

Shepherd's Concept of the Covenant

In the previous issue we published the News Release of Westminster Theological Seminary about the dismissal of Mr. Norman Shepherd, Associate Professor of Systematic Theology. Although Rev. J. Geertsema already paid some attention to this case in the Press Review of November 6, 1981, and following, we may not bypass it in our editorials. Westminster has a unique place in the Presbyterian and Reformed world, the person of Prof. Shepherd is well-known in our Canadian Reformed circles, and the relation of these churches to the Orthodox Presbyterian Church may be affected.

The unique position of Westminster Theological Seminary is due to its struggle against modernist theology and its peculiar blend of Presbyterian and Reformed ways of thinking. Westminster was born in 1929 in order to continue the true tradition of Princeton in adherence to the Presbyterian standards. Gresham Machen preserved the inheritance of Alexander, the Hodges, and B.B. Warfield. In C. Van Til, R.B. Kuiper, and N. Stonehouse there was a direct link to the continental theology, and, more specifically, the Reformed theology of The Netherlands. Men of the Christian Reformed Church in North America and those who later established the Orthodox Presbyterian Church stood shoulder to shoulder in their endeavours to dam up the flood of theological liberalism, most rampant in its subtle criticism of God's infallible Word. The founding of Westminster Seminary preceded the establishment of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. It always remained an independent institution; actions of Westminster may not be ascribed to the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the other way around, although in persons of many members of the Faculty there was — and still is — a not unimportant link.

Professor Norman Shepherd is well-known in the Canadian Reformed Churches. As a member of the Committee on Ecumenicity and Inter-Church Relations of the OPC he attended some sessions of our General Synod in Orangeville, 1968, the same Synod that decided to establish the Theological College, now located in Hamilton. In November 1980 he was the first official delegate of the OPC to visit one of our synods. He was well received at the Synod of Smithville (see Acts, Art. 56 and 68), and during his stay in Hamilton he presented a lecture of our College community. His knowledge of the Dutch language — he even speaks it fluently — gives him an easy access within the circles of our immigrant churches. But more important than ethnic pride is our recognition of a fine scholar who has acquainted himself with the Reformed theology of the European continent in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and who knows the confessional tradition in which the Heidelberg Catechism has a dominant place. Professor Shepherd is a typical represen-

tative of Westminster Theological Seminary. As a student of John Murray and Cornelius Van Til he combines in his person and theological interests and concerns the Presbyterian and Reformed streams that came together in Philadelphia. The manner in which he defended the Reformed doctrine of the Word of God and rebuked the attack on the confession concerning God's eternal reprobation warmed our hearts.

Then the rumour came that Shepherd's teaching itself had been indicted as being not orthodox. It was hardly believable. There are certain instinctive reactions. We know of sinful nature and of the possibility and reality of error in each and every man, except in our highest Prophet and Teacher. "All men are of themselves liars, and more vain than vanity itself," we say in Article 7 of our Belgic Confession. Nevertheless, we also confess God's preservation and the perseverance of the saints, and, therefore, we may expect continuity and consistency in the teaching of a truly Reformed theologian. To me this is also a matter of trust and loyalty. It is not impossible that Prof. Shepherd has used wrong expressions and formulations — which Reformed theologian has never done so? — and that his exegesis of a certain passage of Scripture is debatable. Only seldom do two exegetes agree completely. But if one trusts a theologian because he has shown himself to be an obedient listener to God's revelation in Scripture and a lover of the confession of Christ's catholic church, one will always ask: What is his intention? What is his aim, even though he uses expressions that are not immediately clear and unambiguous? It is evident that Prof. Shepherd has sought to emphasize the teaching of the book of James that a faith that does not obey is a dead faith and therefore a faith that does not justify.

There are a few documents that make his position clear. In November 1978 Prof. Shepherd presented a series of Thirty-Four Theses on Justification to the Presbytery of Philadelphia of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. One may wonder whether it was wise to do so. Prof. Shepherd could have taken the position that his accusers had to bring official charges and to substantiate them. If there is a sphere of distrust, a few written lines may fuel an unjust action. Besides this series of Thirty-Four Theses, Prof. Shepherd published a twenty-two-page essay in 1979 under the title *The Grace of Justification*. Because in the latest News Release also "doctrines related to the covenant" are mentioned, it should be noted that already in 1975 he had presented a paper on "The Covenant Context for Evangelism" (published in *The New Testament Student and Theology*, Vol. 3) and that Westminster Media issued five tapes of a conference in Summer 1981, entitled *Life in Covenant with God*. I do not hesitate to recommend that interested

readers or societies order these tapes (Box 27009, Philadelphia, PA. 19118. US \$17.00).

When we glance through this material we see that *The Grace of Justification* is the most elaborate publication on the topic of justification and good works. It takes its starting point in the message of the Epistle of James and appreciates the way in which this message is integrated with the New Testament as a whole. Prof. Shepherd first looks at the consonance of the teaching of James with Paul. He then places James in the broader context of the epistle to the Hebrews, the teaching of Paul, and the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is clear that Prof. Shepherd wants to stress that living faith is faith working through love (Galatians 5:6); the faith which lays hold on Christ for justification is not alone. These statements are in line with the Presbyterian tradition. The Westminster Confession of Faith, Chap. XI, Sect. 2, declares that faith receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness is the alone instrument of justification. But his confession goes on to say that this faith is never alone. It is ever accompanied with all other saving graces. The prooftexts offered by the Westminster Assembly are James 2:17, 22, 26 and Galatians 5:6.

Francis Turretin was a leading exponent of classic Reformed orthodoxy in the latter part of the seventeenth century. In answer to the question whether faith alone justifies, he observed:

The question is not whether solitary faith, that is, faith 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. Thus the particle alone does not modify the subject but the predicate, that is, faith alone does not justify, but only faith justifies; the coexistence of love with faith in him who is justified is not denied, but its coefficient or co-operation in justification.

Turretin has always maintained a strong influence in the Presbyterian theology in America. His *Institutio* was the dominant handbook for Dogmatics in Princeton until Charles Hodge replaced it by his standard work. It is evident that Shepherd's position is in agreement with Turretin; he emphasized the coexistence of love with faith in him who is justified.

At the same time those who have been nurtured on the solid food of the Heidelberg Catechism remember Question 87: "Can they, then, not be saved who, continuing in their wicked and ungrateful lives, do not turn to God?" Answer: "By no means; for the Scripture declares that no unchaste person, idolator, adulterer, thief, covetous man, drunkard, slanderer, robber, or any such like, shall inherit the kingdom of God." Prof. Shepherd referred to Hebrews 12:14 that speaks about the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

The latest development in the Shepherd case is the broadening or deepening of the attack on his teaching; now also "doctrines related to the covenant" are mentioned. It is possibly a logical or natural development and it makes the controversy even more important to us. Already in the Thirty-four Theses of 1978 the covenant of God came to the foreground. Let us read a few theses of Prof. Shepherd:

18. Faith, repentance, and new obedience are not the cause or ground of salvation or justification, but are, as covenantal response to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the way (Acts 24:14; II Peter 2:2, 21) in which the Lord of the Covenant brings

his people into the full possession of eternal life.

19. Those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and are his disciples, who walk in the Spirit and keep covenant with God, are in a state of justification and will be justified on the day of judgment; whereas unbelieving, ungodly, unrighteous, and impenitent sinners who are covenant breakers or strangers to the covenant of grace, are under the wrath and curse of God
28. In a right use of the law, the people of God neither merit nor seek to merit anything by their obedience to God, but out of love and gratitude serve the Lord of the Covenant as sons in the household of the Father and in this way are the beneficiaries of his fatherly goodness (Mal. 3:16-18).
32. The election of God stands firm so that sinners who are united to Christ, justified and saved, can never come into condemnation; but within the sphere of covenant life, election does not cancel out the responsibility of the believer to preserve in penitent and obedient faith since only they who endure to the end will be saved (Matt. 24:13; Mark 13:13).

Apart from a single expression — is "state of justification" not too static? — I wholeheartedly agree with Prof. Shepherd's covenantal approach. Here I see him in line with Dr. Klaas Schilder, and, what means more, in line with the Form of Baptism that the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands received from the Heidelberg theologians in the Palatinate. Most of our readers know the familiar words by heart: Whereas in all covenants there are contained two parts, therefore are we by God, through Baptism, admonished of and obliged unto new obedience, namely, that we cleave to this one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; that we trust in Him, and love Him with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength; that we forsake the world, crucify our old nature and walk in a godly life.

The Reformed confessor who listens to Shepherd's tapes about *Life in Covenant with God* recognizes his Form of Baptism in the way in which the speaker describes the Covenant as a relation between God and man, a relation of union and communion, a relation comparable to that of husband and wife with mutually binding ties of love and faithfulness. The Covenant is a relation with a promise and with a demand. I was filled with gratitude and even thrilled when I heard how Prof. Shepherd makes an eloquent plea for parental Christian schools based on the doctrine of the Covenant of God with us and our children. Westminster Theological Seminary cannot fulfil its historic function without such Reformed teaching. It is needed, more than ever, in the Presbyterian sector of America, that is influenced by a broad evangelicalism of Baptist brand. The danger is that now the Reformed doctrine of the Covenant will no longer be heard. Where was covenantal teaching in the synodical churches in The Netherlands after Dr. Klaas Schilder and others had been silenced? And another danger is lurking: If a Reformed theologian is dismissed on insufficient grounds, a reaction results. When later a real necessity arises to dismiss a heretic teacher, Synods and Boards have become paralyzed. He who first uses the means of deposition or dismissal in a wrong manner, cannot come to the right use anymore later. Is this not also a lesson from the deposition of Dr. Klaas Schilder in The Netherlands? The similarities in the Shepherd case and the Schilder case are too striking to be ignored.

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