

APPENDIX O

REPORT OF THE AD INTERIM COMMITTEE ON FEDERAL VISION, NEW PERSPECTIVE, AND AUBURN AVENUE THEOLOGIES

Oral Report of the Ad Interim Committee to the 35th General Assembly
(See 35-20, p. 68.)

The “Introduction” to the Report, by TE Paul Fowler:

Mr. Moderator, Fathers and Brothers, I am TE Paul Fowler, from Savannah River Presbytery.

The 34th PCA General Assembly appointed an ad interim committee –

“to study the soteriology of the Federal Vision, New Perspective, and Auburn Avenue Theologies which are causing confusion among our churches. Further, to determine whether these viewpoints and formulations are in conformity with the system of doctrine taught in the Westminster Standards, whether they are hostile to or strike at the vitals of religion, and to present a declaration or statement regarding the issues raised by these viewpoints in light of our Confessional Standards.” (M34GA, p. 229)

First, let me introduce the committee. The committee consists of three ruling elders and four teaching elders:

RE Robert Mattes, from Potomac Presbytery

RE John White, from Metro Atlanta Presbytery

RE William Mueller, from Southern Florida Presbytery

TE Ligon Duncan, from Mississippi Valley Presbytery

TE Sean Lucas, from Missouri Presbytery

TE Grover Gunn, Secretary of the committee, from Covenant Presbytery

TE Paul Fowler, chairman of the committee, from Savannah River Presbytery

On behalf of the committee, we want to thank you for the privilege of serving on this study committee. We met together 3 times in Atlanta, a number of times by conference call, and innumerable times by email. We are a diverse committee with all members contributing significantly.

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Now, concerning the report:

The organization of the report is as follows. The Preface serves to introduce the report, and seeks to clarify certain principles in our approach.

Then follows the Study Portion of our report. We sought to make this portion of the report informative, clear and sufficiently brief (which brevity was requested by our former Assembly) so that all commissioners would be able to read and understand the issues involved.

Because the 34th GA asked the committee to study the *soteriology* of the New Perspectives on Paul (NPP) and Federal Vision/Auburn Avenue Theology (FV/AAT), and “to determine whether their views were in conformity with the system of doctrine taught in the WS,” or were “hostile to or strike at the vitals of religion,” the committee divided the Study Portion of the report into three major sections:

1. election and covenant;
 2. justification and union with Christ;
 3. perseverance, apostasy and assurance.
- Each of these three sections opens with an analysis of relevant materials in the Westminster Standards, mostly quoting the Standards, with minimal comment.
 - Following this, each section provides brief overviews of the NPP and FV/AAT on the specific doctrines being considered.
 - Then, each section ends by analyzing areas of potential difference between our Standards and the NPP/FV/AA views.

In this way, the committee has been careful to follow the General Assembly’s direction: “to determine whether these viewpoints and formulations are in conformity with the system of doctrine taught in the Westminster Standards...[or] are hostile to or strike at the vitals of religion.”

The report concludes with nine Declarations regarding our findings, and with five Recommendations for the Assembly to consider. In offering the nine Declarations, the committee fulfills the 34th General Assembly’s directive “to present a declaration or statement regarding the issues raised by these viewpoints in light of our Confessional Standards.”

I have asked Dr. Ligon Duncan, former Moderator of the GA and pastor of FPC Jackson, to comment briefly on the Study Portion of the report. Then Dr. Sean Lucas, Academic Dean of Covenant Theological Seminary, will comment on the Declarations. Then RE John White, a parliamentarian of this GA, will explain the Recommendations.

Before they proceed, I would like to comment on several points where there may be questions in commissioners' minds.

First, the committee separated the study of the NPP from the FV because, while there may be some similarities as to their views, there are important differences between them, not the least being their views on Scripture and the Reformed Confessions.

Second, we joined the names Auburn Avenue Theology and Federal Vision, and chose the latter name, Federal Vision (FV), to designate their theological position. While not everyone associated with FV agrees on all points, as the report clearly indicates, nevertheless there are "commonly held perspectives" that unite and distinguish them from others within the Reformed and Presbyterian communities. These "commonly held perspectives" include soteriological doctrines that we as a Study Committee have concluded are contrary to our Standards.

Third, this brings up the role of the Westminster Standards (WS). The Preface of the report clearly states the relation between Scripture and the WS. It points out that the Scriptures are "the supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined" (WCF 1.10). The WS are "standard expositions of the teachings of Scripture" (BCO 29-1, 39-3). The PCA has historically understood that this claim does not elevate the WS over Scripture; and yet the WS serve to preserve what we in the PCA believe to be the fundamentals or vitals of the doctrine taught in Scripture. They draw a line in the sand and say, so far and no further. All of us here at this General Assembly have taken a vow to "sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith and the Catechisms of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures." (The vows make this clear distinction: "We believe the Scriptures... We sincerely receive and adopt" the Standards.)

Now, this summation is particularly relevant to the subject at hand. The mandate from the 34th General Assembly was to determine the level of compatibility of the New Perspectives on Paul and Federal Vision with the Westminster Standards. The committee dealt with the FV's interpretation of

Scripture, but the substance of the report was determined by the mandate of the GA. The report does not proceed on the basis of saying that the WS are exhaustive of Scripture. The report proceeds on the basis that further formulations should not contradict what is in the WS. And this is the heart of our report. If one believes that the Standards have not interpreted Scripture correctly, or that certain words in the Standards should be further nuanced, or that the Standards should be expanded to include further doctrines, then that person has the right to propose amendments and let the church through deliberative assembly determine the matter. In this way, the Standards will continue to serve the church as the faithful and standard exposition of Scripture.

Furthermore, this report is not a debate between strict subscriptionists and good faith subscriptionists. Rather, it is a debate on what constitutes the ‘fundamentals’ of our system of doctrine; and I think one will find that both strict subscriptionists and good faith subscriptionists will agree on what constitutes the ‘fundamentals’ of our system of doctrine. The issue is, where do we draw the line. The report sites the FV as differing from the WS on matters of covenant theology, election, justification, union with Christ, perseverance and assurance. These are fundamentals of our system of doctrine! Therefore, this is not a matter of one’s view of subscription. This is a matter of the fundamentals of the faith.

It is the committee’s view that the WCF is not meant to include “a diversity of acceptable positions” *concerning salvation*. It is worded carefully and specifically to define what the Bible teaches about election, effectual calling, justification, and a number of other major doctrines. This is why Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Arminians and even modern PCUSA Presbyterians are not in the PCA. On the fundamental doctrines of the faith, *especially the doctrines of soteriology*, every word is carefully crafted in the Standards.

Hence, the purpose of our committee was to study the views of NPP and FV to see whether they were in conformity with or hostile to the doctrines taught in Scripture. Our entire concern was to speak clearly and fairly and accurately about the issues at stake. It is a common criticism in theological controversy that one side doesn’t understand the other. However, the fact that this report squares with the OPC, RCUS, and RPCUS reports as well as the evaluations of the faculties of Westminster California and Mid-America Reformed Seminary as well as the historical and systematics department at Westminster Philadelphia, suggests that the committee did understand the NPP and FV,

and concluded with these others that some of the views propagated by these movements were contrary to our standards.

We have concluded our report with Declarations and Recommendations. These come to the Assembly as committee recommendations. This is all the committee is empowered to do, and we are doing so in line with the motion of the 34th General Assembly: “to present a declaration or statement regarding the issues raised by these viewpoints in light of our Confession Standards.” This is a study being “commended” to presbyteries and sessions for their “careful consideration and study.” However, the Declarations are clearly set forth by this study committee; and there is no reason why this General Assembly cannot state that these Declarations are in accord with the teaching of the WS.

Now let me ask Dr. Ligon Duncan to comment on the Study Portion of the report. After that, Dr. Sean Lucas will comment on the Declarations. And then RE John White will explain the Recommendations. Thank you.

The “Study Portion” of the Report, by TE Ligon Duncan:

Because the content of our report speaks for itself, I will keep my comments brief.

What is at stake in this deliberation is our commitment as a denomination to the clarity in our presentation of the Gospel truths enumerated in the declarations of this report.

Clarity is at a premium in this whole discussion. One of the things that is so often said by those who have tried to understand and engage the various versions of the NPP or FV is that they come out more confused than when they first began their inquiry. So, the committee has aimed very deliberately to be careful, fair, accurate, brief and clear in the contents of our report.

Our report is about issues, not persons. It is about the doctrines affirmed in the declarations of this report. Any suggestion to the contrary is just distracting you from the real issues at hand. We only mention names in citations or to indicate the specific versions of the NPP or FV teachings we are describing. This is necessary because, as those sympathetic to the NPP or FV often express, their views are not monolithic.

You will have already noted that the substance of the report is intentionally temperate in tone and deliberately limited in scope. In the contents of the report leading up to the declarations and recommendations we do three things: (1) We briefly describe our Standards' teaching on election and covenant, justification and union with Christ, and perseverance, apostasy and assurance. (2) We then briefly describe NPP and FV views of these same topics. (3) Then, in the comparative analysis, we offer some conclusions about and contrasts between typical NPP and FV teaching, and that of our Standards. This was, as Dr. Fowler has already indicated, precisely our charge from the General Assembly.

It is always a temptation, when one does not like the content and conclusions of a report, to question the process or procedure. I would humbly recommend that we not allow ourselves to get sidetracked by such a move, but rather focus on the vital pastoral theological issue at hand, addressed in the substance and declarations of the report. If we disagree on the substance and declarations, so be it. Speak to these things. Vote your conscience. But let us put the focus of our discussion there.

What we will decide today, gentlemen, is whether this Assembly has the will to insist that our ministry is clear on and committed to the Gospel truths affirmed in the declarations of this report. Dr. Lucas (of Covenant Seminary) will now elaborate on those declarations.

The “Declarations” of the Report, by TE Sean Lucas

Fathers and Brothers, the Declarations are found on page 2235 [note: pp. 566-67 of these *Minutes*]. I invite you to turn there. As you do so, just to remind and reiterate as well as to give some context and focus for these Declarations, it has already been noted that the assembly charged the committee last year at our 34th General Assembly with producing a Declaration. In doing so, the General Assembly instructed us to produce this Declaration in the light of our confessional standards, and that was why the report as well as these Declarations focused on the confessional standards.

In addition, we were instructed to determine whether these views were in conformity with the system of doctrine. It's why each of these nine statements speaks to the issue of “conformity” or “is contrary to” the Westminster Standards. Our focus was determining conformity, and that was what we did.

While these Declarations draw from the report, I would say that they do not encompass the entirety of our report. There are other things in the body of the report that we did not believe rose to the level of being stated as “declarations.” There are things upon which perhaps many of us would disagree with the report, for example, issues related to merit and the Covenant of Works. As a committee, we did not think those things rose to the level of a declaration. We tried to focus our declarations on the heart of the matter as the committee saw it.

We would further suggest that these Declarations cohere quite well with various presbytery reports, presbytery reports ranging from the Mississippi Valley Presbytery report to the Missouri Presbytery report.

Another thing to note is the Declarations represent the one place in the body of the report where the committee notes their unanimous agreement. Notice at the head of the section, the report says, “*The committee unanimously makes the following declarations.*” Brothers, we spent several hours, the better part of a day, working on these nine statements to ensure that they represented what we believe the scriptures and our confession teach. As a result, these declarations should be given great weight.

At the heart of these Declarations, we would suggest, are the doctrines of justification by faith alone and union with Christ. We believe that this is the heart of the Gospel and is the heart of our doctrinal system. Justification by faith alone and union with Christ represent those fixed points in our system from which we cannot stray. They represent for us what we truly believe is our hope, as we sung, “Thy Works, Oh Christ, not Mine.” And so I would suggest, and the committee unanimously agrees, that this is not an area in which we should tolerate breadth. We need as a church to say the same things about justification by faith alone and union with Christ. And so, part of my task that I have been assigned is to walk you through each of these nine declarations and give a short explanation of what the committee meant to say in these very compact statements.

The first statement: “*The view that rejects the bi-covenantal structure of Scripture as represented in the Westminster Standards (i.e., views which do not merely take issue with the terminology, but the essence of the first/second covenant framework) is contrary to those Standards.*” Here the committee clearly has in mind WCF 7.2, 3. And we were mindful that while our brothers may disagree about what to call the first covenant – whether a covenant of creation or a covenant of works or a covenant of life or even as our revered

Westminster Seminary Professor John Murray called it an Adamic administration—still we believe the Bible presents a major difference between what happens before Genesis 3:15 and what happens afterwards. That’s what we find in our standards. And that is why the committee believes that positions which dispute and reject the bi-covenantal structure of scripture are contrary to our standards.

Second: *“The view that an individual is “elect” by virtue of his membership in the visible church; and that this “election” includes justification, adoption and sanctification; but that this individual could lose his “election” if he forsakes the visible church, is contrary to the Westminster Standards.”* Here your committee had in mind WCF 3:6, which roots the benefits of Christ’s mediation in individual election in God’s decrees. Here we are particularly taking issue with views that would tie election not simply to the decree of God, but to membership in the visible church as though membership in the visible church conveys election as well as certain salvific benefits – justification, adoption, sanctification – and that it would be possible for someone to lose the benefits that Christ has purchased for them. We believe that’s false. We believe that’s contrary to the standards. That is why we say so in declaration number two.

Declaration number three: *“The view that Christ does not stand as a representative head whose perfect obedience and satisfaction is imputed to individuals who believe in him is contrary to the Westminster Standards.”* Here your committee had in mind particularly WCF 11.1 and WLC 70, 71 which centers justification on a structure of Christ’s obedience and satisfaction. Over again, the standards distinguish those two things, and say that Christ stands as a representative head whose perfect obedience and satisfaction (in the language that we use more popularly, his active obedience and passive obedience—“passive obedience” not meaning that somehow Christ lays back as though he was somehow relaxed or passive, but that relating to his passion, his satisfaction on the cross of the wrath of God, both his obedience in obeying the law and his satisfaction) is imputed to individuals. Views that contradict that, we believe, are contrary to the standards and we believe as well strike at the heart of justification.

Number four: *“The view that strikes the language of “merit” from our theological vocabulary so that the claim is made that Christ’s merits are not imputed to his people is contrary to the Westminster Standards.”* Here your committee had the WCF 17:2 and WLC 55 in its mind and in particular the way both of those sections of our standards root our great hope in

justification—in Christ’s intercession and in our perseverance—in the merits of Christ. We believe that whatever you may think about Adamic merit or demerit, we must not lose this concept in our standards of Christ’s merits gained by his obedience and satisfaction. And that is why we say, views that so move against language of merit that they strike the understanding that Christ merited on our behalf are contrary to our standards.

Number 6: *“The view that water baptism effects a “covenantal union” with Christ through which each baptized person receives the saving benefits of Christ’s mediation, including regeneration, justification, and sanctification, thus creating a parallel soteriological system to the decretal system of the Westminster Standards, is contrary to the Westminster Standards.”* Here the important point to note is not simply the view that water baptism affects a covenantal union or a union between the baptized child or the baptized individual and the church, but the view that this “covenantal union” conveys saving benefits. Your committee, in studying various sections of the standards, particularly WCF 28, believes that water baptism does not convey saving benefits, but rather the grace conferred is the promise of salvation held out in Jesus Christ to all those who believe; we urge our children, our covenant children, to trust in Christ from their earliest age and cling to those promises offered to them in baptism. And so, to suggest that water baptism itself, in creating the covenantal union, conveys saving benefits, and that the child as an individual receives saving benefits solely by virtue of water baptism, we believe is contrary to the Westminster Standards.

Number 7: *“The view that one can be “united to Christ” and not receive all the benefits of Christ’s mediation, including perseverance, in that effectual union is contrary to the Westminster Standards.”* Here your committee once again thought of WLC 69 and WCF 17:1 which ties back into Declaration 5. I’ll backtrack and give that one as well. WLC 69 says that all of Christ benefits in His mediation, justification, adoption, sanctification, and whatever else is included in His benefits is conveyed in our effectual union with Christ. To use language that suggests that one can be united to Christ and not have all of Christ’s benefits, we believe, contradicts WLC 69.

Backing up to Number 5: *“The view that “union with Christ” renders imputation redundant because it subsumes all of Christ’s benefits (including justification) under this doctrinal heading is contrary to the Westminster Standards.”* Here we have WLC 66 and 69 in mind; and the view with which we are particularly taking issue, as you will find it in the body of the report, suggests that simply because you can speak of union with Christ, you don’t

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need to speak of imputation. This is because, the argument goes, union with Christ, imputation in union with Christ, and justification are inseparable. However, the language that Dr. Dick Gaffin, one of my teachers at Westminster Seminary, has come to use in recent days of “inseparable–yet–distinct,” I think, is helpful here and is the way our standards view this; that by virtue of our effectual union with Christ forged by Christ’s Spirit, and by a Spirit-wrought faith, God grants us these inseparable and yet distinct benefits of justification and sanctification and adoption and glorification.

Number 8: *“The view that some can receive saving benefits of Christ’s mediation, such as regeneration and justification, and yet not persevere in those benefits is contrary to the Westminster Standards.”* WCF 17 is particularly on our minds as well as passages of scriptures such as Philippians 1:6 “That he who has begun a good work in you will complete it in the day of Jesus Christ.” We believe that if one receives the saving benefits of Christ’s mediation, justification, sanctification, then surely Christ will cause that one to persevere all the way to the end.

And finally: *“The view that justification is in any way based on our works, or that the so-called “final verdict of justification” is based on anything other than the perfect obedience and satisfaction of Christ received through faith alone, is contrary to the Westminster Standards.”* Here your committee had WLC 77 and WCF 16:5 in mind. Our good works certainly flow from a justifying faith; but at the end of the day they are accepted only in the Beloved. There is no value in them apart from Christ Jesus. WCF 16:5 tells us that they are yet defiled and they cannot merit for us eternal life. Our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.

Fathers and Brothers, these Declarations represent these fixed points. The heart of the gospel, the essentials of our system of doctrine, is why your committee recommends these Declarations to you unanimously, and urges you to recommend them unanimously as a faithful exposition of our standards.

I now pass the microphone to RE John White as he will explain our Recommendations.

The “Recommendations” of the Report, by RE John White:

Mr. Moderator, Fathers and Brothers:

The recommendations of the study committee appear on page 2236 of the Commissioner Handbook [note: p. 567 of these *Minutes*]. Please turn with me to page 2236. It is these recommendations that are before the Assembly for adoption. Just as with previous study committee reports, only the recommendations are to be voted on.

Early on, the committee determined that to be faithful in carrying out its mandate from the 34th General Assembly, it was obligated to make certain declarations and recommendations. The overture adopted last year directed the committee “to present a declaration or statement regarding the issues raised by these viewpoints in light of our confessional standards.

Dr. Lucas has just presented the declarations contained in our report and my role is now to review with you the recommendations of the report.

The first recommendation “commends” this report to the church “for careful consideration and study.” By that we mean that this report is to be made available to the church as a whole, so that our officers and courts have the opportunity to review it, consider it and ultimately to utilize it. I will deal more with that last point later.

The second recommendation simply restates the position of the Presbyterian Church in America as contained in our Book of Church Order, 29-1 and 39-3. Those sections define the status of the Westminster Standards as subordinate to Scripture; and the committee strongly agrees.

Specifically these sections of the BCO state that while the Westminster Standards “are subordinate to the Scriptures of the Old And new Testaments, the inerrant Word of God,” the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms have been adopted by the PCA “as standard expositions of the teachings of Scripture in relation to both faith and practice.” The standards do not replace Scripture and are not superior to Scripture, but articulate our denomination’s public understanding of Scripture.

The committee strongly agrees and in fact we note that this statement about the Westminster Standards being subordinate to Scripture appears to be so important it is found in two separate sections of the Book of Church Order, proper.

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In addition, it is important that we remember the Westminster Standards, together with the Book of Church Order, actually form the constitution of the Presbyterian Church in America. So when we are talking about the Westminster Standards, we are talking about a significant part of our constitution.

Recommendation number three specifically addresses the task assigned to this committee, but does so in language carefully chosen so as not to be confused or taken as amending or changing the constitution of the PCA. Let me remind you of the specific charge to this committee: “to study the soteriology [that is, the theology of salvation] of Federal Vision, New Perspectives, and Auburn Avenue theology which are causing confusion among our churches.”

In adopting that language, the 34th General Assembly acknowledged that “the theology of salvation,” as represented in Federal Vision, New Perspectives and Auburn Avenue Theology, is causing confusion among our churches, and the committee was directed to bring clarity to the matter.

In clear language, therefore, the committee report sets forth nine declarations and this recommendation number three “recommends” (let me repeat, “recommends”) these declarations as faithful to the Westminster Standards and this recommendation also “reminds” PCA teaching elders and ruling elders of their obligation to make known to their courts any differences in their views.

In short, recommendation number three places the burden on our officers to examine themselves and their views and to fulfill their vows.

In the same way, recommendation number four reminds presbyteries and sessions of their responsibilities under the provisions of the Book of Church Order to exercise care over those subject to their authority and to condemn erroneous opinions, injurious to the purity and peace of the church. Those injunctions are found in BCO 31-2 and 13-9.f.

And finally, recommendation number five asks that the committee be dismissed with thanks.

Since this report was first made public, much has been written about it, both pro and con. One issue, in particular, bears some discussion at this point, and that is the subject of *in thesi* statements. “*In thesi*” simply means “on this subject” and we might add “at this time.”

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Clearly *in thesi* statements do not amend our constitution (*The Book of Church Order* and the Westminster Standards) just as judicial decisions do not amend our standards and/or the *BCO*. That being said, where do study reports such as this fit into the equation?

The Book of Church Order 14-6 decrees that the General Assembly shall have power to:

1. “Bear testimony against error in doctrine and immorality in practice, injuriously affecting the church and to decide all controversies respecting doctrine and discipline.”
2. The General Assembly shall have the power “to give advice and instruction in conformity with the constitution” (which includes the Westminster Standards).
3. The General Assembly shall have the power “to suppress schismatical contentions and disputations,” and
4. The General Assembly shall have the power “in general to recommend measures for the promotion of charity, truth and holiness through all the churches under its care.”

The next section of the *BCO*, 14-7, provides that in doing so, actions of the General Assembly such as “deliverances, resolutions, overtures, and judicial decisions are to be given due and serious consideration by the church and its lower courts when deliberating matters related to such action.”

This report, therefore, constitutes a deliverance of the assembly. It does not amend the standards or the Book of Church Order. But, it is to be given due and serious consideration by the church and its courts.

The 11th General Assembly adopted a statement from the Subcommittee on Judicial Business, responding to an inquiry from Gulf Coast Presbytery. That inquiry concerned whether presbytery was denied the right to examine a man and judge him to be in error or heretical on the basis of a previous judicial decision.

The advice given by the Subcommittee on Judicial Business and adopted by the assembly said among other things, “It should be noted that both judicial decisions and *in thesi* statements are alike in that they are interpretation of God’s Word made by a court of the church.”

The language in the *Book of Church Order* at this point is specific and says such decisions and statements are to be “given due and serious consideration.”

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In this regard, we should know that the Presbyterian Church in America is substantially different from some of our sister Presbyterian bodies in so far as *in thesi* statements are concerned. In the PCA, study committee reports are considered “deliverances” or the opinion of the majority of commissioners on a specific subject at a particular point in time and are not an amendment of the BCO or Westminster Standards.

This fact is important because in some Presbyterian bodies there is what is called, “authoritative interpretation of the constitution,” a process that in effect amends the constitution in question. Such is not the case in the PCA. Changes to our constitutional documents must be made by following the process for amending as set forth in *BCO* 26-2 and 26-3. And it is a particularly stringent process, one that is not easy to accomplish.

Let me conclude by reiterating a point about the recommendations in our report, and this is a particularly important point: adoption of the recommendations of this report will make them a deliverance of this assembly and shall entitle them to be given “due and serious consideration” when the church and its courts are deliberating related matters.

Mr. Moderator, Fathers and Brothers, thank you for your attention to this report. On behalf of the committee, I move adoption of recommendations one through five.

Note: For the Report of the Ad Interim Committee, see the following pages (pp. 523-67).