

# THE TRINITY REVIEW

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

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## *The Justification Controversy*

# A Guide for the Perplexed

John W. Robbins

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

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

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

### **The Origins of the Controversy**

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

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

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

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

### Reactions from the Churches

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

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

### The Roots of the Apostasy

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

Movements of this magnitude do not happen overnight, nor do they happen in a theological vacuum, nor are they causes of themselves. Behind the justification controversy in Reformed churches<sup>1</sup> lies the distortion or perversion of a more fundamental doctrine, the doctrine of divine propositional revelation. That perversion of the doctrine of divine revelation has in fact led to the perversion of the doctrine of divine salvation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Peter Leithart<sup>7</sup> ever read N. T. Wright<sup>8</sup> or E. P. Sanders.<sup>9</sup> The Shepherd controversy erupted at Westminster Seminary in 1975, two years before E. P. Sanders published the book that is credited with creating the New Perspective on Paul.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Those whom, God effectually calls he also freely justifies, not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for anything wrought in them or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone; not by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them as their righteousness, but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them, they receiving and resting on him and his righteousness by faith, which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God –

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

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

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

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