

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 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

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*.

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.

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).

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O. Palmer Robertson
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