

Historic Christianity and the Federal Vision

A Theological Analysis and Practical Evaluation

Dewey Roberts

Foreword

Morton H. Smith

My former student, Dewey Roberts, has written a great book for us and the whole church in sounding a needed warning of the insidious dangers of the Federal Vision. The Federal Vision is wrongly viewed by many people within the PCA as an acceptable interpretation of the gospel that represents little cause for concern despite the fact that it is a legalistic system that is contradictory to the Scriptures and the Reformed Standards. Too many ministers and Christians within the PCA or other Reformed denominations are unaware of the deep inroads that have been made by this erroneous system within the body of Christ. Error thrives under the cloak of darkness unless it is vigorously opposed by courageous voices that raise the flag of warning for God's people. Truth is for the purpose of godliness and error / heresy is always destructive of true piety. The author of this book, therefore, is to be commended for plumbing the depths of the theological errors of the Federal Vision and exposing those errors by the light of truth for all to see. This is a book that is both timely and a necessary warning against those errors. It should be read by all who are concerned with the purity of the gospel. And the sooner the better.

In the first half of the twentieth century, J. Gresham Machen raised his voice of protest against the liberalism / modernism of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (the old Northern Presbyterian Church) with the result that he himself was excommunicated from that body despite his unquestioned orthodoxy. A different approach was taken by ministers and elders in the Presbyterian Church in the United States (the old Southern Presbyterian Church). The PCUS decided to tolerate liberalism / modernism within their body through a gentleman's agreement that they hoped would preserve the peace. They sacrificed truth for the sake of a false peace. While heresy grew much more rapidly in the PCUSA than the PCUS, it nonetheless eroded the evangelical foundations of the latter body and her gold became dim. Thus, the Federal Vision cannot be

tolerated within any Reformed or evangelical denomination without causing irreparable damage to that body. Thankfully, this book provides us with the information to properly assess the Federal Vision and the ammunition to defend the gospel against the errors of that system. The author has dug down deep into the system of the Federal Vision in order to let the gospel shine more clearly in contrast with it. His work represents careful research into original source material both by the Federal Vision proponents and the greatest minds in the history of the Church.

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church (as Clark rightly outlined above). Guy Prentiss Waters has already written an excellent book, *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology: A Comparative Analysis*, which responds in detail to numerous quotes from the Federal Vision authors. There is no need for this book to be redundant of his work, but it will build on his research. There will be several quotes from the Federal Vision authors in every chapter that identify the Federal Vision view on various aspects of theology. Those views will then be put into the context of historical theology, the teaching of Scripture, and the great Reformed creeds.

My approach in this book was confirmed to me as the right one when I read an article by Archibald Alexander in *Princeton Versus the New Divinity*. Alexander, along with several other professors at Princeton Seminary in the early nineteenth century, was involved in exposing the theological errors of the “New Divinity” taught by Charles G. Finney, Albert Barnes, and others within the Presbyterian Church. The Princeton professors identified those errors as a revival of Pelagianism. Alexander’s comments on the best way to combat such errors is very telling:

There has never yet been an instance in the history of the church of the rejection of any doctrines of the gospel, where the opposers of the truth have been contented to stop at the first departure from sound doctrine. If they who first adopt and propagate an error are sometimes restrained by habit, and by a lurking respect for the opinions of the wise and good, as also by a fear of incurring the censure of heresy, from going the full length which their principles require; yet those who follow them in their error will not be kept back by such considerations.

Indeed, the principles of self defence require that men who undertake to defend their opinions by argument should endeavor to be consistent with themselves; and thus it commonly happens that what was originally a single error draws after it the whole system of which it is a part. On this account it is incumbent on the friends of truth to oppose error in its commencement, and to endeavour to point out the consequences likely to result from its adoption; and to us it appears that nothing is better calculated to show what will be the effect of a particular error than to trace its former progress by the lights of ecclesiastical history.¹⁰

I agree with Alexander that the best way to show what any heresy

augmented by the faithful obedience and perseverance of the baptized person to the end of his life in order to result in final justification. If the Federal Vision advocates had been at the Council at Jerusalem, their response likely would have been something like this:

It is necessary to baptize them with water and to direct them to be faithful to their covenant baptism.

In both instances, salvation is a result of sacramental grace plus obedience, to which Peter responded:

Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they are also. (Acts 15:10, 11)

Like the Judaizers, the Federal Vision endorses the same yoke of slavery to the law which the Apostles, the Pharisees, the new converts to Christianity, and the fathers of the Old Testament could not keep. It teaches that final justification is by works of righteousness, though Federal Vision advocates nuance their position to make it seem more palatable with evangelical Christianity. Therefore, it denies that salvation is through the free grace of Christ alone. It is a theological system as old as the fall of mankind that has been perpetuated throughout the history of the church by the Pharisees and Judaizers; by various fathers of the church; by Pelagius; by many of the Scholastics of the Medieval church; by the Council of Trent and the Papacy; by Arminius and the Remonstrants; by Richard Baxter; by Albert Barnes and Charles G. Finney; and others. Therefore, this is my definition of the Federal Vision:

The Federal Vision is a scheme of salvation by works, both moral and ceremonial, set within the framework of a conditional covenant that depends on the covenant faithfulness and perseverance of the baptized for its efficacy and for their final justification.

This definition comprehends in a single sentence almost everything that will be covered in this book and is very similar to what a definition of legalism would be. The Federal Vision is a new scheme of legalism that conflicts with salvation by grace alone.

of man. Yet, the joint statement by the Federal Vision permits its signatories to deny the new birth without offering any other solution for how a person undergoes a change in his actions or character.

J. C. Ryle faced many of the same theological issues in the nineteenth century which the Federal Vision presents to our own generation. Concerning the wrong views of regeneration held by some people in his day, he said:

Some hold that regeneration only means admission into a state of ecclesiastical privileges, by being a member of the Church, but does not mean a change of heart. Some tell us that a regenerate man has a certain power within him which enables him to repent and believe if he thinks fit, but that he still needs a further change in order to make him a true Christian. Some say there is a difference between Regeneration and being born again. Others say there is a difference between being born again and conversion.

To all this I have one simple reply, and that is, *I can find no such Regeneration spoken of anywhere in the Bible*. A Regeneration which only means admission into a state of ecclesiastical privilege may be ancient and primitive for anything I know. But something more than this is wanted. A few plain texts of Scripture are needed; and these texts have yet to be found.

Such a notion of Regeneration is utterly inconsistent with that which St. John gives us in his first Epistle. It renders it necessary to invent the awkward theory that there are two Regenerations, and is thus calculated to confuse the minds of unlearned people, and introduce false doctrine.¹¹

Ryle, in his simple and inimitable way, puts his finger on the heart of the issue with all these false theories of regeneration. Despite the passing of time, the same basic issues are plaguing the church today that did so in Ryle's day and earlier times. In his trial before Pacific Northwest Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church in America in 2011¹², Peter Leithart distinguished between an ecclesiastical new life conveyed through baptism, and supernatural regeneration as described by the Westminster Confession of Faith. A theory of two regenerations is necessarily confusing to Christ's little ones because it is utterly unscriptural. There is no scriptural warrant for saying that the new birth or new life is merely an ecclesiastical birth. That requires the teaching of two different regenerations—one ecclesiastical and the other spiritual.

Simon Episcopius was one of thirteen delegates from the Remonstrants to the Synod of Dordt in 1618. He lost his standing and was refused a hearing when he failed to submit to the order by which the Synod determined to proceed. The Synod required that the Remonstrants first present scriptural arguments for their positions, which they could not do and refused to attempt. Their arguments were philosophical in nature, not scriptural. Owen is not the only person to note the identity of the positions of the Arminians and Pelagians with ancient philosophy rather than with Scripture. Arminian theology is not merely based on philosophical reasoning. It is based on heathen philosophy. It has more in common with Cicero or Aristotle than with Scripture.

Grace in the History of the Church

In his masterful work on Scottish theology for the Cunningham Lectures of 1871, *The Theology and Theologians of Scotland, 1560-1750*, James Walker said:

With the growth of mere externalism, the theology of Anselm and Bernard passed away, till you have the Pelagianism of the Jesuits and the Council of Trent, and the deeper views of the atonement to all intents put under brand.²⁹

When grace is defined concerning externals, as it is in the Federal Vision theories, then the atonement of Christ takes a back seat and eventually is removed altogether. Such theories lead to viewing Christ as an example for our own obedience rather than the only Savior of human beings. It is a very short step from that position to Socinianism in which the deity of Christ is denied altogether.

The failure to distinguish between the grace which Adam had in the time of his innocence and the grace which believers receive in the gospel is a fundamental mistake of the Federal Vision. The difference between the two is brought out clearly by Augustine:

Did not Adam have the grace of God? Yes, truly, he had it largely, but of a different kind. He was placed in the midst of benefits which he had received from the goodness of his Creator; for he had not procured those benefits by his own deservings; in which benefits he suffered absolutely no evil. But saints in this life, to whom pertains this grace of deliverance, are in the midst of evils out of which they cry to God, "Deliver us from evil." He in those benefits needed not the death

the whole law, and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all” (James 2:10). Any sin, large or small, is enough to ruin forever our hopes of attaining salvation through keeping the law. God does not grade on the curve. He does not accept sincere obedience in the place of perfect obedience.

The Mosaic law is a gracious covenant to believers, but a covenant of works to all who are without faith in Christ. In his penetrating work on the law in Puritan theology, *The Grace of Law*, Ernest F. Kevan quoted from William Strong’s work on *The Two Covenants*:

The Lord’s intention in giving the Law was double, unto the carnal Jews to set forth to them the old Covenant which they had broken; and yet unto believing Jews it did darkly shadow and set forth unto them the Covenant of Grace made with Christ. . . and therefore it was delivered after a sort in the form of a Covenant of Works. . . . It was to the carnal Jews plainly a Covenant of Works, not in God’s intention, but by their own corruption.²¹

Concerning Paul’s words in Galatians 4:24, 25, Kevan further observes:

Paul’s reference to the covenants in Galatians iv creates a problem at first sight, for he seems to suggest that Sinai was merely a Covenant of Works, but Henry Burton offers the solution that Paul is speaking of the Law only in the killing sense given to it by the carnal Jews, for Sinai and Sion are opposite only as the unbelieving makes them opposite.²²

Despite their denial that the Mosaic law is a covenant of works, the Federal Vision adherents ironically make it such by holding forth the hope of final justification through the keeping of it. Their approach to the law then becomes the carnal view of it that is condemned by Paul in Galatians 4.

The law and the promise, as contrasted in Galatians 4, are two different covenants. The law, in that sense, is a covenant of works. The promise is a covenant of grace. Yet, Federal Vision proponent, Ralph Smith, asserts that “the covenant of works is unbiblical” and that “to truly have a covenant of works, Eden and all its blessings would have to be off limits until Adam and Eve had obtained the merit by which they would be justified and therefore qualified to enjoy the rewards of the covenant.”²³ It is certainly true that God did not use the word covenant when he commanded Adam not to eat from the tree of the

There are two erroneous presuppositions, or fatal flaws, of the Federal Vision which fundamentally affect all their other positions on the doctrines of salvation. These flaws were discovered during my work representing Ruling Elder Gerald Hedman in his complaint against Pacific Northwest Presbytery (PCA) concerning the trial of Peter Leithart—a prominent apologist for the Federal Vision theology. For the most part, the Federal Vision proponents have been guarded about revealing their basic presuppositions, but Leithart expressed two fundamental presuppositions in his trial. The first presupposition makes infant baptism a new paradigm for all baptism. The second presupposition is a redefinition of “efficacy” which will be the subject of the next chapter. These two presuppositions are essential to the whole system of the Federal Vision. Every person who holds to the Federal Vision must also hold to them. Their system cannot be erected without them.

Key Assessment: The Federal Vision makes infant baptism the paradigm for all baptism, contrary to Scripture. The Scripture makes adult baptism the paradigm of baptism.

The confusing statements Federal Vision proponents make concerning baptism cannot be understood without realizing that they have a different paradigm concerning it. Their paradigm of baptism is not new, though. It represents a sacramental view that is at least as old as the Judaizers. It combines the theory of the magical efficacy of sacraments with the doctrine of infant baptism. The Federal Vision’s theories of efficacy and baptism will be explored more in Chapters 6 and 7. At this point, it is important to note that the Federal Vision is not the first system to develop around the theory of what baptism means to an infant. Pelagius, in order to defend his theory of the native innocence of all mankind, was compelled to devise a new view of infant baptism. As G. F. Wiggers wrote in his book, *Augustinism and Pelagianism*, concerning the first principle of Pelagianism:

It is difficult to say whether the contest began with infant baptism or with original sin. . . So much, however, is certain; from the close connection between the doctrine of infant baptism with that of original

9. Chapter ten of the Westminster Confession of Faith is devoted completely to the doctrine of *effectual* calling (*italics added for emphasis*).

Concerning baptismal efficacy, the Westminster Standards restrict it to the elect alone who are the subjects of God's efficacious grace. A wrong view of baptismal efficacy changes the meaning of all the most important doctrines of salvation. Efficacious grace means that the elect alone are: redeemed by Christ; given a new heart; justified, adopted, and sanctified; given the Holy Spirit; forgiven their sins; enabled to persevere; kept by God's power; and, made heirs of eternal salvation. The Federal Vision's view of baptismal efficacy totally redefines the efficacious grace of the Westminster Standards and replaces it with a view of efficacy that is completed by man. Grace, in the Scripture and the Westminster Standards, is efficacious solely through the work of the Spirit and the power of God.

Common and Special Grace as Bearing on Efficacy

The Federal Vision attempts to evade this problem by saying that "baptismal efficacy" is different than efficacious grace or effectual calling. In fact, one Federal Vision proponent, Mark Horne, specifically states that the efficacy of baptism must not be understood solely in terms of "special grace", but "common grace" and the promise as conditional.⁹ Where does special grace end and common grace begin in such a convoluted scheme of baptismal efficacy? There simply is no basis for distinguishing between efficacious grace and baptismal efficacy. Efficacy is the same no matter where it is found in the scheme of salvation. The answer to Shorter Catechism question 88 clarifies to whom baptism is made effectual:

The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communiceth to us the benefits of redemption, are his ordinances, especially the word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.

The efficacy of baptism is the same as the efficacy that comes through reading the Scripture and praying. We can pray fervently for a person, but our prayers are ineffectual for them unless the ones we are praying for are chosen of God. Paul sought urgently to convince King Agrippa of the Christian gospel, but his efforts fell on deaf ears. The preaching of the word and prayer are made effectual only to the

Baptismal regeneration did not begin with the fathers of the early church. Rather, the idea of sacramental regeneration was a part of pagan religions centuries before Christ was born in Bethlehem. The Hindus of India were familiar with the term long before the Christian era, and the Brahmins boasted that they were “twice-born” men. The Babylonians connected the second birth with baptism and used the phrase, “baptismal regeneration,” to describe their religious experience.¹² Thus, Tertullian stated:

Well, but the nations, who are strangers to all understanding of spiritual powers ascribe to their idols the imbuing of waters with the self-same efficacy.” (So they do) . . . and they presume that the effect of their doing that is their regeneration and the remission of the penalties due to their perjuries. Among the ancients, again, whoever had defiled himself with murder, was wont to go in quest of purifying waters.¹³

Regeneration, remission of sins, and purification from the defilement of capital crimes, such as murder, were believed by the heathen to be the result of being baptized with water. All of this was a part of pagan religious belief before Christ, before the Apostles, and before the doctrine of baptismal regeneration became the official doctrine of the Catholic Church. Where did the pagans get this doctrine of baptismal regeneration? Tertullian gives us the answer:

By the devil, of course, to whom pertain those wiles which pervert the truth, and who, by the mystic rites of his idols, vies even with the essential portions of the sacraments of God. He, too, baptizes some, that is, his own believers and faithful followers; he promises the putting away of sins by a laver (of his own); and if my memory still serves me, Mithra there (in the kingdom of Satan), sets his mark on the foreheads of his soldiers; celebrates also the oblation of bread, and introduces an image of a resurrection.¹⁴

Vos, Mullins, Milman, and Tertullian all agree on the essentials. The doctrine of baptismal regeneration predates the Christian church and is found among the pagan religions. Vos and Tertullian go one step further back in showing these views of the magical efficacy of religious rites have their source in the subtlety of the Devil. The Devil, in these pagan rites, has substituted magical efficacy for the power of the Holy Spirit. In his comments on the baptism of Simon Magus, Calvin rejects the magical potency of the sacraments and emphasizes the work of the Holy Spirit:

When we return to the starting point of Scripture for our understanding of the order of salvation, we encounter the difficulty that it tells us two apparently contradictory truths: salvation is God's work and we must work out our salvation. We run the risk of Pelagian nomism, on the one hand, and antinomianism, on the other. Both fail to do justice to the work of Christ. Nomism blurs the line between Christianity and paganism and is present in pietistic as well as rationalistic forms. Antinomianism correctly stresses the full accomplished work of Christ but ignores the application of the work of salvation and thus in effect denies the personality and work of the Holy Spirit.²

The Federal Vision system is guilty of Pelagian nomism concerning the order of salvation. It is a denial that salvation, from beginning to end, is God's work. Instead, it stresses that we must work out our own salvation that will hopefully result in our final justification at the judgment. Interestingly, it also slips into the antinomian error of denying the work of the Holy Spirit in the application of salvation. As Bavinck notes, that error is a denial of the personality and work of the Holy Spirit.

In 1 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul said, "God is not the author of confusion" (1 Corinthians 14:33, KJV). Confusion in the church is not of God. God is the author of order. There is orderliness in salvation also. As John Murray said in his great classic, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*:

When we think of the application of redemption we must not think of it as one simple and indivisible act. It comprises a series of acts and processes. To mention some, we have calling, regeneration, justification, adoption, sanctification, glorification. These are all distinct, and not one of these can be defined in terms of the other. Each has its own distinct meaning, function, and purpose in the action and grace of God.³

Romans 8:29, 30—Election, Calling, Justification, and Glorification

There is an order in which this series of acts takes place in the salvation of every believer. That order is given to us by Scripture itself when we compare one passage with another. The classic passage on the order of salvation is Romans 8:29, 30, which says: "For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many

apply their hermeneutical principle to the doctrine of the covenant. Yet, the tendency of theonomy is certainly towards a “recasting of biblical religion along predominately outward, external, and corporate lines.” Those theonomists who do not move in that direction are being inconsistent with their basic principles. They have two competing systems of theology within their hearts and minds. Yet, as Christ taught, no man can serve two masters. He will either love the one and not the other or he will serve the one and not the other.

Bahnsen’s View of the Objectivity of the Covenant

In *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, Bahnsen made several statements which laid the foundation for the development of the Federal Vision theology. For instance, he emphasized the objectivity of baptism and the sacraments apart from any mention of the subjective work of the Spirit:

Similar words must be spoken with reference to Christian baptism. We who were buried with Christ in baptism are spiritually circumcised, signifying the cutting off of the sinful human nature (Col. 2:11-13); being raised with Christ we must seek those things which are above, in accord with godly holiness (Col. 3:1-17). The washing of baptism should have the effect of cleansing and sanctifying us (Eph. 5:25 f.) or else the baptism is meaningless for us. Our baptism must have the effect of causing us to walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:3 f.), which means that sin (the transgression of the law) should no longer reign in our lives (Rom. 6:5-13).²³

Bahnsen stressed the effect that the washing of baptism *should* have in our lives. He totters between saying what the washing of baptism does and what it should do. He says that baptism spiritually circumcises us, raises us with Christ, and should have the effect of cleansing, sanctifying, giving us newness of life, and breaking the reign of sin in our lives. Bahnsen does not go as far as the Federal Vision proponents concerning water baptism, but neither does he emphasize the work of the Holy Spirit in the sacraments. Reformed theologians have always said that these graces are ours only through real baptism, the baptism of the Spirit. Bahnsen’s position on baptism laid the foundation for the Federal Vision proponents adopting objective, external, and mediate views of the sacraments.

In another passage, Bahnsen emphasized obedience to the com-

or coincide with it, according to divine pleasure. . . The latter teach unconditional baptismal regeneration.⁹

Schaff states unequivocally that all the Reformed symbols reject the baptismal regeneration theories of the Lutheran and Catholic churches. In the Reformed symbols, spiritual regeneration is independent of water baptism and can happen before, during, or afterwards, according to God's sovereign grace. The Federal Vision teaches that baptismal regeneration of a particular kind, an ecclesiastical new life, takes place at every baptism. They teach that a baptized person is given objective grace and formally united with the church, but deny the bestowal of subjective grace. In so doing, they mistakenly think they have avoided the error of Catholicism which is Semi-Pelagian on the sacrament of baptism. By limiting grace to that which is objective, the Federal Vision takes a more purely Pelagian position, whether wittingly or unwittingly.

Many people erroneously think that the doctrinal symbols of the Anglican communions teach baptismal regeneration, but Schaff asserts otherwise:

The Church of England teaches in her formularies the Calvinistic theory of the sacraments in general, and of the Lord's Supper in particular; but in the baptismal service of the Book of Common Prayer, she clearly teaches baptismal regeneration without qualification, and in practice she gives larger scope to the sacramentarian principle.¹⁰

Neither the doctrinal standards of the Church of England, nor its leading ministers up to the time of William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1633-1640, had ever taught baptismal regeneration. The sacerdotal corruption of that denomination was in contradiction of her doctrinal formularies.

Reformed Tradition

Federal Vision proponents, such as Peter Leithart, claim that their sacramental views are within the Reformed tradition and buttress their claim with quotes from various ministers within the broader Reformed church. Sometimes, those sources are quoted accurately, and other times they are not. Many of the ministers and theologians quoted as examples of the Reformed tradition, such as Richard Baxter or Louis LeBlanc or Pierre Jurieu and others, are either not well-known

eternally and unconditionally elect. In Barach's system, a member of the covenant can move back and forth from election to reprobation, depending on that person's covenant obedience or disobedience. Such a view connects election with covenantal obedience in an ongoing process and makes election conditional. As Guy Waters says:

In summary, Barach embraces two distinct but overlapping doctrines of election. He affirms both decretal election and what he calls covenantal election. Decretal election for Barach has little practical value. He prefers to speak of covenantal election. Covenantal election, as Barach expresses it, bears remarkable similarities to the Arminian doctrine of conditional election. It is in this sense, notwithstanding his profession of the Reformed doctrine of (decretal) election, that we may say that Barach's overall doctrine of election is Arminian or at least semi-Arminian.⁶

Barach's view of covenantal election, like the view of others in the Federal Vision, is a corporate election to certain privileges (church membership, incorporation into Christ in a formal sense, etc.), but not the unconditional election of certain individuals to eternal life. Such a view of election has been the typical Arminian interpretation of the Scripture verses which refer to election. For instance, the Arminian commentator, James MacKnight, said concerning Romans 9:11:

The Apostle, according to his manner, cites only a few words of the passage on which his argument is founded, but I have inserted the whole in the commentary, to show that Jacob and Esau are not spoken of as individuals, but as representing the two nations springing from them—"Two nations are in thy womb," etc.—and that the election of which the Apostle speaks is not an election of Jacob to eternal life, but of his posterity to be the visible Church and people of God on earth, and heirs of the promises in their first and literal meaning.⁷

Election for MacKnight is national, ecclesiastical, and visible, but not necessarily eternal. The covenantal election of Barach has all the essential aspects of the definition of election given by MacKnight. Such covenantal election is corporate election of all those baptized, not individual election; it is election to privileges, not election to eternal life; it is election to the visible church, not the invisible church. That definition of election is and always has been the definition of both Arminians and Pelagians. For instance, Her-

One of the witnesses for the Defense at the trial of Peter Leithart made the following assessment of his theology:

On the question of imputation, Dr. Leithart indicated to me that he was opposed to imputation being viewed as an independent act, something in the abstract, rather than in connection with union with Christ.³

The connection of imputation and union with Christ is not disputed by Reformed theologians. It is a fundamental truth taught in the Scripture and has been held by the greatest theologians throughout church history. As John Owen says:

The foundation of the imputation asserted is union. Hereof there are many grounds and causes, as hath been declared; but that which we have immediate respect unto, as the foundation of this imputation, is that whereby the Lord Christ and believers do actually coalesce into one mystical person. This is the Holy Spirit inhabiting in him as the head of the church in all fulness, and in all believers according to their measure, whereby they become members of his mystical body.⁴

The Federal Vision and Union with Christ

Our primary question concerning imputation and union is this: What does the Federal Vision mean by union with Christ? The various statements of the Federal Vision advocates indicate that, for them, union with Christ is formal, but not spiritual. It is external, but not internal. It is objective, but not subjective. All the members of the visible church have this formal, external, objective union with Christ. Such union with Christ in their system is not restricted to the members of the invisible church and often proves to be temporary. However, a formal, external, visible, objective, temporary union is simply not the union with Christ of which the Scripture speaks. In reply to Lusk, Wilkins, Leithart and others in the Federal Vision, union with Christ cannot be limited to an external, objective, temporary union. Rather, it is a vital, spiritual, internal, mystical, permanent union.

The difficulty for the Federal Vision in addressing these concerns is underscored by various statements from “A Joint Federal Vision Profession.” First, the signers state unequivocally that union with Christ through baptism is formal:

We *affirm* that God formally unites a person to Christ and to His covenant people through baptism into the triune Name, and that this bap-

salvation with the rite of baptism, they are necessarily teaching salvation by works; and, a much lower form of salvation by works at that. Their form of doctrine is thoroughly Judaic; it is the ancient heresy of the Judaizers. Whenever justification is connected with circumcision or baptism, the lowest form of works righteousness is taught.

There are examples of both types of works righteousness in the Scripture. The Judaizers connected ceremonial works with moral works at the Council at Jerusalem: "It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses" (Acts 15:5). Circumcision assumed and demanded that the one circumcised would be obedient to the law (Galatians 5:3). The rich young ruler focused on the moral requirements of the law when he asked Jesus, "Good teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" (Mark 10:17). Paul, before his conversion, trusted in his circumcision on the eighth day as part of his hope of righteousness before God. The Scriptures frequently teach that the circumcision of the flesh is nothing (Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4; 9:25; Romans 2:28, 29; 1 Corinthians 7:19; and Galatians 5:6; 6:15) without a heart that has also been circumcised. Justification is neither through ceremonial works nor moral works of righteousness. Both are works of the law and have no part in our justification which is by faith alone.

James D. G. Dunn, a New Perspectives on Paul scholar, made the mistake of trying to distinguish between ceremonial works and moral works in his comment on Romans 3:28. He said that Paul was prohibiting ceremonial works, but not moral works:

His denial that justification is from works of law is, more precisely, a denial that justification depends on circumcision or on observation of the Jewish purity and food taboos. . . "Works of the law" are nowhere understood here, either by his Jewish interlocutors or by Paul himself, as works which earn God's favour, as merit-amassing observances. They are rather seen as badges: they are simply what membership of the covenant people involves, what mark out the Jews as God's people.¹⁰

Yet, John Murray, in his comment on Romans 3:28, describes why all works are excluded in the matter of justification by faith:

The only answer is the specific quality of faith as opposed to that of works. Justification by works always finds its ground in that which the person is and does; it is always oriented to that consideration of virtue

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The Federal Vision and Imputation

“The notion of [Jesus’] thirty-three years of Torah-keeping being imputed to me is problematic. . . These works were not accumulating points that would be credited to Jesus’ people; rather, they were vocation fulfilling acts that prepared the way for the ‘one Man’s righteous act,’ namely his death on the cross. . .

“The active obedience itself, then, is not saving in itself. Rather, it’s the precondition of his saving work in his death and resurrection.” ¹

—**Rich Lusk, a Federal Vision Proponent**

The doctrine of imputation in classic Reformed theology includes three things: the imputation of Adam’s sin to all his descendants, the imputation of the believer’s sin to Christ, and the imputation of the whole obedience of Christ (both active and passive) to the believer. The meaning of both the Hebrew and Greek words interpreted as “impute” is “to count, to reckon, to be counted, to be reckoned, to be charged to” someone. It means to reckon or count something to a person, whether or not it actually belongs to him. The meaning of the word, *impute*, is very important for a correct understanding of this doctrine. As James Buchanan wrote:

Most of the leading errors on the subject of Justification may be traced to obscure or defective views in regard to the nature or import of imputation, and have arisen from supposing—either that it consists in the infusion of moral qualities, in which case Justification is confounded with Sanctification—or that, in so far as imputation may be distinguished from such infusion, it is founded, at least, on the moral qualities which thus became inherent, in which case Justification has for its immediate ground a personal, and not a vicarious, righteousness.²

While the word imputation is used infrequently in Scripture, the idea is present in several passages where the word itself is not mentioned. We will examine some of those Scriptures later in this chapter. Most of the proponents of either the Federal Vision or the New Perspectives on Paul limit the imputation of Christ’s obedience to His passive obedience only—that is, His suffering and death. They deny that the righteousness of Christ, His active obedience, is imputed to believers. In the quote above, Lusk calls the imputation of Christ’s active obedience (what he refers to as Jesus’ Torah-keeping) “problematic.” The Federal Vision proponents adopt both of the errors mentioned above by Buchanan at one time or another. First, their doctrine of final justification denies the imputation of Christ’s righteousness and grounds justification on personal righteousness. Yet, personal righteousness is always subjective in nature, whether viewed from the Augustinian or Pelagian perspectives. It is either the work of subjective grace through the Holy Spirit or it is the subjective faithfulness of the individual. In that respect, the Federal Vision’s emphasis on the objectivity of the covenant is once again betrayed by their own version of subjectivism. Second, the

Federal Vision's interpretation of definitive sanctification confuses justification with sanctification similar to the following statement of the Council of Trent:

If anyone shall say, that men are justified either by the sole imputation of the righteousness of Christ, or by the sole remission of sin, to the exclusion of that grace and charity which is shed abroad in their hearts by the Holy Spirit, and which inheres in them, or shall say that grace whereby we are justified is merely and only the favor of God: let him be accursed.³

In the Scripture, the three imputations—Adam's sin to all his posterity, our sins to Christ, and Christ's righteousness to believers—are so intimately connected that the denial of one will eventually lead to the denial of the other two. Thus, saving faith in Christ requires us to assent to the idea of imputation even if the term is unfamiliar to us. For instance, a sinner in coming to Christ must acknowledge three things essential to saving faith: that he is a sinner by nature (the imputation of Adam's sin), that Christ has died for his sins (the imputation of Christ's passive righteousness), and that God accepts and accounts him as perfect through Christ alone (the imputation of Christ's active obedience). The denial by the Federal Vision of the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers is, therefore, not an intramural debate of little concern. It is a denial of one of the three foundational legs of the gospel. When the imputation of Christ's righteousness is denied, then His life of obedience becomes primarily an example for our own obedience. He profits us only by imitation, not by imputation, and our final justification is based on the totality of our lives, according to this system. That theory of final justification (which denies the imputation of the active obedience of Christ) limits the imputation of the passive obedience of Christ to past sins only; whereas the true doctrine is that Christ has died for all the sins of His people. Both those positions inevitably lead to a denial of the imputation of Adam's sin to his descendants in some degree or another. As the Puritan author, Thomas Watson, astutely observed:

The Pelagians of old held, that Adam's transgression is hurtful to posterity by imitation only, not by imputation. But the text, "In whom all have sinned," confutes that.⁴

George Smeaton, in *The Apostle's Doctrine of the Atonement*, says: The antithesis between our own righteousness and that which is

called the righteousness of God is different. It is between that which is subjective (our own) and that which is objective (God's).⁵

Thus, interestingly, the Federal Vision position is a repudiation of objective righteousness in favor of subjective righteousness. In this instance, the Federal Visionists are inconsistent with their own first principles. There are, indeed, both objective and subjective aspects of salvation. Both aspects are necessary for our salvation. The Federal Vision always misses the mark by emphasizing the wrong work of salvation at the wrong time. This mistake is endemic to the whole system. When they should emphasize the subjective work of the Spirit in working faith in the hearts of God's people, Federal Vision proponents emphasize the objectivity of the covenant in water baptism; when they should emphasize the objectivity of God's grace in the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers, they emphasize the subjective righteousness of the individual as the ultimate ground of his justification. Such errors are neither small nor immaterial.

Romans 5:12-21

It is necessary at the outset, therefore, to establish the fact that Adam's sin is indeed imputed to all his posterity. The whole system of the Federal Vision depends on a reframing of the doctrine of sin which permits people to fulfill the law for their own righteousness. The work of Christ is limited to forgiveness of sins and an example for our obedience. In his comments on Romans 5, Federal Visionist, Peter Leithart, patently denies that the active obedience of Christ is even a part of Paul's argument in that passage:

One could argue that verse 18 is a proof text against the imputation of active obedience, since it roots justification not in a series of acts of obedience during the life of Jesus but in a single act of righteousness in His death on the cross.⁶

Thus, Leithart limits the imputation of Christ's obedience to his death—not his life. John Murray, though, disagrees with such an interpretation of Romans 5:18 and further clarifies his point in his comments on both verses 18 and 19:

If the question be asked how the righteousness of Christ could be defined as "one righteous act", the answer is that the righteousness of Christ is regarded in its compact unity in parallelism with the one

trespass, and there is good reason for speaking of it as the one righteous act because, as the one trespass is the trespass of the one, so the one righteousness is the righteousness of the one and the unity of the person and of his accomplishment must always be assumed.⁷

Later in that commentary, Murray further elaborates:

Undoubtedly it was in the cross of Christ and in the shedding of his blood that this obedience came to its climactic expression, but obedience comprehends the totality of the Father's will as fulfilled by Christ.⁸

Romans 5:12-21 is one of the great passages of Scripture concerning the themes of the federal headships of Adam and Christ, the principle of imputation, and the objective side of salvation. Thus, it is bewildering when a system that claims to restore the objectivity of the covenant opposes the clear teaching of Scripture by rejecting the objective, forensic imputation of Christ's righteousness to His people. The Federal Vision is a misnomer because it is antagonistic to true federal theology. Instead of basing justification on "the totality of the Father's will as fulfilled by Christ" (which is objective), its advocates make it dependent on the totality of the life of the individual (which is subjective). Such inconsistency and contradiction is to be found throughout their whole system.

Centuries before the Federal Vision system was devised, Pelagius denied both the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers and the imputation of Adam's sin to his posterity in his commentary on Romans 5:

Adam became only the model for transgression, but Christ [both] forgave sins freely and gave an example of righteousness.⁹

Just as by the example of Adam's disobedience many sinned, so also many are justified by Christ's example.¹⁰

If Adam's sin injured those who have not sinned, then also Christ's righteousness profits those who do not believe.¹¹

In those comments, Pelagius manifests the logical connection between the denial of the imputation of Jesus' righteousness to believers, and the denial of the imputation of Adam's sin to all his descendants. If Christ's righteousness is not imputed to us, He is merely an example for our righteousness, even as Adam's sin was a bad example for us. One denial inevitably leads to the other. As Pelagius further comments on Christ's righteousness in his Romans commentary:

*How much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved in his life. If we have been saved by Christ's death, how much more shall we glory in his life, if we imitate it.*¹²

*Therefore just as through one person sin came into the world, and through sin death. By example or by pattern. Just as through Adam sin came at a time when it did not yet exist, so in the same way through Christ righteousness was recovered at a time when it survived in almost no one.*¹³

The history of Christian doctrine reveals that errors about imputation always lead back to some form of Pelagianism. This scene has been played out many times before. In that regard, Bernard of Clairvaux proved himself to be a much better theologian than the Federal Vision proponents by connecting all three imputations in the following quote:

When one sins, all are held to be guilty; shall the innocence be counted only for the one who is innocent? The sin of the one produced death for us all; shall the righteousness of the one restore life to one only? Is God's justice more able to condemn than to restore? Is Adam more powerful for evil than Christ for good? Will Adam's sin be imputed [imputabitur] to me and Christ's righteousness not pertain to me? Has the disobedience of the former ruined me, while the obedience of the latter will be of no benefit to me?¹⁴

He bore the punishment of our sin [peccati meritum] and gave us his righteousness by paying the debt of death and restoring life. . . . Death has been put to flight by death in Christ, and Christ's righteousness is imputed [imputatur] to us.¹⁵

The contrast throughout Romans 5:12-21 is between the imputation of Adam's sin which results in condemnation and the imputation of Christ's righteousness which results in justification of life. The Scripture clearly states that "through the obedience of the One *the many will be made righteous.*" Yet, the Federal Vision theory would turn that verse around to say "through the obedience of the One *the many are forgiven.*" The denial of the imputation of Christ's active obedience limits imputation to forgiveness of sins only. Yet, the clear teaching of Scripture in Romans 5 and other passages is against such a position.

2 Corinthians 5:21

The Federal Vision also denies the most important objective truths of

the covenant—particularly, the assumption by Christ of our covenant responsibilities to the works of the law. Such a view is contradicted by 2 Corinthians 5:21- “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” There is a curious inconsistency in the Federal Vision theology which proves it is wrong. Concerning the interpretation of 2 Corinthians 5:21, Smeaton writes:

In the same sense in which Christ was made sin—that is, objectively and by imputation—in that sense are His people made the righteousness of God.¹⁶

A true understanding of the objectivity of the covenant demands that the people of God are made the righteousness of God through the imputed righteousness of Christ to them. By denying the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, advocates of the Federal Vision are inconsistent with their own emphasis on the objectivity of the covenant. This point is clarified by Philip E. Hughes comment on 2 Corinthians 5:21:

It should be noted, further, that, just as Paul does not say that Christ was made sinful, but sin, for us, so also he does not say that in Him we are made righteous, as though henceforth untouched by sin, but *righteousness*, indeed, even more expressly, the righteousness of God—that righteousness, namely, which being, of God, is complete and inviolable forevermore. It is, in a word, the sinner’s *justification* of which the Apostle is speaking, whereby our trespasses are reckoned to Christ and the absolute and spotless perfection of His righteousness is reckoned to us, with the consequence that “there is now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). Justification, indeed, does not preclude sanctification, whereby the believer increasingly becomes that which judicially he already is; on the contrary, justification presupposes sanctification; and the two become one at last in the consummating experience of glorification. But meanwhile they must be kept distinct, since the former is instantaneous and complete, while the latter is gradual and progressive. And both are in Christ our Righteousness.¹⁷

Charles Hodge, commenting on the same verse, shows that the way in which Christ was made sin for us was by being a sin offering; in dying in our place. As he said:

The only sense in which we are made the righteousness of God is that we are in Christ regarded and treated as righteous, and therefore, the

sense in which he was made sin, is that he was regarded and treated as a sinner. His being made sin is consistent with his being in himself free from sin; and our being made righteous is consistent with our being in ourselves ungodly. In other words, our sins were imputed to Christ, and his righteousness is imputed to us.¹⁸

John Calvin likewise commented on this passage:

How can we become righteous before God? In the same way Christ became a sinner. For He took, as it were, our person, that He might be the offender in our name and thus might be reckoned a sinner, not because of His own offences but because of those of others, since He Himself was pure and free from every fault and bore the penalty that was our due and not His own. Now in the same way we are righteous in Him, not because we have satisfied God's judgment by our own works, but because we are judged in relation to Christ's righteousness which we have put on by faith, that it may become our own.¹⁹

Zechariah 3:1-5

The most beautiful illustration of the two parts of justification in the Old Testament is found in Zechariah 3:1-5. In that passage, Satan accuses Joshua, the high priest, of his unfitness to be a priest due to the filthy garments he is wearing; whereas, the law required priests to wear holy garments, for glory and beauty. The angel of the Lord tells those surrounding Joshua to remove the filthy garments from him and to clothe him with festal robes and a clean turban. In removing the filthy garments, the angel tells Joshua, "See, I have taken your iniquity from you and will clothe you with festal robes" (Zechariah 3:4b). The filthy garments represented his sin and the festal robes represented the righteousness that was given to him or imputed to him. There was a perfect exchange which completely mirrors the work of Christ for our salvation. Sin is taken away and righteousness is given. Thomas V. Moore commented on this passage:

Then to show that it was not their righteousness but another's that was the ground of their acceptance, and that it was not to encourage them in sin, but to remove it, the divine angel commanded, v. 4, that these filthy garments (the symbol of sin) should be removed, and, festal robes (the symbol of imputed righteousness) should be put on him, thus setting forth the great and consoling doctrine of a gratuitous justification because of the merits of the Redeemer.²⁰

PCA minister, Richard Phillips, makes a similar comment on this passage in his excellent commentary on Zechariah:

The angel of the Lord did not infuse righteousness—or anything else—into Joshua. He did not give him grace over a certain period of time in which he could clean up his own act. Instead, the Scripture depicts an imputed righteousness, a glorious garment that is the gift of God, bestowed by abounding grace apart from merit and prior to any improvement in the individual. What the angel bestowed was not a righteousness achieved by Joshua but the righteousness of another—what Reformed theologians call an alien righteousness—the righteousness of Jesus Christ in all his glorious perfection.²¹

Philippians 3:9

The final Scripture we will consider is Philippians 3:9 in which Paul contrasts his former life as a Pharisee with his present faith in Christ. That verse says, “And may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith.” Buchanan’s comments on this verse are insightful:

The two righteousnesses are not only distinct, but different; and not only different, but directly opposed, and mutually exclusive, considered as grounds of Justification; insomuch that he who is justified by one, cannot possibly be justified by the other. If the righteousness of man be sufficient, the righteousness of God is superfluous; if the righteousness of God be necessary, the righteousness of man can have no place. Nor can any conciliation or compromise be effected between them, so as to admit of their being combined in one complex ground of acceptance; for they represent two methods of Justification which are irreconcilably opposed,—the one by grace, the other by works.²²

The only possible way to understand what Paul means in Philippians 3:9 is through the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to believers. Paul contrasts personal righteousness according to the law with the alien righteousness of Christ imputed to those who receive it through faith. The righteousness whereby Paul is found in Christ cannot be and is not his own works of righteousness. Christ’s righteousness is not a mere example to us of how to live righteously, but it becomes the righteousness of every believer.

The Westminster Assembly and Imputation

There are some scholars who assert that the Westminster Standards do not require belief in the imputation of Christ's active obedience. They say that the Westminster divines reached a consensus concerning the imputation of Christ's righteousness which permitted those members, particularly Richard Vines and Thomas Gataker, to agree to its language while denying that the active obedience of Christ is imputed to believers. One such contemporary author is William Barker who wrote on this very point:

The Westminster Divines, in such controversies, sought to be clear and faithful to Scriptural language, yet to allow for shades of difference within a generic Calvinism.²³

Yet, Barker also acknowledged that the Westminster Standards still clearly teach the imputation of the active obedience of Christ to believers. Thus, he opined only that the Westminster divines allowed for differences on this point. James R. Daniel Kirk is another contemporary author who concluded that the deletion of the word "whole" in the final version of chapter eleven of the Westminster Confession of Faith indicates that there was allowance for "a range of views with respect to the precise nature of Christ's righteousness."²⁴ Westminster Confession of Faith 11.1 says:

Those whom God effectually calleth, he also freely justifieth; not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone; nor by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them, as their righteousness; but by imputing the [*whole*] obedience and satisfaction of God unto them, they receiving and resting on him and his righteousness, by faith; which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God. (The word whole is in italics and enclosed in brackets to indicate that it was removed in the final version of this section.)

Those who claim that the deletion of the word "whole" in the final version indicates that the Assembly consciously accommodated views that denied the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers are making an argument based on silence that is contradicted both by this section and other parts of the Westminster Standards. This section of the Confession clearly states that evangelical obedi-

ence is not imputed to the believer for his righteousness. Yet, those who deny the imputation of Christ's righteousness—such as Richard Baxter, Albert Barnes, N. T. Wright, and the Federal Vision proponents—invariably teach that one's own evangelical obedience is imputed to them as their righteousness. It would have taken more than the mere deletion of the word "whole" for the Westminster Assembly to accommodate that view. Thus, Jeffrey K. Jue in "The Active Obedience of Christ and the Theology of the Westminster Standards: A Historical Investigation"²⁵ concluded that there is no evidence that the Westminster divines reached a consensus to accommodate those who denied the imputation of the active obedience of Christ. Indeed, as Jue says:

Placing the doctrine of justification within the Westminster Standards as a whole reveals a distinct and consistent theological system that does not comport with the system of theology presented by Vines and Gataker, which includes their "passive obedience only" doctrine of justification.²⁶

Other members of the Westminster Assembly pushed back from the positions of Vines and Gataker concerning Christ's active obedience. Peter Smith, a Westminster Assembly commissioner from Barkway, Hertfordshire, England, interpreted Romans 5:12-21 as follows:

By the "righteousness of the one" must be understood the active obedience of Christ, & the reason is because the word is frequently taken, especially in the Old Testament, for the morall law . . . Ther is a communication in the workes of Christ, his active and passive obedience.²⁷

In fact, the Westminster Assembly's Larger and Shorter Catechisms very clearly state that it is both the obedience and satisfaction that is imputed to believers. The answer to the Shorter Catechism Question #33 says:

Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.

The Larger Catechism #70 is even more direct in attributing justification to the imputation of Christ's righteousness:

Justification is an act of God's free grace unto sinners, in which he pardoneth all their sins, accepteth and accounteth their persons righteous in his sight; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them,

but only for the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ, by God imputed to them, and received by faith alone.

The Larger Catechism specifically rejects the heresies of both the Council of Trent (“anything wrought in them”) and Pelagius (“or done by them”), while affirming that the perfect obedience of Christ is imputed to believers as their righteousness in Christ and is received by faith alone. Since the Catechisms (1647) were written after the Confession was completed (1646), the argument that the Westminster divines arrived at a consensus to accommodate the views of Twisse, Gataker, and Vines and to allow for the denial of the active obedience of Christ cannot be seriously entertained. In the Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter 11, sections 1 and 2, the words “obedience and satisfaction,” and “obedience and death” must be taken to mean the active and passive obedience of Christ. Any attempt to make the Westminster Confession mean something else is an argument based on silence in light of the clear teaching of the Assembly’s catechisms on the imputation of Christ’s righteousness.

Imputation of Christ’s Righteousness in Other Reformed Symbols

Other Reformed creeds, both before and after the Westminster Confession of Faith, emphasize that justification is through the whole righteousness of Christ. For instance, the Belgic Confession of 1561 said:

However, to speak more clearly, we do not mean that faith itself justifies us, for it is only an instrument with which we embrace Christ our Righteousness. But Jesus Christ, imputing to us all his merits, and so many holy works, which he hath done for us and in our stead, is our Righteousness.²⁸

The French Confession of 1559 also emphasized what we denominate as the active and passive righteousness of Christ:

We therefore reject all other means of justification before God, and without claiming any virtue or merit, we rest simply in the obedience of Jesus Christ, which is imputed to us as much to blot our sins as to make us find grace and favor in the sight of God.²⁹

The answer to question #60 of the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) also affirms that both the active and passive obedience of Christ are imputed to the believer:

God, without any merit of mine, of mere free grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never committed nor had any sin, and had myself accomplished all the obedience which Christ has fulfilled for me, if only I accept such benefit with a believing heart.³⁰

The Second Helvetic Confession of 1566, written by Heinrich Bullinger, is very clear concerning the imputation of both our sins to Christ and His righteousness to us, as seen in Chapter 15, section 3:

To speak properly, then, it is God alone justifieth us, and that only for Christ, by not imputing unto us our sins, but imputing Christ's righteousness unto us.³¹

The Savoy Declaration of 1658 states in Chapter 11, section 1 that both the active and passive obedience of Christ are imputed to believers. The London Confession of Faith in 1689 and the Philadelphia Confession of Faith of 1688 adopted the exact language of the Savoy Declaration concerning the active and passive obedience of Christ. Moreover, even the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England of 1562 stated:

We are accounted righteous before God, only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by Faith, and not for our own works or deservings.³²

The Lutheran Formula of Concord also affirms the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers:

For he bestows and imputes to us the righteousness of the obedience of Christ; for the sake of that righteousness we are received by God into favor and accounted righteous.³³

Generic Calvinism as expressed in the various Reformed creeds both before and after the Westminster Assembly is very clear that imputation includes both our sins to Christ and His righteousness to us. No Reformed creed, including the Westminster Standards, ever denies the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers. There is a unanimous consensus in the Reformed symbols concerning the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer that undercuts any attempt to interpret the Westminster Confession of Faith in opposition to this doctrine.

Richard Baxter's Neonomianism

Richard Baxter, the author of such great works as *The Saints' Ever-*

lasting Rest, A Call to the Unconverted, and The Reformed Pastor, served the church well in the area of practical theology, but was greatly deficient in the area of systematic theology. Baxter agreed with the views of Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), a Dutch jurist who laid the foundation for international law, that God did not require the law to be satisfied by Christ, but changed it into a new law with easier terms. This new law became known as Neonomianism. Baxter himself was aware that his theology would cause others to accuse him of heresy as he noted in his *Aphorisms of Justification*:

I know this is the Doctrine that will have the loudest Out-cries raised against it; and will make some cry out, *Heresy, Popery, Socinianism!* and what not! For my own part, the Searcher of Hearts knoweth, that not singularity, Affectation of Novelty, nor any Good-will to Popery, provoketh me to entertain it: But that I have earnestly sought the Lord's Direction upon my knees, before I durst adventure on it.³⁴

Baxter needed to do more than earnestly seek the Lord's directions on his knees. He needed to base everything on the only touchstone of faith—the infallible Word of God. His failure to do so led him to take a position denying the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers. Rather, his position was that the believer's own works are the righteousness which meet the demands of God's new covenant. As he wrote:

As it is beyond Doubt that Christ will then justify Men according to their Works: So 'tis evident, that this is not only to discover the Sincerity of their Faith; but that it is also, as they are Parts of that evangelical Righteousness, which is the condition of their Justification.³⁵

Thus, Baxter conceived that justification was based partly on Christ's satisfaction for our sins and partly on our own works. Such a legal strain, in its reaction to Antinomianism, "at a later stage showed itself to be full-blown Moderatism."³⁶ This tendency of legalism towards Moderatism or Liberalism has also been noted by Packer and Machen. Baxter's work was both a reaction against antinomianism and an effort to remove the supposed advantages of the Papists in the matter of justification. One of those advantages of the Papists, according to Baxter, was the insistence by Protestants on the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers. The result of neonomianism was "so much of a return to Roman doctrine [that] it looked as if in the last resort Paul must be saved from himself."³⁷ As Macleod observes:

This reaction was found not only in the High Church Sacramentarian school of the Anglicans, which was Arminian in its cast of thought, but also in that wing of Nonconformity which held itself most aloof from the extreme of an Antinomian tendency.³⁸

VARIOUS ERRORS CONCERNING IMPUTATION

1. Limiting Justification to Pardon

The Westminster Standards (Westminster Confession of Faith 11:1; Larger Catechism Q # 70; Shorter Catechism Q # 33) teach that there are two parts of justification; pardon and acceptance. Pardon is more aligned with the passive obedience of Christ and acceptance with the active obedience. The ground of our acceptance is through Christ alone—not through our own works. The Federal Vision proponents reduce justification to pardon for sin only with acceptance being contingent on God’s future verdict that their lives have been righteous. For instance, Leithart leaves out our acceptance through the righteousness of Christ when he defines justification:

Justification is, you’re justified from sin. Sin is being pictured as an external enslaving power. And that’s what we’re delivered from.”³⁹

It is interesting that Leithart also reduces sin to an “external enslaving power,” whereas the Scripture describes it as a matter of the heart first of all. When sin is externalized, the natural result is that it is defined in terms of actions only. That is a very Pelagian construction of sin. If sin is externalized, then it also means that the heart of man does not need a spiritual renovation. Thus, the way is opened for the Federal Vision’s theory of a final justification based on one’s personal obedience. Yet, final justification is unnecessary since a scriptural definition of justification also includes our acceptance in Christ. As Jonathan Edwards said:

God doth in the sentence of justification pronounce a sinner perfectly righteous, or else he would need a further justification after he is justified.⁴⁰

Albert Barnes, who was convicted of heresy in 1837 by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, similarly reduced justification to pardon and dismissed acceptance through the imputation of Christ’s righteousness:

It is not that *his* righteousness becomes ours. This is not true; and there is no intelligible sense in which that can be understood. But it is God's plan for *pardon*ing sin, and for *treating us* as if we had not committed it.⁴¹

Sometimes it is wrongly alleged that Calvin limited justification to pardon and did not consider the matter of the imputation of righteousness of Christ to the believer. Those who make such assertions are guilty of quoting the great Reformer out of context. In his commentary on Romans, Calvin made the following statement about chapter 8, verse 30:

Justification might quite well be extended to include the continuation of the divine favour from the time of the calling of the believer to his death. But because Paul uses this word throughout the Epistle for the unmerited imputation of righteousness, there is no necessity for us to depart from this meaning.⁴²

Then again in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin said: On the contrary, justified by faith is he who, excluded from the righteousness of works, grasps the righteousness of Christ through faith, and clothed in it, appears in the God's sight, not as a sinner, but as a righteous man.⁴³

2. Limiting Imputation to the Verdict or Effects

In one of his statements, Leithart reduced the imputation of either the active or passive obedience to the effects or the verdict only:

There is no "independent" imputation of the active obedience of Christ, nor even of the passive obedience for that matter; we are regarded as righteous, and Christ's righteousness is reckoned as ours, because of our union with Him in His resurrection. What is imputed is the verdict, *not the actions of Jesus*.⁴⁴

That is an old error. The New Divinity theologians, Albert Barnes and Charles Finney, made the same distinction about imputation, to which Archibald Alexander replied as follows:

Some have attempted to evade the doctrine [of the imputation of Christ's righteousness], by alleging that not the righteousness of Christ, but its effects are imputed to us. They who talk thus do not seem to understand what they say. It must be by the imputation of the righteousness that the good effects are derived to us; but the imputation of the effects cannot be. What we are inquiring after is the reason why these blessings become ours. It cannot be on account of our own

righteousness; it must be on account of the righteousness of Christ. How does this righteousness avail to obtain for us pardon and justification and peace with God? The answer is by imputation; that is, it is set down to our credit. God accepts it on our behalf; yea, he bestows it upon us. If there is any such thing as imputation, it must be of the righteousness of Christ itself, and the benefits connected with salvation flow from this imputation. The righteousness of Christ can only justify us, by being imputed to us.⁴⁵

Faustus Socinus and his followers, the Socinians, also asserted that imputation is limited to the effects or benefits. Whereas the Papists taught an infused righteousness instead of an imputed righteousness, John Owen noted that the Socinians denied such imputation:

The Socinians, who expressly oppose the imputation of the righteousness of Christ, plead for a participation of its effects or benefits only.⁴⁶

Thus, the Federal Vision advocates have unwittingly taken up the mantle of Socinianism by reducing imputation to the effects or benefits or verdict of Christ. In their overemphasis on the objectivity of the covenant, they have deftly avoided the errors of Rome, but they have been captured by the errors of Pelagius and Socinius instead.

3. Asserting Jesus Had to Obey the Law for Himself

Under direct examination at his trial, Leithart further summarized his position concerning Jesus' obedience:

What I've described—what I've described as the prosecution has quoted is based on Romans 4:25 that Jesus' resurrection is his own justification before the Father. Jesus is raised from the dead as a declaration to the world that this is the righteous son of the Father.⁴⁷

This is the position of Norman Shepherd and others in the Federal Vision/ New Perspectives on Paul camp. Yet, Romans 4:25 says: "He was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification." Jesus was raised for *our* justification—not for *His* justification. By making Jesus' resurrection about His own justification, the Federal Vision also says that Jesus was responsible to obey the law for Himself just like other men. For instance, Leithart says:

Yes, we do have the same obligation that Adam (and Abraham, and Moses, and David and Jesus) had, namely the obedience of faith.⁴⁸

That is a position taken by Charles G. Finney, who also denied the

imputation of Christ's righteousness and said Jesus was obligated to obey the law:

Jesus Christ was bound to obey the law for himself and could no more perform works of supererogation or obey on our account than anybody else.⁴⁹

Yet, the Scripture is clear that Jesus voluntarily obeyed the law for us and laid down His life for us. (Cf. John 10:18; Psalm 40:6-8.) If Jesus was "obligated" to obey the law, then He did not do it willingly, voluntarily, and with authority over his death. As David Dickson says:

The Son of God incarnate becomes voluntarily, a very capable, discreet, ready, and obedient servant to the Father for us.⁵⁰

A. A. Hodge gives the true position concerning the voluntary nature of Christ's atonement:

Christ, although a man, was a divine person, and therefore never personally subject to the Adamic covenant of works. He was essentially righteous, but he was *made under the law* as our representative, and his obedience under the *voluntarily assumed conditions of his earthly life* was purely vicarious.⁵¹

Faustus Socinus, and the Socinians, held the same position as Leithart and Finney concerning the voluntary nature of Christ's sacrifice, as John Owen writes:

He [Socinus] supposeth, that if all he did in a way of obedience, was due from himself on his own account, and was only the duty which he owed unto God for himself in his station and circumstances, as a man in this world, it cannot be meritorious for us, nor any way imputed to us.⁵²

For Socinus, this false principle became the channel by which he denied the divinity of Christ. Owen proved Christ could not have been "under the law" to obey it for Himself, since He is both God and man.⁵³ Christ assumed human nature for His people—not for Himself. He obeyed the law for His people—not for Himself. Nonetheless, the Socinians twisted scriptural terms to their own sense. As James Buchanan says concerning the Socinians:

While they hold a sinner's justification to be his own personal repentance and reformation, they taught, nevertheless, that, in their own sense of the terms, he is "justified freely by grace,"—that he is "justified by faith,"—that he is justified by means "of the death of Christ,"—and that his faith, repentance, and obedience are not the meritorious or procuring causes of his pardon and acceptance, but simply the con-

ditions on which the enjoyment of these blessings depends.⁵⁴

Proponents of the Federal Vision deny the imputation of Christ's righteousness while contending that a sinner is justified by grace or through faith. The only basis for gratuitous salvation is the imputation of both Christ's active and passive obedience, but the Federal Vision denies the imputation of Christ's righteousness. Thereby, they join league with such heresies as those promoted by Catholicism, Pelagius, Socinus, Barnes, Finney, and others.

Summary

One of the doctrines that the Federal Vision most virulently opposes is the imputation of Christ's righteousness or His active obedience. In so doing, the Federal Vision advocates place their position outside the Reformed tradition of the Reformed symbols. Though there were a few members of the Westminster Assembly who denied the imputation of Christ's active obedience, their views were not adopted by the Assembly. All the Reformed creeds and confessions clearly teach the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers. Moreover, this doctrine is clearly taught in several Scripture passages.

Conclusion

Calvinism, in its creeds and through its greatest theologians, has always upheld the three imputations of Scripture—Adam's sin to his posterity, our sins to Christ, and Christ's righteousness to believers. There are those in the broader Reformed community who have differed from these views, but their opinions have universally been rejected by Reformed judicatories and have never been incorporated in the Reformed creeds. Scriptural soteriology depends on a correct understanding of imputation. Whenever and wherever the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believers is denied, it has led to heretical opinions concerning salvation. The Scripture, the Reformed creeds, and the greatest Reformed theologians are all opposed to the limiting of imputation to Christ's passive obedience only or to the *effects* of Christ's active obedience—without the imputation of the same.

Endnotes: Chapter 15

- ¹ Calvin Beisner, ed., Rich Lusk, "A Response to 'The Biblical Plan for Salvation'" in *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros and Cons: Debating the Federal Vision* (Fort Lauderdale, Florida: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004), 140.
- ² James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1961), 337.
- ³ William G. T. Shedd, *A History of Christian Doctrine*, Volume II (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1877), 325.
- ⁴ Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1970), 143.
- ⁵ George Smeaton, *The Apostles' Doctrine of the Atonement* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1957), 113.
- ⁶ Record of the Case, Standing Judicial Commission of the Presbyterian Church in America, Case 2012-5, RE Gerald Hedman vs. Pacific Northwest Presbytery, 217.
- ⁷ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Vol 1, Two volumes in one, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), 201-2.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 205.
- ⁹ Theodore De Bruyn, trans., *Pelagius' Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1993), 95.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ Philip Schaff, ed., Peter Holmes and Robert Ernest Wallis, trans., Saint Augustin, *Anti-Pelagian Writings*, Volume V of *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 245.
- ¹² De Bruyn, *Pelagius' Commentary on Romans*, 92.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ Anthony N. S. Lane, *Bernard of Clairvaux: Theologian of the Cross* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2013), 71.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.
- ¹⁶ Smeaton, *Apostles' Doctrine of the Atonement*, 113.
- ¹⁷ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), 214.
- ¹⁸ Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970), 148-9.
- ¹⁹ T. A. Smail, trans., David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, eds., John Calvin, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), 81-2.
- ²⁰ Thomas V. Moore, *A Commentary on Zechariah* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1968), 65.
- ²¹ Richard D. Phillips, *Zechariah*, (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2007), 70-1.
- ²² Buchanan, *Doctrine of Justification*, 330.

Chapter 15: Imputation

²³ William S. Barker, *Puritan Profiles: 54 Influential Puritans at the Time When the Westminster Confession of Faith was Written* (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor/Christian Focus Publications, 1996), 176.

²⁴ James R. Daniel Kirk, "The Sufficiency of the Cross," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* (2006), 37-38.

²⁵ K. Scott Oliphant, editor, *Justified in Christ: God's plan for us in Justification* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2007), 99-130.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 128.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 122.

²⁸ Philip Schaff, ed., David S. Schaff, rev., *The Creeds of Christendom*, Volume III, *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1983), 408.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 370.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 326.

³¹ Peter Hall, *The Harmony of Protestant Confessions: Exhibiting the Faith of the Churches of Christ, Reformed After the Pure and Holy Doctrine of the Gospel* (Edmonton, Alberta, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, 1992), 149.

³² Schaff, *Creeds*, Volume III, 494.

³³ *Ibid.*, 116.

³⁴ Richard Baxter, *An Extract of Mr. Richard Baxter's Aphorisms of Justification* (Newcastle upon Tyne, England: John Gooding, 1745), 31.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

³⁶ John MacLeod, *Scottish Theology in Relation to Church History Since the Reformation* (Edinburgh, Scotland and Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 111.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 139.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 140.

³⁹ Record of the Case, Standing Judicial Commission, Case 2012-5, 520.

⁴⁰ James Wood, *Old and New Theology* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1845), 149.

⁴¹ McLeod, *Scottish Theology*, 143.

⁴² David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, eds., Ross MacKenzie, trans., *Calvin's Commentaries: The Epistle to the Romans and Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), 182.

⁴³ John T. McNeill, ed., Ford Lewis Battles, trans., *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Volume I (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967), 726-7.

⁴⁴ Record of the Case, Standing Judicial Commission, Case 2012-5, 79.

⁴⁵ Wood, *Old and New Theology*, 152-153.

⁴⁶ William H. Goold, ed., *The Works of John Owen*, Volume V (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), 174.

⁴⁷ Record of the Case, Standing Judicial Commission, Case 2012-5, 478-479.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 78-79.

⁴⁹ Lewis Cheeseman, *Differences between Old School and New School Presbyterians* (Rochester, New York: Erastus Darrow, 1848), 57.

⁵⁰ David Dickson, *A Commentary on the Psalms* (Edinburgh, Scotland and Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1995), 223.

⁵¹ A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1972), 415.

⁵² Wood, *Old and New Theology*, 137.

⁵³ W. H. Goold, ed., *The Works of John Owen*, Volume V (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), 253-257.

⁵⁴ Buchanan, *Doctrine of Justification*, 177.

quirement for all male sons (Leviticus 12:3). Romans 3:28 sets the stage for Paul's argument in Romans 4:9-15, that Abraham received the righteousness through faith before receiving the sign of circumcision. Circumcision is a work of the law and assumes that the one circumcised will be obedient to the law. For instance, William Cunningham wrote in *Historical Theology*:

The natural enmity of the human heart to the principles and plans of the divine procedure in regard to the salvation of sinners . . . has appeared in two different forms: first, a tendency to rely for the forgiveness of sin and the enjoyment of God's favour upon what men themselves are, or can do; and, secondly, a tendency to rely upon the intervention and assistance of other men or creatures, and upon outward ordinances. Heathenism exhibited both; and the corrupted Judaism of our Saviour's days,—the prevailing party of the Pharisees,—exhibited both. The Sadducees of the apostolic days, and the Socinian and the rationalistic, or the semi-infidel, forms of professed Christianity in modern times, have exhibited only the first of these tendencies, in different degrees of grossness, on the one hand, or plausibility, on the other; while Popery, like heathenism and corrupted Judaism, exhibits, a combination of both.¹⁶

Legalism always assumes at least one of these forms of works salvation and often assumes both. Legalism is a denial of the Gospel whereas antinomianism is a denial of the law. The ancient Sadducees, who were the archetypes of rationalism and liberalism, agreed with the Pharisees about salvation through works of morality but parted from them concerning salvation by religious rites and ceremonies. The Federal Vision, by emphasizing nomism and sacramentalism, assumes both forms of works salvation. It teaches that salvation is bestowed according to works of moral righteousness (covenantal nomism) and according to works of sacramental / ceremonial righteousness (baptism in particular). The Judaizers also always believed in both forms of works salvation—as did Pelagius, as does Rome, etc.

Works salvation, or legalism, has always been the greatest plague to the true gospel in the history of the church. Some branches of the church have tended toward the sacramental aspect of works—Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and to a lesser extent, Lutheranism and Anglicanism.

concerning apostasy places its system of thought squarely in line with Catholic theology on the matter.

Hebrews 6:1-12

Several passages of Scripture that touch on the subject of apostasy have been hotly debated by Calvinists on the one hand and Pelagians or Arminians on the other hand. In every instance, the Federal Vision proponents champion the Pelagian, Semi-Pelagian, or Arminian interpretation of those passages in opposition to the Reformed position. In Hebrews 6:4-6, the author of that epistle describes how close to a saving relationship with Christ some professors of faith had come before falling away to utter damnation. He says concerning those who “have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them to repentance” (Hebrews 6:6). John Brown comments on this verse:

By “falling away,” we are plainly to understand what is commonly called apostasy. This does not consist in an occasional falling into actual sin, however gross and aggravated; nor in the renunciation of some of the principles of Christianity, even though these should be of considerable importance; but in an open, total, determined renunciation of all the constituent principles of Christianity, and a return to a false religion, such as that of the unbelieving Jews or heathens, or to determined infidelity and ungodliness.⁵

In Hebrews 6:9, the author describes genuine converts in a different way: “But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation.” Those better things that accompany salvation indicate clearly that there are temporary operations of the Holy Spirit that do *not* accompany salvation? Those temporary operations were mentioned by the author of Hebrews in verses 4 to 6 of the sixth chapter. Yet, Steve Wilkins and Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church in Monroe, Louisiana dismiss the Reformed interpretation of Hebrews 6 with the following statement:

The question raised does not concern the nature of the grace received in the past (i.e. real regeneration vs. merely common operations of the Spirit), but whether or not the one who has received this grace will persevere. Thus, the solution to Heb. 6 is not developing two psychologies of conversion, one for the “truly regenerate” and one for the future apostate, and then introspecting to see which kind of grace one has received. This is a task beyond our competence. The solution is to

Romans 8:16

True assurance of salvation must embrace both the work of Christ for us and the work of the Spirit in us. While there is an overly subjective emphasis among some Christian groups, the subjective side of salvation and assurance cannot be denied without peril. The Scripture itself emphasizes the subjective side of assurance. For instance, Paul says in Romans 8:16, “The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God.” Charles Hodge said concerning this passage:

Beareth witness to, means confirms or assures. “The Spirit of God produces in our spirit the assurance that we are children of God.” How this is done we cannot fully understand, any more than we can understand the mode in which he produces any other effect in our mind. The fact is clearly asserted here, as well as in other passages. See Rom. v. 5, where the conviction that we are the objects of the love of God, is said to be produced “by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.” See 2 Cor. i. 22, v. 5; Eph. i. 13, iv. 30; and in 1 Cor. ii. 4,5; 1 John ii. 20, 27, and other passages, the conviction of the truth of the gospel is, in like manner, attributed to the Holy Spirit. From this passage it is clear that there is a scriptural foundation for the assurance of salvation. Those who have filial feelings towards God, who love him, and believe that he loves them, and to whom the Spirit witnesses that they are the children of God, cannot doubt that they are indeed his children. And if children, they know they are his heirs, as the apostle teaches in the following verses.³

In those words, Hodge mentions several things which are subjective in nature as being proofs to the believer that he is a child of God—the conviction produced by the Holy Spirit that we are objects of His love, the conviction of the truth of the gospel through the Holy Spirit, filial feelings towards God, the love for God, and the assurance that God loves us. All of these subjective experiences are supported by Romans 8:16 and several other passages in the Bible mentioned by Hodge. A denial of the subjective aspect of assurance is patently unscriptural and ultimately leads to a denial of assurance altogether. Thus, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones could say concerning Romans 8:16:

This is, beyond any question, one of the most glorious statements concerning Christian experience found anywhere in the Bible from beginning to end. Nothing is more important from the standpoint of enjoying our great salvation. If it can be said that any one verse constitutes the hallmark of the evangelical Christian, I would say that it is

In contradiction to the Scripture and the Shorter Catechism, the Federal Vision separates perseverance from the other benefits supposedly bestowed through baptismal efficacy. This new position on perseverance allows the Federal Vision adherents to hold to the apostasy of those they assume to be truly united with Christ. Leithart, therefore, gives a typical Federal Vision perspective on perseverance:

I do believe that some are united to Christ yet do not persevere (John 15). During the time they are branches in the vine, they do receive benefits from Christ through the Spirit and may enjoy real, personal, and deep communion with Jesus for a time.¹²

No matter how often they revise their position to make it seem more consistent, their system still contradicts the Scriptures and the Westminster Standards. Their present position is that there are two groups of people who both enjoy “real, personal, and deep communion with Jesus.” Some enjoy those benefits for all eternity, if they persevere. Others enjoy those benefits only “for a time,” if they fail to persevere. For the Federal Vision adherents, perseverance does not so much evidence a true union with Christ as that it simply makes that true union last.

Various Views of Perseverance

The error of the Federal Vision concerning perseverance is similar to Arminianism, Lutheranism, and Catholicism. A. A. Hodge described the Arminian doctrine on perseverance as follows:

It is an inseparable part of the Arminian system, flowing necessarily from their views of election, of the design and effect of Christ's death, and of sufficient grace and free will, that those who were once justified and regenerated may, by neglecting grace and grieving the Holy Spirit, fall into such sins as are inconsistent with true justifying faith, and continuing and dying in the same, may consequently finally fall into perdition.—“Confession of the Remonstrants,” xi.7. The Lutherans and the Arminians agree on this point. They both believe that the “elect” (those whom God has chosen to eternal life because he has certainly foreseen their perseverance in faith and obedience to the end) can not finally apostatize. The true question between them and the Calvinists, therefore, is not whether the “elect”, but whether those who once were truly “regenerate and justified” can finally apostatize and perish.¹³

The certainty of persevering grace for all of God's elect is a cornerstone doctrine of the Reformed faith, but it is in conflict with the doctrine of final justification. Perseverance must inevitably be conditional—uncertain, not certain—in such a scheme. Thus, final justification requires that perseverance be qualified with an “if.” According to the Federal Vision, if a person perseveres in faithfulness he will be saved. If he fails to persevere, he will be lost. There are no “ifs” in the unconditional election of God's grace.

Assessment of Final Justification

Therefore, more is at stake in this debate with the Federal Vision than mere quibbling over semantics. The Federal Vision denies justification by faith alone in its doctrine of final justification. That denial necessarily involves the Federal Vision system in heretical views concerning all the doctrines of salvation. Augustine saw this issue very clearly in his writings against the Pelagians and he stated:

For “If righteousness come by nature, then Christ is dead in vain.” If, however, Christ did not die in vain, in Him only is the ungodly man justified, and to him, on believing in Him who justifies the ungodly, faith is reckoned for righteousness. . .

When, however, the Pelagians say that the only grace which is not given according to our merits is that whereby his sins are forgiven to man, but that which is given in the end, that is, eternal life, is rendered to our preceding merits: they must not be allowed to go without an answer.²

Augustine saw clearly that if the Pelagian theory of a justification based on works at the end of life was true, then it rendered the gospel and the work of Christ meaningless. Likewise, John Owen, in his masterly work on the doctrine of justification by faith, clearly denied that there is any second or subsequent justification to the one justification by faith alone which is once-for-all. Owen acknowledged that there is a manifestation and declaration of our justification at the final judgment but he denied the Roman Catholic doctrine of a double justification:

Yet, is it not a *second justification*: for it depends wholly on the *visible effects* of that faith whereby we are justified, as the apostle James instructs us; yet is it only one single justification before God, evidenced and declared, unto his glory, the benefit of others, and increase of our own reward. . .

In the introduction to *The Federal Vision*, Steve Wilkins makes the following promise:

By putting forth this collection, we do not intend to make a bad situation worse. We have not (and never will) fling charges of heresy against our brothers who disagree with our position. We refuse to do this because such charges are totally unwarranted.²

Yet, the various authors of that symposium make a number of general accusations of heresy against those who differ with the Federal Vision. It is certainly true that there are no charges of heresy against specific individuals, but there are numerous charges of heresy in general. The opponents of the Federal Vision are accused of becoming as Romish as could be in their zeal to avoid Romanism; James Jordan accuses the covenant of works scheme of being “Pelagian in character”³; of holding to tradition even more than Catholicism; of being guilty of experientialism; of using the same hermeneutic in interpreting the Scripture as liberals do; of forcing a system of theology on the Scriptures; and, especially, of being Gnostics. This last charge is pervasive in the writings of the proponents of the Federal Vision, as well as those of N. T. Wright, but all these charges are serious and put the lie to Wilkins’ quote above. They not only will fling charges of heresy against their opponents; they will do so early and often.

Key Assessment: The Federal Vision accuses most of Christianity, especially Reformed Christianity, of the Gnostic heresy, while warning others not to charge them with any heresies.

The Federal Vision proponents often lecture others not to call them heretics. It would certainly be wrong to fling the charge of heresy against anyone who holds to the orthodoxy of the Scripture, but the Scripture also warns us that there are heretics in the church.

Several of the New Testament epistles were written to combat the various heresies besieging the first-century church, particularly Gnosticism. Philip Schaff, the great church historian, is undoubtedly correct in saying that the letter to the Colossians was written against the Gnostic heresy. According to Polycarp, the Apostle John wrote the fourth Gospel and his first epistle to refute the errors of an early Gnostic heretic named Cerinthus.⁴

Mr. Chafer is in the unfortunate and, one would think, very uncomfortable condition of having two inconsistent systems of religion struggling together in his mind.⁵

Only One Gospel

In the scholarly debates with and analyses of the Federal Vision and the New Perspectives of Paul, the essential issue can easily be missed. That issue is that there is only one gospel. There cannot be two very different messages of the gospel. There is only one way for a sinner to gain reconciliation and justification with God. The Apostle Paul made that point very clear in Galatians:

I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! (Galatians 1:6-9).

B. B. Warfield, in *The Plan of Salvation*, succinctly stated the difference between true and false doctrines concerning the gospel:

There are fundamentally only two doctrines of salvation: that salvation is from God, and that salvation is from ourselves. The former is the doctrine of common Christianity; the latter is the doctrine of universal heathenism.⁶

Later in that same chapter, Warfield identified Pelagianism as the doctrine of heathenism which teaches that salvation is from man's efforts or works. Thus, the conflict is between salvation by free grace alone and salvation by works; between the gospel of God's free grace in Christ and the doctrines of heathenism. Whereas A. A. Hodge saw only two complete, self-consistent systems of theology (Augustinianism completed in Calvinism or Pelagianism completed in Socinianism), Warfield identifies the latter system of works salvation with heathenism. Both those great theologians are correct. Between these two positions, there is no stable, middle ground.

Every theological system, ancient or modern, can be grouped broadly under one or the other of these two complete, self-consistent systems. Arminianism and Semi-Pelagianism are simply