

## Précis to the Board on Theological Tensions on the Faculty

Dear Board,

At the request of President Lillback, the undersigned offer this précis on the nature of the theological tensions on the faculty. We offer it in an attempt to present the issues fairly and with a view toward some resolution.

We wish to be clear that the following is an attempt to be brief, and so the various nuances and interpersonal dynamics, vital to any true resolution, cannot be addressed. We would be happy, if asked, to address any issues needing further clarification.

Since the fall of 2004 the faculty has been involved in *formal* discussions on four issues. The issues may appear to be unrelated, but we are convinced that each reflects disagreement on one fundamental question. That question can be formulated thus: “What is the Westminster tradition and what does it mean to uphold it?” Obviously, this question is multidimensional: (1) how has the faculty conceived of its confessional commitment? (2) how should the various disciplines within our curriculum be related? (3) how should Westminster evaluate and/or build on elements of its own tradition (e.g., Machen, Van Til, Kline, Murray, Conn, or Dillard); (4) what is the proper balance between “always Reformed and always reforming” (i.e., between preservation and development)? Divergent answers to this multidimensional yet fundamental question have not only framed the issues proposed for our formal discussions, but also have fueled much of the strong feelings. As we turn to the four formal issues, we should be clear that we believe these can receive no genuine resolution as long as the question of Westminster’s identity is left unresolved, and that until an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust is regained, progress toward a resolution to that primary question is doubtful.

The four issues, in chronological order, are the following:

(1) *Justification and Confessionalism*. Beginning in the fall of 2004, a faculty email discussion arose that touched on topics related to justification. Much of the impetus for this discussion came from worries about Westminster among sectors of our constituency who perceived some linkage between the so-called New Perspective on Paul and the Norman Shepherd controversy. It was felt that further email correspondence was counterproductive, and so the faculty began a series of meetings to address these questions. These discussions (along with board input) soon led to a request by the Vice President for Academic Affairs that the three field committees<sup>1</sup> meet to work on statements on justification by faith, and how we view our understanding of that doctrine in light of our confessional commitment and demands of our disciplines. By early winter

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<sup>1</sup> The term “Field Committee” (henceforth FC) refers to groupings of departments constituted to oversee our three doctoral programs. The Practical Theology Department comprises the Practical Theology FC, the Biblical Studies Departments comprise the Hermeneutics FC, and the Church History, Systematic Theology, and Apologetics Departments comprise the Historical and Systematic Theology FC.

2005 each FC had composed such a document; to our understanding, these have not been seen by the board. We are not at liberty to distribute the work of the other FCs, but the Hermeneutics FC has attached its statement (see Appendix 1). We note that this discussion was intended to determine where common ground could be claimed in an effort to produce, if possible, a unified statement for our constituencies. Sadly, although each FC document professed unqualified support for *WCF* 11, *LC* 70-73, 77, *SC* 33, this did not put the issue to rest. Comparison of all the documents revealed strong differences on the nature of confessionalism. Other developments soon overtook this process and the matter was never resolved. This lack of resolution was unfortunate in the opinion of many faculty members, since competing views of the nature of confessionalism may underlie subsequent faculty conflicts.

In the spring of 2005, the main issues that were before the faculty were a search for a new president and tensions surrounding several faculty promotions. Although both of these issues, as we perceive it, were not unrelated to the larger theological issues, they do not represent directly topics of theological tension. Nevertheless, theological tensions found expression in what appeared to us to be strong block voting on the promotions of Professors Enns and Green,

(2) *Harvie Conn and Contextualization*. Significant tensions would continue in the fall of 2005 with a vigorous discussion, via emails and meetings, concerning the legacy of Harvie Conn. It was clear to us from those discussions that some members of our faculty were calling into question the importance of maintaining Conn's legacy as part of our institutional profile. A number of potentially divisive issues were raised during this discussion that were simply left unaddressed; we believe these issues have subsequently festered. No written documents were produced from this discussion.

(3) *Inerrancy*. Inerrancy was never made a topic of faculty-wide theological discussion, but it began to be a subtle undercurrent in the Fall of 2005. The precipitating factors included the publication that summer of Pete Enns's *Inspiration and Incarnation* (see below)<sup>2</sup> and President Lillback's inaugural address (Sept. 2005). Concerning the latter, several members of the biblical studies faculty met with Dr. Lillback several times that fall to discuss a number of points made in that address that we found to be in tension with what we perceive to be an important part of our legacy at WTS (summarized well in the 1987 faculty publication *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic*).<sup>3</sup> The discussion was very cordial and it led to a request by President Lillback that the Hermeneutics FC write up a positive statement on inerrancy, one that he could use and even distribute to the public should questions arise. The FC met several times and expended much energy in formulating a

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that Dr. Enns circulated a prepublication draft of chaps. 1 & 2 of *I&I* to the entire faculty for the express purpose of soliciting feedback.

<sup>3</sup> Also included in these discussions with the President were matters rising from his August, 2005 54-page paper, "The Significance of the Relationship Between Biblical and Systematic Theology, The Theology of the *Westminster Standards* and the Reformed Doctrine of Inerrancy For the Evaluation of the New Perspective on Paul: A Proposed Statement of the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary." Several members of the biblical studies faculty submitted extensive written responses to President Lillback, but, given other exigencies, the discussions did not proceed.

statement that was concise and reflected accurately what we deeply believe and what we teach. That statement is attached (see Appendix 2).

It was during that fall that *Inspiration and Incarnation (I&I)* began attracting criticism from some faculty and members of our constituencies, and so it was decided that a faculty discussion was in order. The original plan was to discuss the book *in the context of larger faculty issues, in this case, specifically, inerrancy*. Unfortunately, decisions were made that shifted the topic to focus only on the book itself, and therefore on one faculty member. This led to the fourth and current topic of theological tension.

(4) *Biblical Studies, Confessionalism, and Westminster: A Discussion focused on Inspiration and Incarnation*. By January 2006, the faculty had committed to discussing *I&I*, not, we were assured, as a means of isolating one faculty member, but as a means to getting at the larger issues before us. The plan was to spend the spring semester discussing issues raised in the book. The first meeting took place February 4, 2006. In preparation for that meeting, members of the Historical and Theological FC met (perhaps multiple times) to discuss their areas of disagreement with the book and to bring those concerns to the February 4 meeting. Prof. Gaffin served as FC spokesman and outlined orally five areas: (1) lack of theological clarity; (2) inadequate presentation of the incarnational analogy; (3) allowing the phenomena of Scripture to override Scripture's self-witness; (4) being in sympathy with so-called "Post-Conservative Evangelicalism"; and (5) the preface to the book implicates the faculty as a whole as giving tacit approval to the book.

The meeting proceeded in a frank but cordial, dialogical atmosphere, with Prof. Enns offering a number of clarifications as well as several concessions on wording. President Lillback presided over the meeting and issued challenges to both sides. The feeling on the part of many was that real progress was being made and that the next meeting held promise for further progress. At the end of the meeting, President Lillback asked Prof. Gaffin if he would write down his five points, which we assumed was for a matter of record, thus providing something concrete to which to return for discussion in the next meeting. It seems, though, that members of the HTFC took that simple request as a "mandate" from the president to produce, over the next two months, a 24-page document ("A Response to Inerrancy and Incarnation," hereafter "the HTFC critique"), delivered to the faculty on April 4, organized around the five points mentioned above. To many faculty members, this document marked a definite turn to near-formal judicial process, and the end of faculty-wide discussion. In both content and tone the document was confrontational, accusational, largely counter-productive to collegial exchange, and appeared to be only one small step away from formally charging Prof. Enns, and those agreeing with or defending him, with heterodoxy.

The Hermeneutics FC was then directed by President Lillback to respond in writing to this document, and so subsequent face-to-face meetings that semester were cancelled, mainly at the request of the Hermeneutics FC, (1) in order to begin formulating its written response, and (2) because it felt that the tone and content of the HTFC critique had made any discussions at that time counterproductive. To date, the Hermeneutics FC is

preparing a written response, which it hopes to have ready by early spring 2007 for further faculty interaction. That response will be aimed at (1) outlining the broader issues and “history” that has brought us to this moment of conflict, (2) addressing the tone *and* argument of the HTFC critique, (3) laying out a positive vision for the serious, creative, innovative study of Scripture and its interpretation in the Redemptive Historical tradition at Westminster.

We feel these issues are far too important and potentially explosive to address carelessly. However, inasmuch as Board members may have had concerns aroused as a result of the criticisms of *I&I*, which were articulated in the document signed by most members of the Historical and Theological Field Committee, we will here indicate in broad strokes the outline of our response to the substantive arguments:

- a. The HTFC critique has seriously mis-read the genre, purpose, and target audience of *I&I* and consequently has required of the book a form and presentation that would defeat its very apologetic and missional purpose.<sup>4</sup>
- b. The HTFC critique reflects and perpetuates an unbalanced view of our Dutch Reformed/Princetonian heritage with respect to the doctrine of Scripture.
- c. The HTFC critique is out of sympathy with established trends within our Westminster tradition with respect to the doctrine and study of Scripture.
- d. The HTFC critique employs important philosophical concepts in ways that are at best idiosyncratic and at worse highly misleading.
- e. The HTFC critique, in critiquing *I&I*'s use of the incarnation analogy, ends up misusing the analogy in the service of a truncated doctrine of Scripture.
- f. The HTFC critique uses a wooden reading of *WCF* 1 in a manner that forestalls further necessary reflection on the precise nature of Scripture.
- g. The HTFC critique's approach to biblical revelation is out of accord with Vos' redemptive-historical, developmental approach.
- h. Finally, it is out of accord with *WCF* 1 which acknowledges that the proof of Scripture's divinity does not lie in a rationalistic, phenomenological demonstration, but on the Holy Spirit's conviction of the heart.

We realize that few if any board members will have read the full HTFC response to *I&I*, but we underscore these criticisms in an effort to highlight the seriousness of the divide

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<sup>4</sup> This précis is not the place to present developed arguments for each point listed, but we offer the following example as a preview. A frequent complaint of the HTFC critique is that *I&I* does not vigorously articulate the divinity of Scripture, and spends all its time on its humanity. If *I&I* were intended as a presentation of the doctrine of Scripture as a whole, this might be a just criticism, but *I&I*, while it does root itself in the *assumption* of Scripture's divine origin, and this repeatedly (e.g., pp.13-14; 17-18; 21; 56; 66; 80; 106-111; 153; 160-61; 168), its *stated* intended purpose is precisely to face the humanity of Scripture in recognition that such humanity does not undermine Scripture's divinity, but rather points to the self-incarnating God who gave it. Further, the specifically *apologetic* aim of *I&I* is overlooked. The entire purpose of *I&I* is not to undermine but rather to put on better footing the divinity of Scripture, to understand better just *how* its divinity is manifest, precisely for those Christians who are struggling with things they are finding out from university professors or PBS television shows. These Christians don't need bald asseverations of the divinity of Scripture; they need to find out that the humanity of Scripture is not only real but also a fact that demonstrates the unique glory and wisdom of the God that Christians worship.

between the factions on the faculty. The differences are indeed significant, getting to the very heart of why Westminster exists. To say the least, we lament the fact that these issues cannot now be explored in a positive atmosphere of friendly discussion, debate, and correction. We further lament that we cannot respond as quickly as we might like. In view of the seriousness of the matters before us, our response has to be carefully developed and crafted because trust has been broken and the stakes are much higher.

This difficulty is only compounded by the truncation of the Peacemakers process, changes in the governance and administration of the seminary, and a variety of pressing personal matters affecting our body, the most debilitating of which is watching our friend and colleague Al Groves, struggle with cancer. Nevertheless we certainly understand the importance of the theological discussion before us and we will do our best to expedite the process. We are also keenly aware, as Gary Friessen reminded us, that the dysfunctionality of the faculty casts a shadow over the seminary as a whole and impairs our ability to fulfill our Vision and Mission. Trust has been shattered, and this has crippled not only the faculty, but also the administration and staff, and has even become a matter of concern among our students, not to mention a topic of conversation of alumni, prospective students, donors, and others.

To return to the collegial atmosphere many of us remember fondly is, in our view, critical if our school is to retain its character and integrity. But this is unlikely to happen unless we are able to recover a common understanding of Westminster's tradition and legacy. Will Westminster continue its tradition of having a faculty consisting of some who by constitution are more innovative, some more centrist and some more preservational, with that same faculty holding to a deep commitment to work together in a collegial, constructive environment? In a conservative Presbyterian world marked by great theological diversity within a common confessional commitment, is it possible that Westminster, with its breadth of theological ideas on the faculty, could *serve* the church by *leading* in this situation of theological diversity and missional unity, all within a common confessional commitment? Could Westminster *model* for our constituent churches not an enforced uniformity but a rich and variegated unity of exegetes and theologians laboring together for the extension of the gospel of the Kingdom in our world? Will the seminary continue its robust commitment to biblical theology and the necessity of exegesis and rigorous engagement with the Scriptures as the lifeblood not only of systematic theology, but of the very people of God?

We, for our part, hope Westminster will continue to be an institution determined to think God's thoughts after him, intent on understanding and celebrating our God and his ways in and through the Bible, and committed to furthering God's rule in the world. We hope Westminster will continue as an institution that unflinchingly engages history and cultures, both of the ancient and modern worlds, in our theological work across all disciplines. Further, our vision is for a seminary like Westminster which, within a confessional commitment, could produce such beneficial developments as Stonehouse's anticipation of redaction criticism, Gaffin's emphasis on union with Christ (even where that modifies traditional Reformed formulations of the *ordo salutis*), Dillard's work challenging the Evangelical shibboleth of harmonization, Conn's work on the nature of

theology as missional, Poythress's insights on multiperspectivalism; the list could go on. Each of these developments, set within its own historical moment, could be seen as controversial, but with the perspective of time we now see their benefit to the Church. We desire that the seminary, set within its confessional commitment, will continue to benefit the Church through its creative engagement with both Scripture and the world. In our view, this can only be done if we together chart a course that embraces our Reformed tradition and Standards sympathetically but yet critically.<sup>5</sup> Several of us have often commented on how well our colleague Richard Gaffin summarized these issues in 1981, in the context of the Shepherd controversy, when he raised the question,

...whether in our midst Scripture will still have the last word, whether the whole counsel of God will be something more than what we imagine we already have under our control and have already mastered with our theological structures and doctrinal formulations. Will we, too, as the church must in every time and place, continue to return there to be reconfirmed and, when necessary, corrected in our faith, and, above all to discover there the inexhaustible and "unsearchable riches of Christ" (Ephesians 3:8)?<sup>6</sup>

In our opinion, his call to an unflinching biblical fidelity, even where it may challenge traditional formulations, is as vital now as it was then.

The matter is likewise stated in our Faculty Manual (II.2 "Academic Freedom and Obligation"):

Progress is constantly being made, as it has been made in the past, in the discovery, the exposition, and the expression of the great body of divine truth set forth in the Scriptures. To that progress it is hoped that the members of the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary will regularly contribute. To that end the teacher should be (within reasonable and stated restraints) free to propose and discuss conclusions which are only tentative as well as those which are settled, that by debate and analysis a better understanding and clearer statement of the truth may be attained.

We believe our seminary's rich tradition in biblical studies, expressed succinctly in the quotes above, is an integral part of Edmund Clowney's larger vision of Westminster's ministry to the body of Christ. The question is whether this is a vision to which the board, administration, and faculty are still committed, or whether a new course is being charted, one where an "unwholesome traditionalism" (Faculty Manual II.2) threatens to curtail the exploration of the riches of God's Word.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. R. B. Gaffin, Jr., "The Vitality of Reformed Dogmatics," in *The Vitality of Reformed Theology* (ed. J.M. Batteau, J.W. Maris, & K. Veling; Kampen: Kok, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> Taken from a letter from Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., addressed to "those concerned for the ministry of Westminster Seminary," May 19, 1981.

Assuming that such a vision remains intact, it will nevertheless take tremendous effort and wisdom, by faculty, administration, and Board to insure its continued vitality. In some sense, the ball is now, or soon will be, in the Board's court, to determine what kind of seminary Westminster will be in the years to come. We are hopeful that communications such as this will aid in that process.

Respectfully Submitted,

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Peter Enns

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Steve Taylor

Mike Kelly

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## Appendix 1

### **Statement from the Hermeneutics Field Committee on Confessionalism, with particular reference to the Westminster Standards' teaching on Justification:**

We assume the goal of these discussions is, first, to achieve clear understanding within the faculty of what our subscription to the Confession means, with particular reference to the Westminster Standards' teaching on justification, and second, to be able to present that understanding to our students and the Reformed world generally.

Obviously the first item must be dealt with first, and to that end our field committee agrees we need to begin with a general reaffirmation:

*All voting faculty members of the OT and NT departments concur with and enthusiastically affirm that all the teachings on Justification found in WCF Ch. 11, SC 33, and in the LC 70-73 and 77, are sound, biblical, and true.*

We also acknowledge that, because of our character as a confessional institution, it is incumbent upon us to make clear how our explorations of biblical material relate to confessional matters. Therefore, we are concerned that some of our students (and others) have apparently questioned our commitment to the Standards, and some students may have had trouble in presbytery exams on the subject of justification. And we acknowledge that, in spite of our commitment to helping students work through how to be both biblical and confessional, we may not have always communicated clearly, cogently, or consistently on how the results of our biblical study may both be subordinate to the Westminster Standards and at the same time be cognizant of the priority of Scripture over the Standards.

Therefore, in an effort to help us clarify and communicate, we make the following additional observations that may help place our scholarly efforts in context, observations that appear to us to be neither novel nor controversial in our context at WTS, but nevertheless are here repeated to help set that context.

1) The Westminster Standards are a fair and true representation of the doctrines found in Scripture. They are, however, by no means exhaustive of all the truth found in God's Word.

2) The Westminster Standards articulate a precise definition for justification, as well as other theological terms. These definitions enable the Standards to speak clearly about certain important theological issues. But these definitions may not always conform exactly to the way in which similar words are used in Scripture. Otherwise we are presented with insurmountable difficulties in some passages (such as James' use of the word *dikaiovw* in James 2). Hence, we understand that agreement with the Westminster Standards does not necessarily entail that whenever Paul or any other biblical writer uses a certain word, he must have in mind the precise meaning delineated in the Confession and Catechisms. It rather means that the Westminster Standards have spoken biblical

truth in what *they* say using those terms. Could it be that this is the source of some of our present difficulties? We desire to work toward greater clarity in how we communicate these matters.

Based on these two observations, we suggest that the following matters also represent part of the context in which we try to be both confessionally committed and biblically responsible:

a) We take it that there is room for growth within the context of confessionalism. The Confession gives us both “a place to stand and room to move.” Hence when a new way of looking at things comes down the pike and appears to be in some tension with the Westminster Standards, it is not required that it be rejected out of hand. Rather, it might be the case that this new way may be a complex mix, with some aspects or expressions that are genuinely biblical and agreeable to the Standards, and other aspects that are not. In that case we think that discussion and analysis should take place within our community.

b) We believe it is incumbent upon us as confessionalists who study the Bible to engage vigorously in (confessionally-grounded) biblical-theological study, specifically in the mold of the tradition at Westminster, which stresses union with Christ and a redemptive historical approach to Scripture. Although these elements may have been incipient in the Westminster Standards, they were not fully developed there. Yet they are central and defining issues for Westminster Seminary’s approach to reading the Bible. Pursuing these issues does not contravene our commitment to the Standards.

c) We believe that if we as biblical scholars fail to engage in such study it would be harmful for the church. A redemptive historical approach to Scripture has enabled students to capture some of the grandeur and coherence of the Bible in ways not fully appreciated in earlier generations, and to communicate that grandeur and practical value to new generations asking new questions. To engage in this enterprise is not to be unfaithful to the Standards, but to be faithful to the manifold virtue of Scripture which can address a multitude of situations not yet envisaged.

d) Multiple presentations of truth (which is ultimately one because it lies in the one God) occur within the Bible. It is our conviction that our scholarly and ecclesiastical task includes investigating multiple presentations and perspectives in order to understand their essential harmony without doing violence to the integrity of each biblical presentation.

With respect to the Westminster Standards’ teaching on justification, which stresses the juridical dimension of our salvation, we may therefore acknowledge that it is true and normative, because it is a clear biblical teaching, without thereby suggesting that it is exhaustive of the richness of the Bible.

e) It is possible to have genuine liberty in discussing difficult biblical problems while at the same time remaining true to our Confessional commitment. It may very well be that some ideas will turn out to exceed the bounds of the Standards, and ideas that touch as

closely upon the heart of the Confession as those respecting justification will need to be examined with special care; nevertheless the ideas need to be considered so that it may be demonstrated that they do (or do not) exceed the bounds, and/or whether or not they conform with Scripture.

f) With specific regard to the “new perspective,” certain proponents of that perspective have indeed made statements that at points, in our view, do not bear up to exegetical scrutiny and really do seem directly to contravene explicit statements in the Standards, even taking into account terminological differences and the non-exhaustiveness of the Standards. But this does not mean that *everything* that every “new perspectivist” says is out of accord with the Standards. Such a situation calls for critical and patient reflection, sorting out what is fruitful and what is erroneous. Then what is fruitful and gives an additional true perspective on the manifold riches of Scripture should be pursued.

There are many particular issues we could discuss, but we think it would be wise first to deal with these preliminary issues, and clarify what it means to do biblical study with academic integrity in the context of confessional commitment, so that we may in fact do so in the spirit of mutual trust and cooperative investigation.

## Appendix 2

### HFC Statement on Scripture

The Westminster Theological Seminary biblical studies department believes the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be God's inerrant written word to human beings, the only infallible rule of faith and practice. In the light of this affirmation, we understand ourselves to be:

- Pre-committed to receive as truth all that Scripture is found, upon careful study and reflection, actually to teach.
- Awed by the wisdom and condescension of God in giving a word that is both a product of and a witness to his redemptive activity in human history—an activity in history that culminates in the “summing up of all things in the Messiah.”
- Bound to a study of scripture that is diligent, humble, receptive, and honestly descriptive, recognizing that God has providentially given us information about the environment in which the books of the Bible originated, information that at times enables us to deepen our understanding of the scriptures.
- Convinced that the central message of the Bible is clear without knowledge of the historical and cultural background of the biblical books. In this we find ourselves in full accord with WCF I.7: “All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.”
- Aware that we, like all other fallen human beings, are quite capable of erroneous interpretation, of drawing invalid inferences, of imposing on Scripture constructs of our own making, or in other ways falling short of a full discovery of God's truth.
- Grateful to God for the aid of his Spirit and the interpretive wisdom of his church through the ages.
- Confident that it is only in the light of Christ and the Gospel that the majestic coherence of the Old and New Testaments will be fully displayed.

In all this we view ourselves as upholding, for our own time and place, the affirmations outlined in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 1.