

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

## Free Grace Misunderstandings of B.B. Warfield on the Need to Decide to Trust in Christ Personally

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Although all the verses in the previous section<sup>1</sup> emphasize the need to make *a conscious decision to come to Christ and trust him personally*, Free Grace authors such as Joseph Dillow and David Anderson deny that such a decision of the will is necessary for saving faith. They base much of their argument on some quotations from famed Princeton theologian B. B. Warfield (1831–1921), but I do not think that Dillow or Anderson have represented Warfield accurately.

In Dillow’s book *Final Destiny*, he attempts to give evidence for his claim that “saving faith is simply *believing something is true* and resting confidently in the object of faith. It involves knowledge about the object and then belief and acceptance of that knowledge as valid.”<sup>2</sup> Dillow claims that “the will in itself does not seem to be involved in the production of faith.”<sup>3</sup> As support for his view that faith just “happens” when a person sees the evidence clearly and does not involve the will, Dillow quotes B. B. Warfield:

Warfield eliminates a role for the will in producing faith when he says: “Belief ... is a mental recognition of what is before the mind, as objectively true and real.... It is, therefore, impossible that belief should be the product of a volition.”<sup>4</sup>

But Dillow fails to tell the reader that that is not Warfield’s conclusion about the nature of faith, nor is it even Warfield’s definition of what he calls “religious faith.” A closer reading of that entire article by Warfield argues directly against the point that Dillow is trying to establish.<sup>5</sup> (Warfield’s article, understood in its entirety, also argues against

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<sup>1</sup> See Grudem, W. (2016). *“Free Grace” Theology: 5 Ways It Diminishes the Gospel* (p. 112). Wheaton, IL: Crossway.

<sup>2</sup> Dillow, Joseph (2012). *Final Destiny: The Future Reign of the Servant Kings*. Monument, CO: Paniym Group, 679.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 680.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 680–81, quoting Warfield’s article, “Faith in Its Psychological Aspects.”

<sup>5</sup> The Warfield essay that Dillow quoted is available in a different edition with different pagination. I found it in B. B. Warfield, “On Faith in Its Psychological Aspects,” in *Studies in Theology*, vol. 9, *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield* (repr. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991), 315.

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David Anderson, who uses the same quotation from Warfield to argue the same point: that “the will has nothing to do with faith at all.”<sup>6</sup>)

In the statement that Dillow quotes (above), Warfield is not denying that saving faith in Christ must include an element of personal trust (*fiducia*), for he explicitly affirms this very clearly on pages 340–41 of the same article (see below). Rather, in this section, he is beginning a long argument against the idea that faith can exist apart from persuasion of the truth of evidence. He is arguing against the idea that someone can simply “decide” to believe even though there is not adequate evidence on which to base a belief. That is why he says that it is impossible “that belief should be the *product* of a volition.” He is arguing that belief must be based on evidence, not on an arbitrary act of the will in the absence of evidence.

This is evident two pages later when Warfield begins a paragraph by saying, “It would seem to be fairly clear that ‘belief’ is always the product of evidence and that it cannot be created by volitions, whether singly or in any number of repetitions.... [It must be] determined by evidence, not by volition.”<sup>7</sup>

But in the entire structure of the article, after a long discussion demonstrating that belief must be based on adequate evidence (to which I and all Protestant theologians would agree), he then goes on to a section in the article in which he talks about “What we call religious faith.”<sup>8</sup> (Neither Dillow nor Anderson mentions this section on religious faith.) Warfield says that when we begin to talk about religious faith, the element of “trust” becomes prominent:

In what we call religious faith this prominent implication of trust reaches its height.... What is prominent in this state of mind is precisely trust. Trust is the active expression of that sense of dependence in which religion largely consists, and it is its presence in these acts of faith, belief, which communicates to them their religious quality *and raises them from mere beliefs of propositions*, the contents of which happen to be of religious purport, to acts possessed of religious character. It is the nature of trust to seek a *personal object* on which to repose, and it is only natural, therefore, that what we call *religious faith does not reach its height in assent to propositions of whatever religious content* and however well fitted to call out religious trust, but *comes to its rights only when it rests with adoring trust on a*

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<sup>6</sup> Anderson, David R. (2012). *Free Grace Soteriology*. Edited by James Reitman. The Woodlands, TX: Grace Theology Press, p. 169, uses the same quotation from Warfield.

<sup>7</sup> Warfield, “On Faith,” 317.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 331.

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person.... It rests on the person of God our benefactor, or of Christ our Savior.... Faith in God, and above all, faith in Jesus Christ, is just trusting Him in its purity.<sup>9</sup>

In the remaining sections of the article, Warfield affirms several times that saving faith goes beyond believing facts about Christ and must include personally entrusting oneself to him. Following are some further statements.

[The expression] “to believe in,” “to have faith in” comes to mean simply “entrust yourself to.”<sup>10</sup>

The sinful heart—which is enmity towards God—is incapable of that supreme act of trust in God—or rather of entrusting itself to God its Saviour—which itself has absorbed into itself the term “faith” in its Christian connotation.<sup>11</sup>

[Faith comes to terminate] ultimately on God Himself and to rest on Him for our works. And thus it manifests its fundamental and universal character as trust in God ... as the inexhaustible fountain to his creatures of all blessedness.<sup>12</sup>

The Protestant theologians have generally explained that faith includes in itself the three elements of *notitia*, *assensus*, *fiducia*. Their primary object has been, no doubt, to protest against the Romish [i.e., Roman Catholic] conception which limits faith to the assent of the understanding. *The stress of the Protestant definition lies therefore upon the fiducial element.* This stress has not led the Protestant theologians generally, however, to eliminate from the conception of faith the elements of understanding and assent.<sup>13</sup>

Speaking broadly, Protestant theologians have reckoned all these elements as embraced within the mental movement we call faith itself; and they have obviously been right in so doing.... No true faith has arisen unless there has been a perception of the object to be believed or believed in, an assent to its worthiness to be believed or believed in, and *a commitment of ourselves to it as true and trustworthy.* We cannot be said to believe or trust in a thing or a person of which we have no knowledge.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 331–32; emphasis added.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 332.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 337.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 340.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 340–41; emphasis added.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 341; emphasis added.

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In every movement of faith, therefore, from the lowest to the highest, there is an intellectual, and emotional, *and a voluntary* element.<sup>15</sup>

In another article, Warfield explains that faith is “ ‘an absolute transference of trust from ourselves to another,’ a complete self-surrender to Christ.”<sup>16</sup> A little later in the same article Warfield explains that faith “obviously contains in it, therefore, an element of knowledge ... and it as obviously issues in conduct.... But *it consists neither in assent nor in obedience*, but in a reliant trust in the invisible Author of all good.... [It] is not a mere belief in God’s existence and justice and goodness, or crediting of His word and promises, but a practical counting of Him faithful.” Faith “*is thus the going out of the heart from itself and its resting on God in confident trust for all good.*”<sup>17</sup>

So Warfield repeatedly expresses an understanding of faith by which it includes more than agreement with the facts that I am a sinner and that Jesus died and paid for my sins. He says that Protestant theologians generally, and rightly, have seen saving faith as including a strong voluntary element of personal trust in Christ, resting on him, entrusting one’s life to him. This emphasis is different from what Dillow and Anderson represent Warfield as saying.

Therefore it appears that there is a troubling pattern of teaching (at least among some prominent voices in the Free Grace movement) that almost exclusively emphasizes belief in facts about Christ and repeatedly downplays or even denies the very heart of saving faith in the New Testament—a conscious decision of the will to “come to him” in personal encounter and “receive him” and “believe in him” as a living person, as the one who promises us, “Whoever comes to me I will never cast out” (John 6:37).

But if there is such a failure to emphasize trust in Christ as a person in Free Grace churches, there is also a danger that many who attend Free Grace churches have given intellectual assent to all the right doctrines but have never come to trust in the actual person of Christ for their salvation. And if they have never trusted in the person of Christ, they do not have genuine saving faith as the New Testament defines it.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.; emphasis added.

<sup>16</sup> B. B. Warfield, “The Biblical Doctrine of Faith,” in *Biblical Doctrines*, vol. 2, 478. Richard A. Muller says that orthodox theologians following the Reformation did not “equate faith with assent to doctrinal propositions elicited from the biblical text” but taught that saving faith “embraces the whole person and is both intellectual and volitional” (Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 2:290–91).

<sup>17</sup> Warfield, “Biblical Doctrine of Faith,” 501–2; emphasis added.

<sup>18</sup> Grudem, (2016). “Free Grace” *Theology: 5 Ways It Diminishes the Gospel* (pp. 112–118).