

WESTMINSTER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

September 15, 1980

The Presbytery of Philadelphia of the
Orthodox Presbyterian Church

Dear Brethren:

Within recent weeks members of the Presbytery of Philadelphia have received a letter over the names of W. Stanford Reid, Calvin K. Cummings, and Everett H. Bean, members of the board of trustees of Westminster Theological Seminary. Messrs. Reid and Bean are ministers of the Presbyterian Church of Canada. Mr. Cummings is a minister of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church serving in the Presbytery of the South. Included with the letter was a Minority Report severely critical of the theological views of the undersigned, prepared by O. Palmer Robertson and Paul G. Settle. Both are ministers of the Presbyterian Church in America. Dr. Robertson was formerly on the faculty of Westminster Seminary, and Mr. Settle continues as a member of its board. The letter offers to supply upon request additional papers that have been produced in pursuit of the discussion on the doctrine of justification that has been in progress for some five years at the Seminary.

More depressing than the letter itself is the fact that it has come from a post office box in Jenkintown, Pa., tended by persons not named in the letter. I have now learned that this post office box is being serviced by two members of this Presbytery: Arthur W. Kuschke, Jr., former librarian of Westminster Seminary; and Robert D. Knudsen, a colleague in the department of systematic theology and apologetics at the Seminary.

It is common knowledge that Messrs. Kuschke and Knudsen entertain serious differences with the undersigned in their understanding of the doctrine of justification and have labored to have my views condemned by the Presbytery as well as by the board of the Seminary. It is now clear that these two men have chosen a method for advancing their cause which falls far below the dignity of the office they hold in the church and which is unworthy of the great doctrine itself. Mr. Kuschke has indicated privately that other members of Presbytery may also be involved in servicing the Jenkintown post office box, but he has declined to divulge their names and thereby to implicate them in the operation.

There is evidence that the Minority Report and other documents have been circulated by Mr. Kuschke far beyond the bounds of Philadelphia Presbytery. No list of recipients is given. No information is given describing the documents being distributed, or describing what is no less important, the documents not being distributed.

In private conversation Mr. Kuschke has indicated that the present controversy will go on for another twenty or thirty years. In the light of his actions and those of Dr. Knudsen, it is understandable why this prophecy can be made with confidence.

The letter of Messrs. Reid, Cummings, and Bean, and the distribution of other documents serves no constructive purpose. It is divisive, disruptive, and destructive. It does not contribute to the reconciliation of differences, nor does it advance either the peace or the purity of the church.

Irreparable damage is being done to the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, to Westminster Seminary, and to me personally. The discussion has been brought down from the high level on which it has been conducted up to this point. Responsible theological discussion has yielded to the spectacle of political maneuvering and organized ecclesiastical power plays.

The issue here is not the privileged status of the Minority Report; nor is the issue whether the implied allegations of heterodoxy in the Minority Report are true. The issue is whether two members of this Presbytery are free to organize and conduct a campaign designed to marshall public opinion against the orthodoxy of a fellow minister, to undermine his authority as a teaching elder in good standing, and to do so with impunity.

Among the duties required in the ninth commandment are "the preserving and promoting of truth between man and man, and the good name of our neighbour" (Larger Catechism, Qu. 144). Among the sins forbidden are "all prejudicing the truth, and the good name of our neighbours" (Larger Catechism, Qu. 145).

I believe the Presbytery is obligated to repudiate the actions of Messrs. Kuschke and Knudsen, and to take steps to prevent their recurrence.

The Minority Report in itself does not contribute in any positive way to the advance of the discussions held in Presbytery, nor does it point to a resolution of the disputed questions. On the contrary, its misrepresentation of my views is bound to confuse and mislead the church. This letter, however, is not the forum in which to enter into an extended discussion of the theological questions dealt with in the Minority Report. The Presbytery has already provided a forum to discuss these questions in response to my request of November 18, 1978, when I presented my views in Thirty-Four Theses and sought the judgment of the Presbytery concerning them. It was precisely the purpose of the Thirty-Four Theses to lay all of the disputed issues before the Presbytery. Mr. Kuschke contributed to their formulation by specifying in writing all the areas that were of concern to him, and Dr. Knudsen stated several times during the course of the discussion that the Theses succeeded in getting all the issues before the Presbytery.

The Theses were thoroughly evaluated by Presbytery sitting as a Committee of the Whole in some ten full days of discussion extending over a period of more than a year. Messrs. Kuschke and Knudsen as well as the undersigned

were given virtually unrestricted opportunity to state and defend their views. To my knowledge all of the fundamental issues raised in the Minority Report have been aired in Presbytery.

I rest now in the judgment of the Presbytery acting as a Committee of the Whole that all of the Theses on which action was taken, apart from Thesis 20, are in harmony with Scripture and Confession, and that holding the view expressed in Thesis 20 is not contrary to the ordination vows of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. I accept the report of the Presbytery acting as a Committee of the Whole as the resolution to the question of doctrine which I proposed.

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to Presbytery for the serious attention given to the Thirty-Four Theses and apologize for the inordinate amount of time and energy which it eventually proved necessary to consume in reaching a conclusion. I am grateful to God for the patience of the Presbytery and for the unparalleled zeal to understand the truth of the Word of God aright.

Although I do not propose now to enter further into the theological questions raised by the Minority Report, there are some matters concerning the report that I feel ought to be clarified.

On May 29, 1979, upon the recommendation of the President, Edmund P. Clowney, the board of trustees of Westminster Seminary erected a board-faculty committee to draw up a statement and study paper on the doctrine of justification with a view to clarifying for the benefit of the constituency of the Seminary and the general public the Seminary's position on this doctrine. From the beginning, two members of this committee, Messrs. Robertson and Settle, attempted to transform the mandate given to the committee in order to have the committee function as a grand jury to investigate the views of the undersigned. This effort was in contravention of the board's action taken on February 8, 1979, terminating its investigation into my views. This action has never been rescinded.

All the materials included in the Minority Report and the full texts of all the letters from theological scholars outside the Seminary community privately solicited by Messrs. Robertson and Settle were laid before the joint committee. The committee, however, refused to adopt the position of Messrs. Robertson and Settle as its own. Having failed to secure his purpose in the committee, Dr. Robertson subsequently submitted the same materials to the faculty of the Seminary and sought its endorsement of his position. Once again the effort failed. Finally, at the meeting of the board on May 27, 1980, Messrs. Robertson and Settle sought to have the board as a whole adopt their Minority Report. The board refused to do this. At the same meeting, Dr. Robertson tendered his resignation from the faculty of Westminster Seminary.

Presbytery should be aware of the fact that in spite of repeated efforts, the Minority Report has not been adopted either by the board or the faculty

of Westminster Seminary. It is not being distributed by the board, nor with its knowledge, approval, authorization, or encouragement.

There is an aspect of the report deserving of special comment. The Minority Report offers a number of citations from letters written by theological scholars impugning to a greater or lesser degree the theological orthodoxy of the undersigned. Some understanding of the way in which these letters were secured is essential for an assessment of their worth.

In the discharge of its mandate to prepare a study paper and statement on the doctrine of justification, the committee erected by the board on May 29, 1979, was given authorization to consult with theological scholars outside the Seminary community. In the pursuit of their own purposes rather than in pursuit of the mandate given to the committee, Messrs. Robertson and Settle pre-empted the prerogatives of the committee by soliciting opinions privately. As a result the committee as such was for all practical purposes unable to make use of the authorization granted, and did not do so.

In effect, Messrs. Robertson and Settle convened a jury to try the theological orthodoxy of Norman Shepherd. They alone determined who the jurors would be. They alone determined what questions would be asked of the jurors. They alone determined what evidence would be submitted to the jurors. The defendant was not allowed to speak a word in his own defense. Messrs. Robertson and Settle succeeded in obtaining a verdict consonant with their own views. The results of the voting were presented to Mr. Shepherd as an accomplished fact on January 3, 1980, two weeks after they were communicated to the board of the Seminary.

To this day, Messrs. Robertson and Settle will not divulge the names of all the scholars whom they have consulted. There is no way of knowing what scholars were not consulted, or what scholars were consulted and refused to respond, or why they did not respond. It was impossible for me to interrogate those whose testimony has now been invoked against me or to clarify for their information the true purpose of the inquiry in which they were being asked to participate.

The questions given to the jurors were clearly prejudicial. They were framed with a view to securing the kind of response that would advance the cause of those who framed them. The framers encouraged the jurors to find theological heterodoxy.

One of the most important documents written by the undersigned containing lengthy citations from Reformed authors in support of his position was not submitted to the jurors. One juror testifies that he did not receive an important report of the faculty exonerating Mr. Shepherd which was supposedly sent.

Allowing for the movement of the U.S. mail, the jurors were given no more than two weeks to respond and some less than that. Several testify

that they had no time to review the documents thoroughly, but proceeded nevertheless to render negative judgments. None had nearly the exposure to the whole issue or to all sides of it as have the members of the Westminster faculty or the members of Philadelphia Presbytery.

Further, as far as I am able to judge, the substance of these responses was never critically assessed or made use of by the committee. The effort of Messrs. Robertson and Settle reduced to little more than an exercise in gathering and counting votes.

Most significant, the Minority Report contains no citations from the letters received supportive of Mr. Shepherd's views, nor any clear indication that such supportive responses were in fact received. These positive responses could have been supplemented with positive letters from his own files.

This brief review of the actions of Messrs. Robertson and Settle is not edifying and I have no desire to pursue it further. As a whole, the responses from the theological scholars contribute nothing new to the discussions held in Presbytery. In some cases they betray an unfortunate lack of expertness. All of them demonstrate in the nature of the case no benefit from the prolonged and intensive discussions that have taken place over the last five years.

If the views of Mr. Shepherd had been accorded a fair and just hearing, it is safe to say that the net result would have been substantially different from that set forth in the Minority Report. Messrs. Robertson and Settle were fully aware of the fact that when his views were given a fair and just hearing before the faculty of the Seminary and before the Presbytery, they were not condemned. I do not for one moment deem the theological competence of the present faculty of Westminster Seminary or of the Presbytery of Philadelphia of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church inferior to that of the theological scholars quoted in the Minority Report. Consider the prolonged discussions and the intense study that has gone into the doctrine of justification by these bodies, and compare these, for example, to the commendably frank acknowledgment of one of the respondents, the Rev. R. C. Sproul: "Unfortunately this invitation and request comes to me at a time quite un-conducive for protracted research and analysis. I've been reading over the corpus of material you sent me and am responding 'on the run' from a hotel room in the midst of a conference. My reply must be hasty and informal if there is to be a reply at all."

Included among the responses cited in the Minority Report are quotations from two letters written by Orthodox Presbyterian ministers, the Rev. Edward L. Kellogg and the Rev. Professor Meredith G. Kline. Mr. Kellogg writes a total of two and a quarter pages focussing the major thrust of his remarks on Thesis 21 of the Thirty-Four Theses and upon the concept of obedience as necessary to continuing in a state of justification. This matter was thoroughly discussed by Presbytery in the Committee of the Whole,

and since the remarks of Mr. Kellogg do not advance the discussion in any significant way, they need no further comment at this juncture.

Meredith G. Kline criticizes my views from his own distinctive perspective on the nature of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants. He suggests in a passage not quoted in the Minority Report that Mr. Shepherd has erred by "adopting and pursuing further, consciously or not, a direction in which Professor John Murray seemed to be moving." Dr. Kline holds that the Mosaic covenant exhibits a "works principle" diametrically opposed to the "grace principle" of the Abrahamic covenant. The question has yet to be resolved whether Dr. Kline's view is in harmony with Galatians 3 and the Confession of Faith of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Chapter VII, which affirms that the Mosaic covenant is a dispensation of the one covenant of grace inclusive of the New covenant. The value of Dr. Kline's assessment of the views of Mr. Shepherd depends upon the answer to this prior question.

Further consideration of the views of the theological scholars cited in the Minority Report must await the appropriate forum. It is most important at this point that the Presbytery not allow itself to be intimidated by these citations. In the writings of Reformed theologians since the time of the Reformation we find statements such as the following:

"And, again, the faith that justifies is faith conjoined with repentance" (John Murray, COLLECTED WRITINGS, Vol. II, p. 221).

"The faith that does not work is not the faith that justifies" (Ibid.)

"The faith that Paul means when he speaks of justification by faith alone is a faith that works" (J. Gresham Machen, WHAT IS FAITH?, p. 204).

Such statements are not found in the Minority Report. They do not give expression to the deepest convictions of its authors, nor to those of the persons who have taken it upon themselves to distribute the report. Basic honesty compels us to admit this. Such statements qualify the nature of justifying faith as penitent faith or as faith that works. From the point of view of the Minority Report such statements are unacceptable because they subvert the purity of the gospel of justification by faith alone.

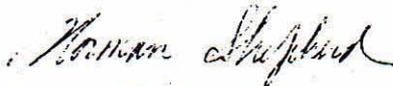
In the estimation of the undersigned, the statements of Murray and Machen quoted above are authentically biblical and Reformed. They do not appear apart from what must be said of the righteousness of Christ as the only ground of the believer's acceptance with God or apart from what must be said of faith as the alone instrument of justification. But they do appear. We can only register distress that apparently this significant element of Reformed teaching may be in imminent and serious danger of suffering eclipse.

We would ask the respondents quoted in the Minority Report to ponder carefully the following observations by Dr. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., Professor of New Testament at Westminster Theological Seminary:

Biblical theology focusses on revelation as an historical activity and so challenges systematic theology to do justice to the historical character of revealed truth. This is an elemental consideration but one which is often overlooked or not appreciated. The "tendency to abstraction" of which Murray speaks as an ever present danger for systematics can be described more pointedly as a tendency to de-historicize, the tendency to arrive at "timeless" formulations in the sense of topically oriented statements which do not adequately reflect the fact that God's self-revelation (verbal communication) is an integral part of the totality of his concrete activity in history as sovereign Creator and Redeemer, and thus a tendency which obscures the historical, covenantal dynamic apart from which his relations to men and the world lack integrity and so lose their vitality and meaning. Vos observes that "the circle of revelation is not a school, but a 'covenant'" and that "the Bible is not a dogmatic handbook but a historical book full of dramatic interest." The pattern of these statements is striking. The structure "not . . . but . . ." is hardly formulated in a void. It has in view the undeniably intellectualistic tendency within traditional orthodox dogmatics as well as the rationalism of the "critical" tradition. We can recall here too what was quoted above from Bavinck to the effect that the redemptive-historical character of revelation has begun to receive adequate attention only recently and was largely ignored by earlier theology. ("Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," THE WESTMINSTER THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL, XXXVIII, 3 (Spring, 1976), 292.)

It is to be hoped that thorough reflection on the doctrine of justification in a less prejudicial context and with greater attention to the covenantal dynamic and to the redemptive-historical character of revelation of which Dr. Gaffin speaks will lead the respondents to a more balanced assessment of the issues involved in the discussions.

Respectfully yours,



Norman Shepherd
Associate Professor
of Systematic Theology