

## WARFIELD, INFANT SALVATION, AND THE LOGIC OF CALVINISM

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What eternal destiny awaits infants who die? This question taxes those who confront it pastorally. But the issue also poses an interesting theoretical question: What is the relation between the issue of infant salvation and the inner logic of Calvinism as B. B. Warfield understood it?

Warfield, the Princeton Presbyterian, in an article concerning the issue of infant salvation<sup>1</sup> outlined three generic views. The "ecclesiastical" view holds that salvation comes only through membership in the visible Church. Baptism is the means for achieving this membership. Thus infants who are baptized will be saved. This view will quickly be recognized as the Roman Catholic view.

The "gracious" view asserts that humans cannot in any way contribute to their salvation. Therefore God, entirely by grace, chooses those who will be saved. Thus infants who are elected by God will be saved. Warfield commits himself to this obviously Reformed position.

The "humanitarian" view holds that the application of salvation depends on a decisive action of the individual. Human beings will be judged according to their choice. Do they choose to follow God (by using a "free will"), or do they resist God's offer? What of infants who obviously cannot take the necessary, decisive step? Though Warfield does not mention this, later Wesleyan/Arminian advocates of this view posit a distinction between infants and adults. The so-called "age of accountability" separates the two groups. Since infants cannot be held accountable for their predicament because of their inability to act so as to choose him, God graciously acts to save all infants who die.<sup>2</sup>

Of interest is Warfield's assertion that "the thinking of the Christian world has been converging" on the view that all infants who die will be saved. Though Warfield does not affirm this view explicitly, he implies that he takes this as the correct position. Strictly speaking, his conclusion is as follows: If one affirms the salvation of all infants who die, one must hold it on Reformed principles—i.e., the gracious view. This is not of course the same as saying that if one holds to the gracious view, one must also affirm that all infants who die will be saved.<sup>3</sup>

In order to analyze Warfield's arguments and the inner logic of his Calvinism, let "free will" mean a power that a person exercises by taking an

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<sup>1</sup>B. B. Warfield, "The Development of the Doctrine of Infant Salvation," in *Studies in Theology* (New York: Oxford University, 1932) 411-444.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 442-443.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 444.

uncoerced but decisive action. It is neutral as to the source of the ability to take the decisive action. This power can be inherent in the individual (Pelagianism), or it can be an ability restored by God and received graciously (Arminianism). According to the humanitarian view, in the case of salvation a "free will" acts to initiate the gracious application of the benefits of the atonement to an individual. This decision taps the graciously provided resources that lead to a solution to the sin problem. "Free will" is understood to be compatible with influence and persuasion but incompatible with force or coercion.<sup>4</sup>

Given this concept, four logically exhaustive categories of persons may be sketched out with respect to sin and salvation: (a) those who have no spiritual needs; (b) those who have spiritual needs and can exercise "free will" because of inherent powers to begin to solve those needs; (c) those who have spiritual needs and can exercise "free will" to ask God to solve those needs if and only if God's grace restores that ability; (d) those who have spiritual needs but who cannot exercise "free will," because God does not restore the power to ask for the application of the benefits of the atonement but, by grace, simply acts sovereignly to elect and save his chosen ones.

In which category should infants be placed? Clearly, according to the Bible they do not fit (a).<sup>5</sup> Nor do they fit (b) or (c), for both of these require a level of consciousness and abstract thought that infants do not have. But (a) through (d) are exhaustive, and thus infants must be in category (d). They have spiritual needs and yet are unable to exercise "free will" in such a way as to choose salvation. If they are to be saved, God must graciously choose them for salvation.

Warfield does seem to hold that all infants who die will be saved. This does not follow simply from: (1) All infants who die are persons in (d). From (1) alone it follows only that whomever God chooses—whether it be all, some or none of those infants in (d)—will be saved. In order to reach the conclusion that all infants will be saved, another premise is needed. This premise is submerged in Warfield's discussion but is nevertheless logically necessary if he is to conclude that all infants who die will be saved. That premise would be something like this: (2) All persons in (d) are persons God has mercy on and saves. To this add: (1) All infants who die are persons in (d). Then add: (3) All infants who die are persons God has mercy on and saves.

The conclusion follows deductively. This is a logically valid syllogism. The minor premise is true, given the discussion above. Assume the major premise to

<sup>4</sup>This point denies what has been called "compatibilism," the view that God's coercive foredetermining of human decisions is compatible with genuine human freedom. Antony Flew affirms compatibilism in his discussion of the problem of evil, holding that an omnipotent being should be able to create free beings that would always freely choose to do good ("Compatibilism, Free Will and God," *Philosophy* 48 [1973] 234). A theist who supports compatibilism will avoid the force of the argument in this essay. Of course this concession is purchased at a high price, for compatibilism devastates the "free-will defense" (much to Flew's delight) and thus, it could be argued, creates even greater dilemmas for the theist with respect to theodicy.

<sup>5</sup>Some might conceivably argue that since infants do not inherit guilt from Adam they do not strictly speaking need forgiveness. However, surely conservatives holding to such a position would acknowledge at least the inheritance of a depravity that presumably needs redemption if not forgiveness. For this reason "spiritual needs" is used broadly to cover the inheritance of guilt, of depravity, or of both.

be true, and the conclusion follows. By assuming a submerged premise that is very much like (2), Warfield can reach his desired conclusion (3).

Could another premise suffice to reach (3)? Consider this alternative: (2') Some persons in (d) are persons God has mercy on and saves. But this premise cannot yield a valid conclusion when combined with (1). In the subset of (d) made up of those beloved of God, one could find all, some or none of those who will die as infants. (2') is consistent with all, some or no infants who die being saved. Premise (2') completely fails to bring about conclusion (3).

Is (2) true? According to Warfield's position, this proposition is true: (4) All humans are persons in (d). Warfield claims, for example, that the humanitarian view is heresy. This is so for it posits that adults are not in (d) because they must exercise "free will" to accept God's offer of salvation. To say that humans act in any way in salvation is heretical.<sup>6</sup> The humanitarian view asserts that adults do take a decisive action, for they are in category (c). This denies (4). Thus Warfield implies that to deny (4) is heretical.

But here comes the rub. Combine (4) with (2)—Warfield implies (4) and assumes (2)—and universalism deductively follows: (2) All persons in (d) are persons God has mercy on and saves; (4) all humans are persons in (d); (5) all humans are persons God has mercy on and saves.

The response to this conclusion by conservative Calvinists is of course that God does not elect all humans. Some are chosen to (double-predestination) or left to (single-predestination) reprobation. This amounts to a denial of (2) and an affirmation of (2') with respect to adults in (d). But with respect to infants in (d) Warfield implicitly affirms (2) and denies (2'). What reasons could warrant this shift?

This places Warfield in a dilemma if he wishes to support the salvation of all infants who die. Either (2) or (2') is affirmed. The only other logically possible premise, that no one in (d) is saved by God, is held by no one. If (2) alone is affirmed, all infants are saved. But then so are all adults. But if (2') alone is affirmed, (3) does not follow deductively. (2') will not tell if all, some or no infants who die are saved. At the same time it stands to reason that if God is just in electing to salvation only some adults (who are entirely precluded by sin and inability from participation in the selection process), he should also be just in electing to salvation only some infants (who are exactly the same as adults in that they are precluded from participation in the selection process). But this conclusion is an unhappy one. Warfield seems not to accept it. Despite Biblical silence on the issue, most Christians would no doubt agree as Warfield suggested.

One way to go between the horns of this dilemma is to hold that God elects all infants and yet elects only some adults. But if God's decisions are not to be arbitrary, there must be some reason that distinguishes the two groups and justifies the apparent inconsistency of God's action with respect to infants and adults.<sup>7</sup> The ecclesiastical and the humanitarian views both have such a reason. These views both deny (4). Although both hold infants to be included in (d), both

<sup>6</sup>Warfield, "Development" 443.

<sup>7</sup>Of course classical Calvinism does not feel the need to justify apparently contradictory actions of God. Writes Calvin: "If . . . we cannot determine a reason why he vouchsafes mercy to his own, except that it

can consider adults to be members of (b) or (c)—that is, because a person who crosses the threshold of accountability can ask for and receive God's gift of salvation by using a graciously restored "free will," it is reasonable to posit that God will act differently toward that person with respect to salvation than toward infants.

The problem with Warfield's gracious view is, however, that no such "age of accountability" can be relevant. In terms of human action to initiate the application of the benefits God graciously provides and offers in the atonement, a thirty-year-old man and a two-month-old baby are in precisely the same situation—that is, all humans are in (d) and, according to Warfield, (4) is true after all.

On what reasonable grounds, then, can those who hold the gracious view rest the contention that God should deal with infants in a particularly merciful way? According to Warfield's Reformed principles, infants are no less able to change their situation through a graciously restored "free will" than adults. Yet they are no less guilty and in need of salvation. Infants and adults are not in any way distinguishable with respect to the procedure for being chosen to salvation. There is no reason here to warrant God's changing his choosing pattern, and thus God's choices must be based on arbitrary grounds.

To put it another way: Considering the choice to be made, age cannot be a relevant criterion for warranting God's different behavior in choosing all infants and only some adults. If a reason is to be relevant, it must be a difference in the persons who are chosen. Age is a factor in the human person. But the inner logic of Warfield's position requires that no factor in the human person can be the basis of God's choosing. The choice must be based only in God's will. Thus God's choices are still arbitrary considering the choice to be made, for all relevant reasons for the different behavior are precluded by the inner logic of Warfield's Reformed system. The position that all infants who die are saved and only some adults are saved can be held, given the gracious view, only by conceding that God's decisions are based on arbitrary grounds. Is the salvation of all infants who die held for sentimental reasons?

This whole line of thought does not show that Warfield's view is incoherent. Someone could take the gracious view in conjunction with universalism and be perfectly consistent (if not Biblical). Or one could accept it coherently by holding all infants and only some adults to be elected to salvation and admitting that God's decisions on this point are simply capricious and arbitrary. Finally, one could accept it in conjunction with a view that only some infants are chosen to salvation when they die. Someone taking Warfield's gracious view, however, cannot hold that God acts reasonably in saving all infants who die and only some adults.

Given certain assumptions, this argument shows that holding Warfield's basic thesis requires at least one costly concession. His thesis: If one affirms the salvation of all infants who die, one must do so on Reformed principles and the gracious view. But the argument here shows that this conclusion holds only if one admits either universalism or the arbitrariness of God's choosing. But if some adults are not saved and God's will is reasonable, then the logic of War-

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so pleases him, neither shall we have any reason for rejecting others, other than his will" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* 3.22.11).

field's Reformed position requires that some infants who die will not be saved. The conclusion is quite the opposite of Warfield's: Unless one is willing to make one of two costly concessions, one cannot reasonably hold to the salvation of all infants who die given the Reformed principles Warfield affirms.

This same conclusion results from an entirely different line of thought. Warfield's discussion depends on another submerged premise: (6) With respect to election to salvation, God deals with humans of all ages in the same manner. Warfield claims that the humanitarian position has no logical place for holding that all infants who die are saved. In fact, he argues, it cannot account for any infant's being saved because it requires for salvation a decision by human "free will" that no infant has the ability to make. The only way the humanitarian view can account for infant salvation is to posit an extension of the probationary period into the next life when the decision to accept salvation can be made. But even this does not explain how all infants who die would be saved—for, if anything, some in this hypothetical intermediary state will reject God just as some adults in this life do.<sup>8</sup> Implied of course is that since an extension of the period in which to accept God's offer of salvation is unacceptable Biblically, the universal salvation of infants who die is logically incompatible with the humanitarian view.<sup>9</sup> This analysis requires (6), for it posits that identical procedures for coming to salvation must apply to persons of every age group.

Warfield's analysis here has two glaring difficulties. The first of these is simply that supporters of the humanitarian view are under no logical or Biblical compulsion to accept (6), and in fact many deny it. Any criticism that depends on (6) as a crucial premise simply fails to be relevant to the humanitarian view. (6) is denied by Wesleyans/Arminians precisely because crossing the threshold of accountability places an adult in category (c) rather than in (d). This amounts to a denial of (4), which says that although all humans have spiritual needs not one can exercise "free will" to receive the gift of salvation graciously offered by God to meet those needs. The procedures for coming to salvation are not the same for infants who die and for adults, argues the Arminian, and (6) is false.

A far more important difficulty, however, arises from applying submerged premise (6) to the rest of Warfield's position. Warfield argues that only the gracious view could account for the universal salvation of infants who die because it alone denies that the application of "man's salvation is causally suspended on any act of his own."<sup>10</sup> But if (6) is true and all infants who die are saved, universalism seems to follow once again. It stands to reason that if God deals identically with all age groups, and if he saves all infants, he will likewise save all adults.

One conceivable way off this hook would be to argue that (6) is ambiguous. God's way of dealing with infants who die and with adults is the same in terms of how one is chosen for salvation but different in terms of who is chosen to salvation. That is, persons in both categories are similarly chosen simply because of

<sup>8</sup>Another possible (if implausible) option is J. Oliver Buswell's idiosyncratic suggestion that just before death, all infants about to die are given the full consciousness of an adult that enables them to make the decision to accept God's gift of salvation (*Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962], 2. 162).

<sup>9</sup>Warfield, "Development" 439-442.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 441.

God's mysterious will: (6) is true with respect to the how of God's choosing. But those in these categories are treated differently when it comes to the specific individuals God elects: (6) is false with respect to the who of God's choosing. Warfield's discussion does seem to assume (6) primarily in the first sense—that the way for becoming included in the company of those who are saved will be consistent regardless of age. That is, at any age the means by which one is included in the elect is simply by God's choosing.

But this does not really solve the dilemma in the long run. For one thing, Warfield would no doubt affirm (6) in both senses. For another, if (6) is denied in the second sense, then the demand for a reason to justify the apparent change in God's choosing pattern arises again. The humanitarian view says that the reason for (6) being false in the second sense (God chooses some adults and all infants) is rooted in the fact that (6) is false in the first sense (adults must exercise "free will"; infants cannot, so God intervenes on their behalf). But again, given the Reformed principles on which Warfield operates, no such reason is possible. This means that if some adults are not saved and God's will is reasonable and consistent, then some infants who die will not be saved. Unless one denies one of the two antecedents, one cannot reasonably affirm the salvation of all infants on the basis of Warfield's gracious view.

Several conclusions follow from these arguments. First, this analysis shows Warfield's assertion that the salvation of all who die in infancy is consistent only with the gracious view to be incorrect. He can make his case only by adding premise (6), which Wesleyans/Arminians deny. Indeed (3) is consistent with the humanitarian view where God simply saves those who never reach accountability. Further, taking the gracious view and its attendant principle that God, in electing to salvation, deals with all groups in the same manner means making one of these concessions: universalism, the arbitrariness of God's choosing, or the damnation of some infants who die. Finally, Warfield forces upon himself one of these costly concessions when he states that one can hold to the salvation of all infants who die only on the basis of his Reformed principles. If the first two concessions (either universalism or the arbitrariness of God's choosing) are too costly, Warfield would be forced to restore coherence by affirming that only some infants who die are saved.<sup>11</sup> Warfield of course would sense no difficulty in affirming that some adults who cannot act to resolve their fallen state are not saved. It would seem easiest just to affirm the same of infants who die.

Contrary to Warfield's thesis, then, it seems most reasonable—given the inner logic of his Calvinist system—to resolve the trilemma by affirming that only some of the infants who die are elected by God and will be saved.

<sup>11</sup>This is not to say that no one (including Warfield) has ever resolved this trilemma by affirming either universalism or the arbitrariness of God's choosing. It just seems more reasonable to achieve coherence by denying the universal salvation of infants who die, since the same concession has already been made in the case of adults.