

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.

Number 259 Copyright 2006 John W. Robbins Post Office Box 68, Unicoi, Tennessee 37692 September 2006
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The Orthodox Presbyterian Cover-up

Paul M. Elliott

Editor's note: Last year The Trinity Foundation published Paul Elliott's book, *Christianity and Neo-Liberalism: The Spiritual Crisis in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and Beyond*. That book examines in detail the false doctrine of salvation now being taught in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and Westminster Theological Seminary. It is available from The Foundation for \$19.95, plus shipping.

In June 2006, the OPC General Assembly voted to distribute, but did not adopt, a *Report* produced by its Justification Study Committee. This essay is a shortened version of chapter 5 of Mr. Elliott's book analyzing the OPC Study Committee *Report, A Denomination in Denial* (published by Teaching The Word). *Denial* is available from The Trinity Foundation for \$8.95, plus \$5 shipping.

We urge our readers to study both books carefully, even if they are not members of the OPC, for the books are clear-headed analyses of how churches, denominations, and seminaries stealthily abandon the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Until the end of 2006, both books – *Christianity and Neo-Liberalism* and *A Denomination in Denial* – can be purchased from The Foundation for the package price of \$20, postpaid to one U. S. address.

From A Denomination in Denial

The reader would expect a 70,000-word *Report* "concerning the doctrine of justification and other related doctrines" to be a comprehensive discussion of the issues. However, the Justification Study Committee *Report* leaves critical issues untouched. It leaves much unsaid that must be said – inconvenient facts that the OPC's leadership has historically denied. Part of the Committee's mandate was to address "other related doctrines" beyond the Federal Vision and New Perspective on Paul, but the Committee has failed to do this. It does not address the false teachings and false teachers that have most seriously undermined the OPC itself.

Thus, the *Report* continues the conspiracy of silence that has prevailed in the OPC for three decades. It leaves the erroneous impression that the serious doctrinal problems are outside the denomination, not within it. The *Report* gives false comfort to those who think the OPC is still a bastion of Biblical orthodoxy. On the contrary, the *Report*, and the 2006 General

Assembly's commendation of it, both maintain the OPC as a safe haven for those who teach error.

Men within the OPC, including at least one member of the Committee itself, teach heresy regarding the Gospel and many other fundamentals of the faith. Even the men on the Committee who have their personal doctrine right have facilitated the teaching of false doctrines by others for decades. Some will reject this as a blanket, indiscriminate indictment. But it is the truth, because those men have failed to speak out publicly against the errorists among them. Not one of the ministers appointed to this Committee has demanded, at any time, that the denomination rid itself of the cancer of neo-liberalism. And now the Committee – a coalition of conservatives plus neo-liberals and those who cooperate with them – has produced a "consensus report" continuing the conspiracy of silence. Each member of the Committee, regardless of his personal doctrinal position, has been and continues to be part of the problem, not part of the solution.

Norman Shepherd

The Committee's *Report* mentions Norman Shepherd at ten different points, and touches on elements of his false teachings five times – but without forthright condemnation. The *Report* describes Shepherd as "a retired CRC [Christian Reformed Church] pastor and former professor of systematic theology at Westminster Theological Seminary." But the *Report* makes no mention of the fact that Shepherd was an ordained minister of the OPC for twenty years. It makes no mention of his mentoring of Richard Gaffin and many other OPC ministers during his years at Westminster. The *Report* makes no mention of the 1975-1982 controversy in the OPC regarding Shepherd's views, no mention of Gaffin's defense of Shepherd during the controversy, and no mention of the OPC's abject failure on three different occasions to condemn Shepherd's teachings.

The *Report* makes no mention of the fact that Norman Shepherd continues to be welcomed into the pulpits of OPC churches. In 2003, Shepherd was given the opportunity to hold conferences for the specific purpose of promulgating his false teachings in four Orthodox Presbyterian churches in Oregon: First OPC in Portland, Oregon, Jack Smith, pastor; Grace Reformed OPC in Bend, Oregon, Dan Dillard, pastor; Faith OPC in Grants Pass, Oregon, Mark Sumpter, pastor; and Trinity OPC in Newberg, Oregon, John W. Mahaffy,

pastor. In 2004, Shepherd participated in the installation service of an OPC minister in the Midwest. Shepherd maintains ongoing friendships and correspondence with many OPC pastors who are his former Westminster Seminary students. But the *Report* makes no mention of Shepherd's great and continuing influence on the denomination.

Roger Wagner and the SCCCS

The *Report* mentions the 2003 conference sponsored by the Southern California Center for Christian Studies (SCCCS) at which Shepherd and Federal Vision theologians promoted another gospel. But the *Report* does not mention that the SCCCS is an arm of Orthodox Presbyterian churches in Southern California. It does not mention that Roger Wagner, president of the SCCCS and a speaker at the 2003 conference, is an OPC minister and pastor of Bayview Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Chula Vista, California.

The *Report* characterizes the SCCCS conference as one that "sought to address many of the...questions put forth by the Federal Vision." This may lead readers to think that orthodox positions received equal time. On the contrary, the conference exclusively promoted Federal Vision theology in general and Shepherdism in particular. Orthodox teaching was entirely absent. The conference lectures were subsequently published in book form as *Backbone of the Bible: Covenant in Contemporary Perspective*. This book appears on the Justification Study Committee *Report's* recommended reading list.

Neither Wagner nor any other OPC man associated with this 2003 conference was ever called to account by the Presbytery of Southern California for preaching and promoting another gospel. The Justification Study Committee *Report* continues the long-standing conspiracy of silence about the cancer of neo-liberalism in the OPC by failing to mention any of this.

Tom Trouwborst and Others

The *Report* briefly mentions Tom Trouwborst, and it does state that he is the pastor of Calvary OPC in Schenectady, New York. It also mentions that Trouwborst participated in a 2003 liberal-conservative "dialogue" on the Federal Vision as a representative of the Federal Vision position. (See the May 2005 *Trinity Review*, "Why Heretics Win Battles," for a discussion of this meeting.) But the *Report* gives the impression that Trouwborst has distanced himself from Federal Vision theology when in fact he has not. It gives the impression that he does not teach baptismal regeneration when in fact he does. Trouwborst openly continues to advocate Federal Vision theology, and he teaches that baptized "children of believers, even from infancy, have regeneration, salvation, and the forgiveness of sins."

The *Report* does not mention the fact that Trouwborst is a graduate of Bahnsen Theological Seminary (named for Greg Bahnsen, Theonomist, student and defender of Norman Shepherd), the degree-granting sister institution of the OPC-related Southern California Center for Christian Studies (SCCCS). The *Report* does not mention the fact that Trouwborst was formerly a Ruling Elder and co-Pastor of Messiah's Congregation, the church of Steven M. Schlissel, one of the most outspoken Federal Visionists. The *Report* does not mention the fact that attempts to bring Trouwborst under presbytery discipline for his teachings have been repeatedly sidetracked on the basis of contrived technicalities.

The *Report* also fails to mention Tom Trouwborst's contributions – and those of three other OPC ministers – to a book titled *To You and Your Children: Examining the Biblical Doctrine of Covenant Succession*. This book denies the doctrine of justification by faith alone, substituting a doctrine of "covenant succession" – salvation of the children of church members through water baptism and "covenant nurture." The book received enthusiastic endorsement in a review published in the OPC's *New Horizons* magazine, but this fact is missing from the Justification Study Committee's *Report* as well.

Trouwborst authored a 45-page section of *To You and Your Children* titled "From Covenant to Chaos." He purports to prove that the 16th century Reformers taught that infant baptism marks the point of regeneration, and that conversion based on an understanding of the Gospel is not necessary for salvation.

Trouwborst also alleges that the Reformed church subsequently lost this "correct" understanding of the meaning of baptism. The Puritans, he says, were wrong to consider a baptized child to be unsaved until the child was subsequently converted. He criticizes 17th century Puritan Thomas Shepherd for teaching that children must reach a point of understanding of the Gospel, and "repent and be converted," in order to be saved. (Apparently Trouwborst would also take issue with the Apostle Peter's use of that very phrase in *Acts* 3:19.)

Christian parents, Trouwborst says, are wrong to have "the expectation of conversion" of their children since "covenant nurture," not conversion, is what is necessary for salvation. In the false gospel of Trouwborst and the other writers of *To You and Your Children*, parents are responsible for their offspring's salvation. That salvation comes, not through belief in the Gospel message, but through parents' instilling of "covenant faithfulness" in their children. If their children abandon "covenant faithfulness" later in life, this marks them as "covenant breakers" – it shows that they had salvation but lost it. And for this, say Trouwborst and the other writers, their parents are responsible before God because they failed in the task of "covenant nurture."

Such are the teachings not only tolerated but also openly promulgated in the OPC, and even promoted in the denominational magazine, but ignored by the Justification Study Committee.

Richard Gaffin

We discussed the theology of Richard Gaffin, the leading theologian of the OPC, earlier in this book. To summarize, Gaffin's own "New Perspective on Paul" echoes Roman Catholic Church dogma to an alarming degree. Both Gaffin and Rome teach that union with Christ through water baptism is the way of salvation and the means of redemption. Both Gaffin and Rome teach that baptism marks the transition from death to life, and that baptism brings about saving union with Christ. Both Gaffin and Rome teach that adoption comes through union with Christ in baptism. Both Gaffin and Rome teach that baptism brings about justification. Both Gaffin and Rome teach that baptism confers sanctification. Both Gaffin and Rome teach that justification and sanctification are indistinguishable, thus making both faith and works instruments of justification. Both Gaffin and Rome teach a "first justification" at baptism as well as a "final justification" at the Last Judgment, in which believers lay claim to entry into the Kingdom of Heaven based on their works plus Christ's.

The Justification Study Committee *Report* contains many statements of sound doctrine that contradict Richard Gaffin's public teachings. The *Report* affirms that salvation involves union with Christ, but not the "existential" and "experiential" union taught by Gaffin. The *Report* asserts that regeneration by the Holy Spirit, not water baptism, marks the transition from death to life. The *Report* upholds the Biblical distinction between justification and sanctification.

The dichotomy between the long-held views of Richard Gaffin and the orthodox doctrines affirmed in the *Report* he helped to write raises a crucial question: Does Richard Gaffin believe the doctrinal statements in the *Report* he helped to write? If Gaffin does in fact believe what the *Report* asserts about justification and related doctrines, then he must in all honesty publicly repudiate what he has consistently taught for the last forty years. Otherwise, he must admit that his own doctrinal position differs from that of the "consensus report." When the Gospel is at stake, no ordained minister or seminary professor should be permitted to hide within a broad consensus. *When the Gospel is at stake there can be no broad consensus* – only a clear-cut stand for the narrow truth.

We must assume that Richard Gaffin has meant what he has said, and has said what he really meant, for the last forty years. But if we were to rely on the Justification Study Committee *Report* for an understanding of Richard Gaffin's theological track record, and his great influence on pastors in the OPC and on men in other Reformed churches, we would be left in the dark. Gaffin's false teachings receive not the slightest mention in the *Report* prepared by the Committee of which he is a member.

Because of Richard Gaffin's long-standing influence on men in Reformed academia and OPC pulpits, and the decades-long conspiracy of silence on doctrinal error which he himself has helped promote, it is not unreasonable to ask another question: Could it be that others on the Committee concur with some or all of Gaffin's views, but are likewise operating under the cover of a consensus report? Each of the other members of the Committee owes it to the church to make his own position in relation to Richard Gaffin's teachings crystal clear.

The Justification Study Committee *Report* not only makes no mention of Gaffin's own teachings, it also makes no mention of Gaffin's stalwart defense of Norman Shepherd during the 1975-1982 controversy and in the years since. The *Report* also makes no mention of Gaffin's written endorsement of the heretical theological statements of John O. Kinnaird, of Gaffin's testimony in defense of Kinnaird at his trial, or of Gaffin's central role in bringing about Kinnaird's ultimate acquittal.

The *Report* mentions that N. T. Wright was a principal speaker at the Auburn Avenue Pastors Conference (AAPC) in 2005. It also mentions that Wright's lectures became the basis of a book titled *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, which is also on the *Report's* recommended reading list. But the *Report* makes no mention of the fact that the other principal speaker at AAPC 2005 was Richard Gaffin himself, who amicably shared the podium with Wright for three days, and delivered a series of lectures based on his book, *Resurrection and Redemption*. The *Report* also does not mention that Norman Shepherd spoke in a meeting associated with the conference.

By not addressing Gaffin's record and associations, the Justification Study Committee has left the door as wide open

as ever for the continued promulgation of heresy on justification and related doctrines in the OPC.

Westminster Theological Seminary

The *Report* also does not mention that the New Perspective on Paul is being promoted in the classrooms of Westminster Theological Seminary, the principal training ground for OPC ministers. Dr. Douglas J. Green, Associate Professor of Old Testament at Westminster, is a self-confessed New Perspective enthusiast. In a January 2004 essay, Green revealed that he is not the only NP enthusiast on the WTS faculty, although he made it clear that some of his colleagues are not willing to admit their position publicly. Green went on to say:

I fundamentally agree with the analysis that sees *Wright's approach to Paul as compatible with Calvin's emphasis on union with Christ*. At Westminster Seminary, union with Christ – rather than justification by faith – is viewed as the organizing center of Pauline soteriology. This emphasis – along with the tradition of redemptive-historical hermeneutics and the consequent subordination of *ordo salutis* [the Biblical order of salvation described in passages such as *Romans* 8:29-30] to *historia salutis* in theology [the Biblical Theology movement's false notion that revelation consists of stories or events and not systematic doctrine] – *should encourage a sympathetic reading of Wright...*

In footnotes to the preceding paragraph, Green makes it clear that when he speaks of the doctrine of "union with Christ" he means not Calvin's orthodox teaching, but the heterodox version of "union with Christ" set forth in Richard Gaffin's *Resurrection and Redemption*. In other words, Green himself sees compatibility between the teachings of Wright and Gaffin, and he makes it clear that *Gaffin's false teaching is the teaching of Westminster Theological Seminary as an institution*.

The Kinnaird Case

The Justification Study Committee *Report* makes no mention of the John Kinnaird case, even though the Kinnaird case and its aftermath led directly to the formation of the Committee, and even though Kinnaird's teachings are just as "aberrant" as those the *Report* does criticize. At many points, Kinnaird is in total agreement with the Federal Vision and New Perspective on Paul. Kinnaird, like Gaffin, attempts to publicly distance himself from the Federal Vision and New Perspective. But it is a distinction without a difference. Kinnaird, along with the teachers of those brands of heresy, denies the doctrine of justification by faith in Christ alone.

The *Report* also fails to mention that several leading men of the OPC signed a statement endorsing Kinnaird's theology of the insufficiency of the imputed righteousness of Christ, justification by faith-plus-works, and admission to the Kingdom of Heaven based on an evaluation of men's works at the judgment seat of Christ. In addition to Richard Gaffin, those signers included:

Donald J. Duff, OPC minister; long-time Stated Clerk of the OPC General Assembly;

Ross W. Graham, OPC minister; General Secretary, OPC Committee on Home Missions;

Barry Hofstetter, OPC ministerial licentiate; doctoral candidate, Westminster Theological Seminary; member of the

adjunct faculty, Center for Urban Theological Studies, Philadelphia; member of the visiting faculty, Reformed Theological Seminary;

Dr. Peter Lillback, former pastor of Bethany OPC, Oxford, Pennsylvania; pastor of Proclamation Presbyterian Church (PCA), Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania; President and Professor of Historical Theology, Westminster Theological Seminary;

Jonathan F. Peters, OPC minister; former pastor of Bethany OPC, Oxford, Pennsylvania;

Thomas E. Tyson, OPC minister; member of numerous denominational committees and commissions; editor (1989-2000), *New Horizons* magazine.

No Discussion of Romans 2:13

The Apostle Paul by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit wrote the following in *Romans* 2:13 – “For not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified.” Debate over the meaning of this passage has been at the center of the “justification controversy” during the last thirty years. Strangely, the Justification Study Committee deliberately chose not to address *Romans* 2:13 head-on. It said only that “this report does not have the space to explore” the “many current exegetical debates” concerning the passage. In light of the OPC’s history and facts that have come to light since the conclusion of the 2006 General Assembly, this is a serious – and revealing – omission.

Norman Shepherd misused *Romans* 2:13 in his *Thirty-Four Theses on Justification* and elsewhere. It is a linchpin of his false gospel. He uses this verse to say that law-keeping by the individual believer is required in order to be justified before God. As noted earlier in this book, the OPC’s Presbytery of Philadelphia had repeated opportunities to condemn this teaching in 1979 and 1980; but through the efforts of Gaffin, Tyson, and other neo-liberals, it failed to do so. The Presbytery said, in fact, that Shepherd’s teaching on *Romans* 2:13 was in accord with the OPC’s ordination vows.

Following Shepherd’s example, John Kinnaird also misuses *Romans* 2:13. Kinnaird teaches that “it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous on that Day of Judgment.” Kinnaird consistently adds the last five words to his personal paraphrase of this text of Scripture, thus changing its meaning entirely. In context, the Apostle Paul is teaching that no one but Christ is capable of keeping the law, and that His perfect law-keeping righteousness is imputed to believers. But by adding his own words to the end of the verse whenever he mentions it, Kinnaird changes *Romans* 2:13 to mean that law-keeping is required of believers themselves in order to be declared righteous on the Last Day. Dr. Peter Lillback, now president of Westminster Theological Seminary, defended Kinnaird’s twisting of *Romans* 2:13 in testimony at his heresy trial. Federal Visionists such as Richard Lusk and New Perspectivalists such as N. T. Wright also twist *Romans* 2:13 to invent an un-Biblical “second justification” at the Last Day.

The Fix Was In

Why did the Justification Study Committee deliberately choose not to address *Romans* 2:13, the central passage of the justification controversy?

We now know the answer to that question, based on eyewitness accounts from the 2006 General Assembly. Phil Hodson, an OPC minister who was present during the

meeting of the Advisory Committee assigned to deal with the Justification Study Committee *Report*, writes the following:

I sat in on the (all day) committee meeting with the Justification Committee as well the advisory committee. The topic was discussed of a future aspect of Justification [*sic*]. They [the members of the Study Committee] specifically said that they did not see the report as cutting off a future aspect of justification, that they had deliberately avoided ruling on this topic, and that Gaffin’s view of *Romans* 2:13, which is shared by others now and in the past in our tradition, was not declared out of bounds by the report.

In other words, it is now clear that the Justification Study Committee *Report*, despite all the other good things it may say, is at its core a compromise by conservatives with the neo-liberals on the heart of the one true Gospel. In the name of tolerance and consensus, the Study Committee tiptoed around the central passage of the entire justification controversy. It expended its energies only on “critiques” of the positions of men outside the OPC, although avoiding all discussion of *Romans* 2:13 made even those tepid “critiques” incomplete. But by deliberately ducking the central passage of the justification controversy, the Committee allowed the heretical positions of Norman Shepherd, Richard Gaffin, John Kinnaird, and many others *within the OPC* to stand unchallenged. This is nothing short of scandalous. This corrupt bargain is a “smoking gun” that reveals the true state of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church – a denomination in denial, unwilling to stand for the truth when it counts the most.

No Mention of Root Causes

Just as the *Report* ignores the cancerous spread of false teaching within the OPC itself, it does not discuss the root causes of the OPC’s crisis. In *Christianity and Neo-Liberalism*, I devote a full chapter to those causes:

How, then, did it happen? How did a seminary and a denomination that began well come to this? We have touched on the answer along the way, but now we shall focus on it: *There has been a profound loss of spiritual discernment in Christian academia and in the church.* This loss of discernment is the result of the influence of un-Biblical thinking – what Scripture calls “the wisdom of this world” or “the wisdom of this age” (*1 Corinthians* 1:20, 2:6).

This loss of discernment made the growth and spread of neo-liberalism possible.

Because seminaries and churches have increasingly abandoned the sure foundation of Scripture as its own interpreter, seminary professors, ministers, and even people in the pews have become like the philosophers of Mars Hill, who “spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing” (*Acts* 17:21).

This is not to depreciate theological education if it is of the right sort – uncompromisingly committed to Scripture alone as the Word of God. Christians who lack formal theological education are better off than the most learned theologian, if they are resolutely committed to Scripture and its proper interpretation when the learned theologian is not. The “lay” Christian who employs Biblical principles of interpretation and does the work of a Berean will soon understand just how wrong and how spiritually deadly the theology of the neo-liberals actually is.

