

My Response to Recent Accusations

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The clerk of my presbytery received a letter this week making serious accusations against me. I had no knowledge of this letter until yesterday (March 29, 2010) when I received a call from the moderator of Missouri Presbytery informing me that the clerk had just received it. After I got off the phone with the moderator, friends informed me that the letter had been published on the Internet that same day. The accusations are very serious, but not true. If any of the men who signed this letter to my Presbytery had taken the time to contact me personally, I could have assured them that these reports were false and, if necessary, clarified my own theological commitments.

To defend my good name and ministry, I offer the following response as an accurate summary of my personal convictions relating to these recent accusations. A process is at work now in our presbytery that I intend to respect. Therefore, I do not desire to engage in public discussions of these matters in an informal way on the Internet. If I have ever seemed to question the fundamental truths I am accused of denying, this process will afford me the opportunity to clarify my intentions and amend any infelicitous or unclear statements I may have made in the past. I do, however, wish to provide an initial, public, defense of the orthodoxy of my personal convictions for the comfort of my friends and interested parties who may hear of these grave allegations and be concerned.

I will address these accusations in the order of their importance rather than the order in which they are found in the letter.

“He rejects justification by faith alone.”

This charge is false. I wholeheartedly affirm justification by faith alone. Throughout my ministry I have taught and preached the biblical and Reformation doctrine of justification by Christ alone through faith alone. I believe that “justification is an act of God’s free grace wherein he pardons all our sin and accepts us as righteous in his sight only for the righteousness of Christ, imputed to us, and received by faith alone” (Westminster Shorter Catechism Q. 33). I have never taken exception to or expressed any reservations whatsoever with the Westminster Standards on the doctrine of justification, especially the Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter XI, “Of Justification.”

Just to be crystal clear, I deny that fallen humans can merit salvation through works. Salvation is a free gift of God graciously granted to sinful humans in spite of their demerit, only because of the sinless life, death, resurrection, and glorification of Christ. I repudiate all forms of salvation by works.

“He rejects the idea that Christ’s merits are imputed to us.”

This accusation is false. I affirm the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to believers. I have always affirmed this Reformation truth. Apart from the judicial imputation of Christ’s

work to us there is no hope of salvation for sinful humans. We are justified by God's "imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ" (WCF XI.1) to us when we believe the Gospel.

"He denies that all who are saved will ultimately end up in heaven."

This, too, is false. I deny that any who have saving faith will not attain heaven and the resurrection of the righteous at the Last Day. All those who are truly saved in this life, the elect, will persevere to the end and enjoy the blessedness of heaven and the eternal state. I wholeheartedly affirm the Reformed doctrine of "the perseverance of the saints" as it is formulated in the Westminster Confession, Chapter XVII: "They whom God has accepted in his Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace; but shall certainly preserve therein to the end, and be eternally saved."

"He affirms that baptism effects a saving, covenantal union with Christ. He affirms that this saving union occurs with all the baptized."

These two accusations seem to be virtually the same. I deny them both. I do indeed joyfully affirm that baptism *formalizes* a child's or an adult believer's covenantal relationship with God. Even before baptism, even in the womb, the children of believers have a covenantal union with Christ as a gracious gift of God. This is why we call them "covenant children," even before they are born, even before they are baptized. At baptism this covenantal union is formally and publicly celebrated and made official through the application of water in the Name of the Triune God. But baptism does not automatically guarantee their salvation.

Although baptism confers many covenantal benefits, I deny that baptism "effects a saving" union with Christ for everyone baptized. The baptized must believe the Gospel and respond to the grace given and offered to them in baptism. I deny that all baptized persons are saved. Sadly, there will be many in hell who, although baptized, refused to believe the Gospel.

I do not believe that the sacraments are effectual unto salvation apart from "the blessing of Christ, and the working of his Spirit in them that by faith receive them" (Westminster Shorter Catechism Q. 91).

"He denies the bi-covenantal structure of the Standards."

This is a curious accusation, and I'm not entirely sure what it means. The statements that come after the letter assert that my views are "radically monocovenantal." These terms "bi-covenantal" and "mono-covenantal" are not found in our Westminster Standards, nor are they part of our traditional Reformed systematic theological vocabulary. I suppose that my accusers object to my reservations about the pre-fall Adamic covenant being characterized as a "covenant of works." But questions about exactly how to characterize the Adamic covenant have long been a matter of intramural debate among Reformed pastors and

theologians. I have had this “exception” to the language of the Westminster Standards registered in every presbytery I’ve been a member of since 1987. All three presbyteries that I have belonged to since then have determined that my disagreement with our standards on this point did “not strike at the vitals of the system of doctrine” found in the Westminster Standards. Full disclosure: here is text of the exception I have registered and have had approved by three different PCA presbyteries:

WCF 7:2-3 (and 19.1). I think that the language of “covenant of works” is at best misleading. The Westminster Standards are not always consistent in using the same language to refer to man’s pre-lapsarian relationship with the Lord (*WCF 4.2, 19.1, WLC 20*). What I am concerned about is that the languages of “works” not lead to the erroneous conclusion that Adam and Eve did not enjoy life and communion with God before the fall as the gift of God’s goodness. Even *WCF 4.2* speaks of pre-lapsarian man being “happy in their communion with God.” Communion with God was not something to be *earned* by Adam and Eve. They possessed “spiritual life.” It is misleading to say that Adam and Eve would have been *rewarded* with life because of their obedience. Genesis 1-2 seems to indicate that they had access to the tree of life, that they should have eaten from it, thereby acknowledging their utter dependence upon God for life and happiness. As a judicial consequence of their sin Adam and Eve *lost* the life that they possessed. They did not pass from a neutral state into an estate of death. The life Adam and Eve possessed, they lost. What I am trying to guard against is the idea that Adam and Eve would have *merited* God’s favor through good works. They were created in an estate of favor with their covenant God. I am not denying that pre-lapsarian man’s life was in some sense an “unconfirmed” life. The righteousness they possessed was capable of being lost. It was lost. What I am denying is that Adam’s life—his acceptance and favor before his heavenly Father—was somehow merited or earned by him.

In the interest of clarity let me state emphatically that I deny that God’s pre-fall covenant with Adam was the same as God’s post-fall gracious covenantal arrangement with sinful man in Christ. I have never taught they were the same. They are two distinct covenants.

Conclusion

I pray that this brief response to the false accusations against me will be received in the spirit I offer it. I have been preaching, teaching, and writing for many years. Consequently, there are many thousands of my words available on audio files, essays, articles, and internet blog posts and comments. When I have had the opportunity to read or hear sermons and lectures I delivered years ago, I often cringe at errors I have made in expounding and applying biblical texts. The Lord continues to sanctify and mature me. The past five years of ministry have been especially transformative as the Lord has graciously changed me and re-directed my ministry in many ways. I’ve said many things in the past that I would love to take back and correct. Perhaps I will have an opportunity to do that publicly during this process.

I have always ministered with the conviction that I have been ordained as a minister of the Gospel and of the Word of God. I believe that being “Reformed” is short for being

“reformed according to the Word.” My absolute commitment to the infallibility, authority, and sufficiency of the Bible alone has sometimes led me to evaluate human creeds and confessions with an eye to improving them; this includes even our Reformed confessional tradition. I believe Jesus taught us to have a healthy dose of suspicion for tradition, especially when it is venerated in ways that practically supplant the authority of the Word of God. I only ask that my critics interpret such critical comments, when they find them, in the context of 25 years of preaching, teaching, and counseling from a decidedly Reformed theological perspective. My pastoral ministry has predominantly been constructive and not centered on criticism of our tradition. My occasional frustration with traditional ways of formulating things in Reformed systematic and confessional theology should not be misinterpreted as evidence of disrespect for our tradition’s faithful exposition of the Word of God.

Finally, I pray that my presbytery will choose a wise course in answering these “reports” so as to defend the peace and purity of the Church of Christ.