

**REPORT OF THE SPECIAL COMMITTEE TO STUDY JUSTIFICATION  
IN LIGHT OF THE CURRENT JUSTIFICATION CONTROVERSY**

Presented to 258<sup>th</sup> Synod of the Reformed Church of the United States

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Your committee was formed with the mandate “to study the doctrine of justification by faith in light of the current controversy surrounding the relationship of good works to justification.”<sup>1</sup> The committee has interpreted the scope of the mandate to particularly include a study of the teachings of Norman Shepherd on justification by faith, and also to include a study of the teachings of the so-called New Perspective on Paul. At this stage in our work your committee presents our report and recommendations concerning Shepherd’s teachings, believing that the New Perspective on Paul warrants a separate treatment.

While we would like simply to dismiss Shepherd's teachings on justification by faith as negligible error and move on, we find this difficult to do because of the growing impact of his teachings in the broader Reformed community and even within our own fold. Indeed Shepherd's influence has reached our communion in that a former elder became an advocate of his views and was removed from the church. More broadly it is reported that Shepherd’s ideas are having greater impact in other Reformed denominations. It is well known that Shepherd continues to teach and write. In addition, others now defend and propagate his or similar views in Reformed churches, over the internet, and elsewhere.

We do not believe that we need to address every error that comes down the road, nor do we need to wait until those errors take firm hold in our churches and upset the peace that the Lord has given us. Since Shepherd's influence has grown and the controversy surrounding his teaching shows no sign of abating in the near future, it is appropriate that synod appointed this committee to consider the issues and suggest actions that appear to be necessary to guard our church from any errors and heresies that are associated with Shepherd's teachings. This your committee has done and we submit our efforts for your consideration and action.

## **NORMAN SHEPHERD’S DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In 1963 Norman Shepherd succeeded John Murray in the department of systematic theology at Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia). In 1975 controversy over Shepherd’s teaching broke out both at the Seminary and in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC), where Shepherd was serving as a pastor.<sup>2</sup> O. Palmer Robertson notes the circumstances in which the controversy first began: “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 works when being examined by various church bodies.”<sup>3</sup> This subsequently led to a seven year investigation into the teaching of Norman Shepherd, which eventually resulted in him being dismissed from his teaching post at Westminster “as of January 1, 1982.”<sup>4</sup> In May 1982 charges were filed against Shepherd and presented before the Presbytery of Philadelphia of the OPC, but “Mr. Shepherd was transferred out of the Philadelphia Presbytery before charges filed against him could be heard. He was received into the Christian Reformed denomination ... without notation that charges had been

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<sup>1</sup> *Abstract of the Minutes of the 257<sup>th</sup> Synod* (The Reformed Church in the United States: 2003), 75.

<sup>2</sup> For a history of the original controversy see O. Palmer Robertson’s book *The Current Justification Controversy* (Unicoi, Tennessee: The Trinity Foundation, 2003). Robertson informs us in the Forward that, except for minor alterations, the material in his book remains as it was twenty years ago when it was approved but then subsequently denied for publication in *Presbyterion*, the theological journal of Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis. “The reason given for this reversal was that the material might prove offensive to another respected seminary of the Reformed and Presbyterian family in America” (9).

<sup>3</sup> Robertson, 14.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

filed against him.”<sup>5</sup> “He served pastorates in the CRC in Minnesota and Illinois before retiring in 1998.”<sup>6</sup>

Though our purpose is not to rehash all the historical details of the original controversy, it is worth noting that the Faculty at Westminster did not find it easy to resolve the controversy. According to Robertson’s history of the controversy, the Faculty found it difficult “to determine whether actual error was being taught in Mr. Shepherd’s formulations, or whether Mr. Shepherd’s modes of expression simply were misleading because of their lack of clarity.”<sup>7</sup> It should also be mentioned that all during the controversy, Shepherd had both supporters and opponents.<sup>8</sup>

His supporters think he was treated unfairly and should never have been questioned for his views on justification, let alone removed from the Faculty. His opponents think his supporters in both the Presbytery and the Seminary managed to short circuit the proceedings in both Presbytery and Seminary, which allowed him and his false teaching to escape clear condemnation.<sup>9</sup>

Eighteen years after Shepherd’s dismissal from Westminster Seminary, and with the publication of Shepherd’s book titled *The Call of Grace*, subtitled *How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism*,<sup>10</sup> the old debate concerning Shepherd’s view on justification has resurfaced, and has created quite a stir in Reformed circles: “this study is highly controversial, not only in the seminary community in which Shepherd ministered for many years, but in the wider arena of contemporary evangelical and Reformed theology.”<sup>11</sup>

Our primary purpose is to examine Shepherd’s view of justification in light of the Bible and reformed theology. Although Shepherd has other controversial and problematic views on related issues such as the nature of the covenant, election, and baptism, we will restrict our analysis primarily to his teaching on justification.

Though Shepherd’s teaching on a number of related theological issues was called into question, the key point of debate was whether he held to the Reformation’s doctrine of justification by faith alone, as expressed in the Westminster Standards, or had, in one way or another, lapsed into teaching that justification was by faith and works together.<sup>12</sup>

We will first look at Shepherd’s views as the Westminster Faculty perceived them, and which eventually formed a part of the Faculty’s own explanation for dismissing Shepherd. Next, we will see that Shepherd’s teaching on justification expressed in *The Call of Grace* does not differ essentially from his teaching that resulted in his dismissal from Westminster in 1982. Then we will examine a recent article on justification that Shepherd wrote for the journal *Reformation and*

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>6</sup> David Vandrunen, “Justification By Faith in the Theology of Norman Shepherd,” *Katekomen* 14:1 (Summer 2002), 23. *Katekomen* is a publication of Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

<sup>7</sup> Robertson, 25.

<sup>8</sup> Among Shepherd’s opponents cited in Robertson’s book was Rev. Norman Hoeflinger. Richard Gaffin is listed among the supporters.

<sup>9</sup> *A Companion to the Current Justification Controversy*, edited by John W. Robbins (Unicoi, Tennessee: The Trinity Foundation, 2003), 14.

<sup>10</sup> Norman Shepherd, *The Call of Grace* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Mark W. Karlberg, *The Changing of the Guard: Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia* (Unicoi, Tennessee: The Trinity Foundation, 2001), 6.

<sup>12</sup> David Vandrunen, 23.

*Revival*.<sup>13</sup> Finally, we will consider an advancement of his position in two lectures that he gave on August 8-9, 2003, at a conference entitled “Contemporary Perspectives on Covenant Theology,” sponsored by the Southern California Center for Christian Studies. This essay will soon reveal that Shepherd’s doctrine of justification is contrary not only to classic reformed theology but also to the biblical gospel of *sola fide*.

## I. Westminster Seminary’s Perception of Shepherd’s Teaching

### A. The Early Stages of the Controversy

From the very beginning of the controversy, the Faculty at Westminster had to deal with Shepherd’s idea that faith and works work together as an instrument of justification. According to the Seminary Board, “Shepherd questioned making justification by faith alone a touchstone of orthodoxy, since, as he argued, what can be said of faith can also be said of good works; neither can be the ground of justification, both can be instrument.”<sup>14</sup> Because this idea directly challenged the Westminster Confession of Faith’s statement that “Faith . . . is the alone instrument of justification,” (11.2) the Faculty requested Shepherd to prepare a paper explaining his view of ‘faith alone’ as expressed in the Westminster Standards. Shepherd’s fifty-three page paper, dated October 1976, was titled “The Relation of Good Works to Justification in the Westminster Standards.”<sup>15</sup>

After reviewing Shepherd’s paper, the Faculty, in its report to the February 10, 1977 meeting of the Board, singled out expressions that they found troubling. For example, ‘faith coupled with obedience to Christ is what is called for in order to salvation and therefore in order to justification.’ ‘Thus, faith and new obedience are in order to justification and salvation.’<sup>16</sup> A fuller report to the faculty was made to the Board meeting of May 17, 1977.

The Faculty report specified four areas where modifications of the language and formulations of Mr. Shepherd were to be desired. These concerned his broad use of the term justification, his language of requirement for good works in relation to justification, his reluctance to make faith prior to justification even in a logical sense; and his strategy of explaining the ‘alone’ function of faith as separating it from meritorious works rather than from other graces.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Norman Shepherd, “Justification By Faith Alone,” *Reformation and Revival* 11:2 (Spring 2002), 75-90.

<sup>14</sup> “Reasons and Specifications Supporting the Action of the Board of Trustees in Removing Professor Shepherd,” in *A Companion to the Current Justification Controversy*, 135. The distinction between the ground of justification (that is, the *reason why* God justifies) and the instrument of justification (that is, *the means by which* God justifies us) is crucial to understanding the biblical doctrine of justification. According to classic reformed theology, justification “is an act of God’s free grace, whereby He pardons our sins and accepts us as righteous, but does not change us inwardly” (Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991 reprint], 512). The ground or reason why God accepts us as righteous is not because we are actually righteous inwardly, for justification does not change us inwardly, but it is only because Christ’s perfect righteousness has been imputed or credited to us. How do I get Christ’s perfect righteousness to be imputed to me? By simply accepting the free gift with a believing heart, which is to say, by faith only. As we will see, Shepherd denies that a simple act of faith is the only means of justification.

<sup>15</sup> Robertson, 19. Robertson critiqued this paper of Shepherd’s with a paper of his own, titled, “Nineteen Erroneous Or Misleading Statements in Norman Shepherd’s October, 1976 paper, ‘The Relation of Good Works to justification in the Westminster Standards,’” reprinted in *The Counsel of Chalcedon* (July/August, 2002).

<sup>16</sup> Quoted from Reason and Specifications, 136.

<sup>17</sup> Reason and Specifications, 137.

Although six members of the Faculty “believed that these criticisms were not severe enough,” and “held Mr. Shepherd’s views to be erroneous,”<sup>18</sup> a majority of the Faculty concluded that “although Mr. Shepherd’s ‘structure of argumentation seems bound to create misunderstanding,’ his formulations fell within the toleration limits of the Westminster Standards (April 25, 1978, Report to the Board).”<sup>19</sup> For those of us on the outside looking in, we can sympathize with Robertson’s observation that the

...implications of this conclusion are rather striking. Mr. Shepherd’s formulations on the central doctrine of justification almost certainly will mislead the church into thinking that somehow works were the way of justification. Yet these formulations were not out of accord with the *Westminster Confession*.<sup>20</sup>

### **B. Philip Hughes’ Dissent**

A dissent from the Faculty’s majority decision was registered in writing by Philip E. Hughes, visiting Professor of New Testament at the Seminary, who began his dissent by expressing amazement that he actually found himself in disagreement with the Faculty of Westminster over the fundamental doctrine of justification.<sup>21</sup> The value of Hughes’ dissent is that, even though first written in the late 70’s, it remains today an up-to-date critique of Shepherd’s teaching on justification.

Hughes expressed concerns, which to him crystallized the issue facing the Seminary. Hughes’ major concern was that the Faculty in its report on Shepherd spoke approvingly of the necessity of good works for salvation. No one denies that the root of faith produces good works, and that without personal subjective holiness no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14). “But the attempt is being made to connect these good works with faith in such a way that though defined as non-meritorious they are regarded as necessary to our future (or final or eschatological) justification: no good works, no Heaven!”<sup>22</sup> Endorsement is given to the idea that justification is “a process in three stages: initial (‘this initial entry into God’s favor’), continuing (‘the continued enjoyment of God’s favor’), and consummating (‘the consummation of God’s favor at the Judgment’).”<sup>23</sup> The problem with this idea is that it “has the effect of calling in question the perfection and the once-for-all character of the initial – and I would insist, the *only* – justification of the sinner who puts his trust in Christ and to whom the perfect righteousness of Christ is fully and indefectibly imputed.”<sup>24</sup> It also “implies that the sinner’s justification is in some real sense dependent on what he does, on the nature of his works, following his ‘initial’ justification.”<sup>25</sup>

In response to the Faculty’s concern that faith not be isolated from good works, Hughes remarks with emphasis,

*where justification is concerned* (and this is the essential qualification) I do indeed isolate faith from good works and I do indeed regard good works as intrinsically in competition with the unique role of faith. I deprecate the extension of justification into the sphere of sanctification, for it is precisely this procedure that leads to the notion that the good

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<sup>18</sup> Reason and Specifications, 137.

<sup>19</sup> Robertson, 26.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>21</sup> The full text of Hughes’ dissent is available in Robbins’ *Companion*, pp. 105-115.

<sup>22</sup> *Companion*, 106.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 106.

works of the Christian have a necessary part to play in his justification. ... This is the whole point of the Biblical and Reformed emphasis on *faith alone* where our justification is concerned; for justification by faith alone (*sola fide*) means justification by faith in isolation, and particularly in isolation from works.<sup>26</sup>

How can Shepherd argue that works are necessary for our justification when Paul clearly says ‘a man is not justified by the works of the law’? Hughes makes reference to Shepherd’s contention that the “works of the law” that Paul excludes from justification are “something quite different from the works of the Christian.” The works of the law “are the works of the unbeliever futilely trying to justify himself by works-righteousness,” but the works of a Christian are “works that are pleasing and acceptable to God.”<sup>27</sup> Therefore, according to Shepherd, it is only legalistic works, not genuine good works, that are excluded from justification.

One of the most popular texts adduced in support of the contention that the good works of Christians are not excluded from justification is Romans 2:13, where Paul says, ‘the doers of the law will be justified.’ Hughes objects by arguing that “this text is not speaking of the works of the Christian, indeed, that it has nothing to do with justification by faith, or with faith that works and is active.”<sup>28</sup> This is proven from the fact that after Paul asserts that only the doers of the law will be justified, he “moves on to demonstrate the universality of human sinfulness, insisting that there is absolutely no one at all who does good, and therefore that all without exception are in need of divine grace and of the justification which comes by faith apart from works [cf. Romans 3:9-12, 20, 23].”<sup>29</sup> Yes, the doers of the law will be justified, but the facts are that no one is good (Romans 3:9-12), and therefore ‘no human being will be justified in his sight by the works of the law’ (Romans 3:20).

The phrase ‘the doers of the law will be justified,’ according to Hughes, plainly indicates the Old Testament principle that “law is a principle of justification to the person who keeps it. ... Hence the affirmations of the Old Testament that it is by the doing of the law that a man shall live (Leviticus 18:5; Nehemiah 9:29; Ezekiel 20:11,13).”<sup>30</sup> The same emphasis is evident in the New Testament. For example, in response to the lawyer’s question, ‘Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus first said, ‘What is written in the law?’ Then He said, ‘Do this, and you will live’ (Luke 10:25ff.). Likewise, Jesus told the rich young ruler, ‘If you would enter life, keep the commandments’ (Matthew 19:16ff.). This is the principle to which Paul draws attention in Romans 10:5, where we read that ‘the man who practices the righteousness which is based on the law shall live by it.’ So again, Paul asserts that ‘the law does not rest on faith, for He who does them shall live by them’ (Galatians 3:12, quoting Leviticus 18:5). However, because of his sinfulness, Paul found that ‘the very commandment which promised life proved to be death to me’ (Romans 7:10). “But the fault is not the law; it is the sinner who is a law-breaker.”<sup>31</sup>

Because they are law-breakers, sinners can never be justified by the law; they can only be condemned by it. A different principle of justification is needed if the sinner is to live before God. ... Consequently, the Gospel principle for sinners is that they may live and

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 107-108.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>28</sup> *Companion*, 109-110.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 111.

be just before God only by faith-union with Christ, with whom alone as the sole law-keeper, God is well pleased.<sup>32</sup>

Jesus perfectly fulfilled the law on the sinner's behalf, and suffered the penalty of our law breaking. Accordingly, 'As by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous' (Romans 5:19). "As the sole 'doer of the law' – the incarnate Son alone is just before God, and in him alone is the sinner's justification (1 Corinthians 1:30)."<sup>33</sup>

Finally, I wish to maintain that

the evangelical doctrine that 'a man is not justified by works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ' applies not only to works done prior to regeneration but also to works done after regeneration. My argument is based on the Biblical teaching that the good works of the Christian believer are still works of the law. The promise of the new covenant includes the assurance: 'I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts' (Jeremiah 31:33; cf. Ezekiel 11:19ff.).<sup>34</sup>

It follows that the good works of the believer are the same as the good works enjoined by the law. But they are the good works of his sanctification, not of his justification. To speak of a necessity of these good works for our salvation ... is to assign to them that very justifying status as works of the law which Paul has repudiated.<sup>35</sup>

In response to Hughes' concerns, Westminster Faculty member Dr. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. defended Shepherd on the ground that Shepherd was simply trying to stress the Reformation emphasis that though faith alone justifies, the faith that justifies is never alone but is always accompanied by all other saving graces.<sup>36</sup>

### C. Charges filed against Shepherd

On May 27, 1977, charges were formally filed against Shepherd in the Philadelphia Presbytery of the OPC. Subsequent to the charges being made, Shepherd submitted to the Presbytery his "Thirty-Four Theses on Justification in Relation to Faith, Repentance, and Good Works."<sup>37</sup> As an alternative to receiving the charges against Shepherd the Presbytery chose to deliberate the *Thirty-Four Theses*. The most contested of these theses, according to Robertson, were the following:

'The Pauline affirmation in Romans 2:13, 'The doers of the Law will be justified,' is ... to be understood ... in the sense that faithful disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ will be justified (Thesis 20).'<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 112-113.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 113-114.

<sup>36</sup> Robertson, 27-28.

<sup>37</sup> Available on the worldwide web.

<sup>38</sup> Thesis 20 in full states: "The Pauline affirmation in Romans 2:13, 'the doers of the law will be justified,' is not to be understood hypothetically in the sense that there are no persons who fall into that class, but in the sense that faithful disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ will be justified (Compare Luke 8:21; James 1:22-25)." This thesis is contrary to the classic reformed interpretation of Romans 2:13, which did in fact understand it hypothetically in the sense that there are no persons who fall into the class "doers of the law." Calvin well states the classic view: "if they alone are justified by the law who fulfill the law, it follows that

‘The exclusive ground of the justification of the believer in the state of justification is the righteousness of Jesus Christ, but his obedience ... is necessary to his continuing in a state of justification (Thesis 21).’

‘The righteousness of Jesus Christ ever remains the exclusive ground of the believer’s justification, but the personal godliness of the believer is also necessary for his justification in the judgment of the last day (Matthew 7:21-23; 25:31-46; Hebrews 12:14) (Thesis 22).’

‘[G]ood works ... though not the ground of [the believer’s] justification, are nevertheless necessary for justification (Thesis 23).’<sup>39</sup>

“After a year’s deliberation, the Presbytery was evenly divided. It could not decide whether these formulations were in accord with Scripture and the *Confession*.”<sup>40</sup>

After the May 23, 1978 Board meeting, Shepherd was given a leave of absence in order to revise his position and then report back to the Board. On February 8, 1979, the Board received Shepherd’s paper, “The Grace of Justification,”<sup>41</sup> and discussed it, along with Shepherd’s “Thirty-four Theses,” which currently was being evaluated by the Presbytery of Philadelphia of the OPC. The Faculty concluded that,

Mr. Shepherd held essentially to the substance of his formulations as developed in the October 1976 paper. The modification of certain phrases as requested by the Board had not changed the substance of his position. Good works were necessary as the way of justification, and not simply as its fruit. Walking in the way of justification was necessary to maintain justification. The sinner seeking justification might just as well be told to follow Jesus as to believe in Jesus.<sup>42</sup>

#### **D. Westminster Seminary’s Reason for Dismissing Shepherd**

To make a long story shorter, Westminster Seminary eventually dismissed Dr. Norman Shepherd. In order to defend its action in dismissing Shepherd, the Seminary Board wrote an eighteen page paper for the public titled “Reason and Specifications Supporting the Action of the Board of Trustees in Removing Professor Shepherd,” approved by the Executive Committee of the Board, February 26, 1982 (see again footnote 13). The first part of the paper reviews the history of the controversy (some parts of which have already been referenced in this essay), and the second part summarizes the theological reasons for the removal of Shepherd. According to its own testimony, “the Board did not remove Mr. Shepherd on the ground of demonstrated errors in his teaching,” but rather “because it has become convinced that Mr. Shepherd’s teaching regarding justification, the covenant of works and the covenant of grace, and related themes is not clearly in accord with the teaching of Scripture as it is summarized in the system of doctrine contained in the Westminster Standards.”<sup>43</sup> While the Board acknowledged that a comparison between Shepherd and the Westminster Standards on justification evinces significant doctrinal differences, they were not willing to charge Shepherd with doctrinal error. “While the Board has

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no one is justified; for no one can be found who can boast of having fulfilled the law” (*Calvin’s Commentaries*, 22 vols. [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979], 19:96).

<sup>39</sup> Robertson, pp.34-35.

<sup>40</sup> Robertson, 35.

<sup>41</sup> This paper can be obtained from the web-site of Rev. Mark Horne, a Shepherd supporter, who has recently written a commentary on Mark published by Canon Press.

<sup>42</sup> Robertson, 30.

<sup>43</sup> Reason and Specifications, 132-133.

not judged that his views are in error, the Board has come to the conviction that his views are not clearly in accord with the standards of the Seminary; for this reason it has acted within its authority to remove him from his office for the best interests of the Seminary.”<sup>44</sup>

The Board’s reasons for Shepherd’s removal are contained in the section, “Problematics in Mr. Shepherd’s Views.”<sup>45</sup> The problems in Shepherd’s teaching, according to the Board,

are inherent in his view of the ‘covenant dynamic.’ Although Mr. Shepherd appeals to the history of Reformed covenantal theology to support his position, the Board finds that Mr. Shepherd’s construction is distinctive. It is in the distinctive elements and emphases of his theology of the covenant that the problem appears.<sup>46</sup>

First of all, “In his ‘covenant dynamic’ Mr. Shepherd develops a formula that permits him to join good works to faith as the characteristic and qualifying response to grace. Obedience is the proper, full, and comprehensive term for all covenantal response, and specifically for our response in the covenant of grace.”<sup>47</sup> In fact, “faith is itself a work, an act of obedience within the total response of obedience.”<sup>48</sup> While Shepherd “is willing to affirm that good works are the *fruit* of faith, he prefers the language of accompaniment or of a ‘working faith.’ Both faith and good works are alike fruits of the Spirit, and are not to be thought of in sequence.”<sup>49</sup> According to Shepherd,

The works to be distinguished from faith in the Pauline passages are not good works, but works of the flesh, works that are done to provide a meritorious ground of justification. ... Since faith, repentance, and good works are intertwined as covenantal response, and since good works are necessary to justification, the ‘ordo salutis’ would better be: regeneration, faith/repentance/new obedience, justification.<sup>50</sup>

The problem with Shepherd at this point is that the “confessional emphasis on faith as the alone instrument of justification is muted in the ‘covenant dynamic’ accent. The Westminster Standards emphasize faith alone, not merely in contrast to self-righteous works but in contrast to all that we might do.”<sup>51</sup>

Secondly, Shepherd’s ‘covenant dynamic’

makes the function of our obedience in the covenant to be the same as the function of the obedience of Adam in the covenant before the fall. ... Adam’s covenantal obedience in the garden did not merit any reward; neither does our covenantal obedience. But both are required by the covenant command. The threat for disobedience is eternal death. This threat is as real for us as it was for Adam in the garden. The warning of the New Covenant must not be blunted or made hypothetical in any way. God’s threat to Adam or

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 148-161.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 151.

to Israel was not idle, and the same sanction of the covenant is directed against us in the New Covenant.<sup>52</sup>

To be sure, says Shepherd, we have resources that Adam did not have. “We have forgiveness of sins in the blood of Christ; we have the Spirit to move us to obey; but we also have the same covenant condition to meet, and the same threat for disobedience.”<sup>53</sup> Shepherd insisted that the threat of eternal death applies to believers, and he “urged before the Board that just as Adam’s posterity would not be ‘off the hook’ if Adam had obeyed, but would be bound to fulfill the condition of obedience, so the posterity of Christ are not ‘off the hook.’”<sup>54</sup>

The problem with Shepherd here “lies in failing to do justice to the history of redemption, to the distinctiveness of God’s administration with Adam and to the distinctiveness of the New Covenant in Jesus Christ.”<sup>55</sup> Shepherd fails to recognize, as has always been recognized in reformed theology, that if Adam had obeyed, his posterity would *not* have been in the same probationary position as Adam. “Parallel to the doctrine of the imputation of Adam’s sin runs the assumption of the imputation of Adam’s righteousness to his descendants had he obediently fulfilled his probation (WCF VII:2).”<sup>56</sup>

Furthermore, Shepherd omits any clear treatment of the teaching of the Westminster Confession that Christ, as the Second Adam, was our covenant keeper. “As the Westminster Standards teach, the covenant of grace is made with Christ and with the elect in him. He is the only Mediator of the New Covenant. He has borne the judgment, the wrath due to us, not simply as sinners, but as covenant-breakers.”<sup>57</sup> “Christ’s active obedience has fulfilled all righteousness for us.”<sup>58</sup> Shepherd’s

omission of any clear treatment of Christ as the covenant Head, of his active obedience, of the imputation of his righteousness in the fulfillment of the covenant command, of his probation in our place (this in a treatment of the covenant that professes to be distinctly Reformed, after years of discussion) evidences a lack of clarity that cannot but cause concern.<sup>59</sup>

Shepherd has met such criticism in a way that adds to the confusion.

He assumes that those who criticize his view are falling away into antinomianism; that to emphasize that Christ has fulfilled the covenant for us is to take us ‘off the hook.’ Yet this is precisely the issue that the Westminster Standards so carefully define. They do it by showing how the law, revealing God’s will and righteousness, remains the norm for our obedience even though believers are delivered from it as a covenant of works ‘so as thereby they are neither justified nor condemned’ (LC Q.97).”<sup>60</sup>

The Westminster teaches that the threats of the law are of use to the regenerate not as a threat of eternal death but rather “to show what even their sins deserve, and what afflictions in this life

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 151-152.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 153-154.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 152-153.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 154-155.

they may expect for them, although freed from the curse thereof threatened in the law' (WCF XIX:6)."<sup>61</sup> The special use of the law is to show believers 'how much they are bound to Christ for his fulfilling it, and enduring the curse thereof in their stead, and for their good; and thereby to provoke them to more thankfulness and to express the same in their greater care to conform themselves thereunto as the rule of their obedience' (LC Q.97).<sup>62</sup>

Shepherd rejects the Westminster Confession's sharp contrast between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. According to the Westminster, the "covenant of works was conditioned upon perfect, personal obedience. The covenant of grace provides the obedience of Jesus Christ and therefore does not have our obedience as its *condition* but requires only faith in Christ to meet the demand of God's righteousness."<sup>63</sup> Shepherd does away with this distinction and makes faithful obedience the all-embracing condition of all covenants. The danger of Shepherd's uniform concept of covenant faithfulness "is that both the distinctiveness of the covenant of grace and of the new covenant fullness of the covenant of grace will be lost from view and that obedience as the way of salvation will swallow up the distinct and primary function of faith."<sup>64</sup> Shepherd argues that making covenant obedience the central category for our response to God

can be done without danger since this obedience is not meritorious and therefore cannot become the ground of our salvation. But the very simplicity of this solution creates its danger. There is a vast and crucial difference between fleeing to Christ for salvation and serving God acceptably in new obedience. Close as the relation must be between faith and works, *the distinction is central to the gospel* [emphasis mine].<sup>65</sup>

## II. The Call of Grace.

We come now to Shepherd's book *The Call of Grace*.<sup>66</sup> In this book, Shepherd reiterates the same brand of covenant theology, which the Westminster Faculty in 1982 considered to be non-reformed and at the root of Shepherd's problematic teaching on justification. Since a full discussion of this book is beyond the scope of this essay we will restrict ourselves primarily to an examination of those parts of the book that bear directly on the relation of justification and good works. Our brief examination will demonstrate that Shepherd's covenant theology continues to permit him to view the good works of Christians as necessary for justification.

At the very outset of his book, Shepherd is unashamedly open about his belief that his brand of covenant theology is the solution to "the problem of faith and works," or the problem of how to relate faith and works, a problem which Shepherd claims is one of the "unresolved questions" of "the Protestant Reformation."<sup>67</sup> In Shepherd's words, "We are profoundly grateful for the progress that was made by the Reformation. We were led into a more biblical understanding of the way of salvation. Nonetheless, unresolved issues remain."<sup>68</sup> The unresolved question is, as Shepherd sees it, if you say as the reformers did that a person is saved by faith alone apart from works, how do you say that "without suggesting that it makes no difference what

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>66</sup> Dr. Cornelis Venema, president of Mid-America Reformed Seminary, reviews Shepherd's book in *Mid-America Journal of Theology* vol. 13 (2002): 232-248.

<sup>67</sup> *Call of Grace*, 4.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 5.

your lifestyle is like? In other words, how do you preach grace without being antinomian? On the other hand, how do you preach *repentance* without calling into question salvation by grace apart from works? How do you insist on obedience without being legalistic?”<sup>69</sup>

Remarkably, Shepherd claims that this question was not answered satisfactorily by the reformation, yet nowhere in his book does he interact with the reformation’s most notable solution to ‘the problem of faith and works,’ namely, the Heidelberg Catechism’s paradigm of sin, salvation, and service. According to the Catechism, we are justified, redeemed, and saved through faith alone, apart from our works; and this doctrine does not make men antinomian, because the indwelling Holy Spirit guarantees that those implanted into Christ by true faith will bring forth fruits of thankfulness (see Question 64). In other words, true faith will invariably produce good works. Shepherd does not like to speak of good works as the inevitable fruit or evidence of faith, because in his mind this is tantamount to suggesting that good works are optional. Shepherd writes,

When the call to faith is isolated from the call to obedience, as it frequently is, the effect is to make good works a supplement to salvation or *simply the evidence of salvation*. Some would even make them an optional supplement. According to the Great Commission, however, they belong to the *essence* of salvation, which is freedom from sin and not simply freedom from eternal condemnation as the consequence of sin [emphasis mine].<sup>70</sup>

Note again, according to Shepherd, to say that obedience is simply the evidence of salvation is to isolate the call to faith from the call to obedience, and thereby to slip into antinomianism. For this reason Shepherd refuses to say that a man is justified by faith alone *apart* from obedience. To do so, in his mind, is to *cut off* obedience from faith and make obedience optional for the Christian.

Shepherd’s solution for antinomianism is to posit, as he always has, that faith and obedience in the covenant are *not* to be thought of in sequence – first faith for justification and then obedience for gratitude (*a la* Ursinus). Rather, faith and obedience are intertwined and thus both are a condition of obtaining justification, salvation, and eternal life. In classic covenant theology, faith and obedience do not function in the covenant of grace as conditions in the same sense or of the same thing. Faith is the *sole* condition of justification and eternal life. Obedience is a condition only in the sense that it is a *duty* of the covenant. It is necessary only in the sense that it is a necessary *fruit* of justification. As Francis Turretin once elaborated, we must “bear in mind the different senses of a condition.”

It may be taken either broadly and improperly or strictly and properly. If in the latter sense, faith is the sole condition of the covenant because under this condition alone pardon of sins and salvation as well as eternal life are promised (Jn. 3:16; Rom. 10:9). There is no other which could perform that office because there is no other which is receptive of Christ and capable of applying his righteousness. But in the former, there is nothing to hinder repentance and the obedience of the new life from being called a condition because they are reckoned among the duties of the covenant (Jn. 13:17; 2 Cor. 5:17; Rom. 8:13).<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 8-9.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>71</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3 vols., translated by George M. Giger, edited by James T. Dennison, Jr (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1992), 2:189.

Contrary to this, Shepherd does not distinguish different senses of a condition. For him faith and obedience function as conditions in the same way in that they both are equally necessary to obtain justification and eternal life.

Shepherd conceives of faith and obedience as equally necessary for justification because he sees no essential difference between faith and obedience.<sup>72</sup> To believe is to obey. As proof, Shepherd cites 1 John 2:23: ‘And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.’ See, says Shepherd, “Even faith itself is a matter of obedience to the command of our Lord.”<sup>73</sup> Obedience “is the fullness of faith. Obedience is simply faithfulness to the Lord; it is the righteousness of faith.”<sup>74</sup> Therefore, to tell sinners, ‘*Believe* in Jesus, and you will be saved,’ is essentially the same as telling them, ‘*Obey* Jesus and you will be saved.’ This aspect of Shepherd’s teaching was recognized eighteen years earlier by the Westminster faculty, as we noted in the first section of our essay: ‘The sinner seeking justification might just as well be told to follow Jesus as to believe in Jesus’ (see again footnote 41).

It is in connection with his treatment of the Abrahamic covenant that Shepherd outlines his teaching that faith and obedience have the same necessity as a condition for entering into eternal life. According to Shepherd’s own emphasis, the “*faith that was credited to Abraham as righteousness was a living and obedient faith.*”<sup>75</sup> By making this statement, Shepherd does not simply mean, what the reformers often said, that justification is by a faith that produces obedience (and a faith that fails to produce obedience it is not true faith). What Shepherd wants to say is that Abraham’s faith itself was active and living obedience to the Lord; therefore, it is erroneous to say that Abraham was justified apart from his obedience. As a proof text for his view, Shepherd cites James 2:21, “Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?” and James 2:24, “You see then that a man is justified by works and not by faith only.”

Traditionally, whenever commentators quote these statements of James in connection with a discussion on justification, they see the need to reconcile James with Paul’s statement that Abraham was not justified by works (Romans 4:2). How can James say that Abraham was justified by works when Paul says that Abraham was *not* justified by works? The classic reformed answer to this question is that James did not speak of justification in the same way as Paul did. Just as words often have more than one meaning in different contexts, so it is with the word ‘justification.’ ‘To justify’ can mean either ‘to declare righteous,’ or ‘to demonstrate righteousness.’ No one stated the classic view better than Calvin did: “If you would make James agree with the rest of Scripture and with himself, you must understand the word ‘justify’ in another sense than Paul takes it.”<sup>76</sup> We “must take notice of the twofold 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

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<sup>72</sup> The Socinians shared Shepherd’s desire to make saving faith itself an act of obedience along with all other acts of obedience. “The Socinians, the more easily to overthrow the fiducial apprehension of Christ’s satisfaction (in which the orthodox constitute the essence of faith) and thus retain the righteousness of works (as so expressly distinguished from the righteousness of faith in Scripture), hold that faith is nothing else than obedience to God’s commands. Thus good works are not so much the fruit of faith as its form” (Turretin, 2:581).

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>76</sup> *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill, Library of Christian Classics. Vols. 20-21 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 3.17.12.

gather from the preceding words, ‘Show to me thy faith,’ &c.”<sup>77</sup> “When Paul says that we are justified by faith, he means no other thing than that by faith we are counted righteous before God. But James has quite another thing in view, even to show that he who professes that he has faith, must prove the reality of his faith by his works.”<sup>78</sup>

In contrast to Calvin, Shepherd (who doesn’t even mention the traditional reconciliation between Paul and James) believes James speaks of justification in the same way that Paul does, and that on this account full credence must be given to James when he says that a man is justified by works. Shepherd counts James 2:24 among “passages of Scripture that speak of repentance and obedience as conditions for entering eternal life,”<sup>79</sup> and argues that previous attempts to make such passages fit into a paradigm of salvation by grace are dubious. “Various exegetical and dogmatic devices of dubious validity are used to defuse and tame these texts [i.e. Galatians 5:6 and James 2:24] so that they do fit.”<sup>80</sup> It is on the basis of his interpretation of James that Shepherd is unwilling to affirm the historic Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone apart from obedience. For Shepherd, if obedience is of the essence of faith, and we are justified by faith, then our obedience cannot be excluded from the verdict of justification.

Shepherd believes that the Mosaic covenant, just like the Abrahamic covenant, subsumes faithfulness under faith. He writes,

The Mosaic covenant embodies promises, and promises can be received only by faith. For Israel, the promises came wrapped in the garments of the Mosaic law. That is why faith in these promises also entailed faithfulness with respect to the commandments. Obedience is simply an expression of faith in the promises of God, not an alternative to faith.<sup>81</sup>

Note carefully what Shepherd does here. He says that the promises can be received only by faith, but then he says that the faith that receives the promises also entails faithfulness. And by saying that obedience is an expression of, and not an alternative to, faith, he means that faith and obedience are not alternative methods of obtaining eternal life. Rather, faith and obedience together constitute the same method.

Just like the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants, the new covenant follows the same paradigm of promising eternal life on the condition of faithfulness. For Shepherd, salvation or eternal life or justification is *not*, as evangelicals have always thought, obtained and secured once and for all the moment a sinner truly believes, but only after a lifetime of faithfulness. Nowhere does Shepherd say that a sinner is justified and saved once and for all the instant he believes in Jesus. Whenever Shepherd speaks of salvation or eternal life or justification he speaks solely in eschatological terms – as that which awaits the believer at the end of his journey. The gospel “promises eternal life *after* the final judgment” [emphasis mine].<sup>82</sup> The gospel promises eternal life only to those who persevere in the faith.<sup>83</sup> A person does not possess eternal life until he has lived a faithful life. Obedience is not a response of gratitude to a salvation already obtained by

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<sup>77</sup> *Calvin’s Commentaries* [James], 22:314-315.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 314. Dr. Venema has recently ably defended the reformed interpretation of James 2 in his extended series on the justification controversy in *Outlook Magazine* (see *Basket of Figs* web-site). See also Brian Schwertley, “What About the Book of James,” 2 parts in *Reformed Herald* (October and November 2003).

<sup>79</sup> *Call of Grace*, 62.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

faith alone apart from obedience, but obedience itself is a necessary condition for salvation. The only way of obtaining eternal life, salvation, and justification, is “by way of a living, active, and obedient faith.”<sup>84</sup> In the end, it matters little whether Shepherd views the verdict of justification as being pronounced once at a certain point in time, or often throughout the course of life, or only at the end of history. In any case his antidote for antinomianism is to make a penitent and obedient faith the method of obtaining justification/salvation/eternal life.

The assertion that a man is justified by obedience clearly smacks of legalism and Roman Catholicism. In order to avoid the charge of legalism, Shepherd reassures us that he does not, as Rome does, view good works as the meritorious grounds of justification. In other words, good works do not merit eternal life.<sup>85</sup> We are not saved *because of* our faith and good works. “Fulfilling the obligations of the Abrahamic covenant is never represented as meritorious achievement.”<sup>86</sup> The inheritance of eternal life “does not come because of human achievement or merit.”<sup>87</sup> We do not “obtain forgiveness on the basis of something we have done.”<sup>88</sup> Rather, eternal life is ultimately obtained “only because of the redemptive work of the Messiah.”<sup>89</sup> OT saints “could be saved, but ultimately only because of the Christ to come.”<sup>90</sup> Shepherd maintains the biblical distinction between the grounds of justification being the redemptive work of Christ and the means of justification being faith. What he adds, however, is the notion that obedience, being intertwined with faith, can also be part of the means of obtaining eternal life: “eternal life is a free gift, unearned and unmerited, but it must be received by a penitent and obedient faith.”<sup>91</sup> Repentance and obedience, just like faith, are the necessary conditions of our acceptance with God, “but they are not the meritorious grounds of our acceptance with God.”<sup>92</sup> What harm can there be, Shepherd asks, in making our good works, just like our faith, a non-meritorious means of justification? This question takes us back to the very beginning of the controversy – back to the original concern of the Westminster faculty, which is worth noting again: “Shepherd questioned making justification by faith alone a touchstone of orthodoxy, since, as he argued, what can be said of faith can also be said of good works; neither can be the ground of justification, both can be instrument” (see again footnote 13).

But what about all those passages, like Romans 3:28 and Galatians 5:4, that clearly exclude works not only as grounds but also as the means of justification? Shepherd’s familiar answer is that the works excluded from justification are not good works but legalistic works or works done to provide a meritorious ground of justification.

When God, therefore, calls for faith that is living and active, and for a blameless walk through life, he is not asking for what Abraham tried to accomplish with Hagar and Ishmael. The obedience that leads to the fulfillment of promise is totally different. It is the expression of faith and trust in the Lord, not the expression of confidence in human merit.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>85</sup> Shepherd is careful to set his view over against that of Rome. “Rome’s doctrine of salvation requires that place be given to human merit”(60). “By good works, this righteous person merits the reward of eternal life” (59).

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 50-51.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 21.

“The obedience required of Israel is not the obedience of merit, but the obedience of faith.”<sup>94</sup> Paul’s statement in Galatians 5:4, “you who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ,” is directed against the person who “seeks to achieve his own salvation by what he does.”<sup>95</sup>

Therefore, according to Shepherd, Rome’s error is *not* the inclusion of good works in justification but rather it is in thinking that there is merit in works. It is only when men try to merit eternal life by their works that their works are excluded as a means of justification. But works done non-meritoriously as an expression of faith are not excluded as a means of justification. This is how Shepherd reconciles Paul and James on justification. *The difference between Paul and James is not how they use justification but how they understand works.* When Paul *excludes* works from justification he is excluding meritorious works. When James *includes* works in justification he is including non-meritorious works, that is, works done as an expression of faith and not in an effort to earn God’s favor.

It is particularly Shepherd’s rejection of the traditional reformed doctrine of the covenant of works that permits him to make obedience a means of justification.<sup>96</sup> Shepherd does not believe that the relationship into which God entered with Adam should be described as a

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>96</sup> Jeong Koo Jeon has shown how a denial of the covenant of works can lead and has led to a denial of justification by faith alone. See *Covenant Theology: John Murray’s and Meredith G. Kline’s Response to the Historic Development of Federal Theology in Reformed Thought* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1999). According to Jeon, the whole point of the covenant of works is to preserve the biblical truth that there is a big difference between man’s pre-fall state and man’s post-fall state. Prior to the fall, man, though created without sin, was in a probationary state, having not yet obtained eternal life. Eternal life was promised to Adam and in him to his posterity, upon the condition of perfect obedience. If Adam had refused to eat from the forbidden tree, he would not have remained in his original state but he and in him his posterity would have advanced to eternal life. After the fall, man having made himself incapable of obtaining eternal life by obedience, God in His grace was pleased to offer eternal life to sinners, upon the sole condition of faith in Jesus Christ. The reformers employed the Law/Gospel hermeneutic to defend this discontinuity between the pre-fall and post-fall states of man. In other words, the Law promises eternal life on the condition of perfect obedience; the Gospel promises eternal life on the condition of faith in Christ. Contrary to this, opponents of the covenant of works, such as Daniel Fuller, reject the distinction between Law and Gospel, and argue that there is no essential difference between the pre-fall and post-fall states of man. Rather, there is ‘a continuum of divine “grace” throughout all God’s dealings with man, pre-Fall as well as redemptive’ (Jeon quoting from Meredith Kline, “Covenant Theology Under Attack,” *New Horizons* 15/2 [1994]: 3). The implication of this continuum is that Adam did not need to do a work of obedience in order to obtain or merit eternal life. Adam was created already in possession of eternal life, he was already experiencing a gracious relationship with the Lord, and he simply needed to obey as a condition for maintaining his gracious gift of eternal life. After the fall, man did not need someone to merit eternal life for him by perfect obedience. He only needed to be forgiven for disobedience and enabled again to walk in the way of obedience. Redeemed man, having been forgiven and enabled to obey, is reinstated in Adam’s original condition, still facing the necessity of obeying as a condition of eternal life. “Fuller’s systematic destruction of the discontinuity between Law and Gospel makes the path of obedience to the law the road to salvation and justification” (253, n.119). Jeon makes a point of emphasizing that though Calvin did not, and John Murray did not want to, designate man’s pre-fall state as a covenant of works, nevertheless, both Calvin and Murray, along with classic reformed theology, recognized the principle inherent in the covenant of works, namely, “that the means of eschatological justification and life in the prelapsarian state was perfect obedience to the law” (331).

covenant of works.<sup>97</sup> He specifically takes issue with Charles Hodge as a representative of the traditional reformed view.

Hodge says that Scripture knows only two methods of obtaining eternal life. One method demands perfect obedience and the other method demands faith. The original covenant with Adam is sometimes called a covenant of life because eternal life is promised as the reward for perfect obedience. It is frequently called a covenant of works because works are the condition on which the promise of life is suspended. Whether it is called a covenant of life or a covenant of works, the idea is the same. Life is promised on the condition of works. The new covenant, by way of contrast, promises life on the sole condition of faith. Eternal life is the gift of grace.<sup>98</sup>

This quote provides the context in which to understand the exact nuance of Shepherd's statement, quoted earlier in connection with his treatment of the Mosaic covenant, that obedience is "not an alternative to faith." Shepherd rejects the idea that perfect obedience and faith represent two alternatives or methods of obtaining eternal life. He believes that there always has been only one way of obtaining eternal life, namely, by means of a living and active and obedient faith.

What Shepherd particularly dislikes about the doctrine of the covenant of works is the reformed principle that Adam had to obey God perfectly in order to inherit or merit eternal life. He calls this principle, the "works/merit" principle.

The basic principle embodied in this conception of the covenant of works can be called the 'works/merit' principle. In the covenant of works, God is a just judge, and his creatures will be dealt with in accordance with strict principles of justice. It is a matter of simple justice to reward perfect obedience with eternal life. At the same time, the slightest infraction of the rules will forfeit eternal life.<sup>99</sup>

Though this formulation of the covenant of works is somewhat of a caricature,<sup>100</sup> Shepherd's disapproval is clear enough. He disapproves of "the idea that perfect obedience merits the reward

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<sup>97</sup> For a recent defense of the Westminster Confession's doctrine of the covenant of works see Cornelis Venema, "Recent Criticisms of the 'Covenant of Works' in the Westminster Confession of Faith," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 9:2 (Fall 1993): 165-198. "Even though some may choose not to speak of 'covenant' in the pre-fall state (for example, Murray), this does not alter the fact that a theology faithful to biblical teaching must reckon with the difference in man's standing before God in the pre- and post-fall states. This the WCF does by means of its formulation of a covenant of works and a covenant of grace." (p.188).

<sup>98</sup> *Call of Grace*, 25.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-26.

<sup>100</sup> Venema wards off the caricature when he writes, "At no point in God's dealings with man as covenant creature may we say that God, in the strict sense of justice, owes the creature anything. Everything God bestows upon the creature, whether in creation or redemption, is an undeserved favor or benefit of his goodness and kindness." "However, the fact is that God has, by entering into covenant with man, bound himself by the promises and as well the demands/obligations of that covenant. This means that Adam's obedience to the probationary command, though it were an outworking and development within the covenant communion in which he was placed by God's prevenient favor, would nonetheless 'merit' or 'deserve' the reward of righteousness God himself had promised" (Venema, 195; emphasis original). Meredith Kline, on the other hand, feels no compulsion to qualify the conviction that the covenant of works was in fact a matter of simple justice: "Adam would have fully deserved the blessings promised in the covenant, had he obediently performed the duty stipulated in the covenant. Great as the blessings were to which the good Lord committed himself, the granting of them would not have involved a gram of grace. Judged by the stipulated terms of the covenant, they would have been merited by simple justice." "Not

of eternal life as a matter of simple justice.”<sup>101</sup> God “*never* did, relate to his people on the basis of a works/merit principle” [emphasis mine].<sup>102</sup> In fact, “the very idea of merit is foreign to the way in which God our Father relates to his children.”<sup>103</sup>

If it is true that God *never* has required perfect obedience as a condition of eternal life, then the reformers were incorrect to insist that the only obedience acceptable to God, if offered as a condition of justification, must be perfect obedience.<sup>104</sup> Shepherd disagrees with the following summation of the reformed view, provided by his own pen.

Although the period of probation ended with Adam, the works/merit principle remains in force. If a person could present himself before God as free from sin, he would not be condemned. He would merit the reward of eternal life. However, no one will inherit eternal life in this way, because no one can present himself before the Lord as free from sin.<sup>105</sup>

Since the works/merit principle has never been in force, argues Shepherd, it was wrong for the reformers to insist that it remains in force after the fall. Whether before or after the fall, according to Shepherd, eternal life does not need to be merited by perfect obedience.

Shepherd especially takes issue with the reformed idea that the works/merit principle plays a key role in the Mosaic covenant. Once again, Shepherd provides a summary of the view he disagrees with.

The law serves the purposes of grace by revealing the depth of our sin and misery as we compare our lives to its perfect standard. It thereby shows the impossibility of finding eternal life by way of perfect obedience. . . . In this way, the law (and more broadly, the Mosaic covenant) drives us to Christ so that we can find salvation as a free gift of grace.<sup>106</sup>

Clearly, Shepherd denies the reformed view that the way in which the Mosaic covenant drives us to Christ is by showing *both* the *necessity*, and *impossibility*, of obtaining eternal life by means of

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grace but simple justice was the governing principle in the pre-Fall covenant; hence it is traditionally called the Covenant of Works. God is just and his justice is present in all he does. That is true of gospel administrations too, for the foundation of the gift of grace is Christ’s satisfaction of divine justice. If you are looking for an element of continuity running through pre-Fall and redemptive covenants (without obliterating the contrast between them), there it is – not grace, but justice” (“Covenant Theology Under Attack,” *New Horizons* [February 1994]).

<sup>101</sup> *Call of Grace*, 26.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 39. Shepherd believes the only way to refute Rome’s idea of meriting eternal life by works is not by pointing to the perfect merits of Christ’s obedience but by abandoning the whole idea of merit. In this way we can take passages like James 2:24 at face value without feeling threatened. “If we do not reject the idea of merit, we are not able to challenge the Romanist doctrine of salvation at its very root” (61-62). “The second consequence of not rejecting the idea of merit is that we feel threatened by passages of Scripture that speak of repentance and obedience as conditions for entering eternal life” (62).

<sup>104</sup> “But why cannot our good works be the whole or part of our righteousness before God? Because the righteousness which can stand before the judgment seat of God, must be perfect throughout and entirely conformable to the divine law, but even our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin” (Heidelberg Catechism, Question 62). According to the Westminster Confession, God bound not only Adam but also “his *posterity* to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience” (19.1; emphasis mine).

<sup>105</sup> *Call of Grace*, 26.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

perfect obedience. According to reformed theology,<sup>107</sup> the Mosaic covenant reminded Israel of the original condition of the covenant of works, namely, that God bound Adam's posterity to perfect obedience as a condition of eternal life; therefore, in order to obtain eternal life, man must satisfy this condition, either by himself or by another.

In Shepherd's covenant theology, Christ as the last Adam did not have to do what the first Adam failed to do. Christ did not have to merit eternal life for us by His perfect obedience, for perfect obedience never has been a condition of eternal life. Nowhere does Shepherd speak of Christ's perfect obedience being imputed to believers. Rather, he says Christ's obedience was imputed to Christ Himself! "His was a living, active, and obedient faith that took him all the way to the cross. This faith was credited to him as righteousness."<sup>108</sup> The implication is that Christ's perfect obedience was necessary only to qualify Him to be our Redeemer and provide us an example of how to obtain the fulfillment of the promises by an obedient faith. "As the covenant is kept, according to the pattern of Jesus Christ, the promises of the covenant are fulfilled."<sup>109</sup> Christ did not need to obey *for us*. He simply needed to take care of the problem of disobedience, which He did by His death on the cross where He paid the penalty for disobedience.<sup>110</sup> God can forgive sinners the penalty for disobedience *only because* (here's the grounds) Christ paid the penalty for disobedience. God forgives all those who have faith in Jesus. True enough, but here is the stickler: Shepherd says that *the way in which* one receives forgiveness is by means of a living, active, and obedient faith. Jesus' death guaranteed the blessing of eternal life. But it is only *by* our faithfulness that we will inherit that blessing. "But just as Jesus was faithful in order to *guarantee* the blessing, so his followers must be faithful in order to *inherit* the blessing" [emphasis original].<sup>111</sup> "He promises forgiveness of sins and eternal life, not as something to be earned, but as a gift to be received by a living and active faith."<sup>112</sup>

Because Shepherd believes that perfect obedience is not necessary for a sinner to obtain the verdict of justification, he leaves the distinct impression that the Christian's imperfect obedience *in and of itself* is acceptable to God, and thus can be the means of obtaining the verdict, 'You are righteous.'

To sum up, Shepherd contends that in order to avoid the twin dangers of antinomianism and legalism the church must abandon the traditional works/merit principle and adopt what he calls the "grace/faith principle."

Salvation is both by *grace* and through *faith*. These are the two parts of the covenant: grace and faith, promise and obligation. Grace is not without conditions, and a living and active faith is not meritorious achievement. It is the biblical doctrine of the covenant that

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<sup>107</sup> See Mark Karlberg, "Reformed Interpretation of the Mosaic Covenant," *Westminster Theological Journal* 43 (1980): 1-57. Karlberg demonstrates that the reformers understood the Mosaic covenant as a particular administration of the single covenant of grace, yet having the traits of a covenant of works.

<sup>108</sup> *Call of Grace*, 19.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>110</sup> Berkhof noted the implications of this idea that Christ merely paid sin's penalty. If Christ "had merely paid the penalty, without meeting the original demands of the law, He would have left man in the position of Adam before the fall, still confronted with the task of obtaining eternal life in the way of obedience" (Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1939], 381). Shepherd clearly wants to leave man with the task of obtaining eternal life in the way of obedience.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

enables us to sail safely between the Scylla of legalism and the Charybdis of antinomianism.<sup>113</sup>

Thus, by making a living and active faith the *condition* of salvation we avoid antinomianism, and by making a living and active faith a *non-meritorious* condition of salvation we avoid legalism.

### III. Shepherd's article in *Reformation and Revival*<sup>114</sup>

Shepherd's purpose in writing this article is to question whether we should continue to use the traditional Protestant formula, 'justification by faith alone.' His concern is that involved in this formula are certain ambiguities and liabilities, and he wants us to "understand and avoid the ambiguities and liabilities involved in it."<sup>115</sup>

Shepherd begins with a brief description of how the formula of justification by faith alone has typically been employed by some Protestant preachers. "We are justified and saved by faith, not by works. There is nothing we can do or need to do to escape from sin and its consequences. Only Jesus can save us and he saves us when we put our faith in him. That is all it takes, a simple act of faith."<sup>116</sup> Shepherd will go on to disagree with the notion that all it takes is a simple act of faith.

Shepherd makes the rather bold claim that the formula, 'justification by faith alone' appears nowhere in the Westminster Standards, and that "By not using the formula, justification by faith alone, the Westminster Standards avoid a serious misunderstanding of the gospel."<sup>117</sup> Shepherd believes the formula justification by faith alone has arisen on account of Luther's insertion of "the word 'alone' into his translation of Romans 3:28 to make it read 'For we hold that one is justified by faith *alone* apart from works of the law.' This is the origin of the dogmatic formula, justification by faith alone. However, his insertion actually distorts Paul's meaning."<sup>118</sup>

Even though the Westminster Standards say that, "Faith ... is the alone instrument of justification," (11.2) Shepherd claims it is not the same as saying justification by faith alone. Though both the Larger and Shorter Catechisms clearly say that the righteousness imputed in justification is "received by faith alone" (Larger Catechism, Question.70; Shorter Catechism, Question 33), nevertheless, Shepherd argues, "They do not use the formula, 'justified by faith alone.'"<sup>119</sup> The reason for this, says Shepherd, is because the use of such a formula would have contradicted another statement in the Westminster, namely, that faith "is not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love" (11.2). Shepherd believes that the precise formula 'justified by faith alone' was left out of the Confession in order to avoid giving the false impression that the faith that justifies is alone, that is, separated from all other saving graces, such as repentance and good works. "There is no such thing as faith alone in the sense of faith existing all by itself."<sup>120</sup> For instance, "Faith and repentance are inseparable twins."<sup>121</sup> The Bible calls for both faith and repentance as a response to the preaching of the gospel (cf. Luke 13:3-5; 24:47; Acts 2:38; 20:21). Even the Westminster

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>114</sup> "Justification By Faith Alone," *Reformation and Revival* 11:2 (Spring 2002), 75-90.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 85. The serious misunderstanding, Shepherd alleges, is that all it takes is a simple act of faith.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 84.

Confession says that repentance “is of such necessity to all sinners, that none may expect pardon without it” (15.3). Hence, “It is not an adequate answer to say that justification is by faith alone, meaning faith without repentance, but that repentance will inevitably follow as the fruit and evidence of faith and justification.”<sup>122</sup> We must *not* “resort to the idea that repentance and obedience automatically follow upon justification as evidence of salvation that is granted by faith alone apart from repentance and obedience.”<sup>123</sup> Shepherd thinks the formula ‘saving faith is followed by good works’ implies that faith can exist *without* good works. Therefore, he argues, though the Confession is certainly correct to say that good works are ‘the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith’ (16.2), we must *not* understand this “as though faith could exist *without* its fruits and evidences” [emphasis mine].<sup>124</sup> Moreover, the very fact that regeneration is prior to faith, and, in addition to faith, gives birth to repentance and obedience, “explains why faith can never be alone.”<sup>125</sup> “It is not surprising then, that the Westminster Confession does not use the formula, ‘justification by faith alone.’ There is no such thing as faith alone in the sense of faith existing all by itself.”<sup>126</sup> “The Confession declares that justifying faith is never, ever alone.”<sup>127</sup>

What then does the Westminster mean when it says that faith is the *alone* instrument of justification? If faith is never alone, then how can it be said that faith is the alone instrument of justification? Shepherd neglects to give the classic reformed answer to this question, which is simply that although faith is accompanied by all other saving graces, and cannot exist without them, none of the other saving graces is the means of justification. Calvin explains.

When they [i.e. Papists] attempt to refute our doctrine, that we are justified by faith alone, they take this line of argument. If the faith which justifies us be that ‘which worketh by love,’ then faith alone does not justify. I answer, they do not comprehend their own silly talk; still less do they comprehend our statements. It is not our doctrine that the faith which justifies is alone; we maintain that it is invariably accompanied by good works; only we contend that faith alone is sufficient for justification.<sup>128</sup>

Notice how carefully and clearly Calvin distinguishes between saving faith’s *accompaniments* and saving faith’s proper *role* in obtaining justification. The Belgic Confession, which is based on Calvin’s theology, states the matter just as clearly.

These works, as they proceed from the good root of faith, are good and acceptable in the sight of God, forasmuch as they are all sanctified by His grace. Nevertheless they are of no account towards our justification, for it is by faith in Christ that we are justified, even *before* we do good works (Article 24; emphasis mine).

Francis Turretin’s insightful remarks are also helpful in this connection.

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<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>128</sup> *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, trans. W. Pringle (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1948), 152. “Now it ought to be a fact beyond controversy that repentance not only constantly follows faith, but is also born of faith” (*Institutes* 3.3.1). “Yet, when we refer the origin of repentance to faith we do not imagine some space of time during which it brings it to birth; but we mean to show that a man cannot apply himself seriously to repentance without knowing himself to belong to God” (*Institutes*, 3.3.2).

The question is not whether solitary faith (i.e., separated from the other virtues) justifies (which we grant could not easily be the case, since it is not even true and living faith); but whether it ‘alone’ concurs to the act of justification (which we assert); as the eye alone sees, but not when torn out of the body....The coexistence of love in him who is justified is not denied; but its coefficient or cooperation in justification is denied.<sup>129</sup>

Turretin used an appropriate analogy from nature. “Natural potencies are connected as to existence, but disjoined as to operation. Light and heat in the sun are most closely connected together, but still the light alone illuminates, the heat alone warms.”<sup>130</sup> Take Turretin’s distinction between connection and operation, and then apply it to faith and repentance. Faith and repentance are most certainly *connected*, but they – just like light and heat – are disjoined as to *operation*. Faith alone operates in the act of justification. “Although remission of sins is promised to repentance, it does not follow that it can be said to justify with faith because it contributes nothing (neither meritoriously, nor *instrumentally*) to the act of justification” [emphasis mine].<sup>131</sup>

In contrast to classic reformed theology, Shepherd’s main argument is to establish that faith and repentance are not just *connected* but they both *cooperate* in the act of obtaining justification – and that this is the position of the Westminster Standards. Shepherd argues that since faith is never without repentance, it follows that repentance justifies right along with faith. “Repentance is like faith. It is neither the cause nor the ground of pardon. Yet it is absolutely necessary for the forgiveness of sins.”<sup>132</sup> And if it is necessary for forgiveness, then it is necessary for justification. “If justification includes forgiveness, and if repentance is necessary for forgiveness, then repentance is necessary for justification.”<sup>133</sup> Shepherd uses the same line of argument as Rome did in Calvin’s day: If the faith that justifies is not alone, then faith alone does not justify. Shepherd writes,

Now if we use the formula, justification by faith alone, do we mean faith *with* repentance or faith *without* repentance? If we mean faith with repentance, how can this faith be described as faith *alone*? But if we mean faith without repentance, how can such faith secure the pardon of sin for which repentance is necessary [emphasis original]?<sup>134</sup>

Shepherd clearly does not want to say that justification is obtained by faith alone apart from repentance and obedience!

If it is the case for Shepherd that repentance and obedience justifies right along with faith, then how does Shepherd understand the Westminster Confession’s statement that faith is the alone instrument of justification? Shepherd explains the alone function of faith *not* as separating it from all those graces that accompany saving faith but rather from all those things that do not belong to saving faith, and thus cannot be considered along with faith an instrument of justification. One example that Shepherd gives is the Roman Catholic idea that baptism is “the real instrument of justification.”<sup>135</sup> “Over against this the Westminster teaches that faith is the *alone* instrument....The believer is justified by faith, not by faith plus baptism” [emphasis original].<sup>136</sup> Shepherd’s line of reasoning is that since baptism does not belong to the essence of

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<sup>129</sup> Turretin, 2:677.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 2:680.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 2:681.

<sup>132</sup> “Justification By Faith Alone,” 84.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 84-85.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 78.

saving faith it cannot be considered along with saving faith an instrument of justification. Whatever does *not* belong to saving faith does *not* belong to the instrumentality of saving faith. Self-righteous works is another example Shepherd gives of those things that do not belong to the essence of saving faith. When Paul excluded works from justification in Romans 3:28, he was excluding only those works that attempt to merit eternal life by clinging to the provisions of the Mosaic covenant. “To attempt justification in that way is to distance one’s self from Christ and to make salvation a matter of human achievement.”<sup>137</sup> Again, Shepherd’s line of reasoning is that since meritorious works do not belong to the essence of saving faith, they do not participate along with faith in the act of justification. On the other hand, whatever belongs to saving faith (e.g. repentance and non-meritorious works) justifies right along with faith. This line of reasoning is the basic underpinning of Shepherd’s interpretation of the Westminster Standards. “The Westminster Standards affirm that although faith is the alone instrument of justification, and although neither faith nor repentance is the meritorious ground of justification, there is no justification without a penitent faith.”<sup>138</sup> Notice how faith and repentance become a penitent faith. This is because in Shepherd’s theology repentance belongs to the essence of saving faith, and thus participates in the instrumentality of saving faith.

Therefore, according to Shepherd, the serious misunderstanding of the gospel, which the Westminster Standards avoid, is the idea that a simple act of faith is all a person needs to be justified. The perspective that all it takes is a simple act of faith “offers no way of accounting for the gospel demand for both faith and repentance as necessary for the forgiveness of sins and no way of accounting for obedience as necessary for entering eternal life.”<sup>139</sup>

Does this mean we may no longer use the formula, ‘justification by faith alone’? Shepherd’s answer is that we may “as long as we understand and avoid the ambiguities and liabilities involved in it.”<sup>140</sup> We may *not* use ‘faith alone’ if we mean that salvation is granted by faith alone apart from repentance and obedience. But we may say ‘by faith alone’ as long as we mean “not by human achievement,”<sup>141</sup> and “avoid any suggestion that justification and salvation are by the merit of good works.”<sup>142</sup> “Use of that particular formula, however, cannot be made a litmus test for orthodoxy. If it were, both Scripture and the Westminster Confession would fail the test.”<sup>143</sup>

#### **IV. Shepherd’s Lectures at Conference on Covenant Theology**

Last summer, in August of 2003, Shepherd gave two lectures at a conference entitled “Contemporary Perspectives on Covenant Theology,” sponsored by the Southern California Center for Christian Studies.<sup>144</sup> The lectures were titled, “Justification by Faith in Pauline Theology,” and “Justification by works in Reformed Theology.” In these lectures Shepherd makes explicit what was implicit in the *Call of Grace*, namely, his rejection of the active obedience of Christ as a grounds of justification. For Shepherd it is merely Christ’s passive suffering on the cross that is the grounds for justification. Shepherd’s assertion in *the Call of Grace* that perfect obedience has never been a condition of obtaining eternal life logically leads to

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>144</sup> Tapes are available by calling SCCCS at (714) 572-8358.

a denial of our need for Christ's active obedience.<sup>145</sup> If perfect obedience to God's law has never been necessary for justification, then Christ's perfect obedience to God's law was not necessary for our justification. It also follows that getting rid of the idea that perfect obedience is necessary for our justification makes room for the idea that imperfect obedience can be constitutive for our justification. Shepherd admits that if he grants that Christ's active law keeping is imputed to us in justification, then he cannot say that our sanctified law keeping is necessary for our justification. Therefore, his burden in the first lecture is to prove that a belief in Christ's active obedience is not in line with the Bible. The burden of his second lecture is to prove that early reformed theology (including Calvin and Ursinus) grounded justification not in the active obedience of Christ, as later reformed theologians did, but solely in His passive obedience. We will briefly consider both lectures one at a time.

### A. "Justification by Faith in Pauline Theology"

Shepherd's first lecture is basically an exegesis-type-sermon on Romans 3:28, 'a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.' It even has three points: (1) what is justification? (2) What is the faith by which we are justified? (3) What are the works excluded from justification? Shepherd's main thesis is that justification, which he defines solely as the forgiveness of sins, involves simply the imputation of Christ's passive suffering on the cross. Christ paid the penalty for our sins, and that and that alone is imputed to us in justification. In other words, the righteousness imputed to the believer in justification is the forgiveness of sin's penalty, not Christ's perfect obedience to God's law. 'To justify,' according to Shepherd, simply means 'to forgive the penalty of sin.' It does not mean to declare a person perfectly righteous, as if he has already perfectly kept all the righteous requirements of God's law. Justification says nothing about whether the believer has obeyed the law in Christ His representative; it simply says that the believer will not suffer the penalty for breaking the law since Christ has already paid the penalty. Imputation is not the positive reckoning of a perfect law keeping, but a negative non-reckoning of sin's penalty. To put it in its simplest terms, to tell a person he won't ever be punished for unfaithfulness is not the same thing as telling him that he is perfectly faithful. For Shepherd, justification is God's declaration that the believer will not be punished for unfaithfulness; it is not God's declaration that the believer is, in God's eyes, perfectly faithful.

To support his view of justification as simply the forgiveness of sins, Shepherd argues that all the passages in both the immediate and broader context of Romans 3:28, particularly Romans 3:24-25, 4:6-8, 4:25, 5:9, and even 5:18-19, uniformly relate justification to Christ's death, and not to His obedience to God's law. It is particularly Shepherd's interpretation of Romans 5:18-19 that interests us, for this is one of the traditional proof texts for the doctrine of Christ's active obedience. Shepherd argues that in v.18 we must understand Christ's 'one act of righteousness' that obtains our justification as the same righteousness that Paul had already written about in Romans 3:24-25, namely, the passive death of Christ. In Romans 5:19, continues Shepherd, the one act of obedience is the same as the one act of righteousness mentioned in v.18 – Christ's passive death on the cross. Nowhere, contends Shepherd, does the Bible ground justification in Christ's law keeping.

When it comes to the means by which a person is justified (forgiven), Shepherd continues to espouse his view that it is by a living, active, and obedient faith. Justifying faith is first and

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<sup>145</sup> Long ago Wilhelmus Brakel argued that, "whoever denies the existence of the covenant of works, ... will very readily deny that Christ by His active obedience has merited a right to eternal life for the elect." See *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, vol. 1, translated by Bartel Elshout (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1992), p. 355.

foremost a faith in Jesus, more specifically, faith in His blood (Romans 4:22, 25; 5:9). Because justification is the forgiveness of sins, justifying faith could not be other than faith in the shed blood of Jesus. Secondly, justifying faith is also a penitent faith. The penitent are those who turn away from sin. Repentance is more than a change of heart and mind; it is also a change of will and deed, as Paul says in Acts 26:20, “do works meet for repentance.” Paul did not call for faith alone with the assumption that repentance would automatically flow from faith. He demanded both faith and repentance, even putting repentance in the first place. “Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:21). If we do not repent we will not be justified on Judgment Day (Acts 17:30). Thirdly, justifying faith is an obedient faith. As faith and repentance are inseparably joined, so also are repentance and obedience. Shepherd bases this assertion on the phrase, ‘obedience to the faith’ (Romans 1:5). According to Galatians 5:6, a man is justified by a faith that works through love. Faith expressing itself through love is keeping God’s commandments. Thus, a man is justified by an obedient faith.

What, then, are the works that Paul excludes from justification in Romans 3:28? You guessed it: only legalistic works. Shepherd rejects the classic reformed view that the ‘works of the law’ refers to all works of any kind, whether good or bad, whether done in faith or unbelief. Shepherd says that the traditional reformed interpretation brings Paul into conflict with his assertion that we are justified by an obedient faith. As proof Shepherd appeals to Romans chapter two, where he thinks Paul contrasts those who seek justification by the works of the law, and thus do not really keep the law, and true believers who repent and seek to do what is good according to God’s law. Those who believe in Jesus with this kind of faith will be justified on Judgment Day, according to verses 13 and 16. The Jews did not really obey the law. Such impenitent covenant-breakers cannot be justified or saved. In Isaiah 64:6, the prophet is not talking about the good works that are done from faith according to God’s law, but the works of meritorious self-righteousness, which only serve to mask disobedience to other aspects of the law. The righteousness of those who truly obey the law is not the righteousness of meritorious achievement but the righteousness of faith. This was the kind of faith imputed to Abraham for righteousness, and has nothing to do with justification by works of the law. There is a vast difference between the works of the law, which Paul everywhere condemns, and the obedience of faith, which Paul everywhere commends.

To sum up, Shepherd teaches that we are justified, not by the works of the law (narrowly considered) done in unbelief, but by the works of God’s law (broadly considered) done from faith in Jesus. Because the unbelieving Jews never really did keep God’s law they could not be justified. Because believers really do keep God’s law they can be justified.

## **B. “Justification by works in Reformed Theology”**

The title of this second lecture reflects Shepherd’s argument that later (not earlier) reformed theology illegitimately grounds justification in the merit of works (i.e. the “works/merit principle”), and thus is structurally the same as the Roman Catholic doctrine that justification is grounded in the merit of works. The only difference is that later reformed theologians say the works are done by Christ (in His active obedience), whereas Rome says the works are done by the Christian. In contrast, early reformed theology grounded justification not in the merit of Christ’s active obedience but solely in His passive obedience. Shepherd boldly claims that one cannot find a belief in the active obedience of Christ in Calvin or Ursinus or the Heidelberg Catechism, because they did not find this doctrine in the Bible. The very few texts quoted by later reformed theologians in support of this doctrine are understood by earlier reformed theologians to refer to Christ’s passive obedience. Even the Westminster Confession was written in such a way as to

accommodate the views of three prominent members (Shepherd does not say who they were) who did not subscribe to the imputation of Christ's active obedience. Therefore, Shepherd concludes, to interpret the language of 'satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ,' in the Heidelberg Catechism, to refer to Christ's active obedience is to read back into early reformed theology the views that developed only at a later time. When exactly this shift in reformed theology took place does not concern Shepherd in this lecture.

To support his contention that "the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ," refers not to Christ's active law keeping but to His passive suffering on the cross Shepherd turns to Ursinus' own commentary on Question 60, and specifically to Ursinus' distinction between legal righteousness and evangelical righteousness. "By *legal righteousness* we mean the fulfilling of the law by one, who is thereby declared righteous; ... This legal righteousness was the righteousness of Adam before the fall."<sup>146</sup> "*Evangelical righteousness* is the fulfilling of the law, performed, not by us, but by another in our stead, and imputed unto us of God by faith."<sup>147</sup> When Adam failed to give God legal righteousness, God promised to send Christ to perform this legal righteousness for mankind. How did Christ perform this legal righteousness for us, Shepherd asks? Did He do it by fulfilling the law during the whole course of his life – what theologians call His active obedience? Or did he do it by submitting to punishment prescribed in the law for transgressors of the law – what theologians refer to as His passive obedience? Ursinus' answer, argues Shepherd, is that it has to be one or the other. It cannot be both. Whereas later reformed theology said that legal righteousness requires *both* obedience to the law *and* payment of the law's penalty, Ursinus, claims Shepherd, maintained it was one or the other but not both. Ursinus wrote, "*Legal righteousness* is performed, either by obedience to the law, or by punishment. The law requires one or the other."<sup>148</sup> Here Shepherd understands Ursinus to mean that if one breaks the law, then the only thing necessary to satisfy the justice of God is to suffer the law's punishment for disobedience. Thus, according to Shepherd's interpretation of Ursinus, for Christ to fulfill the law for us simply meant to pay the law's penalty. Though Christ's perfect law keeping was necessary to qualify Christ to be a worthy sacrifice, it is not the righteousness that is imputed to us in justification. Nowhere, contends Shepherd, does Ursinus say that the righteousness imputed to us is the righteousness of Christ's law keeping. Rather, it is the righteousness of His suffering the penalty for our sins. Ursinus clearly stated that evangelical righteousness "is the imputation and application of that righteousness which Christ wrought out for us by his death upon the cross, and by his resurrection from the dead."<sup>149</sup> Notice, Shepherd emphasizes, Ursinus did not say that the righteousness that Christ wrought out for us was the fulfillment of the demands of the law during the whole course of His life. This is why Shepherd insists that one will not find in Ursinus' definition of justification a reference to Christ's perfect law keeping. Rather, for Ursinus, justification is simply the forgiveness of sins, grounded in Christ's passive obedience. Ursinus said, "Justification and the forgiveness of sins are, therefore, the same."<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, Translated by Rev. G.W. Williard (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company), 325.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 325.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 325.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 326.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.

## V. SUMMARY AND CRITIQUE

If the reformed confessions are an accurate reflection of biblical truth, then it should not be difficult, and it should not have been difficult for Westminster Seminary, to conclude that Norman Shepherd's teaching on the relation of justification and works is a heresy and not merely unclear. Shepherd has made himself very clear. He has maintained from the very beginning that what can be said of faith can also be said of good works; neither can be the ground of justification, but both can be the instrument of justification. By getting rid of the whole idea of merit, especially the idea that perfect obedience is a necessary condition of eternal life, Shepherd is free to assert that the righteousness that can stand before the judgment seat of God can in fact be imperfect and defiled with sin, as long as sin is forgiven.

It is certainly true that we must always be willing to correct our traditional interpretations of Scripture if better exegesis shows them to be in error. The fact is, however, that Shepherd has not only failed to offer better exegesis, but the main tenets of his doctrine of justification are not new, and have already been refuted many times over in the history of the church. The very foundation of Shepherd's view of justification, namely, that eternal life does not need to be merited, has never been seriously entertained in the Church. As Charles Hodge said, "The Church in all ages has recognized this truth. ... They have ever regarded it as intuitively true that heaven must be merited. The only question was, whether that merit was in them or in Christ."<sup>151</sup>

Shepherd's contention that the Westminster Standards do not espouse the classic reformed view of *sola fide*, and that later reformers opposed early reformers on the matter of Christ's active obedience, is just another form of the "Calvin against the Calvinists" approach, which scholars like Richard Muller have definitively disposed of.<sup>152</sup> And if the early reformers were not as mature in their thinking concerning the doctrine of Christ's active obedience, then what Gerhardus Vos stated concerning the doctrine of the covenant of works can equally be said of the doctrine of Christ's active obedience. "But whoever has the historical sense to be able to separate the mature development of a thought from its original sprouting and does not insist that a doctrine be mature at birth, will have no difficulty in recognizing the covenant of works as an old Reformed doctrine."<sup>153</sup>

Multiple passages from both Calvin and Ursinus could be adduced to prove that they both taught the necessity of perfect obedience as a condition of eternal life, and, on this account, the necessity of Christ's perfect obedience to be imputed to us in justification. First, Calvin:

The second requirement of our reconciliation with God was this: that man, who by his disobedience had become lost, should by way of remedy counter it with obedience, satisfy God's judgment, and pay the penalties for sin. Accordingly, our Lord came forth as true man and took the person and the name of Adam in order to take Adam's place in obeying the Father, to present our flesh as the price of satisfaction to God's righteous judgment, and, in the same flesh, to pay the penalty that we had deserved.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989 reprint), 3:129.

<sup>152</sup> See *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003).

<sup>153</sup> Geerhardus Vos, "Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), 237.

<sup>154</sup> *Institutes* 2.12.3.

How has Christ abolished sin, banished the separation between us and God, and acquired righteousness to render God favorable and kindly toward us? To this we can in general reply that he has achieved this for us by the whole course of his obedience. This is proved by Paul's testimony: 'As by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience we are made righteous' [Rom. 5:19]. In another passage [Gal. 4:4-5] ... Paul extends the basis of pardon that frees us from the curse of the law to the whole life of Christ ... Thus in his very baptism, also, he asserted that he fulfilled a part of righteousness in obediently carrying out his Father's commandment [Matt. 3:15]. In short, from the time when he took on the form of a servant, he began to pay the price of liberation in order to redeem us.<sup>155</sup>

Concerning Romans 5:19, Calvin wrote,

we are made righteous through the obedience of Christ, we hence conclude that Christ, in satisfying the Father, has provided a righteousness for us. ... He at the same time shows what sort of righteousness it is, by calling it obedience. And here let us especially observe what we must bring into God's presence, if we seek to be justified by works, even obedience to the law, not to this or that part, but in every respect perfect; for when a just man falls, all his former righteousness will not be remembered. ... Away then with those who confidently claim to the righteousness of works, which cannot otherwise exist than when there is full and complete observance of the law; and it is certain that this is nowhere to be found.<sup>156</sup>

Concerning Christ's subjection to the law in Galatians 4:4, Calvin writes,

Christ the Son of God, who might have claimed to be exempt from every kind of subjection, became subject to the law. Why? He did so in our room, that he might obtain freedom for us. ... So Christ chose to become liable to keep the law, that exemption from it [as a condition of eternal life] might be obtained for us; otherwise it would have been to no purpose that he should come under the yoke of the law, for it certainly was not on his own account that he did so.<sup>157</sup>

Ursinus also taught the necessity of Christ's active obedience, though he did not use those exact words. Shepherd thinks he finds support in Ursinus' statement that "*Legal righteousness* is performed, either by obedience to the law, or by punishment. The law requires one or the other."<sup>158</sup> Shepherd interprets Ursinus to mean that Christ did not have to perform legal righteousness for us by fulfilling the law during the whole course of his life. He only had to submit to the punishment prescribed in the law for transgressors of the law. Ursinus said it was either by obedience or by punishment, but not by both, so argues Shepherd.

It is not difficult to show that Shepherd is guilty of misunderstanding Ursinus. This "either obedience or punishment" paradigm does not indicate two alternatives that were facing Christ, but rather it indicates the nature of man's subjection to the law – *apart from Christ*. Apart from Christ, man has only two choices: obey the law perfectly, or suffer its eternal punishment. Ursinus explains: "The law binds all to obedience, and if this is not performed, to eternal

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 2.16.5.

<sup>156</sup> *Calvin's Commentaries* [Romans], 19:212-213.

<sup>157</sup> *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, 118-119.

<sup>158</sup> *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 325.

punishment and condemnation. But no one renders this obedience. Therefore, the law binds all men to eternal condemnation.”<sup>159</sup> Again,

The law binds either to obedience or punishment. But satisfaction cannot be made through obedience, because our past obedience is already impaired, and that which follows cannot make satisfaction for past offenses. We are bound to render exact obedience every moment to the law, as a present debt. Hence, obedience being once impaired, there is no other way of making satisfaction except by punishment.<sup>160</sup>

Note again, it is man – not Christ – that has two mutually exclusive choices: either obedience or punishment. And since perfect obedience is not possible, man must be punished.

Since man himself has ruined the option of making satisfaction by perfect obedience, it does not follow that Christ did not have to make satisfaction for man by His perfect obedience, and that all He had to do was to make satisfaction by punishment. Quite the contrary, Ursinus says that Christ’s perfect obedience was necessary to satisfy the law’s requirement of perfect obedience. He wrote, “although we are not able to make satisfaction through obedience, we are, nevertheless, able to make it through the endurance of a sufficient punishment, not in ourselves, but in Christ, who has satisfied the law *both by obedience and punishment*” [emphasis mine].<sup>161</sup> Shepherd gives the impression that, for Ursinus, Christ satisfied the law only by punishment, and yet Ursinus clearly said it was by *obedience* and punishment. For Ursinus, obedience, and not merely suffering punishment, is a necessary component of the fulfillment of the law for us. This is clear from his definition of righteousness as conformity with the law:

righteousness is the fulfillment of the law, and a conformity with the law is righteousness itself. This must be observed and held fast to, because *our justification can only be effected by fulfilling the law*. Evangelical righteousness is the fulfilling of the law, and does not conflict with it in the least. The gospel does not abolish the law, but establishes it [emphasis mine].<sup>162</sup>

Since “our justification can only be effected by fulfilling the law,” only Christ’s perfect obedience can effect our justification. Ursinus wrote,

The law promises life to those who are righteous in themselves, or on the condition of righteousness, and perfect obedience. ‘He that doeth them, shall live in them.’ ‘If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments.’ (Lev. 18:5. Matt. 19:17). The gospel, on the other hand, promises life by faith in Christ, or on the condition of the righteousness of Christ, applied unto us by faith. The law and gospel are, however, not opposed to each other in these respects; for *although the law requires us to keep the commandments if we would enter into life, yet it does not exclude us from life if another perform these things for us* [emphasis mine].<sup>163</sup>

We have a right to life because Christ kept the commandments for us! Though more quotes could be multiplied, one more will suffice.

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 325.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 104.

The law promises eternal life and all good things upon the condition of our own and perfect righteousness, and of obedience in us: the gospel promises the same blessings upon the condition that we exercise faith in Christ, by which we embrace the obedience which another, even Christ, has performed in our behalf.<sup>164</sup>

Even if it were granted that the early reformers did not explicitly teach the imputation of Christ's active obedience, it does not follow that they rejected it; and they most certainly did not on any basis make any room for repentance or sanctified obedience to figure in the verdict of justification! "All works are excluded from our justification, yea even faith itself in as far as it is a virtue, or work."<sup>165</sup>

Shepherd is not the first to deny Christ's active obedience as grounds of justification.

According to Anselm Christ's life of obedience had no redemptive significance, since He owed this to God for Himself. Only the sufferings of the Savior constituted a claim on God and were basic to the sinner's redemption. Thinking along somewhat similar lines Piscator,<sup>166</sup> the seventeenth century Arminians, Richard Watson, R.N. Davies, and other Arminian scholars deny that the active obedience of Christ has the redemptive significance which we ascribe to it. Their denial rests especially on two considerations: (1) Christ needed His active obedience for Himself as man. Being under the law, He was in duty bound to keep it for Himself.... (2) God demands, or can demand, only one of two things of the sinner: either obedience to the law, or subjection to the penalty, but not both. If the law is obeyed, the penalty cannot be inflicted; and if the penalty is borne, nothing further can be demanded.<sup>167</sup>

Turretin makes reference to a certain Cargius who also restricted imputation to Christ's passive obedience, arguing that "since the law did not bind sinners to obedience, but only to punishment, Christ (substituted in our place) owed only punishment for us and not obedience."<sup>168</sup>

Evidently, Shepherd is not the only one to misunderstand and misapply the principle "either obedience or punishment." As Berkhof noted, the principle applied to man and not to Christ.

There is some confusion here, however, which results in misunderstanding. This 'either ... or' applied to the case of Adam before the fall, but ceased to apply the moment he sinned and thus entered the penal relationship of the law. God continued to demand

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 497.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 331.

<sup>166</sup> Johannes Piscator (1546-1625), a German Reformed theologian. See Anthony Hoekema, *Saved By Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 182. Piscator's arguments were condemned at the third National Synod of Rochelle: "this Synod, in no wise approving the dividing of causes so nearly conjoined in this great effect of divine grace, and judging those arguments produced by him for the defence of his cause weak and invalid, doth order that all the pastors in the respective churches of this kingdom do wholly conform themselves in their teaching to that 'form of sound words' which hath been hitherto taught amongst us and is contained in the Holy Scriptures; to wit, that the *whole* obedience of Christ, both in His life and death, imputed to us, for the full remission of our sins, and acceptance unto eternal life: and, in short, that this being but one and the self-same obedience, is our entire and perfect justification" (Quoted in James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification* [Edinburgh: Banner Of Truth, 1961 reprint; first published in 1867], 174-175; emphasis original).

<sup>167</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 380-381.

<sup>168</sup> Turretin, 2:140.

obedience of man, but in addition to that required of him that he pay the penalty for past transgression. Meeting this double requirement was the only way of life after sin entered the world.<sup>169</sup>

It is not difficult to prove, as many able scholars have proven before, that Scripture grounds our justification before God in the imputation of Christ's active obedience. A good place to begin is with the baptism of Jesus, the purpose of which, according to Jesus Himself, was "to fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15). Christ submitted to John's baptism of repentance, certainly not for Himself, for He had no sin to repent of, which explains John's hesitation to baptize Jesus. Clearly, by obeying the command to be baptized, Jesus was showing – at the very commencement of His public ministry – that He was fulfilling all righteousness not for Himself but *for us*! No passage is clearer than Romans 5:18-19 for establishing the biblical basis of the doctrine of Christ's active obedience. "Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous." This parallel and analogy between the first and second Adams clearly entails that Christ had to obey to make up for Adam's disobedience. Nowhere does the text or context limit Christ's obedience to His death on the cross. "It necessarily includes his obedience in willingly undergoing death, but the text provides no reason for limiting it to that one act."<sup>170</sup> The mistake of limiting Christ's one act of obedience to His death "is based on a failure to realize the full meaning of obedience. By nature, obedience is a continuous state, requiring a continuation of obedience, but even one act of disobedience makes a person disobedient. The obedience of Christ in Romans 5, in the context, can only mean his whole life in obedience to God."<sup>171</sup> In those places in Scripture where our salvation is ascribed to the death of Christ,

this is not done to the exclusion of the obedience of life because nowhere is such a restriction found. ... Rather it must be understood by a synecdoche by which what belongs to the whole is ascribed to the better part because it was the last degree of his humiliation, the crown and completion of his obedience.<sup>172</sup>

The Scriptures everywhere portray the righteousness of Christ as a seamless garment, whereas Shepherd portrays it as excluding Christ's active obedience. Thus, Shepherd is guilty of dividing what should not be divided.<sup>173</sup>

Furthermore, to limit the righteousness of Christ to His suffering the penalty of sin is to overlook the fact that righteousness is a positive concept and does not consist in suffering but in fulfilling the demands of the law: "righteousness is nothing else than conformity to the Law,

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<sup>169</sup> Berkhof, 381.

<sup>170</sup> Nicolaas H. Gootjes, "Christ's Obedience and Covenant Obedience," *Koinwnia* 19/2 (Fall, 2002), 16.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>172</sup> Turretin, 2:452.

<sup>173</sup> "It is customary to distinguish between the active and passive obedience of Christ. But in discriminating between the two, it should be distinctly understood that they cannot be separated. The two accompany each other at every point in the Savior's life. There is a constant interpenetration of the two. It was part of Christ's active obedience, that He subjected Himself voluntarily to sufferings and death. He Himself says: 'No man taketh my life from me, I lay it down of myself,' John 10:18. On the other hand it was also part of Christ's passive obedience, that He lived in subjection to the law. ... Christ's active and passive obedience should be regarded as complimentary parts of an organic whole" (Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 379-380).

while sin is any want of conformity to it.”<sup>174</sup> “And it shall be our righteousness, if we observe to do all these commandments before the Lord our God, as he hath commanded us” (Deuteronomy 6:25). If righteousness is obeying the law, it follows that imputed righteousness includes Christ’s obedience to God’s law. “For life is promised by the law, not to him who suffers, but to him who performs – ‘Do this and live.’”<sup>175</sup> “Besides, sufferings do not yield obedience to those commands of the law to which the promise of life is annexed, but they only satisfy its sanctions. Hence they cannot be called righteousness.”<sup>176</sup> Again,

punishments cannot be said to fulfill the law or its commands, but to satisfy the denunciations of the law. Who would say that a robber (capitally punished on account of his crimes) had obeyed the command or law of the king? Besides, since to act agreeably to law is a thing honest and praiseworthy, this cannot be asserted concerning the endurance of punishment, unless perchance one is to be praised because he is tormented in hell.<sup>177</sup>

In other words, to suffer the law’s penalty is not the same as to satisfy the law’s demands. To go to jail for stealing is not the same thing as being a righteous man who doesn’t steal. Even if someone else were to go to jail in my place (i.e. pay my penalty for stealing), that *in itself* does not constitute me a righteous man who doesn’t steal. To say that I won’t be punished for stealing is not the same as to say that I am not a thief but a hard-working man who gives to the poor!

When it is said that by the suffering of punishment, a sin of omission is expiated, it ought not to be understood in the sense that the sin had not been committed and that man had done whatever he was bound to do (which is repugnant to the truth). Rather inasmuch as by the penal endurance he is freed from the curse resting upon him on account of sin, the remission therefore granted him takes away indeed actual guilt, but does not on this account give him a right to life.<sup>178</sup>

It follows that Christ, in order for us to be declared righteous in God’s eyes, had to do more for us than simply suffer the law’s penalty. He also had to satisfy the law’s demands. If Christ merely suffered the law’s penalty for me, that *in itself* would not constitute me a law-keeper. To say that I won’t pay the penalty for breaking the law is not the same as to say that I am a law-keeper! For this reason the reformers insisted that justification is not simply pardon. “It includes pardon, but it also includes a declaration that the believer is just or righteous in the sight of the law. He has a righteousness which completely satisfies its demands.”<sup>179</sup> The Westminster Confession reflects the historic reformed position that God justifies His people *both* “by pardoning their sins, *and* by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous.” And God accepts us as righteous “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” (11.1; emphasis mine). According to the classic reformed view, I am declared a law keeper not because I have kept the law, but because Christ has kept it for me!

If Shepherd wants to say that Christ merely suffered the law’s penalty for us, and that justification is merely the forgiveness of sin’s penalty, then how or on what basis can a person be

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<sup>174</sup> Buchanan, 268.

<sup>175</sup> Turretin, 2:451.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:454.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:451.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:141.

<sup>179</sup> Hodge, 3:119.

accounted a law-keeper in God's eyes? If, as Shepherd argues, it is *not* on the basis of Christ's law keeping, then it can be only on the basis of one's own personal law keeping. Since Shepherd clearly does not want to say that we are accounted law-keepers on the basis of Christ's law-keeping, the only option left for him is to say that we are accounted law-keepers on the basis of our own personal sanctified law-keeping; and this is exactly what he says. In the *Call of Grace*, Shepherd states, just as Christ's living, active and obedient faith was credited to him as righteousness, so Abraham's living, active, obedient faith "was credited to Abraham as righteousness."<sup>180</sup> God declared Abraham righteous because Abraham was in fact righteous. He had a living, active, obedient faith! Since Shepherd rejects perfect obedience as necessary for our persons to be accounted righteous in God's eyes he has no problem saying that a person can be accounted righteous in God's eyes on the basis of an imperfect righteousness.

The Bible, however, says that no one is justified by an imperfect righteousness. "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." (Matthew 5:48). "So likewise, ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are *unprofitable* servants: we have done that which was our duty to do" (Luke 17:10) "Cursed is every one that continueth not in *all things* which are written in the book of the law to do them" (Galatians 3:10). "For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the *whole law*" (Galatians 5:3). "For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in *one point*, he is guilty of *all*" (James 2:10). "Do not enter into judgment with your servant, for *in Your sight no one living is righteous*" (Psalm 143:2). The Lord has always required perfect obedience from His creatures, and He did not lower His standard after Adam fell. Thus, "God cannot show favor to, nor justify anyone without a perfect righteousness. For since the judgment of God is according to truth, he cannot pronounce anyone just who is not really just."<sup>181</sup> "IN YOUR SIGHT NO LIVING IS RIGHTEOUS" (Psalm 143:2)! Therefore the gospel teaches that he "who is destitute of personal righteousness ought to have another's, by which to be justified." This righteousness is found nowhere else than in Christ, who "fully satisfied the justice of God by his perfect obedience and thus brought to us an everlasting righteousness by which alone we can be justified before God."<sup>182</sup>

In the final analysis, it is crucial to Shepherd's whole argument to show that not all works are excluded from justification. He is well aware of the fact that Scripture clearly excludes works of some kind from justification – 'a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law' – and even pronounces an anathema upon those who would involve law keeping in the verdict of justification (cf. Galatians 1:9; 2:16, 2:21; 5:4). Therefore, it is not surprising that Shepherd is very anxious to escape the anathema by attempting to prove that not every kind of law-keeping is excluded from the verdict of justification. He argues that the 'deeds of the law' refer not to all works of any kind, whether done in unbelief or faith, but only to legalistic works done to merit eternal life.

It is not difficult to show, as most conservative interpreters have shown, that Scripture excludes all works without distinction from the verdict of justification. Long ago, Calvin responded to the argument of the Sophists that 'deeds of the law' refer only to those works done apart from Christ's grace. His reply was: "all works are excluded, whatever title may grace them;"<sup>183</sup> "not even spiritual works come into account when the power of justifying is ascribed to

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<sup>180</sup> *Call of Grace*, 15.

<sup>181</sup> Turretin, 2:647.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:647.

<sup>183</sup> *Institutes* 3.11.14.

faith.”<sup>184</sup> “Indeed, we confess with Paul that no other faith justifies ‘but faith working through love’ [Gal. 5:6]. But it does not take its power to justify from that working of love.”<sup>185</sup> “We have not a single work going forth from the saints that if it be judged in itself deserves not shame as its just reward;”<sup>186</sup> “no other righteousness than the complete observance of the law is allowed in heaven.”<sup>187</sup>

The simple and clear fact is that, although the Bible certainly distinguishes bad works done in unbelief from good works done in faith, nevertheless, whenever the Bible specifically excludes works from justification it does not restrict its definition of works to merely evil works to the exclusion of good works. For instance, if Paul had *not* wanted us to think he was excluding all works without distinction from justification, then why didn’t he put the matter this way: “we are not justified by the works of the law, but we are justified by the works of faith”? When he told us that Abraham was not justified by works, why didn’t he tell us: “Of course, the works I am referring to are *not* all those wonderful works that Abraham did as a believer”? When Paul pronounced an anathema against the idea that a man can be justified by the law, “Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law” (Galatians 5:4), why didn’t he qualify his anathema so as to leave no doubt that he only meant to exclude legalistic law-keeping but not sanctified law-keeping? After all, it was a matter of heaven and hell! Instead of saying, “in Jesus Christ ... availeth ... faith which worketh by love,” (Galatians 5:6), why didn’t Paul say, “in justification availeth faith which worketh by love,” or, better yet, “a man is justified by love”? Why doesn’t Paul ever say that we are justified by any of the fruits that faith produces? If Paul had not wished to exclude sanctified works from justification, then is it too much to ask for just one reference in any of his writings where he actually uses the words, ‘a man is justified by good works’ or ‘a man is justified by repentance’ or ‘a man is justified by regeneration’ or ‘a man is justified by the obedience of faith’? Why is it always simply, ‘a man is justified by faith’? This is a crucial point: though the Bible most certainly says that no one will enter heaven without good works (without holiness no one will see the Lord), it never speaks of good works or holiness as a *means* of obtaining justification. When Jesus said that only those who do the will of God will enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 7:21), He did *not* say that *by means of* doing God’s will we obtain justification!

The phrase in Romans 2:13, “the doers of the law shall be justified,” does not help Shepherd’s case at all, as Andrew Sandlin once pointed out.

The employment of Romans 2:13 as such a dominant motif in his theory sharply contradicts Shepherd’s distinction between the repugnant ‘works of the law’ and the desirable ‘working of faith,’ for there is no reason to assume Paul’s usage of ‘doers of the law’ envisions anything but the “works of the law.” A face-value reading of Romans 2 could render no other interpretation – the Jews possessed the inscripturated ‘works of the law’ and nonetheless violated them; the Gentiles ‘show the work of the law written in their hearts’ (v.15) and they also violate it. A “working of faith” conception of v.13 cannot be in view. Hence, if the “works of the law’ are the repugnant attempt at merit which Shepherd depicts, in Romans 2:13 they cannot serve as an instrument of justification as Shepherd asserts.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 3.11.14.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 3.11.20.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 3.14.9.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 3.14.13.

<sup>188</sup> Andrew Sandlin, “Deviations From Historic Solafideism in the Reformed Community,” *Chalcedon Report* (February 1995), 23.

The truth once recognized by Sandlin is still recognized by most interpreters.

‘Works of the law,’ then, as most interpreters have recognized, refers simply to ‘things that are done in obedience to the law.’ Paul uses the phrase ‘works of the law’ instead of the simple ‘works’ because he is particularly concerned in this context to deny to Jews an escape from the general sentence pronounced in v.19 [Romans 3:19]. But, since ‘works of the law’ are simply what we might call ‘good works’ defined in Jewish terms, the principle enunciated here has universal application; nothing a person does, whatever the object of obedience or the motivation of that obedience, can bring him or her into favor with God. It is just at this point that the significance of the meaning we have given ‘works of the law’ emerges so clearly. Any restricted definition of ‘works of the law’ *can* have the effect of opening the door to the possibility of justification by works – ‘good’ deeds that are done in the right spirit, with God’s enabling grace, or something of the sort. This, we are convinced, would be to misunderstand Paul at a vital point.<sup>189</sup>

Moo could not have summed it up better than when he said, “‘Works of the law’ are inadequate, not because they are ‘works of the law,’ but, ultimately, because they are ‘works.’”<sup>190</sup> Turretin also sums up the whole matter rather nicely.

For it is gratuitously and most falsely supposed that only works antecedent to faith are excluded. But he excludes all works entirely without distinction and indeed the works of Abraham not only as an unbeliever, but also a believer (since this was said of him when he was already a believer and renewed). Again, he excludes all debt (v.4); therefore, he also excludes every work. Finally, if he had not wished to exclude works done from faith, he ought not to have opposed ‘one working’ to ‘one believing’ simply, but one working without faith to one working from faith (which, however, he nowhere does).<sup>191</sup>

If the only passage that the opponents of *sole fide* have is James 2:24, “by works a man is justified, and not by faith only,” then they are in big trouble if they hope to escape Paul’s anathema! For not even James says that ‘a man is justified *before God* by works.’ “For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but *not before God*” (Romans 4:2). “But how can a man be just *before God*?” (Job 9:2). “How then can man be justified *before God*? Or how can he be clean that is born of a woman?” (Job 25:4). That is the question Paul answered, but that was *not* the question James answered. The reformers were right. James is not discussing forensic justification *before God* but rather justification *before men*. “James is describing how a man may ‘show’ his faith to be genuine (James 2:18), and how faith inevitably will ‘come to fullness’ or ‘fruition’ in good works (James 2:22).”<sup>192</sup> Since it is not possible to show men our faith by a mere profession of faith, James says, “I will show thee my faith by my works” (James 2:18).

The whole crux of the matter is that Shepherd robs the gospel of good news. How can a man be justified before God? The good news is that Christ’s righteousness, namely, His perfect

<sup>189</sup> Douglas Moo, “The Epistle to the Romans,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 209; quoted in James White, *The God Who Justifies* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House, 2001), 179-180; emphasis original.

<sup>190</sup> *The Epistle to the Romans*, 217; quoted in Edward Donnelly, “By Faith Alone,” *The Banner of Truth* (August/September 2003), 42. See also Douglas Moo, “‘Law,’ ‘Works of Law,’ And Legalism in Paul,” *WTJ*, Vol. 45:1 (Spring 1983), pp. 73-100.

<sup>191</sup> Turretin, 2:678.

<sup>192</sup> Robertson, *Justification Controversy*, 18-19.

obedience and sacrifice upon the cross for the sins of His people, is freely imputed by God to all who receive Christ by faith alone, trusting in his saving work on their behalf. By fulfilling the law and suffering its curse, Christ obtains righteousness and eternal life as a free gift for His people. Now, Mr. Shepherd, if Christ fully satisfied the justice of God and appeased God's wrath against my sin, then what act of obedience would you have me do, or what act of disobedience would you have me avoid, in order to escape God's wrath? The Bible says that the only means of escape is to reach out the empty hand of faith and receive the gracious gift. Yes, Mr. Shepherd, all it takes is a simple act of faith. 'The vilest offender who truly believes that moment from Jesus forgiveness receives.' Yes, Mr. Shepherd, salvation and justification *do* in fact take place at a certain point in time – the moment a person believes! "Verily, verily, I say to you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me *hath everlasting life*, and *shall not come into condemnation*; but is passed from death unto life" (John 5:24). "And the publican, ... saying, God be merciful to me a sinner! I tell you, this man went down to his house *justified*!" (Luke 18:13-14). "Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved"! (Acts 16:30-31). "For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Romans 9:13). Justification does not take place at any other time than the *first* appearance of genuine faith in the human heart.

But as justification cannot be conceived to have taken place from eternity before the ages, so neither ought it to be thrown forward to the consummation of the world as others hold – as if God only then exercises properly the act of a Judge, both in the pardon of believers and in the condemnation of the wicked. For thus the declaration of justification is falsely confounded with justification itself.<sup>193</sup>

Therefore, the question is this: Is justification by faith alone apart from obedience the one true gospel or is it not? John Murray believed that "it makes void the gospel to introduce works in connection with justification."<sup>194</sup> For precisely this reason, Calvin (and Luther too!) called the doctrine of justification by faith alone "the main hinge on which religion turns."<sup>195</sup> Turretin termed it "the principal rampart of the Christian religion. This being adulterated or subverted, it is impossible to retain purity of doctrine in other places. Hence Satan in every way has endeavored to corrupt this doctrine in all ages, as has been done especially by the papacy."<sup>196</sup> Take note: deny justification by faith alone, and it is impossible to retain purity of doctrine in other places! It is a downward slide.

Does Shepherd really want to maintain that the fathers of the reformation, who together wrote the Protestant Creeds, along with all their spiritual sons, men like Turretin, Hodge, Berkhof, and John Murray, have all misread Scripture and have all misunderstood the doctrine of justification by faith alone?

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<sup>193</sup> Turretin, 2:684.

<sup>194</sup> John Murray, *Collected Writings*, vol. 2 (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 221.

<sup>195</sup> *Institutes*, 3.11.1.

<sup>196</sup> Turretin, 2:633.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**RECOMMENDATION 1.** That the following four resolutions and their respective grounds be adopted by synod.

**Resolution 1:** That we reaffirm the truth of the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone, including the imputation of the active obedience of Christ as a necessary element in our righteousness before God, as it is expressed in the Three Forms of Unity, specifically in those passages that follow:  
[Pertinent words are in bold print]

### A. The Heidelberg Catechism

Question 1: What is your only comfort in life and in death?

Answer 1: That I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ, **who with His precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins, and redeemed me from all the power of the devil;** and so preserves me that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that all things must work together for my salvation. Wherefore, by His Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live unto Him.

Q11: But is not God also merciful?

A11: God is indeed merciful, but **He is likewise just; His justice therefore requires that sin, which is committed against the most high majesty of God, be punished with extreme,** that is, with everlasting punishment both of body and soul.

Q18: But who now is that Mediator, who in one person is true God and also a true and righteous man?

A18: Our Lord Jesus Christ, who is freely given unto us for **complete redemption and righteousness.**

Q21: What is true faith?

A21: True faith is not only a sure knowledge, whereby I hold for truth all that God has revealed to us in His Word, but also a hearty trust, which the Holy Ghost works in me by the Gospel, that not only to others, but to me also, forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness, and salvation are freely given by God, merely of grace, only for the sake of **Christ's merits.**

Q30: Do those also believe in the only Savior Jesus, who seek their salvation and welfare from "saints," **themselves,** or anywhere else?

A30: No; although they make their boast of Him, yet in their deeds they deny the only Savior Jesus; for either Jesus is not a complete Savior, or they who by true faith receive this Savior, **must have in Him all that is necessary to their salvation.**

Q37: What do you understand by the word "suffered"?

A37: That **all the time He lived on earth, but especially at the end of His life, He bore, in body and soul, the wrath of God against the sin of the whole human race**; in order that by His suffering, as the only atoning sacrifice, He might redeem our body and soul from everlasting damnation, and obtain for us the grace of God, righteousness and eternal life.

Q52: What comfort is it to you that Christ "shall come to judge the living and the dead"?

A52: That in all my sorrows and persecutions, I, with uplifted head, look for the very One, who **offered Himself for me to the judgment of God, and removed all curse from me**, to come as Judge from heaven, who shall cast all His and my enemies into everlasting condemnation, but shall take me with all His chosen ones to Himself into heavenly joy and glory.

Q56: What do you believe concerning the "forgiveness of sins"?

A56: That God, for the sake of Christ's satisfaction, will no more remember my sins, nor the sinful nature with which I have to struggle all my life long; but **graciously imputes to me the righteousness of Christ, that I may nevermore come into condemnation.**

Q60: How are you righteous before God?

A60: Only by true faith in Jesus Christ: that is, although my conscience accuses me, that I have grievously sinned against all the commandments of God, and have never kept any of them, and am still prone always to all evil; yet God, **without any merit of mine**, of mere grace, grants and imputes to me the **perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ**, as if I had never committed nor had any sins, **and had myself accomplished all the obedience which Christ has fulfilled for me**; if only I accept such benefit with a believing heart.

Q61: Why do you say that you are righteous by faith only?

A61: **Not that I am acceptable to God on account of the worthiness of my faith, but because only the satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ is my righteousness before God; and I can receive the same and make it my own in no other way than by faith only.**

Q62: But why cannot our good works be the whole **or part** of our righteousness before God?

A62: Because the righteousness which can stand before the judgment seat of God must be **perfect throughout and entirely conformable to the divine law**, but even our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin.

Q63: Do our good works merit nothing, even though it is God's will to reward them in this life and in that which is to come?

A63: **The reward comes not of merit, but of grace.**

Q64: But does not this doctrine make men careless and profane?

A64: **No, for it is impossible that those who are implanted into Christ by true faith, should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness.**

Q86: Since, then, we are redeemed from our misery by grace through Christ, without any merit of ours, why must we do good works?

A86: Because Christ, having redeemed us by His blood, also renews us by His Holy Spirit after His own image, that with our whole life **we show ourselves thankful to God** for His blessing, and that **He be glorified through us**; then also, that **we ourselves may be assured of our faith** by the fruits thereof; and by our godly walk may **win others** also to Christ.

Q87: Can they, then, be saved who do not turn to God from their unthankful, impenitent life?

A87: By no means, for, as Scripture says, no unchaste person, idolater, adulterer, thief, covetous man, drunkard, slanderer, robber, or the like shall inherit the kingdom of God.

Q91: What are good works?

A91: **Those only which proceed from true faith, and are done according to the Law of God, unto His glory, and not such as rest on our own opinion or the commandments of men.**

Q114: Can those who are converted to God keep these Commandments perfectly?

A114: No, but even the holiest men, while in this life, have **only a small beginning** of such obedience, yet so that with earnest purpose they begin to live not only according to some, but according to all the Commandments of God.

Q115: Why then does God so strictly enjoin the Ten Commandments upon us, since in this life no one can keep them?

A115: First, that as long as we live we may learn more and more to know our sinful nature, and so the more earnestly seek forgiveness of sins and righteousness in Christ; second, that without ceasing we diligently ask God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, that we be renewed more and more after the image of God, until we attain the **goal of perfection after this life.**

## B. The Belgic Confession

Article XX: God Has Manifested His Justice and Mercy in Christ.

We believe that God, who is perfectly merciful and just, sent His Son to assume that nature in which the disobedience was committed, **to make satisfaction in the same**, and **to bear the punishment of sin** by His most bitter passion and death. **God therefore manifested His justice against His Son when He laid our iniquities upon Him**, and poured forth His mercy and goodness on us, who were guilty and worthy of damnation, out of mere and perfect love, giving His Son unto death for us, and raising Him for our justification, that through Him we might obtain immortality and life eternal.

Article XXI: The Satisfaction of Christ, Our Only High Priest, for Us.

We believe that Jesus Christ is ordained with an oath to be an everlasting High Priest, after the order of Melchizedek; and that He has presented Himself in our behalf before the Father, to appease His wrath by **His full satisfaction**, by offering Himself on the tree of the cross, and pouring out His precious blood to purge away our sins, as the prophets had foretold. For it is written: He was

wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and numbered with the transgressors; and condemned by Pontius Pilate as a malefactor, though he had first declared Him innocent. Therefore, He restored that which he took not away, and suffered, the righteous for the unrighteous, as well in His body as in His soul, feeling the terrible punishment which our sins had merited; insomuch that his sweat became as it were great drops of blood falling down upon the ground. He called out: My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? and has suffered all this for the remission of our sins.

Wherefore we justly say with the apostle Paul that we know nothing save Jesus Christ, and him crucified; we count all things but loss and refuse for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord, in whose wounds we find all manner of consolation. **Neither is it necessary to seek or invent any other means of being reconciled to God than this only sacrifice, once offered, by which he hath perfected forever them that are sanctified.** This is also the reason why He was called by the angel of God, JESUS, that is to say, SAVIOR, because He would save his people from their sins.

Article XXII: Our Justification Through Faith in Jesus Christ.

We believe that, to attain the true knowledge of this great mystery, the Holy Spirit kindles in our hearts an **upright faith, which embraces Jesus Christ with all His merits, appropriates Him, and seeks nothing more besides Him.** For it must needs follow, either that all things which are requisite to our salvation are not in Jesus Christ, or if all things are in Him, that then those who possess Jesus Christ through faith have complete salvation in Him. Therefore, **for any to assert that Christ is not sufficient, but that something more is required besides Him, would be too gross a blasphemy; for hence it would follow that Christ was but half a Savior.**

Therefore we justly say with Paul, **that we are justified by faith alone, or by faith apart from works.** However, to speak more clearly, **we do not mean that faith itself justifies us, for it is only an instrument with which we embrace Christ our righteousness. But Jesus Christ, imputing to us all His merits, and so many holy works which He has done for us and in our stead, is our righteousness. And faith is an instrument that keeps us in communion with Him in all His benefits, which, when they become ours, are more than sufficient to acquit us of our sins.**

Article XXIII: Wherein Our Justification Before God Consists

We believe that our salvation consists in the remission of our sins for Jesus Christ's sake, **and that therein our righteousness before God is implied;** as David and Paul teach us, declaring this to be the And the same apostle says that we are justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

And therefore we always hold fast this foundation, ascribing all the glory to God, humbling ourselves before Him, and acknowledging ourselves to be such as we really are, **without presuming to trust in anything in ourselves, or in any merit of ours, relying and resting upon the obedience of Christ crucified alone, which becomes ours when we believe in Him. This is sufficient to**

**cover all our iniquities**, and to give us confidence in approaching to God; freeing the conscience of fear, terror, and dread, without following the example of our first father, Adam, who, trembling, attempted to cover himself with fig-leaves. And, verily, if we should appear before God, relying on ourselves or on any other creature, though ever so little, we should, alas! be consumed. And therefore every one must pray with David: O Jehovah, enter not into judgment with thy servant: for in thy sight no man living is righteous.

Article XXIV: Man's Sanctification and Good Works.

We believe that this true faith, being wrought in man by the hearing of the Word of God and the operation of the Holy Spirit, sanctifies [1] him and makes him a new man, causing him to live a new life, and freeing him from the bondage of sin. Therefore it is so far from being true that this justifying faith makes men remiss in a pious and holy life, that on the contrary without it they would never do anything out of love to God, but only out of self-love or fear of damnation. **Therefore it is impossible that this holy faith can be unfruitful in man; for we do not speak of a vain faith, but of such a faith which is called in Scripture a faith working through love, which excites man to the practice of those works which God has commanded in His Word.**

These works, as they proceed from the good root of faith, are good and acceptable in the sight of God, forasmuch as they are all sanctified by His grace. **Nevertheless they are of no account towards our justification**, for it is by faith in Christ that we are justified, even before we do good works; otherwise they could not be good works, any more than the fruit of a tree can be good before the tree itself is good.

Therefore **we do good works, but not to merit by them (for what can we merit?); nay, we are indebted to God for the good works we do, and not He to us, since it is He who worketh in us both to will and to work, for his good pleasure.** Let us therefore attend to what is written: When ye shall have done all the things that are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants; we have done that which it was our duty to do. In the meantime we do not deny that God rewards good works, but it is through His grace that He crowns His gifts.

**Moreover, though we do good works, we do not found our salvation upon them; for we can do no work but what is polluted by our flesh, and also punishable; and although we could perform such works, still the remembrance of one sin is sufficient to make God reject them. Thus, then, we would always be in doubt, tossed to and fro without any certainty, and our poor consciences would be continually vexed if they relied not on the merits of the suffering and death of our Savior.**

### C. The Canons of Dordt

#### Second Head of Doctrine

Article 1: God is not only supremely merciful, but also supremely just. And His justice requires (as He has revealed Himself in His Word) that our sins committed against His infinite majesty should be punished, not only with

temporal but with eternal punishments, both in body and soul; which we cannot escape, unless satisfaction be made to the justice of God.

Article 2: Since, therefore, we are unable to make that satisfaction in our own persons, or to deliver ourselves from the wrath of God, He has been pleased of His infinite mercy to give His only begotten Son for our Surety, who was made sin, and became a curse for us and in our stead, that He might make satisfaction to divine justice on our behalf.

#### Second Head of Doctrine: Rejection of Errors

Paragraph 3: **Who teach: That Christ by His satisfaction merited neither salvation itself for anyone, nor faith, whereby this satisfaction of Christ unto salvation is effectually appropriated;** but that He merited for the Father only the authority or the perfect will to deal again with man, and to prescribe new conditions as He might desire, obedience to which, however, depended on the free will of man, so that it therefore might have come to pass that either none or all should fulfill these conditions.

Paragraph 4: Who teach: That the new covenant of grace, which God the Father, through the mediation of the death of Christ, made with man, does not herein consist that we by faith, **inasmuch as it accepts the merits of Christ, are justified before God and saved, but in the fact that God, having revoked the demand of perfect obedience of faith, regards faith itself and the obedience of faith, although imperfect, as the perfect obedience of the law, and does esteem it worthy of the reward of eternal life through grace.**

**For these contradict the Scriptures: Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus; whom God set forth to be a propitiation, through faith, in his blood (Rom. 3:24, 25). And these proclaim, as did the wicked Socinus, a new and strange justification of man before God, against the consensus of the whole Church.**

#### Third and Fourth Head of Doctrine

Article 5: Neither can the decalogue delivered by God to His peculiar people, the Jews, by the hands of Moses, save men.[1] **For though it reveals the greatness of sin, and more and more convinces man thereof, yet, as it neither points out a remedy nor imparts strength to extricate him from this misery, but, being weak through the flesh, leaves the transgressor under the curse, man cannot by this law obtain saving grace.**

#### Fifth Head of Doctrine

Article 6: But God, who is rich in mercy, according to His unchangeable purpose of election, **does not wholly withdraw the Holy Spirit from His own people even in their grievous falls; nor suffers them to proceed so far as to lose the grace of adoption and forfeit the state of justification, or to commit the sin unto death or against the Holy Spirit; nor does He permit them to be totally deserted, and to plunge themselves into everlasting destruction.**

Article 8: **Thus it is not in consequence of their own merits or strength, but of God's free mercy,** that they neither totally fall from faith and grace nor continue and perish finally in their backslidings; which, with respect to themselves is not only possible, but would undoubtedly happen; but with respect to God, it is utterly impossible, since His counsel cannot be changed nor His promise fail; neither can the call according to His purpose be revoked, **nor the merit, intercession, and preservation of Christ be rendered ineffectual, nor the sealing of the Holy Spirit be frustrated or obliterated.**

Article 11: The Scripture moreover testifies that believers in this life have to struggle with various carnal doubts, and that under grievous temptations they do not always feel this full assurance of faith and certainty of persevering. But God, who is the Father of all consolation, does not suffer them to be tempted above that they are able, but will with the temptation make also the way of escape, that they may be able to endure it (I Cor. 10:13), and by the Holy Spirit again inspires them with the comfortable assurance of persevering.

Article 12: **This certainty of perseverance, however, is so far from exciting in believers a spirit of pride, or of rendering them carnally secure, that on the contrary it is the real source of humility, filial reverence, true piety, patience in every tribulation, fervent prayers, constancy in suffering and in confessing the truth, and of solid rejoicing in God; so that the consideration of this benefit should serve as an incentive to the serious and constant practice of gratitude and good works,** as appears from the testimonies of Scripture and the examples of the saints.

**Resolution 2:** That we find that Rev. Norman Shepherd for many years has taught a confused doctrine of justification, contrary to the Heidelberg Catechism, The Belgic Confession and the Canons of Dordt. The specifics are as follows.

- a. That in his failure to distinguish between faith and works he has undermined this essential doctrine of the Christian faith. It is false doctrine to say that works of love are another way of looking at faith, for true faith is occupied with the gospel and the fullness of Christ's redemption, while a work of love is occupied with the law and showing gratitude to God for this redemption. It is false to teach that "believing" in Jesus is the same as "obeying" Jesus as it regards justification, for the two are occupied with different things.
- b. In failing to distinguish between faith and works, he has mixed justification and sanctification, reviving the Romish doctrine of justification by infused righteousness, which is rightly rejected by all people of faith.
- c. He compounds his error by teaching that when the beloved Apostle Paul speaks of the "works of the law" Paul means those works which are done for the purpose of meriting justification, and not works that are done in faith. In this also Shepherd shows confusion of mind, for if works done in faith are done with the idea that they are justifying, then those very works become "works of the law," even though Shepherd denies it. He may say that works as a Christian are not meritorious, but if he says that they are necessary for salvation and that one is cursed if he does not do them, then Shepherd has made them meritorious no matter how much he protests that he has not. To keep works in their proper place, no room must be given for works in the act

of justification in any way, as the Apostle Paul and our creeds so clearly state.

- d. Shepherd's error is grievous when he affirms that every covenant consists of promise and punishment, and that Christians are not "off the hook," if they do not obey just as Israel was not "off the hook" when they disobeyed. This is contrary to the Gospel and to the creeds and confessions that teach that Christ was made a curse for us so that the blessings of Abraham could come upon us. We are therefore blessed of the Lord, although Gentile churches may be cut off if the reprobate in them corrupt their faith in the fullness of Christ's redemption and teach them to trust in their own righteousness.
- e. He misinterprets Romans 2:6-13, in support of his error. We affirm that Paul does not teach here that one could be justified by works. Rather he is refuting the madness of those who boast in the law but do not do the law, and condemn others. Those who boast in the law must do the law if they trust in the law. To be justified by works, it is not enough for men to glory in them, they must actually perform all the law demands. Thus, no one can be justified by works, a conclusion that Paul makes in Romans 3.
- f. He misinterprets the beloved apostle James in James 2. We reject a dialectical interpretation of Paul and James, which would require a synthesis of opposites. James is not speaking of forensic justification before God (as does Paul) but rather a demonstration of faith: in the words "Show me your faith"-- which can only be done by good works.
- g. He errs in confusion again in affirming that the "idea of merit is foreign to the way in which God our Father relates to his children," as if God has not required perfect obedience to His law as a condition for life. This would overthrow the perfect justice of God and corrupt the perfect obedience of Christ, both active and passive, which is the complete and perfect righteousness of the believer. God does not owe His creatures anything, but in conditioning Adam's life upon obedience God affirmed that life would be the reward of obedience and a curse would come for disobedience.
- h. He errs in denying that the active obedience of Christ has any part in justification. The result is to revive the old Romish, Socinian, and Arminian error that justification is forgiveness only; and that future justification depends upon works done in faith.
- i. His inclusion of works as necessary for some future justification is contrary to our confessions, which teach that faith is a gift of God which gives us access to the righteousness of God, even the perfect passive and active obedience of Christ which alone is all our righteousness, for we are complete in Him.
- j. He slanderously reports that the Reformed teach that "faith can exist without its fruits and evidences." This is Arminian, Socinian, and Romish doctrine that he falsely attributes to the Reformed, and then seeks to cure the disease that the Reformed do not have, by seeking to apply to it the Arminian, Socinian, and Romish cure: that works must be added to faith in order for the believer to be justified. The Reformed have always taught that faith without works is dead, being no faith at all and that true faith is alive and will inevitably bring forth the fruit of repentance and loving works.
- k. He errs in teaching that Paul's phrase, "righteousness of faith" means the works that Christians perform by faith, rather than the perfect righteousness of Christ which is received by faith.

1. He errs in confusing the relationship between faith and works, affirming that both cooperate in justification and whatever goes with faith also cooperates in justification. This is contrary to the Scripture, the Creeds, and the Confession which teach that works are the fruit of faith, and inevitably appear, but have no part in justifying the sinner before God.

**Resolution 3:** Therefore, we also resolve that the teachings of Norman Shepherd on justification by faith are another gospel, and we admonish Reverend Shepherd and call on him to repent of his grievous errors.

**Resolution 4:** That the Reformed Church in the United States recognize these Romish, Arminian, and Socinian errors for what they are and urge our brethren throughout the world to reject them and to refuse those who teach them.

**RECOMMENDATION 2:** That this report, along with the supplementary material, be made available to the churches of the RCUS, to all denominations in fraternal relations, to the Christian Reformed Church of North America, and to member denomination of NAPARC and ICRC.

**RECOMMENDATION 3:** That this committee be continued to study the New Perspectives on Paul in the light of its original mandate and to report back to synod next year.

**RECOMMENDATION 4:** That per his request, Rev. Norman Jones, be removed from the committee due to health reasons and that another member be assign as a replacement.

## **SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAY**

### **The Biblical Doctrine of Justification by Faith Versus Professor Norman Shepherd's Doctrine of Justification**

**By Rev. Norman Jones**

#### **Introduction**

It is with sadness that we critique the theology of Professor Norman Shepherd. He has been a highly respected teacher of the Bible and Reformed theology for many years at the prestigious Westminster Theological Seminary. It is not a pleasant task to condemn some of his aberrant doctrines. But we have to conclude that his teaching on the critical doctrine of justification is not only erroneous, but it stands as damnable doctrine, a false gospel, which can only lead men away from the true Gospel of Jesus Christ.

For several years Shepherd's theology and its implications have come under scrutiny, leading to his termination as a professor at WTS and heresy charges being brought against him by the Presbytery of Philadelphia (OPC). More recently, some of his followers have spoken publicly at various conferences which has led observers to conclude that the theology of Shepherd and his disciples is heretical as to

the nature of justification, the role of faith in justification, the relation of faith and works, the meaning of baptism, the eternal security and perseverance of the saints..., the unity of the covenant of grace, the difference between the Old Testament and Judaism, the relation of Law and Gospel, and the nature and goal of evangelism. (Joe Morecraft III, "What's So Controversial About the New Controversy?", 2002).

In the interests of brevity, this analysis will deal with only the critical doctrine of justification that lies at the heart of the Biblical Gospel of salvation. It was Martin Luther who made the famous comment that justification is "the article of a standing or falling church." Indeed, justification by faith alone was the newly discovered truth that produced the Protestant Reformation!

In our examination of this subject we shall explain the doctrine of justification by faith alone, and see its confessional status, and lastly consider the heretical deviation from this doctrine by Prof. Shepherd and his followers.

#### **I. The Biblical Doctrine of Justification by Faith Alone**

### A. Representative Definitions of Justification:

1. “Justification is a judicial act of God, in which He declares, on the basis of the righteousness of Jesus Christ, that all the claims of the law are satisfied with respect to the sinner” (L. Berkhof, Systematic Theology, p. 513).
2. Prof. J. I. Packer elaborates as follows: “Justification is God’s act of remitting the sins of, and reckoning righteousness to, ungodly sinners freely, by grace, through faith in Christ, on the ground, not of their own works, but of the representative righteousness and redemptive, propitiatory, substitutionary blood-shedding of Jesus Christ on their behalf” (Packer, God’s Words, p. 139).
3. The place of faith in the doctrine of justification is of critical importance. The Greek text says that we are justified *dia pisteos* (“through faith,” Rom. 3:25, 28, 30) or *ek pisteos* (“by faith,” Rom. 3:30, 5:1; Gal. 2:16). Berkhof explains that the preposition *dia* stresses the fact that faith is the instrument by which we appropriate Christ and His righteousness. The preposition *ek* indicates that faith logically precedes our personal justification. The dative is used in an instrumental sense.

The Scripture never says that we are justified “on account of faith” (*dia ten pistin*) (Berkhof, p. 520). Romans 5:1 should be translated “having been justified [*dikaiwthentes*] therefore by faith.” This is an aorist passive participle from the verb *dikaioo*. As an aorist it denotes punctiliar action, that is, a certain non-repeatable point with continuing effect. Justification takes place at a particular point and cannot be changed or repeated. Being a passive participle, the subject of the justification is acted upon by God. The instrument by which justification is received is faith, not works or anything of man. Faith is itself a gift of the Holy Spirit. This kind of verbal form is also seen in Romans 5:9; I Cor. 6:11 and Titus 3:7: “having been justified,” that is, a past action with continuing effect.

### B. The Elements of the Doctrine of Justification by Faith Alone

1. Justification is mentioned 39 times in the New Testament, 29 times by the Apostle Paul.
2. Justification is a forensic, or juridical term. It denotes an act of God’s free grace by which He, the righteous judge, declares the sinner to be righteous. Romans 3:22-25; 4:5.
3. In Justification, God pardons all of a believer’s sins, and accepts that person as positively righteous in God’s sight: “It is an act of administering the law which settles a person’s relation to the law” (Packer). II Cor. 5:19-21; Romans 3:22-28.
4. Justification is not based on the character or works of the person justified, nor even on the work of the Holy Spirit in his heart, but is strictly “according

to His mercy” and based on Christ’s righteousness and “redemption through his blood”: Romans 3:24-28; Titus 3:5-7; Eph. 1:7.

5. In justification the merit of Christ’s righteousness and obedience is “imputed” (charged, or credited) to the account of the person who is justified, who receives this imputed righteousness as a free gift of God: Rom. 5:17-19; 4:6-8.
6. The pardon granted in justification applies to all sins, past, present, and future, and this involves the removal of all guilt and every penalty. This follows from the fact that justification is a once-for-all pronouncement and does not admit of repetition: Rom. 5:21; 8:1, 32-34; Heb. 10:14; Psa. 103:12; Isa. 44:22.
7. Justification is grounded not only in the “passive obedience” of Christ, His suffering and death, but also in His “active obedience,” His perfect obedience to the Law of God all his life. Christ’s active obedience also is imputed to the believing sinner “as if I had never committed nor had any sins, and had myself accomplished all the obedience which Christ has fulfilled for me” (H. Cat. #60): Isa. 42:21; Matt. 3:15; John 6:38; Rom. 5:19; 10:4; I Cor. 1:30; 6:11; II Cor. 5:21; Gal.4:4; Heb. 1:9; 5:8-9.
8. Faith is the means of justification, or the connecting link between the sinner and the righteousness of Christ: Acts 10:43; Gal. 2:16; Phil. 3:9 (cf. J.G. Vos for much of the above.)
9. “Justification and sanctification though perfectly distinct, the one being a change of our legal relation and responsibilities, the other of our inherent character, yet are never separated. The person who is justified is always the subject of the Spirit’s work of sanctification; and faith is a necessary instrument of both. A justifying faith is always a sanctifying faith” (A. Alexander).

## II. Justification According to the Reformed Creeds

### A. The Heidelberg Catechism (1563)

The Heidelberg Catechism plainly and powerfully states the Biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone. Indeed this truth is infused throughout this creed, and it may accurately be said to be the heart of the Catechism, as Questions One through 59 lead up to Question 60, which then asks the question, “How are you righteous [justified] before God?” The answer it gives is a ringing affirmation of the Biblical Gospel of justification by grace alone, by the imputation of the righteousness of Christ alone and by faith alone. The next question (#61) clarifies the place of faith and its relation to justification. Faith is the instrument by which a sinner receives the promise of salvation. Faith itself does not save, nor is anyone’s faith a perfect faith, but if it is a God-given faith it is adequate to receive Christ as Lord and Savior (see Question 21). The Catechism implies both the active and passive obedience of Christ when it uses the phrase “the perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ” (see also # 62, 18, 21c, 30 and 36).

## B. The Belgic Confession of Faith (1561)

Articles 20, 21, 22 and 23 give a clear, Biblical description of the nature and elements of justification. Article 20 speaks of Christ's making satisfaction to God's justice by bearing the full punishment for sin and raising Him for our justification. Salvation is solely by the grace and mercy of God. Article 21 speaks of the full satisfaction of Christ, our only high priest, to appease God's wrath. Salvation is entirely of grace apart from any work or merit of man. Article 22 deals with justification through faith in Jesus Christ. It asserts, "that we are justified by faith alone, or by faith apart from works. It also emphasizes that faith is "only an instrument with which we embrace Christ our righteousness" and that there is no merit in faith. Article 23 explains clearly wherein our justification before God consists. It consists wholly in the sufficiency of Christ's merits and a total renunciation of our own works or merit. It strongly asserts that if we should rely "on ourselves or on any other creature, though ever so little, we should, alas, be consumed!"

The Belgic Confession is so clear and explicit that anyone with a modicum of understanding could not fail to get the message of how a person is declared righteous before God—and yet some professors and pastors do not accept this confession and still they want to be considered Reformed!

## C. The Canons of Dort (1618)

The Canons in II:7, 8 speak of the sovereign grace of God in providing Christ for us, and that saving faith is a gift from God given only to the elect by the Holy Spirit. The Rejection of Errors, II:4 condemns the error that justification is the reward for faith—even imperfect faith. Article III/IV:6 speaks of faith as the only means of obtaining Christ in both the OT and NT.

## D. All the Reformed Creeds Have a Unified Doctrine of Justification

1. Because justification by faith alone was a cornerstone doctrine of the Reformation, all the Reformed creeds speak with one voice concerning its necessity and elements
2. The Westminster standards (The Confession and Larger and Shorter Catechisms) are especially noteworthy. The Westminster Confession of Faith (1648), being based on earlier creeds, has a magnificent statement on "Justification" in Chapter 11 and equally profound statements on "Saving Faith" (Chapter 14) and "Repentance Unto Life" (Chapter 15).
3. Because not all our readers will have access to the WCF, we here reproduce Chapter 11 in full, omitting the proof texts in the interests of space:

### **CHAP. XI. - *Of Justification.***

1). Those whom God effectually calleth, He also freely justifieth: not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for any thing wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone;

nor 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.

2). Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and His righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification: yet is it not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love.

3). Christ, by His obedience and death, did fully discharge the debt of all those that are thus justified, and did make a proper, real, and full satisfaction to His Father's justice in their behalf. Yet, in as much as He was given by the Father for them; and His obedience and satisfaction accepted in their stead; and both, freely, not for any thing in them; their justification is only of free grace; that both the exact justice, and rich grace of God might be glorified in the justification of sinners.

4). God did, from all eternity, decree to justify all the elect, and Christ did, in the fulness of time, die for their sins, and rise for their justification: nevertheless, they are not justified, until the Holy Spirit doth, in due time, actually apply Christ unto them.

5). God doth continue to forgive the sins of those that are justified; and, although they can never fall from the state of justification, yet they may, by their sins, fall under God's fatherly displeasure, and not have the light of His countenance restored unto them, until they humble themselves, confess their sins, beg pardon, and renew their faith and repentance.

6). The justification of believers under the old testament was, in all these respects, one and the same with the justification of believers under the new testament.

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In the light of the clear testimony of the Bible and the Reformed creeds, it is nothing short of amazing that so-called Reformed theologians and teachers could devise doctrines that contradict this testimony and yet pose as Reformed men and respected teachers of Christ's church! But such is the case as we now focus on one of the ringleader of such a movement, Professor Norman Shepherd.

### **III. The Heretical Doctrines of Norman Shepherd**

#### A. Our Sources

Professor Shepherd has not produced a great deal of written material, but three of his documents are available to us:

- “Thirty-four Theses on Justification” (Nov. 1978, 3 pp),
- “The Grace of Justification” (Feb. 1979, 22 pp)
- The Call of Grace (P & R Pub. 2000, 110 pp)

Besides these written documents, we have Prof. Shepherd's two taped lectures given at a conference sponsored by the Southern California Center for Christian Studies in the summer of 2003. The lectures are titled: 1) Justification

by Faith in Pauline Theology, and 2) Justification by Works in Reformed Theology.

Then also, we have materials by Shepherd's disciples on various subjects. All of this material has been carefully scrutinized by various Reformed theologians and their findings are readily accessible. In particular we recommend the following books and articles:

--The Changing of the Guard by Mark W. Karlburg (Trinity Foundation, 2001, 47 pp., \$3.95)

--The Current Justification Controversy by O. Palmer Robertson (Trinity Foundation, 2003, 107 pp. \$9.95). This book gives a carefully detailed history of the Shepherd controversy at WTS and the Philadelphia Presbytery in the 1970s and 1980s. Prof. Robertson was on the scene at the time.

--A Companion to the Current Justification Controversy by John W. Robbins (Trinity Foundation, 2003, 194 pp. \$9.95). This book brings the Shepherd controversy up-to-date with further analysis and documentation. Professors Van Til and Gaffin are taken to task for siding with Prof. Shepherd.

--"The Counsel of Chalcedon" magazine, July/August, 2002, Publ. by The Chalcedon Presbyterian Church (RPCUS), Cumming, GA.

--The New Southern Presbyterian Review, Summer 2000 issue, Publ. by Chalcedon Presbyterian Church (RPCUS), Cumming, GA. 259 pp.

--The New Southern Presbyterian Review, Fall, 2000 issue, Publ. by Chalcedon Presbyterian Church (RPCUS), Cumming, GA. 169 pp.

--Mid-America Journal of Theology, Vol. 13, 2002, Publ. by Mid-America Reformed Seminary, Dyer, IN, \$12.00.

--Katekomen (Journal), summer, 2002. Publ. by Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, 26 pp.

--There are many other articles addressing this matter, pro and con.

## B. Shepherd's Teaching

There are a number of Biblical doctrines that Prof. Shepherd has modified to suit his purposes--for example, his views of the Covenant, the Church and the Sacraments, and Arminianism to name a few. However, we shall focus on just two: Shepherd's doctrine of the obedience of Christ and his doctrine of justification.

## C. Shepherd on the Obedience of Christ and our Redemption

Earlier we spoke of the active and passive obedience of our Lord that provided the ground or basis for our redemption as He acted as the substitute for His people. Professor John Murray writes: "...the law of God has both penal sanctions and positive demands. It demands not only the full discharge of its precepts but also the infliction of penalty for all infractions and shortcomings.... His (Christ's) obedience becomes the ground of the remission of sin and actual justification" (Redemption Accomplished and Applied, pp. 28-29). Prof Berkhof states, "...If Christ had not rendered active obedience, the human nature of Christ itself would have fallen short of

the just demands of God and He would not have been able to atone for others” (Systematic Theology, p. 380). Berkhof goes on to declare that “Piscator, the seventeenth century Arminians, Richard Watson, R. N. Davies, and other Arminian scholars deny that the active obedience of Christ has the redemptive significance which we ascribe to it” (Ibid, p. 380).

One of the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism, Ursinus, said in his commentary on Question 16 which speaks of Christ being “perfectly righteous” that Christ fulfilled the law “in four respects. 1) By His own righteousness. Christ alone performed perfect obedience, such as the law requires...for unless His righteousness had been full, and perfect, He could not have satisfied for the sins of others...” (Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism, p. 86).

Professor Shepherd rejects the truth of the active obedience (work) of Christ as a necessary ground for our redemption. In his lectures in California, referenced above, he made it very emphatic that a sinner is not saved by his works (very true)—nor even by the works of Jesus Christ (that is, His active obedience) (very wrong)! He stressed that the death of Christ on the cross is the one and only act of (passive) obedience (Rom. 5:18-19) by which Christ procures our justification. He equates justification with the forgiveness of sins only. Shepherd devoted his second lecture in California to trying to prove that the Heidelberg Catechism supports his view that Christ’s passive obedience is the only ground for our justification. This is simply contrary to what has been said in the foregoing discussion. Shepherd’s view undercuts half the ground of Christ’s merits that paid for our redemption. We submit that this is a fearful heresy and no man who holds to it is entitled to the name “Reformed.” Christ not only paid the penalty for our sins, but He kept all God’s law, which righteousness is imputed to our account—as if we ourselves had accomplished all the obedience which Christ has fulfilled for us!

#### D. Shepherd’s Ambiguous Statements on Justification by Faith

1. One has the disconcerting experience of trying to understand Shepherd’s actual teaching on justification. In some places he makes orthodox statements such as in many of his “Thirty-four Theses on Justification” which he presented to the Presbytery of Philadelphia (OPC) in 1978. For example, Thesis #5 reads:

The ground of justification or the reason or cause why sinners are justified is in no sense to be found in themselves or in what they do, but is to be found wholly and exclusively in Jesus Christ and in his mediatorial accomplishment on their behalf.

However, Theses Numbers 21, 22 and 23 say that justification is dependent on obedience and good works!

Thesis No. 21: “The exclusive ground of the justification of the believer in the state of justification is the righteousness of Jesus Christ, *but his obedience*, which is simply the perseverance of the saints in the way of truth and righteousness, *is necessary to his continuing in a state of justification* (Hebrews 3:6,14).” (Italics supplied.)

Thesis No. 22: “The righteousness of Jesus Christ ever remains the exclusive ground of the believer’s justification, *but the personal*

*godliness of the believer is also necessary for his justification in the judgment of the last day (Matt. 7:21-23; 25-31-46; Heb. 12:14)."* (Italics supplied.)

Thesis No. 23: "Because...*repentance is necessary for the pardon of sin included in justification, and because abiding in Christ by keeping His commandments* (Jn. 15:5,10; I Jn. 3:13,24) are necessary for continuing in the state of justification, good works,...though not the ground of justification, *are nevertheless necessary for salvation...and therefore for justification* (Romans 6:16, 22; Gal. 6:7-9). (Italics supplied.)

***Because of these and similar statements, which Professor Shepherd refused to retract after much discussion, many have been forced to conclude that he teaches justification by faith and good works, which is a false gospel.***

2. At the heart of Professor Shepherd's confused thinking is his Biblical theological understanding of "covenant," which he makes the interpretive key for all other doctrines. He says that **all** Biblical covenants are comprised of two elements: *promise and obligation*. This means, in the case of election and justification, that these are temporal and conditional principles; and they can be reversed! He illustrates this with an interpretation of Ephesians One and the Parable of the Vine and the Branches in John 15 which makes election subservient to faith: i.e., a saved (justified) "branch" can be lost again! (Cf. The Call of Grace, pp. 86-91.)

Dr. Robertson observes,

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 a new doctrinal formulation (The Current Justification Controversy, p. 89).

On the basis of these and other (contradictory/paradoxical) statements by Prof. Shepherd, based on his novel understanding of the Covenant of Grace, Dr. Meredith Kline referred to Shepherd's theology as "dialectical." Shepherd says the only election discussed in Scripture is "covenant election" which may become reprobation, and yet the election of God stands firm! (Robertson, p. 89).

In May of 1981, 45 Reformed scholars signed a letter titled "Friends of the Reformed Faith." These are well-known professors and teachers, including seven board members and five faculty members of Westminster Seminary (Philadelphia). This letter was sent to ministers of the OPC and PCA indicating their displeasure with the ambiguities of Prof. Shepherd and calling for the seminary to return to a clear commitment of justification by faith alone. This letter was met with resentment by a Shepherd supporter, Prof. Richard Gaffin. (Robertson, p. 62).

3. Dr. Robertson analyzed Prof. Shepherd's erroneous views on justification in an article title, "Nineteen Erroneous or Misleading Statements" in Shepherd's 1976 paper, "The Relation of Good Works to Justification in

the Westminster Standards.” Following is a summary of Robertson’s rebuttals of Shepherd’s arguments:

--Mr. Shepherd errs by interchanging “salvation” with “justification” and thereby confuses justification with sanctification.

--Mr. Shepherd faults Rev. G.I. Williamson’s understanding of justification by faith alone. Rev. Williamson wrote a well-received commentary on the Westminster Confession of Faith many years ago.

--Mr. Shepherd misleads when he identifies faith with the works it produces, so that ultimately he can affirm that a person is justified by works just as well as he can affirm that a person is justified by faith.

--Mr. Shepherd errs when he says that acts of repentance that take time are necessary for justification rather than as “fruits” or “evidence” of justification.

--Mr. Shepherd errs when he argues that continuing deeds are necessary for maintaining the state of justification.

--Mr. Shepherd has departed from the concept that the only righteousness that shall stand in the Day of Judgment is the imputed righteousness of Christ. Rather, it is the “godly ones” who shall be saved.” Note the ambiguity!

--Mr. Shepherd misinterprets Romans 2:6-13 when he says that the Apostle is referring to the eschatological reality that the “doers” of the law shall be justified” at the last day.

--Mr. Shepherd misleads when he argues that “faith” is a “work” and therefore men are justified “by works.”

--Mr. Shepherd confuses “obedient faith” with “faithful obedience” and thereby incorporates the process of sanctification with the act of God’s free grace in declaring a sinner justified by a God-given faith.

--Mr. Shepherd does not regard works simply “as evidences of faith,” but as an essential part of the “way” to justification, even as they are an essential part of covenant life.

Though we do not have access to the original Shepherd document with which Dr. Robertson interacts, we are confident that Dr. Robertson accurately addresses the specific paragraphs of that document which he references.

***It has become obvious in the foregoing discussion that Professor Shepherd teaches a gospel of justification by faith and works. Applying what the Apostle said to the Galatians in chapter one, we must conclude that Mr. Shepherd has embraced a false gospel, which is no gospel at all.***

Professor John Murray stated the matter succinctly:

Justification is not by the righteousness of performance on our part; it is not of works (Rom. 3:20; 4:2; 10:3,4; Gal. 2:16; 3:11; 5:4; Phil. 3:9). The Scripture is so insistent upon this that it is only by spiritual blindness and distortion of the most aggravated type that justification by works could ever be entertained or proposed in any form or to any degree (Redemption Accomplished and Applied, p. 156).

4. In closing, we include a few comments on one of Shepherd's favorite texts, James 2:14-24. Shepherd rejects the traditional interpretation which seeks to harmonize Paul's doctrine of justification with James' doctrine of justification which states that Paul uses the word "justification" in the sense of forensic declaration whereas James uses the word in a demonstrative sense: A believer is justified by works as a demonstration of the reality of his living faith, verse 24: "You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone." Professor Shepherd, on the other hand, insists that both Paul and James use the word "Justified" in the forensic sense.

Professor Louis Berkhof gives a completely satisfying harmony of Paul's and James' concepts of justification as follows:

The difference between the representation of Paul and James is unquestionably due partly to the nature of the adversaries with which they had to deal. Paul had to contend with legalists who sought to base their justification, at least in part, on the works of the law. James, on the other hand, joined issue with the Antinomians, who claimed to have faith, but whose faith was merely an intellectual assent to the truth (2:19), and who denied the necessity of good works. Therefore he stresses the fact that faith without works is a dead faith, and consequently not at all a faith that justifies. The faith that justifies is a faith that is fruitful in good works.

But it may be objected that this does not explain the whole difficulty, since James explicitly says in verse 24 that a man is justified by works and not only by faith, and illustrates this by the example of Abraham, who was "justified by works in that he offered up Isaac" (verse 21). "Thou seest," says he in verse 24, "that faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect." It is quite evident, however, that in this case the writer is not speaking of the justification of the sinner, for Abraham the sinner was justified long before he offered up Isaac (cf. Gen. 15), but of a further justification of the believing Abraham. True faith will manifest itself in good works, and these works will testify before men of the righteousness (that is, the righteousness of life) of him that possesses such a faith. The justification of the just by works confirms the justification by faith. If James actually meant to say in this section of his letter that Abraham and Rahab were justified with *justificatio peccatoris*, on the basis of their good works, he would not only be in conflict with Paul, but would also be self-contradictory, for he explicitly says that Abraham was justified by faith (Systematic Theology, p. 521).

## Conclusion

In this paper we have tried to spell out the Biblical/Reformed doctrine of justification by faith alone. We have shown that Professor Norman Shepherd has departed seriously from the orthodox, Protestant doctrine. Our purpose in this report is to both instruct God's people in the truth of God's Word, and to warn them of the subtle danger of deviating from the precise wording of the Bible and the Reformed creeds.

Dr. David Van Drunen, a professor at Westminster Theological Seminary in California, gives a fitting conclusion to this subject:

That Norman Shepherd's theology of justification has attracted interest within Reformed circles...is again a matter of great curiosity. ...Whatever the importance of the variety of matters hotly debated among Reformed Christians, the present issue is undoubtedly of the highest urgency, for the nature of the Gospel is directly at stake. In light of this, our churches ought to be vigilant in keeping the clear distinctions of the Reformed doctrine of justification from falling into flaccid ambiguity, and persistent in refusing to revise the life-giving message that our faith, and not our obedience justifies. ("Justification by Faith in the Theology of Norman Shepherd," Katekomen, Summer, 2002).

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