

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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The Gospel of Jesus Christ *versus* Neolegalism

John W. Robbins

Since I have published several essays in which I quote the Antichristian opinions of men such as Charles Colson, Norman Shepherd, and John Piper, and I have alluded to the Antichristian opinions of several others, a few churchgoers have written to me who do not know what Neolegalism is. Worse still, they do not know what legalism is, and some of these men are Elders in Presbyterian churches.

Legalism and Man-made Law

One common misunderstanding of legalism is that one is a legalist only if one tries to obey, or insists that others obey, man-made laws. In this way of thinking, one cannot be a legalist if one is concerned exclusively about obeying God's law. The primary example of legalism, one correspondent told me, is the Pharisees, who by their traditions had made void the laws of God. Now, to be sure, no one denies that the Pharisees were legalists. But my correspondent does not understand what made the Pharisees legalists. They were not legalists because they added to the law of God, but because they thought that by law-keeping they could obtain salvation. Compare them with the Judaizers who were corrupting the church in Galatia. The Judaizers did not invent laws for Christians to keep, as the Pharisees invented laws for the Jews to keep; they merely insisted that Christians keep laws that God himself had imposed. The Judaizers earned the curse of Paul in his letter to the churches in Galatia, just as the Pharisees earned the curse of Jesus in *Matthew 23*. The Judaizers were legalists, too.

Legalism and Keeping God's Law

Another misunderstanding asserts that legalism is a concern for keeping God's law. This is also a very popular misunderstanding of legalism, and it frequently leads to accusing anyone with scruples about obeying God's law of being a legalist. So if one refuses to work, to shop, or to play sports on Sunday, he is accused of being a legalist. But scrupulosity about God's law is not

necessarily legalism; what makes keeping God's law legalistic is the wrong motive for keeping the law. If one is scrupulous about obeying God's law because one hopes, or intends, or desires, by keeping his law, to obtain or retain one's salvation, then he is a legalist, and lost. But if one tries to keep his law, not in order to be saved at the final judgment, but because he is already saved and is grateful for his salvation, then he is not a legalist, but a Christian.

What Is Legalism?

Legalism is the notion that a sinner can, by his own efforts, or by the power of the Holy Spirit in his life, do some work to obtain or retain his salvation. Some legalists think man has free will and can perform good works if he just sets his mind to it, thereby obtaining the favor of God. This type of legalist thinks that a sinner can believe the Gospel on his own steam. Other legalists think that a sinner does not have free will, that any good he does is done by the power of the Holy Spirit dwelling in him, and it is these good deeds done by the power of the Holy Spirit that obtain or help obtain, retain or help retain, his salvation. Both types of legalists, but especially the latter, may acknowledge that Christ's work of obedience is necessary for salvation, but both deny that Christ's work is sufficient for salvation. Both types of legalists assert that to Christ's work must be added the works of the sinner, done either under his own steam, or by the power of the Holy Spirit. That is what makes them legalists: their shared belief in the incompleteness or insufficiency of the work of Christ outside of them. They may differ on what constitutes good works; they may differ on whether only God's law or church law as well is to be obeyed; but they agree that the work of Christ alone is insufficient for their final salvation.

What Is Neolegalism?

Neolegalism is the appearance of legalism in Presbyterian, Reformed, and Baptist churches in recent years. It is called Neo—new—in order to distinguish it

from older forms of legalism. Neolegalism wears the trappings of Calvinism and Reformed theology, claiming to be Reformed, Calvinist, and covenantal. Some of its proponents are Norman Shepherd, pastor in the Christian Reformed Church; Steven Schlissel, pastor of a church in New York City; Steven Wilkins, pastor of Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Monroe, Louisiana; and Andrew Sandlin of the Center for Cultural Leadership. In December 2001, three Elders from Midway Presbyterian Church, Jonesborough, Tennessee, wrote to Steven Schlissel about an essay he had published in the *Auburn Analecta*, the newsletter of the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church, titled "Covenant: Keeping It Simple," and about a letter that Schlissel had addressed to one of the Midway Elders, Dr. Joseph Neumann. Following is the text of the letter addressed to Schlissel by Dr. Joseph Neumann, Mr. Neil Smith, and Dr. John Robbins. In it you will see what Neolegalism is, and why it is Antichristian.

The Neolegalism of Steven Schlissel

Wednesday, December 5, 2001

Mr. Steven M. Schlissel
2662 East 24th Street
Brooklyn, NY 11235-2610

Dear Mr. Schlissel:

On May 28, 2001, Dr. Joseph Neumann, an Elder here at Midway, seeking clarification of your views, addressed a letter to you asking four questions about an essay the Elders of Midway had read, "Covenant: Keeping It Simple," which appeared in the May 1, 2001, *Auburn Analecta*. Rather than addressing you as a Session, we thought that perhaps an individual query from Dr. Neumann would clear things up and eliminate our concerns. Unfortunately, your reply of June 1, 2001, while it does clarify some things, fails to allay our concerns about your doctrine, particularly the doctrine of salvation. Therefore, we find it necessary to write again, as individuals, to seek clarification of your views.

First, we want to thank you for making it perfectly clear that you "very much approve of Norman Shepherd's work on covenant." We note that you "hope he [Shepherd] goes farther still." Those statements do indeed clarify some matters, for they indicate your hearty approval of Mr. Shepherd's views on the covenant, and express your hope that Mr. Shepherd will indeed go further in the direction he has begun. We will raise this issue again later in this letter.

Although you gratuitously impugned Dr. Neumann's motives by suggesting that he is engaged in a "deliberate attempt to misunderstand [your] words," your June 1 letter confirms that his and our initial reading of your article was correct: You are indeed in agreement with the views of Norman Shepherd; so much so that you think he has been too reticent in his published views and ought to go further still.

Second, we recognize that your article expresses "the position of a very substantive number of Reformed and

Presbyterian folk." That is another of our concerns, for the views expressed by Mr. Shepherd and others are a departure from Scripture and the doctrine of justification by faith alone. That was one of the reasons Mr. Shepherd was dismissed from his post at Westminster Theological Seminary 20 years ago. Seeing the logic of his position on the covenant, some readers of Mr. Shepherd have proceeded to full communion with the Roman Catholic Church, while Mr. Shepherd himself left the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and joined the Christian Reformed Church, an organization some of whose blatant errors you yourself have decried.

Third, in your letter of June 1 you seem to misunderstand the first question Dr. Neumann propounded in his letter of May 28. Question 1 concerned the relationship between the doctrines of individual election and covenant, not the question of whether Dr. Neumann's name is written in *Romans* 9. The same confusion is present in your article in the *Auburn Analecta*. In *Romans* 9-11, Paul explains the covenant and defends God's fidelity to his promises by demonstrating how God's election and salvation of merely a remnant of the covenant people is the complete fulfillment of his promises. "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated," is the example Paul presents — both Jacob and Esau being children of the covenant. Contrary to your statement that "Covenant is not informed by individual election," that is precisely what covenant is informed by in *Romans* 9-11. Paul asserts that the doctrine of individual election explains the covenant, and he uses it to that end; but you seem to be at a loss to explain how the two doctrines fit together into one noncontradictory whole. That seems to be why you suggest that we leave the doctrine of individual election out of the discussion of the covenant, thus "keeping it simple." Paul not only did not leave the doctrine of individual election out of his explanation of the covenant in order to "keep it simple," but Paul taught that the only way correctly to understand the covenant and God's promise of salvation is through the doctrine of individual election. Once that explanation is made, it is clear that not all — in fact only a believing remnant — within the visible covenant people will be saved. Without that explanation, an indispensable principle of which is individual election, the doctrine of the covenant is baffling and at best incomplete.

Fourth, once again we want to thank you for your forthright answer to Dr. Neumann's second question about the covenant of works, for your answer makes it clear that you reject the doctrine of the covenant of works, and are not merely using a new name for the same covenant. Your answer clarifies things somewhat, and, once again, confirms our initial reading of your article. Far from there being a "deliberate attempt to misunderstand [your] words" on his part, your reply to Dr. Neumann confirmed our understanding of your words in the *Auburn Analecta* as a rejection of the covenant of works. But using another term without defining that term and disclosing how it differs from the covenant of works is of little help. What exactly do you mean by the phrase "covenant of creation" and how does that covenant differ from the covenant of works?

Fifth, you failed to answer Dr. Neumann's third question about *John* 1:11-13, and you repeated a statement you had used in your article that "God works only in the line of generations," expressing your astonishment that any Presbyterian would disagree. But we know of no sound Presbyterian who would agree with your statement. It is patently false, and you yourself seem to be unable to adhere to it, for you write: "When someone comes [to faith] from outside the covenant...." But if God works only in the line of generations, as you repeatedly assert, it is impossible for someone to come to faith from outside the covenant. Once again it seems that your understanding of covenant is at odds with the doctrine of God's sovereignty in election and salvation.

Sixth, in response to Dr. Neumann's fourth question about Christ's role as federal head, the substitute for his people, and his righteousness imputed to believers, you wrote, "My article was not about Christ's obedience, was it? It was about *our* place in God's covenant." But your reply ignored the fact that our place, and our salvation, is completely dependent upon Christ's obedience as our federal head and substitute. And it is indeed salvation you are discussing, as is obvious from your quotation of several passages of Scripture that speak of salvation. It seems that not only was individual election omitted from your discussion of the covenant, but Christ's crucial role, without which our place in the covenant cannot be explained, was omitted as well.

Addressing the doctrine of salvation directly, you asked, "Are you saved apart from faithful obedience? Say the answer loudly, please." Well, the answer is given loudly in Scripture and summarized clearly in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*:

Those whom God effectually calls he also freely justifies, not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous: not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone; not by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them as their righteousness, but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them....

To reply directly to your demand for a loud answer, Scripture does indeed teach that we are saved "apart from our faithful obedience": "not for anything...done by them," "not by imputing...any other evangelical obedience to them as their righteousness," "apart from works," "apart from the deeds of the law," "apart from the law," "saved through faith, not of works," by the faithful obedience of Christ alone and his righteousness alone imputed to us as a free gift. Since you used the word "apart," please notice how Paul repeatedly used the word "apart" in *Romans* 4:

But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God which is through faith in Jesus Christ to all and on all who believe....

Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith. Therefore, we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.... But to him who does not work, but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works:

"Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin."

...Therefore, having been justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.... But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him.

This teaching of Scripture is summarized by the *Westminster Confession of Faith*.

To be sure, saving belief, "which is the alone instrument of justification," produces good works in the believer, but those works are the consequence, effect, or result of an already possessed and irrevocable salvation, not the antecedent, cause, ground, or condition of our salvation. Christians, like all men, are indeed required to obey God's law, but not for the purpose of obtaining or retaining salvation. Our good works are not conditions for obtaining or retaining our salvation. We neither enter the covenant nor maintain ourselves in the covenant by our good works. Nor are works part of or equivalent to belief, as some now assert, for, among other things, that would deny the Bible's antithesis between belief and works. The believer's salvation has already been completely accomplished by Christ: "It is finished." The Gospel is precisely that good news, which we are called upon to believe. The Gospel is not "Do!" It is "Done!"

The *Westminster Confession* goes on to explain the doctrine of salvation, and please notice the words "fully" and "full":

Christ, by his obedience and death, did fully discharge the debt of all those that are thus justified, and did make a proper, real, and full satisfaction to his Father's justice in their behalf. Yet, inasmuch as he was given by the Father for them, and his obedience and satisfaction accepted in their stead, and both freely, not for anything in them, their justification is only of free grace....

As you can see, Christ's substitutionary atonement and Christ's faithful obedience as our federal head is central to the doctrine of salvation and to our place in the covenant. Yet your article was silent on Christ's indispensable obedience, focusing instead on our faithful obedience as a condition of obtaining (or retaining) salvation. Not only did you omit the doctrine of individual election from your discussion of covenant and salvation, but you also omitted the doctrines of Christ's federal headship, substitutionary atonement, and faithful obedience.

You asked, "Is a person 'saved' who disbelieves and disobeys God?" We are tempted to answer that only such a person can be saved, for the righteous do not need salvation. But if you are asking, Can a person be saved apart from belief of the Gospel, the answer is no. Faith, that is, belief, is, to use the words of the *Westminster Confession*, the "alone instrument of justification." Because it is alone, belief is the indispensable instrument. Because it is alone, belief is both the necessary and sufficient instrument. But your misreading of the *Heidelberg Catechism* suggests that our faithful obedience is a condition on which our salvation depends. Once again, here is the *Westminster Confession's* accurate summary of the Bible's teaching:

God does continue to forgive the sins of those that are justified [notice that the justified disobey God, for if they did not disobey, they would have no sins]; and although they can never fall from the state of justification, yet they may by their sins fall under God's fatherly displeasure....

Please note: "They can never fall from the state of justification." This is the doctrine of the sufficiency of Christ's work applied to the lives of all believers. Believers can and do sin continually and grievously, yet they can never fall from the state of justification. To read the warnings of Scripture against unbelief and presumption as suggesting that justified sinners can either lose their salvation or that retention of their salvation depends on their faithful obedience is logically and theologically perverse.

Question 87 of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, contrary to what you imply, teaches that unbelievers of various sorts cannot be saved. To suggest that our salvation depends in part on our meeting the condition of faithful obedience is to adopt the position of the Roman Church-State, which teaches: "We can therefore hope in the glory of heaven promised by God to those who love him and do his will. In every circumstance, each one of us should hope, with the grace of God, to persevere 'to the end' and to obtain the joy of heaven, as God's eternal reward for the good works accomplished with the grace of Christ" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1821).

The *Heidelberg Catechism*, which you quote, though it was not the best creed to emerge from the Reformation, still explains the Gospel clearly enough:

Q. 1 What is your only comfort in life and death?

A. 1 That I, with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ; who with his precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins, and delivered me from the power of the devil...wherefore by His Holy Spirit he also assures me of eternal life and makes me heartily willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto Him.

Notice that Christ has "fully satisfied" for "all our sins," including those committed after our regeneration. Notice further that Christ assures us of eternal life on the basis of his full satisfaction, his faithful obedience, not on the

basis of our faithful obedience, for we could have no assurance of salvation if we had to meet that condition. Notice also that Christ is not lying, nor speaking tentatively, nor imposing additional conditions for salvation when he assures the simple believer of eternal life. Finally, notice that our being willing and ready to "live unto Him" is a consequence, not a condition, of our salvation.

Q. 30 Do such, then, believe in the only Savior Jesus who seek their salvation and welfare of [from] saints, of [from] themselves, or anywhere else?

A. 30 They do not; for though they boast of Him in words, yet in deeds they deny the only Savior Jesus; for one of two things must be true: Either Jesus is not a complete Savior, or they who by a true faith receive this Savior must find in Him all things necessary to their salvation.

Here the *Catechism* states a Biblical antithesis, a complete disjunction, an Either-Or: Those who do not find in Christ alone, and not in themselves or others, "all things necessary for their salvation" are not Christians, even though "they boast of Him in words."

Q. 59 But what does it profit you now that you believe all this?

A. 59 That I am righteous in Christ before God, and an heir of eternal life.

Here the *Catechism* asserts that one who believes the Gospel is already righteous "in Christ" before God and an heir of eternal life. That is his profit now. He is righteous, present tense, not merely future tense. He is an heir, present tense, not merely future tense. He cannot and will not be disinherited.

Q. 60 How are you righteous before God?

A. 60 Only by a true faith in Jesus Christ; that is, though my conscience accuse me that I have grievously sinned against all the commandments of God and kept none of them, and am still inclined to all evil, yet God, without any merit of mine, of mere grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I never had or committed any sin, and myself had accomplished all the obedience which Christ has rendered for me; if only I accept such benefit with a believing heart.

Here the *Catechism* teaches that our only righteousness is imputed to us "only by a true faith in Jesus Christ," and that Christ's imputed righteousness is complete and perfect, while we have kept none of the commandments of God.

Q. 61 Why do you say that you are righteous only by faith?

A. 61 Not that I am acceptable to God on account of the worthiness of my faith, but because only the satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ is my righteousness before God, and I can receive the

same and make it my own in no other way than by faith only.

Here the *Catechism* makes it clear that our faith itself is not a good work or an act of “faithful obedience” by which we meet the conditions of salvation. It is merely the instrument by which we receive the righteousness of Christ Jesus imputed to us.

Q.62 But why cannot our good works be the whole or part of our righteousness before God?

A. 62 Because the righteousness which can stand before the tribunal of God must be absolutely perfect and wholly conformable to the divine law, while even our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin.

Here the *Catechism* makes it clear that the Holy God has not lowered his standards so that our “faithful obedience” meets some of his conditions for salvation.

One ardent follower of Norman Shepherd has written the following about salvation and the *Heidelberg Catechism*: “So which is it? Are we saved by faith? Or are we saved by repentance? Or are we saved by obedience? Always remember that we are saved by Christ and his righteousness. But how do we lay hold of him in contrast to the mass of humanity that perishes? We do so by faith, repentance, and obedience.... Unfortunately, in formulating the Protestant doctrine of *sola fides* (solely by faith), Protestants have tended to isolate faith. Thus Protestant creeds (including our *Heidelberg Catechism*) have said that we are saved by “faith alone.” This creates some tension because the Bible says that we are not saved by faith alone. Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians have been quick to criticize this glaring inconsistency.... Does Norman Shepherd lead us back to Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy as his critics have charged? Absolutely not.... But we can be thankful that Shepherd does lead us a little closer in agreement with other Christians, working toward a resolution of differences.” (It is widely reported that Shepherd himself, not merely some of his followers, has also explicitly repudiated justification by faith alone.)

Do you agree with this writer’s assertion that “the Bible says we are not saved by faith alone”? Do you agree with this writer that *sola fides* is an unfortunate misrepresentation of what the Bible says? Do you believe justification is by faith alone?

Finally, you once again made your views clear when you stated, with emphasis, that there are “covenant conditions,” which we must meet or “perish.” You asserted that our final salvation does indeed depend in part on our meeting the condition of faithful obedience, that is, on the condition of good works. You wrote: “The above statements...set forth some of the covenant conditions which can be subsumed under the heading of ‘faithful obedience.’ ” By this phrase, “some of the covenant conditions,” we understand that even this list is not a complete list of conditions required of us for salvation. But if we are to be saved by the method you suggest, we must have a complete list of the conditions

we must meet. An incomplete list of conditions for salvation would preclude the salvation of all men. What is the complete list of conditions that a person must meet in order to be saved?

The argument of your letter, which began with a rejection of the covenant of works, ended by denying the complete and sufficient work of Christ in redemption and by asserting “covenant conditions,” some of which you failed to specify, that sinners must meet in order to be saved.

We do agree with you, as you stated in the penultimate paragraph of your letter, that our differences on this matter are global and involve “a way of seeing,” or better, a way of salvation. This matter is not a detail that can be overlooked. We are indeed discussing two Gospels, and one of them, as Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians, is “a different gospel, which is not another,” but a perversion of the Gospel of Christ. We are indeed discussing two ways of salvation, only one of which can be true — the first depends on Christ’s work alone, and the second depends on Christ’s work and the sinner’s fulfilling several conditions, which you have not specified. We ought not, we must not, gloss over or minimize this difference, for it is the difference between eternal life and eternal death.

Therefore, we urge you to reconsider this matter and to retract and to correct the statements you have made, both publicly and privately, that suggest that salvation does not depend wholly upon Christ’s faithful obedience, but upon the sinner’s meeting conditions as well.

Sincerely in Christ,
Joseph Neumann Neil Smith John Robbins

Elders, Midway Presbyterian Church
Jonesborough, Tennessee

Arrogant and Impenitent

Schlissel did not respond to the Midway Elders. Instead, he has continued to teach his errors publicly and even to ridicule the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Paul made it very clear that such teachers are cursed: “If anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.” The curse of God rests on the teachers of Neolegalism in the churches.

Andrew Sandlin: Defender of Neolegalists

On July 1, 2002, Andrew Sandlin, formerly of the Chalcedon Foundation, published an attack on those who are opposing Neolegalism in the churches. Ironically, in 1995, Sandlin had published an essay titled “Deviations from Historic Solafideism in the Reformed Community,” in which he listed as theological deviations some of the very ideas he now endorses. By his own 1995 standards, Sandlin is now a theological deviant. (Read the essay at www.chalcedon.org/review.)

Sandlin libels this author by accusing him of making “a career of vilifying good Christians,” and failing to quote even a single example, let alone a careerful, of such alleged vilification of “good Christians.” Thus,

Sandlin libels by falsely accusing others of libel, and he has the audacity to say he is being charitable in doing so. This has been the *modus operandi* of the Gospel's adversaries for millennia—at least since King Ahab accused Elijah of being a “troubler of Israel” (1 Kings 18). But more important than Sandlin's several statements maligning those defending the faith are his defenses of Neoliberalism:

There is an unsettling fundamentalist strain at work that seems convinced that fidelity to the Faith is impossible if one is not badgering or anathematizing other good Christians (as Barach, Schlissel, Wilkins and Wilson truly are): “There must always be enemies in the Church, and if we can't find them, we'll invent them.”

Here we see Sandlin's antipathy to “fundamentalism,” not because it truncates the faith (it is Sandlin who truncates the faith, as we shall see presently), but precisely because it is obedient to the Scriptural injunction to contend earnestly for the faith. Had he lived in the 1920s and 1930s and taken the same attitude, Sandlin would have opposed J. Gresham Machen, who also was accused by his adversaries of having a fundamentalist streak and badgering “good Christians,” accusing “ministers in good standing” in the Presbyterian Church.

Further, Sandlin implicitly accuses the RPCUS in general and Joe Morecraft in particular of lying by “inventing” enemies in the church. Sandlin opines that Barach, Schlissel, Wilkins, and Wilson “truly are good Christians,” without even attempting to refute a single one of the charges of doctrinal error leveled against those men by the RPCUS statement. Apparently we are supposed to believe Sandlin because he says so.

Then Sandlin raises an objection that has become the stock-in-trade of those who want to escape correction for publicly teaching doctrinal errors: “More importantly, what about the requirements in Matthew 18 first to confront an erring brother privately?” The fact that Sandlin asked this question shows that he does not understand what *Matthew 18* says. The Neoliberalists have not sinned privately against specific church members, but publicly teach grave doctrinal error, garbling the Gospel that belongs to Jesus Christ. They are to be dealt with as Paul dealt with Peter for a lesser offense: “I opposed him to his face...before them all” (*Galatians 2:11-14*). In acting as it did, the RPCUS was obeying the many commands to guard the flock, to reprove and rebuke, and to contend earnestly for the faith. In *Matthew 18*, private confrontation is required in cases of private sin; the public teaching of heresy need not be first confronted privately. But as a matter of fact, the letter I just quoted in its entirety, sent by three Elders of Midway Presbyterian Church to Steve Schlissel, is precisely the kind of private rebuke that Sandlin erroneously thinks is necessary. After receiving it, Schlissel did not repent of his errors, but continued to teach them publicly. Unlike Peter, who repented after Paul's public rebuke, the Neoliberalists have not

repented, but have hardened their hearts against the Gospel.

Sandlin continues:

While I hold this theological school [Calvinism] in high regard, I *start* from historic, orthodox Christianity anchored in the ecumenical Christian creeds — what Thomas Oden would call “classical Christianity.” I see the Reformed Faith as the capstone, not the foundation, of Christian orthodoxy. It's the finish line, not the starting gate.

Here Sandlin distinguishes between “historic, orthodox Christianity” and the “Reformed Faith.” The Reformed Faith is merely the “capstone, not the foundation, of Christian orthodoxy.” It is not Sandlin's starting point; something he calls “classical Christianity” is. One can have the whole structure of “classical Christianity,” minus the capstone of the Reformed faith, and be a “good Christian,” in Sandlin's view. The Reformed faith, far from being necessary, is simply the icing on the cake. The foundation is the “ecumenical creeds.” The building is “classical Christianity.” Notice also that Sandlin's faith is not anchored in the Scriptures, but in the “ecumenical creeds”—that is uninspired documents accepted by several branches of “Christendom.” The Reformed Faith, while not exactly superfluous, is neither foundational nor structural.

Now in case our readers do not know who Thomas Oden is, let me briefly explain. Oden is Buttz Professor of Theology and Ethics at Drew University Theological School, a United Methodist seminary, hardly a Christian institution. Recently Oden said, “...if you are going to be Eastern Orthodox, and I don't want to try to dissuade you from that at all, I think you can find the One Holy Catholic Church there.” This is the man Sandlin cites as his authority on “classical Christianity.”

Sandlin continues:

As I've written elsewhere, heresy is almost always defined in terms of deviation from classical Christianity, not from the distinctives of any particular species of the (orthodox) church, even the Presbyterian Church. So, even if the men charged are not Reformed (and I believe they are; they claim to be), they are not thereby heretics.

So, according to Sandlin's scheme, a man is not a heretic if he denies, say, justification by faith alone, since it is a peculiar doctrine of the Reformed Faith, a doctrine that is not accepted by either Orthodoxy or Romanism, and which is not mentioned in the ecumenical creeds. Nor, according to Sandlin's scheme, is a man a heretic if he denies the sufficiency and inerrancy of Scripture, since those doctrines are not mentioned in the ecumenical creeds and are in fact denied by the Romanists and the Orthodoxists. Nor is a man a heretic if advocates the use of images and statues in worship, since both the Orthodoxists and the Romanists use and advocate the use of such “aids to worship,” and since the ecumenical creeds do not condemn their use. One could go on at length, but by

now the reader should get the point: Sandlin has repudiated Biblical Christianity in favor of something he calls "classical Christianity." In repudiating the Reformation, Sandlin has repudiated Scripture and the Gospel that belongs to Jesus Christ. But he is not finished yet:

Joe's [Morecraft] sectarian anathemas sow unnecessary division among those who should be committed to a broad, orthodox Christian culture (without sacrificing their own Presbyterian distinctives).

The central topic of the RPCUS Resolutions is justification by faith alone. Sandlin describes this as "sectarian." And the doctrine of justification by faith alone would indeed be sectarian, if Christianity were what Sandlin says it is. But the Scriptures, and the Scriptures alone, not "ecumenical creeds," determine what Christianity is, and those Scriptures say that if one errs on the Gospel, not only is one lost, but the whole of his doctrine is worthless: "But even if we [the Apostle Paul] or an angel from Heaven should announce a gospel to you beside what we preached to you, let him be accursed."

The Judaizers in Galatia no doubt were "classical Christians" before their time. Undoubtedly they believed in the deity of Christ and other doctrines of the ecumenical creeds; but they erred on justification by faith alone, and for that Paul damned them. Addlepat Paul should have recognized, as smart Sandlin has recognized, that the primary concern is creating a "broad Christian culture," and that the Judaizers, since they agreed with him on so many things, and differed only on a sectarian distinctive, were allies in his struggle against a pagan culture. How shortsighted and sectarian the addlepat Apostle was--at least according to Sandlin's scheme. But as a Biblical Christian, and not a "classical Christian," I think that the Apostle Paul knew better than Andrew Sandlin, Thomas Oden, or any other "classical Christian" what Christianity is, and that is why Paul denounced the Judaizers without first confronting them privately, and why his public denunciation of them is permanently inscripturated. Sandlin sees this division as "unnecessary." Good Christians see it as most necessary, for error on this point sends souls to Hell, and undermines the whole faith.

Sandlin asks:

I don't support baptismal regeneration one whit, and I'm not sure the men anathematized are advocating it; but is Joe [Morecraft] ready to overturn Nicene orthodoxy ("One baptism for the remission of sins") and indict with heresy the vast majority of the Christian church, which does espouse it?

The Christian answers: I certainly hope so. Apparently Sandlin regards the ecumenical creeds as infallible, so that even their errors are elevated to the status of irrefragable truth. But notice that Sandlin thinks that the vast majority of the visible churches are Christian. And since they endorse the soul-destroying error of baptismal regeneration, they cannot be con-

demned as heretics. Apparently "classical Christianity" finds truth by counting noses.

Sandlin continues his attack on Christianity:

Is justification a work accomplished solely by the grace of God apart from human merit or good works? In contrast with Rome and in a breathtaking innovation, Luther came to believe that justification means to declare, not to make, righteous; and many modern Roman Catholic theologians (like Hans Küng) now agree.

Notice Sandlin's audacity: Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone was "a breathtaking innovation," not a rediscovery of the Scriptural doctrine, which the Roman Church State had suppressed for a thousand years. Luther was an innovator, and therefore is to be viewed with suspicion. Then Sandlin mentions the name of Küng, a "modern" theologian, and because he is modern, he also is suspicious, and this suspicious fellow agrees with the innovating Luther. But as a matter of fact Küng espouses the Roman Catholic view of justification, as can be seen from his book on the subject and his interchange with Karl Barth, who also accepted the Roman Catholic view. (See "Karl Barth" in the Review Archives at The Trinity Foundation website, <http://www.trinityfoundation.org/>.) Sandlin boasts that "We (like our Reformed forefathers) grapple with texts like Psalm 106:30-31 and James 2:21, which don't seem to fit neatly into the tight Protestant scheme." Not only does Sandlin "grapple" with such texts, he loses the struggle, and ends by repudiating the teaching of Scripture and the Reformers. He apparently understands those texts about as well as he understands *Matthew* 18. Notice that he insinuates that "our Reformed forefathers" also came to his conclusion. Hardly. Had Sandlin been around in 1517 rather than Luther, there would have been no Reformation, just another bloody attempt at bolstering "Christian culture" against encroaching secularism. Such "cultural Christianity" had prevailed in Western Europe for a millennium, and it enshrouded the West in darkness, while even Islam was creating a superior civilization.

Sandlin misrepresents and attacks the covenant of works, calling it "odious" and "un-Biblical":

The notion of the Covenant of Works and human merit are (I believe) flatly un-Biblical; and to reintroduce them is to veer dangerously toward a works-righteousness salvation that, in fact, is the very root of the Covenant of Works. I abhor the Covenant of Works because (a) the Bible nowhere teaches it and (b) I want to stay as far as possible from the idea that man can merit his salvation by good works or law-keeping. I want Jesus Christ exalted as the only possible Mediator of eternal life.

Sandlin sees an opportunity to capitalize on the name "covenant of works" in order to bamboozle those who are unfamiliar with the concept. In fact, it is the Neolegalists who teach works-righteousness, or as they call it, covenant faithfulness, precisely because

they deny the merit of Christ's work in completely fulfilling the requirements of salvation for his people. To suggest, as Sandlin does, that the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, which explicitly teaches the covenant of works, espouses the notion of works-righteousness is ludicrous.

But there is a further problem for Sandlin here: He says that he repudiates the notion of salvation by works-righteousness. But "classical Christianity," indeed, the "vast majority of the Christian church," to use his own phrase, teaches salvation by works-righteousness. Is not Sandlin therefore a heretic by his own current definition, since he disagrees with the "vast majority of the Christian church" on this central matter?

Sandlin's attack on Christianity continues:

The RPCUS attacks any definition of faith that includes "faithful obedience".... I believe that, in spite of their best intentions, the RPCUS men are setting forth a one-sided view of faith that could easily be used to justify antinomianism.

Sandlin's accusation of antinomianism is, of course, the same charge leveled against Paul and the Gospel, to which Paul responded in *Romans* 4-6. Sandlin levels the false accusation for the same reason the Judaizers accused Paul: Paul defined faith as simple belief of the Gospel, "apart from works," and Paul asserted that it is such faith, in antithesis to works, that is the sole and indispensable instrument of justification. The Holy Spirit asserted that "to him WHO DOES NOT WORK BUT BELIEVES ON HIM WHO JUSTIFIES THE UNGODLY, his faith is accounted for righteousness" (*Romans* 4:5). It is this doctrine that offends the Neolegalists, just as it offended the Judaizers of Paul's day.

Finally Sandlin writes:

To whom are denominations accountable? *To the entire Christian tradition*. This is what makes Joe's and the RPCUS's anathemas so objectionable. Not one orthodox church in the history of the world has declared the teachings of which these men are accused as outside the bounds of historic, catholic ("classical") Christianity, even were Barach, Schlissel, Wilkins and Wilson wrong on every teaching attributed to them. Virtually the entire Christian tradition would, I am confident, rise to reprimand Joe's denomination and find it recalcitrant, provincial and sectarian. It implicitly stands condemned by that entire orthodox Christian tradition, to which it should be submitted.

Conclusion

Here is the bottom line for Sandlin: Tradition. Scripture is not the bottom line; the "entire orthodox Christian tradition" as represented in "classical Christianity" is. It is to this tradition that the RPCUS must submit, and by implication, every one who claims to be a Christian.

Sandlin's is the voice of the Dark Ages speaking through one who calls himself Reformed. Listen to this

voice, and the Gospel and civilization will once again be suppressed by a lifeless, mindless, ruthless ecclesio-crazy determined to impose "Christian culture" on a recalcitrant world. Sandlin represents the wave of the past—the dark, bloody, millennial reign of Rome that was ended by the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ through Luther, Calvin, Knox, and millions of other Christians who disbelieved classical Christianity and believed Biblical Christianity.

Visit our website, <http://www.trinityfoundation.org/> to read more essays on Neolegalism and the Gospel of justification by faith alone.

For Further Reading

The Atonement, Gordon H. Clark
The Everlasting Righteousness, Horatius Bonar
Faith and Saving Faith, Gordon H. Clark
The Johannine Logos, Gordon H. Clark
Justification by Faith Alone, Charles Hodge