

May 19, 1981

To those concerned for the ministry of Westminster Seminary:

Recently you received an open communication concerning division within the Westminster Seminary community. Perhaps your reaction as you read was one of dismay and alarm—over the views of Professor Shepherd, as reported to you, and that a majority of both the board and the faculty of the seminary have in fact exonerated him.

Such a reaction is hardly surprising, nor is it the unintended effect of those who signed the communication. But I ask you now also to assess this communication in the light of the following observations.

1. Is this communication the constructive or even proper way to prosecute concerns about doctrinal error? Does it really serve the well-being of the church to widely publicize loosely supported allegations of serious doctrinal error? Why have the signers of the communication who, along with Mr. Shepherd, are member of Presbytery of Philadelphia of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church become involved in spreading these accusations, while persistently refusing, despite the express directive of the presbytery, to institute orderly judicial proceedings against Mr. Shepherd? Why haven't the other signers refused to become involved, at least until the procedure has been followed which is designed to protect the concerns of both Mr. Shepherd and the entire church? One thing is certain: the effect of this communication has been to undermine, without due process, what is most precious to Mr. Shepherd as a seminary professor, the confidence in him of the churches he is seeking to serve.

I hesitate to dwell on this point, because it so easily give rise to the suspicion of evasion, of diverting attention from doctrinal issues and responsibility to "procedural matters." But no doctrinal issue, no matter how important it is deemed or in fact is, warrants wrong or questionable procedures. I have no doubt that the signers of the communication have acted out of conviction and are ready to defend what they have done. But I am bound to ask whether they have not in fact withheld from Mr. Shepherd the elemental Gospel righteousness of treating him as they would have him treat them (Luke 6:31).

2. Turning to the contents of the communication, I can't try here to put out every fire that is lit. Before focusing on the most substantial consideration, I want to make several brief observations that ought not to be overlooked.

a) All of the quotations from Mr. Shepherd's writings on pp. 2-5 of the December 4, 1980 letter to the Trustees of Westminster Theological Seminary are taken and strung together out of context. (Even at that it is difficult to find fault with some of them. Take for example the quotations beginning at the bottom of p. 2 under the heading, "(Our Knowledge of Election is Through the Covenant)."  
Does anyone really question that the relationship between God and man is covenantal in its entirety? that there is not one

word of special revelation that is given outside the context of God's covenantal dealings with his people? that salvation in all its aspects is the work of Christ as mediator of the new covenant? that every benefit of salvation, including the knowledge and assurance of our eternal election, is received, by faith, only in covenantal union with Christ? Presumably the response would be that Mr. Shepherd means something different, an erroneous election-covenant dichotomy. But that is just what remains to be proved and what these quotations, as presented, do not substantiate.)

b) The Thirty-four Theses of Mr. Shepherd were prepared by him as a basis for discussion within his presbytery and were defended by him in those discussions. Taken out of that context and read apart from those discussions they function in a way he did not intend. They are not meant as a full or balanced statement of his views of justification.

c) On page 1 of the December 4, 1980 letter you read of well-known Reformed scholars who have rejected Mr. Shepherd's position. What you are not told is that these judgments were privately solicited by two opponents of Mr. Shepherd's views, in a manner which I and others consider something less than impartial. Nor are you informed of those whose responses were either supportive or recognized the legitimacy of Mr. Shepherd's views. And I know of one person--no one is better known or has greater influence in the English-speaking Reformed world--who did not reply because he did not believe he had been given adequate material to form a responsible judgment.

Possibly more objective is the assessment of the Lutheran scholar, Professor Milton L. Rudnick of Concordia College, St. Paul, Minnesota. In a recent study, American Evangelicals on Justification, published in mimeograph form, he summarizes and analyzes the responses to a survey form sent by him to the exegetical and systematic theology departments of a number of Reformed and evangelical seminaries. Considerable attention is given to the situation at Westminster (pp. 9-11, 13-17). He states, on the basis of the response to his survey questions, "Professor Shepherd articulates a clear, strong, traditional Presbyterian view of the basic content of justification" (p. 9), which also reflects "essential agreement" with Lutheran confessional theology (p. 10). (Where he does see the difference between Shepherd and some within the Westminster community is on the relationship between justification and sanctification, namely, at the point of Shepherd's emphasis on sanctification as a benefit, coordinate with justification, flowing directly from union with Christ (pp. 16f.); cf. for a similar stress, J. Murray, Collected Writings, II (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977): 286f.).

d) I ask you to consider the inherent implausibility of the position taken by the signers of the communication. The issue, as they see it is not some subsidiary point of doctrine; the heart of the gospel itself is allegedly at stake. This means that the majority of the board and faculty, and by implication, the vast majority of Mr. Shepherd's students in recent years, either support or are blind to a fundamental distortion of the gospel. This, though not impossible, is just not plausible. Westminster Seminary students are known for a lot things, but lamb-like docility is not one of them. If the heart of the gospel were truly in jeopardy, a massive hue and cry without end would have arisen long ago. In this respect the communication does a disservice to recent students at Westminster.

3. I ask you now to consider, necessarily at somewhat greater length, how the communication defines the basic issue of its concern. That is said to be whether justification is by faith with it works or by faith apart from its works (letter of 12/4/80, p. 6, para. 4; cf. letter of 5/4/81, p.1, para. 5). Mr. Shepherd is in fundamental error because he holds to the former, "a clear and unambiguous witness to the truth of the gospel of grace" (letter of 5/4/81, p. 2, top) depends on maintaining the latter. I find this way of stating the basic issue of the controversy to be itself ambiguous, the source of considerable confusion, and one of the roots of division among us.

a) Consider the Westminster Confession of Faith, XI, 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." A proper paraphrase of this is to say that faith, contemplated just as justifying faith, the alone instrument of justification, is not alone, but works by love; that is, (justifying) faith is not "apart from its works."

No doubt further qualifications are necessary to guard this statement against misunderstanding and wrong inferences, but this does not invalidate the statement itself or its important truth. Perhaps it will be said that Mr. Shepherd means something different than the Confession, but that difference, if it exists, remains to be proved and at any rate is not identified by the way the communication defines the basic issue of conflict.

b) On page 6 of the letter of 12/4/80, paragraph 3, both John Murray and Calvin are quoted in support of the basic position of the communication. All of these quotations are taken from their contexts and made to say what they do not intend. I limit myself here to Calvin. A careful reading of the quoted statements in context will discover that in each instance Calvin's controlling concern is with the idea of merit, to deny emphatically that anything other than the finished righteousness of Christ, imputed to the sinner and received by faith, merits justification. What he is resolutely opposing is the "merit(s) of works" )Institutes, III:11:13; III:11:18), various Roman Catholic efforts to establish a "righteousness . . . composed of faith and works" (III:11:13) as the ground or basis or meritorious cause of justification; also he is opposing anything that would deny the sole instrumentality of faith. In what other respects (than as ground or instrument) good works may or may not stand in relation to justification and faith is simply not within the purview of these statements.

This is confirmed by a highly instructive passage elsewhere in Calvin, recently called to my attention. It is from his commentary on Ezekiel 18:14-17 and has the distinction of being among the last, perhaps in fact the last, of his comments on the relationship among justification, faith and works, having apparently been written shortly before his death in 1564. It is perhaps, too, his most pointed commentary on their interrelationship. An excerpt of some length is provided here, because it needs to be read carefully and digested, and because it addresses so directly the basic issue as seen by the communication (Commentaries on the Prophet Ezekiel, Vol. II (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 238):

When therefore, we say that the faithful are esteemed just even in their deeds this is not stated as a cause of their salvation, and we must diligently notice that the cause of salvation is excluded from this doctrine; for, when we discuss the cause, we must look nowhere else but to the mercy of God, and there we must stop. But although works tend in no way to the cause of justification, yet, when the elect sons of God were justified freely by faith, at the same time their works are esteemed righteous by the same gratuitous liberality. Thus it still remains true, that faith without works justifies, although this needs prudence and a sound interpretation; for this proposition, that faith without works justifies is true and yet false, according to the different senses which it bears. The proposition, that faith without works justifies by itself, is false, because faith without works is void. But if the clause "without works" is joined with the word "justifies," the proposition will be true. Therefore faith cannot justify when it is without works, because it is dead, and a mere fiction. He who is born of God is just, as John says. (1 John v. 18.) Thus faith can be no more separated from works than the sun from his heat: yet faith justifies without works, because works form no reason for our justification; but faith alone reconciles us to God, and causes him to love us, not in ourselves, but in his only-begotten Son.

You will see that Calvin considers the proposition, taken by itself, that faith without works justifies (remember, this is where the signers of the communication take their basic stand), to be ambiguous. It "needs prudence and sound interpretation"; it is "true yet false," depending on the way it is read. Pinpointed grammatically, Calvin is saying that when the prepositional phrase, without works, is taken adverbially, with the verb, justifies, the proposition, faith without works justifies, is true. But when the prepositional phrase is taken as an adjective, with the noun, faith, then the proposition is false. By itself, Calvin asserts, faith does not justify, "because faith without works is void." Again, "faith cannot justify when it is without works, because it is dead and a mere fiction." Calvin is saying in effect, to try to focus the balance of his remarks: faith (with its works) justifies (without works).

The significance of this passage from Calvin for the controversy at Westminster Seminary is difficult to overestimate. In it, the great Reformer, who had such an unparalleled grasp of the doctrine of justification by faith, shows himself to have wrestled until his death with an issue which has concerned Mr. Shepherd and others, but which the signers of the communication seem to consider false as well as misleading and harmful to the church. Further, so far as the communication defines the basic issue on which the grace of the gospel depends, Calvin does not stand with the signers. Rather he would reject their statement of the issue as ambiguous and misleading, and if forced to decide between the alternatives "with its works" or "apart from its works" (in an adjectival sense), there can be little doubt that he would choose for the former.

c) But what now about Bavinck? He is cited (p. 6) as the crowning witness on behalf of the communication, and his language serves its formulation of the basic issue. Is he in conflict with Calvin? Here again it has to be said that the communication in quoting him out of context has given his words a sense he did not intend.

This can be seen by referring to the attachment (see p. 8), which gives the sentences cited by the communication in their immediate context. (This translation, by the way, was readily available to me, because it is part of a longer section of Bavinck which Mr. Shepherd had taken the time to have translated, just because it expresses his view and concerns.) I ask you to stop here and take the time to read it over carefully before you go on to my observations.

The "distinction mentioned" at the beginning of the excerpt is the distinction, in the application of redemption, between the active and passive justification, which Bavinck has been discussing at some length. Now, in the excerpt, he focuses on the nature of faith, in the light of this distinction. Two things, then, are immediately plain: he is discussing justifying faith and he is concerned to show that it is both a "receptive organ" and an "active power." (This in itself has relevance to the communication, some of whose signers have insisted we must affirm that faith as it justifies is exclusively passive or receptive. Bavinck is arguing that that kind of emphasis is wrong because onesided.)

In the first paragraph Bavinck describes the receptive or passive character of justifying faith. In the second paragraph, where just about in the middle are found the sentences quoted in the communication, he argues at somewhat greater length that justifying faith is "at bottom a living and active faith, and it does not stand opposed to all work in every respect." This, we may say, is the topic sentence, the controlling thesis of the entire paragraph.

From this you can see how the communication has misconstrued Bavinck. The communication brings together quotations from Murray, Calvin and Bavinck to say plainly in effect, if not outright, that in the matter of justification faith is opposed to all work in every respect (and that the basic, gospel-subverting error of Mr. Shepherd, either shared or supported by the majority of the Board and Faculty of Westminster Seminary, is that he denies this). Bavinck, in fact, denies this: justifying faith is not opposed to all work in every respect.

Having stated this as the negative side of the key thought of the paragraph, Bavinck proceeds to differentiate and to spell out the different respects in which justifying faith is and is not properly opposed to works. He says it is properly opposed to the works of the law, taken either as the material cause (ground) of justification or as the instrument of justification. Further, justifying faith is properly opposed to the work of faith, specifically when these (or even faith itself) are taken as the ground of justification.

But, Bavinck continues, (justifying) faith is wrongly opposed to working, if it is opposed to works per se, as if justifying faith is dead and inactive. Here, then, follow the two sentences quoted in the communication. Note that in context they have a qualifying, virtually parenthetical character.

The first sentence intends to remove the misconception that the Reformers were contending for a dead or inactive faith. It must be fully appreciated from the rest of the paragraph how Bavinck means this: what was not at issue for the Reformers is that (justifying) faith is living and active in the sense that it is "the principle of all good works" (17 lines from the bottom) and a "living faith, faith that includes and brings forth good works" (9 lines from the bottom). The living, active character of justifying faith is specifically its working character.

The second quoted sentence is Bavinck's statement of the real issue between Rome and the Reformation. Unless we are to find him in flat contradiction with himself, its term must be understood in the light of the rest of the paragraph. The prepositional phrases, "with its works" and "apart from its works," are not intended by him in a sweeping, undifferentiated way. Rather, his preceding discussion in the paragraph plainly shows how they are to be understood: "With its works" has in view the introduction of works as in some sense the ground of justification; "apart from its works" refers to the rejection of works as in any sense the ground of justification. In other words, the prepositional phrases are adverbial (modifying "justifies"), not adjectival (modifying "faith"), as they are misconstrued by the communication in its statement of the basic issue.

(Bavinck also maintains that faith is not to be opposed to the works of faith insofar as the latter are a means of assurance. But this thought, it should be noted, is additional to what he has already said about the basic character of faith as active, working.)

Bavinck's discussion prompts several other remarks. (1) We are presuming ourselves to be wiser than and going beyond men like Bavinck (and Calvin and, most importantly, I believe it can be shown, Scripture), when, in discussing justification, we absolutize the opposition of faith to good works so as to exclude works other than as the ground and/or the instrument. This is the presumption of the communication. There has always been room within the Reformed tradition to say, with Galatians 5:6, for instance, that justifying faith is working faith.

(2) Consider the following statements abstracted from Bavinck (beginning 8 lines from the bottom of the excerpt). "The faith that justifies" is a "faith that includes and brings forth good works." "Not the more passive, but the more lively and the more powerful it [faith] is, so much the more does it justify us." I submit that these statements, isolated and read as just given, are as bold and venturesome, and perhaps unsettling, as anything Mr. Shepherd has said or written. Yet they make an important biblical point, as do, I believe, Mr. Shepherd's statements on justifying faith, when they are read in context.

(3) Toward the end Bavinck touches on the perennial question of the relationship between Paul and James. Some among the signers have insisted, in opposing Mr. Shepherd's views, that the only way to the two can be reconciled and the grace of the gospel preserved is by holding that each is talking about a different justification. Bavinck disagrees. "It is indeed not right," he says, "to say that Paul speaks only of the 'justification of the sinner' and James of 'the justification of the just.'" And after noting their common concerns, he observes the "only . . . difference" is "that Paul contends against

dead works and James declaims against dead faith." J. Gresham Machen, for one, takes essentially the same position (The New Testament. An Introduction to its Literature and History (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), pp. 238f.).

I recognize that the communication raises other points. But I have focused on what its signers tell us is the basic issue. I have tried to show that those fathers in the faith to whom the communication appeals in support of its "clear and unambiguous witness to the truth of the gospel of grace," and in fact precisely at the points of appeal, turn out rather to occupy ground which is close, if not identical, to where Mr. Shepherd and those who support him are standing. A strange and confusing situation. It leaves me wondering where we really are and to ask the signers of the communication, in particular, to consider that the real issue is the unedifying fact that we are guilty of largely talking past each other. For the sake of the purity and peace of the Reformed community isn't it imperative that somehow we try together to discover why this is?

It has been difficult for me to write this to you. I do so with a deep sense of discouragement and loss. For the past five years I, along with others, have labored to contain the controversy at Westminster within the seminary community, not because we were trying to keep it under wraps or evade our accountability to the church, but because of our conviction that the controversy had begun there and should end there.

Others, however, have seen fit to take it into the church at large. So some response has seemed necessary. For the basic issue in the terms of the communication, some of us are convinced, is not the gospel of the gratuitously imputed, justifying righteousness of Christ, received by faith alone--which we gratefully and cordially confess from the heart--but whether all are ready to confess, with Bavinck and others, that living, justifying faith is both active and passive, that the faith that accepts, receives, and rests upon Christ alone for justification is an active abandonment of ourselves to the Savior, a restless repose in his righteousness.

But there is another basic issue, as some of us see it, that has not really been touched on here. That is whether in our midst Scripture will still have the last word, whether the whole counsel of God will be something more than what we imagine we already have under our control and have already mastered with our theological structures and doctrinal formulations. Will we, too, as the church must in every time and place, continue to return there to be reconfirmed and, when necessary, corrected in our faith, and, above all, to discover there the inexhaustible and "unsearchable riches of Christ"(Ephesians 3:8)?

My hope is still that all parties concerned with the controversy at Westminster Seminary desire the same answer to this questions.

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(Bavinck, Gereformeerde Dogmatiek, 4th ed. (1930), pp. 206f.)

Thirdly, the distinction mentioned makes it possible for us to conceive of faith at the same time as a receptive organ and as an active power. If justification in every respect comes about after faith, faith becomes a condition, an activity, which must be performed by man beforehand, and it cannot be purely receptive. But if the righteousness, on the ground of which we are justified, lies wholly outside of us in Christ Jesus, then it can obviously only become ours through our childlike acceptance of it. "Remission of sins is the things promised on account of Christ. Therefore it cannot be accepted except by faith alone, for a promise cannot be accepted except by faith alone." Faith is therefore not a "material cause" or a "Formal cause," it is not even a condition or instrument of justification, for it stands in relation to justification not as, for example, the eye to seeing or the ear to hearing; it is not a condition, upon which, not an instrument or organ, through which we receive this benefit, but it is the acceptance itself of Christ and all his benefits, as He offers himself to us through word and Spirit, and it includes therefore also the consciousness, that He is my Lord and I am his possession. Faith is therefore not an instrument in the proper sense, of which man makes use in order to accept Christ, but it is a sure knowledge and a solid confidence which the Holy Spirit works in the heart and through which He persuades and assures man that he, not withstanding all his sins, has part in Christ and in all his benefits.

But if this faith is saving faith, then it cannot be "historical knowledge" or a "bare assent;" it is at bottom a living and active faith, and it does not stand opposed to all work in every respect. It forms a contrast with the works of the law in a double sense, namely therein, that these works can be neither the "material cause" nor the "instrumental cause" of justification. It also stands opposed to the works of faith (infused righteousness, obedience, love) the moment these are to any degree viewed as the ground of justification, as forming as a whole or in part that righteousness on the ground of which God justifies us; for that is Christ and Christ alone; faith itself is not the ground of justification and thus also neither are the good works which come forth from it. But faith does not stand opposed to work, if one were to mean by that, that only a dead, inactive faith can justify us. For the quarrel between Rome and the Reformation did not have to do with whether we are justified by an active or inactive faith, or by a living or a dead faith. But the question was, just as it was for Paul, whether faith with its works, or whether faith apart from its works, justifies us before God and in our consciences. And further, faith does not stand opposed to the works of faith, in so far as these, as the fruit of faith are used by the Holy Spirit as a means to assure the believer of the sincerity of his faith and thus of his salvation. In this sense faith itself is a work, John 6:29, the best work and the principle of all good works. Therefore the Reformed also said that it is indeed "faith alone which justified, but however, faith which justifies is not alone," and they spoke in addition to the "justification of the sinner" also of a "justification of the righteous." In this sense also Paul and James are not in contradiction to each other. It is indeed not right to say that Paul speaks only of the "justification of the sinner" and James of the "justification of the just." Rather, both deny that the ground of justification lies in the works of the law, and both recognize that faith, living faith, faith that includes and brings forth good works is the means by which the Holy Spirit assures us of our righteousness in Christ. In this there is only this difference, that Paul contends against dead works and James declaims against dead faith. The faith that justifies is the assurance wrought in our hearts by the Holy Spirit of our righteousness in Christ. And therefore, not the more passive, but the more lively and the more powerful it is, so much the more does it justify us. Faith works together with works and is perfected by works, James 2:22.