

# THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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## Federal Vision<sup>\*</sup>

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*The Federal Vision*, Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner, editors. Monroe, Louisiana: Athanasius Press, 2004. 299 pages, \$21.95 (paper).

Written by several of the leading proponents of the heresy now solidly entrenched in most of the reputedly conservative Presbyterian and Reformed churches, and spreading, *The Federal Vision* brazenly defends justification by works; universal covenant grace to every child of believing parents, if not to every person sprinkled with water in the name of the triune God; an election unto grace that fails to save; baptismal regeneration; and the falling away of many who were once united to Christ. Among the authors are Steve Wilkins, John Barach, Rich Lusk, Peter J. Leithart, Steve Schlissel, James Jordan, and Douglas Wilson.

### Justification by Works

The movement that calls itself the “federal vision” teaches justification by the obedience of the sinner. “The presuppositions undergirding Paul’s statement [in *Romans* 2:13] include the facts that the Law is ‘obeyable,’ that truly responding to the Law (the Word) in faith does justify” (Schlissel, 260). *Romans* 2:13 states that “the doers of the law shall be justified.” Schlissel’s comment on the text, that the “Law is ‘obeyable,’” affirms justification by deeds of obedience to the law.

Schlissel denies that *Romans* 3:28 has any and all human works in view when it speaks of the “deeds of the law”: “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.” Rather, the reference is only to “Jewish” deeds, that is, ceremonial works done with the motive of meriting salvation (260, 261). According to

Schlissel, the apostle merely excludes “Jewish” deeds from justification. Other deeds, deeds performed by the believer in the power of true faith, are included in justification. The Apostle Paul concluded that a man is justified by faith *without* deeds — any deed and all deeds. Steve Schlissel concludes that a man is justified by faith *with* deeds — deeds performed by faith.

Peter Leithart charges the Reformation with distorting the truth of justification: “The Reformation doctrine of justification has illegitimately narrowed and to some extent distorted the biblical doctrine” (209). The distortion is the Reformation’s sharply distinguishing justification and sanctification and its insistence that justification is a verdict (211, 213). Leithart argues that justification in Scripture has “a much wider scope of application than the strictly judicial” (209). In fact, according to Leithart, “justifying is never *merely* declaring a verdict” (213; the emphasis is the author’s). Justification is also the sanctifying work of God within the sinner enabling him to perform good works, which then become part of his righteousness with God, as Rome has been teaching for the past five hundred years.

### Resistible Grace

The “federal vision” teaches that the saving grace of God in Christ is universal within the sphere of the covenant, but that this grace can be resisted and lost. Everyone who is baptized, particularly every child of believing parents who is baptized, is savingly united to Christ, although many later fall away and perish:

Non-elect covenant members are actually brought to Christ, united to Him and the Church in baptism, receive various gracious operations of the Holy Spirit, and may even be said to be loved by God for a time.... In some sense, they were really joined to the elect people, really sanctified by Christ’s blood, and really

<sup>\*</sup>“Vision: 1a: something seen in a dream, trance, or ecstasy, specifically a supernatural appearance that conveys a revelation; b: an object of imagination....2a: the act or power of imagination....”

recipients of new life given by the Holy Spirit. The sacraments they received had objective force and efficacy [Lusk, 288].

God truly brings those people into His covenant, into union with Christ. They are "in Him," to use Jesus' words in *John* 15. They share in His blessings (think of *Hebrews* 6). They experience His love, but that covenant relationship is conditional. It calls for repentance and faith and new obedience. God's *choice* was not conditional, but life in the covenant is [Barach, 37; the emphasis is the author's].

The new covenant theology in the Reformed and Presbyterian churches teaches that election fails to save many whom God chooses. It teaches that the *eternal election of Ephesians 1:4 and Colossians 3:12* fails to save many who are the objects of this gracious choice. "And yet not all who are united to the Elect One, Jesus Christ, remain in Him and fulfill the high vocation that election brings with it. It is still to be seen who will persevere and who will fall away from within the elect people" (Lusk, 294).

### Baptismal Regeneration

The movement teaches baptismal regeneration. The ceremony of sprinkling with water in the name of the triune God effects the temporary regeneration and salvation of everyone baptized. It effects regeneration by the power of the Spirit, but the ceremony regenerates and saves everyone who is baptized, particularly every infant of godly parents. This regeneration and salvation can be lost. "The threshold into union with Christ, new life in the Spirit, and covenant membership in the family of God is actually crossed when the child is baptized" (Lusk, 109).

The advocates of the "federal vision" teach the falling away of covenant saints from saving covenant grace. They teach the falling away of saints aggressively. The falling away of covenant saints is one of their favorite doctrines:

Those who ultimately prove to be reprobate may be in covenant with God. They may enjoy for a season the blessings of the covenant, including the forgiveness of sins, adoption, possession of the kingdom, sanctification, etc., and yet apostatize and fall short of the grace of God [Wilkins, 62].

Clearly, then, *Hebrews* 6:4-8 teaches the possibility of a real apostasy. Some people do indeed fall away, and it is a *real* fall from grace. Apostates actually lose blessings they once possessed. Apostasy is so terribly heinous precisely because it is sin against grace [Lusk, 274; the emphasis is the author's].

Lusk manages to incorporate all of the false doctrines mentioned above in a paragraph that could have been written by James Arminius or Cardinal Bellarmine:

All covenant members are invited to attain to a full and robust confidence that they are God's eternally elect ones. Starting with their baptisms, they have every reason to believe God loves them and desires their eternal salvation. Baptism marks them out as God's elect people, a status they maintain so long as they persevere in faithfulness. By looking to Christ alone, the preeminently Elect One, the One who kept covenant to the end and is the Author and Finisher of the faith of God's people, they may find assurance. But those who take their eyes off Christ, who desert the Church where His presence is found, who forsake the external means of salvation, will make shipwreck of their faith and prove to have received the grace of God in vain [289].

The "federal vision" rejects sovereign grace in the sphere of the covenant. In the sphere of the covenant, particularly among the children of believers, election fails, Christ died for all, grace is resistible, justification is by works, saved saints fall away to perdition, and salvation depends on the will of the sinner.

### A Conditional Covenant

The root of the heresy is an erroneous doctrine of the covenant. The doctrine of the covenant being developed by the movement teaches that God graciously makes His covenant with all the children of believers alike. In the sphere of the covenant, regarding all baptized babies without exception, grace is universal. The movement is one of covenantal universalism. But the covenant is conditional. Whether the covenant is continued with a child, whether a child continues in the covenant, whether a child continues to enjoy union with Christ and covenant grace, and whether a child is finally saved by the grace of the covenant depend upon the child's faith and obedience. The movement is full-fledged Arminianism in the realm of the covenant.

In short, the error whence all the denial of sovereign, particular, irresistible grace springs is a covenant doctrine that refuses to permit God's election to control covenant grace and salvation.

[*Hebrews* 6 and similar] passages simply speak of the *undifferentiated* grace of God [Lusk, 275, 276; the emphasis is the author's].

God truly brings those people into His covenant, into union with Christ. They are "in Him," to use Jesus' words in *John* 15. They share in His blessings (think of *Hebrews* 6). They experience His love, but that covenant relationship is conditional. It calls for repentance and faith and new obedience. God's *choice* was not conditional, but life in the covenant is [Barach, 37].

To be in covenant is to have the treasures of God's mercy and grace and the love which He has for His

own Son given to you. But the covenant is not *unconditional*. It requires persevering faithfulness.... The covenant is dependent upon persevering faith [Wilkins, 64, 65; the emphasis is the author's].

Our salvation covenant with the Lord is like a marriage. If we persevere in loyalty to Christ, we will live with Him happily ever after. If we break the marriage covenant, He will divorce us [Lusk, 285, 286].

## **Contempt for the Creeds**

The Reformed creeds mean nothing to these men, all of whom loudly protest that they are Reformed. The Canons of Dordt reject the Arminian heresy that "there is one election unto faith and another unto salvation, so that election can be unto justifying faith without being a decisive election unto salvation." The reason is that this teaching is

a fancy of men's minds, invented regardless of the Scriptures, whereby the doctrine of election is corrupted, and this golden chain of our salvation is broken: "And whom He foreordained, them He also called; and whom He called, them He also justified; and whom He justified, them He also glorified" (*Romans* 8:30) [Canons of Dordt, I, Rejection of Errors/2].

Contradicting the Canons and breaking the "golden chain of our salvation" bother Rich Lusk not at all. With (undocumented) appeal to Augustine, he distinguishes a "predestination unto grace," which is only temporary and does "not lead to final salvation," from "predestination unto perseverance," which does issue in final salvation (275).

With cavalier disregard for the teaching of the Reformed creeds, James B. Jordan denies that Jesus *merited* salvation for His people. "Nowhere [in Scripture] is Jesus' accomplishment spoken of as earning salvation" (192). "What we receive is not Jesus' merits, but His maturity, His glorification" (195).

## **Absurdity and "Fuzzy-edged Mystery"**

James Jordan's presence in the book is significant. Jordan is one of the old-guard Christian Reconstructionists, involved in the fiasco of Tyler, Texas, where an early attempt to bring in Christian Reconstruction's earthly kingdom died aborning. Jordan connects the original movement of Christian Reconstruction with its contemporary manifestation. It should not be overlooked that most of the men of the "federal vision" are zealots on behalf of postmillennial Christian Reconstruction.

James B. Jordan is the wildest hare started by Christian Reconstruction. His speciality is allegorical, fantastical exegesis. In comparison with Jordan, Origen and Harold Camping are pikers. According to Jordan, Adam in Paradise would eventually have eaten the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil with God's approval. Adam would then have died a "good-death." By this "good-death,"

he would have been glorified, maturing into eternal life. This would have enabled Adam to fight the dragon for a while in the unfallen world at large. But Adam would have needed help. Help would have appeared in the form, not of St. George or Frodo, but of the incarnate Son of God. The eternal Son would have become incarnate even if Adam had remained obedient. But the incarnate Son likewise would have passed through the "good-death" of eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, so that He too could "mature." This fantasy is further embellished by Jordan with mind-boggling theories about garments and distinctions among animal, vegetable, and mineral (151-200).

If James Jordan is the exegete of the "federal vision," the movement is not only heretical but also absurd.

The absurd is the unintelligible.

Theological unintelligibility does not trouble Rich Lusk. Bravely drawing the inevitable conclusion from his premise that the Bible is not logical, Lusk is content to "live with fuzzy-edged mystery" (279). "Fuzzy-edged mystery" is "federal vision" language for ignorance. The specific area in which Lusk is content to live in his "fuzzy-edged mystery" is the Biblical doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. Lusk readily admits that his doctrine of an illogical Bible, which is full of contradictions, particularly concerning the perseverance of the saints, derives from his "biblical-theological/redemptive-historical" method of interpreting the Bible, in opposition to what Lusk calls a "systematic/dogmatic" method (280).

In fact, Lusk's "fuzzy-edged mystery" is due to his denial that Holy Scripture as the inspired Word of God is non-contradictory and logical, as non-contradictory and logical as the God whose Word it is. As the written Word of God, Scripture is clear, sharp-edged, and certain revelation, particularly of God's preservation unto glory of every recipient of His grace. Scripture is clear, sharp-edged, and certain *to faith*.

## **"Luther's Malady"**

It falls to Steve Schlissel to make the most despicable attack on the Gospel of grace. Schlissel calls Luther's knowledge of himself as a guilty sinner before a just God, out of which Spirit-worked knowledge came his understanding of the Bible's Gospel of justification by faith alone, "Luther's malady" (255). Luther's sickness! Justification by faith alone, therefore, is a diseased doctrine. Since justification by faith alone is the cornerstone of the entire Reformation Gospel, the entire Reformation Gospel of sovereign grace is sick.

This "malady," the men of the "federal vision" are determined to cure by a massive infusion of works-righteousness into the theology of Presbyterian and Reformed churches and into the spiritual lives of Presbyterian and Reformed people. The device by which works-righteousness is injected into the bloodstream of the

churches and people influenced by the “federal vision” is the doctrine of a conditional covenant.

The heresy of the “federal vision” is deep and broad. It penetrates to the heart of the Gospel, and it extends to all the doctrines of grace. It can be refuted and rooted out only by the doctrine of a covenant of unconditional, particular grace. And this is why the Presbyterian and Reformed churches where the heresy is boldly taught are both unwilling and unable to resist it.

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*Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul: A Review and Response*, by Guy Prentiss Waters. Presbyterian & Reformed, 2004. Paperback, 274 pages, \$16.99. Reviewed by Pastor Edwin C. Urban, OPC.

Many in the conservative Presbyterian denominations are waking up, rubbing their eyes, and beginning to see that their communions are embroiled in a controversy that they never dreamed could have arisen in their Reformed churches. The controversy is over the nature and definition of justification. This debate is shaking the foundations of these denominations and is having a distinctly polarizing effect within them and between them.

It behooves every pastor and elder, the overseers of their flocks, to study and assess the now conflicting views that are being proposed regarding the nature of justification – a primary doctrinal concern of the Protestant Reformation. Much excellent material is being written and published regarding this debate.

One of the best books is *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul* by Guy Prentiss Waters, B.A. in Greek and Latin, University of Pennsylvania; M.Div., Westminster Theological Seminary; and Ph.D., Duke University (concentrations in New Testament, Old Testament, and Ancient Judaism).

At Duke, Dr. Waters studied under Richard B. Hays and E. P. Sanders, two leading expositors of the New Perspectives on Paul. Dr. Waters is a member of the Society of Biblical Literature and the Institute for Biblical Research. He is an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church in America.

D. A. Carson, well known New Testament scholar, has written of Waters' book:

In the last few years there have been several careful evaluations and critiques of the New Perspective. This one excels for its combination of simplicity, fair-dealing, historical awareness, and penetration. For the pastor who is vaguely aware of the debates, but who has little mastery of the confusing details, this book's careful presentation of each scholar's position is a model of accuracy and clarity. Even those who have been pondering the issues for years will see some things in a fresh light. The ability of Waters to combine exegetical, historical, biblical-theological, and systematic reflections, and all in relatively brief compass, enhances the credibility of the argument. Combine these virtues with

pedagogically helpful chapter summaries and an annotated bibliography, and it is easy to see why this book deserves wide circulation.

In reading this book, this reviewer was fascinated by the historical links the author establishes between the early exponents of the "historical-critical" school, F. C. Bauer and Wilhelm Bousset, through Albert Schweitzer, to Rudolph Bultmann and Ernst Kasemann, with the major authors of the New Perspective, E. P. Sanders, James D. G. Dunn and N. T. Wright. Waters has skillfully traced the affinities of the heterodox positions of this two hundred-year-old line of critical descent with the contemporary advocates of the New Perspectives on Paul, and beyond that, with Reformed circles close to home.

In the Preface, projecting the course along which his arguments will run, Waters writes, "I will...attempt to explain why officers and congregants within Reformed and evangelical churches find the New Perspectives on Paul attractive, and why such interest often attends interest in the theology of Norman Shepherd and the theology represented in the September 2002 statement of the session of the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church."

Among the reasons for writing this book, Waters, in the Preface, writes, "I want to illustrate the ways in which the New Perspectives on Paul deviate from the doctrines set forth in the Westminster Standards. I also want to show how Reformed theology surpasses the New Perspectives on Paul in explaining Paul's statements regarding the law, the righteousness of God, justification, and a host of other topics and doctrines."

Waters concludes his book with these remarks:

All expressions of Christianity are on the path to one of two destinations, Rome or Geneva. What the New Perspectives on Paul offer us is decidedly not "Genevan"... It seems that there are elements active in the Reformed churches that wish to lead the church into a sacramental religion, all in the name of being "more Reformed." If we examine their arguments carefully, we see that what they are *really and increasingly* saying is that Luther and Calvin were mistaken, and that Trent was right. May God give us grace that we may not squander the rich theological heritage bequeathed to us by the Reformers, historic British Calvinism, and American Presbyterianism. May we model, in spirit and teaching, that "pattern of teaching" preserved so faithfully by our forefathers.

After reading this book, it has become clearer to this reviewer that those in Reformed circles who have fallen under the influence of Sanders, Dunn, and Wright – whether they are conscious of it or not – are rejecting the federal theology of the Westminster Standards and are promoting, not just a refinement of the doctrine of justification, but a completely new system of doctrine.

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## Why Heretics Win Battles

John W. Robbins

*The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros and Cons  
Debating the Federal Vision*

E. Calvin Beisner, editor

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The Apostle Paul lost some of his battles. When Paul preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the synagogues, he was persecuted by the original antichrist, Judaism. We do not know, but tradition says that Paul died a violent death. (Jesus himself was almost murdered on the Sabbath by devout synagogue-going Jews who did not like his sermon; see *Luke 4*.) Most of the Jews of the first century rejected Christ; only the remnant was saved. The wrath of God, exercised through an unbelieving and unwitting General Titus, ended the apostate Temple cult – the vaunted Second Temple Judaism of the New Perspective on Paul. It was only through the writing of new Scriptures, the divinely inspired New Testament, and the establishment of new institutions – churches to propagate the doctrines of the Scriptures, both Old and New – that the Gospel survived the first century. As a Christian, Paul did not use force (as Saul he had). He lost battles, but he won the war.

The Reformer Martin Luther lost some of his battles. When he launched his doctrinal reform in 1517, he hoped to transform the Roman Church-State. Instead, the papal tyrant excommunicated him, burned his books, and murdered his followers. There was no significant reform of the Roman Church. Five hundred years later, the Roman Church-State is bigger and more heretical than ever. Only the writing of books, sermons, and tracts, and the establishment of Protestant churches and schools, ensured the survival of the Reformation. Most of the Romanists rejected Christ; only the remnant was saved. Luther lost battles, but won the war.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century Presbyterian J. Gresham Machen lost some of his battles. In 1923 he wrote a book demonstrating that the Presbyterian Church in the United States was preaching two different messages, Christianity and Liberalism. His efforts to stop the Auburn heresies ended with Machen and others being excommunicated by the

Presbyterian Church in 1936. Most of the Presbyterians rejected Christ; only the remnant was saved. Only the publication of more literature, and the establishment of new churches and schools, ensured that Biblical Christianity would not disappear in the United States. Machen lost battles, but Christ won the war.

In the 21st century the institutions that resulted from the efforts of Machen are subverted by heretics. If history is any indication, the heretics will win, and only the publication of more literature, plus the establishment of new institutions, will ensure the survival of Biblical Presbyterianism in America. Most American Presbyterians will reject Christ, and only the remnant will be saved.

### Why Heretics Win

There are several reasons that heretics win battles.

First, Scripture tells us that they are more clever and cunning than believers: “For the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light” (*Luke 16:8*). They have a way of thinking that makes them more politically astute, more street smart, more imaginative in their machinations, and more willing to act in sinful ways in order to achieve their goals. Stealing, lying, and bribery are fine so long as they “advance the Kingdom.”

Second, heretics introduce false ideas stealthily: “But this occurred because of false brethren secretly brought in (who came in by stealth to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage” (*Galatians 2:4*) and “For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation...” (*Jude 4*). They appear to be sheep, but are not; and the ideas they teach, at least at first, appear to be true, but are not. By their smooth words, they deceive many into thinking that they are Christian brothers and the ideas they advance are Biblical.

Third, heretics frequently use force to persecute Christians. Force works; it silences the opposition. That is why heretics and tyrants use it. The blood of the martyrs is not the seed of the church; only the Gospel is.

Fourth, and most important, those who believe the truth tend to be slow to recognize error and even slower to take the actions necessary to defend the truth. They lack both discernment and courage. This is the crucial matter. Christians cannot help the fact that the sons of this world are more shrewd than they are, or that false brethren do things subtly, surreptitiously, and coercively. But Christians can help how they understand and respond to such doctrinal and ecclesiastical subversion. Their lack of discernment stems from a lack of knowledge of Scripture, and their lack of courage comes from a lack of belief in the promises of Scripture.

## **Paul, Our Model**

We can learn a great deal from the example of the Apostle Paul in Antioch and his letter to the Galatians, for he was neither slow to recognize error nor timid in correcting it. Our failure to learn from and imitate Paul is the principal reason why heretics win battles.

Paul recognized doctrinal error quickly and acted swiftly to correct it. He wrote: "But this [a problem over the preaching of the Gospel] occurred because of false brethren...to whom we did not yield submission even for an hour, that the truth of the Gospel might continue with you" (*Galatians* 2:2-5). Paul did not put up with ("yield submission" to) error or those teaching error on the Gospel "even for an hour." He was quick to recognize error and quick to correct it, so that "the truth of the Gospel might continue with you." While his concern was doctrinal, it was not academic, for he did not tolerate those who were teaching error in the churches. He understood error, and he refused to tolerate the men who were teaching or abetting error in the churches.

Paul explained further how Christians ought to respond to those who obscure the Gospel: "But from those who seemed to be something – whatever they were, it makes no difference to me; God shows personal favoritism to no man – for those who seemed to be something added nothing to me" (*Galatians* 2:6). Paul was not impressed by a person's status in the church. God is no respecter of persons, and neither was Paul. Church status, church office, educational credentials afford no immunity. In fact, the Biblical rule is just the opposite: To whom much is given, much shall be required. The greater the office, the greater the responsibility in the churches. That is why Paul told Timothy: "those [elders] who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all" (*1 Timothy* 5:20).

So far, we have learned three things about how we must oppose those who obscure or pervert the Gospel:

- (1) We must recognize doctrinal error as a serious sin.
- (2) We must not tolerate either error on the doctrine of salvation or those who teach it "even for an hour."

(3) We must not allow ourselves to be intimidated or cowed by the reputations or credentials of those teaching error on the doctrine of salvation.

But Paul has much more to teach us about correcting doctrinal error in the churches. He continues: "But when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face" (*Galatians* 2:11). This is Paul's fourth lesson: Not only must those who teach a false Gospel be anathematized (see *Galatians* 1), but Christians must also oppose and correct brothers who tolerate those who preach a false Gospel. In *Galatians* 1 Paul had cursed those who preach a false Gospel. In chapter 2 he instructs us on how to deal with brothers who tolerate those who teach a false Gospel, thus obscuring or compromising the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Peter had not preached a false Gospel, but his actions abetted those who did. Paul explained: "for before certain men came from James, he [Peter] would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy." By describing Peter's and Barnabas' actions as "hypocrisy," Paul indicated that Peter and Barnabas believed the Gospel, but nevertheless they tolerated those who did not. Tolerance of error on the doctrine of salvation is a sin. It is doubly sin for elders, who are charged with the responsibility of teaching, of feeding the sheep, and of guarding the flock.

Moreover, Paul opposed Peter "to his face" – directly and openly. Paul was Peter's friend and fellow Apostle. Paul went to the root of the problem and confronted Peter directly. Paul had no misplaced personal loyalty to Peter; he did not let a false notion of friendship interfere with his responsibility to correct Peter and defend the Gospel. Paul did not take Peter aside privately and suggest politely that he eat with the Gentiles. Paul opposed Peter directly to his face. Opposing error and those who tolerate it is something many Christians are loathe to do. They would rather whine, "Can't we all just get along?" Those who allow an un-Biblical view of friendship to cloud their judgments have forgotten Paul's question: "Have I therefore become your enemy because I tell you the truth?" (*Galatians* 4:16).

Further, in Paul's manner of confronting Peter we see the important principle that the truth, the Biblical doctrines, are to be defended openly, directly, and clearly. To try to defend truth by stealth, by cleverness, by political means, is to undercut the very things we are defending. Falsehood can be, and usually is, propagated by dishonest, uncandid, and irrational means, but truth cannot be. Truth must be proclaimed openly, honestly, rationally, and candidly.

Paul said that he opposed Peter, "because he was to be blamed." This is Paul's fifth lesson for us. Paul assigned blame, and he assigned it correctly. Paul identified the Apostle Peter as blameworthy. Peter's status as an Apostle did not shield him from being blamed nor from

Paul's open opposition. Paul judged Peter – accurately, openly, and clearly. Paul did not misunderstand Christ's words, "Judge not, that you be not judged," as so many professing Christians do. Paul judged Peter, accurately and swiftly; and he acted on his judgment. His judgment, of course, was not about a trivial matter, but about the Gospel, and Peter's role in obscuring it. The same zeal for the Gospel that Paul displayed in *Galatians* 1, which compelled him to curse those who teach any other message in the churches, also compelled him to judge and blame Peter for not being straightforward about the truth of the Gospel in chapter 2.

But Paul is not done teaching us how to handle churchmen who undermine the Gospel. He wrote, "But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the Gospel, I said to Peter before them all." Here Paul teaches us that men who are not straightforward about the truth of the Gospel are to be rebuked publicly: "before them all." They are not to be taken aside privately; they are not to be dealt with according to *Matthew* 18, for Paul understood, as many churchmen do not understand today, that that procedure is irrelevant to situations in which the Gospel is being publicly twisted and obscured. Teachers who err on the doctrine of salvation are not to be ignored, condoned, or dealt with privately.

Furthermore, Paul publicly rebuked Peter the Apostle, not the lesser men who surrounded him: "I said to Peter before them all." By making an example of Peter, by writing his name in Scripture for all time, by addressing the Apostle and not some Elder, Deacon, or ordinary layman, Paul made it perfectly clear that even the highest officers in the church are subject to the Gospel. *A fortiori*, so are all the rest. By addressing Peter, Paul acted on the principle that the greater the office, the greater the responsibility. Were Paul to rebuke Peter today, he would, of course, be accused of making a "personal attack" on Peter, a pastor in good standing in the church, and Paul would have been censured by some seminary faculty or church court for using intemperate language as well. Such critics, not accustomed to rigorous thinking, cannot differentiate between personal attack and rebuking a specific person for obscuring the Gospel. Paul's concern was wholly doctrinal; he had no personal animus against Peter. His doctrinal concern, his position as a Christian and an Apostle, required him to confront Peter publicly.

### **Where Is Paul When We Need Him?**

Unfortunately, all these Pauline lessons are lost on most Christians today. The present volume, *The Auburn Avenue Theology*, illustrates the failure of Christians, two thousand years later, to learn Paul's lessons. It also indicates why the present heretics, the advocates of Neolegalism, will win battles (even though they will lose the war).

The organizer of the colloquium tells us that an "anonymous donor," a "kind, thoughtful Christian

businessman" who "holds men on both sides in this controversy in high esteem" "paid all travel, meals, lodging, and other expenses for the colloquium." They met at Lago Mar, a "luxurious" resort in Fort Lauderdale, for three days in August 2003. (Can you imagine a businessman paying for Paul, Peter, and the Judaizers to attend an all-expense paid colloquium at a posh resort on the coast so they could discover how much they had in common and iron out their misunderstandings?)

The editor continues: This businessman "holds the pastoral office in such high regard that he insisted that if we were to ask these dedicated servants of God to gather for stressful debate we must provide beautiful rooms in a beautiful location with gourmet food to show them due honor." Unlike Paul, who disdained status in the church when the purity of the Gospel was at stake ("But from those who seemed to be something – whatever they were, it makes no difference to me"), this businessman "holds the pastoral office in high regard." He esteems men who pervert the Gospel as "dedicated servants of God." And those whose essays in this volume oppose the Federal Vision regard men who twist the Gospel as "brothers." The critics of the Federal Vision admit their lack of discernment. One describes those promoting heresy as "friends of mine – even heroes." He writes: "We had recommended these brothers to hundreds, perhaps thousands."

The editor explains that he first had the idea of a private colloquium while attending the 2003 AAPC Pastors Conference in Monroe, Louisiana. He dreamed of a meeting at which both proponents and opponents of the new theology could discuss matters in order to clear up "misunderstandings": "I hoped that such a colloquium would result in the whole group's being able to say, 'The vast majority of charges against these men rest on misunderstandings of what they've said. Here's what they've really said, and in all but a few instances – and those largely peripheral – they're solidly within the boundaries of Reformed, orthodox confessionalism.' That certainly was my hope." This private colloquium would be set up so that "the discussion would be private, with no observers present, no reports made, and the papers and responses not to be quoted outside the colloquium group, unless the participants unanimously voted otherwise after the last session. The aim was to ensure that everyone could speak openly without fear of his words' being raised in ecclesiastical charges...." Now, why didn't Paul think of that?

This notion – that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the proper subject of an academic discussion, off the record, with no one's words being taken down, with a promise of immunity against church discipline (but with a hope of exoneration) – violates Scripture at many points, some of which are listed above. The editor reports that "much misunderstanding was cleared away and warm relationships were renewed," despite the fact that

“substantive disagreements really divided the groups,” which remain “strongly divided over specific doctrines.” Now, the Apostle Paul did not seek a warm relationship with his friend and fellow Apostle Peter. He wanted them to be of one mind on the Gospel and the importance of not obscuring it. That is the consistent theme of Scripture: The only worthwhile unity in the church is unity in the truth. Warm fuzzy relationships devoid of such unity are worse than worthless. It is such warm relationships apart from the truth that enable the growth of heresy in the churches.

## **Douglas Wilson**

Not only has heresy grown in the Reformed churches, it has spread like kudzu. Men like Douglas Wilson claim that their views are “orthodox and Christian.” But who knows what the Great Redefiner means by those terms? The *modus operandi* of false teachers is to use old terms with new meanings, thus deceiving the naive and undiscerning. Wilson claims, “One of our fundamental concerns is this: we want to insist on believing God’s promises concerning our children.” Unfortunately, neither he nor any other proponent of Neolegalism ever quotes those promises. Worse, no critic of Neolegalism calls Wilson’s bluff in this book. Wilson alludes to *Acts* 2:39, but that merely shows he does not understand the verse. Neither that verse nor any other verse in the Bible promises salvation to children of believers simply because they are children of believers. Several verses explicitly deny it (*Luke* 3:8; *John* 1:12-13), and others report that some children of believers are eternally lost.

Wilson imagines – he has a great imagination, which is why he is such an atrocious theologian – that *Acts* 2:39 promises salvation to the children of believers, but here is what the verse says: “For the promise [of the Holy Spirit] is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.” There are three recipients of the promise: “you,” “your children,” and “all who are afar off.” All three groups receive the same promise; children are not singled out for any special promises. So “all who are afar off” have the same promise of the Spirit as “your children.” Furthermore, the last clause of the verse, “as many as the Lord our God will call,” modifies and limits all three referents: “you, your children, and all who are afar off.” Therefore, the promise of the Holy Spirit is made only to the elect, not to all of Peter’s audience, nor to all their children, nor to all who are afar off, but only to as many as the Lord our God will call from all three groups. The promise is not to all that Peter addressed, nor to all their children (let alone to Wilson’s children), nor to all afar off, but only to the elect. The Jewish-pagan notion that salvation is received by genetic or ritual endowment (Wilson vacillates between two erroneous and conflicting opinions, that children of believers are born Christians, and that they are made Christians by baptism) is denied repeatedly by Scripture.

Another major theme of the Neolegalists is “union with Christ.” Scripture teaches legal and intellectual union with Christ, but that is not what Wilson means: “When we talk about union with Christ, we are talking about union with his body, as it is in the world today, blemishes and all.” So “union with Christ” means church membership. Not only does this confuse Christ with the church (if Christ is the head, he is not the body; if Christ is the bridegroom, he is not the bride), it makes the institutional church salvific, and makes salvation a result of church membership. This medieval heresy ought to be recognized for what it is.

At the foundation of Wilson’s heresies lies his irrationalism, which is perhaps the worst heresy of all. He writes: “In faith we want to say that children of believers are saved [‘infant baptism is *not* a crap shoot,’ he says emphatically]. But we are not making a categorical statement of the ‘All P are Q’ kind. [Please note the contradiction between the two preceding sentences.] We are saying that we believe God’s statements and promises concerning covenant children.... Now these promises...have apparent instances of non-fulfillment. How are we to account for this?... The question of levels of discourse is central in understanding this. On one level, all of us confess that some of the children of believers are reprobate, and will eventually fall away. On another level of discourse, we say that God is God to our children. In preaching, in catechesis, in liturgy, the second level of discourse is operative. This level is operative because faith in the promises requires it. But an important point to note is that we are not saying contradictory things within one level of discourse.”

Now there is a simple word for Wilson’s doctrine: dishonesty. His nonsense about “levels of discourse” – what is true on one “level” is false on another – is a blatant rejection of both God and Scripture. Christ said, “Let your Yes be Yes, and your No be No” (*Matthew* 5:37). He did not add, “Of course I am speaking on one level of discourse, but if I speak on two levels, ‘Yes’ may be ‘No’ and ‘No,’ ‘Yes.’” In Wilson’s theology, “liturgical truth,” “catechetical truth,” and “preached truth” are one thing, “operative” on one level of discourse; and truth itself is another, inoperative in preaching, teaching, and worship.

Paul wrote, “As God is faithful, our word to you was not Yes and No, for the Son God...was not Yes and No” (2 *Corinthians* 1:17-19). Paul did not add, “but our word to you might be Yes and No if we talk on different levels of discourse.” One reason Christians and churches are held in such low esteem by the world is that churchmen like Wilson, through the ages, have dishonestly played with words and denied the truth. They prattle on about paradoxes, antinomies, tensions, levels of discourse, and other un-Biblical ideas, attributing them to Scripture, and impugning both the intelligence and the honesty of God himself.



The proponents of this Neolegalist theology are

**John Barach**, a minister in the United Reformed Churches of North America;

**Peter Leithart**, a minister in the Presbyterian Church of America and teacher at New St. Andrews College;

**Rich Lusk**, then assistant pastor of the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Monroe, Louisiana;

**Steve Schlissel**, pastor of Messiah's Congregation in New York City;

**Tom Trouwborst**, pastor of Calvary Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Schenectady, New York;

**Steve Wilkins**, pastor of the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church (PCA), Monroe, Louisiana; and

**Douglas Wilson**, pastor of Christ Church (CREC), Moscow, Idaho.

The opponents of the Neolegalist theology whose papers appear in this book are

**E. Calvin Beisner** (PCA), Professor of Historical Theology and Social Ethics, Knox Theological Seminary;

**Christopher Hutchinson**, associate pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church (PCA), Statesboro, Georgia;

**George W. Knight III**, erstwhile teacher at Matthews OPC, Charlotte, North Carolina;

**Richard D. Phillips**, minister of the First Presbyterian Church of Coral Springs, Florida (PCA);

**Joseph Pipa, Jr.**, President of Greenville (South Carolina) Presbyterian Theological Seminary (GPTS);

**Carl Robbins**, pastor of Woodruff Road Presbyterian Church (PCA), Greenville, South Carolina;

**Morton H. Smith**, Professor at GPTS; and

**R. Fowler White**, dean of the faculty at Knox Seminary.

## Steve Schlissel

Steve Schlissel attacks justification by faith alone by changing the definition of *faith*. He emphatically informs us that "Reason requires a proposition as its object whereas Faith requires a history and/or a Person as its object." Like Wilson and Wilkins, Schlissel is fatally confused. We have heard all this before: "No creed but Christ" was the view of the Liberals a hundred years ago. They thought it was the height of piety then, and Schlissel thinks so today. Far from being pious, the slogan is a direct attack on Scripture, which is propositional revelation. But Schlissel wants "history" and "Story" and persons to be the objects of faith, not propositions. He even capitalizes the word Story. History and Story, Schlissel says, are not propositional, which means that Schlissel does not know what the word "proposition" means.

## Rich Lusk

Rich Lusk, erstwhile assistant to Steve Wilkins, tells us that "Machen would have been more true to Paul if he had had [sic] telegraphed [sic], 'I'm so thankful for [the] resurrection of Christ. No hope without it.' The resurrection is the real centerpiece of the gospel since it is the *new* thing God has done."

Lusk makes it clear that Richard Gaffin of Westminster Seminary is the co-father (along with Norman Shepherd) of this heretical theology. Decades ago Gaffin published a book called *The Centrality of the Resurrection* in which he argued that point. Like Gaffin, Lusk appeals to *Romans* 4:25, which simply shows he does not understand the verse; and he ignores the verses that teach explicitly that we are "justified by his blood," not by his resurrection.

The *New King James Version* translates *Romans* 4:25 correctly: "who [Jesus] was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification." Christ was not raised "for" (in order to accomplish) our justification, but "for" (because of) our justification. To twist this verse into saying that the effect of Christ's resurrection (not his death) is justification through union with Christ, when this verse comes at the end of Paul's grand chapter on imputation, is theologically grotesque.

Lusk explicitly denies imputation, and thus the Gospel:<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Westminster Larger Catechism* Question 72 is usually misread by people looking for some esoteric and complicated definition of saving faith as something more than understanding of and assent to the Gospel. What the *Catechism* actually teaches is that one must not only assent to the truth of the promise of the Gospel, but also to the righteousness of Christ imputed to believers:

"Justifying faith is a saving grace wrought in the heart of a sinner by the Spirit and word of God, whereby he, being convinced of his sin and misery, and of the disability in himself and all other creatures to recover him out of his lost condition, not only assents to the truth of the promise of the Gospel, but receives and rests upon Christ and his righteousness, therein held forth, for pardon of sin, and for accepting and accounting of his person righteous in the sight of God for salvation."

The *Catechism* is concerned to make clear what truths one has to believe in order to be saved. It is not discussing the psychology of the act of believing, still less is it disparaging assent to the truth of the Gospel.

Among other things, this Catechetical and Biblical definition of justifying faith asserts what Wilson *et al.* deny: that sinners are saved by believing the doctrine of justification by faith alone. That is precisely what the *Larger Catechism* asserts. If the *Catechism* is correct, Lusk is lost.

Also important to note is that no Reformed Confession, and certainly not the *Westminster Confession*, defines "faith" by asserting that it consists of three components,

This justification [because it comes by union with Christ, as Gaffin says] requires no transfer or imputation of anything. It does not force us to reify "righteousness" into something that can be shuffled around in heavenly accounting books. Rather, because I am in the Righteous One and the Vindicated One, I am righteous and vindicated. My in-Christ-ness makes imputation redundant. I do not need the moral content of his life of righteousness transferred to me.... Union with Christ is therefore the key.... I am not justified by a legal transfer of his "obedience points" to my account.... there is no imputation, strictly speaking. Rather, there is a real union, a marriage.

## The Failure of the Critics

The big disappointment in this book is not the vehemence with which the Neolegalists state their views (that is to be expected), but the failure of their critics to challenge their premises. Time after time the critics concede points to the Neolegalists. Now the critics do make some telling arguments, but they do not challenge the Neolegalists where they must be challenged. When one critic comes close, the arrogant Schlissel demands an apology.

This failure of the critics to defend the Gospel properly seems to stem from two causes: misguided loyalty to the Neolegalists, and ignorance of what the Bible teaches. One critic describes his relationship to the Neolegalists in these words: "I speak/write with nothing but the deepest affection and appreciation for each of the men who will be attending the colloquium." Nothing but affection and appreciation? How about a little skepticism, if not suspicion? How about a little of Paul's willingness to speak sharply to Peter? Or, perhaps more to the point, a little of Paul's zeal in cursing false teachers? The critic continues:

James Jordan has been an instructor and stimulant for twenty years.<sup>2</sup> My children have gone to sleep with Peter Leithart's<sup>3</sup> stories ringing in their ears. Steve Schlissel's faithful ministry was what we self-consciously modeled our urban ministry after in Las Vegas. I have given away more Douglas (and Nancy) Wilson's books in the process of family counseling/discipleship than anyone else in North America. Steve Wilkins has helped to home-school my

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*notitia*, *assensus*, and *fiducia*. When professed Reformed theologians lapse into that misleading Latin model, they sound like they are exegeting the Vulgate, not the Greek New Testament.

<sup>2</sup> In 1992 *The Trinity Review* published a review of James Jordan's book on the church under the title "The Reconstructionist Road to Rome." There is no excuse for any Elder to have been bamboozled by Jordan for the past twenty years.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Leithart is the author of the book *Against Christianity*. He is against Christianity.

children in history<sup>4</sup> (and me in homiletics) and had faithfully preached from our pulpit. Rich Lusk and John Barach were gracious counterparts when we met in Monroe, and their scholarship and humility are a gift to the whole church. Because I value these brothers so highly, it is very difficult for me to write a disagreeable word against them.... I am deeply saddened over the inappropriately public way these discussions have been conducted heretofore....

Why does this PCA pastor fail to defend the faith? "Because I value these brothers so highly, it is very difficult for me to write a disagreeable word against them." Not only does he value them too highly, he values the Gospel too little. This critic allowed his personal relationships to cloud his judgment for twenty years, and he is still doing so. That is one reason this heresy has spread so widely in the churches.

Another reason this heresy has spread so widely is this critic's (as well as others') ignorance of what the Bible teaches on these matters. Even after this critic quotes James Jordan explicitly denying regeneration, he says "James Jordan's humility and scholarship are both beyond question.... I have no intention of assaulting Jordan, but I would like to humbly point out several areas of advice or disagreement where he could (perhaps) hone his arguments." Contrast these words with those of Paul when he confronted Peter "to his face before them all," merely for hypocrisy. Peter was a much greater man than James Jordan, and his error was less serious than James Jordan's. This pastor's response is pathetic – and sinful. It is thinking like this that has allowed these heresies to spread and flourish in the churches.

In one of his essays, Fowler White, dean of the faculty at Knox Seminary and a man who strongly professes to believe in the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture, writes several paragraphs about Scripture that certainly sound like a denial of inerrancy:

[W]e want to consider briefly the biblical authors' assertions from the perspective of their finite knowledge. I have in mind the point that we underestimate the historical character of the Bible if we interpret its human authors' reflections on the salvation of individuals as though they had direct access to the secrets of the eternal decree. On this fact, we do not differ from the FV group.... As we all recognize, the authors of Scripture are people whose knowledge of salvation is a finite creaturely knowledge based on

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<sup>4</sup> Anyone listening to the first fifteen minutes of Wilkins' tapes on American history should have known how far off base he is: Wilkins informs his listeners that Columbus was a Christian who desired to take the Gospel to the New World. Wilkins repeats Romanist propaganda. Last year Wilkins was caught in some serious plagiarism from *Time on the Cross* in the booklet he co-wrote with Douglas Wilson defending Southern slavery.

observable conformity to the canonically revealed – that is, the covenantally revealed (Deuteronomy 29:29) – defining traits of those destined for blessing or curse. Given the boundaries of their finite knowledge and the prerogatives of God’s infinite knowledge, the writers of the Bible could not presume to make infallible assertions with regard to individual salvation.... They could, however, make justifiable, if fallible assertions [in Scripture] about an individual’s salvation based on his observable conformity to the defining traits of those whom God saves as revealed in the covenant. [White here cites *Ephesians* 1:3-14 as an example of the fallible assertions he is talking about.]... In my view, it is precisely the nature of human knowledge and faith that we have to take into account when we interpret those assertions in which the biblical writers, conditionally and otherwise, attribute salvation ordained, accomplished, and/or applied to individuals.

White’s words assert the following errors:

1. The “historical character” of the Bible somehow makes it susceptible to error;
2. The “human” Biblical authors teach their fallible “reflections” on the salvation of individuals in Scripture;
3. The Biblical authors did not have access to divine secrets about the salvation of individuals when they wrote Scripture;
4. The Biblical authors’ statements about the salvation of individuals are “finite” and “creaturely,” that is, fallible; and not divine, that is, infallible;
5. The statements in Scripture, “conditional or otherwise,” about the salvation of individuals, are “fallible.”

White’s errors are directly attributable to his denial that the authors of Scripture have access to the relevant divine secrets when writing Scripture, because of the “boundaries” of their knowledge. He does not seem to realize that whatever the limitations of human knowledge are, those limitations do not apply to the writers of Scripture, *qua* writers, for their written words, every one of them, are inspired by God, completely true, and infallible.

In his response to White’s essay Douglas Wilson agrees with White’s attribution of fallible “reflections” to Scripture. Wilson admits, and White expresses no disagreement, that the authors of Scripture, when writing Scripture, used “provisional knowledge” which may in fact be false.

## **Steve Wilkins**

Steve Wilkins, a pastor in good standing in the PCA, and a Neolegalist, tells us that water “baptism unites us to Christ and his church and thus in him gives us new life.... By our baptism we have been reborn, in this sense, having died with Christ, we have been raised with him.... The same is true for all who are baptized.” According to Wilkins, water

baptism means “united to Christ, forgiveness of sins, Holy Spirit cleansed, regenerate and renewed, buried and resurrected, joined to the body of Christ, clothed in righteousness, justified and sanctified, saved, ordained as priests with access to [the] heavenly sanctuary.”

For years the PCA has tolerated this false Gospel being taught in its congregations, from its pulpits, and in its presbyteries. If a true church bears three marks – the preaching of the Gospel, the proper administration of the sacraments, and church discipline – neither the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church nor the PCA is a true church.

Wilkins informs us that

The elect are those who are faithful in Christ Jesus. If they later reject the Savior, they are no longer elect – they are cut off from the Elect One and thus lose their elect standing. But their falling away doesn’t negate the reality of their standing prior to their apostasy. They were really and truly the elect of God because of their relationship with Christ.... The apostate, thus, forsakes the grace of God that was given to him by virtue of his union with Christ. It is not accurate to say that they only “appeared” to have these things but did not actually have them.... That which makes apostasy so horrendous is that these blessings actually belonged to the apostates.... *The apostate doesn’t forfeit “apparent blessings” that were never his in reality, but real blessings that were his in covenant with God [emphasis is Wilkins’].*

## **Neo-Arminianism**

It should be obvious to the reader by now (though no critic in this book raised the point), that the Neolegalists at least implicitly deny every one of the five points of Calvinism:

1. They do not regard men as totally depraved, for they teach that the law of God is “do-able.”
2. They do not teach that election is unconditional, but they assert that election is conditional, and the condition is faith plus works.
3. They do not teach that Christ died only for his people, but for all baptized persons. They teach that all the baptized receive “all the blessings and benefits of Christ,” yet some of the baptized are eternally lost. Christ’s work is ineffective.
4. They do not believe God’s grace is irresistible, for some men who are saved, regenerated, justified, and adopted, can and do reject the Lord and lose their salvation.
5. They do not believe in the preservation of the saints, for a saint can fail to persevere and lose his salvation.

At all points at which the disciples of Arminius differed from the Reformed faith, the Neolegalists differ as well. We must keep in mind that throughout the Arminian controversy, Arminius’ disciples claimed to be Reformed.

## **The Error of Worldview Thinking**

The critics of the Neolegalists, however, do not recognize this. The last chapter of the book, written by the editor, returns to the theme of the first. He writes: " I find myself feeling much more comfortable in the company of the Monroe Four and their associates than in that of the broad generality of professing Christians and their pastors.... My broad commitments, concerns, and postures are solidly with these brothers."

This error might be called the error of worldview thinking. It is the error of thinking that "broad commitments, concerns, and postures" are somehow more important or more fundamental than the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the error of thinking that a worldview can be Christian even though it does not include the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the error of thinking that justification is merely one more topic of theology, and that if one can agree on other topics, that one can have fellowship with men who deny, pervert, or obscure the Gospel of Jesus Christ. One well-known proponent of such worldview thinking, who attends a PCA church, says that he has risen above the Calvinist-Arminian theological dispute. He travels in the more important realm of social and political action.

Paul did not make that mistake in Antioch or Galatia. There must have been many things he agreed with the Judaizers about, to say nothing of Peter and Barnabas. But to none of them did he declare his solidarity until he had rebuked them for obscuring the Gospel and they had repented. Justification by faith alone was not just another topic in theology for Paul; it was the center of Christian theology, a *sine qua non* of Christian doctrine. The Reformers recognized its central place 1500 years later and declared that it was the doctrine by which churches, as well as individuals, stand or fall.

But in American Reformed churches, such understanding and courage are absent. Even when the Mississippi Valley Presbytery of the PCA denounced the errors of the Neolegalists earlier this year, it did not request any action from the PCA as a whole to stop the propagation of their doctrines. It asked the Louisiana Presbytery to investigate Steve Wilkins. If the Louisiana Presbytery does so, it will accomplish three things:

1. It will gain more time for the heretics to spread their heresies in Presbyterian churches.
2. It will preclude other Presbyteries from taking original jurisdiction in bringing Wilkins to trial, as they now are permitted to do under PCA law.
3. It will be able, after a year or two of investigation, to whitewash Wilkins and his heresies. Douglas Wilson's denomination whitewashed him last year after he requested an examination from them.

Paul's lessons, and his example, are lost on American Reformed churches. That is why, once again, the heretics are likely to win the battle over justification. A few, the

remnant, will be saved, but most of the churches and seminaries will be lost to the heretics. Perhaps God will bless his people and his Gospel, and cause many who are now outside the increasingly apostate Reformed churches to accept the truth of justification by faith alone. Or perhaps God is finished with the United States, and it will become a vast spiritual wasteland, very religious of course, but Antichristian to the core, like the medieval Europe for which the Neolegalists long.

# THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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## AGAINST CHRISTIANITY

John W. Robbins

### *Against Christianity*

Peter Leithart

Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2003

Trade paperback, 154 pages, no index

Dr. Peter Leithart, who holds graduate degrees from Westminster Theological Seminary and Cambridge University, is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church in America, a "Senior Fellow" of Theology and Literature at New St. Andrews College (Moscow, Idaho), and the author of several books published by Canon Press. His essays have appeared in the *Westminster (Seminary) Theological Journal*, *Credenda/Agenda* magazine (Douglas Wilson, editor), *Biblical Horizons* (James Jordan, editor), *First Things* (Richard John Neuhaus, editor), and elsewhere. Leithart is opposed to Christianity, as the title of his latest book shows.

Leithart describes his book as "bricolage," which is French for "puttering," an English word meaning "moving or acting aimlessly, idly, randomly." His book is written in the disjointed, oracular style of Friedrich Nietzsche, to whom Leithart (pronounced "light-heart") invites comparison. Nietzsche wrote about *Antichrist*. Leithart writes *Against Christianity*.

Some readers, still sleeping, might object, "But Leithart can't mean by 'Christianity' what the word ordinarily means." But that is precisely the point: Leithart does use the word "Christianity" in its ordinary sense as the name of a set of theological beliefs or a doctrinal system. Those readers have simply not been paying attention: There are prominent men in the PCA, a denomination that professes to believe the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, that deny openly and loudly, not merely in their cups, cardinal doctrines of the faith, and attack the Gospel publicly, aggressively, and with impunity. There is apparently no one in the PCA with the intelligence, the integrity, and the courage to identify them publicly as the

Antichristians they are, and no court in the PCA has brought charges against them, let alone convicted them of heresy and removed them from office. The PCA heretics, far from being removed from office, are protected by a phalanx of pseudo-Presbyterian grunts who stubbornly defend them and attack anyone who criticizes them. This writer is acquainted with Elders who have left the PCA because it was impossible for them to discipline heretics entrenched in that organization.

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**"Christianity is the heresy of heresies, the underlying cause of the weakness, lethargy, sickness, and failure of the modern church."**

– Peter Leithart

**Presbyterian Church in America Minister**

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Here is Leithart's opening barrage against Christianity:

1

The Bible never mentions Christianity. It does not preach Christianity, nor does it encourage us to preach Christianity. Paul did not preach Christianity, nor did any of the other apostles. During centuries when the Church was strong and vibrant, she did not preach Christianity either. Christianity, like Judaism and "Yahwism," is an invention of biblical scholars, theologians, and politicians, and one of its chief effects is to keep Christians and the Church in their proper marginal place. The Bible speaks of Christians and of the Church, but Christianity is gnostic, and the Church firmly rejected gnosticism from her earliest days.

2

Christianity is the heresy of heresies, the underlying cause of the weakness, lethargy, sickness, and failure of the modern church [13].

He later repeats paragraph 1 on page 43, substituting the word "theology" for the word "Christianity."

The reader may be forgiven if he is shocked at Leithart's vicious diatribe against Christianity. The reader may have thought that the root problem of the modern church is its *lack* of Christianity. How foolish of him. It is not the lack of Christianity that has caused the failure of the modern church, but Christianity itself, at least according to PCA minister and Westminster Seminary grad Leithart. Christianity is "gnostic" (Leithart either does not know what the word means, or he deliberately misuses the word) and the "heresy of heresies." Leithart writes with the audacity of an apostate who understands that there is no court in the PCA that will accuse him, let alone remove him from office.

Leithart writes in the manic, episodic style of the 19<sup>th</sup> century atheist Friedrich Nietzsche, though Leithart does not enjoy Nietzsche's talent for epigrams. And Nietzsche is not the only 19<sup>th</sup> century atheist that Leithart resembles: In the opening paragraph of his book, Leithart adopts the sociology of Karl Marx in his attack on Christianity. Christianity, Leithart says, is an "ideology" developed by the ruling class (politicians and the intelligentsia) whose effect is to "keep Christians and the Church in their proper marginal place." Like Marx, Leithart regards Christian theology as an "ideology" developed and used for political and sociological purposes.

In addition to writing like one 19<sup>th</sup> century atheist and parroting the sociology of another, Leithart makes one logical blunder after another. Christianity, Leithart says, is the "heresy of heresies." This is reminiscent of another 19<sup>th</sup> century socialist, the Frenchman Proudhon, who informed the world that "Property is theft." Leithart's statement is reminiscent of Proudhon's, because both statements are literal nonsense, and for the same reason: The concepts *theft* and *heresy* logically depend on the concepts *property* and *theological truth* respectively. Theft and heresy can be understood and defined only within the context of property and theological truth. One cannot speak of theft in a universe in which there is no property; and one cannot speak of heresy in a universe in which there is no true theology, Christianity. The concept *heresy* requires and depends on the concept *Christianity*. An idea is heretical only if it differs from Christianity. To say that Christianity itself is heresy is to talk sheer nonsense.

And sheer nonsense is what Leithart talks. The trouble is, most professing Christians, if they were to read this evil little book, would not realize that Leithart is talking nonsense. They are so accustomed to hearing sanctimonious nonsense from the pulpit – nonsense-in-vestments that wannabe-

priests solemnly intone as "mysteries," "paradoxes," "antinomies," and "tensions" – that they can no longer tell theological truth from theological lies.

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**Leithart adopts the sociology of Karl Marx in his attack on Christianity. Christianity, Leithart says, is an "ideology" developed by the ruling class.**

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Leithart continues: "I have stated a simple fact: the word 'Christianity' does not appear in the Bible, so it is quite impossible for the Bible to encourage us to believe or preach or practice Christianity" (13). Since Leithart is woodenly literal, let us play along: The Bible was written in Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic, so it is not surprising that the English word "Christianity" does not appear in it. But there are plenty of synonyms for "Christianity" in the English Bible: "the faith once delivered to the saints," "my Word," "the Scriptures," "my doctrine," "my teachings," "the words of eternal life," "the whole counsel of God" and so on. All these terms and phrases refer to the revealed propositions that are reduced to writing in the Scriptures. They all refer to a body of theology, a set of doctrines. They refer to Christianity. Christianity *is* the propositions of the 66 books of the Bible together with their logical implications. Christianity *is* the set of Biblical doctrines.

It is this notion of Christianity as the set of Biblical ideas that Leithart rejects. He writes: "More important, however, is the fact that the Bible does not even have the concept of Christianity. This, of course, begs the question of what I mean by 'Christianity'" (14). (Leithart shows his ignorance of both logic and English usage by using the phrase "begs the question" incorrectly. The phrase means "to assume as proven what must in fact be demonstrated." Leithart uses it to mean "raises the question.") Here is Leithart's definition of Christianity:

Christianity sometimes refers to a set of doctrines or a system of ideas. It is contrasted with the teachings of Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, or Islam. By this definition, Christianity is what Christian people believe about God man, sin, Christ, the world, the future, and so on [14].

In his first sentence Leithart describes Christianity as a "set of doctrines" or a "system of ideas." It is this notion of Christianity that he opposes. He denounces it as "gnostic" and "rationalist." This idea – supported by many Scriptures – the idea of "saving knowledge" is the idea Leithart hates and rejects. Then he goes on to say in his third sentence that

Christianity "is what Christian people believe." Tellingly, Leithart does not say that Christianity is what Scripture teaches, but that Christianity is what Christian people believe. The importance of this will become clear in a moment.

The notion that Christianity is "what Christian people believe," if intended to be a definition of Christianity, is, of course, an impossible definition. Leithart cannot know which people are Christian unless he first knows what Christianity is. C. S. Lewis made the same logical blunder in *Mere Christianity*, where he proposed to define "mere Christianity" as what most Christian people believe. But unless one first knows what Christianity is, one cannot tell which people are Christian. Such empirical definitions are worse than useless; they deceive both the writer and his readers. Leithart's procedure, as Lewis Carroll pointed out, also, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is equivalent to hunting snarks. But despite the foolishness of their procedure, there is a reason that both Lewis and Leithart make the same blunder: They both wish to deny that the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture is the only authority, and they both wish to make the Church the religious authority. This will become more clear a little further on.

Leithart is not content to say that the word "Christianity" does not appear in the Bible. He denies that the Bible contains even the idea of Christianity. It is missing not merely the word, but more importantly the idea. He explains further:

The Bible, however, never speaks of such beliefs except as all-embracing, self-committing confessions of God's people. The Bible gives no hint that a Christian "belief system" might be isolated from the life of the Church, subjected to a scientific or logical analysis, and have its truth compared with competing "belief systems" [14].

So Christian apologetics, the intellectual defense of the faith (that is, Christianity) against other belief systems, is not only wrongheaded, but positively un-Biblical. There is no belief system, no systematic theology, no organized doctrine called Christianity in the Bible, Leithart says. Such doctrine and theology is the "ideology" of a ruling class of politicians and scholars designed to keep Christians and the church in their inferior place. By this tactic, Leithart hopes to disarm anyone inclined to defend Christianity against his attack.

Furthermore, Leithart tells us that "The Church is not a people united by common ideas, ideas which collectively go under the name 'Christianity'" (14). But that is precisely what the church is: "We have the mind of Christ" (1 *Corinthians* 2:16). Communion with Christ and with Christians is sharing the same Biblical ideas. It is not eating the same food (that

cannot be done in any case, for what one person eats, another cannot eat) nor having the same emotions, but sharing the same theological ideas. That is why Paul wrote to the Philippians saying that he thanked God for "your fellowship in the Gospel from the first day until now" (1:5); why he exhorted the Corinthians to "speak the same thing...be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment" (1 *Corinthians* 1:10). That is why John wrote that he declares the Gospel to his readers so "that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ" (1 *John* 1:3).

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**Leithart is not content to say that the word "Christianity" does not appear in the Bible. He denies that the Bible contains even the idea of Christianity.**

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Leithart's attack on theology/doctrine/ideas is part of a contemporary, widespread, and diabolical attack on propositional revelation. Scripture is *exclusively* verbal and propositional; it is not sensory or pictorial. Divine revelation consists of words, not images; it is addressed to the intellect, not to the senses; and there is nothing sensate or "sacramental" about it. Leithart's goal, and the goal of men like him through the centuries, is to replace the invisible Word with something visible – pictures, images, icons, statues, the sacraments, the institutional church, the priesthood, the Vicar of Christ. In their Antichristian religion, the visible, not the invisible, dispenses salvation. They cannot abide the notion that

...that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said unto you, You must be born again. The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit [*John* 3:6-8].

Their religion, the religion of Leithart and his friends, is a descent into Magic – an attempt by earthy, sensate men to control spiritual things by their rituals, symbols, and incantations. That is why they teach that water baptism makes sinners into Christians; that the sacraments are efficacious in themselves; that there is no invisible church; and so on. Theirs, of course, is not the brilliant, pioneering thinking they foolishly think it is. They are traveling a superhighway built and paved by apostate churchmen in the Middle Ages when the light of the invisible Word was eclipsed by the darkness of the visible church, priestcraft,

and the idolatry of icon, statue, relic, sacrament, and pope. Theirs is a religion of Medieval Magic. (The reader should consult Carlos Eire's book *War Against the Idols*, available from The Foundation.)

Leithart admits that "the New Testament does use [the word] 'faith' to refer to a set of teachings," but he effectively denies what the New Testament teaches by adding to it: "'Faith' stretches out to include one's entire 'stance' in life, a stance that encompasses beliefs about the world but also unarticulated or inarticulable attitudes, hopes, and habits of thought, action, or feeling." To support this notion of faith as inarticulable attitudes and feeling, he cites the phrase "one mind" in *Philippians* 1:27, which passage I quote in full:

Only let your conduct be worthy of the Gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind, striving together for the faith of the Gospel, and not in any way terrified by your adversaries, which is to them a proof of perdition, but to you of salvation, and that from God. For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake....

Far from supporting Leithart's point, this verse asserts what Leithart denies. Paul is exhorting the Philippians to act like the Christians they are, and with singlemindedness of purpose to suffer for "the faith of the Gospel" that they believe. There is nothing "inarticulable" or "unarticulated" about the faith. As for feeling, Paul's command is that they should *not* be terrified "in any way," but remain calm in the face of opposition and persecution.

Leithart continues his attack on Christianity:

The Bible, in short, is not an ideological tract, and does not teach an ideology. Scripture does present a certain view of the world that has true propositional content. But [you knew that "but" was coming] it is an error, and a fatal one, to suggest that, once we have systematized the propositional content of Scripture, the result is a "worldview" called Christianity to which we can give our assent.... [14-15].

Leithart finishes the sentence, "and there is an end." Of course, no Christian theologian ever said "there is an end," and Leithart quotes no theologian saying that. What he is attacking are the ideas that (1) systematic Christian theology is a "worldview," that is, a set of doctrines; and that (2) one can assent to Christianity. It is not only understanding Biblical doctrine (that is, Christianity) that Leithart attacks, but also assenting to Christian doctrine. Christians, he thinks,

are made "sacramentally" and communally by authorized representatives of the church; they are not made spiritually and individually by the Holy Spirit directly changing the minds of men. "The Church," Leithart pontificates, "is salvation" (32, emphasis is Leithart's). By this declaration he denies Christ's statement, "*My words* are Spirit and they are life." By his declaration Leithart intends to outdo the Romanists, whom he criticizes for having an inadequate view of the Church, thinking that it merely dispenses salvation, when in fact the Church *is* salvation.

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### **A century ago, ordinary Presbyterian churchgoers would have recognized Leithart's words as the language of Liberalism and unbelief.**

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Lest a reader erroneously think that all this is academic and somehow irrelevant to "real life," I shall continue to quote from Leithart: "What Jesus and the apostles proclaimed was not a new ideology or a new religion.... What they proclaimed was salvation, and that meant a new human world, a new social and political reality" (16).

A century ago, ordinary Presbyterian churchgoers would have recognized Leithart's words as the language of Liberalism and unbelief, the sociological drivel of Walter Rauschenbusch and his cohorts. But their great-grandchildren cannot. They have been so confused by the social gospel, particularly by its rightwing form called Reconstructionism, that they cannot even recognize an attack on the Gospel of Jesus Christ by a Presbyterian churchman.

Leithart enthusiastically adopts the term and the idea of the "social gospel":

Since the gospel is about the restoration of the human race in Christ, the gospel is a social gospel from the very outset [38].

...thus the gospel is sociology and international relations....

...thus the gospel is politics....

If we are going to stand for *this* gospel, we must stand against Christianity [40].

Leithart, of course, is simply parroting Anglican bishop N. T. Wright and a dozen other apostate academics when he writes that "the gospel is politics." Notice that Leithart has come full circle: He began by denouncing Christianity as an "ideology" developed by politicians and the intelligentsia who use it to keep ordinary Christians in their place. Now he asserts that his gospel – which he emphatically denies is



Christianity – is inherently political, and that “salvation” means “a new social and political reality.” It is Leithart who substitutes politics for soteriology and political ideology for theology. He falsely accuses others of what he himself is doing.

Later, in a chapter titled “Against Ethics,” Leithart writes,

Transformation of life, including social and political life, is not an “implication” of the gospel.... Transformation of life is not an implication of the gospel but inherent in the gospel, because the good news is *about* transformation of life [97].

In writing this, Leithart makes clear that he has a different message, another gospel, for the Gospel of Jesus Christ is *not* about transformation of life. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is about Jesus Christ and his finished work completely outside of us. The Gospel is *not* subjective, but objective. *It is not about us, but about him.* All forms of false religion that have a doctrine of salvation teach that their good news, their gospel, is about “transformation of life.” Only Christianity, the uniquely true theology, says that the Gospel is good news about the forgiveness of sins through Christ’s substitutionary atonement and the imputation of his perfect righteousness to believers. Missing from Leithart’s gospel is any mention of, let alone discussion of, man’s sin, God’s justice, the propitiation of God’s wrath by the death of Jesus Christ, and the imputation of his righteousness to sinners through belief alone. That is the “gnostic theology,” the “belief system,” that Leithart hates.

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**Missing from Leithart’s gospel is any mention of, let alone discussion of, man’s sin, God’s justice, the propitiation of God’s wrath by the death of Jesus Christ, and the imputation of his righteousness to sinners through belief alone.**

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Leithart is thoroughgoing in his Antichristianity: “Conversion thus means turning from one way of life, one culture, to another.” In Leithart’s religion, which is not Christianity, conversion is cultural and social. It is not spiritual, intellectual, or individual, despite Paul’s command, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (*Romans 12:2*). The Greek word Paul uses, *nous*, is as thoroughly intellectual in its connotation as the English words “mind” and “intellect.” Paul emphasizes the transformation of the mind,

but Leithart finds that “gnostic” and “rationalist.”

Like the rest of the medievalists in Moscow, Leithart is opposed to “modernity.” He explains, “*Modernity* refers to the civilization of the West since about 1500” (17) – that is, since the Reformation. In the modern world, he laments, “Every individual and every group chooses its own values.” Leithart longs for the good old days of iron clothing and serfdom when a totalitarian Church-State imposed its values on nations and individuals. He denounces political “liberalism,” by which he means freedom, not statism. What really annoys Leithart in the field of politics is the idea of freedom, especially the idea of religious freedom. He writes, “the American church-state settlement is founded on heretical ecclesiology. It is founded on Christianity” (35). The “liberal order,” by which Leithart means civil freedom, particularly religious freedom, “is a thoroughly hostile environment” (36). Leithart composes an obscene dialogue, which he sacrilegiously calls a parable, to augment his attack on religious freedom (135).

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**Christianity, that is, the faith once delivered to the saints, is not merely the “heresy of heresies,” but also “institutionalized worldliness.” Could Leithart’s hatred of Christianity be stated any more clearly?**

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Leithart wants to save his beloved Dark Ages from being blamed for Christianity. He writes, “Though it has its roots in the patristic period, Christianity in its more developed form is the Church’s adjustment of the gospel to modernity....” So, his words imply, Christianity has developed since the time of the Reformation. He continues: “Christianity is institutionalized worldliness, worldliness accepted in principle, worldliness not at the margins but at the center, worldliness built into the foundation” (17).

Christianity, that is, the faith once delivered to the saints, is not merely the “heresy of heresies,” but “institutionalized worldliness.” Could Leithart’s hatred of Christianity be stated any more clearly? Nietzsche himself did no better.

Leithart’s Antichristian theology – his Antichristianity – parts of which are set forth in this book, lead him to oppose economic as well as religious freedom. “McDonaldization” is a threat, because it represents “capitalist economic institutions” (34); “...what the world calls the ‘operations of the market’ the Church must sometimes label as oppression of the needy and grinding the faces of the poor” (54). Leithart is a socialist opposed to both religious and economic

freedom. He is a devout medievalist, that is, a devout totalitarian.

Chapter 2, titled "Against Theology," is a continued attack on Christian theology. Leithart does not realize that he himself has a theology, so his title "Against Theology," opposes his own theology. What he really means to say is "Against Christian Theology." He is not opposed to his own Antichristian theology. He writes:

Formally, the Bible is not a "theology text" or a "catechism" that arranges doctrines in a systematic order. Paul's epistles have often been treated as mini-textbooks, but they are manifestly not. They are epistles, encyclicals, addressing specific issues in the churches.... Form cannot be stripped away without changing content, and when Paul's various statements on, say, justification, are removed from the epistolary and ecclesiastical context and organized into a calm and systematic and erudite "doctrine," they become something different from what Paul taught [43-44].

In this paragraph Leithart denies that the chapter on justification in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, which, as a PCA minister he has sworn before God and witnesses he believes and teaches, is Biblical. Not only that, he denies that every other chapter in the *Confession* is Biblical as well. *All the Confession is organized into "calm and systematic and erudite doctrine," and therefore all the Confession is "different from what Paul [and Moses, Isaiah, and Jesus] taught."*

Leithart, with the audacity of an apostate who knows that no court in the PCA will rebuke him publicly, let alone remove him from office, attacks the *Westminster Confession* explicitly:

Theology [specifically chapter 2 of the *Westminster Confession*] tells us that God is eternal and unchangeable in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.

The Bible tells us that God relents because He is God (Joel 2:13-14), that God is "shrewd with the shrewd" (Ps. 18:25-29), that He rejoices over us with shouting (Zeph. 3:14-20), and that He is an eternal whirlwind of triune communion and love.

In the first paragraph Leithart quotes the *Confession*, and in the second paragraph he denies that the Bible teaches what the *Confession* says. This is an example that stands for the completely general principle that systematic theology is different from and a distortion of Biblical theology. Leithart is not attempting to correct the *Confession* on a single point;

he is asserting that *no* systematic, calm, organized doctrine can be Biblical. Leithart relentlessly attacks systematic theology as un-Biblical and untrue.

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**Leithart arrives at his opinion that all systematic theology must be un-Biblical and therefore false by taking the principal assumption of so-called Biblical Theology to one of its Antichristian conclusions.**

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Leithart arrives at his opinion that all systematic theology must be un-Biblical and therefore false by taking the principal assumption of so-called Biblical Theology to one of its Antichristian conclusions. That assumption is that historical events and the chronological order of God's acts of revealing truth to men are more fundamental than, more important than, and somehow superior to the logical order of God's thought. It is a denial of this proposition: "Forever, O Lord, your Word is settled in Heaven" (*Psalms* 119:89).

Leithart makes his assumptions clear:

With regard to content, theology frequently aims to deal not with the specifics of historical events, but with "timeless truths" of doctrine. But the content of Scripture almost wholly consists of records of historical events, commentary on events in prophecy and epistle, celebration and memorial of events in Psalms, and, occasionally, reflection on the constants of life in the form of Proverbs,

not with "timeless truths" (44). Leithart accepts the primacy of events and depreciates the notion of "timeless truth," thereby revealing himself as profoundly Antichristian, for Christianity is truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. "Timeless truth" is a redundancy, for all truth is timeless. Eternality is an attribute of truth, for God is truth.

This is true, not merely of such truths as  $2 + 2 = 4$ , but of all historical truths as well: There never was a time when Christ was not the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. There never will be a time when Christ will not be the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. And lest someone think that I have tricked him by using that particular example of an historical event, I hasten to add a trivial example: There never was a time when the proposition "April 19, 2004, was a sunny day in Unicoi, Tennessee" was not true, and there never will be a time when that proposition will not be true. If true propositions about historical events could change into false propositions, they would not be true, and God would not be God. From all

eternity God decreed that April 19, 2004, would be a sunny day in Unicoi, Tennessee. It is a timeless, eternal truth. There are no truths that are not eternally true.

Truth, not historical events, has primacy. Christianity is not events, nor is it based on events. Historical events are the product of God's eternal decree. They are not surds in the universe. Christ was crucified on a certain date in human history because he was the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. Systematic theology antedates, produces, and explains all historical events; events do not antedate, produce, or explain theology. Leithart gets the relationship between Biblical theology and systematic theology backwards.

Leithart continues his attack on Christian theology and truth: "Even theology proper [the doctrine of God] does not deal with purely 'timeless' realities. And how can a 'doctrine of the atonement' be formulated as a set of 'timeless truths'?"

The answer to this last question has already been given: Christ is the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. The doctrine of the atonement is a timeless truth that antedates creation. Systematic Christian theology, far from being an ideology developed by politicians, is eternal. It is both chronologically and logically prior to history. Leithart would prefer that the doctrine of the atonement not be true than to admit that it is a timeless truth.

He writes:

Theology is a product of Christianity and aids in its entrenchment. If theology deals with "timeless truths," then all the temporal things we encounter in life are outside the range of theology.

But *everything* we encounter in life is temporal.

Therefore, all life is outside theology.

First, Leithart's inference in his second sentence is a glaring *non sequitur*. His conclusion simply does not follow from his premise. I have already demonstrated – and the Bible is full of such examples – how truths about historical events are in fact eternal and timeless.

Second, it is a lie that "everything we encounter in life is temporal." Truth is eternal, not temporal, and we cannot live without thinking truth. We cannot think without using the laws of logic, which are eternally true because they are the way God thinks, and the way we think, because the *Logos* lights our minds (*John* 1:9).

Third, rather than all life being outside theology, it is Christian theology that gives life: "The words that I speak to you are Spirit and they are life" (*John* 6:63). Christian theology is living and it grants life to believers: *John* 1:4; 3:15-16; 6:68; *Philippians* 2:16, etc.

One of the reasons Leithart makes such false statements

seems to be his pagan notion of what life is. For Leithart, intellectual life is not real life. Real life, reflected in the Bible, not theology, is "hair, blood, sweat, entrails, menstruation and genital emissions" (47). "Theology," he sneers, "is a 'Victorian' enterprise, neoclassically bright and neat and clean, nothing out of place" (47). "Let us not talk of theology. Let us talk about the Church's language and myth" (51).

Leithart opens his third chapter, "Against Sacraments," with criticism of the Reformers for "stripping the altars" (71) of icons, statues, and symbols. Of course, there are no altars – let alone icons, statues, and symbols – in Christian churches, and Leithart's altar-call is as pagan and idolatrous as Rome's. He criticizes the Puritans and Protestants for their hostility to visible religious symbols. He excoriates

a Protestant tendency toward the "primacy of the intellect." It is rationalism, in that it reduces baptism and the Supper to a means for communicating information. But that is not what rituals are *for*. Treating baptism and the Supper as disguised sermons reduces them so they can be encompassed and tamed by Christianity [76-77].

Leithart derives his theology of rituals and sacraments, not from Scripture, which, to his chagrin and annoyance, contains nothing but true information, but from unbelievers full of disinformation. In fact, he derives his notion of the proper function of Christian sacraments from pagan religious practices in ancient Greece and Rome, quoting Simon Price at length (87-88). Sacraments are "rituals of a new society, public festivals of a new civic order" (77). What the ancient Greek *polis* did is what the new Church *polis* ought to do. What keeps us from seeing this, he opines, is our individualism, and he launches into a diatribe against individuals and individualism. Political liberals are always waxing eloquent about the plight of the poor and needy and their love for "humankind," but they loath individuals and individualism. Leithart writes: "The only 'individuals' in the Bible are idols and their worshipers.... And individualism is part and parcel of the heresy of Christianity" (77).

While discussing rituals, Leithart thinks of wedding ceremonies, and he discloses that he has no idea what makes a marriage: "Wedding ceremonies do not guard the *status quo ante* [funerals do, he says] but create a wholly new thing – a marriage – and confer, *ex opere operato*, a new identity upon a man and woman, the identity of husband and wife." Of course, wedding ceremonies do no such thing, let alone do it Magically, as Leithart says. (He uses the same Latin phrase Romanists use of the Mass.) What makes a marriage, what transforms an unmarried man and woman into husband and wife, is their articulated words expressing their

informed, rational consent to this new relationship. There is nothing magical about it; it is intellectual and rational. Leithart has the same pagan view of what makes a marriage as his friends Steve Wilkins and Douglas Wilson, whom I have discussed elsewhere. (The interested reader should consult my books *A Companion to The Current Justification Controversy* and *Not Reformed at All: Medievalism in "Reformed" Churches*.)

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**“Since there is no salvation without the Church, since, indeed, the Church is salvation, there is no salvation without the sacraments.”**

**–Peter Leithart**

**Presbyterian Church in America Minister**

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Lest the reader think that I have misrepresented Leithart as a sacramentalist (since he titles one of his chapters “Against Sacraments”), I quote: “Since there is no salvation without the Church, since, indeed, the Church is salvation, there is no salvation without the sacraments” (85). But we must understand the sacraments as Leithart teaches, not as Christianity teaches. Christian “sacraments flow out of and promote Christianity; and so I am against sacraments to the degree I am against Christianity” (81). But Leithart’s sacraments are not Christian sacraments: His sacraments work *ex opere operato*, and they are indispensable to salvation.

Leithart titles his final chapter “For Constantine.” He likes the fourth century Roman emperor who saw an apparition in the sky, or at least said he did, and became a “Christian.” Leithart likes the idea of Christendom: an empire in which the Church occupies the position of primacy. Leithart writes: “...so long as Christianity reigns, the Church can never convert anything. Unless we renounce Christianity, we will have no Christendom” (123-124). Leithart is correct in viewing Christianity and Christendom as antithetical. The Christian Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century shattered medieval Christendom. That is one reason Leithart criticizes the Reformers, Protestants, and Puritans.

Leithart quotes little Scripture in his book, but he does quote many unbelievers, including Aristotle, the Greek genius whose philosophy has corrupted churches and theologies for centuries; N. T. Wright, an Anglican bishop who promotes false gospels through his many books; the Nazi philosopher Martin Heidegger, whom Leithart calls “a prophet from among the Gentiles” (46); and the Romanists de Lubac and Danielou, whom he praises for resurrecting the medieval method of typological exegesis.

*Against Christianity* is a brazen attack on Christianity.

# THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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## The Gospel of Jesus Christ *versus* Neolegalism

John W. Robbins

Since I have published several essays in which I quote the Antichristian opinions of men such as Charles Colson, Norman Shepherd, and John Piper, and I have alluded to the Antichristian opinions of several others, a few churchgoers have written to me who do not know what Neolegalism is. Worse still, they do not know what legalism is, and some of these men are Elders in Presbyterian churches.

### Legalism and Man-made Law

One common misunderstanding of legalism is that one is a legalist only if one tries to obey, or insists that others obey, man-made laws. In this way of thinking, one cannot be a legalist if one is concerned exclusively about obeying God's law. The primary example of legalism, one correspondent told me, is the Pharisees, who by their traditions had made void the laws of God. Now, to be sure, no one denies that the Pharisees were legalists. But my correspondent does not understand what made the Pharisees legalists. They were not legalists because they added to the law of God, but because they thought that by law-keeping they could obtain salvation. Compare them with the Judaizers who were corrupting the church in Galatia. The Judaizers did not invent laws for Christians to keep, as the Pharisees invented laws for the Jews to keep; they merely insisted that Christians keep laws that God himself had imposed. The Judaizers earned the curse of Paul in his letter to the churches in Galatia, just as the Pharisees earned the curse of Jesus in *Matthew 23*. The Judaizers were legalists, too.

### Legalism and Keeping God's Law

Another misunderstanding asserts that legalism is a concern for keeping God's law. This is also a very popular misunderstanding of legalism, and it frequently leads to accusing anyone with scruples about obeying God's law of being a legalist. So if one refuses to work, to shop, or to play sports on Sunday, he is accused of being a legalist. But scrupulosity about God's law is not

necessarily legalism; what makes keeping God's law legalistic is the wrong motive for keeping the law. If one is scrupulous about obeying God's law because one hopes, or intends, or desires, by keeping his law, to obtain or retain one's salvation, then he is a legalist, and lost. But if one tries to keep his law, not in order to be saved at the final judgment, but because he is already saved and is grateful for his salvation, then he is not a legalist, but a Christian.

### What Is Legalism?

Legalism is the notion that a sinner can, by his own efforts, or by the power of the Holy Spirit in his life, do some work to obtain or retain his salvation. Some legalists think man has free will and can perform good works if he just sets his mind to it, thereby obtaining the favor of God. This type of legalist thinks that a sinner can believe the Gospel on his own steam. Other legalists think that a sinner does not have free will, that any good he does is done by the power of the Holy Spirit dwelling in him, and it is these good deeds done by the power of the Holy Spirit that obtain or help obtain, retain or help retain, his salvation. Both types of legalists, but especially the latter, may acknowledge that Christ's work of obedience is necessary for salvation, but both deny that Christ's work is sufficient for salvation. Both types of legalists assert that to Christ's work must be added the works of the sinner, done either under his own steam, or by the power of the Holy Spirit. That is what makes them legalists: their shared belief in the incompleteness or insufficiency of the work of Christ outside of them. They may differ on what constitutes good works; they may differ on whether only God's law or church law as well is to be obeyed; but they agree that the work of Christ alone is insufficient for their final salvation.

### What Is Neolegalism?

Neolegalism is the appearance of legalism in Presbyterian, Reformed, and Baptist churches in recent years. It is called Neo—new—in order to distinguish it

from older forms of legalism. Neolegalism wears the trappings of Calvinism and Reformed theology, claiming to be Reformed, Calvinist, and covenantal. Some of its proponents are Norman Shepherd, pastor in the Christian Reformed Church; Steven Schlissel, pastor of a church in New York City; Steven Wilkins, pastor of Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Monroe, Louisiana; and Andrew Sandlin of the Center for Cultural Leadership. In December 2001, three Elders from Midway Presbyterian Church, Jonesborough, Tennessee, wrote to Steven Schlissel about an essay he had published in the *Auburn Analecta*, the newsletter of the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church, titled "Covenant: Keeping It Simple," and about a letter that Schlissel had addressed to one of the Midway Elders, Dr. Joseph Neumann. Following is the text of the letter addressed to Schlissel by Dr. Joseph Neumann, Mr. Neil Smith, and Dr. John Robbins. In it you will see what Neolegalism is, and why it is Antichristian.

### **The Neolegalism of Steven Schlissel**

Wednesday, December 5, 2001

Mr. Steven M. Schlissel  
2662 East 24<sup>th</sup> Street  
Brooklyn, NY 11235-2610

Dear Mr. Schlissel:

On May 28, 2001, Dr. Joseph Neumann, an Elder here at Midway, seeking clarification of your views, addressed a letter to you asking four questions about an essay the Elders of Midway had read, "Covenant: Keeping It Simple," which appeared in the May 1, 2001, *Auburn Analecta*. Rather than addressing you as a Session, we thought that perhaps an individual query from Dr. Neumann would clear things up and eliminate our concerns. Unfortunately, your reply of June 1, 2001, while it does clarify some things, fails to allay our concerns about your doctrine, particularly the doctrine of salvation. Therefore, we find it necessary to write again, as individuals, to seek clarification of your views.

First, we want to thank you for making it perfectly clear that you "very much approve of Norman Shepherd's work on covenant." We note that you "hope he [Shepherd] goes farther still." Those statements do indeed clarify some matters, for they indicate your hearty approval of Mr. Shepherd's views on the covenant, and express your hope that Mr. Shepherd will indeed go further in the direction he has begun. We will raise this issue again later in this letter.

Although you gratuitously impugned Dr. Neumann's motives by suggesting that he is engaged in a "deliberate attempt to misunderstand [your] words," your June 1 letter confirms that his and our initial reading of your article was correct: You are indeed in agreement with the views of Norman Shepherd; so much so that you think he has been too reticent in his published views and ought to go further still.

Second, we recognize that your article expresses "the position of a very substantive number of Reformed and

Presbyterian folk." That is another of our concerns, for the views expressed by Mr. Shepherd and others are a departure from Scripture and the doctrine of justification by faith alone. That was one of the reasons Mr. Shepherd was dismissed from his post at Westminster Theological Seminary 20 years ago. Seeing the logic of his position on the covenant, some readers of Mr. Shepherd have proceeded to full communion with the Roman Catholic Church, while Mr. Shepherd himself left the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and joined the Christian Reformed Church, an organization some of whose blatant errors you yourself have decried.

Third, in your letter of June 1 you seem to misunderstand the first question Dr. Neumann propounded in his letter of May 28. Question 1 concerned the relationship between the doctrines of individual election and covenant, not the question of whether Dr. Neumann's name is written in *Romans* 9. The same confusion is present in your article in the *Auburn Analecta*. In *Romans* 9-11, Paul explains the covenant and defends God's fidelity to his promises by demonstrating how God's election and salvation of merely a remnant of the covenant people is the complete fulfillment of his promises. "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated," is the example Paul presents — both Jacob and Esau being children of the covenant. Contrary to your statement that "Covenant is not informed by individual election," that is precisely what covenant is informed by in *Romans* 9-11. Paul asserts that the doctrine of individual election explains the covenant, and he uses it to that end; but you seem to be at a loss to explain how the two doctrines fit together into one noncontradictory whole. That seems to be why you suggest that we leave the doctrine of individual election out of the discussion of the covenant, thus "keeping it simple." Paul not only did not leave the doctrine of individual election out of his explanation of the covenant in order to "keep it simple," but Paul taught that the only way correctly to understand the covenant and God's promise of salvation is through the doctrine of individual election. Once that explanation is made, it is clear that not all — in fact only a believing remnant — within the visible covenant people will be saved. Without that explanation, an indispensable principle of which is individual election, the doctrine of the covenant is baffling and at best incomplete.

Fourth, once again we want to thank you for your forthright answer to Dr. Neumann's second question about the covenant of works, for your answer makes it clear that you reject the doctrine of the covenant of works, and are not merely using a new name for the same covenant. Your answer clarifies things somewhat, and, once again, confirms our initial reading of your article. Far from there being a "deliberate attempt to misunderstand [your] words" on his part, your reply to Dr. Neumann confirmed our understanding of your words in the *Auburn Analecta* as a rejection of the covenant of works. But using another term without defining that term and disclosing how it differs from the covenant of works is of little help. What exactly do you mean by the phrase "covenant of creation" and how does that covenant differ from the covenant of works?

Fifth, you failed to answer Dr. Neumann's third question about *John* 1:11-13, and you repeated a statement you had used in your article that "God works only in the line of generations," expressing your astonishment that any Presbyterian would disagree. But we know of no sound Presbyterian who would agree with your statement. It is patently false, and you yourself seem to be unable to adhere to it, for you write: "When someone comes [to faith] from outside the covenant...." But if God works only in the line of generations, as you repeatedly assert, it is impossible for someone to come to faith from outside the covenant. Once again it seems that your understanding of covenant is at odds with the doctrine of God's sovereignty in election and salvation.

Sixth, in response to Dr. Neumann's fourth question about Christ's role as federal head, the substitute for his people, and his righteousness imputed to believers, you wrote, "My article was not about Christ's obedience, was it? It was about *our* place in God's covenant." But your reply ignored the fact that our place, and our salvation, is completely dependent upon Christ's obedience as our federal head and substitute. And it is indeed salvation you are discussing, as is obvious from your quotation of several passages of Scripture that speak of salvation. It seems that not only was individual election omitted from your discussion of the covenant, but Christ's crucial role, without which our place in the covenant cannot be explained, was omitted as well.

Addressing the doctrine of salvation directly, you asked, "Are you saved apart from faithful obedience? Say the answer loudly, please." Well, the answer is given loudly in Scripture and summarized clearly in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*:

Those whom God effectually calls he also freely justifies, not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous: not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone; not by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them as their righteousness, but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them....

To reply directly to your demand for a loud answer, Scripture does indeed teach that we are saved "apart from our faithful obedience": "not for anything...done by them," "not by imputing...any other evangelical obedience to them as their righteousness," "apart from works," "apart from the deeds of the law," "apart from the law," "saved through faith, not of works," by the faithful obedience of Christ alone and his righteousness alone imputed to us as a free gift. Since you used the word "apart," please notice how Paul repeatedly used the word "apart" in *Romans* 4:

But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God which is through faith in Jesus Christ to all and on all who believe....

Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith. Therefore, we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.... But to him who does not work, but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works:

"Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin."

...Therefore, having been justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.... But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him.

This teaching of Scripture is summarized by the *Westminster Confession of Faith*.

To be sure, saving belief, "which is the alone instrument of justification," produces good works in the believer, but those works are the consequence, effect, or result of an already possessed and irrevocable salvation, not the antecedent, cause, ground, or condition of our salvation. Christians, like all men, are indeed required to obey God's law, but not for the purpose of obtaining or retaining salvation. Our good works are not conditions for obtaining or retaining our salvation. We neither enter the covenant nor maintain ourselves in the covenant by our good works. Nor are works part of or equivalent to belief, as some now assert, for, among other things, that would deny the Bible's antithesis between belief and works. The believer's salvation has already been completely accomplished by Christ: "It is finished." The Gospel is precisely that good news, which we are called upon to believe. The Gospel is not "Do!" It is "Done!"

The *Westminster Confession* goes on to explain the doctrine of salvation, and please notice the words "fully" and "full":

Christ, by his obedience and death, did fully discharge the debt of all those that are thus justified, and did make a proper, real, and full satisfaction to his Father's justice in their behalf. Yet, inasmuch as he was given by the Father for them, and his obedience and satisfaction accepted in their stead, and both freely, not for anything in them, their justification is only of free grace....

As you can see, Christ's substitutionary atonement and Christ's faithful obedience as our federal head is central to the doctrine of salvation and to our place in the covenant. Yet your article was silent on Christ's indispensable obedience, focusing instead on our faithful obedience as a condition of obtaining (or retaining) salvation. Not only did you omit the doctrine of individual election from your discussion of covenant and salvation, but you also omitted the doctrines of Christ's federal headship, substitutionary atonement, and faithful obedience.

You asked, "Is a person 'saved' who disbelieves and disobeys God?" We are tempted to answer that only such a person can be saved, for the righteous do not need salvation. But if you are asking, Can a person be saved apart from belief of the Gospel, the answer is no. Faith, that is, belief, is, to use the words of the *Westminster Confession*, the "alone instrument of justification." Because it is alone, belief is the indispensable instrument. Because it is alone, belief is both the necessary and sufficient instrument. But your misreading of the *Heidelberg Catechism* suggests that our faithful obedience is a condition on which our salvation depends. Once again, here is the *Westminster Confession's* accurate summary of the Bible's teaching:

God does continue to forgive the sins of those that are justified [notice that the justified disobey God, for if they did not disobey, they would have no sins]; and although they can never fall from the state of justification, yet they may by their sins fall under God's fatherly displeasure....

Please note: "They can never fall from the state of justification." This is the doctrine of the sufficiency of Christ's work applied to the lives of all believers. Believers can and do sin continually and grievously, yet they can never fall from the state of justification. To read the warnings of Scripture against unbelief and presumption as suggesting that justified sinners can either lose their salvation or that retention of their salvation depends on their faithful obedience is logically and theologically perverse.

Question 87 of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, contrary to what you imply, teaches that unbelievers of various sorts cannot be saved. To suggest that our salvation depends in part on our meeting the condition of faithful obedience is to adopt the position of the Roman Church-State, which teaches: "We can therefore hope in the glory of heaven promised by God to those who love him and do his will. In every circumstance, each one of us should hope, with the grace of God, to persevere 'to the end' and to obtain the joy of heaven, as God's eternal reward for the good works accomplished with the grace of Christ" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1821).

The *Heidelberg Catechism*, which you quote, though it was not the best creed to emerge from the Reformation, still explains the Gospel clearly enough:

Q. 1 What is your only comfort in life and death?

A. 1 That I, with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ; who with his precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins, and delivered me from the power of the devil...wherefore by His Holy Spirit he also assures me of eternal life and makes me heartily willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto Him.

Notice that Christ has "fully satisfied" for "all our sins," including those committed after our regeneration. Notice further that Christ assures us of eternal life on the basis of his full satisfaction, his faithful obedience, not on the

basis of our faithful obedience, for we could have no assurance of salvation if we had to meet that condition. Notice also that Christ is not lying, nor speaking tentatively, nor imposing additional conditions for salvation when he assures the simple believer of eternal life. Finally, notice that our being willing and ready to "live unto Him" is a consequence, not a condition, of our salvation.

Q. 30 Do such, then, believe in the only Savior Jesus who seek their salvation and welfare of [from] saints, of [from] themselves, or anywhere else?

A. 30 They do not; for though they boast of Him in words, yet in deeds they deny the only Savior Jesus; for one of two things must be true: Either Jesus is not a complete Savior, or they who by a true faith receive this Savior must find in Him all things necessary to their salvation.

Here the *Catechism* states a Biblical antithesis, a complete disjunction, an Either-Or: Those who do not find in Christ alone, and not in themselves or others, "all things necessary for their salvation" are not Christians, even though "they boast of Him in words."

Q. 59 But what does it profit you now that you believe all this?

A. 59 That I am righteous in Christ before God, and an heir of eternal life.

Here the *Catechism* asserts that one who believes the Gospel is already righteous "in Christ" before God and an heir of eternal life. That is his profit now. He is righteous, present tense, not merely future tense. He is an heir, present tense, not merely future tense. He cannot and will not be disinherited.

Q. 60 How are you righteous before God?

A. 60 Only by a true faith in Jesus Christ; that is, though my conscience accuse me that I have grievously sinned against all the commandments of God and kept none of them, and am still inclined to all evil, yet God, without any merit of mine, of mere grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I never had or committed any sin, and myself had accomplished all the obedience which Christ has rendered for me; if only I accept such benefit with a believing heart.

Here the *Catechism* teaches that our only righteousness is imputed to us "only by a true faith in Jesus Christ," and that Christ's imputed righteousness is complete and perfect, while we have kept none of the commandments of God.

Q. 61 Why do you say that you are righteous only by faith?

A. 61 Not that I am acceptable to God on account of the worthiness of my faith, but because only the satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ is my righteousness before God, and I can receive the



same and make it my own in no other way than by faith only.

Here the *Catechism* makes it clear that our faith itself is not a good work or an act of “faithful obedience” by which we meet the conditions of salvation. It is merely the instrument by which we receive the righteousness of Christ Jesus imputed to us.

Q.62 But why cannot our good works be the whole or part of our righteousness before God?

A. 62 Because the righteousness which can stand before the tribunal of God must be absolutely perfect and wholly conformable to the divine law, while even our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin.

Here the *Catechism* makes it clear that the Holy God has not lowered his standards so that our “faithful obedience” meets some of his conditions for salvation.

One ardent follower of Norman Shepherd has written the following about salvation and the *Heidelberg Catechism*: “So which is it? Are we saved by faith? Or are we saved by repentance? Or are we saved by obedience? Always remember that we are saved by Christ and his righteousness. But how do we lay hold of him in contrast to the mass of humanity that perishes? We do so by faith, repentance, and obedience.... Unfortunately, in formulating the Protestant doctrine of *sola fides* (solely by faith), Protestants have tended to isolate faith. Thus Protestant creeds (including our *Heidelberg Catechism*) have said that we are saved by “faith alone.” This creates some tension because the Bible says that we are not saved by faith alone. Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians have been quick to criticize this glaring inconsistency.... Does Norman Shepherd lead us back to Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy as his critics have charged? Absolutely not.... But we can be thankful that Shepherd does lead us a little closer in agreement with other Christians, working toward a resolution of differences.” (It is widely reported that Shepherd himself, not merely some of his followers, has also explicitly repudiated justification by faith alone.)

Do you agree with this writer’s assertion that “the Bible says we are not saved by faith alone”? Do you agree with this writer that *sola fides* is an unfortunate misrepresentation of what the Bible says? Do you believe justification is by faith alone?

Finally, you once again made your views clear when you stated, with emphasis, that there are “covenant conditions,” which we must meet or “perish.” You asserted that our final salvation does indeed depend in part on our meeting the condition of faithful obedience, that is, on the condition of good works. You wrote: “The above statements...set forth some of the covenant conditions which can be subsumed under the heading of ‘faithful obedience.’ ” By this phrase, “some of the covenant conditions,” we understand that even this list is not a complete list of conditions required of us for salvation. But if we are to be saved by the method you suggest, we must have a complete list of the conditions

we must meet. An incomplete list of conditions for salvation would preclude the salvation of all men. What is the complete list of conditions that a person must meet in order to be saved?

The argument of your letter, which began with a rejection of the covenant of works, ended by denying the complete and sufficient work of Christ in redemption and by asserting “covenant conditions,” some of which you failed to specify, that sinners must meet in order to be saved.

We do agree with you, as you stated in the penultimate paragraph of your letter, that our differences on this matter are global and involve “a way of seeing,” or better, a way of salvation. This matter is not a detail that can be overlooked. We are indeed discussing two Gospels, and one of them, as Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians, is “a different gospel, which is not another,” but a perversion of the Gospel of Christ. We are indeed discussing two ways of salvation, only one of which can be true — the first depends on Christ’s work alone, and the second depends on Christ’s work and the sinner’s fulfilling several conditions, which you have not specified. We ought not, we must not, gloss over or minimize this difference, for it is the difference between eternal life and eternal death.

Therefore, we urge you to reconsider this matter and to retract and to correct the statements you have made, both publicly and privately, that suggest that salvation does not depend wholly upon Christ’s faithful obedience, but upon the sinner’s meeting conditions as well.

Sincerely in Christ,  
Joseph Neumann      Neil Smith      John Robbins

Elders, Midway Presbyterian Church  
Jonesborough, Tennessee

### **Arrogant and Impenitent**

Schlissel did not respond to the Midway Elders. Instead, he has continued to teach his errors publicly and even to ridicule the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Paul made it very clear that such teachers are cursed: “If anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.” The curse of God rests on the teachers of Neolegalism in the churches.

### **Andrew Sandlin: Defender of Neolegalists**

On July 1, 2002, Andrew Sandlin, formerly of the Chalcedon Foundation, published an attack on those who are opposing Neolegalism in the churches. Ironically, in 1995, Sandlin had published an essay titled “Deviations from Historic Solafideism in the Reformed Community,” in which he listed as theological deviations some of the very ideas he now endorses. By his own 1995 standards, Sandlin is now a theological deviant. (Read the essay at [www.chalcedon.org/review](http://www.chalcedon.org/review).)

Sandlin libels this author by accusing him of making “a career of vilifying good Christians,” and failing to quote even a single example, let alone a careerful, of such alleged vilification of “good Christians.” Thus,

Sandlin libels by falsely accusing others of libel, and he has the audacity to say he is being charitable in doing so. This has been the *modus operandi* of the Gospel's adversaries for millennia—at least since King Ahab accused Elijah of being a “troubler of Israel” (1 Kings 18). But more important than Sandlin's several statements maligning those defending the faith are his defenses of Neolegalism:

There is an unsettling fundamentalist strain at work that seems convinced that fidelity to the Faith is impossible if one is not badgering or anathematizing other good Christians (as Barach, Schlissel, Wilkins and Wilson truly are): “There must always be enemies in the Church, and if we can't find them, we'll invent them.”

Here we see Sandlin's antipathy to “fundamentalism,” not because it truncates the faith (it is Sandlin who truncates the faith, as we shall see presently), but precisely because it is obedient to the Scriptural injunction to contend earnestly for the faith. Had he lived in the 1920s and 1930s and taken the same attitude, Sandlin would have opposed J. Gresham Machen, who also was accused by his adversaries of having a fundamentalist streak and badgering “good Christians,” accusing “ministers in good standing” in the Presbyterian Church.

Further, Sandlin implicitly accuses the RPCUS in general and Joe Morecraft in particular of lying by “inventing” enemies in the church. Sandlin opines that Barach, Schlissel, Wilkins, and Wilson “truly are good Christians,” without even attempting to refute a single one of the charges of doctrinal error leveled against those men by the RPCUS statement. Apparently we are supposed to believe Sandlin because he says so.

Then Sandlin raises an objection that has become the stock-in-trade of those who want to escape correction for publicly teaching doctrinal errors: “More importantly, what about the requirements in Matthew 18 first to confront an erring brother privately?” The fact that Sandlin asked this question shows that he does not understand what *Matthew 18* says. The Neolegalists have not sinned privately against specific church members, but publicly teach grave doctrinal error, garbling the Gospel that belongs to Jesus Christ. They are to be dealt with as Paul dealt with Peter for a lesser offense: “I opposed him to his face...before them all” (*Galatians 2:11-14*). In acting as it did, the RPCUS was obeying the many commands to guard the flock, to reprove and rebuke, and to contend earnestly for the faith. In *Matthew 18*, private confrontation is required in cases of private sin; the public teaching of heresy need not be first confronted privately. But as a matter of fact, the letter I just quoted in its entirety, sent by three Elders of Midway Presbyterian Church to Steve Schlissel, is precisely the kind of private rebuke that Sandlin erroneously thinks is necessary. After receiving it, Schlissel did not repent of his errors, but continued to teach them publicly. Unlike Peter, who repented after Paul's public rebuke, the Neolegalists have not

repented, but have hardened their hearts against the Gospel.

Sandlin continues:

While I hold this theological school [Calvinism] in high regard, I *start* from historic, orthodox Christianity anchored in the ecumenical Christian creeds — what Thomas Oden would call “classical Christianity.” I see the Reformed Faith as the capstone, not the foundation, of Christian orthodoxy. It's the finish line, not the starting gate.

Here Sandlin distinguishes between “historic, orthodox Christianity” and the “Reformed Faith.” The Reformed Faith is merely the “capstone, not the foundation, of Christian orthodoxy.” It is not Sandlin's starting point; something he calls “classical Christianity” is. One can have the whole structure of “classical Christianity,” minus the capstone of the Reformed faith, and be a “good Christian,” in Sandlin's view. The Reformed faith, far from being necessary, is simply the icing on the cake. The foundation is the “ecumenical creeds.” The building is “classical Christianity.” Notice also that Sandlin's faith is not anchored in the Scriptures, but in the “ecumenical creeds”—that is uninspired documents accepted by several branches of “Christendom.” The Reformed Faith, while not exactly superfluous, is neither foundational nor structural.

Now in case our readers do not know who Thomas Oden is, let me briefly explain. Oden is Buttz Professor of Theology and Ethics at Drew University Theological School, a United Methodist seminary, hardly a Christian institution. Recently Oden said, “...if you are going to be Eastern Orthodox, and I don't want to try to dissuade you from that at all, I think you can find the One Holy Catholic Church there.” This is the man Sandlin cites as his authority on “classical Christianity.”

Sandlin continues:

As I've written elsewhere, heresy is almost always defined in terms of deviation from classical Christianity, not from the distinctives of any particular species of the (orthodox) church, even the Presbyterian Church. So, even if the men charged are not Reformed (and I believe they are; they claim to be), they are not thereby heretics.

So, according to Sandlin's scheme, a man is not a heretic if he denies, say, justification by faith alone, since it is a peculiar doctrine of the Reformed Faith, a doctrine that is not accepted by either Orthodoxy or Romanism, and which is not mentioned in the ecumenical creeds. Nor, according to Sandlin's scheme, is a man a heretic if he denies the sufficiency and inerrancy of Scripture, since those doctrines are not mentioned in the ecumenical creeds and are in fact denied by the Romanists and the Orthodoxists. Nor is a man a heretic if advocates the use of images and statues in worship, since both the Orthodoxists and the Romanists use and advocate the use of such “aids to worship,” and since the ecumenical creeds do not condemn their use. One could go on at length, but by

now the reader should get the point: Sandlin has repudiated Biblical Christianity in favor of something he calls "classical Christianity." In repudiating the Reformation, Sandlin has repudiated Scripture and the Gospel that belongs to Jesus Christ. But he is not finished yet:

Joe's [Morecraft] sectarian anathemas sow unnecessary division among those who should be committed to a broad, orthodox Christian culture (without sacrificing their own Presbyterian distinctives).

The central topic of the RPCUS Resolutions is justification by faith alone. Sandlin describes this as "sectarian." And the doctrine of justification by faith alone would indeed be sectarian, if Christianity were what Sandlin says it is. But the Scriptures, and the Scriptures alone, not "ecumenical creeds," determine what Christianity is, and those Scriptures say that if one errs on the Gospel, not only is one lost, but the whole of his doctrine is worthless: "But even if we [the Apostle Paul] or an angel from Heaven should announce a gospel to you beside what we preached to you, let him be accursed."

The Judaizers in Galatia no doubt were "classical Christians" before their time. Undoubtedly they believed in the deity of Christ and other doctrines of the ecumenical creeds; but they erred on justification by faith alone, and for that Paul damned them. Addlepatated Paul should have recognized, as smart Sandlin has recognized, that the primary concern is creating a "broad Christian culture," and that the Judaizers, since they agreed with him on so many things, and differed only on a sectarian distinctive, were allies in his struggle against a pagan culture. How shortsighted and sectarian the addlepatated Apostle was--at least according to Sandlin's scheme. But as a Biblical Christian, and not a "classical Christian," I think that the Apostle Paul knew better than Andrew Sandlin, Thomas Oden, or any other "classical Christian" what Christianity is, and that is why Paul denounced the Judaizers without first confronting them privately, and why his public denunciation of them is permanently inscripturated. Sandlin sees this division as "unnecessary." Good Christians see it as most necessary, for error on this point sends souls to Hell, and undermines the whole faith.

Sandlin asks:

I don't support baptismal regeneration one whit, and I'm not sure the men anathematized are advocating it; but is Joe [Morecraft] ready to overturn Nicene orthodoxy ("One baptism for the remission of sins") and indict with heresy the vast majority of the Christian church, which does espouse it?

The Christian answers: I certainly hope so. Apparently Sandlin regards the ecumenical creeds as infallible, so that even their errors are elevated to the status of irrefragable truth. But notice that Sandlin thinks that the vast majority of the visible churches are Christian. And since they endorse the soul-destroying error of baptismal regeneration, they cannot be con-

demned as heretics. Apparently "classical Christianity" finds truth by counting noses.

Sandlin continues his attack on Christianity:

Is justification a work accomplished solely by the grace of God apart from human merit or good works? In contrast with Rome and in a breathtaking innovation, Luther came to believe that justification means to declare, not to make, righteous; and many modern Roman Catholic theologians (like Hans Küng) now agree.

Notice Sandlin's audacity: Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone was "a breathtaking innovation," not a rediscovery of the Scriptural doctrine, which the Roman Church State had suppressed for a thousand years. Luther was an innovator, and therefore is to be viewed with suspicion. Then Sandlin mentions the name of Küng, a "modern" theologian, and because he is modern, he also is suspicious, and this suspicious fellow agrees with the innovating Luther. But as a matter of fact Küng espouses the Roman Catholic view of justification, as can be seen from his book on the subject and his interchange with Karl Barth, who also accepted the Roman Catholic view. (See "Karl Barth" in the Review Archives at The Trinity Foundation website, <http://www.trinityfoundation.org/>.) Sandlin boasts that "We (like our Reformed forefathers) grapple with texts like Psalm 106:30-31 and James 2:21, which don't seem to fit neatly into the tight Protestant scheme." Not only does Sandlin "grapple" with such texts, he loses the struggle, and ends by repudiating the teaching of Scripture and the Reformers. He apparently understands those texts about as well as he understands *Matthew* 18. Notice that he insinuates that "our Reformed forefathers" also came to his conclusion. Hardly. Had Sandlin been around in 1517 rather than Luther, there would have been no Reformation, just another bloody attempt at bolstering "Christian culture" against encroaching secularism. Such "cultural Christianity" had prevailed in Western Europe for a millennium, and it enshrouded the West in darkness, while even Islam was creating a superior civilization.

Sandlin misrepresents and attacks the covenant of works, calling it "odious" and "un-Biblical":

The notion of the Covenant of Works and human merit are (I believe) flatly un-Biblical; and to reintroduce them is to veer dangerously toward a works-righteousness salvation that, in fact, is the very root of the Covenant of Works. I abhor the Covenant of Works because (a) the Bible nowhere teaches it and (b) I want to stay as far as possible from the idea that man can merit his salvation by good works or law-keeping. I want Jesus Christ exalted as the only possible Mediator of eternal life.

Sandlin sees an opportunity to capitalize on the name "covenant of works" in order to bamboozle those who are unfamiliar with the concept. In fact, it is the Neolegalists who teach works-righteousness, or as they call it, covenant faithfulness, precisely because

they deny the merit of Christ's work in completely fulfilling the requirements of salvation for his people. To suggest, as Sandlin does, that the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, which explicitly teaches the covenant of works, espouses the notion of works-righteousness is ludicrous.

But there is a further problem for Sandlin here: He says that he repudiates the notion of salvation by works-righteousness. But "classical Christianity," indeed, the "vast majority of the Christian church," to use his own phrase, teaches salvation by works-righteousness. Is not Sandlin therefore a heretic by his own current definition, since he disagrees with the "vast majority of the Christian church" on this central matter?

Sandlin's attack on Christianity continues:

The RPCUS attacks any definition of faith that includes "faithful obedience".... I believe that, in spite of their best intentions, the RPCUS men are setting forth a one-sided view of faith that could easily be used to justify antinomianism.

Sandlin's accusation of antinomianism is, of course, the same charge leveled against Paul and the Gospel, to which Paul responded in *Romans* 4-6. Sandlin levels the false accusation for the same reason the Judaizers accused Paul: Paul defined faith as simple belief of the Gospel, "apart from works," and Paul asserted that it is such faith, in antithesis to works, that is the sole and indispensable instrument of justification. The Holy Spirit asserted that "to him WHO DOES NOT WORK BUT BELIEVES ON HIM WHO JUSTIFIES THE UNGODLY, his faith is accounted for righteousness" (*Romans* 4:5). It is this doctrine that offends the Neolegalists, just as it offended the Judaizers of Paul's day.

Finally Sandlin writes:

To whom are denominations accountable? *To the entire Christian tradition*. This is what makes Joe's and the RPCUS's anathemas so objectionable. Not one orthodox church in the history of the world has declared the teachings of which these men are accused as outside the bounds of historic, catholic ("classical") Christianity, even were Barach, Schlissel, Wilkins and Wilson wrong on every teaching attributed to them. Virtually the entire Christian tradition would, I am confident, rise to reprimand Joe's denomination and find it recalcitrant, provincial and sectarian. It implicitly stands condemned by that entire orthodox Christian tradition, to which it should be submitted.

### **Conclusion**

Here is the bottom line for Sandlin: Tradition. Scripture is not the bottom line; the "entire orthodox Christian tradition" as represented in "classical Christianity" is. It is to this tradition that the RPCUS must submit, and by implication, every one who claims to be a Christian.

Sandlin's is the voice of the Dark Ages speaking through one who calls himself Reformed. Listen to this

voice, and the Gospel and civilization will once again be suppressed by a lifeless, mindless, ruthless ecclesio-cracy determined to impose "Christian culture" on a recalcitrant world. Sandlin represents the wave of the past—the dark, bloody, millennial reign of Rome that was ended by the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ through Luther, Calvin, Knox, and millions of other Christians who disbelieved classical Christianity and believed Biblical Christianity.

Visit our website, <http://www.trinityfoundation.org/> to read more essays on Neolegalism and the Gospel of justification by faith alone.

#### **For Further Reading**

*The Atonement*, Gordon H. Clark  
*The Everlasting Righteousness*, Horatius Bonar  
*Faith and Saving Faith*, Gordon H. Clark  
*The Johannine Logos*, Gordon H. Clark  
*Justification by Faith Alone*, Charles Hodge