

SHEPHERD'S DISMISSAL FROM WESTMINSTER SEMINARY

In order to inform our readers we publish the main part of a news release sent by Prof. Norman Shepherd. It reads as follows:

* * *

At its meeting on May 25, 1982, the Board of Trustees of Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, Pa., ratified its action of Nov. 20, 1981, dismissing the Rev. Norman Shepherd from his office as Associate Professor of Systematic Theology after 19 years of service at the institution. In taking this action the Board did not allege theological error or a violation of the Seminary's doctrinal standard, but expressed its desire to distance the Seminary from a controversy which it had come to view as unresolvable. Previously, both Faculty and Board had exonerated Shepherd from allegations of holding views contrary to Scripture and Confession.

The Board's Nov. 20 action was widely recognized to have been taken on the basis of expediency. The dismissal provoked an avalanche of protest from students, alumni, and supporters of the Seminary. Seven members of the Faculty including Cornelius Van Til communicated to the May 25 meeting their view that an adequate case had not been made for Shepherd's dismissal and requested his reinstatement.

The Executive Committee of the Board had prepared a position paper to justify Shepherd's removal. It makes clear that Shepherd was not dismissed on the ground of demonstrated errors in his teaching, but nevertheless seeks to show that his position is "not clearly in accord with" the Westminster Standards at three points. No attempt is made to deal with Shepherd's position on the basis of Scripture.

In the first point, Shepherd is alleged to obscure the emphasis on faith alone as the instrument of justification by virtue of his stress on justification by a living, active, and obedient faith. Shepherd holds that the position taken in the Executive Committee's paper distances itself, in fact, from the precise emphasis of the Westminster Confession that although faith is the alone instrument of justification, 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" (Chap. XI, Sect. 2). The paper fails to take account of this confessional statement and also fails to take account of Shepherd's appeal to the Westminster definition of repentance as inclusive of turning from sin and a "purposing and endeavouring to walk with Him in all the ways of His commandments." The

Confession states that such repentance is necessary for pardon without being the cause or ground of pardon (Chap. XV, Sect. 2, 3).

In the second point, Shepherd's insistence on covenantal loyalty and obedience as the second part of the new covenant is alleged to obscure the fulfillment of covenant demand in the obedience of Jesus Christ on behalf of his people. Shepherd, however, has held throughout the controversy that the obedience of Christ, active and passive, secures the justifying verdict of God, and that Christ's work for his people lays the foundation for a life of covenantal obedience. This obedience is the holiness without which no man will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14).

In Shepherd's view, the negative reaction to the necessity for covenantal obedience as expressed in the position paper arises from a mistaken conception of good works as intrinsically meritorious. While designed to guard the meritoriousness of Christ's obedience, such a conception subverts the Reformed doctrine of the normative use of the law by putting the obedience of the believer essentially into competition with the obedience of Christ as the exclusive ground of justification. It also deprives Reformed theology of any basis in principle for a thoroughgoing and radical rejection of the Roman Catholic doctrine of the meritoriousness of good works. Both the Belgic Confession (Art. XXIV) and the Heidelberg Catechism (L.D. 24) deny that the good works of the believer are meritorious.

In keeping with its mistaken conception, the position paper objects explicitly to the historic Reformed doctrine that every covenant, including the new covenant, contains two parts: promise and demand. It also objects to speaking of the new covenant as embracing conditions although Reformed theologians have often done so, including R.B. Kuiper and John Murray, both of whom have taught systematic theology at Westminster. The conditions were not construed as meritorious in a Roman Catholic or Arminian sense; but as Calvin taught, "Those whom in mercy he has destined for the inheritance of eternal life, he, in his ordinary administration, introduces to the possession of it by means of good works" (*Institutes* III, 14, 21).

Shepherd believes that a consistent application of the criteria set forth in Clowney's view of the covenant as stated in the position paper would make Kuiper and Murray unacceptable at Westminster. The paper marks a significant shift in the theological position of the Seminary. It also calls into question the Seminary's willingness to tolerate serious discussion of theological differences within

the bounds of its confessional standards.

The position paper views the warnings of the New Testament against the consequences of disobedience as only hypothetical with respect to the elect, thus depriving them of their force and urgency in the church's proclamation. In a third point, it is alleged that taking these threatenings seriously as Shepherd does undermines assurance understood as knowledge or information about one's election "of the kind that could be produced by special revelation."

Shepherd argues that this construction differs from the Westminster Confession's appeal to the promises of the gospel received by faith and borne home by the testimony of the Holy Spirit as the foundation for assurance. A view which subordinates faith in the promises of the revealed Scriptures to a subjective experience of searching for insight into the secret decree ultimately undermines the biblically grounded infallible assurance of which the Confession speaks.

Shepherd maintains that the allegation of "deep inherent problems in the structure and particular formulations of Mr. Shepherd's views" in the brief Nov. 21 Board Statement explaining his suspension arises from an insistence that the application of redemption be approached from the point of view of election with rational deductions concerning what may or may not be true in the lives of particular persons. The position paper's evaluation of his views is conducted from this perspective. This essentially rationalistic and deductivistic approach often brings the theologian into conflict with the language and intent of Scripture creating serious problems of its own.

Shepherd finds the distinctiveness of the Reformed doctrine of salvation to lie in its grasp of the biblical teaching on covenant including promise as well as demand and warning. On the ground of the covenant keeping of the representative head, Jesus Christ, and by way of the covenant God's unchangeable sovereign electing purpose is realized in history. The covenant is not to be defined in terms of election, but election is to be understood from the perspective of the covenant. As Calvin and other Reformed theologians have pointed out, it is wrong for the creature to seek to mount up directly into the blinding light of God's decree.

Weary of the long-drawn procedure, Shepherd withdrew his request for a hearing and took steps to transfer his ecclesiastical membership from the Orthodox Presbyterian Church to the Christian Reformed Church. Although Westminster Seminary and the OPC are independent of one another, historically they are part of the same reformational movement in American Presbyterianism. His removal from the Seminary made a transfer out of the OPC appropriate. Subsequently he was informed that charges would be filed against him at the May 7 meeting of Philadelphia Presbytery of the OPC. On May 18, Classis Hackensack declared him eligible for a call in the CRC after an extensive interview concerning his doctrinal position.

* * *

Thus far the news release. We thought that it would be informative for our readers. In the Canadian Reformed Churches there is deep sympathy with the person of Norman Shepherd and especially with his views concerning God's Covenant. This sympathy does not exclude disappointment and disagreement with respect to his last steps. Also in horizontal relationships we should not be

rash with our mouth, nor let our heart be hasty to utter words. Ecclesiastes says: God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few (5:2). Nevertheless, public matters should be dealt with in a public manner. Moreover, sympathy and friendship are under the norm of the Word of God.

We may not hide our conviction that Prof. Shepherd should not have left the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Philadelphia Presbytery of the OPC had previously devoted ten whole days extending over a period of more than a year to a discussion of Shepherd's views. The discussion was initiated by Shepherd himself who submitted Thirty-Four Theses to the Presbytery requesting its judgment on them. Thirty of the theses were found to be in harmony with Scripture and Confession, another was found to be in accord with the ministerial vows, and no action was taken on three others which, according to Prof. Shepherd, expressed opinion on matters of historical interpretation. Should Prof. Shepherd not have subjected himself to a discussion of the charges that now — finally! — would be filed against him? Precisely now that his views concerning the Covenant had been attacked and the debate had shifted from the issue of justification to the Covenant doctrine, we as Canadian Reformed people would have been interested in an official Orthodox Presbyterian statement. Is Shepherd's covenantal doctrine in accord with his ministerial vows? Is the teaching of the Covenant as established by God with the believers and all their children in accord with Larger Catechism Q. 31? Our readers know that the Larger Catechism states that the Covenant of grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in Him with all the elect as His seed. The Orthodox Presbyterian Church and we would have been helped by a thorough discussion of the issue.

Although within the NAPARC relationships a transfer of ministerial credentials to the Christian Reformed Church does not meet with great difficulties, and although personal circumstances have undoubtedly played their role, the transition of Prof. Shepherd to the Christian Reformed Church is even less understandable. In Dutch we say: "Nu komt hij van de regen in de drup." The attacks upon the infallibility of Holy Scripture, the influence of contemporary liberal movements like feminism (and the consistent strife for women in office), and the spread of secularism in Christian Reformed circles must bring a truly Reformed minister of the Gospel into trouble. Moreover, Canadian Reformed people know of the position that the Christian Reformed Church took with respect to the pronouncements of the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (syn.) concerning Covenant and Baptism. In ecumenical context (the Reformed Ecumenical Synod of 1946) they approved a doctrinal statement that exactly embodies a definition of the covenant in terms of election, to use Prof. Shepherd's own terminology. During the last decades they followed the synodical Dutch churches also in other respects and still maintain the ecclesiastical fellowship with those deviating churches in The Netherlands. This is also a matter of covenantal disobedience!

But my words should be few. We will listen to Paul's word: "Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls" (Rom. 14:4). *Ceterum censeo* that Westminster Seminary lost an eminent Reformed dogmatician and that it should guard its path to the future.

J. FABER