

BOOK REVIEW

of

Benjamin B. Warfield,

Counterfeit Miracles: A Defense of Divine Miracles Against Pagan, Medieval, and Modern Marvels,
The Trinity Foundation, 2007.

This book is in the Evangel Library,
and this review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield (B.B. Warfield) prior to his death in 1921 was considered to be one of the three outstanding living exponents of the Reformed Faith, the other two being Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck. In 1886 he was called to succeed A.A. Hodge as professor of Systematic Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, a position he held until his death. Warfield was a prolific writer and this volume is based on a series of lectures on counterfeit miracles that Warfield delivered at Union Seminary in South Carolina in 1918. These lectures are therefore almost 90 years old, yet they are as fresh and relevant today as they were when first delivered. Claims to the miraculous are everywhere, not just today but throughout history. Based upon claims, we are in the odd situation that orthodox Christianity seems to have the fewest, perhaps no, miracles whereas seemingly every strange cult and pagan religion has plenty! Therefore this book is as much a defense of truly divine miracles as it is an exposure of counterfeit miracles. This book is based upon lectures, but the printed version we have in this book contains many detailed footnotes that makes the presentation, true to Warfield, of high scholarship.

The book has six chapters: The Cessation of the Charismata, Patristic and Medieval Marvels, Roman Catholic Miracles, Irvingite Gifts, Faith-Healing, and Mind-Cure. The book contains a very extensive index.

As to the cessation of the charismata Warfield writes: “The apostolic church was characteristically a miracle-working church. How long did this state of things continue? It was the characterizing peculiarity of specifically the apostolic church, and it belonged therefore exclusively to the apostolic age – although no doubt this designation may be taken with some latitude. These gifts were not the possession of the primitive Christian as such; nor for that matter of the apostolic church or the apostolic age for themselves; they were distinctively the authentication of the apostles. They were part of the credentials of the apostles as the authoritative agents of God in founding the church. Their function thus confined them to distinctively the apostolic church, and they necessarily passed away with it. Of this we may make sure on the ground both of principle and of fact; that is to say both under the guidance of the New Testament teaching as to their origin and nature, and on the credit of the testimony of later ages as to their cessation. But I shall not stop at this point to adduce the proof of this. It will be sufficiently intimated in the criticism which I purpose to make of certain opposing opinions which have been current among students of the subject. My design is to state and examine the chief views which have been held favorable to the continuance of the charismata beyond the apostolic age. In the process of this examination occasion will offer for noting whatever is needful to convince us that the possession of the charismata was confined to the apostolic age.” In summary, Warfield argues that true divine miracles ceased at the conclusion of the Apostolic era. Historical documents indicate this. Then beginning in the fifth century or so the church began to adopt pagan practices of claiming marvels, apparently thinking that such claims encouraged faith, and provided supposed evidence for the authority of the church. These claims kept increasing with time, until the Roman Catholic church was awash with miracles, relics, and shrines everywhere as we have it today. Many today claim otherwise, as Warfield acknowledges: they claim that miracles slowly died out with time, and that the Pentecostal movement is a return to primitive Christianity that was lost after the time of Constantine. Warfield claims that true history is just the opposite. In the second and third centuries it was pagan religions and cults that were making miracle claims, and that the orthodox church made few such claims. It was after Constantine that miracle claims in the organized, authorized church grew rapidly as the church increasingly took on pagan practices.

Having established the Roman Catholic Church as the church of miracles and marvels par excellence through the centuries, and that the first few centuries after the Protestant Reformation had little of miracles in protestant churches, then Warfield notes how the miraculous has grown within protestant Christendom. Although Warfield traces the miraculous within protestant Christendom somewhat to Wesley, the miraculous within protestant churches appears to have been initiated by the Scottish Presbyterian minister Edward Irving in the mid-1800s. Irving is quoted as having written, and many today would agree with him, that “Unless men be disposed to say that they know God hath ceased to be at any pains or charges in giving testimony to this work of his Son, they have no ground for believing that the age of miracles is past.” Such a statement is of course a very loaded one. What does he mean by the “age of miracles”? It appears in Scripture that there were three “ages of miracles,” all of which were relatively brief. Isaiah is not recorded as having performed any miracles. Neither is Jeremiah. Neither is Ezekiel. Neither are most of the prophets. Most time periods in Scripture report no miracles. So what is this “age of miracles”? Irving doesn’t say. And does Irving mean to say that God has left no testimony to the work of his Son? Does he not believe the witness of Scripture?

However, we must use caution when dealing with this issue lest we appear to not be people of faith. To the contrary we must insist that the reformed view of these matters is upholding Biblical faith. God is the God of true miracles. He is the sovereign Lord over all of His works. When we suffer for whatever reasons, of course we call upon the One who has the power to do something about it. And we should do so in faith, accepting whatever answer He gives, whether we like the answer or not. When the three faithful Jewish followers of God in Babylon were about to be thrown into the furnace for not bowing to the golden idol erected by Nebuchadnezzar it had been a long time since any miracles had been reported in Israel, and the nation had been conquered and its citizens deported. Yet they responded by saying “our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up.” What makes the story so memorable to us is that they were miraculously delivered. But note that they didn’t know that such would be the case. Their faith in God and their relationship to Him was more valuable to them than life itself. God is capable of anything consistent with His nature and it is important that we believe that. His will is better than our own. He is a God of miracles, but let’s let Him decide when and where according to His perfect will. Counterfeit miracles, fraudulent claims, and deceptive practices are a denial of God.