

[This essay has been completely rewritten and the present version is very different from one prepared in April, 2006]

Norman Shepherd and His Critics

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(Version 2.77)

NOTES (Since this study deals with a controversy.)

1. This is an unfinished project. This study is an unpublished work in the sense that it is not a final version. It is presented here with the purpose of receiving correction where needed.
2. The reader may not cite or make reference to this work in any public medium (including blogs, forums, and discussion lists) without written permission from the author. If the work is to be cited positively, both author and reader will be built up through email or other fellowship. If the desire is to correct the author, let's first speak to each other in private in order to "gain our brother". To contact me, please send an email to: ralph.boersema@canrc.org.
3. This study has already matured much as a result of readers' comments. You are invited to also contribute to this process.
4. This study argues that many of Mr. Shepherd's critics misread what he is saying. It is conceded that in individual writings Mr. Shepherd does not always provide qualifying and clarifying statements that could be helpful.
5. Although this study agrees with Mr. Shepherd on a number of points, it's purpose is to promote Reformed theological reflection and to argue for the correct understanding of Mr. Shepherd's positions, more than to promote his views.

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1. Introduction

The Rev. Mr. Norman Shepherd, Reformed pastor, teacher, author, and former professor of systematic theology at Westminster Theological Seminary is being severely criticized by some Reformed colleagues. An evaluation of his writings in the light of the criticisms reveals that the critics have misread Mr. Shepherd. It appears that they read into his writings ideas that are alien to him.

The subject of the controversy is the biblical doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. The critics are concerned that Mr. Shepherd undermines this doctrine, while, in fact, he champions it:

Paul says in Romans 3:28, "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law." We are *justified* — our sins are forgiven and they are no longer held against us. We are justified *by faith* — not by anything we can do to save ourselves. We look to Christ alone for pardon of sin and for the holiness without which no man will see the Lord (Heb. 13:14). We are justified *apart from observing the law*. We do not cling to the old Mosaic covenant now that Jesus has established the new covenant in his blood. We do not seek to perform works to ingratiate ourselves with the Lord God.

We are justified by grace through faith. The Lord leads us into possession of all that he has promised including eternal life by way of a living, penitent, and obedient faith just as he led Israel into possession of the Promised Land by way of a living, penitent, and obedient faith. This is the Biblical and Pauline doctrine of justification (Shepherd, *Backbone*, 2004, 103).

There is nothing that any man can do to save himself from condemnation or to contribute to his salvation in any sense or at any point, so that any attempt on the part of man to save himself not only fails but even serves to compound his guilt (Shepherd, 1978, thesis 2).

Justification is an act of God, by which He forgives sinners acquitting them of their guilt, accounts and accepts them as righteous, and bestows upon them the title of eternal life (Shepherd, 1978, thesis 3).

The ground of justification or the reason or cause why sinners are justified is in no sense to be found in themselves or in what they do, but is to be found wholly and exclusively in Jesus Christ and in his mediatorial accomplishment on their behalf (Shepherd, 1978, thesis 5).

2. Understanding James

In the early 1970's, Mr. Shepherd noted that John Murray had not dealt with James 2 in his teaching on justification and saw the need for such a study. In pursuing this, he found that the exegetical considerations in favor of understanding James' use of justification as forensic and soteric were decisively stronger than for a demonstrative use. This led him to follow J. Gresham Machen in not seeing the distinction between Paul and James to be in a different use of justification, but in referring to different kinds of works and different kinds of faith.

James speaks of the works of a believer which are an expression of faith and he agrees with Paul's condemnation of works that seek to contribute to justification and desire to be its ground. With this understanding, Shepherd rejected all thoughts that the Christian's works make a contribution to his justification. He followed the Westminster Confession in affirming that faith is never alone in the person justified (WCF 11.2). Bearing this in mind was helpful for addressing what Shepherd called "easy-believism", receiving Jesus Christ as personal Savior, without obeying him as Lord. In answer to this error, he taught his students that living faith is always penitent, obedient faith. Faith cannot exist without works (James 2:26). Works of repentance and love accompany true faith, not only subsequent to justification, but also for justification itself. Nevertheless, we are not justified by our working, but by faith in Christ and his redemptive work.

In his lectures, Shepherd spoke of works being in parallel with faith. The word, "parallel", indicated that works and faith always exist together. Works should not be described as only coming after faith. Further, just as faith is only an instrument in receiving justification, and we are not justified on account of the worthiness of our faith, so also the worthiness of our works has nothing to do with justification. We are justified by "faith working through love"(Gal. 5:6). "...A person is justified by works and not by faith alone" (James 2:24).

In the light of James 2:24 and similar passages, Shepherd at one time spoke of works and faith together being the instrument of justification. He meant that the faith that is the instrument of justification is faith that exists together with works. Later, he agreed that this terminology was causing misunderstandings. He had not intended to deny the uniqueness of faith's role in justification. We are not justified by faith and works. Shepherd agrees with the Westminster Confession that faith is the alone instrument of justification. In his published works he avoids the earlier formulations. Besides, he never intended to say that we are justified by the working of faith. He only sought to emphasize that living faith cannot exist alone.

As a student of Mr. Shepherd, this writer heard of no one in his class thinking that Mr. Shepherd was suggesting that works make a contribution to the Christian's justification. At a later point, however, misunderstandings arose. Mr. Shepherd was perceived to be teaching that the performance of the regenerate believer contributes to his righteousness, even though he always clearly said that the only ground of our justification is the imputed righteousness of Christ. In the ensuing years of discussion, some took exception to other teachings of Mr. Shepherd, as well. This included differences about how to view God's covenant (a discussion that had already involved John Murray and Meredith Kline at an earlier date) and how to regard the historical covenants in relation to God's eternal election. More recently, with appeals to Calvin, Zacharias

Ursinus and some of the members of the Westminster Assembly, Shepherd has also raised questions about the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's active obedience.

3. The Point

The main point of this essay is not to convince the reader that Mr. Shepherd is correct. It is, rather, to promote theological reflection on the Bible's teaching. Such reflection is not helped when opponents misunderstand each other. Therefore, this study wants to convince the reader that there are ways in which the critics misread Shepherd. In some cases clear statements are not taken into account and sometimes incorrect conclusions are drawn from what he says, and even from what he does not say.

We are called to read each other's writings with great care. Especially in a discussion of righteousness, it is incumbent on us to deal righteously with our brothers in the Lord and spare Christ's church much grief and division by speaking the truth in love, with gentleness, patience and humility (Eph. 4).

“Heavenly Father, we beseech you to graciously make all of us humble, gentle and patient towards one another and to express our love for you by loving our brothers as ourselves.”

To read Norman Shepherd correctly, we need to bear in mind that he is working from within the Reformed context. He is only seeking to refine and develop Reformed thought, just as we are all called to do. In none of the points he is raising does Shepherd opt for legalistic, Romanistic or Arminian views. We may question whether he expresses himself clearly, whether he is right in his appeal to certain Reformed fathers or whether his exegesis is sound. We ought to interact with him to mutually build each other up. However, we do not do well to interpret his teachings in the light of legalistic, Romanistic or Arminian schemes of thought. Careful attention to Shepherd's writings soon reveals that this just does not work.

Mr. Shepherd did not intend that his teachings about justification be seen as stepping out in a new direction for Reformed theology. It has been the misreading of his position that has resulted in the perception that he was doing something other than continuing to teach his students in the way set out by his predecessors at Westminster Theological Seminary. From the beginning of the controversy, many judged that Shepherd's critics were attributing a wrong understanding to his statements. The majority of the Westminster faculty consistently understood that he was not teaching error and that misunderstanding of his position was part of the problem.

The writer of this study may be mistaken, of course, but he has the impression that Shepherd's critics have so frequently repeated their perceptions of him that the majority of those who have heard about Shepherd now believe that his critics present his views accurately. This has also had the sad consequence that stalwart Reformed theologians, ministers, and elders (such as members of the faculty and board of trustees of WTS at the time of the controversy), who read him correctly and do not condemn his views, are now being regarded by many as not quite trustworthy. This tragic situation needs to urgently be corrected. Even now, if more people are persuaded that Shepherd does not hold much of what he is said to teach, it will take years to remedy the damage.

4. The Criticisms

Let us proceed to consider what some of the critics are saying. If their interpretations that Shepherd teaches such things as justification by faith plus works and that faith and works are one and the same thing would be true, then we should all join the chorus in questioning his views. If his teaching would be that the believer is justified by the grace of God and the believer's works, he would, indeed, be legalistic and Romanistic. We will seek to show, however, that virtually all of the objections involve misconceptions. There are, in fact, differences between Shepherd and his critics, but these are being given such interpretations and evaluations that the critics end up objecting to teachings that are quite different from those Shepherd holds. In addition to the discussion that follows, in which the critics' comments are treated topically, an appendix provides a more extensive selection of critical remarks made by five of Norman Shepherd's opponents.

4.a. Justification

With regard to the meaning of justification, Shepherd provides clear, orthodox statements:

Justification is an act of God, by which He forgives sinners acquitting them of their guilt, accounts and accepts them as righteous, and bestows upon them the title of eternal life (Shepherd, 1978, thesis 3).

The Roman Catholic doctrine that justification is a process in which the unjust man is transformed into a just man by the infusion of sacramental grace confuses justification with sanctification, and contradicts the teaching of Scripture that justification is a forensic verdict of God by which the ungodly are received and accepted as righteous on the ground of the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ.

The Roman Catholic doctrine that faith merits (congruent merit) the infusion of justifying grace, and that faith formed by love performing good works merits (condign merit) eternal life contradicts the teaching of Scripture that justification is by grace through faith apart from the works of the law (Shepherd, 1978, thesis 26, 27).

There can be no misunderstanding here. Justification is an act of God. It is forensic. It is God's pardon of sin and accounting a sinner as righteous exclusively on the ground of the imputed righteousness of Christ. It is to be distinguished from the Romanist view, for it is not a process, nor is it accomplished through the infusion of grace or by the believer's works.

In some circles it is said that Shepherd's views have changed over the years and his earlier writings cannot be used to defend his present position. This is not the case. More recently he has argued that Christ's active obedience has not been imputed to us as meritorious work, necessary to earn eternal life. This point is based on the lack of Scriptural evidence for the imputation of works that receive heaven as wages and it does not change his earlier views in any way. Thus he writes in 2006, commenting on an Orthodox Presbyterian report on justification, "I have repeatedly stressed the centrality of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the sole ground

of our redemption. (See the Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 67.)” (Shepherd, *Comments – 2*, 2006). In the first set of comments on this report, he clearly reaffirms that it is faith that alone justifies. Shepherd continues to teach that, while they show our faith, our works are neither the ground nor the instrument of our justification.

His statements in 1978 and 1979 continue to be relevant:

The ground of justification or the reason or cause why sinners are justified is in no sense to be found in themselves or in what they do, but is to be found wholly and exclusively in Jesus Christ and in his mediatorial accomplishment on their behalf (Shepherd, 1978, thesis 5).

The righteousness of Jesus Christ is imputed to the sinner the moment he believes. He believes and is justified. . . .

Faith is wholehearted trust in Christ and by this faith the believer receives, accepts, and rests upon the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ alone for justification. . . .

[T]hose who believe and repent of sin are received and accepted as righteous on the ground of the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ. . . .

The biblical language of exhortation and warning must be allowed to function in the proclamation of the whole counsel of God in a way that does not jeopardize the doctrine of justification by faith on the ground of the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ alone. . . .

The redemption wrought by Jesus Christ has in view the salvation of his elect people from the penalty of sin, which is everlasting condemnation and death. This redemption is grounded in the sole sufficiency of the work of Christ whose obedience and satisfaction for sin is imputed to those who believe. . . .

There is a radical distinction between justification and sanctification. Justification is an act of God’s free grace with respect to his people whereby he pardons their sin and accepts them as righteous on the ground of the righteousness of Jesus Christ imputed to them and received by faith alone. . . .

In justification the obedience and satisfaction of Christ are imputed to believers so that they are no longer under the wrath and condemnation of God (Shepherd, 1979).

In spite of this clarity, Shepherd is criticized as holding the very teachings from which he distances himself. Michael Horton writes:

While Shepherd and the federal-vision proponents oppose the category of merit in principle, they do insist that faith *and* obedience (or faith *as* obedience) are the instruments of final justification, which amounts to the *congruent* merit advocated by late medieval theology (Horton, 2007, 205).

Similarly, Richard Phillips states:

Shepherd's definition of faith does not direct us to look to and rely upon Christ and his work, but ourselves and our work (Phillips, 2005, 121)

One wonders what was the effect of the Fall; it must have been very slight if the view of Smith and Shepherd and others in their camp is correct. Perhaps here more than anywhere else, in its low view of the consequences of the Fall, this new theology of covenant intersects with Roman Catholicism, along with sharing an approach to justification which depends on the grace of God working *in us* rather than the alien righteousness of Christ imputed *to us* by grace and through faith alone (Phillips, 2005, 122).

One wonders how these Reformed brothers can make what appear to be such obviously invalid evaluations. The answer is to be found in their misreading of what Shepherd teaches about works in relation to our justification. This will be considered below, but first it will be useful to look at another matter.

4.b. When Are We Justified?

Justification refers to a forensic declaration of a verdict of, “Not guilty,” or of being righteous. It can also be the expression of such a judgment outside of a judicial setting, but still as an evaluation of moral or legal righteousness (cf. Rom. 3:4). In Scripture, it further has the special meaning of forgiveness of sin on the basis of satisfaction for those sins. Of course, the only satisfaction possible for man’s sins is the blood of Christ.

When a Bible reader asks, when are we justified, several answers come to mind as these senses of justification are considered. Since there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1), and we are united with Christ through faith, we are justified when we repent and believe in Him. We are forgiven at our conversion and we are forgiven each day as we confess our sins and pray the Lord to forgive our debts. The great Judgment on the last day also comes to mind, for we all will appear before the Judgment-seat of God.

Many Christians puzzle about how we can be fully forgiven when we first believe while we also have daily forgiveness of sins and there remains a future Day of Judgment for all. Yet it is generally recognized that initial justification, daily forgiveness and the Last Judgment all have to do with God’s verdict of pardon and right-standing before him. We may have difficulty relating full forgiveness with continuing repeated forgiveness and with the necessity for a Last Judgment, but we usually do not question the revealed facts. Initial justification, daily forgiveness and the Last Judgment all have to do with God’s declaration of righteousness and with his forgiveness. They all relate to justification.

In its chapter on justification, the Westminster Confession of Faith describes two of the realities to which justification refers. Sinners are justified when Christ is first applied to them and there

continues to be forgiveness of sins for those who are in the state of justification when they confess their sins and God's favor is restored to them:

IV. God did, from all eternity, decree to justify all the elect, and Christ did, in the fullness of time, die for their sins, and rise again for their justification: nevertheless, they are not justified, until the Holy Spirit doth, in due time, actually apply Christ unto them.

V. God doth continue to forgive the sins of those that are justified; and, although they can never fall from the state of justification, yet they may, by their sins, fall under God's fatherly displeasure, and not have the light of his countenance restored unto them, until they humble themselves, confess their sins, beg pardon, and renew their faith and repentance (*WCF*, XI).

The Confession also proclaims the biblical truths about the Last Judgment in which, not only the non-elect will be judged (as only the apostate among the angels are judged), but all will be judged according to their works:

I. God hath appointed a day, wherein he will judge the world, in righteousness, by Jesus Christ, to whom all power and judgment is given of the Father. In which day, not only the apostate angels shall be judged, but likewise all persons that have lived upon earth shall appear before the tribunal of Christ, to give an account of their thoughts, words, and deeds; and to receive according to what they have done in the body, whether good or evil (*WCF*, XXXIII).

In the same way, Shepherd defends that:

The term "justification" may be used with reference to the acquittal and acceptance of a believer at his effectual calling into union with Christ, or with reference to the state of forgiveness and acceptance with God into which the believer is ushered by his effectual calling, or with reference to God's open acquittal and acceptance of the believer at the final judgment (Matt. 12:36, 37; Rom. 3:22,24; 5:1; 8:1; Gal. 5:5), (Shepherd, 1978, thesis 4).

Although Shepherd holds all the truths confessed in the Westminster Standards in relation to when we are justified, his critics take issue with him on this matter. It would appear that this is largely because, in one way or another, they read him as saying that the Last Judgment is partly on the ground of the Christian's works or the justification on that day depends on the instrumentality of works. This is a skewing of Shepherd's position, which is none other than the received Reformed doctrine. The only difference is that he gives more attention to what the New Testament teaches about works in relation to justification – more than do the majority of Reformed theologians of the present day.

Dr. O. Palmer Robertson, one of Mr. Shepherd's opponents at Westminster Seminary, argues against Shepherd's views concerning when the concept of justification can be applied:

. . . little if any evidence may be found in Scripture that *forgiveness* of sins shall occur in the judgment of the last day. Essential to "justification" is the forgiveness of sins, yet the unbeliever certainly will not be forgiven at the last day. The believer already stands justified. The cleansing forgiveness associated with sanctification hardly will be needed by the saints who already will have been changed into the glorious likeness of Christ at his appearing.

Indeed, a "vindication" of the status of the believer shall occur at the last judgment. He shall be "openly acknowledged, and acquitted in the Day of Judgment" (*Shorter Catechism* Q.38). But in that vindication, good works arising from repentance shall function only as fruit and evidence of the unshakable status of justification which had been realized at the moment of believing. (Robertson, 2003, 21-22)

Robertson's arguments do not do justice to the various aspects of justification and are confusing. It is true that the glorified believer will not be forgiven for sins done in his state of glory, but that does not provide an explanation for the biblical teaching that also for those who are in Christ there will be a real judgment on the last day. Justification is not limited to the forgiveness of present sin. It is also the forensic declaration of innocence. Just as God is justified when he is judged (Rom. 3:4), so not every sense of justification need be applied to the Last Judgment. Robertson acknowledges the vindication of believers on that day. Is that not justification – the official declaration of innocence? That judgment will be according to works done in the flesh. With Robertson, Shepherd sees works functioning for this judgment as the evidence of faith and not as the ground of justification.

Another point of possible confusion is suggested by Robertson's words, "...cleansing forgiveness associated with sanctification..." If he means forgiveness that occurs at the same time as we are sanctified, there is no problem. However, if the intention is to suggest that the Christian's daily forgiveness is to be viewed as sanctification, then sanctification and justification are confused. Sanctification is inward transformation, but forgiveness is an act of God outside of us. The daily forgiveness of our sins is just as much justification as is the forgiveness at our effectual call. Among some, there is a tendency to regard all that happens to us between our initial justification and our glorification to be sanctification, where definitions are determined sequentially. This cannot do justice to the Biblical data. At the same time, our daily forgiveness does not call into question the fullness and definitive character of the forgiveness received when we first believe.

The Westminster Confession describes the forgiveness of God's children in the state of justification as the restoration of a father's favor and reminds us that God continues to forgive the justified even though they can never fall from the state of justification. Since we are not sons of God before our union with Christ, this is a good way of relating the difference between our justification when Christ is first applied to us and our forgiveness as we continue in the covenant of grace. Recently Dr. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. has provided a helpful description of the relationship of our present justification to our justification at the Last Judgment by applying the distinction between faith and sight. Believers are already justified - by faith. But they are yet to be justified - by sight (Gaffin, 2006, 88). Such explanations help us to see how we are already

justified, continue to receive forgiveness, and will be openly acquitted as justified in the Final Judgment.

Why treat our daily forgiveness and the Final Judgment as justification? Why not limit this concept to when we first believe? One reason is that these realities deal with the forensic declaration of forgiveness and innocence and to describe them as sanctification or glorification would be wrong. Another is that the biblical language presses us to speak in this way. For example, the Holy Spirit demonstrates no tension when He illustrates the doctrine of justification with situations in the lives of those already converted. Genesis 15:6, “And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness,” was not given at the time of Abraham’s effectual call. From Hebrews 11:8 we know that Abraham already believed when he obeyed the command to go out to Canaan, which was well before Genesis 15. Similarly, Paul’s appeal to David in Romans 4:6,7, to show that justification is apart from works, was also an appeal to forgiveness that was not the initial justification in David’s life (Psalm 32).

Shepherd speaks scripturally when he points out the three different uses of the concept of justification. In Scripture the declaration that we are righteous is not always a reference to the initial constituting declaration. We can be repeatedly declared to be righteous, since we continue, in fact, to be righteous and continue to have saving faith, such that we continue to accept, receive and rest in Christ for our righteousness. At the same time, Christ continues to be our advocate when we sin (1 John 2:1), and we continue to be forgiven for sins we still commit and will commit until our death. This reality will see its close at the Great Assize when all will be judged according to what they did in the body. Those who trusted in Jesus Christ alone for justification and salvation will go into eternal life, while those who did not feed Christ when he was hungry or clothe him when naked will go into eternal punishment.

Charles Hodge explains:

The believer feels the constant necessity for confession and prayer for pardon, but the ground of pardon is ever present for him to offer and plead. So that it would perhaps be a more correct statement to say that in justification the believer receives the promise that God will not deal with him according to his transgressions, rather than to say that sins are forgiven before they are committed (Hodge, III, 163-164).

Given that Scripture does not abstract justification from God’s continued forgiveness of those who are in the state of justification, nor from entrance into life eternal at the Last Judgment, we now ask, what use does Shepherd make of this? Does he suggest that final justification is on a different basis than initial justification? Are we finally justified by faith in Christ and by the works we do by the grace of God in us, as some critics affirm to be his teaching? Not at all. He does not speak of justification by works. Rather, he follows earlier Reformed theologians in speaking of the necessity of works for justification, and he means the same thing they did.

4.c. The Necessity of Works for Justification

Among Shepherd’s thirty-four theses about justification are the following:

21. The exclusive ground of the justification of the believer in the state of justification is the righteousness of Jesus Christ, but his obedience, which is simply the perseverance of the saints in the way of truth and righteousness, is necessary to his continuing in a state of justification (Heb. 3:6, 14).

22. The righteousness of Jesus Christ ever remains the exclusive ground of the believer's justification, but the personal godliness of the believer is also necessary for his justification in the judgment of the last day (Matt. 7:21-23; 25:31-46; Heb. 12:14).

23. Because faith which is not obedient faith is dead faith, and because repentance is necessary for the pardon of sin included in justification, and because abiding in Christ by keeping his commandments (John 15:5; 10; 1John 3:13; 24) are all necessary for continuing in the state of justification, good works, works done from true faith, according to the law of God, and for his glory, being the new obedience wrought by the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer united to Christ, though not the ground of his justification, are nevertheless necessary for salvation from eternal condemnation and therefore for justification (Rom. 6:16, 22; Gal. 6:7-9). . . .

25. The Reformed doctrine of justification by faith alone does not mean that faith in isolation or abstraction from good works justifies, but that the way of faith (faith working by love), as opposed to the "works of the law" or any other conceivable method of justification, is the only way of justification. (John Calvin, Institutes, III, 11, 20. "Indeed, we confess with Paul that no other faith justifies 'but faith working through love' [Gal. 5:6]. But it does not take its power to justify from that working of love. Indeed, it justifies in no other way but in that it leads us into fellowship with the righteousness of Christ.") (Shepherd, 1978).

These summary statements leave no doubt about what Shepherd means. Works or the believer's godliness are not the basis or ground for justification, nor are they an instrument of justification. They are necessary for forgiveness in the same sense as repentance is required. Faith without works is dead. A dead faith cannot justify. The Bible says much more about the necessity for works as Mr. Shepherd summarizes in these theses and shows in other writings. Nevertheless, the heart of the matter was expressed by Dr. Cornelius Van Til in his support for Shepherd, when he reportedly emphasized, "Faith without works is dead." The above theses plainly state that Christ's righteousness is the exclusive ground for justification and, as was mentioned previously, it is received by imputation. Thus he clearly excludes any suggestion that Christ's righteousness for forgiveness becomes ours through the infusion of grace. Calvin expressed it succinctly in the citation in the previous paragraph, and Shepherd nowhere writes anything that might leave us in doubt about whether he means something different from Calvin.

The critics, however, give a different reading to what Shepherd teaches about the necessity for works. John Carrick writes, "... 'Shepherdism' ... is a subtle form of legalism..., subversive of the gospel; ... subversive of this great, wonderful, yet vulnerable doctrine of justification by faith alone" (Carrick, 2005, 142-143). Robertson concludes, "His ambiguous use of the phrase 'obedience of faith' then serves as a means of communicating the idea that justification is by the obedient acts done in faith as well as by faith, which inevitably comes to expression in obedience

to God” (Robertson, 2003, 95). Shepherd’s understanding of the obedience of faith will be considered again below, but it is not what Robertson attributes to him and Shepherd does not say that justification is by works. Given his statements, cited above, that the exclusive ground for justification is the righteousness of Christ and that justification is by faith alone, there appears to be no basis for speaking of legalism in Shepherd and subversion of the Gospel cannot be found in these theses.

Belief in the necessity of works for justification is not something new in Reformed theology. With Calvin, the Reformed faith commonly holds that the faith by which we are justified is faith that rests in Jesus Christ for righteousness and works through love, without deriving its power to justify from that working. Faith without works can impossibly save because it is dead. It is recommended that Shepherd’s paper entitled, “The Grace of Justification,” (1979) be read in order to be reminded how this teaching has been commonly held. The following are extracts from this paper which can be said to be Shepherd’s mature thoughts on his teachings when they were being contested at Westminster Seminary:

Calvin concludes, “Man is not justified by faith alone, that is, by a bare and empty knowledge of God; he is justified by works, that is, his righteousness is known and proved by its fruits.” . . .

We, indeed, allow that good works are required for righteousness: we only take away from them the power of conferring righteousness, because they cannot stand before the tribunal of God....

Gal. 5:6 makes clear that the doctrine of Paul and the doctrine of James are the same. James does not deny that faith justifies, but he does deny that *inactive* faith justifies. Faith without works is *dead* (2:26). Dead faith does not save (vs. 14) and dead faith does not justify (vs. 24). This is what James has in view when he says that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. Both James and Paul denounce dead works and dead faith. They both commend a living and active faith. The teaching of James and Paul is nowhere better summarized than by John Murray at the conclusion of his chapter on Justification in *Redemption – Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), p. 161: “Faith alone justifies but a justified person with faith alone would be a monstrosity which never exists in the kingdom of grace. Faith works itself out through love (cf. Gal. 5:6). And faith without works is dead (cf. James 2:17-20). It is living faith that justifies and living faith unites to Christ both in the virtue of his death and in the power of his resurrection.” Noteworthy is the fact that Murray relates both James 2 and Gal. 5:6 to the doctrine of forensic justification. Living faith is not to be defined simply as a faith wrought through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. Just because it is wrought by the Spirit it is a faith that works....

. . . A. A. Hodge comments, “Consequently orthodox theologians have always acknowledged that while faith alone justifies, a faith which is alone, or unassociated with other graces and fruitless in good works, will not justify” (*A Commentary on the Confession of Faith* [Phil.: Pres. Bd. Of Pub. 1869], p. 253). Hodge’s observation is of

value not only for what it says of the Confession but also for its testimony to what is the commonly held view of orthodox theologians (Shepherd, 1979).

With regard to the necessity of works for justification, then, Shepherd expresses the recognized Reformed position that works are required for justification because faith without works is dead and a dead faith cannot lead us into fellowship with Christ and his righteousness.

4.d. Are Obedience and Works Always to be Viewed as Meritorious?

Because Paul makes a sharp contrast between works and faith, there is a tendency among not a few to think that he is speaking of works in general and faith in general. Faith is thought to always be contrasted with works. In reality, however, Paul uses these terms as shorthand for two opposing concepts. We all understand that he is referring to faith that embraces Jesus Christ and his righteousness and contrasts it with works that seek to present human worth or merits as the basis for approval by God. Paul is clearly not speaking of every sense of faith or every sense of faith in the true God. He surely agrees that the faith the devils have is not saving faith and that there are also people who think they believe in God (and, perhaps, do so in some sense), but who do not have saving faith. Similarly, all works are not the same. In both Paul and James the terms faith and works are employed as parts for the whole and to understand what is meant when they are used, it is the whole that needs to be considered.

In the present controversy, however, it appears that a measure of confusion can be attributed to a tendency to view obedience and works as necessarily indicating meritorious activity. Thus, whenever works are associated with justification, it is understood that they are a human contribution to right-standing with God. Some might want to insist that in our theology we need to reserve the term works for meritorious performance. It is difficult to see how this would be profitable, but if it is done, it is surely not sound reasoning to insist that someone who does not share this approach is actually opening the door for legalism when he joins other Reformed theologians in saying that works are necessary for justification.

Understanding obedience and works as inherently meritorious complicates our reading of Scripture. For example, Galatians 5:6 would then tell us that what avails for justification is faith performing merits through love – something Paul clearly does not intend. We do much better if we stick with the basic meanings of these words. Obedience is simply responding positively to a command or to authority and working is simply doing. So, faith itself is obedience to the command to believe (1 John 3:23), but is not counted as meritorious for righteousness, and, even though he uses the word with a different meaning than his interlocutors, Jesus doesn't need to use qualifiers when he says that the work of God is that we believe in him whom he has sent (John 6:29). Believing is something we do, but to join Jesus in regarding it as work does not change faith into something credited for its worth. Faith is work in the sense of being a human activity. John Murray writes:

Regeneration is the act of God and of God alone. But faith is not the act of God; it is not God who believes in Christ for salvation, it is the sinner. It is by God's grace that a person is able to believe but faith is an activity on the part of the person and of him alone (*Murray, 1955, 106*).

Faith is obedience, but it is not the imperfect obedience of our faith that justifies. Believing is something we do, but it is not the performance of faith that is the instrumental cause of being accounted as righteous. It is the extraspective entrustment of ourselves to Christ and his cross and resurrection that makes it the alone instrument of justification, for it is only the righteousness of Christ that is accounted to us for right-standing with God..

If we acknowledge that faith is not only a gift of God, but also an activity, a work we perform and yet contributes nothing meritorious to our justification, then it should not be difficult to see that there is no contradiction in Shepherd when he teaches that works are necessary for justification and also that "...there is nothing that any man can do to save himself from condemnation or to contribute to his salvation in any sense or at any point,...." (thesis 2). His understanding is that the works that accompany faith and are the manifestation of faith are not meritorious and are not to be seen as contributing anything to justification. In this analysis, he follows Machen, saying:

Machen described this chasm when he wrote in developing further his reconciliation of the teaching of James and Paul:

Moreover, as the faith that James condemns is different from the faith, which Paul commends, so also the works, which James commends, are different from the works, which Paul condemns. Paul is speaking about "works of the law" -- that is, works which are intended to earn salvation by fulfilling the law through human effort. James says nothing in chapter 2:14-26 about works of the law. The works of which he is speaking are works that spring from faith and are the expression of faith. Abraham offered Isaac as a sacrifice only because he believed God. His works were merely an evidence that his faith was real. Such works as that are insisted upon by Paul in every epistle. Without them no man can inherit the kingdom of God (Gal. 5:21). Only -- and here again James would have been perfectly agreed -- such works as that can spring only from faith. They can be accomplished not by human effort, but only by the reception of the power of God (Op. cit., p. 221) (Shepherd, *The Grace of Justification*).

Machen and Shepherd emphasize that, when speaking of the believer's works in connection with justification, they distinguish such works from those that seek to be meritorious so as to contribute to right-standing with God. Believing works are commanded in Scripture and, not infrequently, related to the reception of eternal life (e.g., Matt. 5:7; 6:14,15; 12:36, 37; 16:27; 18:23-35; 25:31-46; John 15:1-14; James 2:13; Rev. 20:12, 13; 22:12, 14, 15). They do not contribute to justification, but are evidence, fruit, expressions and manifestations of faith. Faith cannot exist without works, but believing works do not merit anything. Shepherd says repeatedly that justification is exclusively through the imputed righteousness of Christ. Works are compatible with and demonstrative of total reliance on Him.

Nevertheless, it almost seems like his critics cannot conceptualize works without attributing some form of merit to them. Shepherd wants us to reason in a way that always recognizes that faith without works is dead, but his critics seem to think that the very nature of works implies

merit and, therefore, if works are said to be necessary for justification, this can only suggest that they make a contribution to justification – a point Shepherd consistently denies.

As we saw already, Robertson writes that Shepherd's "...ambiguous use of the phrase 'obedience of faith' then serves as a means of communicating the idea that justification is by the obedient acts done in faith as well as by faith, which inevitably comes to expression in obedience to God" (Robertson, 2003, 95). This is a distorted summary of what Shepherd believes. He does not teach that obedient acts done in faith constitute any part of justification. They are necessary because only obedient faith saves, that is, only living faith justifies. Of course, it is really only Christ's imputed righteousness by which we are justified, but, I trust, we all agree on that.

When Shepherd speaks of the obedience of faith, he thinks of obedience to God and his law that is a manifestation of faith. He uses this term in a manner similar to the Synod of Dort (1618-1619), when it said, "This election is not based on foreseen faith, the obedience of faith, holiness, or any other good quality of disposition, as a cause or condition in man required for being chosen, but men are chosen to faith, the obedience of faith, holiness, and so on" (*Dort*, I.9, ed., *Book of Praise*, 1984). We have been chosen for the obedience of faith, and not of merit, that we may manifest Christ in us. This obedience expresses our faith in the Christ who is our righteousness. It is not the basis for our justification. With Dort, Shepherd rejects the error that God "...chose or selected the act of faith, which in itself is without merit, as well as the imperfect obedience of faith, to be a condition of salvation. In His grace He wished to count such faith as complete obedience and worthy of the reward of eternal life" (*Dort*, I, Error 3, ed., canrc.org).

Leading up to the above statement, Robertson states:

In a similar manner, when Mr. Shepherd asserted that Paul excluded only works done in an attitude of boasting and pride from the "way" of justification and did not intend to exclude also the "good works" done in faith by the regenerate as the "way" of justification, he had the obligation of establishing this point on clear exegetical grounds. Working in the context of history since the Reformation, he basically had a responsibility to answer the argument of John Calvin and others in their analysis of the scope of the "works of the law" excluded from justification by Paul. Calvin had argued quite convincingly that if Paul were excluding only boastful works from justification, then he would not have cited the Old Testament to show that if a person should do these very "works" he would be blessed with *life* (see John Calvin's treatment of *Galatians* 3:10,13 in his *Institutes* III, ii, 19 [probably II,xi,19 is meant]) (Robertson, 2003, 95).

In this section, Calvin is speaking of works with the power to justify and he rightly excludes all works from justification in that sense. As we have already seen, Shepherd follows Calvin on this point. Here we encounter Robertson's fundamental misreading of Shepherd. He interprets him as saying that works have the power to justify. In reality, Shepherd speaks of the necessity of works only in the sense of faith without works being dead. Boastful works of unbelievers who seek justification on the basis of their works are not those that evidence living faith. Believing works, on the other hand, are the manifestation of faith and faith without such works is dead (James

2:26). Dead faith cannot possibly justify. This is the point that Machen and Shepherd make and no other.

Shepherd writes:

[T]he gospel which comes with the power of the Spirit bears the fruit of the Spirit in faith, repentance, and new obedience. Neither faith nor repentance, nor the works, which flow from and are the manifestation of faith and repentance, become the meritorious ground upon which the sinner is justified and given the title to eternal life. They are descriptive of the way in which God sovereignly and efficaciously brings his children into the possession of all that Jesus has wrought for them. As Calvin describes it, "Those whom the Lord has destined by his mercy for the inheritance of eternal life he leads into possession of it, according to his ordinary dispensation, by means of good works" (*Institutes* III, 14, 21) (Shepherd, 1979).

The dynamic that Shepherd describes is one that denies all human merit and this with the purpose of excluding any suggestion that our works can contribute anything to our salvation. They do not work justification but they have a role in the way in which God leads us into possession of eternal life. It is not legitimate to translate his use of the term, "way," as the instrumental means by which we are justified, as do Robertson and other critics.

Shepherd calls attention to occasions when Scripture shows that faith itself is obedience and work in order to demonstrate how obedience and works do not necessarily speak of merit. After all, Reformed theology teaches that we are not accounted righteous because of the worthiness of our faith. Therefore, if faith, considered as a work we do, is not meritorious, then works that accompany it should not be regarded as meritorious, either. Some critics, on the other hand, interpret Shepherd's point as teaching the exact opposite. For them, if he counts faith to be an obedient work, then he attributes meritorious worth to faith. This will become evident when we consider what critics say about his teaching concerning the relationship of faith and works.

This basic difference in mindset with regard to works is, probably, the main contributor to the misreading of what Shepherd and Machen say. Again, it should be possible to disagree with Shepherd without assigning to him legalism, Arminianism, and Romanism, which are all based on works as meritorious. One can prefer to understand works in a meritorious sense, but that does not mean that Shepherd teaches that we are justified by faith and works when he only says that works, in a non-meritorious sense, must be present if the faith that justifies is to be genuine.

4.e. Faith and Works

A major complaint leveled against Shepherd is that he does not distinguish clearly between faith and works. Phillips writes:

The problem here is... a clear refutation of a definition of faith that is distinct from works. He is asserting that justifying faith is not merely "shown" by its works, as James 2:18 says and as the whole flow of James' argument indicates, but that justifying faith and its works are one and the same thing. For this reason, Shepherd has been able to say

simultaneously that we are justified by faith alone and that we are justified by works. Faith, repentance, and the new works of obedience that follow are not merely joined in salvation, but are meshed together in what Shepherd calls "the obedience of faith," wrongly applying Paul's use of that expression in Romans 1:5 (Phillips, 2005, 121).

Does Shepherd really make faith and works the same thing? Consider the following quotation:

But if Paul says that the faith which avails for justification is faith working through love, does he mean that faith derives its power to justify from love so that it is after all love or works that justify and not faith? Not at all! This is the Roman Catholic interpretation of Gal. 5:6, which affirms precisely what Paul denies in the very same verse as well as in the Epistle as a whole. Faith alone justifies – that is Paul's doctrine. Faith looks neither to itself nor to its own working for justification. Faith lays hold of Jesus Christ and his righteousness and the righteousness of Jesus Christ is imputed to the one who believes. This is the distinctive function of faith in justification, which it shares with no other grace or virtue. The righteousness of Jesus Christ is imputed to the sinner the moment he believes. He believes and is justified. But Paul nevertheless specifically says in Gal. 5:6 that this faith which lays hold of Christ for justification is not alone, it is a faith that works through love. Hence Calvin says of Gal. 5:6, "Indeed, we confess with Paul that no other faith justifies 'but faith working through love.'" (*Institutes* III, 11, 20) (Shepherd, 1979).

We see, then, that Phillips' description of Shepherd's position is a misconstruction of his thought. He no more makes faith and works the same thing than do Calvin and Paul. The faith that alone justifies is a faith that works. Shepherd appeals also to Turretin to show that his position is that of Reformed orthodoxy:

Francis Turretin is a leading exponent of classical Reformed orthodoxy in the latter part of the seventeenth century. In answer to the question whether faith alone justifies, Turretin observes: "The question is not whether *solitary* faith [*fides solitaria*], that is, separated from the other virtues, justifies, which we grant could not easily be the case since it is not even true and living faith; but whether it *alone* concurs to the act of justification, which we assert: as the eye alone sees, but not when torn out of the body. Thus the particle *alone* does not modify the subject but the predicate, that is, *faith alone does not justify, but only faith justifies*; the *coexistence* of love with faith in him who is justified is not denied, but its *coefficiency* or co-operation in justification...."

The analogy of the eye which Turretin uses is one that is frequently found in Reformed authors to accent the distinctive office of faith in relation to justification while preserving what must be said about the vitality of this faith. The eye alone sees. The ear or the nose or the arm do not see. There is no other instrument of vision but the eye alone. However, there is no such thing as a seeing eye in isolation from the body. The eye sees only as it is organically joined to the body. Similarly, justification is by faith alone, but a faith, which is alone, does not justify. This is the teaching of James and Paul and it has been characteristic of Reformed theology (Shepherd, 1979).

It is evident that Shepherd's teaching about the relationship of faith and works is the doctrine of the Reformation. Faith cannot exist alone, so justifying faith is never without works. However, faith and works do not both justify. Works do not cooperate with faith or with grace to effect justification. Despite Shepherd's clarity, Michael Horton, as we have already noted, sees similarity between Shepherd's teaching and the late medieval theory of congruent merit and concludes his comparison by saying that Shepherd insists "that faith *and* obedience (or faith *as* obedience) are the instruments of final justification" (Horton, 2007, 205). Shepherd teaches that works cannot be lacking for justification, that it is only those who persevere to the end that will be saved, but it is a misreading to say that he teaches something similar to Catholicism or that faith and works are instruments of justification in virtue of their obedience. Neither faith nor works effect justification at any point.

Robertson reports, "The controversy began with Mr. Shepherd's assertion that works paralleled faith as the *instrument* of justification. The issue continued as Mr. Shepherd insisted that works were the way of justification, and that faith included in its essence the good works that justify" (Robertson, 2003, 19). We have not verified the earlier statements, but the later writings would suggest that earlier statements, too, were meant to teach the orthodox view expressed in the writings made public since 1978.

One of Shepherd's points is to insist that works must not be seen as only subsequent to justification by faith. When we are justified, they parallel faith. We are not justified by faith unaccompanied by works and then sanctified by faith and works. As the Reformers pointed out, we cannot be justified by dead faith. Even if some of Shepherd's earlier expressions could have left some doubt, this has been cleared up for many years. We have already cited sufficient statements to show that he holds that faith is the alone instrument of justification and that it does not share its distinctive function with any other grace or virtue. It cannot be said that he confuses faith and works. He distinguishes them, but follows Scripture in not abstracting faith from works or works from faith.

When critics give a Romanist sense to Shepherd's early statements about works paralleling faith as instrument, they interpret him with a view of instrumentality that contradicts his teaching. He has been clear about justification being forensic and not through inwrought righteousness. The Reformed view of the instrumentality of faith in justification is that faith does not have the power to justify. It only expresses our communion with and dependence on Christ. When works are associated with faith in justification, faith is still seen as only an instrument of trust in the Lord. This trust is not an abstraction, but expresses itself in works, works that manifest extraspective dependence on Christ as our only righteousness. Any analysis of Shepherd that gives a non-Reformed sense to faith's instrumentality, evidenced in works, is not even close to being on target. Contrary to the claims of Robertson, Horton, and Phillips, a concept of instrumentality that functionally makes faith and/or works a basis or ground for justification is totally absent from Shepherd's theology.

Shepherd's burden is that our theology reflect Scripture in teaching that true repentance, faith and works exist together and cannot do otherwise. The controversy started when Shepherd became convinced that in James 2 the same forensic sense of justification is used as in Romans and Galatians. What does he conclude, then?

James does not deny that faith justifies, but he does deny that *inactive* faith justifies. Faith without works is *dead* (2:26). Dead faith does not save (vs. 14) and dead faith does not justify (vs. 24). This is what James has in view when he says that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone (Shepherd, 1979).

The following illustration may help understand James. If we say that a pedestrian was struck down by a red Ford, we do not mean that the victim was hurt by the redness or fordness of the moving object, but the description is important to identify what hit the person. Similarly, when James tells us that we are justified by works and not a faith that is alone, he does not mean that works effect justification, only that it is not inactive faith that justifies. To conclude that Shepherd teaches that faith and works cooperate as instruments that produce justification is to miss his point. As Calvin taught, works are required for justification, but they do not have the power to justify.

Seeking to express the doctrine of an important theme in Scripture, Shepherd speaks of perseverance in works as necessary in the way of justification. He calls attention to the necessity of works, but his opponents persist in reading a measure of efficiency into what he explains, identifying “way” as a different expression for “instrument.” The following is an example of what Shepherd writes:

Hebrews 10:36-39 together with chapter 11 of which it forms the preface is closely related to James 2:14-26. Vs. 36 says that you have need of endurance or perseverance. This is perseverance in the face of opposition. Specifically it is perseverance in doing the will of God. It is perseverance in obedience to God. Why is this perseverance in obedience necessary? The answer given is that you may receive what is promised. Perseverance in doing the will of God is the way in which the believer comes into possession of what is promised.

Vs. 38 specifies what is promised as *life*, the fullness of redemptive blessing and privilege. The path of obedience is the way into eternal life. Our Lord taught the same truth in Matt. 7:14. “For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it” (Shepherd, 1979).

It is evidently difficult to express oneself in a satisfactory way, once the intended audience has adopted a mindset that construes the message differently. While Shepherd seeks to have our theology do justice to the historical process described by Jesus and the author of Hebrews, his opponents work with a paradigm that grants only two options to the human role in justification. Man either seeks to provide his own ground for it, or God gives him faith as the instrument of justification. With only two options, works cannot be considered necessary and are, therefore, limited to having a role in sanctification. They are viewed as the necessary fruit and evidence of faith, but not in association with justification.

Shepherd has shown, however, that limiting ourselves to only two options cannot do justice to the dynamic of much biblical language. He does nothing that is new to Reformed theology when he describes works as necessary for justification, but many critics do not seem to hear what he is saying. Hence, they read him as teaching that we are justified by faith as obedience or that final

justification is by both faith and works or that faith and works are one and the same thing. None of these is true. He only teaches that works are necessary for justification (whether at our effectual call or on Judgment Day) because we can be justified only by living faith, that is, active faith.

Shepherd argues that repentance has a role in justification that is similar to works. This is helpful because the necessity for repentance is well established in Reformed confessional statements and it is generally accepted that this role is not limited to one of the two options just mentioned:

The demand for repentance is not a demand that men save themselves by the merit of their own accomplishment of self-righteousness. The Westminster Confession makes this very clear in the very same sentence where the indispensable necessity of repentance is affirmed. Repentance is not to be rested in as any satisfaction for sin, nor is it any cause of the pardon of sin. Pardon is the act of God's free grace (XV, 3). Therefore the proclamation of repentance is not the introduction of a doctrine of salvation or justification by the "works of the law." Repentance is rather the necessary implicate of coming to Christ in faith. The Shorter Catechism, Qu. 85 (cf. Qu. 86, 87), and the Larger Catechism, Qu. 153, immediately join repentance to faith. The one is not required without the other. Neither repentance nor the works appropriate to repentance (Acts 26:20) constitute satisfaction for sin or the ground of pardon because these benefits are found in Jesus Christ and his mediatorial accomplishment. The faith invariably intertwined with repentance rests upon Christ alone for justification of life (Shepherd, 1979).

Repentance for the remission of sin and the works appropriate to it are indispensable for the pardon of sin. They are inextricably intertwined with saving faith, but never supplant faith in its unique function of entrustment to Christ for deliverance from condemnation.

Repentance, faith and works do not merge in the sense of becoming one and the same thing or losing their distinctive functions. Nevertheless, they can be said to merge as they join together in obedient response to the call of the Gospel. We can think of a car merging into a lane with other cars as part of one stream of traffic. That car does not become part of one of the other cars. It merely joins the others in the same lane. Even if we use a different illustration that brings the two even closer, as is done below, namely, that faith is like blue in a blue car, it is still clear that blue is not a car. When Christ calls us to follow him, come to him, repent, and do the will of his father, he calls to faith at the same time. The call to faith and repentance is a call to obedience and vice versa, not in the sense that they all are the same thing, but in the sense of always being conjoined. They cannot exist or act separately:

Because faith is called for in all gospel proclamation, exhortations to obedience do not cast men upon their own resources to save themselves, but are grounded in the promise of the Spirit to accompany the proclamation of the whole counsel of God with power so that the response of the whole man called for in the gospel is wrought in the sinner (Shepherd, 1978, thesis 31).

Just as the truth that salvation is wholly of God's grace cancels out neither the need to exhort men to faith in order to be saved nor the need to warn men against the disastrous consequences of unbelief, so also the fact that this grace is realized experientially by faith which will inevitably bear fruit in the life of the believer, cancels out neither the need to exhort believers to obedience which issues in eternal life nor the need to warn them against disobedience whose consequence is death (Rom. 6:4, 12, 16, 22; and Rom. 8:1, 4, 12, 13). Gospel proclamation that calls upon men to accept Jesus Christ as Savior without either expressly or by implication calling upon them to submit to him as Lord, is a gospel that calls men to dead faith. Gospel proclamation that calls men to obedience of life as anything other than a manifestation of faith in Jesus Christ, is a gospel that calls men to dead works. Dead faith and dead works are equally soul-destroying, and the gospel that urges either is an anti-gospel. Jesus calls upon men to believe in him and to become his disciples (Shepherd, 1979).

Just as it is only the eye that sees, but it cannot see except as part of the body, so it is only faith that rests in Jesus Christ for justification, but true faith cannot exist except as part of faithfulness. As Beza affirmed, faith can no more exist without good works than the sun without light or fire without heat. Faith is a heart commitment, a human attitude and activity, similar to love. Although it can be defined in the abstract, it cannot exist in the abstract. Just as blue can only exist as blue pigment, a blue car, etc., so faith can only exist as expressed in thoughts, words, actions, prayer, praise, confession, adoration, obedience, etc. When we say that we are justified by faith, we use the word faith as a part for the whole. We are really talking about faith that embraces Christ through prayer, obedience, etc. Believing works are also part of the whole, namely works expressing faith and trust in the Lord.

4.f. Fruit and Evidence

Having established that Shepherd does not confuse faith and works, or suggest that they are one and the same thing, we do well to also clarify his position about works as the fruit and evidence of faith. We have seen already that his critics repeatedly express the idea that Shepherd needs to limit his description about works in relation to faith as being only the fruit and evidence of it. They understand that, in some form or another, he blends faith and works and makes works to be more than fruit and evidence of faith.

Shepherd agrees that works are the fruit and evidence of faith. However, he is rightly concerned about possible misuse of this terminology. We cannot permit a perception that falls short of James' description of the relationship of faith and works. For James, they are so closely united that just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead (James 2:26). Faith is completed by works (James 2:22). If fruit is what faith always produces as fire produces heat and if evidence is understood as expressing that works are integrally related to faith as normal body temperature is one evidence of good health, then we need say no more about the relationship of the two. However, if it is argued that a tree does not always bear fruit, and it is possible to have faith without there always being evidence of it, then the terminology of "evidence and fruit" is insufficient.

Also, if we try to conceptualize total reliance on Christ by viewing faith as only a mental attitude and urge that all human exercises need to be removed from justification and associated only with sanctification, then we construct an impossibility. Faith acts. It cannot do otherwise. There can be no living faith if there is no action of entrustment, even if only expressed in thought.

Regarding faith as only attitude brings us no further in removing all reliance on ourselves. Even the mental attitude of faith is ours and presents the same problem as anything else that is ours.

In an article on justification by faith alone, after establishing that faith is the alone instrument of justification, Shepherd argues:

Chapter 16, section 2, speaks of the good works done in obedience to God's commandments as "the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith," and they certainly are that. But we have to avoid misunderstanding the metaphor used at this point. It is not as though faith could exist without its fruits and evidences the way an apple tree can exist without apples hanging from its branches. An apple tree without apples is still an apple tree, but faith without its fruits and evidences is neither true nor lively. Such faith is hypocritical and dead. It does not come to life after it has justified. The Confession declares that justifying faith is never, ever alone (Shepherd, 2002, 82).

Machen speaks of works as the expression of faith and Shepherd calls works the manifestation of it. Such terms are helpful. The fiducial aspect of faith can be prejudiced if we limit works to evidence and fruit of faith. By faith we rest in Jesus (*Westminster Confession of Faith* 11.2) and embrace him (*Belgic Confession* 22). Resting and embracing can only occur in confession of inability and dependence, in pleading the blood of the Savior, in loving him by keeping his commandments, in offering your son when commanded to do so, etc. When done in faith, these are all works that express faith. To say that works such as pleading the blood of Jesus are only the evidence and fruit of faith makes it difficult to escape the conclusion that faith does not include *fiducia*.

Of course, neither true faith in Christ nor works done in him do themselves justify us before God. Both faith and works are the obedience that expresses that God himself provides the Lamb for the sacrifice (Gen. 22). Together they embrace Christ for righteousness. Both lack the perfection that alone can stand before the tribunal of God. If we then speak of the necessity of faithfulness for justification, we do not mean that faithful covenant keeping contributes to our justification by constituting (part of) the righteousness that justifies. Rather, we mean that the faith that receives Christ and his righteousness must be living, active faith in Christ that is more than just saying that one believes. In other words, the faith that saves is faith that expresses itself in faithfulness to the Lord. If faith and works are abstracted from each other, it is impossible to do justice to the language of Scripture:

It is both striking and significant that the Great Commission in neither Matthew nor Luke speaks of calling upon sinners to believe. Faith is not mentioned specifically, but only by implication. What is explicitly asserted is the call to repentance and obedience. When the call to faith is isolated from the call to obedience, as it frequently is, the effect is to make good works a supplement to salvation or simply the evidence of salvation. Some would even make them an optional supplement. According to the Great

Commission, however, they belong to the essence of salvation, which is freedom from sin and not simply freedom from eternal condemnation as the consequence of sin. Because good works are done in obedience to all that Christ has commanded, they are suffused with and qualified by faith, without which no one can please God (Heb. 11:6) (Shepherd, 2000, 104).

Robertson objects to speaking about the necessity of specific actions and actions that take time:

...[A]lthough it is commonly acknowledged that the grace of repentance in terms of a whole-hearted commitment to turn from sin always will accompany the faith that justifies, it is somewhat different to say that specific actions arising from repentance also are necessary to be carried out as the way of justification. For to say that concrete actions of repentance are necessary as the way of justification is to join works to faith as the way of justification.

...Mr. Shepherd affirmed that not only faith and actions of repentance are necessary as the way of justification. Also works that take time, including even the diligent use of the outward means of grace, are necessary for justification (15, 17) (Robertson, 2003, 21).

If works are understood to necessarily be meritorious and the “way of justification” is regarded as the ground or instrumental cause of being accounted righteous, then concrete works, done over a period of time become the basis for justification as an ongoing process of progressively becoming more just. Such a construction directly conflicts with the biblical definitive declaration of forgiveness and peace with God upon repentance. If, however, works are viewed as the evidence and expression of faith and the way of justification is seen to refer to the historical covenant relationship with God in which we continue to be forgiven from day to day, while in the state of justification, and are declared righteous on the day in which all men are judged, then repentance cannot be just a commitment when we first believe. Repentance and the works of repentance are necessary the whole while we are in Christ and they evidence that we do not have just any kind of faith, but the lively, active faith in God that really brings us into fellowship with Christ and his righteousness.

When Shepherd speaks of the necessity of works for justification, he is reflecting Scriptures that associate salvation and life eternal with perseverance in concrete works of faith. James gives the concrete example of feeding and clothing a poor brother to illustrate that faith without works cannot save (James 2:14-17). The righteous who live by faith and preserve their souls are those who need to endure in doing the will of God in order to receive what is promised (Hebrews 10:36-39). The righteous who will enter eternal life are those who perform specific works of love for the least of Christ’s brothers (Matthew 25:31-46). Scripture conditions eternal weal and woe on our works in this life, not as meritorious ground, nor as instrumental cause, but as manifestation of living faith worked in us by the Spirit of God.

Mr. Shepherd provides an able exegesis of James 2 to show that James uses justification in the same forensic sense as Paul. When he writes that we are justified by works and not by faith alone (James 2:24), James is saying that we are forgiven and saved by having faith that works through love and not faith that is alone. Robertson calls this exegesis into question:

... even though [Shepherd] analyzed rather carefully the optional meanings of the word "to justify" in *James*, he never established that James meant specifically that the guilty, polluted sinner had all his sins forgiven "by works" and not merely "by faith." In this case, it would not be adequate to show that James used the term "justified" semantically to mean "declared to be just" rather than "demonstrated to be just" In order to establish that Pauline "justification" is "by works," Mr. Shepherd would have to show that James' intention was to affirm that all the guiltiness of the polluted sinner is removed by the sinner's own actions - actions which in themselves at best are imperfect and sinful (Robertson, 2003, 94-95).

Robertson fails to convince. First, he argues against a position he mistakenly attributes to Shepherd. We have already seen how Shepherd is clear that James (or Paul) does not teach that works effect justification. Second, Robertson uses an argument that would imply that it is faith itself that removes the guilt of the polluted sinner. James teaches that we are justified by works and not by faith that is alone, because it is only working faith that brings us into fellowship with Christ, who removes all the guilt of the polluted sinner – even though his faith is imperfect and sinful.

Shepherd distinguishes properly between faith and works, promoting the historic Reformed doctrine that faith is the alone instrument of justification, but it is not alone when it justifies by bringing us into union with Christ. He does not confuse faith and works, nor does he confuse justification and sanctification – another charge often leveled against him.

4.g. Justification and Sanctification

Many think Shepherd confuses justification and sanctification. He is thought to not clearly distinguish between the two and his close association of faith and works is said to make justification dependent on sanctification, while we must preserve the order that justification precedes sanctification. God works holiness in us only after he declares us to be just on the ground of Christ's righteousness. Now, it is true that Shepherd has real differences (not just misunderstandings) with many of his critics on this matter, but, in this writer's judgment, this is not a confusion of justification and sanctification and actually some of his critics confuse them.

It has already been noted how (in thesis 26) Shepherd distances himself from the Romanist view that justification is a process in which the unjust man is transformed into a just man by the infusion of grace and how he observes that this confuses justification with sanctification. As a Reformed theologian, he states that this "...contradicts the teaching of Scripture that justification is a forensic verdict of God by which the ungodly are received and accepted as righteous on the ground of the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ."

He also makes a clear distinction when he writes:

There is a radical distinction between justification and sanctification. Justification is an act of God's free grace with respect to his people whereby he pardons their sin and accepts them as righteous on the ground of the righteousness of Jesus Christ imputed to them and received by faith alone. Sanctification is a work of God's free grace in them

whereby He transforms them progressively into the image of his Son (Shepherd, 1979).

There is, therefore, no difference between Shepherd and other Reformed ministers about how justification and sanctification are to be defined and about how Romanism confuses the two. There are some differences, however, about how to relate the two. For Shepherd, the inception of sanctification precedes justification and there are aspects of justification that both accompany sanctification and follow it. His critics generally insist that justification only precedes sanctification and sanctification only follows justification. They tend to wrongly conclude that Shepherd makes justification to be grounded in sanctification.

In his article about justification by faith alone, Shepherd reviews the teaching of the Westminster Confession on effectual calling, regeneration, justification, and sanctification and writes:

Faith is logically prior to justification. We believe with a view to being justified. Because regeneration is prior to faith and is the initiation of sanctification, we have to say that the process of sanctification is begun prior to justification. This does not mean that justification is sanctification, or that sanctification is the ground of justification. This was the erroneous teaching of the Council of Trent. Justification is forensic, not transformative (Shepherd, 2002, 83).

In this connection, he points out that there is a difference between Lutherans and Reformed with regard to the order of the application of redemption:

Lutheranism can also maintain that "faith is never alone," but means by this that saving faith is always *followed* by works and is productive of works. The sequence is of fundamental importance. This is not what the Westminster Confession means when it says that justifying faith is never alone and cites James 2:17, 26 together with Galatians 5:6 to support that affirmation.

The pattern in Lutheranism is similar to Romanism with unformed faith (faith alone) prior to justification, and a formed faith subsequent to justification. Lutheranism could never confess in the same way as the Westminster Confession that justifying faith is never alone. For Lutheranism that would be to deny the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

The Confession says that faith is the alone instrument of justification, but this faith is never alone. The "alone" in the expression "by faith alone" in the Catechisms is not an adjective but an adverb. The point is not that the faith is thought of as existing all by itself, even in the act of justification. Rather, the point is that the justifying verdict is received only by faith and in no other way (Shepherd, 2002, 81).

Lutherans and Reformed both hold that faith is the only instrument of justification, but Lutherans generally teach that faith is alone when it justifies and classic Reformed statements do not. Lutherans insist on a sequence that has all sanctification follow justification. The Lutheran Formula of Concord states, "...after that man is justified by faith, then that true and living faith works by love (Gal. v. 6), and good works always follow justifying faith..." (Art. III,

Affirmative VIII) and rejects as error the teachings “that faith does not justify without good works, that therefore good works are necessarily required for righteousness, and that independently of their being present man can not be justified” (Art. III, Negative XI). Of course, when the Reformed say that justifying faith is accompanied by works, they do not mean that works have the power to justify, only that they are present when faith justifies, something the *Formula of Concord* rejects as error.

In contrast to many of his Reformed critics, Shepherd asks us to consider that justification and sanctification accompany each other. The beginning of sanctification supplies the faith that is the instrument of justification. The aspect of justification that pertains to the daily forgiveness of the believer accompanies his sanctification, and the final declaration that we are counted among the righteous when Christ divides the sheep from the goats takes place when our sanctification is complete. This does not mean that justification is grounded in sanctification, nor that justification is accomplished through sanctification, only that the two should not be defined sequentially.

If the daily pardon of the justified sinner is counted as sanctification the two are confused. This is also the case if justifying faith is thought to not be part of inward renewal, i.e., sanctification. Although justification should not be defined as wholly preceding sanctification, it must be maintained that justification is always grounded in the one sacrifice of Christ, that the believer experiences only one justification, and that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus in a union that is definitive at the moment of his effectual call.

4.h. The Nature of Righteousness

One of the points of contention between Shepherd and his critics is the function of merit in man’s relationship with God. Shepherd finds himself in agreement with theologians such as S.G. De Graaf, K. Schilder, J.G. Woelderink, G.C. Berkouwer, John Murray, Anthony Hoekema, C. Vander Waal and J. Faber who call into question the idea that in the Adamic administration confirmation in righteousness and entrance into eternal life were grounded in the merit of the works man was to perform. They prefer to not call the original covenant a covenant of works. They do not question the necessity of perfect, perpetual, and personal obedience in that administration, only whether the reward was to be in exchange for merits produced. Murray writes:

From the promise of the **Adamic** administration we must dissociate all notions of meritorious reward. The promise of confirmed integrity and blessedness was one annexed to an obedience that Adam owed and therefore, was a promise of grace. All that Adam could have claimed on the basis of equity was justification and life as long as he perfectly obeyed, but not confirmation so as to insure **indefectibility**. Adam could claim the fulfillment of the promise if he stood the probation, but only on the basis of God's faithfulness, not on the basis of justice. God is debtor to his own faithfulness. But justice requires no more than the approbation and life correspondent with the righteousness of perfect conformity with the will of God (Murray, 1977, 56).

In criticism of Shepherd and in defense of merit and a covenant of works, Phillips, for example, writes, “The logic of God's covenant with Adam was that obedience produced righteousness,

righteousness received justification, and justification received life” (Phillips, 2005, 113). Before discussing the Adamic covenant, it will be helpful to reflect on the nature of righteousness in relation to justification.

Good works have merit in the sense of being worthy. They are to be approved, encouraged, honored, and praised. They deserve to be recognized and God both blesses and rewards man for obedient good works. We can even speak figuratively of God repaying an upright person for his good works. Nevertheless, there is a concept of merit produced by works that is not correct.

The *American Heritage Dictionary* gives as one of its meanings for *merit*: in “Christianity, Spiritual credit granted for good works.” Here we have a Romanist concept of merit that should be rejected. In Rome good works take on the character of a spiritual currency, credits exchanged for God’s favors. Rome teaches that God owes nothing to man, but gives man grace. God’s grace is counted as meritorious and, by cooperating with grace, man earns more merit – recompense owed for actions or accomplishments. Merit is governed by a principle of equality. Each action merits a corresponding reward or punishment. A modern Catholic Catechism states:

Merit is to be ascribed in the first place to the grace of God, and secondly to man's collaboration. Man's merit is due to God.... Moved by the Holy Spirit, we can merit for ourselves and for others all the graces needed to attain eternal life, as well as necessary temporal goods (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1993, 2025, 2027).

In Rome’s view, merit is treated as capital that can be exchanged for other commodities. All God’s graces are such merits or commodities. Justice becomes the administration of merits. A ledger of debits and credits is drawn up. Debits can be compensated by penance, grace and works of supererogation. Heaven is earned by means of a cooperative effort of God, man and saints.

Elements of this view of merit can also be found in Reformed theology. Charles Hodge, for example, writes, concerning the imputation of active obedience:

The second consequence attributed to the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, is a title to eternal life. This in the older writers is often expressed by the words “adoption and heirship”. Being made the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus (Gal. iii. 26), they are heirs of God and joint heirs with Jesus Christ of a heavenly inheritance. (Rom. viii. 17.) The mere expiation of guilt confers no title to eternal life. The condition of the covenant under which man was placed was perfect obedience. This, from all that appears in Scripture, the perfection of God requires. As He never pardons sins unless the demands of justice be satisfied, so He never grants eternal life unless perfect obedience be rendered. Heaven is always represented as a purchased possession (Hodge, III, 164).

Without, of course, denying that God requires perfect obedience, it is noteworthy how similar Hodge’s paradigm is to the Romanist. For him, it is not sufficient that sins be expiated but eternal life needs to be purchased. Here we see both the debit/credit ledger and the merit/purchase idea. Hodge’s construction is different from Rome’s in that it does not settle for anything less than perfect obedience and the only one who purchases heaven is Christ, but the merit model is similar.

It is telling that Hodge says the older writers used the words adoption and heirship to express entitlement to eternal life. Not only is entitlement by inheritance based on a significantly different principle than entitlement by purchase, but this also sounds like a concession that the early reformers generally did not have a theology of imputation of active obedience with a view to meriting (in the sense of purchasing) God's favor and eternal life.

The "purchase of heaven" paradigm represents a confusion of economic and judicial concepts. Righteousness is about justice, about right and wrong, not about producing a commodity with value that can be exchanged for another commodity. Judicial concepts of merit apply to obedience to God's laws, but not economic ones. Eternal life is not a wage and is not purchased. As a matter of fact, the Gospel is not about acquiring heaven but about restoring fellowship between God and his people. For justification, then, the point is not to do away with all uses of merit, but to not confuse judicial merit and economic merit.

With regard to our service to the Lord, we need to distinguish between economic perspectives relating to production and performance and judicial perspectives concerning right and wrong, good and evil. The principle that obtains when the Lord rewards man for his stewardship is not that of justification, but of rewarding accomplishments. A laborer is worthy of his hire and his salary is his due. This is so, not because righteousness merits such rewards, but because the labor or the work produced merits it. The labor must be done righteously for the salary to be received, but it is not the righteousness that is being recompensed.

Righteousness is fair play in a soccer game. It is not the achievement of winning the game. A team that commits no infractions of the rules is righteous, but that does not lead to a reward for winning. Although righteousness in a game is indispensable for winning, the winning team is rewarded for effort and skill, not for righteousness. This distinction is essential for the proper understanding of biblical justification. God rewards achievement and performance, but that reward is not merited justification.

Do good works merit justification? In a judicial sense they do, but not in the sense of wages or economic value. Good works deserve judicial approval and that is what justification is about. Righteousness can even be rewarded, but not as repayment of credit. A finder who returns a lost wallet to its owner may be given a reward, but the owner is under no obligation to give a reward to the finder for doing what is right. God may wish to encourage us to do what is right, but doing what is right does not place God under obligation to give recompense. Eternal life is not compensation for righteousness, not even in the sense that God voluntarily or graciously is pleased to place himself under such an obligation. This would be foreign to the concept of righteousness.

In justice, righteousness and unrighteousness do not call for equal consequences. Unrighteousness deserves punishments that correspond to the severity of the crime committed, but there are no degrees of righteousness that merit corresponding rewards. With regard to law-breaking we can speak of wages for sin (possibly a figure of speech), but we should not speak of a declaration that one is upright as being a wage. Civil authorities pursue after the criminal until he is brought to justice. No one goes after a righteous person to give him some kind of

remuneration for doing what is right and one cannot accumulate merits by being more and more righteous. Such ideas are naturally foreign to justice. We simply hold that everyone is obligated to be righteous and to do righteous acts. A covenant servant obeys his suzerain, not in order to merit wages, but just because it's the right and loyal thing to do.

Righteousness is a gift of God and life and liberty are conjoined with it. Sin merits death and thus the sinner loses life as a matter of justice. When restored to righteousness, life and liberty are also restored to the former sinner. They accompany justification. It is legally wrong for a just person to be incarcerated or put to death. He has a right to life and liberty, but that does not mean that his works have produced the righteousness that guarantees this right. When we reason that obedience produces righteousness, which receives justification which merits life, we are probably using logic that applies to economics rather than justice, since righteousness is not a commodity that is produced.

It can be said that righteousness is produced or achieved in the sense that a righteous person produces works that are righteous or in the sense that a person can take action to change sinful situations into righteous ones. In a more basic sense, however, works do not produce righteousness (i.e., right-standing) and thus achieve justification. Righteousness precedes works. A person must first be righteous in order to do what is righteous. This is demonstrated in the Adamic covenant.

Adam was already righteous when created. He did not start out as only innocent with the obligation to produce a righteousness that was still lacking. Innocence *is* righteousness. Adam was justified from the beginning. His righteousness would, of course, express itself in obedience and love to God. He did not have to produce something he already had. Righteousness and justification were not something to be gained. They could only be lost. It is possible that for this reason Adam was not prohibited from eating from the tree of life. He already had the right to life and may have been free to eat of the symbol of life as long as he remained righteous. Adam was called to be actively obedient. In this he would express his covenant pledges of love for God, rather than seek to earn a righteousness he already had.

God granted Adam righteousness and life, not as a salary for righteousness produced by works. God gave life to Adam as a gift when he created him righteous, and he gave it before Adam had done any work. Adam was God's workmanship, created for good works prepared beforehand that he should walk in them. He was justified, approved for his good works, not because he produced spiritual credits worthy of compensation for their righteousness, but because, having received righteousness as a gift, he walked by faith in God, doing the good works prepared for him.

Adam was justified from the beginning and so was Jesus. He did not have to produce righteousness (right-standing) through active obedience. He already had it. The sense in which he achieved, accomplished or produced righteousness was in paying the just penalty for sin and propitiating the wrath of God towards sinners. Having restored righteousness to man through the cross, Christ did not additionally have to achieve righteousness through active obedience. When the penalty for crime is paid, the former criminal is forensically innocent. When freed from incarceration, he only needs to be sure to not again commit crimes. He does not also have to

“achieve” righteousness after having paid his debt in prison. This is the case in our human system of justice. It is also true for God’s justice.

4.i. Covenant of Works?

Having been raised on the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) and the Belgic Confession (1561), I did not hear about the covenant of works until my later teens. When I did, I simply understood it to mean that righteous Adam and Eve were called to remain obedient to the Lord if they were to inherit eternal life. I did not attach particular significance to the term, “works,” other than a call to obedience. I imagine many others think about this covenant similarly. Adam and Eve were righteous from the beginning and had to express this in perfect obedience. No Reformed Christian would ever want to deny the necessity of absolute obedience to God. However, if works are understood as referring to the way of acceptance with God that Paul contrasts with the way of grace, then a different picture emerges.

Paul criticizes the view that man earns God’s favor as a meritorious reward for doing enough good works or the right works in keeping the law. He rejects the view that man finds acceptance with God on the ground of achievements presented to him. The justification of a sinner cannot be through works regarded as those of a laborer who is worthy of his hire. God’s approval and rewards are not wages for worthy works presented to him. Paul sharply contrasts works with grace: “Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness” (Romans 4:4-5).

Now, what is it that Paul condemns? Proponents of the covenant of works answer that it is only the idea that a sinner’s imperfect works can merit justification. They hold that perfect law-keeping does, in fact, merit the reward of eternal life. God’s justice functions on the principle that acceptance by God, confirmation in righteousness, and life eternal are like wages for works performed. After the fall no one is able to achieve the perfect obedience needed to merit justification, but Adam was called to and could, in fact, earn God’s favor before he sinned and Jesus Christ did earn justification and the meritorious reward for us through perfect obedience.

On the other hand, Paul’s condemnation of works righteousness can be regarded as a rejection of more than imperfect works. He could be condemning the very idea of justification being achieved through the presentation of works to God. Rather than earning justification as a laborer earns a salary, obedient works can be viewed as the fruit and evidence of righteousness already possessed. Righteous works and the doer of them are honored as they express a righteousness received as a gift from God. If righteous works are then referred to as meritorious, what is meant is that they are worthy manifestations of righteousness and the doer of such works is to be counted as just, but there will be no element of approval being purchased, no concept of wages in justification.

There can actually be a great deal of overlap between how the two views of works are described. To avoid driving a wedge between Reformed brothers, both sides should be appreciative of what others are trying to say and not attribute views to them that go beyond what they are really seeking to express. For example, in this discussion terms like, “earn” and “merit” can be used

with various meanings. In the debates, there is a tendency to assume that they are self-explanatory, while, in reality, speaker and hearer often do not have the same understanding.

The representation of God's administration with Adam has not, among the orthodox Reformed, been universally conceived of as a covenant in which justification is grounded on the earning power of works. That God's justice always requires perfect obedience to his law is, of course, not challenged. All agree that God's relationship with man incorporates a call to good works and that God recompenses the obedience of his servants and curses with death all disobedience not atoned for by Christ. What has been questioned is that God's favour towards man and his judicial acceptance are earned through works and that the key concept in the Adamic covenant is works in contrast with grace.

As was noted above, John Murray disassociates all notion of meritorious reward from God's promises of confirmation in integrity and blessedness. For him, God's promises to Adam were promises of grace. In defending this position he teaches the same as a number of theologians in the Dutch Reformed churches. In 1982, J. Faber wrote some editorials for *Clarion*, a Canadian Reformed magazine, in which he expressed his concern about the opposition to Shepherd's teachings. In his articles he provides an overview of what several Dutch theologians said in rejection of the covenant of works. It is beneficial to highlight some of the statements of these Reformed brothers. Let us start with Faber himself:

. . . [O]ne should. . . not bring a Pharisaic or Judaistic work-principle into the good covenant of Paradise. The term "covenant of *works*," used in the Westminster Standards in distinction from the expression "*covenant of grace*," must lead to misunderstanding. The misunderstanding of Prof. Shepherd's opponents is that the works in Paradise would have been meritorious. Adam would have *earned* eternal life. But the question must arise: Can man ever earn anything in relation to God? The Belgic Confession states in Article 24, speaking about man's sanctification and good works: Therefore we do good works, but not to merit by them (for what can we merit?); nay, we are indebted to God for the good works we do, and not He to us, since it is He who *worketh in us both to will and to work, for His good pleasure*. Would this confession be valid only for the life in the covenant of God's grace and not also for the covenant in the Paradise situation? The question "For what can we merit?" is a strong and striking rhetorical statement concerning the basic structure of the relation between God and man, Creator and creature. Each and every breath was a gift of God of life, and the creation of man as the image of God was fruit of God's favour (Faber, *Clarion*, 31 : 5).

Faber quotes S. G. De Graaf's explanation:

We are accustomed to speaking of this covenant as the covenant of works. However, we should not take this name to mean that man was expected to earn eternal life as a reward for doing good works, as though eternal life was man's payment for services rendered. Because man owes everything he is and has to God, we may never speak of man earning wages paid out by God. Therefore it might be wiser to speak of the covenant of God's favor (Faber, *Clarion*, 31 : 5).

Faber continues:

G.C. Berkouwer resolutely took the side of de Graaf over against the criticism of Hepp. Man's original life under God's rule can not be regarded, for even a moment, apart from God's love and communion:

Because of that fact we can never construe an antithesis between the covenants of 'works and 'grace. We err if we interpret this distinction as though God's original covenant had to do with *our* work or *our* achievement or our fulfillment of his law, while the later covenant of grace has reference to the pure gift of his *mercy* apart from all *our* works. If we assume this we are compelled to say that God's original relation to man was strictly legal,' or that the structure of that relation was determined by man's merit. In that case, we lose sight of the fact that man's obedience to God's command can never be different from a thankful response to God's own fellowship. . . .

“Even the obedience which men originally owed to God could only be regarded as the product of God's own love and graciousness and could only root in God's own fellowship, If we drive a wedge between these concepts of works and grace we interpose the notion of an impersonal legalism within the original relation of God and man” (Sin p. 208).

The way of works is condemned by God because it is not the way of God. Should we then in a speculative vision see this by-God-forbidden way laid out by Himself in Paradise? Berkouwer rightly asks: How can this infusion of merit leave room for a genuine criticism of Rome concerning their good works (Faber, *Clarion*, 31 : 5)?

Further, Faber calls attention to J.G. Woelderink (1886-1956) and K. Schilder (1890-1952). Rephrasing a citation of Woelderink, he comments:

Alas, People committed the unforgiveable error of calling this covenant a covenant of works. Woelderink makes this sharp and pointed remark: While Scripture teaches that the desire to be justified by works is the very sin of man, people adorn this sin with a crown of righteousness in the covenant before the fall. If one objects to using the word "grace" before the fall, then one should speak of a covenant of sovereign favour, in which promise and demand have their place exactly as in the covenant of grace (Faber, *Clarion* , 31 : 6).

With regard to Schilder, Faber explains:

Schilder argued that in the so-called covenant of works, the possibility to work was *given* to man and his ability was *created*. If there is spoken of a reward in Paradise, then this reward is not of merit, but of "favour." If you want to use a less clear word — a word from answer 12 [of the Heidelberg Catechism], you may say: this reward is not of merit but of "grace." God Himself made and created the connection between work and reward; both work and reward are given; all boasting is excluded, also in Paradise.

[Under the heading], "Gratuitous, a word also from the beginning," Schilder writes about the dogmatic Idea that man would have obtained eternal glory, if he would not have fallen into sin. God had spoken to man: You, second party in the covenant, may enter Into My Sabbath in the way of obedience. . . . This eternal bliss would have come upon man *in the way of obedience*, not because of his obedience. There is no *apodosis*; there is no payment legally due to man on the basis of his achievements. To speak in the words of I Cor. 4:7: What does man have that he did not receive? His reward is not of merit, but of free favour. . . . There is no contrast of *works* and *grace*, as if the covenant before the fall would have been a covenant of merit rather than favour (Faber, *Clarion*, 31 : 6).

When considering the Adamic covenant, it should also be noted that the discussion about whether entrance into eternal glory is payment for works performed or the receipt of a promised gift is not about justification. John Murray correctly observes in the citation above, that justice only requires approbation. Justification is about justice. In the Adamic covenant the declaration that Adam was just was applicable from the beginning. Among the gifts received at creation was also the gift of righteousness. From this righteousness flowed the obedience that was to be the way in which Adam would receive the gift of the promised inheritance.

It is sometimes argued that in the covenant of works the concepts of merit and earning are not used in an absolute sense. All Reformed theologians recognize that the covenant is monopoleuric in its origin. God is under no obligation to enter into covenant with man. He does so only in gracious condescension, but, it is argued, in the covenant, the Lord, in this condescension and wisdom, establishes a principle of works to govern his relationship with man. This is not, however, an adequate answer to the objections raised against the idea that the first covenant was one of works (contrasted with a post-fall covenant of grace).

This can be demonstrated by a comparison with the marriage covenant. The grace in the Lord's condescension to make his covenant can be compared to the fact that a young man is not bound to marry any particular woman. His bride has not earned the right to be asked in marriage. We can say that it is by grace that the man binds himself in covenant with his wife. More needs to be said, however. The wife is true to her husband and lovingly serves him, not in order to earn his love and not because he is true to her on the basis of the merit of her works. Rather, she obeys him as an expression of her commitment to her promises and she receives his promises as a gift, trusting him to fulfill them. The principle at the heart of the marriage covenant is not one of earning merit, but of mutual love and commitment to vows. The same is true of God's covenant with man. The eternal inheritance is not a *quid pro quo* for services rendered, but a promised love gift from God.

In his teaching about faith never being alone, Shepherd holds the same Reformed doctrine as Calvin, Turretin and the Westminster divines. In his doctrine concerning the Adamic covenant, he promotes the Scriptural views of Murray, De Graaf and Schilder, views that have their counterpart in doctrinal expressions of early reformers, before the rise of the idea that the first covenant should be viewed as one of works.

4.j. Grace and Faith in the Preredemptive Covenant?

In 2004, Shepherd provided a summary of his position that the Adamic covenant was not one of works. For him, God did not have a work contract with man. Of course, this is not a denial of the presence of a Lord/servant relationship, nor of the necessity of obedience, just that God's favor was with Adam from the beginning – an expression of love, not a relationship to be earned or purchased:

The Bible teaches that God created Adam and all of mankind in his own image for covenant fellowship. The relation established in this covenant is not analogous to the relation of an employer to an employee, but is analogous to the relation of a father to a son or a husband to a wife. It is a relationship of union and communion in the bonds of mutual love and faithfulness. This is the way the covenant relationship is described throughout the Bible and the covenant relationship established as a result of the program of redemption is similar to the original relationship. It is not a structurally different kind of relationship with the first one based on works and the last one based on grace. The program of redemption does not destroy creation but recreates, restores, and renews what was there from the beginning.

The command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is not a task to be performed in order to earn the right to eternal life. In this command the Lord does not actually ask Adam to do anything, but *not* to do something. Obedience to this command is a pure act of faith. There was no reason not to eat of the tree except for the word of the Lord. The issue in the probation was whether Adam would live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. In other words, the issue was whether he would live by faith or perish in unbelief.

Consider the fact that Adam was created holy and righteous, without sin. He was the original just man. He would live and live forever not by the merit of his works but by faith. He would exhibit the principle stated in Habakkuk 2:4 and reiterated by Paul in Romans 1:17, "The righteous will live by faith." Whatever blessing was in store for him was not a reward to be earned by performance but a gift to be received by faith.

Paul writes in Romans 4:4, "Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due." If Adam had turned a deaf ear to Satan and obeyed the Lord's command he would not have received what was his due, but a gift. He would have received that gift by faith. The Lord God did not and never does deal with his image bearers in terms of a principle of works and merit but ever and always in terms of a principle of faith and grace (Shepherd, *Law and Gospel*, 2004, 3-4).

Among those who have rejected the covenant of works, some have avoided the term grace for the Adamic covenant, explaining that Scripture always uses grace to describe the Lord's favor to man after the fall. On the other hand, Shepherd has followed Murray in freely speaking of grace, also before the fall. This is not to deny the dissimilarity between grace to the righteous and grace to sinners. Certainly, there is a difference between unmerited favor and demerited favor. The Bible's words for grace cannot, however, linguistically be restricted to mercy to sinners, and if

the absence of the term before the fall would be decisive, then terms like covenant and justification ought also to be reserved for after the fall into sin.

The use of the term faith before the entrance of sin into the world can be discussed similarly. Before the fall, Adam and Eve were not righteous on the basis of the alien righteousness of Christ, received by faith. The word “faith” gains this added dimension only after the fall. Again, linguistically no objection against speaking of the sinless living by faith is decisive. Also, theologically, *notitia*, *assensus*, and *fiducia* are all included in man’s reliance on the Lord in Paradise. Believing and faith are limited improperly if they are reserved for justification through the work of Christ. God wants our faith to extend to a far broader content. Shepherd speaks of preredemptive grace and faith in order to call attention to the fact that all God’s covenants with man are structurally similar.

Let the reader be assured that, in speaking of preredemptive grace and faith, Shepherd does not at all detract from the truths that sinners are saved by grace alone, when they deserve nothing but eternal death, and that faith is the alone instrument of coming into fellowship with Christ to be justified only through his imputed righteousness. His motivation is not to minimize how horribly offensive sin is or how disastrous its results. What he is doing is seeking to follow the lead of his predecessors, that is, to continue to develop theological understanding on the basis of exegesis. This has resulted in joining others in giving greater emphasis to the fact that even before man’s rebellion, his fellowship with the Creator was fruit of undeserved favor, leading to loving thankfulness that all boasting is in the Lord who is all in all. Clearly, there is nothing legalistic or otherwise unreformed in this perspective.

4.k. Law and Gospel

Reformed theology is characterized by an emphasis on God’s covenants. There is, however, a debate about how covenant theology is to be interpreted. In the tradition of the Westminster Standards works and grace are contrasted and two basic covenants are identified, one of works and one of grace. In this tradition, many adherents identify two opposing principles of law and promise (or law and Gospel) that are contradictory ways of acceptance with God. The above-mentioned Dutch Reformed theologians argue that law and promise are integral to all God’s covenants, and are in harmony. They become opposing principles only when the law is misused by those who seek to merit justification through works of the law. In line with this school of thought, Shepherd says:

In the Adamic, Noahic, and Abrahamic covenants law and gospel are not set over against one another as mutually exclusive principles of inheritance. They do not embody antithetical principles of faith and works, or grace and merit. What we have instead are gracious covenants with two sides; promise and obligation. All that is promised is the pure gift of grace, the undeserved and unmerited favor of God. Promises are received not by the merit of works, not as an obligation that is due to perfect performance. What is promised is a gift of grace and it is received by a living, active, and obedient faith (Shepherd, *Law and Gospel*, 2004, 5-6).

It is not the importance of perfect obedience that is being questioned, but that God repays this obedience as a debt he owes to man for merits earned. Schilder explains that, although satisfaction to God's justice can be described as payment, this does not mean that something is earned by it. In relationship to God payments to satisfy his justice are the fulfillment of covenant duties and not of earning merits. Whether as sons or servants, we only perform what is our duty, and this, in faith. God is not an administrator of contracts who pays out to each according to what he has earned:

. . . How often have we already pointed out that, *in the strict sense, "earning" is impossible* for man? When Adam, in his righteous state, makes payment to God's righteousness, does he then *earn* thereby? The answer is, no, isn't it? . . . Without a doubt, *to pay* [fulfill obligations or make satisfaction, RB] *is still not the same as to earn* [or merit, RB]. As it concerns us, to pay is, among other things, to consciously *deny* the *possibility* of having personal *merits*, to, in faith, acknowledge God's *favor* and later, that is, after the fall, his *grace*, as the only source of our *will* to pay, our *ability* to pay, and our *actual* payments. To pay is to live from God's hand. It is in the act of paying (in which we are recognized as a party together with God in a *two-sided* covenant) that we *also* continually bring *that* offering of our lips by which we praise him as the *first* party and with thankfulness experience and acknowledge God's sovereign acts of lordship in his *one-sided disposition* of the covenant.

. . . Just as one deposits his goods in a savings account and later the bank administration repays to each his own, so the Jews viewed self-righteous man as laying up treasures for himself and God later promptly repaying to those who had this right. Man pays from what is his and God returns the goods deposited in the heavenly bank with interest and profit. . . . Oh, those Jews! And oh, those Calvinists with their payment terminology! They made their Father's house into an office for administering contracts! . . . Even the thought itself, that God should be something like the Excellent Administrator [who pays out to each one his due for work performed, RB], is in conflict with *true* payment to his righteousness. If he deserves the name of Father, also in Paradise, then it is also especially *faith* in him, as the one who gives his revelation about the payment a child owes to his father (one that does not reckon credits, yet is strictly righteous): "So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded," in other words, when you have perfectly paid the requirements of God's righteousness, "say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty'" (Luke 17:10). Perfect payment to God's righteousness (response to the law) is, for mere man, the opposite of merit. . . .

For where God requires of man the offer of the *heart* in all his activities, there *true* payment can never be uncoupled from "faith, hope, and love," and what more may be man's duty. Precisely in this unchangeable way, it is again so clearly evident that God did not make a *contract* with man, but a *covenant*, and that he did not set aside his covenant (Schilder, II, 1949, 23-26) [Translation mine. RB. Italics original.].

We see in Schilder's presentation how speaking of faith and love in the Adamic covenant does not undermine justice and the duty of perfect fulfillment of law. Also, God's law is not minimized by denying a *quid pro quo* works/merit principle. Promise and law, faith and

works, love and justice are in complete harmony in God's covenants. The law is a perfect law of liberty, not only the ground for condemnation and it is not an instrument for calculating merits that place God in our debt. It is sinful misuse of the law that is condemned by Paul in his stark contrast of faith and works.

Structurally, pre-fall and post-fall covenants are the same, even though their fulfillment is radically impacted by sin. Before the fall, there is only love, no condemnation, and man is perfectly obedient. After the fall, man is hateful by nature and condemned by God in his justice. Satisfaction to God's justice is only through his mercy in Christ, only through Christ's righteousness.

Shepherd develops the theme of all God's covenants being gracious and having two sides in the first part of his book, *The Call of Grace*. He summarizes how these features are present in the Abrahamic covenant as follows:

The Abrahamic covenant was not unconditional, but neither were its conditions meritorious. This is the light that is shed on the way of salvation by the biblical teaching on covenant.

In the Abrahamic covenant, there are promises and obligations. The blessings of the covenant are the gifts of God's free grace, and they are received by way of a living and active faith. Salvation is by grace through faith. By *grace* and through *faith*! Those are the two parts of the covenant (Shepherd, 2000, 22).

All God's covenants are of grace. All consist in promises and obligations. All spell out the mutual loyalty of the two parties, God and his people. The Lord's commitments of love and communion are conveyed in his promises. His people's commitments are stipulated in obligations expressed by God in requirements, precepts and laws. The fulfillment of these obligations does not put the Lord of the covenant in debt to repay his people for their performance or production. Both parties in the covenants are debtors to their own vows. However, the parties are not equal. The only way the people can make vows and keep them is through God working in them both to will and to do. This dependence on God is expressed in faith. God's promised blessings are received by his people, not as earned rewards, but in the way of faith, faith that is expressed in obedience.

Shepherd sees the structural similarity of the covenants in all having the same principle of inheritance, namely, that of children who remain true to their Father in believing obedience. Not only Abraham lived by faith, but also Adam, and so did Jesus.

When Schilder and Shepherd call attention to faith as the way of life with God, they are thinking of man's response to God's revelation and man's total dependence on him as the source of everything. For repentant sinners this faith includes resting in Christ as God's provision of substitutionary atonement for sin, but that is only part of the general concept of faith in God. When Shepherd calls attention to Jesus' faith, he does not think of faith for the pardon of sin. Rather, he wants us to see that the man Jesus also trusted his Father and, therefore, rejoiced to do

his will. As man, Jesus, too, was dependent on his heavenly Father and lived by believing and obeying every word from the mouth of God. So Shepherd writes:

All of this is made possible through the covenantal righteousness of Jesus Christ. His was a living, active, and obedient faith that took him all the way to the cross. This faith was credited to him as righteousness.

Galatians 3:16 says, "The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed." That seed was Jesus Christ. Because Jesus was obedient unto death, even death on the cross, the promises are now being fulfilled. Galatians 3:14 says that the blessing given to Abraham comes to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus.

Nothing demonstrates the conditional character of the Abrahamic covenant more clearly than the way in which the promises of that covenant are ultimately fulfilled. They are fulfilled through the covenantal loyalty and obedience of Jesus Christ.

But just as Jesus was faithful in order to *guarantee* the blessing, so his followers must be faithful in order to *inherit* the blessing (Shepherd, 2000, 19).

The Abrahamic covenant, then, was not a one-sided unconditional covenant of promise only. Ultimately, its conditions were fulfilled through obedience, the obedience of Christ, the only obedience that could guarantee the covenant blessings. But what kind of obedience was this? Was it unbelieving obedience or obedience apart from faith? No, it was the obedience of the one true and righteous Son who knew his Father's will, was committed to it, and entrusted Himself to the Father when he did not do his own will, but the will of the One who sent him (John 6:38-39). It was an obedience of faith that was approved in Christ's probation in the wilderness, when he believingly answered to Satan, "It is written." True faith is obedience, always manifested in works and, therefore, Jesus' faith was counted to him for righteousness. Now, if we affirm this about Jesus, may we conclude from it that, in the case of the believer, it is his own faith and works that are counted to him for righteousness? Of course not, neither our faith nor our obedience contributes anything to our justification. Our only justifying righteousness is the righteousness of Jesus Christ (Philippians 3:7-9).

Shepherd's presentation of the structural similarity of all the covenants has met with much disagreement. Cornelis Venema comments:

This flattening out or virtual identifying of the pre- and post-fall covenants has unavoidable and mischievous implications for our understanding of the way of salvation. For example, one implication of Shepherd's argument is that the way of salvation, whether for Adam or Christ or any believer, is always one and the same - the way of covenant-keeping faithfulness. Thus, one of the ironies of his formulation of the covenant at this point is that, though Shepherd introduces grace into the covenant relationship before the fall into sin in a way that parallels the priority of grace in the post-fall covenant, he also treats the stipulation of obedience for believers in the covenant of grace as though it were merely a reiteration of the pre-fall obligation of obedience. Salvation is by grace through faith(fulness), before as well as after the fall.

God's promise secures or guarantees the believer's covenant inheritance. However, that inheritance can only be received by way of the believer's covenant keeping (p. 19) (Venema, 2002, 242).

Part 1 of *The Call of Grace* has specific purposes and does not broadly address all questions that may come to the reader's mind. It is a publication of a series of lectures and, of course, lectures have time constraints that limit what can be said. Shepherd's emphasis is on the structural similarity of the covenants and he assumes the basic tenets of the Reformed faith, as is clear from the preface of the book. The differences between pre and post-fall covenants as to sin and justification are not ignored. As we have seen above, it is Christ's obedience that accomplishes the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. Only his faithfulness guarantees the covenant blessings. Shepherd does not expand on justification in this covenant because the text of Genesis does not do so, but in his argument about the Mosaic covenant, he writes:

Why was the law added to the Abrahamic covenant? It was not added to propose an alternative way of salvation that was bound to fail. Paul says it was added because of transgressions (v. 19). The law was designed to counter the devastating effect of sin in the world. The law makes clear the kind of behavior that is pleasing and honoring to the Lord and is in the best interests of humanity. It warns about the consequences of unbelief and disobedience. In the sacrificial system, it also shows Israel how to lay hold of the forgiveness graciously offered by the Lord.

. . . In Deuteronomy 9:4-6, Moses reminds the Israelites that they must never say that they have taken possession of their inheritance because of their own righteousness. Rather, it is because of the Lord's righteousness in remembering his covenant that the Israelites possess the land.

...The fulfillment of this promise is ultimately possible only because of the redemptive work of the Messiah. . . . The whole sacrificial system as outlined in the Mosaic covenant is one glorious promise concerning the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.

...The Mosaic covenant shows that God forgives sin out of pure grace. . . . [Besides moral laws,] there are the laws that show how to deal with the guilt of sin. These are the ceremonial laws that describe in great detail a system of sacrifices by means of which the Israelites experienced forgiveness.

The sacrificial system does not outline a series of chores to be done in order to gain pardon and acceptance with God. Rather, the sacrificial system reveals that our God is a gracious God. He actually wants to forgive those who sin against him, even though they do not deserve to be forgiven!

The point of the sacrificial system is not how much *we* have to do to be forgiven, but how much God will do. Forgiveness comes by the shedding of blood, when the penalty for sin, which is death, is paid. It comes by way of substitution: the innocent victim takes the place of the guilty sinner. In a word, the sacrificial system promises salvation through the death of Christ. Through the ceremonial laws, the benefits of Christ's

atonement sacrifice were made available to believers before his advent and death on the cross.

...The sacrificial system is a leading feature of the Mosaic covenant. It does not exhibit a works/merit principle whereby we obtain forgiveness on the basis of something we have done. It leads us to Christ and to salvation by grace through faith in him (Shepherd, 2000, 29-34).

Shepherd shows structural similarities in all God's covenants. He argues that neither the Adamic nor the Mosaic covenant was one of works meriting an inheritance. However, he does not flatten out the differences sin brought into the world. He plainly embraces the teaching of redemption through the blood of Christ for every covenant after the fall. This is also evident in what he writes concerning the new covenant:

As we have already seen, the benefits and blessings of the new covenant are pure grace. Eternal life is promised as an undeserved gift from the Lord. He forgives our sins and receives us as righteous because of Jesus Christ and his redemptive accomplishment on our behalf (Shepherd, 2000, 50).

The advent of Christ himself made this Mosaic covenant obsolete. First, the blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sin, but the blood of Jesus can and does take away sin. Second, the commandments cannot impart life, but the resurrection of Jesus from the dead can and does impart life. . . . The death and resurrection of Jesus accomplished what the Mosaic system could never in itself accomplish. "Through [Jesus] everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses" (Acts 13:39) (Shepherd, 2000, 55).

Paul says in Romans 8:3-4 that the law was powerless because it was weakened by sinful human nature. But what the law could not do, God has done in the fullness of time by sending his Son. His Son deals definitively with the problem of sin, with both the guilt and the pollution of sin, "in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit" (Shepherd, 2000, 56).

We now return to Venema and note more criticisms:

Shepherd treats Christ as though he were little more than a model believer whose obedient faith constituted the ground for his acceptance with God in the same way that Abraham's (and any believer's) obedient faith constituted the basis for his acceptance with God. In his zeal to identify the covenant relationship between God and man in its pre- and post-fall administrations, Shepherd leaves little room to describe Christ's work as Mediator of the covenant in a way that honors the uniqueness, perfection and sufficiency of Christ's accomplishment for the salvation of his people (Venema, 2002, 243-244).

Here Venema misses the mark altogether. In drawing attention to the fact that Christ's obedience was the obedience of trusting God and entrusting himself to God's will as he fulfilled all righteousness, Shepherd only strengthens Christ's mediatorial work. One goes far wrong if he thinks Shepherd does not confess the classic Reformed doctrines about the uniqueness of Christ's work and the importance of his atonement for sin. The above citations from the book already show how the criticism is altogether untenable. There is little profit in criticizing a brother for not fleshing out a topic he is not dealing with. A critic can express the wish that an author would have said something more about a certain matter that he thinks would have been helpful, but it is always wrong to draw unfounded conclusions. Again, the reader can be assured that there is no sense in which Shepherd minimizes the uniqueness of the redemptive work of the God-man, the only-begotten Son of God. Venema's criticism continues:

Fourth, these features of Shepherd's reformulation of the doctrine of the covenant raise questions regarding his understanding of the doctrine of justification.... Shepherd does not make it clear, for example, that the believer can only obtain eternal life upon the basis of the perfect obedience, satisfaction and righteousness of Christ alone received by faith alone (compare the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 23 & 24)....

Fifth, the ambiguity in Shepherd's formulations (the reader will look in vain in this book for a clear, express statement of the doctrine of justification by grace alone *through faith alone*) is undoubtedly related to his antipathy for the idea of merit....(Venema, 2002, 244-245).

We have here more of the same problem. It is not helpful to complain that one finds little in a book about a topic that goes beyond the limitations of the book. Anyone who is seeking a clear statement on justification need only read Shepherd's *The Grace of Justification*. This and various other writings show that Shepherd heartily confesses that the believer can only obtain eternal life upon the basis of the perfect obedience, satisfaction and righteousness of Christ alone received by faith alone. We do well to do justice to Shepherd's statement in the Preface of *The Call of Grace*, that the five points of the Canons of Dort "...are certainly characteristic of, and indispensable to, full-orbed Calvinism...." (vi).

Richard Phillips is another (among not a few) that objects to the denial that the first covenant should be characterized as one of works and to Shepherd's development of this theme in the other covenants:

This aligns with the teaching of Norman Shepherd in *The Call of Grace*, which sees our justification taking place in a manner parallel to Christ's own. Shepherd writes, "Just as Jesus was faithful in order to *guarantee* the blessing, so his followers must be faithful in order to *inherit* the blessing." It is difficult to avoid the inference that we are justified by being like Jesus, by our faithfulness which is *just* as Jesus' faithfulness, instead of, as Paul puts it in Romans 5:19, being made righteous by the one man's obedience, namely, Christ, who lived and died not merely as our example but first as our federal head and our substitute. Both Wright's and Shepherd's views of justification require a mono-covenantal view of redemptive history and permit no place for the biblical covenant of works (Phillips, 2005, 107).

Phillips' inference is wrong. Shepherd is only saying that both Christ and the believer are called to faithfulness. Christ *guarantees* the blessing and his followers *inherit* it. In this passage, he does not expand on how Christ guarantees it, but in other parts of the book and in other writings he teaches that the guarantee is through the shedding of his blood, through his righteousness, through his resurrection. He does not suggest that justification is in any other way than through faith in Christ by whose mediatorial work we are reconciled to God.

We have seen that Shepherd joins other honorable Reformed theologians in objecting to the idea that acceptance by God is earned by worth produced through labor. He does not object to every sense of merit. The citations above, concerning God's forgiveness through the shedding of blood, are ample evidence that he does not deny the satisfaction to Justice accomplished by the Mediator's atoning sacrifice and justifying resurrection. Shepherd's subscription to the confessional statements about the merits of Christ's death to redeem from sin and captivity cannot be doubted. Committed to the Reformed confessions, he rejects the error of those who teach that "...by His satisfaction Christ did not really merit for anyone either salvation itself or faith by which this satisfaction of Christ to salvation is effectually made one's own" (*Dort*, II, Errors 3).

Since merit is not used in the Bible as a term for Christ's atonement, it would not be wrong to believingly reflect on whether our forefathers chose a term that is free from possible misunderstanding. We do not, for example, say that a person pays the penalty of the law by the merits of the prison term he serves. Whatever one may think about the felicity of the term merit to describe Christ's death, it is clearly wrong to deny the truth that Christ made full satisfaction to God's justice which required eternal death for our sins.

4.1. Two Covenants or One?

Venema and Phillips object to mono-covenantalism and to flattening out the differences between the pre and post-fall covenants, but are they correctly identifying the differences between Shepherd's view and theirs? In reality, it is not that one view holds to two covenants and the other to only one. Both defend the basic unity among all covenants. Those who start with a covenant of works, see the presence of the works principle in all of the covenants. In the pre-fall covenant Adam accomplished the works and in the other covenants they are accomplished by Christ. The theologians Shepherd follows see the unity in the principle of grace. Adam obeyed by grace through faith and in the post-fall covenants the righteous live by grace through faith in Christ, the Just One, who lived by faith and offered himself to God as a propitiatory sacrifice for his sheep.

Both parties also defend that there is a radical difference between the pre and post-fall covenants. For both, Adam was originally perfectly obedient and an heir to eternal life without need of a Redeemer. Both agree that after the fall no one can inherit eternal life without faith in Christ, the only Redeemer.

The real difference concerns the significance of works in the covenants. The critics hold that justification and eternal life are earned through works. In the first covenant, Adam was to earn

justification by the righteousness he produced. In the second, Christ earned life and believers receive it by grace through faith. Men like De Graaf and Murray, on the other hand, defend that righteousness is always received as a gift. Adam received the gift of righteousness and lived by faith. When he fell, he lost righteousness and came under death. In the post-fall covenants, righteousness was possessed by Christ when he began his mediatorial work and he lived righteously as he lived by grace or favor. In righteous obedience, Christ accomplished his mediatorial atoning work through which he removed the guilt of the sins of God's people.

The rejection of the covenant of works is not the rejection of the distinctiveness of the pre-fall covenant, nor of the absolute necessity of the mediatorial work of Christ for post-fall salvation. It is rather, the rejection of the concept that this distinctiveness is to be found in the earning of justification by performance of perfect works. It is not the necessity of perfect works and perfect obedience that are rejected, but the idea that, for justification, they produce credits worthy of compensation in the form of eternal life.

To reduce confusion, it would be good to follow the lead of those who choose names for the pre and post-fall covenants that more clearly point out the differences. Rather than covenant of works and covenant of grace, it would be better to use distinctions such as covenant of unspoiled favor and covenants of redemptive grace.

4.m. The Perspective of the Covenant in History and the Eternal Decrees

In Part 2 of *The Call of Grace* Shepherd seeks to shed covenant light on evangelism:

The second part deals with a perennial issue faced by Calvinists who take seriously the call to evangelize the lost with a view to their conversion to Christ and salvation in him. If God is sovereign in the planning, accomplishment, and application of redemption, how can we honestly and sincerely call sinners to faith and tell them to repent, without compromising the five points (Shepherd, 2000, vii)?

With regard to this part of the book, Venema finds Shepherd's treatment of the relation between election and covenant to be troubling:

Remarkably, because Shepherd is unwilling to distinguish between those with whom God covenants in a broader sense (covenant in its administration) and those with whom God covenants in a narrower sense (covenant in its fruition), he ends up with what sounds suspiciously like a *conditional election* doctrine. Covenant members are elect in Christ *so long as* they persevere in faithfulness. However, should they become unfaithful, they may become subject to covenant discipline and lose their election. But this is not the end of the mischief that his approach creates for our understanding of the doctrine of election. For example, Shepherd maintains that the Reformed preacher is authorized by the doctrine of the covenant to address all with the message that Christ died for them, even though some so addressed may choose not to believe and obey the gospel (p. 85). Does this mean that persons for whom Christ died, because they fail to persevere in the way of obedient faith, do not receive the covenant's blessings? In

Shepherd's formulation of the covenant's significance for our understanding of election, notes such as these are sounded that can hardly be harmonized with those found in the Canons of Dort... (Venema, 2002, 247).

Venema is by no means alone in this concern. Not a few Calvinists read Shepherd as undermining the doctrine of election. Robertson writes:

...if the only election and justification that the sinner who trusts in Christ can know may be lost, then all enduring assurance is lost. It was this point in particular that served ultimately to clarify the implications of Mr. Shepherd's various formulations, and to evoke a steady resistance to his teachings. For he clearly had introduced a new element into the classic formulations of the Reformers when he declared that justification and election by God could be lost (Robertson, 2003, 23-24).

In considering these concerns, we need to pay attention to the nature of the material presented. It, too, is a publication of speeches which imposes limitations of time and specific purposes of the occasion. For those who complain that Shepherd is confronting unnamed persons, it is good to bear in mind that he is not having a theological debate with specific people. He is only developing a point that compares methods of evangelizing. In this he contrasts the language and logic of one method with that of another. He makes reference to problems that can and do arise if one seeks to be consistent in evangelizing from the perspective of eternal election, but is not addressing what specific people are defending, nor is he challenging confessional statements. The reader is not expected to agree with all the comparisons. He is only asked to consider how evangelism from the perspective of the covenant in history can improve our way of discipling the nations.

It is also important to note that Shepherd embraces the biblical truths of the Canons of Dort. When he asks us to approach gospel proclamation from the perspective of the covenant, he is not suggesting that this perspective should replace that of eternal election or of God's sovereign regeneration. Just as architectural drawings from different perspectives are really in harmony and complement each other, so the different perspectives discussed by Shepherd do not cancel each other or compete. Now, let us look at what Shepherd writes:

Because the Calvinist has an accomplished redemption that is particular in scope though always effective for the elect, he cannot apply it to particular persons. The application has to be more general and abstract because he cannot distinguish between the elect and the reprobate in real life. That is why Reformed sermons on "the doctrines of sovereign grace" are often in the third person, expressed in terms of what Christ has done "for his own," or for those who "truly believe." The exception is the exploration of human sin, which can be, and often is, very specific and in the second person, because of the universality of sin and depravity.

... Unlike Arminians, [Calvinists] have grace that is really and truly grace. Salvation from beginning to end, from conception in eternity to consummation in glory, is all of God and is summed up in the name of Jesus Christ. But they are hampered in getting that glorious gospel across to particular persons in the pew or on the street as *grace*.

. . . The answer to this theological dilemma, therefore, is not compromise with Arminianism, but the Reformed doctrine of the covenant. The Bible itself, and the New Testament in particular, provide the data that give rise to the dilemma, and yet there is no consciousness of it in the Bible itself.

. . . The reason why the Bible is not conscious of this dilemma is not that the prophets and apostles who wrote it were not as intellectually or theologically sharp as we are. Rather, the reason is that *the prophets and apostles viewed election from the perspective of the covenant*, whereas we have tended to view the covenant from the perspective of election.

From the perspective of the covenant, there is mystery because we are creatures and God is the Creator. We cannot know God exhaustively. God remains incomprehensible. We can never know God's decree as he knows it, and for that reason we cannot begin to reflect on his salvation from the perspective of the decree, even though our salvation originates in the predestinating love and purpose of God. To look at covenant from the perspective of election is ultimately to yield to the primal temptation to be as God. The proper stance for Adam and for all of us after him is a covenantal stance of faithful obedience. Only from that perspective can election be understood as grace. Therefore, although from the perspective of covenant there is mystery, there is no dilemma and no paradox or contradiction (Shepherd, 2000, 81-83).

The problem of how to relate covenant and election is not new, of course. Shepherd's proposed solution is not new, either. In the Dutch Reformed churches the problem has been discussed extensively, for more than a century, in relation to presumptive regeneration and self-examination. Viewing the covenant from the perspective of election, a common view is that the new covenant is really only with the elect and, therefore, covenant children should be presumed to be born again. If later they show themselves to be rebellious, it can be concluded that they were in the covenant only externally. This view is often challenged with the argument that no one is to be presumed to be regenerate without there being evidence of it. Parents and the church must call covenant children to examine themselves as to whether they are in Christ and they can have assurance only upon seeing evidence of regeneration. This second view also holds that the Lord makes his covenant effectively only with the elect.

Many ministers, including men like S. Greijdanus and K. Schilder, provided a different solution to this problematic. It was to give heed to Deuteronomy 29:29 and not define the covenant according to the secret things of God. The covenant is to be understood in terms of God's revelation. He has revealed to us that he has a covenant with believers and all their children, not just the elect. The covenant is not unconditional. In it God gives his promises and also his people have their obligations and must make their commitments. The promises are addressed to all and all are called to repentance and faith, lest they be cut off. It is this solution that Shepherd has adopted and which he brings to expression when he says that we should look at God's decrees from the perspective of the covenant.

This covenantal approach is deeply rooted in classic Reformed theology. The famous ecumenical Synod of Dort (1618-1619) which spoke so clearly on God's election and man's total inability, also spoke clearly about the status of covenant children in 1.17:

We must judge concerning the will of God from His Word, which declares that the children of believers are holy, not by nature but in virtue of the covenant of grace, in which they are included with their parents. Therefore, God-fearing parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom God calls out of this life in their infancy (ed., *Book of Praise*, 1984).

The Synod reasons that while someone is legitimately in the historical covenant, this person must be regarded as elect. This does not mean that all covenant people are eternally elect, only that at a given point in history those who are legitimately in covenant with God must be counted as elect because of their status in the covenant. Covenant children dying in infancy are received into eternal communion with God, on the basis of the covenant promise that the Lord is their God and they are his people. That such infants die before they begin to fulfill their covenant obligations (or to reject them) is, of course, an act of God. At the same time, the Lord confirms that they are among his eternally elect by taking them at this early age. What is definitive for the Synod are God's own covenant promises.

The Synod's "covenant in history" approach can also be seen in Chapter 5 of the Canons in statements about sins committed by believers:

By such gross sins, however, they greatly offend God, incur the guilt of death, grieve the Holy Spirit, suspend the exercise of faith, severely wound their consciences, and sometimes for a while lose the sense of God's favour - until they return to the right way through sincere repentance and God's fatherly face again shines upon them (Article 5. ed., *Book of Praise*, 1984).

The guilt of death is incurred by sins committed by those who are in the state of justification and this guilt is removed upon confession of sin, at the same time as it is also true that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. We have here a case, similar to so many in the Bible, in which two matters that might seem to be a contradiction are plainly both true for God and the Synod sought to express this faithfully.

At an earlier date, the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) reflected the same approach. The covenant was surely the warrant for teaching all children of believers, from the youngest age that Christ had died for them. They were taught to say, "...I... am not my own, but belong...to my faithful Saviour, Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood..." (L.D. 1, ed., *Book of Praise*, 1984). Children did not start out by saying, "If I am elect," or "If I am regenerated." Of course, they were also taught the necessity of new birth and repentance, but the Catechism did not teach presumptive non-regeneration, nor limit the covenant to the eternally elect.

It is this covenant perspective that Shepherd also works out, not only in discipling covenant children and the elect who fall into grievous sin, but the nations, as well. They are to be

discipled, not with a view to searching out the elect, but by addressing God's authoritative will to the whole world. All covenant-breakers, without exception, are to be called to repent and believe and are to hear the proclamation that is Good News to all people. Shepherd explains:

In utter sincerity and without equivocation, Reformed evangelism calls every person to life in the way of faith, repentance, and obedience, with the assurance that Jesus will not refuse anyone who cries out to him for mercy. The evangelist labors in the confidence that God really stands behind the message that he has authorized him to preach to all people. God has wrought a finished and complete redemption, and so salvation (and not merely the possibility of salvation) is offered sincerely and without equivocation to all. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

. . . Both the Arminian and the Calvinist look at John 3:16 in terms of the doctrine of election, the one denying it and the other upholding it. From the perspective of the covenant, however, all of the words of John 3:16 mean exactly what they say.

The Reformed evangelist can and must preach to everyone on the basis of John 3:16, "Christ died to save you." The death of Christ is inherently efficacious; otherwise, it would not be gracious. The world is the world of human beings blinded and crippled by Satan, the prince of this world. Christ did not die for inanimate objects or preternatural beings, nor did he die for abstractions. He died for people, for sinners, for you and for me (Shepherd, 2000, 84-85).

The Heidelberg Catechism and Synod of Dort teach us to take seriously God's word in history. When God declares that he has a covenant with our children, we must take him at his word and not redefine covenant as being true only for some with whom it is made. Shepherd applies this approach of giving full weight to God's declarations also to the Gospel proclamation. It is a genuine offer of grace to the whole world, not just to the elect. God's grace is good news for everyone. Whoever believes will have eternal life. Salvation is genuinely proclaimed as available to all. There is mystery here. God loves the world even as he hates Esau before he was born.

One may be unsure whether Shepherd is right when he says that the evangelist should say to the world, "Christ died for you and for me." He may also think that Shepherd does not make himself clear at this point. What is the sense in which Christ died for all people in the evangelist's audience? One may disagree with Shepherd. However, one should not think of him as if he is denying the doctrines of God's sovereign decrees and eternal election. That would be a misreading:

If we look at this message, "Christ died to save you," from the perspective of election, it is only possibly true, and may well be false. From this perspective, Christ died only for the elect and not for the reprobate. But John 3:16 is embedded in the covenant documents of the New Testament. As such, it is not an elaboration of the doctrine of election or a commentary on the extent of the atonement. Rather, John 3:16 is covenant truth. Its specific application—and this is what the proclamation of the gospel must

be—in the declaration, "Christ died for you," is a demonstration of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ opening the way to fellowship with God (Shepherd, 2000, 85).

Christ did not die for the reprobate. The atonement extends to definite people and not to all. Shepherd holds these truths. What he says is that John 3:16 is not addressing questions about who will be saved. It is, rather, about presenting the covenant to all without restriction. The call to repentance and to be a follower of Christ is a call to covenant union and communion with the Lord. It is real communion that is really offered to all hearers and that communion is guaranteed by Christ's death. Covenant promises are not simple predictions about outcomes. They are expressions of commitments made at the moment of speaking. Thus, the specific application of John 3:16 "is a demonstration of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ opening the way to fellowship with God." Christ died to open the way of fellowship and this message is proclaimed as good news for all people, not just for some among them.

Shepherd illustrates the use of covenant language with two other passages:

The first passage is Ephesians 1:1-14. These verses are suffused with covenantal language. The Ephesians are a congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ, enjoying the spiritual blessings of sanctity of life, adoption to sonship, forgiveness of sins, and the seal of the Holy Spirit. At the same time, all of these blessings are traced back to the predestinating love of God. This accent comes through so strongly and so repeatedly at the very beginning of the letter, that Paul may even appear to be writing from the perspective of election. We would then have to understand his letter from that perspective. We would have to look at the covenant in the light of election.

Careful attention to the language of these verses makes clear, however, that precisely the reverse is the case. Paul looks at election from the perspective of covenant. For that reason, predestination is not a theological puzzle, but a cause for gratitude. When Paul says, "He chose us" [v. 4), we must ask who "we" are.

. . . are we to think that Paul was addressing only some of those on the roll of the Ephesian church and had nothing to say to the rest? How would these people know who they were...?

Any attempt to understand Paul's statement, "He chose us," as though Paul had direct insight into the eternal decree of God, is bound to be both artificial and impractical. No pastor or evangelist could use that language today because we don't know who the elect are.

In Ephesians 1, Paul writes 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. He addresses them as such and encourages them to think of themselves as elect. A Reformed pastor can and must do the same today. . . .

It is true that some in the congregation may fall away and leave the church. Paul issues a warning in view of that possibility. Were some to fall away, he would no longer speak

of them as the elect of God. However, he would not confess that "unfortunately" his initial judgment had been wrong. . . . Paul is right to address the saints and faithful in Ephesus as elect, and at the same time he is right to warn them against apostasy. He has the freedom to do this and senses no dilemma in doing so, because he has evangelized the Ephesians using a covenant methodology in accordance with the Great Commission. Only by following the same methodology can the Reformed pastor today enjoy the Pauline freedom to speak grace and encouragement to the flesh-and-blood people seated before him in his congregation (Shepherd, 2000, 86-88).

It is not that all in the covenant community *are* elect and that election can be lost, only that it is biblical to regard the faithful as elect, to treat them as such and to address Christ's church as elect. Based on the pattern of Scripture's language, it is not uncommon for Reformed pastors to instinctively do this, even when their theology tells them that God makes his covenant only with the elect. When Shepherd urges us to view election from the perspective of the covenant and not vice versa, he is asking us to do what is not so strange. When someone confesses faith in Christ, we call him a brother and speak of his salvation. If we were to consistently view the covenant from the perspective of election, we would need to regard each professor of the name of Christ with reservation. Not having God's revelation about the confession of a person's heart, we would have to always think and say, "If you are truly in Christ, then all your sins are forgiven, etc." The biblical example, however, is to speak to all who confess the Name as having eternal life in Jesus *and*, at the same time, to warn them against falling away. This is also the way Jesus speaks in John 15, for example:

A second passage that is illustrative of the covenant perspective on election is John 15:1-8. Jesus is clearly and unambiguously saying in this passage that he is the vine and that his hearers are branches abiding in him. He exhorts them all to continue abiding in him by bearing fruit, and that means by persevering in faith and obedience. If they do, the Father will see to it that they bear even more fruit. They are at no point cast upon their own resources, because as branches they get their vitality at every point from the vine. On the other hand, if certain branches do not abide in Christ, but deny him and become disobedient, the Father will cut them off and destroy them. The passage is a grand exhortation to covenant faithfulness, enveloped in the overflowing grace of Christ.

. . . If [a distinction between being in Christ outwardly or inwardly] is in the text [as is often proposed], it is difficult to see what the point of the warning is. The outward branches cannot profit from it, because they cannot in any case bear genuine fruit. They are not related to Christ inwardly and draw no life from him. The inward branches do not need the warning, because they are vitalized by Christ and therefore cannot help but bear good fruit. Cultivation by the Father, with its attendant blessing, is guaranteed.

. . . Ephesians 1:1-14, John 15:1-8, and similar passages can be understood properly only within the context of the covenant. In Deuteronomy, the great covenant document of the Old Testament, Moses writes, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law" [Deut. 29:29]. This verse means more than that we do not know

who the elect are. It means that we cannot conduct our affairs as though we were God. We have to live as creatures made by God to live by the light of his word (Shepherd, 2000, 88-90).

Covenants deal with God's revealed will and man's commitments. They speak according to expectations and not secret decrees. In terms of what a covenant disciple knows about God's will for him, he is both encouraged to continue in faithful communion with Christ and warned about what will happen if he does not abide in the Vine. Of course, the actual outcomes will be strictly according to what God has decreed from eternity, but that's a different, and no less true, perspective.

Those who misinterpret Shepherd as teaching that final justification is based on believing works and that he attributes justifying power to faith plus works, will be inclined to give an Arminian interpretation to what Shepherd teaches concerning the need to view election from the perspective of the covenant. This is decidedly not Shepherd's view. He is not speaking of a justifying process through inward sanctification that can be interrupted. It is not the case that pardon of sin can be had at one point and then later lost for lack of perseverance in the faith. We cannot know the secret things of God, but we know that the only faith that justifies is one that is alive, works through love and perseveres to the end. The covenant simply calls Christ's disciples to exercise that kind of faith. By it we receive the promises, embrace Christ, and know that in Christ we inherit the blessings of the covenant.

4.n. Baptism, the Mark of Conversion

God directs our path according to his revealed will and not his secret election. This also means that, although a disciple needs to know that he must be born again from above, the evangelist should not orient his message by trying to determine whether someone is regenerate, but by the visible profession of faith and God's baptism as the mark of conversion. It is not God's secret work of regeneration that guides the Gospel preacher, but the revealed covenant with its promises, stipulations, and signs. Shepherd tells us:

. . . [I]nstead of looking at covenant from the perspective of regeneration, we ought to look at regeneration from the perspective of covenant. When that happens, baptism, the sign and seal of the covenant, marks the point of conversion. Baptism is the moment when we see the transition from death to life and a person is saved.

This is not to say that baptism accomplishes the transition from death to life, or that baptism causes a person to be born again. That is the doctrine of baptismal regeneration, which is rightly rejected by Reformed churches. The Holy Spirit works where, when, and how he pleases, not necessarily at the precise moment of baptism.

From the perspective of election, regeneration is the point of conversion. Regeneration, however, is a secret work of the Holy Spirit, and so we do not know when it takes place. We do not have access to the moment of regeneration. What we hear from the converted sinner is a profession of faith, and what we see is his baptism into Christ. This covenant sign and seal marks his conversion and his entrance into the church as the body of

Christ. From the perspective of the covenant, he is united to Christ when he is baptized (Shepherd, 2000, 94).

Regeneration is the point of conversion, but it is not revealed to us. We are called to labor in accordance with the revealed terms of the covenant. This means that the preacher calls the unconverted to repentance, profession of faith, and baptism. To make disciples is to baptize and teach to observe all Christ's commandments. The Good News is that God establishes a covenant of union and communion with as many as the Lord our God calls. Entrance into the covenant is signified and sealed by baptism, a mark that receives due attention in New Testament evangelism. It is not reported how many were regenerated, but how many were baptized. Shepherd is not speaking of baptismal regeneration, nor of illegitimate baptisms where the biblical conditions are not present. His concern is to evangelize according to the covenant methodology of the Bible.

The covenantal focus on baptism does not mean that regeneration is discounted. Rather, the new birth is put in proper perspective. The connection between baptism and regeneration comes to vivid expression when Paul says that we are saved "through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). He also says that we are washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 6:11). A comparison of the forms of the Great Commission in Matthew and Luke (Matt. 28:19 and Luke 24:47) shows the correlation of baptism, repentance, and remission of sins. Baptism is therefore to be understood as of a piece with the total transformation that is salvation. It is the sacramental side of the total renewal (regeneration in the broad sense) of both the inner and the outer man (Shepherd, 2000, 102).

4.o. Time, Eternity and the Covenants

It is not uncommon for Reformed people to express the relationship of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility in an equation of $100\% + 100\% = 100\%$. God is 100% sovereign, man is 100% responsible for his own actions, and the two come together not in a contradiction or as one limiting the other, but as a perfectly overlapping unity. This same type of relationship is present when considering time and eternity. We must be watchful to not so emphasize the eternal decrees that we conceive of God's working in time as somewhat of a figure of speech. God is so great that he works 100% in eternity and 100% in time. He truly and fully interacts with man on a moment by moment basis. Thus the gospel offer is well-meant even to the eternally reprobate. At any specific moment in history God is truly kind and patient to them because he truly wants them to repent. He is not just going through some motions. His interaction with man moment by moment in history is not a sham or "only external" with a view to accomplish the "real", the bringing to fulfillment of his eternal election.

Exodus 32 and 33 provide a good illustration of God's relation to his people in historical time, such that he declared it to be his wish to destroy Israel and later forgave them. His desire to destroy Israel and make a people for himself from Moses was just as real as his later desire to forgive. The whole concept of redemptive history is dependent on the truth of God expressing himself in the moment-by-moment processes of history. Of course, the changes God goes

through in history were already predetermined in his eternal decrees. Nevertheless, in history God does make real changes in his attitudes and desires with regard to specific people.

God's covenants are made with man in history, that is, in time. They must be allowed to function in our minds as 100% real. The covenants function in historical progression of time, even as they take nothing away from God's working out his plan from all eternity.

We see this type of interaction very clearly in prayer. It is not the case that we actually don't have to pray since, after all, God already knows what we need and he knows what he is going to give us. Nor is prayer only for man's sake, that is, that we pray to God only to remind ourselves of our needs and relationship with our Father. In prayer, God really listens to us as we speak to him in a progression of time. His interaction with us is fully within the limitations of time in a way similar to how people converse with each other.

Consider Hezekiah (2 Kings 20). When God told him to set his house in order because he would not recover, it would have been wrong for Hezekiah to think that he could not pray to the Lord about this and plead with him to change his intention to cause him to die. To say that God was testing Hezekiah and that he really meant that Hezekiah would die unless he would plead with him is true, but an insufficient explanation. He said that Hezekiah would not recover and he meant it. In his eternal decrees he had already determined to grant fifteen more years, but at that historical moment, he was genuinely telling the king that he would not regain his health.

This perspective needs to be kept in mind in our understanding of covenants, as well. When God is our God in the covenant and we are his people, this is real on the basis of God's speaking to us. There are real promises and laws expressed in his speaking. Their validity does not depend on regeneration and eternal election. It is not the case that God's promises are only true for the elect and not for all who are being addressed.

When God says that our children are his people, then they are his people at that moment in time. If they later turn against the Lord, they are at that time cut off from his people, not just "recognized as never having been truly God's people". Yet this progression in historical time does not call into question the fact that only the regenerate, those who are eternally in Christ, only the eternally justified will be saved. God's historical blessings and speaking of promises to us are no less real than his eternal counsel.

We must address both adult professors of faith in Christ and their children as real participants in God's covenant grace. This does not give grounds for anyone to presume upon God's grace, however. The Lord truly declares to his people that they are his redeemed people, but they are also called to self-examination. From an "in-time" perspective, both adults and children can be comforted by the promise of God's forgiveness while at the same time they are warned about the need to persevere in faith. They can at one point be sanctified by the blood of Christ and at a later point tread underfoot the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified (Heb. 10:29). Yet this in-time perspective never changes God's eternal counsel. Those who go out from us never were of us (1 John 2:19). Nevertheless, until they depart from God's people they are full members of the covenant.

The marriage covenant illustrates the point. A couple is truly married at the point of exchanging vows. The covenant can be broken in the case of adultery and divorce, but until then, the covenant is real and there is not just some kind of external covenant. It is correct to apply these concepts to God's covenant with his people as well.

Covenant promises are not valid, however, for hypocrites or for those who distort the truth. Hypocrites, who knowingly present themselves as believers when they are not, cannot be comforted by promises of forgiveness. False churches that distort God's teaching about the covenant cannot be regarded as covenant-keepers. The covenant principles apply only when the covenant is established in sincerity and truth, but then they apply fully to all who are in the covenant. They are not dependent for their validity on future events. It is not so that the covenant has real meaning only for those who persevere to the end. On the other hand, it is necessary to persevere to the end, lest one be cut off from the covenant.

It is God's speaking and acting in historical time that Shepherd has in mind when he pleads for a covenantal approach to evangelism and discipleship. In this context he also speaks about election. God's covenant people are an elect nation. Historically, there are some who are among the chosen who later are cut off. While they are among the faithful and themselves confess faith in the Savior, they are to be regarded and addressed as saved people. This does not, however, remove the call to repentance and faith. At the same time as the Lord vows his love and promises his blessings, he also calls his people to repentance, faith and obedience.

Speaking covenantally and historically, just as a marriage covenant is in full effect when the vows are exchanged and not only when a spouse fully realizes the implications experientially, the covenant with the Lord goes into full effect when one is baptized. This does not mean that the outward rite of baptism regenerates a person, nor that regeneration is irrelevant for salvation. What it does mean is that baptism marks a separation from the world and, at that moment in history, we should speak of being chosen by God.

In hindsight we can conclude that a certain person was only historically chosen to be among God's people and not eternally elect. However, in our preaching and counseling we cannot speak to some as eternally elect and to all as historically elect, at least not in the sense of defining for all what blessings come to them and for the elect, what additional blessings are theirs. In the Bible God addresses the whole covenant people with promises that are no more limited than those of eternal blessings. At the same time, he addresses all (and not just the eternally non-elect) with warnings about unbelief and rebellion. We must follow the same approach. We do not know who are only historically elect and are called to address all as elect and also call all to perseverance. It is not that Shepherd does not distinguish between historical and eternal election, only that we must speak as God does, addressing the hope of eternal election to all and the warnings of historical election to all, as well.

One might ask, if the whole church is to be addressed as elect, is this not the same as presumptive regeneration? All those who profess faith in Christ, faith that is penitent and obedient, can be assured that they are born again. If the term is applied to such fruit-bearing covenant-keepers, one might speak of presumptive regeneration. The expression is, however, normally used in a different way. It is used for covenant infants and proceeds from the thesis that

God's new covenant is really only with the elect. This construction has its problems, and the idea of presuming regeneration proceeds from a wrong understanding of the principle by which covenant children are holy and not unclean (1 Cor. 7:14). God does not include children in the covenant by virtue of actual or potential regeneration, but by his declaration that he makes his covenant with believers and their seed.

Covenant children will not see the Kingdom except they be born again, but when or if they will be regenerated is known only to God and is not a prerequisite to covenant membership. Their inclusion among God's people is on the principle of representative headship, not by virtue of regeneration. God establishes his lordship over believers and all who come under their headship. When used in reference to covenant infants, the idea of presumptive regeneration should be rejected. Rather than presume that our children are born again, they should be taught about the need for regeneration, repentance, and faith even as they are assured of God's love for them and also taught that if they turn against the Lord they will be cut off from God's people.

God works out his calling and election through a historical process. In that process some are among the chosen for a time and later reprobate. This does not mean that anyone can be first predestined for eternal salvation and later for eternal damnation. God's predestination does not change. However, in the historical process God joins some to his people for a time who are later condemned. While they are legitimately among God's people (we're not speaking of hypocrites), the covenant promises are fully applied to them. We are not called to look into a person's heart or communicate God's promises on the basis of future events that have not been revealed to us. Instead, we speak in terms of what is true at a particular moment in time without predicting the future. Reasoning in a linear way from the perspective of predestination, the idea that someone can be first chosen and later rejected is confusing. However, the matter is similar to embracing both God's sovereignty and man's responsibility, something Reformed theology has agreed on for centuries.

4.p. Imputation of Christ's Active Obedience?

The last point of difference between Shepherd and his critics to be considered here concerns the imputation of Christ's active obedience. Shepherd defends that the imputation of Christ's obedience for our justification is fully accomplished in the imputation of his passive obedience for the forgiveness of sins. This is a real difference between him and the majority of Reformed teachers. Nevertheless, we need to take care to not complicate the discussion by jumping to unwarranted conclusions.

If Shepherd is incorrectly understood to teach a form of legalism in which the Christian's works cooperate with faith so that faith and works are functionally the ground of justification alongside of Christ's work, then it is an easy step to assume that the reason he denies the imputation of the active obedience of Christ is to make room for the believer's obedience to contribute to his justification. Christ's atonement would be the ground for the pardon of sin and the Christian's covenant faithfulness would complete his justification as his righteousness is supplied by his obedience worked by God's grace in him. Such an interpretation would, however, be a gross distortion of the point Shepherd makes. At no point does he suggest that imperfect obedience satisfies the justice of God.

Those who are well-grounded in Reformed theology and, like me, had not thought about it that the imputation of the active obedience of Christ might not always have been part of Reformed doctrine, will find that it takes some patience to accept that this topic can legitimately be discussed without subverting the Gospel in any way. The truth is that Calvin and the early reformers generally taught that justification consists solely in the pardon of sin. Righteousness and forgiveness were commonly equated. A specific teaching of imputation of active obedience was lacking. As N. H. Gootjes has pointed out (Gootjes, 2002, 10), when attention was first called to Christ's active obedience in relation to his work for us, this was in response to Osiander's teaching that Christ's righteousness was imparted to us according to his divine nature and not his humanity (cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.8). The point was that Jesus' righteousness was manifested in his human nature, starting with his incarnation, but this was not conceived of as providing merits of works for justification, in addition to the atonement for sin.

Although the Reformed theologian, Piscator, was condemned by French synods (1603-1613) for denying the imputation of Christ's active obedience, delegates to the ecumenical Synod of Dort (1618-1619) who also denied this doctrine were not considered unorthodox. One of them, Johannes Bogerman, served as the moderator of the Synod. These men strongly opposed all Arminian and Socinian doctrine, but, like Calvin, they held that the pardon of sin is the whole of Christ's justification and not just a part (*Institutes*, 3.11.11). The small minority of Westminster divines who opposed the teaching of imputation of active obedience were also not sidelined as unorthodox. The Standards adopted were so formulated that these men were able to subscribe to them in good conscience. This is evidence of how the denial of the imputation of active obedience is not inconsistent with the Reformed understanding of Scripture.

It is imperative to be accurate about what it is that Shepherd denies. He does not deny the importance of Christ's active obedience for our salvation and the discussion gets skewed if, even for convenience sake, we talk about the denial of Christ's active obedience. It is the imputation of that obedience that is being questioned and, then, a particular sense of imputation. If by imputation we understand that Christ's obedience for us is counted as if we had never sinned and had kept the law perfectly, then there is no question. Also, the matter is not to deny that Christ's active obedience was necessary for the inheritance of eternal life. All Christ's obedient works were done for us and in our place. Shepherd does not deny that where Adam failed, Christ was faithful. Adam did not pass the probation, but Christ did. Christ's obedience, including his obedience to the moral law, resulted in eternal life for his people. At the point of his effectual call the believer is counted as righteous as Christ. This perfect right-standing with God is his exclusively through the imputation of Christ's perfect obedience in his place. For his justification his only righteousness is the righteousness of Christ.

There is an area of overlap between Piscator and Shepherd, but there are also important differences. The two positions should not be confused. Shepherd's concern is the lack of biblical evidence for a works/merit principle of justification. Together with not a few other Reformed theologians, he calls into question the purchase of an inheritance and God's favor in a covenant of works. Consequently, he also fails to see a works/earn principle in Christ's obedience for our justification. He rejects the view of God that Schilder describes as that of an Administrator of work contracts. Righteousness does not consist in presenting worthy works that are recorded in

account books such that God accounts a man as just only after perfect works have been presented to him. God does not withhold his love, favor, and approval until these have been earned. Requiring merits produced through active law-keeping on Christ's part to be accounted on our credit ledger before we can be judged to be righteous is based on an incorrect concept of justice. It is this mistaken sense of imputation of "righteousness" that Shepherd asks us to reconsider. In so doing, he does not at all question the importance of Christ's perfect active obedience as our representative head as the last Adam.

Since not every reader may be well-versed in the teaching concerning the imputation of Christ's active obedience, let us review the point before continuing the discussion. In theology, Jesus' suffering for the propitiation of our sins is called his passive obedience, that is, his obedience of suffering. His perfect observance of God's law during his life on earth is referred to as his active obedience.

Commonly it is thought that the death of Jesus does not really save us or does not save us completely. Negatively the death of Christ saves us from the guilt of sin so that we are rendered innocent, but positively it does not make us righteous. The sin that would keep us out of heaven is gone, but there is still no righteousness that would give us the right to enter into eternal life. It is thought that this righteousness is supplied by the lifelong active obedience of Christ and imputed to the sinner the moment he believes.

This construction would seem to be incompatible with the idea that man does not earn merits that God repays in justification. It is also difficult to square with the concept of righteousness outlined earlier in this study. Righteousness does not function in a paradigm of there being a point of moral neutrality from which one can accumulate either debits or credits. Just as one is either alive or dead, he is either innocent or guilty, righteous or unrighteous.

Christ's perfect obedience throughout the whole course of his life was certainly necessary for our salvation. Jesus kept all God's laws perfectly. His sacrifice was that of a lamb without blemish. Only such an offering could pay the penalty for our sins. By this one obedience the many were made righteous. The righteous lamb was just from the beginning. His law-keeping did not achieve a righteousness he did not already have. Jesus resisted Satan's temptations, not in order to gain righteousness for us, but in order to not lose it. He was made in the likeness of sinful flesh and baptized by John in order to identify with us in our sinful state and represent us. As our representative, he gave his life on the cross in order to be made our righteousness through his atoning sacrifice.

Adam came from the hand of God not merely innocent but righteous. Since innocence *is* righteousness, those for whom Christ died are by that death not merely counted as innocent, but as righteous, and as such they are holy. Our justification is through Christ's blood (Rom. 5:9). His death for sin *is* the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21).

Among the various considerations that enter into this discussion, Shepherd calls particular attention to what justification is: "For Paul in Romans 3:28, justification is the forgiveness of sins so that we are accepted by God as righteous and receive the gift of eternal life" (Shepherd, *Backbone*, 2004, 86). He demonstrates this from both the immediate context of Romans 3:28 and

the broader context, starting with Romans 1. Paul sets the righteousness revealed from heaven over against the condemnation of all men because of their sin. This righteousness is Christ's propitiatory sacrifice (Rom. 3:25). In at least four other passages Paul also describes justification or righteousness as the forgiveness of sins through the blood of Jesus: Romans 4:6-8; 4:25; 5:8-9; 5:18-19. Since this last text is often used to promote the imputation of active obedience, let us provide here Shepherd's defense:

Paul writes in 5:18, "Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men." The one trespass is the sin of Adam in eating the fruit God had forbidden him to eat. Corresponding to this is the "one act of righteousness." This one act of righteousness is the righteousness from God that Paul wrote about earlier in chapter 3, verse 22. It is the sacrifice of atonement, the death of Jesus on the Cross. This one act of righteousness obtains our justification. That is to say, it obtains the forgiveness of our sin.

In the next verse, verse 19, Paul writes, "For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous." The disobedience that makes us sinners is the one trespass of Adam mentioned in the preceding verse. So also the obedience that makes us righteous is the one act of righteousness also mentioned in verse 18. We are constituted righteous by God when he justifies us by forgiving our sin (Shepherd, *Backbone*, 2004, 88-89).

R. Scott Clark opposes Shepherd and describes the imputation of active obedience position as follows:

It seems clear that the two sides in this discussion hold different views of divine justice, sin, and the nature of Christ's work. According to the proponents of the imputation of active obedience, divine justice requires both obedience and punishment for sin such that Christ had to provide obedience and suffer the penalty for his elect. Proponents of the imputation of active obedience held to a twofold nature of sin and consequently a twofold remedy: the imputation of active obedience and remission of sins (Clark, 2006, 249).

All should agree that God's justice requires full obedience to the whole law. It should also be agreed that sin can be characterized as both sin of omission and of commission. Further, it can be agreed that all Christ's obedience as our Mediator, both active and passive, was for us and in our place. What can be questioned is the dynamic of who is just and how one is justified. Does one only become righteous after performing active obedience? Is righteousness a job to be completed in order to attain right-standing? Or does righteousness precede performance? The latter is more correct. Adam was righteous and had forensic right-standing before performing righteous work. Although he lost his good standing by law-breaking, it was not law-keeping that would have produced right-standing. Works are fruit and evidence of righteousness, not its source. It is sin that left Adam unjustified and it is the atonement for sin that justifies the sinner. Christ paid the penalty for all sin, both sins of commission and of omission (lack of active obedience). The point

of discussion then, is whether, for justification, there is a twofold imputation of Christ's obedience, that of his atonement plus the merits of his law-keeping, or only the imputation of his priestly obedience in offering the sacrifice and shedding his blood for the atonement of sin. Is the forgiveness of sins the whole of our justification or only part of it?

Calvin was unambiguous about justification being only the forgiveness of sins:

...you see, in fine, that satisfaction intervenes, since it is said that we are justified from our sins by Christ. Thus when the publican is said to have gone down to his house "justified," (Luke 18: 14,) it cannot be held that he obtained this justification by any merit of works. All that is said is, that after obtaining the pardon of sins he was regarded in the sight of God as righteous. He was justified, therefore, not by any approval of works, but by gratuitous acquittal on the part of God. Hence Ambrose elegantly terms confession of sins "legal justification," (Ambrose on Psalm 118 Serm. 10) (*Institutes*, 3.11.3).

Now, then, when Paul says that David "describeth the blessedness of the man unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works, saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven," (Rom. 4: 6, 7; Ps. 32: 1,) let Osiander say whether this is a complete or only a partial definition. He certainly does not adduce the Psalmist as a witness that pardon of sins is a part of righteousness, or concurs with something else in justifying, but he includes the whole of righteousness in gratuitous forgiveness, declaring those to be blessed 'whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered,' and "to whom the Lord will not impute sin." (*Institutes*, 3.11.11).

Let us now consider the truth of what was said in the definition, viz., that justification by faith is reconciliation with God, and that this consists solely in the remission of sins (*Institutes*, 3.11.21).

The French or Gallican Confession (1559) expresses the same:

XVII. We believe that by the perfect sacrifice that the Lord Jesus offered on the cross, we are reconciled to God, and justified before him; for we can not be acceptable to him, nor become partakers of the grace of adoption, except as he pardons [all] our sins, and blots them out. Thus we declare that through Jesus Christ we are cleansed and made perfect; by his death we are fully justified, and through him only can we be delivered from our iniquities and transgressions.

XVIII. We believe that all our justification rests upon the remission of our sins, in which also is our only blessedness, as says the Psalmist (Psa. 32:2). We therefore reject all other means of justification before God, and without claiming any virtue or merit, we rest simply in the obedience of Jesus Christ, which is imputed to us as much to blot out all our sins as to make us find grace and favor in the sight of God (ed., Schaff).

This confession, with Calvin as its principal author, reacts to the Romanist doctrine that we need the forgiveness of sins and the performance of good works to obtain grace and favor. It declares

that we receive God's grace and favor when all our sins are blotted out by Christ's death, rather than by forgiveness plus works. The Belgic Confession (1561) continues Calvin's teaching, as well:

we do not mean that faith as such justifies us, for faith is only the instrument by which we embrace Christ our righteousness; He imputes to us all His merits and as many holy works as He has done for us...*. Therefore Jesus Christ is our righteousness, and faith is the instrument that keeps us with Him in the communion of all His benefits. When those benefits have become ours, they are more than sufficient to acquit us of our sins. [*The Synod of Dort later inserted here the phrase, "and in our place".]

We believe that our blessedness lies in the forgiveness of our sins for Jesus Christ's sake and that therein our righteousness before God consists (Articles 22-23, ed. *Book of Praise*, 1984).

In 1561 the theory of a covenant of works with its idea of earning acceptance with God was not yet generally espoused among the Reformed. Given this confession's affinity with the Gallican and with Calvin, as well as the clear emphasis here on forgiveness, it is unlikely that the author, Guido de Bres, was thinking of twofold imputation. When speaking of the imputation of Christ's merits and holy works, Article 22 is referring to all Christ did as the perfect priest and lamb without blemish to make full satisfaction for our sins and so his benefits are more than sufficient to acquit us of all sin. Note that, at this time, the reformers applied the term "merits" to Christ's passive obedience as is seen in Article 24 of this Confession when it says, "...our poor consciences would be constantly tormented, if they did not rely on the merit of the death and passion of our Saviour."

The Heidelberg Catechism (1563) also confesses that the only ground for justification is the sacrificial suffering of our Lord:

Q. Are both the Word and the sacraments then intended to focus our faith on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as the only ground of our salvation?

A. Yes, indeed. The Holy Spirit teaches us in the gospel and assures us by the sacraments that our entire salvation rests on Christ's one sacrifice for us on the cross (L.D. 25, ed., *Book of Praise*, 1984).

It is noteworthy that in 1619, when the idea of a covenant of works was already well-known and the imputation of Christ's active obedience was a subject of considerable debate, the Synod of Dort did not incorporate this teaching in the *Canons*. It applied the term "merits" only to Christ's satisfaction for the expiation of sins (*Dort*, II). Evidently, there was no consensus concerning the teaching of a twofold imputation. This synod did add the phrase, "and in our place," to Article 22 of the *Belgic Confession* in order to emphasize that Christ's holy works were imputed to us because he performed them in his human nature, as our substitute. However, the context of the article was not altered. This imputation could continue to be seen to be for the acquittal of sin and not for the earning of righteousness in addition to making satisfaction for sins.

In chapter 6 of *Backbone of the Bible* and in a later article (see bibliography), Shepherd explains in detail how the Heidelberg Catechism teaches that justification and righteousness imputed to us both refer only to the pardon of sin through Christ's satisfaction for them. It is plain that he is not in bad company when he asks us to reconsider what we mean when we teach the imputation of Christ's active obedience:

We do not find a belief in the imputation of active obedience in Calvin, Ursinus, or the Heidelberg Catechism for the reason that their understanding of justification as the remission of sins did not require it and they did not find it in the Bible. The very few Bible texts quoted by later theologians in support of this doctrine are understood by earlier theologians to refer to the imputation of the righteousness Christ wrought out in his suffering and death for his people in obedience to the will of his heavenly Father. Even the Westminster Confession as late as 1647 was written as a compromise document to accommodate the views of three prominent members of the Westminster Assembly (William Twisse [Prolocutor of the Assembly], Thomas Gataker, and Richard Vines) who did not subscribe to the imputation of active obedience.

However we do find confessional language that has been interpreted as affirming the imputation of active obedience. For example, in Lord's Day 23 of the Heidelberg Catechism we have, as already noted, references to the satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of our Lord being imputed to sinners for their justification. But interpreting these as a reference to the imputation of active obedience is a reading back into earlier Reformed theology of views that developed only at a later time. Early Reformed theology had no doctrine of the imputation of active obedience because it defined soteriological justification as the forgiveness of sins. Justification meant that God forgives our sins and on that basis accepts us as righteous and gives us the title to eternal life. There is no imputation of active obedience because the faith/grace paradigm within which they understood justification did not require it and no Bible texts taught it (Shepherd, *Backbone*, 2004, 115).

We are not justified ultimately by works, as R.C. Sproul affirms, but we are justified ultimately by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Paul says, "if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing" (Galatians 2:21). Paul does not say, "if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ lived a life of perfect obedience for nothing." We do not gain righteousness through the law and Christ did not die in vain. We gain righteousness and are justified through the death of Christ. "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification" (Rom. 4:25) (Shepherd, *Backbone*, 2004, 119-120).

There are a number of crucial problems that the proponents of the imputation of Christ's active obedience (in the works/merit sense) have not adequately addressed:

First, the texts that have been offered to prove their point only show that all of Christ's obedience was important for our salvation. They have never been shown to teach a relationship between his active obedience and the blessings received as one of value received for work rendered. The dynamic of this relationship is adequately understood as fulfillment of God's covenant vows without introducing a concept comparable to the earning of wages.

Second, distinguishing between innocence and righteousness as judicial status has no biblical basis. Adam was righteous when created and Christ was righteous from birth. The logic of this distinction requires that Christ was only innocent when born and became righteous by producing obedient works – a strange thought, to say the least.

Third, law-keeping is fruit and evidence of righteousness. Judicial approval by God is *maintained* by obedience, not produced or earned by it. Righteousness precedes works and not vice versa. When, as proof for the theory of imputation of active obedience, it is argued that the job must be completed before one can be justified, the order is reversed, and this introduces confusion into the discussion.

Fourth, justification is about being just. God chooses to bless the righteous, but justification does not establish rights to rewards such as eternal life. Producing works that are worthy of wages is an economic concept, not a judicial one. If, in condescension, God had contracted to give eternal life as a right earned through works, this would describe an economic relationship, but would not describe justification. Man would have had to be just to merit the reward, but being justified would not yet establish a right to such a reward.

Fifth, there is no parallel in Scripture or common justice that requires active obedience before one is counted as righteous. When a driver is fined for going through a stop light and the fine has been paid, he is no longer a law-breaker. He does not have to first stop at three red lights before he can be counted as just before the law. Ursinus, the principal author of the Heidelberg Catechism, based his teaching about justification on the premise that for legal righteousness one must either obey the law or pay the penalty, but not both.

Sixth, the new covenant is signified and sealed to us by two sacraments that point to forgiveness and cleansing through Christ's death and resurrection. There is no symbolism for a twofold ground for justification. Nothing in the sacraments points to the imputation of law-keeping credits.

4.q. Entitlement to Eternal Life

Those who believe in Christ receive eternal life (John 3:16), but does justification give entitlement to indefectibility and eternal life? Does a declaration of righteousness include God's provision that we will no longer be able to sin and will inherit the grace of glorification? Justification gives title to life, but does it give title to life eternal in God's Sabbath rest? Murray rightly tells us that

All that Adam could have claimed on the basis of equity was justification and life as long as he perfectly obeyed, but not confirmation so as to insure **indefectibility** (Murray, 1977, 56).

The discussion concerning the imputation of Christ's active obedience usually involves the assumption that in justification there is an element that provides the basis for entitlement to the inheritance of eternal life. When we are justified through Christ's obedience, we are not just

restored to the status Adam had in the Garden. The basis for moving the post-fall believer beyond Eden is often thought to be the imputation of Christ's active obedience. The assumption that this is accomplished in justification can be questioned, however. If we follow Murray's thought, we can regard the gifts of indefectibility and inheritance as conjoined with justification without being received by virtue of it. In this way, the concept of justification is reserved for what it really is, a verdict that one is just according to God's law.

By faith in Christ we receive much more than justification: adoption, membership in the Church, spiritual gifts, sanctification, to name only a few. All God's gifts to the redeemed accompany justification, but many are not effected by it. They are gifts of grace that are to be distinguished from justification, but not disassociated from faith in Christ. Do we not have more clarity when we do the same for confirmation in righteousness and for the inheritance of eternal life?

In the Garden of Eden, the Lord initiated a historical program for mankind that was governed by a covenant-defined relationship of love and communion. He blessed Adam and Eve, empowering them to fulfill his covenant law that spelled out a program of filling the earth and subduing it. In the Sabbath ordinance and the Tree of Life, he also promised greater blessings of entering God's rest and living forever. At the same time, the covenant contained a warning of the curse of death for disobedience to the commands. This was signified in the Tree of Knowledge and the prohibition to eat of it.

It has been argued throughout this study that this Adamic covenant defined a relationship of favor or grace. The fulfillment of the promises were to be the expression of God's love and commitment to his vows of loyalty, not wages to be paid out for works performed. Similarly, man's obedience to God's law was an expression of love and thankfulness for undeserved favor, the affirmation of his covenant loyalty to his Lord and Father, not a presentation of worth or merit that would put God in debt to repay works with higher honors as a matter of justice. Murray writes:

Adam could claim the fulfillment of the promise if he stood the probation, but only **on** the basis of God's faithfulness, not on the basis of justice. God is debtor to his own faithfulness. But justice requires no more than the approbation and life correspondent with the righteousness of perfect conformity with the will of God (Murray, 1977, 56).

Adam's obedience and that of his descendants was to be the righteous expression of love and trust. In the way of this faith and obedience, the Lord was to lead them into confirmation in integrity and possession of the inheritance of the Sabbath rest to live forever in communion with God in glory. This was not the way of meritorious earning of glory, but that of believing expression of faithfulness in which man would persevere in the perfect righteousness he had received as a gift from his Creator. It required no Day of justification. Adam was justified from the outset and would receive the inheritance by fulfilling the cultural mandate, while continuing to be just. As a son rejoices to labor on the family properties, so man was to work diligently in the Lord's estate and, in due time, would come into possession of full participation in God's rest and glory.

In the covenant of redemptive grace, the terms of the Adamic covenant were not abolished but fulfilled by and in Jesus Christ. First, he accomplished redemption from slavery to sin and death. He provided for justification through his priestly obedience and propitiatory sacrifice. In him we have full redemption from both the guilt of sin and its dominion and influence. He is setting us free in every way. In addition to his redemption, he also restores and fulfills the original covenant program for the earth and the sons of man.

Besides justification, God grants us the privilege of adoption, so that we receive the promised inheritance as sons of God. Through his serving obedience in our place, Christ faithfully followed God's leading and was honored with glory. His active obedience was not a means of earning the inheritance for us. An inheritance is a gift not a purchase! His active obedience was not imputed to us for righteousness. It was, rather, the faithful persevering in righteousness, by which, in his priestly office, he offered a perfect sacrifice for sin, and in his kingly office, he provided for our heavenly citizenship and leads us into possession of it (Phil. 3:20-21). God led him into possession of the promised blessings in the way of believing obedience.

God's promises are received as gifts by faith, and that is also how Christ took possession of them and was crowned with glory and honor. Entitlement to the heavenly inheritance is not through justification, but a blessing that accompanies it, one that comes to us through Christ's faithful covenant obedience in Adam's place. Title to life eternal is not established through justice, nor through merit, but as a gift received by faith. The principle that applies is not that of earning or purchase, but of inheritance.

5. Communication Style

Some of Shepherd's readers wish he would include more qualifying statements and clarifications. He does, indeed, use a style of presentation that develops an argument without seeking to address all possible misunderstandings and objections. He focuses on developing the point he is making without necessarily balancing it out with other realities God teaches. Some readers have drawn wrong conclusions, reading thoughts into what Shepherd writes that contradict his views.

Hindsight shows that more explanation might have improved the reception of Shepherd's views. However, just because an author does not expand on what he does not mean, does not give liberty to a reader to draw conclusions that are not stated. It is the reader's responsibility to read precisely what is written. For example, given that Shepherd clearly states that the believer's justification is only through the imputed righteousness of Christ, the reader does not do well to draw conclusions that undermine this statement, just because Shepherd does not keep qualifying his remarks whenever a reader might interpret them wrongly.

I cannot speak for Mr. Shepherd in his style, but there are some observations one can make on his behalf. One is that his style is not so unusual. Readers in sympathy with a particular author, often do not realize how "unclear" and "careless" he appears to be to someone who comes to the material from a different perspective.

Shepherd's mentor, John Murray, used a style that was rather similar. His arguments were focused and compact, not necessarily guarded against all kinds of misinterpretations. For example, Murray wrote an article that argued that the visible/invisible church distinction is invalid (Murray, 1976, 231-236). In it he hardly interacts with those who make extensive use of this distinction and he makes no mention of the use the Westminster Standards make of it. Few of us would question his subscription to the Standards and I do not suppose any would suggest that Murray calls into question the teachings that the Standards present in the context of this distinction. I urge us to treat Shepherd with the same kindness.

It is also true that the Bible often makes statements that can be misunderstood, but makes no effort to insert all kinds of qualifying remarks. Consider Genesis 26:4-5, "And in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws." Also, Deuteronomy 5:33, "You shall walk in all the way that the Lord your God has commanded you, that you may live...." Do such statements undermine the doctrine of justification by faith alone?

6. Theological Influences

It has become common to associate Shepherd with a theological movement referred to as that of New Perspective on Paul, as well as discussions between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics that produced a document entitled, "Evangelicals and Catholics Together," and with a movement referred to as Federal Vision Theology. It should be pointed out that he has only recently started to inform himself about the New Perspective on Paul, and has nothing at all to do with the NPP or with Evangelicals and Catholics Together. His connection with the Federal Vision is that those who associate with this movement appeal to him for some of their views. Shepherd's theological influences are not to be found in these movements, only in traditional Reformed theology. John Murray is his main teacher and the development of his theology comes from interaction with the same Reformed theologians that all of us conservative, traditional Reformed folks study, including continental Reformed theology.

Shepherd subscribes to the same Confessions we all love, and his readers do him and themselves a disservice if they permit themselves to read confessional divergences into him except in the points he himself raises. He does nothing different from other Reformed theologians, namely to continue to do exegetical studies and seek to continue to reform our biblical understanding.

He does not question the Confessions in matters of justification, faith and works. He has no divergences with regard to the five points of Calvinism. What he does question is the correctness of describing the difference between the pre-fall and post-fall covenants as one of a contrast between works and grace, where righteousness is viewed as achieved by works before the fall into sin and received by grace after the fall. According to him, the points he raises should be discussed within the framework of Reformed theology.

7. What Difference Does It Make?

If Shepherd's teachings express traditional Reformed orthodoxy, one might ask whether the points raised by him and the other theologians we have mentioned, really make a difference. Do they have a pastoral impact on Christian living? In the perception of these theologians, they do.

Ridding ourselves of the notion that good works necessarily imply trusting in self and attempting to earn eternal life helps to alleviate a number of tensions. Many Reformed sermons warn against the constant danger of resting in our own works and it is not uncommon for a Christian to be concerned that in his good works he may be competing with Christ. He is afraid to rejoice in his works, lest he be boasting in himself. Although our theology teaches us that we all must work out our salvation and that good works are necessary as the evidence of faith, our sermons frequently focus on justification with the result that the beauty of the good works in which we were created to walk is dimmed by the emphasis on self-examination that constantly looks for possible resting in self, rather than Christ. If we completely rid ourselves of the leaven of works righteousness and understand it was sinful pride that introduced the idea of earning God's favor, and that good works were never intended to be contrasted with faith and grace, then this tension dissipates.

We must not adopt the Pharisees' concept of the meritorious nature of good works and only remove it from justification. Transferring good works (as meritorious) to sanctification does not really remove the tension. Only the understanding that the very nature of true obedience to God is to express trust in God, fellowship with him, and joy in his gifts sets the heart free to do good works – works in which we walk on the way of liberty.

Of course, our indwelling sin puts us in the danger of trusting in ourselves, and there is always the need for self-examination. Putting off this evil work of self-righteousness, however, involves more than resting in Christ for righteousness. We joyfully put on Christ when we understand that we simply express faith in him by doing good works. Just as true faith is not confidence in faith, but in Christ, so true Christian works do not express confidence in works, but in Christ.

With this understanding of good works and obedience to law, tension between law and gospel falls away. Contrasts between the old covenant and the new as between law and grace also are removed. All the emphasis in law-keeping that is strongly expressed in both Testaments becomes an emphasis on faith and grace, because to obey the law is to walk in works prepared by God. The difference between the old and new covenants is seen to be that the new is the fulfillment of the old covenant of shadows and types, rather than a substitution of grace for law. Promise and law and law and grace are seen to be in full harmony, rather than in tension.

When we stress that works are not only subsequent to initial faith and that faith is always manifested in works, the possibility of receiving Christ as Savior without receiving him as Lord is dispelled. The importance of this should not be minimized. Also, rather than seeing God's law mainly as the convictor of sin, its use as the rule for thankfulness and faith is brought to better expression when obedience is joined with faith. The various uses of God's law must all receive due attention. Those who set their minds on the things that are above can joyfully commit themselves to good works.

Our sermons should not, as a rule, follow a pattern of giving the bulk of the time to conviction of sin, less time to pointing to the glory of Christ as our Savior, and even less to the joy of putting on Christ in obedient good works. This will be a good approach for texts that have conviction as their main purpose, but too frequently, Reformed congregations leave worship services with dampened spirits because a text that calls them to obedience is expounded mainly in terms of man's inadequacies and guilt. The preacher seeks to drive his congregation to Christ, but often the emphasis on man's weakness has the greater impact. God's people should remember that, in addition to being freed from guilt, the Christian is also set free from the dominion of sin. He not only *ought* to put on the new man, but he actually *does* walk in good works. What joy it is to be a new creation in Christ Jesus!

Just as the body is dead without the spirit, so faith is dead without works and cannot exist without them (James 2:26). This truth impacts our evangelistic message. Although no one can ever earn fellowship with God, we do not tell sinners to only believe to be saved. Inactive faith does not express fellowship with Christ and his righteousness. As did Christ and John the Baptist, we call all to repentance, faith, love, devotion, confession, adoration, obedience, and so much more. A man can be justified only by working faith, faith that is accompanied by actions as we turn from dead idols to the living God. We follow Christ, keep his commandments, and have no other gods before the only God, all by grace, but not by inactive grace.

What we need to make clear in the Gospel proclamation is not that we cannot work out our salvation, but that we cannot do it in our own strength or earn it. Justification is not received in the way of meritorious obedience, but it is received in the way of obedience worked in us by God's Spirit. Therefore, all men everywhere are commanded not only to believe, but to believe, repent, and bring forth works worthy of repentance. It is only in this way that, with believing Abraham, we obey the Lord's command and say the Lord himself provides the sacrifice for sin. Now, when we say that justification is received in the way of obedience, we do not mean that the obedience instrumentally effects justification. Rather, obedience is the way in which God graciously applies Christ to us and our justification is received in the fellowship with him that is manifested in obedience.

Some will think that the differences mentioned above are not all real and not the result of theological differences. They may suggest that where weaknesses might be present, these are only due to pastoral deficiencies. Of course, our churches have a variety of weaknesses and it is also often the case that the problems just mentioned are not present in a significant way. What is being affirmed here is only that this writer views the theological position of his teachers as making such differences. He does not deny that often Reformed preachers and pastors do well in these areas, even when they hold views that he questions. He only wants to say that a different theological perspective provides a better basis for balanced pastoral ministry and evangelistic outreach. The same applies to the points raised in what follows.

8. The Impact of the Covenant Perspective

What difference does it make when we live from the perspective of the covenant in history, rather than of predestination? In general, we conduct our lives on the basis of what has been revealed to us and not what is known only to God. This keeps God's promises and man's

commitments in Scriptural balance. God's sovereignty and man's responsibility operate together, without one undermining the other. If we define the covenant from the perspective of election, we cannot do justice to God's call to repentance directed to his children, nor to his warnings against falling away. If the covenant is really only with the elect, there can be no possibility of falling away and the many Scriptural warnings are not meaningful for members of God's covenant people.

From the perspective of the covenant, God's people (both adults and children) are assured of God's love at the same time as they are called to repentance, faith and perseverance in well-doing. This covenant love is that of a Father for his children and is bestowed on all members of the covenant people. It is not addressed only to the elect, nor does it merely bring a people into the pale of the Gospel. Baptism symbolizes union with God in Christ, not just the offer of union. God's love is not conditioned on man's, just as a husband's love is not conditioned on his wife's. At the same time, the covenant has two parts. God's people must also commit themselves to him with unconditional love. From covenant perspective, his vow of blessing is yea and amen to all and his warnings of curses are also for all. The covenant both comforts and exhorts, and this for all the people.

Covenant people are encouraged and thankful when they see fruit of grace in their lives, but self-examination should not focus mainly on looking for evidences of grace, even though they are not unimportant. Knowing that the solemn covenant oaths we have sworn to God require unconditional loyalty, the examination of our souls should principally focus on fulfilling vows and doing the will of the Lord. Rather than asking whether we have produced enough fruit to be assured of our election, we should focus on doing today what the covenant requires. We have vowed to rest in Christ for justification, for example, so we confess our sin daily and plead his blood for the pardon of our debts. Simultaneously, we forgive our debtors and seek reconciliation with brothers we have offended. To fulfill our vows we love Christ and keep his commandments. It is not our role to determine who the elect are. We are called to simply do what needs doing, in accordance with what is observable and what has been revealed.

This focus on serving God through faith in Christ does not only apply to the elect. All must obey. All must selflessly present living sacrifices to him, not in order to earn heaven, but to express unconditional love, covenant loyalty and faith. Thanks be to God, that he has mercy on whom he wills and enables us to repent and follow Christ! Living from the perspective of the Lord's covenant in history does not mute the perspective of God's eternal decrees. The child of God who is joyfully assured by God's love expressed in covenant promises, also rejoices in the Lord's revelation that he has loved his elect in Christ from before he founded the world. God's will revealed in history should not mute his revelation about eternal election, but his revelation about election should also not be allowed to mute the fact that the Lord has established a legally binding bond with his people in the form of a covenant in which he really swears an oath to be a God and Father to his people. This oath can never be reduced to something merely formal or outward.

Salvation through Christ is sincerely offered to all people. If we look at history only from the perspective of predestination, it is illogical to think that God truly calls the reprobate to partake of Christ's love or that his love is revealed to them in Christ. However, God so loved the world

that he gave his only Son so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. This is true love for all persons. The Lord made a covenant with Abraham, one by which he would bless all the families of the earth. The Good News proclaims the covenant to all nations. This is not just a manner of speaking. God really does desire all men to repent and know Christ. He does not make his covenant with all, but he does lovingly offer it to all. He does not regenerate all members of the covenant, but he does pledge to all of them that he will be their God and they his people.

To understand this, we need to take God at his word; we need to consider that predestination is only one perspective in history. There is also the perspective of God's desires as they are revealed moment by moment. We believe that both are valid, just as we trust that Jesus really died, even though God cannot die. The well-meant Gospel offer is spoken to all men in the same kind of language as the covenant, language that expresses God's sincere commitment and heart's desire, without predicting the outcome. Not that God does not reveal future events, just that covenant vows should not be reduced to predictions. When a couple exchanges vows in a covenant marriage ceremony, they are not forecasting what will happen, only voicing their commitment and love. We believe that, in God's greatness, his revealed covenant will and his secret will of predestination are in perfect harmony and we seek to so trust in God that we do not feel the compulsion to remove the mystery involved.

9. Why the Concern About Merit?

Although much has been said in this study about whether justification is earned through law-keeping, it may still be good to summarize how this point really does make a difference to how we view God and our relationship with him. As was said in a variety of ways, we need not deny every sense of merit, only the idea that God is placed in debt to man by man's performance, good works producing worth that God repays in a sense similar to wages. Rejecting this view of justice makes a big difference.

Justice is about right and wrong, not about producing worth. This means that a distinction between innocence and righteousness is invalid. The righteous man does what is right and, therefore, keeps the law out of love for God. Righteous character precedes righteous actions and righteous actions are fruit and evidence of righteousness, not its cause.

Adam was righteous and justified until he sinned, and Christ was righteous at all times. He inherited the Kingdom for us rather than purchasing it. The imputation of active obedience as merits for earning justification does not make judicial sense. There was nothing lacking in early Reformed teaching on justification when our forefathers taught that justification consists solely in the forgiveness of sins.

By rejecting the concept of earning merits in order to present value to God with a view to being accepted by him, we reject all human pride and the covenant relationship is seen to be expressed in love, loyalty and trust on the part of both parties. God loves man and man relates to him in love that only seeks his glory. True love is not *quid pro quo* goodness given in exchange for goodness. True love is unconditional, with no strings attached. It is not earned by works nor does it seek to earn favor. Righteousness is not a commodity produced through works. This view does not undermine law-keeping. Love is the fulfillment of the law and righteous Adam was called to

perfect obedience to God's law, loving him with all his heart, soul, strength and mind. Love and justice belong in perfect harmony. True love is committed to perfect law-keeping.

When we understand that the merit of righteousness does not have a pharisaic sense of placing God in debt with man or of earning justification like a worker earns wages, then justice and Adam's original relationship with God receive a different dynamic. Adam lived by grace and by faith. The just do not only receive life eternal through faith in Christ, but they always live by faith. Even in the Garden of Eden, man walked by faith in total dependence on the Lord for all things. Also in Paradise, he performed good works prepared for him that he should walk in them by faith. God's blessings were not earned, but received as gifts. This perspective serves to strengthen the Bible's emphasis that all glory be to God alone.

When justification is not regarded as conditioned on the completion of a job assignment, but limited to judgment about right and wrong, good and evil, then justification is not withheld until Adam's faithful completion of the probation. He was justified from the beginning, until he sinned. Had he not fallen, the Lord would have led him into the inheritance of eternal life in the way of covenant obedience, not as wages paid to a laborer, but as an inheritance given to a loving, faithful, and responsible son.

What the first Adam failed to accomplish, the Second performed for him. In addition to justifying his own, Christ also sanctifies them and leads them into the glory he has received from the Father. His active and passive obedience accomplished the sacrifice that paid the price for their redemption. Further, he also fulfills the creation mandates that bring all things to completion and leads his people into the inheritance. By faith and with thanksgiving his people put to death the deeds of the flesh, put on the new man and rejoice in the Lord always, as they go and make disciples of all nations, thus gathering in the church, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Christ both fills the earth and subdues it. "When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28). The Gospel for God's church is not only about conviction of sin and justification. His people are also more than conquerors in Christ Jesus as they follow in his train (Ps. 68:18; Eph. 4:8). The Christian life is not just about deliverance from sin, but also about victorious fulfillment, in Christ, of God's program for his creation.

10. Two Paradigms

Why has there been so much confusion about what Shepherd teaches? Part of the reason is a clash between paradigms. Shepherd's opponents think of redemption in terms of a paradigm that understands obedience as meritorious working and the reward of eternal life as wages for work accomplished. To be counted as just is conditioned on the merit of the work performed. A number of Dutch Reformed theologians and John Murray with his followers use a paradigm that views obedience as living by God's grace or favor. They are satisfied with 16th century Reformed statements on justification and question the concepts developed in the theory of a covenant of works, which was introduced at the end of that century. The first paradigm contrasts

even perfect works with grace. The second contrasts grace not with works, but with works when they are viewed as *earning* God's acceptance.

Confusion has arisen due to adherents of the works/merit paradigm evaluating Shepherd in terms of their theological construct and drawing conclusions on the basis of their own rather than Shepherd's paradigm. Much clarification will be achieved if Shepherd's critics will resist the temptation to draw unwarranted conclusions and if adherents of both paradigms carefully evaluate to what extent their paradigm is being read into their exegesis of various Scripture passages.

When the misunderstandings are removed, it will be recognized that Shepherd does not teach: that justification on the last day is based on the believer's works contributing anything to his righteousness; that imperfect works can be counted for justification; that Christ's atonement is to be understood differently than taught in the Reformed Confessions; that man's sin is not all that serious; that perfect personal obedience was not necessary for Adam; that faith and works are one and the same thing; that justification is partially through infused righteousness; and so many more misinterpretations. When clarity has been achieved, brothers in the Lord will be able to help each other through edifying discussions about the real differences – differences that do not set either Shepherd or his critics outside the fold of orthodoxy.

11. The Point

The main point of this essay was not to convince the reader that Mr. Shepherd is correct. It was, rather, to promote theological reflection on the Bible's teaching. To achieve this, this author sought to convince the reader that there are ways in which the critics misread Shepherd. Please let him know if he has been successful. His understanding is that although a number of views attributed to Shepherd are, indeed, subversive of the Gospel, the convictions Shepherd really holds are true to Scripture and should be thoughtfully appreciated, even by Reformed brothers who do not share them.

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Appendix

The Criticisms

The following are more extensive quotations of some of the criticisms of Rev. Norman Shepherd, interspersed with a few questions and observations, intended to help put them in perspective. We limit ourselves to five of the many critics.

Dr. O. Palmer Robertson describes Mr. Shepherd's views in *The Current Justification Controversy*:

First, Mr. Shepherd affirmed that not only faith, but also the concrete actions of repentance are necessary as the way of justification (13-15 [October 1976 Paper]).

In making this affirmation, appeal was made to the Statement of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, that repentance was so essential to salvation that "none may expect pardon without it" (WCF 15.3). Elsewhere the *Westminster Confession* affirms that "all other saving graces" will ever accompany the faith that justifies (WCF 11.2).

While placing his analysis in the framework of classic Confessional statements, Mr. Shepherd's formulations were certain to engender controversy. For although it is commonly acknowledged that the grace of repentance in terms of a whole-hearted commitment to turn from sin always will accompany the faith that justifies, it is somewhat different to say that specific actions arising from repentance also are necessary to be carried out as the way of justification. For to say that concrete actions of repentance are necessary as the way of justification is to join works to faith as the way of justification.

Secondly, Mr. Shepherd affirmed that not only faith and actions of repentance are necessary as the way of justification. Also works that take time, including even the diligent use of the outward means of grace, are necessary for justification (15, 17).

In a subsequent paper, Mr. Shepherd attempted to explain his statement that the diligent use of the means of grace was necessary for justification. He indicated that he intended to refer to the justification of the last day (March 1, 1978 paper, 4f.).

Yet this explanation hardly could prove adequate to relieve the tension felt by many between Mr. Shepherd's statements and the assertions of Scripture. For little if any evidence may be found in Scripture that *forgiveness* of sins shall occur in the judgment of the last day. Essential to "justification" is the forgiveness of sins, yet the unbeliever certainly will not be forgiven at the last day. The believer already stands justified. The cleansing forgiveness associated with sanctification hardly will be needed by the saints who already will have been changed into the glorious likeness of Christ at his appearing.

Indeed, a "vindication" of the status of the believer shall occur at the last judgment. He shall be "openly acknowledged, and acquitted in the Day of Judgment" (*Shorter Catechism* Q.38). But in that vindication, good works arising from repentance shall function only as fruit and evidence of the unshakable status of justification which had been realized at the moment of believing.

Mr. Shepherd's efforts to explain his statement about the necessity of good works as the way of justification could not relieve the tension created by his earlier assertions. Good works indeed may be perceived as the necessary fruit and evidence of the faith that justifies, but good works cannot be acknowledged as the way of justification without creating confusion.

A third point made by Mr. Shepherd in his October 1976 paper ultimately proved to be significant in clarifying his whole system of thought about the relation of good works to justification. In the October paper, Mr. Shepherd posits that good works are necessary to maintain a person in the state of justification (14). In order to continue in justification, a person must perform good works.

In various subsequent discussions, Mr. Shepherd affirmed that a person could lose his justification. He proposed that an individual who was elect according to the election of *Ephesians* 1 could become non-elect if he did not continue to walk in covenant faithfulness.

So when Mr. Shepherd posited the necessity of good works for justification in the last judgment, and the necessity of the diligent use of the means of grace for continuing in justification, he was affirming that the justified actually could become non-justified. In this construction, good works must be seen as actually necessary to maintain a person in a state of justification.

Mr. Shepherd later presented as his model for this argumentation the exile of Israel under the old covenant. He also found support in the illustration of the branches cut off from Christ in the new covenant. For from his perspective these cut-off branches first were savingly united to Christ.

According to Mr. Shepherd, the election of individuals described in *Ephesians* 1 consisted of the same kind of election experienced by Israel as a nation. Israel's movement to a state of non-election thus could serve as a warning to the elect of the new covenant that they too could become non-elect.

As the full consequences of Mr. Shepherd's teaching became apparent, the controversy over his formulations inevitably deepened. For if the only election and justification that the sinner who trusts in Christ can know may be lost, then all enduring assurance is lost. It was this point in particular that served ultimately to clarify the implications of Mr. Shepherd's various formulations, and to evoke a steady resistance to his teachings. For

he clearly had introduced a new element into the classic formulations of the Reformers when he declared that justification and election by God could be lost.

Fourthly, Mr. Shepherd modified the generally accepted understanding of the proper pattern of the Gospel call for justification. In his view, "the command to believe, the command to repent and be baptized, and the command to follow Christ doing as he commanded are not ultimately different answers" to the question concerning how a man is to be justified. For although Paul told the Philippi an jailer that he must believe to be saved, he just as well could have told him to rise up and follow Christ. For "to ask for obedience is not a fundamentally different thing than to ask for faith, though faith and obedience maybe distinguished as descriptive of a single total response from different perspectives" (October 1976 paper, 51).

In analyzing these assertions, it must be remembered that the subject under discussion was the way to *justification*. "Salvation" in the broader sense includes sanctification as well as justification, and clearly obedience performed by faith is an essential aspect of holiness.

But Mr. Shepherd by his formulations had merged faith and obedience as a "single total response" which brings justification. According to his view, faith is united with works as a single response to the Gospel call for justification. As a consequence, justification is by faith and by works, or by faith/works, or by the works of faith. Or, justification is by "obedient faith," which could be interchanged with "faithful obedience." (Robertson, 2003, 20-24)

Questions and observations:

1. Robertson argues as if the only way our theology can use the concept of justification is in relation to the forgiveness granted to the believer at the point of first believing. Is this necessary? This is not a point that Reformed theology has historically made.
2. What is wrong with speaking of a single response of repentance, obedience and faith? The only way in which speaking of a single response in which works, repentance and faith come together is problematic, is when one or all is taken as itself effecting justification. Faith does not itself accomplish justification and repentance and works do not, either.
3. Robertson objects to pointing out that specific actions accompany faith when Scripture speaks of justification, but his objection cannot be sustained. Faith never exists apart from specific works. For example, when Abraham believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness (Genesis 15:6) he gave a specific response to the Lord's promise. He probably said, "Amen." It was counted to him for righteousness when he said it. As a concept, one can abstract faith from repentance and works, but in the historical expression of faith this is not possible.

4. Robertson does not do justice to how we are to understand the Final Judgment. "Open acquittal" is forensically declaring to be just. It *is* justification and "...we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil" (2 Cor. 5:10). Just as Paul in this text, Shepherd does not say that what we have done in the body produces the righteousness that is the ground of our acquittal.
5. Shepherd does not admit that an elect person, eternally justified in Jesus, can lose his salvation. He does not teach that all in the church at Ephesus were elect. He only argues that Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, addressed all in the church at that time as elect. From the perspective of the covenant in history we are to be regarded as justified while in covenant with God and, from that perspective, Scripture reveals that the Lord, in fact, cuts off the rebellious and unrepentant.
6. To allow that someone who has received covenant promises, is holy, and is not unclean (1 Cor. 7:14) can be cut off from the Lord if he rebels, no more robs a believer of assurance than does self-examination that looks for evidences of regeneration. In the final analysis, assurance is a gift of God.

Robertson seeks to summarize Shepherd's views as follows:

It is somewhat difficult to capture all the nuances of a perspective that still is emerging. Yet an effort may be made to summarize the distinctiveness of Mr. Shepherd's formulations that generated this controversy:

(1) Justification has been perceived inadequately by the church through its use of a Roman legal model. The Biblical perspective requires that justification be understood in terms of the dynamic of the covenant model. The "covenant of *life*" must not be reduced to a legalistic courtroom setting, even when discussing specifically the doctrine of justification.

(2) Election has been viewed deficiently by the dominance of a static model of God's unchanging decrees. Since man cannot perceive the elect as God sees them, it is fruitless as well as misleading to assume this perspective. Instead, the church must view election as Scripture does, which is out of the dynamic of the covenant. God indeed elects unchangeably. But he nonetheless functions in the dynamic of the covenant. In this framework the movement from reprobation to election also opens the real possibility that God's elect may become reprobate.

(3) Church membership and the sacraments must be seen for what they really are. They define genuine positions and experience in the covenant of grace. Any lesser perspective on their significance mocks the divine ordinances and contradicts the clear teaching of many portions of Scripture. Baptism rather than regeneration marks the point of transition from death to life. But discontinuation in the covenant ordinances means damnation.

(4) Faith and its fruits never can be abstracted from one another, for to believe is to obey. As a consequence, the way of justification before God is the way of obedience, and obedience is the way of justification. The unity of man's salvation finds its realization in the dynamic of covenant living.

Time will uncover the ultimate consequences of Mr. Shepherd's distinctive formulations. But as novel perspectives on the Biblical teaching concerning justification, the covenant, the sacraments, and the relation of faith to works, they provided the catalyst for the current controversy. This issue was one of theological substance and not of incidental disagreements that could have been avoided (Robertson, 2003, 90-91).

Observation:

A close look at the points Shepherd makes, without reading into his writing what he does not intend to say, leads to the conclusion that his views are not so distinctive or novel. He does not hold that the believer's performance contributes anything to his justification, nor does he believe that eternal justification in Christ can be lost. He is only seeking to do justice to the dynamic of historical covenant language. He is dealing with a different matter than Robertson understands him to be treating.

Further, Robertson writes:

Mr. Shepherd was not altogether convincing with respect to his basic exegesis of certain portions of Scripture which have played a crucial role in the development of his new "Biblical Theology." He posited that justification had identical significance in the letter of *James* and in Paul's argument in *Romans* and *Galatians*. Yet even though he analyzed rather carefully the optional meanings of the word "to justify" in *James*, he never established that James meant specifically that the guilty, polluted sinner had all his sins forgiven "by works" and not merely "by faith." In this case, it would not be adequate to show that James used the term "justified" semantically to mean "declared to be just" rather than "demonstrated to be just." For the meaning of *justification* in Paul can be understood properly only in terms of the total context which deals with the way guilt is removed. In order to establish that Pauline "justification" is "by works," Mr. Shepherd would have to show that James' intention was to affirm that all the guiltiness of the polluted sinner is removed by the sinner's own actions - actions which in themselves at best are imperfect and sinful.

In a similar manner, when Mr. Shepherd asserted that Paul excluded only works done in an attitude of boasting and pride from the "way" of justification and did not intend to exclude also the "good works" done in faith by the regenerate as the "way" of justification, he had the obligation of establishing this point on clear exegetical grounds. Working in the context of history since the Reformation, he basically had a responsibility to answer the argument of John Calvin and others in their analysis of the scope of the "works of the law" excluded from justification by Paul. Calvin had argued quite convincingly that if Paul were excluding only boastful works from justification,

then he would not have cited the Old Testament to show that if a person should do these very "works" he would be blessed with *life* (see John Calvin's treatment of *Galatians* 3:10,13 in his *Institutes* III, ii, 19).

When Mr. Shepherd's exegesis of Paul is joined to his exegesis of James, the implication is that a man is justified by good works done in faith, although he is not justified by works done in prideful boasting. His ambiguous use of the phrase "obedience of faith" then serves as a means of communicating the idea that justification is by the *obedient acts* done in faith as well as by *faith*, which inevitably comes to expression in obedience to God (Robertson, 2003, 94-96).

Observations:

1. These statements imply that Robertson is reasoning from an incorrect view of faith. Robertson argues as if Shepherd is talking about works actively removing guilt. Works do not remove guilt. Faith does not itself remove guilt, either. Only Christ removed guilt when he paid the penalty of our sin and God declares us guiltless on the ground of Christ's righteousness.

Shepherd speaks only of works that express faith. Boastful works are unbelieving works that seek to establish self-righteousness. Works of faith, on the other hand, exercise trust in God and look to Christ for the only righteousness that stands before God. Shepherd does not teach that they justify through their action, as Robertson implies. They only accompany and express the faith by which alone we receive Christ.

2. The ambiguity of which Robertson speaks is not to be found in Shepherd but in Robertson's reading of Shepherd.

Robertson writes on page 19 of his book:

Subsequent discussion of the "justification" issue must begin with a full awareness of the original state of the matter, Otherwise, later assertions by Mr. Shepherd that actually continue his initial perspective will be heard only as affirmations of traditional orthodoxy. The controversy began with Mr., Shepherd's assertion that works paralleled faith as the *instrument* of justification. The issue continued as Mr. Shepherd insisted that works were the *way* of justification, and that faith included in its essence the good works that justify.

Observation:

Shepherd's position is, indeed, traditional orthodoxy. His earlier statements are also to be understood in the line of Reformed theology. He never said that the Christian's works contribute anything to his justification. He never taught that faith includes in its essence good works that justify. Robertson recognizes that Shepherd's clarifications are an expression of faithful Reformed doctrine. It is disappointing that this recognition has not led him to see that his earlier reading of Shepherd was inaccurate.

Dr. Cornelis P. Venema of Mid America Reformed Seminary wrote an extended review of Shepherd's book, *The Call of Grace*. From his evaluation of Shepherd, we distill the following:

Shepherd's study has several evident strengths. The book is clearly written and makes a good case for recognizing the unity of the covenant of grace in its various historical administrations. Shepherd's general description of the covenant as a divinely-initiated relationship of union and communion between God and his people is unobjectionable and fairly traditional. In his brief survey of the administration of the covenant of grace in its Abrahamic, Mosaic and New Testament forms, Shepherd properly insists upon the mutuality and conditionality of the covenant relationship. When the Lord enters into a communion or covenant with his people, this covenant stipulates or obligates its members to live together in the bonds of mutual fidelity and love. There are, accordingly, senses in which the covenant of grace is both unconditional in its initiation and conditional in its administration. In his treatment of the Mosaic covenant, Shepherd rightly opposes any view that would interpret it exclusively as a kind of "covenant of law," neglecting thereby to recognize the priority of God's grace and promise in this administration of the covenant as well as others. Whatever the peculiar features of the Mosaic covenant, Shepherd correctly maintains its continuity with the formal establishment of the covenant with Abraham and its subsequent fulfillment in Christ.

Since the covenant, according to Shepherd, invariably includes the elements of God's gracious promises, stipulations of obedience, and sanctions for disobedience or unfaithfulness, it provides a framework for understanding how God's sovereign grace does not diminish but undergirds human responsibility. When the doctrine of salvation is viewed exclusively in terms of God's sovereign and unconditional electing grace, and not in terms of the covenant in history, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to accommodate the Scriptural emphasis upon human responsibility in the context of gracious privilege. In this way the error of antinomianism can be resisted, since the privileges of God's gracious covenant serve not to diminish but rather to establish the responsibilities of the covenant relationship. Shepherd effectively makes these points throughout his study.

In his treatment of the relation between covenant and evangelism, Shepherd also offers a number of helpful observations regarding the benefits of a covenantal approach. In his exposition of the Great Commission, he rightly observes that it can only be understood against the background of God's promise to Abraham. The promise of blessing for all the families of the earth is now being fulfilled through the discipling of the nations. This promise of blessing and salvation, moreover, does not aim simply to save sinners from condemnation and death. Rather, it aims to gather the nations in order that God's kingdom may come, and that the peoples serve the Lord in truth and faithfulness. Evangelism, therefore, is not merely a matter of "snatching a few brands from the burning," but includes the goal of preaching the gospel of the kingdom to the ends of the earth. On the basis of this covenantal emphasis, Shepherd also resists the temptation to draw an inappropriate line between the nurture of covenant members and the evangelistic seeking out of non-covenant members in order to bring them into the

fellowship of the church. The same covenantal gospel is preached to all, and it is preached with the same goal in view.

Perhaps the primary emphasis of Shepherd's advocacy of a covenant-evangelism approach is that the gospel preacher should not approach sinners from the perspective of God's decree of election and reprobation. When this is the case, and the primary focus of interest is upon the regeneration (or non-regeneration) of covenant members, insoluble problems arise for the evangelistic task of the church. Since no one knows precisely who is elect and who is non-elect, the gospel promise may not be generally extended to all recipients of the gospel (for fear that non-elect persons be improperly addressed). Furthermore, since no one knows the "secret things" of God's electing or non-electing counsel, the gospel may not be communicated in a way that assures its recipients of God's promise and faithfulness. Anxiety about the assurance of salvation often follows and believers become preoccupied with looking for evidences of regeneration, which then become the basis for a confidence about one's salvation. Because the electing grace of God in Christ is unconditional, evangelism that is oriented to the decree of election also suffers, according to Shepherd, from an inordinate fear of emphasizing the gospel's conditions of faith and obedience. However, when we approach people in terms of the covenant with its promises and obligations, we can simultaneously herald the good news of God's grace in Christ and the corresponding summons to new obedience. Shepherd's main point regarding covenant evangelism, therefore, is the helpful reminder that we should approach lost sinners with the gospel of God's covenant grace in Christ, making judgments respecting people in terms of the covenant's administration (through Word and sacrament) rather than curiously inquiring into the secret things of God (Venema, 2002, 239-241).

Observation:

It should be kept in mind that the purpose of Shepherd's book is to argue for the points above. Shepherd does not deal with other matters. In the criticisms that follow, Venema sometimes draws conclusions from what Shepherd does not say and so raises concerns that are not valid. Arguments from silence are always troublesome.

Venema continues:

Despite these evident strengths of Shepherd's study, there are also a number of deeply troublesome features to his book that I do not believe can be ignored or minimized....

First..., it is rather perplexing... to read Shepherd's study and discover that he cites almost no authors in the course of his study.... Shepherd's bold claims for the advantages of his formulations, as contrasted with (unnamed and unidentified) formulators of traditional Reformed theology, would seem to place a greater burden of proof upon his shoulders. That burden includes, minimally, a significant amount of interaction with the exegetical, confessional and theological tradition known as "Reformed." Readers of this little volume, however, will find such interaction notably lacking.

Second, in making a case for the unity of the covenant of grace throughout the history of its various administrations, Shepherd treats the covenant relationship between God and his people *as largely identical at every point, including its administration before and after the fall into sin*. In all of God's dealings with human beings, whether before or after the historic fall into sin, the covenant relationship consists of a graciously established bond of union and communion between God and his people. This covenant relationship is born of God's free grace, stipulates faith and obedience, and threatens with sanctions those who fail to fulfill its obligations.

This flattening out or virtual identifying of the pre- and post-fall covenants has unavoidable and mischievous implications for our understanding of the way of salvation. For example, one implication of Shepherd's argument is that the way of salvation, whether for Adam or Christ or any believer, is always one and the same - the way of covenant-keeping faithfulness. Thus, one of the ironies of his formulation of the covenant at this point is that, though Shepherd introduces grace into the covenant relationship before the fall into sin in a way that parallels the priority of grace in the post-fall covenant, he also treats the stipulation of obedience for believers in the covenant of grace as though it were merely a reiteration of the pre-fall obligation of obedience. Salvation is by grace through faith(fulness), before as well as after the fall. God's promise secures or guarantees the believer's covenant inheritance. However, that inheritance can only be received by way of the believer's covenant keeping (p. 19).

Third..., Shepherd makes clear that he rejects the traditional Reformed doctrine of a pre-lapsarian "covenant of works" that promised Adam life "upon condition of perfect obedience" (Westminster Confession of Faith, Chap. VII.ii.)....

Shepherd treats Christ as though he were little more than a model believer whose obedient faith constituted the ground for his acceptance with God in the same way that Abraham's (and any believer's) obedient faith constituted the basis for his acceptance with God. In his zeal to identify the covenant relationship between God and man in its pre- and post-fall administrations, Shepherd leaves little room to describe Christ's work as Mediator of the covenant in a way that honors the uniqueness, perfection and sufficiency of Christ's accomplishment for the salvation of his people.

Fourth, these features of Shepherd's reformulation of the doctrine of the covenant raise questions regarding his understanding of the doctrine of justification....

Shepherd does not make it clear, for example, that the believer can only obtain eternal life upon the basis of the perfect obedience, satisfaction and righteousness of Christ alone received by faith alone (compare the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 23 & 24)....

Fifth, the ambiguity in Shepherd's formulations (the reader will look in vain in this book for a clear, express statement of the doctrine of justification by grace alone *through faith alone*) is undoubtedly related to his antipathy for the idea of merit....

The problem with Shepherd's wholesale repudiation of the idea of "merit" in our understanding of salvation, however, is that it has detrimental implications for other aspects of the traditional Reformed view of salvation. As we have already noted, it requires a thorough revision of the classic Reformed view of the covenant of works. However, it also would seem to require a revision of the classic Reformed view of Christ's saving work as Mediator of the covenant of grace....

Unlike Shepherd, who seems to think grace and justice, fatherly mercy and judicial satisfaction, are at odds, the Reformed view always insisted upon and assumed their harmony. The covenant is an expression of God's fatherly favor, to be sure. But it is also a relationship that God justly administers.

And sixth, though Shepherd offers some helpful observations in his apology for covenant evangelism, his treatment of the relation between covenant and election also raises some troubling questions. To put it somewhat simplistically, Shepherd seems to want to view election exclusively through the lens of the covenant of grace in its historical administration....

Remarkably, because Shepherd is unwilling to distinguish between those with whom God covenants in a broader sense (covenant in its administration) and those with whom God covenants in a narrower sense (covenant in its fruition), he ends up with what sounds suspiciously like a *conditional election* doctrine. Covenant members are elect in Christ *so long as* they persevere in faithfulness. However, should they become unfaithful, they may become subject to covenant discipline and lose their election. But this is not the end of the mischief that his approach creates for our understanding of the doctrine of election. For example, Shepherd maintains that the Reformed preacher is authorized by the doctrine of the covenant to address all with the message that Christ died for them, even though some so addressed may choose not to believe and obey the gospel (p. 85). Does this mean that persons for whom Christ died, because they fail to persevere in the way of obedient faith, do not receive the covenant's blessings? In Shepherd's formulation of the covenant's significance for our understanding of election, notes such as these are sounded that can hardly be harmonized with those found in the Canons of Dort....

The solution, for example, to the supposed problem of faith and works is not to confuse justification and sanctification, or to stress the believer's obligations of obedience as indispensable to the inheritance of blessing. Rather, the solution lies in a careful presentation of the riches of God's grace toward us in the Person of our Mediator. Christ, as Calvin often remarked, is given to us by God for righteousness and sanctification. In Christ, and in Christ alone, God provides every spiritual or covenantal blessing, whether it be the blessing of acceptance with him, on account of the righteousness of Christ, or the blessing of renewal in holiness, on account of the Spirit of Christ at work in us (Venema, 2002, 241-248).

Observations:

1. Shepherd's point is to demonstrate in which ways the covenant structure is the same throughout history, and he does not deal with the other issues that Venema raises. On these points he adopts the traditional Reformed teaching. Because he is in agreement with these doctrines, there is no need for the interaction with the Reformed confessions that Venema desires. With regard to the covenant, besides arguing for the Reformed understanding that Venema also endorses, Shepherd's concern is that the relationship of love that obtains between God and his people not be poured into a works/merit, *quid pro quo* mould.
2. Venema seeks to show that he does not misread Shepherd, but in fact, he does. All of Shepherd's writings make very clear that he does not at all consider Christ to be little more than a model believer.
3. Shepherd does not question that pre-fall Adam was called to perfect obedience and that he lost eternal life because of his rebellion. His argument is just that the conditions of the pre-fall covenant should not be characterized as meritorious in contrast with grace, as if there was no grace or faith before the fall. The covenants are structurally the same, but they differ with regard to sin and the need for redemption.
4. For Shepherd, grace and justice are not at odds. He does not reject the idea of satisfaction in justice, nor salvation through Christ's satisfaction to the justice of God. The point is not to set aside the concept of justice, but only to question that earned merits are what make active obedience righteous. That disobedience merits punishment and that Christ suffered the punishment in substitutionary atonement is not questioned at all.
5. Shepherd does not deny election in favor of the covenant of grace in its historical administration. He does not question the Canons of Dort at any point.
6. Suggesting that Shepherd confuses justification and sanctification reflects a lack of understanding of what he teaches. For Shepherd, justification removes the guilt of sin and sanctification removes the corruption of sin. Justification is God's forensic verdict of innocence. Sanctification is inward renewal of the believer.
7. Shepherd wholeheartedly joins Calvin and Venema in affirming that "Christ... is given to us by God for righteousness and sanctification. In Christ, and in Christ alone, God provides every spiritual or covenantal blessing, whether it be the blessing of acceptance with him, on account of the righteousness of Christ, or the blessing of renewal in holiness, grounded in that same righteousness and worked through the Spirit of Christ at work in us."

In a chapter in *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry*, Dr. Michael S. Horton of Westminster Seminary California affirms:

Shepherd and others within our circles share the view of advocates of the new perspective on Paul that merit—a crucial category in Reformation theology [particularly

with respect to Christ's)—is an idea we can live without. Not surprisingly, the crucial doctrine of the imputation of Christ's active obedience—indeed, imputation of Christ's righteousness at all—is denied (Horton, 2007, 201).

And:

At this point Lusk appeals to Shepherd's contrast between a merit principle and a covenantal approach. Yet like the new perspective in Paul, Lusk (and Shepherd) ignores not only that the Reformed held) the principle of merit [Christ's) within a thoroughly covenantal theology, but also fails to recognize that Rome *had* a covenantal paradigm—very much like the covenantal nomism already described.

Identified especially with the school of nominalism, the slogan of this medieval covenant theology was this: "God will not deny his grace to those who do what lies within them." Strictly speaking, no one merits salvation (*condign* merit). Rather, God accepts the imperfect obedience of those who belong to the church as if it were satisfactory for final justification (*congruent* merit). Although no one is strictly meritorious of final justification, God has instituted a covenant in which cooperation with infused grace will be accepted in place of perfect fulfillment of the law. Grace was provided through the sacraments, just as it had been through the sacrifices of the old covenant. As faith became formed by love—in other words, as faith became obedience—it became justifying. The "new law," as the New Testament was called, is a kinder, gentler form of conditionality than is the old covenant. Jesus is a new Moses, but a milder one (evidently, the Sermon on the Mount, with its far more demanding interpretation of Torah, was not determinative). Similarly, the Arminians on the Continent and neonomians (such as Richard Baxter) in England sought a rapprochement with Rome on justification by saying that faith—construed as obedience—was the only work substituting for full obedience. The law now relaxed, one could be justified simply by having the beginnings of holiness. It was a "kinder, gentler" justification by works.

While Shepherd and the federal-vision proponents oppose the category of merit in principle, they do insist that faith *and* obedience (or faith *as* obedience) are the instruments of final justification, which amounts to the *congruent* merit advocated by late medieval theology. While our confessions affirm that the faith that justifies is a living, active, and obedient faith, they universally insist that faith is justifying only in its act of resting in Christ's merits (Horton, 2007, 204-205).

Observations:

1. Shepherd does not deny the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers.
2. There is no sense in which Shepherd teaches something like congruent merit. For him, the believer's works constitute no part at all of his justification.
3. There is nothing in Shepherd's thought that can be described as relaxed law or justification through imperfect obedience.

4. Shepherd's view of justification is that of the Confessions as referred to by Horton.

The Rev. Richard Phillips spoke at a conference at Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary in 2004. He discusses N. T. Wright and then says:

This aligns with the teaching of Norman Shepherd in *The Call of Grace*, which sees our justification taking place in a manner parallel to Christ's own. Shepherd writes, "Just as Jesus was faithful in order to *guarantee* the blessing, so his followers must be faithful in order to *inherit* the blessing." It is difficult to avoid the inference that we are justified by being like Jesus, by our faithfulness which is *just* as Jesus' faithfulness, instead of, as Paul puts it in Romans 5:19, being made righteous by the one man's obedience, namely, Christ, who lived and died not merely as our example but first as our federal head and our substitute. Both Wright's and Shepherd's views of justification require a mono-covenantal view of redemptive history and permit no place for the biblical covenant of works (Phillips, 2005, 107).

Numerous objections are made to this teaching, surprisingly from many who vow to uphold the Westminster Confession, to which clear biblical answers may be and have been presented. But the most important objection, in my view, follows from a hotly contested word I used above, that is, *merit*. Some critics consider it unseemly that man could ever stand before God on the basis of earned merit. This objection takes many forms. First, is the rejection of merit as the basis for divine-human relationships on the grounds that God is Father and fathers receive their children on the basis of fatherly love rather than on earned merit. Second, it is said that man cannot add to God's glory, nor can a creature ever put God in his debt. Third, the idea of earned merit is rejected for depicting the divine-human relationship as that between an employer and an employee.

Fourth, it is objected that God's dealing with Adam was, in fact, gracious. This is so because God was not obligated to offer any covenant to man and especially because the promised reward offered to Adam - eternal life - was far out of proportion to the value of his obedience, which Adam already owed to God apart from reward. This complaint was made famous by John Murray and is advanced today by many. Murray also complains that the word *covenant* is not used in the Bible for God's dealings with Adam.

Last are objections leveled by Norman Shepherd, in addition to the above objections. He complains that the covenant of works stands in direct opposition to the idea of salvation by grace alone. That God accepts us by the grace/faith principle rules out the merit/works principle. Furthermore, he protests that until we reject the idea of earned merit, "we feel threatened by passages of Scripture that speak of repentance and obedience as conditions for entering eternal life," and are forced to use "exegetical and dogmatic devices of dubious validity" to avoid legalism (Phillips, 2005, 108-109).

Most credible of all the objections to the covenant of works is the one that argues that God's pre-fall dealings with Adam entailed a good deal of grace. That this was raised by a stalwart of Reformed theology, John Murray, has made this point all the more deserving of consideration. Murray writes, "The term [covenant of works] is not felicitous, for the reason that the elements of grace entering into the administration are not properly provided for by the term 'works'." The question must be asked, however, if grace is the proper term for God's favor shown to Adam in the Garden. Cornelis P. Venema argues for a distinction between God's kindness to Adam prior to his sin and the grace shown to him after the Fall. He writes, "There is a real difference between *undeserved favor* shown a sinless, obedient creature, and the *undeserved grace* granted the disobedient covenant breaker" (Phillips, 2005, 110).

The logic of God's covenant with Adam was that obedience produced righteousness, righteousness received justification, and justification received life. Apart from our desire to note God's goodness in the Garden (which Kline helpfully reminds us to keep distinct from God's grace towards sinners), this covenant reflected God's justice, not his grace. Complaints against non-biblical, medieval vows and teachings of merit do not change the fact that the pre-Fall covenant was conditioned on Adam's obedient works and that acting as our federal head he failed to meet the stipulated condition. As Paul so meticulously works out in Romans 5:12-21, Adam's disobedience produced guilt, guilt received condemnation, and condemnation yielded the bitter curse of death. Likewise, we can see that Jesus achieved our righteousness by fulfilling the covenant of works....

It is noteworthy that John Murray, though rejecting the term *covenant of works*, treats what he calls the Adamic administration as possessing all the features of a covenant. His discussion is organized around the headings *the condition*, *promise*, and *threatening*, the very features common to biblical covenants. In this, he affirms one of the strongest arguments for calling God's dealings with Adam a "covenant", namely that it contains all the features found in all other covenants identified as such in the Bible. This is why Murray's soteriology was safeguarded from the debilitating effects commonly resulting from a denial of the covenant of works. While objecting semantically, he retains all its important features, thus safeguarding the doctrine of justification in his thinking. Writing of God's dealings with Adam, Murray lays out the very progression I noted above, saying, "Righteousness, justification, life is an invariable combination in the government and judgment of God. There would be a relation that we may call perfect legal reciprocity." Therefore, Murray observes that in the covenant of grace God does not set aside his justice, but rather satisfies it through the substitutionary atonement and the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ, offered to us by faith alone (Phillips, 2005, 113-114).

The problem here is not an ambiguity in terminology, as has often been said in Shepherd's defense, but a clear refutation of a definition of faith that is distinct from works. He is asserting that justifying faith is not merely "shown" by its works, as James 2:18 says and as the whole flow of James' argument indicates, but that justifying faith and its works are one and the same thing. For this reason, Shepherd has been able to say simultaneously that we are justified by faith alone and that we are justified by works. Faith, repentance, and the new works of obedience that follow are not merely joined in

salvation, but are meshed together in what Shepherd calls "the obedience of faith," wrongly applying Paul's use of that expression in Romans 1:5. Furthermore, Shepherd's intent becomes clear when he adds that justification ultimately takes place at the final judgment and that the obedient believer may lose his or her justification by failing to continue in faithful obedience.

Shepherd's definition of faith does not direct us to look to and rely upon Christ and his work, but ourselves and our work (Phillips, 2005, 121).

What about Christ's saving blood? Smith allows that we need to be forgiven through Christ "when we sin," which one gains the impression is not likely to be very often for a faithful covenant-keeper. But we are justified by works, that is, by our works, at least so long as we continue to do them. One wonders what was the effect of the Fall; it must have been very slight if the view of Smith and Shepherd and others in their camp is correct. Perhaps here more than anywhere else, in its low view of the consequences of the Fall, this new theology of covenant intersects with Roman Catholicism, along with sharing an approach to justification which depends on the grace of God working *in us* rather than the alien righteousness of Christ imputed *to us* by grace and through faith alone (Phillips, 2005, 122).

Observations:

1. When Shepherd points out similarities between Christ's faithfulness and ours, it is not at all in order to call into question his federal headship or substitutionary obedience and mediation.
2. Shepherd fully endorses Phillips' view:

...that the pre-Fall covenant was conditioned on Adam's obedient works and that acting as our federal head he failed to meet the stipulated condition. As Paul so meticulously works out in Romans 5:12-21, Adam's disobedience produced guilt, guilt received condemnation, and condemnation yielded the bitter curse of death.

His point is not to deny the pre-fall covenant and its stipulations, only to affirm (with Murray) that the elements of grace entering into the administration are not properly provided for by the term "works".

3. Shepherd does see a radical difference between the pre-fall and the post-fall covenants. Pre-fall there was no sin and no imputation of Christ's righteousness. Post-fall, the only righteousness is the righteousness of Christ, both for our justification through imputation of his sacrificial death (Rom. 5:18), and for our sanctification, as his resurrection life is made our inherent righteousness (Rom. 6; Gal. 2:20; Tit. 2:5). When we stand before the Lord on the Day of Judgment, by the grace of God alone, we will stand as those whose sins are forgiven and whose lives have been renewed/recreated by the power of the Holy Spirit. All this on the ground of what Christ did for us through his crucifixion and

resurrection. Before the fall, Adam stood before God as righteous by grace, as well, but his righteousness was expressed in personal obedience, not Christ's.

4. Murray and Shepherd certainly do not deny the significant difference between grace to the sinless and grace to sinners deserving of death. That difference, however, should not exclude grace from the Adamic covenant or from the life of Christ (Luke 2:40).
5. Our understanding of Shepherd's view of justification must bear in mind that he emphasizes that justification is a gift. There is no legalism at all in his view.
6. Murray's "perfect legal reciprocity" is not the same as Phillips' "obedience produces righteousness". Phillips rightly observes that Murray safeguards his soteriology. The same must be said for Shepherd.
7. Shepherd's view of the relationship between faith and works is precisely the one Phillips claims Shepherd denies, namely that faith and works accompany each other. They are not meshed together as one and the same thing.
8. The assertion that Shepherd has us relying on ourselves and our work rather than Christ and his is clearly a misunderstanding of Shepherd. He no more has us relying on ourselves and our works than Reformed theology, in general, has us relying on ourselves and our faith.
9. It is wrong to suggest that in Shepherd's view a Christian does not sin very often. To speak of a low view of sin in Shepherd is to attribute to him thoughts that are entirely alien to him.
10. Claims that Shepherd attributes our justification to anything other than the imputed righteousness of Christ can only be made by ignoring his plain statements on the matter.

Dr. John Carrick of Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary agrees with Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who considered Shepherd's views to be a subtle form of legalism. Carrick writes, "... 'Shepherdism' ... is a subtle form of legalism..., subversive of the gospel; ... subversive of this great, wonderful, yet vulnerable doctrine of justification by faith alone." (Carrick, 2005, 142)

Observation:

In fact, Shepherd does not promote legalism. He does not teach that the believer's obedience to law contributes anything to his righteousness, not at any point, neither at the initial moment of being constituted righteous or at any point thereafter as he lives out his life in covenant faithfulness, accepting, receiving and resting in Christ alone for righteousness, sanctification and redemption.

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