

RCUS Study Committee on the Federal Vision's Doctrine of Justification

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the Federal Vision from its inception was to interpret Scripture and the world by means of a covenant perspective, hence its name. This was a laudable goal, but what emerged from the 2002 pastors' conference sponsored by the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church (PCA) of Monroe, Louisiana, was anything but praiseworthy. Its main tenets were extracted from Norman Shepherd, N.T. Wright and John Williamson Nevin, and were informed by a post-Kantian philosophy, with no two proponents of the Federal Vision offering the same formulation. The New Perspectives on Paul, baptismal regeneration, and paedocommunion, for example, are both affirmed and denied among its supporters. Because of this diversity, some Federal Vision advocates have argued that the Federal Vision is neither a movement nor a theology.

Of particular concern to this committee was the Federal Vision's doctrine of justification. Most of the key personalities supporting the Federal Vision would insist, and many have insisted, that they unequivocally affirm this important Biblical teaching. Yet their writings demonstrate that the doctrine they teach is not the biblical doctrine as understood and taught by the historic Reformed standards, but is something quite different.

Our investigation presented us with some unique challenges, and it is our hope that the following introduction will help the members of Synod appreciate the difficulty of our work. This introduction is divided into four parts. The first part is a condensed history of the Federal Vision. The second part provides some biographical information for those men whose views are presented and critiqued in this paper. The third part outlines some of the challenges that presented themselves to your committee along with some choices your committee made in dealing with them. The fourth part is a brief summary of the principles that underlie the thinking and methodology of the Federal Vision writers.

History

The subject of this report is known by several terms, including Federal Vision, Auburn Avenue Theology, and the theology of the Monroe Four. Each of these names refers either to the subject or to the location and time of a pastors' conference hosted in early 2002 by the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Monroe, Louisiana. The speakers at this conference were Douglas Wilson, Steve Schlissel, Steve Wilkins and John Barach. Its subject was the Bible's doctrine of the covenant. Schlissel gave a foretaste of these 2002 lectures in a speech in October of the previous year, when he spoke at Redeemer College (Lancaster, Ontario) on the subject, "More than Before: the Necessity of Covenant Consciousness." In that lecture Schlissel expressed his belief that the Reformed tradition had lost its unique covenantal focus, had assumed a Greek epistemology and therefore misread the Bible. In particular, he wanted the Reformed community to move beyond its fascination with the question "How am I saved?" to the more biblical question "What must I do?" It is that command to obey, he said, that constitutes the gospel.

The lectures at the 2002 pastors' conference and Redeemer College sparked considerable interest and debate. In June of the same year the Reformed Presbyterian Church in the United States issued a resolution claiming that the Federal Vision advocated Roman Catholicism and semi-pelagianism with its confused teaching about such things as the covenants of work and grace, the sacraments, justification, and the nature of the church.

In response, the speakers at the Auburn Avenue conference defended their positions. No response was more comprehensive than Wilson's book in the fall of 2002 entitled *Reformed is not Enough*. By late 2002 the organizers of the Auburn Avenue conference believed those who questioned the Federal Vision should be given opportunity to present those concerns publicly. Accordingly, their next conference (January 2003) was entitled "The Federal Vision: Examined." Those invited to respond to the original four speakers were Joseph Pipa, Morton Smith, and Carl Robbins. Unfortunately the interaction at that conference did little to convince anyone that the problem was much more than men talking past each other. This led to a colloquium hosted by Knox Seminary in August of 2003 for the four Auburn Avenue pastors' conference participants, several other proponents, and various critics. Again it was hoped that private meetings and discussions would bridge the differences between the Federal Vision and its opponents. They did no such thing. The book which resulted from the colloquium, entitled *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros and Cons*, served to reinforce the idea that the Federal Vision was viewed by its critics as substantively, if not generally, at odds with historic Reformed doctrine.

Since 2003 concerns about the Federal Vision have been addressed in several ecclesiastical bodies. The 71st (2004) General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church issued a declaration on justification and appointed a special committee to study justification. The OPC's final report included information and evaluation about the Federal Vision. This report is now available (along with various responses to it) on the internet. Likewise, the Mississippi Valley Presbytery of the PCA received a report in 2005 that was highly critical of the Federal Vision. There were also two requests made to the Louisiana Presbytery of the PCA to evaluate the Federal Vision and to investigate the teaching of one of its ministerial members, Steve Wilkins. In July of 2005 the Louisiana Presbytery adopted a report which cautioned Wilkins about some of his teaching but generally exonerated him concerning the allegations that he violated the PCA's confessional standards. The presbytery's report did not quiet the concerns of the Federal Vision's critics and the presbytery was asked to reconsider its findings.

At the current time there appears to be little hope that the Federal Vision's proponents and critics will come to agreement regarding their most fundamental differences. The suggestion that those differences are only perceived or are the result of misunderstanding appears naive. Therefore the continuing debate between proponents and critics seems destined to persist into the foreseeable future.

Biographies

Following the "original" Auburn Avenue pastors' conference, several other men have come to write or speak in defense of the Federal Vision. These men include Peter Leithart, Mark Horne, Rich Lusk, Jeffrey Meyers, James Jordan, Andrew Sandlin, Ralph Smith, Joel Garver, and Tom Trouwborst. It is important to note that among these men there is variety in their emphases as well as some important differences. Rather than expending our efforts chronicling these similarities and differences in an exhaustive way your committee believes that the work of the original four speakers (Wilson, Schlissel, Wilkins, and Barach), along with two notable additions (Lusk and Leithart), provides a fair and representative view of the Federal Vision on the doctrine of justification. Indeed, the committee is of the opinion that, along with Norman Shepherd, the primary intellectual and academic contributors to this issue are Lusk and Leithart.

Douglas Wilson is the pastor of Christ Church in Moscow, Idaho. His congregation is part of the Confederation of Reformed Evangelical Churches (CREC). Wilson is perhaps best known for his rather prolific writing, which until the advent of the Federal Vision was mainly concerned with classical education and the Christian home. He is also credited with starting New St. Andrews, a four year undergraduate institution in Moscow, Idaho, Credenda/Agenda magazine and Canon Press. Wilson began his ministry without any formal theological training, but he considers himself to be historically Calvinistic and Presbyterian.

Steve Schlissel is the pastor of Messiah's Congregation in New York City, which had been part of the Christian Reformed Church but is currently independent. Schlissel is also the founder of Urban Nations, an outreach that ministers to New York immigrants.

Steve Wilkins has been the senior pastor of Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church in Monroe, Louisiana since 1989. His church sponsors the annual pastors' conferences at which some of the Federal Vision's proponents have spoken.

John Barach recently accepted a call to Reformation Covenant Church (CREC) in Oregon City, Oregon, in order to plant a church in the Medford region. Prior to this Barach served two congregations in the United Reformed Church.

Rich Lusk served as an assistant pastor of the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church during the 2002 Pastors Conference. Unlike Wilkins, Lusk has written voluminously on the subject of justification, stating his opinions with unmistakable clarity.

Peter Leithart is an instructor at New St. Andrews in Moscow, Idaho, where he teaches theology and literature. He also serves as the organizing pastor of Trinity Reformed Church (CREC) in Moscow, although his ministerial credentials remain with the Presbyterian Church in America. Leithart completed his doctoral studies at Cambridge, and is among the most theologically well trained, widely read, and therefore most apt defenders of the Federal Vision.

Challenges

Three challenges presented themselves to your committee as we undertook our work.

The first, which will become more apparent as the report proceeds, is that the Federal Vision extends far beyond the area of investigation that was assigned to your committee. There is not only a

great deal said about justification (our central concern) but also about the sacraments, the church, the covenants, assurance of salvation, the Trinity, and less overtly, biblical history and hermeneutics. It is particularly in its bringing the understanding of justification to bear on other areas of theology that the Federal Vision's doctrine of justification becomes most clear. It is inevitable, then, that this report will include explanation and critique beyond the bare doctrine of justification.

The second challenge we encountered has already been suggested by the number and variety of men who take their place among the promoters and defenders of the Federal Vision. As will be the case whenever there are so many men involved with so little formal organization, this diversity does not lend itself to a concise evaluation of their position. Two of the most common complaints made by the promoters of the Federal Vision are that they are not treated with personal kindness nor are the nuances of their individual positions noted. Rather than running the risk of homogenizing the positions of many men, your committee chose to restrict our study to the Federal Vision's main speakers and promoters. We do acknowledge that it is possible (and even likely) that others more loosely in the Federal Vision camp would choose to express themselves somewhat differently and perhaps with different emphases on minor points. Your committee is confident, though, that there is general agreement regarding justification among those whose views we have examined, and further that this agreement is not likely to be broken by any promoters not included.

The third challenge we encountered is that the Federal Vision uses traditional theological terms but fills those terms with different content. They claim that they are using the terms in their biblical, rather than their historical, sense. That explanation is not only dubious; it also lends itself to further confusion both for those who confess appreciation for, as well as critics of, the Federal Vision.

We would then urge you, brothers, to pay close attention to the body of this report. It is supposed by some that the disagreement about the Federal Vision is simply quibbling over appropriate formulations, use of terms and unusual paradigms. Your committee must charitably disagree. We believe that, while there are some legitimate concerns that the Federal Vision have raised, in an attempt to correct what they see as errors, these men go too far "beyond Christ" and end up teaching a doctrine of justification that detracts from the gospel as it is presented in Scripture and taught by our creeds. Any teaching about justification that takes the eyes of the believer off Christ and encourages him or her to look elsewhere has failed to serve the interest and cause of Christ Jesus.

A BRIEF SUMMARY OF PRINCIPLES¹

In as much as the phrase "Federal Vision" is derived from the notions of both "covenant" and "perspective," it should be no surprise that the purpose of those advocating a "federal vision" desire us to "view" the doctrines of Scripture—particularly ecclesiology and soteriology—by means of this "lens." As the following critiques show, there is no consistent hermeneutic adhered to by all, but there are certain principles that will come to light.

The overriding principle is that the legal and decretal dimensions of the covenant are pushed to the background,² and "covenant" as a description of the relationship with the Triune God through Jesus Christ is brought forth as the central teaching of the Bible. From this it is maintained that salvation is being "in covenant," that is, in a relationship that brings one within this Trinitarian "circle of fellowship" and is founded upon "union with Christ." Being in a relationship, the entire community meets with God in an "objective" fashion. By means of liturgy and sacraments, together with the preaching of the Word, this meeting is effected and, as such, are all necessary elements in each worship service; none of these elements ought to be denied to any covenant member. Since each member is also in relation to each

¹ Please see the appendix to this paper for a fuller treatment of Federal Vision's doctrine of the covenant.

² The "legal" dimension of the covenant is basically the *external* administration of the covenant as opposed to the inward working of the Spirit of God for salvation (see Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 287). As the Belgic Confession puts it, "hypocrites, . . . are mixed in the Church with the good, yet are not of the Church, though *externally* in it" (article 29). The "decretal" dimension of the covenant refers to eternal election, more specifically to the fact that not all those who partake of the administration of the covenant are, properly speaking, elect of God.

other, faith cannot be known nor practiced outside the covenant community and structure. Baptism creates a real union with the body of Christ. It dissolves the relationship with the old Adam and with his family and, at least relationally, the baptized member is “reborn” into solidarity with the New Adam and His community. This baptism is also an ordination, by which each member of the community is to be a “christ” (small “c”)—a new status that can be lost only by disloyalty and unfaithfulness. Remaining an elect member of this covenant community and membership in the covenant is contingent upon remaining loyal and faithful to our baptism (ordination). Justification within this system is also—though not exclusively—a matter of relation and community. Real union with the body of Christ entails participation in the vindication of Christ as the verdict pronounced concerning Him by His resurrection. This justification is not the imputation of the “satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ,” it is a function of being in relationship with Christ by means of the covenant, and so the whole community is in some sense “justified.” This way of describing (not defining) all things “in relation” to the covenant is the heart of the Federal Vision enterprise. The following critiques show how this way of looking at the doctrines of Scripture, particularly justification, is at odds with the historic, Reformed understanding of Christ, His work, and our true relationship with Him.

RICH LUSK

Lusk and N.T. Wright

Following the original pastors’ conference, Rich Lusk wrote an article in which he, with some minor caveats, approves of N.T. Wright’s treatment of the doctrine of justification.³ Its first paragraph begins,

This article will not attempt to provide a comprehensive analysis and defense of N.T. Wright.... Rather, my much more modest goal is to offer a plea for Reformed theologians and pastors to give Wright a sustained and sympathetic reading. Several Reformed theologians have recently gone on record critiquing Wright particularly on the issue of justification. My hope is to clear the ground, and show why I think these critics have, in several key ways, misread and mischaracterized Wright’s theology. In fact, if we ignore Wright or fail to do the careful study needed to understand his work, we will be missing out on tremendous blessing.

Later in the article, Lusk explains that he first began reading Wright in the mid-1990s and soon “discovered Wright had a profound grasp of Pauline theology.” The remainder of his article is devoted to summarizing “the overall shape of his doctrine of justification, showing it basically harmonizes with, complements, and even enhances more traditional Reformed formulations.”⁴

In particular, Lusk approves of the following seven ideas found in Wright:

1. “Wright uses the standard Reformed law court metaphor for justification.” For Lusk, this means that Wright’s doctrine of justification “has a forensic dimension” and is not a transformation of character. Lusk argues that Wright maintains that justification is “the eschatological verdict of God brought into the present time” and that it’s based on the death and resurrection of Christ.

2. “Wright says ... that we are justified *by faith*. His definition of faith, according to Lusk, has two roles: “it is the instrumental means of claiming forgiveness as one’s own in Christ and it functions as the badge of covenant membership in the new, messianic age.” Although Wright emphasizes the latter as a “boundary marker,” Lusk believes that both roles are present and complementary.

3. “Wright’s doctrine of justification is inseparable from his corporate Christology.” What does this mean? Lusk explains: “He simply uses union with Christ to do in his theology what imputation does

³ Rich Lusk, “N.T. Wright and Reformed Theology: Friends or Foes?” *Reformation and Revival* 11, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 35-47. In fact, this entire issue is dedicated to the doctrine of justification. Other articles include “Justification by Faith Alone” by Norman Shepherd, “Lutheranized Calvinism: Gospel or Law, or Gospel and Law” by Andrew Sandlin, and an interview with N.T. Wright.

⁴ Lusk, “N.T. Wright,” 39.

for traditional Reformed systematics.” But for Lusk this change is not particularly significant for two reasons. First, “the net result is the same: sinners are right with God because of what Christ did in their stead.” And second, the doctrine of union with Christ is not new to Reformed theology.⁵ In any case, Wright’s corporate Christology illuminates the doctrine of justification as follows:

In other words, for Calvin and Gaffin, as well as for Wright, it is not quite proper to speak of an alien righteousness in justification. Rather, in terms of union with Christ, his righteousness belongs to us in the same way a man’s name and possessions now belong to his new wife. Because we are in Christ, all that Christ has is now ours including his righteous standing before the Father as the New Adam. The forensic, imputational aspect of salvation is included as one dimension of our union with the risen and vindicated Christ. Justification has no freestanding structure of its own; it is a function of our oneness with Christ.⁶

4. Wright’s “corporate Christology feeds into a narrative reading of Scripture.... In other words, he reads the Pauline doctrine of justification in terms of redemptive history.... [J]ustification has at least as much to do with the history of salvation as it does with some sort of individualistic *ordo salutis*.”⁷

5. Wright emphasizes the “corporate nature of justification. While Luther and Calvin were concerned with matters of individual salvation, Wright claims that our understanding of Paul has been governed more by existential sixteenth-century questions, than by the questions that led Paul to pen the epistles in the first place.” Lusk illustrates this from the book of Galatians. The issue of justification, he claims, arose in a “debate over proper table fellowship (2:11ff)!”⁸ Thus, he says that justification is not merely soteriological, but also sociological and ecclesiological.⁹

6. “Wright begins his discussion of justification in the same place Paul does in the epistle to the Romans: in the future.” In regard to Romans 2, according to Wright, “both Rome and the Reformers must be found wanting.” Rome’s failure is placing justification entirely in the future, making present assurance impossible. The Reformers’ failure was thinking of justification solely as a past event in the life of a believer. Lusk’s agreement with Wright on this point is rather telling. Quoting from Wright, he says, “For Wright justification is both present and future. Initial justification is received by faith alone. But ‘future justification, acquittal at the last great Assize, always takes place on the basis of the totality of the life lived.’” Lusk adds, “Scripture repeatedly points ahead to a final judgment in which works will play a vital role in our acquittal (though not in abstraction from faith or union with Christ, of course).”¹⁰

7. The last issue for Lusk is Wright’s redefinition of righteousness. “For Wright, righteousness is not strictly legal but relational.” In other words, whether for God or man righteousness is a matter of fidelity to one’s covenant and/or promises.¹¹ Since righteousness is “not strictly legal,” one’s law-keeping need not be perfect to have a right standing with God, and justification as the imputation of righteousness becomes the very thing that Lusk tries to save Wright from, viz., a “legal fiction.”

After claiming that Wright retains “all the major, traditional Reformed concerns,” Lusk adds,

⁵ The latter statement is, of course, true. Calvin had a very high regard for this blessing of the gospel, but it would be irresponsible to conclude that union with Christ took the place of forensic imputation in his theology.

⁶ Lusk, N.T. Wright,” 42.

⁷ Ibid., 42-43.

⁸ For an extended treatment of this topic, see Rich Lusk, “The Galatians Heresy: Why We Need to Get It Right.” Available from http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/getting_the_galatian_heresy_right.htm (accessed 28 November 2006).

⁹ At this point, Lusk expresses his appreciation to Wright: “Wright has recovered this basic Pauline insight, and for that we should thank him.”

¹⁰ Lusk, “N.T. Wright,” 44-45.

¹¹ Lusk not only agrees with Wright on this point, in his response to Smith he uses the same idea to undermine the Adamic covenant and the necessity of pre-lapsarian law. See Lusk in *Auburn Avenue Theology*, 128.

The language and packaging are somewhat unique to Wright, but the heart of Wright's work is not antithetical to the Reformation. Granted, his definition of justification is not fully traditional. But what justification does in older Reformed systematics, Wright accomplishes with his corporate Christology and covenant-historical reading of Scripture. His work should be considered an expansion and development of Reformed theology, not its undoing. I consider his inclusion of corporate and eschatological dimensions in his doctrine of justification to be salutary developments.¹²

Lusk's agreement with Wright on the major points of his theology is undeniable.

But if Wright's doctrine of justification is "not fully traditional," and, in fact, replaced with a "corporate Christology and covenant-historical reading of Scripture," we have to question whether Wright truly retains all the major Reformed emphasis and is not antithetical to the Reformation. We maintain that he fails on both counts, as the Synod's report on N.T. Wright clearly shows. But, more to our point, since Lusk has expressed his affinity with Wright on the very points in question, Lusk fails as well.

Lusk on Justification

The question at this point is, Where does this take Lusk? What exactly does he believe regarding justification?

The answers to these questions find their clearest expression in another article titled "Rome Won't Have Me,"¹³ which is basically Lusk's response to charges made against him by Morton Smith and Michael Horton.¹⁴ The problem with the critiques of both these men, Lusk argues, is that they claim that he posits congruent merit and/or infused righteousness. Lusk, however, insists that he has rejected "the most fundamental tenets of Rome's doctrine of justification... Roman theology requires merit; I reject it categorically." Horton, on the other hand, claims that, while Lusk may have jettisoned the word *merit*, his theology requires the concept nonetheless.

But Lusk not only claims to reject the concept of merit, he says that it cannot be found in the Bible either. "Obviously, since 'merit' is not found in the canonical Scriptures, it had to be imported from elsewhere," he wrote. But from where did it come into existence? Lusk is not without answer: "The notion of merit was introduced into Christian discourse in a rather unsophisticated way by Tertullian... Tertullian borrowed the concept from the Roman judicial system. From there it took on a life of its own."

He goes on to say that medieval nominalists and voluntarists, on the other hand, separated merit from the law, maintaining instead, "God is free to consider *any* act meritorious according to his good pleasure." This means "merit had to do not with the intrinsic worth of an act but with its value in the covenant." Thus, an act was meritorious if God approved of it, though there may not be anything in the act itself deserving of God's attention and favor.

The Reformers of the sixteenth century, according to Lusk, built on the nominalist and voluntaristic understanding outlined above, but "worked hard to avoid the problems inherent in the earlier forms of nominalism." For example, he claims that in Calvin's writings "merit was almost qualified out of existence, as he radically subordinated merit to God's free mercy." But ultimately the problem Lusk has with the Reformers is that they failed "to completely [sic] eradicate the notion of merit altogether." In the article Lusk explains why he wants to scrap the notion completely:

Considering that some version of merit stood at the foundation of the corrupt medieval practices of indulgences, the treasury of merits, prayers to the saints, penance, and so forth, it is clear that

¹² Lusk, "N.T. Wright," 46.

¹³ Available from http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/rome_wont_have_me.htm (accessed 28 November 2006). All quotes from Lusk in this section, unless otherwise noted, are from this article.

¹⁴ See Morton Smith, "The Biblical Plan of Salvation, With Reference to the Covenant of Works, Imputation and Justification by Faith," in *Auburn Avenue Theology*, 96-117, and Michael Horton, "Déjà vu All Over Again" in *Modern Reformation*, July/August 2004 (Vol. 13:4). The latter article is also available from <http://www.modernreformation.org/mh04dejavu.htm> (accessed 28 November 2006).

the concept has wrought great havoc. It obscures the true (non-meritorious) nature of covenant conditionality and tends to confuse evangelical “obedience of faith” with legalistic “works of the law.” “Merit,” as a category, can be rescued, no doubt, but the project doesn’t seem to be worth the effort.

Remember, too, that in scrapping the concept of merit, the active obedience of Christ must either disappear or assume a different role. Christ’s perfect law-keeping is, as we find it expressed in the creeds and writings of the sixteenth-century Reformers, exactly what is imputed to believers in justification.¹⁵ But when Lusk asks himself whether he believes in the imputation of Christ’s active obedience, the answer is a very definite maybe. Certainly, “the perfect obedience of Jesus played a vital role in his salvific work on our behalf.” But what was that vital role? Lusk continues, “So his active obedience is necessary to guarantee the efficacy and worth of his death and guarantee his resurrection on the other side.” This means that his active obedience was necessary because it qualified him to offer himself as an acceptable sacrifice, etc. While this is true, it fails to address our concern. We want to know if the active obedience of Christ is that which is imputed to believers in justification. Lusk denies that it is. Several paragraphs later, he writes,

I have fully acknowledged that at the heart of the gospel stands a crediting (or an imputation). Christ’s righteousness is our righteousness in the divine law court. His righteousness is our only hope and surety of justification. But note: it is not Christ’s righteous character as such or his thirty-plus years of obedience that get reckoned to our account. Rather, it is the verdict the Father passed over him. The Father declared Jesus righteous; that verdict took the shape of the resurrection (cf. 1 Timothy 3:16). Now (by faith alone, of course) that verdict belongs to us. He shares his legal righteousness and vindication with us. This is a forensic, external, and gracious justification.

Thus, according to Lusk, God imputes to believers the verdict that Jesus was righteous. That verdict was, of course, grounded in his active obedience and confirmed in the resurrection, but it is not Christ’s active obedience per se that God imputes to his people.

In the Colloquium, Lusk shows less restraint and even a degree of scorn for a doctrine of imputed righteousness. He wrote,

This justification requires no transfer or imputation of anything. It does not force us to reify ‘righteousness’ into something that can be shuffled around in heavenly accounting books. Rather, because I am in the Righteous One and the Vindicated One, I am righteous and vindicated. My in-Christ-ness makes imputation redundant. I do not need the moral content of his life of righteousness transferred to me; what I need is a share in the forensic verdict passed over him at the resurrection. Union with Christ is therefore the key.¹⁶

The first rather odd twist in this is that Lusk believes (or at least claims) that his view is perfectly consonant with Reformed theology. He writes,

[N]othing from the typical “imputation of Christ’s active obedience” formulation has been lost – only nuanced. . . . Indeed, the imputation of Christ’s active obedience is tightly included in my view, since the verdict the Father passes over the Son in the form of the resurrection is grounded upon his perfect obedience. The imputed verdict brings with it the perfect record of obedience upon which the verdict was based. Thus, my view makes the imputation of Christ’s active and

¹⁵ In his response to Morton Smith, Lusk mocks the notion that Jesus’ obedience contained any element of merit. He wrote, “The gospels make it clear that Jesus *never* had to earn the favor of God. He was never a ‘Dutiful Employee’ but *always* a ‘Beloved Son.’ . . . Even his exaltation was of grace, not of merit! It was not like an ‘Employee of the month’ award.” See Lusk in *Auburn Avenue Theology*, 137-8. While it is true that Christ never had to merit God’s favor for himself, he certainly had to merit God’s favor for believers.

¹⁶ Lusk in *Auburn Avenue Theology*, 142.

passive obedience, as well as the resurrection, internal to the doctrine of justification.

What! Nothing has been lost? Nothing, that is, except the imputation of a perfect righteousness that sinners need in order to stand before a holy God. We may have the verdict, but (according to Lusk) the righteousness upon which that verdict was based is imputed only implicitly and not explicitly. It is “internal to the doctrine of justification.”

The second odd twist here is that Lusk follows this with an expression of agreement with “a host of contemporary Pauline scholars who interpret the New Testament phrase *pistis christou* as a subjective genitive, that is, as a reference to Christ’s own faith.” Then he adds, “[S]urely this is no different than saying that his active obedience has been credited to us.” But if there is no difference, then why won’t Lusk simply affirm that Christ’s perfect law-keeping is imputed to believers in justification?

While this may seem strange, and is certainly contradictory, it is necessary because Lusk agrees with Wright’s corporate Christology and his redefinition of righteousness, among other things. In corporate Christology, union with Christ takes precedence over forensic imputation. And righteousness, as redefined, is more relational than juridical. Notice how these ideas come to the fore in the following quotes:

Even our faith (the sole instrument of our justification) is simply a sharing in Christ’s own life of faith. His story – his life of sustained faithfulness – is now my story because his faith has become mine.

So Christ was the perfectly faithful man. He lived a life of total faith in his Father. While his faith obviously has significant discontinuities with our faith, we must see our faith is simply the result of our being swept up into union with him. Our life of faith derives from and depends upon and gets its efficacy from his life of faith. Everything needed for salvation – even faith itself – is located in Christ. We need look nowhere else.

Lusk’s Sacramentology

In addition to his fondness for the New Perspectives theology of N.T. Wright, Lusk has also been noted for his doctrine of the sacraments. For example, he argues that the purpose of preaching is to make one desire what God offers in the sacrament.¹⁷ That this makes the sacraments converting ordinances and therefore coordinate with the preaching of the gospel is clear in his explanation. He writes,

Preaching alone is insufficient to make them participants in Christ’s work of redemption.... They must respond to the preached word with repentance and be baptized to enter into the way of salvation. Baptism, not preaching per se, is linked with forgiveness and the reception of the Spirit. Clearly, Peter believes God will give them something in baptism that they have not received through preaching alone. Baptism will consummate the process of regeneration begun by the Word preached.¹⁸

The coordination of the sacraments with the preached Word is necessary, according to Lusk, because “Preaching communicates truth, the sacraments communicate life.”¹⁹ Since Christianity is both doctrine and life, each is necessary and “there is a kind of equal ultimacy” between them.

Since our subject is justification and not the sacraments per se, we will examine Lusk’s sacramentology only as it relates to justification. This subject receives its fullest treatment in his

¹⁷ Proposal #4 in Rich Lusk, “Some Thoughts on the Means of Grace: A Few Proposals.” Available from http://www.homes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/some_proposals_about_the_means_of_grace.htm (access 29 November 2006). This article is prefaced with the following comment: “The thoughts in this paper were largely prompted by a study of Walter E. Krebs, ‘The Word and the Sacraments,’ *Mercersburg Review* (July, 1867), 366-383.”

¹⁸ Proposal #4 in “Some Thoughts.”

¹⁹ Proposal #5.

contribution to *The Federal Vision*.²⁰

Lusk begins this article with a historical analysis of the decline of infant baptism in the first half of the nineteenth century. Citing Charles Hodge, he identifies the chief culprits in this decline as revivalism and an Enlightenment worldview. Yet, in spite of the fact that Lutherans, who held to a high sacramental theology, fared only slightly better than Presbyterians and the Dutch Reformed, Lusk believes that Hodge was ineffective because he failed to develop “a robust sacramental theology.”²¹ For this he turns to John Williamson Nevin and *The Mystical Presence*.

Nevin argued that the decline in the practice of infant baptism was due to the loss of understanding of the efficacy of baptism. If the value of the sacraments lies only in the subjective response of those who receive them and infants are incapable of an intelligent, believing response, then infant baptism has no meaning. The answer then is to reinvigorate infant baptism with objective force. Nevin’s view, according to Lusk, presupposes “Christ is at work by his Spirit in the ordinances entrusted to the Church,” and that children of believers “were not conceived and born as Christians in the full sense; rather they were made Christians at the font.”²² Lusk continues:

Prior to baptism, the children of believers were entitled to all the rights and privileges of the covenant promise, but those blessings did not actually become their true possession until baptism. Grace was bestowed not naturally, through conception by regenerate parents, but supernaturally and sacramentally, through the new birth of baptism.²³

Throughout the next several pages, Lusk attempts to demonstrate that Nevin’s view of sacramental efficacy was closer to the Reformers’, specifically Calvin’s and Knox’s, than was Hodge’s. A lot of this is based on an examination of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century confessions by Emanuel V. Gerhart, who was largely responsible for mainlining Nevin’s views in the Reformed Church in the United States in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Gerhart taught that baptism assures the person baptized that he is in Christ, regenerated by the Holy Spirit and forgiven; and yet, because baptism must be received on condition of faith, it does “not guarantee one’s eschatological salvation. . . . The waters of baptism must be mixed with persevering faith in order to result in final redemption.” Lusk shows his approval of Gerhart’s view when he says, “On the other hand, we must insist that the blessings delivered over to us in baptism can only be received with the open hand of faith. Baptism is the way God gives us Christ; faith is the human instrument that receives Christ through the physical means.”²⁴

Lusk maintains that Christ and all his benefits are really and truly given in baptism. He insists repeatedly that “[b]aptism is what it is, even apart from our response,”²⁵ Word and sacraments “retain their integrity, completely apart from our subjective response,”²⁶ and “we do not suggest that baptism’s efficacy depends on our faith.”²⁷ Thus, baptism never fails to give Christ to those who are baptized. But if one fails to appropriate Christ by faith “through the physical means,” then, although Christ has been truly

²⁰ Rich Lusk, “Paedobaptism and Baptismal Efficacy: Historic Trends and Current Controversies,” in *Federal Vision*, 71-125.

²¹ Lusk in *Federal Vision*, 83.

²² *Ibid.*, 88. Much of the material that Lusk quotes from Nevin can be found in James Hasting Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology: Nevin and Schaff at Mercersburg* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

²³ Lusk in *Federal Vision*, 88.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 105.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 103.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 104.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 105.

given to him in baptism, his baptism becomes to him as “waters of drowning and judgment.”²⁸ Lusk says, “The choice is yours.”²⁹

One area of special concern to Lusk is the relationship of paedobaptism to conversion. He asks, “What can a tiny, unreasoning child receive from God in the sacrament of baptism?”³⁰ This is a good question and takes us to the main point of his article. Calvin’s “position,” he says, illustrates the “complexities involved.”³¹ Lusk says that Calvin “ties regeneration and justification to the moment of baptism. Infants receive an age appropriate portion of that grace that will later be theirs in a fuller fashion.”³² This is probably the clearest statement in all the FV literature that justification takes place, if not *by* baptism, certainly in conjunction with it. And it’s not just that justification is tied to the act of baptism, though such a statement would raise concerns of its own, but Lusk specifically argues that justification is tied to the *moment* of baptism. He adds, “We might say the unbaptized child of the covenant is *betrothed* to the Lord from conception onwards. But the *marriage* – that is, the actual covenant bonding – takes place at baptism.”³³ And again,

Alfred North Whitehead once quipped the whole history of philosophy was simply a giant footnote to Plato; I doubt that’s right, but I am sure that the whole Christian life may be seen simply as a footnote to one’s baptism. The importance of baptism to one’s identity and assurance can never be overestimated.³⁴

Because regeneration and justification are tied to the moment of baptism, Lusk encourages Christian parents to treat their baptized children “as the Christians they are.”³⁵

Lusk, following N.T. Wright, wants to have a multidimensional approach to Scripture that allows “a forensic dimension” to justification but also includes competing, if not contradictory, dimensions. In particular, he wants a corporate Christology and a corporate understanding of salvation with an emphasis on the objective relationship. Since an unbiblical concept of merit has wreaked havoc on the church at times, Lusk also wants to do away with merit altogether. Thus, the perfect obedience and righteousness of Christ cannot be meritorious. His active obedience merely qualifies him to serve as our high priest, and only the verdict that Christ was righteous is actually imputed to believers. On the other hand, Lusk also shares Nevin’s concern regarding the modern church’s failure to embrace infant baptism, believing that the realization of the inherent efficacy of baptism is the answer. Especially with infants, it is clear he believes that not only regeneration but also justification takes place at the moment of baptism. If that is so, then either justification occurs apart from faith, or, more likely, a seminal faith must be implicit in baptism along with justification. Either way, Lusk’s view is neither Biblical nor confessional.

PETER LEITHART

In his article entitled, “Judge Me, O God — Biblical Perspectives on Justification,”³⁶ Peter

²⁸ Ibid., 103.

²⁹ Ibid., 104.

³⁰ Ibid., 107.

³¹ Ibid., 108. Actually, what Lusk says is that Calvin did not have a single position at all. In different places, he expressed three different views. It is the so-called second view of Calvin that concerns us here.

³² Lusk in *Federal Vision*, 108.

³³ Ibid., 108.

³⁴ Ibid., 110.

³⁵ Ibid., 112.

³⁶ *Federal Vision*, 203-235.

Leithart challenges the traditional Protestant understanding of justification. He writes, “[W]hile Protestant theology rightly understands ‘justification’ as ‘courtroom’ or ‘forensic’ language, it does not take sufficient account of the full biblical scope of the ‘forensic.’” In other words, our understanding of justification is inadequate. We will now examine his assertions in the light of Scripture.

Leithart implies that the historic Protestant view of judgment suffers because it is based upon a modern rather than Hebraic conception of judgment. His contention is that the term *to judge* includes not only a verdict but also deliverance. As Leithart says, “Defined biblically, judging is not simply a declaration that changes one’s legal standing without changing his condition or situation.” He enlists the support of Ezekiel 7:3-5, 7-8, and 27 to demonstrate his point.

In reply, it must be pointed out that in Protestant theology, the relationship between justification and deliverance is not denied, ignored, nor unknown, as the following quote from Kittel makes clear. “He [Yahweh] helps to right (ἁγιάζει), and the man who is set in the right by His pronouncement is ἁγιάζεται. Strictly, this picture of *the legal process* (δικαίωμα) is always present when the OT describes as righteous the pious man who is acknowledged by Yahweh. As the judge decides between two parties, pronouncing in favour of the ἁγιάζεται and against the ἁμαρτωλός, the wrongdoer, so Yahweh *takes action* when He intervenes in the confusion of human affairs on behalf of the pious who keep His laws” [emphasis added].³⁷ While the historic Protestant view vigorously maintains the distinction between justification and deliverance, to imply or state that it allows that one could be justified without also being delivered is simply untrue. The Scriptures are very clear that it is *impossible* for those who have been given the “abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness” (Rom. 5:17ff.) not to have both temporal and ultimate victory over our deadly enemies, sin and death in particular (Rom. 6).

Abram in Genesis 15

In the light of his previous assumptions, Leithart points us to Abram and Genesis 15. After quoting verse 6, he states, “the strict Reformation understanding of justification as ‘God’s imputation of righteousness to a sinner that makes Him acceptable to God’ does not, on the face of it, apply in this context.” Instead, Abram’s justification has to do with land and seed promises, as well as “Yahweh’s personal interest in and care for His servant Abraham.” Leithart claims that this understanding is contextual: “Genesis 15:6 must be understood in this context [of protection against the peoples of the land], and this context, first of all, should shape our understanding of the nuances of the language.” While this has a certain amount of truth to it, it is also true that our understanding of the context must be shaped by the inspired commentary on this passage given in the book of Romans. There Paul reads Genesis 15:6 as a statement of *forensic* justification. Leithart even appears to recognize this when he states, “Yet, Paul clearly takes the verse differently....” Indeed, he does. Even Romans 4:20-21, the linchpin verses of Leithart’s view, can be easily understood forensically without violence to the natural reading of the text. Why, then, must we understand it differently?

Paul and “Covenantal Justification”

Here we ask, what does Leithart mean by the term “covenantal justification”? The short answer is that “covenantal justification” is basically a synonym for “‘covenant faithfulness,’ whether God’s or man’s.” This twist of language is obviously meant to replace *forensic* or legal justification. Regarding the New Testament use of ἀδικάζω (“to justify”), “it is seldom that one cannot detect the legal connexion.... For Paul the word ἀδικάζω does not suggest the infusion of moral qualities, a *justum efficere* in the sense of creation of right conduct... It may be conceded that the *usus forensis* is not given prominence in every passage by express emphasis of the judicial act. [cf. Gal. 5:4] ... On the other hand, the main point is obscured if we forget that the *actus forensis* takes place in an *act* of grace from which it is not to be severed. *Only thus do we see the new element as compared with the Rabbinic doctrine of justification, which at root postpones the judicial act until the last judgment*” [emphasis added].³⁸

³⁷ Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, 1964 ed., σ.ὠ.δικη.

³⁸ Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, s. v. “ἀδικάζω.”

Leithart's "covenantal justification," with its emphasis on the covenant faithfulness of the believer, seems to be more in line with "Rabbinic doctrine" (see below) than the Bible. The classic Reformation formula of "salvation by grace alone, through faith alone" is replaced with "salvation by grace and covenant faithfulness of God and man." This is the inescapable destination of his doctrine expressed in his five conclusions regarding justification:

1. The idea of "counting righteous" can be used in non-judicial, personal contexts, where it has the sense of consider, appraise or estimate as righteous. *Where Yahweh is the one doing the reckoning, it means that Yahweh counts someone as a covenant-friend.* The phrase is not always strictly forensic, and is not strictly so in Genesis 15, a crucial passage on this matter.

2. Justification is God's judgment that a man or a people is righteous, but God's judgments are never simply verbal sentences. When God passes judgment in someone's favor, that judgment includes His "righteous deeds" by which He ensures that the one judged righteous receives justice.

3. From Genesis 15:6, we see that *justification (counting righteous), whether divine or human, is bound up with the making and keeping of covenant promises. For a man to be justified means that Yahweh considers him a proper recipient of promises;* for God to be justified means that He fulfills the promises. These promises include promises of deliverance from the curse of death that reigns since Adam's sin.

4. *Justification is by faith because there is time between the making and the keeping of promises; faith means patient waiting on Yahweh to keep His word when the promise has not been fulfilled and looks to be unlikely of fulfillment.*

5. *Yahweh regards those who trust His promises and wait for justification as righteous, and they are the ones who will eventually receive God's favorable judgment in a public way. Those who wait on the Lord to fulfill His promises, clinging to Him and His word and His tokens of favor, will be vindicated/justified.* God will publicly demonstrate that they are righteous when He keeps His promises, delivering them in real time and history, or in His final act at the end of all history.

³⁹

We must conclude that Leithart's doctrine of justification, by adding human faithfulness to our justification, and introducing progressive justification, is a perversion of the finished work of Christ, as well as the doctrine of once and for all, forensic justification.

STEVE WILKINS

Wilkins on Assurance

If the driving theme of Federal Vision theology is covenant objectivity, then Steve Wilkins' particular area of concern is the doctrine of assurance. Wilkins says very little about the doctrine of justification directly. Most of what he says is implied in what he says about assurance.

Citing a pastoral concern, Wilkins wants "to assure the people of God of their blessedness without tolerating or condoning ungodly presumption upon the grace of God."⁴⁰ Instead of introspection and self-examination, which he believes to be unhelpful (if not harmful) to the faith of God's people, he promotes a view of assurance that is objective. He wrote,

Whenever you focus on subjective experience as the basis of assurance of salvation, you are ultimately undermining assurance. You ask questions that cannot be answered with any certainty.

³⁹ Emphasis added in all 5 points.

⁴⁰ Wilkins in *Auburn Avenue Theology*, 268.

Have you truly believed? Are you really converted? The decree of election is no ground since no one can know if they have been chosen for salvation.

Men must have something objective and certain. But if you refuse to look to your baptism then all you are left with is experience.⁴¹

Of course, baptism itself is experiential, but it differs from other experiences because it also includes God's promise of spiritual cleansing.

Yet, if assurance is to be objective in Wilkins' sense, then whatever it is that we rely on for our assurance must be objective in the same sense. Otherwise, it would offer us no assurance at all. This immediately raises a problem with the doctrine of justification and its place in Wilkins' theology. The problem, of course, is that justification has no objective sign. It leaves Wilkins' pastoral concern unanswered.

Wilkins' Definition of the Covenant

Although Wilkins acknowledges that his definition of covenant is "simply and perhaps too simplistically stated," his article fails to go much beyond the notion that a covenant is "the relationship of love and communion with the living, Triune God."⁴²

In his critique, Dr. Pipa immediately exposes a very serious problem here. He says that Wilkins' definition of the covenant is "one-sided," i.e., so focused on covenant life that it totally ignores "the contractual nature of the covenant."⁴³ Quoting Richard Phillips, Pipa argues that there can be no life and blessing in the covenant apart from the binding together of the parties by legal stipulations, for it is in the stipulations of the contract that the envisioned relationship is defined.

Now, note what we have here. By defining covenant as a relationship and ignoring its legal dimension, Wilkins has left unmentioned the need for justification. The covenant establishes a relationship of love and communion with God, but he fails to say that such love and communion presupposes a perfect righteousness, which God himself requires of us, and that no man can have that love and communion with God apart from perfect righteousness.

This minimalization of justification can also be seen in the Summary Statement on Covenant, Baptism and Salvation written, approved and later revised by the session of the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church. The first article of the revised form speaks specifically about justification.⁴⁴ What it says is good as far as it goes. But in light of the present controversy, it neither says enough nor is it clear in what it says.⁴⁵

⁴¹ "The Monroe Four Speak Out," 41. Available from <http://www.paulperspective.com/docs/wisz1.pdf> (accessed 5 December 2004).

⁴² Wilkins in *Auburn Avenue Theology*, 254. Later, he elaborated on this as follows: "Covenant is a gracious relationship with the Triune God, in which we are made partakers of His love and participants in the communion and fellowship that has existed from all eternity in the Godhead" (p. 257).

⁴³ Pipa in *Auburn Avenue Theology*, 271.

⁴⁴ To quote, "Salvation is by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and not of works. It is founded upon the obedience, death, and resurrection of the faithful Second Adam, Jesus Christ. Justification is an act of God's free grace wherein sinners are accepted as righteous in God's sight by virtue of the righteousness of Christ imputed to them and received by faith alone (WSC Q. 33). This justifying faith is always accompanied by all other saving graces and virtues (WCF 11.2). Justifying faith, therefore, is never vain but one that works by love (Gal. 5:6)." The revision (dated 3 April 2005) is available from <http://www.auburnavenue.org/Official%20Positions%20and%20Statements/summary%20statement%20on%20baptism.htm> (accessed 14 December 2005). The original (dated 26 September 2002) is available from <http://www.auburnavenue.org/%20Positions%20and%20Statements/Covenant%20Baptism.htm> (accessed 14 December 2005).

⁴⁵ For example, the statement mentions the obedience and righteousness of Christ. Shepherd would have no problem with this, since he limits the obedience of Christ that effectuates our salvation to his death and resurrection. To avoid ambiguity, there needs to be an explicit acknowledgment of Christ's active obedience as the basis of justification. Further, the paraphrase of WCF 11.2 is not quite accurate. The summary could be interpreted to mean

Even more distressing is the fact that the Statement fails to say anything further about justification. Instead, the remaining twelve paragraphs shift the focus to the relational, i.e., to union with Christ. “Salvation,” it says, “depends upon being united to Christ.”⁴⁶ How is one united to Christ? Paragraph 7 says, “By baptism, one enters into covenantal union with Christ and is offered all his benefits.” Therefore, “[o]nce baptized, an individual may be truly called a ‘Christian’ because he is a member of the household of faith and the body of Christ.”

To be sure, there is a sense in which the aforementioned statements are not too objectionable, although we would want to make a careful distinction between a vital and saving union with Christ and a mere outward union with the church through baptism. Later we’ll see that Wilkins refuses to make this distinction, preferring instead to emphasize the relational and ignore the legal. He is no less emphatic in his article, where hardly a word is said about justification and our whole salvation is grounded in union with Christ:

By virtue of union with the Second Adam we have wholeness and restoration – new birth, regeneration, new life. And by virtue of our union with Him who is the true image of God (Colossians 1:15), we are restored to full image-bearing (Romans 8:29). A new humanity is re-created in the Second Adam.

By virtue of our union with Him, we are made recipients of all that is His. This is how we receive the grace of God.

Salvation is relational. It is found only in covenant union with Christ. As we abide in Him, all that is true of Him is true of us.⁴⁷

Based on such comments, Pipa observes that

Wilkins fails, however, to make any reference to Christ’s active obedience. Subsequently [sic], he makes no reference to the imputation of Christ’s righteousness in our redemption. Thus, he defines our restoration on the basis of union with Christ. ... One might infer from this section that salvation is by infused righteousness. ... The lack of discussion of justification in a paper on covenant and salvation is disturbing. Justification is central to true federal theology.⁴⁸

It may very well be true that Wilkins and his session “have maintained the legal and forensic nature of justification at every point and have never denied it,”⁴⁹ but it does not really matter if he has effectively made the hinge pin of our salvation to be something else.

Wilkins’ Covenantal/Historical Perspective

Following Shepherd, Wilkins also distinguishes between a decretal/eternal perspective of salvation and a covenantal/historical perspective. He says that the “Bible ordinarily (though not always) views election through the lens of the covenant.”⁵⁰ For Wilkins this means, as Pipa explains, that “the

that justifying faith, even in regard to justification itself, is accompanied with all other saving graces. Shepherd, who defines faith as faithfulness, would agree again. But the Confession says exactly the opposite: in justification faith is the alone instrument of reception, although faith is never alone in the person who is justified. But since the session chose not to elaborate on its view, it’s impossible to say in what sense its words are to be understood.

⁴⁶ Summary Statement (Revised), paragraph 9.

⁴⁷ Wilkins in *Auburn Avenue Theology*, 259-60.

⁴⁸ Pipa, 274.

⁴⁹ Theological problem 2 of the Reply.

⁵⁰ Summary Statement (Revised), paragraph 3.

soteriological revelation of salvation is a relatively minor theme in the Bible.”⁵¹ The Bible emphasizes what is observable here and now in regard to our relationships, what is objectively true about the sacraments and church membership, and says very little about the final outworking of God’s decree regarding ultimate salvation, including justification.

Wilkins’ emphasis is clearly on the objective covenant or the visible assembly of those who confess Christ. Here we begin to understand why he exalts union with Christ at the expense of justification. Baptism objectively and necessarily brings the person baptized into union with Christ and offers him all of Christ’s benefits, which continue to be his as long as he perseveres. Following the controversial pastors’ conference of 2002, the “Monroe Four” (Steve Schlissel, Steve Wilkins, John Barach and Doug Wilson) were interviewed for an article in *The Counsel of Chalcedon*. The following questions, addressed to Wilkins, speak to this point:

Q: Steve Wilkins, in your address you say that the Puritans and Presbyterians believe that baptism brings a child merely into ecclesiastical covenant. What else does it do?

S. Wilkins: Modern Presbyterian theology has made a distinction between external membership and real membership in the covenant. Obviously, by baptism we become members of the church, but to be a member of the church is to be a member of the body of Christ and biblically speaking, that means that the baptized are united to Christ.

Q: Can we be in the church but not united to Christ?

S. Wilkins: That’s a distinction the Bible doesn’t make. I see what they’re trying to preserve, but the distinction is not biblical. The visible, historic church is the body of Christ and thus, to be joined to it by baptism is to be united to Christ. By baptism God offers and gives Christ to us. But this good gift must be received by faith or our baptismal union with Christ will bring judgment not salvation. None of this undermines the sovereignty of God since faith is a gift from God and how we respond to His gifts is ultimately determined by His comprehensive decree.

Q: Is there a difference between being baptized in union with Christ and knowing and enjoying that union?

S. Wilkins: One is objectively true and the other is the fruit of a faithful embracing of that union.⁵²

There are several problem areas in this exchange. For one thing, Wilkins refuses to distinguish between ecclesiastical membership and a vital union with Christ. To be a member of a church is to be a member of Christ. According to Wilkin’s answer to the second question, union with Christ comes about through baptism. Baptism not only offers but actually gives Christ to those who are baptized. Earlier we saw that such union with Christ means that we also receive all that is his. Salvation, and specifically justification, would have to be included in “all that is his.” But Wilkins does not explicitly say that we are justified by baptism. Instead he contradicts what he had just said and insists that we receive Christ by faith and not by baptism alone.⁵³ This leaves the clear impression that he wants to have it both ways. Baptism unites us to Christ and makes us partakers of all his gifts (the relational), but we are not really united to Christ and made partakers of all his gifts unless we believe (the salvational). It’s possible, then, to be united to Christ in baptism and thus be restored to “full image-bearing” and receive “all that is true of him” in the relational sense, and still come under God’s judgment in regard to salvation.

For the orthodox, these statements are nothing short of incredible. For one thing, they confuse categories. Things that are salvational (full image-bearing, receiving all the benefits of Christ) are attributed to the relational. But, even more problematic for Wilkins, they seem to undermine his position.

⁵¹ Pipa, 280.

⁵² “Monroe Four,” 38.

⁵³ In the interview it might seem that Wilkins is distinguishing between what baptism “offers” or “gives” and what we “receive” by faith. But it is clear in previous quotations that what baptism offers and gives, viz., union with Christ, etc., is received by those who are baptized. Rather, the distinction he makes is between those who persevere in the covenantal union with Christ and those who do not.

He wants something objective in which to ground assurance. Belief, however, is not objective in the same way that baptism is. Or is it? How does Wilkins deal with this?

Later in the same interview, Wilkins explains how this can be:

Faith is required of all who are joined to Christ in covenant. But we must not separate the work of the Spirit from the visible elements of the sacrament. Our Confessions make plain that a sacrament includes both the sign and the thing signified. Without both there is no sacrament.⁵⁴

Here Wilkins affirms without question that the ministry of the Spirit of God is inextricably tied to the visible elements of the sacrament.⁵⁵ He repeated this, and even stated the matter more strongly, in his response to a subsequent question:

Q. Can you be baptized by water and not baptized by the Spirit?

S. Wilkins: I would say no. We may distinguish the work of the Spirit from baptism, but we should never separate the two.⁵⁶

In Wilkins' view it is impossible for a person to be baptized with water but not baptized by the Spirit because the covenant is objectively communicated in the outward sign of baptism. He focuses on the relational aspects of the covenant rather than the contractual. Consider also this statement:

The Bible teaches us that baptism unites us to Christ and His body by the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13). Baptism is an act of God (through His ministers) which signifies and seals our initiation into the Triune communion. ... At baptism we are clothed with Christ, united to Him and to His Church which is His body (Ephesians 3:26-28).⁵⁷

Here the words "at baptism" tell us precisely how the work of the Spirit is tied to the administration of baptism.⁵⁸ The connection is temporal. When are we clothed with Christ (justified)? At baptism. When are we united to Christ AND to his church? At baptism. Since Wilkins is reticent to separate water baptism and Spirit baptism, it makes no difference which he means. The gifts of Christ are given to God's people at baptism.

But here's the problem: if the work of the Spirit cannot be separated from the visible elements of the sacrament, then faith, which is a gift of the Spirit, and justification, which is received by faith alone, must be conveyed by baptism to everyone who is baptized. The gift of faith (and therefore justification) would have to be implicit in the sacrament itself. A person may or may not continue in the faith, but he objectively receives faith and justification at baptism.

In his Reply to the Mississippi Valley Presbytery, Wilkins unequivocally affirms that he holds to

⁵⁴ "Monroe Four," 39.

⁵⁵ Wilkins is far from consistent in this. In a subsequent question he was asked, "Is new life in this context baptismal regeneration?" He responded, "If we mean by regeneration a gift of new life that will never die out but produces persevering faith, then no, I don't believe that is necessarily given at baptism. But I don't believe that is how the Bible uses the term regeneration" ("Monroe Four," 39). The problem here is that he had just said that "the work of the Spirit" must not be separated from the "visible elements," and now he insists that regeneration and new life, which are not only works of the Spirit but are specifically the works that precede many of his other works (including union with Christ), are not "necessarily given at baptism." So, which works of the Spirit are performed in connection with the sacraments? How can Wilkins exclude regeneration and new life from the Spirit's works?

⁵⁶ "Monroe Four," 40.

⁵⁷ Wilkins in *Auburn Avenue Theology*, 259.

⁵⁸ Wilkins also makes the point that this takes place "at baptism" in his Reply, problem 10. There he wrote, "The various forms of 'baptismal regeneration' must be distinguished. We have striven to qualify what we mean by the phrase (i.e., the work of the Spirit at baptism, transferring the baptized from union with Adam into union with Christ)."

a form of “baptismal regeneration,” one that he claims “actually has a long Reformed pedigree.”⁵⁹ Apparently, he does not want us to confuse his version of baptismal regeneration with that of Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism or Lutheranism. But if union with Christ confers a complete restoration, including new life and regeneration, and if these blessings come precisely “at baptism,” then we are at a loss to see any difference.⁶⁰ His choice of terms at this point goes well beyond the merely relational.

If Wilkins wants something objective by which to minister the comfort of assurance to God’s people, he could direct them to rest in the merits of the Savior, the imputation of Christ’s active obedience to his people, the full and perfect satisfaction for sins made on the cross, and all the promises of the Word of God. Instead, he directs them to the work of man. He finds assurance in water baptism and one’s perseverance in covenantal union with Christ (i.e., the church).

JOHN BARACH

John Barach’s contribution to the Federal Vision discussion deals with the relation between covenant and election.⁶¹ While the main focus is the doctrine of perseverance, what Barach teaches concerning this relation has serious ramifications for the historic protestant doctrine of justification by grace which is appropriated to the elect by faith alone.⁶² In order to maintain the doctrine of election as defined by perseverance in the covenant, Barach is forced to conclude that God is faithless to certain members of the covenant who, having been brought into “genuine” union with Christ, nevertheless are not “kept to the end” by God. What follows is mostly an analysis of his article, “Covenant and Election.”⁶³

Barach and the Historic Doctrine of Election

⁵⁹ Theological problem 10 of the Reply (here and following).

⁶⁰ It should be noted that not all Federal Vision advocates operate with a reformed understanding of regeneration. James Jordan, for example, says, “My thesis is that there is no such thing as “regeneration” in the sense in which Reformed theology since Dort has spoken of it. The Bible says nothing about a permanent change in the hearts of those elected to heaven.... My position: everyone who is baptized has been given the same thing. No one has been given a permanently changed “regenerated heart” (“Thoughts on Sovereign Grace and Regeneration: Some Tentative Explorations,” *Occasional Paper No. 32* [Niceville, FL: Biblical Horizons, 2003], 7, as quoted in Carl D. Robbins, “The Reformed Doctrine of Regeneration,” *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros and Cons*, 164.).

⁶¹ It is in some ways unfortunate that Barach, and not Shepherd, made the presentation at the Auburn Conference, for there is a clear link between the teachings of Norman Shepherd and the Federal Vision. Shepherd articulates what is a manifest presupposition in the writings of most of those advocating the “Federal Vision,” namely, “. . . the election of God stands firm so that sinners who are united to Christ, justified, and saved, can never come into condemnation; but within the sphere of covenant life, election does not cancel out the responsibility of the believer to persevere in penitent and obedient faith since only they who endure to the end will be saved (Matt. 24:13; Mark 13:13).” See “Thirty-four Theses on Justification in Relation to Faith, Repentance, and Good Works” by Rev. Norman Shepherd, presented to the Presbytery of Philadelphia, Orthodox Presbyterian Church, November 18, 1978. It is this non-Reformed teaching that perseverance is the “responsibility of the believer,” which Barach attempts to support in his article but can never quite say. Rather, Barach holds that God, having begun a good work in someone, in the end does not finish but abandons some individuals. In both cases, there is the creation of a “covenant life” which is the conceptual metaphor in which all “covenantally elect” people have embedded in them the eternally elect. All the eternally elect obtain eternal life, but not all the covenantally elect.

⁶² With respect to the relationship between justification and perseverance, Jonathan Edwards writes “remission of sins and inheritance among them that are sanctified, are mentioned together, as what are jointly obtained by faith in Christ: Acts xxvi. 18.” Perseverance is naturally implied in justification, as the “golden chain of salvation” teaches: those whom God “foreknew He also predestined . . . and those He predestined He also called, and those He called He also justified, and those He justified He also glorified” (Romans 8:29,30). According to Scripture—and in Edwards treatment of perseverance—there is no intervening “human activity”—whether it is called loyalty or faithfulness or covenant-keeping—that is a condition to be maintained by human effort that keeps us between justification and glorification. It is interesting that David Bahnsen quotes Edwards in defense of the Federal Vision teaching, but fails to understand or intentionally obfuscates the entirety of Edwards’ argument.

⁶³ John Barach, “Covenant and Election,” in *The Federal Vision*, eds., Steve Wilson and Duane Garner (Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2004), 15-44. This article of Barach should not be confused with his other article also titled “Covenant and Election,” in *Auburn Avenue Theology*, 149-156.

Barach affirms the historic doctrines of the Canons of Dordt and expresses a desire to hold them and teach them as the Synod fathers desired, “reverently,” “pastorally,” and “scripturally.”⁶⁴ He writes that “everything that happens is the outworking of God’s will. Everything—your salvation, but also your birth and your baptism. All the events of your life, including your perseverance in faith and your final glorification with Christ.”⁶⁵ Barach takes great pains to point out that predestination is Scriptural and pastoral, that we are to take comfort and glory in the fact that “no matter what happens, God’s purposes cannot be frustrated. What our confessions say about God’s election and predestination is true.”⁶⁶ It would be ungracious to deny that Barach wishes his readers to know that the doctrine of election, as he understands the confession of the Reformed faith to teach, is both Biblical and correct. This is not the problem as he sees it. The issue is to understand the *way* in which Scripture teaches the doctrine of election and the *tone*, that is, the “manner in which Scripture presents all of its talk about God’s predestination and election.”⁶⁷

Barach and How the Covenant Informs the Doctrine of Election

According to Barach, this “tone” or “manner” in which Scripture speaks of predestination and election is that of covenant. Barach argues that the Arminian position, which held that God has elected a class of people, but not individuals, to eternal glory in Christ, must be rejected because God determines not only those who enter into the covenant, but also who will persevere.⁶⁸ The position of the Presbyterians (Westminster Standards), Protestant Reformed, Netherlands Reformed, Reformed Baptists, and like-minded, on the other hand, view membership in the covenant in such a way that some may be *externally* a member but not *really* or *internally* in the covenant.⁶⁹ But this distinction, argues Barach, makes any pastoral application of the covenant impossible. If baptism refers either to the external application of water or the internal work of the Holy Spirit, it is not possible to know who are the “really” baptized. Consequently, the children of believers must be treated as unbelievers and preaching must always be in the third person (“Christ died for the elect”). As a final result, the covenant is “as invisible and as unknowable for us as God’s eternal predestination.”⁷⁰ Barach argues that neither of these views of the relationship between covenant and election properly presents to us the way in which the Scriptures *use* covenant to represent the historic outworking of eternal election.

Central to Barach’s notion of this relationship is the proposition that “God’s *choice* was not conditional, but life in the covenant is.”⁷¹ According to Barach, there is a large set of individuals who are

⁶⁴ *Federal Vision*, 17.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*: “The number of people who will enter into final glory is the number of people God always intended to enter into final glory with Christ” (*Ibid.*).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 20. The Reverend Dr. R. Scott Clark has written an excellent article entitled “Baptism and the Benefits of Christ: The Double Mode of Communion in the Covenant of Grace,” *The Confessional Presbyterian*, Volume 2, 2006, Reformation Presbyterian Press, in which he discusses the mistakes that Barach makes with regard to the internal/eternal and the difference between baptized children and children of believers. Ursinus also treats of this in the commentary in the section on baptism (pages 371-373 for a summary).

⁷⁰ Barach in *Federal Vision.*, 21.

⁷¹ Barach in *Federal Vision.*, 37. In endnote 1 (qv.) on page 42, Barach acknowledges that he has developed his notion of conditional covenant from the writings of Klaas Schilder. It is evident in Barach’s treatment that underlying his thinking is the notion of promise and obligation or demand, a notion central to Schilder’s teaching. Schilder argued that the only “obligation” to be exercised was faith, but others have argued that he had repentance and obedience in mind as well. Some of those who followed Schilder clearly

to be considered “God’s people” who are “in the covenant, head for head” and are to be considered and addressed as ‘His elect.’”⁷² There is, however, a smaller subset of this group who are “predestined . . . to eternal glory with Christ”—an unchanging number.⁷³ This subset is what the Reformed standards have generally called “the elect.” It is focusing on this smaller group as “the elect” that has caused Reformed thought to diverge from the “tone” of Scripture as it uses and talks about covenant relationship.

The proper paradigm is not the fixed number predestined to eternal glory, but it is Old Testament Israel. The “election” of Israel—that “choice of Israel”—was “unconditional,” “not because of anything that was true of them. He chose them to belong to Him, but their life in covenant with God was *conditional*.”⁷⁴ And all Israel was in the covenant, “head for head.” Furthermore, the Old Covenant was breakable, and there were those who were apostate, that is, that failed to exercise “faith and obedience and perseverance.” In the New Covenant, God has also chosen a set of people (believers and their children), engrafted them into Christ, and from this set of people the eternal elect will emerge at the end.⁷⁵ But, argues Barach, election or “the elect” must be viewed as that larger set of covenant members, some of whom have been predestined “to eternal glory with Christ” but “it also includes others who have not been predestined to eternal glory with Christ, but who will apostatize.”⁷⁶ This, he argues, is the way and manner in which Scripture addresses the New Covenant people. Moreover, Barach asserts that this is more or less the approach of Calvin, clearly held by Zwingli, and best reflects the teachings of the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dort.⁷⁷

As part of this view, it must be recognized that the New Covenant, like the Old, can “be broken.” Each member is to be addressed as elect, speaking without discrimination to each that “God chose *you*.” Preaching must be to the larger set, so that the promises and threats are understood to pertain to “all” who are “in covenant” or part of the larger, chosen people. Just as the promises are addressed to each member “head for head,” so also must the warnings against apostasy and covenant-breaking. Someone can be genuinely united to Christ and yet fall away and fail to attain “eternal glory in Christ.” Yet it is God who will either include or exclude anyone in the smaller subset. Falling away is a function of God ceasing to work in that covenant member so that the fall away, even though they were genuinely in Christ for a time. Individuals fail to persevere because God “for whatever wise reason of His own” did not keep “working in them to will and to do (Phil. 2:1–13).”⁷⁸

Assessment of Barach’s Position

In denying the veracity of God in His promise that He “who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6), Barach has removed the proper object one ought to seek in response to any anxiety about one’s salvation. The two terms “begun” and “perform” in Philippians are used by Paul in Galatians to rebuke that church, asking “having begun in the Spirit, are you now perfected in the flesh?” (Galatians 3:3). The “He” in the Philippians passage is the same Holy Spirit spoken of in Galatians. So Paul not only argues that we can have confidence in God to finish, but

thought that more that faith was required.

⁷² Ibid., 32.

⁷³ Ibid., 31.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 26.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 22. The union with Christ is real and not hypothetical. Barach states that those united to Christ “were not stuck to the tree with Scotch Tape. These branches were genuinely in Christ.” He clearly wants us to accept that the union with Christ is living and life-giving (genuine) and not simply apparent or hypocritical.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 32.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 23; and the Appendix on page 39.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 37.

the Galatians passage teaches that the whole of our problems revolve around not looking to Him to do so. In fact, Galatians teaches that if we take the responsibility upon ourselves to do what is the work of the Spirit, we no longer have Christ. The promise is that if God has begun in an individual, He will finish it. To deny that, in our greatest temptation, even if we are faithless, He is faithful, is to remove what ought to be the greatest comfort to a Christian. All the evil of this world, internal and external, is designed to drive the true believer to Christ, because “all the promises of God in Christ are yea, and in Him Amen” (II Corinthians 1:18, 20). God is true, but every man a liar. The “truth is in Jesus” (Ephesians 1:13), Christ is the truth (John 14:6), and all that God has revealed to us is the truth (John 17:17). If anyone is anxious about whether or not he or she is elect, the only Biblical answer is “believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:31). This is the only answer to each individual in each generation.

Barach writes that it is necessary to preach to all in a congregation that “God chose you for salvation and Jesus died for you” even though some fall away and “apostatize and end up in hell” because, in Scripture, “truth is more than conformity to facts. It is trustworthiness and faithfulness.”⁷⁹ The only comfort in life and in death is that we belong to our faithful Savior—not only that with His precious blood He has fully satisfied for all my sins, but that He also preserves me. As it says in the Canons of Dort, “If the elect of God were deprived of this solid comfort that they shall finally obtain the victory, and of this infallible pledge of eternal glory, they would be of all men most miserable” (V.11). Faithful preaching points the members to Christ. Faithful preaching says without qualification “believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.” In the end, Barach offers only half a Savior to those who hear.

STEVE SCHLISSEL

Steve Schlissel is the most blatant proponent of salvation by obedience among the advocates of the Federal Vision. He believes in “the necessity of covenantal obedience...for salvation.”⁸⁰ Though he may say he believes in justification by faith alone, his meaning differs both from that of the Bible and the Reformed confessions. Whereas Reformed theology distinguishes between faith and obedience, Schlissel makes them synonymous, thereby making justification by faith identical with justification by obedience: “Obedience and faith are the same thing, biblically speaking. To submit to God’s word is what it means to believe. To believe is to obey.”⁸¹

When the Bible says that we are justified “apart from the deeds of the law” (Romans 3:28), according to Schlissel, this does not mean *apart from the believer’s obedience to God’s law*, but *apart from obedience to the Jewish ceremonial law*. In other words, Paul’s main point in Romans 3 is that a person does not need to become Jewish in order to be justified. Schlissel writes, “Paul’s point, therefore, was not to prove justification by faith, but rather to prove justification for Gentiles,” namely, “the way of being right with God cannot be by being Jewish.”⁸² What then do sinners need to do to be right with God? Schlissel’s answer is, “the doers of the law will be justified” (Romans 2:13). He contends “the presuppositions undergirding Paul’s statement include the facts that the law is ‘obeyable,’ that truly responding to the Law (the Word) in faith does justify, and that such justification is not an exclusively Jewish possession.”⁸³

Therefore, Schlissel clearly believes that obedience is necessary for justification. “Despite the reality of the promises that we possess as Christians, as members of his church, if we defy God and his conditions He will kill us and send us to hell.”⁸⁴ After quoting 2 Timothy 2:11-13, “if we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will disown us,” Schlissel concludes, “If we disown Him, he

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁸⁰ Schlissel, “Justification and the Gentiles,” in *The Federal Vision*, 237.

⁸¹ Schlissel, “A New Way of Seeing?” in *Auburn Ave. Theology*, 26.

⁸² *Ibid.*,

⁸³ Schlissel, “Justification and the Gentiles,” 260.

⁸⁴ Schlissel, “A New Way of Seeing,” 27.

disowns us. Sounds like a condition of faithfulness to me.”⁸⁵

Although the reformers were careful to say that good works “are of no account towards our justification, for it is by faith in Christ that we are justified, even *before* we do good works,”⁸⁶ Schlissel says that our good works do count towards our justification. Whereas Scripture says that God “justifies the ungodly” (Romans 4:5), Schlissel implies that God justifies the godly.

Another Schlissel-distinctive is that there is minimal difference between the Old Testament and the New. He emphasizes that faith, grace, and regeneration are clearly spelled-out Old Testament doctrines, so that the difference between the Old and the New is marginal at best. According to Schlissel, *the* great difference between the Old and the New is the inclusion of the Gentiles into the kingdom of God. “THAT IS IT,” he emphasizes.⁸⁷ To arrive at this conclusion, Schlissel downplays to the vanishing point Paul’s emphasis upon justification from the guilt of sin by faith alone. His theology approximates the work of N.T. Wright, when he (Schlissel) says with regard to Paul that “...justification tells us how God accepts Gentiles’ ...Justification...had less to do with a guilty conscience than with the new age inaugurated with Jesus.”⁸⁸ For Wright justification is all about keeping them (Jews) in, whereas for Schlissel justification pertains to the fact of *how* Gentiles are included in Christ’s kingdom. This means that for Schlissel the distinction between law and Gospel as two conflicting methods of salvation is largely a false dichotomy. To drive home this point, Schlissel says that the Gospel is not “What must I do to be saved?” so much as “What does God require?”⁸⁹ This re-definition usurps saving faith (the “heartly trust” of Heidelberg Catechism Question 21) and exalts obedience to God’s law as the means of justification. The upshot is that the limelight is not so much upon the salvation that Jesus Christ procured by His life, death and resurrection, but the call of man to obey. While Schlissel does speak about faith in Christ, he damns such with faint praise. For him, what gets top-billing in the New Testament is the incorporation of the Gentiles into the Church.

Schlissel’s interpretation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25 is a clear example of his belief in salvation by obedience. The Scripture says that a certain lawyer tested Christ, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Christ answered that this lawyer must love God perfectly, “with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind.” Then, the Lord added that he must love his “neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27). The lawyer’s response was to justify himself by asking Christ to identify his neighbor. So, Christ told the Parable of the Good Samaritan, which glorifies the neighborliness of the Samaritan toward the victim of crime. The crime victim’s true neighbor was not the Levite and priest who passed him by. On two occasions, Christ told the lawyer if he performed like the Samaritan, that he would live. Jesus’ first “do this and you shall live” was immediately after the lawyer spoke of the love-demand of the Great Commandment (verse 27). The second occurrence is after the Parable, when the lawyer understood that the merciful man was the battered man’s true neighbor. Jesus then said: “Go and do likewise” (verse 37). It is Jesus’ command to “do” and “live” that occasions Schlissel’s emphasis upon salvation by obedience.

But what does Jesus’ command “to do” and “live” really mean? Schlissel’s interpretation is a brazen advertisement for a works’ salvation. If Christ commanded the lawyer to “do likewise,” then the command, according to him, was “do-able.” Although Schlissel does not explain “do-able,” he makes no attempt to guard against the error that justification is by man who wills and runs (Romans 9:16). In fact, he says that the command was even *very* doable. We assume that Schlissel means what he says and says what he means. On the other hand, the Scriptural teaching is that “the carnal mind is enmity against God, and is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed *can* be” (Romans 8:7).

Commenting on Luke 10, Schlissel writes, ‘It is effrontery, an insult, to suggest that Jesus’ answer, ‘Do this and you will live,’ was anything other than plain truth. ... [I]t was Christ teaching that obedience to the law was something very do-able and that such obedience, which includes repentance

⁸⁵ Schlissel, “A Response to [Rich Philip’s] ‘Covenant and Salvation,’” in *Auburn Ave. Theology*, 89.

⁸⁶ *Belgic Confession*, Article 24.

⁸⁷ “More than Before: The Necessity of Covenant Consciousness,” delivered at Redeemer College, Ancaster, Ontario, 2001.

⁸⁸ Schlissel, “Justification,” *Federal Vision*, 242.

⁸⁹ Schlissel, “Justification,” in *Federal Vision*, 239.

and faith, does save.”⁹⁰

Schlissel’s understanding of Christ’s “Do this and you will live,” is deficient for two reasons. First, God’s law is the perfect standard of life; the covenant that God made with Adam and his posterity still abides; and the essence of that covenant is that God requires perfect obedience. The language of “Thou shalt love” that introduces this parable is the language of God’s perfect law, requiring perfect obedience. God expects us to love Him with our “all”; no less than four times we are commanded to love God perfectly.

Second, the reason the do-ability interpretation is wrong lies in the “hidden murder” bent of the lawyer’s heart. He claimed to love God, but his profession was contradicted by his failure to love his neighbor (including Samaritans and other “accursed” Jews—John 4:9, 24; 7:49). This explains why when He heard Christ preach neighborly love, the lawyer justified himself, “Who is my neighbor?” In other words, this man was “into” self-justification. He gave himself an A+ with regard to loving his neighbor. But the real truth is that there were a thousand skeletons in his closet. And because there were a thousand neighbor-skeletons, there were also ten thousand God-skeletons! Hating our neighbor is a tangible evidence of hating God. John wrote, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his neighbor, he is a liar, for he who does not love his brother who he has seen, cannot love God, who he has not seen” (1 John 4:20, *ESV*).

If Schlissel’s interpretation is correct, it would mean that Christ’s four “Thou shalt” in the Great Commandment are “very do-able,” even though the thrust of the parable is to expose the lawyer’s hatred toward the God whose image is reflected in man. We ask: How is it Lutherized Calvinism to assert that God-hating and man-hating sinners cannot love God perfectly? Jesus preached the “same” message to the rich, of whom He said that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven. And when it was asked, “Who then can be saved?” He said that “with men it is impossible, but not with God: for with God all things are possible” (Mark 10:26-27). Schlissel’s very-doable-anthropology would mean that even for the covetous rich self-salvation is possible, that is, doable. As for the lawyer, Christ’s purpose is not to frustrate him, but to expose him. The Heidelberg Catechism asks and then answers: “Can you keep all this [God’s law] perfectly?” “No, for I am prone by nature to hate God and my neighbor” (Question 5). The lawyer is the incarnation of this double-hatred.

To his credit, Schlissel does argue that faith and repentance accompany this obedience. Assuming that Schlissel believes that faith and repentance are gifts of God—this, at least, may save him from total Pelagianism. But this is too little too late; he states his case in such a way that faith and repentance are either afterthoughts, or that our works *plus* faith and repentance result in justification of life. For Schlissel obedience to the law receives the academy award; saving faith in Christ is a mere supporting actor.

Schlissel argues that Jesus’ purpose is not to frustrate this lawyer since God’s law is “very do-able.” But if God’s law is “very do-able,” then God’s grace would be frustrated. Paul wrote: “I do not frustrate the grace of God; for if righteousness comes by the law, then Christ is dead in vain” (Galatians 2:21).

To our knowledge, Schlissel does not teach baptismal regeneration (as some of his Federal Vision friends do), nor does he tie baptism to justification in the *ex opera operato* sense. He is against paedo-communion, and has even formally debated such baby-communionists as Tim Gallant. Schlissel’s emphasis is obedience to God’s law, covenantal obedience. He even argues that in establishing the New Covenant, that “Christ has become a new Moses” and that this is “the point of the New Testament.”⁹¹ He says that justification is mainly Gentile inclusion so that what Moses gave to the Old Testament people of God, Christ brings to the New Covenant people and to the world.

Assessment of Schlissel

First, to a little extent, Schlissel’s theology of justification is one of emphasis. For example, when he says that Paul’s focus is on the incorporation of Gentiles into the Church and “less” on God’s justifying guilty consciences, he may leave a little room for gratuitous justification. However, to de-emphasize a Biblical emphasis (such as free justification of the guilty by faith alone) can be as

⁹⁰ Quoted by Michael Horton, “Covenant Confusion: Déjà vu All Over Again,” in *Modern Reformation* (July/August 2004): 27.

⁹¹ Schlissel, “A New Way,” in *Knox Colloquium*, p. 23.

mischievous as denying the doctrine *in toto*. In fact, when put this way, it could be construed that he gives no more than lip-service to a free justification that is received entirely by faith. While his official creed might be that of justification by faith alone, his working creed is justification by faith plus works. Of justification by faith alone, Schlissel even says that “legal justification, far from being ‘the heart of the Gospel,’ let alone identical with it, is hardly ever in view when Paul speaks of justification....”⁹² We would call this damning a cardinal doctrine with faint praise.

Second, Schlissel’s attempt to flatten the Bible so that there is virtually no difference between the Old and the New Testaments except for Gentile-inclusion, causes us to marvel as Christ marveled at Nicodemus (John 3:7, 10). That he regards Christ as a “new Moses” and that this is “the point of the New Testament” is shockingly wrong. Not only is Jesus “better” than Moses (Hebrews 3ff.), but God rebukes all attempts to build tabernacles to him, saying, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased, *Hear Him*” (Matthew 17:5). Just as the Jews wrongly thought of John the Baptist as Elijah, Schlissel wrongly regards Christ as Moses. At best this is an anachronism; at worst, it is a return to the beggarly elements of the Jewish law.

That Schlissel sees minimal difference between the Old Testament and the New shows great blindness. To his credit he says that faith, grace, and justification are not novel New Testament doctrines. In this respect, he is a peg better than Nicodemus (and many dispensationalists). However, he fails to appreciate the discontinuities between the Old and the New, too. For example, there is greater power and glory (2 Corinthians 3:7-11), greater light (Matthew 11:22), greater revelation (1 Peter 1:11-12), greater grace and truth because of the incarnation of God’s Son (John 1:14, 17), etc. In addition, there is the baptism of the Holy Spirit in the New, which was the outpouring of the Spirit of the resurrected Christ on the day of Pentecost (John 7:37-39; Acts 1:5, 8; 2:33). Understood this way, Schlissel’s understanding of the Old Testament is that old means only “older,” instead of old (relatively-speaking) in the sense of obsolete (Hebrews 8:13).

Third, while there is an eschatological element in justification (namely, that we shall be *publicly* acquitted on the Day of Judgment—Matthew 12:37), this is not Schlissel’s message. Rather, he says our justification in the end is based on our faith, repentance, plus *the obedience* of baptism. This in turn is similar to the Judaizers in Galatia who believed in justification by faith *and* circumcision (Acts 15:1; Galatians 1). In short, Schlissel jettisons the first article of the Five Points of Calvinism. He replaces Total Inability with Do-Ability. His error is an old one—that because God requires it, we must be able to do it. The effect can only keep miserable sinners away from the Gospel that they so desperately need. His “very do-able” Gospel can only increase the sinner’s self-reliance. Instead of despairing within himself and crying out, “God be merciful to me a sinner,” the sinner will think of himself as self-sufficient and become complacent in sin.

DOUG WILSON

Wilson on Justification

Doug Wilson argues that he holds to the historic Reformed doctrine of justification by faith alone. For example, he writes, “the historical Protestant position on justification is correct, and the Roman Catholic understanding of individual justification as a process involving an infusion of righteousness is wrong.”⁹³ Again, he writes, “Justification must *not* be understood as an infusion of righteousness. Rather, justification is the pardon for sins and the legal reckoning of our persons as righteous. ... We are justified for Christ’s sake only. God does not justify us for anything done by us, and, far more importantly, for anything done in us (even by Him). Nor does God justify us because of our faith – rather He justifies us because of Christ’s obedience and work, and this is appropriated by us

⁹² “A New Way of Seeing?” in *The Auburn Avenue Theology*, 18-39.

⁹³ Douglas Wilson, *Reformed Is Not Enough: Recovering the Objectivity of the Covenant* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2002), 171.

through faith.”⁹⁴ “We are saved through faith alone.”⁹⁵ “Faith is the only instrument God uses in our justification.”⁹⁶ “Justification is permanent, and God never ceases to see a justified person as perfect. This has reference to the person’s legal status; they are secure in their position within the family of God.”⁹⁷ Wilson reaffirms “the traditional Protestant doctrine of the righteousness of Christ imputed to those individuals who are elect. This, plus nothing, constitutes the ground of their final acceptance before God.”⁹⁸

On the surface, this appears to be consistent with the Biblical doctrine of justification. However, there are other statements by Wilson that indicate that his understanding is, at best, deficient. It is necessary to examine other things written and weigh these against the above claims. There are good reasons to doubt the accuracy of Wilson’s claim that he holds to the historic Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone, and the following arguments demonstrate these reasons.

First of all, Wilson’s summary of the historic Protestant doctrine of justification is not complete. It is missing a very crucial element. Though Wilson is careful to say repeatedly that “good works are not in themselves the ground of our salvation,”⁹⁹ and that “the ground of every aspect of our salvation is Christ,”¹⁰⁰ he neglects to point out that the *ground* of justification has never been the issue in the justification controversy. The issue is whether good works are in any way an *instrument* of justification.

Norman Shepherd is the primary teacher of this distinction between works not being the ground and yet an instrument of justification. He admits that Christ is the only ground of justification and specifically denies the Roman Catholic argument that justification is an *infusion* of righteousness. Nevertheless he argues that good works, though not the ground of justification, are an instrument in obtaining justification. According to the Westminster Seminary Board, “Shepherd questioned making justification by faith alone a touchstone of orthodoxy, since, as he argued, what can be said of faith can also be said of good works; neither can be the ground of justification, both can be instrument.”¹⁰¹ To make good works an instrument of justification is to make good works necessary for continuing in a state of justification. In his “Thirty-Four Theses on Justification in Relation to Faith, Repentance, and Good Works,” Shepherd makes himself perfectly clear: “The exclusive ground of the justification of the believer in the state of justification is the righteousness of Jesus Christ, but his obedience ... is necessary to his continuing in a state of justification (Thesis 21).” “The righteousness of Jesus Christ ever remains the exclusive ground of the believer’s justification, but the personal godliness of the believer is also necessary for his justification in the judgment of the last day (Matthew 7:21-23; 25:31-46; Hebrews 12:14) (Thesis 22).” “[G]ood works ... though not the ground of [the believer’s] justification, are nevertheless necessary for justification (Thesis 23).”¹⁰²

Wilson argues a similar position. While he says that justified persons are “secure in their position within the family of God,” he adds the qualification that “men fall away because their *salvation was*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*,

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 172.

¹⁰⁰ Douglas Wilson, “Union With Christ: An Overview of the Federal Vision,” in *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros and Cons. Debating the Federal Vision*, ed., E. Calvin Beisner (Fort Lauderdale, Florida: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004), 2.

¹⁰¹ “Reasons and Specifications Supporting the Action of the Board of Trustees in Removing Professor Shepherd,” in *A Companion to the Current Justification Controversy*, ed. John W. Robbins (Unicoi, Tennessee: The Trinity Foundation, 2003), 135.

¹⁰² Quoted in O. Palmer Robertson, *The Current Justification Controversy* (Unicoi, Tennessee: The Trinity Foundation, 2003), 34-35.

contingent upon continued covenant faithfulness [emphasis added] in the gospel.”¹⁰³ By making salvation “contingent” upon the “covenant faithfulness” of a believer, he has made salvation contingent upon a personal quality in, or a state of being of, the believer. This is the simple meaning of the suffix “-ness” in “faithfulness.” In so doing, Wilson has shifted the means by which we appropriate the work of Christ from the exercise of faith to a change in the quality of one’s character. This can be understood in no other way than salvation being contingent upon something in or of a person other than Christ.

Second, Wilson so defines faith that, at times, faith becomes indistinguishable from good works. Again, this parallels Shepherd who implies that justification by faith could just as easily mean justification by good works.¹⁰⁴ For Wilson, faith and good works (obedience) are used interchangeably in Scripture: “We simply want to say that for those faithful to the covenant, initial faith and initial obedience are used interchangeably in Scripture. Consequently, this ought to be one of the scriptural definitions of obedience. For example, take Romans 6:17-18a: ... This is a converting obedience. Another scriptural name for this is faith. The gospel is to be obeyed. Another way of saying this is that the gospel is to be believed.”¹⁰⁵ Wilson grants that one should not use the phrase “faith is obedience” without qualification, but his qualification does not exclude every kind of obedience from justification, only a certain kind of obedience: “And so, to qualify again, to think a man can earn his way into heaven autonomously by any amount of choosing, willing, running, do-gooding, obeying, brownie-pointing, Westminster-confessing, or whatever else a foolish man may think up to take credit for, is a false gospel.”¹⁰⁶

This is again a misunderstanding of the way in which the Scriptures relate faith to obedience and oppose faith to good works. Obedience does indeed flow from true faith, as Paul states in Romans that the purpose of his apostleship is to bring about the “obedience of faith” (Romans 1:5). But that is precisely the point. If obedience is “of” or “from” faith it must be the case that faith is prior to and the motive for that obedience. As such, obedience cannot be an instrument by which we appropriate to ourselves the “satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ” if, as Scripture teaches and the Belgic confirms (Article 24), any good works or acts of obedience are preceded by and flow from faith.

Third, Wilson shows that by “covenant faithfulness” and “obedience” he means precisely “good works” as an instrument of justification. He insists we “have to say, using biblical language [i.e. the language of James], that we are justified by good works.”¹⁰⁷ Like Norman Shepherd, Wilson does not endorse the traditional reconciliation between Paul’s statement that Abraham was *not* justified by works (Romans 4:2), and James’ statement that Abraham *was* justified by works (James 2:21). Wilson argues that James is using the term *justification* in the same sense as Paul, and so he says (*a la* Shepherd) that it is proper to speak of justification *by means of* good works, as long as we understand that James “is not speaking of rabbinical works-righteousness, or Pelagian self-salvation, or of medieval merit theology.”¹⁰⁸ Note that Wilson here does not reject *good* works as an instrument of justification. He rejects only *self-righteous* and *meritorious* works as instruments of justification!

Again, if Wilson wants to be orthodox, he must unambiguously proclaim that good works are not an instrument of justification. He needs to embrace what has been taught by Reformed theology concerning James’ use of the term “justify.” Calvin’s says it well when he writes: “If you would make James agree with the rest of Scripture and with himself, you must understand the word ‘justify’ in

¹⁰³ *Reformed Is Not Enough*, 138.

¹⁰⁴ This is exactly how Shepherd defends his teaching that good works are an instrument of justification: “faith itself is a matter of obedience” (*The Call of Grace* [Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2000], 48).

¹⁰⁵ “Union With Christ,” 8.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Reformed Is Not Enough*, 172.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 173.

another sense than Paul takes it.”¹⁰⁹ We “must take notice of the twofold meaning of the word *justified*. Paul means by it the gratuitous imputation of righteousness before the tribunal of God; and James, the manifestation of righteousness by the conduct, and that before men, as we may gather from the preceding words, ‘Show to me thy faith.’”¹¹⁰ In rejecting this understanding of James, Wilson rejects the traditional interpretation of James and places James at odds with and in contradiction to the teachings of Paul. Therefore, Wilson is wrong. James is *not* using justification in its usual declarative (Pauline) sense. When James says Abraham was justified *by* works he does *not* mean God *declared* Abraham righteous, or that Christ’s righteousness was *imputed* to Abraham, when he offered up Isaac. He is simply teaching that, like wisdom, the outcome proves the possession. In making “good works” a co-instrument with faith in the appropriation of Christ our righteousness, Wilson denies that justification is truly by “faith alone.”

Wilson on the Sacraments

Fourth, along with good works being a co-instrument of justification, Wilson also adopts a position on the sacraments that makes them to some degree instrumental in appropriating our justification. This is especially true with respect to his teaching on baptism.

Wilson says, “The only hand which a man may extend to receive the gift of justification is faith,”¹¹¹ yet, as with good works, he also says that baptism is an instrument of justification. Do you think “baptism is *a* means of salvation, just not *the* means of salvation? That’s what *I* think,” says Wilson.¹¹² Wilson argues that the “efficacy of the baptism . . . is a *saving* efficacy.”¹¹³ This does not mean, cautions Wilson, “that salvation automatically comes to someone simply because he has been baptized.”¹¹⁴ A person must bring faith to the baptismal font: “Those who come to the sacraments *with true evangelical faith in God* are those on whom this blessing of salvation is bestowed.”¹¹⁵ Wilson believes that this is precisely what is taught in the Westminster Standards, particularly in the Shorter Catechism, Q&A. 92: “A sacrament is an holy ordinance instituted by Christ, wherein, by sensible signs, Christ, and the benefits of the new covenant, are represented, sealed, and applied to believers.” “This means,” argues Wilson, “that an honest and strict subscription to the Westminster Standards requires a man to say that he believes that the benefit of justification and the benefit of regeneration (both being benefits of the new covenant) are *applied* to a man *through the sacraments* when that man has faith.”¹¹⁶

Note what Wilson clearly says: the benefit of justification is applied *through baptism* to the man who has faith. By confusing the sign with the thing signified, Wilson makes baptism co-instrumental with faith in the appropriation of the work of Christ to the sinner. This again denies justification by faith *alone*. If baptism is a means of justification, then obviously faith is not the *only* means of justification. Although we can speak of union with Christ being signified by baptism, it is not the same as when Wilson says: “We are united to Him in faith and in our baptism.”¹¹⁷ Salvation, then, is received by faith

¹⁰⁹ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill and trans. Ford Lewis Battles, *Library of Christian Classics*, vols. 20-21 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), III.xvii.12.

¹¹⁰ Calvin’s *Commentaries*, vol. 22, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, ed. and trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House), 314-315.

¹¹¹ Wilson, “Sacramental Efficacy in the Westminster Standards,” in *Auburn Avenue Theology*, 243.

¹¹² Douglas Wilson, “A Response to Covenant and Apostasy,” in *Auburn Avenue Theology*, 224.

¹¹³ “Sacramental Efficacy in the Westminster Standards,” 239.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 237.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 238.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 240. It is clear that Wilson believes the Westminster Confession teaches baptismal regeneration: “Raise your hand if you knew that the Westminster Confession taught baptismal regeneration” (*Reformed Is Not Enough*, 103).

¹¹⁷ “Union With Christ,” 5. Compare this with Norman Shepherd’s statement: “baptism, the sign and seal of the covenant, marks the point of conversion” (*The Call of Grace*, 94).

plus baptism.

Wilson's primary failure is to distinguish between the work of the sacraments in the confirmation of faith. In this, all the graces of God are at work. But it is a confirmation of that faith by which alone we are justified. Wilson attempts to prove his case that the efficacy of the sacraments is a *saving* efficacy, by a simple juxtaposition of questions 89 and 91 from the Shorter Catechism: "How is the Word made effectual unto salvation?" (Q.89) and "How do the sacraments become effectual means of salvation?" (Q.91) Wilson's inference is that God uses both Word and sacrament to apply salvation, but this is not how the Westminster Standards put the matter. Rather, the Westminster Standards make a distinction between the Word as a means of *saving* grace, and the sacraments as a means of *sanctifying* or *edifying* grace: "the grace of faith ... is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word, ... and by the administration of the sacraments, and prayer, it is increased and strengthened" (*Westminster Confession*, 14.1). Note that, according to the Westminster Confession, the sacraments come *after* salvation in order to increase and strengthen faith!

Wilson fails to note the different senses in which Word and sacraments are means of salvation. With respect to the Word as a means of salvation, the Shorter Catechism distinguishes between the Word as converting sinners, and the Word as edifying believers. Question 89 asks, "How is the Word made effectual unto salvation? *A.* The Spirit of God makes the reading, but especially the preaching of the Word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation." Note that the phrase "unto salvation" applies in two senses, in the sense that sinners are saved, and in the sense that the converted are built up. Thomas Vincent's comments are helpful in connection with this question: How is the Word made effectual unto salvation? "First, in reference unto sinners and ungodly ... to convert them from sin.... Secondly, In reference unto those that are converted, the Word is effectual unto salvation, as it is a mean of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation."¹¹⁸

Therefore, if the Word can be effectual unto salvation in a *sanctifying* or *edifying* sense, then so can the sacraments, especially since, as the Westminster Confession states, the sacraments increase and strengthen faith. Nowhere do the Westminster Standards speak of the sacraments as they do the Word, as a means of converting sinners!

G.I. Williamson offers a very good summary of the teaching of the Westminster Confession concerning the efficacy of baptism, correctly observing that the efficacy is *not* a saving efficacy: "Baptism *never* causes union with Christ. It never has that effect. That is not the purpose of baptism. The purpose of baptism is ... to confirm and testify ... that God gives union with Christ to whom he will, as he will, and when he will. ... Baptism, like circumcision, may have no effect upon some people. But infant baptism ... does have a profound effect upon some who are converted long after they are baptized. The order then may be either (1) baptism, then effectual calling into union with Christ, and then the efficacy of baptism, or (2) effectual calling, then baptism, and then efficacy of baptism. It cannot be in any other order. For one cannot ... experience the efficacy of baptism prior to effectual calling."¹¹⁹

Wilson's claim that his view is that of Calvin is blatantly erroneous. Calvin never said that the efficacy of the sacraments is a *saving* efficacy. The sacraments, Calvin said, are "confirmations of our faith."¹²⁰ They "sustain, nourish, confirm, and increase our faith."¹²¹ The Lord "nourishes faith spiritually through the sacraments, whose *one function* [emphasis added] is to set his promises before our eyes to be looked upon, indeed, to be guarantees of them to us."¹²² The ministry of the sacraments helps us "sometimes to foster, confirm, and increase the true knowledge of Christ in ourselves; at other times, to possess him more fully and enjoy his riches. But that happens when we receive in true faith what is

¹¹⁸ Thomas Vincent, *The Shorter Catechism Explained From Scripture*, Puritan Paperbacks (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1980), 235-236.

¹¹⁹ G.I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1964), 215.

¹²⁰ *Institutes*, IV.xiv.12.

¹²¹ *Institutes*, IV.xiv.7.

¹²² *Institutes*, IV.xiv.12.

offered there.”¹²³

Regarding passages such as Mark 16:16, Acts 2:38, Acts 22:16, Titus 3:5, and 1 Peter 3:21, Wilson says that we ought to use the language of Scripture. If Scripture says we must believe and be baptized in order to be saved, or be baptized for the remission of sins, or baptism saves, then we ought to say that too: “Peter tells us that baptism saves, and his subsequent qualifier does not mean that baptism does not save.”¹²⁴ “In blunt language, Ananias told Saul to come to the baptismal font in order to wash away his sins.”¹²⁵

Contrary to Wilson, Calvin said that passages like these “did not mean to signify that our cleansing and salvation are accomplished by water, ... but only that in this sacrament are received the knowledge and certainty of such gifts.”¹²⁶ Calvin’s interpretation of Acts 2:38 is, “we receive Christ’s gifts by faith, and baptism is a help to confirm and increase our faith.”¹²⁷ “Why, then, did Ananias tell Paul to wash away his sins through baptism if sins are not washed away by the power of baptism itself? ... Ananias meant only this: To be assured, Paul, that your sins are forgiven, be baptized.”¹²⁸

Wilson is wrong, and Louis Berkhof was correct: “Calvin and Reformed theology proceeded on the assumption that baptism is instituted for believers, and does not work but strengthens the new life.”¹²⁹ “According to Reformed theology, it [i.e. baptism] is not, as the Roman Catholics claim, the means of initiating the work of grace in the heart, but it is a means for the strengthening of it or, as it is often expressed, for the increase of grace.”¹³⁰ Whereas the Reformers viewed the sacraments as a means of *confirming* or *strengthening* saving grace, Wilson views them as a means of *bestowing* saving grace.

To sum up, if Wilson is going to be clear of heresy he must renounce his errors and confusion and truly affirm the historic protestant doctrine of justification *by means of* faith alone apart from works of any kind – including the work of baptism!

CONCLUSION

We believe this report as a whole leads us to no other conclusion than that the teachings of the Federal Vision herein reviewed and critiqued seriously undermine the testimony of the Gospel and are substantially at odds with the Christian gospel. In particular we believe they promote serious error and represent a deviation from the teachings and doctrines of Scripture and the Reformed confessions and are another gospel in the following three areas:

1. In as far as proponents of Federal Vision so define baptism as to make it a saving ordinance that unites us to all the benefits of Christ, without distinguishing between those who have the inward washing of the Spirit and those who do not, we reject the errors of the Federal Vision. We affirm that while baptism is a sign of God’s saving work, the external sign should not be confused with its internal reality (Col. 2:11; Eph. 5:26; 1 John 1:7; 1 Cor. 6:11; B.C. Art. 34, H.C. Q.72-73).

¹²³ *Institutes*, IV.iv.16.

¹²⁴ *Reformed Is Not Enough*, 100.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹²⁶ *Institutes*, IV.xv.2.

¹²⁷ *Calvin’s Commentaries*, Vol. 18, Vol. 1 of *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 119.

¹²⁸ *Institutes*, IV.xv.15.

¹²⁹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co.), 627.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 641.

2. In as far as proponents of Federal vision teach that all those who are baptized bear the same relation to the covenant, without making a distinction between mere ecclesiastical membership and a vital union with Christ through faith in him alone, and that those in union with Christ can lose their position in Christ, we reject the errors of the Federal Vision. We affirm that those who are vitally joined to Christ by a living faith not only shall never be lost, but also can be certain they have been predestined to eternal glory, even though our faith is often weak and we continue to sin. All the regenerate in covenant with God, on account of the redemptive work of Christ effectually applied by the Spirit of God, receive the gift of perseverance (Jer. 32:40; John 10:28-29; Rom. 8:29-39; B.C. Art. 24; Canons of Dordt. V, 1-15).

3. In as far as proponents of Federal Vision teach that justification by faith is not a one time in history declaration of God by which we are accounted righteous solely on the basis of the imputation of Christ's merits which is received by faith alone, but that our justification is contingent upon our continued covenant faithfulness, we reject the errors of the Federal Vision. We affirm that justification is in no way based upon what we do, or else there would be no hope that any would stand (Ps. 115:1; Rom. 3:20, 24-28; 4:2-5; 8:33; 10:3-4; 1 Cor. 4:7; Phil. 3:9; Gal. 2:16, Heb. 7:19; BC. Art. 22-23; HC. Q.62-64).

Your committee therefore recommends the following:

1. That the conclusion of this report be adopted as our denomination's position on the aberrant view of justification as promoted by men of the Federal Vision.
2. That pastors and elders warn the members of their congregations about which men promote the Federal Vision and how the teachings of the Federal Vision are at odds with biblical teaching.
3. That this report be sent to the denominations with which we are in fraternal relations as well as those which are members of NAPARC.

Respectfully submitted,

Rev. David Fagrey, chairman
Rev. Jeff DeBoer
Rev. Warren Embree
Rev. Frank Walker
Rev. Jim West
Elder Ted Schieffelin
Elder Doug Schlegel

APPENDIX

Justification within the Sphere of the Covenant

The intention of those associated with the Federal Vision is to set forth a method of interpretation that investigates and reformulates the historic doctrines of the Reformed faith by means of a "covenant" view of Scripture.¹³¹ It is not the intent or desire of this committee to outline and critique this method of interpretation in its entirety, but to investigate it as it relates to the doctrine of justification.

In order to understand what justification means in the Federal Vision's view of the covenant, it is

¹³¹ "Federal Vision" is derived from the Latin *foedus* (a league, treaty, compact, covenant) and *visio* (view or faculty of sight). The desire is to create a universe of discourse which is pervasively "covenant" and enables one to critique the historic "view" of orthodox doctrines. The ultimate goal is to develop a theology that is more inherently Biblical and also freed from the limits and excesses of scholastic, systematic categories.

necessary to understand what “being in covenant” means. Its emphasis is without question on “relationship” or being in “union with Christ.” The result is that the legal and decretal dimensions of the covenant are neglected or relegated to the status of unimportant. The Federal Vision centers on the idea of union and communion.¹³² Steve Wilkins states it well when he writes:

Covenant is the central teaching of the Word of God; it describes a relationship with the Triune God through Jesus Christ, His only Begotten Son. To be in covenant is to be in real communion with God, attendant with real privileges and real blessings. It is to be brought into the circle of the eternal fellowship that has always existed between Father, Son, and Spirit. It is to be made partakers of the divine nature. It is to be beloved of the Father for the sake of His Son and is founded upon union with Christ.¹³³

In accord with the central proposition of this quote, it follows that every aspect of Biblical faith and practice must be seen in the relation “covenant.”¹³⁴ This relation covenant supplies the common relational structure by which the doctrines of the church, sacraments, faith, regeneration, sanctification, election, and justification (the concern of this report) are to be understood and taught.¹³⁵ The fundamental presupposition is that, if one is a member of this common relational structure (“in covenant”), then one

¹³² While many of those writing favorably concerning a “Federal Vision” use varying types of “discourse analysis” (speech-act from Searle or folk story analysis from Von Propp and Greimas via N.T. Wright), the committee believes the Federal Vision seems to be most at odds primarily with the creedal and scholastic categories of thought. One issue in reading the Federal Vision writings is figuring out how they understand the category “covenant.” The notion of categories—as objects of cognition—has shifted over time. Kant replaced ontological realism and nominalism of earlier days with conceptual categories. With Husserl categories became descriptive, being more concerned with meaning and how things relate than with what something is in itself. It is difficult, at times, to determine whether the Federal Vision writers are setting forth ontological, conceptual, or descriptive relational categories. In the following quote, Wilkins, for example, seems to move seamlessly from the descriptive (“description of a relationship”) to the conceptual (“in covenant”) to the ontological (“real communion,” “real privileges,” “real blessing”), back to the conceptual (“circle of eternal fellowship”), then to the ontological (“partaker of the divine nature”) before ending with what seems to be an ontological-conceptual-descriptive relation (“union with Christ”). Wilkins has set forth a theory of reality that is inclusive of realism, nominalism, and conceptualism, and expects the notion of covenant to be understood within such without informing the reader. In the final analysis, though, the committee has concluded that the Federal Vision sees all things in relation to the covenant, thus holding a conceptual framework as primary without denying the ontological. As such, this is more or less Kantian.

¹³³ *The Federal Vision: Essays on the Covenant*, edited by Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner.

¹³⁴ The use and priority of “relational” categories—whether ontological, conceptual, or descriptive—is not particularly new. Aristotle devotes Chapter 7 of his *Categories* to the discussion of relations and considers it one of the “top ten” kinds of the highest categories. During the Reformation and before, the notion of predication was thought to require a process of “relations” (*ad aliquid* or *relativa*) when the simple term “than” was required to talk about something. One does not say X is taller, but always X is taller *than*. The difference was between using “relative” terms, which require comparison to something else and “absolute” terms, which predicate what something is in itself. Nominalists denied that categories necessarily adhere in “reality,” but did not deny the need for linguistic, relational categories. Whether the distinction was real (realism) or semantic (nominalism) was the fodder of considerable debate. During the middle ages and leading up the Reformation, there was a finer distinction drawn between relations which are merely semantic (*relationes secundum dici*) and relations that are in accord with nature or being (*relationes secundum esse*). Oddly enough, this distinction, though not explicitly invoked, is often found in many of the Federal Vision writings.

¹³⁵ The classic distinction between “ontological” and “relational” says that a rock, by virtue of being what it is, has mass, but the rock’s weight depends upon whether the scales are on the earth or on the moon. Mass is therefore generally considered intrinsic, that is, a property or quality of “being” a rock, while weight is consider extrinsic, that is, dependent upon a “relationship” it has with something else. When this distinction is used as a way by which we understand our world, the question where something “belongs” is determined by a common relational structure (Wilkins used box, circle, and union to explicate “in covenant”) rather than a common property or quality of being.

partakes of all the various aspects of that structure (“real communion,” “real privileges,” “real blessings,” “circle of the eternal fellowship,” and so forth) and is “in union” with Christ and a partaker of all His benefits.¹³⁶ As the following quotes reveal, it is impossible to understand the federal vision approach to justification without looking through this particular lens. The “covenant idea” is the means by which we rightly see and understand the teachings of Scripture and, fundamentally, the way in which the life promised by God is received and achieved.

The operative term here is “relation.” It’s the relation in the Federal Vision that defines reality and holds it together.¹³⁷ We can see this by looking at the Federal Vision’s teaching on church, sacraments, faith, regeneration, sanctification, and election, which, in turn, show how all of this informs and determines its doctrine of justification.

A major emphasis in the Federal Vision is that the church, sacraments, and preaching are where God *is* and where He meets with His people. All the elements of the liturgy, the application of the sacraments, and the presentation of the Word “renew” the relational covenant bond. In this way, an “objective” experience of God, of His grace, and fellowship with His people is experienced.¹³⁸ Thus, the worship of God is not dependent upon or created by personal experience or introspection. Rich Lusk writes:

Why do we speak of the Divine Service as covenant renewal? The covenant is an everlasting bond of union, communion, and self-giving love between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Triune God is covenantal. Each of the three divine persons eternally relates to the other two in peace and humility. God has graciously and sovereignly chosen a people to be included in his divine family. Believers and their children are made members of the covenant through Jesus Christ, the eternal Son incarnated in human flesh. We enter into this covenant via baptism. In and through the waters of baptism we receive, as John Calvin said, “regeneration and cleansing from sin.” Baptism unites us to Christ; this union gives way to communion, celebrated in our weekly partaking of the Lord’s Supper. At the table of the Lord, we receive the true body and blood of Christ, the glorified life of our crucified and risen Savior. This feast is the climax of covenant renewal each Lord’s Day, when our fellowship with the Triune God and one another is freshly experienced and manifested. The Divine Service, then, is covenant renewal because God renews and reapplies his pledge of redemption to us and we renew and recommit ourselves to loyal service in his kingdom.... The minister’s role, therefore, is symbolic, but not merely symbolic. We are not just “playing church” each Lord’s Day; God really is powerfully at work through the

¹³⁶ The priority of “union with Christ” to that of faith has been a watershed discussion over the past one hundred years. Vos distinguished the Reformed from the Lutheran view precisely at this point, in that the Reformed view holds that we are united to Christ by a mystical union which finds a “conscious recognition” (including justification) in faith, whereas the Lutheran position is that faith, generated by the Holy Spirit, embraces Christ, receives justification, and is united to Christ in mystical union. What exactly this means is the subject of much of the debate. Gaffin argues that “not justification by faith but union with the resurrected Christ by faith . . . is the central motif of Pauline soteriology.” See *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*; Gaffin, R.B., Eds.; Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co.: Phillipsburg, New Jersey, 1980.

¹³⁷ Mertz calls this bonding “ontogial,” “the glue of being” (from the Greek *ontos* [“being”] + *glia* [“glue”]). “Things” or “complexes” need to be held together, and relations are the glue. See “Individuation and Instance Ontology” by D.W. Mertz, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 79, Number 1 / March 01, 2001, page 45 – 61.

¹³⁸ In philosophy, this would be called “instantiation.” An analogy from computer science would be the notion of “class.” In programming, you create a structured set of code which has properties and methods. For example, a class based upon an address file has the properties of name, street, city, state, and zip code. The methods are read, write, create, and delete. This code lies dormant in a program until invoked and an “instance” of the class springs into being and is used until the instance is returned to nothing. The class remains, but the instance goes away. As the following quote shows, “covenant” is much the same as it relates to church, sacraments, and preaching in the Federal Vision. In the “class” “worship,” the relational property is the “covenant bond” of the Trinity, and the methods are “church,” “sacraments” and “preaching.” Then “covenant renewal” is invoked and these methods called, and an instance of the “real communion” with God and each other is “freshly experienced and manifested.”

actions of the minister. As officiant, he represents Christ in the liturgy and is authorized to act and speak his name, so that what the pastor does for us in the service (e.g., baptizing, absolving us of sin, preaching, giving us the Lord's Supper, blessing us) is really done by Christ.¹³⁹

Likewise, faith must be understood as a covenant relational structure whose boundaries are not streets, walls, and fences, but "signs, rites, words, conduct." Peter Leithart writes:

Covenant theology has great promise: it highlights the fact that redemption takes place in the real world, that redemption involves the creation of a new community, and that the community is necessarily marked out by signs, rites, words, conduct. But the language of covenant theology sometimes leaves the impression that the whole institutional apparatus of Israelite polity and worship was established to bolster and support individual personal faith. NO! The institutional apparatus was the OC (Adamic) organization of human life under Yahweh. Covenant community and structure do not exist simply for the sake of individual faith, nor is individual faith swallowed up. Community and structure are part of the communal life of faith.¹⁴⁰

Because the covenant relation is objective, regeneration becomes simply the dissolution of the covenant bond (relation) between Adam and the individual and the establishment of a new covenant bond between Christ and the individual. This is effected through baptism, one of the methods that changes the relation, as it dissolves the old bond and forms the new. Thus, baptism properly (in a relational way) has the "new birth" as the outcome. Mark Horne writes (in a critique of Samuel Miller):

... the Confession [Westminster] affirms precisely that every baptized person is 'born into the visible kingdom of the Redeemer.' Baptism admits the baptized person into the Church, 'the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation' (28.1; 25.2). One is thus placed in a new relationship that is explicitly called, both in Scripture and in the Confession, a family where God is father and Jesus is the elder brother. One's solidarity with the old family of Adam is covenantally ended in favor of solidarity with the new Adam. To claim that a change to a new family in which one is Abraham's offspring (Galatians 3.29) must never be referred to by the metaphor of 'birth' or 'rebirth' seems quite arbitrary and unnatural.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ "A Visionary Ecclesiology: A Primer for Church Members on the Nature and Functions of the Body of Christ" by Rich Lusk,

http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/a_visionary_ecclesiology.htm. This quote is given to emphasize the covenant structure notion inherent in the Federal Vision writings as it relates to church, sacraments, and word. In the article, Lusk wishes to express the importance of community ("Through God's ordained rites and rituals, we are congealed together into Christ's new society. Therefore, as an outflow of the weekly liturgical, sacramental gathering, we begin to experience real community with our fellow Christians"), **discipleship** ("Faith and obedience are not two separate ways of relating to God, as though we had faith for justification and works for sanctification. Rather, faith-filled obedience is the holistic, full-orbed response to God's grace that the gospel calls for and calls forth, by God's Spirit"), **mission** (quoting from another author "the church is the only institution in the world that exists for the sake of her *non-members*. The church does not merely have a mission; she is a mission. We have been called out of the world into the body Christ not merely for the sake of our own salvation; rather, we are to become the embodiment of God's love to the world"), as well as an appreciation of **tradition** and anticipation of the continuing work of the Spirit until the end (**eschatology**).

¹⁴⁰ <http://www.leithart.com/archives/001277.php> "The Promise of Covenant Theology," by Peter J. Leithart on Monday, May 09, 2005 at 10:48 PM.

¹⁴¹ "Samuel Miller, Baptism, & Covenant Theology" by Mark Horne Copyright © 2004. http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/mark_horne/samuel_miller_baptism_and_covenant_theology.htm. Horne argues that Miller's attack on superstition is on target, but undermines the trust which people should have in "the blessings of God to his people in Word and Sacrament." In an article elsewhere, Horne writes approvingly of Nevin's view of the mystical union as an appropriate understanding of the relation between Christ and His people. The problem is that Nevin's view is ontological to the point of being pantheistic. As such, Horne sees the covenant relation (solidarity) to be in accord with nature or being (*relationes secundum esse*).

With respect to covenant and sanctification, Lusk writes:

What's true of Jesus is now true of us (with appropriate qualification, of course). We are baptized into Christ's baptism, we are christened into his christening, we are anointed into his anointing. In baptism, we become christ's (with a small 'c') in union with the Christ [there is a note to reference an article by Peter Leithart]. In other words, our baptisms are ordination services as well. Baptism grafts us into the royal priesthood of the new covenant. We become Melchizedekal priest-kings ourselves, under our great high priest and king. The anointing of baptism enrolls us in liturgical service in God's house; but more than that, this anointing flows down to cover the whole of our lives, leaving nothing unconsecrated to God's service.¹⁴²

The historic doctrine of election, while viewed as absolute and unconditional in some sense, nevertheless acquires contingency inside the covenant structure (sphere).

John Barach writes:

God truly brings those people into His covenant, into union with Christ. They are 'in Him,' to use Jesus' words in John 15. They share in His blessings (think of Hebrews 6). They experience His love, but that covenant relationship is conditional. It calls for repentance and faith and new obedience. God's choice was not conditional, but life in the covenant is.¹⁴³

With respect to justification, then, we can see how the principle of "relation" works out in the understanding of how it is that we are "righteous before God." Peter Leithart, in response to a request by the NW Presbytery of the PCA (in 2005) wrote:

Strictly, I believe that what is reckoned to us is not Christ's obedience per se (cf. WCF 11.1), but the verdict God passed on Christ's obedience in His resurrection (Romans 4:25)... There is a relation between my work on justification and my work on baptism in one important sense: If, as I argue, baptism grafts the baptized into the body of Christ, and He is the Risen Righteous One, then the baptized share in some fashion in that righteous standing. I cannot offer a Confessional defense of this view, but there is precedent for such a view within Reformed theology, evidence for which I could provide on request. There is also a corporate/historical dimension to justification: Israel as a nation was 'vindicated' by the restoration from exile (Isaiah 54:17; Jeremiah 51:10) and by deliverance from judgment (Joel 2:23). In an analogous way, one may speak of the church as being 'vindicated' and of the members of the church as sharing in that 'vindication.'¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² "Jesus' Baptism: The Fount Of Life: A Study in Biblical and Practical Theology," Sunday School Notes / Epiphany 2004, by Rich

Lusk, http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/jesus_baptism_the_fount_of_life.htm.

He goes on to state that "Of course, baptism alone does not make us faithful priests. We can lose our sanctuary access and be excommunicated from the presence of our Father and King if we do not maintain a true heart in full assurance of faith' (Heb. 10:22). Baptism does change our status before God and men, but that new status must be received and maintained by loyalty to the covenant. The key, of course, is faithful performance of our covenant duties in the gathered assembly (Heb. 10:25)." The status is changed, we are sanctified, but maintenance requires "loyalty" and "faithful performance" which, it would seem, is the notion of progressive sanctification.

¹⁴³ *Federal Vision*, page 37.

¹⁴⁴ "Presbytery Summary" by Peter Leithart, <http://www.leithart.com/archives/001248.php>. This summary shows the core of Leithart's thinking and, as he and Rich Lusk are the most capable of the federal vision writers, it does a good job of summarizing the federal vision "lens" as it relates to sacraments, church, election, and justification.