

The Auburn four are perhaps the most controversial theologians in the Reformed world today. I've heard much about them, primarily from my own session, but I'd never had a chance to read either a formal critique or defense of their teachings until this assignment. So, needless to say, I've found the readings on this topic to be very informative.

It appears from the outset that Rev. Schwertley is making some grave accusations against Wilson, Schlissel, Barach, and Wilkins. He accuses them of departing from such confessional and historic Reformed doctrines as justification, the atonement, regeneration, and perseverance of the saints, even to the point of leaning toward papism<sup>1</sup>. These doctrines have long served as a test for establishing Reformed orthodoxy. It appears then both from Reading Wilson and from readings Schwertley's critique of the Auburn four, that the Auburn theologians are claiming to affirm these doctrines at the same time that they describe them in ways that seem to contradict historic reformed orthodoxy.

After reading a little from both sides, it is immediately evident that they are not speaking the same language. There's a fundamental principle of biblical interpretation, which is at the heart of the debate here between the Auburn four and historic reformed orthodoxy. The Westminster Confession of faith states, "the infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture, is the Scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the full and true sense of any scripture, (which is not manifold, but one), it may be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly<sup>2</sup>." This is the hermeneutical principle which underlies the entire reformed faith and especially the historic

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<sup>1</sup> Schwertley, Brian. "A Defense of Reformed Orthodoxy against the Romanizing doctrines of the New Auburn Theology", p. 1

<sup>2</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter I, section 9

development of systematic theology. All of the parts of Scripture mutually consent<sup>3</sup> in teaching one uniform system of doctrine, which is discernable through careful study. The Scripture contains no contradictions. In contrast, Wilson advocates a completely contrary hermeneutical principle, “G. K. Chesterton, my favorite papist, once said that when we are confronted with two apparently contradictory truths, we should insist on keeping both of them. We are not to make it easier for ourselves to hold on to one by letting go of the other. This is precisely the situation we face<sup>4</sup>...” Right here in his own words Wilson exposes his radical departure from the historic reformed hermeneutic, thereby giving explanation for all of his departures on specific doctrines. This is the kind of hermeneutic I’ve encountered when debating Lutherans on biblical doctrine. It’s the attitude that a faithful Christian theologian ought to hold doctrines in contradiction because the Scripture teaches contradictory doctrines. In contrast, the reformed theologian, believing the Holy Scripture to be none other than God’s perfect revelation, assumes that any contradictions he may perceive at first glance are not actually contradictions, and that he may, through ordinary means, attain to a correct harmonious understanding of those passages. He relies on the context of each passage and uses clearer passages to reveal the meaning of statements that are less clear. Since the Auburn four rely on such a radically divergent hermeneutic, it’s no wonder then that their theology departs greatly from reformed orthodoxy.

Take for example their doctrine of justification. Wilson says, “James actually says that a *man* is justified by his works (James 2:24). It would be far more faithful to the text to say that a man is justified by a living faith alone...My point here is certainly not to deny Sola Fide, but rather to deny any quick and easy formulation of it that caters to our

<sup>3</sup> Larger Catechism, Answer 4

<sup>4</sup> Wilson, Douglas, “Response to White’s Covenant and Apostasy”, Auburn Colloquium, p. 225

own appreciative audience and slights the demands of the text. In every controversy, we must embrace all the texts *as they come*<sup>5</sup>.” Here it should be obvious to any reformed Christian that we do not simply interpret texts individually “as they come”, but in context and harmony with the whole of divine revelation. Wilson’s interpret-on-the-fly hermeneutic leads him to include our own works in that act of God’s free grace we call justification. If he would use a more reverent hermeneutic for interpreting God’s Holy Word, namely that taught by the Westminster Confession, he would take James 2:24 in context with Paul<sup>6</sup> and the rest of the passage in James. He would understand that James is not speaking of our works as being any part of our justification before God, but only in the sense of justification (being declared righteousness) before other men<sup>7</sup>. Thus Wilson’s hermeneutic of scriptural contradiction leads him to simultaneously pronounce Sola Fide and the Romanist doctrine of justification.

Any faithful interpreter of Scripture must come to God’s Word reverently with the conviction that it is perfect, pure and contains no errors. God cannot contradict himself. On this basis the reformed faith teaches us that the Bible contains one system of doctrine. By relying on another hermeneutic that is antithetical to the reformed faith, the Auburn four have departed from the orthodox doctrines of the faith while contradictorily claiming to uphold them.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 226, emphasis Wilson’s

<sup>6</sup> Romans 4:5

<sup>7</sup> James 2:18