

## Is That All?

With a view to promoting peace and unity among Reformed Christians by destroying straw men, here is a fictitious, but realistic dialog between two elders, a dialog about Norman Shepherd and his teachings as they might be discussed at a popular level.

“Hey brother, what’s new in your neck of the woods?”

*“Well, people are really getting fired up about the justification controversy.”*

“You mean about Norman Shepherd?”

*“Yes. I can’t see how anybody who is Reformed can defend him. There are people out there who say he teaches heresy, and from what I understand about it, I’m not sure they’re wrong.”*

“Interesting. I’m not surprised to hear you say this, but you might be surprised to know that I agree with Shepherd.”

*“What! You? After hearing you speak out at presbytery meetings for five years, I would never have expected this. It just goes to show that one never knows. Are you willing to talk about it?”*

“Why, of course! There’s nothing to hide. Why don’t you tell me what you understand Mr. Shepherd to be teaching?”

*“To begin with, he has a low view of sin. He denies the covenant of works. Adam didn’t have to be perfectly obedient to earn life. All he had to do was to have faith in God. So when Adam and Eve fell, they lacked faith and Jesus Christ came to be an example of faith. Of course, he says man needed to be obedient, but he means faithfulness to the covenant, not perfect obedience to the whole moral law. According to him, Christ just lived by faith and his faithfulness took him to the cross. He didn’t accomplish active obedience. His death was only to provide forgiveness and believers today, who are in union with him, will be justified by faith and works on the last day. He says that Christ did atone for our sins, but we are justified by our faithfulness. If we aren’t faithful, we can lose our justification and election. Christ died for the forgiveness of our sins, but that’s not enough to make us justified. We need to be faithful to the end and so our imperfect obedience is necessary for our justification in the last judgment.”*

“You don’t think that I would agree with such things, do you?”

*“No, that’s why I’m surprised you say you agree with him. Think about it. He denies justification by faith alone; there’s no perfect obedience needed for Adam; the elect can lose their salvation. It all sounds bad to me!”*

“Indeed, if these things were true, I’d join the chorus in condemning Shepherd, but then he would, too.”

*“O.K., then. Let’s start at the beginning. He denies the covenant of works. Surely it isn’t biblical to say that Adam only had to believe and didn’t have to be perfectly obedient?”*

“On this point, Shepherd follows Murray. They don’t at all deny that Adam had to be perfectly obedient! The point they make is that Adam would receive eternal life, not by

merit, but by grace. The promise of life had to be received as a gift. Adam was not supposed to think that he had to earn it. He simply had to be righteous and true to his covenant love for God. God would also be true to his covenant promises. I would say, the point is that Adam did not have to buy his way into heaven.”

*“Of course, not. So you’re saying that Shepherd does not deny that Adam had to be perfectly obedient, and the point is just that Adam’s obedience should not be looked at as meriting wages.”*

“That’s right. That’s all he’s saying.”

*“That sure changes things. So, does Shepherd also agree that when Adam disobeyed, he became dead in sins and couldn’t do anything at all to save himself from hell? By the way, does he believe that mankind was really condemned to hell when Adam sinned?”*

“Absolutely, Shepherd completely agrees with the Reformed teachings about total depravity and eternal condemnation.”

*“But why does he say that we just have to follow Christ’s example of faithfulness? Someone who is dead in sins can’t exercise faith and, surely, Christ had to pay for our sins!”*

“The idea that Shepherd teaches that Christ was mainly an example of faithfulness for us was made up by someone else. Shepherd has never said something that sounds like that. What he has said is that Christ’s obedience was obedience of faith. He didn’t merit heaven for us by perfectly keeping God’s law. He did, of course, keep the law perfectly, but when he did so he wasn’t building up merits to earn wages. He was living by faith, simply trusting the Father in all things and so also receiving the Father’s promises in faith. Living by faith, he obeyed his Father even to the point of the death on the cross.”

*“I’ve never thought of Christ living by faith, but it doesn’t sound all that far out, so long as we hold that Jesus had to be and was perfectly obedient to the whole of God’s law.”*

“Of course, he obeyed in everything, not only because he was absolutely righteous and rejoiced to do his Father’s will, but also to perfectly accomplish the substitutionary atonement for our sins.”

*“Oh yes, but I got the impression that Christ’s death wasn’t so important to Mr. Shepherd. Maybe that’s because he has such a low view of sin”*

“Don’t you get it, brother? Shepherd doesn’t have a low view of sin at all. That’s what others are saying about him, but it’s not in his writings. Like all Reformed people, he teaches that man can do nothing at all to contribute to his salvation. We are justified only by the blood of Jesus Christ!”

*“You make it sound like there’s no reason for concern at all. Surely, that can’t be right. There’s so much discussion and there are so many warnings about him on the Internet, it isn’t possible that there’s nothing wrong. Let’s talk about justification by faith alone. I know that Mr. Shepherd teaches that we are justified by faith and works. He says a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.”*

“You know who said that first, don’t you?”

*"That a man is justified by works and not by faith alone? I suppose it was a Roman Catholic."*

"No, it was James in the Bible."

*"Oh, of course. That was stupid of me. Well any way, tell me what you think Shepherd teaches."*

"First, he emphasizes that no one can contribute anything to his justification. Any attempt to do so will only increase his guilt. In justification, Christ's righteousness is imputed to us and our only righteousness is his righteousness."

*"But what about faith and works?"*

"We are justified only by faith. The point is that faith is never alone. James says that as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead."

*"All Reformed folks say that. We are justified by faith alone, but faith is never alone."*

"Right. What some people don't like is that Shepherd says that works are necessary for justification. They say that works are the fruit and evidence of faith and always follow faith, but Shepherd says more than that. For him, works are not only necessary for sanctification, but also for justification."

*"Doesn't that mean that Shepherd teaches that we are justified by infused grace, by the grace of God producing works in us?"*

"No, the only ground of our justification is the sacrifice of Jesus Christ."

*"Well, what do you think of this? Faith comes first for our justification and works inevitably follow for sanctification."*

"Wouldn't that mean that we are justified by dead faith and then sanctified by living faith?"

*"Hmm, I suppose so. Is that Shepherd's point?"*

"It is. Living faith cannot exist without works. The faith by which we are justified is working faith, but, as Calvin said, it's not the working that justifies us."

*"So is that what James means when he says that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone? He couldn't possibly be saying that works contribute to our justification."*

"James is saying that the specific faith by which we are justified is faith that works. Here's how I look at it. You can say that a pedestrian was killed by a red Ford. You don't mean that the redness or Fordness of the vehicle killed him. In the same way, James is just referring to works as identifying the faith that justifies. Works manifest faith. When he says that a man is justified by works, he means that the faith by which he is justified is one that works, like the moving object that killed the pedestrian was a red Ford."

*"I'm almost persuaded, but let's look at this logically. If works are necessary for justification they must either be the ground or the instrument of justification. You've said that works are not the ground of justification. Shepherd must be saying, then, that they are an instrument of justification. But, we all hold that faith is the alone instrument of justification."*

“Remember that he doesn’t say that we are justified by works, only that works are necessary.”

*“Wait a minute. I get it. It’s like repentance. We generally agree that there can’t be forgiveness of sins without repentance. So works are like repentance. Repentance faith and works all happen at the same time. You can’t have one without the other. Of course, that has to be true even for justification. Still I wonder, how do we keep them distinct? How do we make sure that works are not part of faith?”*

“We can’t ignore the fact that even faith is work. Jesus says that the work we have to do is to believe in the one the Father sent. In general, faith is trust and works are doing. Believing is something you do. When we obey God, the Holy Spirit works three things in us at the same time: repentance, faith and works. They cannot be separated, but are distinct. We are justified by faith alone because by it we entrust ourselves to Jesus Christ and by our union with the Lord, his atonement for sins is counted to us for righteousness. Faith is distinct from other works of obedience to the Lord, but faith and works exists so closely together that James compares their relationship to that of body and soul.

*“So when Abraham sacrificed Isaac, he was entrusting himself to the Lord. His obedience was an expression of his faith that God could raise his son from the dead. It was this living faith that justified him, wasn’t it?”*

“Yes. Do you see how Shepherd is seeking to do justice to the Bible?”

*“I don’t see why I should dispute that. If he says that we are saved by Christ alone and are justified by faith alone, and if he emphasizes that faith without works is dead, there doesn’t seem to be a problem. But this doesn’t cover all the points of concern. People are telling me that he denies the active obedience of Christ.”*

“He doesn’t deny Christ’s active obedience, only its imputation to us to earn justification. That’s directly related to holding that Adam didn’t have to earn heaven. Jesus didn’t have to earn merits for us to get eternal life. Our problem is our sin and Christ’s great salvation work was to pay for it by his death and to restore peace with God for us by his resurrection.”

*“I’m learning that I have to pay careful attention to what is being said, so let me verify this. Am I right that he does not deny that Christ was fully obedient to the whole moral law? He isn’t saying that Christ only had to believe?”*

“Right! The point of Christ being obedient by faith is that his righteous obedience was not to earn merits. Rather, he obeyed because he trusted God. God’s promises came to him as gifts received by faith, not as wages earned by labor. There’s more. Christ was righteous from the beginning. He didn’t have to work to become righteous for us. If the argument is that the imputation of Christ’s death would only leave us guiltless, but we still wouldn’t be righteous, this would require that, before performing his active obedience, Christ would also only have been guiltless and not yet righteous. That doesn’t make sense, does it?”

*“I never thought of Jesus Christ starting out only innocent and having to do works of the law to become righteous. Righteousness doesn’t work that way. You’re either righteous or unrighteous. You can’t be neutral. As I think about it, this would mean that once your sins are forgiven you again have right standing with God.”*

“Yes, it’s like Calvin said, justification consists solely in the forgiveness of sins.”

*“Calvin said that? It kind of makes sense, but I know a lot of men insist that justification also requires an imputation of positive righteousness. There’s probably something I’m missing, so I’ll withhold judgment for now. Come to think of it, this discussion makes it sound like Shepherd really emphasizes grace. How come I keep hearing that Shepherd is a legalist, subversive of the Gospel?”*

“Some come right out and say he is a legalist and others even claim he teaches the Romanist heresy of justification by grace plus works, but the more careful Reformed theologians only speak of a subtle form of legalism. This would be because he teaches that works are necessary for justification. We already covered that. They are necessary in the same sense as repentance is necessary. They don’t contribute anything to our righteousness for justification. It’s just that faith cannot exist without works. So, if you say that we are justified by faith without works, it could sound like we’re justified by dead faith.”

*“I won’t quarrel with you about that, but wait a minute. I remember something else, and it’s pretty important. Justification refers to our pardon when we first believe, but according to Mr. Shepherd, there’s also justification in our daily walk with Christ and then there’s justification on the Judgment Day. That’s a real problem for me. If the final justification is based on the works we perform as Christians, then we do have legalism. Then imperfect works are counted as righteousness and that cannot be! Besides, that takes away the assurance of Romans 8:1. It is essential that all are sins be forgiven immediately when we believe.”*

“Actually, Shepherd doesn’t teach anything unorthodox here. We are definitively justified when Christ is applied to us at the moment of our conversion. At that point we come into a state of being justified, counted as righteous only by faith in Jesus Christ. In that state, however, we still sin, God teaches us to pray for forgiveness and he pardons the sins we continue to do.”

*“Wait, that’s sanctification. First is justification and after that we have sanctification.”*

“No, no. Justification is pardon, an act of God outside of us. Sanctification is inward renewal, God’s work in us. Our faith and works are part of sanctification. God’s forgiveness is justification. Our daily forgiveness of sin is an act of God outside of us. We must not confuse justification and sanctification.”

*“I guess I have been confusing them and never realized it. Now let’s move on to the final judgment. I know that, although the guilt of our sins is washed away when we first believe, we can still speak of justification on that day because it says that God will judge everyone and that means he declares that those who are in Christ Jesus are righteous. However, it would be wrong to say that on that day we’ll be justified on the basis of our faithful works.”*

“You’re absolutely right and, of course, Mr. Shepherd does not teach that. Whether on the day we believe or on Judgment Day, there is only one justification. We are justified by faith alone and that’s not because of the merit of the works we do when we believe, nor even because of the worthiness of our faith. Faith brings us into fellowship with Christ and it is only his atonement that removes all our guilt. When people say that

Shepherd teaches that we are justified on the last day on the basis of works done in faith or works cooperating with faith, they are drawing their own conclusions. It's not what he teaches."

*"We've covered a lot of ground. I think there's only one more point that needs clarification. Does Shepherd teach that a believer can lose his justification and election?"*

"The answer to that would be yes and no. It's a matter of perspective. You know how an architect can draw the same house from a number of different perspectives. Each looks very different, but there is no contradiction. The church and Christian life can also be looked at from different perspectives. The two perspectives Shepherd discusses are that of God's eternal decrees and that of the covenant. In our Christian life as we live it we need to look at things from the perspective of the covenant. The promises God makes to us and our response to them and to God's law are expressed in the covenant. It is important to bear in mind that when Shepherd considers matters from the perspective of the covenant, he is not substituting a covenant perspective for the eternal perspective. What he says about the covenant is not at all a denial of eternal election. Eternal election and covenant living in history are both true at the same time."

*"You're setting the stage for an explanation, but get on with it. What do you really want to say with your yes and no?"*

"From the perspective of eternal election, God's plan does not change. Someone who is elect in Christ from eternity, will never lose his justification and election. We don't know the Lord's eternal decrees, however. We can't say and are not called to say who are elect and who aren't. What God does reveal to us are the terms of the covenant. By those terms, God promises eternal life to all who repent and believe, and he establishes his covenant with his chosen people. From the perspective of the covenant, a minister can assure all who profess to believe in Christ that they have the forgiveness of sins and are among the chosen of the Lord. Based on the covenant promises, we can regard as elect all who profess faith. There are, of course, people who are actively committed to the things of the Lord who do not persevere to the end. Shepherd says that when we are speaking from the perspective of the covenant we should regard all believers as being justified and God's elect. We should not treat them as only possibly elect. When some turn away, we don't have to say that we were first wrong, just because from the eternal perspective they were not elect. He urges us to speak the way the Bible does, that is, to address all in the covenant as having the full promises of the covenant. I compare it to a marriage. When a husband promises to love his wife, she doesn't have to doubt his words just because there are marriages that end in divorce. In the same way, members of the covenant people can really say that God loves them, even though some may later come under his wrath."

*"I'm not sure about this, but you've got me thinking. Any way, do I understand correctly then that Mr. Shepherd does not say that all church members are eternally elect, just that, so long as they are faithful, we should regard them as elect?"*

"Right."

*“So the controversy is mostly about misunderstandings. According to you Shepherd doesn’t believe any of the things I was thinking an hour ago. Are you sure that’s all there is to it?”*

“There are some differences, but they are not anything like what many are saying. Shepherd, like John Murray and a number of other Reformed theologians, does not want to call the Adamic covenant a covenant of works. That’s a real difference, but their point is only to say that you don’t earn life eternal. Even Adam would have received it as a gift if he had not been disobedient. What is fundamental is that all agree that righteousness that can stand before the tribunal of God must be perfectly obedient to the whole law.”

*“In your opinion, what are some other real differences?”*

“Shepherd’s denial of the imputation of active obedience for justification is a real difference from most Reformed theology, but he does have support in Calvin and Ursinus, namely that reconciliation with God comes only through the forgiveness of sins. The difference is about what is the nature of the righteousness of Christ that is imputed to believers. All agree, however, that we are justified only by the imputation of the righteousness of Jesus Christ. With regard to faith and works, the formulations are different, but I don’t think there are real differences with many Reformed teachers. When he says that good works are necessary for justification, he is only expressing that we can only be justified by faith that is living. Of course, many think the differences are greater, but I don’t agree with them. There are many that don’t want to hear of justification also referring to daily forgiveness and the judgment, but since Shepherd sees these as grounded in the one justification through Christ’s death on the cross, I don’t think that’s a significant difference. Many Reformed people cannot go along with saying that we should regard all faithful church members as saved and elect. The difference here is that they understand this to be a contradiction with the teaching that the elect cannot be lost. Shepherd expresses himself differently, but we need to appreciate that he does not teach that anyone who is eternally elect can be lost. He is a firm defender of the five points of Calvinism.”

*“Now comes an important question, how do you know that you have the right understanding of Shepherd?”*

“Because I checked all these things with him.”

*“You mean if I would contact him and ask if you have the right understanding of his position, he would say, yes?”*

“I’m sure he would.”

*“You know, I’m surprised. We’re having a great conversation! I really thought a discussion about Norman Shepherd would be very different. I thought we’d have a heated discussion. I don’t think I can make up my mind about this yet, but maybe I should read Shepherd’s writings for myself.”*

“By all means. When you do, be careful to read what he says. Don’t draw any conclusions he doesn’t draw and keep in mind that he is Reformed. Don’t read non-Reformed ideas into what he writes.”

*“You know, I still can’t handle the idea that the controversy is mostly due to misunderstanding. I still wonder, is that all? I guess I’d better study this some more.”*

By Ralph Boersema