their fundamental assumption seems to the lay reader not altogether unaccountable. He gets an impression that as greater and greater masses of fact are accumulated, the load is becoming a little too heavy for the original assumption of evolution to carry.²⁵

These assumptions, and their lack of attention to facts, Warfield elsewhere deems “highly speculative” and judges that the whole enterprise “looks amazingly like basing facts on theory rather than theory on facts.”²⁶

Once more, in a 1916 review Warfield spoke optimistically of evolution as demonstrating teleology, design. “Imbedded in the very conception of evolution, therefore, is the conception of end.” Here he seems to be more open to evolution. But later in this same review he wrote more critically of the woeful lack of proof for it.

The discrediting of his doctrine of natural selection as the sufficient cause of

²³ *ESS*, 121-22, 143, 152, 171.

²⁴ *ESS*, 168.

²⁵ *ESS*, 184-85.

²⁶ *ESS*, 246.

evolution leaves the idea of evolution without proof, so far as he [J. N. Shearman, the author under review] is concerned—leaves it, in a word, just where it was before he took the matter up. And there, speaking broadly, it remains until the present day. . . . Evolution is, then, if a fact, not a triumph of the scientist but one of his toughest problems. He does not know how it has taken place; every guess he makes as to how it has taken place proves inadequate to account for it. His main theories have to be supported by subsidiary theories to make them work at all, and these subsidiary theories by yet more far-reaching subsidiary theories of the second rank—until the whole chart is, like the Ptolemaic chart of the heavens, written over with cycle and epicycle and appears ready to break down by its own weight.²⁷

1.4. A Christian Evaluation of Evolution

Despite Warfield's sustained critique of evolution and its scant supporting evidence, he still affirms that holding to an evolutionary scheme is not necessarily inconsistent with theism. In the aforementioned lecture, "Evolution or Development," Warfield argues that a theist may hold a higher view of the evolutionary process than the deist and see in it all the everywhere-present God accomplishing his will. "But to be a theist and a Christian are different things." This is a distinction Warfield often makes. It is one thing to reason as a theist that God is at work through evolution. It is quite another matter to say that this is consonant with Scripture and with Christian doctrine.

Certainly, for Warfield, a thoroughgoing evolutionism is impossible to reconcile with Christianity and its frank supernaturalism. Evolution cannot account for the immaterial human soul, its substantiality, and its persistence in life after the dissolution of the body. So also evolution cannot account for the fact that humans are moral beings with a conscience—these are matters inevitably tied up with creation in God's image. Evolution completely reverses the biblical teaching in regard to humanity's fall into sin and posits a moral development. Similarly, evolution cannot address the question of ultimate origins, and it cannot account for the incarnation of Christ. On all these matters evolutionary theories undermine Christian doctrine.²⁸

So Warfield cautions that it is not enough to ask whether evolution may be consistent with theism. "The test point," he insists, is whether it is consistent with the Bible in its specific statements and in its related doctrines. He further insists on the priority of God's written word over the "discoveries" of science.

All statements will find their test in facts, but it does not thence follow that revelation will find its test in science. Science is not fact, but human reading of fact; and any human reading of fact may well bow humbly before the reading given by God. In the conflict between the infallible Word and the "infallible

²⁷ *ESS*, 319-20.

²⁸ *ESS*, 125-29.

science,” it is the part of reason to prefer the word-statement sufficiently authenticated as divine to the word-statement which is obviously very human indeed.²⁹

It is God’s written word that provides the touchstone of truth, and all else must be judged by it.

What then should be the Christian attitude toward evolution? First the Christian must insist strenuously that evolution cannot explain origins. Evolution can speak only of subsequent modification. Second, the Christian must also with equal vigor deny that evolution can take the place of mediate creation. Evolution cannot account for the arrival of matter; within matter it cannot account for the arrival of living beings; it cannot account for the human soul, the human mind, self-consciousness, sin, or the afterlife; and it cannot account for the incarnation of Christ. All of these require a supernatural act of God producing something absolutely new. But with this said, Warfield allows that a Christian as such has “no quarrel with evolution when confined to its own sphere as a suggested account of the method of the divine providence.” It should be noted here that Warfield speaks of the Christian accepting evolution as a “suggested” account of the divine providence. This is the position he maintained throughout his career. Kept in its own place, evolution is not necessarily incompatible with Scripture, if at some point it might be demonstrated to be true. Then he continues his counsel: What the Christian must insist on “is that providence cannot do the work of creation and is not to be permitted to intrude itself into the sphere of creation, much less to crowd creation out of the recognition of man, merely because it puts itself forward under the new name of evolution.”³⁰

The next question, therefore, is whether evolution, rightly understood, is compatible with Scripture. On this point Warfield says, “The sole passage which appears to bar the way is the very detailed account of the creation of Eve.” We should note here that Warfield’s words are a bit of an overstatement. Perhaps he was thinking of exegetical as opposed to theological barriers since the account of the creation of Eve was not, in fact, the only bar to evolution that Warfield could see for the Christian. In the previous paragraphs he had just noted problems such as the origin of the human soul and the afterlife. But this only qualifies a bit his next assertion, “that there is no *necessary* antagonism of Christianity to evolution, *provided that* we do not hold to too extreme a form of evolution.” He continues,

To adopt any form that does not permit God freely to work apart from law and that does not allow *miraculous* intervention (in the giving of the soul, in creating Eve, etc.) will entail a great reconstruction of Christian doctrine, and a very great lowering of the detailed authority of the Bible. But if we condition the theory by allowing the constant oversight of God in the whole process, and his occasional

²⁹ ESS, 130, 174.

³⁰ ESS, 209-10; Works, 10:380-85.

supernatural interference for the production of *new* beginnings by an actual output of creative force, producing something *new*, i.e., something not included even *in posse* in the preceding conditions, we may hold to the modified theory of evolution and be Christians in the ordinary orthodox sense.

But just as important to us in discerning Warfield's own view is his next statement: "I say we may do this. Whether we ought to accept evolution, even in this modified sense, is another matter, and I leave it purposely an open question."³¹

Warfield further rejected as "exegetically untenable" the understanding of the "days" of Genesis 1 as twenty-four hour days standing at the climax of successive ages of development. With this he also rejects the understanding that the Genesis account concerns the origin only of those things which man can see, leaving unaddressed the long ages of development previous to man.³² And in an 1897 review of Methodist theologian Luther Tracy Townsend (1838-1922), Warfield enthusiastically commended the author for rejecting "not merely the naturalistic but also the timidly supernaturalistic answers" as to the origin of man and for insisting "that man came into the world just as the Bible says he did. Prof. Townsend has his feet planted here on the rock." Then Warfield explained his support further: "When it is a question of scriptural declaration versus human conjecture dignified by any name, whether that of philosophy or that of science, the Christian man will know where his belief is due. . . . [Prof. Townsend's] trust in the affirmations of the Word of God as the end of all strife will commend itself to every Christian heart."³³ Warfield's adherence to Scripture is obvious.

1.5. The Origin of Humanity

The previous discussion has raised by implication the pivotal question of the origin of humanity. Given the exegetical difficulties Warfield saw for evolution, how did he conceive more broadly humankind's beginnings? Among the options of immediate creation, mediate creation, or evolution, Warfield observes, simply, that the Scriptures teach and in seemingly more ways than we can count, that humanity owes its being to the creative act of God. More, this is "the constant presupposition of every portion of Scripture," as well as the express assertion of so many passages. He points for examples to Pss 8; 89:47; and 119:73. But of course it is in the opening chapters of Genesis this teaching is presented most plainly, in key verses like 1:27 and 2:7. That we owe our existence to God is one of the most basic presuppositions of Scripture and one of the most intimate convictions of our own consciousness. Warfield speaks often and at length of this "ineradicable sense of dependence" we have on God as a result of our creation in his image. Man is not self-created, as modern speculation would have us

³¹ ESS, 130-31.

³² ESS, 145.

³³ ESS, 177-78.

believe. He is created by God.³⁴

But Warfield is willing still to find room for the evolutionist to acknowledge creation, and he reasons that the evolutionist should not need to press the theory so far as to exclude divine, creative activity in the production of something new. That is, even within an evolutionary framework there should be room for mediate creation. Indeed, the biblicist does not require that God's activity in the creation of humanity is such that excludes all process or interaction with natural factors. Psalm 89:47, for example, declares that God "created all the children of men," and Ps 119:73 that he fashioned the psalmist himself. "But surely no individual since Adam has been fashioned by the mere fiat of God to the complete exclusion of the interaction of natural forces of reproduction." From this and Gen 2:7, Warfield concludes, "It does not appear that the emphasis of the biblical assertion that man owes his existence to the creative act of God need therefore exclude the recognition of the interaction of other forces in the process of his formation."³⁵ We see again that Warfield is characteristically open to evolution in theory without actually affirming it.

Warfield is careful to say, however, that this option is allowable only so long as it is maintained that man originated as the result of God's supernatural creative activity. The Genesis account insists on this. In the creation of man, God does not say, "Let the waters or the earth bring forth," as he had said previously. There is no secondary production here. Rather, he says, "Let us make." In the preceding days there is reproduction "after its kind," but "man is set forth as created after the kind of God—'God created man after his own image.'" Man did not arise from below. There was a double act and a double result: man was formed "from the dust of the ground, but he was not so left; rather, God also breathed into his nostrils a breath of life," signaling that there is something about man that comes from above also. No purely evolutionary scheme will suffice here. And having reaffirmed this, Warfield once again allows that "if"—and he always stresses this "if"—the facts demonstrate the reality of an evolutionary process, then it may be understood only within this framework. No evolutionary scheme can find common ground with Scripture until it recognizes that in the arrival of humanity, God, supernaturally intruding, has created something new.³⁶

2. The Livingstone-Noll Thesis Reconsidered

What, then, of the Livingstone-Noll thesis that Warfield was a theistic evolutionist? Clearly, Warfield was open to the possibility. But surely Livingstone misstates the matter when he says that Warfield remained "a key advocate" of evolution since his undergraduate days at Princeton college.³⁷ As noted above,

³⁴ ESS, 212.

³⁵ ESS, 213-14.

³⁶ ESS, 215-16.

³⁷ Livingstone, "B. B. Warfield, the Theory of Evolution, and Early Fundamentalism," 78.

Warfield does claim that in his first year at Princeton College when theistic evolutionist McCosh arrived there as president Warfield was already “a Darwinian of the purest water.” But to allege that Warfield remained a “key advocate” of evolutionism throughout his life is to ignore his own later claims on the subject. Livingstone further claims that Warfield “remained enthusiastic” about the Darwinian theory.³⁸ But it was particularly the Darwinian theory of evolution that received Warfield’s sharpest attacks, and Warfield repeatedly noted that scientists of his own day were abandoning much of the Darwinian theory. These claims by Livingstone in 1986 are certainly unwarranted.

The later claim of Livingstone-Noll that over the course of his career Warfield came increasingly *again* to embrace the doctrine of evolution likewise goes beyond the evidence. Livingstone and Noll rightly affirm that Warfield allowed the “possibility” of evolution within a Christian framework. They also state that other than in the narrative of Eve’s creation Warfield saw no necessary conflict between evolutionary development and Scripture. But if they acknowledge that Warfield allowed for the *possibility* of evolution and if they admit that Warfield saw the narrative of the creation of Eve as standing in the way, then we might wonder how it is or on what ground they can assert with such confidence that Warfield did, in fact, accept the theory of evolution as true.

2.1. Warfield on James Orr

The confidence with which Livingstone and Noll speak stems primarily from two considerations. First, in a 1906 review of James Orr’s *God’s Image in Man*, Warfield notes Orr’s argument that disparate development of mind and body is impossible, that it would be absurd to suggest an evolutionary development of the human body from a brutish source and a sudden creation of the soul by divine fiat. Warfield commends Orr’s grasp of man as body and soul in unity and refers to this as “the hinge of the biblical anthropology.” But always aware that a weak argument never helps a case, Warfield also comments that Orr’s argument would lose its force against a theory of evolution *per saltum*—evolution by leaps (macroevolution) under the directing hand of God propagating a human body from brutish parents while at the same time creating a soul for that body. In this instance, Warfield argues, God would be understood not as directing organic material to produce something the seeds of which are already in the earlier forms, but as directing an evolution *and* creating something new. Orr’s argument did not take into account this possibility, and so it is not as persuasive as Orr seemed to think. But what is important here is that Warfield does not commit himself to this understanding. He allows it as a possibility in order to demonstrate that Orr’s argument falls short, but he does not embrace it himself. Neither does he disagree with Orr’s position. This is how Warfield argued consistently over the course of his career: he allowed the possibility of evolution, but he remained non-committal. It overstates the case when Livingstone and Noll allege that Warfield

³⁸ ESS, 79.

here “proposed again his combination of evolution and some form of creation to account for the origin of humanity” and that he “had clearly accepted the theological legitimacy of an evolutionary account of the human body.” Warfield pointed out a weakness in Orr’s argument, and he allowed the possibility of the alternative, but he did not reveal his own commitments. Earlier in the same review, Warfield praised Orr for his “courage to recognize and assert the irreconcilableness of the two views and the impossibility of a compromise between them; he also undertakes the task of showing that the Christian view is the only tenable one in the forum of science itself.” Warfield then followed with this evaluation: “That he accomplishes this task with distinguished success is the significance of the volume.” Certainly this line of comment, by itself, at least, would have led Livingstone and Noll to a very different conclusion. They do not seem to have taken this into consideration. The fact is Warfield did not commit himself here to any evolutionary scheme.³⁹

Indeed, at the conclusion of the same review, Warfield raised yet another problem with evolution. Orr had remarked that “there is not a word in Scripture to suggest that animals . . . came under the law of death for man’s sin.” Warfield finds this statement surprising, and he advises that Orr has not thought through the implications of the issue well enough. “The problem of the reign of death in that creation which was cursed for man’s sake and which is to be with man delivered from the bondage of corruption, presses on some with a somewhat greater weight than seems here to be recognized.”⁴⁰ Warfield does not comment further, but he evidently sees the biblical account of death as an obstacle to evolution. Evolutionary theories depend on death in many seemingly endless successions prior to human beings, yet the biblical account is that death has entered the creation only by means of human sin. Interestingly, Orr may have been more decidedly opposed to evolution than Warfield, but here Warfield provides Orr with more ammunition!⁴¹

Finally, Warfield closed his review with a broad endorsement of Orr’s work. “The book is a distinct contribution to the settlement of the questions with which it deals, and to their settlement in a sane and stable manner. It will come as a boon to many who are oppressed by the persistent pressure upon them of the modern point of view [evolution]. It cannot help producing in the mind of its readers a notable clearing of the air.”⁴² It would seem that this 1906 review demonstrates

³⁹ *ESS*, 29, 37, 231-33; *Works*, 10:136-41. Interestingly, Peter S. Heslam argues from this quote that Warfield was increasingly *unwilling* to accept the evolutionary theory because of the influence of his esteemed friend, the Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper (“Architects of Evangelical Intellectual Thought: Abraham Kuyper and Benjamin Warfield,” *Them* 24:2 [1999]: 13-15); *ibid.*, *Creating a Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper’s Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 255-56.

⁴⁰ *ESS*, 235-36.

⁴¹ Warfield nowhere takes up this argument to explain further how he could see this (and other objections noted above) as an obstacle and yet remain open to the possibility of evolution for the Christian. The most we can surmise is that these objections seem to have prevented him from accepting the theory himself.

⁴² *ESS*, 236.

no acceptance of evolution on Warfield's part.

2.2. Warfield on John Calvin

The confidence of Livingstone and Noll in naming Warfield an evolutionist stems, secondly, from Warfield's 1915 essay on Calvin's doctrine of creation. Warfield surveys Calvin's emphasis that God created by means of second causes. In the beginning he created *ex nihilo*, but in the following days the already existing matter is commanded to "bring forth." Calvin did not teach a doctrine of mediate creation, Warfield argues. He taught, rather, that after the initial creation God brought subsequent things into existence from the previously created matter. This reflects Calvin's high doctrine of providence, the doctrine of *concursum* that in this context means simply that God created by means of second causes. Warfield concludes, "Calvin's doctrine of creation is . . . for all except the souls of men, an evolutionary one." He goes on to acknowledge that "Calvin doubtless had no theory whatever of evolution; but he teaches a doctrine of evolution. . . . All that is not immediately produced out of nothing is therefore not created—but evolved." Calvin's doctrine was not simply evolutionism but "pure evolutionism."⁴³

Warfield's work in all aspects of Calvin studies was exhaustive, and he has been hailed as Calvin's "incomparable American interpreter."⁴⁴ But that he represents Calvin accurately at this point is open to question. Indeed, John Murray fairly discredits Warfield on this point.⁴⁵ What is significant here, however, is not Warfield's accuracy or inaccuracy in interpreting Calvin. What is significant for our purposes is to ask—regardless of whether Warfield accurately represents Calvin as teaching a doctrine of evolution—does this reflect Warfield's own leanings? Perhaps. To be sure, he never states agreement with Calvin that evolution was the means God used. In fact he asserts plainly that Calvin's position is inadequate within a framework of six natural days. Calvin's view would require these days to be ages, something Calvin does not allow. So Warfield sees inconsistency in Calvin's teaching at this point, as he understands it. Still, however, it is tempting to see in this at least a possible reflection of Warfield's own evolutionary leanings, even if he does not quite say so. Gundlach suggests that Warfield may have wanted to establish evolution as within the bounds of Calvinist orthodoxy, anticipating the possibility that evolution might one day be proven.⁴⁶ But Livingstone and Noll are on better ground here. Noll is right to describe this as "Warfield's strongest assertion of evolution."⁴⁷ But even so, this is not much, and its flimsiness, especially as weighed over against all the other evidence, ironically strengthens the argument against Warfield himself being an

⁴³ *Works*, 5:303-5.

⁴⁴ Archer E. Anderson, review of Emil Brunner, *The Mediator*, *BSac* 92 (1935): 358.

⁴⁵ John Murray, "Calvin's Doctrine of Creation," *WTJ* 17 (1954): 28-42.

⁴⁶ Bradley John Gundlach, "The Evolution Question at Princeton: 1845-1929" (PhD diss., University of Rochester, 1995), 296.

⁴⁷ Mark A. Noll, "Charles Hodge and B. B. Warfield on Science, the Bible, Evolution, and Darwinism," *Modern Reformation* 7:3 (May/June 1998): 18-22.

evolutionist.

2.3. Further Considerations for Warfield as Evolutionist

In another place, not noted by Livingstone and Noll, Warfield might appear to tip his hand in favor of evolution, but the remarks are so brief it is impossible to make much of it. In a review of Scottish theologian James Iverach's *Christianity and Evolution*, Warfield demurs that Iverach has made too much of evolution and too little of God. "Christ is no doubt the great exception" to evolution, Warfield says in agreement, "but," he says further by way of clarification, "he is not the sole exception." Then he continues, "'Evolution' can in no case be accepted as the formula of all that is; we must in any case rise above it to the higher formula of 'God'—who is more than evolution, who indeed works in evolution, but also out of it." This much sounds as if Warfield is granting evolution as a point of agreement. But these remarks are in 1895, much too early to fit Livingstone's and Noll's thesis. Moreover, in the same review Warfield seems to indicate that he had merely granted this for the sake of argument: "We say this is true 'in any case'; we intend to leave the impression that we are by no means as sure as is Dr. Iverach of the reality of evolution in the wide range which he gives it. We would not willingly drag behind the evidence, indeed—nor would we willingly run ahead of it."⁴⁸

Something should be noted of the significance of Warfield's lecture, "Evolution or Development." This lecture, which Warfield prepared in 1888 for classroom use, is published for the first time in Livingstone and Noll's *Evolution, Science, and Scripture*. Livingstone and Noll have referred to this lecture several times as representing Warfield's most skeptical period concerning evolution, for as cited above, here he perceives it as a "very improbable" theory. Their thesis is that this was his most critical point, but through the years he came increasingly to embrace evolution. But this 1888 lecture cannot be so easily dismissed. Livingstone and Noll themselves acknowledge that Warfield used this lecture repeatedly over the years, making minor adjustments along the way. Some of these later adjustments were additional remarks critical of evolution,⁴⁹ as for example a lengthy four paragraphs entitled "Evolution Not Yet Proven."⁵⁰ We do not know at what point this addition was made, but it was presumably later than 1888, and it indicates not a waning but a strengthening conviction against evolution. Moreover, although we cannot know how long this lecture was in use, it is the only Warfield lecture on the subject we have. It was evidently never replaced by another with differing views. Its substance is repeated in subsequent articles, and there is no evidence that leads us to think that Warfield ever abandoned the position outlined in this lecture, as Livingstone and Noll's thesis would lead us to think.

⁴⁸ *ESS*, 152.

⁴⁹ E.g., *ESS*, 125.

⁵⁰ *ESS*, 117-18.

Finally, in 1916, Warfield reports a private conversation about evolution with McCosh, from some years earlier, in which McCosh insisted that all biologists under the age of thirty were evolutionists. Warfield comments, "I was never quite sure that he understood what I was driving at when I replied that I was the last man in the world to wonder at that, since I was about that old myself before I outgrew it."⁵¹ Here Warfield's own claim in 1916 is that he had rejected evolutionism by the early 1880s, and significantly, his remark seems to reflect his thinking still in 1916. That is, we are left to think that having outgrown his earlier evolutionism, Warfield claimed as late as 1916 still to reject it.

3. Conclusion

That Warfield actually committed himself to a doctrine of evolution seems impossible to affirm simply because although there are some indications that he entertained the idea, he never admits to accepting it. More to the point, what he expressly claims is a critical agnosticism on the subject, and it would seem this is where the matter must rest.

In summary, Warfield plainly stated his agnosticism on the subject in his lecture that he prepared in 1888 and gave repeatedly over the years, and the same agnosticism is reflected in his student's class notes at the turn of the century. Indeed, these class notes preserve one of Warfield's regular descriptions of evolution—"speculation." This expressed agnosticism is what we find repeated in various reviews over the years and in his more in-depth 1895 article, adapted from his 1888 lecture. In his 1901 and 1903 articles he expressed doubts and is expressly non-committal. Continuously he spoke of the acceptability of evolution only "if" it were to be demonstrated as true—and that with the emphasis that it has not, in fact, been so demonstrated. He mocked the evolutionist's need for seemingly infinite time as though time were a magic wand to perform the impossible, and he spoke increasingly over the years of various evolutionary theories as losing support even within the scientific community. And in 1906 he endorsed Orr's opposition to evolution. Granted, it is easy to read his 1915 article on Calvin as reflecting his own leanings toward evolution, and there are other times also when he seems more open than others. But in the 1916 review cited above, he specifically and almost mockingly stressed evolution's lack of support. And again in 1916 he indicated, via his reported conversation with McCosh, that he never returned to his youthful acceptance of it. Ironically, Livingstone boldly asserts, "Warfield left the matter an 'open question' in 1888, but there is no mistaking his increasing acceptance of evolutionary theory over the years."⁵² It would not appear that the evidence supports his enthusiasm.

This much is clear: although at times speaking with allowance of the possibility of evolution (carefully defined), Warfield never expressly affirmed it. Rather, he

⁵¹ "Personal Recollections," 652.

⁵² *Darwin's Forgotten Defenders* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 119.

affirmed that he had rejected it sometime about age thirty and that he remained unconvinced. The Livingstone-Noll thesis does not reflect the evidence, and the prevailing understanding of Warfield as an evolutionist must be rejected.

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