

# THE TRINITY REVIEW

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

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## Why Heretics Win Battles

John W. Robbins

*The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros and Cons  
Debating the Federal Vision*

E. Calvin Beisner, editor

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The Apostle Paul lost some of his battles. When Paul preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the synagogues, he was persecuted by the original antichrist, Judaism. We do not know, but tradition says that Paul died a violent death. (Jesus himself was almost murdered on the Sabbath by devout synagogue-going Jews who did not like his sermon; see *Luke 4*.) Most of the Jews of the first century rejected Christ; only the remnant was saved. The wrath of God, exercised through an unbelieving and unwitting General Titus, ended the apostate Temple cult – the vaunted Second Temple Judaism of the New Perspective on Paul. It was only through the writing of new Scriptures, the divinely inspired New Testament, and the establishment of new institutions – churches to propagate the doctrines of the Scriptures, both Old and New – that the Gospel survived the first century. As a Christian, Paul did not use force (as Saul he had). He lost battles, but he won the war.

The Reformer Martin Luther lost some of his battles. When he launched his doctrinal reform in 1517, he hoped to transform the Roman Church-State. Instead, the papal tyrant excommunicated him, burned his books, and murdered his followers. There was no significant reform of the Roman Church. Five hundred years later, the Roman Church-State is bigger and more heretical than ever. Only the writing of books, sermons, and tracts, and the establishment of Protestant churches and schools, ensured the survival of the Reformation. Most of the Romanists rejected Christ; only the remnant was saved. Luther lost battles, but won the war.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century Presbyterian J. Gresham Machen lost some of his battles. In 1923 he wrote a book demonstrating that the Presbyterian Church in the United States was preaching two different messages, Christianity and Liberalism. His efforts to stop the Auburn heresies ended with Machen and others being excommunicated by the

Presbyterian Church in 1936. Most of the Presbyterians rejected Christ; only the remnant was saved. Only the publication of more literature, and the establishment of new churches and schools, ensured that Biblical Christianity would not disappear in the United States. Machen lost battles, but Christ won the war.

In the 21st century the institutions that resulted from the efforts of Machen are subverted by heretics. If history is any indication, the heretics will win, and only the publication of more literature, plus the establishment of new institutions, will ensure the survival of Biblical Presbyterianism in America. Most American Presbyterians will reject Christ, and only the remnant will be saved.

### Why Heretics Win

There are several reasons that heretics win battles.

First, Scripture tells us that they are more clever and cunning than believers: “For the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light” (*Luke 16:8*). They have a way of thinking that makes them more politically astute, more street smart, more imaginative in their machinations, and more willing to act in sinful ways in order to achieve their goals. Stealing, lying, and bribery are fine so long as they “advance the Kingdom.”

Second, heretics introduce false ideas stealthily: “But this occurred because of false brethren secretly brought in (who came in by stealth to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage” (*Galatians 2:4*) and “For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation...” (*Jude 4*). They appear to be sheep, but are not; and the ideas they teach, at least at first, appear to be true, but are not. By their smooth words, they deceive many into thinking that they are Christian brothers and the ideas they advance are Biblical.

Third, heretics frequently use force to persecute Christians. Force works; it silences the opposition. That is why heretics and tyrants use it. The blood of the martyrs is not the seed of the church; only the Gospel is.

Fourth, and most important, those who believe the truth tend to be slow to recognize error and even slower to take the actions necessary to defend the truth. They lack both discernment and courage. This is the crucial matter. Christians cannot help the fact that the sons of this world are more shrewd than they are, or that false brethren do things subtly, surreptitiously, and coercively. But Christians can help how they understand and respond to such doctrinal and ecclesiastical subversion. Their lack of discernment stems from a lack of knowledge of Scripture, and their lack of courage comes from a lack of belief in the promises of Scripture.

## **Paul, Our Model**

We can learn a great deal from the example of the Apostle Paul in Antioch and his letter to the Galatians, for he was neither slow to recognize error nor timid in correcting it. Our failure to learn from and imitate Paul is the principal reason why heretics win battles.

Paul recognized doctrinal error quickly and acted swiftly to correct it. He wrote: "But this [a problem over the preaching of the Gospel] occurred because of false brethren...to whom we did not yield submission even for an hour, that the truth of the Gospel might continue with you" (*Galatians* 2:2-5). Paul did not put up with ("yield submission" to) error or those teaching error on the Gospel "even for an hour." He was quick to recognize error and quick to correct it, so that "the truth of the Gospel might continue with you." While his concern was doctrinal, it was not academic, for he did not tolerate those who were teaching error in the churches. He understood error, and he refused to tolerate the men who were teaching or abetting error in the churches.

Paul explained further how Christians ought to respond to those who obscure the Gospel: "But from those who seemed to be something – whatever they were, it makes no difference to me; God shows personal favoritism to no man – for those who seemed to be something added nothing to me" (*Galatians* 2:6). Paul was not impressed by a person's status in the church. God is no respecter of persons, and neither was Paul. Church status, church office, educational credentials afford no immunity. In fact, the Biblical rule is just the opposite: To whom much is given, much shall be required. The greater the office, the greater the responsibility in the churches. That is why Paul told Timothy: "those [elders] who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all" (*1 Timothy* 5:20).

So far, we have learned three things about how we must oppose those who obscure or pervert the Gospel:

- (1) We must recognize doctrinal error as a serious sin.
- (2) We must not tolerate either error on the doctrine of salvation or those who teach it "even for an hour."

(3) We must not allow ourselves to be intimidated or cowed by the reputations or credentials of those teaching error on the doctrine of salvation.

But Paul has much more to teach us about correcting doctrinal error in the churches. He continues: "But when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face" (*Galatians* 2:11). This is Paul's fourth lesson: Not only must those who teach a false Gospel be anathematized (see *Galatians* 1), but Christians must also oppose and correct brothers who tolerate those who preach a false Gospel. In *Galatians* 1 Paul had cursed those who preach a false Gospel. In chapter 2 he instructs us on how to deal with brothers who tolerate those who teach a false Gospel, thus obscuring or compromising the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Peter had not preached a false Gospel, but his actions abetted those who did. Paul explained: "for before certain men came from James, he [Peter] would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy." By describing Peter's and Barnabas' actions as "hypocrisy," Paul indicated that Peter and Barnabas believed the Gospel, but nevertheless they tolerated those who did not. Tolerance of error on the doctrine of salvation is a sin. It is doubly sin for elders, who are charged with the responsibility of teaching, of feeding the sheep, and of guarding the flock.

Moreover, Paul opposed Peter "to his face" – directly and openly. Paul was Peter's friend and fellow Apostle. Paul went to the root of the problem and confronted Peter directly. Paul had no misplaced personal loyalty to Peter; he did not let a false notion of friendship interfere with his responsibility to correct Peter and defend the Gospel. Paul did not take Peter aside privately and suggest politely that he eat with the Gentiles. Paul opposed Peter directly to his face. Opposing error and those who tolerate it is something many Christians are loathe to do. They would rather whine, "Can't we all just get along?" Those who allow an un-Biblical view of friendship to cloud their judgments have forgotten Paul's question: "Have I therefore become your enemy because I tell you the truth?" (*Galatians* 4:16).

Further, in Paul's manner of confronting Peter we see the important principle that the truth, the Biblical doctrines, are to be defended openly, directly, and clearly. To try to defend truth by stealth, by cleverness, by political means, is to undercut the very things we are defending. Falsehood can be, and usually is, propagated by dishonest, uncandid, and irrational means, but truth cannot be. Truth must be proclaimed openly, honestly, rationally, and candidly.

Paul said that he opposed Peter, "because he was to be blamed." This is Paul's fifth lesson for us. Paul assigned blame, and he assigned it correctly. Paul identified the Apostle Peter as blameworthy. Peter's status as an Apostle did not shield him from being blamed nor from

Paul's open opposition. Paul judged Peter – accurately, openly, and clearly. Paul did not misunderstand Christ's words, "Judge not, that you be not judged," as so many professing Christians do. Paul judged Peter, accurately and swiftly; and he acted on his judgment. His judgment, of course, was not about a trivial matter, but about the Gospel, and Peter's role in obscuring it. The same zeal for the Gospel that Paul displayed in *Galatians* 1, which compelled him to curse those who teach any other message in the churches, also compelled him to judge and blame Peter for not being straightforward about the truth of the Gospel in chapter 2.

But Paul is not done teaching us how to handle churchmen who undermine the Gospel. He wrote, "But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the Gospel, I said to Peter before them all." Here Paul teaches us that men who are not straightforward about the truth of the Gospel are to be rebuked publicly: "before them all." They are not to be taken aside privately; they are not to be dealt with according to *Matthew* 18, for Paul understood, as many churchmen do not understand today, that that procedure is irrelevant to situations in which the Gospel is being publicly twisted and obscured. Teachers who err on the doctrine of salvation are not to be ignored, condoned, or dealt with privately.

Furthermore, Paul publicly rebuked Peter the Apostle, not the lesser men who surrounded him: "I said to Peter before them all." By making an example of Peter, by writing his name in Scripture for all time, by addressing the Apostle and not some Elder, Deacon, or ordinary layman, Paul made it perfectly clear that even the highest officers in the church are subject to the Gospel. *A fortiori*, so are all the rest. By addressing Peter, Paul acted on the principle that the greater the office, the greater the responsibility. Were Paul to rebuke Peter today, he would, of course, be accused of making a "personal attack" on Peter, a pastor in good standing in the church, and Paul would have been censured by some seminary faculty or church court for using intemperate language as well. Such critics, not accustomed to rigorous thinking, cannot differentiate between personal attack and rebuking a specific person for obscuring the Gospel. Paul's concern was wholly doctrinal; he had no personal animus against Peter. His doctrinal concern, his position as a Christian and an Apostle, required him to confront Peter publicly.

### **Where Is Paul When We Need Him?**

Unfortunately, all these Pauline lessons are lost on most Christians today. The present volume, *The Auburn Avenue Theology*, illustrates the failure of Christians, two thousand years later, to learn Paul's lessons. It also indicates why the present heretics, the advocates of Neolegalism, will win battles (even though they will lose the war).

The organizer of the colloquium tells us that an "anonymous donor," a "kind, thoughtful Christian

businessman" who "holds men on both sides in this controversy in high esteem" "paid all travel, meals, lodging, and other expenses for the colloquium." They met at Lago Mar, a "luxurious" resort in Fort Lauderdale, for three days in August 2003. (Can you imagine a businessman paying for Paul, Peter, and the Judaizers to attend an all-expense paid colloquium at a posh resort on the coast so they could discover how much they had in common and iron out their misunderstandings?)

The editor continues: This businessman "holds the pastoral office in such high regard that he insisted that if we were to ask these dedicated servants of God to gather for stressful debate we must provide beautiful rooms in a beautiful location with gourmet food to show them due honor." Unlike Paul, who disdained status in the church when the purity of the Gospel was at stake ("But from those who seemed to be something – whatever they were, it makes no difference to me"), this businessman "holds the pastoral office in high regard." He esteems men who pervert the Gospel as "dedicated servants of God." And those whose essays in this volume oppose the Federal Vision regard men who twist the Gospel as "brothers." The critics of the Federal Vision admit their lack of discernment. One describes those promoting heresy as "friends of mine – even heroes." He writes: "We had recommended these brothers to hundreds, perhaps thousands."

The editor explains that he first had the idea of a private colloquium while attending the 2003 AAPC Pastors Conference in Monroe, Louisiana. He dreamed of a meeting at which both proponents and opponents of the new theology could discuss matters in order to clear up "misunderstandings": "I hoped that such a colloquium would result in the whole group's being able to say, 'The vast majority of charges against these men rest on misunderstandings of what they've said. Here's what they've really said, and in all but a few instances – and those largely peripheral – they're solidly within the boundaries of Reformed, orthodox confessionalism.' That certainly was my hope." This private colloquium would be set up so that "the discussion would be private, with no observers present, no reports made, and the papers and responses not to be quoted outside the colloquium group, unless the participants unanimously voted otherwise after the last session. The aim was to ensure that everyone could speak openly without fear of his words' being raised in ecclesiastical charges...." Now, why didn't Paul think of that?

This notion – that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the proper subject of an academic discussion, off the record, with no one's words being taken down, with a promise of immunity against church discipline (but with a hope of exoneration) – violates Scripture at many points, some of which are listed above. The editor reports that "much misunderstanding was cleared away and warm relationships were renewed," despite the fact that

“substantive disagreements really divided the groups,” which remain “strongly divided over specific doctrines.” Now, the Apostle Paul did not seek a warm relationship with his friend and fellow Apostle Peter. He wanted them to be of one mind on the Gospel and the importance of not obscuring it. That is the consistent theme of Scripture: The only worthwhile unity in the church is unity in the truth. Warm fuzzy relationships devoid of such unity are worse than worthless. It is such warm relationships apart from the truth that enable the growth of heresy in the churches.

## **Douglas Wilson**

Not only has heresy grown in the Reformed churches, it has spread like kudzu. Men like Douglas Wilson claim that their views are “orthodox and Christian.” But who knows what the Great Redefiner means by those terms? The *modus operandi* of false teachers is to use old terms with new meanings, thus deceiving the naive and undiscerning. Wilson claims, “One of our fundamental concerns is this: we want to insist on believing God’s promises concerning our children.” Unfortunately, neither he nor any other proponent of Neolegalism ever quotes those promises. Worse, no critic of Neolegalism calls Wilson’s bluff in this book. Wilson alludes to *Acts 2:39*, but that merely shows he does not understand the verse. Neither that verse nor any other verse in the Bible promises salvation to children of believers simply because they are children of believers. Several verses explicitly deny it (*Luke 3:8*; *John 1:12-13*), and others report that some children of believers are eternally lost.

Wilson imagines – he has a great imagination, which is why he is such an atrocious theologian – that *Acts 2:39* promises salvation to the children of believers, but here is what the verse says: “For the promise [of the Holy Spirit] is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.” There are three recipients of the promise: “you,” “your children,” and “all who are afar off.” All three groups receive the same promise; children are not singled out for any special promises. So “all who are afar off” have the same promise of the Spirit as “your children.” Furthermore, the last clause of the verse, “as many as the Lord our God will call,” modifies and limits all three referents: “you, your children, and all who are afar off.” Therefore, the promise of the Holy Spirit is made only to the elect, not to all of Peter’s audience, nor to all their children, nor to all who are afar off, but only to as many as the Lord our God will call from all three groups. The promise is not to all that Peter addressed, nor to all their children (let alone to Wilson’s children), nor to all afar off, but only to the elect. The Jewish-pagan notion that salvation is received by genetic or ritual endowment (Wilson vacillates between two erroneous and conflicting opinions, that children of believers are born Christians, and that they are made Christians by baptism) is denied repeatedly by Scripture.

Another major theme of the Neolegalists is “union with Christ.” Scripture teaches legal and intellectual union with Christ, but that is not what Wilson means: “When we talk about union with Christ, we are talking about union with his body, as it is in the world today, blemishes and all.” So “union with Christ” means church membership. Not only does this confuse Christ with the church (if Christ is the head, he is not the body; if Christ is the bridegroom, he is not the bride), it makes the institutional church salvific, and makes salvation a result of church membership. This medieval heresy ought to be recognized for what it is.

At the foundation of Wilson’s heresies lies his irrationalism, which is perhaps the worst heresy of all. He writes: “In faith we want to say that children of believers are saved [‘infant baptism is *not* a crap shoot,’ he says emphatically]. But we are not making a categorical statement of the ‘All P are Q’ kind. [Please note the contradiction between the two preceding sentences.] We are saying that we believe God’s statements and promises concerning covenant children.... Now these promises...have apparent instances of non-fulfillment. How are we to account for this?... The question of levels of discourse is central in understanding this. On one level, all of us confess that some of the children of believers are reprobate, and will eventually fall away. On another level of discourse, we say that God is God to our children. In preaching, in catechesis, in liturgy, the second level of discourse is operative. This level is operative because faith in the promises requires it. But an important point to note is that we are not saying contradictory things within one level of discourse.”

Now there is a simple word for Wilson’s doctrine: dishonesty. His nonsense about “levels of discourse” – what is true on one “level” is false on another – is a blatant rejection of both God and Scripture. Christ said, “Let your Yes be Yes, and your No be No” (*Matthew 5:37*). He did not add, “Of course I am speaking on one level of discourse, but if I speak on two levels, ‘Yes’ may be ‘No’ and ‘No,’ ‘Yes.’” In Wilson’s theology, “liturgical truth,” “catechetical truth,” and “preached truth” are one thing, “operative” on one level of discourse; and truth itself is another, inoperative in preaching, teaching, and worship.

Paul wrote, “As God is faithful, our word to you was not Yes and No, for the Son God...was not Yes and No” (2 *Corinthians 1:17-19*). Paul did not add, “but our word to you might be Yes and No if we talk on different levels of discourse.” One reason Christians and churches are held in such low esteem by the world is that churchmen like Wilson, through the ages, have dishonestly played with words and denied the truth. They prattle on about paradoxes, antinomies, tensions, levels of discourse, and other un-Biblical ideas, attributing them to Scripture, and impugning both the intelligence and the honesty of God himself.

The proponents of this Neolegalist theology are

**John Barach**, a minister in the United Reformed Churches of North America;

**Peter Leithart**, a minister in the Presbyterian Church of America and teacher at New St. Andrews College;

**Rich Lusk**, then assistant pastor of the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Monroe, Louisiana;

**Steve Schlissel**, pastor of Messiah's Congregation in New York City;

**Tom Trouwborst**, pastor of Calvary Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Schenectady, New York;

**Steve Wilkins**, pastor of the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church (PCA), Monroe, Louisiana; and

**Douglas Wilson**, pastor of Christ Church (CREC), Moscow, Idaho.

The opponents of the Neolegalist theology whose papers appear in this book are

**E. Calvin Beisner** (PCA), Professor of Historical Theology and Social Ethics, Knox Theological Seminary;

**Christopher Hutchinson**, associate pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church (PCA), Statesboro, Georgia;

**George W. Knight III**, erstwhile teacher at Matthews OPC, Charlotte, North Carolina;

**Richard D. Phillips**, minister of the First Presbyterian Church of Coral Springs, Florida (PCA);

**Joseph Pipa, Jr.**, President of Greenville (South Carolina) Presbyterian Theological Seminary (GPTS);

**Carl Robbins**, pastor of Woodruff Road Presbyterian Church (PCA), Greenville, South Carolina;

**Morton H. Smith**, Professor at GPTS; and

**R. Fowler White**, dean of the faculty at Knox Seminary.

## Steve Schlissel

Steve Schlissel attacks justification by faith alone by changing the definition of *faith*. He emphatically informs us that "Reason requires a proposition as its object whereas Faith requires a history and/or a Person as its object." Like Wilson and Wilkins, Schlissel is fatally confused. We have heard all this before: "No creed but Christ" was the view of the Liberals a hundred years ago. They thought it was the height of piety then, and Schlissel thinks so today. Far from being pious, the slogan is a direct attack on Scripture, which is propositional revelation. But Schlissel wants "history" and "Story" and persons to be the objects of faith, not propositions. He even capitalizes the word Story. History and Story, Schlissel says, are not propositional, which means that Schlissel does not know what the word "proposition" means.

## Rich Lusk

Rich Lusk, erstwhile assistant to Steve Wilkins, tells us that "Machen would have been more true to Paul if he had had [sic] telegraphed [sic], 'I'm so thankful for [the] resurrection of Christ. No hope without it.' The resurrection is the real centerpiece of the gospel since it is the *new* thing God has done."

Lusk makes it clear that Richard Gaffin of Westminster Seminary is the co-father (along with Norman Shepherd) of this heretical theology. Decades ago Gaffin published a book called *The Centrality of the Resurrection* in which he argued that point. Like Gaffin, Lusk appeals to *Romans* 4:25, which simply shows he does not understand the verse; and he ignores the verses that teach explicitly that we are "justified by his blood," not by his resurrection.

The *New King James Version* translates *Romans* 4:25 correctly: "who [Jesus] was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification." Christ was not raised "for" (in order to accomplish) our justification, but "for" (because of) our justification. To twist this verse into saying that the effect of Christ's resurrection (not his death) is justification through union with Christ, when this verse comes at the end of Paul's grand chapter on imputation, is theologically grotesque.

Lusk explicitly denies imputation, and thus the Gospel:<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Westminster Larger Catechism* Question 72 is usually misread by people looking for some esoteric and complicated definition of saving faith as something more than understanding of and assent to the Gospel. What the *Catechism* actually teaches is that one must not only assent to the truth of the promise of the Gospel, but also to the righteousness of Christ imputed to believers:

"Justifying faith is a saving grace wrought in the heart of a sinner by the Spirit and word of God, whereby he, being convinced of his sin and misery, and of the disability in himself and all other creatures to recover him out of his lost condition, not only assents to the truth of the promise of the Gospel, but receives and rests upon Christ and his righteousness, therein held forth, for pardon of sin, and for accepting and accounting of his person righteous in the sight of God for salvation."

The *Catechism* is concerned to make clear what truths one has to believe in order to be saved. It is not discussing the psychology of the act of believing, still less is it disparaging assent to the truth of the Gospel.

Among other things, this Catechetical and Biblical definition of justifying faith asserts what Wilson *et al.* deny: that sinners are saved by believing the doctrine of justification by faith alone. That is precisely what the *Larger Catechism* asserts. If the *Catechism* is correct, Lusk is lost.

Also important to note is that no Reformed Confession, and certainly not the *Westminster Confession*, defines "faith" by asserting that it consists of three components,

This justification [because it comes by union with Christ, as Gaffin says] requires no transfer or imputation of anything. It does not force us to reify "righteousness" into something that can be shuffled around in heavenly accounting books. Rather, because I am in the Righteous One and the Vindicated One, I am righteous and vindicated. My in-Christ-ness makes imputation redundant. I do not need the moral content of his life of righteousness transferred to me.... Union with Christ is therefore the key.... I am not justified by a legal transfer of his "obedience points" to my account.... there is no imputation, strictly speaking. Rather, there is a real union, a marriage.

## The Failure of the Critics

The big disappointment in this book is not the vehemence with which the Neolegalists state their views (that is to be expected), but the failure of their critics to challenge their premises. Time after time the critics concede points to the Neolegalists. Now the critics do make some telling arguments, but they do not challenge the Neolegalists where they must be challenged. When one critic comes close, the arrogant Schlissel demands an apology.

This failure of the critics to defend the Gospel properly seems to stem from two causes: misguided loyalty to the Neolegalists, and ignorance of what the Bible teaches. One critic describes his relationship to the Neolegalists in these words: "I speak/write with nothing but the deepest affection and appreciation for each of the men who will be attending the colloquium." Nothing but affection and appreciation? How about a little skepticism, if not suspicion? How about a little of Paul's willingness to speak sharply to Peter? Or, perhaps more to the point, a little of Paul's zeal in cursing false teachers? The critic continues:

James Jordan has been an instructor and stimulant for twenty years.<sup>2</sup> My children have gone to sleep with Peter Leithart's<sup>3</sup> stories ringing in their ears. Steve Schlissel's faithful ministry was what we self-consciously modeled our urban ministry after in Las Vegas. I have given away more Douglas (and Nancy) Wilson's books in the process of family counseling/discipleship than anyone else in North America. Steve Wilkins has helped to home-school my

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*notitia*, *assensus*, and *fiducia*. When professed Reformed theologians lapse into that misleading Latin model, they sound like they are exegeting the Vulgate, not the Greek New Testament.

<sup>2</sup> In 1992 *The Trinity Review* published a review of James Jordan's book on the church under the title "The Reconstructionist Road to Rome." There is no excuse for any Elder to have been bamboozled by Jordan for the past twenty years.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Leithart is the author of the book *Against Christianity*. He is against Christianity.

children in history<sup>4</sup> (and me in homiletics) and had faithfully preached from our pulpit. Rich Lusk and John Barach were gracious counterparts when we met in Monroe, and their scholarship and humility are a gift to the whole church. Because I value these brothers so highly, it is very difficult for me to write a disagreeable word against them.... I am deeply saddened over the inappropriately public way these discussions have been conducted heretofore....

Why does this PCA pastor fail to defend the faith? "Because I value these brothers so highly, it is very difficult for me to write a disagreeable word against them." Not only does he value them too highly, he values the Gospel too little. This critic allowed his personal relationships to cloud his judgment for twenty years, and he is still doing so. That is one reason this heresy has spread so widely in the churches.

Another reason this heresy has spread so widely is this critic's (as well as others') ignorance of what the Bible teaches on these matters. Even after this critic quotes James Jordan explicitly denying regeneration, he says "James Jordan's humility and scholarship are both beyond question.... I have no intention of assaulting Jordan, but I would like to humbly point out several areas of advice or disagreement where he could (perhaps) hone his arguments." Contrast these words with those of Paul when he confronted Peter "to his face before them all," merely for hypocrisy. Peter was a much greater man than James Jordan, and his error was less serious than James Jordan's. This pastor's response is pathetic – and sinful. It is thinking like this that has allowed these heresies to spread and flourish in the churches.

In one of his essays, Fowler White, dean of the faculty at Knox Seminary and a man who strongly professes to believe in the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture, writes several paragraphs about Scripture that certainly sound like a denial of inerrancy:

[W]e want to consider briefly the biblical authors' assertions from the perspective of their finite knowledge. I have in mind the point that we underestimate the historical character of the Bible if we interpret its human authors' reflections on the salvation of individuals as though they had direct access to the secrets of the eternal decree. On this fact, we do not differ from the FV group.... As we all recognize, the authors of Scripture are people whose knowledge of salvation is a finite creaturely knowledge based on

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<sup>4</sup> Anyone listening to the first fifteen minutes of Wilkins' tapes on American history should have known how far off base he is: Wilkins informs his listeners that Columbus was a Christian who desired to take the Gospel to the New World. Wilkins repeats Romanist propaganda. Last year Wilkins was caught in some serious plagiarism from *Time on the Cross* in the booklet he co-wrote with Douglas Wilson defending Southern slavery.

observable conformity to the canonically revealed – that is, the covenantally revealed (Deuteronomy 29:29) – defining traits of those destined for blessing or curse. Given the boundaries of their finite knowledge and the prerogatives of God’s infinite knowledge, the writers of the Bible could not presume to make infallible assertions with regard to individual salvation.... They could, however, make justifiable, if fallible assertions [in Scripture] about an individual’s salvation based on his observable conformity to the defining traits of those whom God saves as revealed in the covenant. [White here cites *Ephesians* 1:3-14 as an example of the fallible assertions he is talking about.]... In my view, it is precisely the nature of human knowledge and faith that we have to take into account when we interpret those assertions in which the biblical writers, conditionally and otherwise, attribute salvation ordained, accomplished, and/or applied to individuals.

White’s words assert the following errors:

1. The “historical character” of the Bible somehow makes it susceptible to error;
2. The “human” Biblical authors teach their fallible “reflections” on the salvation of individuals in Scripture;
3. The Biblical authors did not have access to divine secrets about the salvation of individuals when they wrote Scripture;
4. The Biblical authors’ statements about the salvation of individuals are “finite” and “creaturely,” that is, fallible; and not divine, that is, infallible;
5. The statements in Scripture, “conditional or otherwise,” about the salvation of individuals, are “fallible.”

White’s errors are directly attributable to his denial that the authors of Scripture have access to the relevant divine secrets when writing Scripture, because of the “boundaries” of their knowledge. He does not seem to realize that whatever the limitations of human knowledge are, those limitations do not apply to the writers of Scripture, *qua* writers, for their written words, every one of them, are inspired by God, completely true, and infallible.

In his response to White’s essay Douglas Wilson agrees with White’s attribution of fallible “reflections” to Scripture. Wilson admits, and White expresses no disagreement, that the authors of Scripture, when writing Scripture, used “provisional knowledge” which may in fact be false.

## **Steve Wilkins**

Steve Wilkins, a pastor in good standing in the PCA, and a Neolegalist, tells us that water “baptism unites us to Christ and his church and thus in him gives us new life.... By our baptism we have been reborn, in this sense, having died with Christ, we have been raised with him.... The same is true for all who are baptized.” According to Wilkins, water

baptism means “united to Christ, forgiveness of sins, Holy Spirit cleansed, regenerate and renewed, buried and resurrected, joined to the body of Christ, clothed in righteousness, justified and sanctified, saved, ordained as priests with access to [the] heavenly sanctuary.”

For years the PCA has tolerated this false Gospel being taught in its congregations, from its pulpits, and in its presbyteries. If a true church bears three marks – the preaching of the Gospel, the proper administration of the sacraments, and church discipline – neither the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church nor the PCA is a true church.

Wilkins informs us that

The elect are those who are faithful in Christ Jesus. If they later reject the Savior, they are no longer elect – they are cut off from the Elect One and thus lose their elect standing. But their falling away doesn’t negate the reality of their standing prior to their apostasy. They were really and truly the elect of God because of their relationship with Christ.... The apostate, thus, forsakes the grace of God that was given to him by virtue of his union with Christ. It is not accurate to say that they only “appeared” to have these things but did not actually have them.... That which makes apostasy so horrendous is that these blessings actually belonged to the apostates.... *The apostate doesn’t forfeit “apparent blessings” that were never his in reality, but real blessings that were his in covenant with God [emphasis is Wilkins’].*

## **Neo-Arminianism**

It should be obvious to the reader by now (though no critic in this book raised the point), that the Neolegalists at least implicitly deny every one of the five points of Calvinism:

1. They do not regard men as totally depraved, for they teach that the law of God is “do-able.”
2. They do not teach that election is unconditional, but they assert that election is conditional, and the condition is faith plus works.
3. They do not teach that Christ died only for his people, but for all baptized persons. They teach that all the baptized receive “all the blessings and benefits of Christ,” yet some of the baptized are eternally lost. Christ’s work is ineffective.
4. They do not believe God’s grace is irresistible, for some men who are saved, regenerated, justified, and adopted, can and do reject the Lord and lose their salvation.
5. They do not believe in the preservation of the saints, for a saint can fail to persevere and lose his salvation.

At all points at which the disciples of Arminius differed from the Reformed faith, the Neolegalists differ as well. We must keep in mind that throughout the Arminian controversy, Arminius’ disciples claimed to be Reformed.

## **The Error of Worldview Thinking**

The critics of the Neolegalists, however, do not recognize this. The last chapter of the book, written by the editor, returns to the theme of the first. He writes: " I find myself feeling much more comfortable in the company of the Monroe Four and their associates than in that of the broad generality of professing Christians and their pastors.... My broad commitments, concerns, and postures are solidly with these brothers."

This error might be called the error of worldview thinking. It is the error of thinking that "broad commitments, concerns, and postures" are somehow more important or more fundamental than the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the error of thinking that a worldview can be Christian even though it does not include the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the error of thinking that justification is merely one more topic of theology, and that if one can agree on other topics, that one can have fellowship with men who deny, pervert, or obscure the Gospel of Jesus Christ. One well-known proponent of such worldview thinking, who attends a PCA church, says that he has risen above the Calvinist-Arminian theological dispute. He travels in the more important realm of social and political action.

Paul did not make that mistake in Antioch or Galatia. There must have been many things he agreed with the Judaizers about, to say nothing of Peter and Barnabas. But to none of them did he declare his solidarity until he had rebuked them for obscuring the Gospel and they had repented. Justification by faith alone was not just another topic in theology for Paul; it was the center of Christian theology, a *sine qua non* of Christian doctrine. The Reformers recognized its central place 1500 years later and declared that it was the doctrine by which churches, as well as individuals, stand or fall.

But in American Reformed churches, such understanding and courage are absent. Even when the Mississippi Valley Presbytery of the PCA denounced the errors of the Neolegalists earlier this year, it did not request any action from the PCA as a whole to stop the propagation of their doctrines. It asked the Louisiana Presbytery to investigate Steve Wilkins. If the Louisiana Presbytery does so, it will accomplish three things:

1. It will gain more time for the heretics to spread their heresies in Presbyterian churches.
2. It will preclude other Presbyteries from taking original jurisdiction in bringing Wilkins to trial, as they now are permitted to do under PCA law.
3. It will be able, after a year or two of investigation, to whitewash Wilkins and his heresies. Douglas Wilson's denomination whitewashed him last year after he requested an examination from them.

Paul's lessons, and his example, are lost on American Reformed churches. That is why, once again, the heretics are likely to win the battle over justification. A few, the

remnant, will be saved, but most of the churches and seminaries will be lost to the heretics. Perhaps God will bless his people and his Gospel, and cause many who are now outside the increasingly apostate Reformed churches to accept the truth of justification by faith alone. Or perhaps God is finished with the United States, and it will become a vast spiritual wasteland, very religious of course, but Antichristian to the core, like the medieval Europe for which the Neolegalists long.