

Union with Christ and the Sacraments:
Clarifying the Federal Vision Theology of Douglas Wilson and Peter Leithart

by

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

In 2006, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing released a book by Guy Prentiss Waters titled *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology: A Comparative Analysis*.¹ One of the book's endorsements, written by David Calhoun, praises the author for "[A]dvancing the discussion along biblical lines 'in the bond of peace.'"² In his book Waters makes use of extensive quotations from the Federal Vision proponents. And yet, nearly every one of the men Waters critiques has written back since publication of the book to complain that he has been misquoted, misunderstood, or miscast.

The dialogue over Waters's book is merely the latest round of salvos in the Federal Vision controversy. In the past five years since the original Auburn Avenue conference in Monroe, Louisiana, multiple presbyteries and denominations have issued statements branding the Federal Vision a heresy and linking it with the New Perspective on Paul, Roman Catholicism, and other movements. Federal Visionists are accused of double-talk, sacerdotalism, baptismal regeneration, works-based salvation, and worse. Despite these accusations, the proponents of the Federal Vision continue to proclaim that their teachings are orthodox.

It is my hope in this thesis to catch the greater nuances and sense of the Federal Vision so as to evaluate its teaching on sacramental union with Christ. Douglas Wilson and Peter Leithart are the most prolific writers within the Federal Vision. Therefore, I have chosen to use their writings to articulate a "base" or "control" position. I have noted important contributions by others within the Federal Vision where appropriate.

STATEMENT

The Federal Vision is a coherent system. In speaking about the original 2002 Auburn Avenue Conference, Douglas Wilson noted, "We generally were coming from the same neck of the woods...and I think it was coherent. There were differences between the different speakers as there always are, but they were differences of emphasis and differences of how interested speakers were in harmonizing what they were saying with what had gone before."³

¹ Guy Prentiss Waters, *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology: A Comparative Analysis* (Philipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2006).

² Ibid., rear cover.

³ Douglas Wilson and Rich Lusk, "Federal Vision: Dark or Light?" (CD audio published by Canon Press), Track 1, 0'30."

The Federal Vision's teachings on sacramental union with Christ lose sight of the subjective element of faith within the sacraments, leading to an identification of the sign with that which is signified and a failure to appreciate the various ways the Bible speaks of union with Christ, particularly eschatological and existential dimensions of that union.

CHAPTER 2

SUMMARY OF THE FEDERAL VISION

I. INDIVIDUAL REDEMPTION

A. ELECTION

The Federal Vision has consistently upheld the foreordination and predestination of God as expressed by the Westminster Confession. Wilson writes:

In our doctrine of salvation, we must hold that God is the sole author of sovereign grace. We therefore must hold to the biblical truth of sovereign election. Before the foundation of the world, the Father chose a people for Himself, and He did so without any regard to any choices, merit, or boyish good looks on the part of those chosen. The ground of that sovereign choice was not to be found in man, but in the good pleasure of God.⁴

The principle of exhaustive sovereignty extends not only to circumstantial events like the color of animal fur, but to both natural evil such as town-destroying tornadoes and moral evil such as holocausts and world wars. And yet Wilson asserts, "...[T]his does not make God the master puppeteer. What He foreordained was a world full of choices."⁵ How God can do this and yet not be accused as the author of sin or the annihilator of free will is a mystery, but the fact remains that the Bible can say that Joseph's brothers intended (speaking of the freely expressed motivation of their hearts) to sell Joseph into slavery while God

⁴ Douglas Wilson, *Mother Kirk* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2001), 38.

⁵ Douglas Wilson, *Reformed Is Not Enough* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2002), 26.

intended (speaking of God's unrestrained exercise of His decretive purpose) the same act for the good of Israel (Gen. 50:19-20).

Though more will be said later about "corporate justification," the Federal Vision asserts that within the eternal decree of God there is a distinction among those who are eternally elect covenant members and those who are not. Wilson writes:

Because the word *predestination* is in the Bible something must be done with it, and men try to make the elect an elastic category. But we are basically dealing with two lists of names which are fixed. These lists do not grow or shrink, and names on the lists cannot be exchanged.⁶

Wilson believes that God elected a definite number of people to salvation on the basis of His secret counsel which flows from His good will, grace, and love. This election includes the preconditions and means necessary to salvation, including the Fall, Christ's atonement, evangelism, and the calling of the Spirit. Both aspects of God's election, the redemption of the righteous and the destruction of the wicked, men and angels alike, manifest the glory of God.

B. EFFECTUAL CALLING

Federal Visionists affirm the Confession's position that man is thoroughly depraved and unable to respond to the call of God except by the regenerative power and call of the Holy Spirit. As Wilson makes clear: "Simply put, the objectivity of the covenant does *not* mean that a man does not have to be born again."⁷ Those who are born again are the Elect of God. Wilson suggests an *ordo salutis* compatible with Reformed theology:

The effectual call is all of God, and man has no part in it – other than to benefit from the gift of it. Man is altogether passive until after the gift is given. Once the Holy Spirit quickens and renews him, he is then able to respond to the gift. Consequently, the *hierarchical* order is effectual call,

⁶ Ibid., 27-28 [emphasis author's].

⁷ Ibid., 33 [emphasis author's].

regeneration, repentance, faith in the gospel, and salvation (I am aware of the theological problems inherent in trying to put a stopwatch to this process of conversion. This order should simply be understood as systematic illustration designed to resist every form of syncretism).⁸

Much emphasis is placed upon a Trinitarian participation in the salvific process. The call, proceeds from the Father, is given power in the Son and applied by the Spirit. Therefore, it can not help but be effective. As Wilson writes:

When salvation is understood biblically, that is, as rooted in the eternal will of the Father in election, in the eternal blood of the covenant that secured their salvation, and in the resurrection of the Spirit bringing them into life, the idea of a man losing his salvation means that God's words must fall to the ground.⁹

C. JUSTIFICATION

Regarding individual justification, the Federal Vision affirms forensic justification.

As Wilson writes:

God justifies those He calls, but this justification must *not* be understood as an infusion of righteousness. Rather, justification is the pardon for sins and the legal reckoning of our persons as righteous.¹⁰

Peter Leithart also affirms forensic justification. He writes:

As far as it goes, the Protestant doctrine is correct; if the scene of a sinner in the dock before the Judge is put before us, and we are asked, 'What does justification mean?' or 'On what grounds is a person justified?' then the proper answer is the Reformation answer: Justification is an act of God's free grace whereby He pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in His sight, only for the righteousness of Christ reckoned to us and received by faith alone.¹¹

⁸ Ibid., 37-38.

⁹ Douglas Wilson, *The Paidea of God: And Other Essays on Education* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 1999), 69.

¹⁰ Wilson, *Reformed Is Not Enough*, 45 [emphasis author's].

¹¹ Peter Leithart, "Judge Me O God: Biblical Perspectives on Justification" in *The Federal Vision* eds. Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner (Monroe, Louisiana: Athanasius Press, 2004), 209.

Wilson upholds the doctrine of imputation; Christ's righteousness is imputed to the Elect as appropriated by faith. "We are justified for Christ's sake only," he writes,

God does not justify us for anything done by us, and, far more important, for anything done in us (even by Him). Nor does God justify us because of our faith – rather He justifies us because of Christ's obedience and work, and this is appropriated by faith.¹²

This justification is permanent and is the "*sine qua non* of being a saint of God."¹³

Traditional formulations of imputation distinguish between the active and passive obedience of Christ. Christ's active obedience is said to be His sinless life, while His passive obedience is His willing submission to death by crucifixion. The terms "active" and "passive" are not used in the Confession, though by definition they are included in the phrase "perfect obedience and sacrifice of himself." Wilson comments:

While the point of this division is an important one, we need to recognize that it is the righteousness of Christ's entire obedience that is imputed to us, and not the righteousness of Christ on even-numbered days along with the righteousness of Christ on odd-numbered days. If theological divisions help us understand that we have all of Christ, then well and good. If not, we should perhaps not overanalyze it.¹⁴

Leithart adds:

Jesus attained to this fulfilled kingship by remaining faithful to the terms of God's covenant. Because He obeyed the covenant law, Jesus inherited the covenant promise. Unlike the First Adam, the Last Adam did not grasp for equality with God, but humbled Himself and became obedient unto death (Phil. 2:5-11). Unlike Adam, Jesus did not put dominion ahead of worship. He was a self-sacrificing Priest before He was a reigning King. And because of His faithful obedience, Jesus was highly exalted above all rule and authority and power and dominion and every name that is named.¹⁵

In another place he comments:

¹² Wilson, *Reformed Is Not Enough*, 45.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 48 [emphasis author's].

¹⁴ Douglas Wilson, "Westminster Eight: Of Christ the Mediator," blog posted on 9/21/2006 and viewed at <http://www.dougwils.com/index.asp?Action=ArchivesByTopic&TopicID=20>.

¹⁵ Peter Leithart, *The Kingdom and the Power* (Philipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1993), 62.

At the heart of our redemption is our union with Christ in His death, resurrection, and ascension. We are justified by union with Christ's resurrection, adopted in the Son, made alive together with the One whom the Father raised from the dead, sanctified by the indwelling presence of Christ through His Spirit, made priests and kings in the Priest and King.¹⁶

These are traditional orthodox formulations, but like Wilson, Leithart believes that systematic categories have tended to give too much weight to “proper” or “improper” senses of theological terms. Leithart does not believe that it is improper to speak of justification in contexts that the Scriptures validate. For example, Leithart suggests that in Scripture to “justify” someone is to count him as “righteous,” which, Leithart argues, always refers to correct behavior within the covenant. Thus, in addition to being declared righteous, to be “justified” is to be counted as a covenant-keeper.¹⁷

A covenantal view of justification leads Leithart to write:

Behind Paul's rebuke [to Peter in Galatians 2] is the insight that the doctrine of justification has not only to do with one's individual relationship to God but is an ecclesiological doctrine, having to do with the constitution and shape of the church.¹⁸

Justification, then, according to the Federal Vision, is not a simple pronouncement. It is more importantly the covenantal commitment of God to make the Elect righteous within the community of His people. Seen as a vector, the forensic declaration of God would be the starting point, with God's actual deliverance or sanctification of the individual the remaining portion of the vector. These two, declaration and deliverance, are so inextricably linked that they may be seen as part of the same action or vector, although the Federal Vision does try to distinguish the two aspects. Leithart writes:

¹⁶ Peter Leithart, *Blessed Are the Hungry* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2000), 13.

¹⁷ Leithart, “Judge Me O God: Biblical Perspectives on Justification,” 212-213.

¹⁸ Ibid.

God's declaration that we are justified *takes the form of* deliverance from sin, death, and Satan. God declares us righteous by delivering us from all our enemies, or, to use the language of 1 Kings 8, God 'justifies by giving to the righteous according to his righteousness,' by keeping His covenant promises with those counted righteous. It is true that God 'reckons' or 'considers' us righteous prior to His taking action on our behalf, and that 'reckoning' is an act of sheer grace for the sake of Jesus. But that secret decision is not justification, any more than the decree to save the elect *is* the salvation of the elect....A legal decision must be promulgated as a decision of the court, and in many passages of Scripture, God's public declaration of righteousness occurs when He 'gives to the righteous according to His righteousness.'¹⁹

James Jordan argues similarly when he compares God's forensic declaration of justification with His original declaration of creation. As with the speaking of the heavens and the earth into existence, Jordan writes:

God's actions are *creatively constructive*. He speaks, and it comes to pass. Thus, His symbols are copies only of His character and intentions....The heart of the Biblical doctrine of salvation lies here. Justification, sanctification, and glorification are inseparable, but which has primacy? Justification. First God redefines us, resymbolizing us as righteous, and then He remakes us. Similarly, Paul in Romans 6 says that we are to reckon ourselves dead to sin and alive to righteousness, and then we will live that way. Symbols bring about reality, not vice versa.²⁰

In this vein, then, the final salvation of individuals is their ultimate "justification." In the Federal Vision, justification takes on an eschatological "already/not yet" nature. The Elect are "definitively" and forensically justified now, and yet their final glorification as sons and daughters of God will be the last act in a progressive series of God's acts constituting their complete justification. More will be said below about the eschatological elements of justification and union.

D. FAITH

¹⁹ Ibid. [emphasis author's].

²⁰ James B. Jordan, *Through New Eyes: Developing a Biblical View of the World* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 32-33 [emphasis author's].

The Federal Vision affirms that faith is the sole instrument of justification, although it is always quick to add that faith is not alone in the person justified. As Wilson notes:

The temptation – from the very beginning – has been to see faith as a point in time affair, after which the work of sanctification takes over. The Galatians stumbled into thinking this way [Gal 3:3]....We must *continue* the way we began. We must *walk* the way we received. How? From faith to faith.²¹

What is faith according to the Federal Vision? It is not simply an intellectual grasp of the Gospel; even the demons possess this knowledge. Wilson writes:

Understanding Christ's person correctly, we should see, is essential. It is essential, and yet not sufficient. On the last day, God will judge many rebellious men who had their catechism answers nailed down smartly.²²

For Wilson, faith is a worldview that so permeates the individual that one's every action begins to be conformed to it. "Believing in the name of Jesus Christ," writes Wilson,

leads necessarily, the next moment, to a love for other Christians. This is why the Bible associates "having" the Son of God with having *life*. It involves much more than giving assent to a particular set of propositions. The propositions are important, but they always point beyond themselves.²³

Thus, Wilson often utilizes the term "living faith," which simply restates the Confession's "no dead faith." For Wilson, living faith is a gift of the Spirit that "...does not die when the moment of justification has passed."²⁴ Nor is it "lonely" as Wilson would say, but is ever accompanied by good works.

Knowing that emphasis upon the living aspect of faith causes some to wonder if he thinks that salvation is partly works-based, Wilson is careful to state: "Like axle grease and ice cream, grace and works do not mix."²⁵ Further,

²¹ Wilson, *Reformed Is Not Enough*, 42 [emphasis author's].

²² Douglas Wilson, *Clean Water, Red Wine, Broken Bread* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2000), 25.

²³ Ibid. [emphasis author's].

²⁴ Wilson, *Reformed Is Not Enough*, 46.

²⁵ Wilson, *Clean Water, Red Wine, Broken Bread*, 36.

What is it that shows a man's relation to Abraham? It is his faith – with absolutely no admixture of human effort, striving, deciding, altar-calling, church-attending, willing, or running. Many admirable things will always proceed from faith alone, but nothing *mixes* with faith alone.²⁶

Leithart adds:

How can a sinner find peace with a holy God? Luther's answer was the right one: We find peace with God through Jesus, by trusting in Him and not by any moral goodness that we can achieve.²⁷

For Wilson,

Good works are not the ground of salvation, but they are the ground of assurance of salvation. They are the fruit of the tree, not the cause of the tree. They are the clear evidence that the tree is alive and growing. They are fruit and evidence of a true and lively faith. Good works are instruments through which believers show how thankful they are. This also has the result of fortifying assurance of salvation. Good works are a blessing and edification to other believers, and unbelievers see in the good works an adornment to the gospel itself. Those nonbelievers still disposed to kick against the faith are shut down by our good works. All our works together, in all their relations and effects, have the end result of glorifying God.²⁸

According to the Federal Vision, works are the animating principle of faith in the same way that the spirit is the animating principle of the body.²⁹ In the vein of James 2, this is to say that faith is living if it results in works. At the same time, Federal Visionists do not want to divide faith and works into two completely separable categories. As Wilson writes:

We simply want to say that for those faithful to the covenant, initial faith and initial obedience are used interchangeably in Scripture. Consequently, this ought to be one of the scriptural *definitions* of obedience....But it may still be argued that we ought not to say things like 'faith is obedience' without qualification because people will grossly misunderstand. That is fair enough, and so we do want to qualify these things where possible, and when given reasonable opportunity. And so, to qualify *again*, to think a man can earn his

²⁶ Wilson, *Mother Kirk*, 30 [emphasis author's].

²⁷ Leithart, *Blessed Are the Hungry*, 143.

²⁸ Douglas Wilson, "Westminster Sixteen: Of Works," blog posted on 10/12/06 as seen at <http://www.dougwils.com/index.asp?Action=ArchivesByTopic&TopicID=20>.

²⁹ See Wilson's comment in *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros & Cons: Debating the Federal Vision*, ed Calvin Beisner (Fort Lauderdale, Florida: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004), 8.

way into heaven autonomously by any amount of choosing, willing, running, do-gooding, obeying, brownie-pointing, Westminster-confessing, or whatever else a foolish man may think up to take credit for, is a false gospel. That is to say, it is no gospel at all.³⁰

Wilson affirms the Confession's statement that God accepts the good works of the Elect because He looks upon them in His Son. He writes:

To maintain our footing, we must remember the ground of our salvation. Just as we are lost through our union with Adam, so those who are saved are saved through their union with Christ in His perfect life, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension. When we speak of the ground of salvation, we are talking about the *basis* for it, the *foundation* of it. Everyone who comes to salvation is saved because of the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, plus nothing else. His work, and God's grace in uniting us with Him, is the sole reason we are saved.³¹

Those in the Federal Vision believe that the Elect are enabled both to repent and to believe by the work of the Holy Spirit in and through the preached Word, the administration of the sacraments, and prayer. Wilson writes:

As the people of God, we exhibit to the world what it means to be right with God, to be living under the 'righteousness of God.' Individuals are put right with God as individuals, families as families, churches as churches, and the Church as the Church. In order to be right with God, two fundamental attitudes are necessary, corresponding to the two central scriptural gospel commands – *repent* and *believe*. The first attitude is that of contrition and repentance, and of course this means honest self-examination. It does *not* mean perpetual morbidity. The second is faith in *all* of God's promises. The problem with pietistic Christians is that they get stuck in the first mode, and never move on to the second.³²

The failure to believe in all of God's promises is a common theme for Federal Vision proponents like Wilson. He exhorts the Church to be like Abraham who had great faith concerning his status as called and blessed by God. Instead, most Christians today are what

³⁰ Ibid. [emphasis author's].

³¹ Wilson, *Clean Water, Red Wine, Broken Bread*, 35 [emphasis author's].

³² Wilson, *Reformed Is Not Enough*, 175-176 [emphasis author's].

Wilson would term “faithless” in part (what the Confession terms a “weak faith”) because they do not take hold of all of God’s promises as Abraham once did. He writes:

We are faithless, but nevertheless we remain the *faithful*. We have been unrighteous, but nonetheless we are the righteous. Like Lot in Sodom, we are hated because of our judicial connection to Jehovah, but also like Lot in Sodom, we do not live up to God’s full standard. The fact that we do not understand this is readily seen in the fact that we read Genesis and the account of Lot’s life, and we would never dream of describing him as Peter does – as *righteous*. But ironically, it is when we believe God’s pronouncement, despite the empirical evidence, that we first supply the empirical evidence.³³

E. ASSURANCE

The Federal Vision affirms that the Elect may be assured of their justification. Wilson comments:

The Bible teaches that not one of the elect can fall away. Every forgiven sinner may be assured that God will complete the work of redemption He has begun. No true saint, numbered among the elect, can ever fall away from the protecting and sustaining grace of God.³⁴

Wilson differentiates between having justification, which he agrees is permanent, and having the “joy of justification” which can at times be compromised by disobedience. “A child awaiting a spanking in the basement is just as much a member of the family as he ever was. However, it can safely be said that he is not happy about being a member of the family.”³⁵

Peter Leithart bases assurance upon the involvement of the Trinity in redemption. As he says: “All of God does all that God does. The Spirit is active in justification.”³⁶ Seen in yet another way: the Father declares (Jordan’s “effective word”); the Son acts (Wilson’s concept of vindication outlined below and Leithart’s concept that judgment implies action);

³³ Ibid., 180 [emphasis author’s].

³⁴ Wilson, *Mother Kirk*, 40.

³⁵ Douglas Wilson, “Westminster Eleven: Of Justification,” blog posted on 10/5/06 as seen at <http://www.dougwils.com/index.asp?Action=ArchivesByTopic&TopicID=20>.

³⁶ Peter Leithart, “And Abraham Believed God: Justification and Righteousness in Genesis,” in *Great Deliverance: Justification*, 2005 Christ Church Ministerial Conference, CD 5, Track 9, 40”.

the Spirit transforms. Because all three Persons are involved in redemption, one cannot separate justification and sanctification. Thus, one may have assurance because the completed action is necessarily an integral component of the initial decree.

Leithart argues that this full-orbed view of redemption has always been the understanding of God's people. When David, for example, in Psalm 35:1 prays that God will "plead his cause," he anticipates that such pleading also involves God's "fighting" for Israel. A mere plea would not save David from his enemies. Similarly, in Isaiah 54 Israel is "justified" or vindicated as the chosen nation of God by her restoration from exile. In the New Testament, Jesus is said to be "justified in the Spirit" by His resurrection from the dead (1 Timothy 3:16). In commenting on Genesis Leithart says:

[T]o be righteous is to be picked out from within a generation of wickedness, within a generation of violence, in a world that is being corrupted by human sin, to be picked out in order to survive, but not just in order to survive...that's not the end of the story. Rather, the righteous man is picked out to survive and then ultimately to be the agent of renewal of creation....The righteous man is to be enthroned as king.³⁷

For Leithart, then, God's justification of individuals includes not only action, but also plan and purpose following the paradigm of Christ's own justification mentioned in 1 Timothy. The justification of "righteous" Noah or "righteous" Abraham, for example, are said to be types of death through judgment followed by justification through resurrection (i.e. deliverance).

F. SANCTIFICATION

The Federal Vision asserts that that sanctification is a lifelong process in which the believer matures in his faith and is conformed ever more like Jesus Christ. Sanctification is to

³⁷ Ibid., Track 14 0'0."

be distinguished from justification at this point, though as noted above the Federal Vision so closely links these two works that they are inseparable. Wilson writes:

Put simply, sanctification is the process of growing in *goodness*. The words *justification* and *sanctification* are distinct, and yet closely related to one another. Just as a husband is different from his wife, yet without a wife he is no husband, so justification is different from sanctification but is not justification without sanctification. In the same way, justification is distinct from becoming good, but if there is no process of growing in goodness, then this means that there has been no justification.³⁸

While the Federal Vision agrees with the Confession that, “sanctification is through the whole man,” its proponents would have the Church develop a proper perspective of spiritual war, themselves, and their circumstances. Despite defeat in particular spiritual battles, the war has been won. The Elect, therefore, should see themselves as “righteous” in the present because of their union with Christ. God has both declared them righteous and vindicated the Church as righteous. This leads Wilson to comment:

We have an unhappy tendency to use the lens of ultimate things to look at life around us. But as we have said, the ultimate things are the secret things (Deut. 29:29). So the problem is that we cannot see through the lens of ultimate things (election, for example), which is why we have a great deal of trouble making sense of what is occurring in the world around us. And so our unhappy tendency is to speak of the *saved* and the *unsaved*. But the biblical language is to speak of the *righteous* and the *wicked*. The former assumes the perspective of the eschaton while the latter assumes the perspective of the covenant, here and now.³⁹

G. PERSEVERANCE

The Federal Vision affirms the perseverance of the saints. Because salvation is founded upon God’s work, it cannot fail. Wilson notes:

Christ died in order to secure the redemption of His people, and that act of obedience was powerful and efficacious. When Christ died, the salvation of

³⁸ Wilson, *Clean Water, Red Wine, Broken Bread*, 34 [emphasis author’s].

³⁹ Wilson, *Reformed Is Not Enough*, 179-180 [emphasis author’s].

every sinner to be saved was at that point secured – not merely made possible, but actually secured. But while the purchase price had been paid, it was not yet applied in each individual case. This application is made by the Holy Spirit at the regeneration of each sinner. We may call this application resurrecting grace. Our salvation is therefore gladly ascribed to our Triune God: sovereign election is the work of the Father; efficacious redemption is the work of the Son; and resurrecting grace is the work of the Spirit.⁴⁰

II. CORPORATE REDEMPTION

A. ELECTION

The Federal Vision uses the term “election” in a corporate sense to refer to God’s establishment of a covenant people. God has called a people out from the world, the Church, even as He once called Israel. The Church is composed of “Christians” who profess Christ and are baptized. Drawing an analogy with the term “Jew,” Wilson argues that to be a Christian is simply to bear the name of Christ, just as to be a Jew is to bear the name of Judah. However, since the term Christian “...is strongly entrenched in our evangelical traditions and...used to refer to the moment of regeneration,”⁴¹ Wilson acknowledges that there are “true Christians” and false ones. He writes:

Jews who had circumcision only were not Jews at all in one sense, but they were of course Jews in another. Lest anyone be tempted to think that this made external membership in the covenant a big nothing, Paul hastens to add that such membership was actually quite important.⁴²

Similarly, there can be Christians who have baptism only that are not Christians in one sense (members of the eternally Elect), but Christians in another (covenant members). All are said to be united to Christ, but not all share in God’s preserving grace.

⁴⁰ Wilson, *Mother Kirk*, 39.

⁴¹ Ibid., 17.

⁴² Ibid., 18.

The Federal Vision loves paradox. For example, Wilson’s favorite illustration for describing how one can be a Christian and yet not a Christian is that of an adulterous husband. He writes:

Suppose a man marries and he knows that he is going to be unfaithful to his wife – in fact, he already has adulterous plans. But for various reasons, he thinks it expedient to be married, so he goes to the church and makes the vows. Now, is he married? Of course he is – he is under covenantal obligation to keep his vows, *whether or not he meant them*. Using a figure of speech, we might say that he was not being a “real” husband to his wife...but in another sense, he is very much a real husband....In the same way, baptized infidels are not “real” Christians, and unless they repent, they will all perish....These hypocrites remain under the obligations of the covenant, and so in another sense, they *are* real Christians.⁴³

B. COVENANT

The Federal Vision defines the term “covenant” relationally. Steve Wilkins, for example, writes:

Covenant...describes a relationship with the Triune God through Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son. To be in covenant is to be in real communion with God, attendant with real privileges and real blessings.⁴⁴

More traditional in terminology, Wilson’s definition is: “A covenant is a solemn, binding agreement, sovereignly administered, with attendant blessings and curses.”⁴⁵

Federal Visionists see two overarching covenants in Scripture, with two federal heads that represent them. The first covenant Wilson calls the “Covenant of Creation,” believing that the Westminster Divines poorly described the pre-Fall covenant as a “Covenant of Works.” Wilson writes:

To call this covenant with Adam a covenant "of works" leads people to confuse it either with the Old Testament economy, or with pharisaical distortions of the law....If by "covenant of works" is meant raw merit, then we

⁴³ Wilson, *Mother Kirk*, 97 [emphasis author’s].

⁴⁴ Steve Wilkins, “Introduction,” in *Federal Vision*, 11.

⁴⁵ Wilson, *Clean Water, Red Wine, Broken Bread*, 11.

have to deny the covenant of works. But if this covenant made with Adam was inherently gracious (as many Reformed theologians have held), then the only problem is the terminological one.⁴⁶

The “Covenant of Creation” was made with Adam and promised him life as a blessing if he continued in perfect obedience, while it promised death if violated. This covenant is what Wilson calls a “deep covenant.” He writes: “The relation that exists between us and Adam is clearly a covenantal one. Because we are organically connected to Adam by covenant, when he sinned in the garden, we all sinned as represented by him.”⁴⁷ Adam is the federal head of this covenant.

The stipulation of the Covenant of Creation was perfectly to obey God’s commands. While the specific context in Eden involved the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, this stipulation must be extended to every command of God. Given that the federal head of the Covenant of Creation was Adam, all his progeny (which is every human being) are bound by it. Humanity, according to the Federal Vision, is still required to uphold the Covenant of Creation.

When Adam fell he was cursed with death and enslaved to sin and Satan. Satan became Adam’s master and by extension the master of all his posterity. Adam’s fall, therefore, necessitated a new covenant with a different federal head since no man can serve two masters. God thus graciously initiated a redemptive covenant and its federal head is Christ. When the Elect are called of the Father, united to Christ, and indwelt by His Spirit, they are regenerated or re-born under a new father. They are sons and daughters of God and their new federal Head is Christ. As such they are no longer under the Covenant of Creation, but under the Covenant of Grace since one cannot live under two federal heads.

⁴⁶ See Wilson’s comments in his 9/21/06 blog at <http://www.Douglaswils.com/index.asp?Action=ArchivesByTopic&TopicID=20>.

⁴⁷ Douglas Wilson, *Federal Husband* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 1999), 17.

The pre-Fall Covenant of Creation is not to be confused with the “Old Covenant” described in Hebrews. Rather the Old Covenant is the early stage of the Covenant of Grace. The reason why Christ describes the Covenant of Grace as “new” in the Gospels is that the advancement and fulfillment of God’s covenantal promises are realized through Christ’s atonement and resurrection. The difference between life in the covenant before and after Christ’s resurrection is so monumental that God’s gracious covenant deserves a new name after the transition, even though the covenant is still the one and same Covenant of Grace.

Wilson writes:

The believer must think of the covenant as a growing child, a fruitful tree, a bud unfolding into a flower, but above all he must think of death and resurrection. We must understand the continuity of the covenants *only in this way*. That continuity is found in a Person, crucified and raised, and reflects the solitary redemptive purpose of God from the beginning of history to the end of it, always expressed in covenant.⁴⁸

C. COVENANT MEMBERSHIP

According to the Federal Vision, those who have been baptized are joined to Christ covenantally and are consequently members of the covenant people of God. They will in time be shown to be either covenant breakers or covenant keepers. They will be known by their fruit, although God already knows them. Wilson comments:

In short, we can say that God knows those who call themselves Christians and who take upon themselves the marks of discipleship. Their lips are close to God, but their hearts are far from Him. Such are Christians covenantally, but their lives betray the covenant. This does not make God false – it would take more liars among men than we could come up with to accomplish that – but it does show that the word *Christian* can be used in two senses.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Wilson, *Reformed Is Not Enough*, 66 [emphasis author’s].

⁴⁹ Ibid., 19 [emphasis author’s].

Leithart describes “salvation” as being “adjectival.” For him, salvation is not a substance or an entity, but rather describes the restoration and reconciliation of sinful humanity. The creation of the Church is a salvific act of God in history, and thus members of the Church can be described as “saved” because they participate in the life of the Church.

Leithart writes:

If, as I have argued, man is a being-in-relation and salvation involves the restoration of human life (including social life), and if salvation, biblically speaking, is realized in history, then this restoration of social life must be historically manifest in a saved society. God’s saving acts must produce a *visible* and *historical* community, and ‘salvation’ must be a description of the condition and life-together of this visible community.⁵⁰

Defining salvation with this additional nuance requires that Leithart distinguish those who are “saved” as members of the historic Church and those who are “saved” eternally. Thus

Leithart writes:

This does not, of course, mean that everyone who enters the church participates in the salvation of humanity in the same manner. Prior to the eschaton the salvation that takes form as the church, is always only the ‘already’ and never the ‘not yet.’⁵¹

D. THE CHURCH

The Federal Vision does not favor the traditional invisible/visible distinction when speaking of the Church. Such a distinction, Wilson believes, comforts those who are concerned that so many churches struggle visibly with sound doctrine, proper worship, and even simply living out the Christian faith. He comments: “The distinction [between visible

⁵⁰ Peter Leithart, “Trinitarian Anthropology,” in *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros & Cons: Debating the Federal Vision*, 69 [emphasis author’s].

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 70.

and invisible] is a valuable and necessary one and was made in response to the claim of the papal church to be the one true Church.”⁵²

While such a distinction may be necessary in some circumstances, many within the Federal Vision are uncomfortable with the ambiguity contained in the adjectives “invisible” and “visible.” They believe that such a nice division between what we can see and not see will lead some to think that the invisible Church is the true Church, while the visible one is not. Such a radical differentiation leads to Gnosticism in which only the spiritual and invisible is true and real. The physical then is only a corrupted reflection of the real.

Wilson prefers the terms “historical” and “eschatological” because he believes they more adequately represent the Hebraic worldview. He writes:

Instead of thinking of the elect as composing an invisible Church in hyper-space, we should think of the full number of the elect as composing the eschatological Church – the Church as it will visibly be on the last glorious day of *history*....And rather than thinking of a visible Church, we should think of the historical Church....This distinction helps us to understand the relationship of unregenerate professing Christians to the Church as well. The Bible teaches clearly that in the historical Church there are fruitless branches (but real branches nonetheless) which will not be there in the eschatological Church....This does not mean that the elect can lose their salvation. But it *does* mean that branches can lose their position on the tree. The elect always bear fruit, and their fruit remains.⁵³

For Wilson, the crucial distinction, then, is that the visible/invisible dichotomy stresses ontology whereas the historical/eschatological dichotomy stresses chronology. The visible/invisible paradigm seems to create two churches, the historical/eschatological emphasizes but one.

⁵² Wilson, *Mother Kirk*, 24.

⁵³ Ibid., 25-26 [emphasis author’s].

Wilson likes the terms historical and eschatological for another reason as well. To speak of visibility and invisibility tends to abstract the concept of the Church. To call the Church “historical” is to remind believers of their tie to those of previous generations.

E. JUSTIFICATION

Those in the Federal Vision often argue that Enlightenment rationalism and scholasticism has led particularly the American church to overemphasize narrow, categorical definitions of biblical terms like “justification,” “regeneration,” and so on. These systematic formulations of justification, they argue, are appropriate when speaking of individuals, but need further development when speaking of what is termed “corporate justification.” As Wilson writes:

Complicating the matter (a little) further, we find that the Scriptures also frequently refer to a *corporate* justification of God’s people that is highly visible. This corporate justification begins with the justification of Jesus, our Head, which cannot be thought of as justification in the tradition of crisis conversions. As Richard Gaffin has argued, the resurrection of Jesus is the ground of our justification (Rom 4:25) because it is first of all the vindication (justification) of Jesus (1 Tim. 3:16).⁵⁴

Corporate vindication or justification is the result of the Holy Spirit’s activity. When Jesus rose from the dead, the entire world was affected; His Kingdom was declared and began to spread over all the earth as the Holy Spirit created the Church. Wilson writes:

Our corporate justification as the Church was Pentecostal. God publicly vindicated us, owned us as His people, and established us in the world as His own righteous people. This means that the Church *as the Church* is justified, just as the Church is elect, and redeemed, and so forth. But this also means that the nonelect covenant members, while truly attached to the body, are

⁵⁴ Wilson, *Reformed Is Not Enough*, 174 [emphasis author’s].

nevertheless an incongruity – spots and blemishes that will be removed as the Bride is made radiant.⁵⁵

To be a member of the historical Church and the Covenant of Grace is to be a member of what Wilson terms the “corporate regeneration” or sometimes simply the “Regeneration.” God’s people are to embrace by faith the reality of their individual *and* their corporate justification. Wilson comments:

When we were first converted, God ‘judged’ us in Jesus Christ. We were justified (in the proper theological sense) at that time. But since that time, we should all have learned to look to God, seeking His ongoing deliverances, historical judgments, and justifying vindications. As the justified people of God, it is therefore our responsibility to begin to see ourselves as righteous. To be justified is to be declared righteous, and of course we are justified through faith in believing God’s declarations.⁵⁶

In other words, there are nonelect covenant members who stand amidst the Regeneration and yet reject all that takes place to them and around them because they lack faith. These Christians are corporately justified, being a part of the Spirit-blessed Church. However, they are not individually justified or eternally elect. Wilson writes: “If a covenant member dies and goes to Hell, it was because something was radically wrong with *him*, and not because of the “state of affairs” around him. *He* is the one who receives the judgment.”⁵⁷

F. APOSTASY

The Federal Vision affirms that true believers are assured of their salvation because God has given to them the Holy Spirit as a guarantee of His promises. As Wilson writes:

⁵⁵ Ibid., 174-175 [emphasis author’s].

⁵⁶ Ibid., 178.

⁵⁷ Douglas Wilson, “A Response to ‘Covenant and Apostasy’,” in *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros & Cons: Debating the Federal Vision*, 227 [emphasis author’s].

[I]f God did not keep His guarantee, then He forfeits the earnest payment. This means that if one of the elect, a regenerate man, quickened by the Holy Spirit, were to fall away and go to Hell, the Holy Spirit would have to go with him – which of course is absurd. Therefore, he cannot fall away.⁵⁸

This assurance leads to love for the brethren, humility of mind, delight in the means of grace, understanding of spiritual things, obedience, and chastening for disobedience.

The Federal Vision also believes that nonelect covenant members can be said to “apostasize” from the Covenant. Wilson comments: “Apostasy is a real sin in real time. It is important for us to settle in our minds at the outset what an apostate falls away *from*. In shorthand, he falls away from Christ; he falls away from grace.”⁵⁹ Expanding the shorthand, for Wilson “falling away from Christ” means falling away from covenantal union with Him, not from Election; “grace” refers to the covenant blessings which flow out to all people, elect and nonelect alike, who are covenant members.

Federal Visionists often cite John 15 and Jesus’ metaphor of the vine and branches. The branches are seen to be real branches because that is how Jesus speaks of them. Wilson writes:

Another Reformed exegetical problem is to err by making such a person disconnected from Christ (in every respect) from the beginning. The Bible does not permit this option either. The Arminian needs to hear the Words of Christ: ‘Depart from me; I *never* knew you’ – in other words, something was wrong from the start. The Reformed need to hear some other Words of Christ: ‘If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch.’ The one cast out as a branch *was a branch*, and not some bit of tumbleweed caught in the branches.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Wilson, *Reformed Is Not Enough*, 126.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 132 [emphasis author’s].

⁶⁰ Ibid., 133 [emphasis author’s].

“Branchness,” then, is covenantal relationship. The faithful branch produces fruit; the faithless branch is cut off and thrown into the fire. Both are united to Christ through covenant, but only true branches enjoy the Holy Spirit and the full benefits of Christ forever.

Lest some should misunderstand at this point, many Federal Vision proponents are careful to clarify. Wilson adds:

[W]e don’t want to be guilty of the reverse problem, camping out in John 15 and failing to treat the fact that many of the illustrations indicate an ontological difference between the elect and reprobate within the covenant as one existing *the entire time*. Tares are weeds the entire time, the sow that is washed is a clean pig but still has a natural affinity for the mire, the dog that vomited is still a dog. On the other side, all the branches are true branches, including those to be cut out, etc. I simply want to affirm all the passages at face value, and let God sort it out. The only way I can do this is affirm the objectivity of the covenant, affirm that ontological differences exist between the elect and the reprobate whether the covenant is involved or not, and affirm that we should not pry too closely into it.⁶¹

Apostasy is one of the indicators that individuals are not true branches. But until apostasy occurs, as 1 John notes and as the parables of Christ indicate, it is impossible to know that they are “not of us.” In fact, Wilson argues that the Bible often refers to both true and false branches in general terms as “saints” and as “elect.” He is careful, however, to note that false branches are not specially or individually elect.

⁶¹ Douglas Wilson, “Life in the Regeneration,” blog posted on 9/27/04 at <http://dougwils.com/index.asp?Action=Archive&ArchiveDate=9/1/2004> [emphasis author’s].

CHAPTER 3 SACRAMENTAL UNION WITH CHRIST

I. SACRAMENTS AS SIGN AND SEAL

A. FEDERAL VISION

As with other theological terms, the Federal Vision upholds traditional formulations of the sacraments and adds its own nuances. According to Wilson,

A sacrament is a sign, and a sign that *seals* what it signifies. The sacraments of the Christian religion therefore are those that signify and seal the covenant of grace. We know that a practice is such a sacrament if it was instituted by God in order to *represent* Christ and His salvation. A sacrament is placed upon a particular individual in order *to establish a link* between the promises of the covenant and that person. A sacrament is also given as a means of distinguishing the saints of God from those who are not – to put a visible difference between the Church and the rest of the world. Now, when God places this visible difference before us, are we not obligated to *see* it? As a result, those with such a divine mark upon them are obligated by it.⁶²

Wilson also believes that a sacrament is “a performative act.”

God has established the meaning of these acts, and so that is what the action in context means. This is different from saying that the sacraments mean something the way a detached label means something else. The baptismal water is simply water – until it is applied in such a way that makes the action a performative, covenantal act. The bread and wine are simply bread and wine. This is why Peter Leithart notes ‘that there is no ‘eating as such’ but only ‘eating in this or that way.’⁶³

By emphasizing performance, the Federal Vision adds an unusual liturgico-sociological dimension to the sacraments that is not found in traditional formulations. An individual

⁶² Douglas Wilson, *Reformed Is Not Enough* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2002), 88-89 [emphasis author’s].

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 95-96.

“performs” the sacrament before the witnesses of the Church and before God. A parallel might be made with a wedding ceremony where the recitation of the words “I do” take on substantive meaning because they are spoken in the context of a binding marital oath before witnesses.

Since liturgy invests the sacraments with meaning, for Wilson and Leithart the efficacy of the sacrament is based upon one’s covenantal relationship to God and to the Church, as well as right performance. In this vein, Wilson interprets “worthily” in 1 Corinthians 11 to mean “faithfully with regard to the covenant.” By doing so, he hopes to “...avoid the swamp-like superstitions of true sacerdotalism, as well as the arid rationalism that detaches all of our actions from what they are meant to *seal* for us.”⁶⁴

Leithart argues that sacraments are necessary to distinguish the Church as an organized religious group separate from the world. Further, the New Covenant sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper are the “conjugations” of signs and rites found in the Old Covenant that represent Christ and His salvation. As he writes: “Sacraments are not ‘outside’ redemption pointing ‘inward’ but make up the reality of the *totus Christus* in its earthly manifestation, which is salvation promised and now, though pre-eschatologically, fulfilled.”⁶⁵

Sacraments are necessary for a second reason. They are God’s chosen symbols of communication with His Church. In disagreement with Calvin, Leithart suggests that if Calvin’s theory of accommodation means that signs are somehow an imprecise form of communication, then such a theory makes the sacramental sign somehow “second-best.”

⁶⁴ Ibid., 97 [emphasis author’s].

⁶⁵ Peter Leithart, *The Priesthood of the Plebs: A Theology of Baptism* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003), 42 [emphasis author’s].

God always employs signs in communicating Himself to us (words, as Augustine said, being signs), and that is not a "husk" that needs to be discarded in favor of some non-significant 'kernel.' That's just the way the Triune God communicates with human beings. Calvin also seems to take away with one hand what he gives with another. Baptism is the 'washing of the soul,' and yet the Spirit is free to wash souls or not through the sign of baptism. But then how is baptism a 'seal' that increases our assurance of the promise? The Spirit washes the souls of the elect in baptism, so to know whether baptism has really been effective we need to have some independent confirmation of our election-some experience, some inward voice, some direct unaccommodated contact with God that bypasses the sign. I see this as a real tension in Calvin's sacramental theology, and in all subsequent Reformed sacramental theology, and it's the tension that has opened into a wound within contemporary Reformed discussions.⁶⁶

Leithart's resolution is to see the sacrament as the enacted covenantal promise of God. In this way the sacraments have corporate dimensions. He writes: "A branded sheep becomes a member of the flock, a sealed slave a member of the household, a tattooed soldier a member of the regiment. So also baptism inducts us into the fellowship of the church."⁶⁷

B. THE BROADER REFORMED VIEW

1. SACRAMENT AS SIGN

The Westminster Confession defines the sacraments as "holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ and His benefits; and to confirm our interest in Him: as also, to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the Church and the rest of the world; and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to His Word" (WCF 27.1). Since the sacraments as signs "represent Christ and His benefits," the believer encounters Christ in the sacraments and communes with Him by faith. Significantly, this is a Christ raised, ascended, and exalted; not a Christ re-

⁶⁶ Peter Leithart, "Calvin On Baptism Again," blog posted on 1/25/07 as seen at <http://www.leithart.com/archives/002724.php>.

⁶⁷ Peter Leithart, *The Kingdom and the Power* (Philipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1993), 190.

crucified. Thus, communion is with the risen Christ and the benefits are all those blessings that are “Yes” in Him because He reigns in Heaven.

2. SACRAMENT AS SEAL

If it weren't for the description of the sacraments as “seals,” one might be tempted to see them as mere symbols of a greater reality. Paul writes in Rom 4:11 that Abraham “received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised...” Here circumcision, like baptism, is a sign of Christ's redemptive work in setting apart a people unto Himself. The seal is said to be of the righteousness of faith. In parallel, the New Covenant sacraments are seals of righteousness, the righteousness of Christ imputed to the believer by faith.

As seals, the sacraments are guarantees of God's promise. Paul writes in 2 Cor 1:21-22: “Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us is God, who also has sealed us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.” More clear is Eph 1:13: “In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise.” The Holy Spirit is the seal and guarantee of God's covenantal promises.

Though more will be said later with regard to sacramental union and efficacy, it is important at this point to note the relationship between faith and the sacraments. Faith rests upon God's promises, it does not effect them. Faith acknowledges, receives, and responds; it does not create. Thus, one must carefully avoid the view that faith activates or energizes the sacraments.

Can a lack of faith then nullify the sacraments? Not if the sealing of the sacraments is predicated upon God's own activity. It is God's integrity and trustworthiness that makes the sacrament effective. Therefore, the unbeliever never participates in an empty or false sacrament. The sacraments are always endowed with God's divine authority and in them promises of God are sealed to believers for redemption while they are sealed to unbelievers for destruction. Berkouwer comments: "The teaching of the sacrament of baptism is never an empty sign, but...is connected with the promise of God in such a manner that the nature of this sacrament can never be affected by misuse of it."⁶⁸

C. POINTS OF TENSION

The Federal Vision, like most in the Reformed community wants to avoid the concept of the sacraments as *nudum signa*, or "empty signs." It, too, hinges the integrity of the sacraments upon the action and promises of God and not upon the subjective experience or faith of the participants. People do not leave the Table or their baptism unaffected; they are either under blessing or under curse.

A point of contrast can be found, however, in the way each group defines the sacraments as signs. Peter Leithart, for example argues the following:

Baptism is not a "symbol" of someone becoming a disciple. Because Jesus designated it as such, this symbol *is* his 'becoming-a-disciple.' It is not a picture of a man being joined in covenant to Christ; it *is* a man being joined in covenant to Christ.⁶⁹

The difference here, is that the Federal Vision sees the reality as contained within the sign itself. As Leithart says, the symbol *is* the reality.

⁶⁸ G.C. Berkouwer *Studies in Dogmatics: The Sacraments* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1969), 157.

⁶⁹ Peter Leithart, *Against Christianity* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2003), 85 [emphasis author's].

The broader Reformed community agrees that the sacraments are more than mere symbols. They are gateways, if you will, to the reality which supports the sacraments. The signs themselves are not salvation, but salvation is represented and given through the signs to him who properly sees them in faith, thus inseparably linking the symbol and the reality. In a similar way, the mere listening to the preached Word does not regenerate the lost. Rather, through the preached Word the faithful rest upon the promises that are contained therein.

Another point of contrast can be found in the way each group defines the sacraments as seals. The Federal Vision asserts that the sacraments seal one into union with Christ. In contrast, the broader Reformed community asserts that while the sacraments seal *believers* into union with Christ, they seal unbelievers as covenant breakers and thus make them liable to God's curse. Those who are under God's condemnation by participating in the sacrament without faith, while experiencing the common operations of God's providence and beneficence to the community of the faithful, nevertheless are recipients only of God's wrath; they are never recipients of such covenantal blessings as forgiveness of sins or the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.⁷⁰

II. BAPTISM

A. FEDERAL VISION

Though often accused of it, the Federal Vision does not believe in baptismal regeneration from the perspective that baptism as a ritual results unfailingly in eternal salvation. Wilson writes:

⁷⁰ Both the Federal Vision and the broader Reformed community have to wrestle with the full meaning of Hebrews 6:4-6 and what it means to "taste the heavenly gift." Much of the tension is in how each party interprets this passage.

Of course there are baptized covenant members who are not individually regenerate. They are the ones who reject what God is offering to them in their baptism. They therefore fall away from the *covenant* and not from election.⁷¹

Because the Federal Vision affirms God's sovereignty, it must necessarily conclude that none can fall away from God's elective decree. And since some of the baptized do fall away, the Federal Vision reasons that baptism establishes a covenantal relationship between the baptized and Christ. Wilson comments:

In one sense, it is true that if you baptize an unrepentant pagan, you get a wet pagan. But it is the thesis of this book that far more happens than this. When you baptize an unrepentant pagan, what you actually get is a covenant-breaker. His baptism now obligates him to live a life of repentance, love and trust, which he is refusing to do.⁷²

In baptism, the status of the pagan changes from being outside the covenant to being a covenant-breaker.

The consequence of baptism is that the Church formally brings individuals into the covenant, which of course means that it requires excommunication to remove them. Within the Federal Vision, the baptized are treated as full covenant members. However, in order for baptism to be effective, Wilson argues that the significance of baptism must be embraced in faith, namely that Christ died and rose again. "Baptism does not save by means of the water (not putting away physical dirt), but baptism does save by the resurrection of Jesus Christ accompanied by the answer of a good conscience."⁷³

Leithart does not distance himself in the same way as Wilson from the phrase "baptismal regeneration." However, he does also reject any concept of baptismal regeneration which would suggest that baptism makes an individual one of the eternally Elect. Because Leithart believes that baptism makes priests in God's House, he argues that

⁷¹ Wilson, *Reformed Is Not Enough*, 104 [emphasis author's].

⁷² Ibid., 99.

⁷³ Ibid., 100.

baptism has the effect of inducting an individual into the cultural-liturgical practice of the church. This can be seen as a “regeneration” of sorts. He writes:

Our typology leads to a doctrine of ‘baptismal regeneration.’ Aaron and his sons received new tasks, a new title and name, new privileges and responsibilities, and baptism likewise forms new creatures. But here we meet a sharp objection from traditional sacramental theology, for I seem to have reduced ‘baptismal regeneration’ to ‘operative ceremony.’ This typology produces a theology of baptism that seems purely ‘external,’ ‘merely legal,’ and ‘juridical,’ while baptism is something far ‘more profound and more inward,’ related to ‘an inner salvation-event to which the outward confession is only a precondition [quoting at various places Schnackenburg]. This objection goes to the heart of the problematics of sacramental theology, for it poses the question of the relation between outward sign and inward grace.⁷⁴

Leithart attempts to solve the relation of external sign and internal grace by positing a relationship between sociological status (priest in God’s House) and theological reality. He writes:

I maintain that baptism signifies and extends a covenant renewal portrayed in the New Testament as a ‘cosmic’ transformation; it is, in the widest sense, a ‘washing of regeneration.’ If baptism is the Christian conjugation of ordination, if baptism does now what ordination did then, we have reason to suspect that it also reconstructs the religious landscape....[forming] a new priestly community, historically extending the veil-rending work of Jesus’ ministry; it contests and remaps antique Israelite topography.⁷⁵

Thus, the baptized becomes a “son” of the House whose participation in the culture and liturgy of the Church has a real effect in the corporate ministry of the Kingdom of God even if he later leaves the House. Additionally, Leithart writes:

Yahweh regarded Aaron differently after the rite [of ordination], permitting him to enter the house, stand at the altar, offer and eat His bread. Baptism, analogously, effects a transition, as Rowan Williams puts it, not only in the regard of men but in the ‘gaze of God,’ and this makes us ‘new creations’ in the deepest possible sense.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Leithart, *The Priesthood of the Plebs*, 166.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 184-185.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 170.

The Federal Vision teaches that baptized children are Christians and members of the Covenant (which some have called “presumptive regeneration”), arguing that this perspective is the natural result of parents embracing God’s covenantal promises in faith. Wilson, for example, asserts that the Half-Way Covenant and revivalism of the Great Awakening led to a covenantal rigorism which emphasized testimonies and visible conversions. Children were considered members of the “covenant community” but not really partakers in the covenant. Thus they were barred from the Lord’s Table until they gave a credible confession of faith. Wilson calls this attitude “presumptive nonregeneration.”⁷⁷

Federal Visionists suggest that doubt as to the status of our children is counter to the Scriptures, to the Confession, and to our Reformed heritage. “We stopped believing God’s Word, and started believing converts,” Wilson writes. “Before we would take any sacramental action, we had to hear from *man*. Having heard God’s promises was insufficient.”⁷⁸ In fact, the Federal Vision argues that we stand in opposition to God when we presume our children to be nonregenerate because God uses the faith of parents in His promises concerning their children as an instrument to actually fulfill those promises.

Wilson and others are careful at this point to acknowledge that a parent’s faith is not the ground of a child’s salvation.

Every human parent has inadequate works. No human parent has met all the conditions of works that would ensure godly offspring. Godly children are not the result of our works. They are God’s reward, God’s covenant blessing. If God were to have my children turn out on the basis of my works – on one of my good days – they would all be in the penitentiary. But he offers to *give* me my children, and their children after them. What must I do? I must believe Him when He offers them to me.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Wilson, *Reformed Is Not Enough*, 183.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 185 [emphasis author’s].

⁷⁹ Ibid., 187 [emphasis author’s].

The end result of a right view of children in the covenant, Wilson suggests, is that the Church does not parade children before the congregation in later adolescence to give confessions of faith, but rather treats them as if their entire lives they know Jesus Christ and love His Word and Church. To do otherwise is to teach children to doubt and not to have faith. Wilson writes:

[S]ome are troubled because we speak so freely of our little ones as Christians, as saints, as heirs of salvation. This language makes people think we are asserting that we *have* somehow decoded the secret decrees, and that we have discovered that God's secret counsel has predetermined the ultimate salvation of this child and that one. But no, we speak this way because the *covenant* requires it of us. We believe, therefore we have spoken. But at the same time, we really *do* believe it, and this faith of ours is one of the instruments God uses to instill that same faith in our children. Doubting over our children is an excellent way to teach them to doubt. Believing over them enables them to grow up in an environment of believing.⁸⁰

As stated above, the Federal Vision does not equate a presumptive regeneration with actual regeneration. Wilson notes:

In faith, we want to say that children of believers are saved. But we are not making a categorical statement of the 'All P are Q' kind. We are saying that we believe God's statements and promises concerning covenant children, and we think others should believe them, too. Now these promises (in all our theological systems) have apparent instances of non-fulfillment. How are we to account for this? We all acknowledged that some of our children grow up and depart from the living God. We see the same kind of thing with adult converts....At the same time, the new covenant contains stipulations and promises that invite *parents* to believe. Some do and some do not. But according to our baptismal rites, all of them say they do.⁸¹

Leithart agrees with traditional Protestantism that infant baptism points to the reality that infants receive benefits as members of the Church, particularly regular instruction under the Word. However, Leithart adds that infants are not just "passive" members of the Body.

⁸⁰ Douglas Wilson, "Union with Christ: An Overview of the Federal Vision," in *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros & Cons: Debating the Federal Vision*, ed Calvin Beisner (Fort Lauderdale, Florida: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004), 3 [emphasis author's].

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 7 [emphasis author's].

They are baptized as priests and thus inducted into ministry. What is that ministry? Leithart writes:

Because they are utterly incapable of sustaining their own growth toward maturity, infants help coagulate the community; precisely because infants are entirely passive, their presence is powerfully active and activating. Infant baptism thus implies the question of who is considered a productive member of the Christian priesthood. Physically and mentally disabled persons, social outcasts and refugees, orphans and widows are as much at issue as infants....Jesus forms a priestly people from the blind, the lame, the blemished, the weak – precisely those excluded from Old Covenant housekeeping and from the Old Covenant table.⁸²

B. THE BROADER REFORMED VIEW

Baptism by water is a picture of the purification that is offered by Christ in the Gospel. God promised in Ez. 36:25 and throughout that He would “sprinkle clean water” upon His people; an act that would also accompany the replacement of stony, calcified hearts with fleshy, pliable ones that delight in His Word and know His ways. This purification results only from the atonement of Christ and thus baptism is a “meaningful sign of the accomplished salvation and of all the richness of blessing comprised in that salvation.”⁸³

Baptism is not a separate work of grace; it does not save apart from or in conjunction with the saving work of Christ on the cross. When Paul speaks of salvation he speaks of the centrality of the cross, which is effected through the instruments of faith, word and water. For example, in Ephesians 5:26 he writes that Christ gave Himself up for the Church in order to sanctify it, having “cleansed it by the washing of water with the word.”

⁸² Leithart, *The Priesthood of the Plebs*, 153-154.

⁸³ Berkouwer, *The Sacraments*, 104.

Baptism is also the correlate of circumcision. Like circumcision, baptism is given to the children of believers in recognition of God's covenantal promise to be a God "to you and to your children." However, as John Murray writes:

Though circumcision and baptism are the signs and seals of covenant union and communion, it does not follow that every one who bears this sign and seal is an actual partaker of the grace signified and sealed and is therefore an heir of eternal life. It frequently happens that the sign is administered to those who, from the standpoint of good government and discipline, ought not to be baptized.⁸⁴

Even so, all baptized children, until evidencing otherwise, are to be treated as the Elect and members of the Church.

What then is to be said about those children who are not of the Elect, but have been baptized? This question is valid also for non-Elect adults who are also baptized. The answer cannot be that such baptisms are false or ineffective. Baptism remains the sign and seal of not just external blessings, but of the covenant itself. Therefore, the fact that some baptized individuals do not possess the actual blessings of covenant is not due to God's inconsistency, but rather to man's inability to penetrate the mystery of God's eternal decree. Murray comments:

[T]here is a discrepancy between the secret operations and purposes of God in his saving grace, on the one hand, and the divinely instituted method of administering the covenant in the world, on the other....God has not given us any assurance that the operations of His saving grace are invariably present where the divine institution is observed. Consequently, among adults there are some to whom the sign is administered, rightly and properly in accordance with the administration which God has committed to men, who do not possess, either in the forum of conscience or in the forum of the divine judgment, the inward grace of which baptism is the sign....It may be said that such are only in external covenant relationship. But it may not be said that baptism is simply the sign and seal of such external relationship.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1980), 51.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 52-53.

C. POINTS OF TENSION

While both the Federal Vision and broader Reformed community believe that baptism “does something” with regard to those not elect of God, they diverge with regard to what exactly does happen. This was seen earlier in the discussion of the sacraments as seals. The Federal Vision believes that creating a “quasi-membership” of those who are only externally related to the covenant has led the Church in recent generations to doubt the status of children and require a future confession of faith to determine if the baptism was “real.” The Federal Vision offers, instead, a view of baptism that actually unites individuals to Christ “covenantally.” The difference then is that those who are not Elect will eventually apostasize from Christ.

The Federal Vision also adds greater depth and nuance to the meaning of baptism. Leithart, in particular, suggests typological and sociological aspects of baptism that, unless carefully read, can lead to confusion among those comfortable with traditional formulations. Viewing baptism as the “conjugate” of the Old Testament initiation rite for priests prompts Leithart to say that baptism works *ex opere operato* (the baptized are always made priests of God’s House) and regenerates, terms and phrases normally associated with Roman sacerdotalism and guaranteed to startle many who will not take the time to read his lengthy dissertation.

III. THE LORD'S SUPPER

A. THE FEDERAL VISION

As with baptism, the Federal Vision acknowledges that the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is a sign and seal of the benefits of Christ to true believers. Wilson writes: "True believers are nourished. They renew covenant with God. God makes promises to us in the Supper."⁸⁶ Since the Supper is a form of covenant renewal it belongs to those who are members of the covenant, thus those who have been baptized. This would include young children who can eat and drink the elements but who may not yet articulate a "credible confession." As Wilson states,

Baptism is the doorway of the visible Church. A man who has not been baptized in water is not yet a professing Christian. He may be regenerate – God knows – but he has not yet professed Christ in the way Christ instructed and required....In short, the visible mark of a visible saint is water baptism. This is how Jesus told us to make disciples.⁸⁷

Wilson sees the Table as a form of nurture within the Covenant. He writes:

Baptism and the Lord's Table have the Lord's promises attached to them, and when approached rightly, they nurture and instruct us in this way of thinking. They enable us to see what is occurring throughout the rest of our lives.⁸⁸

In another place he writes: "In the Table of the Lord we have a glorious opportunity to grow in faith, as the Word commands the sacrament, and the sacrament enriches the Word."⁸⁹

Given that Leithart sees baptism as the conjugation of the ordination and circumcision rites of the Old Covenant, it is not surprising that the Supper takes on additional nuance in Leithart's writings as well. The Supper is the analogue of "filling the hand" of the priest as found in Exodus 29 and Leviticus 22. Leithart comments:

⁸⁶ Wilson, *Reformed Is Not Enough*, 110.

⁸⁷ Wilson, *Mother Kirk*, 94.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

The phrase ‘filling the hand’ means in part that Yahweh filled the priests’ hands with portions of sacrificial food. Ordination began with washing in water and ended with a meal in the holy place, exhibiting the same form as other covenant-cutting rites (cf. Exod. 19:17-24:1-11). Aaron and his sons entered covenant with Yahweh by exchanging gifts of food and sharing a meal. Once installed, priests might eat holy portions of the sacrifices.... not the comparatively meager fare of ‘strangers’ to the house.... Members of a priest’s household – including slaves, unmarried children, and divorced or widowed daughters – shared certain kinds of priestly food (Lev. 22:11-13; cf. 6:16-18, 29; 7:6). Infants were included, since the holy gifts were a prime food source for priestly families, who had no landed inheritance.⁹⁰

With regard the presence of Christ at the Table, the Federal Vision denies any Roman Catholic view of the Table as a perpetual sacrifice of Christ or of the elements as transubstantiated into the body and blood of Christ. However, many like Wilson do believe that they “...truly become the body and blood of Christ *sacramentally*, not physically. The elements themselves remain bread and wine.”⁹¹ Thus, the Federal Vision also denies any Zwinglian view of the Supper as a mere memorial. Wilson comments:

The blessing of the sacrament has historically been distorted in two ways. One is the error of the sacerdotalist, who magnifies what happens to be bread and wine to the point of idolatrous superstition. The other is the error of the memorialist, who reacts to the idolatry, and minimizes or denies the reality of the blessing.⁹²

When asked what happens during the Lord’s Supper, Leithart writes:

We, as children of Abraham, are offered the trees of the garden; as sons of Abraham, we celebrate a victory feast in the King’s Valley; as holy ones, we receive holy food; as the true Israel, we feed on the land of milk and honey; as exiles returned to Zion, we eat marrow and fat, and drink wine on the lees; we who are many are made one loaf, and commune with the body and blood of Christ; we are the bride celebrating the marriage supper of the Lamb, and we are also the bride undergoing the test of jealousy; at the Lord’s table we commit ourselves to shun the table of demons.⁹³

⁹⁰ Leithart, *The Priesthood of the Plebs*, 143-144, 147.

⁹¹ Wilson, *Reformed Is Not Enough*, 112 [emphasis author’s].

⁹² Wilson, *Mother Kirk*, 101.

⁹³ Leithart, *Blessed Are the Hungry*, 12-13.

Leithart's view of the Table is far more one of a participatory ritual that recasts the many types of the Old Covenant. Seen in this light, the focus is moved away from what the elements signify to what is dramatized in the participation. Thus, Leithart writes:

At the Table we receive an initial taste of the final heavens and earth, but the Lord's Supper is not merely a *sign* of the eschatological feast, as if the two were separate feasts. Instead, the Supper is the early stage of that very feast. Every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we are displaying in history a glimpse of the end of history and anticipating in this world the order of the world to come.⁹⁴

Regarding participants at the Table, the Federal Vision does espouse a "covenantal communion" position. Wilson, for example, does not believe that the Confession's term "ignorant" refers to those who are unable to articulate a testimony of faith. Rather, he writes:

There are types and degrees of ignorance. For example, there are ignorant people who ought not to be, and so they should be excluded from the Table because their ignorance is culpable. But a five-year-old is necessarily ignorant and, to some extent, so is a mature Christian. We are all *ignorant*, but the Supper is given to nourish and strengthen us....Consequently, we do not want to be maneuvered into saying that Christians should grow big and strong, and then we will give them some food. This aspect of the Confession has to be carefully considered when discussing the issue of child communion, although I do not believe it excludes child communion necessarily. It seems clear that the ignorance addressed (at least here) is a culpable, stiff-necked ignorance, and is not the ignorance which every worthy partaker of the Supper confessed daily.⁹⁵

Traditional understanding of the term "unworthy," Wilson argues, could also use refinement. He writes:

If this chapter is taken as meaning that unworthy partakers do not receive the *blessing* promised to any right use of the Supper, then this is correct. But if it means that the wicked do not partake of Christ *in any sense* when they partake of the Supper, then I think this is wrong. The curses of the covenant fall upon wicked and ignorant partakers precisely because they defile the body and blood of the Lord. The reason they are guilty of the body and blood of the

⁹⁴ Ibid., 15 [emphasis author's].

⁹⁵ Wilson, *Reformed Is Not Enough*, 115 [emphasis author's].

Lord is because they came to it in an unworthy way. When this happens, they eat and drink to their own damnation. They cannot defile what they did not receive. The contrast that Scripture presents at the Table is blessings and *curses*, not blessings and no blessings.⁹⁶

Here “unworthy” means faithless covenant members and not “unbelievers” or “sinners.”

B. THE BROADER REFORMED VIEW

The broader Reformed community believes that the Lord’s Supper is used by God to nourish the faithful within the Covenant of Grace. This nourishment both strengthens the Body of Christ with heavenly food, but is also eschatologically oriented. The Church is to celebrate the Supper until Christ eats again with His people. Thus, there is an orientation towards the past as people remember Christ’s sacrifice, an orientation towards the present as the people of God are built up into one Body, and an orientation towards the future as the Bride anticipates participation in the marriage supper with her Bridegroom.

While the Church has struggled over the centuries to find proper analogies for the Supper, it finds its best model in the Supper as a preparation for a wedding ceremony. As her husband Christ prepares a feast for her, the Bride must be ready, pure, and beautiful. She is nourished and renewed every time she sits down to commune with her Groom. When people are wed, there is narrative, celebration, and singing. Hearts are filled with rejoicing, and the senses overwhelmed with sights of splendor, taste, and smells; one does not leave a wedding unaffected. The Reformed community recognizes that this must be true of worship, particularly as expressed in the Table. It is a time of intimate feasting; not dry talk of theology or mere formalism.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 114 [emphasis author’s].

C. POINTS OF TENSION

The contrast between the Federal Vision and broader Reformed community centers not around what necessarily happens in the Supper, but who participates meaningfully in it. For most of those outside the Federal Vision, the Supper is not for the ignorant and scandalous, which includes those unable to examine themselves prior to participation. The Federal Vision, in contrast, believes that as a direct parallel to Passover, baptized children ought to participate as soon as they are able to eat and drink.

IV. SACRAMENTAL UNION

Given the summary above of Federal Vision soteriology and sacramentology, we are now in a position to evaluate the Federal Vision teaching on the ability of the sacraments to effect union with Christ. There are three sections of the Westminster Confession that are most pertinent to the discussion: WCF 27.2, 27.3, and 28.6. They read as follows:

WCF 27.2: There is in every sacrament a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified; whence it comes to pass that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other.

WCF 27.3: The grace which is exhibited in or by the sacraments, rightly used, is not conferred by any power in them; neither doth the efficacy of a sacrament depend upon the piety or intention of him that doth administer it, but upon the work of the Spirit, and the word of institution, which contains, together with a precept authorizing the use thereof, a promise of benefit to worthy receivers

WCF 28.6: The efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered; yet, notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God's own will, in his appointed time.

A. FEDERAL VISION

The Federal Vision believes that many Reformed Christians today ignore these portions of the Confession, or at least misunderstand them by emphasizing, for example, the adjective “sacramental” in the phrase “sacramental union” rather than acknowledge that the Confession describes a union between the sign and the thing signified, namely between the sacrament and Christ and His work. Wilson writes: “...I want to say that it is a sacramental *union*, with union meaning union.”⁹⁷

Wilson affirms that there is no specific grace in the sacrament itself. To suggest so would be to abstract grace into an ontological substance. He writes: “Grace is not a fluid that can fill up a reservoir. Grace is a covenantal relationship between persons.”⁹⁸ Here, then, is Wilson’s emphasis: Grace is the blessing which flows out of a covenantal relationship between the triune God and faithful covenant members by the power of the Holy Spirit. No person ever comes away from a sacrament unchanged, because covenant-breakers receive the curse of the covenant. Wilson comments:

There is no power in the sacrament itself; there *is* power in that which the sacrament is identified with – the blessings and curses of the covenant itself. This being the case, the sacrament does not depend for its efficacy on the godliness of the one administering the sacrament.⁹⁹

It is particularly in the sacraments that covenant keepers and covenant breakers are distinguished; the one receiving blessings, the other curses. Due to sacramental union, both are brought into a covenant relationship with Christ. Wilson says:

A true son is brought into the covenant and is nourished there. A false son is brought into the covenant and by his unbelief incurs the chastisements of that covenant. Objectively, both the true and false son are brought into the same

⁹⁷ Ibid., 89 [emphasis author’s].

⁹⁸ Ibid., 91.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 90 [emphasis author’s].

relation. But because one of them is elect and the other is not, the former is faithful and the latter is faithless. Objectively, baptism makes me a member of Christ's body, and this becomes an episode in the story of who I am.¹⁰⁰

In another place:

What we need to say is that the nonelect do not receive what the sacraments receive *for blessing*. They do taste and participate, and they taste Christ as their covenant Lord and Judge. They do come in contact with the blood of the covenant, but this happens because they have trampled it.¹⁰¹

Like Wilson, Leithart rejects a sacerdotalist view of the sacraments. He writes:

Baptism is not, strictly, a 'means of grace,' a 'bottle containing the medicine of grace' or a 'channel' through which the fluid of grace flows. Rather baptism *is* a gift of God's grace, since through it He adopts us as sons.¹⁰²

God uses the rite of baptism as the ceremony thorough which He initiates people into His house, the Church.

Baptism is efficacious because Jesus assigned *this* rite value as the entry token for the feast, as the induction ceremony into His Spirit-filled house, as ordination into priesthood. Baptism works because, like the tabernacle and ordination, it conforms to the verbal *torah* revealed on another mountain.¹⁰³

In this sense, then, the sacrament of baptism operates as a means of grace because it bestows favors and privileges. Leithart concludes:

If grace is the favor of God manifested in the bestowal of favors, then baptism is and confers grace: the grace of a standing in the house of God, the grace of membership in the community of the reconciled, the grace of immersion in the history of the bride of Christ, the grace of God's favorable regard upon us.¹⁰⁴

Leithart also distinguishes between what the sacraments accomplish individually and corporately. Corporately, the sacraments bestow a new status in the house of God. In this

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 96.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 97 [emphasis author's].

¹⁰² Leithart, *The Priesthood of the Plebs*, 175 [emphasis author's].

¹⁰³ Ibid., 181 [emphasis author's].

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 183.

way, they are efficacious. Commenting on the ordination of priests in the Old Testament,

Leithart writes:

The ordination texts imply an emphatically objective notion of ritual efficacy. At the beginning of the rite, Aaron and his sons were not allowed to approach the altar or enter the tent, but when it ended Aaron was ministering at Yahweh's table and in the house....Aaron was not made a priest because his heart was right, or because he experienced or possessed what the ritual symbolized. As far as qualification for priestly standing was concerned, the inner state of his heart *was* indifferent.¹⁰⁵

While baptism brings a new identity, in which one's "story" is added to that of the Church,¹⁰⁶ Leithart acknowledges that this identity change concerns one's role in the House of God and does not affect God's eternal elective decree. As Leithart writes:

Baptism to priesthood does not guarantee an eternal standing among the people of God, for priests may be removed from the house and cut off from the table. Yet, baptism is not irrelevant to eternal salvation; though baptism 'by itself' does not guarantee a standing, baptism never is 'by itself' but always a step on a pathway. Perseverance to the end of the pathway, the mark of eschatologically saving faith, is, as Augustine insisted, a gift of grace, which, being grace, is gratuitously distributed as God pleases. God determines which priests stand or fall and brings this about through a variety of specific instruments.¹⁰⁷

Wilson believes that efficacious grace, referring to the conversion of individuals, is the grace of baptism which the Holy Spirit applies to the Elect in God's appointed time. This explains the Confession's emphasis on a once only baptism. Because this grace is the grace of baptism, one can say with Peter that "baptism saves" or that grace and salvation are conferred upon the Elect through baptism.

Using again Wilson's favorite metaphor of marriage, baptism is like a wedding. In a wedding ceremony two individuals are brought into covenantal union with one another. A ring is given as a sign and seal of that marriage. As Wilson writes:

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 155,158 [emphasis author's].

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 168.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 173.

Does anyone really stumble over the words ‘with this *ring* I thee wed’? Does anyone really think that a little piece of metal contains such awesome powers? Not at all – there is a sign and the thing signified, and there is in performative acts a covenant *union* between the two.¹⁰⁸

And yet, the ring does signify something real. There is a marriage and the man is a husband.

Whether the man is a true husband or not depends upon his faithfulness to the marriage covenant. If he becomes adulterous then he is an adulterer or covenant breaker.

Leithart distinguishes between the eternal salvation meant by the Confession and “salvation” understood in a corporate sense. In doing so, Leithart argues that baptism does “save” in that it makes the baptized a member of a “saved people.” Leithart writes:

By baptism into the royal priesthood, one is incorporated into the race of the Last Adam. It is thus not correct that the Spirit first enlivens and then at some second stage equips for ministry. Living the life of salvation *is* ministering in God’s house; as baptism authorizes and deputizes to such ministry, it grants a share in the life of salvation.¹⁰⁹

To share in the life of salvation is as in Hebrews 6 to “taste of the heavenly gift,” but it is not a guarantee to eternal life. One must still persevere through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

B. THE BROADER REFORMED VIEW

1. DEFINITION OF UNION

Robert Reymond, in his book *Systematic Theology*, provides a good starting point for the concept of union with Christ as defined by the broader Reformed community:

Union with Christ is the fountainhead from which flows the Christian’s every spiritual blessing – repentance and faith, pardon, justification, adoption, sanctification, perseverance, and glorification. Chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, and *in the divine mind* united with Christ in his death and resurrection, the elect, in response to God’s effectual call, are through

¹⁰⁸ Wilson, *Reformed Is Not Enough*, 102 [emphasis author’s].

¹⁰⁹ Leithart, *The Priesthood of the Plebs*, 171-172 [emphasis author’s].

God's gift of faith *actually* united to Christ. Their union with Christ is in no sense the effect of human causation....By virtue of his actual union with Christ the Husband in his death and resurrection, the Christian, as Christ's "bride," is forgiven of his sin and liberated from the law – his previous 'husband' – and made capable of doing that which he could never do before, namely, 'bear holy fruit to God' (Rom. 7:4-5). To the degree that the Christian 'reckons himself dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus' (Rom. 6:11), that is to say, to the degree that the Christian takes seriously the reality of his Spirit-wrought union with Christ, to that degree he will find his definitive sanctification coming to actual expression in his experiential or progressive sanctification. The holiness of the Christian's daily walk directly depends upon his union with the Savior.¹¹⁰

From Reymond's definition we can derive several key points: 1) union with Christ is the fountainhead of every blessing; 2) union with Christ belongs to the Elect alone; 3) union with Christ is not brought about by human activity or ritual – it is appropriated by faith; 4) union with Christ is a spiritual reality; 5) union with Christ is union in His death and in His resurrection, resulting in forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

a) Union with Christ is the Fountainhead of Every Blessing

The Bible speaks of the blessings in Christ as an "inheritance" (Eph. 1:11). Believers are made recipients of that inheritance because they are, as Paul says, "in Him." Utilizing marital imagery, it is evident that this accrues to believers because Christ is their Husband and all that is His is made theirs. One can also employ covenantal imagery. As Berkhof writes:

As Adam was the representative head of the old humanity, so Christ is the representative head of the new humanity. All the blessings of the covenant of grace flow from Him who is the Mediator of the covenant.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Tennessee: Nelson, 1998), 739 [emphasis author's].

¹¹¹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1938 (reprinted 1996)), 447.

Berkhof is also quick to point out that those who are not “reckoned in Christ,” i.e. non-elect, are not united with Christ and therefore partake only of the blessings of “common grace.”¹¹²

b) Union with Christ Belongs to the Elect Alone

Key to traditional formulations of union is that such union is given only to the eternally Elect. Those that are united to Christ are said to be “seated in the heavenly places” (Eph. 2:6), denoting a position given only to those made holy and given access to the throne room of God. This access is granted as a result of having been individually justified by faith (Rom. 5:1). It is maintained by grace and results in the hope of glory due to the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:2-5). The Bible does not describe this access as temporary. Rather, it is said to be “sealed” by the Spirit as a guarantee of eternal life (Eph. 1:13-14). This blessing can only be said to be the real possession of the Elect.

c) Union with Christ Is Appropriated by Faith

John Murray argues that by our faith in Jesus Christ and by our effectual calling “...we are united to Christ and invested with his righteousness unto our acceptance with God and justification by him.” Thus, Murray sees grace-gifted faith as the antecedent to both justification and union with Christ. This faith rests upon the sufficient work of Christ as the foundation of all true righteousness.

When we are united to Christ, there is a sense in which we no longer live, but Christ who lives in and through us (Gal. 2:20). That life is energized by faith – the gracious gift of God to elect sinners (Eph 3:16-17). Faith believes that God is a Rewarder of those who seek

¹¹² Ibid.

Him, and thus the regenerated believer strives for the hope of a future inheritance which at present is invisible and unrealized.

d) Union with Christ is Spiritual

Richard Gaffin makes the following observation:

As spiritual, that is, effected by the Holy Spirit, [union with Christ] is neither ontological (like that between the persons of the Trinity), nor hypostatic (like that between Christ's divine and human natures), nor psychosomatic (between body and soul in human personality), nor somatic (between husband and wife); nor is it merely intellectual and moral, a unity in understanding, affections, and purpose.¹¹³

Ontological, hypostatic, psychosomatic, and somatic versions of union threaten to remove personal distinctiveness. In contrast, Scripture suggests that the one united to Christ maintains his or her personal identity. Paul and others describe the believer as "in" Christ (Rom. 6:11, 23) or becoming "like" Christ (Rom. 6:5).

There has been recent scholarship on exploring union in a moral/intellectual capacity. Bruce McCormack, for example, suggests that with the rejection of Platonism and the isolation of perichoresis to descriptions of intra-Trinitarian relationships, the only mode of union left is an ethical/intellectual relation. McCormack writes:

For much of Christian history, the work of the Spirit has been thought of along the lines of a kind of divine surgery. The will, on this view, is thought of as something quasi-substantial, a 'thing' that can be operated upon by God so as to effect a 'healing.'... We would be better off, I suspect, thinking of the work of the Holy Spirit in terms of an existential encounter of divine person with human person whose point of entry, if you will, is the mind.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Richard Gaffin. *By Faith, Not by Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation* (Waynesboro, Georgia: Paternoster Press, 2006), 38-39.

¹¹⁴ Bruce L. McCormack, "What's at Stake in Current Debates over Justification," in *What's at Stake in Current Debates over Justification*, Husbands, Mark, and Treier, Daniel J. eds. (Downer's Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2004), 116.

For McCormack, then, “illumination” is the best synonym for union.

The diversity of scholarly thought on this topic reveals that at its heart the mechanics of union are a mystery. Of course, this doesn’t prevent one from eliminating poor analogies and embracing better ones. For example, defining union as “spiritual” is a reminder that union is fundamentally a work of the Holy Spirit both in its creation and sustenance. As Sinclair Ferguson writes: “Our union with the Lord is created by the agency of the Holy Spirit. He carries us ‘into Christ.’”¹¹⁵ Paul describes the result of union as a “new creation” and God’s “workmanship” (Eph. 2:10). Describing union as spiritual also contrasts with the spiritual death brought about by sin; union results in spiritual life where one was once spiritually dead (Eph. 2:4-5).

e) Union with Christ is in His Death and Resurrection

Colossians 2:11-14 combines many of the characteristics of union in one passage.

Paul writes:

In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us (New King James Version).

The believer is “buried with Christ” and raised with Him from the dead by faith in God’s work. The benefits of Christ’s resurrection are thus imputed to those united to Him in a representational capacity for believers have not been ontologically buried with Christ.

¹¹⁵ Sinclair Ferguson, *The Christian Life* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth Trust, 1991), 109.

At the same time, however, one must not see union with Christ's death and resurrection as merely representational. Believers are truly forgiven and given access, *now*, to God's immediate presence (Rom. 5:2). Union with Christ is the goal of Christ's work; where union with the first Adam brought about death, union with the second Adam results in forgiveness and eternal life. Paul's message, as Gaffin notes, is centered upon this soteriological truth. Our plight is sin and the solution is Christ, "particularly his being 'obedient to death – even death on a cross.'...Union with Christ by faith – that is the essence of Paul's *ordo salutis*."¹¹⁶ It is an existential reality with real effect, real change, and real hope.

2. RELATIONSHIP OF WORD TO UNION WITH CHRIST

Paul commends the Thessalonians in 1 Thess 2:13 for receiving his word "not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe." Paul's words were his own audible pronouncements, but they were the inspired revelation of God. As such, they have life-giving effect for those who have faith. What this means is that God uses common elements like linguistic phonemes and imparts to them divine authority. He does not need to rely upon articulate or eloquent speech to accomplish His purpose; He merely requires that His servants speak His Word so that His sheep will hear His voice.

It has already been seen above that union with Christ is appropriated by faith. It is this faith that embraces what is heard in the preached Word. Of course, as Ephesians 2:8 teaches, even faith is a gift of God.

¹¹⁶ Gaffin, *By Faith, Not by Sight*, 29,43 [emphasis author's].

3. RELATIONSHIP OF WORD AND SACRAMENT

The operation of the sacraments is in many ways similar to the operation of the preached Word. Proper reception of the sacraments by faith results in blessing; improper reception results in condemnation and curse. However, it is the Word that establishes and defines the sacrament, it is the word of institution that consecrates the sacrament, and it is to the Word or Gospel that the sacraments point. In this way, it is the Word that is of primary importance, imparting life. The sacraments, apart from the Word, cannot impart life in the same way. As Calvin writes:

It is known that, from the very beginning of the world, whenever God offered any sign to the holy Patriarchs, it was inseparably attached to doctrine, without which our senses would gaze bewildered on an unmeaning object. Therefore, when we hear mention made of the sacramental word, let us understand the promise which, proclaimed aloud by the minister, leads the people by the hand to that to which the sign tends and directs us.¹¹⁷

While the Word must be seen as of primary importance, the sacraments are not made thereby superfluous or of diminished significance. At a minimum we can say that God commanded their observance and therefore they are important. However, the sacraments are more than just commanded rituals; they are the signs and seals of the covenant promises found in the Word. God uses them to nurture the individual believer and confirm His covenant. As Berkouwer writes:

The addition of the sacrament to the word shows us with undeniable clarity that we can depend on the promise, although both the Word and the sacrament can only be understood in faith...The significance of the sacrament lies in the divine act in which God directs our attention again to the trustworthiness of his Word, upon which man can depend without fear and with great boldness.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV, XIV, 4.

¹¹⁸ Berkouwer, *The Sacraments*, 52-53.

4. SACRAMENTAL EFFICACY

Because God institutes the sacraments, one must see the signaling and sealing of the sacraments as God's act. No mere minister can effect salvation through the sacraments, nor can any participant. God, through the agency of the Holy Spirit, makes His sacraments effective to all. Grace is truly offered to all who participate in the sacraments, but only the Elect receive it by faith, that faith itself a gift of the Holy Spirit. Calvin once wrote:

The integrity of the sacrament, an integrity which the whole world cannot violate, lies here, that the flesh and blood of Christ are not less truly given to the unworthy than to the elect believers of God; and yet it is true, that just as the rain falling on the hard rock runs away, because it cannot penetrate, so the wicked by their hardness repel the grace of God, and prevent it from reaching them. We may add, that it is no more possible to receive Christ without faith, than it is for seed to germinate in the fire.¹¹⁹

The sacraments do not infuse grace; nor do they, absent faith, unite individuals to Christ. Berkouwer writes, "There is a receiving of the sacrament which is altogether different from the receiving of supernatural grace. The sacrament is directed toward faith, in order to nourish and strengthen it."¹²⁰ In this sense then, there remains a subjective element to the sacraments. However, this subjectivity must not be seen as antithetical to the objective nature of the sacraments. The sacraments remain objective in that one can not change them by unbelief. As Calvin writes, the integrity of the sacraments rests upon God's own nature and activity; thus they are objective.

At the same time, the sacraments, as noted above, cannot be separated from Word and faith. The Reformed understanding of the sacraments, then, is always in a tension between the subjective and objective. In their objectivity, the sacraments offer, promise, and seal. In their subjectivity they are received and believed. This tension cannot be resolved because it is

¹¹⁹ Calvin, *Inst.*, IV, XVII, 33.

¹²⁰ Berkouwer, *The Sacraments*, 76.

at heart a reflection of a great mystery. The Church is commanded to treat the sacrament as objective and believe that all participants in the sacraments are truly members of the Covenant, but at the same time it is acknowledged that in the secret counsel of God, not all will be regenerate and will in time evidence that truth by a failure to produce the fruit of the Spirit.

It is in the tension between subjectivity and objectivity¹²¹ that one must find the explanation for WCF 27.2's discussion of a sacramental union between the sign and the signified. Berkouwer writes: "When faith speaks of this connection, it is confessing the veracity of God."¹²² Baptism signifies and seals union with Christ through faith. Thus, the faithful rest upon that truth, knowing that God's promises are true. God has promised that Christ's body and blood, received by faith, will nourish His people. Thus, the faithful rest upon this truth too. In all of this, the real connection or union is between the believer and Christ as promised by Word and Sacrament. The sacraments are but instruments, though they are certainly no lowly instruments, for they are God's appointed means to strengthen and confirm the believer's union with Christ and His promises. Nothing, though, is ever added to faith.

C. POINTS OF TENSION

If there is tension to be found, it is here most prevalent. The Federal Vision defines union with Christ "covenantally," but leaves out many of the dimensions found in the broader Reformed definition of union. While both groups believe that participation in the

¹²¹ "Subjective" and "objective" are used here to correlate with the terminology of the Federal Vision. Traditionally, one would compare/contrast the covenant with election.

¹²² Ibid., 81.

sacraments results in either blessing or condemnation, the Federal Vision also affirms a spiritual union (branchness), based primarily on a reading of John 15, for covenant breakers that is denied by the broader Reformed community.

Fundamentally, the traditional Reformed position regards union as having an eschatological dimension. The Bible speaks of an inward renewal (2 Cor. 4:16) that results from the work of the Spirit and takes place in the present for those united to Christ. This renewal which is refined through affliction builds up an “eternal weight of glory.” Thus, there is an inseparable connection between the “already” and “not yet” that the Federal Vision must reject for the covenant breaker (i.e. the covenant breaker experiences the already, but due to apostasy will not experience a future weight of glory).

While the Federal Vision denies that works keep men and women in union with Christ, it still must posit an additional grace (elective persevering grace) beyond that which effects the union in the first place (covenantal grace). This is not in line with traditional formulations. As Herman Bavinck has written:

The counsel of redemption, fixed in eternity, and the covenant of grace, with which man is acquainted immediately after the fall, ... stand in the closest of relationships with each other. They are so closely related that the one stands or falls with the other. There are many who are committed to a different idea. They take their vantage point in the covenant of grace and from that position deny and attack the counsel of redemption. In the name of the purity of the gospel, they reject the confession of election. Actually, they destroy the covenant of grace and convert the gospel into a new law. After all, when the covenant of grace is separated from election, it ceases to be a covenant of grace and becomes again a covenant of works. Election implies that God grants man freely and out of grace the salvation which man has forfeited and which he can never again achieve in his own strength. But if this salvation is not the sheer gift of grace but in some way depends upon the conduct of men, then the covenant of grace is then converted into a covenant of works. Man must then satisfy some condition in order to inherit eternal life.¹²³

¹²³ Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1956), 272-3.

The broader Reformed community, as Bavinck notes, does not separate Election from Covenant and so Election leads inexorably to Covenant and the Covenant unfailingly fulfills Election. To be in the Covenant of Grace is to be assured of salvation and future resurrection. Richard Gaffin comments regarding 1 Corinthians 15 and Paul's discussion of Christ as the "firstfruits" of the resurrection:

We must not miss the full impact of what Paul is saying here. For him it does not go far enough to say, as it is often put, that Christ's resurrection is the guarantee of our resurrection, in the sense of being certain because of God's eternal purpose or his word of promise to the church, although both are certainly true for Paul. Rather, Christ's resurrection is a guarantee in the sense that it is nothing less than the *actual* and, as such, representative beginning of the 'general epochal event' [quoting Vos]. In Paul's view, the general resurrection, as it includes believers, *begins* with Christ's resurrection.¹²⁴

Thus, the broader Reformed community does not believe that one united to Christ can apostasize in the sense suggested by the Federal Vision. In fact, such apostasy would contradict the very integrity of Christ's resurrection, for as Gaffin also states:

We may say that for Paul these two resurrections [that of the believer and Christ] are not so much two events, separate from each other, as they are two episodes, temporally distinct, of the *one and same* event. Together they form the beginning and end of the *same* 'harvest.'¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Gaffin, *By Faith, Not by Sight*, 60 [emphasis author's].

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 61 [emphasis author's].

CHAPTER 4

OPPORTUNITIES FOR RECONCILIATION AND CLARIFICATION

Is there hope for reconciliation? Clearly there are many points of tension between the Federal Vision and broader Reformed community. Several denominations and well-known theologians have accused the Federal Vision of espousing heresy and the Federal Vision has often branded its accusers as being governed by Enlightenment rationalism and revivalist subjectivity. Rhetoric aside, is it possible to clarify the Federal Vision and work reconciliation between the two parties?

At the 2003 Knox Colloquium, Joseph Pipa summarized his and his colleagues' concerns under three general headings: methodological problems, areas of imbalance, and clear Scriptural violations.¹²⁶ The methodological concerns boil down to ways in which the Federal Vision uses theological terms and approaches Scripture hermeneutically. The areas of imbalance primarily relate to the role of the covenant and sacraments. The Scriptural violations center upon exegesis of key concepts like regeneration, union, and justification.

The Federal Vision has been accused of failing to interpret Scripture with Scripture and of alleging that terms are always used the same way in Scripture without the need for exegesis. As support, Pipa quotes John Barach from the question and answer period of the 2002 Auburn Avenue conference:

When Paul says baptism, let's take him to mean baptism, the baptism that the church knew about, baptism with actual water and to believe that when he

¹²⁶ Joseph Pipa, "Federal Vision Theology: An Overview of Critics' Concerns," in *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros & Cons: Debating the Federal Vision*, ed Calvin Beisner (Fort Lauderdale, Florida: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004), 10.

says that through baptism we are united to Christ, that he means with the application of that water, there is something efficacious taking place.¹²⁷

To the extent that Barach and others suggest that every time the word “baptism” or “baptize” occurs in the New Testament that the meaning is water baptism, Pipa is right to be critical. Clearly there are times when the word “baptism” does not refer to water baptism. In Luke 12:50 Jesus speaks of a baptism that he must undergo, referring to his impending crucifixion. In Acts 11:16, Peter distinguishes between a baptism with water and a baptism of the Holy Spirit. This is similar to the distinction made in the Old Testament between external circumcision and the circumcision of the heart.

In general, however, the Federal Vision has been careful to distinguish the different ways terms are used in Scripture. In fact, it is one their principal arguments that systematic theology has too precisely and narrowly defined many terms that have multiple, not single, meanings in the Bible. This can be seen in Wilson’s statement:

People tend to assume that the necessarily precise language of systematics is the way language is used in the Bible. For example, the word *elect* has a theologically precise meaning in systematics. It has multiple meanings in the Bible.¹²⁸

This brings us to a second accusation. The Federal Vision is said to have a “disdain for the role of systematic theology.”¹²⁹ This is an oversimplification.¹³⁰ The Federal Vision does caution against bondage to systematic categories. Wilson writes:

As we see it, the danger of systematic theology lies *not* in the fact of it, for rational and intelligent discourse is impossible apart from such summarization

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Douglas Wilson, “Union with Christ: An Overview of the Federal Vision,” in *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros & Cons: Debating the Federal Vision*, ed Calvin Beisner (Fort Lauderdale, Florida: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004), 4.

¹²⁹ Pipa, “Federal Vision Theology: An Overview of Critics’ Concerns,” 11.

¹³⁰ Although the rhetoric of some Federal Visionists like Steve Schlissel often only goads theologians like Pipa to make such statements. See below my comment on the need for those in the Federal Vision to be more pastoral and to better articulate their views with traditional Reformed orthodoxy.

and abstraction. The danger lies in any process whereby such abstractions place themselves beyond the correction of Scripture. So the question is never ‘systematics’ versus ‘no systematics,’ but rather ‘submissive systematics’ versus ‘unsubmissive systematics.’¹³¹

Many Reformed scholars have given similar caution. John Frame, for example, warns:

[N]o definitive criteria for orthodoxy can be laid down once and for all. If such criteria were definitive, then they would be on a par with Scripture. Rather, criteria of this sort are always *applications* of Scripture to various situations; and situations change.¹³²

While systematic summaries of Scripture and confessional statements help maintain orthodoxy in the Church, as Frame argues, one must be careful not to elevate either to the level of Scripture.

Having given valid caution, Federal Visionists actually praise the role of systematic theology and confessions. Wilson, for example, writes:

The Canons of Dort and the Westminster Confession are wonderful examples of the kind of doctrinal maturity which is possible....A central part of our duty is to labor and pray for the time when the entire Church is mature enough to confess a truly Reformed faith.¹³³

Thus, the Federal Vision sees itself within the boundaries of traditional creedal and confessional orthodoxy. Leithart comments:

Insofar as the Auburn Avenue conferences have proposed refinements of Reformed theology, we have done so in order to purge Reformed theology of pagan impersonalism and to replace it with more thoroughly Trinitarian and more thoroughly Calvinistic formulations. Abstraction, especially Enlightenment abstraction, is the great bogey-man of the Auburn Avenue speakers.¹³⁴

¹³¹ Douglas Wilson, “Union with Christ: An Overview of the Federal Vision,” in *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros & Cons: Debating the Federal Vision*, 4 [emphasis author’s].

¹³² John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Philipsburg, New Jersey: P&R, 1987), 305 [emphasis author’s].

¹³³ Douglas Wilson, *Angels in the Architecture* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 1998), 102.

¹³⁴ Leithart, “Trinitarian Anthropology,” 65.

The Federal Vision has been accused of ambiguous and/or novel usage of historical terms like election, regeneration, justification, and adoption. This is a fair accusation. Careful reading of the Federal Vision makes clear that, for the most part, novel usage of terms relates to the Federal Vision's treatment of corporate regeneration and justification, as well as to added nuances in liturgy and sociology. While some theologians in the broader Reformed community have spoken of covenantal representation in a corporate manner¹³⁵ and even "historical election,"¹³⁶ Wilson and Leithart add such broad sociological dimensions to traditional terms and concepts that they can be described as introducing novel ideas. And while a thorough and objective assessment of the Federal Vision reveals that its position on subjects related to individual election, justification, and so on are within the pale of orthodoxy, there does remain the question whether or not the Federal Vision's corporate formulations are consistent with its individual formulations (particularly with regard to the doctrines of union with Christ and certain aspects of the sacraments).

In accusing the Federal Vision of spreading confusion, Pipa comments:

When Wilson attempts to apply his construct to the issue of election, it leads to serious confusion. Consider this statement: 'This does not mean the elect can lose their salvation, they cannot.' Thus far he seems to be using the term as it has been historically used. But he continues, 'But it does mean that branches can lose their position on the tree. You can be on the tree, someone can be on the tree right next to you and he is as much on the tree as you are, he's as much a partaker of Christ as you are, he is as much a member of Christ as you are and he is cut away and you are not and you stand by faith, so don't be haughty, but fear.'¹³⁷

¹³⁵ See, for example, Sinclair Ferguson's book *The Christian Life* in which he comments "The Old Testament is also familiar with the idea of representative or 'corporate' personality in which one person takes the place of many others and the many are seen to be united together in the accomplishments of the one. They share in his gains and losses."

¹³⁶ See John Frame's comments in *The Doctrine of God*, (Philipsburg, New Jersey: P&R, 2002), 324-325, where Frame's concept of "historical election" sounds very similar in parts to the Federal Vision.

¹³⁷ Pipa, "Federal Vision Theology: An Overview of Critics' Concerns," 11-12, quoting Wilson, "Visible and Invisible Church Revisited," 2002 Auburn Avenue Pastors' Conference, side 2, 408.

Pipa is right to say that this comment, on its surface, is confusing. However, within the context of the whole of the Federal Vision most confusion is removed. As summarized above, the Federal Vision argues that perseverance in covenant union with Christ is according to the eternal, elective decree of God. The more relevant issue in Wilson's comment is not a challenge against Election, but an understanding of union with Christ. This, I believe, is the heart of the controversy.

The Federal Vision is accused of over-objectifying the covenant. Traditionally, objectivity has referred to the inability of individuals to affect the meaning of the covenant, the sacraments, etc. If this is what is meant, then the Federal Vision does not over-objectify the covenant. The Federal Vision clearly recognizes that the integrity of the covenant and sacraments are based upon God's own promises and faithfulness.

What the Federal Vision does seem to do is lose sight of the role of subjective faith in both the covenant and sacraments. In the effort to do justice to passages like John 15, the Federal Vision confuses analogy with identity. The Bible speaks of union with Christ using a variety of metaphors. As Murray points out:

On the highest level of being [union with Christ] is compared to the union which exists between the persons of the trinity in the Godhead. This is staggering but it is the case (John 14:23; 17:21-23). On the lowest level it is compared to the relation that exists between the stones of a building and the chief cornerstone (Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Pet. 2:4,5). In between these two limits there is a variety of similitude drawn from different levels of being and relationship. It is compared to the union that existed between Adam and all of posterity (Rom. 5:12-19; 1 Cor. 15:19-49). It is compared to the union that exists between man and wife (Eph. 5:22-33; cf. John 3:29). It is compared to the union that exists between the head and the other members in the human body (Eph. 4:15, 16). It is compared to the relation of the vine to the branches (John 15). Hence we have analogy drawn from the various strata of being, ascending from the inanimate realm to the very life of the persons of the Godhead.¹³⁸

¹³⁸ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1955), 168.

Equating analogy to reality can lead to unorthodox, even heretical results. While our union with Christ, for example, shares the same kind of intimacy as that shared between the persons of the Trinity, union with Christ does not mean that believers become members of the Trinity. Thus, at some point the metaphor breaks down. Similarly, when Christ speaks of the necessity to abide in Him, He asserts that He is the root and source of eternal life. Those who do not abide in Him do not have life.

If we make the analogy an identity then we are forced to deal with living branches that never produce fruit and are cut off to wither and die. The Federal Vision equates these branches to apostate covenant-breakers. But to do so, it must assert that at one time such branches were living with “sap flowing through them.”¹³⁹ What would that sap be? It would have to be the life-imparting Holy Spirit. Of all the Federal Visionists, Steve Wilkins is the most bold in this regard. He suggests that covenant-breakers enjoy “all spiritual blessings in the heavenly places,” which includes a “share in redemption,” the sacrifice of Christ, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and cleansing from former sins.¹⁴⁰ When we force the analogy, the only difference left between the Elect and non-Elect is persevering grace.

A related issue is the seeming lack by the Federal Vision to deal fully with contrasting analogies. For example, in Luke 6, we are told that people will be known by the fruit they produce (Lk 6:43-45). The wicked are not simply unfruitful branches, they are, in fact, trees of a different sort altogether, producing rotten fruit. In a parable of the Kingdom, unbelievers within the Church are called “tares” (Mt 13), ontologically distinguished from the true wheat. These tares belong to and are sowed by their father the Devil. There is never a

¹³⁹ See Douglas Wilson, *Reformed Is Not Enough*, p132.

¹⁴⁰ Steve Wilkins, “Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation,” in *Federal Vision*, 57-61.

time in which they are transplanted from one kingdom to another. Such analogies again point to the limited use of metaphor – we should never allow an analogy to dominate our theology.

Douglas Wilson has said that the debate over the Federal Vision is at heart “a debate over the theology of children.”¹⁴¹ With regard to the role of children in the covenant, the Federal Vision does recapitulate some of the historic Reformed debates. Lewis Schenck¹⁴² relates several of these debates, including those over confirmation of children in the Puritan “Half-Way Covenant” and the proposed revision of the 1847 Book of Discipline recommended by Thornwell, Dabney, and others. In both of these instances, the objectivity of the covenant was at issue, together with the concepts of presumed regeneration, the role of the sacraments, and so on. These were and are important discussions. Like those in the past, the Federal Vision has been instrumental in warning against individualism, pietism, Gnosticism, and rationalism in the Reformed Church.

At the same time, those who took the side of the Federal Vision in these past debates, men like Charles Hodge who argued against Thornwell’s position, maintained a different understanding than the Federal Vision of the role of the Holy Spirit in uniting the Elect to Christ. Hodge could say, like the Federal Vision, that one could “expect that in the use of the appointed means, children of believers would become truly children of God.”¹⁴³ When parents failed to trust in God’s promises and treated their children as pagans, not trusting in such promises as Deuteronomy 4 or Proverbs 22, Hodge said: “We cannot doubt that this is a source of incalculable evil.”¹⁴⁴ Hodge even spoke of presumption:

¹⁴¹ Wilson, *Reformed Is Not Enough*, 183.

¹⁴² Lewis Bevens Schenck, *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant* (Philipsburg, New Jersey: P&R, 1940, 2003).

¹⁴³ Ibid., 149 quoting Charles Hodge, “Bushnell’s Discourses on Christian Nurture,” *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* (1847), Vol. 19, No. IV, Art. III, 504.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 152, quoting Charles Hodge, *Essays and Reviews*, 316.

“The presumption of election is not founded on their baptism, but their baptism is founded on this presumption; just as the presumption that Jewish children would take Jehovah to be their God was not founded on their circumcision, but their circumcision was founded on that presumption.”¹⁴⁵

And yet, as Schenck comments: “[Hodge’s] deduction was that presumptive membership in the invisible church was no presumption of vital union with Christ, or regeneration by the Holy Spirit.”¹⁴⁶

Hodge’s distinction between presumption of election and presumption of union is an important one, as it helps explain the modern controversy. Hodge’s comments appear more faithful to WSC 28.6 (The efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered) for they recognize that God has made promises to the parents about their children, but that God’s actual timing of calling a child can differ from one individual to the next. Some can be regenerated in the womb like John the Baptist, while others are called later in life. Still others are not regenerated at all. Believing God’s promises gives parents great confidence that their children will respond to the Word.

Schenck comments that Hodge’s position was not Calvin’s position and that the two, while nearly in full agreement, differed on the time element of regeneration. Schenck argues that Calvin believed that God gave “a little spark of his light” to the children of believers, a seed which was made to sprout and subsequently develop as those children were raised in the Word. He writes:

On these grounds Calvinists in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries taught that children of believers were to be considered as recipients of efficacious grace, in whom the work of efficacious grace had already begun. Accordingly they were to receive baptism as being presumably in vital union with Christ, and regenerated by the Holy Spirit.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 135, quoting Charles Hodge, “The Church Membership of Infants,” *op. cit.*, 376.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 136.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 138.

The Federal Vision claims to be the heir of seventeenth century Calvinism. Its self-perceived role has been to flesh out some of the logical consequences of embracing God's promises in the sacraments, as well as to contemplate what it means for the non-Elect to be united to Christ. Unfortunately, some of Federal Vision's consequences lead to unbiblical conclusions. Rather than allow such conclusions to invalidate or modify the premise, the Federal Vision instead massages the concept of union to the point that it no longer fully matches biblical definitions.

As long as the Federal Vision allows the presupposition of spiritual union of non-believers to Christ to so control its paradigm, there may be little hope for reconciliation. The situation is made worse by the fact that several Federal Visionists don't articulate fully their views with the traditional formulations of the past (notable exceptions being Wilson and Leithart who, if anything, have both made efforts to show alignment with the Confession and Reformed orthodoxy).

If there is to be hope for reconciliation, the Federal Visionists, in addition to revisiting the concept of union with Christ, must also be more pastoral in the presentation of their views. The Federal Vision has long left the academic halls of seminars and conferences; it has filtered down into churches and coffee-table books. Many within the broader Reformed community are not familiar with previous debates and don't hear an echo of them in the Federal Vision. They hear only the clash of traditional terms used in strange ways, like strange fire offered at the altar. Because of this, the Federal Vision ought to consider using different terms for the sake of unity. Rather than talk, for example, about corporate justification, it should perhaps speak more clearly of the vindication of God's faithfulness.

The Reformed community, in turn, needs to try to understand better the words of their brethren. So often in my own experience, conversation breaks down over a failure to listen. Add to this a love for a good, stimulating controversy that will keep the books printing, blogs rolling, and seminars scheduled and the result is a juggernaut of rhetoric. It is far too easy simply to allow the Federal Vision to exist within a separate denomination while we publish accusations of heresy. My personal hope is that we will soon see cooperative, mediating works between those in the Federal Vision and Reformed community that seek to explain the historic nature of these debates, better define terms, and acknowledge what is similar and helpful while delineating what is clearly different and whether or not it is alright to be different.

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Jordan, James B. *The Law of the Covenant: An Exposition of Exodus 21-23*. Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1984.

Examines the relationship of the New Covenant to the Old Covenant, particularly with regard to civil law.

Jordan, James B. *Through New Eyes: Developing a Biblical View of the World*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999.

Attempts to establish a biblical worldview from the book of Genesis and then develop it further through the typology and covenants of the Old Testament

Leithart, Peter. *A House for My Name: A Survey of the Old Testament*. Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2000.

An Old Testament survey intended to draw out covenantal themes from the biblical stories.

Leithart, Peter. *Against Christianity*. Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2003.

Rethinks evangelical notions of church, state, and culture through a series of short essays, aphorisms, and parables.

Leithart, Peter. *Blessed Are the Hungry*. Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2000.

A series of meditations on the meaning and significance of the Lord's Supper.

Leithart, Peter. *The Kingdom and the Power*. Philipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1993.

Highlights the spiritual war behind the modern cultural war and calls the reader to a deeper appreciation of corporate worship, church discipline, the Word and sacraments, and prayer.

Leithart, Peter. *The Priesthood of the Plebs: A Theology of Baptism*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003.

Leithart's doctoral dissertation at Cambridge asserting that baptism is the conjugation of the Old Testament initiation ritual for the priesthood.

Lusk, Rich. *Paedofaith*. Monroe, Louisiana: Athanasius Press, 2005.

Attempts to answer the controversial question of when faith develops in a child. Argues that a covenant child has faith from the womb that we should expect to mature throughout their life.

Murray, John. *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1955.

A systematic explanation of the two sides of redemption: its accomplishment by Christ and its application to the life of the redeemed.

Murray, John. *Christian Baptism*. Philipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1980.

Sets forth the scriptural arguments basic to the Presbyterian teaching on baptism.

Reymond, Robert. *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*. Nashville, Tennessee: Nelson, 1998.

A systematic summary of the Scriptures, logically structured to correlate with the Westminster Confession of Faith.

Sadler, M.F. *The Second Adam and the New Birth*. Monroe, Louisiana: Athanasius Press, 2004.

New edition of the works of nineteenth century Anglican M.F. Sadler which are often quoted by the Federal Vision proponents. Discusses the relationship between the sacraments, Church, and salvation.

Strawbridge, Gregg, Ed. *The Case for Covenant Communion*. Monroe, Louisiana: Athanasius Press, 2006.

A collection of essays including contributions by Douglas Wilson, James Jordan, Rich Lusk, Peter Leithart, and Steve Wilkins on the topic of covenant communion.

Waters, Guy Prentiss. *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology: A Comparative Analysis*. Philipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2006.

A comparative analysis of the Federal Vision with modern covenantal theology (as a reflection of British and American Puritanism).

Wilkins, Steve and Garner, Duane, Eds. *The Federal Vision*. Monroe, Louisiana: Athanasius Press, 2004.

A collection of essays by federal vision proponents outlining their views on the Covenant, Election, sacraments, merit theology, the Church, justification, and assurance of salvation.

Wilson, Douglas and Jones, Douglas. *A Serrated Edge: A Brief Defense of Biblical Satire and Trinitarian Skylarking*. Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2003.

Argues that satire is a form of preaching and a rhetorical model for dealing with ecclesiastical obstinacy and other forms of arrogance in the Church.

Wilson, Douglas and Jones, Douglas. *Angels in the Architecture*. Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 1998.

Reevaluates modern conceptions of the medieval period as an age of darkness. Presents the medieval view of family and church.

Wilson, Douglas. *Clean Water, Red Wine, Broken Bread*. Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2000.

A presentation of Wilson's view of the Lord's Supper particularly as it relates to the nature of the sacrament, the ability to participate, etc.

Wilson, Douglas. *Federal Husband*. Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 1999.

Looks at the subject of covenant headship from the perspective of marriage, encouraging men to lead their families and take responsibility as federal husbands.

Wilson, Douglas. *Mother Kirk*. Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2001.

Essays on ecclesiology written to define and expound upon the elements of a Biblical church.

Wilson, Douglas. *"Reformed" Is Not Enough*. Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2002.

Proposes that baptized individuals are brought into an objective, visible covenant relationship with the Triune God.

Wilson, Douglas. *The Paidea of God: And Other Essays on Education*. Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 1999.

Examines the ancient process of enculturating the young through development of a biblical worldview.

Wilson, Douglas. *To A Thousand Generations*. Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 1996.

Argues that it is not sufficient merely to say that infant baptism is consistent with the Scriptures, but that the Bible requires infant baptism.

Conferences:

2002 Auburn Avenue Pastors Conference. The Federal Vision. Monroe, Louisiana.

The original conference that sparked the debate. Speakers include Doug Wilson, John Barach, Steve Schlissel, and Steve Wilkins on topics related to Covenant Community.

2005 Auburn Avenue Pastors Conference. Paul's Perspective: The Apostle and His Theology. Monroe, Louisiana.

Richard Gaffin and N.T. Wright were the primary speakers at this conference on Pauline theology. Given the frequent accusation that Auburn Avenue is really a form of the New Perspective on Paul (NPP) movement, these tapes are a helpful clarification of what at least Steve Wilkins and the Auburn church endorse regarding the NPP.

2006 Auburn Avenue Pastors Conference. The Glorious Body of Christ: The Church in the 21st Century. Monroe, Louisiana.

Two of the original 2002 conference speakers, Wilson and Wilkins, are joined by Rich Lusk and Darryl Hart to address the nature of the Church. Many of the topics from the 2002 conference are revisited with a mind to responding to allegations and accusations that were issued during the intervening period.

Secondary Sources:

Berkhof, Louis. *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1950 (reprinted 1994).

Introduces the principles of grammatical, historical, and theological exegesis of Scripture.

Boers, Hendrikus. *The Justification of the Gentiles: Paul's Letters to the Galatians and Romans*. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994.

Argues that the proper way to exegete Paul is to understand that Paul's primary purpose is not to propose justification by faith, but rather the meaning of the Christ event to Jew and Gentile alike.

Bright, John. *Covenant and Promise*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Westminster Press, 1976.

A compilation of the 1971 Thomas White Currie Lectures in which the author examines the eschatological outlook of the pre-exilic prophets, particularly as relates to covenant and promise.

Calvin, John (edited by John McNeill). *On the Christian Faith*. Indianapolis, Indiana: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957.

A compilation of Calvin's writings regarding the faith from his *Institutes* and other writings.

Carson, D.A., O'Brien, Peter, and Seifrid, Mark A. eds. *Justification and Variegated Nomism, Vols. 1-2*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2001.

Intended as a response to E.P. Sanders's presentation of covenantal nomism as found in his work *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*.

Clark, R. Scott. *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry*. Philipsburg, New Jersey: P&R, 2007.

A collection of essays written by the faculty of Westminster Seminary, Escondido, covering topics highlighted in the Federal Vision and the New Perspective movement.

Ferguson, Sinclair. *The Christian Life*. Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth Trust, 1989.

- Expounds themes such as grace, faith, repentance, new birth, and assurance.
- Fiddes, Paul S. *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989.
- Examines the social and political implications of atonement, particularly as they apply to the sacraments and community of the Church.
- Grenz, Stanley J. *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001
- Posits a Trinitarian understanding of anthropology, seeking to reestablish a right concept of the image of God in the light of postmodernism.
- Horton, Michael. *Putting Amazing Back into Grace*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2002.
- An accessible treatment of the Reformed doctrine of salvation.
- Horton, Michael. *Lord and Servant: A Covenant Christology*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005.
- Explores the topics that are generally grouped under the doctrines of God, humanity, and Christology.
- Husbands, Mark, and Treier, Daniel eds. *Justification: What's at Stake in the Current Debates?* Downer's Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2004.
- A collection of essays examine the current debates on justification among Protestants and between Protestants and Roman Catholics.
- Lillback, Peter A. *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2001.
- Evaluates Calvin's role in the historical development of covenantal theology.
- Mathison, Keith A. *Given for You*. Philipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2002.
- An historical examination of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper from the early church through the Reformation.
- McGrath, Alister E. *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*. New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

An essential resource for those studying the Reformation debates on the identity of Christianity and modern discussions between Protestants and Roman Catholics on the nature of salvation.

McCoy, Charles S. and Baker, J. Wayne. *Fountainhead of Federalism: Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenantal Tradition*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster, 1991.

Analysis of Bullinger's teachings on federalism as well as the influence of the German and Swiss schools of thought on European and American covenant theology.

McGrath, Alister E. *Reformation Thought*. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1999.

An introduction to the theology and history of the early Reformers.

Old, Hughes Oliphant. *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1992.

Examines the relationship between Word in sacrament in the theology of the sixteenth century Reformers.

Otis, John M. *Danger in the Camp: An Analysis and Refutation of the Heresies of the Federal Vision*. Corpus Christi, Texas: Triumphant Publications, 2005.

Argues that the Federal Vision paradigm is simply a hybrid form of Roman Catholicism and Calvinistic Protestantism.

Robertson, O. Palmer. *The Christ of the Covenants*. Philipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1980.

A biblical-historical presentation of the covenants found in the Old and New Testaments intended to show the centrality of Christ to all of them. Included is a discussion of Dispensationalism vs. Covenantalism as hermeneutic.

Sadler, M.F. *The Second Adam and the New Birth*. Monroe, Louisiana: Athanasius Press, 2004.

Nineteenth-century Anglican M.F. Sadler examines the sacrament of baptism. Sadler argues from both Scripture and history that orthodox Christian theology has traditionally recognized baptism as the basis of union with Christ.

Schenck, Lewis Bevens. *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant: An Historical Study of the Significance of Infant Baptism in the Presbyterian Church*. Philipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1940. (reissued in 2003).

Another source oft-quoted by the Federal Vision proponents. Examines the doctrine of infant baptism, particularly in the history of American Presbyterianism.

Shepherd, Norman. *The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism*. Philipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2000.

An important book for understanding the intellectual climate just prior to the 2002 Auburn Avenue Pastors Conference. The book is a compilation of lectures originally presented in 1999 at Erskine Seminary and in 1975 at a presynodical conference sponsored by the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America. It tackles the relationship of justification to evangelism from a covenantal perspective.

Schwertley, Brian M. *Auburn Avenue Theology: A Biblical Analysis*. Iola, Wisconsin: Covenanted Reformation Press, 2005.

Argues that the Federal Vision is a radical departure from Protestantism, all the Reformed symbols, the teaching of all the Reformers and all of the notable Reformed theologians.

Smith, Ralph. *Eternal Covenant: How the Trinity Reshapes Covenant Theology*. Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2003.

Explores the intersection of covenant and Trinitarian theology that he began with his earlier book *Paradox and Truth*. Suggests that a Covenant of Works paradigm is problematic, both biblically and theologically.

Sproul, R.C. *Grace Unknown: The Heart of Reformed Theology*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1997.

A basic, though comprehensive summary of Reformed doctrine.

Turretin, Francis (edited by James T. Dennison). *Justification*. Philipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2004.

A special volume drawn from Turretin's larger *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, this work champions the traditional position of justification as an imputation of an alien righteousness, forensic in nature.

Van der Waal, C. *The Covenantal Gospel*. Pella, Iowa: Inheritance Publications, 1990.

Examines the structure and typifying elements of both biblical and social covenants, and proceeds to study commonly accepted distinctions such as "covenant of works" versus "covenant of grace" and "law" versus "gospel."

Westerink, H. *A Sign of Faithfulness: Covenant and Baptism*. Pella, Iowa: Inheritance Publications, 1997.

Attempts to prove the continuity between the old and new covenants with respect to baptism.

White, James R. *The God Who Justifies: The Doctrine of Justification*. Bloomington, Minnesota: Bethany House, 2001.

An exegesis of key Scripture texts regarding the doctrine of justification.

Wikner, Benjamin ed. *To You and Your Children: Examining the Biblical Doctrine of Covenant Succession*. Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2005.

A collection of essays that seek to address the role of children in the church, particularly as relates to their position in the covenant and union with Christ.

Willis, David and Welker, Michael eds. *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1999.

A collection of essays by leading theologians that explores the challenges facing Reformed theology in modern society.

Wright, N.T. *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1991.

Argues that the Law was always intended to be a temporary measure to be relativized when God established His eschatological community through the death and resurrection of the Messiah.