



PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF VICTORIA

Federal Vision (May 2014)

At the 2012 General Assembly of the PCV a committee was appointed “to investigate the soteriology of the Federal Vision/Auburn Avenue theologies and determine whether these viewpoints and formulations conform with or are compatible with the system of doctrine taught in the Westminster Confession of Faith read in the light of the Declaratory Statement, whether they are hostile to or strike at the very heart of the gospel”.

The following was presented to the 2014 Commission of the General Assembly (min. 11) and referred to all as a helpful source of information on Federal Vision.

1. Introduction and orientation

The *ad-hoc* committee was asked specifically to focus on the soteriology (salvation teaching) of the Federal Vision (FV hereafter) movement, not to make an assessment of the whole movement or its total theology. As a result, the committee has selected those topics for analysis that in some way affect or state the movement’s views on salvation. Those who wish for an understanding of the movement as a whole can find this from the sources listed at the end of this paper.

FV is essentially a movement that has arisen within the Reformed family of churches and assumes from the beginning that people are aware of and committed to the confessional teachings of the Reformed tradition that dates from the 16th and 17th centuries, including the Westminster Confession of Faith. Their title ‘Federal Vision’ expresses a belief in the covenant theology of that tradition along with a new vision or way of seeing it in today’s world and church. FV spokesmen claim to be within the historic stream of the Reformed tradition and do not wish to be charged with heresy. Its leading spokesmen have been Douglas Wilson, Peter Leithart, Steve Schlissel, James Jordon, John Barach, Rich Lusk, Steve Wilkins, and Ralph Smith.

The views of FV are not entirely new. Some of their leading ideas can be found in streams of 20th century Dutch theology such as those of Klaas Schilder and Herman Hoeksema, that have in turn found a home in some of the smaller Reformed denominations in Canada and America. Some of the proponents of FV have also belonged to Reconstructionism with its strong attachment to the laws of the Old Testament and the political significance of the national covenant with Israel for nation states today. Yet FV is its own movement, or conversation, as its advocates would prefer to say, and should be heard in its own voices and terms.

We say 'voices' because FV does not speak with one voice, its spokesmen not always agreeing among themselves about the tenets and goals of the movement. However, public statements have been made and there is enough shared perspective within the movement to critique it as a single entity.

FV owes its existence in part to the innovative teachings of Norman Shepherd in the 1970s in Philadelphia, USA, teachings that he has continued to defend. In the last decade these ideas have been taken up by other ministers in Presbyterian churches in America, leading in some cases to the formation of break-away denominations and disciplinary proceedings. A range of critical responses have been made to FV both by individuals and churches because of the perceived possibility of FV giving rise to new forms of sacramentalism, synergism, formalism and legalism. The movement has spread to other parts of the world and is making an impact in Presbyterian, reformed and confessional churches. FV spreads its message through modern media channels along with books, journals and articles, symposia, conference papers, sermons, and reviews, both in hard-copy and on-line.

FV is a reactionary movement against what it sees as some bad expressions of traditionalism in Calvinistic churches and excesses and deficiencies in evangelical churches in the North American scene generally. Some of these supposed errors have to do with doctrines like election and covenant, others with practices like baptism and evangelism. Like all intentionally corrective movements FV is in danger of over-reacting so that itself becomes in need of theological and practical correction. The larger agenda of FV is the ecumenical one of founding a catholic orthodoxy that would work together with and learn from other ecclesiastical traditions such as Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodox, for the ultimate goal of a Christian culture and civilisation patterned after the Christendom of the first 1000 years of the Christian era.

FV raises questions not only of a theological kind but of a variety of hermeneutical issues such as the qualities of the Semitic mind compared to the Hellenistic, the relation of John Calvin's teachings to those of 17th century Protestant Scholasticism, as represented by the Westminster Confession (WCF hereafter), the supposed impact of the philosophical Enlightenment on Reformed and Evangelical theologies, and the place of reason and logic in doing theology. FV shows an aversion to systematic theology in favour rather of reading the Bible as story, a preference for the literal sense of biblical language, and a critical attitude to the use of common sense principles like good and necessary inferences from Scripture statements.

These issues lie outside the field of this report and so will not be addressed directly. However, briefly in response to these sorts of issues, the working principles of the committee have been that FV polarises the Hebrew and Greek cultures in unwarranted ways, argues for a false conflict between systematic theology and biblical theology, exaggerates the differences between Calvin and the Westminster theologies, charges the Evangelical and Reformed theological traditions unfairly with philosophical principles, and undervalues rationality and coherence in doing exegetical, biblical and systematic theology.

In aiming to follow its remit the committee has made the following findings in relation to certain errors and inconsistencies in representative statements of FV

advocates, with references to the body of the report for easier reference:

In relation to **the Covenant (2)** FV alters the meaning of covenant because it:

1. Separates the covenant and election (2.1)
2. Wrongly makes the Trinity its paradigm of covenant (2.2)
3. Denies a covenant of works (2.3)
4. Denies merit, affirms maturity (2.4)
5. Flattens the biblical covenants (2.5)
6. Underestimates the new covenant (2.6)

In relation to **Election (3)** FV confuses election because it:

1. Introduces two elections (3.1)
2. Denies that election can be known (3.2)
3. Preferences corporate election (3.3)
4. Believes that election is losable (3.4)

In relation to **Justification (4)** FV changes the meaning and method of justification because it:

1. Limits justification to forgiveness (4.1)
2. Believes justification can only be known at the Last Day (4.2)
3. Blends justification with sanctification (4.3)
4. Moves the focus from Christ's death to his resurrection (4.4)

In relation to **Faith (5)** FV fails to clarify faith because it:

1. Denies that justification is by faith alone (5.1)
2. Confuses justifying faith with obedience, faithfulness, etc. (5.2)
3. Preferences James over Paul (5.3)

In relation to the **Assurance of salvation (6)** FV prevents well-grounded assurance because it:

1. Denies infallible assurance (6.1)
2. Ignores biblical cases (6.2)
3. Limits the covenant promises (6.3)

In relation to **the Work of Jesus Christ (7)** FV clouds the glory of Jesus Christ as Mediator because it:

1. Opposes the active obedience of Christ (7.1)
2. Denies the imputation of Christ's righteousness (7.2)
3. Makes the resurrection the centrepiece of the Gospel (7.3)

In relation to **Baptism (8)** FV exaggerates the place and power of the sacrament because it:

1. Confuses the thing signified with the sign (8.1)
2. Believes the WCF teaches baptismal regeneration (8.2)
3. Speculates about covenant children (8.3)

In relation to **the Church (9)** FV holds to a one-sided ecclesiology because it:

1. Opposes the invisible/visible church distinction (9.1)
2. Believes apostates have been united with Christ (9.2)

2. Covenant

FV is about rethinking the concept of covenant in relation to salvation, and changing our categories and terminology as a result. The idea of covenant lies at the heart of the biblical narrative in both Testaments, and it is biblical covenant that shapes the doctrine taught in the WCF (ch. VII), a system of doctrine that is biblical, covenantal and evangelical. FV does cast a new vision for covenant theology and the reformed churches but its actual statements and reformulations undermine biblical soteriology and the system of doctrine of the WCF that it claims to be exegetically based upon.

2.1 *Covenant and election*

'Election is unconditional but the covenant is *never* unconditional.' (P. Andrew Sandlin) Contrary to the biblical teaching and the WCF (III/5-6) FV separates God's eternal election of his people in Christ (Rom 9:10-24, Eph 1:3-5) from the history of the covenant of grace. Speaking of the various salvation covenants of the Bible FV states: 'There is an aspect to such covenants which we may postulate as settled in the mind of God. For example, God knew and foreordained from the foundation of the world who the elect would be at the end of the world. But this foreknowledge is not the covenant itself, but rather God's ultimate knowledge of the outcome of the covenant.' (Douglas Wilson) Such a qualified statement about the divine purpose actually nullifies the sovereign grace of God to make room for a church covenant that is conditioned on human decision and life-long obedience. Since God's election is unknowable FV argues for the greater importance of the historical covenant that depends on life-long faithfulness on the part of the members of the visible covenant community.

But the New Testament traces back our salvation to God's eternal election (Rom 11:5, Eph 1:4, 2 Tim 1:9-10) so that all the glory of salvation, in all its aspects, may be given to the Triune God alone (1 Cor 1:26-31). Salvation is either by grace alone or by human works of righteousness; it cannot be both (Rom 11:6, Eph 2:8-9). The new covenant of the Gospel is the means God has ordained for bringing about his eternal purpose to save a people for himself who will share the glory of his Son forever in a new creation. The new covenant achieves that purpose perfectly just because it is grounded in God's own purpose and the grace that he gave us unconditionally in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time (2 Tim 1:9-10).

2.2 *The Trinity as the new model for covenant*

'The Triune God is the archetype of the covenant. The Trinity, not Ancient Near Eastern suzerain treaties, must define our view of the covenant . . . The covenant within the Trinity is the model for extra-Trinitarian covenants . . . The creation covenant is just the loving outreach and overflow of the inter-Trinitarian covenant.' (Rich Lusk) The attraction of this idea is that it validates the desire of

FV to define covenant purely in term of natural relationship and love without legal aspects. But this is a false dichotomy, as reflection on one of the favourite analogies of FV will show, that of marriage. It is the legal aspect of a marriage that actually safeguards and defines the relationship of love and trust; the covenant is not the relationship, as FV suggests, but rather the formal instrument through which the relationship exists and flourishes.

All God's covenants in the Bible show legal and formal aspects such as promises, obligations, sacrifices, sacraments, sanctions and oaths. A covenant is a legal relationship that guarantees the relationship itself. So the New Testament speaks of God's covenants being 'founded upon' legal structures such as priesthood and promises (Heb 7:11, 8:6). It is a mistake to reduce covenant to the idea alone of fellowship between two parties because this confuses the goal of the covenant with the covenant itself. In the case of the Godhead it is difficult to see how the idea of biblical covenant could be applied meaningfully to the ontological Trinity in its intra-Personal life, without falling into some form of tri-theism where the Trinity would be reduced to a loving community of three distinct Persons. Simply, covenant is a judicial instrument that the sovereign and all-wise God has selected and employed with which to relate to his human creatures and to redeem them by his grace.

Further, the teaching of the WCF (VII/1) is that there is such a distance between us and God, as creatures and Creator, that we could never have any enjoyment of God as our blessedness and reward without an act of "voluntary condescension" on his part, which he has made to us in the form of a covenant. If covenant were internal to the being of God then he would not have had to condescend to it as a special instrument for saving his creatures; instead it would have been there all along. We may conclude by saying that covenant is extrinsic to God but he has made it intrinsic to us as his creatures, both in creation and redemption (Rom 2:14-15, Heb 13:20-21).

2.3 The covenant of works

'We deny that continuance in this covenant in the Garden was in any way a payment for work rendered. Adam could forfeit or demerit the gift of glorification by disobedience, but the gift of continued possession of that gift was not offered by God to Adam conditioned upon Adam's moral exertions or achievements.' (A Joint Federal Vision Profession) Basic to this rejection of a covenant of works is the FV view that the covenant expressed a natural, filial relationship of trust and love between God and Adam. On this view the covenant of works should be seen as one of grace in which God intended Adam to attain maturity, but not to reward him for anything done in obedience to the explicit command of God. 'He was a favoured son awaiting an inheritance, not an employee seeking an earned wage.' (Rich Lusk)

But this is a caricature which fails to reckon with the specific engagement of God with Adam in the Garden (Gen 2:16-17) and after the Fall. Grace does not adequately account for all the biblical evidence and the aftermath in the judgement of Adam, Eve and the whole of creation (Gen 3:14-19), nor the typological reasoning of the New Testament about Adam's act of disobedience being the type of Jesus Christ's active obedience (Rom 5:12-21, 8:19-23). Grace in the Bible is more than God's goodwill, it is his special and unmerited favour to

those who have violated his covenant and forfeited any right to his blessings. By so accentuating the gracious nature of the covenant of works FV is in danger of turning it into a covenant of grace, while their later stress on the covenant obedience of the Christian in the real covenant of grace is in danger of turning it into a covenant of works.

Although the term 'covenant' is never used in the biblical narrative in Genesis 1-3 the standard elements of later divine covenants are present here, such as promises, conditions and sanctions. Genesis 2 and 3 indicate that, in addition to being created in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27), Adam was placed under a special command to which was attached a sanction of death for disobedience, along with an implied promise of life for obedience (Gen 2:16-17). Because Adam represented all humanity as covenant head (Rom 5:12-19) his decision to disobey the divine command brought down the guilt of his sinful act, a human nature now corrupted by sin, and the penal sanction of total death, upon the whole human family. As the WCF expresses it, 'The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience. Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein he freely offers to sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved, and promising to give to all those that are ordained to eternal life his Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe.' (VII/2-3) By disowning the covenant of works FV removes the corner-stone of the soteric theology of the WCF.

FV remains largely silent about Genesis 3 where the legal and universal nature of the covenant appears. A tribunal (Calvin) is set up where God acts as Judge by hearing evidence, pronouncing verdicts and invoking the sanctions of the broken covenant towards the creatures, the woman and the man, and the whole creation (Gen 3:11-19). This historic passage provides the redemptive context for the saving work of Jesus Christ when he comes as the promised seed of the woman who will overturn the destructive work of the serpent (Gen 3:15, 1 John 3:8, Rom 16:20). It also provides the foil for Paul's eschatological belief in a restored cosmos through the resurrection of the children of God as the final stage in their redemption through Jesus Christ (Rom 8:18-23). Rejection of a covenant of works at the beginning of creation greatly hinders our understanding and believing acceptance of the saving work of Jesus Christ as the Second Adam (Rom 5:12-21, 1 Cor 15:20-22, 45-49).

2.4 Maturity and merit

FV opposes the idea of merit that it claims is integral to the idea of a covenant of works; instead it wants to champion the idea of human maturity. Having argued for a covenant of a purely natural kind FV moves easily to the idea of maturation as the goal of the covenant. As created Adam was infantile in his knowledge but through a process of testing and covenant faithfulness he would eventually develop into the ideal of glorious humanity that God had in mind for him. But in order to reach this conclusion FV reverses the order of the trees in the Garden, arguing that by eating from the Tree of Life Adam would have sustained his life before God, and then eventually by eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil would have arrived at the final stage of his development in

wisdom. The objection of FV to the idea of merit is that it would mean that Man could put God in his debt, and that can never be.

But the biblical narrative suggests a formalising of the filial relationship with God that Adam undoubtedly enjoyed from the beginning (Luke 3:38). The Creator-Judge initiated such an agreement with a specific command, a generous permission and a definite penal sanction (Gen 2:15-17, 3:17-19). Undoubtedly Adam would have gained a new maturity in knowledge and holiness in his relation to God by choosing deliberately to obey the specific command of God, but in doing so he would also proclaim his love for his sovereign Creator- King and so secure the promise of eternal life contained in the covenant.

FV objects to this interpretation on the ground that it gives rise to two ways in which man might gain eternal life, an original one of works and a later one of promise and faith. But the New Testament appears to support this antithesis by setting law and gospel, faith and works, as alternative ways to gain righteousness with God (Matt 19:16-19, Rom 10:5-8, Gal 3:10-14, 4:21-26). The original condition of salvation by works remains in principle though not in possibility due to the loss of that first promise through Adam's disobedience. The law of that first covenant remains in order to make known to us all our inability to fulfil the law of works in order that we may embrace the law of faith in Jesus Christ revealed in the Gospel. The Saviour regains for us the right to the Tree of Life in the new Paradise of God that the first Adam lost to us in the first Eden (Rev 2:6, 22:1-5). We are can no longer be saved by works except the works of Jesus Christ, the Lord our Righteousness.

As for merit, apart from the fact that the WCF does not bring merit into the covenant of works, merit is not the same as works the Creator-King might require from man as his servant-son. If God decided to place Adam under conditions, promises and commands of God's own choosing there can be nothing ungracious or objectionable about that. Through this freely chosen arrangement God intended to honour the man by rewarding his work of obedience with eternal life even although that obedience was inherent in the Creator-creature relationship and strictly deserved no such return. On the same principle the Lord has promised to reward the good works of his people in the Day of Christ despite their inherent imperfections (Matt 25:19-23, 1 Cor 4:5, Rev 14:13). The WCF (VII/1) speaks of all God's covenants as acts of 'voluntary condescension' on his part, with a view to man's enjoying God as his 'blessedness and reward'. In a similar way, the Bible presents Christ's resurrection, enthronement and glory as the reward for his incarnation, obedience, and death (Isa 53:11-12, Acts 2:32-33, Phil 2:8-11, Heb 2:9).

2.5 God's covenants

FV holds that all the biblical covenants are the same and reduces their content to one of faith and faithfulness 'The relationship between works and faith is the same in every covenant' (Ralph Smith). Overall, FV reads covenant history in a unilateral way by reducing all the covenants to the simple slogan "trust and obey". And yet the discontinuities between the covenants, no less than their continuities, help us to see the meaning, necessity and greatness of salvation in Jesus the Son of God. In particular, (though this is denied by FV), the Mosaic covenant forcefully reiterates the principle of obedience that was first enunciated

in Adam's covenant. Likewise, the WCF (XIX/1-2) finds a correspondence between the binding law of 'personal, entire, exact and perpetual obedience' in the covenant of works with the moral law, summarised in the Ten Commandments, that was given to Israel as 'a perfect rule of righteousness'. This perfect revelation of the will of God in the Mosaic covenant serves to highlight the plight of human beings under sin and death, due to their failure under the covenant of works (Rom 3:20, 5:20, 7:7, Gal 2:19), and so to prepare the world for the revelation of God's saving righteousness in his Son for all who believe (Rom 1:1-4, 16-17, 3:21-22, 8:3, 10:3-4, Gal 3:22-25).

FV denies that God has ever required perfect righteousness from his people: 'the law did not require perfect obedience. It was designed for sinners, not unfallen creatures. Thus, the basic requirement of the law was covenant loyalty and trust, not sinless perfection.' (Rich Lusk) But this stance contradicts several biblical authorities such as Jesus (Matt 19:16-17), Paul (Gal 3:10), John (1 John 2:1) and James (Jas 2:10-12). So although the human race now lives under the curse of the broken covenant of works the requirement of perfect obedience to our Creator-King still stands, a moral obligation that is written indelibly on every human mind, to which natural conscience bears witness (Rom 2:14-15). For the same reason we believe that the Lord Jesus Christ as the Servant-King of his people was born under this law and did perfectly fulfil it by the perfect obedience and sacrifice of himself (Gal 4:4-5, Phil 2:5-8), and so proved himself to be the promised seed of the woman (Gen 3:15), the second Adam and the true Israel, God's faithful Servant and Son (Rom 5:18-19, WCF VIII/4-5).

Again, just as Adam was banished from the Garden of Eden and Israel exiled from the land of promise so will all those be banished from the presence of the Lord, who have not fulfilled the law of human righteousness (Rom 1:18, 2 Thess 1:8-9). Paul can argue from the Jewish Scriptures that both Jews and Gentiles are under sin (Rom 3:9-18), and conclude that by the deeds of divine law, generically considered, no flesh can be justified, since this is the message of the law itself (Rom 3:19-20). Although the Mosaic covenant should be understood as a particular historical edition of the covenant of grace it did lend itself to being used as a covenant of works by those who failed to respond in faith to its true goal which was always Jesus Christ and his righteousness (Rom 10:4). The prominence of divine commandment in the Law-covenant was intended to highlight the sinfulness of the human heart and human inability to please God. In itself, apart from Christ, the Law was weak and inadequate (Rom 8:3, Gal 3:12, 4:22-26, Heb 7:19, 8:6-7) because it could neither take away the guilt of sin nor change the human heart (Deut 9:6, 29:4, Ezek 36:24-27, 2 Cor 3:12-14, Heb 10:1-4), hence the need to replace it (Jer 31:31-32, Heb 8:7-13). For this reason such texts should be read as more than *ad hominem* arguments that are responding to *misunderstandings and misusings* of the law (so FV); they should be read as timely reflections on the in-built limitations and ambiguities of the Law-covenant of Sinai in serving the interests of the better covenant with its better promises and better hope (John 1:17, Gal 3:19-25, Heb 8:6-13).

In practice FV does make some distinctions between the covenants in its tendency to privilege the old covenant over the new, especially in its doctrine of the Christian church, its beliefs and practices. This same bias for the Old Testament helps explain other distinctives of FV such as making the covenant of grace conditional on the covenant faithfulness of the individual, the high status

given to water baptism as the source of assurance of salvation, prioritising the corporate nature of salvation over the individual, making the visible covenant rather than God's eternal election the key to salvation, stressing the historical church over any invisible church made up of elect believers, and obsessing over apostasy from Christian profession along with the curses of the new covenant.

But these emphases reverse the biblical order of things generally where the progression of redemption and revelation move from the outward to the inward, from the visible to the invisible, from the historical to the eschatological, from the earthly to the heavenly as an overriding principle of faith (2 Cor 3:7-4:6, Heb 11:1). The WCF makes the same point in speaking about the Gospel: 'This covenant was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel' (WCF VII/5) when it is administered 'with more simplicity, and less outward glory' with 'more fullness, evidence, and spiritual efficacy, to all nations' (WCF VII/6). Christians do not focus on the things that are seen but the unseen, where Christ is seated at God's right hand (2 Cor 4:17-18, Col 3:1-4).

2.6 The special grace of the Gospel covenant

In spite of repeatedly mentioning the need for covenant faithfulness on the part of members of the church covenant FV fails to highlight the special grace of the Gospel covenant that meets that particular need. Part of the glory of the new covenant is the gift of the Holy Spirit who inscribes God's law of love and righteousness on human hearts, and dwells there Personally as the Sanctifier of his people by transforming them progressively into the image of God's own Son (Rom 8:29-30, 2 Cor 3:17-18). This is essentially the gift of regeneration that Jesus described (John 3:3,5), the prophets of Israel predicted in the age of the Messiah (Ezek 36:25-28, 37:12-14, 24-28) and that the effectual call of the Gospel brings about by uniting the believing soul to Christ in an act of spiritual resurrection (1 Cor 1:9, 2 Thess 2:13-14).

The Gospel therefore gives what the Law could never do – it internalises God's law, democratises knowledge of God, and really forgives sins (Jer 31:31-34, Heb 8:7-13). What the law could not do because it was weak through human sinfulness, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and condemned sin in human nature through making him an offering for sin (Rom 8:2-3), with the result that God's people live and conduct themselves in the Holy Spirit by fulfilling the righteous demands of the law (v 4).

By flattening the covenants of redemptive history FV does not allow the greater power, glory and effectiveness of the Gospel properly to appear, instead giving the impression that the effectiveness of all the covenants ultimately depends on the covenant faithfulness of its human members instead of the covenant faithfulness of the God of the covenant, his only Mediator and the Holy Spirit of promise (John 1:16-17, Eph 1:13-14, 1 Cor 1:8-9, Col 1:9-10, Heb 8:6-7, 13:20-21). God's grace in the covenant of grace is not synergistic (depending on man as much as God) but monergistic (God giving freely what he commands). See WCF XIII.

3. Election

We have seen how FV separates God's election of his people in Christ from before creation (Eph 1:4-5) from the covenant of grace that becomes a reality in the visible church. There are other errors in connection with election to salvation that we should address.

3.1 *Are there two elections?*

FV distinguishes between decretal election from eternity and covenantal election through being a member in the historical church. The first is unknowable, the second comes with visible church membership. 'We admit we only have a creaturely knowledge of God's decree. We can never, in this life, know with absolute certainty, who the elect are. So we have to make evaluations and declarations in terms of what has been revealed namely the covenant.' (Rich Lusk) But this distinction lacks biblical backing and renders decretal election in practice virtually irrelevant. Clearly God's election in Christ determines the outcome of evangelistic preaching (Acts 13:48, 1 Thess 1:4-5, 2 Thess 2:13-14), a view shared by the WCF where decretal election is the backdrop to its soteriology at every point – VII/3, VIII/5-6, X/1, 3, XI/4, XIV/1, XVII/2. Divine election from eternity grounds the evangelical covenant in its historical outworkings, not the reverse.

Nor do we learn from Scripture itself any criteria by which we might decide which passages refer to the one kind of election and which to the other. Instead the one type of divine election to salvation prevails across the apostolic writings, an election that comes to reality in the covenant of grace so as to make them co-equal (John 6:37, 39, Rom 8:29, 11:5-6, 1 Cor 1:27-29, 2 Thess 2:13-14, Jas 1:18, 1 Pet 1:2, 2 Pet 1:10). Further, since eternal election is largely irrelevant because it is unknowable, we may well ask why this doctrine appears so clearly in Scripture and why Christians should go on believing in it at all? This wedge between election and covenant leads to an Arminian interpretation of election as conditional and undermines the sovereignty of the saving grace of God.

3.2 *Election is to be known from visible signs*

But is a person's election unknowable? FV argues that a person's inclusion in the elect number of God's saved people cannot be known from introspection but only from the visible evidences of it in water baptism, Christian profession, and membership in the visible church. But this direction fails to reckon with a whole book of the New Testament (1 John) that was written in order to give sure knowledge of being born by God (1 John 5:13). John holds up three clear signs of the new birth so that people may be able to say truly, 'I know God' and he is 'my God and Saviour' (1 John 1:6, 2:3-5). See also WCF XVIII.

Elsewhere Scripture calls for self-examination so that people may have sound reasons for claiming Christ's name (Psa 139:23-24, 1 Cor 11:28, 2 Cor 13:5). Not all self-examination has to be morbid as FV argues; there is a right kind of self-examination that is essential if a believer is to grow in grace and knowledge. Separating eternal election in Christ from the historical covenant of grace in favour of sacramental membership in the visible Church, without discriminating between true and false membership, will only lead to churches filled with nominal

Christians who know and care nothing of the experience of Christ and his grace.

3.3 Corporate election and individual election

Because the New Testament transfers the description of covenant Israel to the Christian churches (1 Cor 10:1-11, 1 Pet 2:9-10) FV argues that election passages in the New Testament that address and describe the Christian churches should be true for every member indiscriminately just because they belong to the community of faith. Corporate election here overrides individual election and yet is supposed to lead to the knowledge of it. For this reason, it is mistaken for a pastor to try to decide among his congregation who the elect people of God might be. He should indiscriminately encourage them to believe in their own election and salvation, until and unless they actually apostatise. If individuals are troubled about their own election they should be reminded of their participation in the visible symbols of the Christian church.

But the election passages in the apostolic letters (e.g. Rom 8:28-30, Eph 1:4-5, 2 Tim 1:9-10) express a judgement of charity towards the individual members of those churches, a pastoral practice that FV chooses to deny in favour of a literal and indiscriminate reading of these Scriptures. Holy Scripture does make election (and reprobation) an individual thing as the classic example of Jacob and Esau illustrates (Rom 9:10-13). It is true that the elect are one body in Christ but they are individuals whom the Father chose and Christ have loved (Gal 2:20). There was indeed a corporate election of Israel as a people (Deut 7:7-8) but also a remnant of elect individuals who represented the true people of God who found salvation (Rom 11:1-7). Transferring the covenant promises and privileges of the ancient people to the Christian churches (1 Pet 2:9-10) does not mean that they apply to everyone within those churches in the same way; belonging to a nation by birth does not correspond exactly to being born again into a heavenly kingdom. The New Testament infers eternal election from clear signs in their lives rather than simply from membership in the visible church (1 Thess 1:4-5, 2 Thess 2:13-14, 2 Pet 1:5-10). Further, Scripture does make distinctions among the members of the covenant community (Matt 7:14, 1 John 2:19-20, 1 Pet 5:13). Pastors, like apostles, are to encourage and guide their people to make their call and election sure by every effort (2 Pet 1:5-10).

3.4 Is election losable?

'The elect are those who are faithful in Christ Jesus. If they later reject the Saviour they are no longer elect – they are cut off from the Elect One and thus, lose their elect standing. But their falling away doesn't negate the reality of their standing prior to their apostasy. They were really and truly the elect of God because of their relationship with Christ.' (Steve Wilkins) FV uses Israel as a covenant people to illustrate this point. Israel was chosen by God in the Exodus but then became reprobate at the Exile. FV, in effect, makes God's grace in election conditional on the faithful and sustained response of the individual. This belief runs counter to both the Scriptures and the WCF where God's election to salvation means the certainty of salvation for those so chosen (Rom 8:29-30, 9:23, 11:2-5, Eph 1:4-5, 1 Thess 1:4-5, 2 Thess 2:13-14, 1 Pet 1-2, WCF III/6). The way FV articulates its doctrine of election is closer to an Arminian understanding, despite using reformed categories and terminology in doing so. When all the biblical teaching is brought under review it seems best to say that

the visible churches will always include members who are not true believers (Acts 8:18-23), who belong to Christ's Church outwardly but not inwardly (1 John 2:18-19), yet God's purpose of election is secure (2 Tim 2:17-19).

4. Justification

By placing the message of the righteousness of God for believers in Jesus Christ at the forefront of his summary of the Gospel in his letter to the Romans Paul implies that this theme that we call justification leads us into the Gospel as a whole (Rom 1:16-17, 3:21-22) and that it is paramount in the life of the individual and the church.

4.1 *Justification is more than forgiveness*

Having preferenced relational categories over juridical ones, as in the doctrine of the covenant of works, or (see below) the active obedience of Christ, FV is consistent in limiting justification to being forgiven by God. 'To have righteousness imputed means that sins are forgiven.' (Rich Lusk) But while forgiveness is included in justification it fails to express the complete blessing that justification gives which concerns our legal standing before God. The Bible's teaching on sin tells us that we are sinners in a double sense – because we constantly fail to live up to God's standards and because we repeatedly breach those standards (Matt 6:12, Rom 2:13, 3:9-19, 23,13:8, Jas 4:17). God's law presents us with God's standards and so all our sin is some form of lawlessness (1 John 3:4). We are both debtors and transgressors in respect of God's law, and it is this dual aspect of sin that Jesus Christ answered for us in his personal obedience even to the death of the Cross. Our debts have been paid in full and our transgressions have been fully obliterated (Rom 4:5-8). Justification is more than the negative blessing of forgiveness; it is also the positive blessing of being accounted righteous, as though we had personally fulfilled all God's commands of love and righteousness (Rom 5:18-19). God does not reckon our sin, he does reckon Christ's righteousness (Rom 4:5-8); he reckoned our sin to Christ, he reckons Christ's righteousness to us (2 Cor 5:19, 21). So, the WCF distinguishes in justification two aspects: God's pardoning our sins *and* accounting and accepting our persons as righteous before him (XI/1).

4.2 *Justification is completed now*

'Final justification is **to** the (faithful) doers of the law (Rom 2:1ff.) and **by** those good works which make faith complete (Jas. 2:14ff). Justification will not be fully realized until the resurrection . . . Final justification is, however, according to works. This pole of justification takes into account the entirety of our lives. God's verdict over us will be in accord with, and therefore in some sense based upon, the life we have lived.' (Rich Lusk) It was the teaching of late Judaism that justification was God's secret until the judgement day, while life on earth was a preparation for it. FV teaches something disturbingly similar when it makes covenant salvation conditional on the life-long faithfulness of the believer in Jesus. While acknowledging the place of faith and a present justification FV yet strongly affirms the eschatological nature of justification. This means that our initial faith needs to be supplemented with a course of faithfulness in works for that justification to be secured in the last day. Our works of faith will have more

than evidentiary value at the judgement.

In sharp contrast the New Testament links justification with the death of Christ as its ground and his resurrection as its validation (Rom 4:25, 5:1, 8:31-34). Because of this Paul speaks with absolute certainty about the future judgement for believers (Rom 5:9-10, 8:38-39). Jesus anticipated this future certainty when he already on earth authoritatively forgave and reconciled men and women to God (Matt 9:6, Luke 7:48-50). Justification is the verdict of the last day brought forward into the present, so that the believer in Jesus can be assured here and now of his safety in the last day (Rom 5:9). The judgement of the last day will only make public what is assured and settled now through faith in Jesus Christ the righteous One.

Further, contrary to this reticence about a believer's complete justification now is the glorious resurrection of believers in Christ when he comes again (Phil 3:20-21). But this event will itself already attest to the righteous standing of those who are Christ's since resurrection is God's vindication and acceptance first of Christ and then of his people (1 Cor 15:20-23). Since their glorious resurrection must precede the final judgement the verdict of that judgement will be already known. The intermediate state of believers in Jesus in their going immediately to be with Jesus when they die, in the same way points to a justified standing with God through Jesus before death or final judgement (Luke 16:22, 1 Thess 4:14,16-17, Phil 1:23, see WCF XXXII). From the biblical evidence we can confidently conclude that the justification of believers in Jesus is a judicial verdict of acquittal before God once for all made by God in the moment of their first believing in Christ, to which the transfigured bodies of believers will give eloquent witness in the Day of Christ's appearing. Full salvation is "not yet" but justification is "now already".

FV confuses being justified by faith alone and being judged according to our works. For the saints being judged according to their works is the same as their being rewarded according to their works (Rom 2:6-11). Our justification is wholly and alone because of the works of obedience, completed in his death, done by Jesus Christ as our Representative before God; our good works, though imperfect and unworthy of any reward because they are always mingled with self-love and sin, will yet be rewarded as though worthy, by God in his grace in Jesus (Matt 25:14-30, 1 Cor 3:14, Rev 11:17-18).

4.3 Justification and sanctification

'Justification is rooted in our entanglement in a perichoretic communion. Christ in us, we in Christ; the Spirit in us, we in the Spirit. It is all one: Christ the righteous in us, we in the righteous Christ . . . When Paul says "Christ lives in me", then too he is talking about Justification.' (Peter Leithart) While it is the case that the Holy Spirit represents Jesus Christ to us as our righteousness it is on the basis of his substitutionary death that he does this (Rom 5:5-10). We ought to differentiate clearly without confusing or separating them what Christ has done *for* us and what he is doing *within* us through the Holy Spirit. Otherwise, we will confuse justification (the external, legal blessing) with sanctification (the internal, transformative blessing).

'Faith never exists on its own, even at its inception . . . Indeed, given that faith is a gift of God, its presence in us is proof that that the Spirit has already begun his work of transforming us.' (Rich Lusk) While it is true that the regeneration that takes place in effectual calling is a sovereign act of the Holy Spirit that generates that new life that expresses itself in evangelical believing and repenting (WCF X/2), FV's way of stating this connection is constantly in danger of confusing the forensic with the transformative aspects of salvation. Jesus Christ is the whole cause and source of the righteousness (justification) and holiness (sanctification) of the believer united to him (1 Cor 1:30). We could even say that justification is the legal warrant for sanctification, the legal aspect preceding the moral in the logical ordering of salvation (Rom 8:29-30). Sanctification is always given with justification but never as part of what justification is, nor as prior to it. Otherwise there is the real possibility of falling into a synergistic view in which justification is based in part on what the believer has become *in himself* through grace, instead of being based entirely on what the God of grace has done once for all in Jesus Christ.

4.4 Justification, Union with Christ and imputation

'This justification requires no transfer or imputation of anything. . . Rather because I am in the Righteous One and the Vindicated One, I am righteous and vindicated. My in-Christness makes imputation redundant. I do not need the moral content of his life of righteousness transferred to me; what I need is a share in the forensic verdict passed over him at the resurrection. Union with Christ is therefore the key.' (Rich Lusk)

But several things have changed in this FV rendition of justification. First, the relational experience of union with Christ has taken the place of the judicial blessing of being justified freely through the imputation of Christ's righteousness. The forensic world cannot be merged into the participationist one, however inseparable they may be. Secondly, transferring justification to the resurrection of Christ as the point where believers find their vindication by God runs into conflict with Paul who tells us that justification took place in Christ's death (Rom 5:9). As the church sings, "In my place condemned he stood / Sealed my pardon with his blood." There is nothing equivalent in Paul's teaching about the resurrection of Christ to what he exclaims about the Cross (Gal 6:14). The death of Jesus is the real trigger for Paul's Gospel. Thirdly, Paul does speak of righteousness being reckoned to the believer in Jesus (Rom 4:5-8), which is what we believe imputation language is saying too. Just as our sins were imputed or debited to Christ, so his righteousness is imputed or credited to those who are united to him (Rom 5:18-19, 2 Cor 5:18-21). Fourthly, being in Christ does not mean to say that we may not distinguish different ways in which the several blessings of union with Christ are mediated to us. There is room in union with Christ for forensic (justifying righteousness) and transformative (heart holiness) categories, in fact union with Christ opens a progression of different blessings from initial enlightenment (wisdom) to bodily resurrection (redemption) (1 Cor 1:30). Fifthly, Christ's resurrection in relation to his death has declaratory power in proclaiming that Christ fully satisfied divine justice when he died (1 Cor 15:12-19, *Larger Catechism* Q/A 52). While it is the Christ who was justified in his resurrection (Rom 4:25, 1 Tim 3:16) whose righteousness is credited to the believer, yet to claim that 'we have the forgiveness of sins in his cross and justification in his resurrection' (Rich Lusk) is misleading because the justifying verdict of Christ's

resurrection is grounded in the justice of his obedient life and death.

For all of the above reasons we cannot assent to the view that the inclusion of the Gentiles in the people of God is either the meaning of justification or the main theme of the New Testament. 'It is not grace that is new in the New Testament. It is not faith that is new in the New Testament. It is not justification that is new in the New Testament. What is new is that Gentiles are fully incorporated into Israel by faith alone.' (Steve Schlissel) While it is true that the new covenant is characterised by Gentile inclusion, its greatest glory is found in the Personal incarnation of the Son of God, his life, death and resurrection, along with the coming of the Holy Spirit and the free gift of righteousness in him (2 Cor 3:4-18, Heb 8:6- 13). Justification is not a sociological issue but a redemptive one in the deepest sense of the word, a matter of eternal life or death.

5. Faith

Just as FV merges justification with sanctification so FV brings works into faith in the justifying act of the believer.

5.1 *By faith alone*

'Faith alone, faith without works is a theological abstraction that does not exist in the experience of converted sinners.' (Norman Shepherd) This is a man of straw because whenever Paul discusses justification he always refers to faith in opposition to works, that is, faith alone in Jesus Christ (Rom 3:27-28, 4:2-5, 10:3-7, Gal 2:15-16, 3:10-14, 5:2-5, Phil 3:7- 9). What FV states here may be true when we consider salvation as a whole, but in justification we receive from God the whole gift of righteousness which is Jesus Christ himself, by faith alone (Rom 3:21-22, Phil 3:9). By constantly qualifying justifying faith in various ways FV actually undermines the sole instrumentality of faith. It is the very nature of faith in the Gospel to receive from God and not to give to God initially (Gal 3:14, 22). This is what we mean when we speak of the fiducial/trusting nature of justifying faith, a faith that rests in and accepts Jesus Christ alone for righteousness. So says the WCF XI/2.

'The only kind of faith that justifies is a faith that lives – that is to say, a faith that loves, obeys, repents, calls, and seeks.' (Rich Lusk) The reason why we are justified by faith alone is that in justification what we receive – Christ and his righteousness – is wholly external to ourselves. In repentance, good works of obedience or covenant faithfulness, however, we offer something to God. The righteousness of faith is such because it is wholly taken up with Jesus Christ the righteous Saviour offering himself to us in the Gospel message. As the case of Abraham shows justification has always been by faith alone in the merciful promise of God in Jesus Christ, the seed of Abraham (Gal 3:16, Heb 11:7). 'Faith justifies a sinner in the sight of God, not because of those other graces which always accompany it, or of good works which are the fruits of it, nor as if the grace of faith, or any act of it, were imputed to him for his justification; but only as it is an instrument by which he receives and applies Christ and his righteousness.' (*Larger Catechism* Q/A. 73)

We can all agree that justifying faith is a living and not a dead faith but the real

question is, What makes it a living faith? FV answers this by pointing to other qualities such as penitence, love and obedience that faith brings with it. But that is not the answer of classic Reformed theology which appears, for example, in chapter 15 of the *Second Helvetic Confession* (1566). In comparing James with Paul it says: 'Wherefore, in this matter we are not speaking of a fictitious, empty, lazy, and dead faith, but of a living, quickening faith. It is and is called a living faith because it apprehends Christ who is life and makes alive, and shows that it is alive by living works.' By opposing the principle of faith alone in justification FV in effect denies that it is by Christ alone, since these are the two faces of the one reality of justification. In adding human qualities into justifying faith, even at its inception, FV comes perilously close to the medieval doctrine of congruent grace with its mixture of grace and works.

5.2 The obedience of faith

'Neither obedience without faith, nor faith without obedience will justify or save.' (Norman Shepherd) In support of such notions FV likes to appeal to the phrase 'the obedience of faith' in Romans 1:5, 16:26 where they take obedience as the substance of faith so that 'faith is obedience'. However, the phrase 'of faith' is best understood as a subjective genitive, as in 'the righteousness of God' (Rom 1:17, 3:21) where God is the source of righteousness, or 'the hope of righteousness' (Gal 5:5) where hope is what righteousness generates. It is true that we are commanded to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation (Acts 16:31). It is also true that no one is able by themselves to comply with that command (Rom 8:11). However, the covenant of grace promises "to give to all those that are ordained to eternal life his Holy Spirit to make them willing and able to believe" (WCF VII/3). In fact, the little phrase 'the obedience of faith' may be understood as summing up the two major themes of the Gospel in Romans 1-8, namely, justification ('faith') chapters 1-5, and sanctification ('obedience') chapters 5-8, where the latter is the outworking of the former, but distinct from it.

By aligning faith and obedience so closely FV virtually makes them interchangeable, even in the initial justifying act of faith, the implication being that faith is justifying because it obeys. But the reason Paul never qualifies faith in any such way, instead always linking it simply with Jesus Christ (Rom 3:21-22, Phil 3:9), is that any such definition or qualification turns justification into a faith and works scheme, in Pauline reckoning. All the blessings of salvation are in Jesus Christ, alone and altogether (Eph 1:3, Col 2:3-4, 9-10). Even 1% of human additive to the completed work of Jesus Christ threatens that finished work of the covenant Mediator which he has accomplished once for all (Heb 10:14). The Gospel calls us not to rely on our faith in Christ but on Christ himself who covers all our deficiencies and gives us his perfect righteousness instead. Just as Jesus Christ died for the ungodly who were without any strength of their own (Rom 5:6) so God justifies the ungodly who have no righteousness of their own (Rom 4:5). Both are absolute pronouncements regarding the ungodly. Otherwise, God is robbed of his exclusive glory (1 Cor 1:31).

In similar fashion it is said that the faith that saves is 'a faith that includes faithfulness.' (Andrew Sandlin) But although faith can be translated as 'faithfulness' (Gal 5:22) and although faithfulness belongs to the practice of covenant, Paul's uses of 'faith' in the places where he explains and defends justification by faith have normally been understood as describing the trusting

response of the sinner to the free promise of God's mercy in Jesus Christ (Rom 1:16-17, Rom 3:21-22, Gal 2:16). While it is true that Christ's faithfulness in life and death grounds and justifies justification (Rom 3:24-26) it is only by trusting for oneself in that justifying righteousness that the individual believer can gain possession of it. The Gospel of the righteousness of God is equally the Gospel of the righteousness of faith.

The first ecumenical council of the Christian Church (Acts 15) quite properly debated the terms of salvation. Some said it was by faith in Jesus Christ plus human works (vv. 1, 5); the apostles said salvation was by faith alone in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ alone (vv. 7, 9, 11). The question was decided in favour of the second position. The few requirements that were added (vv. 19-21, 28-29) were not works of the law necessary for salvation but prudential requirements aimed at avoiding needless friction between Jewish and Gentile churches. Justification must be by faith alone because Jesus Christ is the sole ground of justifying righteousness.

5.3 Paul and James

We no doubt arrive at a different conclusion about justification than that of 'faith alone' when we start with James (Jas 2:14-26) over Paul (Rom 4:1-8, Gal 2:15-16, Eph 2:8-9). But since Paul writes most of all the New Testament writers about justification it seems natural to start with him (WCF I/9 – 'where there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture [which is not manifold, but one] it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly'). Further, FV interprets Paul through James because it assumes that the two authors are using the same vocabulary (faith, justification, and works) in the same way. But this leads to some dangerous conclusions: 'James has in view the same kind of justification as Paul – forensic, soteric justification he says their persons will *not* be justified by faith alone, but *also* by good works of obedience they have done...In other words, in some sense, James is speaking of a justification in which faith and works *combine together* to justify.' (Rich Lusk) On this view Paul and James clearly conflict, with James stating the very opposite of Paul (Jas 2:24). Andrew Sandlin does not see any need to harmonise James and Paul because, in his view, the Bible is often a rather imprecise Book, and anyway there is no special virtue in being precise in theology.

In response, we should understand that the same key terms (faith, works, and justification) are being used by the two writers to denote different realities because they are writing for different audiences in addressing different problems. Paul was defending justification by faith alone in Jesus Christ for people who imagined that their own works made them righteous before God; James was writing for people who professed faith in Jesus Christ and imagined that they were right with God from this notional faith but failed to show the natural fruit of true faith in works of love. The faith that James condemns is not the faith that Paul commends, and the works James commends are not the works Paul condemns. The issue for James is a faith that shows itself to be true by good works (Jas 2:18) which is why we can paraphrase verse 24 as: 'You see [then] that a person is [shown to be] justified by what he does and not by [a rational] faith alone.' Both writers can in this way select the same example of Abraham and quote the same verse (Gen 15:6) but take complementary truths from them. So James no more commends human works as the reason for being justified

than Paul does.

6. Assurance of Salvation

FV emphasises the objectivity of the covenant in an attempt to save people from a morbid introspection that seeks for signs in the believer himself to show that he is in a state of grace. Instead, people are counselled to look to the outward signs of their membership in the visible Church.

6.1 Infallible assurance

The New Testament proclaims a joyful faith that results from the saving acts of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in the economic Trinity (Eph 1:3-14) and the believing acceptance of these works in the mind, heart and conscience of the Christian (Heb 10:19-23). The WCF (XVIII) likewise expects and encourages all believers to attain to an evangelical assurance (XVIII/3), and grounds it in the truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidences of those graces to which these promises are directed, and the independent witness of the Holy Spirit with the Christian's own spirit. This is a rather different list from the FV one, in not being afraid of mentioning subjective signs and helps to assurance of salvation. This is in line with the general avoidance of experiential categories or arguments in the teachings of FV. But believers do not have to wait until the Judgement Day before being fully assured of their salvation.

This infallible assurance is opposed to the FV claim that we can never know our salvation by using such criteria. 'You cannot know if you were ever sincere. You cannot know if you really meant it when you asked Jesus into your heart. Those questions are unanswerable. Were you really given a new heart? Well, you can't answer that question. God knows. You don't know. What you can know is that you have been baptised and you have the Lord's Supper.' (Steve Wilkins) But this kind of pastoral counsel will only lead to carelessness and presumption in the Christian churches where it is given, while members who are honestly troubled about their spiritual condition will receive no proper comfort and guidance. Further, without a strong theology of regeneration by the Holy Spirit through the outward preaching of the Gospel (effectual call) the mission work of the churches will falter and fail.

6.2 Outward apostates

The Bible gives several examples of individuals who belonged to the ranks of God's people visibly through circumcision or baptism, for example, Esau (Heb 12:16-17) and Simon (Acts 8:13, 20-23), who yet fell away from their faith and so proved to be strangers to God's grace and covenant. By denying the outward/inward distinction when it comes to deciding authentic membership in the community of faith, FV actually hinders true believers from coming to a well-grounded assurance of their salvation. Contrary to the assertion of FV, giving credibility to personal elements in a Christian assurance is not the same as giving way to a doctrine of works righteousness. But speaking of false members of the churches as being 'in Christ' and 'members' of the covenant in a soteric sense, and attributing genuine Christianity to such persons, on the basis of passages like John 15:2, Hebrews 10:29, is misleading because it implies that a

person may be chosen by God for salvation and really be in Christ, and yet lose everything.

6.3 Future grace

In the teaching of FV there is nothing that separates the Christian from eternal damnation except his own perseverance in covenant faithfulness. There is always the possibility of final apostasy from Christ and the blessings of salvation that currently belong to him. This being the case a believer can never be certain of his final salvation until he dies since he can never be sure of his perseverance for as long as he lives. But the covenant of grace promises and provides for the life-long perseverance of the believer in Christ (John 6:44-51), due to the three-fold bond of the covenant in the Father's election, the Son's vicarious atonement, and the Holy Spirit's regeneration and indwelling (WCF XVII/2). By so accentuating the need for covenant faithfulness throughout the course of a person's life FV reads suspiciously like the covenantal nomism that is attributed to Second Temple Judaism. According to the Scriptures believers are being kept by God's power for their future salvation and can confidently praise God for this living hope (1 Pet 1:3-5).

7. Christ's Saving Work

There is a disturbing loss of focus in the writings and pronouncements of FV on the Person and work of Jesus Christ the Mediator of the new covenant. This results from the greater interest of FV in the human side of things in its doctrine of the Church, the Covenant and Baptism. In some respects, a higher and clearer Christology would have answered some of FV's discontents.

7.1 Christ's obedient life

FV is opposed to any doctrine of the active obedience of Christ in fulfilling God's commands for us. FV accepts the biblical witness to Christ's obedience as the second Adam (Rom 5:18- 19, Phil 2:8) but either explains this as vocational and so peculiar to himself as promised Messiah (and so not saving) or as referring to Christ's death only. There are undoubted tensions and ambiguities within the ranks of FV here since members agree, for example, that Christ needed to be personally blameless so as to fulfil the symbolism of sacrificial animals that were offered on Israel's altars and that foreshadowed his death, an obedience that was also necessary to guarantee his resurrection on the other side. Nevertheless, that active obedience of Christ was not saving *in itself*.

It seems ironical that FV on the one hand wants to excise the doctrine of Jesus Christ's active obedience on our behalf while at the same time preaching up the necessity of an active and obedient faith on the part of the Christian. Is this not an unfortunate substitution of anthropology for Christology, that results in the focus of attention being shifted away from Christ and his work to the Christian and his, as though the second was equally or more important than the first? The objectivity of the covenant of grace, as the historical outworking of God's eternal, saving decree is lost in doing so.

7.2 The imputation of Christ's righteousness

In Reformed theology the cumulative obedience of Jesus Christ at the end of his life answers for the disobedience of Adam at the beginning of his (Rom 5:18-19). In the Reformed theology of the WCF the covenant of works, Christ's active obedience and the imputation of his righteousness to the believer all hang together. The principle underlying this way of reasoning is that righteousness is the fulfilling of the law (Rom 2:13), whether we think of that law as natural or Mosaic. The works of the law (Gal 2:16) are more than the rituals that marked the Jews, such as circumcision and the food laws, because these were part and parcel of the whole law that circumcision obliged a Jew to keep (Gal 5:3, Jas 2:8-11); the works of the law are the works of the moral law that was first given to Adam in the covenant of works, delivered to the Jewish people in the Mosaic covenant and that remains 'a perfect rule of righteousness' (WCF XIX/1-2). This was the law that Christ was born under (Gal 4:4, Heb 10:5-10), obedience to which he learned through suffering (Heb 5:8, Phil 2:8) and the curse of which he bore in his death (Gal 3:13, Deut 27:14-26). His obedience thus has a dual aspect, that of 'doing and suffering' (Robert Rollock). This is Christ's covenant faithfulness that ended climactically at the Cross, and which is the righteousness credited to the believer in Jesus (Rom 4:5, 22-25). It is Jesus' own righteousness, credited fully and freely to the one who is united to him by faith, that grounds the believer's standing before God forever (Rom, 1:17, 3:21, 2 Cor 5:21, Phil 3:9). The good news is that the Gospel is the law fulfilled, while the Cross is the summary, reality and symbol of Christ's justifying righteousness. See WCF VIII/3-5.

7.3 Christ's resurrection

'The resurrection is the real centrepiece of the gospel since it is the new thing God has done.' (Rich Lusk) At his resurrection Jesus became the first mature man in possession of that humanity that God intended for Adam at the beginning of creation but which he forfeited through his own fault. By union with Christ the believer shares in the maturity of Christ and gains true human wisdom. So, says FV, instead of relying on Christ's active obedience Christians should pay more attention to the soteric meaning of his resurrection (Rom 4:25, 1 Tim 3:16). But in making the resurrection of Jesus Christ rather than his death the real centre piece of the Gospel FV fails to reflect the repeated focus of the apostolic gospel on the Cross of Jesus (1 Cor 1:17-18, 23-25, 2:1, 5:21, Gal 3:1, 13, 6:14).

'The New Testament is clear throughout that what is given to the saints is the Spirit, who comes from the glorified Jesus. It is not Jesus' earthly life and "works and merits" that are transferred to us, but his glorified and resurrected life in the Spirit that is transferred to us.' (James Jordan) But this is a false antithesis between the righteousness of Christ and union with him in his resurrection, as well as failing to reckon with the forensic significance of Christ's resurrection (1 Tim 3:16). The resurrection was the point of Christ's public vindication by which the charges against him in his death were shown to be fraudulent, just as his human judge had declared (Luke 23:22), and the death penalty which he bore for others was reversed (Acts 2:24). The resurrection was declarative of Christ's righteousness and innocence, the verdict on his righteousness made visible on our behalf (Rom 4:25). By union with Christ through faith and the Holy Spirit that

verdict becomes ours but its forensic nature is never lost in the mystical union.

As a general observation here we can say that in its soteriology FV prefers participationist categories to judicial ones, or transformative ones to imputation ones. This is because FV began by eliminating moral law/commandment as dispensable for understanding salvation history and Christian experience, and wants to escape from any idea of merit in the way it interprets the covenants and construes salvation. But the overview of biblical teaching is that man was created with the law written on his heart and conscience (Rom 2:14-15), Adam was obliged to obey God's law (Gen 2:16-17), Israel was locked up under law until faith came (Gal 3:23), Christ fulfilled the law for us and endured its curse (Gal 3:13), and the believer has God's law rewritten on his heart through the Holy Spirit (Heb 8:10).

8. Baptism

The problem here is that FV attributes to the rite of water baptism too great efficacy. This emphasis grows out of and is consistent with its high view of the institutional Church as the only Church and the means of grace for salvation.

8.1 The sign and the reality

The nub of the question is the relation between the outward sign and the spiritual reality it signifies. 'Baptism is the work of both water and the Spirit (cf. John 3:5). Water alone is not baptism, it is an empty symbol. Nor is the work of the Spirit apart from the means of water a baptism. The sacrament includes both. Baptism is more than just a sign; it is also the grace signified.' (Rich Lusk) But while the Bible makes a close connection between water and the Holy Spirit's secret work in the heart (Acts 2:38) it nowhere makes the connection absolute as though the sign and saving grace are interchangeable or simultaneous. That the work of the Holy Spirit does not always run concurrently with the act of baptism is illustrated in the case of Simon who despite being baptised was found to be in a state of serious unbelief and hardness (Acts 8:21-23).

Saving faith is always the context for water baptism in the New Testament (Acts 2:41, 8:12-13, 30-39, 9:17-19, 10:44-48, 16:13-15, 29-33, 19:1-5), being produced normally by the preached message and the sovereign working of the Holy Spirit through and with that word of truth in the heart and mind of the hearer (Acts 11:14-15, 16:14, Rom 1:16-17, 10:14). Water baptism then follows faith in the sense of confirming and strengthening what the believer in Jesus has already believed, received and become. This is what the WCF also teaches (WCF XIV/1-2). Baptism is not therefore a converting ordinance but is dependent on and subordinate to the preached Word of Christ through whom alone we can be received into the kingdom of grace and life. In contrast to this FV rarely refers to the preaching of the Word in connection with water baptism, instead giving baptism the leading role.

FV is sceptical of any teaching that draws attention to the fruits of saving faith in a person's life as a way of deciding those who are worthy of the sacrament (1 Cor 11:27-29). 'It is true that when a person is a believer, the external sign does conform with these internal spiritual realities. But what are these realities? Regeneration?

Christ is our Regeneration. Redemption? Christ is our Redemption. Forgiveness? Christ is our Forgiveness.’ (Douglas Wilson) The problem here is that Jesus Christ as our Representative in salvation is so one-sidedly affirmed that salvation in its objective and subjective/experiential aspects is wholly said to be found in him. The result is that those who profess his Name must simply presume that these are true for them despite the lack of visible, conscious evidence. But this can only encourage a faith that consists in a mental assent to the truth of the Christian faith, a faith that stops short of that fiducial self-entrustment to Jesus Christ for righteousness and life that is the heartbeat of biblical religion. Douglas Wilson concedes that the fruit of a person’s life proves that he/she is unregenerate; why cannot the same test apply to prove a person regenerate in Christ?

On the assumption of a typology between priestly ordination under the old covenant and water baptism under the new Peter Leithart attributes an objective causal efficacy to Christian baptism. ‘Baptism clothes us as priests and these clothes remake the man.’ ‘Baptism effects a transition not only in the regard of men but in the “gaze” of God and this makes us “new creation” in the deepest possible sense.’ ‘Baptism grants a share in the life of salvation.’ ‘Baptism is necessary for salvation.’ But all such statements fail to grasp the distinction made across the New Testament (also the WCF XXVII/2) between the sacramental sign and the reality signified. For example, Paul plays down whatever baptismal ministry he engaged in at Corinth instead recalling with pride and pleasure his persistent ministry of the preached word of the Cross (1 Cor 1:13-17); and in summing up his intensive and extensive ministry at Ephesus over a 3-year period he does not even mention baptism (Acts 20:17-35). People will be eternally condemned because of final unbelief, not because they were never baptised (Mark 16:16).

Even in the case of circumcision, baptism’s precursor (Col 2:11-12), the spiritual reality could not be automatically equated with the rite (Rom 2:28-29) because the rite depended on the word of God’s promise for its effectiveness (Rom 3:1-2). Circumcision was a sign and seal of a personal faith already present (Rom 4:11). FV in its own way of reasoning turns baptism inside out by prioritising the outward over the inward or/and denying this traditional distinction itself. And in doing so it falls into the Galatian error of requiring the use of a sacramental rite in addition to faith alone in Jesus Christ alone for salvation (Gal 5:2-4, 6:12- 16, Acts 15:5-11).

8.2 The WCF and baptismal regeneration

‘The Westminster divines viewed baptism as the instrument and occasion of regeneration by the Spirit, of the remission of sins, of ingrafting into Christ (cf. 28.1). The Confession teaches baptismal regeneration.’ (Rich Lusk) Actually, the WCF offers a carefully crafted statement about baptism and regeneration, teaching that ‘grace and salvation are not so tied to the rite that no person can be regenerated or saved without it, or that all who are baptised are undoubtedly regenerated.’ (XXVIII/5) This is fully in keeping with the distinction of Jesus between believing in him and being baptised in his name (Mark 16:15-16) or the way Paul separates the two in his apostolic ministry (1 Cor 1:14-17). The same chapter of the Confession further safeguards the integrity of baptism by warning that the Holy Spirit only confers the grace promised in the sacrament to ‘such as that grace belongs to, according to the counsel of God’s own will’, which is code

for the secret and sovereign purpose of God in election to salvation in Christ (Eph 1:4-5). Likewise the WCF claims that 'the efficacy of Baptism is not tied to that moment of time in which it is administered' but is administered by the Holy Spirit 'to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongs to, according to the counsel of God's own will, in his appointed time.' (XXVIII/6) These careful qualifications (see also WCF XXVII/3) clearly refute the charge of teaching baptismal regeneration.

8.3 Infant baptism

In particular, FV holds the highest view of the status of baptised covenant children, stating that it is normal for God to give such children faith in the womb. 'God is already in the process of drawing the child to Himself from the moment of conception . . . But the work isn't complete until the child receives the sign of initiation . . . The threshold into union with Christ, new life in the Spirit, and covenant membership in the family of God is actually crossed when the child is baptised.' (Rich Lusk) Likewise Douglas Wilson wants to talk of his baptised infants as already Christians, saints and heirs of the kingdom because for him union with Christ essentially means union with the church on earth through baptism. The revealed Christ is the one we must be united with and this happens when we are united with his institutionalised Church.

However, the WCF speaks of 'elect infants' (X/3), implying that not all infants may be so, as well as limiting the grace of baptism to those individuals to whom it belongs in the covenant of grace and election. In addition there are the clear biblical examples of Ishmael and Esau who typologically illustrate the fact that a person may receive the God-appointed rite but totally fail to receive the saving grace intended by the rite (Gen 25:23, Rom 9:10-13). FV explains this by saying that these two boys were inside the covenant in a real sense but that they chose to remove themselves from the saving covenant relationship with God through their own unbelief and disobedience.

But FV makes two errors here, first in presuming that circumcision made the covenant effective through regeneration in every case, and secondly, by elevating the fickle will of the individual over the sovereign good-pleasure of the God of salvation. Far better to say that if Ishmael and Esau were already regenerated then they would have continued infallibly in a lifetime of believing obedience (1 Thess 1:4-6); but by not continuing to improve the meaning of their circumcision through life-long faith and perseverance they gave clear evidence that they had never been regenerated in the first place (Heb 10:35-39, 12:15-17).

9. The Church

Due to its revisionist views of the covenant and of God's grace FV opts for a revised view of the Christian Church in which, unfortunately, ecclesiology threatens to take the place of soteriology.

9.1 The church visible/invisible

Douglas Wilson argues against the pair of terms 'visible/invisible' since the Church of Christ is always a reality in history and on earth; he prefers to speak of

the 'earthly/historical' Church simply. This is consistent with the FV commitment to an earthly/historical covenant of grace free from considerations of either an eternal decree of salvation or subjective, existential signs of worthy membership. Instead, the point of interest is in the objective over the subjective, and the historical over the eternal. So, 'Entry into the church is always a soteriological fact for the person who enters.' (Peter Leithart)

But without a visible/invisible distinction in the doctrine of the Church, which the WCF clearly maintains (XXV/1-2), church members will have to presume on their eternal election and saved status in Christ. The place and need of 'credible profession' will also have to be rejected as leading to the kind of morose and useless introspection that FV condemns. The serious danger inherent in the FV view is that instead of coming to God through Jesus Christ and so becoming true members of his Body the Church, individuals will come to God through formal membership in the Church and so presume that they are united to Christ. This is a fundamental reversal of the apostolic order of salvation.

'The question of when a man is "regenerated", or given "saving faith", or "truly converted", are ultimately questions we cannot answer and, therefore, they cannot be the basis upon which we define the Church or identify God's people.' (Steve Wilkins) Yet the Bible in both Testaments (Rom 9:6, Acts 8:13, 20-23, Heb 10:26-31), not to speak of the evidence of church history and pastoral observation, teaches us that the local church does not always coincide with the Church as the Body of Christ, made up of living believers who are united to him and to one another through him (Eph 4:16, 1 Pet 2:4-5). For this reason the apostles insist in their letters to the churches on high and specific moral principles and standards being maintained as the practice of faith, in the community of believers and the wider world (Rom 6-8, 12-15, 1 Cor 5-6, Gal 5, Col 3, 1 Thess 4, 1 Tim 2-3). Nowhere do the apostles direct converts to the simple fact of their physical presence in the local church as the reason for believing that they are also in God's favour. Instead, their attention is directed to the great heavenly realities which saving faith and hope appropriate and live by (2 Cor 4:16-18, Heb 11:1). A Christian profession must be credible to be real, otherwise formalism and externalism will take over in our churches and worship.

9.2 When Church members apostatise

While religious apostasy has always been a problem for Christian churches FV has created a real dilemma here because of the way that it equates baptised membership in the visible Church with membership in the covenant of grace, being united with Christ and receiving all the blessings of salvation. The assumption is that until and unless a person finally apostatises they can lay claim to all that is said to be true of believers in Christ. So what happens when someone falls away irretrievably? FV argues that such an individual has chosen to renounce the covenant of salvation and the Christ in whom he really possessed eternal life. As a result, the curses of the new covenant fall upon that person in this life and the next. Incidentally, FV never addresses the common pastoral experience of church members who never apostatise outwardly but appear never to turn to Christ savingly either. On the FV model pastors should encourage such persons to believe that they have a saving relationship to Christ.

The exegetical basis for these views are supposedly found in passages like John

15:1-8, Hebrews 6:4-6 and 10:26-31, read in such a way that we should conclude that an actual union with Christ has taken place in the case of all the branches in the parable of the Vine and the parties described in the Hebrews passages. But such an interpretation brings these texts into direct conflict with others that affirm the indefectibility of God's grace in his people, the completed nature of Christ's mediatorial work and the permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit in true believers. Traditionally, the distinctions made in these passages have been understood as referring to nominal members of the visible churches who have never accepted or appropriated the promises of salvation for themselves. What these people have experienced are the common effects of the Holy Spirit that do not result in regeneration and conversion (Mark 4:16-17). In the Vine parable of Jesus branches are rejected because they *never* bore fruit from the Vine, and in the parable (verses 7-8) in Hebrews 6 the apostates described in the warning passage (verses 4-6) are represented by soil that *only* produces thorns and thistles; there is no hint of salvific realities being experienced or lost by them, in contrast to those who *have* obtained salvation and shown it by works of love (verses 9-12).

These warning passages are part of God's purpose for spurring his chosen people to greater effort in obeying him and for rendering apostates inexcusable for their rejection of the Gospel covenant. Again, Scripture refers to those who in the Day of Judgement will be disowned by Christ because although they appeared to belong to him covenantally they were all along unknown to him; there was no living union with him (Matt 7:21-23, 25:41-46, Luke 13:26-27). This invalidates Douglas Wilson's favourite illustration of a marriage to explain the relation of apostates to Christ before they defected from their faith; it is still a marriage even when adultery takes place, he says. But Jesus' words indicate that the so-called marriage was never consummated because such people never were united with him by a living, personal faith. By contrast, the covenant of grace promises God's faithfulness in preserving his people to the end (1 Cor 1:8-9, 1 Thess 5:23-24, Heb 10:23) so that true believers may be persuaded that nothing in time or space, present or future, will ever separate them from God's love for them in Jesus Christ (Rom 8:38-39). See WCF XVII.

10. Conclusions

The committee has found it difficult sometimes to be sure whom or what FV is targeting with its criticisms and objections. Sometimes its targets look like straw men or the views and practices of minority groups within the Christian world. Sometimes FV uses traditional terms (like regeneration) in loose or novel ways. Sometimes the views expressed seem to be more imbalanced than wrong, an over-reaction to bad practice or misunderstandings in other parts of the evangelical and reformed community. Sometimes the arguments advanced and the conclusions put forward are poorly constructed from biblical texts or are assumed in trying to prove them true. But in some of their assertions and claims FV does appear to challenge Biblical and Confessional standards.

In general, FV tends to take the human side of salvation rather than the divine side, it places ecclesial matters like baptism and visible membership ahead of soteriological ones like saving faith and its moral fruits; it makes God's sovereign grace contingent on human decision and perseverance, it wants works added to

simple faith in justification, it draws its ecclesiological vision from the old covenant more than the new, it objects to the active obedience of Jesus Christ but insists on the active obedience of the Christian. Such clear tendencies in FV are evidence of a skewed vision both of biblical and Reformed theology which, if left unchecked, will lead into Roman Catholic synergism, Arminian soteriology, Church sacramentalism, presumptive regeneration of covenant infants, formalism in worship and nominalism in Christian profession. Paul's principle still stands that a little leaven corrupts the whole lump (Gal 5:8-9).

For the above reasons, particularly because of its recasting of covenant theology and the biblical teaching on faith and justification, the committee has come to the view that the soteriology of the FV is incompatible with the system of doctrine taught in the Westminster Confession of Faith, and that the Declaratory Statement grants no liberty of opinion on those matters since they are integral to the doctrine of the Confession. We believe therefore that the soteriology of FV does strike at the heart of the Gospel of the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Douglas Milne

(Convener *ad hoc* committee)

Select Bibliography

FV sources:

Steve Wilkins & Duane Garner (eds), *The Federal Vision*, (Athanasius Press, 2004)

P. Andrew Sandlin (ed), *A Faith That Is Never Alone. A Response to Westminster Seminary California*, (Kerygma Press, 2007)

_____, *Backbone of the Bible: Covenant in Contemporary Perspective*, (Covenant Media Press, 2004)

_____, "Toward a Catholic Calvinism", docsandlin.com/2012/03/22/toward-a-catholic-calvinism-7/

Calvin Beisner (ed), *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros and Cons: Debating the Federal Vision*. The Knox Theological Seminary Colloquium on the Federal Vision August 11-13, 2003, (Knox Theological Seminary, 2004)

A Joint Federal Vision Profession (2007)

Norman Shepherd, *The Way of Righteousness. Justification Beginning With James*, (Kerygma Press, 2009)

_____, *The Call of Grace. How the Covenant Illumines Salvation and Evangelism*, (Presbyterian & Reformed, 2000)

Ralph Smith, *The Eternal Covenant. How the Trinity Reshapes Covenant Theology*, (Canon Press, 2003)

Peter Leithart, *The Priesthood of the Plebs. A Theology of Baptism*, (Wipf & Stock, 2003)

P. Andrew Sandlin & John Barach (eds), *Obedient Faith. A Festschrift for Norman Shepherd*, (Kerygma Press, 2012)

Credenda/Agenda theological journal, edited by Douglas Wilson

The websites of the various members of the Federal Vision, which periodically post articles on relevant and related themes

Wikipedia, "Federal Vision", especially References, Further Reading and External Links at the end of this entry

General background

J.V. Fesko, *Justification. Understanding the Classic Reformed Doctrine*, (Presbyterian & Reformed, 2008)

Peter Golding, *Covenant Theology. The Key of Theology in Reformed Thought and Tradition*, (Mentor, 2004)

Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New On Paul. The "Lutheran" Paul and His Critics*, (William Eerdmans, 2004)

Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man: Comprehending a complete Body of Divinity*, 2 volumes, (The den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1990)

Critiques of FV

Denominational reports on Federal Vision by various American Presbyterian Churches such as the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Presbyterian Church in America, United Reformed Churches, Bible Presbyterian Churches, Reformed Church in the USA, and the *Doctrinal Testimony* of the Mid-America Reformed Seminary.

"PCA Study Report on Federal Vision and the New Perspective on Paul",

(www.pcahistory.org/pca/07-fvreport.html), Presbyterian Church in America

David Engelsma, *Federal Vision. Heresy at the Root*, (Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2012)

R. Scott Clark (ed), *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry*, (Presbyterian & Reformed, 2007)

Richard Phillips, "Covenant Confusion", Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, http://www.alliancenet.org/partner/Article_Display_Page/0

John Piper, *Counted Righteous In Christ*, (Inter-Varsity Press, 2003)

Guy Waters, *Justification and the New Perspective on Paul*, (Presbyterian & Reformed, 2004), pp. 204-212

_____, *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology. A Comparative Analysis*, (Presbyterian & Reformed, 2006)