

HERETICAL THEOLOGY AND A LACK OF LOVE

*Hewitson's Trust and Obey**

The full-throated defense of Norman Shepherd and his theology by Ian A. Hewitson, *Trust and Obey*, appeared too late for me to take it into account in this book.

Nothing in *Trust and Obey* calls into question any aspect of *Federal Vision: Heresy at the Root's* condemnation of Shepherd's theology as heresy. On the contrary, *Trust and Obey* confirms the charge of this book that the theology of Norman Shepherd, which is essentially that of the federal vision, is heresy and that the root of the heresy is a false doctrine of the covenant of grace.

Because *Trust and Obey* is an avowed and ardent defense of the teachings of Norman Shepherd, it warrants critique as an appendix in the book.

The full title of the book is *Trust and Obey: Norman Shepherd and the Justification Controversy at Westminster Theological Seminary*.

Trust and Obey is composed of two parts. The first is a meticulous, merciless account of the mishandling of Professor Shepherd by the faculty of Westminster Seminary (Philadelphia), by the Board of Trustees of the seminary, and by the Philadelphia Presbytery of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church between 1974 and 1982.

* Ian A. Hewitson, *Trust and Obey: Norman Shepherd & the Justification Controversy at Westminster Theological Seminary* (Minneapolis, MN: NextStep Resources, 2011).

The second part is a vigorous apology for Shepherd's theology as orthodox.

The author, Ian Hewitson, is a staunch defender of Shepherd and his theology. He is a critic of Shepherd's critics. Hewitson informs the reader that his book "will endeavor to show [that suspicion of Professor Shepherd] is entirely unjustified."¹ Hewitson's conclusion states:

This book has sought to demonstrate that Westminster Seminary perpetrated an injustice against the Reverend Professor Norman Shepherd by inflicting upon him the severest of penalties: They removed him from his teaching position at the seminary. Part One demonstrates...that Westminster Seminary did not have adequate grounds to remove Shepherd...Part One allows for no other determination than that Shepherd was an orthodox Reformed theologian...The second part of this book demonstrates that Westminster Seminary also had no grounds theologically to remove him from his teaching post. Professor Shepherd's theological formulations concerning justification, baptism, election, and covenant were in harmony with Scripture and confession.²

The purpose of the book is to "remove suspicion from Shepherd and to restore to him that which is more precious to him than silver or gold—his good name, a name besmirched not by enemies of the gospel but by brothers."³

Hewitson's determination to defend Shepherd and to put Shepherd's theology in the best light possible makes this book all the more damning regarding the doctrine of Norman Shepherd. The heresy is not charged by a foe, but revealed, however unwillingly, by a friend.

1 Ian A. Hewitson, *Trust and Obey: Norman Shepherd & the Justification Controversy at Westminster Theological Seminary* (Minneapolis, MN: NextStep Resources, 2011), 16.

2 *Ibid.*, 225.

3 *Ibid.*, 226.

THEOLOGY OF A CONDITIONAL COVENANT

Shepherd's theology was the issue in the Shepherd "case," although "rhubarb" would be a more fitting term, because of the failure of his adversaries ever to make and prosecute a case, church politically. "At its heart, this struggle was over theology."⁴

The theology that was the heart of the struggle was Shepherd's doctrine of the covenant. The Commission on Allegations that was to examine Shepherd's theology in light of criticisms of it stated that Shepherd made "the 'covenant dynamic' central in his theological work."⁵ The first paragraph of that part of *Trust and Obey* dealing with Shepherd's theology raises the issue of "covenant, election, and baptism."⁶

The distinctive covenant doctrine of Shepherd that was the heart of the struggle was a doctrine of a *conditional* covenant.

Throughout the controversy Shepherd maintained that a proper understanding of the relationships of divine sovereignty and human action to justification is to be found not in a further refinement of the *ordo salutis* [order of salvation] but in an appreciation of the structural significance of the covenant relation between God and man as that unfolds in the course of the history of redemption for an understanding of the application of redemption. For Shepherd it is the biblical concept of covenant that breaks through, and breaks down, the tension [*sic*] between faith and works in the doctrine of justification and that exhibits the proper relation between sovereign grace and human responsibility in terms of the functioning of the "covenant dynamic." The contours of Shepherd's suggested covenant structure of the doctrine of justification permit an alternative formulation to the traditional and sacrosanct "justification by faith alone"...*In short, the theological problem that provoked seven years of controversy*

4 Ibid., 220.

5 Ibid., 157.

6 Ibid., 105.

*was how to speak of conditions in the application of redemption and yet maintain the priority of grace in the use of the word "faith."*⁷

The quotation above is Hewitson's analysis of the Shepherd controversy. Shepherd's judges in the case that was never a case agreed that the heart of the struggle was Shepherd's doctrine of a conditional covenant. Reflecting particularly on Shepherd's teaching that all the branches of John 15:1–8 (a favorite passage of the federal vision) are alike savingly united to Jesus Christ, the Board of Trustees of Westminster Seminary said,

The problem that is raised by the redefinition of our response in the New Covenant as essentially obedience is obvious. Coupled with Prof. Shepherd's emphasis on the non-hypothetical nature of N. T. warnings and the two-sided character of the covenant, *the conditional emphasis of the covenant dynamic is loud and clear.*⁸

All of Shepherd's heretical teachings arose from his doctrine of a conditional covenant of grace with all baptized members of the church alike, especially all the baptized babies of believing parents.

All of the teachings of Shepherd that a few of his colleagues on the faculty of Westminster called into question were rooted in his doctrine of a conditional covenant.

This is why neither the Westminster faculty, nor the Board of Trustees, nor the Philadelphia Presbytery of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, nor the Commission on Allegations condemned Shepherd. This is the reason, *to this day*, none of Shepherd's critics, whether theologian or church, with one exception, has taken hold of Shepherd's heretical theology *at the root*. All share Shepherd's fundamental theological conviction, namely, that the covenant of grace is conditional. Some reject the bitter fruit; all approve the malignant root.

7 Ibid., 32; emphasis added.

8 Ibid., 180; emphasis added.

It was fitting that what finally did Shepherd in as a professor at Westminster (which was not the same as accomplishing his condemnation) was a series of lectures on “Life in Covenant with God.”⁹

The failure of the authorities at Westminster Seminary and in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church to judge Shepherd’s theology as false doctrine is scandalous. The failure cries to high heaven, where Jesus Christ sits on the throne of final judgment as king of his church, as dreadful dereliction of duty to defend the truth of the gospel of grace—the truth restored to the church at the Reformation and confessed in the Reformed creeds.

Shepherd’s heresies were gross, grievous, and evident. Even though Shepherd was the typically subtle heretic and even though Hewitson exerts himself mightily to put the heresies in a good light, there is no difficulty in detecting Shepherd’s heresies in *Trust and Obey*.

JUSTIFICATION BY WORKS

Shepherd denied justification by faith alone, that is, justification altogether apart from any and every good work of the believer, including the works he does by the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit in his heart. Shepherd taught aspiring Presbyterian ministers at Westminster that justification is by faith and by the good works that faith performs. The struggle over Professor Shepherd commenced with the response of his students to questions at their presbytery examination concerning justification. The students responded that justification is by faith and works and that they learned this from Professor Shepherd.

The event that placed Shepherd’s teaching before the faculty was the refusal of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church to license David Cummings after he presented an understanding of justification that he believed he had been taught by Shepherd at Westminster Seminary.¹⁰

9 Ibid., 82.

10 Ibid., 39.

Shepherd taught that James 2:24, which states that justification is “by works...and not by faith only,” speaks of justification in the same sense as does Paul in Romans 3:28, where the apostle affirms justification by faith, apart from works. That is, according to Shepherd, James 2:24 teaches that God’s legal verdict of righteousness, declaring the guilty sinner innocent, takes the sinner’s own good works into account. “The spark that ignited the powder keg in this controversy was Shepherd’s exegesis of James 2:14–26.”¹¹ Shepherd “believes both Paul and James are speaking of justification in the declarative sense...Faith and works might stand in parallel relationships to justification.”¹² What “avails for justification” is “faith working by love.”¹³

This explanation of James 2:24 and of justification, which has always been the Roman Catholic interpretation of James 2 and of justification, demanded that Shepherd harmonize James 2:24 with Romans 3:28, which obviously refers to justification as the legal verdict by the judge. Shepherd harmonized James 2 and Romans 3:28 by explaining “deeds of the law” in Romans 3:28 not as genuine good works, but as merely the ceremonial works required by the Old Testament or as only works performed with the motive of meriting. “Works of the law [in the ‘Pauline letters’ are] an external and formal adherence to selected legal prescriptions apart from faith.”¹⁴

Shepherd, therefore, read Romans 3:28 this way: “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith, without obedience to the ceremonial law and without works that do not proceed from faith, but not without good works that faith performs.” This is to say, “A man is justified, in the sense of the legal verdict of God upon him, by faith and by the good works of faith.” In Romans 3:28, Shepherd’s Paul teaches that justification is by faith and by (genuine) good works.

11 *Ibid.*, 221.

12 *Ibid.*, 119.

13 *Ibid.*, 124.

14 *Ibid.*, 124.

Eight verses later, Shepherd's Paul, having forgotten what he had written in Romans 3:28, writes: "But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness" (Rom. 4:5).

Shepherd also denied justification by faith alone in his interpretation of Romans 2:13: "For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified." Shepherd explained the text as describing what actually will, and must, be the case in the justification of the final judgment. Doers of the law will be justified, and they will be justified, not by faith alone, but by faith and by the good works of obedience to the law that faith performs. "Anything less than this [a working faith] is a dead faith and does not justify or save. That is why Paul can say that the doers of the law will be justified."¹⁵

Shepherd taught that "good works...are...necessary for salvation from eternal condemnation and therefore for justification." Although the righteousness of Jesus Christ is "the exclusive ground of the believer's justification...the personal godliness of the believer is also necessary for his justification."¹⁶

Shepherd's inclusion of the works of the sinner himself in the justifying act of God is condemned by the Reformed creeds (Heid. Cat., Q&A 59–64; Bel. Conf., Articles 22–24); contradicts Scripture in John 8:11 (the adulteress had no good work by which to be justified) and in Romans 4:5 ("to him that worketh not, but believeth"); overthrows the sixteenth-century Reformation of the church (which consisted mainly of the doctrine of justification by faith alone); and denies the heart of the gospel of grace.

Regarding this last, namely, Shepherd's denial of the heart of the gospel, Calvin's words to Cardinal Sadolet are applicable:

You [Cardinal Sadolet, then, and the Rev. Shepherd, now], in the first place, touch upon justification by faith, the first and keenest subject of controversy between us. Is this a knotty and useless question? Wherever the

15 Ibid., 153

16 Ibid., 156.

knowledge of it is taken away, the glory of Christ is extinguished, religion abolished, the Church destroyed, and the hope of salvation utterly overthrown.¹⁷

Although this false doctrine, understandably, was on the foreground in the struggle at Westminster Seminary and in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church between 1974 and 1982, it was by no means the only doctrine of the gospel that Shepherd corrupted. How could it be? Justification by faith alone is, as Calvin described it, “the main hinge on which religion turns.”¹⁸ Shepherd’s bending of the hinge was the ruin of the entire Christian religion according to the Reformed understanding of it.

CHANGEABLE PREDESTINATION

Shepherd denied biblical predestination, as confessed by the first head of doctrine of the Canons of Dort. He taught that election in the New Testament is not an eternal, unchangeable decree, but a temporal, mutable decision of God. Specifically, Shepherd taught that election in Ephesians 1:4 is not the “eternal decree of God.” Rather, “Paul speaks from the perspective of observable covenant reality and concludes from the visible faith and sanctity of the Ephesians that they are the elect of God.”¹⁹

Ephesians 1:4 reads: “According as he [God] hath chosen us before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him.” Verse 5 sheds more light on the eternal election of verse 4: “In love having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will.”

In Shepherd’s theology, Ephesians 1:4 is the apostle’s conclusion concerning all the members of the Ephesian congregation, that they are the elect of God. And all of them are the elect of God, *for the time being*. However, according to Shepherd,

17 John Calvin, “Reply by John Calvin to Letter by Cardinal Sadolet to the Senate and People of Geneva,” in *Tracts Relating to the Reformation*, trans. Henry Beveridge, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844), 1:41.

18 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.1, 1:726.

19 Hewitson, *Trust and Obey*, 185.

“some [of the ‘elect’ of Ephesians 1:4] may fall away” and become reprobates. “Paul warns against that possibility. Were some to fall away, he would no longer speak of them as the elect of God.”²⁰

Judas Iscariot was an elect, in the sense of Ephesians 1:4, who later is “rejected [reprobated] as a son of perdition because of his apostasy.”²¹

Accompanying the radical revision of the Reformed doctrine of election, as confessed in the Canons of Dordt, 1.7 (“Election is the unchangeable purpose of God”), was a novel doctrine of reprobation. “Reprobation” in the theology of Norman Shepherd “is not incontrovertible.”²² That is, reprobation is not the eternal, decisive, unchangeable appointment of a certain number of persons to perdition.

Shepherd’s revision of creedal predestination was rooted in his covenant doctrine. He said so. “The election of God is reflected upon from the perspective of covenant.”²³ “Reprobation from within the context of the covenant...is not incontrovertible.”²⁴

In the purportedly biblical and Reformed theology of Norman Shepherd, predestination is controlled by a conditional covenant. If one trusts and obeys, God elects him. If this believer fails to perform the conditions of the covenant, as is a real possibility, God changes his election of the man into a reprobation of him. If the lapsed elect repents and again performs the conditions of the covenant, he regains his status as the object of election. One can only hope that his final breath finds him performing the conditions of the covenant. This must be the wish of God as well for those in whom he has begun salvation.

What is this wretched doctrine but the application of the conditional predestination of Arminianism to the covenant and covenant salvation?

20 Ibid., 185.

21 Ibid., 183.

22 Ibid., 181.

23 Ibid., 184–85.

24 Ibid., 181.

Election—the eternal, sovereign, gracious, unchangeable decree of God of Ephesians 1:4 and of the Canons of Dordt, 1.7—does not govern the covenant and the salvation of sinners in the covenant. Rather, Shepherd’s covenant—the conditional contract or relationship between God and every baptized person, which depends upon the sinful member of the covenant—governs God’s election.

Shepherd’s protest that he still also acknowledges an eternal decree of God is worthless. It is mere deception and foolery. For, first, this eternal election does not amount to anything. It does not do anything. It does not govern the covenant, the covenant Christ, and covenant salvation. The only election that is involved in the covenant—*the covenant of grace!*—is Shepherd’s “covenant election,” and this is a weak, changeable, and pitiful thing. The eternal decree, to which Shepherd pays lip service, is, in Shepherd’s theology, inoperative. It is a dead letter.

Second, there is no biblical basis for the eternal decree in the theology of Shepherd. If Ephesians 1:4, which explicitly states that God chose some “before the foundation of the world,” does not refer to the eternal decree, *no* passage of Scripture teaches it. The only basis of an eternal decree of election is the word of Norman Shepherd that, in spite of his consignment of it to the realm of the insignificant, there is such a decree. The word of Norman Shepherd is not sufficient to establish doctrine.

Did any one of the many judges of Shepherd’s doctrine of election ever point out to him that the Canons of Dordt, 1.7 makes Ephesians 1:4–6 the biblical ground of election not as a temporal, changeable, “covenant” election, but as “the unchangeable purpose of God, whereby, before the foundation of the world, he hath, out of mere grace, according to the sovereign good pleasure of his own will, chosen, from the whole human race...a certain number of persons to redemption in Christ...”²⁵

25 Canons of Dordt, 1.7, in *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:582.

UNIVERSAL ATONEMENT

Such is the intimate relation both of justification and the cross and of election and the cross that error concerning justification and concerning election must also extend to the doctrine of the atonement. Shepherd taught heresy concerning the atonement of the cross of Christ.

Shepherd criticized Calvinism for denying that the world of John 3:16 includes all humans without exception. By this denial “the Calvinist...hedges on the extent of the world [in John 3:16].” The trouble with the Calvinist is that he explains the world of John 3:16 “in terms of the doctrine of election.” Contrary to Calvinism’s limitation of the humans included in the world of John 3:16 to the elect, Shepherd declared that the word “mean[s] exactly what [it] says.” What it says in Shepherd’s thinking he made plain when he immediately added, “The Reformed evangelist can and must say on the basis of John 3:16, Christ died to save you.”²⁶

Shepherd meant that the Reformed evangelist may rightly say, “Christ died for you,” to every human. It is the evangelist who may say this. Evangelists address people outside the church—the unbaptized and unbelieving. That Shepherd meant that the evangelist can and must say “Christ died for you” to every human without exception, he made explicit in his book, *The Call of Grace*: “The Reformed evangelist can and must preach to everyone on the basis of John 3:16, ‘Christ died to save you.’”²⁷

Unless Shepherd thought that Reformed evangelists are liars, he taught that Christ died for all humans without exception and that he died for all, because God loved all humans with the saving love of John 3:16.

Hewitson’s conclusion regarding Shepherd’s doctrine of the atonement defies not only logic and rationality, but also the plain meaning of words. Having quoted Shepherd as denying Calvinism’s limitation of the extent of the atonement to the elect and as declaring that an evangelist can and must say to

²⁶ Hewitson, *Trust and Obey*, 208.

²⁷ Shepherd, *Call of Grace*, 84–85.

every human “Christ died for you,” Hewitson concludes that “Shepherd affirms the doctrine of definite atonement... [Shepherd’s] teaching ‘does not challenge’ the doctrine of election or the doctrine of definite atonement.”²⁸

One may not insult a Presbyterian doctor of theology by attributing to him ignorance of the fact that by “definite atonement” the Reformed faith understands that Christ did not die for all humans without exception, but only for the elect. It is inconceivable that Dr. Hewitson does not know that the Reformed faith has expressed its doctrine of definite atonement in the ecumenical creed, the Canons of Dordt.

For this was the sovereign counsel and most gracious will and purpose of God the Father, that the quickening and saving efficacy of the most precious death of his Son should extend to all the elect, for bestowing upon them alone the gift of justifying faith, thereby to bring them infallibly to salvation: that is, it was the will of God, that Christ by the blood of the cross, whereby he confirmed the new covenant, should effectually redeem out of every people, tribe, nation, and language, all those, and those only, who were from eternity chosen to salvation, and given to him by the Father; that he should confer upon them faith, which, together with all the other saving gifts of the Holy Spirit, he purchased for them by his death.²⁹

No Reformed evangelist “can and must,” or may, say to every human whom he meets, whether on the streets of Philadelphia or in the wilds of Brazil, “Christ died for you.” No apostle of Christ ever conducted missions in this way, according to the book of Acts.

Hewitson’s affirmation that Shepherd taught definite atonement, therefore, must be the deliberate use of an orthodox

28 *Ibid.*, 208.

29 Canons of Dordt, 2.8, in *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:587.

phrase to express an entirely different, unorthodox meaning. It plays the reader for a fool.

Shepherd taught universal atonement. He taught an ineffectual atonement. Many to whom his evangelist said “Christ died for you,” evidently because Christ did die for them, nevertheless perish in hell.

The Reformed faith repudiates with all its heart such a view of the cross of the eternal Son of God in human flesh. In the cross of Christ, the Reformed faith glories.

RESISTIBLE (SAVING) GRACE

As is evident from Shepherd’s doctrine of a conditional justification, an inefficacious, changeable election, and a cross that fails to save many for whom Christ died, Shepherd denied sovereign grace. This is the necessary implication of his doctrine of a conditional covenant, which is the root of all his theology. The denial of sovereign, irresistible grace was glaringly evident in Shepherd’s doctrine of salvation—the regeneration, sanctification, and perseverance of sinners.

Working with John 15:1–8, Jesus’ teaching about the vine, the branches, and the necessity of bearing fruit, Shepherd taught that God saves all who are baptized with water by uniting them all alike, savingly, into Jesus Christ. This is the sovereign work of grace. Whether those united to Christ, and saved, remain in Christ and enjoy everlasting salvation, however, depends upon their performing the condition of bearing fruit. Some fail to perform the condition and are separated from Christ, so that they perish everlastingly.

Shepherd rejected the explanation of John 15:1–8 that distinguishes “between two kinds of branches” and that holds that “some branches are not really in Christ in a saving way.” He criticized the concern that the passage be “squared with the doctrines of election and the perseverance of the saints.”³⁰

Thus Shepherd rejected the explanation and criticized the concern of John Calvin. Commenting on John 15:1–8, Calvin

30 Hewitson, *Trust and Obey*, 178.

wrote, “Can any one who is ingrafted into Christ be without fruit? I answer, many are supposed to be *in the vine*, according to the opinion of men, who actually have no root *in the vine*.” Calvin added, “Not that it ever happens that any one of the elect is *dried up*, but because there are many hypocrites who, in outward appearance, flourish and are green for a time, but who afterwards, when they ought to yield fruit, show the very opposite of that which the Lord expects and demands from his people.”³¹

Hewitson defends Shepherd’s explanation of the passage:

Shepherd contends for grace sovereignly bestowed (the first part of the covenant) [the uniting of all the baptized into Christ] and for the necessity of faith and repentance (the second part of the covenant) [the dependence of remaining in Christ and obtaining everlasting life upon the performance of conditions].³²

This is not a doctrine of sovereign grace. Sovereign grace not only begins the work of salvation in the sinner, but also maintains and perfects it. Sovereign grace not only unites the dead sinner to Christ, but also causes the now living sinner to produce fruit and in this way to persevere in Christ unto everlasting life.

Grace that begins the work of salvation, but fails to perfect this work—fails to bring it to its end in the resurrection of the body—because the saved sinner fails to perform the condition upon which the perfection of grace depends, is resistible grace.

Shepherd’s covenant grace is the resistible and losable grace of Arminian theology that the Canons of Dordt reject as an aspect of the Arminian heresy, when the Canons reject the error of those “who teach that the true believers and regenerate not only can fall from justifying faith and likewise from grace and salvation wholly and to the end, but indeed often do fall from this and are lost forever. For this conception makes powerless

31 John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, trans. William Pringle, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949), 2:108, 110.

32 *Ibid.*, 196.

the grace, justification, regeneration, and continued keeping by Christ, contrary to” many passages of Scripture, which the Canons then quote.³³

Hewitson, like Shepherd himself, muddies the waters by denying that Shepherd’s conditions, upon which grace and salvation depend, are “meritorious.” “Shepherd teaches that there are conditions of the covenant and...he teaches these conditions are not meritorious.”³⁴

It makes not a particle of difference whether the conditions are meritorious or nonmeritorious. What is heretical is the teaching that God’s saving grace in Christ is ineffectual, fails to accomplish the final salvation of one in whom it began salvation, and is dependent upon conditions that sinners must perform. Both Rome’s meritorious conditions and Shepherd’s nonmeritorious conditions rob God of his glory in salvation and give the glory to the sinner who performs the conditions.

A THEOLOGY OF DOUBT

Inherent in a doctrine of salvation that denies the sovereignty of grace is the real possibility of the falling away of saints and, therefore, also the loss of assurance of salvation. Shepherd’s theology is a theology of doubt and fear. Some who are united to Christ and begin to enjoy the blessings of salvation, including justification and eternal life, and, therefore, who possess faith, for justification is by faith, can and do fall away from Christ and perish eternally. Some branches, which are as savingly united to the vine as those that bear fruit and abide in the vine, fail to perform the condition of bearing fruit, are cut off from the vine, and are burned.

No one, therefore, who believes in Jesus Christ and begins to enjoy eternal life is, or can be, certain of abiding in Christ and inheriting eternal life in the day of Christ.

All believers must live in the supreme terror that they might fall away from Christ and go lost forever.

33 Canons of Dordt, 5, Rejection of Errors 3, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 177.

34 Hewitson, *Trust and Obey*, 195.

The theology of Norman Shepherd gives assurance to those who believe and practice this theology that they are saved at the present moment. Because this assurance is based on their own performing of conditions rather than on the eternal, gracious, unchangeable election of God through faith in Christ crucified, this assurance is a false assurance.

In the theology of Norman Shepherd, one may have the assurance that he will be saved in the future, even everlastingly, *if he continues to perform the conditions. But he does not have the assurance that he will believe and obey to the end.* For in the covenant theology of Shepherd, believing and obeying are conditions that the sinner must perform. They are not the working of sovereign grace in the sinner, flowing to him from the gracious election of God, merited for him by the cross of Christ, and irresistibly maintained in him by the Spirit.

Assurance in Shepherd's theology is the conditional and, therefore, highly uncertain assurance of Roman Catholic and of Arminian theologies. It is not the assurance of the Reformed faith, as expressed in the fifth head of the Canons of Dordt.

Of this preservation of the elect to salvation, and of their perseverance in the faith, true believers for themselves may and do obtain assurance according to the measure of their faith, whereby they arrive at the certain persuasion that they ever will continue true and living members of the Church; and that they experience forgiveness of sins, and will at last inherit eternal life.³⁵

The alleged assurance of the theology of Shepherd is, in reality, doubt.

SHEPHERD AND DORDT

The theology of Norman Shepherd is heresy.

It is the heresy exposed and condemned by the Canons of Dordt.

Shepherd and Hewitson do not rescue Shepherd's theology from Dordt's condemnation by calling it a "covenant theology": temporal, changeable *covenant* election; universal, ineffectual

35 Canons of Dordt, 5.9, in *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:594.

covenant atonement; resistible, losable *covenant* grace; the falling away of *covenant* saints; lifelong, terrifying *covenant* doubt.

Dordt's doctrines refer to and describe the *covenant* gospel—*covenant election*, a *covenant* cross, *covenant* grace, *covenant* preservation, and *covenant* assurance.

How did the pernicious notion ever gain entrance into Reformed and Presbyterian churches that the Canons of Dordt apply to some saving work of God other than his covenant of grace? Where did the evil idea originate that Dordt is describing some gospel other than the gospel of the covenant of grace? Who gave currency to the foolish thought that Dordt condemned all theologies of a universal, resistible, saving grace of God—a grace that does not have its source in and is not governed by election—*except such a theology of the covenant?*

There is no other gospel than the gospel of the covenant of grace.

There is no other salvation than the salvation of the covenant Jesus Christ.

Everything Dordt teaches, it teaches about the covenant. The theology of Dordt is covenant theology.

And the theology that Dordt condemned in 1618–19 was a false, heretical theology of the covenant. Arminian theology was covenant theology, as Arminius and his disciples declared, loudly and clearly.

A Reformed or Presbyterian theologian, or layman, for that matter, would have to be blind not to see that the theology of Norman Shepherd is, essentially, *in all respects*, from a conditional predestination to the falling away of elected saints, the same conditional covenant theology that the Synod of Dordt condemned. He would have to be blind not to see that Shepherd's theology opposes the same gospel of sovereign, particular grace that the Arminians fought so fiercely in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

But the majority of the faculty at Westminster Seminary, the majority of the Board of Trustees of the seminary, a blue-ribbon Commission on Allegations, and the Philadelphia Presbytery of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church could not see this. "Professor Shepherd was exonerated three times by

the Westminster faculty, twice by the Board of Trustees, and by his own presbytery—exonerations that have never been rescinded.”³⁶ “In the end, the Commission [on Allegations] exonerated Shepherd...(even though no charges were extant).”³⁷ Not one of these bodies—the judges in the quasi-case—ever condemned Shepherd’s theology during all the seven years of the Shepherd controversy at Westminster.

LACK OF LOVE

This brings up part one of Ian Hewitson’s important defense of Norman Shepherd—the handling of the Shepherd controversy between 1974 and 1982.

The treatment of Shepherd and his teachings by adversaries and supporters alike was appalling.

On the part of Shepherd’s adversaries, their dealing with a colleague, one whom they were called to view and treat as a brother in Christ, was a travesty of justice and a trampling upon the basic rules of Reformed church order. They called into question Shepherd’s orthodoxy, *in the fundamental matter of justification*, without ever making a formal charge of false doctrine, complete with grounds, and then processing this charge before the appropriate church assemblies.

The result was seven years of high-level theological debate and bitter doctrinal wrangling, as though the issue were merely academic, and, in the end, the dismissal from his teaching position of a man who, not only had never been condemned for heresy, but also had never been charged.

But there is far more to the result than only this, bad as this is. The result was also that Shepherd’s theology has never been condemned at Westminster Seminary or in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. On the contrary, on every occasion that his theology came to the attention of some body of judges at Westminster or in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Shepherd’s teachings were approved. His defenders on the faculty

36 Hewitson, *Trust and Obey*, 16.

37 *Ibid.*, 222.

and in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, of whom there were many, were perfectly within their rights to continue teaching the theology of Norman Shepherd. And they did. Shepherd was gone; his theology remained.

In addition, the result of the failure to deal with a suspected heretic according to the Reformed church order, which in this aspect is the rule of Christ in Matthew 18:15–18, was that Shepherd and his theology were loosed upon the conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches in North America, indeed upon the Reformed churches worldwide. He left Westminster Seminary and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church with “clean papers,” as the Dutch Reformed say, that is, as an orthodox theologian and as a good Christian man, indeed a good Christian man much abused by foes. This good reputation enabled him to spread his theology abroad as the federal vision. Those who did not charge him with heresy, and then press the charge, if necessary to the general assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, bear responsibility.

There is also a personal side to the mishandling of Shepherd. Christian discipline always has as its purpose the repentance and salvation of the sinner. This purpose applies also to the discipline of theologians and professors of theology. Heresy is a sin. The heretic is a sinner. The Church Order of Dordt mentions heresy first in its list of “gross sins” that render a minister worthy of deposition from office and excommunication.³⁸ Shepherd’s adversaries, who correctly saw that he was guilty of heresy regarding justification, were duty-bound to exercise church discipline in order, if God willed it, to bring Professor Shepherd, their brother, to repentance and salvation. The keys of the kingdom have this power. Theological fighting for seven years does not.

No one ever brought a charge against Professor Shepherd, according to Hewitson’s careful account of all the proceedings in the Shepherd controversy. The adversaries only raised

38 Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches, Art. 80, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 402.

questions, deadly serious questions, about the orthodoxy of Shepherd's teachings, over a period of seven years. The Board of Trustees, as well as the Philadelphia Presbytery of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, allowed this to continue. And then the board of Westminster Seminary permitted this disorderly conduct to be successful in the ouster of Professor Shepherd from the seminary.

Appalling as this aspect of the handling of the Shepherd case is, there is another aspect that is still more appalling. In the providence of God, despite the absence of any formal charge, the theology of Shepherd came to the attention of the faculty of Westminster Seminary, to the attention of the Board of Trustees, to the attention of the Philadelphia Presbytery of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, and to the attention of a high-powered panel of Reformed and Presbyterian theologians and churchmen—the Commission on Allegations.

Shepherd's theology came to the attention of all these bodies and men for judgment.

They examined Shepherd's theology thoroughly, under the heavy pressure of trouble in the seminary and in the church.

They tested Shepherd's theology, in a way, for seven years.

These were some of the most learned and respected men in all of Presbyterian Christendom.

All the bodies and a majority of the men approved Shepherd's theology as Reformed orthodoxy and "exonerated" Shepherd.

This was a theology that taught justification by faith and by works; the election of Ephesians 1:4 as conditional and, therefore, changeable; the atonement of Christ for all men without exception; saving (covenant) grace that is resistible and losable, not infallibly bringing to glory; and the falling away from Christ, grace, and salvation of (covenant) saints.

Hewitson implicitly accuses Shepherd's adversaries of a lack of love for Norman Shepherd. That was reprehensible.

Far worse was the lack of love for the truth of the gospel on the part of Shepherd's defenders. Lack of love for the truth of the gospel of grace is the fast track of apostasy in these last days (2 Thess. 2:10).