

Report of the Faculty to the Board  
on Faith and Justification

April 25, 1978

In response to the board's request that the faculty respond to Professor Shepherd's papers of January 3, 1978 and an amended formulation to be presented by March 1, 1978, the faculty has adopted the following report by a vote of 8-3, with Messrs. Godfrey, Knudsen, and Robertson recording their negative votes.

Since the February, 1978, meeting of the Board of Trustees the full faculty has conducted further discussions of Mr. Shepherd's views on justification on March 3, 14, 25, and 28, and April 4 and 25, and a special committee elected by the faculty has met on April 5, 6, 10, 12, 18, 21, and 22. On the basis of these discussions and the papers presented by Mr. Shepherd on January 3 and March 1, 1978, the faculty has concluded that Mr. Shepherd's position does not contradict the system of doctrine taught in Holy Scripture and summarized in the Westminster Standards.

To be sure, substantial differences still exist within the faculty concerning the exegesis of certain key passages of Scripture, and concerning the way of expressing the relationship between justification and good works that is the clearest and most faithful to Scripture. Further advances in understanding and communication are to be sought, but they should be sought in the recognition of fundamental areas of agreement among all faculty members. There are such areas of agreement included in Mr. Shepherd's paper of April 15, 1977.

The reformulations presented by Mr. Shepherd in the papers of January 3 and March 1, 1978, have been helpful. They remove some of the misunderstandings to which earlier formulations were subject. For example, the March 1, 1978, paper answers clearly a concern of some, namely the fear that Mr. Shepherd was teaching in the Study Paper "that acts of obedience to Christ are necessary prior to the justification of the sinner at conversion" (paper of 3/1/78, p. 1). The March paper states that: "At conversion the sinner believes and faith alone receives the righteousness of Christ for his justification. Prior to his conversion he neither believes nor obeys Christ. At conversion the righteousness of Christ is imputed to him and is received by faith" (p. 2). As another example, "obedient faith" is a better expression than the phrase, "faith coupled with obedience," used in the Study Paper, for it better serves to communicate the fact that obedience is the working of faith, the expression of its nature as living faith rather than something quite distinct from faith that must be added to it, or could be separated from it. The faculty judges, however, that the alterations are alterations in wording rather than in the substance of Mr. Shepherd's position. Therefore, the question to be answered is: does that position contradict the teaching of the Bible and of our secondary standards?

In support of its negative answer to that question, the faculty would bring to the attention of the Board the following considerations:

1. Mr. Shepherd's concern for bringing works into close relation to justification is not meant to obscure the sufficiency and sole efficacy of Christ's imputed righteousness in freeing us from God's wrath, nor to confuse justification with

sanctification. Good works do not in his view "contribute" to justification. They do not make up part of a total package of righteousness in terms of which we are acceptable to God. Hence, Mr. Shepherd's language about the "necessity" or the "requirement" of good works is no more to be interpreted in that way than is the language of The Shorter Catechism, Question 85: "What doth God require of us, that we may escape his wrath and curse due to us for sin? To escape the wrath and curse of God due to us for sin, God requireth of us faith in Jesus Christ, repentance unto life, with the diligent use of all the outward means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption." Mr. Shepherd's language is no more to be seen as contradicting The Larger Catechism, Question 71 ("...imputing his righteousness to them, and requiring nothing of them for their justification but faith, which also is his gift...") than is the language of The Shorter Catechism.

Moreover, what Mr. Shepherd writes concerning the sine qua non character of good works is not meant to obscure the unique role of faith with reference to justification. Faith is unique in its function of resting on Christ alone for justification. Good works or other Christian virtues (e.g., love, hope) do not have this role. "The office of faith is to abandon all self-righteousness and to rest upon or apprehend the righteousness of Jesus Christ alone as the exclusive ground of forgiveness and acceptance by God. No other virtue shares this office with faith and without faith there is no justification of the sinner; therefore justification is by faith alone" (Shepherd, statement of April 15, 1977).

Mr. Shepherd is concerned throughout to bring out the inevitable and organic character of the connection between good works and faith in the life of the believer. "When we go on to say, as we must, in terms of WCF XI, 2, and XV, 3, that this faith is the kind of faith which turns from sin and works by love, we are not contradicting LC 71; for the obedience implied in obedient faith is not intended to atone for sin or supply a ground of acceptance with God. It is simply that the faith 'wrought in the heart of a sinner by the Spirit and word of God' (LC 72) is a living and active faith" (Shepherd, response of January 3, 1978). Faith is never faith-in-isolation, to which works can be added later as a second component. This emphasis is that of the WCF XI, 2: "yet is it [faith] not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love."

In striving to emphasize vigorously the organic character of the connection between faith and good works, Mr. Shepherd hopes to keep us from offering, in the presentation of the gospel, a description of faith that would be artificial and abstract because it isolates faith from the other aspects of the Christian walk. He understands James' statement that "a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone" (2:24) as a polemic precisely against such a corruption of the biblical conception of faith. James indeed speaks of soteric, forensic justification, as Shepherd reads him, but stresses that the faith which is unto justification is a living faith (v. 26, "faith without works is dead"). As Machen wrote: "'Faith working through love' is the key to an understanding both of Paul and of James. The faith about which Paul has been speaking is not the idle faith which James condemns, but a faith that works." (Notes on Galatians, p. 220; see also What Is Faith?, p. 204.) Some faculty members may prefer a different solution to the problem of reconciling James and Paul, but Mr. Shepherd's is not one which contradicts the biblical doctrine of justification.

2. Mr. Shepherd also desires to bring our thinking and teaching with respect to justification into organic connection with other doctrines of Scripture. He sees both justification and sanctification as blessings flowing from our union with Christ. Mr. Shepherd does distinguish clearly Christ's perfect righteousness for us (imputed righteousness) from the righteousness that the Holy Spirit works in us (imparted righteousness) by union with Christ, but he is concerned in his expressions to warn against an approach that would in practice (though not perhaps in theory) make sanctification a kind of appendage or afterthought to the "real" salvation which consists in justification.

Mr. Shepherd is concerned to do justice to all the biblical data and seeks to correlate them more adequately than systematic theology has in the past. Therefore, he has drawn into the discussion passages on good works, baptism, and the last judgment, passages that we have not been accustomed to seeing in relation to justification. This has generated faculty concern. Will the specificity of Paul's teaching on justification be adequately protected? A number of faculty members still have serious problems with Mr. Shepherd's understanding of parts of Romans 3 and Galatians 3, particularly of the expression "the works of the law." Yet we believe that his explicit statements concerning the imputed righteousness of Christ as the sole ground of justification and concerning the unique role of faith as the sole instrument are adequate affirmations of Paul's teaching.

How then do we understand those of Mr. Shepherd's statements that seem to some to be more problematic? One should again recognize Mr. Shepherd's concern to bring the doctrine of justification into relation to the doctrine of union with Christ. The essence of our salvation is found in the work of Christ and our union with him. The authors of Scripture can speak of this salvation in many ways, sometimes using the term "justify" (dikaioō) and sometimes using other terms to express the same teaching: we have been reconciled to God and freed from his curse by union with Christ. To bring out the larger connections of the doctrine of justification with other doctrines, Mr. Shepherd sometimes uses the term "justification" in a broader sense. (As he points out, the Bible uses the term dikaioō more broadly.) We should therefore understand him to be talking about "escaping God's wrath and curse," as do The Larger Catechism, Q. 153 and The Shorter Catechism, Q. 85, and "receiving God's favor." This is a slightly broader conception than we usually associate with the word "justification." "Justification" is often pinpointed at the beginning of the Christian life. It is the point of escape from God's wrath. But we may also speak of a present enjoyment of God's favor (Rom. 8:1), and a future acquittal and "escape" at the Last Judgment. Without ignoring the distinctions, Mr. Shepherd wants to draw our attention to the similarity between all these senses of escaping God's wrath and enjoying God's favor.

If we insist upon a faith which stands alone in connection with conversion and the accompanying escape from God's wrath, then we may find ourselves inhibited from seeing the close similarity between this initial entrance into God's favor, the continued enjoyment of God's favor, and the consummation of God's favor at the Judgment. We may be inhibited from seeing the common character of the union with Christ by faith which is the source of our standing at every stage. We may also be inhibited from speaking of the "necessity" of holiness, of good works, for salvation, of the impossibility of justification without sanctification. For instance, Galatians 6:8 tells Christians: "For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit reap eternal

life." And Hebrews 12:14 speaks of "the holiness without which no one will see the Lord," which surely involves standing justified before the Lord. We may be inhibited from speaking in this way because we have isolated faith from good works and encouraged people to think of good works as somehow intrinsically in competition with the unique role of faith. It is precisely this type of "inhibition" or one-sidedness that Mr. Shepherd wants to avoid.

In sum, Mr. Shepherd is to be understood in terms of his concern for (1) the organic connection of faith with good works in the Christian life; and (2) a polemic against a "faith-alone" viewpoint which in theory or in practice says that faith can exist, at least for the first moment of the Christian life, without accompanying good works or other Christian graces; and (3) Mr. Shepherd's broader use of "justification" to designate "escaping God's wrath and enjoying his favor."

The faculty is convinced that Mr. Shepherd's position, properly understood, does not undermine the unique role of faith in justification nor obscure the proper distinction between justification and sanctification, and is within the bounds of the Westminster Standards.

The sharpest objections to Mr. Shepherd's position appear to arise from a failure to understand what he has said in the light of the concerns summarized above. It must be recognized, however, that the questions and criticisms of Mr. Shepherd's position in the faculty cannot all be traced to such misunderstanding. Mr. Shepherd has exaggerated the basic position he is presenting by a method of polarization that attacks differing views so radically that his own views are caricatured. Further, his structure of argumentation seems bound to create misunderstanding. The faculty urges Mr. Shepherd, for the cause of the kingdom, to seek less provocative language and different means of argument, less open to misunderstanding, to develop and explain his legitimate concerns. The faculty commends Mr. Shepherd for these concerns and encourages him in his effort to develop a statement of the doctrine of justification that does justice to all the biblical teaching.