

REPORT OF AD INTERIM STUDY COMMITTEE ON FEDERAL VISION, NEW PERSPECTIVE, AND AUBURN AVENUE THEOLOGY

Preface

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, 34-57, III, pp. 229-30).

The committee was asked to study the soteriology of the “New Perspective” and the “Federal Vision.” It should be noted that “the New Perspective on Paul” (NPP) is an academic movement associated since the 1960s with scholars such as Krister Stendahl, E. P. Sanders, James D. G. Dunn, and N. T. Wright. The committee recognizes that there are a variety of viewpoints associated with the NPP; therefore, we are cautious in our analysis of the movement as a whole. However, there are common issues that characterize this theological movement. In particular, N. T. Wright has had a significant influence in recent years on the broader evangelical and Reformed communities; therefore, our study of NPP will focus primarily on Wright’s writings.

The committee also understands that a major concern of the General Assembly at the present time pertains to the views of what has been called Federal Vision (FV) or Auburn Avenue Theology (AAT). These are one and the same, different names designating the same theological movement. The name “Auburn Avenue Theology” comes from its association with the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church in Monroe, Louisiana, which has hosted

conferences where their ideas have been promoted. In addition, a symposium book was entitled *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros & Cons: Debating the Federal Vision*. The book included papers focused on their theological views.¹ The name “Federal Vision” appears to be the name preferred by proponents, who together authored a book entitled *The Federal Vision*.² Since both names refer to the same theological movement, and since proponents prefer the label “Federal Vision,” we will use the name Federal Vision (FV) when referring to their views in this report.

We further recognize that there are a variety of viewpoints among FV teachers and writers. For example, some hold to particular doctrines (e.g., monocovenantalism or paedocommunion) while others do not. In addition, some have objected strenuously to the labeling of their views, saying that there is no such thing as a “federal vision,” either as a movement or a theological system. In response to the 2005 Mississippi Valley Presbytery report, the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church Web site stated:

The “report” assumed that there is a well-defined movement labeled the “Federal Vision.” This is highly debatable. . . . There is no organized movement, formal or informal. Though there are some commonly held perspectives, there are quite a few differences when it comes to specifics and therefore there is no consistent system of theology which can be labeled “Federal Vision” theology.³

Nevertheless, it is these “commonly held perspectives” that unite and distinguish the FV from others within Reformed and Presbyterian communities. Their writings are largely consistent on major points. They quote each other approvingly; they stress the same points; they state many of their issues using virtually the same language; and they joined together to produce a book called *The Federal Vision*.

¹ E. Calvin Beisner, ed., *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros & Cons: Debating the Federal Vision; The Knox Theological Seminary Colloquium on the Federal Vision, August 11-13, 2003* (Ft. Lauderdale: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004). This volume is very important for understanding the various issues being debated.

² Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner, eds., *The Federal Vision* (Monroe: Athanasius Press, 2004).

³ Cf. the Auburn Avenue PCA Web site (www.auburnavenue.org).

We recognize that many Federal Vision proponents affirm loyalty to the Westminster Standards and frequently appeal to the *Standards* when arguing their views. Nevertheless, the General Assembly has charged the committee “to determine whether these viewpoints and formulations [i.e., NPP and FV] 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.”

We proceed with the following principles in mind. First, we are a biblical church. We affirm the principle of *sola scriptura* as articulated in our *Standards*: “The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined...can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture” (WCF 1:10).

In addition, we are a confessional church. The PCA has affirmed that “the *Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Westminster Assembly*, together with the formularies of government, discipline, and worship are accepted by the Presbyterian Church in America as standard expositions of the teachings of Scripture in relation to both faith and practice” (BCO 29-1; cf. 21-5.2; 26-1; 39-3). The church has historically understood that this claim does not elevate the *Standards* over Scripture itself; and yet, our Constitution does recognize the *Standards* as our “standard expositions of the teachings of Scripture.” Because this is the case, the main focus of our study will be to determine whether the views of the NPP and AAT/FV are in conformity with our *Westminster Standards*.

Key in the present discussion is the definition of doctrines that have been crucial to our identity as a biblical and confessional church. In the PCA, we use theological terms such as “regeneration,” “election,” “justification,” and “perseverance” to define these doctrines in a particular and agreed upon fashion through ecclesiastical action. The committee affirms with the PCA that the *Confession’s* usage of these and related terms is faithful to the teachings of Scripture. While we are aware that the biblical usage of some of these words may have varying nuances in different contexts, our task is to study the theological claims that the NPP and FV proponents make about such terms. Then, our purpose is to determine whether the theological claims they make serve to undermine the system of doctrine taught in the Scripture and *Confession*. It is certainly possible to say more than our *Confession* does about biblical truth, but this should not necessitate a denial of the vitals of our faith.

MINUTES OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

The committee also affirms that we view NPP and FV proponents in the PCA as brothers in Christ. Thus, we take their published statements and writings seriously. We have worked hard to be fair and accurate in our study of their writings and in the statement of the issues they raise.

Following this preface, the report has three major sections that outline soteriological issues raised by the NPP and FV:

- I. Election and Covenant;
- II. Justification and Union with Christ;
- III. Perseverance, Apostasy, and Assurance.

Each of these major sections opens with a brief exposition of the relevant materials in the Westminster Standards; is followed by brief overviews of NPP and FV views on the same issues; and concludes by analyzing and comparing the NPP/FV views with that of the *Westminster Standards*. In this way, the committee fulfills the General Assembly's direction "*to study the soteriology of the Federal Vision, New Perspective, and Auburn Avenue Theologies . . . in light of our Confessional Standards.*"

The fourth section sets forth nine features of NPP and FV teaching that the committee finds to be contrary to the Westminster Standards. This section is worded to assist presbyteries as they investigate these matters. In offering these declarations, the committee fulfills the General Assembly's direction "*to present a declaration or statement regarding the issues raised by these viewpoints in light of our Confessional Standards*" and "*to determine whether these viewpoints and formulations are in conformity with the system of doctrine taught in the Westminster Standards [or] whether they are hostile to or strike at the vitals of religion.*"

Finally, the committee brings five recommendations to the General Assembly and urges their adoption. As we have prayed together, we have sensed the prayers of God's people and the power of God's Spirit guiding our deliberations. We hope that our efforts will serve to preserve the peace, purity and unity of the church. We urge our beloved church to stand together committed to God's Word, the *Westminster Standards*, and the Great Commission.

Committee Members:

TE Paul Fowler, Chairman
TE Grover Gunn, Secretary
TE Ligon Duncan
TE Sean Lucas

RE Robert Mattes
RE William Mueller
RE John White

I. Election and Covenant

A. Westminster Standards

1. *Election*

The doctrine of election is vital to the whole doctrinal system set forth in the Westminster Standards.⁴ As such, election is firmly set in the context of God's eternal decree (*WCF* 3.1, 5, 6, 8). The Standards state that

Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, *before the foundation of the world was laid, according to His eternal and immutable purpose*, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of His will, hath chosen, in Christ, unto everlasting glory . . . (*WCF* 3.5; italics added)

This election, *before the foundation of the world was laid*, was an election *unto life* and *unto everlasting glory* (*WCF* 3.5). "As God hath appointed the elect *unto glory*, so hath He, by the eternal and most free purpose of His will, foreordained all the means thereunto," so that the elect "are effectually called unto faith in Christ by His Spirit working in due season, are justified, adopted, sanctified, *and kept by His power, through faith, unto salvation*" (*WCF* 3.6, italics added). Conversely, the same paragraph in the *Confession* goes on to state, "Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only." Clearly, the *Standards'* doctrine of election unto life is anchored in God's decree from eternity past, provides the basis for the doctrines of final perseverance of the saints in the future, (*WCF* 17:1, 2) and the believer's assurance of eternal life (*WCF* 17.2; 18.3). For the present, only those eternally elect are justified, adopted, and sanctified.

The *Confession* is, of course, fully aware of the national, ethnic, external, covenant election of Israel (*LC* 101), as a church under age (*WCF* 19.3-4, 1.8, and 7.5). But the *Confession*, in accord with Scripture, does not portray God's decree of election to eternal salvation as coming to bear on all within the external boundaries of the covenant people. Neither in the Scripture nor in the

⁴ The terms used in the *Standards* most frequently include "elect," "elected," and "chosen"; the term "election" actually occurs only three times. The doctrine is featured, deployed, and applied variously even where the term is not found (*LC* 13, 30; *SC* 20). Other terms such as "predestined" and "effectually called" are frequently used as well.

Confession is membership in the covenant community (externally considered) identical with election to everlasting life (e.g., Rom. 2:17-29; 9:1-13).

Indeed, according to the Standards, decretal election leads to a distinction even within the covenant community (*WCF* 7.5; *LC* 34; *SC* 88). This distinction is not between those who are elect and persevere, and those who are elect and do not persevere. Instead, the distinction is between those who are elect and non-elect, even though both are numbered amongst the people of God externally considered (*WCF* 10.4, 25.1-2, *LC* 31, 68). This is precisely one of the points of the *Confession's* visible/invisible distinction regarding the church: "All that hear the Gospel, and live in the visible church, are not saved; but they only who are true members of the church invisible" (*LC* 61). The church considered in its invisible aspect "consists of the whole number of the elect" (*WCF* 25.1, *LC* 64); in its visible aspect, it is made up of professing members and their children, some of whom may be non-elect (*WCF* 25.2, 4, 5).⁵

Consequently, the *Confession* and *Catechisms* repeatedly qualify their references to the "effectual means of salvation" by pointing to God's larger purposes of election (*LC* 161). For example, the Standards qualify sacramental efficacy with the assertion that the sacraments are efficacious and effectual to the elect (that is, the elect from the standpoint of the decree) and to them only (*WCF* 8.6, 8.1, 28.6; *LC* 154 [cf. 59]). Likewise, they also speak of the Word of God as effectual or refer to its efficacy in the same manner as they do the sacraments (*LC* 2, 155; *SC* 89).

The decree of election also leads to a distinction in mankind, between those chosen and those passed by. "The rest of mankind God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of His own will...to pass by; and to ordain them to dishonour and wrath for their sin, to the praise of His glorious justice" (*WCF* 3.7). This preterition is judicial in character, the just penalty for sin, and thus God's righteous judgment is vindicated.

While the *Westminster Confession* counsels us to exercise great care in our handling of the Bible's teaching on election, it positively celebrates the importance of the doctrine of decretal election for assurance (*WCF* 3.8). Indeed, the doctrine of election is viewed as a matter "of praise, reverence, and admiration of God; and of humility, diligence, and abundant consolation" for all true believers (*WCF* 3.8).

⁵ The *Confession* does not entertain the idea that the elect do not persevere; rather, it grounds perseverance in the decree of election (*WCF* 17.2).

In summary, the *Westminster Confession*, because it views election as based upon God's decree, contemplates an election that possesses the qualities of God's decree. It is from all eternity, based on God's holy and wise will, and unchangeable (*WCF* 3.1). It is unconditional; that is, it is not based upon anything in us or done by us, foreseen by God or otherwise (*WCF* 3.2). It is an election to everlasting life, and thus a saving election in the fullest sense of the term (*WCF* 3.3,6). God elects particular individuals, and this decree is immutable, certain, definite and eternal (*WCF* 3.4, 8).

God's election is based on his "mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith, or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving him thereunto; and all to the praise of his glorious grace" (*WCF* 3.5). Because God has appointed both the means and the end of his election, all of the elect, and only the elect, are redeemed by Christ, effectually called to faith in Christ by the Spirit, justified, adopted, sanctified, kept by the power of the Spirit, and saved (*WCF* 3.6, 11.4, 14.1, 29.2, 33.2, *LC* 32, 45, 66, 75).

2. *Covenant*

The Westminster Standards set forth a bi-covenantal structure of federal theology, with a covenant of works before the Fall and a covenant of grace after the Fall providing the outline to the biblical story of creation, fall and redemption (*WCF* 7.2-3).⁶ The *Confession* explains that God himself is the blessedness and reward of his people, but that we could not have enjoyed him as such apart from his voluntary condescension (*WCF* 7.1). This is necessary because of the distance between God and man, which is not because of some inherent defect or want in man, but due to the Creator-creature distinction and the greatness of God (*WCF* 7.1). The *Confession* identifies God's voluntary condescension with covenant in general, and the covenant of works in particular (*WCF* 7.1-2).

⁶ By "federal theology," we mean to use the term interchangeably with "covenant theology," particularly stressing the representative aspect of two great "federal heads," Adam and Jesus. Federal simply derives from the Latin *foedus*, which means "covenant." We recognize that Reformed theologians such as John Murray argued against the language of "covenant" as applied to the "Adamic Administration." Yet, he also recognized a major difference between the way God dealt with Adam pre-Fall and post-Fall as well as the necessity for Adam's perfect and perpetual obedience in the Garden. These, we would suggest, represent the main points for setting forward a "bi-covenantal" structure for Reformed theology, even when the language is not used.

To say it another way, the *Confession* identifies the “first” and “second” covenants (i.e. the covenants of works and grace) as ways in which God secures his people’s enjoyment of union and communion with him. Thus, the *Confession* teaches that the God of the Bible relates to his creatures covenantally. Apart from any obligation determined by humanity or imposed by just necessity, God extends life with him to his people first in a “covenant of works” and then through the various administrations of the “covenant of grace” (*WCF* 7.5). It is right then to see the covenant concept as an important architectonic principle of the theology of the *Confession*.

The covenant made with man before the Fall, is called by our Standards a covenant of *works* (respecting its terms or conditions) (*WCF* 7.2), a covenant of *life* (respecting its goal or end) (*LC* 20), a covenant with *Adam* (respecting its party or representative) (*LC* 22), and the *first* covenant (respecting its chronological priority and indicating that there is a successor) (*WCF* 7.2). All four names describe the same pre-Fall covenant and aspects essential to it.

This first covenant or covenant of works entailed both promises and conditions (*WCF* 7.2). Furthermore, it comprehended Adam as federal head or representative, and required of him perfect and personal obedience to the moral law (*LC* 22, *WCF* 19.1-3). When Adam fell, however, he made himself and all his posterity by ordinary generation incapable of life by the covenant of works, and plunged all mankind into a condition of sin and misery (*WCF* 7.3, *LC* 22, 23-25).

Yet God in his love and mercy (*LC* 30) “was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace,” in which he offers salvation to sinners by faith in Jesus Christ and promises to the elect the Holy Spirit (*WCF* 7.3). The *Confession* indicates that testamentary themes and terms in scripture are to be subsumed under the rubric of the covenant of grace (*WCF* 7.4).

The *Confession* affirms that there is one covenant of grace in the Old Testament era (“the time of the law”) and the New Testament era (“the time of the gospel”) (*WCF* 7.5). Hence the *Confession* asserts the unity of the covenant of grace in its various administrations (*WCF* 7.6), while also affirming its diversity or progress. The *Confession* is clear in its insistence that salvation is by faith in the Messiah, in the Old Testament as in the New (*WCF* 7.5).

The *Confession* does not equate the instrumentality of faith in relation to justification in the covenant of grace with the conditions of the covenant of works. It carefully distinguishes conditions from requirements and reminds us that even the faith of the elect is the gift of God (*WCF* 11.1; *LC* 32). Likewise, the *Confession* draws a line from the conditions of the covenant of works to the obedience and satisfaction of Jesus Christ, teaching us that it is not our faith or faithfulness but Christ's work which satisfies the covenant of works (*LC* 20, 32, *WCF* 3.5, 7.2, 11.1, *SC* 12).

This is precisely the point of the Standards' use of the term and theological category of "merit." Merit relates to the just fulfillment of the conditions of the covenant of works (*LC* 55, 174). This no man can do since the Fall (*LC* 193) but Christ only (*WCF* 17.3). The Standards consistently assert our inability to merit pardon of sin (*WCF* 16.5),⁷ and contrast our demerit with Christ's merit (*LC* 55, cf. *WCF* 30.4). Christ's work (active and passive, preceptive and penal, perfect and personal, obedience and satisfaction) fulfills the conditions of the covenant of works (*WCF* 8.5, 11.1, 3, 19.6), and thus secures a just and righteous redemption that is at the same time freely offered and all of grace.⁸

Though it is common in Reformed theology to use the term covenant of grace both broadly and narrowly – that is, to speak of it entailing everyone who is baptized into the Christ-professing covenant community (broad) and in reference to those who are elect members of the invisible church, united to Christ by the Spirit through faith (narrow) – nevertheless, the *Confession* never speaks as if all those who are in the covenant of grace broadly considered (the visible church) are recipients of the substance or saving benefits of the covenant of grace narrowly considered (the invisible church). This is a vital distinction, and so those who deny or confuse it, or who assert

⁷ "We cannot by our best works merit pardon of sin, or eternal life at the hand of God, by reason of the great disproportion that is between them and the glory to come; and the infinite distance that is between us and God, whom, by them, we can neither profit, nor satisfy for the debt of our former sins, but when we have done all we can, we have done but our duty, and are unprofitable servants; and because, as they are good, they proceed from His Spirit; and as they are wrought by us, they are defiled, and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection, that they cannot endure the severity of God's judgment" (*WCF* 16.5).

⁸ Hence, denial of the category of merit, or the substitution of the idea of maturity in its place, neither enriches our covenant theology nor makes God more gracious in his dealings with us, but instead compromises the Cross's vindication of the righteousness of God, and diminishes the believer's apprehension of the security that flows from the costly justice of free grace.

that all the benefits of the covenant of grace accrue to all who are baptized, do err and are out of accord with both the Scriptures and the *Confession* (LC 61; Rom. 9:6, 11:7).

B. New Perspective on Paul

The version of the NPP most attractive to Reformed evangelicals is taught by N. T. Wright. Wright is more theologically conservative and has a higher view of scripture than other major figures associated with the NPP (such as E.P Sanders and James D.G. Dunn). Wright also sees himself standing in both continuity and discontinuity with the NPP, often preferring to call his view a “fresh perspective” and disagreeing with key ideas that are affirmed by other NPP exponents.⁹

What all the various versions of the NPP have in common, though, is the shared opinion that:

- (1) The dominant, Reformation tradition of Pauline interpretation requires substantial revision and correction, especially in its (mis)understanding Paul on faith and works, grace and law, synergistic Jewish soteriology and monergistic Christian soteriology.
- (2) The various and diverse forms of Judaism contemporary to the NT era did not teach that obedience to the law is the way to salvation. Different NPP authors posit different views of the function of the law. Some view it, not as a means of “getting in” but rather of “staying in.” Others, in contrast, view the law and obedience to it, as functioning as a marker of unique religious-ethnic identity.
- (3) The law’s function in first century Judaism was, thus, ecclesiological rather than soteriological. That is, as a minority group within the dominant Hellenistic culture, the Jewish loyalty to God was expressed in terms of fidelity to practices like circumcision, food laws, and Sabbath-observance. These practices were an expression of divine election, not the basis of it.
- (4) Paul’s censure of his fellow Jews was thus not about a synergistic soteriology, but rather about a Jewish exclusivism that failed to embrace God’s purposes for the Gentiles.

⁹ A recent formulation of Wright’s views, which is a consistent elaboration of his earlier work, can be found, for instance, in his *Paul: A Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

(5) Protestantism (and also Reformation-era Catholicism) thus misread Paul by anachronistically imposing on him their own contemporary theological categories and presuppositions, which were derived more from their own context than his. Hence, proponents of the NPP argue that in light of their fresh understanding of first century Judaism, the historic Protestant reading of Paul's soteriology, whatever true and right insights it may offer, must now be refined.

Wright emphasizes the importance of "covenant theology" in Paul's thought and writings. According to Wright, what Paul "says about Jesus and the Law reflects his belief that the covenant purposes of Israel's God had reached their climactic moment in the events of Jesus' death and resurrection."¹⁰ Wright argues that Paul has redefined the Jewish theology of monotheism and election, God and Israel, *via* the doctrines of the person and work of Christ and the Spirit.¹¹

What is also striking in Wright's version of covenant theology is the emphasis on corporate categories. Forensic language in Paul is seen to refer to "covenant membership." Election is viewed as national and ecclesial. He roots election in Israel's corporate election as God's own people; as he observes, "All through [the Old Testament] was a basic belief that the one creator God had called Israel to be his special people, and as part of that call had given Israel the land to live *in* and the Law to live *by*."¹² It is often this emphasis on the corporate that draws appreciation of Wright from those associated with the FV.

As will be detailed in the next section, Wright's redefinition of election will lead to a reworking of justification. Present justification is about how covenant membership is discerned, and thus about how Paul's revised Christological election is ascertained. Writing on Galatians 2, he observes that "there then follows the first ever statement of Paul's doctrine of justification, and, despite the shrill chorus of detractors, it here obviously refers to the way in which God's people have been redefined." Justification is not about "getting in" or "staying in" but about "how we know we are in."¹³ Hence, we often hear the description that justification (in Wright's version of the NPP) is more about ecclesiology than soteriology.

¹⁰ N.T. Wright, *Climax of the Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), xi.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹² Wright, *Paul*, 109 (emphasis his).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 111.

Needless to say, this NPP version of Paul's teaching on election and covenant stands in stark contrast to the confessional formulation of these themes. Both cannot be right as faithful presentations of the Pauline teaching on election and covenant.

C. Federal Vision

Over the last decade, a handful of voices within the American Reformed community have been advocating for theological revision. Concerned that the Reformed churches have been too influenced by revivalism and rationalism, and believing that traditional Reformed doctrine itself has not escaped the blind spots of this context, these men have articulated a need for Reformed pastors and churches to undertake some serious theological reassessment. This diverse group of conversation partners has embraced the designation "Federal Vision" (FV) as a description of its collective aspirations.

Many FV proponents view this discussion as more about the boundaries of our community and about Reformed identity than about theology. Some are more respectful of confessional language, categories and formulations, while others are aggressively critical, but there are those who openly admit that the FV is desirous of redrawing the boundaries between Lutheran, Catholic, and Reformed theological systems (appreciating aspects of each). FV advocates, of course, view this as refining our theology in light of Scripture in order to fulfill the aspiration of *semper reformanda*. FV opponents, of course, dispute this.

Peter Leithart says:

"Federal Vision" theology messes with these boundaries. It attempts to follow the lead of Scripture, even when that seems to conflict with Confessional formulae and seems closer to Luther than Reformed orthodoxy. It develops a baptismal theology that is not starkly at odds with Luther, appreciates de Lubac on the doctrine of the church and Alexander Schmemmann on the Eucharist, finds Barth and Lindbeck intriguing and helpful at a number of points, and is stimulated by Anglican New Testament scholar N. T. Wright. As a result, "Federal Vision" theology challenges conservative Reformed culture as much or more than it does Reformed theology, for it questions the performances and boundaries that once defined

this culture. Though the specifics of the debate can appear to be so much gnat-straining (particularly to those few outside the Reformed world who pay attention), the debate touches a nerve and provokes profound reactions because it's not just a theological debate but an identity crisis. The Federal Vision challenges some of the identifying symbols, the boundary-markers of Reformed communal identity, and that kind of challenge cannot help but provoke a heated response.¹⁴

Two of those identifying symbols or boundary-markers are the doctrines of election and covenant. It is true that many FV proponents affirm the decretal view of election found in the *Westminster Standards*. As Douglas Wilson writes, "The fact of decretal election is affirmed by every FV spokesman that I know of."¹⁵ This view of election is accompanied, however, by an equally strong affirmation of the need to view election from Scripture and from the viewpoint of the covenant. According to Steve Wilkins, "The term 'elect' (or 'chosen') as it is used in the Scriptures most often refers to those in covenant union with Christ who is *the Elect One*."¹⁶

One of the real challenges in trying to understand the FV on these issues is the monolithic way they write about "the Covenant." Rather than making distinctions between the "first" and "second" covenant in the fashion of the Westminster Standards, some express hostility to the distinction, while others simply collapse any distinction at all. Those who preserve the bi-covenantal distinction do so in such a way as to redirect the confessional understanding of the covenant of works.¹⁷

Central to the FV understanding of "covenant" is their definition: "covenant" is defined as a vital relationship with the triune God. "To be in covenant is to be in real communion with God, attendant with real privileges and real

¹⁴ Peter J. Leithart, "Presbyterian Identity Crisis," in Leithart.com (2007, 13 February), <http://www.leithart.com/archives/002784.php>.

¹⁵ Doug Wilson, "Three Extra Eggs in the Pudding; Topic: Auburn Avenue Stuff," in BLOG and MABLOG (2006, 26 July), <http://www.dougwils.com/index.asp?Action=Anchor&CategoryID=1&BlogID=2586>.

¹⁶ *The Federal Vision*, 56.

¹⁷ Ralph Smith, *The Eternal Covenant: How the Trinity Reshapes Covenant Theology* (MoSCow, ID: Canon, 2003).

blessings.”¹⁸ Coupled with this definition is their understanding of the “objectivity” of the covenant. “A covenant is also objective, like your marriage. It’s there whether the members of the covenant feel it’s there, or they believe it’s there, whether they even believe in the covenant or not.”¹⁹ As Douglas Wilson states, “We have noted repeatedly that baptism in water is objective, and it establishes an objective covenant relationship with the Lord of the covenant, Jesus Christ.”²⁰ This concept of covenant objectivity includes the view that “every baptized person is in covenant with God and is in union, then, with Christ and with the triune God.”²¹ This confluence of “covenant objectivity” through baptism and “real and vital union” with Christ produces significant confusion about the relationship between the “sign” and “thing signified” and the nature of children who are “in this respect” within the covenant of grace (*WCF* 27:2, *LC* 166).

A major consequence of covenantal objectivity is that membership within the covenant is viewed in an undifferentiated manner. One upshot of this is that the *BCO* distinction between “communing” and “non-communing” members is set aside or eliminated. Most FV proponents also agree that the emphasis needs to rest on the “visible” church as the “people of God.” Union with this people, through baptism, is what is required for one to be elect; for the visible people of God is the “body of Christ,” and Christ himself is the “Elect One.”

¹⁸ Virtually all proponents of FV agree that a covenant is a real relationship with God. “Covenant is relationship. That is what covenant is. Relationship” (Steve Schlissel, “Covenant of Peace, Part 1”). “The persons of the Triune God are eternally united in a covenant bond of love” (Ralph Smith, *Paradox and Truth*, 73). “The Covenant is a personal-structural bond which joins the three persons of God in a community of life, and in which man was created to participate” (James Jordan, *The Law of the Covenant*, 4). “Covenant isn’t a thing that you can analyze – covenant is a relationship. It is a personal, ordered and formally binding relationship” (John Barach, “Covenant and History,” AAPCPC Sermon). “Covenant is a real relationship, consisting of real communion with the triune God through union with Christ. The covenant is not some *thing* that exists apart from Christ or in addition to Him (another *means* of grace) – rather, the covenant is union with Christ” (Steve Wilkins [Italics, his], Knox Colloquium, 262).

¹⁹ John Barach, “Covenant and History,” 2002 AAPCPC Sermon. The analogy of marriage is used by several FV proponents in the context of covenantal objectivity.

²⁰ Douglas Wilson, “‘Reformed’ Is Not Enough,” sub-titled, “Recovering the Objectivity of the Covenant.”

²¹ John Barach, “Covenant and History.”

Wilkins maintains that “Scriptures seem to use the terms ‘covenant,’ [and] ‘elect,’ ... in a different way than the *Westminster Confession* uses them. Thus, in the Scriptures, the Covenant is a structured relationship of love with the Triune God in which man participates in Christ Jesus. The elect are all those who are presently ‘in Christ’ (as members of His body, the Church).”²² He also urges his readers to rethink their theological categories and terminology “from the perspective of the covenant,” and adds: “All that we as Calvinists have been concerned to preserve (the absolute sovereignty of God in salvation, the absolutely gracious nature of salvation, the supremacy of Christ over all, etc.) can be preserved without falling prey to the error of forcing the Scriptures to submit to a preconceived logical or theological construct and, thus, subtly departing from Scripture as the supreme rule of faith and life.”²³

Furthermore, because the first covenant with Adam was a gracious covenant, coming from a gracious God, with the condition of the first covenant being the covenantal faithfulness of Adam, not merit, FV proponents suggest that believers should recognize the essential unity of the covenants from Adam through Christ. They are all basically the same with the same condition, covenant faithfulness. In addition, FV writers unanimously reject the concept of merit under the covenant of works: “God did not have an arrangement with Adam in the garden based on Adam’s possible merit. Everything good from God is grace. If Adam had passed the test, he would have done so by grace through faith.”²⁴

D. Comparative Analysis

We often hear proponents and sympathizers of the NPP and FV who are part of confessional Reformed communities say, that while they go beyond the Westminster Standards in what they affirm, they do not contradict the Westminster Standards. But it is evident that the version of covenant and election taught by the NPP and FV is incompatible with the views of the Westminster Standards. In fact, these two approaches to covenant and election are not complementary ways of looking at the biblical data, but irreconcilably contradictory alternative accounts of the biblical data.

²² Steve Wilkins, “Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation,” *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros & Cons*, 268.

²³ *The Federal Vision*, 67.

²⁴ Douglas Wilson, “Beyond the Five Solas,” *Credenda/Agenda* 16/2:15.

The 1646 chapter title “God’s eternal decree” emphasizes the unitary and comprehensive nature of God’s divine plan. Thus views which juxtapose “election from the standpoint of the covenant” with the Standard’s decretal view of election, offering this as an alternative and superior way of thinking about (e.g.) the visible church, the sacraments and assurance are not only forsaking the language of *the* Standards, but undermining its theology.²⁵

Moreover, to affirm the Standards, and then redefine the terms used in the Standards, is not to affirm the Standards. For example, to affirm the decretal view of election, and then to say that the Bible teaches that the elect may fall from their election, is to set the Bible over against the Standards. The committee holds that by receiving and adopting the Westminster Standards as containing the system of doctrine taught in Scripture, we are saying that the terms used in the *Confession* faithfully represent what is taught in Scripture.

The Committee would suggest that the FV proponents have in effect provided an alternative hermeneutic for interpreting Scripture. They have done so 1) by concentrating their efforts on the “objectivity” of the covenant, 2) by stressing the “covenantal” efficacy of baptism, 3) by focusing on the undifferentiated membership of the visible church, 4) by holding the view that the “elect” are covenant members who may one day fall from their elect status, and 5) by highlighting the need for persevering faithfulness in order to secure final election.

FV proponents also want to stress that covenant is a “relationship” but often assume their definition rather than closely scrutinizing the covenant concept in Scripture. Scripturally speaking, a covenant is, first, a special way in which a binding relationship is secured (and thus, it has the function of confirming and assuring divinely established relationships between God and his people). Secondly, by metonymy, covenant stands for the relationship secured by means of the covenant. Hence, covenants do not effect relationships, they secure them.

Because of their assumed definition of covenant as relationship, FV proponents are apt to ascribe an objectivity and efficacy to the covenant (almost always in the singular), covenant membership, and covenant signs that diminish or ignore the effectual character and priority of the word of

²⁵ See Rowland S. Ward’s comments on this chapter in *The Westminster Confession of Faith: A Study Guide* (Wantirna, Australia: New Melbourne Press, 1996, 2004), 63ff.

promise, as well as the reality of the invisible/visible distinction. This tendency leads them to assign saving benefits ascribed to all members of the visible church, elect and non-elect covenant members alike.²⁶

Some FV writers criticize the confessional doctrine of the covenant of works, and wrongly parallel the condition of Adam's obedience in the covenant of works with the instrumentality of our faith in the covenant of grace. The Standards are clear that an obedience principle lies at the heart of the first covenant; and it parallels that obedience principle, not to our faith, but to the work of Christ under the second covenant. Often FV writers who criticize the covenant of works do so in reaction to theologians who stress "merit" as part of that covenant. Regardless of one's stance on that issue, the major point of the Standards is not the merits gained by Adam, but the merit of Christ's work.²⁷

Finally, the FV confuses the benefits of salvation by attributing them to non-elect members of the visible church and so undermines the security enjoyed by the believer in view of Christ's perfect and personal fulfillment of the terms of the vitiated covenant of works.

²⁶ Of course, this presumes a more basic question: can non-elect people be covenant members? The Reformed have answered this in different ways, although no one has ever said that the line between elect and non-elect should be blurred. Witsius and a'Brakel, for instance, posit that only those who are elect are really in covenant with God. Gaffin and Robertson would say that covenant is broader than election. The latter authors speak of the internal and external aspects of the covenant. Either way, there is a difference between external and internal. See *The Federal Vision*, 58-62, especially, where definitive sanctification, calling, redemption, forgiveness of sins, and justification through baptism are ascribed to all, head for head, who are in the covenant, non-elect covenant members and elect covenant members alike, without any distinction of terms.

²⁷ What is key to the covenant of works is that the reward is conditioned on the performance of works, not on whether there is some sort of equivalence between the reward earned and the work performed. In the pivotal text of Romans 4:4, the idea of "what is due" need not invoke the idea that "what is due" has been earned by a work that is commensurate with the reward itself, but merely that there was a covenant which promised that reward if the work was performed. Thus, if Adam had obeyed in the probation, God would have owed him the reward of eternal life, because God had promised it to him on that condition. God would not have owed it to him because his obedience in the probation merited eternal life.

II. Justification and Union with Christ

A. Westminster Standards

1. *Union with Christ*

The Westminster Standards only speak of a “union with Christ” as that which is effectual; or to say it another way, as that which is saving and belongs to the elect (*LC* 65, 66). This is the “work of God’s grace” whereby the “Spirit applieth to us the redemption purchased by Christ, by working faith in us, and thereby uniting us to Christ in our effectual calling” (*LC* 66; *SC* 30). This “thereby” of the catechism’s statement is important: it conveys that the Spirit uses faith to unite believers to Christ (cf. *WCF* 26:1).

This union is such that believers are “spiritually and mystically, yet really and inseparably, joined to Christ as their head and husband” (*LC* 66). There is no sense in which believers are made “in any wise partakers of the substance of his Godhead, or be equal with Christ in any respect” (*WCF* 26:3). Rather, it is a spiritual union, whereby Christ is head and husband of all who are eternally saved, both singly as individuals and corporately as the church (*WCF* 25:1). Not only is this union spiritual, it is *real* and *inseparable*; the union attested in our Standards cannot be lost (*LC* 79). Confusing this “union with Christ” with visible membership in the body of Christ through outward profession or sacramental expression is a serious error and endangers our church’s faithful testimony to the Gospel essential of justification by faith alone.

From this union with Christ, believers in the invisible church have a “communion in grace” in which they share all the benefits of redemption. By virtue of “Christ’s mediation,” “justification, adoption, sanctification, and whatever else, in this life, manifests their union with him” are applied to believers (*LC* 69; cf. *SC* 32, 36). The Standards, taken as a whole, view union with Christ as the umbrella category under which the individual aspects of Christ’s redemption fit. And yet, union with Christ does not make justification or the other benefits redundant.

Interestingly, the Standards use different terms when talking about how baptism relates to union with Christ: they speak of baptism serving as “a sign and seal...of [our] ingrafting into Christ” (*WCF* 28:1; *LC* 165; *SC* 94). Water baptism does not effect this on its own, nor does it do so necessarily at the time of administration (*WCF* 28:5). Rather, baptism serves to exhibit and confer the gracious promises of the Gospel to the elect recipient in God’s

appointed time (*WCF* 28:6). Further, baptism serves sacramentally to “strengthen and increase [our] faith” (*LC* 162); this is why we are urged to “improve” our baptisms (*LC* 167).

2. *Justification*

When the Westminster Standards describe what happens in justification, they describe a judicial “act” that has two elements: “pardoning their sins” and “accounting and accepting their persons as righteous” (*LC* 70; *WCF* 11.1).²⁸ Hence, we can say that, according to our Standards, justification involves both the forgiveness of sin and the accounting of sinners as righteous.

When the Standards go on to describe how that accounting and accepting of sinners as righteous occurs, they further specify that “accounting” involves imputation (“by God imputed to them” *LC* 70). God imputes both the “obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them” (*WCF* 11:1, 3; *LC* 70, 71).²⁹ To put it differently, Christ’s “perfect obedience” (his “active obedience” to the demands of the law) and his “full satisfaction” of God’s justice (his “passive obedience” in which he suffered on the Cross for sinners) are both imputed to sinners; they are then accounted to be and accepted as righteous in God’s sight. In other words, the sole ground for justification is the “righteousness of Christ,” which is “imputed” to sinners (*WCF* 8:5; *LC* 77).

Further, the Standards assert that nothing that sinners do nor anything in them can serve as the ground of justification: “not for anything wrought in them, or done by them” (*WCF* 11:1; *LC* 70). Faith serves as “the alone instrument” “by which [the believer] receiveth and applieth Christ and his righteousness” (*WCF* 11:2; *LC* 72). This justifying faith “is a “saving grace wrought in the heart of a sinner by the Spirit and Word of God” in which the individual “not only assenteth to the truth of the promise of the Gospel, but receiveth and resteth upon Christ and his righteousness” (*LC* 72). This faith will be “accompanied with all other saving graces” (*WCF* 11:2) and yet, these other graces or good works do not serve as the ground for justification; rather, the ground by which God justifies the ungodly is the righteousness of Christ, his obedience and satisfaction (*LC* 73).

²⁸ Both *WCF* 11:1 and *LC* 70 have this language; *SC* 33 only refers to “accepting.”

²⁹ Both *WCF* 11:1 and *LC* have this language; *SC* summarizes this up as “the righteousness of Christ.”

While sinners offer nothing as the ground of justification, that does not mean that their faithfulness, or good works, is pointless. Rather, “good works” are accepted because of God’s prior acceptance of sinners “through Christ” (*WCF* 16:6). These works are accepted not because they are “wholly unblamable or unreprouvable in God’s sight”; rather, in spite of their “weaknesses and imperfections,” God “is pleased to accept and reward” these works because he looks upon them “in his Son” and because they “proceed from his Spirit” (*WCF* 16:3, 5). Though these works serve to increase the Christian’s holiness in this life and so encourage him toward “eternal life” (*WCF* 16:2), they in no way “merit pardon of sin, or eternal life at the hand of God” (*WCF* 16:5). In fact, even good works done in faithfulness as Christians, proceeding from God’s Spirit, cannot of themselves “endure the severity of God’s judgment,” because they are “defiled and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection” (*WCF* 16:5).

Once sinners experience this judicial act of justification, they “can never fall from [this] state” (*WCF* 11:5). That does not mean, however, that justified sinners may not know “God’s fatherly displeasure” for their sins; nor does it mean that Christians will not wrestle with their assurance of faith (*WCF* 18:4). It does mean that justified sinners cannot be “unjustified”; they “whom God hath accepted in his beloved...can neither totally nor finally fall away” (*WCF* 17:1). After death, these believers will be “made perfect in holiness and received into the highest heavens” (*WCF* 32:1; *LC* 86), while they await the “full redemption of their bodies” at the resurrection. At final judgment, which coincides with the resurrection of all, “the righteous” will be “openly acknowledged and acquitted” (*LC* 90; *SC* 38) because of the prior act of justification, which “free[s] all believers from the revenging wrath of God, and that perfectly in this life” and promises that “they [shall] never fall into condemnation” (*LC* 77).

B. New Perspective on Paul

1. *E. P. Sanders*

One key area where the “New Perspective on Paul” has come under intense scrutiny is justification by faith. Starting with E. P. Sanders’ *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, these NT scholars suggest that our understanding of the Pauline context is shaped more by later, Reformational doctrinal contexts, rather than the situation of the intertestamental period. This period, also called

“Second Temple Judaism,” has become a major historical battle ground in seeking to understand the Pauline situation and teaching.³⁰

In sum, those who follow Sanders suggest that the Judaism which confronted Jesus and Paul in the first century of the Christian era was not a “legalistic” religion, but a religion of grace. This divine graciousness was demonstrated, first, by God’s election of Israel as his people; this election and the establishment of covenant relationship was a demonstration of God’s grace. Even further, by virtue of God’s election of corporate Israel, each individual Israelite was “elected” until he rejected this election and abandoned the people of God.³¹

According to this view, Jews and Christians were fundamentally saying the same things about the relationship between grace and works: grace was the way an individual “got into” the covenant and so identified with the people of God; this grace was evidenced in the election of the church to be God’s people; obedient works represented the way that individual “stayed in” the covenant, demonstrating his or her covenant loyalty to God. The major problem that Paul had with Judaism was that it was not Christianity; that is, Judaism did not properly assess the world-historical significance of Jesus as Lord.³²

It is important to note that not everyone who sees themselves as working within Sanders’ categories agrees with him on every particular. For example, Sanders suggests that Paul’s justification language was not merely forensic, but also includes a transformative aspect to it. In fact, he argued that the notion of participation in Christ is central to Paul’s thought and that forensic

³⁰ E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977). For recent evangelical attempts to determine the relationship between Second Temple Judaism and Pauline doctrinal development, see D. A. Carson, P. T. O’Brien, and Mark Seifrid, eds., *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003-4). Other major evangelical critics include Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The “Lutheran” Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); Guy Prentiss Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul: A Review and Response* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2004); Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *By Faith, Not By Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2006).

³¹ Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 75, 147.

³² Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 442, 543, 552; cf. N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 19.

categories are subsidiary to this main concern. As a result, for an individual to be “righteous,” it was necessary for him to “be-in-Christ,” which ultimately meant being in Christ’s covenant people, who are his own body. Not all NPP proponents, however, accept that the participatory language in Paul’s thought swallows up, if you will, the forensic side of his theology.³³

2 N. T. Wright

By far, the most influential NPP proponent for Presbyterian and Reformed believers is N. T. Wright. There are helpful insights in much of Wright’s work. For example, in his series of major volumes on NT studies, he has proved to be a strong and noteworthy defender of the historicity of the Christian religion, especially on the key fundamentals of the historical Jesus and the reality of Christ’s resurrection. By noting potential problem areas in his observations on Paul’s theology, we do not mean to suggest that we have nothing to learn from Wright.³⁴

The challenge comes in Wright’s understanding of Paul’s theology of justification. While acknowledging the forensic orientation of Paul’s use of justification, Wright appears to read justification in corporate terms first: “‘Justification’ thus describes the coming great act of redemption and salvation, *seen from the point of view* of the covenant (Israel as God’s people) on the one hand and the law court on the other (God’s final judgment will be like a great law-court with Israel winning the case).” In Israel’s view, this justification (or vindication) would occur at the end of the age, when God would cause his people to triumph over their enemies, vindicating or justifying them by raising them from the dead after they had suffered.³⁵

³³ Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 503-8.

³⁴ Wright’s major publishing effort is his series on Christian Origins and the Question of God; three volumes have appeared to date: *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992); *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Fortress, 1996); and *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Fortress, 2003). He has published two “interim” reports on how his major Paul volume might proceed: *What Saint Paul Really Said*, and *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005). In addition, he has produced a major commentary on Romans for the New Interpreter’s Bible: N. T. Wright, *Romans* in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: Vol. 10* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 393-770. This section of the report will focus on these three major sources with additional attention paid to his essays found in *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

³⁵ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 33 (emphasis his), 36. Wright uses the terms justification and vindication interchangeably.

Jesus overturns Israel's (and the pre-converted Paul's) understanding of justification, according to Wright, because "*the one true God had done for Jesus of Nazareth, in the middle of time, what Saul had thought he was going to do for Israel at the end of time.*" That is, God had vindicated or justified Jesus, the true Israelite, by raising him from the dead. This meant that the crucified and resurrected Jesus was exactly whom he claimed to be: the promised Messiah who was Israel's true King or Lord. For Wright, this is what the "gospel" is: the narrative proclamation that Jesus is Lord.³⁶

Not only was Jesus exactly who he claimed to be, but, through Jesus' resurrection, God himself was shown to be "righteous" (i.e., faithful to His covenant promises). For Wright, the term "the righteousness of God" primarily relates to God's own covenant faithfulness. God had established his covenant with his people, a covenant that centered on the promise he would be their Lord and Savior; and he demonstrated his "righteousness" by showing that he was faithful to his covenant promises. By this, God did far more than demonstrate his faithfulness to Israel; through the resurrection of Jesus, he showed his faithfulness to the entire cosmos—in Jesus, God was demonstrating his righteousness to the entire creation by renewing all things and vindicating himself as the one true God.³⁷

And so, this gospel was a proclamation to Israelite and Gentile to bow the knee to Jesus, to confess him as Lord, and to join the elected people of God. The means of initiation into God's people, or the "badge of membership," was faith in Jesus as Lord. Those who belong to this people are "justified": justification "was about God's eschatological definition, both future and present, of who was, in fact, a member of his people. In [E. P.] Sanders' terms, it was not so much about 'getting in,' or indeed about 'staying in,' as about 'how you could tell who was in.' In standard Christian theological language, it wasn't so much about soteriology as about ecclesiology; not so much about salvation as about the church." To put it briefly, according to Wright, justification is chiefly the status of covenant membership, the status of belonging as a member of God's people. As he notes, for first century Jews and Christians, justification was "*membership* language," focused on "covenant membership" in the people of God.³⁸

³⁶ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 36-37, 45, 51-7 (emphasis his).

³⁷ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 48, 50-1, 97-111, 124 (emphasis his), 129.

³⁸ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 94, 119; Wright, *Paul*, 30, 113.

Wright does recognize that some may take this more “ecclesiological” understanding of justification too far. In 2005, he observed that while the NPP has succeeded in driving this point home, it has failed to show “how this integrates with the traditional view that [Paul] is talking about how sinners are put right with God.” Wright believes that these two emphases “are in fact part of the same thing, both to be equally stressed.” And yet, though he claims this, it does appear that his default mode for understanding justification is the more corporate, expansive understanding: Paul “is not simply assuming an implicit narrative about how individual sinners find a right relationship with a holy God...In so far as [Paul] would be happy with the former way of stating matters at all, he would insist on framing it within the much larger question of how the creator God can be true to creation, how the covenant God can be true to the covenant, and how those things are not two but one.”³⁹

With this understanding, Wright proposed that Galatians, especially, be re-read. The key issue in that Pauline letter, according to Wright, was “how you *define the people of God*: are they to be defined by the badges of Jewish race, or in some other way?” Paul employs justification in Galatians to argue that the way to tell who belongs to God’s people is not by pointing to Jewish circumcision, dietary laws, or feast days, but by pointing to faith—all those who have faith belong to God’s people and, hence, are justified. In other words, justification has to do with “covenant *membership*; it is the gift of God, not something acquired in any way by the human beings involved; and this gift is bestowed upon faith.”⁴⁰

While Wright notes that justification (covenant membership) is a declaration that an individual’s sins are already forgiven, it does not mean that there is a transfer of God’s or Christ’s righteousness to sinners. As he argues, “*The righteousness they have will not be God’s own righteousness...* God’s righteousness remains, so to speak, God’s own property. It is the reason for his acting to vindicate his people. It is not the status he bestows upon them in so doing.”⁴¹ Rather, justification means that sinners “are declared in the present, to be what they will be seen to be in the future, namely the true

³⁹ Wright, *Paul*, 36, 37.

⁴⁰ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 120, 124-5 (emphasis his); Wright, *Paul*, 120-1.

⁴¹ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 99 (emphasis his). Elsewhere, Wright observed that “justification in the present is possible, Paul argues, because the grace of God deals with the sins of the people through the death of Jesus. The people in question are, therefore, a forgiven family” (Wright, *Romans*, 466).

people of God.” Or to put it differently, “justification, for Paul, is a subset of election, that is, it belongs as part of his doctrine of the people of God.” Both justification and election are re-read in corporate terms, focused on belonging to the covenant people of God.⁴²

As a result, according to Wright, the traditional idea of “imputed righteousness,” whereby sinners are accepted and accounted as righteous in God’s sight because of the righteousness of Jesus, is incorrect: “If we use the language of the law court, it makes no sense whatever to say that the judge imputes, imparts, bequeaths, conveys or otherwise transfers his righteousness to either the plaintiff or the defendant. Righteousness is not an object, a substance or gas which can be passed around the courtroom.”⁴³

In addition, Wright argues that Paul did not mean to suggest that “Jesus’ ‘obedience’ was somehow meritorious, so that by it he earned ‘righteousness’ on behalf of others. That is an ingenious and far-reaching way of making Paul’s language fit into a theological scheme very different from his own.” Jesus, in his living, dying, and rising again, simply was faithful to what God had intended the covenant to achieve.⁴⁴

Thus, the idea of a “gracious transfer” is simply not found in the biblical texts, according to Wright. In dealing with Romans 4:3-5, Wright understands the “book-keeping metaphor” of “counted” (ESV) as referring to the individual’s “status of being a member of the covenant; ‘faith’ is the badge, the sign, that reveals that status because it is its key symptom.” This badge of covenant membership is an act of sheer grace, granted by God to the ungodly. As he observed in comments on Romans 4:22, “Faith is the sign of life; life is the gift of God. Justification is God’s declaration that where this sign appears, the person in whom it appears is within the covenant.” According to Wright, the language of Romans 4 does not represent “imputation” of “Christ’s/God’s righteousness” to the ungodly.⁴⁵

Those who respond to Jesus in faith and are identified with God’s people are justified and represent “the obedience of faith.” The Greek word *pistis* can be translated either as faith or faithfulness: for example, Wright understands Romans 1:17 (“the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith”

⁴² Wright, *Paul*, 121; Wright, *Romans*, 468.

⁴³ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 98, 99, 129, 131;

⁴⁴ Wright, *Romans*, 467.

⁴⁵ Wright, *Romans*, 491-2, 501.

ESV) to mean “from God’s faithfulness to human faithfulness”: “When God’s action in fulfillment of the covenant is unveiled, it is because God is faithful to what has been promised; when it is received, it is received by that human faith that answers to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, that human faith that is also *faithfulness* to the call of God in Jesus the Messiah.”⁴⁶

As might be expected, “union with Christ” is revised in line with this “covenantal” reading of Scripture. Wright suggests that, for Paul, being in Christ “means ‘belonging to the people of God as redefined around the Messiah.’ It is, in other words, a specifically *covenantal* way of speaking.” And the means for being united to Christ is baptism. The sacrament of baptism serves to unite the individual to the Messiah and so unites him to the Messiah’s people. “That which is true of the Messiah is therefore now true of them; that is what happened to him happens to them *with him*... Their status and condition now, therefore, is that they are *in Christ*, so that his having died to sin and being alive to God is true of them also. This is the logic of incorporative Messiahship, and hence of baptism.” Following Wright’s logic, though unstated – to be baptized into the Messiah and, hence, into the Messiah’s body of people means that the baptized one is justified and elect as well.⁴⁷

C. Federal Vision

1. *Peter Leithart*

While Federal Vision proponents frequently subsume the doctrine of justification under the category of “union with Christ,” Peter Leithart, in one influential essay, deals with justification language in the Bible. Leithart suggests that while the Bible does use “justification” in a forensic sense, readers must broaden their understanding of what “forensic” means in order to understand justification. That is to say, forensic usage in the Bible could cover military, personal, and liberation contexts, as well as one oriented to the court-room.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Wright, *Romans*, 425 (emphasis his). Wright does recognize that a great deal of debate has occurred over this way of understanding *pistis*: see, for example, *Romans*, 467, n103.

⁴⁷ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 152 (emphasis his); Wright, *Paul*, 9; Wright, *Romans*, 533-5 (emphasis his).

⁴⁸ Peter Leithart, “Judge Me, O God: Biblical Perspectives on Justification,” in *The Federal Vision*, ed. Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner (Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2004), 209. Leithart observed that “the Reformation doctrine has illegitimately narrowed and to some extent distorted the biblical doctrine. As far as it goes, the

APPENDIX O

In order to broaden the traditional Protestant reading of justification, Leithart pays attention to the biblical usage of the justification word-group as it is used in the OT Psalms and Prophets. By focusing on these texts, he suggests that biblical readers will come to see that God's judgment is "never simply a declaration that changes one's legal standing without changing one's condition or situation. When God condemns, He acts to enforce that sentence." Hence, the way most Protestants would understand "forensic" must be expanded to include both the declaration *and* the execution of a sentence.⁴⁹

God especially acts to justify or vindicate ungodly Israel by bringing about their deliverance, renewal and resurrection. "Israel's 'justification' takes the form of Israel's restoration and rebirth," Leithart suggests. "Israel's justification looks like Abram's, like death being swallowed up by life...Justification does not refer merely to a declaration that changes the legal status of Israel, but leaves them in ruin and defeat. Their justification is their deliverance from ruin, exile, and the curse."⁵⁰

This OT background, Leithart notes, informs Paul's theology of justification, especially in Romans. There are "echoes" of the Psalms in Romans 3, which should allow biblical students to see that Paul and the Psalmists were agreed that justification was "a favorable judgment of God rendered through deliverance from enemies." The public means by which this judgment was declared was the resurrection of Jesus, "the paradigmatic case of justification." And because this is so, "our justification must likewise involve deliverance from the power of death and from the threat of enemies, including the enemies of sin and Satan."⁵¹

The upshot is that "in this sense, justification and definitive sanctification are two ways of decribing the same act." Drawing on Romans 6:7, Leithart argues that "to be justified from sin is to be liberated." Because sinners are united to Christ through baptism, they are "joined with the vindicated Son." Sinners share in Jesus' prior vindication, evidenced in his resurrection, and realize liberation from sin. This justification is realized in the present by faith, but awaits the final judgment for the full and final vindication.⁵²

Protestant doctrine is correct...The problem is, this is *not* the only setting for justification in *SC*ripture."

⁴⁹ Leithart, "Judge Me, O God," 216.

⁵⁰ Leithart, "Judge Me, O God," 222.

⁵¹ Leithart, "Judge Me, O God," 225-7.

⁵² Leithart, "Judge Me, O God," 227, 228, 231-2.

2. *Rich Lusk*

Another important discussion of issues related to justification can be found in Rich Lusk's response/essay in the Knox Seminary Symposium. Responding to Morton Smith's essay on the "biblical plan of salvation," Lusk suggests that "bi-covenantal federalism begins to look more and more like a theological grid imposed upon Scripture to satisfy the requirements of a dogmatic system rather than an organic outgrowth of biblical reflection and exegesis." In particular, Lusk argues against any understanding of covenant theology that uses the category of merit to describe God's relationship with Adam or Jesus.⁵³

While the Federal Vision understanding of "covenant" is treated elsewhere in this report, it is important to notice how Lusk's reluctance to use the concept of merit affects his understanding of justification and, especially, the way imputation functions within the biblical doctrine of justification. First, Lusk argues that the purpose of law was to point the way to maturity, not to establish merit. He suggests that "the law did not require perfect obedience" and that Moses suggested that "the law was not too hard to keep, for it was a law of faith." He also claimed that "the Torah was not a law code in any modern sense." Rather, the law was intended to communicate "fatherly instruction," wisdom and counsel to gain blessing from God, and served as "the Gospel in pre-Christian form," giving the "blue print of the coming Gospel."⁵⁴

And so, while affirming that "the perfect obedience of Jesus played a vital role in his salvific work on our behalf," Lusk elaborates on that claim by arguing that Christ's active obedience was a "precondition of his saving work in his death and resurrection." That is, Christ's active obedience "is not saving in itself"; nor were these works that "would be credited to Jesus' people"; nor did Christ "merit" anything for himself or his people that would be legally

⁵³ Rich Lusk, "Response to 'Biblical Plan of Salvation,'" in *The Auburn Avenue Theology Pros and Cons: Debating the Federal Vision*, ed. E. Calvin Beisner (Ft. Lauderdale: Knox Seminary, 2004), 145.

⁵⁴ Lusk, "Response to 'Biblical Plan of Salvation,'" 128, 130. At one point, Lusk did claim that "God certainly did require perfect and perpetual obedience of Adam" (121); and yet later, he claimed that the law did not require perfect obedience. It would seem, then, that God required more of Adam in a gracious garden than he would of Israel in a fallen world.

transferred to his people's account. For Lusk, "justification requires no transfer or imputation of anything," especially the "merits" of Jesus.⁵⁵

Rather, what is required for God to justify sinners is union with Christ. Following others who focus on this theological category, Lusk suggests, "If I am *in Christ*, he is my substitute and representative. All he suffered and accomplished was for me. All he has belongs to me. With regards to justification, this means my right standing before the Father is grounded in Christ's own right standing before the Father." In fact, he states that "my in-Christ-ness makes imputation redundant. I do not need the moral content of his life of righteousness transferred to me; what I need is a share in the forensic verdict passed over him at the resurrection."⁵⁶

The way of incorporation or union with Christ is by faith, sealed in baptism. In a separate essay, Lusk holds that "the Westminster standards teach that in baptism, the thing signified—which is nothing less than union with Christ, regeneration, and forgiveness—is truly sealed, conferred, applied, and communicated." Hence, baptism unites the individual to Christ effectually and, at that moment, the individual is justified—the forensic verdict passed over Christ at the resurrection is passed over the individual at baptism. Or as Lusk puts it elsewhere, "faith is the instrument of justification on our end, while baptism is the instrument on God's side. God offers Christ and applies Christ to us through the instrument of baptism."⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Lusk, "Response to 'Biblical Plan of Salvation,'" 140, 142; see also 137. Lusk also observes that "it is not Christ's life-long obedience *per se* that is credited to us. Rather, it is his right standing before the Father, manifested in his resurrection" (141).

⁵⁶ Lusk, "Response to 'Biblical Plan of Salvation,'" 142. Lusk later uses Richard Gaffin's work to suggest that "imputation, as such, has no free standing structure of its own. It is simply a corollary of union with Christ" (143). Gaffin responds to Lusk's usage of his work and the suggestion that union with Christ makes imputation "redundant" in *By Faith, Not By Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2006), 44-52.

⁵⁷ Lusk, "Response to the 'Biblical Plan of Salvation,'" 134; Rich Lusk, "Paedobaptism and Baptismal Efficacy: Historic Trends and Current Controversies," in *The Federal Vision*, 98; Rich Lusk, "Faith, Baptism, and Justification," http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/faith_baptism_and_justification.htm. Lusk argues similarly in "Baptismal Efficacy and Baptismal Latency: A Sacramental Dialogue," *Presbyterion* 32 (2006): 18-37. He would go on to suggest that grace is truly offered and conferred in baptism, but it would be possible to apostatize and hence "fall from grace" (cf. Lusk, "Paedobaptism and Baptismal Efficacy," 103-4; Lusk, "New Life and Apostasy: Hebrews 6:4-6 as a Test Case," in *The Federal Vision*, 271-99).

3. *Steve Wilkins*

A similar way of thinking about justification, imputation, union with Christ, and baptism can be found in Steve Wilkins' essay. Wilkins writes that "all the blessings and benefits of salvation therefore are found 'in Christ'...By virtue of union with the Second Adam we have wholeness and restoration—new birth, regeneration, new life." Individuals are united to Christ and so receive the benefits of salvation by baptism: "The Bible teaches us that baptism unites us to Christ and His body by the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13). Baptism is an act of God (through his ministers) which signifies and seals our initiation into the Triune communion...At baptism we are clothed with Christ, united to Him and to His Church which is His body."⁵⁸ Hence, baptism unites individuals to Christ; and by virtue of union with Christ, all the benefits of salvation are received by the individual.⁵⁹

Part of the salvific benefits received by union with Christ, which occurs in baptism, is justification. This is because Jesus "is the Justified One." Because Jesus was "vindicated" by the Father at the resurrection, we too are "vindicated" or justified; we share in Jesus' "justification." Elsewhere Wilkins states that "union with Christ means that all that is true of Christ is true of us." While not directly addressing the issue of imputation, these statements would seem to serve as Wilkins' short-hand for understanding this view – that baptism unites the individual to Christ in such a way that all that is true about Jesus (as the Justified One) is true about the individual (as a justified one).⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Steve Wilkins, "Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation," in *The Federal Vision*, 54, 55.

⁵⁹ One of the issues raised early on in the 2002 Auburn Avenue Pastor's Conference was "baptismal regeneration." For example, Wilkins said, "And you see, reading the Bible in this way, in this sense, we can speak of baptismal regeneration in this sense, not in the sense that there is some mystical power in the water of baptism that automatically transforms men if the water has been sufficiently sanctified. But, nor is it saying that God is bound to the water of baptism, that God, somehow, his blessing is always bound to that and can't come part from that...What we, what I mean by this is we can speak of it in the sense that by the blessing of the Spirit, baptism unites us to Christ and his church and thus in him gives us new life...By our baptism we have been reborn, in this sense, having died with Christ, we have been raised with him" (Wilkins, "The Legacy of the Half-Way Covenant," 2002 Auburn Avenue Pastors Conference, tape 11, side 2). Subsequently, Wilkins and other FV proponents have backed away from using "baptismal regeneration" as a category, even while they might defend ideas that suggest the same.

⁶⁰ Wilkins, "Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation," 55,58.

Faith plays a role in perseverance, or in “abiding in union with Christ”: “Covenant life is always founded upon persevering faith in the faithful One. If we are to abide in union with Him, we, by the grace and power of the Spirit, must be faithful.” Hence, it would be possible for someone who is baptized, united to Christ, and shares in the blessings of Christ not to be truly elect and so to apostatize: “the elect are marked by *abiding* in the Word of Christ.” While these issues are treated later in the report, it is important to notice how, for Wilkins, these issues relate to each other.⁶¹

D. Comparative Analysis

While the NPP, as represented by N. T. Wright, offers a thorough-going re-reading of the theology of the Apostle Paul, there are several areas of concern for officers who subscribe to the Westminster Standards. Wright’s re-reading of justification and union with Christ in “covenantal” (or ecclesiological) terms leads to different and incompatible understandings of those terms when compared with our Standards. What makes this terribly confusing is that Wright will affirm an individual aspect of justification; and yet, he quickly turns the focus back to the corporate: justification is “about God’s eschatological definition, both future and present, of who was, in fact, *a member of his people*.” Likewise, while there may be an individual aspect of union with Christ, Wright focuses attention on a corporate or ecclesiological reading of the teaching: it means “‘belonging to *the people of God* as redefined around the Messiah.’ It is, in other words, a specifically covenantal way of speaking.” This orientation around corporate categories places theological reflection on a different trajectory than that of *the* Standards.

Moreover, there is some question raised by Wright’s understanding of what Jesus came to do, especially his obedience in relation to the status of his people. In his view, Jesus does not stand as a representative head whose perfect obedience is imputed to his people by faith. Rather, Jesus is the representative Israelite, who experiences in his own person all that corporate Israel expected God to do for them. Jesus is vindicated by God in the resurrection, and hence, is righteous. And yet, this “righteousness” is not transferred to anyone else. In fact, Wright denies any understanding of “transfer” language in the NT, which also means a denial of imputed righteousness. This is a position that contradicts our Standards and strikes at the system of doctrine contained in them.

⁶¹ Wilkins, “Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation,” 66.

Likewise, the stance of Federal Vision proponents raises concerns for officers who subscribe to *the Westminster Standards*. While the Committee would agree that *the Standards* use “union with Christ” as an umbrella category for “Christ’s mediation,” the way Federal Vision proponents collapse the distinct benefits of this mediation (i.e. justification, adoption, sanctification) into “union with Christ” creates significant confusion. Similarly, Federal Vision’s appeal to “the biblical usage” of justification as a way to collapse forensic and transformative categories also confuses doctrines that our Standards rightly distinguish (i.e., justification and sanctification).

Nevertheless, the truly problematic claims of the Federal Vision proponents come when some suggest that “Christ’s active obedience” is not transferred to his people or that imputation is “redundant” because it is subsumed in “union with Christ.” Such claims contradict the position of the *Westminster Standards* and strike at the vitals of the system of doctrine contained there. Further, to strike language of “merit” from our theological vocabulary so that the claim is made that Christ’s merits are not imputed to his people contradicts the position of the *Westminster Standards* (WCF 17:2; LC 55; 174).

Finally, the claim of some FV proponents that *all* those who are baptized with water are savingly “united to Christ” flatly contradicts *the Westminster Standards*. The position of our *Standards* is that union with Christ occurs only to those who are effectually called (or who are the elect; LC 66-68). Further, the committee affirms that in baptism “the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost,” with these qualifications, “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” (WCF 28:6). When FV writers tie together water baptism and baptismal efficacy in a fashion that may feel to some like *ex opera operato* (i.e., in the performance of the act), they run counter to WCF 28:6, which insists “the efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment wherein it is administered.” Moreover, the efficacy of baptism is tied by our *Standards* to “the working of his [Christ’s] Spirit in them that by faith receive them [the sacraments]” (WSC 91).