

September 19, 2003

Dear fathers and brethren of the Presbytery of Southern California,

It has been nearly 12 weeks now since the General Assembly denied my appeal, and I've been doing a lot of thinking and praying about how I'm going to respond. I've also received much counsel and advice. That advice has been far from unified, but the most important advice I received was from Roger Wagner. We met a few weeks after GA and had a very cordial time together. I told him that I was prepared to ask the presbytery's forgiveness for proceeding to make public comments critical of the Confession without "sufficiently" bringing these matters to the attention of the presbytery. This was a concern expressed by the GA advisory committee, a concern that I agreed had some legitimacy. However, I could not in good conscience repent of anything substantive in my teaching. Roger encouraged me to repent of as much as I could repent of, and to consider whether I could present my view in a way that would conform as much as possible to the language of the Confession. He also said that one of the main things he thinks I need to work on is my view of the Mosaic covenant as a typological covenant of works. In keeping with the majority perspective expressed at GA, Roger said he would like to see me move as much as possible toward the view that the Mosaic covenant is an administration of the covenant of grace, while recognizing legitimate discontinuities within the overarching continuity. At the conclusion of our meeting, he said that if I write a letter to the presbytery sometime in September, that would give the presbytery a chance to think it over before the third stated meeting in October.

After thinking and praying I have come to the following decision. I would like to ask the presbytery's forgiveness for proceeding to make public comments critical of the Confession without sufficiently bringing these matters to the attention of the presbytery. I believe I did the right thing by asking for a meeting with the Ministerial Oversight Committee in November of 2000 to disclose to them my disagreement with the Confession's statement that the Sabbath is binding on all men, as well as my scruple with the near-identification of the Decalogue and the moral law at WCF XIX:2. However, after the Ministerial Oversight Committee reported my scruples to the presbytery at the first stated meeting of 2001, I should have written a follow-up letter requesting guidance on how to handle my scruples in my public ministry. Instead, I too hastily assumed that the presbytery's silence was tacit approval permitting me to teach my views. Brothers, I am sorry for proceeding to publicize my differences with the Confession before receiving your counsel.

Furthermore, I acknowledge that the manner in which I expressed my differences with the Confession was unwise. In my zeal to defend the truth as I saw it and continue to see it, I expressed my differences in an overly critical tone. I used unnecessarily harsh terms when referring to the Confession, terms like "wrongheaded" and so on. As the trial progressed, I adopted a less critical stance toward the Confession, seeking to show that my views are consistent with the Confession, but I should have done this from the beginning. I acknowledge that when I spoke against the Confession, in my heart I was really speaking against some of you in the presbytery. I ask for your forgiveness for failing to express my disagreements with you in a more charitable manner. Pray for me as I seek the Lord's grace to be more conformed to the character of Christ.

At this point, I wish I could also repent of something substantive in my view of the Law, as Roger counseled. However, I cannot in good conscience do so – and here is why. Throughout the trial at the presbytery level, I appealed to numerous passages in Paul's epistles which teach the antithetical contrast between the Law and the Gospel, that the Law is a covenant of works with blessings and curses (Gal. 3:10), a ministry of condemnation and death (2 Cor. 3:6-11), that it is not based on faith (Gal. 3:12), and that believers have died to it and are no longer under it (Rom. 7:1-6). I was eager to hear how the presbytery would interpret these texts, but the OPC failed "to minister and declare the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice, and to subordinate all human judgments to that infallible rule" (BD IV:A.1.a). At every meeting of the trial judicatory, as well as at every session of GA, the moderator read this admonition with which you are all familiar. And yet during the lengthy debates that ensued, the admonition seemed to be forgotten as those who opposed my views examined the meaning of the Confession in great detail, but made scant reference to the Word of God. One could argue that the charge itself appeals to the Word of God in its citation of proof texts. But even granting this, absolutely no attempt was *ever* made by the presbytery to provide a counter exegesis of the Pauline statements concerning the Law to which I had appealed. On paper the OPC claims that the secondary standards are subordinate to the Word of God, but it behaved as if the reverse were true.

In the absence of biblical argumentation, how can I repent of my teaching? Repentance is a spiritual grace, wrought in our hearts by the Spirit, in which we are convicted of our sin in the sight of a holy God. How can I be brought to such conviction of sin, when hardly any attempt was made to show me how my view of the Law violated the Word of God? If I were to repent in the absence of a conviction of sin wrought by the Spirit working through the Word, I would be bowing to the pressure to conform my view to jot and tittle of the secondary standards, *merely on the authority of the secondary standards*.

When I subscribed to the standards, I did so on a very specific understanding of the vow. I understood the vow historically, going all the way back to the Adopting Act of 1729, as binding officers not to the detailed manner in which the Confession states every doctrine, but to "the system of doctrine" contained in the Confession and Catechisms. Based on this distinction, in my defense I repeatedly affirmed my commitment to the substantive teaching of the Confession concerning the moral law (e.g., I agree with the key statement at WCF XIX:5 without qualification). With regard to the bottom line of my teaching on Christian ethics, even the prosecution admitted that they did not have any concerns. My differences were with the manner in which WCF XIX:2 seemed to equate the Decalogue and the moral law. The defense also demonstrated that this scruple is not novel but one voiced by others in the Reformed tradition, such as Samuel Bolton and Patrick Fairbairn. And yet the OPC did not accept this distinction between my substantive agreement with the standards' doctrine of the moral law and the precise manner in which that doctrine is stated. In effect, therefore, the GA has ruled that if I desire to subscribe to the Confession and remain a minister in the OPC, I must adopt the jot and tittle of the Confession. But as a matter of principle, I cannot in good conscience subscribe to the Confession in this manner, because I believe the Word of God alone has the authority to bind my conscience with that degree of rigor and strictness. So I cannot do what Roger encouraged me to do – namely, to modify my view so as to erase my scruples with the Confession's formulation of the doctrine of the moral law.

Ironically the OPC failed even to follow her own secondary standards. The OPC interpreted the secondary standards a-historically, with Murray-colored glasses, and thus unwittingly narrowed the historic breadth of our tradition. The defense proved that my view of the Law was present at and permitted by the Westminster Assembly. The fact that the standards, on four separate occasions, speak of "the law as a covenant of works," testifies to this fact. Dr. T. David Gordon's expert testimony proved that the Reformed tradition includes a spectrum of views on the Law. He pointed out that the prosecution's paper demonstrated the existence of one view within the Reformed tradition, while failing to demonstrate that this was the *only* view within the circle of orthodoxy. The defense further showed that Murray's view of the Mosaic covenant was the novel view, as Murray himself admitted when he stated that "covenant theology ... needs recasting" (*The Covenant of Grace*, p. 5). When I was ordained by the OPC, I vowed to uphold the system of doctrine contained in the Westminster standards, historically interpreted, not the novel views of John Murray. The 25 commissioners who protested the GA's denial of my appeal hit the proverbial nail on the head:

The Assembly failed to recognize the difference between [Mr. Irons'] substantive agreement with our Standards, which contain the system of doctrine taught in Scripture, and his manner of expressing his views with regard to the unchanging and binding nature of the moral law. Not only has the assembly made an erroneous judgment in this matter but by this determination has also called into question the teaching of a significant and vital stream of Reformed, Presbyterian, and confessional thought.

What, then, should I do? Short of modifying my view, one option would be for me to agree not to publicly teach it. Whenever I come to a passage like Ephesians 2:15, the text that I preached on back in February of 2001 and which prompted this charge – I could simply skip such texts and move on to the next paragraph. But I cannot in good conscience do that either. I am an expository preacher. I am bound by Paul's solemn charge, in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom, to preach the Word (2 Tim. 4:1-2). I am charged to be a minister of the whole Word, not just parts of it. Furthermore, the Law is not a minor topic of concern in the Bible. If I were to agree not to teach on this topic, I would be unable to preach on Galatians, large portions of Romans, and many other passages in Paul. I would also be unable to preach on Jesus' teaching that the Law has been fulfilled, and many other related passages in both Testaments.

But even this mechanical approach does not convey the full extent to which my view of the Law is woven into the fabric of my overall understanding of the whole counsel of God. I do not know how I could function as a minister of the gospel if I were obligated to make absolutely no reference to my understanding of the Mosaic Law in the flow of

redemptive history. For example, it is practically impossible to teach the doctrine of the atonement without making reference to the fact that Christ "was made under the law, and did perfectly fulfill it" (WCF VIII:4; citing Gal. 4:4), not only by obeying its commands but by bearing its curse in our place. Paul says: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us – for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree'" (Gal. 3:13). What is "the curse of the Law" that Christ bore? In context, it is the dreadful curse that rests upon those who do not abide in all the things written in the book of the Law to do them (Gal. 3:10, quoting Deut. 27:26). Thus the historic Reformed and confessional doctrine of the active and passive obedience of Christ, which is a non-negotiable for me, presupposes that the Law is in some sense a covenant of works.

In view of the above, I contemplated the possibility of apologizing for the way I proceeded to make public my criticisms of the confession, but explaining that my conscience was bound to continue preaching what I understood to be the whole counsel of God. I contemplated writing such a letter and letting the presbytery decide whether that would be satisfactory. But the more I thought about it, the more it became clear to me that this half-measure would not do. The reason is because of the GA's denial of the second specification of error of my appeal:

Specification of error # 2: The Presbytery of Southern California erred in judging the teaching of Mr. Irons (viz., "that the Decalogue is no longer binding on believers as the standard of holy living") to be "a violation of the system of doctrine contained in the Holy Scriptures as that system of doctrine is set forth in our Confession of Faith and Catechisms." (Denied by a vote of 72 to 46)

Everything hangs on the denial of the second specification of error. It was a very specific motion, one that I carefully crafted when I wrote my appeal. By denying it, the GA denied my defense argument and the argument of the advisory committee that my teaching, while perhaps contrary to some of the formulations contained in the Confession, is not a violation of its essential system of doctrine. The GA, on the contrary, ruled that my teaching *is* a violation of the essential system of doctrine. Now an ordained officer may be permitted to teach contrary to the standards, assuming that he has set forth his scruples and the presbytery has deemed his scruples to be about non-essential points and therefore not a violation of the system of doctrine. But how can an ordained officer be permitted to teach that which the highest judicatory of his church has deemed to be a violation of the system of doctrine?

Therefore, I have come to a firm decision, motivated by a sincere desire to be respectful of the presbytery's verdict and the GA's affirmation of that verdict. I have decided that I must "peaceably withdraw" from the OPC. When I took "The History of American Presbyterianism" with Mr. James Dennison at WTS/CA, he taught me the following little device that the American Presbyterians came up with during the controversy over the Great Awakening: When the synod rules on any given matter, the members of the synod must "actively concur, passively submit, or peaceably withdraw." I have never forgotten his words, and I have always been firmly convinced that they are true and wise. In fact, I believe these three options are implicit in our fourth ordination vow, in which we promise "subjection to our brethren in the Lord." In my case, I cannot actively concur, because I have not been persuaded from the Word of God that I am in error. I cannot passively submit by refraining from teaching my views, because I believe that would be a sinful violation of my higher responsibility to preach the whole counsel of God. Therefore, I can see no other option but to peaceably withdraw.

Although I prefer the language of "peaceably withdrawing," let me make clear that I intend to "renounce the jurisdiction of the OPC" at the third stated meeting (October 17-18, 2003) in accordance with the provisions set forth for "Cases Without Full Process" (BD V:2.b (1)). As I interpret this paragraph of the Book of Discipline, the act of renouncing the jurisdiction of the OPC is unilateral and does not require the concurrence of presbytery. The presbytery may "seek to dissuade [me] from [my] course," but it cannot prevent me from withdrawing from the OPC.

Note that the Book of Discipline permits a minister to do so "whether or not he be charged with an offense." This ambiguous statement might be interpreted as permitting such an action only when the minister has been charged but not yet found guilty. However, in light of the concluding proviso ("... unless the presbytery institutes or continues disciplinary action"), it would appear that a minister may renounce the jurisdiction of the OPC and have his name erased from the roll at any point in the disciplinary process, unless the presbytery decides to continue the disciplinary process. In light of the unilateral nature of renouncing the jurisdiction, I believe that the concluding proviso only applies to the presbytery's *response* to the minister's act of renouncing the jurisdiction. In my case, the presbytery would appear to have two options by way of response: it may erase my name from the roll and record

the circumstances in the minutes ("an act of discipline without full process," BD V:2), or it may proceed with the full disciplinary process by implementing the proposed censure or some other censure. I would much rather receive the disciplinary act of erasure, rather than censure, since I intend to continue my ministry outside of the OPC.

In this connection, the Book of Discipline sets forth three distinct methods by which a minister may renounce the jurisdiction of the OPC: (1) by abandoning his ministry and membership in the OPC, (2) by declaring himself independent, or (3) by joining another body without a regular dismissal. I do not want to be understood as abandoning my ministry, nor have I joined another body without a regular dismissal. I therefore intend to renounce the jurisdiction of the OPC by declaring myself independent. I have not opted for independency as a matter of ecclesiastical principle but only as a temporary expedient. I am currently investigating other ecclesiastical bodies, but I have not yet decided which one I will seek to join.

Finally, this paragraph of the Book of Discipline states that when a minister desires to renounce the jurisdiction of the OPC, "the presbytery shall seek to dissuade him from his course." Typically presbyteries fulfill this by committee, which makes good sense. In my case, however, with all that has transpired and the obvious implications of the GA's denial of my appeal, I do not see the value of meeting with such a committee. I have had ample opportunity to repent of my theological position, or to reformulate it in a direction that might be more acceptable to the presbytery, but my conscience firmly forbids me to do either. In addition, I do not want to meet with a committee if this would require me to delay my act of renouncing the jurisdiction to an adjourned or subsequent meeting of presbytery. I am, however, willing to meet with the Judicial Committee during one of our recesses if the presbytery desires further clarification of anything in this letter. But after presbytery adjourns on October 18, 2003, I will consider myself no longer under the jurisdiction of the OPC.

#### Was the GA's denial of my appeal a judicial anomaly?

At this point you may be wondering why I have chosen to "jump the gun" and withdraw from the OPC before the presbytery decides whether to implement the proposed censure of indefinite suspension. I have already explained that my action is independent of the presbytery, and is a direct response to the GA's denial of my appeal. I believe the GA's ruling is binding on me directly, regardless of any compromise the presbytery might be willing to accept. This consideration alone is sufficient to justify my decision to peaceably withdraw prior to the presbytery's consideration of the censure. But I have heard some argue that the GA's denial of my appeal was an anomaly due to the controversial prehistory that lay behind my case, and that, rather than "jumping the gun," I should give the presbytery a chance to correct the anomaly. Some have suggested that the presbytery might even lower the censure.

As much as I would like to believe that this is true, I am not persuaded by this argument. There probably were unprincipled individuals here and there who voted to find me guilty for reasons other than those stated in the charge. I do not see any evidence that this was a widespread problem at the presbytery or at GA, but regardless of what men's motives were (and I cannot read hearts), I believe the outcome of my case was no judicial anomaly but a product of the OPC's rejection of the Law-Gospel contrast. The evidence for this is the case of Mr. John Kinnaird whose appeal was dealt with the day after mine. I believe the GA's handling of this case shows that the general theological direction of the OPC is such that even if there had been no controversial prehistory, the GA would still have denied my appeal. The same Assembly that judged my view of the Law *as a covenant of works* to be out of accord with the Confession's system of doctrine endorsed Mr. Kinnaird's view that we are justified by keeping the Law *as a covenant of grace*. The two cases are theologically related by the theme of the OPC's rejection of the Law-Gospel contrast.

As a commissioner to the 70th GA, I carefully read all of the documentation provided and listened to all of the arguments on the floor. As I understand his view, Mr. Kinnaird applies the "already/not-yet" scheme to the doctrine of justification, teaching that the "already" aspect of justification occurs at conversion, and is by faith alone on the ground of Christ's active and passive obedience, but that the "not-yet" aspect of justification must be "in accordance with our works." He cites Romans 2:13 in support: "For it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified." In other words, while the believer's justification starts out "by faith alone" (Mr. Kinnaird's "already"), by the time the believer stands before the Great Tribunal on the day of judgment, his justification is no longer *sola fide* but according to his works as well (Mr. Kinnaird's "not-yet"). Let me quote Mr. Kinnaird in his own words:

[T]he decision, the judgement, as to who enters the city and who stays outside (for eternity) will be made, on that Great Day of Judgement, in accordance with what you have done in this life ... Who are these people who thus benefit; who stand on the Day of Judgement? They are those who obey the law who will be declared righteous ... It is justification - a forensic act of God whereby he declares a person righteous. God is able to make this declaration on That Day because it is a truth. Something has happened to change those who were once sinful. What is it? Our confession, which so many of my readers profess, says that we who are in Christ Jesus, are sanctified really and personally by the Spirit and Word of Christ to the practice, in this life, of true holiness without which no man shall see the Lord. (Kinnaird Appeal, pp. 65-66 of the Agenda for the 70th GA)

According to Mr. Kinnaird, the Spirit's work of sanctification in us causes us to obey the Law. And it is in accordance with the believer's Spirit-wrought obedience to the Law that God will declare the believer to be righteous on the day of judgment and thus qualified to enter the eternal city.

But what is the value of our celebrated doctrine of justification *by faith alone* if it is reduced only to the initial justification at conversion? Was the blood of so many Reformers shed in defense of a doctrine that we are only *initially* justified by faith alone, but that in the end it is really by our own works that we will stand before the holy Judge of all the earth? When the Bible says that the believer is justified, it is a statement that the future verdict of righteousness on the last day has already been pronounced in the present. Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life" (John 5:24). The true application of the "already/not-yet" to justification is that by faith we "already" experience the assurance of knowing that our "not-yet" justification at the last day has been secured for us by Christ. Paul said that on the day of judgment he wants to be "found in [Christ], not having a righteousness of my own, derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith" (Phil. 3:9). This teaching of Scripture is accurately summarized in the Confession when it teaches that God justifies believers "not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, *but for Christ's sake alone* ... by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them" (WCF XI:1).

Mr. Kinnaird tried to make his astonishing teaching sound orthodox to Reformed ears by arguing that the good works of the believer are simply taken into account in a non-meritorious manner at the day of judgment. He argued that since sanctification and good works are the result of the Spirit's sovereign work within us, no one can boast before God or take credit for being declared righteous in accordance with one's works. Amazingly, the GA was satisfied with this explanation, failing to recognize that even the believer's good works are "mixed with so much weakness and imperfection, that they cannot endure the severity of God's judgment" (WCF XVI:5). Furthermore, the GA apparently ignored the fact that even if a person could progress in sanctification to such a degree that he attained perfection at the end of his life (this can't be done, but for the sake of argument, if it could) even then, that would not be sufficient. For the Law requires perfect obedience throughout the course of one's life from beginning to end. This is how Paul interprets the Law when he quotes Deuteronomy 27:26: "Cursed is everyone who does not *abide* in all the things written in the book of the Law, to perform them" (Gal. 3:10). And again, "Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness which is based on the Law shall live by that righteousness" (Rom. 10:5). The Law sets forth two options: either you keep the Law perfectly and gain eternal life by it, or you are under God's curse. In other words, the Law is a covenant of works. Mr. Kinnaird's belief that there is an imperfect, non-meritorious obedience to the Law that will suffice to receive the declaration of righteousness at the day of judgment presupposes that the Law's requirements have somehow been lowered or softened.

Following the teaching of Paul and the Reformed tradition, I believe that the Law revealed on Mount Sinai was in some sense a covenant of works, and that the Law-Gospel contrast is essential to safeguarding the doctrine of justification by faith alone. The vast majority of ministers and elders in the OPC, however, follow Murray's novel teaching that the Law is nothing more than an administration of the covenant of grace. If the Law is an administration of the covenant of grace, it follows that NT believers are obligated to keep the Law – not meritoriously or perfectly, but as part of the Spirit's work of progressive sanctification. I don't agree with this view, but I have been content to minister peacefully alongside those who embrace it. But once this groundwork has been laid, when a man comes along and teaches that sanctification is the necessary condition of acquittal at the day of judgment, it is but a small step from sanctification by the Law as a covenant of grace to *justification* by the Law as a covenant of grace. The OPC claims to believe that we are still "justified by grace," but it is a grace that has been redefined as law. And as Paul said, such "grace" is no grace at all: "If it is by grace, it is no longer by works, otherwise grace is no longer grace" (Rom. 11:6).

Just as Paul warned the Galatian Christians, when the Law's character as a covenant of works is softened so as to allow it to serve in a seemingly harmless role as a means of sanctification, inevitably the Law will become a means of justification. That is why Paul spends so much time arguing – contra the Judaizers who viewed the Law in gracious terms as something that could be added to faith in Christ – that the Law is not to be trifled with, that those who want to be under it are in danger of placing themselves under a curse (Gal. 3:10), that the Law is not compatible with faith (Gal. 3:12), and that those who try to be justified by it have fallen from grace. Aesop's fable of the dog who saw his own reflection in the water comes to mind. As soon as he made a grab for the second bone he saw in his reflection, he lost the one in his own mouth. Instead of having two bones, he was left with none. So here. If you try to add the Law to Christ, neither Christ nor the Law will be of any benefit to you (Gal. 5:2-4).

I am not prepared to say that the OPC has fallen into irreparable apostasy, but something is terribly amiss with a denomination that is willing to indefinitely suspend me from the ministry for holding a position that is part of "a significant and vital stream of Reformed, Presbyterian, and confessional thought," and then turns right around the very next day and fails to censure a man who teaches a doctrine of justification that has never been part of *any* stream within the orthodox Reformed tradition, indeed, that denies the very reason for the Reformation itself. The implication is staggering: Murray's recasting of covenant theology is now an essential test of orthodoxy in the OPC, but the historic Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone is not.

These two rulings of the 70th GA have caused me great sadness, but perhaps they will become a wake-up call to the OPC. I hope and pray that the OPC corrects its course and renews its commitment to the doctrine of justification as clarified by the Law-Gospel contrast taught by Paul and reaffirmed by the Reformers.

I hereby request that my action of peaceably withdrawing from the OPC be made effective at the conclusion of the third stated meeting (October 17-18, 2003). I say "at the conclusion" of the meeting, because I plan to attend and desire to be seated as a member in order to read this letter and to engage in deliberation on all matters related thereto.

Sincerely, in the service of Christ,

Lee Irons