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3233 BURTON STREET, S.E., GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN 49506

November 9, 1979

Mr. O. Palmer Robertson  
Mr. Paul G. Settle  
Board-Faculty Committee  
Westminster Theological Seminary  
Philadelphia, Penna. 19118

Dear Brothers in Christ:

Your letter of October 9, 1979 together with various documents reached me on October 19. The confidence expressed in me by the requests contained in your letter has overwhelmed me, not to mention the responsibility involved in a meaningful response within the limited time available.

Your letter lists three numbered questions and adds one without number. I will number that last question as (4), but respond to it first. I trust that my responses will be read in the light of the obvious fact that I have not been in on the internal discussions of the issues; hence I may have missed some of the nuances of some words and of some of the arguments. Also, my response is, of course, limited to the documents which were sent to me. At times reference was made to materials to which I had no access. This could have some effect on my understanding the materials. Here, then, are the four questions and my responses to them.

(4) Do "the subsequent papers of Mr. Shepherd represent a significant departure from the formulations of the October, 1976 paper...?"

The October 9 letter mentions only two subsequent papers by Mr. Shepherd, those of March 1, and November 18, 1978. The packet of documents also included a third dated February 8, 1979. My response includes all three later documents. Mr. Shepherd has himself stated that the October, 1976 paper was "at points obscure or misleading and at other points loosely written or ambiguous"(Nov. 18, 1978, p.2). In this light I respond to your question. I do recognize certain clarifications that have been made in the subsequent papers, clarifications which appear to me to be in accord with the original context and key words found in that context. Hence I do not find the subsequent papers of Mr. Shepherd to represent a significant departure from the October, 1976 paper.

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- (1) "Whether a significant doctrinal error may be involved in Mr. Shepherd's formulations"?

No, I do not judge this to be the case. I think I understand the intention of the 1976 paper. The clarifications provided in the March 1, 1978 paper helps to bring out those original intentions more consistently and more clearly. Hence I do not consider the views expressed to involve "a significant doctrinal error," not even "a doctrinal error."

- (2) "Whether his formulations on justification could seriously mislead the church"?

Doctrinal controversies which one reads about from the outside are usually "confusing", a milder word than "misleading." At least they are confusing until one has sorted through all the words to discover the heart of the matter. That was true for me in reading the many papers and the many pages--equivalent to approximately 170 pages of single-spaced typescript! In spite of a great deal of overlapping in the many pages, I think I have discerned the central issues.

In response to this question I must say that I do not think the formulations of Mr. Shepherd as clarified in the March 1, 1978 paper and as restated in November 18, 1978 and February 8, 1979 should mislead the church. Controversies of a doctrinal kind with confusion resulting from a multiplicity of documents and with expressions or slogans sometimes taken out of intended contexts could, of course, mislead the church. But such conflicts always have two sides! There may be a certain one-sidedness to the documents from both sides of the debate. While controversy and confusion may mislead, it is also possible that better understanding, greater clarity, and even correction of one-sidedness may emerge from the entire discussion. I have learned from papers on both sides of the debate, and I have disagreed with expressions in papers from both sides as well.

- (3) "Suggestions you might offer as to how a resolution of the problem might be achieved"?

This is a dangerous question to answer because an outsider's suggestions may appear superficial in view of the length of this controversy, the complexity of the issues, and the great number of documents involved. Yet my concern for the Biblical-Reformed faith, for Westminster Theological Seminary, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and for all the faculty members involved, leads me to make the following suggestions:

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a. I humbly suggest that all parties sincerely pledge together to strive to understand each other fairly and to make a vigorous effort to reach a resolution of the controversy that will promote the cause of God's kingdom, seriously praying together for God's grace needed in this endeavor. If this has already been done, let it be done again with increased urgency!

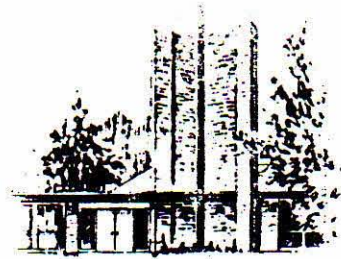
b. In attempting such a resolution of the differences, I humbly suggest that an attempt be made to express together 1) the positions that all agree are to be rejected, such as the Roman Catholic, the Arminian, etc., and 2) the precise point(s) of difference. I am suggesting this, especially 2), because the documents are so many and the pages of discussion so numerous, that the precise issue(s) is difficult to isolate. Furthermore, the same position appears in different contexts and with variant wording; precision has suffered in the multitude of words.

c. After b. has taken place, and the point(s) of issue has been discussed further, I suggest that an attempt be made to produce a short positive statement [one or two pages] expressing the areas of agreement. If the Westminster standards do not provide fitting words for such a short statement, perhaps the Heidelberg Catechism or some other confession might provide the impetus for agreements. It may be necessary, however, for the sake of greater precision in the controversy, to draw up a new, brief statement on soteriology. That effort might, hopefully, contribute to resolution of the conflict and possibly serve the larger Christian community.

d. With a view to c, but also to b,2, I urge that every effort be made to avoid such expressions which are ambiguous in the light of post-Reformation history. Avoid summaries and slogans, which, taken out of context, prove confusing or misleading.

e. Especially with a view to c. I suggest that greater attention be directed to the nature of true faith. In the context of the present controversy I think it is preferable to speak of true faith rather than to refer to obedient faith or living faith. This is especially the case if the focus is upon the initial verdict of justification-- i.e. true faith that relates to "the justification of the sinner at conversion" (March 1, 1978, p.1 bottom). Since it is God who declares the believer just, He is the one who judges whether the believer's faith is true, genuine, authentic. My impression is that there are different conceptions of faith involved in this controversy. Perhaps greater attention

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must be devoted to the nature of true, genuine, authentic faith. Perhaps that could clarify the confusion relating to different senses of justification and to the concern of some to emphasize faith's-works re justification. What I am suggesting could possibly prove helpful in moving the discussion to the nature of true faith and thus away from the issue of the relation of works to justification or the relation of justification to sanctification. With that in mind I think of the illustration of the dying thief on the cross and of the biblical illustrations of the publican (Lk.18:14) and Zacchaeus (Lk.19:8,9).

With these suggestions in mind I am sending a few relevant pages from the Heidelberg Catechism. Can you perhaps find some help in these, especially in 21, 22, 59-64 and 86-91?

These suggestions are submitted in response to your questions; it would certainly have reflected arrogance without the request. But even with the requests, I still feel uncomfortable and inadequate in submitting these thoughts to you. My prayer, however, is that God will grant His grace so that together you may all rediscover your unity within the authoritative Word of God.

Sincerely yours,

Fred H. Klooster