

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 Justification Controversy

A Guide for the Perplexed

John W. Robbins

If you are a member or regular attendee of a Reformed church in the United States, and if you have not been snoring in the pews for the past five years, you have probably heard someone mention "Norman Shepherd," "Shepherdism," "Neolegalism," "Auburn Avenue Theology," "Federal Vision," "N. T. Wright," "Douglas Wilson," "R. C. Sproul, Jr." "Steve Wilkins," "Peter Leithart," or the "New Perspective on Paul." Like many, you may be unsure what to make of the controversy that surrounds these men and their doctrines. Perhaps you are just now learning of this controversy and have no idea what it is all about. The purpose of this essay is to inform ordinary churchgoers of the nature and importance of this controversy, to encourage them to learn more and to take action to defend the faith of the Bible and the purity of the church.

As a churchgoer and reader, you may be under the impression that there are "good men" on both sides of the controversy who have simply misunderstood each other. Perhaps you think that with time, patience, Christian forbearance, and lots of discussion, the controversy can be ended, and we can all once again be one big happy Reformed family. Or perhaps you think the critics of the men mentioned above have been unfair and unkind to them.

Whatever your present thoughts about the matter, I hope that this essay will enlighten you as to what is going on in American Reformed churches and why.

The Origins of the Controversy

The justification controversy actually began 30 years ago in 1975, when students of Professor Norman Shepherd of Westminster Theological Seminary gave the wrong answers to questions posed by presbyteries examining them for ordination. When asked how a sinner is justified, the Westminster Seminary students answered: by faith and works.

Their incorrect answers led to an internal debate at the Seminary that lasted for seven years, ending with the dismissal of Professor Shepherd from the faculty in 1982. For most of that time, the Seminary managed to keep the controversy in-house, and the church at large heard little about it. So long as the Seminary could contain the controversy within its walls, it kept Professor Shepherd on the Seminary faculty. In 1981, when the Board and faculty could no longer contain the controversy, the Board did not renew Mr. Shepherd's contract. The controversy then subsided and he left the Orthodox Presbyterian Church as well, where charges were pending against him, and joined the Christian Reformed Church, where his views were non-controversial.

With the return of relative calm, many people outside the Seminary thought the doctrinal problem had been corrected. It had not. Professor Shepherd was not the only member of the Westminster faculty who taught justification by faith and works; in fact, the reason that the controversy lasted so long was that the majority of the Seminary faculty and Board of Trustees approved his teaching and defended him against his critics. So when the Seminary Board, bowing to outside pressure, finally let Professor Shepherd go, most of the faculty at the Seminary agreed with his doctrine, opposed the Board's action, and continued to teach his doctrines. One of Westminster Seminary's oldest and most revered professors, Dr. Cornelius Van Til, publicly defended Professor Shepherd and his doctrine of justification by faith and works. Other Shepherd defenders included Professor Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., now *de facto* dean of the faculty at the Seminary; Dr. Samuel Logan, who later became president of the Seminary; and Mr. John Frame, now teaching at Reformed Theological Seminary. These men and others ensured that though Professor Shepherd was no longer at Westminster Seminary, his teaching would continue in that institution.

And continue it did. During the past 30 years, Westminster Seminary has taught this false doctrine to thousands of men (and women), who now occupy positions of influence and income in several denominations, para-church organizations, publishing companies, and mission fields. When the Seminary Board removed Professor Shepherd, it took no action against those faculty members who agreed with him and had defended him for seven years. When Professor Shepherd left the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, that denomination took no action against those who had defended him and his doctrines who remained within that church. So when P&R Publishing Company published Norman Shepherd's book *The Call of Grace* in 2000, there were many graduates of Westminster Seminary ready and willing to promote the book and to oppose Professor Shepherd's critics. To their number must be added those writers and leaders in the churches who did not attend Westminster, but who have read and absorbed the ideas of Professor Shepherd and his students: Steve Schlissel, Steve Wilkins, Douglas Wilson, and R. C. Sproul, Jr., for example. These men, along with Westminster men such as Peter Lillback, Peter Leithart, and James Jordan, have been defending the theology of Professor Shepherd in their churches and publications. As a result of their teaching, churches have been split, friendships ended, Presbyterians have become Roman and Greek Catholics, and Christ has been dishonored.

Reactions from the Churches

Various denominations have reacted to this new theology, which I call Neolegalism, in different ways. Douglas Wilson, who had started his own denomination, the **Confederation of Reformed and Evangelical Churches** (CREC), asked his denomination to question him about these matters. Surprise, surprise, they found nothing wrong with Wilson's theology. The **Reformed Presbyterian Church in the United States** (RPCUS), faced with internal problems caused by the teaching of Neolegalism in one of its congregations, denounced the Auburn Avenue Theology as heresy in 2002. The **Reformed Church in the United States** (RCUS) denounced the teaching of Norman Shepherd in 2004, but it said nothing about the other men or their teachings. The **Orthodox Presbyterian Church** (OPC) overturned the conviction of one of its Ruling Elders, a longtime defender of Norman Shepherd, for teaching justification by faith and works. The OPC found no serious problem in his teaching. The OPC has since appointed a committee to study justification and investigate the views of various men, but Norman Shepherd is not one of them. In the **Presbyterian Church in America** (PCA), a few presbyteries (the denomination comprises about 60 presbyteries) have appointed committees to investigate the false doctrines being promoted within the denomination. One presbytery, the Mississippi Valley Presbytery, has adopted a *Report* that denounces those doctrines. But the General Assembly of the PCA has neither taken nor scheduled any action on the matter.

Today the controversy is no longer over merely the doctrine of justification. In his 2000 book, Shepherd also discussed baptism, the covenant of grace, election, and other doctrines. As the Neolegalists have developed their new theology, they have redefined the Biblical doctrines of the sacraments (teaching that baptism, for example, either converts or "marks the point of conversion" of the sinner); election (teaching corporate rather than individual election); the church (teaching that there is no such thing as the invisible church, and that all church members are Christians); the covenant (teaching that any member of the covenant of grace can lose his salvation, and some have); faith (teaching that faith includes works); and so on. They are working out their new theology, their "new paradigm" as they call it, and denying Christian doctrine in an ever-widening downward spiral of apostasy.

The Roots of the Apostasy

Unfortunately, only a few of those who have become aware of the danger posed by this new theology understand its origins. The result is that measures taken to curtail the spread of these doctrines in Reformed churches are likely to be ineffective. To use a medical analogy: The doctors have noticed symptoms and traced them to their immediate causes, but they do not understand either the severity or the etiology of the disease. If this lack of discernment among those who oppose this new theology prevails, whatever measures they take will have a limited and short-lived effect. When a brilliant neurosurgeon or a GammaKnife is required to excise a glioblastoma multiforme, they are prescribing vitamins and analgesics for headaches.

Movements of this magnitude do not happen overnight, nor do they happen in a theological vacuum, nor are they causes of themselves. Behind the justification controversy in Reformed churches¹ lies the distortion or perversion of a more fundamental doctrine, the doctrine of divine propositional revelation. That perversion of the doctrine of divine revelation has in fact led to the perversion of the doctrine of divine salvation.

When the Christian Reformers of the 16th century declared theological war on a corrupt and apostate church, they fought on two major fronts: the doctrines of revelation and salvation. Their battle cries were *Scripture alone*, *grace alone*, *faith alone*, and *Christ alone*. The Reformers understood clearly that the Roman Church-State could defend a corrupt Gospel only because it had perverted the doctrine of divine propositional revelation.

Divine propositional revelation is the indispensable axiom, the starting point, the first principle of Christianity. If that first principle is perverted or twisted, then all theorems

¹ Among Reformed churches I include both Baptist and Presbyterian churches, for there are Baptist theologians who teach similar doctrines: Don Garlington, John Armstrong, and John Piper in his book *Future Grace*, to name only three.

– doctrines such as election, salvation, covenant, and church – derived from it will be perverted or twisted as well. Some who understand that there is a serious problem in Reformed churches with regard to the doctrines of salvation fail to see the root of the problem. They cannot – or perhaps they will not – trace the roots of the current apostasy, for they prefer to think that this apostasy suddenly and inexplicably appeared in 2002, and that, like Melchizedek, it has no theological forebears.² No analysis of the controversy could be more shortsighted than that.

Unless those who understand that there is widespread apostasy in the Reformed churches are willing to discover the roots of that apostasy, no matter how personally or theologically embarrassing it might be to do so, any attempted solution to the current apostasy will be superficial and inadequate. The Reformed churches in the United States are being ravaged by a virulent form of brain cancer, and analgesics, or even amputating a limb, will not save the patient. But many would rather do that than trace the etiology of the cancer and take sufficient measures to cure the disease.

Other people who recognize the existence of apostasy in Reformed churches have tried to trace its origins, and they have gone running down the wrong trail. The origin of the current apostasy is not the New Perspective on Paul. The Biblical doctrines of justification and revelation had been perverted long before such writers as Norman Shepherd,³ Richard Gaffin,⁴ Douglas Wilson,⁵ R. C. Sproul, Jr.,⁶ and

² I use the date 2002, for some who write about the justification controversy trace its origins to the January 2002 Pastors Conference sponsored by the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church in Monroe, Louisiana. This is very myopic. No error of this magnitude arises in so short a time.

³ Norman Shepherd was Professor of Systematic Theology at Westminster Seminary (Philadelphia) from 1963 to 1981. The Board of Trustees refused to renew his contract because he had become an embarrassment to the Seminary, and presumably an impediment to successful fundraising. During the controversy, the Seminary Board had repeatedly approved Shepherd's teaching on justification, election, and covenant; and the majority of the faculty approved Shepherd's teaching even after he was removed from his post. During this whole time Shepherd was a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, and he was never convicted of any doctrinal error by that organization, despite the efforts of a few Orthodox Presbyterians to do so. For details, read *The Current Justification Controversy* (by Dr. O. Palmer Robertson), *A Companion to The Current Justification Controversy* (by Dr. John W. Robbins), and *The Changing of the Guard* (by Dr. Mark W. Karlberg).

⁴ Dr. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. is a Teaching Elder in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and a lifelong defender of Norman Shepherd. His book, *Resurrection and Redemption* (previously titled *The Centrality of the Resurrection*) is based on his doctoral dissertation (he received his terminal degree from Westminster Seminary in 1969), and is a subtle and clever attack on the Biblical and Reformation doctrine of forensic justification.

⁵ Douglas Wilson is a prolific writer and one of the leading spokesmen for Neolegalism in Reformed churches. In 2002 he

Peter Leithart⁷ ever read N. T. Wright⁸ or E. P. Sanders.⁹ The Shepherd controversy erupted at Westminster Seminary in 1975, two years before E. P. Sanders published the book that is credited with creating the New Perspective on Paul.

The evidence shows that the origins of the current apostasy must be traced to Westminster Seminary, not to the New Perspective on Paul. Graduates of Westminster, inculcated in a perverted doctrine of divine revelation – a doctrine that teaches that the Bible is paradoxical; that no man can understand a single thought God has; that human logic is different from God's logic; that literal language is defective, and that poetic, analogical, or parabolic

wrote a manifesto for the movement, *"Reformed" Is Not Enough: Recovering the Objectivity of the Covenant*. He describes himself as "postmillennial, Calvinistic, Presbyterian, Van Tillian, theonomic, and reformed." I have co-authored a rebuttal: *Not Reformed at All: Medievalism in "Reformed" Churches*.

⁶ R. C. Sproul, Jr., the namesake of his more famous father, is an effective proponent of Neolegalism. One need read only his own writings and examine the "favorite links" at his website, <http://www.gospelcom.net/hsc/links.php>. He recommends the websites of James Jordan, Douglas Wilson, the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church, Covenant Media Foundation, and so on. As editor of *Tabletalk* magazine, a monthly published by his father's Ligonier Ministries, Junior Sproul hired Douglas Wilson to write monthly columns for three years, and he occasionally published essays by other leading Neolegalists, including Steve Schlissel and Steve Wilkins. Wilson and James Jordan, another Westminster Seminary graduate, have also spoken at Ligonier conferences. Through the Ligonier conferences and *Tabletalk* magazine, the Sprouls have given them the imprimatur of Ligonier Ministries, and Ligonier has introduced them to audiences they might not have otherwise reached. Keith Mathison is a senior editor at Ligonier Ministries. One of his books, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, published by Douglas Wilson's Canon Press, is an attack on the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*. In a statement on April 12, 2005, Mr. Mathison says that "I disagree with both Norman Shepherd's doctrine as well as the Auburn Avenue theology. I've never believed those doctrines and certainly have never taught them in writing or otherwise."

⁷ Dr. Leithart is a graduate of Westminster Seminary and Cambridge University and a Teaching Elder in the Presbyterian Church in America. Like his comrades, Leithart is a prolific author, whose most famous book is titled, tellingly, *Against Christianity*. He makes it very clear why he is against Christianity. The May and June 2004 issues of *The Trinity Review* criticize this book.

⁸ Nicholas Thomas Wright is the prolific Bishop of Durham in the Apostate Anglican Church. His books have been recommended by the Neolegalists. Wright was a featured speaker, along with Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., at the January 2005 Pastors Conference sponsored by Steve Wilkins' Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church (PCA). Wright is a leading figure in the mostly academic movements called the Quest of the Historical Jesus and the New Perspective on Paul.

⁹ E. P. Sanders is usually credited with starting the academic movement called the New Perspective on Paul with the 1977 publication of his book, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. He has taught at Duke University for about 30 years.

language better approximates the unknowable divine truth; that Systematic Theology distorts theology, and so-called Biblical Theology does not – Westminster graduates have simply been discovering liberals and apostates, recognizing their own views in their books, and promoting those books to members of Reformed churches.

A minor example of this is Jack Bradley, an OPC minister, who reports that he recently read and recommends the book *Christian Nurture* by the 19th century American theologian Horace Bushnell. Bradley had already arrived at his erroneous views of the covenant and salvation, but he found corroboration for them in Bushnell's book. Bushnell, of course, was a 19th century liberal, famous for his moral theory of the atonement (which fits in well with Neolegalism's denial of the imputation of Christ's active obedience to believing sinners) and for his theory of language as arising by natural means (which fits in well with a denial of the historicity of *Genesis* 1-3). Bushnell perverted, among other things, the doctrine of propositional revelation by disparaging literal language and logic. He used the word "paradox" to describe his theology 75 years before Karl Barth.

Neolegalists throughout the United States are discovering liberals and apostates who express their views better than the Neolegalists themselves can express them, and they recommend their books. If these liberals are still living and speak with a British accent, the Neolegalists seek to ride their theological coattails to respectability. That is why the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church featured Bishop N. T. Wright at its 2005 Pastors Conference. The Neolegalists at the AAPC had arrived at their views independently of Wright, but they see in Wright an ally against Christianity. So they seek to enlist him whenever and however they can to promote their errors, and Wright gladly obliges.

The root of the justification controversy in Reformed churches is not the New Perspective on Paul, but the false teaching generations of students received at Westminster Seminary. Professor Cornelius Van Til, who taught at Westminster from 1929 to 1972, was one who perverted the doctrine of divine propositional revelation. He taught, for example, that "At no point [note well] does such a system [by which he means the "Reformed confessions of faith"] pretend to state, point for point, the identical content of the original system of the mind of God.... To claim for the Christian system identity of content with the divine system at any point [note well] is to break the relationship of dependence of human knowledge on the divine will."¹⁰

The crucial point to note is that Professor Van Til distinguished and separated two systems of theology: He called one the "Christian system," by which he meant "Reformed confessions of faith"; and the other he called the "divine system," which is known only to God. The two systems are not the same. In fact, they have nothing in common, for "at no point" does the Christian system, that

¹⁰ *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 1971, 18-19. There are many such statements in this book.

is, the Reformed confessions, "state, point for point, the identical content of the original system of the mind of God." So when Chapter 11 of the *Westminster Confession*, "On Justification," to take a relevant example, asserts that

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, they receiving and resting on him and his righteousness by faith, which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God –

when the *Confession* summarizes the doctrine of justification by faith alone, it "at no point" states, "point for point, the identical content of the original system of the mind of God." In short, the *Confession* contains no divine information about justification, and God may indeed justify by faith and works, if he justifies at all. That is, if there is a God at all.

The utter skepticism and agnosticism of Professor Van Til's doctrine of revelation (and his agnosticism is shared by many theologians) – the notion that we cannot know at any point what God knows – opens the door to any and every form of denying Biblical truth. Some of his students have developed his doctrine into a philosophy of various theological perspectives, which may all be found in Scripture. Those new perspectives are now appearing in Reformed churches.¹¹

Once one abandons the Biblical doctrine that God has revealed divine truth to men in human language – clearly, non-paradoxically, and logically – all Hell breaks loose. Hell has now broken loose in Reformed churches, just as it broke loose a century ago in liberal churches. The souls of men and the honor and veracity of God are at stake in this controversy, and half-measures will not suffice. The new theology must be rooted out, no matter how personally painful it may be to some churchmen to do so.

¹¹ Among those students are Vern Poythress (WTS) and John Frame (WTS/RTS), who have written books on perspectivalism. They have done what Geerhardus Vos, who held the first chair of Biblical Theology at Princeton Seminary, warned against in his 1894 inaugural lecture: "With the greatest variety of historical aspects, there can, nevertheless, be no inconsistencies or contradictions in the Word of God. The student of Biblical Theology is not to hunt for little systems in the Bible that shall be mutually exclusive, or to boast of his skill in detecting such as a mark of high scholarship." Of course they deny that their perspectives are mutually exclusive, for they are merely facets of the multifarious paradoxical antinomies of Scripture.

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The Current Justification Controversy

O. Palmer Robertson

Editor's Note: Dr. O. Palmer Robertson is Director and Principal of African Bible College, Uganda, and Professor of Theology at African Bible College, Malawi. Formerly, he had been on the faculties of Knox, Covenant, Westminster, and Reformed Seminaries. He is the author of several books, including *The Christ of the Covenants*, *The Final Word*, *Understanding the Land of the Bible*, and *The Israel of God*.

This essay, which concludes in the August 2003 issue of The Trinity Review, is taken from his new book, The Current Justification Controversy, a history of the controversy surrounding Norman Shepherd in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and Westminster Theological Seminary. The Trinity Foundation plans to publish it in August. More information on ordering the book appears in the August 2003 issue of The Trinity Review.

Background to the Controversy¹

The Gospel of justification through belief alone is the central doctrine of Scripture, as Paul makes clear in his letter to the Romans. After declaring this Gospel to be the power of God for salvation in *Romans* 1:16-17, the apostle discusses other doctrines and how they imply or are implied by the doctrine of justification through belief alone. He begins with the sinfulness of men, their universal and total depravity, for the doctrine of total depravity is a necessary implication of the doctrine of justification through belief alone. Paul emphasizes that the Jews, who had great confidence in their sacrament of circumcision, their Abrahamic lineage, and their Mosaic covenant, were as guilty before God, and more so, than the uncircumcised Gentiles outside the law who had none of those privileges. The Jews too, if they are to be saved, Paul argues, must be justified through belief alone. That doctrine of

justification was the central issue of the Christian Reformation of the 16th century, and defections from that doctrine throughout church history merit the anathemas Paul pronounced on all who teach a different message.

When Norman Shepherd was dismissed from the faculty of Westminster Seminary in early 1982, I thought the Seminary had solved the problem of false teaching by removing a false teacher. I was wrong. As Dr. Mark Karlberg explained in another of Trinity's books, *The Changing of the Guard*, the Seminary's Board had removed one teacher (Shepherd) from its faculty – a teacher John Murray had approved as his successor, and whose view of justification Cornelius Van Til had defended – but had allowed false teaching on justification to continue at the Seminary. For the past 20 years, though Norman Shepherd has not been on the faculty of Westminster Seminary, men who agree with him on these matters and defend and endorse his views have been teaching there, inculcating their views of election, justification, covenant, and salvation in hundreds of men who are now pastors, missionaries, and teachers in Presbyterian and Reformed churches, schools, and seminaries. So, when P&R Publishing Company (which has had close ties to the faculty of Westminster Seminary for at least three decades) published Norman Shepherd's book *The Call of Grace* in late 2000, there were plenty of defenders of Shepherd's erroneous views in the churches, and they responded to his call by vigorously defending the errors they had learned. The result has been a widespread outbreak of opposition to the Gospel of justification through belief alone in the very churches that profess to be Reformed.

The cancer of Neolegalism was not killed in 1982, and it has now metastasized throughout Reformed and Presbyterian churches in America. The Philadelphia Presbytery of the OPC, by failing to take proper disciplinary action against Shepherd, his supporters, and their views when it had the opportunity to do so more than 20 years ago, permitted the leaven of the Pharisees to leaven the whole lump.

¹ A longer version of this introductory essay by Dr. John W. Robbins appears in *A Companion to The Current Justification Controversy*. *A Companion* includes documents mentioned by Dr. Robertson but not included in his book. It is available from The Trinity Foundation for \$7.95 when purchased in conjunction with *The Current Justification Controversy*.

Dr. Robertson's history of the justification controversy more than 20 years ago is indispensable to understanding how Reformed and Presbyterian churches have arrived at the dire situation they are in today.

Covenant Seminary's Role

When Dr. Robertson wrote *The Current Justification Controversy*, the Editorial Committee of *Presbyterion*, the theological journal of Covenant Seminary (where Dr. Robertson had been a member of the faculty since 1980) accepted it for publication. But the faculty of Covenant Seminary intervened and voted to stop its publication on the grounds that it might embarrass the faculty of another Reformed Seminary, namely, Westminster. Dr. Robertson authored a Resolution appealing this decision to the General Assembly of the PCA, the highest court in the denomination:

A Resolution to the Eleventh General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America

Whereas the pursuit of truth with integrity is essential to the propagation and defense of the Gospel; and

Whereas this pursuit of truth must be carried on with Christian love and sensitivity but without respect of persons or institutions; and

Whereas the attached history of the "current justification controversy" among Reformed and Presbyterian churches in America has been submitted to the theological journal of Covenant Theological Seminary by a faculty member of the Seminary; and

Whereas the editorial committee of this journal (*Presbyterion*) has commended this article as a fair representation of the issues currently before the church so far as it can determine, noting that the material "must" be published, and even offering to assist financially in its publication; and

Whereas this committee, and then by a vote of five to four with two abstentions, the faculty of Covenant Seminary voted not to publish this article in its journal, giving as its reason that it might be offensive to another respected seminary of the Reformed and Presbyterian family in America; and

Whereas the author of this article has expressed his openness to editorial suggestions, and his willingness to have other viewpoints on this issue printed in subsequent editions of *Presbyterion* so long as they are factually true and promote the doctrinal positions of the Presbyterian Church in America; and

Whereas due to this church's relation to Covenant Theological Seminary, *Presbyterion* in some sense serves as the organ for ongoing theological discussion within the Presbyterian Church in America, and not merely the organ of Covenant Theological Seminary; and

Whereas the policies and decisions related to Covenant Theological Seminary are subject to the review and control of the Presbyterian Church in America;

Therefore, the Presbyterian Church in America is respectfully requested to determine whether or not the pages of *Presbyterion* should be open to this article on the current justification controversy.

Respectfully submitted,
O. Palmer Robertson

Dr. Robertson's appeal failed. His detailed history of the justification controversy was never published in any theological journal. The powers that be, reading their copies of 1984, as well as church history, did their best to suppress it. The Trinity Foundation is pleased to be able to offer it for the first time in book form. Here are some excerpts from Dr. Robertson's book:

Introduction

By the five-hundredth anniversary of Martin Luther's birth [1483-1983], it might have been expected that the question of the way of a man's justification before God would have been settled, at least in Reformed and evangelical circles. But history demonstrates that such an expectation fails to take account of the resilience inherent in man's natural inclinations to find some role for his own performance in determining his position before God. For the controversy over the relation of works to justification continues to challenge the church.

The recurrence of this issue attests to the correctness of Luther's judgment that justification by faith alone is the doctrine of the standing or falling church. For why else would this single doctrine become the point of dispute throughout the generations?

This historical overview of a current controversy relative to justification is offered in the hope that it may provide a framework by which the church in this day may see more clearly the Gospel issues, and may maintain a fully Biblical perspective. Certainly this brief treatment cannot expect to conclude the matter in the present context. But perhaps it can provide some impetus for advancing the discussion in a way that shall promote the peace and the purity of the church....

The Beginnings of the Controversy

The "justification issue" came to the attention of the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary in 1975, when certain students were reported to have set forth a position that justification was by faith and by works when being examined by various church bodies. In February 1976, two Faculty members formally addressed the situation, and requested that together with Mr. Norman Shepherd, Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at the Seminary, the Faculty attempt to clarify the matter.

In a previous Faculty discussion of the issue on April 14, 1975, Mr. Shepherd had affirmed that as faith was the instrument of justification, so also works were the instrument of justification. This assertion had drawn a rather vigorous response from various members of the Faculty, since it challenged directly expressions in the doctrinal standards of the Seminary. For the *Westminster Confession of Faith* states that "Faith...is the alone instrument of justification" (WCF 11.2).

Through the early years of the discussion in the Faculty and the Board at the Seminary, it was not clear that Mr. Shepherd actually had taught in the classroom that justification was "by works" as well as "by faith." It was reasoned that a teacher cannot be held responsible for all

the ways his students may understand him. It was also proposed that some of Mr. Shepherd's expressions had been exploratory, and were meant only for the Faculty.

However, in the discussions of a special Board-Faculty committee in 1980, it finally was made clear by tapes of his 1975 lectures that Mr. Shepherd had taught in the classroom that justification was by works as well as by faith. In these lectures, Mr. Shepherd developed extensively the idea that works functioned in a parallel role to faith in justification. He declared that justification presupposes *faith*; *faith* is not the ground of justification, but *faith* is the instrument of justification. In parallel fashion, he declared that justification presupposes *good works*; *good works* are not the ground of justification, but *good works* are the instrument of justification. While faith and works were maintained as distinctive in themselves, each was presented not as the ground but as the instrument of justification.

At this point, certain aspects of the controversy as it originally developed may be noted.

First of all, the problem arose with Mr. Shepherd's affirmation that good works served as the *instrument* or as the *way* of justification. He wished to avoid the idea that good works might serve as the *ground* of justification. But he also plainly stated that good works paralleled faith as the instrument of justification.

Secondly, Mr. Shepherd declared his intention to remain loyal to the teaching of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and catechisms. This fact must be remembered, and explains much of the divergence in subsequent evaluations of the issue. For in Mr. Shepherd's mind, his teaching was in accord with the standards of the church, although going beyond the *Confession* and catechisms at certain points. The question created by his formulations was whether or not many of his statements actually did accord with the teaching of Scripture and the *Confession*.

Thirdly, Mr. Shepherd defended a "unique" role for faith in justification. Faith was viewed as playing a role in justification that nothing else could fulfill. Indeed, good works also were to be viewed as the instrument or the "way" of justification, but faith was presented as having a distinctive place in justification. This assertion about faith's "uniqueness" had the effect of allaying the fears of many about Mr. Shepherd's commitment to the Reformed doctrine of justification. But for others, so long as his teaching did not also exclude works as the "way" of justification, the issue remained clouded.

Fourthly, Mr. Shepherd developed from these original formulations a variety of ways by which he might express his distinctive position. Originally he affirmed that good works were the instrument of justification as well as faith. Then for a period of time he proposed that neither faith nor works should be regarded as the "instrument" of justification, since the term "instrument" had the danger of being understood as "instrumental cause." Since only the righteousness of Christ rightly could be understood as the cause of justification, it would be dangerous to speak of either faith or works as the "instrument" of justification. Finally he spoke of faith as "unique" in its role as

instrument of justification, while works were the "way" of justification.

Yet through all this divergence of phraseology, a consistency of position was being maintained, indicated by a Faculty report to the Board dated May 17, 1977. The subsequent evaluations of several outside scholars also noted this consistency. Despite his various modes of expression, faith and good works were presented consistently as parallel to one another in their relation to justification. In this scheme, one could speak of the "unique" role of works as the "way" of justification as well as the "unique" role of faith as the "instrument" of justification. But the distinction between an "instrument" of justification and a "way" of justification in Mr. Shepherd's formulations was difficult to determine.

Fifthly, Mr. Shepherd stressed the organic unity of faith and works in justification. In the end, he could reduce to a single assertion his views about the parallelism of faith and works in justification. He could affirm that justification was "by faith alone" and yet retain his position that justification was by faith and by works. For in his view the "faith" that justifies is itself a work of obedience which is an integral aspect of the larger covenantal response of obedience for justification. If justification is by "obedient faith," it also is by the "obedience of faith." If justification is by a "working faith," it also is by the "works of faith." Even the classic assertion that justification is by "faith alone" thus comes to mean that justification is by faith and by works, since the "faith" that justifies is understood as integral to good works done as the way of justification.

Because of this distinctive perspective, Mr. Shepherd was understood by some to be attacking a recognized enemy by his formulations. He might emphasize that a faith that does not work cannot justify; and so the errors of "easy-believism" would be countered. But because by these expressions he also could mean that the works of faith justify, he was communicating once more the same point that had received such vigorous opposition originally. In a slightly different form he was asserting his view that works as well as faith justify.

Mr. Shepherd cited as Biblical support for his view the statement of James that a man is justified by works as well as by faith (*James* 2:24). In his interpretation, James was speaking of essentially the same justification as Paul, and so could be cited as proof that justification was "by works."

At this point, it may be remembered that both Martin Luther and John Calvin responded rather explicitly to the Roman Catholic analysis of these assertions of James. As Calvin says:

That we may not then fall into that false reasoning which has deceived the Sophists [the Romanists], we must take notice of the two-fold meaning of the word *justified*. Paul means by it the gratuitous imputation of righteousness before the tribunal of God; and James, the manifestation of righteousness by the conduct, and that before men, as we may gather from the preceding words, "Show me thy faith," etc. [*Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, 314ff.].

According to the Reformers, James does not say that “works” must be added to “faith” or included in faith as the way by which men receive God’s judicial declaration that their sins are forgiven. In their understanding, James is not even discussing the way to pardon from guilt, as is Paul. To the contrary, James is describing how a man may “show” his faith to be genuine (*James 2:18*), and how faith inevitably will “come to fulness” or “fruit” in good works (*James 2:22*).

Subsequent discussion of the “justification” issue must begin with a full awareness of the original state of the matter. Otherwise, later assertions by Mr. Shepherd that actually continue his initial perspective will be heard only as affirmations of traditional orthodoxy. The controversy began with Mr. Shepherd’s assertion that works paralleled faith as the *instrument* of justification. The issue continued as Mr. Shepherd insisted that works were the *way* of justification, and that faith included in its essence the good works that justify....

The Causes of the Controversy

What brought about these agonizing and seemingly hurtful disputes within the very womb of evangelical Christianity in America today? How could it be that those so close in theological background and commitment would find themselves so radically opposed on the central doctrine of justification?

Many false reasons have been cited as the source of the issue.

False Reason 1: Misunderstanding

It has been said that misunderstanding of Mr. Shepherd’s position is to blame for the controversy. If his opponents had been more careful in their evaluations, they would not have misread him.

Such a proposition begins to lose credibility after a certain point. As the circle of dissent from Mr. Shepherd’s position broadens to include ever larger bodies of scholars, theologians, pastors, and laymen, the appeal to “misunderstanding” loses whatever convincing character it may have possessed.

As any pedagogue knows, the teacher is responsible to a great degree not only for what he says but for how he is heard. Communication has not been achieved until the hearer rightly understands the speaker.

It should not be suggested that Mr. Shepherd manifested incompetence in the area of communication skills. He continually demonstrated his ability as a trained scholar and a devoted theologian.

Yet in this case, evidence clearly indicates that whatever his intent, he communicated doctrine that many understood to contravene the teaching of Scripture and the *Westminster Confession*.

False Reason 2: Dutch Tradition

Another proposed explanation for the controversy has been the suggestion that Mr. Shepherd’s theology represented a tradition of the faith of the Reformers different from the perspective prevalent among evangelical Presbyterians in America today. A rejection of his

formulations on justification and the covenant would then signal a tragic narrowing of the Reformed tradition represented at Westminster Seminary and in American Presbyterianism. Evidence to support this analysis has been found in the newly emerging “predominance” of the Presbyterian Church in America on the Board of Westminster Seminary.

A significant cultural distinction may be detected between the Scotch-English and the Dutch tradition of Calvinism as they have come to expression on American soil. It is true that the Presbyterian Church in America, representing the former of these traditions, has increased its representation on the Board of Westminster in recent days.

Yet it is difficult to establish a view of justification and the covenant rooted in the Canons of Dordt of the Dutch tradition that is different from that which may be found in the *Westminster Confession* and catechisms. The Reformers were united about the doctrine of justification. Their creedal statements reflect that unity. Although differences may be found at certain points, it is difficult to drive a wedge between these two traditions with reference to the doctrines of justification and the covenant.

Of course, if a difference of substance should have emerged, Westminster Seminary as a point of historical fact is committed to the formulations of the Westminster Standards. It is to these documents specifically and not to a broader confessional base that the professors and Board members of Westminster Seminary are committed.

A head-count of the constituency of Westminster’s Board with reference to their church affiliation dispels the theory that domination by the Presbyterian Church in America explains the conflict. At the time of the dismissal of Mr. Shepherd, the Board included seven members from the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, six members from the Christian Reformed Church, and six members from the Presbyterian Church in America. This proportioning hardly represents “PCA domination.”

The wide spread of ecclesiastical background in the opponents of Mr. Shepherd’s view also dispels the notion of a possible denominational “coalition” against him. Board and faculty members opposing his views included representatives from the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the Christian Reformed Church, the Reformed Church in America, the Canadian Presbyterian Church, the Reformed Church in the United States (Eureka Classis), the Presbyterian Church in America, and the Church of England.

False Reason 3: Personality Conflict

A third explanation of the controversy has been made. It has been suggested that a “personality conflict” created the controversy. Strong individuals on either side encountered one another, with the inevitable result of an unending struggle. It cannot be denied that strong personalities were involved in the issue. Persistence marked participants on each side of the controversy. But this phenomenon can neither be faulted in itself, nor blamed as the source of the problem. A matter of such crucial substance clearly justifies determination on the part

of participants. Blame for the conflict must be found elsewhere.

False Reason 4: Lack of Due Process

It has been proposed with some vigor that the real blame for the controversy must lie at the doorstep of Mr. Shepherd's opponents. Their un-Christian procedures so marred the orderly process of evaluation that discussion of the theological substance of the matter became meaningless. By a prejudicial and premature calling forth of opinions from "outside theologians," and by a dissemination of one-sided allegations to the public, all hope of coming to a sympathetic understanding of Mr. Shepherd's legitimate concerns was destroyed. Instead, Mr. Shepherd became the public scapegoat of a seriously mishandled situation.

However, those opposed to Mr. Shepherd's views, and particularly the signers of the May 4, 1981 letter,² had no guarantee that the broader community of the church would agree with them in their assessment of Mr. Shepherd's formulations. If their statement of the issue was prejudicial to Mr. Shepherd's views, then in time an evaluation of the primary documents of the discussion should make that fact evident to all. Interestingly, however, it has been Mr. Shepherd's opponents who have been most concerned that all the materials of the controversy be made available to the public, while at the same time recognizing the right and perhaps the necessity of Mr. Shepherd to retract any of his controverted statements.

In the final analysis, only the presence of an issue of substance can explain the controversy. Numerous factors have tended to conceal this reality. But this perspective alone provides an explanation of all the various elements involved in the controversy.

Reason 1: Deep Doctrinal Differences

Not all theological disputes center on issues of substance. But this matter had substance from the beginning. Never has a view of justification and the covenant precisely like that of Mr. Shepherd's been proposed in the church. Indeed, many close parallels may be found. But as a man with distinctive academic gifts and qualifications, he has developed a unique perspective that represents new doctrinal formulations....

It is somewhat difficult to capture all the nuances of a perspective that still is emerging. Yet an effort may be made to summarize the distinctiveness of Mr. Shepherd's formulations that generated this controversy:

(1) Justification has been perceived inadequately by the church through its use of a Roman legal model. The Biblical perspective requires that justification be understood in terms of the dynamic of the covenant model. The 'covenant of *life*' must not be reduced to a

² For the text of this letter, as well as additional information about the origins and effects of the Shepherd case not included in *The Current Justification Controversy*, see *A Companion to The Current Justification Controversy* by Dr. John W. Robbins, available from The Trinity Foundation for \$7.95 when ordered with *The Current Justification Controversy*.

legalistic courtroom setting, even when discussing specifically the doctrine of justification.

(2) Election has been viewed deficiently by the dominance of a static model of God's unchanging decrees. Since man cannot perceive the elect as God sees them, it is fruitless as well as misleading to assume this perspective. Instead, the church must view election as Scripture does, which is out of the dynamic of the covenant. God indeed elects unchangeably. But he nonetheless functions in the dynamic of the covenant. In this framework the movement from reprobation to election also opens the real possibility that God's elect may become reprobate.

(3) Church membership and the sacraments must be seen for what they really are. They define genuine positions and experience in the covenant of grace. Any lesser perspective on their significance mocks the divine ordinances and contradicts the clear teaching of many portions of Scripture. Baptism rather than regeneration marks the point of transition from death to life. But discontinuation in the covenant ordinances means damnation.

(4) Faith and its fruits never can be abstracted from one another, for to believe is to obey. As a consequence, the way of justification before God is the way of obedience, and obedience is the way of justification. The unity of man's salvation finds its realization in the dynamic of covenant living.

Time will uncover the ultimate consequences of Mr. Shepherd's distinctive formulations. But as novel perspectives on the Biblical teaching concerning justification, the covenant, the sacraments, and the relation of faith to works, they provided the catalyst for the current controversy. This issue was one of theological substance and not of incidental disagreements that could have been avoided.

Reason 2: Discoordination between Presbytery and Seminary

Complicating the entire process was the relationship developed between the Seminary community and the church. Ecclesiastical approval for ministry depended on the evaluation of materials by the Presbytery. Seminary approval depended on evaluation of materials by the Board and Faculty. The church and the Seminary of necessity had to take into account the evaluations of one another.

Yet the two groups simultaneously were working with different sets of materials. Even as the Seminary was evaluating the October 1976 paper and a subsequent paper modifying four of its most controversial formulations, the Presbytery was determining not to admit this material as evidence for charges against Mr. Shepherd. The Presbytery eventually moved on to evaluate Mr. Shepherd's *Thirty-four Theses*, and in the end failed to pass a motion finding them in accord with Scripture and the *Confession*.

When considered by a select group of faculty members at the Downingtown Conference, these *Theses* failed to provide a basis for unity, particularly when placed in the

context of Mr. Shepherd's distinctive views on the covenant.

A partial reason for prolonging the controversy appears to reside in this distinction between the respective roles of Presbytery and Seminary. The Seminary had opportunity to make a more thorough analysis of Mr. Shepherd's distinctive formulations because of its access to a broader scope of materials. But their evaluation did not have the advantage of open and public discussion in which it would become apparent how Mr. Shepherd would be heard by the church at large.

On the other hand, the Presbytery restricted the scope of materials it would consider. By such an action, it closed the door to a most important avenue of relief for the opponents of Mr. Shepherd's views. He had propounded and defended for a two-year period certain doctrinal statements that never had been seen by the Presbytery. Although he made a general statement regretting their problematic nature, he never retracted anything in particular. The Presbytery, therefore, never was in a position to judge whether Mr. Shepherd's more recent formulations actually did represent a repudiation of the specific statements that were proposed to be of an erroneous or misleading nature.

At the same time, the general statement of regret made by Mr. Shepherd to the Presbytery hardly could be expected to satisfy Faculty and Board members who had heard him repeatedly defend the most controverted of his statements. A way of relief could have been found if Mr. Shepherd had retracted statements regarded as erroneous or misleading. But so long as one set of documents was being considered by the Seminary, and a different set of documents was being considered by the Presbytery, it was not likely that this step would be taken.

Reason 3: "Biblical Theology"

A third major cause of the controversy may be proposed. It has been identified by some as the "ascendancy" of "Biblical Theology" over Systematics.

Mr. Shepherd in his own mind had discovered a distinctive teaching on justification in *James*. He desired to allow *James* to speak with full canonical authority in the church. He did not want the formulations of Paul to mute the vital words of *James* that justification was "by works."

Mr. Shepherd also wished to give full weight to the warnings of Scripture concerning those who professed faith but did not live in obedience. Particularly the warnings of *Hebrews* needed to be given their proper place in a doctrine of justification, since this book insisted on a "holiness" without which no one could see the Lord.

The experience of elect Israel also needed a renewed emphasis in the modern church scene. Unquestionably Israel had been the elect of God. The distinctive words of *Deuteronomy 7* clearly asserted that fact. Yet they had become "not-my-people," the reprobate among the nations. This distinctive message of Scripture needed to be given its proper role in the doctrine of justification.

It was in the framework of a bringing together of these various testimonies of Scripture that Mr. Shepherd developed his distinctive formulations. The older "order" of

God's applying the benefit of Christ's redemption (the *ordo salutis*) needed reassessment in the light of this new data provided by "Biblical Theology." Systematics must now be "informed" by these new perspectives.

This ascendancy of "Biblical Theology" over Systematics could be hailed as a great triumph which would lead to renewal in a church permeated with the errors of "easy-believism." All the vitalities and distinctive insights of the Biblical Theologian could become the catalyst for compelling the church to rethink its dogmatic assumptions about "once saved, always saved" that too often lead to presumption.

The church can only rejoice over the discovery of fresh insights provided by the discipline of Biblical Theology. Drawing out the distinctive emphases of the various portions of Scripture must inevitably enrich the church's appreciation of the variegated revelation of God to men.

But some reserve must be expressed on this subject. First, the Biblical Theologian must be very careful that his exegesis is correct as he deals with the various portions of Scripture. Secondly, the Biblical Theologian must emphasize the rich diversity and distinctive message of Scripture only in a framework in which he also recognizes the controls exercised by the unity of the whole of Scripture. In other words, the "progress" of revelation must always proceed with a full awareness of the final stages of the revelational process. For it must be remembered that the ultimate context of any particular Scripture is the totality of Scripture.

Reason 4: Unconvincing Exegesis

Mr. Shepherd was not altogether convincing with respect to his basic exegesis of certain portions of Scripture which have played a crucial role in the development of his new "Biblical Theology." He posited that justification had identical significance in the letter of *James* and in Paul's argument in *Romans* and *Galatians*. Yet even though he analyzed rather carefully the optional meanings of the word "to justify" in *James*, he never established that *James* meant specifically that the guilty, polluted sinner had all his sins forgiven "by works" and not merely "by faith." In this case, it would not be adequate to show that *James* used the term "justified" semantically to mean "declared to be just" rather than "demonstrated to be just." For the meaning of *justification* in Paul can be understood properly only in terms of the total context which deals with the way guiltiness is removed. In order to establish that Pauline "justification" is "by works," Mr. Shepherd would have to show that *James*' intention was to affirm that all the guiltiness of the polluted sinner is removed by the sinner's own actions – actions which in themselves at best are imperfect and sinful.

In a similar manner, when Mr. Shepherd asserted that Paul excluded only works done in an attitude of boasting and pride from the way of justification and did not intend to exclude also the "good works" done in faith by the regenerate as the "way" of justification, he had the obligation of establishing this point on clear exegetical grounds. Working in the context of history since the Reformation, he basically had a responsibility to answer

the argument of John Calvin and others in their analysis of the scope of the “works of the law” excluded from justification by Paul. Calvin had argued quite convincingly that if Paul were excluding only boastful works from justification, then he would not have cited the Old Testament to show that if a person should do these very “works” he would be blessed with *life* (see John Calvin’s treatment of *Galatians* 3:10,13 in his *Institutes* III, ii, 19).

When Mr. Shepherd’s exegesis of Paul is joined to his exegesis of James, the implication is that a man is “justified” by good works done in faith, although he is not justified by works done in prideful boasting. His ambiguous use of the phrase “obedience of faith” then serves as a means of communicating the idea that justification is by the *obedient acts* done in faith, as well as by *faith*, which inevitably comes to expression in obedience to God.

Some have credited “Biblical Theology” with these “fresh insights” into the way of justification. But if the “distinctive” message of Paul and of James both have been represented from a perspective that is not precisely true to their own message, then the “Biblical Theology” arising from these conclusions could not prove to be helpful to the church.

Reason 5: Misunderstanding of Covenant Election

A close scrutiny also must be made of Mr. Shepherd’s analysis of the teaching of *Deuteronomy*, *Ephesians*, and *Hebrews* on election, the covenant, and perseverance. Is it true that God’s election of individuals under the new covenant actually is of the same sort as God’s election of national Israel under the Old? Do the typological limitations associated with national Israel’s election continue in the individual election described in *Ephesians* 1? May a person elected by God according to the categories of *Ephesians* 1 lose his elected status just as the nation of Israel lost theirs in the historical event of the exile? Is the only election found in Scripture something that may be called “covenant election,” referring to an election-in-covenant that may become reprobation?

Once more the appeal to the discipline of “Biblical Theology” must be weighed with care.

It is true that the distinctive emphasis of every portion of Scripture must be given full expression. Such a distinction in the progress of revelation with respect to divine election and reprobation is brought out by Geerhardus Vos when he notes that the doctrines of election and reprobation “are by preference viewed in the Old Testament as they emerge in the actual control of the issues of *history*. It is God acting in result of his eternal will, rather than *willing in advance of His temporal act* that is emphasized in the Old Testament stage of revelation” (“The Biblical Importance of the Doctrine of Preterition,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1980, 413, emphasis supplied). This old covenant emphasis on viewing God’s eternal decrees through the admittedly limited perspective of historical images may be contrasted

with the greater emphasis of the New Testament on the “eternal background” of the same reality (*ibid.*).

In attempting to make relevant the significance of the movement from election to reprobation of Israel under the old covenant, Mr. Shepherd asserted that the individual elected according to *Ephesians* 1 also could become reprobate. But it must be questioned whether he has communicated adequately the progress of Scriptural revelation as described by Vos. Instead of letting the finalized revelation of the New Testament provide the framework for understanding the shadowy form of the Old Testament, it may be that Mr. Shepherd has allowed the typological forms of the Old Testament to exercise too much control over the manner in which the New Testament is to be read. As a consequence of this perspective on election, a corresponding perspective emerged in his development of the idea of “justification” that actually could be lost.

The Biblical Theologian must not only describe accurately the distinctive message of the various portions of Scripture. He must also balance Scriptural diversity with Scriptural unity. The distinctive message of each portion of Scripture has as its final and definitive context the totality of the teaching of Scripture. In the end, portions of Scripture which deal most explicitly with the topic at hand must be given their full weight. The “shadows” of Old Testament Scripture must be interpreted in the context of New Testament “reality.” The obscurities of Scripture must be understood in the light of its more explicit teaching.

In view of these considerations, it may be inappropriate to credit the “fresh insights” of Biblical Theology in contrast to Systematics for originating this controversy. Only as exegesis functions accurately in describing the progress of revelation meaningfully in the context of the total message of Scripture may it properly be termed “Biblical Theology.” The delicate art of exegesis can be spoiled by setting one statement over against another if an actual dialectic is created. The assertions of one text may be overstated so that an equivalent adjustment-in-error of many other texts may be required for maintaining “harmony” in Scripture.

For these and other reasons this controversy on justification has arisen in the church today. It is indeed painful to engage in such a vigorous debate on the central doctrine of justification. But perhaps the controversy itself may be the means by which the church will clarify and deepen its thinking. Perhaps the church will be prepared for even more meaningful advances in testifying to the saving grace of Jesus Christ, who is “The Lord our Righteousness” (*Jeremiah* 33:16).

The Current Justification Controversy

O. Palmer Robertson
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March, April 1988

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What Is the Gospel?

John W. Robbins

There are more than two thousand organizations in the United States alone in 1988 that profess to be Christian. Yet these organizations, let alone the particular individuals who compose them, differ dramatically.

Historically, for example, both the Roman Catholic Church and the Puritans claimed to be Christians. Yet will anyone deny that Roman Catholicism—with its veneration of saints; its adoration of Mary; its use of images, beads, and statues; its clerical hierarchy; and its elaborate ritual and ostentatious costumes—is a different religion from iconoclastic Puritanism? Which one, then, is Christian?

Today the contrast is equally dramatic, if not so obvious as in the seventeenth century. There are small groups of people who still believe the religion of the Protestant Reformers and the Puritans. They believe that the Bible alone is the Word of God and that it is therefore without error; that Jesus Christ was an actual figure of human history, like George Washington or Abraham Lincoln; that he was God incarnate, born of the Virgin Mary; that he was crucified for the sins of his people, he rose again the third day and later ascended into Heaven, from where he will return to judge the living and the dead. They believe that Christ died to save only his people, and that he, being all-powerful, actually saved them from both sin and Hell. They believe that sinful men obtain right standing with God only on the basis of the imputed righteousness of Christ, not by any thing they have done or can do, and not

by anything God has done in their lives, nor by any experiences they may have had, but simply by the work Christ did on Earth two thousand years ago.

In contrast to these few heirs of the Protestant Reformation, there is not only the 800 million member Roman Catholic Church, there are also large Protestant churches that have repudiated the Reformation with its resounding affirmations of "The Bible alone" as the source of truth, "faith alone" as the means of justification before God, "grace alone," not human merit, as the reason for man's salvation, and "Christ alone" as the provider of that salvation. There are also groups such as the Mormon church, which claims to be Christian; the Unification church, which claims to be Christian, the Christian Scientists, and so on indefinitely. In the twentieth century there are thousands of different groups that claim to be Christian. What then, in all this confusion, is Christianity?

The confusion that plagues the religious world is not restricted to the meaning of the word *Christian*. The Gospel itself, which all who call themselves Christians should agree on, has become so confused by the opinions of men as to be almost meaningless. The ancient Tower of Babel has been replaced by radio and television towers as dozens of religious leaders teach their own gospels on the airwaves every day.

Pat Robertson, like many other American religious leaders, is called an "Evangelical." The word has its roots in the Greek New Testament, where the

Gospel is called *euangelion*, the Good News. At the time of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, the word *Evangelical* was applied to the Reformers; for they believed and preached the Good News, the Gospel, that Christ had earned salvation for his people, that men need not and could not earn salvation by their own works and experiences, and that this Good News—this Gospel—was found in the Bible alone. The word *Evangelical* originally meant two things: (1) that the Bible, not church leaders, nor clergymen, nor human experience, is the sole source of truth; and (2) that a sinner received right standing before God by having Christ's righteousness reckoned to his account through faith in the person and work of Christ. These ideas were expressed in two slogans: *sola Scriptura*—Scripture alone—and *sola fide*—faith alone.

Today, however, there is a great deal of confusion about what the Gospel is, and what an Evangelical is, just as there is confusion about what a Christian is. Because of this confusion, many people are called Evangelicals who do not believe the Gospel. It might be best to begin to sort out this confusion by spelling out some of the popular religious ideas that are not the Gospel.

Counterfeit Gospels

The Gospel is not "You must be born again."

The Gospel is not "You must be filled with the Holy Spirit."

The Gospel is not "You must be baptized in the Holy Spirit."

The Gospel is not "You must speak in tongues."

The Gospel is not "You can perform miracles."

The Gospel is not "Let Jesus into your heart."

The Gospel is not "You must have a personal relationship (or experience or encounter) with Christ."

The Gospel is not "Repent."

The Gospel is not "Expect a miracle."

The Gospel is not "Put Jesus on the throne of your life."

The Gospel is not "Jesus set an example for us so that we may follow him to Heaven."

The Gospel is not "Trust Jesus."

The Gospel is not "Let go and let God."

The Gospel is not "Draw nigh unto God."

The Gospel is not "Christ died for all men and desires the salvation of all."

The Gospel is not "Decide for Christ."

The Gospel is not "Christians should take dominion over the Earth."

The Gospel is not "Make Jesus Lord of your life."

The Gospel is not "Jesus is coming again."

All these messages, and presumably many more that I have neither heard nor thought of, are being preached from American pulpits and television studios as the Gospel. A few of them are commands taken from Scripture. But none of them is the Gospel. Not everything in the Bible is the Gospel. The Gospel is Good News.

But the Gospel is Good News of a particular sort. It is not good news about what Christians will enjoy in Heaven. It is not good news about what God can do in changing your life. It is not good news about the success, prosperity, health, money, and powerful living that God wants you to enjoy. Many people, like Pat Robertson, confuse the Gospel with stories about what God has done or can do in their lives. One looks in vain through Pat Robertson's books and newsletters for a presentation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. What one finds instead are numerous accounts of miracles, speaking in tongues, and other amazing and exciting religious experiences. None of these things is the Gospel.

Robertson and the charismatics make the same mistake that seventy disciples did, as Luke reports in chapter 10. Let me repeat the story:

After these things the Lord appointed seventy others also, and sent them two by two before his face into every city and place where he himself was about to go.... Then the seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name."

And he said to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from Heaven. Behold, I give you authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you. Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice because your names are written in Heaven.

Unlike many religious people who falsely claim they can perform divine miracles, here were seventy men who could truly perform divine miracles. God was doing wonderful things in their lives. They had dominion even over demons. But Jesus tells them explicitly, "Do not rejoice in this." Christ gave them a direct and explicit command not to rejoice in their own experiences—experiences that some people today would promote as "power evangelism" and "power healing." The disciples were focusing on their own experiences rather than what God had done from all eternity and what Christ was going to accomplish on the cross. They were rejoicing in their subjective experiences. But Christ told them to rejoice in something that they had never experienced, something that God had done wholly outside of them, even before they were born. He told them to rejoice in the doctrine of election—that their names are written in Heaven. That election is permanent: Their names are *written*. But many, if not all, of those who are promoting healing and miracles today actually deny the doctrine of election. They believe that man is free of God's control. Therefore, they have nothing to rejoice in but their own experiences.

Most of what are called "Evangelical" books, essays, television programs, and sermons consist of little more than stories about the wonderful things God is doing in this movie star's life, or that football player's life, or what he can do in your life.

They do not contain even the least suggestion of the Gospel. It is impossible to over-emphasize this point. Virtually all of what is preached from the pulpits and television studios of America, in conservative as well as in liberal churches, is not the Gospel. It is a clever counterfeit, and millions of churchgoers and television viewers are being cheated.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ

In contrast to Robertson's near total reliance on his subjective religious experience, the apostle Paul tells us what the Gospel is in *1 Corinthians 15*:

Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the Gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.

That is the Gospel, and that Gospel is preached in very few so-called Christian churches today: Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, he was buried, and he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.

Because of contemporary religious confusion, there are several aspects of Paul's Gospel that demand elucidation. First, the Gospel concerns history, not legend or myth. It is not, as Peter says, "cunningly devised fables." When Paul mentions Jesus Christ, he means an actual historical character like George Washington or Julius Caesar. He is not speaking of an experiential "Christ" whom we imagine. There are many different "Christs" and "Gods" being talked about today. The words *Jesus*, *Christ*, and *God* have become almost meaningless in the twentieth century, as we have seen, and unless one says exactly which "Christ" he means, no one, including himself, can know. Paul does that. His Christ is an historical figure, not a voice, nor a vision, nor a dream.

Second, the Gospel concerns the past, neither the present nor the future. It is history. The Gospel does not describe any present or future action that God or man might take. The Gospel is news about actions God in Christ took 2,000 years ago to save his people, actions that are wholly outside of our experience. Just as all men are condemned by Adam's sin, which was wholly outside of us, so are all of God's chosen people saved by Christ's obedience unto death, which is wholly outside of their experience. Just as the Gospel is history, not legend; and just as the Gospel concerns the past, not the present nor the future; so the Gospel is about something that God did, not something that we must do or can do. Christ is both the author and the finisher of our salvation. We do not complete what he began; Christ said, "It is finished."

Third, the Gospel concerns what Christ did for *his* people: Christ died for *our* sins, not for the sins of everyone in the world, but for the sins of his people only. He did not die for the sins of Judas, for example, for Judas went to Hell. If Christ had died for Judas's sins, why was Judas sent to Hell? Was it for his unbelief, his failure to "let Jesus into his heart"? But unbelief and failure to "accept" Christ admittedly are sins, and Christ, according to this false but popular gospel, died for all of Judas's sins. So the question remains unanswered: If Christ died for all men, why are some men punished in Hell?

The Scriptures teach that Christ did not die for all men. He came to Earth to save some men, whom the Bible calls "his people," "the sheep," "friends," and "the church," among other names, and he actually earned salvation for them. He did not come merely to offer salvation to all men and hope that some men would accept his offer. He came to save his people, and he did so.

The Gospel is an objective and historical message. It does not concern our experiences at all. It does not concern our works, but God's works. It does not concern our alleged miracles, but Christ's death and Resurrection. Regeneration—sometimes called the new birth—sanctification, faith, and the Second Coming—are all consequences of what Christ accomplished 2,000 years ago in Judea. They must

not be confused with the Gospel, for effects should not be confused with causes.

The Whole Counsel of God

But there is more in Paul's account of the Gospel than might appear in a superficial reading. What we have discovered so far is totally different from what passes for the Gospel in this decadent age. But there is a great deal more. Paul uses the phrase "according to the Scriptures" twice in this concise account of the Gospel. His whole summary of the Gospel takes only twenty-seven words in the *New King James* translation (and fewer in the Greek), and eight of those words are "according to the Scriptures ... according to the Scriptures." The phrase is obviously very important. Why does Paul repeat it? What does it mean?

The Gospel, according to Paul, is embedded in some thing much larger: It is embedded in all the Scriptures. Not only are the Scriptures the only reliable source of information we have about the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, but the Scriptures alone explain those events. The Gospel is not merely that Christ died; so did Paul. The Gospel is not merely that he was buried; so was Abraham. The Gospel is not merely that Christ rose again, so did Lazarus. The Gospel is that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. And that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures. The Gospel is in accord with and explained by the Scriptures, all sixty-six books of them. When Christ explained his resurrection to the disciples, he did so by explaining the Scriptures:

And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.... Then their eyes were opened and they knew Him: and He vanished from their sight. And they said to one another, "Did not our heart burn within us while He talked with us on the road, and while He opened the Scriptures to us? ... And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures.

By emphasizing the phrase "according to the Scriptures," Paul is emphasizing the fact that the Gospel is part of a system of truth given to us in the Bible. All of the parts of this system fit together. All the statements in the Bible are logically consistent with one another. To give but one example of this, Christ's birth, life, death, and resurrection fulfilled specific prophecies given centuries earlier. The exact town where he would be born was predicted hundreds of years before his birth; the fact that his birth would be unusual, for his mother would be a virgin, was predicted centuries before his birth; his death among the wicked and his burial among the rich were predicted; and Christ himself predicted his resurrection. The specific propositions that Paul calls the Gospel in *1 Corinthians 15* do not stand alone. They imply and are implied by many others. The choosing by God the Father of those that should be saved, the suffering of the punishment due them for their sins by Jesus Christ at Calvary, and the gift of faith to the elect people by God the Holy Spirit are all part of the system of truth taught in the Bible. They are the three great aspects of redemption: election, atonement, and faith. And the Gospel, the doctrine of the atonement, is the central theme. It is impossible to defend the Gospel, or even to preach the Gospel, without defending and explaining the system of truth of which it is a part.

Paul's emphatic phrases in *1 Corinthians 15* indicate that those who wish to separate the Gospel from the system of truth found in the Bible cannot do so. The Gospel, while a distinct *part* of the Biblical system, is nevertheless a part of the *system*. This system is fully expressed in the Scriptures. The propositions that Paul calls the Gospel are some of the propositions of Scripture. Because the Gospel is part of the Scriptural system of truth, it is impossible to defend the Gospel without defending the whole system. An exclusive emphasis on the "fundamentals" of the faith, rather than the "whole counsel of God," which is the phrase the Bible uses, is futile. Six or eight unconnected truths, even if they be major doctrines of Christianity, are not the whole of Christianity, and cannot be defended effectively. Fundamentalism poses no serious threat to secular philosophies because it is logically unsystematic and disjointed, a mere shadow of the robust Christianity we find in the Bible.

Paul emphasized the Scriptures, but this emphasis upon the writings is not unique to Paul. When explaining and defending Christianity, Christ always appealed to Scripture, and never to his own experience. During his temptation in the wilderness, Christ quoted Scripture in reply to each of the Devil's temptations: "It is written," "It is written," "It is written." What makes this appeal more significant is the context in which it occurred. Christ had just been baptized in the River Jordan by John the Baptist. He had heard a voice from Heaven saying, "This is my beloved Son in Whom I am well-pleased." The Holy Spirit had descended on him in the form of a dove. Talk about religious experiences! No one else, before or since, has ever had such an astonishing experience. Yet Christ did not tell the Devil what had happened to him, the voice from Heaven and the giving of the Holy Spirit. Why not? Why did Christ ignore all this and quote what many today call the dead letter of the Bible? Why does Christ answer the Devil by quoting Scripture rather than recounting his recent and unique spiritual experiences? Because the Scriptures are the objective written word of God. The Bible, not our experience, is authoritative. If Christ did not appeal to his experience, and it was a far greater experience than any mere man could ever hope to have, there is absolutely no justification for our appealing to our miserable and possibly deceptive experiences.

It was, in fact, the Devil who wanted Christ to appeal to his personal experiences: He wanted Christ to perform a miracle; Christ refused. He wanted Christ to take a leap of faith off the pinnacle of the temple, presuming God the Father would perform a miracle; Christ refused. He wanted Christ to worship him, avoid the hellish suffering of the cross, and thereby gain dominion over all the kingdoms of the world; again Christ refused.

The Devil used the same appeal to experience in the Garden when he tempted Eve: He promised Eve that she would become godlike when she ate the forbidden fruit. And Eve "saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise." Relying upon her experience, and seeking a still more wonderful experience, Eve abandoned the Word of God. The

secret of Christ's intransigent resistance to diabolical temptation was precisely the fact that he did not prefer his own experiences to the Word of God.

The apostle Peter also emphasizes the written Word of God. He climaxes his account of the testimony concerning the truth of the Christian faith by mentioning Scripture. In his second letter, Peter says,

For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to him from the Excellent Glory: "This is my beloved son, in whom I am well-pleased." And we heard this voice which came from Heaven when we were with him on the holy mountain.

We also have the prophetic word made more sure, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

A few verses earlier Peter had written that God's "divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness through the knowledge of him who called us." Please notice the phrase "all things." Later in the same chapter Peter again says that Scripture is the *only* way we have of getting this knowledge: Scripture, the prophetic word made more sure, is the light that shines in a dark place—not a brightly lit place, nor even a dimly lit place, but a dark place. There is no other source for this knowledge, including knowledge of the Gospel, than the Scriptures. The Bible claims to have a monopoly on truth. The charismatics, like all other cults and false religions, deny that monopoly. They denigrate the Bible and base their religion on their personal experiences.

But the Gospel is neither accounts of our personal experiences nor commands that we are to obey. The Gospel is the Good News of what Christ did for his people 2,000 years ago. It is not about the new

birth, nor the Second Coming, nor the activities of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. The Gospel is propositions about historical events that happened wholly outside of us. It has consequences and implications for us today, to be sure, but these consequences are *effects* of the Gospel, and must not be confused with the Gospel itself. The fatal error of the Dark Ages was to confuse God's work for us with God's work in us, and so pervert the Gospel. The same error is widespread among so-called Evangelicals today who do not distinguish between what Christ has done for us and what the Holy Spirit can do in us. We are rapidly re-entering the Dark Ages because the light and clarity of the Gospel has been lost.