

# 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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## Saving the Bible Presbyterian Church

Mark W. Evans

*Editor's Note: This essay is reprinted with minor changes from the September-October 2004 issue of The Pilgrim's Watch, edited by Mark W. Evans, a minister in the Bible Presbyterian Church. Mr. Evans makes these prefatory remarks:*

This issue contains a plea concerning the Bible Presbyterian Church (BPC), a denomination born out of controversy in the late 1930s. Men of God banded together to preserve an American Presbyterian testimony, true to the Scriptures and the *Westminster Standards*. The Lord has graciously preserved the BPC. Through the years, BPC leaders labored to keep the church out of dangerous ecclesiastical relationships. Especially worrisome was a movement called New Evangelicalism, which touted a spirit of toleration toward error. The BPC avoided ties with this ideology. Last August [2004], an historic BPC vote threatened this policy.

My present ministerial membership is in the BPC. The following article is written primarily to those within the BPC, but I thought others would like to examine the issues that concern all of us as Reformed believers. It seems to me that the best way for a Church to preserve a Reformed testimony is to stay separated from error and compromise. Apparently, some Reformed churches are failing to discipline those who introduce theological innovations, contrary to the Scriptures and the Reformed creeds. There are "Reformed" leaders laboring to reconcile Protestantism with Roman Catholicism. The doctrine of justification by faith alone is under attack. To compromise with such churches is to endanger Christ's flock.

The 68<sup>th</sup> General Synod of the Bible Presbyterian Church (BPC), meeting in Cincinnati, Ohio, August 5-10, 2004, voted 24 to 17 to establish an ecclesiastical relationship with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC). When denominations enter an ecclesiastical relationship, they express unity in essential principles. If four BPC delegates had voted against, instead of for the measure, the proposal would have failed. A simple majority of a few votes changed a position held for almost seventy years.

Many BPC delegates had no prior knowledge that they would vote on this issue. Churches and sessions were not notified. Yet, the Synod's decision speaks for all BPC ministers, elders, and churches. What can we say when leaders fail to inform particular churches and Synod delegates of an impending decision of this magnitude? No delay of action was allowed. While opposing delegates struggled to present debate, the chairman of the BPC's Interchurch Relations Committee, along with the OPC's representative, enjoyed free access to the floor and frequently

responded to objections and questions. The final vote was by secret ballot. In the face of a 41 percent negative vote, the majority put our Synod on a new road. For some of us, this action is more than troubling.

In the past, the BPC disagreed with the OPC over the matter of ecclesiastical separation. While both denominations agreed in principle that Christ's Church should separate from apostasy, there existed sharp dissent over how ecclesiastical purity is maintained. Besides apostasy, the BPC viewed New Evangelicalism, the compromising spirit that gives aid to apostasy, as a serious threat to Christianity. The BPC exposed and confronted this movement for many years. The OPC, on the other hand, has maintained ecclesiastical relations with those embracing New Evangelicalism.

What is New Evangelicalism? During the 1950's, a group of influential evangelicals grew weary of the fundamentalists' protest against heretical liberalism. These leaders perceived the national mood and determined to regain their own influence. They developed a different strategy, replacing confrontation with dialogue. The idea was to make friends with liberals and infiltrate their institutions. This was a clever tactic, but out of step with the manly, honest defense of Christianity taught in the Bible.

The movement advanced through leaders and institutions. Billy Graham stepped forward with a declaration that prominent liberals and Roman Catholic clergymen were Christian brethren.<sup>1</sup> A magazine, *Christianity Today*, dedicated itself to promoting the new ideology. A conglomeration of churches, called the National Association of Evangelicals, added church authority to the cause. Fuller Theological Seminary conditioned future leaders to live peacefully with false doctrine. Other evangelical educational institutions took up the cause. The movement swept through the nation. Today, New Evangelicalism dominates American evangelical thinking.

Liberals and Roman Catholics love New Evangelicalism because it gives them credibility. The world loves it, because it does not confront them with sin. Pastors love it, because it fills their churches and restores their influence. Seminaries love it, because it brings financial gain and large enrollments. The media love it, because it advances the ecumenical, inclusive church. Everybody loves it, except for a few fundamentalists (the BPC among them), who cry out against it. Now the strong voice of the BPC on this

<sup>1</sup> See Brad K. Gsell, *The Legacy of Billy Graham: The Accommodation of Truth to Error in the Evangelical Church*. Fundamental Presbyterian Publications, 1996.

issue is trembling. As the BPC joins the Reformed community through the OPC, dialogue triumphs and confrontation withers. "If the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself for the battle?" (1 Corinthians 14:8).

Is it still necessary to oppose New Evangelicalism? Certainly the movement has advanced beyond the Billy Graham days. Yet its spirit of toleration has spread like a cancer. There are New Evangelicals who would never attend a Billy-Graham-style meeting or join the National Association of Evangelicals. They are too "Reformed" to countenance Arminian activities. Yet, they are New Evangelicals at heart, preferring peace to confrontation, dialogue to discipline. This movement has an ancient history in the Church. King Jehoshaphat fell into its trap. The prophet rebuked him with these words: "Should you help the ungodly, and love them that hate the LORD? Therefore is wrath upon you from the LORD" (2 Chronicles 19:2). Even the Apostle Peter wavered because he did not want to offend his friends. Paul said: "But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed" (Galatians 2:11). Peter, "fearing them which were of the circumcision" compromised the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Paul rebuked him with these words: "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified" (Galatians 2:16).

The OPC is at a critical juncture. Prior to its 2004 General Assembly, an article appeared in the OPC's magazine, *New Horizons*, describing the state of the denomination:

The Orthodox Presbyterian Church is in danger of splintering apart. As we come to the Seventy-first Assembly, perhaps never before in the life of the Church have so many controversies been troubling us. Some of them are coming before this Assembly. We debate the days of creation, the law of God, and the doctrine of justification. We debate the merits and demerits of the public school, the Christian day school, and home schooling. We identify ourselves as theonomic, redemptive-historical, or "truly reformed." Because of such things, some of our members will not attend the worship services of certain other congregations of the OPC. Because of such things, a minister in good standing in one presbytery is prevented from receiving a call in another presbytery. Because of such things, we are suspicious of each other, we fear that our brethren are on a slippery slope to destruction, and we are ready to hurl anathemas at each other.

We are ready to justify our fierceness by appealing to Galatians 1:8: "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed." Some of us seem to be ready to keep on fighting until the Church is split, for split it must if the truth is to be preserved. But it is by no means obvious that every issue debated involves another gospel. And whether we are dealing with an issue of such magnitude or not, Paul also warns the Galatians, "If you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another" (Gal. 5:15).<sup>2</sup>

Those in the OPC who are strong in the Reformed truth face those who promote doctrinal innovations, including the Framework Theory of Genesis 1 and 2, that reduces the creation account to a metaphor. There has also appeared a new system of interpreting and preaching God's Word, called the Redemptive-Historical

method, understood as an improvement upon the Reformers. Another innovation concerns the doctrinal pillar of the church, justification by faith alone. This deviant theology seeks to harmonize Rome and Protestantism.<sup>3</sup> At the 2004 OPC General Assembly, a committee was created to study the justification question. Although the error within the OPC may be traced back to Norman Shepherd, his name was not mentioned in the committee's assignment.<sup>4</sup> It will likely take an official rejection of Shepherd's theology to rid the denomination of the dark cloud hovering over it. The OPC Assembly adopted a "Declaration on Justification." It is a good statement, quoting the Westminster Standards, but it does not solve the difficulty. No statement, short of a point-by-point repudiation of Shepherdism, will suffice. Proponents of the new view on justification can look the most orthodox creedal statement in the face and declare that they are in accord with their views. This mystical ability is accomplished by redefining terms. For example, "faith" is understood as an "active faith," which includes works.<sup>5</sup> Thus, to say "I believe in justification by faith alone" means "I believe in justification by faith and works." These pioneers of a new theology are able to make Shepherdites out of the Westminster divines.<sup>6</sup>

In the 1970s, Norman Shepherd, professor at Westminster Seminary, Philadelphia, was charged with teaching justification by faith plus works. It took seven years (1975-1982) for that institution to dismiss him. After years of debate, although Shepherd re-stated some of his propositions, he held the same belief.<sup>7</sup> He was a respected scholar, teaching at Westminster Seminary, Philadelphia, for 18 years. His students now serve as ministers and leaders throughout the Reformed community, including the OPC.

During the Seminary's investigation, OPC ministers and Westminster professors defended Shepherd. Repeatedly, supporters on the faculty and boards mustered enough votes to exonerate him. Outside pressure ended in his dismissal. Even then, he left the Seminary and the OPC without any official black mark against him. He transferred to the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) and continued as a minister in good standing and is now retired. Neither the OPC nor the CRC condemned his teachings.

Dr. O. Palmer Robertson, who had a part in examining Shepherd, provided this summary of his views:

1. Justification has been perceived inadequately by the church through its use of a Roman legal model. The Biblical perspective requires that justification be understood in terms of the dynamic of the covenantal model. The "covenant of life" must not be reduced to a legalistic courtroom setting, even when discussing specifically the doctrine of justification.
2. Election has been viewed deficiently by the dominance of a static model of God's unchanging decrees. Since man cannot perceive the elect as God sees them, it is fruitless as well as misleading to assume this perspective. Instead, the church must view election as Scripture does, which is out of the

<sup>3</sup> Norman Shepherd, *The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism*. P & R Publishing, 2000, 63.

<sup>4</sup> Danny E. Olinger, "The Seventy-first General Assembly," *New Horizons*, August-September 2004, 8-9.

<sup>5</sup> Mark W. Karlberg, *The Changing of the Guard*. The Trinity Foundation, 2001, 26.

<sup>6</sup> See P. Andrew Sandlin, ed., *Backbone of the Bible: Covenant in Contemporary Perspective*. Covenant Media Press, 2004, 48-49.

<sup>7</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *The Current Justification Controversy*. The Trinity Foundation, 2003, 76.

<sup>2</sup> James S. Gidley, "Quick to Hear, Slow to Speak, Slow to Anger: A Plea to the Commissioners to the 71<sup>st</sup> General Assembly," *New Horizons*, June 2004, 8.

dynamic of the covenant. God indeed elects unchangeably. But he nonetheless functions in the dynamic of the covenant. In this framework the movement from reprobation to election also opens the real possibility that God's elect may become reprobate.

3. Church membership and the sacraments must be seen for what they really are. They define genuine positions and experience in the covenant of grace. Any lesser perspective on their significance mocks the divine ordinances and contradicts the clear teaching of many portions of Scripture. Baptism rather than regeneration marks the point of transition from death to life. But discontinuation in the covenant ordinances means damnation.

4. Faith and its fruits never can be abstracted from one another, for to believe is to obey. As a consequence, the way of justification before God is the way of obedience, and obedience is the way of justification. The unity of man's salvation finds its realization in the dynamic of covenant living [90-91].

If Shepherd had faded away, these false doctrines would serve as an historical curiosity. Sadly, his views are enjoying popularity within the Reformed community. His book, *The Call of Grace*, contains materials from two lectures. The first lecture was presented at the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church's (ARPC) Erskine Theological Seminary, Due West, South Carolina. The second lecture was presented at a pre-synodical conference sponsored by the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA), meeting at Geneva College, Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania. Dr. R. J. Gore, dean of Erskine Seminary, endorsed the book: "All who love the Reformed faith will profit from this thought-provoking work." Dr. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., on the faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, and an OPC Teaching Elder, also praised the book: "*The Call of Grace* should benefit anyone concerned about biblical growth in Christian life and witness." While these facts fall short of establishing wide acceptance of Shepherd's doctrinal views, they demonstrate that Shepherd's teachings are alive and well. They also reveal that his views are being disseminated.

A report from the 258<sup>th</sup> Synod (2004) of the Reformed Church of the United States (RCUS) supports the charge that Shepherd's doctrines are threatening the Church. The title of the study paper indicates as much: "Report of the Special Committee to Study Justification in Light of the Current Justification Controversy." If "Shepherdism" were dead, there would be no need for this report. The paper traces the history of the Shepherd controversy at Westminster Seminary, Philadelphia. It also analyzes Shepherd's *Call of Grace*, his article in *Reformation and Revival*, and his lectures at the Conference on Covenant Theology. The Synod adopted a resolution listing twelve departures of Shepherd from the Reformed standards. Here are four of those departures:

That in his failure to distinguish between faith and works he has undermined this essential doctrine of the Christian faith. It is false doctrine to say that works of love are another way of looking at faith, for true faith is occupied with the gospel and the fullness of Christ's redemption, while a work of love is occupied with the law and showing gratitude to God for this redemption. It is false to teach that "believing" in Jesus is the same as "obeying" Jesus as it regards justification, for the two are occupied with different things.

In failing to distinguish between faith and works, he has mixed justification and sanctification, reviving the Romish doctrine of justification by infused righteousness, which is rightly rejected by all people of faith.

He errs in denying that the active obedience of Christ has any part in justification. The result is to revive the old Romish, Socinian, and Arminian error that justification is forgiveness only; and that future justification depends upon works done in faith.

His inclusion of works as necessary for some future justification is contrary to our confessions, which teach that faith is a gift of God which gives us access to the righteousness of God, even the perfect passive and active obedience of Christ which alone is all our righteousness, for we are complete in Him.<sup>8</sup>

The RCUS, after weighing Shepherd's teachings in the balances and finding them wanting, adopted several resolutions, including the following: "Therefore, we also resolve that the teachings of Norman Shepherd on justification by faith are another gospel, and we admonish Reverend Shepherd and call on him to repent of his grievous errors" [40].

The *Presbyterian and Reformed News*, explained the background and significance of the RCUS' position:

While the OPC never formally adopted Mr. Shepherd's views, many people in the Reformed community expressed concern regarding the prevalence of those views within that denomination. At the 1981 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), the Rev. Dr. O Palmer Robertson, who had been a colleague of Professor Shepherd at Westminster Seminary, argued against "joining and receiving" between the OPC and the PCA because of how widespread his views had become in the smaller denomination.

The RCUS Synod took this action because Professor Shepherd's position on this key Biblical and Confessional doctrine has disturbed the peace of many churches, and also threatens fraternal relations with other conservative, Reformed denominations.<sup>9</sup>

Another event evidences the presence of Shepherd's teachings within the OPC. A Ruling Elder in the OPC, John Kinnaird, was put on trial for teaching a doctrine of justification by faith and works contrary to the Word of God and the Westminster Standards. The Interim Session of Bethany OPC, Oxford, Pennsylvania, found him guilty. Kinnaird appealed to his presbytery, and the presbytery sustained the session's verdict. He appealed to the OPC General Assembly (2003), and his conviction was reversed. The General Assembly even declared his views to be compatible with Scripture and the Westminster Standards. A transcript of the session's trial is available to those who have access to the internet at The Trinity Foundation's website. In his book, *A Companion to The Justification Controversy*, Dr. John Robbins provides an analysis of Elder Kinnaird's teachings:

[Kinnaird:] If communion with God is to be restored, righteousness of a real and personal nature must be restored.

[Robbins:] According to Kinnaird, it is our "real and personal righteousness" that "restores communion with God," not the perfect imputed righteousness of Christ.

[Kinnaird:] On that Great Day of Judgement [sic], God's righteous judgement [sic] will be revealed. God will then give to each person according to what he has done. To those who by persistence in doing good (we Presbyterians call this perseverance) seek glory, honor, and immortality, He will give

<sup>8</sup> 258<sup>th</sup> Synod of the Reformed Church of the United States, *Report of the Special Committee to Study Justification in Light of the Current Justification Controversy*, 39.

<sup>9</sup> "RCUS Synod Declares Views of Norman Shepherd To Be Another Gospel," *Presbyterian & Reformed News*, January-December 2004, 1.

eternal life. For those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be eternal wrath and anger (Romans 2:6-8) and destruction from before the face of the Lord. It is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous on that Day of Judgment.

[Robbins:] Note that Kinnaird says the judgment according to works will decide whether one receives eternal life or death. Those who will be “declared righteous,” that is justified, and given eternal life will be “those who obey the law.” He is not discussing degrees of reward, but salvation and damnation. In fact, he explicitly denies he is discussing degrees of reward:

[Kinnaird:] Those who teach that the purpose of the Day of Judgement [sic] is not to reveal God’s righteousness in His judgements [sic] (judgments that will be unto eternal life or death in accord with what men have done on this earth), but rather only to determine types and degrees of rewards to be given to Christians, are in error.

[Kinnaird:] These good works are a required condition if we would stand in the Day of Judgment and they are supplied by God to all His people... Who are these people who thus benefit -- who stand on the Day of Judgment? They are those who obey the law who will be declared righteous.

[Robbins:] Good works are a “required condition” of salvation. The imputed righteousness of Christ is insufficient. Those who will be “declared righteous,” that is, justified, will be “those who obey the law.”

[Kinnaird:] Neither the imputation of the righteousness of Christ, which all Christians receive at justification, nor the infusion of the righteousness of Christ (a false and non-existent concept taught by the Roman Catholic Church) can suffice for that purpose. Christ does not have an imputed righteousness. His righteousness is real and personal. If we are to be conformed to His image, we too must have a real and personal righteousness.

[Robbins:] Kinnaird asserts that the imputed righteousness of Christ cannot suffice for making us brothers of Christ or allowing us to stand in the presence of God. Kinnaird makes our “real” and “personal righteousness” sufficient for both those things -- adoption and communion with God. Among other things, his language suggests that Christ’s imputed righteousness is not “real.”

[Kinnaird:] On the Day of Judgement I will hear God declare me to be righteous. As to the reason for that, it is not because of the works, even though it will be in accord with the works. The reason will be: first, because it [God’s declaration that John Kinnaird is righteous] will be true because God will have changed me so that I am really and personally righteous. After all, we will be crowned with righteousness. This is the result of the work of the Holy Spirit in my sanctification in this life.

[Robbins:] According to Kinnaird, God’s declaration of righteousness is not made because of the imputed righteousness of Christ, but because “God will have changed me so that I am really and personally righteous...” Kinnaird will be declared righteous because of his sanctification and the work of the Holy Spirit, not because of the imputed, alien righteousness of Christ. The imputed righteousness of Christ is depreciated in Kinnaird’s soteriology, for he apparently thinks imputed righteousness is unreal and impersonal: He always contrasts it unfavorably with a righteousness that is “real” and “personal” [54-57].

The *Presbyterian and Reformed News* made these observations concerning the Kinnaird trial:

Last year’s [2003] OPC General Assembly sustained the appeal of Ruling Elder John Kinnaird, who had been convicted of teaching contrary to the historic doctrine of justification. Many in the OPC who are opposed to the views of Professor Shepherd have steadfastly maintained that the sustaining of the appeal was for procedural rather than theological reasons. Nevertheless, Shepherdites have claimed the outcome of the adjudication to be a vindication of their perspective [1].

The Kinnaird case is distressing. Ten OPC commissioners presented the following protest to the Assembly:

The undersigned respectfully protest the action of the General Assembly in sustaining Specification A of the Appeal of John O. Kinnaird as presented by Advisory Committee 10B, namely, “that the Session and the Presbytery erred in finding Mr. Kinnaird’s teaching to be contrary to the Church’s Standards,” for the following reasons:

1. The decision did not demonstrate that the specifications of error in the verdict of the Session of Bethany Church, Oxford, Pa., were false, namely, that “it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous on that Day of Judgement [sic],” “those inside the city are those who have kept the law of God and those only,” and “these good works are a required condition if we would stand in the Day of Judgement [sic] ... Who are those people who thus benefit – who stand in the Day of Judgement [sic]? They are those who obey the law who will be declared righteous.”

2. The failure of the Assembly to adopt reasons for deciding that the session and presbytery were in error in finding Mr. Kinnaird’s teaching to be contrary to the Church’s Standards leaves the decision open to the impression that the entire content of the Kinnaird “Declaration” is fully acceptable in the Church, which the undersigned denies. In the opinion of the undersigned the “Declaration” is an untrustworthy document.

3. The decision of the Assembly to sustain the appeal opens the gate, in the judgment of the undersigned, to use throughout the Orthodox Presbyterian Church of a hermeneutic that allows interpretations of Scripture that are out of accord with the whole body of the Word.

John P. Galbraith, DeLozier, Jambura, Miller, Mueller, Pluister, Rao, Serven, Swink, Wilson.

Is there a serious doctrinal crisis in the OPC? The facts indicate there is. While we should pray for our brethren in the OPC who stand for Christ’s doctrines, the BPC has an obligation to bear witness by word and example that it rejects Shepherdism and the compromising spirit that aids its success. The Apostle Paul said: “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which you have learned; and avoid them” (*Romans* 16:17).

BPC leaders have almost reasoned themselves out of existence. If their supposition that there are no essential differences between the BPC and the OPC is correct, there remains no basis for separation. Any conclusion short of merger would be schism. However, there are numerous differences. The “justification controversy” is one example. Time would fail to address theological deviations such as the “Framework View” of creation and a divisive innovation called the Redemptive-Historical method. There are matters of practice to consider as well. Please pray that the Lord will secure an American Presbyterian testimony that will stay on the old paths. The BPC may furl its banner, but our sovereign Christ “shall not fail nor be discouraged” (*Isaiah* 42:4).