

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

August, September 1998

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An Open Letter to the Patrons, Alumni And Students of Reformed Theological Seminary

Dear Christian Friends:

You have supported, attended, or are attending Reformed Theological Seminary – in the belief that it is a Christian institution. But there is growing reason to fear that some Christian seminaries, like some Christian colleges, are not delivering to their students and patrons what they promise to deliver in their catalogues and fundraising letters. One would expect, for example, a Christian seminary to uphold the major doctrines of the Reformation – "The Bible alone is the Word of God," and "Justification is solely God's gracious declaration of a sinner's innocence, based on the alien righteousness of Christ alone, Christ's righteousness being imputed, not infused, to believers through faith alone." Yet there is growing evidence that some faculty members at Reformed Theological Seminary in Maitland (Orlando), Florida, do not believe the Biblical doctrine of justification.

Some years ago, the administration of Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, bowing to pressure from outside the Seminary, dismissed a professor for teaching justification by faith and works. The professor merely moved his shingle to the Christian Reformed Church. Unfortunately, it now appears that several more professors at putatively Reformed seminaries do not believe in justification by faith alone. That, of course, would

explain why several graduates of these seminaries have abandoned the Christian faith and joined the Roman and Orthodox churches. It is, of course, a double betrayal of trust that the boards and administrations of seminaries first hire teachers who do not teach the central truths of the Bible, and then fail to dismiss those teachers until compelled to do so by patrons and alumni. If the same laws against fraud and misrepresentation that apply to business applied to schools, our prisons would be populated with seminary directors and administrators.

Since the publication of our essay "Healing the Mortal Wound" in three parts in the March, April, and May issues of *The Trinity Review*, we have received several letters from angry readers – angry not about the treason to Christ and truth committed by the signers of "The Gift of Salvation," but angry that anyone would have the audacity to criticize the famous evangelical leaders who organized, publicized, and endorsed that Roman Catholic document.

Roger Nicole

One of these letters came from Dr. Roger Nicole, Visiting Professor of Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary in Maitland, Florida. Dr. Nicole, as you may recall from reading "Healing the Mortal Wound," wrote a letter to *Christianity Today*

enthusiastically endorsing the Roman Catholic document, "The Gift of Salvation." Now, one might think that a man who had taught theology all his life might understand theology, especially its central doctrine – justification by faith alone – and possess the discernment that such an understanding engenders, but that does not seem to be the case.

Before teaching at Reformed Theological Seminary, Dr. Nicole taught for decades at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Massachusetts, where he influenced several seminarians who went on to become Roman or Orthodox. Among his students were Scott Hahn and Gerald Matatics, who now are fawning and yipping lapdogs for the pope. I do not know how many more of Dr. Nicole's seminary students have apostatized. A teacher, of course, cannot be held accountable for his students' errors, unless, of course, the teacher himself teaches error. What does Dr. Nicole teach? Dr. Nicole wrote to us here at The Trinity Foundation in May to explain his job and what he teaches. Here is his letter in its entirety:

Roger Nicole

Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

P.O. Box 945120

Maitland, Florida

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5/4/98

Dear Mr. Robbins,

Prof. Nash had the kindness to share with me April and May issues of The Trinity Review. Unfortunately I have not seen the March 1998 issue in which your series on "Healing the Mortal Wound" began. May I request you to have the kindness to send me a copy of that issue no. 157.

May I provide some correction to what you say about me on page 3, col 2 of the May

Issue:

1. I am not a Professor of new testament at RTS, but my title is

visiting professor of theology, a field in which I have taught at seminary level for 50 years (41 years at Gordon-Conwell and 9 years at RTS).

2. I was not oblivious to the "meaning and content" of "The Gift of Salvation", but approved them as well as the "context and mood".
3. That I understand the issues should be made plain in my article on "Justification: Standing by God's Grace" (Tenth 10/3, July 1980) on which I defined justification as follows:

Justification is that redemptive act of the Triune God, whereby, on the basis of the substitutionary work of Jesus Christ, the head and mediator of the New Covenant, he declares the penitent and believing sinner to be free of all guilt and to be entitled to all the blessings secured by the perfect obedience of Christ.

You might be pleased to hear that I resigned from my regular title at RTS as of July 1, 1998. I will continue to be associated with this institution, although not on regular salary. Thus your fear that some Presbyterians might mispend their money for my support should be allayed.

Dr. Gordon Clark, in his Festschrift, had the kindness to express his opinion that I was "one of the most competent theologians in the United States today". (R. Nash, ed. The Philosophy of Gordon H. Clark. Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1968, p. 478.) This is in sharp contrast with your evaluation as a "useful idiot" (The Trinity Review, no. 159, p.3, col 1).

While I may not deserve Dr. Clark's very generous evaluation, you may forgive me if it helps me not to be crushed by your opinion of my ability.

Yours in Christian love

Roger Nicole

This was our reply, in its entirety. We did not hand write our letter, so it appears in typescript:

May 7, 1998

Dr. Roger Nicole

Visiting Professor of Theology

Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

Post Office Box 945120

Maitland, Florida 32794-5120

Sent by fax and mail.

Dear Dr. Nicole,

I have received your letter dated May 4, 1998. I am disappointed that it offers no sign of repentance, no change of mind about your endorsement of "The Gift of Salvation," but, if anything, a hardening of your position.

Thank you for correcting me about your academic title; I was following *Christianity Today*, which apparently gave you a rank undeserved. I presume you have sent the magazine a correction as well. Thank you also for correcting my spelling of Hans Kueng's name. I should indeed have spelled it with either an umlaut or an "e."

I find it disturbing, however, that you are so meticulous about spelling and academic titles, and so sloppy about the doctrine of justification. I wish that some of your zeal concerning the jots and tittles of German spelling and academic titles extended to Christian soteriology. I have in mind not only your endorsement of "The Gift of Salvation," in which justification is said to be "conferred" on the sinner ("conferred," by the way, is the same word the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* uses), but also your letter itself. I note that the definition of "justification" you espoused in 1980, which you quoted in your letter to me as evidence that you currently "understand the issues," is silent about imputation and omits the sola's of the Reformation. Even if the rest of your 1980 article said something different, your quoted definition of "justification" is

no evidence that you understand the issues today, or did so in 1980. Your 1980 definition is, at best, incomplete and misleading, and, at worst, Roman. This prompts me to ask: Did your incomplete and misleading definition of "justification" influence your student Scott Hahn?

Yes, given your impenitence, I am pleased to hear that you have resigned your "regular title" (and, I presume, your teaching) at RTS, but I would be elated to hear that all errant faculty members at all seminaries have resigned as well. Is there something you can do toward that end?

As for Clark's opinion that you are "one of the most competent theologians in the United States today," it might very well have been true in 1968, and it might very well still be true in 1998. But that merely makes my point about the dismal condition of theological education in the United States, does it not?

Sincerely yours,

John W. Robbins

P.S. I am enclosing Part 1 of "Healing the Mortal Wound," as you requested.

Copy: Ron Nash

Dr. Nicole has not responded to my letter in the past two months. He will, however, be addressing the November meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Orlando. Perhaps those of you who are members of that Society will ask Dr. Nicole some pertinent questions at that meeting, in a public forum.

Steve Brown

One of our readers, concerned that Steve Brown had endorsed books by theologically challenged Charles Colson, sent Mr. Brown a copy of "Healing the Mortal Wound" for his comments. For those of you who may not know who Steve Brown is, he is a teacher at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, a Presbyterian Church in America elder, and a radio talk show host. Here is Mr. Brown's reaction to "Healing the Mortal Wound."

The Trinity Review August, September 1998

Steve Brown

KeyLife Network

June 23, 1998

Dear _____,

Who in the world is John Robbins? What are his credentials? What in heaven's name is *The Trinity Review*?

If you want to read this kind of drivel, no wonder you are confused. Mr. Robbins has done no service to the Body of Christ and his writing is as strident, as condemning, and harsh as anything I've read in a long time... even from Pagans.

For what it's worth, I know most of the Evangelicals named as "ersatz-evangelicals" and they are godly, kind, committed men who love Christ with all their hearts and believe the Bible... all of it. They have been used by God in amazing ways to bring thousands to Christ and to build up the church. Whenever John Robbins (whoever he is) can say the same thing, be willing to confess his sin, and be less bombastic and condemning, perhaps more people would listen to him.

The Protestants he has named all affirm without reservation or exception the doctrine of salvation by faith in Christ alone and the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures. That is certainly true of Reformed Theological Seminary.

The thing I found especially interesting is the way Mr. Robbins attacks R. C. Sproul. He's got to be kidding! R. C. has taken a clear and negative stand about the whole Evangelical-Catholic thing. It is amazing to me that Mr. Robbins would place R. C. in his list of those to condemn. Me? Maybe. But R.C.?

The issue of "imputation" vs. "impartation" is a red herring. I guess, when we stop killing babies, affirming the immorality of our nation's leaders, and are all agreed on the eternal verities of the faith, we could discuss that one. Of course salvation is instantaneous once and for all action. I don't know of any of those evangelicals in the articles who would not clearly affirm that.

What really bothers me (and I'm surprised that it doesn't bother and confuse you too) is the obvious lack of grace in Mr. Robbins writings. His writing violates the clear teaching of the Bible on how one ought to deal with others within the Body of Christ. Mr. Robbins ignores Matthew 18, pretends that 1 John 4:7-11 doesn't exist, and must read Galatians 5:15a 16 out of his Bible. In fact, I'm quite concerned and confused because there is simply no fruit of the Spirit in either one of the articles.

I think Mr. Robbins ought to get a life. But then, I don't know him and there is a good chance that I'm doing to him what he has done to others.

Hope this fulfills your request that I "advise ASAP."

Sincerely,

Steve

The reader to whom Mr. Brown wrote this letter kindly sent it on to me and asked that I comment on it. I did so in a letter written to the reader, not to Mr. Brown. That reply appears below.

The perspicacious reader was upset by Mr. Brown's letter, not because of his personal attacks on Mr. Robbins (those are unimportant) but because the reader understood the implications of Mr. Brown's disparaging remarks about justification. From those remarks the reader concluded that Mr. Brown's ministry is "worthless." Indeed it is. But his teaching at any seminary or any church is worse than worthless: It is dangerous, and forbidden by Scripture. That is the whole import of Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia: Do not be deceived by the false teachers who err on justification and want to pervert the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

John Robbins

The Trinity Foundation

Unicoi, Tennessee

July 3, 1998

Dear _____,

Thank you for sending me a copy of the June 23, 1998, letter you received from Steve Brown of KeyLife Network. I understand that his letter was written in response to your sending him a copy of "Healing the Mortal Wound," my essay on the Cassidy-Colson-Neuhaus Group's latest manifesto, "The Gift of Salvation." Since you asked me to comment on Mr. Brown's letter, I hasten to do so.

Mr. Brown's first tactic is to question the credentials of John Robbins, thereby raising the first of several red herrings intended to distract from the central doctrinal issue Mr. Robbins discussed in his essay. Mr. Brown's questions about Mr. Robbins' credentials – and he apparently considers these questions important enough to raise first in his letter – are completely irrelevant to the doctrinal issues at hand. Those doctrinal issues –

(1) the collaboration of professed Evangelicals with Roman Catholics, including three cardinals of the Roman State-Church, in issuing a manifesto on salvation, in violation of explicit Biblical commandments to remain separate from unbelievers;

(2) the repudiation of the Biblical and Reformed doctrine of salvation by these professed Evangelicals; and

(3) the continued presence of these professed Evangelicals at allegedly Protestant seminaries, colleges, and other para-church organizations – are not addressed by Mr. Brown. Instead, he refers to Mr. Robbins' essay as "strident, condemning, and harsh drivel."

After first questioning Mr. Robbins' credentials to criticize great men such as Charles Colson, Mr. Brown next questions Mr. Robbins' tone, and thus raises a second red herring. Perhaps Mr. Brown should read Matthew 23 or the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Galatians, or any of the many passages in Scripture in which errant teachers are rebuked in clear and bold language. But then, as we shall see, Mr. Brown does not believe that these teachers, such as Charles Colson, are errant.

Next, Mr. Brown, rather than dealing with the doctrinal issues involved, divulges his personal

acquaintance with "most of the Evangelicals named as 'ersatz-evangelicals,'" and he offers his opinion that "they are godly, kind, committed men who love Christ with all their hearts and believe the Bible...all of it. They have been used by God," Mr. Brown continues, "in amazing ways to bring thousands to Christ and to build up the church. Whenever John Robbins (whoever he is) can say the same thing, be willing to confess his sin, and be less bombastic and condemning, perhaps more people would listen to him."

How Mr. Brown knows the hearts of these great men, whom he has personally met, I cannot say. All we ordinary mortals can do is to take them at their words, and it is their words that I discuss in my essay. It is their words that do not measure up to Scripture. But Mr. Brown prefers to ignore their words, for he knows the hearts of these great men, whom he has personally met.

Now the achievements of these great men are, again, irrelevant to the matter at hand. The matter at hand is the doctrine of justification, and justification has nothing to do with great men's works and achievements. Many great men, great leaders in the church, will be surprised to discover the worthlessness of their works on the day of judgment, for at the last judgment they will plea, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied [preached] in your name, cast out demons in your name, and done many wonders in your name?" And then Christ will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from me, you who practice lawlessness!" (Matthew 7:22-23). On the day of judgment Christ will declare that these very pious, very active church leaders who will have done all these great works in the name of Christ, who will address him as "Lord" – are lost, and Christ himself will send these great men, these church leaders, to Hell. These church leaders are lost because they do not believe – and have never believed – the doctrine of justification by faith in the imputed righteousness of Christ alone. Their defense – their statement of their credentials – at the last judgment will be their own works, not the works of Christ. They will not understand, as Mr. Brown does not understand, that we are not to glory in anything but the finished work – the cross – of Christ. Therefore, I must resist Mr. Brown's

demand that I boast of my accomplishments and thereby establish my credentials.

Mr. Brown avers that "The Protestants he [Robbins] has named all affirm without reservation or exception the doctrine of salvation by faith in Christ alone and the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures. That is certainly true of Reformed Theological Seminary." Mr. Brown is being either obtuse or disingenuous. "The Gift of Salvation" claimed that all its signers, Evangelical and Roman, believed in salvation by faith in Christ alone. Why, therefore, does Mr. Brown speak only of the Protestants (a designation, by the way, the ersatz Evangelicals who signed "The Gift of Salvation" eschew)? Furthermore, is Mr. Brown not aware that the Protestant doctrine of justification is the imputation of Christ's righteousness alone, received through faith alone? If he is not aware of the Protestant doctrine, why does he hold himself forth as a Reformed Protestant? Furthermore, if he does not know or does not believe the Protestant doctrine, why has he not resigned from all positions of leadership in Protestant organizations? Moreover, the fact that Reformed Theological Seminary permits Mr. Brown to teach indicates that the Seminary does not hold to the Protestant doctrine of justification by the imputed righteousness of Christ alone. The Seminary, too, is deceiving the public.

Mr. Brown drags in still another red herring in his mention of R. C. Sproul. He finds Mr. Robbins' criticism of R. C. Sproul "especially interesting." Mr. Robbins' criticism of Mr. Sproul consisted of one sentence: "R. C. Sproul, regrettably, clings tenaciously to Aristotelian and Roman Catholic philosophy, while preaching the sovereignty of God, apparently believing that a mind divided against itself can too stand." Mr. Brown offers nothing to contradict that statement. Instead, he ridicules it. Mr. Brown's ridicule indicates either that he is ignorant of what R. C. Sproul teaches or that he (Mr. Brown) feels he can distract attention from the doctrinal issue at hand by bringing up a renowned name like Sproul. Well, a few years ago, Mr. Sproul's magazine, *Tabletalk*, devoted an entire issue to explaining the views of and praising Thomas Aquinas, the philosopher of the Roman Church. I am sure that Ligonier Ministries would be

glad to send you a copy of that issue. Demonstrating that Mr. Sproul's philosophical position is Thomist would be like demonstrating that Calvin believed in predestination: gratuitous and superfluous.

On page 2 of his letter, Mr. Brown finally gets to the central doctrinal issue. He writes: "The issue of 'imputation' vs. 'impartation' is a red herring." Furthermore, it is an issue, Mr. Brown declares, that is of least importance. Issues having greater importance are "killing babies, affirming the immorality of our nation's leaders, and the eternal verities of the faith." That is, after our social and political objectives have been achieved, and after "we all agree on the eternal verities of the faith," then "we could discuss that one [the doctrine of justification]." Therefore, Mr. Brown believes that the doctrine of justification is not among the eternal verities of the faith.

Please contrast his remarks with what the Westminster Confession says about justification. I have italicized some words to call them to your attention:

Those whom God effectually calls he also freely justifies, *not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous: not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone; not by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience, to them as their righteousness, but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them, they receiving and resting on him and his righteousness by faith: which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God.*

This doctrine of imputed righteousness, which Mr. Brown calls a "red herring" and something we might discuss after all the important matters are taken care of, was described by Calvin as "the principal article of the Christian religion" and "the principle of the whole doctrine of salvation and the

foundation of all religion." Martin Luther said that the imputed righteousness of Christ is "the article by which the church stands or falls."

Now we must choose between Steve Brown on the one hand, or Martin Luther and John Calvin on the other. If Calvin and Luther are correct, then Mr. Brown does not believe the principal article of the Christian religion, or the principle of the whole doctrine of salvation. Indeed, by despising the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's righteousness as a red herring and unimportant, Mr. Brown indicates that he does not believe either the Bible or the Westminster Confession of Faith. This doctrine, as Paul's letter to the Galatians demonstrates, is not merely the article by which the church stands or falls; it is also the article by which individuals stand or fall. The Apostle Paul damns those who teach anything other than justification by the imputed righteousness of Christ alone.

After his brief mention and dismissal of justification, in which he makes clear that he does not believe what the Bible teaches, Mr. Brown finally gets around to what really bothers him: "What really bother me...is the obvious lack of grace in Mr. Robbins [sic] writings. His writing violates the clear teaching of the Bible on how one ought to deal with others within the Body of Christ. Mr. Robbins ignores Matthew 18..."

What really bothers Mr. Brown is Mr. Robbins' tone, his "lack of grace." I have already commented on this. But Mr. Brown's ignorance of Scripture must be pointed out once again. Matthew 18 deals with private sins against oneself. Those who teach falsehoods and thus sin publicly against God and the truth are to be reprov'd publicly. Who, Mr. Brown is sure to ask in good Romanist fashion, has the credentials to do this reprov'ing? Let me be perfectly clear: Anyone with a Bible. One man with a Bible is worth more than all the credentials of all the priests and elders and bishops and popes and seminary professors and radio talk show hosts without one.

Mr. Brown continues: Robbins "pretends that I John 4:7-11 doesn't exist, and [he] must read Galatians 5:15a & 16 [sic] out of his Bible." Now these

passages have to do with loving the brethren. It was out of love for the brethren that Paul damned the false teachers in Galatia. It was out of love for the brethren that Paul confronted Peter, because Peter had done something that compromised the doctrine of justification by the imputed righteousness of Christ alone. It was out of love for the brethren that Christ and the Apostles warned the brethren against the wolves, the false teachers in the church. It was out of love for the brethren that Christ damned the false teachers in the church of his day. Mr. Brown, who confesses that the doctrine of justification is unimportant, shows himself to be a false teacher, as have all those who have signed "The Gift of Salvation."

Finally, Mr. Brown expresses his opinion -- no doubt considering it extremely witty -- that "Mr. Robbins ought to get a life." Well, Mr. Robbins has a life, and it is hidden in Christ Jesus.

I hope my comments have been of some help to you, . Thank you for sending Mr. Brown's letter to me. With your permission, I would like to publish both his letter and mine in *The Trinity Review*, after deleting your name, of course.

Sincerely yours,

John W. Robbins

P.S. The additional materials you sent indicate that Francis Schaeffer was confused about the nature of faith when he wrote that letter. What is a "personal and loving communion with God" unless it is believing what he tells us in Scripture and obeying his commands? Christ said, "If you love me, keep my commandments." He steered his followers back to his words, his doctrine, his teaching. Attempting to go beyond or behind his words is both impious and impossible.

Second, there is no such thing as dead orthodoxy. There is such a thing as hypocrisy, that is, individuals and churches professing to believe, but not believing, the truth. It is not the orthodoxy -- the true doctrine -- that should be impugned by calling it dead, but the hypocrites who do not believe it. It is they who are dead. Careless language such as this is

not only confusing, it is demeaning and disrespectful to the truth.

As for the new Lutheran-Roman concord, they are agreed on the Roman doctrine of justification. Rome has held that justification is by grace alone. Its diabolic subtlety lies in saying that divine grace is infused.

August/September 1998