

The Gospel Crisis in the OPC and PCA

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In the conservative Presbyterian and reformed realm, there has been a controversy raging since 2002. In the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) and the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) the controversy has been especially painful because the Federal Vision teachings have been adopted by a number of pastors and elders, who by their teaching and example, have turned whole congregations away from the doctrines of Scripture and the Westminster Standards on crucial gospel issues.¹

In the Orthodox Presbyterian Church the matter of the Federal Vision teaching is coming to a head this summer. The 73rd General Assembly will decide what to do when they discuss the committee report (i.e. “The Report of the Committee to Study the Doctrine of Justification”) that deals with the Federal Vision this June. We take the occasion of the release of the OPC Report to make a few comments on the report, discuss what the OPC and PCA need to do on this matter if they are to avoid complete apostasy and offer some analysis as to why so little has been done during the last four years to stop this dangerous teaching from spreading. It is our express hope and prayer that the OPC and PCA will finally deal with the Federal Vision heresy decisively before more congregations and families are drawn into the pit of an anti-Scriptural legalism.

The report on justification that deals with the New Perspective on Paul and the Federal Vision is from an academic viewpoint quite helpful.² It offers a scholarly, well-argued and

¹ There are a number of OPC and PCA ministers and elders who have written papers, spoken at conferences in favor of this theology, and defended church officers holding the same in the church courts: e.g., Prof. Richard Gaffin, Thomas Tyson, Thomas Trouwburst, Peter Lillback, Richard Lusk and Steven Wilkins. There is substantially no difference between Shepherdism and the Federal Vision, as the advocates of both share in the same conferences and together promote the doctrine of justification by faith plus faithful obedience or good works. Norman Shepherd’s heretical book, *The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illustrates Salvation and Evangelism*, published by Presbyterian and Reformed, was endorsed by Prof. Richard Gaffin.

²The General Assembly committee had been formed to deal with the Federal Vision and New Perspective on Paul in 2004, because of an overture from the Mid-West Presbytery. On the first page of the report there is a warning regarding internet articles and those who “post opinions without due reflection and without proper accountability to others.” The unscholarly, untrustworthy internet articles are contrasted with material that is accountable and circulated through “ordinary channels.” While, no doubt, there are a lot of unscholarly, unbiblical articles on the internet, the articles and books that are published by “respectable” seminary professors through “ordinary channels” after “due reflection” and “receiving valuable feedback” are often no more reliable or trustworthy than the many heterodox internet articles. One can point to the two unbiblical books on worship by John Frame which were published by Presbyterian and Reformed and endorsed by four seminary professors (Frame’s book *Worship in Spirit and in Truth* was endorsed by Richard Pratt, Jr. and Steven Brown from Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando and Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. and D. Clair Davis from Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia). For a biblical refutation of Frame’s attack on the regulative principle and the Westminster Standards, see Brian M. Schwertley, “The Neo-Presbyterian Challenge to Confessional Presbyterian Orthodoxy”; also Kevin Reed, “Presbyterian Worship: Old and New” in Brian M. Schwertley, *Musical Instruments in the Public Worship of God* (Southfield, MI: Reformed Witness, 1999). There is James Hurley’s defense of women teaching doctrine to men in public worship in his *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981). Meredith Kline’s unbiblical and dangerous writings on Genesis chapter one constitutes another example. One could multiply examples, for modern “conservative” Presbyterian seminaries both reflect and support the widespread defections from the Westminster Standards found in the OPC and PCA today.

organized critique of these two dangerous new systems of theology. It unequivocally condemns virtually every unbiblical aberration of the New Perspective and Federal Vision paradigms. Most importantly it explicitly states that the Federal Vision doctrine of justification is contrary to the Word of God and the Westminster Confession of Faith. The committee writes,

Thus our survey of FV teaching in all these areas of theology is always with a view to its impact on the doctrine of justification. The committee points out that in regard to the doctrine of justification more narrowly considered, FV problems include a failure to affirm the imputation of Christ's active obedience along with a redefinition of faith that merges Christ's trust in the Father with our faith in the work of Christ and that also includes good works in the very definition of faith itself (1689-1690).

The report has three recommendations. First, it recommends fourteen different topics that ought to be used "with a view to ensuring each candidate's fidelity to biblical and confessional teaching on justification and his ability to articulate that teaching..." (1690). Second, "that presbyteries, sessions and pastors be proactive in addressing teaching of the New Perspective on Paul [NPP] and of the Federal Vision [FV] that compromises the purity of the gospel" (1961). Third, that the report should receive a wide distribution in the denomination and other denominations with which it has fraternal relations (1691). In short, it is an exhortation to be more careful about examining candidates for the ministry, teaching about the errors of the New Perspective and the Federal Vision, and here is the report to help in these recommendations.

Although as an academic theological refutation of NPP/FV we are *generally* pleased with the report and its conclusions, there are a number of serious problems relating to the report's recommendations that need to be considered. (1) The report recommends reading the writings of these heretics. While pastors need to be aware of current dangerous theological opinions to an extent to guard the flock of God, it is unbiblical and irresponsible to recommend that believers read subtle, insidious, ambiguous and contradictory heretical doctrines that lead people away from the faith once delivered to the saints. We do not find Paul, John or Peter recommending the writings of Judaizers, Gnostics or Antinomians. Various quotes by these heretics in refutations ought to be sufficient. (2) The report's recommendations fail to biblically shepherd the people of God. This point is established by what the report does not recommend. (Keep in mind that the report stated that the Federal Vision's doctrine of justification is contrary to Scripture and the Westminster Standards. We are not just dealing with a minor error or a non-scandalous mistake but with error that strikes at the very heart of Protestantism, evangelicalism, the reformed faith or Christianity itself.) There is nothing in the report that deals with sanctions against the wolves (heretics) among the flock.³ What should the report have recommended?

First, the teachings of the Federal Vision on justification must be declared to be a damnable heresy. Regarding those who pervert the gospel of Christ, Paul says by the Holy Spirit: "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, if any man

³ The report's omissions are particularly troubling given the OPC's past failures to protect the sheep under their care when they had the opportunity. The OPC Presbytery of Philadelphia failed to convict Norman Shepherd of heresy in the late 1970s when he was dismissed from Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia. Also, Elder John O. Kinnard was acquitted by the OPC General Assembly, after being convicted of teaching a doctrine of justification by faith plus works. Although Kinnard displayed some remorse for a lack of clarity in his teaching, he has never repented of teaching the Shepherdite/FV doctrine of justification by faith and faithful obedience (or works).

preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed”(Gal. 1:8-9). Martin Luther’s comments on this passage are worthy of note. He writes,

Therefore, he plainly excommunicateth and curseth all teachers in general, himself, his brethren, an angel, and moreover all others whatsoever, namely all those false teachers his adversaries. Here appeareth an exceeding great fervency of spirit in the Apostle, that he dare curse all teachers throughout the whole world and in heaven, which pervert his Gospel and teach any other: for all men must either believe that Gospel that Paul preached, or else they must be accursed and condemned. Would to God this terrible sentence of the Apostle might strike a fear into their hearts that seek to pervert the Gospel of Paul; of which sort at this day (the more it is to be lamented) the world is full.⁴

Calvin’s comments on this passage are every bit as strong as Luther’s. He writes,

He...rebuketh them...specially for the overgreat lightness that was in them in giving ear to deceivers...but whensoever anybody goes about to mingle anything with the pure seed [of the gospel] which we have of our Lord Jesus Christ, it is nothing else but an overthrowing of God’s building [i.e., the church]...And therefore if we have not the pure and single doctrine, wherein our Lord Jesus Christ was manifested unto us: surely we have nothing at all: and whensoever we have once been instructed in it, we must hold it to the last push. For if we swerve never so little from it, there will be nothing but unfaithfulness in us.... Now, were it not better that the whole world would sink and perish, than that all this [the glorious gospel] should be overthrown.⁵

Second, any church officer that adheres to the Federal Vision paradigm must be deposed from the ministry. “A man that is a heretick after the first and second admonition reject; knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself”(Tit. 3:10-11). The church courts should attempt to turn a person who adheres to scandalous false doctrine back to the truth on two separate occasions. “He does not mean any ‘admonition’ whatever, or that of a private individual, but an ‘admonition’ given by a minister, with the public authority of the Church; for the meaning of the Apostle’s words is as if he had said, that heretics must be rebuked with solemn and severe censure.”⁶ If that person does not repent, he is to be cast out of the visible church by excommunication. The imperative *paraitou* “is used here in the sense of ‘reject’ or ‘dismiss,’ i.e. remove from the fellowship of the Christian community” (cf. 1 Cor. 5:11-13; 2 Thes. 3:14; Mt. 18:17-18).⁷ When a Christian is guilty of scandalous false teaching,

⁴ Martin Luther, *A Commentary of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1953), 69. William Hendriksen writes, “The truth expressed in the first conditional sentence (verse 8) greatly strengthens that expressed in the second (verse 9). We have here the reasoning: if even, then all the more. In effect, Paul is saying, ‘If even we (I, or a fellow-worker) or a holy angel must be the object of God’s righteous curse, were any of us ever to preach a gospel contrary to the one we humans previously preached to you, then all the more the divine wrath must be poured out upon those self-appointed nobodies who are now making themselves guilty of this crime.’ Here the storm is unleashed in all its fury. Paul’s ‘Let him be anathema’ is not a mere wish, but an effective invocation. The apostle, as Christ’s fully authorized representative, is pronouncing the curse upon the Judaizers, who are committing the terrible crime of calling the true gospel false, and of substituting the false and ruinously dangerous gospel for the true and saving one.” (*Galatians and Ephesians* [Grand Rapids: Baker (1967, 68) 1979], 41).

⁵ John Calvin, *Sermons on Galatians by John Calvin* (Audubon, NJ: Old Paths, [1574] 1995), 50 51, 55, 63, 64, 65).

⁶ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 342.

⁷ George Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 355. “And this the word (*paraitou*) notes, for it properly signifies to be drawn out of a city as an outcast, or (applied to the church) to cast a man out by

Paul, speaking by divine inspiration, tells us plainly that words, arguments, statements and positive teachings are not enough when heretics are obstinate. Church discipline must be lovingly and firmly applied otherwise the debates and theological battles will never come to an end (Gal. 5:15). After two solemn and sober warnings heretics are to be cast out of the church. The shock of deposing from church office may be used of God to turn them from their foolishness back to the genuine gospel of Christ. Further, the welfare of the church is protected. Church discipline is an act of love toward the one excommunicated (As Paul says, “That the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” [1 Cor. 5:5]). We must obey Scripture which says in 1 Timothy 1:3, “As I besought thee . . . , that thou mightest charge some that they teach no other doctrine.” If necessary whole presbyteries may be censured by the general assembly or synod, vindicating those church officers who have dissented and complained in the presbytery.

Paul also instructed Titus what must be done with false teachers. He writes, “Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers. For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, especially they of the circumcision: *Whose mouths must be stopped*, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre’s sake” (Tit. 1:9-11; cf. 12-16; 3:10-11). When the apostle says that their mouths must be stopped he uses a verb (*epistomizein*) which has the primary meaning of to “stop the mouth either with bridle or muzzle or gag.”⁸ For Paul it is not enough for Titus to write a position paper on why the false teachers are wrong. They must be silenced. They are no longer to be permitted to teach and if they persist they are to be disciplined and even excommunicated if necessary. “When men are thus confuted by argument, overthrown with the sword of the Spirit, and confounded by the power of the truth and still proceed to trouble the peace of the church and the faith of the saints, then the church may and must proceed by censure and admonition to enjoin them to silence; which if they will not hear, they ought by the church to be driven from the society of the faithful. If they prove gangrenous, they must be cut off.”⁹ Calvin’s comments on this passage apply beautifully to the situation many Presbyterians find themselves in today. He writes,

A good pastor ought therefore to be on the watch, so as not to give silent permission to wicked and dangerous doctrines to make gradual progress, or to allow wicked men an opportunity of spreading them. But it may be asked, “How is it possible for a bishop to constrain obstinate and self-willed men to be silent? For such persons, even though they are vanquished in argument, still do not hold their peace; and it frequently happens that, the more manifestly they are refuted and vanquished, they become the more insolent; for not only is their malice strengthened and inflamed, but they give themselves up to indolence.” I reply, when they have been smitten down by the sword of God’s word, and overwhelmed by the force of the truth, the Church may command them to be silent; and if they persevere, they may at least be banished from the society of believers, so that they shall have no opportunity of doing harm.¹⁰

Thus far the PCA has not obeyed the teaching of Paul and ordered Steve Wilkins, Richard Lusk, Mark Horne and others to stop spreading their heretical teaching on justification, the atonement, the sacraments and worship. The OPC has not dealt with James B. Jordan (a

excommunication, or to cut him off from the society of the church” (Thomas Taylor, *Exposition of Titus* [Minneapolis, MN: Klock & Klock (1619) 1980], 531).

⁸ Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker [1931] n.d.), 4:600.

⁹ Thomas Taylor, *Exposition of Titus* (Minneapolis, MN: Klock and Klock [1619] 1980), 174-175.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 298.

church member), Prof. Richard Gaffin, Thomas Tyson, Tom Trouwborst and the many others who are poisoning the sheep with their teaching.

In a similar vein, Paul writes, “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple” (Rom. 16:17-18). Paul warns us to be on the look out for anyone who causes divisions in the church because their doctrine contradicts the teaching of the apostles. He orders us to keep away from men who depart from the faith. If we are to follow Paul and separate ourselves from heretics, then we must separate ourselves from false prophets and by way of application those who shelter them. John Murray’s comments are helpful. He writes,

We have here false teachers and propagandists.... [T]he stumbling is that caused by false doctrine and falls into the category of the error anathematized in Galatians. The injunctions comport with an error of such character; they are to ‘mark’ the proponents so as to avoid them and they are to ‘turn away from them’.... The teachers were skilled in the artful device of ‘smooth and fair speech,’ a common feature of those who corrupt the purity and simplicity of the gospel.¹¹

If a church by its irresponsible inaction in dealing with false teachers forces believers to separate in order to maintain fidelity to the gospel and the injunctions designed to protect the gospel, then believers must not regard their separation as a dividing of the body of Christ but rather as the most effectual way to promote its union. For union must always be rooted in truth. We are commanded to have the mind of Christ. This separation is not based on pride or selfishness but rather on obedience to the will of God and the greater interest of the church of Christ.

When dealing with false teaching—especially damnable heresy—it is not enough to make positive statements in favor of true doctrine and then set out general warnings against the false. There must be sanctions that back up such statements. The unwillingness thus far, over a period of almost four years, to discipline teachers in their own ranks who publicly advocate gross heresy is unconscionable. At the very beginning of the controversy, when people were struggling to figure out what exactly these men were saying, one could make an argument that some time (a month or two) is needed to properly assess the situation. But, this heresy has been analyzed and exposed for over three and a half years. What are the OPC and PCA waiting for? When will they repent of their sinful, blatant negligence?

The apostle John also teaches that denominations and even individual believers have a moral obligation to reject pastors, teachers and elders who have apostatized and teach damnable heresy. “Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds” (2 Jn. 9-11). The apostle John is warning us about teachers who intentionally or unintentionally labor to destroy the church of Jesus Christ. “[T]he Christian who welcomes the instructor into his house actually promotes the purpose of his visitor. In effect, the Christian gives his blessing to the work the false teacher performs. Note that John does not consider this an innocent and insignificant act. He calls it sharing in wicked work that

¹¹ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1959, 65] 1968), 2:236.

originates with Satan...”¹² Regarding false teachers Matthew Henry writes, “They are not to be entertained as ministers of Christ.... 1. ‘Support them not’....2. ‘Bless not their enterprises.... Attend not their service with your prayers and good wishes’.... God will be no patron of falsehood, seduction and sin.”¹³ A person that supports a man or an organization with his presence and money is morally responsible for the heresy that is spread by that false prophet or denomination. Members of the OPC and PCA congregations should speak to their Sessions about separation and in unity depart from these denominations; but individual members and covenant heads of families must immediately take themselves and their children out of these corrupt denominations, if the respective Sessions are unwilling to separate.

When the OPC or PCA fails to depose ministers who are publicly spreading this heresy, they are implicitly giving these false prophets much greater opportunities of doing harm to Reformed churches and believers elsewhere. Further, they are acting in a manner which makes it much more difficult for these false teachers to see the errors of their ways. These denominations may argue that they have at various times condemned these teachings (e.g., the recent [April 2006] OPC report on justification [73rd General Assembly]) and thus their hands are now clean. But, if a denomination condemns a teacher’s doctrine on so crucial a matter as justification as unscriptural and unconfessional and yet does not back that statement up with the biblically required discipline, then what good is it? What the OPC and PCA have essentially been doing the last four years is akin to saying: “Adultery is contrary to the Scriptures and our Standards. We are strongly opposed to adultery. In fact we need to be more careful in excluding adulterers from church membership. However, we do not discipline or excommunicate adulterers, that would be too harsh and unloving.”¹⁴ Church history teaches us that church reports and denominational statements without corresponding appropriate acts of discipline accomplish little to nothing. Heretics, generally, do not leave on their own accord; they must be forced out.

Men who teach and rule in the church of Christ are to use their gifts “to edification, and not to destruction” (2 Cor. 10:8; 13:10). The doctrines set forth must be biblical and clear, if they are to lead to the salvation and spiritual edification of the church. Those ministers who are advocating this new teaching are not promoting the spiritual good of others but rather are leading them into multiple heresies. Therefore, the church must exercise its God-given authority to remove this deadly error; otherwise, she is responsible for the abuse, apostasy and destruction of the sheep under her care. Men who by their teaching deprive their congregants of the perfect righteousness of Christ and instead lead them to their own filthy, stinking rags of “covenant faithfulness” for final justification are wolves and not shepherds. If the OPC and the PCA refuse to depose and excommunicate the proponents of the Federal Vision theology who do not repent, then constitutionally *in principle*, they are no longer a true church. They are fundamentally *in practice* apostate. All the blood of those souls slain by her damnable teaching on justification which she purposely refused to expunge in the name of forbearance, love and compassion (falsely so called) will be required at her hand. “And what concord hath Christ with Belial? Or

¹² Simon J. Kistemaker, *James and I-III John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 384.

¹³ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* [McLean, VA: MacDonald, no date], 5:1102.

¹⁴ While God often defines love in terms of His willingness to chastise His own people when they go astray, modern, corrupt Presbyterians seem to define love as being willing to chastise those who believe that sin and heresy ought to receive admonition, rebuke and censure. When the RPCUS defended the gospel of Jesus Christ in 2002 by condemning the Federal Vision teaching on justification as heresy, the widespread reaction among many Presbyterians and so-called theologians was shock and anger, not at the damnable heretics who were denying the true gospel, but at the RPCUS for defending it. We live in a time of widespread ignorance and declension.

what part hath he that believeth with an infidel...? Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord” (2 Cor. 6:15-17).

Third, after due process in the courts those persons who adhere to and/or support the teachings of the Federal Vision theology must be excommunicated from the communion of the visible church of Jesus Christ unless they repent of these heretical doctrines and recant any sermons, writings, books, lectures, tapes, websites, newsletters, etc., that advocate these teachings. “If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; He is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: *from such withdraw thyself*” (1 Tim. 6:3-5). “Paul forbids the servants of Christ to have any intercourse with such persons. He not only warns Timothy not to resemble them, but exhorts him to avoid them as dangerous plagues.”¹⁵ “Good ministers and Christians will withdraw themselves from such.”¹⁶ “[W]ith such men have nothing to do, avoid them in thy private converse, and cast them out of the church if their faults be public scandals, and they be contumacious”¹⁷ “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. But *shun profane and vain babblings*: for they will increase unto more ungodliness” (2 Tim. 2:15-16; see 3:5, 13; 4:2-4). “Now we command you, brethren in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye *withdraw yourselves from every brother* that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received from us... And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and *have no company with him*, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother” (2 Th. 3:6, 14-15; the passages discussed in the previous section apply to this point as well).

In these passages Paul implicitly or explicitly teaches: (1) Individual believers have a moral obligation to withdraw themselves socially and ecclesiastically from persons who teach or live heresy. (2) The church has a biblical responsibility to order men to stop teaching false doctrine. They are to be silenced because their teaching is devastating to whole families (Tit. 1:11). (3) False teachers are to be censured and separated from the communion and fellowship of the church. “Paul declares that such persons must be put away from the society of believers, that they may not bring dishonor upon the Church.”¹⁸

The primary mark of a true church is the pure preaching and profession of the Word (Jn. 8:31, 32, 47; 14:16; 6:34; 2 Tim. 1:13; 2:2; 3:10, 14; 4:3; Tit. 1:9; 2:1; 3:10-11, etc). The true church can only stand upon true apostolic doctrine. Calvin writes,

But as soon as falsehood breaks into the citadel of religion and the sum of necessary doctrine is overturned and the use of the sacraments is destroyed, surely the death of the church follows—just as a man’s life is ended when his throat is pierced or his heart mortally wounded. And this is clearly evident from Paul’s words when he teaches that the church is founded upon the teaching of the prophets and apostles, with Christ himself the chief cornerstone [Eph. 2:20]. If the foundation of the church is the teaching of the prophets and apostles, which bids believers entrust their salvation to Christ alone—then take away that teaching, and how will the building continue

¹⁵ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, 156.

¹⁶ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6:828.

¹⁷ Matthew Poole, *Commentary on the Holy Bible* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1685] 1963), 3:788.

¹⁸ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians*, 352.

to stand? Therefore, the church must tumble down when that sum of religion dies which alone can sustain it. Again, if the true church is the pillar and foundation of truth [1 Tim. 3:15], it is certain that no church can exist where lying and falsehood have gained sway.¹⁹

For this reason, ministers and elders, as guardians of the flock, have a responsibility (after following the necessary levels of admonition) to “reject” (Tit. 3:10), “put away from” the church (1 Cor. 5:13) and regard as “heathen” (Mt. 18:17) those who do not repent of this heresy.

The Westminster Confession gives a number of reasons why church censures are essential:

Church censures are necessary, for the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren, for deterring of others from the like offenses, for purging out of that leaven which might infect the whole lump, for vindicating the honour of Christ, and the holy profession of the gospel, and for preventing the wrath of God, which might justly fall upon the Church, if they should suffer His covenant and the seals thereof to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders” (30:3; see 1 Cor. 5; 1 Tim. 5:20; Mt. 7:6; 1 Tim 1:20; 1 Cor. 11:27-34; with Jude 23).

Regarding ministers who advocate the Auburn Avenue or Federal Vision doctrine we ask the following questions. (1) Does their teaching rise to the level of the highest censure called greater excommunication (Mt. 18:17)? Yes, all good Protestants agree that denying the doctrine of justification by faith alone is gross, damnable heresy. (2) Are the advocates of this doctrine teachable and humble or obstinate and rebellious? Sadly, the latter is obviously the case. As they have been confronted by the truth, they have dug in their heels and become more blind and stubborn. Thus far, not one has repented.²⁰ (3) Have these men received proper biblical admonitions and have they been given a reasonable amount of time to repent? These men (i.e. at least the prominent leaders) have been confronted privately, publicly and have been thoroughly refuted in print.²¹ This controversy is almost four years old. These answers raise another question: Why has the OPC and PCA refused to discipline virtually anyone related to this heresy?²² This is a perplexing question. One reason men shrink from such a duty is that “it is

¹⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 4:2:1, 2:1041-1042. Regarding church discipline William Cunningham writes, “Censures are just the application of the statements of scripture to the external conduct of men individually, and they are ratified or confirmed by God in their bearing upon man’s eternal welfare, only in so far as they correspond with the statements of His word, and with the actual circumstance of the case.... Exclusion by a judicial sentence from the visible church, is just in substance a solemn declaration by the ecclesiastical office-bearers, that they regard the party whom they exclude as maintaining opinions or pursuing a course of conduct opposed to the word of God” (*Discussions on Church Principles: Popish, Erastian, and Presbyterian* [Edinburgh: T and T. Clark, 1868], 244-245).

²⁰ Doug Wilson has attempted to appear more orthodox and moderate than his comrades by asserting his belief in the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. While Wilson in his subtle equivocations and statements that are orthodox may appear to be better than some of his theological partners in heresy (e.g., Rich Lusk), he in reality must be rejected as a heretic because: (1) Despite his moderate tone, he comes to virtually all the same conclusions as Lusk and Wilkins. (2) He is in full support of the movement which is at its core heretical and deadly. Canon Press publishes the most radical of opinions and New St. Andrew’s College employs Peter Leithart whose writings on the church, worship and the sacraments are radically unorthodox. If a man supports a heretical movement with his money, writing, publishing, lectures, etc then that man is a dangerous heretic.

²¹See Brian M Schwertley, *Auburn Avenue Theology: A Biblical Analysis* (Iola, WI: Covenanted Reformation Press, 2005); John M. Otis, *Danger in the Camp: An Analysis and Refutation of the Heresies of the Federal Vision* (Corpus Christi, TX: Triumphant Publications, 2005).

²²“Office-holders in those denominations—Pastors, Elders, Deacons, seminary professors and administrators—have taken no effective action to stop the spread of the heresies or to discipline the heretics. In fact, they have done the

painful work to every benevolent mind. It is a work in which no man is willing to engage, unless constrained by sense of duty.”²³

Another possible reason is that some people interpret excommunication as a statement that a person is unregenerate and definitely belongs to hell. Excommunication consists in casting the offender “out of the Church into the world which is described in Scripture as Satan’s kingdom.”²⁴ Such persons, however, may repent and be readmitted to the visible church. Another likely reason is that many churchmen are placing institutional peace (i.e. they are afraid of a church split) before the disciplinary requirements of Scripture. If this is the case, then such men have not learned the lessons of the modernist takeover in the PCUSA. Men who seek peace when there is no peace lack wisdom. The splits will come (some already have), but they will be the faithful seceding from corruption, apostasy and cowardice instead of heretics fleeing justice. Churchmen who refuse to discipline are acting like false prophets who say, “Peace, peace when there is no peace” (Jer. 6:14; 8:11). The OPC and PCA at present allow men to serve in the ministry who are false prophets on the broad path that leads to destruction. Given the biblical injunctions on false teachers it is abundantly clear that the Scriptural answer to the Federal Vision’s penetration into the OPC and PCA must have both a positive and negative response.

Further, many people have an unbiblical view of discipline as harsh, unnecessary and unkind. People who have opposed the Auburn Avenue doctrines have even been called unloving. This view, however, assumes, contrary to Scripture, that discipline is bad. Discipline is indeed painful; it causes grief and heartache. But, it is certainly not bad. We could even say that the refusal to discipline those who definitely deserve it is the opposite of love, for it makes people comfortable in their sins (Lev. 19:17). It gives people who are in rebellion against God a false sense of security

The reason the OPC and PCA are plagued by false and deficient ministers is their very lax concept of subscription to the Westminster Standards. When traveling or moving to a new area the family that visits an OPC or PCA church does not know what they are going to encounter until they attend a church service. Will it be a “new life” celebrative (i.e. Arminian Charismatic style worship), a James Jordanite Anglo-Catholic service, a “traditional” old-

opposite. There are good-ole-boys’ networks, developed during seminary days, that protect false teachers from any effective discipline or opposition. Students protect their professors; professors protect their students; and students and professors protect each other. Because they control the church courts, the good-ole-boys’ networks have prevented church courts from taking any effective action against false teachers in Presbyterian churches. With the exception of John Kinnaid (an Elder charged with heresy by ordinary church members, not seminarians, and whose conviction was subsequently overturned by the highest court of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, controlled, of course, by seminarians), no teacher has been disciplined by those denominations. (In one obscure case involving Burke Shade, now a “pastor” affiliated with Douglas Wilson’s sect, CREC, Illiana Presbytery [PCA] deposed him from office. Hardly anyone has heard of that case outside of that Presbytery, since the Presbytery did not understand that Shade, a follower of James Jordan, was part of a much larger problem in the PCA.) Out of the scores of Pastors, Elders, and seminary professors teaching false doctrine in the OPC and the PCA in the past five years, not one has been removed from office, not one has been convicted of doctrinal error, not one has been tried, not one has even been charged with error. A few Presbyteries and congregations have adopted “statements” on some errors, but such statements are both toothless and shallow. The lads in charge of the seminaries and churches have failed in their duty to Christ and the church, but they have succeeded, so far, at protecting their own backsides and the backsides of their friends. But when church officers fail to do their duty, they are judged by God, and he raises up Christians who know and do their duty” (John Robbins, *The Trinity Review* [Unicoi, TN: The Trinity Foundation, February, 2006], 1).

²³ Samuel Miller, *The Ruling Elder* (Dallas, TX: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, [1831, 32, 43, 44] 1999), 189.

²⁴ Robert Shaw, *An Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Geanies House, Feann: Christian Focus Publications, [1845] 1973), 364.

fashioned service or a Westminster Confessional service (a cappella exclusive psalmody)? Will there be the many false teachings and practices that are allowed by way of exceptions to the Standards: paedocommunion, high church prelatical liturgies, priestly robes and vestments, deviant views on the early chapters of Genesis, mono-covenantalism, baptismal regeneration, higher life antinomian concepts of love, justification through faithful obedience, etc? A Presbyterian denomination that has a lax concept of subscription is “like a box of chocolates...you never know what you’re going to get.” If the OPC and PCA want to stop the declension they need to stop treating the Standards as a rubber yardstick or a set of broad recommendations. They must return to the full subscriptionism of their forefathers.

If the OPC and PCA do not condemn and censure the heretics, which is likely, given their rather advanced states of doctrinal decay on creation, the gospel, morality, biblical worship, the sacraments, etc; then they should be open and honest and rewrite the Westminster Standards to reflect what they really believe, allow and practice. The purpose of full subscription is to lock in a particular theological system and protect it from decay. Another purpose is to tell everyone what is confessed and represented. The lax system in place today really does neither. The Westminster Standards are sort of what we believe, sometimes, depending on who the local pastor and session is.

In the OPC and PCA today there two rival religious systems. On the one side, generally speaking, we have the conservative remnant of New School Presbyterianism. On the other side we have the sacramentalists who are essentially Anglo-Catholic in worship and modern Judaizers on justification. They do not really look to Calvin, Knox and Melville but medieval Christianity, Norman Shepherd and Neo-legalism. Both sides cannot exist together in harmony, for fundamentally they are two separate, different religious systems: one of grace alone, the other of works righteousness.

The crucial issue for both these denominations is sanctions. Rules, confessions and laws without sanctions are in the long run worthless. A denomination without full subscriptionism and church discipline to back it up will be slowly devoured by a thousand qualifications. With full subscriptionism and biblical discipline people have the biblical freedom of God’s law Word. There is predictability in doctrine and ethics. With a very loose form of subscriptionism and the pragmatism and human flexibility that attends it, the flock in essence is left to the whim of liberal church bureaucrats. There is a slow evolution of doctrine and practice away from the Reformed faith. That is why in many areas, in doctrine, worship, and practice, the OPC and PCA are so much worse now than they were only 30 to 40 years ago.

Conclusion

Having briefly considered the OPC Report on Justification, we are compelled to conclude the following. The committee report of the OPC does not recommend that unrepentant Federal Vision teachers and advocates be deposed and censured, which is precisely what the OPC needs. Unless a church officer from the floor alters the recommendation and a motion passes to begin the admonition and censure process, then the report is little more than words that can and will likely be ignored. On the one hand, the Federal Vision doctrine of justification is said to contradict Scripture; but on the other hand, the proponents of this doctrine are tolerated as though it was a non-vital error. This is a scandalous sin, a sin so great that it justifies separation or

secession on the part of those who want to be faithful to Scripture.²⁵ How long are the Truly Reformed (TR) or “conservatives” in the OPC and PCA going to keep on tolerating blatant, serious and even deadly contradictions to Scripture and the Westminster Standards in their communions?²⁶ If one does not separate from the toleration of damnable heresy, then one is guilty of participating in these scandalous sins. Once we strip away all the excuses, pragmatism, worldly concepts of love, fund raising needs, and bureaucratic maneuvering, we are left with a toleration of a complete repudiation of the all-sufficiency of Christ’s redemption. This toleration of a false gospel is totally unacceptable. How many congregations and families need to be destroyed by heresy before a decision to depart is made? “Know ye not that a little leaven leavens the whole lump” (1 Cor. 5:6)? There comes a time when the best method of reformation is to protest and secede, with denouncing of jurisdiction. Faithfulness at this hour requires it.

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²⁵ Instead of quiet withdrawal and transfer to another denomination, the historic reformational method of protest and secession is the answer to warn other church officers and communicant members of the seriousness of the gospel corruption. These are damnable heresies akin to those of the Judaizers and the Roman Catholic church, requiring a disruption.

²⁶ The practice of very loose subscriptionism, today where “conservative” Presbyterian denominations have many different and contrary theological views and worship practices has led to a type of functional independency for the TR congregations. These congregations know that from a human standpoint there is nothing that they really can do about it. Therefore, they unconsciously, and sometimes even consciously, adopt a “let us be strict on doctrine and worship—please just leave us alone” attitude. They perhaps even think of themselves as a reformed oasis in a desert of declension and apathy. They justify their membership in a corrupt, deforming denomination by telling themselves, “We are here to be used of God to reform this denomination;” or “If we leave who will be left to work for reformation?” Since there is no empirical evidence that the TR’s have brought about even one iota of reformation in the OPC or PCA in the last thirty years, we must ask our conservative brothers a final question. Now that one of the central pillars of the faith, justification by faith alone apart from the works of the law, is openly denied without sanctions in the OPC and PCA, what excuse remains?