

Position of Providence Presbytery on Federal Vision, New Perspective, and Auburn Avenue Theologies

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 (MGA 34:229-30).

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 recognized that there are a variety of viewpoints associated with the NPP; therefore, they were cautious in their 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, the committee’s study of NPP focused primarily on Wright’s writings.

The committee also understood that a major concern of the General Assembly at that time pertained 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,” the committee used the name Federal Vision (FV) when referring to these views in their report.

The committee further recognized 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*.

The committee recognized 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 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.”

The Committee proceeded with the following principles in mind. First, the PCA is a biblical church. It affirms the principle of *sola scriptura* as articulated in the 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, the PCA is 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, the Constitution does recognize the Standards as our “standard expositions of the teachings of Scripture.” Because this is the case, the main focus of the study was to determine whether the views of the NPP and AAT/FV are in conformity with the Westminster Standards.

Key in the discussion was the definition of doctrines that have been crucial to the PCA’s identity as a biblical and confessional church. In the PCA, theological terms such as “regeneration,” “election,” “justification,” and “perseverance” are used to define these doctrines in a particular and agreed upon fashion through ecclesiastical action. The committee affirmed with the PCA that the Confession’s usage of these and related terms is faithful to the teachings of Scripture. While they were aware that the biblical usage of some of these words may have varying nuances in different contexts, they saw their task as to study the theological claims that the NPP and FV proponents make about such terms. Then, they sought to determine whether the theological claims made by the FV serve to undermine the system of doctrine taught in the Scripture and Confession. They recognized that 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.

The committee also affirmed, as does Providence Presbytery, that we view NPP and FV proponents in the PCA as brothers in Christ. Thus, their published statements and writings are

taken seriously. They worked hard to be fair and accurate in their study of their writings and in the statement of the issues raised by them.

Following their preface, their report had 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 opened with a brief exposition of the relevant materials in the Westminster Standards; was followed by brief overviews of NPP and FV views on the same issues; and concluded by analyzing and comparing the NPP/FV views with that of the Westminster Standards. In this way, the committee sought to fulfill 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 set forth nine features of NPP and FV teaching that the committee found to be contrary to the Westminster Standards. This section was worded to assist presbyteries like us as we investigate these matters. In offering these declarations, the committee fulfilled 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 brought five recommendations to the General Assembly and urged their adoption. As you will see below, we have altered and adopted the first four.

Providence Presbytery, meeting on February 9, 2010, at First Presbyterian Church of Tuscumbia, Alabama, PCA in Tuscumbia, AL, hereby adopts the body of the General Assembly's report as our own position on these matters without change or alteration.

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 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).

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).

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

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.

(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.

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 *ælect* (or *æhosen*) 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 either 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 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."

Wilkins maintains that "Scriptures seem to use the terms *æcovenant*, [and] *ælect*, í 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.

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 ðelectö 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 ðrelationshipö 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 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 ðmeritö 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.

II. Justification and Union with Christ

A. Westminster Standards

1. Union with Christ

The Westminster Standards only speak of a ðunion with Christö 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 ðwork of God's graceö whereby the ðSpirit applieth to us the redemption purchased by Christ, by working faith in us, and thereby uniting us to Christ in our effectual callingö (LC 66; SC 30). This ðtherebyö 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 ðspiritually and mystically, yet really and inseparably, joined to Christ as their head and husbandö (LC 66). There is no sense in which believers are made ðin any wise partakers of the substance of his Godhead, or be equal with Christ in any

respectö (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 öunion with Christö with visible membership in the body of Christ through outward profession or sacramental expression is a serious error and endangers our churchö faithful testimony to the Gospel essential of justification by faith alone.

From this union with Christ, believers in the invisible church have a öcommunion in graceö in which they share all the benefits of redemption. By virtue of öChristö mediation,ö öjustification, adoption, sanctification, and whatever else, in this life, manifests their union with himö 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 Christö 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 öa sign and sealí of [our] ingrafting into Christö (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 Godö appointed time (WCF 28:6). Further, baptism serves sacramentally to östrengthen and increase [our] faithö (LC 162); this is why we are urged to öimproveö our baptisms (LC 167).

2. *Justification*

When the Westminster Standards describe what happens in justification, they describe a judicial öactö that has two elements: öpardoning their sinsö and öaccounting and accepting their persons as righteousö (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 öaccountingö involves imputation (öby God imputed to themö LC 70). God imputes both the öobedience and satisfaction of Christ unto themö (WCF 11:1, 3; LC 70, 71).[\[29\]](#) To put it differently, Christö öperfect obedienceö (his öactive obedienceö to the demands of the law) and his öfull satisfactionö of Godö justice (his öpassive obedienceö 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 Godö sight. In other words, the sole ground for justification is the örighteousness of Christ,ö which is öimputedö 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: önot for anything wrought in them, or done by themö (WCF 11:1; LC 70). Faith serves as öthe alone instrumentö öby which [the believer] receiveth and applieth Christ and his righteousnessö (WCF 11:2; LC 72). This justifying faith öis a ösaving grace wrought in the heart of a sinner by the Spirit and Word of Godö in which the individual önot only assenteth to the truth of the promise of the Gospel, but receiveth and resteth upon Christ and his righteousnessö (LC 72). This faith will be öaccompanied with all other saving gracesö (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).

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's 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 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."[\[35\]](#)

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's resurrection, God himself was shown to be "righteous" (i.e., faithful to His covenant promises). For Wright, the term "the

righteousness of Godö 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 righteousnessö 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 cosmosö 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,ö was faith in Jesus as Lord. Those who belong to this people are justifiedö: justification öwas about God's eschatological definition, both future and present, of who was, in fact, a member of his people. In [E. P.] Sanders's terms, it was not so much about -getting in,ö or indeed about -staying in,ö as about -how you could tell who was in.ö In standard Christian theological language, it wasn't so much about soteriology as about ecclesiology; not so much about salvation as about the church.ö 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*,ö focused on covenant membershipö in the people of God.[38]

Wright does recognize that some may take this more ecclesiologicalö 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 öhow this integrates with the traditional view that [Paul] is talking about how sinners are put right with God.ö Wright believes that these two emphases öare in fact part of the same thing, both to be equally stressed.ö And yet, though he claims this, it does appear that his default mode for understanding justification is the more corporate, expansive understanding: Paul öis 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.ö[39]

With this understanding, Wright proposed that Galatians, especially, be re-read. The key issue in that Pauline letter, according to Wright, was öhow you *define the people of God*: are they to be defined by the badges of Jewish race, or in some other way?ö 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 faithö 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.ö[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, ö*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.ö[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 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 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.ö Following Wright's logic, though unstated ó 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 öunion with Christ,ö Peter Leithart, in one influential essay, deals with justification language in the Bible. Leithart suggests that while the Bible does use öjustificationö in a forensic sense, readers must broaden their understanding of what öforensicö 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.[\[48\]](#)

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 önever 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.ö Hence, the way most Protestants would understand öforensicö 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. öIsrael's justification takes the form of Israel's restoration and rebirth,ö Leithart suggests. öIsrael'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.ö[\[50\]](#)

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

The upshot is that öin this sense, justification and definitive sanctification are two ways of describing the same act.ö Drawing on Romans 6:7, Leithart argues that öto be justified from sin is to be liberated.ö Because sinners are united to Christ through baptism, they are öjoined with the vindicated Son.ö Sinners share in Jesus's 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.[\[52\]](#)

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 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."[\[57\]](#)

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]

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.

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).

III. Perseverance, Apostasy and Assurance

A. The Westminster Standards

1. *Perseverance*

WCF 17:1 states that those "whom God has accepted in His Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved."

Their perseverance is due not to their own free will (WCF 17.2), nor to their own perseverance of faith or good works (WCF 3.5), but strictly to the immutability of the decree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father. WCF 17.2 adds that the certainty and infallibility of their perseverance is also based on the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ, the abiding of the Spirit, and of the seed of God within them, and the nature of the covenant of grace.

Moreover, the Standards are very clear that God has appointed only the elect unto glory and that they are kept by his power. Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only (WCF 3:6). The rest of mankind [the non-elect] God was pleased to pass by; and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin, to the praise of his glorious justice (WCF 3:7).

The Westminster Confession repeatedly teaches that the Holy Spirit applies the work of redemption efficaciously to all the elect and only the elect (8:8, 10:1, 14:1, WLC 32). Indeed, the Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption (WCF 18:2). The non-elect, however, although they may be called by the ministry of the Word, and may have some *common operations of the Spirit*, yet they *never truly come unto Christ*, and therefore cannot be saved (WCF 10:4, emphasis added). The faith which the non-elect sometimes have is from the beginning a dead faith which does not work by love (cf. WCF 11.2). The works performed by the non-elect in the church are not pleasing to God because they are not "the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith" (WCF 16.2) and because "they proceed not from an heart purified by faith" (WCF 16.7).

All three of the Standards state that justification, adoption and sanctification are the benefits that flow from effectual calling (WCF 3:6, WLC 79, WSC 32). And the benefits that flow from justification, adoption and sanctification include assurance of God's love and perseverance therein to the end (WSC 36; cf. WLC 74, 77; WCF 11:5). In short, all those whom God elected, all those for whom Christ died, all those for whom Christ intercedes, all those whom the Spirit regenerates, all those in whom the Spirit dwells, and all those in vital covenant union with Christ, all those justified, adopted and sanctified, will persevere. All these benefits refer to the same specific set of individuals in history (WCF 17).

2. *Visible and Invisible Church*

As part of this teaching on perseverance and apostasy, the Standards distinguish between the visible and the invisible church. The visible church consists of all in the world who profess the true religion [together with] their children (WLC 62; cf. WCF 25.2). The invisible church is the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one under Christ the head (WLC 64; cf. WCF 25:1). WLC 61 states that not all those in the visible church are saved, but they only who are true members of the church invisible.

The Westminster Larger Catechism specifically addresses the issue of the difference between the grace experienced by the elect in the invisible church and the benefits available to all in the visible church. The elect in the invisible church enjoy union and communion with him [Christ] in grace and glory. This union is a grace, whereby they are spiritually and mystically, yet

really and inseparably joined to Christ,ö based ðin their effectual callingö (WLC 65-66). They also partake ðof the virtue of [Christ¸] mediation, in their justification, adoption, sanctification, and whatever else, in this life, manifests their union with himö (WLC 69).

Both the elect and non-elect in the visible church have ðthe privilege of being under God¸ special care and government; of being protected and preserved in all ages, notwithstanding the opposition of all enemies; and of enjoying the communion of saints, the ordinary means of salvation, and offers of grace by Christ to all the members of it in the ministry of the gospel, testifying, that whosoever believes in him shall be saved, and excluding none that will come unto himö (WLC 63). The benefits available to all within the visible church are sincere and genuine, just as is the grace of the free offer. Yet these benefits do not include that irresistible, efficacious grace which perseveres and which the elect alone receive. The teaching is not that the non-elect in the visible church receive irresistible grace and are saved but do not persevere in that salvation. The teaching is that the non-elect are not saved because they ðnever truly come to Jesus Christö (WLC 68).

3. Apostasy

The Confession¸ chapter on assurance refers to ðhypocrites and other unregenerate menö who ðmay vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of being in the favour of God, and estate of salvation (which hope of theirs shall perish)ö (WCF 18:1). The Confession refers to ðnotorious and obstinate offendersö who can profane the church, to ðpurging out of that leaven which might infest the whole lump,ö and to ðexcommunication from the churchö (WCF 30:3, 4).

Our Standards imply some truths about the grace lost in apostasy. It speaks of those who have experienced ðsome common operations of the Spiritö but have ðnever truly come unto Christö (WCF 10.4). On the other hand, we are reminded that all those who have been ðeffectually called unto faith in Christö are also ðkept by his power, through faith, unto salvationö (WCF 3.6). Therefore, those in whom God has begun the effectual work of salvation cannot apostatize.[\[62\]](#)

4. Assurance

True believers may have a confident, subjective assurance that ðthey are in the estate of grace, and shall persevere therein for salvation.ö This assurance is for those who ðtruly believe in Christ, and endeavour to walk in all good conscience before himö (WLC 80, WCF 18:1). They receive this assurance ðby faith founded upon the truth of God¸ promises,ö ðby the Spirit enabling them to discern in themselves those graces to which the promises of life are made,ö and by the Spirit ðbearing witness with their spirits that they are the children of God.ö Consequently, they may be ðinfallibly assuredö that they will persevere (WCF 18:2; WLC 80).

The Confession emphasizes that this infallible assurance is ðnot a bare conjectural and probable persuasion, grounded upon a fallible hopeö (WCF 18:2). It is a healthy confidence not based on any claim to know the secret things of God, but upon promises found in Scripture. One proper

foundation of full assurance is "the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made" (WCF 18:2). Among these inward graces are a respectful fear of God and a dread of falling into sin and error. An inner trembling at the warnings of Scripture should strengthen a sound assurance; the lack of such trembling should call into question a false assurance. Warnings are one of the means God efficaciously uses to enable the elect to persevere. The Confession teaches that a "true believer" responds in faith to the Scriptures and thus "trembl[es] at the threatenings" found in the Word of God (WCF 14.2; WLC 79).

The Confession also emphasizes that "this infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long" for it. Nevertheless, "he may, without extraordinary revelation" attain thereunto. "Christians receive assurance through "the right use of ordinary means," especially "the Word, sacraments, and prayer, all which are made effectual to the elect for their salvation" (WCF 18:3; WLC 154).

B. New Perspective on Paul

The doctrines of perseverance and assurance do not appear prominently in the writings of the NPP. In the section above on justification, we noted that proponents of NPP hold that justification is the status of covenant membership; that faith is the "badge" for covenant membership; and that God's righteousness has to do with God's covenant faithfulness. According to N. T. Wright, "Justification is not about "how I get saved" but "how I am declared to be a member of God's people."^[63] As a result, justification is a declaration concerning who belongs to the people of God.

The question is then raised, when does this justification occur? For Wright, justification is an eschatological judgment that is applied in the present time "as a proper anticipation of the eventual judgment which will be announced, on the basis of the whole life led, in the future."^[64] This "whole life" includes both the membership badge of "faith" as well as faithful responses by the individual to life among God's people.^[65]

The place where Wright argues this most forcefully is in his exposition of Romans 2. There, Wright suggests that the justification of God's people occurs "on the basis of works" (cf. Romans 2:6). When he describes what this "basis" represents, he suggests that it is not so much the accomplishment of particular works, but rather the "seeking for them": the godly are "defined in terms of that for which they seek and the means by which that quest is pursued." What God is looking for is not a "checklist of things done and not done"; and yet, "works" have some role to play in final justification. They serve to indicate a heart that is turned toward God, but they also serve some role in God's final declaration of righteousness.^[66]

Because Wright bases justification on "the whole life led," perseverance must of necessity be viewed in the context of a person persevering in faithfulness until the final day of judgment and then being declared justified. Wright's view is not grounded on the imputation of the righteousness of Christ or in the alone instrument of faith (i.e., receiving and resting on Christ alone), but on the Spirit-produced works of the believer. Indeed, it shifts the basis for justification from the finished work of Christ to the faithful works produced by the believer.

C. Federal Vision

1. *Perseverance*

FV proponents have demonstrated a great desire to assure all those who have been baptized and are in the visible church that they are part of the elect of God. In the context of Romans 8, one FV advocate concludes that “clearly, Paul is not stating promises that are true only for some unknown group called the ‘elect.’ Nor is he speaking only to a portion of the congregation whom he judges to be ‘regenerate.’ Rather, he is applying these promises to all the members of the Church who have been baptized and united to Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection.”[\[67\]](#) Behind this statement is the common assumption of FV proponents that when the apostles – especially Paul – addressed their readers as “elect,” they intended this to refer to all members present in the church.

Further, they state their conviction that some individuals are elected from eternity past. And yet, some also proclaim that both elect and non-elect in the local church receive qualitatively the same grace. As Rich Lusk observed, “We need to be willing to speak of the undifferentiated grace of God (or the generic, unspecified grace of God).” In a similar fashion, other proponents view grace granted to biblical characters, such as Saul and David, as “the same initial covenantal grace”; interpret verses traditionally understood as referring to individual election in an undifferentiated fashion; and read statements from both the Gospels and epistles referring to the entire church’s salvation as a salvation that could be lost or the image of a branch that could be cut off.[\[68\]](#)

A general theme of FV proponents is that “all those who are baptized are genuinely baptized into Christ (Galatians 3:27), are brought into Christ’s body, the church (1 Corinthians 12:13), and are members of God’s covenant, at least until they are cut off, whether by Christ’s church (excommunication) or directly by Christ (death or judgment).” Many FV proponents view everyone in the covenant community, elect and non-elect, as having a common election as long as they remain in good standing in the covenant community. This occurs through individual “covenant-keeping”: “The covenant is not unconditional. It requires persevering faithfulness! Covenant life is always founded upon persevering faith in the faithful One.” What happens to those who do not persevere? It was “God’s choice to have them belong to His covenant [in order] to show them grace and love [only] for a time.” In fact, “the elect are those who are faithful to Christ Jesus. If they later reject the Savior, they are no longer elect.”[\[69\]](#)

2. *Visible and Invisible Church*

Our Standards use the visible and invisible aspects of the church to help explain the difference between the grace received by the elect and the benefits available to all in the visible church. Some FV proponents have questioned this distinction. Doug Wilson has promoted the use of the alternative terms the “historical” church and the “eschatological” church.[\[70\]](#) Similarly, the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church’s session has stated, “It seems better to us to speak of the ‘invisible’ church simply as the ‘eschatological’ church – i.e., the church in its perfection as it will exist at the last day.”[\[71\]](#)

Furthermore, some FV writers have also denied that the covenant can be viewed from two different aspects. John Barach observed that "the Bible doesn't know about a distinction between being internally in the covenant, really in the covenant, and being only externally in the covenant." Likewise, Steve Wilkins argued that "all in covenant are given all that is true of Christ." Doug Wilson has implied that all baptized covenant members are participants in Christ in the same "strong sense," writing that "the person who did not persevere was not given less of Christ."[\[72\]](#)

3. Apostasy

FV proponents have emphasized that the apostate has suffered a loss of real grace and have argued that this implies that he must have possessed the same grace as the elect who persevere. According to Steve Wilkins, "Because being in covenant with God means being in Christ, those who are in covenant have all spiritual blessings in the heavenly places." This includes all the blessings listed in Ephesians 1:3-14: election, adoption, justification, forgiveness of sins, sanctification, regeneration, possession of the Kingdom, and so forth. "It is not accurate to say that they only "appeared" to have these things but did not actually have them" if that were so, there would be nothing to "forsake" and apostasy is bleed of its horror and severity." Nevertheless, the elect may "later reject the Savior" and "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 elect of God because of their relationship with Christ." The point is that, for the FV writers, the elect can become non-elect, the elect can possibly fail to persevere.[\[73\]](#)

4. Assurance

FV proponents have argued that the warnings against apostasy cannot seem real to the elect if the elect have an infallible assurance that they will indeed persevere. In the words of John Barach, "When you proclaim the warnings, people brush them off because they figure that if they're elect they can't incur God's wrath and if they aren't, there's nothing they can do about it anyway."[\[74\]](#)

While they all affirm that individuals are elected by God from eternity past, nevertheless, they find pastoral problems with holding simply to this view. Problems surface because "we cannot know the secret decrees of God or the hidden operations of the Spirit. The secret things belong to God (Deuteronomy 29:29)." Steve Wilkins has said, "Whenever you focus on subjective experience as the basis of assurance of salvation, you are ultimately undermining assurance. You ask questions that cannot be answered with any certainty. Have you truly believed? Are you really converted? The decree of election is no ground since no one can know if they have been chosen for salvation."[\[75\]](#)

For FV proponents as a whole, God establishes His covenant with all who have been baptized. In baptism, a person is united to Christ and is cleansed, regenerated, forgiven, justified and sanctified. As John Barach proclaimed, "How do you know [the promise of election] is really for you? The answer is that you've had the special experience. You've been baptized." In pushing

forward baptism as a “special experience,” the FV writers set it over against “subjective experience”: “Men must have something objective and certain. But if you refuse to look to your baptism, then all you are left with is experience.”[\[76\]](#)

D. Comparative Analysis

1. *Perseverance*

In the Westminster Standards, the elect and non-elect in the church do not receive the same non-differentiated, homogeneous grace. There is a definite distinction between the irresistible saving work of the Spirit and the resistible common operations of the Spirit. The reason, therefore, that some persevere and others do not is not an unrevealed mystery. The elect alone persevere because of the distinctive quality of the grace which the elect alone receive. God has decreed not only the elect’s final state of salvation but also the efficacious application of all the means to the final state by the Spirit (WCF 3:6). The elect, with the non-elect, experience the common operations of the Spirit, but the non-elect never experience the efficacious work of the Spirit which actually saves. From regeneration to glorification, the Holy Spirit applies the redemption accomplished by Christ to the elect in terms of the secret decree of election. The non-elect may have a form of faith, but they never have saving faith and never bear the fruit that is evidence of a lively faith and a vital union with Christ (WCF 14:2, 16:2; SC 86).

One of the common arguments of FV proponents, drawn from their presupposition that election should be viewed from the standpoint of the covenant, is that when the apostles addressed their readers as “elect,” they intended this term to refer to “all in the church,” both those who would inherit eternal life and those who would not. This view underlies their claim that “all in the church” receive the saving benefits of being in union with Christ, that is, until and unless they apostatize. However, this assumption claims too much. The apostles clearly recognized that while the churches to whom they wrote included “saints” and those who were “faithful in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 1:1; et. al.), they also included those who may be false professors (Romans 8:9: “However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him”). In fact, while Paul does not feel the need to qualify every broad claim regarding his letter’s recipient, it is striking that nearly every Pauline letter includes some qualification (e.g. 1 Corinthians 15:1-2; 2 Corinthians 13:5-6; Galatians 3:4, 29; 4:11,20; Ephesians 4:20-21; Philippians 2:16; Colossians 1:23; 1 Thessalonians 3:5).

The committee sees this FV claim—that the elect and those united to Christ can “lose” their election and union—as doing major harm to the system of doctrine contained in the Standards. If their claim stands, it would practically reverse the relationship between election and perseverance. The Confessional view and the FV view cannot both be held at the same time.

2. *Visible and Invisible Church*

While FV proponents raise important questions about the way Christians today may hear the term “invisible” in reference to the church, the committee holds that the Standards’ distinction between the visible and invisible aspects of the church has important theological and pastoral

implications. First, we would point out that our Standards already recognize a future, "eschatological" aspect for the church; however, this is not separated from the past or present reality of the "invisible church" that God alone sees (LC 64).

But even more importantly, the committee notes that the FV proponents merge the visible and invisible aspects of the church into the "body of Christ." To belong to the visible church is to belong to the "body of Christ" and to share in all the benefits of "Christ's body" (i.e. election, justification, adoption, and sanctification; but see WCF 25:1). This claim stands against the Standards' teaching that "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). This also fails to reckon adequately with the reality that the visible church is always "more or less pure" in every age (WCF 25:4).

The issue is joined with perseverance in this way: according to FV proponents, when someone forsakes the visible church, they lose all the benefits of "Christ's body" — the elect become non-elect. This contradicts our Standards by misapplying the benefits of Christ's mediation to everyone who "profess[es] the true religion and their children," instead of to those who are elect, who have received God's effectual calling, and who share in union and communion with Christ (LC 63-67). Moreover, this contradicts our Standards by divorcing election from perseverance; for the FV, election becomes a benefit that can be lost (WCF 17:2).

As a result, this failure to hold the distinction between the visible and invisible aspects of the church leads to a position on the perseverance of the saints that contradicts the Standards and does damage to the spiritual confidence of God's people.

3. Apostasy

Building from their understanding of the visible and invisible church, FV proponents stress that those who leave the visible church lose real grace — the grace of election, forgiveness, justification, and sanctification. However, the Standards make plain that the proper categories for these apostates are "hypocrites" and "unregenerate" (WCF 18:1), those who only experience the "common operations of the Spirit" and "who, for their wilful neglect and contempt of the grace offered to them — do never truly come to Jesus Christ" (WCF 10:4; LC 68).

By failing to use the Confession's language, the FV proponents move in directions that contradict the Confession's teaching on perseverance: those who are accepted in the Beloved, effectually called, united to Christ, and sanctified by his Spirit "can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace" (WCF 17:2; LC 66).

The committee does agree that those who forsake the visible church do lose "special benefits": namely, coming under God's special care and government; being protected and preserved from enemies; enjoying the communion of saints, the ordinary means of salvation, and the free offer of the Gospel in the ministry of the Word (LC 63). Nevertheless, these privileges are not the same as the benefits of Christ's mediation to those who are effectually called to salvation.

4. Assurance

We recognize that FV proponents point to a major failing in the modern evangelical church: the easy terms upon which a Christian's assurance may rest. Yet in seeking to challenge these terms, these writers overstress the objective means of salvation and underplay the subjective aspects of an infallible assurance.

While we know the importance of improving our baptism as a needful and much neglected duty to be performed by us all our life long, especially in the time of temptation, and we know that there is a confirming and assuring grace offered in baptism to those to whom it belongs, the committee reminds the church that our infallible assurance of faith rests upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, [and] the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God (LC 167; WCF 18:2; 28:6). This assurance is both objective and subjective; it rests upon the work of the Word and Spirit in the life of the believer.

The Committee views the FV position as ultimately leading to presumption or despair, not assurance. At the heart of their belief is the view that water baptism serves as the means for uniting each participant to Jesus; those baptized receive all the benefits of Christ's mediation except final perseverance. Our concern is that some of those who are baptized will simply presume on God's grace, continuing in the covenant without apostatizing but also without justifying faith (cf. Matthew 22:1-14); others will be driven to despair, working for a salvation out of covenant faithfulness instead of resting and receiving Jesus alone for their salvation.

IV. Declarations

Further, in light of the controversy surrounding the NPP and FV, and in light of the report above, Providence Presbytery makes the following declarations:

1. The view that rejects the bi-covenantal structure of Scripture as represented in the Westminster Standards (i.e., views which do not merely take issue with the terminology, but the essence of the first/second covenant framework) is contrary to those Standards.
2. The view that an individual is elect by virtue of his membership in the visible church; and that this election includes justification, adoption and sanctification; but that this individual could lose his election if he forsakes the visible church, is contrary to the Westminster Standards.
3. The view that Christ does not stand as a representative head whose perfect obedience and satisfaction is imputed to individuals who believe in him is contrary to the Westminster Standards.
4. The view that strikes the language of merit from our theological vocabulary so that the claim is made that Christ's merits are not imputed to his people is contrary to the Westminster Standards.

5. The view that ÷union with Christö renders imputation redundant because it subsumes all of Christö benefits (including justification) under this doctrinal heading is contrary to the Westminster Standards.
6. The view that water baptism effects a ÷covenantal unionö with Christ through which each baptized person receives the saving benefits of Christö mediation, including regeneration, justification, and sanctification, thus creating a parallel soteriological system to the decretal system of the Westminster Standards, is contrary to the Westminster Standards.
7. The view that one can be ÷united to Christö and not receive *all* the benefits of Christö mediation, including perseverance, in that effectual union is contrary to the Westminster Standards.
8. The view that some can receive saving benefits of Christö mediation, such as regeneration and justification, and yet not persevere in those benefits is contrary to the Westminster Standards.
9. The view that justification is in any way based on our works, or that the so-called ÷final verdict of justificationö is based on anything other than the perfect obedience and satisfaction of Christ received through faith alone, is contrary to the Westminster Standards.

V. Recommendations

Also, Providence Presbytery adopts the following four recommendations:

1. That the Presbytery commends to Ruling and Teaching Elders and their congregations this report of the Ad Interim Committee on NPP, AAT and FV for careful consideration and study.
2. That the Presbytery reminds the Church, its officers and congregations of the provisions of BCO 29-1 and 39-3 which assert that the Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Westminster Assembly, while ÷subordinate to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, the inerrant Word of God,ö have been adopted by the PCA ÷as standard expositions of the teachings of Scripture in relation to both faith and practice.ö
3. That the Presbytery recommends the declarations in this report as a faithful exposition of the Westminster Standards, and further reminds those ruling and teaching elders whose views are out of accord with our Standards of their obligation to make known to this court any differences in their views.
4. That the Presbytery reminds the Sessions of Providence Presbytery that it is their duty ÷to exercise care over those subject to their authorityö and ÷to condemn erroneous opinions which injure the purity or peace of the Churchö (BCO 31-2; 13-9f).

[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).

[4] The terms used in the Standards most frequently include *elect*, *elect*, 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.

[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).

[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.

[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.

[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).

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

[11] *Ibid.*, 1.

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

[13] *Ibid.*, 111.

[14] Peter J. Leithart, *Presbyterian Identity Crisis*, in *Leithart.com* (2007, 13 February), [Http://www.leithart.com/archives/002784.php](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](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).

[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 I"). "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."

[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.

[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.

[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.

[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."

[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.

[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.

[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.

[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).

[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.

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

[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.

[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.

[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).

[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 Pastors' 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.

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

[62] An interesting observation in this regard was made recently by Wilkins in his 2007 response to Louisiana Presbytery: “When the Confession says that these non-elect people “never truly come unto Christ, it means that they do not receive Christ with a faith that perseveres unto final salvation” (<http://www.auburnavenue.org>). But that is not what the Confession means; rather, it means that the non-elect *never* come to Christ with a true and saving faith.

[63] Wright, *Paul*, 122; cf. *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 119.

[64] It would appear that Wright is inconsistent when it comes to his means for receiving present and future justification. In the present, Wright argues that the badge of justification is faith alone and that no works are involved in this (Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 132). However, in reference to “final” justification, Wright argues that it is “on the basis of the whole life led.” But this is a contradiction: how can one be assured of “final justification,” if the final verdict is based on the whole life led (i.e. faith plus faithfulness/works)? Is there such a case as a person receiving present justification and not final justification? These inconsistencies seem to shift the means for receiving justification to works, since the only difference between one who receives present justification from one who receives final justification is that the latter works.

[65] Wright, *Paul*, 57.

[66] Wright, *Romans*, 438-9.

[67] Steve Wilkins, “Covenant, Baptist, and Salvation,” in *The Federal Vision*, ed. S. Wilkins and Duane Garner (Monroe: Athanasius, 2004), 57.

[68] Rich Lusk, “Covenant and Election FAQs (Version 6.4),” http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/covenant_election_faqs.htm; AAPC Session, “Summary Statement of AAPC’s Position on the Covenant, Baptism and Salvation (Revised),” item 10; Douglas Wilson, “The Objectivity of the Covenant,” *Credenda Agenda* 15:1:5, <http://www.credenda.org/pdf/15-1.pdf>; Wilkins, “Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation,” *Auburn Avenue Theology*, 260-5.

[69] Barach, “Covenant and Election,” 150, 154; Wilkins, “Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation,” *Auburn Avenue Theology*, 261, 266-7. Compare with Rich Lusk, *Baptismal Efficacy and the Reformed Tradition: Past, Present, and Future* (2002); http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/baptismal_efficacy_the_reformed_tradition_past_present_future.htm.

[70] Douglas Wilson, *Reformed Is Not Enough* (Moscow: Canon, 2002), 69-78 See also his article in *Federal Vision*.

[71] Session, “AAPC Session’s Response to Charges of “Heterodoxy” (Monroe, Louisiana: Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church, 8 June 2006), http://www.auburnavenue.org/Official%20Positions%20and%20Statements/AAPC_Heterodoxy_Response.htm;

[72] Barach, “Covenant and History,” quoted in *Auburn Avenue Theology*, 309; Wilkins, “Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation,” 263; Doug Wilson, “Call It Regeneration; Topic: Life in the Regeneration,” in *BLOG and MABLOG* (24 July 2004), <http://dougwils.com/index.asp?Action=Anchor&CategoryID=1&BlogID=358>.

[73] *Ibid*, 261, 262, 264; cf. Barach, “Covenant and Election” in *The Federal Vision*, 28. FV writers frequently refer to John 15, where they use the allegory of the vine to make the point that the elect can be “cut off” (e.g., Wilkins, “Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation,” in *Federal Vision*,

62ff.; Barach, "Covenant and Election," in *Federal Vision*, 37). Their reasoning is based on Norman Shepherd (see Shepherd, *The Call of Grace* [Phillipsburg: P&R, 2000], 89-90). For a biblical response, see E. Calvin Beisner, "Concluding Comments on the Federal Vision," in *The Auburn Avenue Theology*, 312ff.

[74] Barach, "Covenant and Election" in *The Federal Vision*, 33.

[75] Wilkins, "Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation," 267; Gerry Wisz, "The Monroe Four Speak Out," *The Counsel of Chalcedon*, June 2004, [Http://www.counselofchalcedon.org/modules/smartsection/item.php?itemid=15](http://www.counselofchalcedon.org/modules/smartsection/item.php?itemid=15).

[76] Gerry Wisz, "The Monroe Four Speak Out," *The Counsel of Chalcedon*, June 2004, [Http://www.counselofchalcedon.org/modules/smartsection/item.php?itemid=15](http://www.counselofchalcedon.org/modules/smartsection/item.php?itemid=15); John Barach, quoted in Guy Prentiss Waters, *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology: A Comparative Analysis* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2006), 134; Wilkins, "Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation," 267.