

Sept 12, 1999

Dear Carl,

Here is Mitchell's defense of Shepherd which I promised you, with compliments.

Sorry it is so marked up, but you are getting it third-handed, only some of the notes are mine. I did get Mitchell's personal permission to make as many copies as I like, he now considers it an open letter.

I would appreciate your response to this defense sometime.

In Messiah's mission,
Joe Fickasola
Ashland, OH

P.S. Thanks for being the personal chauffeur of Greg and me, it was a great trip to Westminster's Jubilee, and good to know you better, brother. J.F.

and thanks for your two books, which I shall read.
J.F.

Jeff Beck

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An Open Letter
to the Presbytery of Philadelphia, et al.

A Possibility of Reconciliation

of presently opposing views concerning Professor Norman Shepherd's
"Thirty-four Theses on Justification, Etc."

What follows is a very personal expression because it grows out of a very personal concern. I have been distressed increasingly at the lack of progress and unity in Presbytery's consideration of Mr. Shepherd's "Thirty-four Theses." The debate has had moments of edification; but too often speeches have been off the point, unrelated to the issues, supererogatory efforts to correct some brother on points not related to Mr. Shepherd at all. *more the duty*

This concern grows out of a more basic concern that Mr. Shepherd's views should be subject to a court of Christ's church rather than being bottled up in a quasi-judicial proceeding within the faculty and board of Westminster Seminary. When the "Thirty-four Theses" were brought to the Presbytery, I felt this would allow a proper resolution of the disagreements that had developed within the faculty and board.

After the meeting of Presbytery on May 12, however, it would be easy to despair. I was startled at the tie vote on finding Thesis 22 "in harmony with the teaching of Scripture and the Westminster Standards." If Presbytery cannot speak with more unity than that, it should perhaps give up the effort no matter how grave a delinquency that would be. Unless I thought there was some hope of easing this deadlock (other than my having to cast tie-breaking votes), I would agree to give up. If a presbytery cannot see its way in a doctrinal question more clearly than that, it ought to abdicate.

What gives me some hope is that also on May 12 there came into clarity (for me) some of the underlying difficulties that explain the apparently irreconcilable views in the Presbytery. These difficulties have been there all along, but for me it had not been possible to pin them down. Basically they are difficulties due to an a-priori "mind-set," a result of our prior conditioning, that controls our thinking and reception of others' remarks. (I owe much of my understanding of this to Dr. Vern Poythress.)

What follows is an attempt to show these difficulties as I see them and to state my opinion as to how they may be overcome. If there is to be any reconciliation of views, any clarity of doctrinal expression, it can come only if all of us will reexamine our own assumptions while bending every effort to see and acknowledge the assumptions of others. If what I say here has any merit, it will require a complete reading of this letter and thoughtful pondering. If your mind is closed, then don't bother.

Thesis 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).

I have chosen to restrict my remarks to this one thesis (though others will be referred to as needed), since this is the one that Presbytery split evenly over, and because it was in relation to this thesis that some of the difficulties became more apparent to me.

I shall refer to individuals by name, since it would be obscure not to do so. Names will also serve to identify views beyond my summaries here.

I will also employ a measure of emphasis that may seem overdone, but I am concerned to make my meanings clear.

For myself, since I first saw Mr. Shepherd's "Thirty-four Theses" (my first exposure to his views except by hearsay), I have sought to withhold final judgment until hearing the discussion. Since being chosen chairman of Presbytery's Committee of the Whole dealing with the theses, I have continued my effort to keep an open mind so that my moderating might be fair.

That is not to say I had no opinions on the theses. When I first read Thesis 22, though critical of its style, I had no basic disagreement with what it said. (This in contrast to other theses including some with which Presbytery itself has had much less difficulty.)

So, when Presbytery turned down a proposal to declare Thesis 22 to be "contrary to the teaching of Scripture and the Westminster Standards," and turned down a proposal to declare it "unsatisfactory," I was frankly amazed that the presbyters were unable to say it was "in harmony with the teaching of Scripture and the Westminster Standards." Nothing I heard in the debate on May 12 gave me any reason to alter my initial opinion about Thesis 22, and I had no hesitancy whatever (except to lose my "neutrality") in casting the tie-breaking affirmative vote.

Basis for despair

The proposal to declare Thesis 22 contrary to Scripture and the Standards clearly lost. The proposal to say it was "unsatisfactory" (a rather mild but ambiguous criticism) also clearly lost. Why then did the affirmative resolution fail to muster a clear majority?

One can only guess. Certainly those who favored either or both of the negative proposals would vote against the positive one. But those negatives both lost. There must have been a shift in votes for perhaps a variety of reasons by those who felt it unwise to express approval of Thesis 22.

In fact, several presbyters recorded their reason for voting against the positive resolution as follows: "Because we believe that Thesis 22 can be understood to teach that good works must constitute a ground for justification." At the time, that did not seem an unreasonable explanation of those negative votes. With reflection, however, that reason contains more than ample grounds for despair over Presbytery's ability to judge.

To elaborate: Some people understand Scripture to teach a flat earth, but we don't exclude their "proof-texts" just because of some people's denseness. But I don't believe those who recorded the reason cited above did so because of the possibility that some people might be stupid. They meant to imply that Thesis 22 could be reasonably understood as teaching that good works must constitute a ground for justification.

How could anyone believe that, however, in the face of the absolutely unambiguous assertion of Thesis 22 itself that "the righteousness of Jesus Christ ever remains [i.e., no other possibility in time or eternity] the exclusive [i.e., no other possibility of any sort whatever] ground of the believer's justification"? It is incomprehensible to me--with hindsight, I admit--that anyone could believe that Thesis 22 could be reasonably understood to teach anything that so clearly contradicts its own first clause.

Unless one supposes Mr. Shepherd to be totally illogical or irrational, one has to believe that the second clause of Thesis 22 cannot contradict the first. One may be undecided as to what the second clause means, but he cannot reasonably suppose that the words "necessary for justification" can be understood in the sense of "necessary as a ground."

How did this "incomprehensible" situation come about? It was due to this

matter of "mind-set"--but of that, more later.

Significance of votes

I must add that it is also distressing to hear frequent expressions of concern over the "testimony" of the Presbytery in these decisions. This presbytery was not asked to make, nor is it engaged in making a testimony. It was asked to resolve a question of doctrine reasonably proposed, and it has that duty to do before worrying about its "testimony." Presbyters who vote out of concern for what "others" may think are, if not derelict in duty, at least falling short in resolving the question of doctrine before us.

Now I suppose that some of those who recorded their reason for their negative vote did so, not because they thought Thesis 22 actually taught that good works are a ground for justification, but because they thought others might so interpret it. And there is plenty of evidence that some do interpret it that way even in the Presbytery. But again, presbyters are being asked to vote, not out of concern for how someone may misunderstand this or that thesis; they are being asked to determine whether a thesis is in harmony with Scripture and the Standards or not. To fail to do either, as Presbytery nearly did on May 12, is a failure to perform a duty. (This is not to impugn anyone's motives, but is to remind us of just what the job before us really is.)

Nor is this to say there is no reason for concern about what "others" may think. But that concern must not be allowed to interfere with answering the doctrinal questions before us. Once that has been done, it would be fully in order to adopt some "testimony" on the subject if that is deemed wise for the sake of the truth of the gospel.

I repeat: It is not responsible to vote on these questions--at this stage of the proceedings--with an eye to what "others" may think. (As for those who were conscientiously persuaded that Thesis 22 was "contrary" to Scripture and the Standards, more later.)

What might have been

If I had been less startled by that tie vote, and more prepared to seize a parliamentary advantage, I might well have refrained from casting a vote to break the tie. In that case Presbytery would have been in the highly untenable position of having refused--by a clear majority--to declare Thesis 22 "contrary" to Scripture and the Standards, or even to say it was "unsatisfactory," and also having refused to say it was "in harmony." It was in harmony or it was contrary, one or the other. (Thesis 14 differed since it included expression of opinion that did not purport to be derived from Scripture; Thesis 22 meant to express scriptural teaching--either it did so or it did not, and Presbytery should have declared which.)

If I had refrained from voting (leaving the affirmative resolution to fail), it would have been in order then to bring a formal complaint against Presbytery for (1) its failure to resolve a question of doctrine, and (2) its failure to declare that Thesis 22 is in harmony with the teaching of Scripture and the Westminster Standards. That would have put the shoe on the other foot and would have confronted Presbytery with what I can only suppose would have been an impossible dilemma.

Such an outcome would have put at least part of the basic issues in a concise form that could have been forwarded to the General Assembly. I rather wish it had turned out that way. But I still feel it is possible for the Presbytery of Philadelphia to do its duty in this matter and do it

so as to satisfy the proper concerns of us all. Bear with me.

Problem of "mind-set"

On May 12, what had been a problem all along finally became clear (to me, anyway, at that time). A real language barrier exists among us. We think we're speaking English, but the dialects in use are mutually unintelligible. It is a barrier that prevents us from hearing others--or expressing ourselves--without categorizing these thoughts in ways that are neither necessary nor always biblical. That the barrier is real and potent became abundantly evident in the paper presented by Mr. Kuschke concerning Thesis 22, and in the reason recorded by those who refused to affirm Thesis 22.

There is in all of us--and we must recognize it--an automatic reaction to certain words and phrases due to past conditioning. Speak of "dinner" and my mind's eye conjures up delectable dishes and the like, and even salivation (yes, we're talking about Pavlov's dog!). I do not think of tigers (though I might if I lived in Bangladesh), nor of worms (though I might if I had a morbid imagination). "Dinner" refers to my eating, not my being eaten.

Grant that we have a "mind-set." Grant too the history of doctrine that has generated it. Grant the wisdom of distinguishing certain words and concepts clearly from others. It remains to ask, Does Scripture necessarily operate with the same mind-set? Is Scripture governed by our categories and definitions in systematic theology, however useful such refinements may be? Certainly not, witness Scripture's use of "regeneration."

The "mind-set" trap

Mr. Kuschke fell squarely into the trap of that conditioning (and those who recorded their reason for the negative vote were still caught in it). His statement that "to speak of our obedience . . . as necessary for our justification implies the necessity of that obedience either as ground or as instrument of our justification," is neither a necessary implication from any datum of Scripture or from logic. There may well be other necessary relationships between obedience and justification that have nothing to do with ground or instrument; there is no a priori reason to exclude the possibility. And, since the justification spoken of in Thesis 22 is the verdict of acquittal at the final judgment, that necessity could be of more than one kind.

Also, Mr. Kuschke's insistence that "personal godliness" and the like "all pertain to sanctification" and cannot have a necessary relation to justification is also due to a "mind-set" and not to Scripture or logic. I grant all these things "pertain to sanctification." But that does not eliminate the possibility of a necessary relation to justification. Sanctification is always the subsequent to (initial) justification; there is a relation of necessity here in which sanctification must, in God's gracious purpose, follow on that initial justification. The final acquittal (or "justification" in Mr. Shepherd's usage) is a necessary subsequent to sanctification, also in God's gracious purpose (cf. Romans 8). The conclusion: Whatever pertains to sanctification bears a prior and necessary relation to the "justification in the judgment of the last day."

Why does Mr. Kuschke (and others) have such a problem? It is the "mind-set." He speaks as he does, as most of us normally do, because of a conditioned zeal to avoid the errors of Roman Catholic confusing of justification and sanctification. That is a good motive. But that does not prove that some other way of speaking of these things is unbiblical.

We simply must recognize the possibility that some of us have allowed our definitions from systematic theology to dictate for us what is and is not "scriptural." That was the very trap that governed the Council of Trent. We must be extremely careful to avoid such a "mind-set" trap.

Analysis of Thesis 22

All of this is rather much of generalities. What follows is an examination of a specific case--the one in which Presbytery found no unity.

After the fact at least, it seems incomprehensible that anyone could fail to see that Mr. Shepherd was not speaking contrary to Scripture. He was certainly speaking contrary to our "mind-set," to what we are accustomed to hearing, and that may be reason enough to criticize him.

But the thesis baldly insists that the righteousness of Christ is the only and "ever remains" the only ground of our justification (which should be understood as including the initial act of God, the resultant state, and the final judgment acquittal). No one took any exception to this first part of the thesis. Since Mr. Shepherd insisted on it, it must be granted that he believes it no matter what he may be thought to say in the second part.

Mr. Shepherd, having clearly stated the sole ground of our justification (then, now, and at judgment), goes on to insist that Scripture teaches that "personal godliness" is also necessary--in some sense that can only be other than ground--for the final "justification."

I do not know how Mr. Shepherd could have more clearly excluded "personal godliness" from the category of necessary ground. Since he is speaking (in the second clause) of "justification at the judgment day," he is excluding "personal godliness" from the category of necessary instrument. By the nature of the case, it is too late to produce the instrument of our initial justification when standing at the judgment seat. The question, then, is whether Scripture warrants our speaking of "personal godliness" as necessary in some other sense than that of ground or instrument.

A serious reflection

Upsetting as has been the "mind-set" that persistently (stubbornly?) insists that "necessary for justification" can only mean "necessary as ground or instrument" no matter what, more upsetting has been the practical refusal to engage in exegetical discussion despite Mr. Shepherd's appeals for it. The "mind-set" has come dangerously close to shutting us off from examination of Scripture itself.

Now that sounds harsh. But I believe it is factual. The appeal to be shown why Scripture may not support the statements in Thesis 22 has not received adequate response. This seems due to the "mind-set." Even when a Scripture passage seems to be saying that something is necessary for justification (in whatever sense) other than as ground or instrument, the reaction is, whatever the passage means, it cannot mean that--end of discussion.

The Orthodox Presbyterian Church has been noted for its willingness to examine anything in the light of Scripture and to yield to the results. Apparently this commendable attitude does not prevail about matters said to be necessary for justification. The final word is in: Nothing can be necessary for justification except as ground or instrument and Scripture cannot say anything otherwise.

Brethren, I do not like what I just said. But it happened on May 12. Until we are ready to set aside our "mind-set" on this matter, we could be in the preliminary stages of splitting our church, the seminary, and the

wider community of Reformed people who stand with us.

With that behind us, let us look at one Scripture passage. This one is not cited in Thesis 22, but was used elsewhere in Mr. Shepherd's paper, and was referred to in the debate on Thesis 22. I have chosen to use it simply because it illustrates several important points.

Matthew 12:33-37

The questions: Is it biblically warranted to speak of the final verdict of acquittal at the judgment day as a "justification"? (This is not to ask whether it is prudent to do so.) Is it biblically warranted to speak of anything as necessary for that "justification" in which the necessity is other than that of ground or instrument?

Righteousness. For a question I have not heard mentioned so far in the discussion, it seems useful to ask just what is meant by "righteous" or "righteousness." We all agree that "justify" can mean "declare righteous." What is this quality of being righteous?

The concept has two aspects. Basically, it has to do with fair or equitable dealing (in both Hebrew and Greek). In that sense, it is a virtue, a personal quality.

If we leave the concept there, however, we fall into a swamp of Roman Catholic confusion. Righteousness is not just a virtue, not just a quality of the person. It goes beyond that. To be righteous, particularly in the situation when one is first justified by God's gracious act, ~~is not a matter of virtue or quality (though this must follow in time), but of status.~~ At root, the righteous man is the man with a certain status, that of "standing in right" with God. The immediate result of being justified is a status and not a virtue. It is this distinction that lies at the heart of Catholic and Protestant dispute about justification.

~~This is not to say that dikaios, dikaiosunē, or dikaiōō never have reference to virtue. It is to say that they always, in some degree, imply one's status before God.~~ Virtue is involved, but more important and often overlooked is the matter of status.

Day of Judgment. Back to Matthew 12:33-37. Throughout this discourse, Jesus is speaking of the final judgment. Whatever illustration is used, it has something to do with that subject. And whatever else may be meant, in verse 37 the subject is the last judgment and the possible verdicts, i.e., a question of possible status before God at that day.

Parallelism. Verse 37 is a double statement, so constructed that it is impossible to deny the parallelism. The contrast is solely in the verbs.

Without asking what either verb may mean, any fair principle of hermeneutics would have to agree that the verbs are being used in parallel senses. Whatever is clearly meant by one must be, mutatis mutandis, meant by the other. Any other exegesis would violate the parallelism.

Verdicts. The context is the last judgment. The verbs have something to do with that final judgment. Since the second verb (katadikazō) can only have the meaning of "condemn," "declare guilty," the first verb must have a parallel meaning. Since "justify," "declare righteous," is a primary meaning of dikaiōō, it must have ~~this forensic sense here.~~ (That the verbs are direct opposites is shown by the direct contrast in the previous verses.)

If there is some hermeneutical principle that allows some other interpretation, I would be pleased to hear of it. As it stands, no other interpretation does justice to the text--in spite of what respected commentators may have said. (But see Calvin on this verse.)

To give dikaiōō a demonstrative meaning (possible in the abstract) would

violate the parallelism; katadikazō has no such demonstrative meaning. And if Jesus had meant for us to understand a demonstrative force here, he did a poor job of indicating it. (Another basic hermeneutical principle: A passage should be understood--not necessarily exhaustively--in the sense the original audience would have understood it. Even to suggest that in Aramaic the words might have had different connotations, however, only leaves the confusion as a fault of the Holy Spirit who is responsible for the Greek.) Unless one is to suppose a real lack of clarity here, the only conclusion is that dikaioō means "declare righteous" in a forensic sense.

Analogia fidei? I'm sure someone is ready to remind me that there is another hermeneutical principle to listen to. There is the "analogy of faith," the principle that every Scripture must be understood in harmony with the teaching of the whole. Fair enough.

But is it contrary to the overall teaching of Scripture to understand dikaioō as a forensic declaration in Matthew 12:37? What is being contradicted? The conclusion seems clear: It is biblically warranted to speak of the final verdict of acquittal as a "justification"--however wise or not it may be. Failure to grant this is a matter of stubbornness.

The necessity. The other notable feature in Matthew 12:37 is the parallel with various expressions in Paul having to do with justification. Paul speaks of being justified by faith (ek pisteōs), being justified not by works (ex ergōn). Here in Matthew, Jesus speaks of being justified (at the final judgment, though) by words (ek logōn).

Grant that prepositions are notoriously inexact words. Still, there is this parallel construction in Matthew and Paul. At least, one must ask whether ek logōn has the same force as ek pisteōs. Basically, ek with a genitive means "out of" or "from," both of a place or a state. Paul uses the construction to indicate the condition out of which one is justified, i.e., ek is used to indicate the means or instrument by which something is received. (Curiously, Bagster's little lexicon cites Matthew 12:33, 37 as its illustrations of ek used as means or instrument.) Again, so far as the surface of the text is concerned, may not ek logōn be understood as indicating the instrument of our final acquittal?

If it does, we do have a problem with the analogia fidei. It seems clear enough that faith is the "alone instrument" of justification (albeit with reference to the initial act of God). Either additional means are required for the final verdict, or we must understand ek logōn in some other way. Since the first alternative is also contrary to Scripture (the initial justification by the sole instrument of faith never being suspended and still being in force at the final judgment), we must seek another meaning.

-Logōn as demonstrative. In Matthew 12, Jesus is not concerned to take account of all the niceties of Pauline theology. There is a pastoral concern here, that his hearers (and we readers) realize, not that good words merit final justification, but that their presence proves something.

Jesus is speaking of "words" (and I think he means literal utterances) as the product of a man's heart, either good or evil (verse 35). The words, as a product are therefore a demonstration of the heart's condition.

This is the demonstrative element (not the word dikaioō). Good words show a good heart, one (we learn from other Scripture) renewed to faith, one believing to justification. Good words do not directly prove the justified state of the person; they prove his good heart and from that fact his being justified is then established.

Thus "good words" are necessary for the final justification, not as a ground or as an instrument in themselves, but as proof (not to God, but to the assembled angels and mortals) that behind and prior to the good words

there is a heart regenerated to saving, justifying faith.

(To say that this somehow denies the possibility of a "death-bed conversion" where the convert lacks time to utter any "good words," is to introduce a possibility about which Scripture is silent. So should we be.)

If the "good words" can be fairly translated as "personal godliness" (they are at least representative of it), and if they are understood as the evidence of justifying faith in a renewed heart, then there is no biblical reason to reject the statement that "the personal godliness of the believer is also necessary for his justification in the judgment of the last day." This is taught in Matthew 12:37 (and Calvin happens to agree).

Reiteration

There is nothing in Matthew 12:33-37, nor from the rest of Scripture, to cause us to reject the surface implications of the parallelism in verse 37. To "justify" here means to "declare righteous."

The demonstrative element is not in dikaioō, but in the logōn. It is just as reasonable to see the "idle words" as demonstrating a polluted heart as the "good words" show a renewed heart. The ground of condemnation is not the evil words themselves (though even one such would ground enough), but the inner state of rebellion to which they point. So too with the "good words": they are not a ground of justification, or a part of the ground, but a pointer to the believing heart by which one is justified.

I do not see how anyone can make a plausible case for seeking dikaioō in Matthew 12:37 except as expressing a forensic declaration, a verdict. Even if you are persuaded otherwise, is there anything in the foregoing interpretation that contradicts the teaching of Scripture as a whole? If not, you should have had no trouble agreeing that Thesis 22, as stated and with its own clear qualification, is in harmony with Scripture and the Westminster Standards, however problematic the choice of words may be.

By way of transition

I mean now to go to engage in criticism of the general approach and terminology in the theses (though with continuing focus on Thesis 22). I would remind us again that in considering these theses we are not being asked whether they could be improved upon--it will be obvious I think they could and should be improved. ~~We are being asked whether, in whatever clumsy, confusing, even ambiguous, terms a thesis may be stated, is it (in context with all the others) in harmony with Scripture and the Standards.~~

~~In other words, Is a thesis passable? Not. Does it pass magna cum laude?~~

Basic criticism of theses

In brief, my basic criticism of Mr. Shepherd's "Thirty-four Theses" is that they ignore the history of doctrine, particularly from the Reformation. Secondly, the theses have a terminology that is beyond scriptural warrant and is confusing to the reader.

Since Martin Luther, the word "justification" has been used, in theological discussion within orthodox Protestantism, to refer only to the initial act of God by which, on the ground of Christ's imputed righteousness received through the sole instrument of faith, a sinner is declared to be and is constituted as righteous in the sight of God.

but in Thesis 4, "justification" is defined in two additional senses, leaving a large measure of confusion thereafter. Consider:

Thesis 3. Justification is an act of God by which He forgives sinners acquitting them of their guilt, accounts and accepts them as righteous, and bestows upon them the title to eternal life.

Thesis 4. The term "justification" may be used with reference to the acquittal and acceptance of the believer at his effectual calling into union with Christ, or with reference to the state of forgiveness and acceptance with God into which the believer is ushered by his effectual calling, or with reference to God's open acquittal and acceptance of the believer at the final judgment (Matt. 12:36, 37; Rom. 3:22, 24; 5:1; 6:1; Gal. 5:5).

Question of biblical warrant

Now Presbytery has already agreed, though with a strongly voiced dissent, that these two theses are in harmony with the teaching of Scripture and the Westminster Standards. (And it is at this point--i.e., in relation to Thesis 22--that Mr. Kuschke's insistent objection to the consideration of the theses seriatim shows some validity. It is more obvious at this point what is involved in Theses 3 and 4 than when they were first considered. Even so, I do not see how we could have proceeded except seriatim.)

Was that early judgment on Theses 3 and 4 warranted? I believe it was. Thesis 3 is certainly true, and ~~it is quite conceivable that scriptural usage, as summarized in Thesis 4, is less precise, more inclusive, than our theological or confessional usages in regard to "justification."~~ That is obviously what Presbytery thought when it voted on Theses 3 and 4.

Dr. Miller's problem

From that decision on Theses 3 and 4 onward, Dr. C. J. Miller has repeatedly referred back to what he sees as a basic confusion in the two. If justification is, as Thesis 3 defines it, ~~an act of God; how can it also be the resultant state of the justified person?~~

Dr. Miller has a point. But he has failed to grant that Theses 3 and 4, however inconsistent they may be, nevertheless are in harmony--to some degree--with Scripture teaching. "Justification" in Thesis 3 is limited to the initial act of God; "justification" in Thesis 4 includes two additional usages found in Scripture. The confusion is not in the two theses per se, but in the use of "justification" in more than one sense. This has biblical warrant and must be granted, however confusing it turns out to be.

But the confusion is real. It illustrates a lack of precision in the theses, or better, a failure to reconcile two goals apparently present in their composition. ~~These goals are--(1) to summarize certain biblical teaching, in something of a biblical style and wording, concerning "justification" (in the inclusive sense) and related subjects, and (2) to make theologically accurate statements on these points at the same time.~~ The two goals do not always mesh, or at least have not always been successfully achieved.

Further analysis

It is one thing to summarize scriptural usage of "justification" and its cognates as Thesis 4 does, and does accurately. It is quite another thing to define "justification" as an act of God, as Thesis 3 accurately does, and leave it uncertain how the definition and three-fold usage are related. The

implication--not the necessary conclusion--is that the definition of Thesis 3 somehow applies to all three of the usages itemized in Thesis 4.

That implication is not a necessary conclusion. But the confusion created by the juxtaposition of Theses 3 and 4, with no clarifying distinctions made, is a real problem. Though lumping three distinct situations under the single rubric of "justification" may have some biblical warrant, it certainly is not helpful in an attempt to make theological statements.

Neither is it good biblical theology. Scripture nowhere defines justification as a unified concept meant to apply to all three usages. Scripture nowhere uses the term so to imply reference to all three situations. To do so in the theses (this is done in the first clause of Thesis 22) is to go beyond scriptural warrant and introduce serious confusion.

Altogether apart from the "mind-set" problem (which Mr. Shepherd has not taken anything like adequate cognizance of if he really means to communicate scriptural truth more clearly), the theses have their own "mind-set" problem. The effort to summarize Scripture's teaching about dikaiōō and its cognates and related concepts has resulted in a confusion of certain distinct concepts that Scripture itself is never guilty of, always providing adequate context to determine the specific concept in view.

Criticism elaborated

I would express basic sympathy with Mr. Shepherd's attempt to state and summarize certain biblical teachings more adequately and in closer style to Scripture's own manner of speaking than has always been done in the past. Thesis 4 is basically just such an attempt. If it stood alone, I would have little difficulty with it.

But since the fifteenth century, "justification" in theological discourse has referred only to the initial act of God in declaring a believer righteous in God's sight. To use the word, in theological statements, in any added senses, is to confuse most of us, to say the least.

The only way to succeed in Mr. Shepherd's goal is (1) to provide three distinct definitions of "justification" for each of the distinct usages, and (2) to employ some means thereafter to make it clear which usage is in view.

That would suggest either using three distinct terms for each concept (a perfectly good biblical possibility), or at least so modifying each appearance of "justification" that it is clear which usage is in view. (The first instance of "justification" in Thesis 22 is not so indicated, but the second one is.)

The use of "necessary"

The use of "justification," particularly in theological statements, almost automatically evokes reference to God's initial act of declaring a sinner righteous. The use of "necessary" (whether "necessary to" or "necessary for" seems to make no difference) in relation to "justification" equally automatically evokes an implication of ground or instrument--that being the "mind-set" with which most of us are conditioned. That being so, the conjunction of "justification" and "necessary" ought to be avoided (which the Bible itself normally does) unless one means to evoke ground or instrument.

Or if one desires to express some necessary relationship to "justification" (in whatever sense), "necessary" should be parenthetically explained so there is no misunderstanding, no "mind-set" problem. If that had been done in Thesis 22, much of the difficulty would have been eased.

For example: "The righteousness of Jesus Christ ever remains the bx-

clusive ground of the believer's justification, but the personal godliness of the believer is also necessary, as evidence of a believing heart, for his justification in the judgment of the last day." Better yet, omit "also" and relieve any suggestion that the necessity in the second clause is of the same kind as implied in the first. Even better yet, modify the instances of "justification" to make it clear which sense is in view. Thus:

"The righteousness of Jesus Christ is the exclusive ground of the believer's initial justification by God, remains the exclusive ground of his being justified and accepted by God as a consequent state, and still will be the exclusive ground of his final verdict of acquittal at the judgment day; but the personal godliness of the believer--not in perfection, but in reality--not as a ground but as evidence of a believing heart, is necessary for the final verdict of acquittal at the judgment day."

Clumsy style

I believe this final "revised version" of Thesis 22 says what Mr. Shepherd meant to say in Thesis 22 but says it such a way as to avoid the problems. But the style is impossible, cumbersome and unwieldy.

The basic problem is still that use of "justification" in a three-fold sense and of "necessary" when something other than ground or instrument is meant. To avoid the problems, the "revised version" of Thesis 22 has had to import sufficient context to make clear the actual meaning intended.

The Bible does not use the word "justification" or its cognates without providing a context that indicates which meaning is intended. But to supply an adequate context in a theological statement results in a ludicrously clumsy style. The answer is simply that in theological statements the prerequisite is clear definitions of terms. This is not true in the theses.

In summary, Mr. Shepherd's effort to state certain biblical teachings in more biblically suggested terms has failed. In thesis 22, it has failed for two reasons: (1) it uses "justification" (in the first clause) in an inclusive way not warranted by any scriptural example; (2) it uses "justification" (in both clauses) and "necessary" in a way that does not avoid the "mind-set" that automatically--and with its own biblical warrant--hears that combination as referring to ground or instrument.

What now?

It might seem reasonable, in view of the criticism expressed above, to ask Mr. Shepherd to reformulate the theses taking the criticism into account. I do not believe, however, that this would be very helpful. For one thing, Mr. Shepherd has a right to expect that his fellow presbyters will listen to his views and seek to understand them on his terms, not theirs. For another, it is the "Thirty-four Theses" that have been laid before the Presbytery, and it is those statements as given that should be dealt with.

Those with the "mind-set" (most of us to some degree), that cannot hear "justification" and "necessary" except in terms of ground or instrument, must get loose from that particular hang-up, at least while discussing the theses. Neither Scripture nor logic warrants such a restricted view. It may indeed be biblically warranted in some instances; it is not so in all.

Those who, with Mr. Shepherd, want to set forth scriptural teaching on the necessity for personal godliness, must take account of the existence of a "mind-set" (that does have biblical warrant in part), must realize how pervasive this is and how controlling in effect, and must seek to avoid any unneeded aggravation of it. They need to take special care not to mislead

anyone into supposing that ~~no matter what may be required of him by God, his salvation is in no way dependent on his own efforts~~. And they need to take account of the fact that Scripture nowhere uses "justification" in an inclusive way to refer to all three usages at once.

Let the Presbytery finish its job. Let us do it with more readiness to understand others on their terms, not on our "mind-set." Whether, after finishing its consideration of the theses, Presbytery wants to adopt some "testimony" of its own, give advice to Mr. Shepherd, or whatever, is something I am not prepared to give an opinion on. You've read enough already.

Final comment

Nothing said above should be understood to suggest that any thesis so far considered by Presbytery (apart from 7, 8, and 9), including Thesis 22, fails to meet the mark of being "in harmony with the teaching of Scripture and the Westminster Standards."

That opinion should not be understood as suggesting that the style and vocabulary used in the theses is wise or prudent in view of the conditioned thinking patterns that have prevailed in the church for centuries.

Nothing said in this letter should be understood as suggesting that Mr. Shepherd should rewrite the theses at this time. It should be understood to suggest that it would be expedient for him to reformulate his thoughts at some future point.

If there is a greater need to change for one group than for the other, that burden rests on those who have voted against Mr. Shepherd's theses. They are the ones with the "mind-set" problem. They have the greater need to open their minds to alternative ways of expressing biblical truth. And they must remember that they are ~~not being called upon to endorse the theses as ideal statements~~; they are only being asked to say whether a given thesis, however badly formulated, is in harmony with the teaching of Scripture and the Westminster Standards.

Thank you for your attention to these extended comments. I'm not sure my meaning will come through with the clarity I want. But after revising this extensively and repeatedly, I feel this is the best I can do. I hope it is of help in enabling the Presbytery of Philadelphia to complete what is perhaps the most difficult task laid before it in recent times.

May we pray for greater humility, for mutual forbearance, for a greater ~~readiness to put the best construction on another's faulty expression~~. It is the glory of Christ, the peace and unity of the church, that is at stake in how we conduct ourselves as a presbytery.

Earnestly in Christ,



cc: Members of the Presbytery of Philadelphia
Members of the Faculty, and
Members of the Board of Trustees,
Westminster Theological Seminary