

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Website: [www.churchredeemeraz.org](http://www.churchredeemeraz.org)

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**Pastor/Teacher**  
**Gary L. W. Johnson**

### Excursus: The Federal Vision Once Again (Part 1)

Throughout this series I have from time to time addressed the doctrinal distinctives (errors) of the Federal Vision.<sup>1</sup> Due to the high profile of Doug Wilson, the Federal Vision has gained a degree of respectability among many in the Reformed Community. Just last year, John Piper invited Wilson to be one of the speakers at the Desiring God Conference held annually at Piper's Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minn. Wilson has gained a lot of attention by debating the rabid British atheist Christopher Hitchens (Chuck Colson praised Wilson for this). Wilson is a likeable fellow, very witty and is an accomplished writer. As such, many Christians are taken back when Wilson is subjected to criticism. Some of you will remember that Doug spoke here back in the late 90's, and I invited Doug back in 2000 to contribute to the book I co-edited with Fowler White.<sup>2</sup> Why now the drastic change of opinion regarding him? Why worry about the Federal Vision? There are two reasons. First, I am convinced that the Federal Vision is a serious departure from the Reformed faith. It introduces a sacramentalist system along the lines of Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. The result is described well by the Presbyterian Church in America General Assembly's FV Report: '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."<sup>3</sup> The FV represents a completely different doctrinal system contrary to the Biblical system of doctrine summarized in both the Westminster Confession of Faith and The Three Forms of Unity. The Federal Vision is not only *not* Reformed, they are in many ways not even Protestant!. The Apostle Paul is clear on what happens when we tolerate such major doctrinal errors. "A little leaven leavens the whole lump" (Gal. 5:9). "Their message will spread like cancer" (2 Tim. 2:17). John Calvin put it well when he declared, "Satan's stratagem is, that he does not attempt an avowed destruction of the whole gospel, but he taints its purity by introducing false and corrupt opinions... We must exercise the utmost caution lest we allow any counterfeit to be substituted for the pure doctrine of the gospel."<sup>4</sup> The Federal Vision is actually the off-spring of Norman Shepherd. Most telling is the fact that to date the Federal Vision has served as a conduit to Rome. A growing number of Federal Vision enthusiasts have ended up in the Roman Catholic Church. Here is the testimony of one of them, Taylor Marshall, who was first attracted to the teachings of Norman Shepherd, the Federal Visionists and N. T. Wright. His testimony is most revealing. He writes:

"I was drawn to their liturgical/covenantal worldview, because it was robustly biblical. It was able [to] handle cultural questions in a way that was much more effective than the Evangelical 'proof-texting' model. I took hold.

While at Westminster Seminary, I began to flirt with the Episcopal Church and joined the Anglican tradition as an 'orthodox conservative.' I saw the need for the Eucharist as the focal point of Christ's covenant. I also saw the need for a historical organic Church, bound through time in Apostolic Succession. A few years later I became an Anglican priest and spent my time reading through the volumes of N. T. Wright. Then I finally did the unspeakable – I became...Catholic.

Needless to say, I now follow the 'Federal Vision' debate in the Reformed realm of theology with great interest. I suspect that it will play out like the Oxford Movement of the Church of England in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Federal Visionists will soon see that they are not tolerated by Presbyterians and over time

they will be persecuted. Some of their great minds will become Catholic. Others will break away and start their own 'Reformed Catholic' movements (similar to the Anglo-Catholic Ritualist movements). These breakaways will continue to write and develop their thought.

### **What is Federal Vision?**

The Federal Vision movement is so termed because it stresses the *foedus*, Latin for 'covenant.' They are covenantal theologians par excellence. Fundamentally, Federal Visionists reject the bi-covenantal structure of the Scriptures taught in the Presbyterian articles of the Westminster Confession of Faith. In other words, the universe does not rotate on covenantal axis of 'Works' and 'Grace.' Federal Visionists would say that obedience and works are not opposed to grace. They rightly point out that before the fall, Adam worked, obeyed, and received the grace/favor of God. Grace and obedience are not opposed to one another.

It is not a surprise then that Federal Visionists believe that justification is best understood as 'union with Christ' and not as the imputation of righteousness in a strict merit/demerit transaction. Very biblical and very Catholic.

Federal Visionists believe that the sacrament of Baptism actually accomplishes union with Christ – not in a nominal way, but in an ontological way. Again, very biblical and very Catholic. A person is Christian if they are baptized – they are either a 'good Christian' or an 'apostate Christian.' This somewhat approximates the way Catholics understand being in a state of grace or mortal sin.

Federal Visionists understand 'election' primarily in terms of sacramental participation, much as the Catholic Church does.

Federal Visionists stress the need to 'persevere in the covenant.' This is perceived by many of their Calvinist brethren to be a repudiation of the doctrine of perseverance of the saints, or to put it in Evangelical terms, 'once saved, always saved.'

Harkening back to Norman Shepherd, Federal Visionists believe that obedience to the Gospel is a necessarily element of salvation. This causes them to be lambasted as seeking a salvation through 'works-righteousness.'

### **The Catholic Perspective on the Federal Vision**

As a Catholic I believe the Federal Vision group is right in its theological tendencies and wrong about its denomination. Whether or not the PCA holds to the Westminster standards, the PCA is still largely a Zwinglian/Anabaptistic denomination. I don't mean this in a pejorative way, I just mean that the inherited tradition of the PCA is not covenantal and sacramental.

The Anglican Tractarians constantly 'proved' that Anglicanism was Catholic. They quoted Anglican divines and tweaked the 39 Articles of Religion in a 'Catholic' direction. They pointed to the liturgy and quoted the Fathers – but at the end of the day, the people of the Church of England were Protestant and had moved away from any sense of the Catholic past. Sure, there were 'Catholic' movements *within* the Church of England – but that was not the Church of England. These 'high-church' movements were exceptions, not the norm.

The same goes for the PCA. The leadership and pew members are basically Evangelicals that read R. C. Sproul, maybe believe in infant baptism, and have worked 'the five points of Calvinism' into their worldview. And when the last word is spoken, the Federal Visionists will be sidelined and ridiculed as crypto-Catholics and adherents to 'salvation by works.' Fundamentally, the PCA fears that the Federal Vision movement is 'just too Catholic.' All this talk about sacraments, covenants, ecclesiology, robes, candles, weekly communion, just gives your typical Southern Presbyterian the heebie-jeebies. They want that old time religion of three Wesleyan hymns, the pastoral prayer, and a 35 minute sermon proclaims the 'sovereign grace of the Gospel.'

Ultimately, I think that younger Presbyterians will gravitate toward what the Federal Vision offers. Many will sink their teeth into it and many will find it wanting. Many will discover that the Catholic Church is their true home, and many will discover her in a great moment of joy. This Federal Vision is really only a peek into the keyhole of the Catholic Church. The Federal Visionists has a vision of the beautiful things inside, but they have not yet appreciated the warmth of a true home."<sup>5</sup>

One of the major ways in which the Federal Vision departs from the historic Reformed/Presbyterian confessions is in their view of baptism. They view baptism as an effective instrument which unites a person to Christ. Here are a few FV quotes to show this significant departure.

“By baptism one is joined to Christ’s body, united to Him covenantally, and given all the blessings and benefits of his work” (Summary Statement of the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church’s [which gave birth to the Federal Vision in 2002] Position on Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation).

“In baptism, we are transferred by the power of the Spirit, from the old Adam, and the wrath and curse of God which rested upon the old man, into the new man, which is Jesus Christ.” “By baptism the Spirit joins us to Christ since he is the elect one and the Church is the elect people” (Steve Wilkins, “Covenant and Baptism” & “The Legacy of the Halfway Covenant”).

“All baptized persons receive, objectively, the same promised inheritance and privileges” (Rich Lusk, “Do I Believe in Baptismal Regeneration?”).

“Baptism is covenantally efficacious. It brings every person baptized into an objective and living covenant relationship with Christ, whether the baptized person is elect or reprobate” (Douglas Wilson, “Credos” On Baptism,” #8).

Unlike the Federal Vision, the Reformed position doesn’t attribute this type of efficacy or instrumentality to baptism. Instead, the Reformed talk about *faith alone (sola fide)* as an instrument: the Heidelberg Catechism says we are grafted into Christ and receive all his benefits and our inheritance by faith alone (Q/A 20, 21, 60, 61; cf. Calvin’s *Institutes*, IV.15.6). The catechism is unambiguous: the only way we can make Christ’s benefits ours is by faith alone (Q/A 65-66, 72).

In other words, faith alone unites us to Christ and through that faith we receive all the blessings of salvation. Baptism is an arrow (sign) that points us to Christ’s cleansing blood, and a mark/seal of the promises of salvation. The Belgic Confession says that cleansing and regeneration are “not...effected by the external water” but by the Spirit applying Christ’s blood to the sinner’s soul through the instrument of faith, which keeps us in communion with” Christ and all his benefits (BCF 22, 34).

Here’s the Reformed position articulated by Herman Bavinck.

“Faith alone apart from any sacrament communicates, and causes believers to enjoy, all the benefits of salvation...Baptism can only signify and seal the benefits that are received by faith and thereby strengthen that faith.”<sup>6</sup>

Though this is a brief intro, from the outset it is clear that these two positions are at irreconcilable odds.<sup>7</sup> A bold example of this is seen in Federal Vision advocate Jeffrey Meyers, Pastor of Providence PCA in St. Louis, MO said explicitly:

“I do think the latest scholarly work in biblical theology demands that we go back and redo a great deal of the Westminster standards. They were written when people still thought of the covenant as a contract and believed that ‘merit’ had some role to play in our covenantal relations with God. The whole bi-polar covenant of works/grace schema has got to go. And if that goes, the whole ‘system’ must be reworked.”

Fellow PCA pastor (and vocal FV critic) Wes White wrote:

“This is the real issue. Yes, we all need to pay attention to Biblical language. However, we will always use other terms and phrases to describe what we believe the Bible as a whole is teaching. Those terms and phrases will grow out of our understanding of what the Bible is teaching. The Westminster Confession and the FV use different terminology because the Federal Vision is a different system of doctrine than that of the Westminster Confession, as I have demonstrated repeatedly on these pages and hope to show again as I go through the Joint FV Profession.”<sup>8</sup>

## **CONCLUSION:**

Since the Federal Vision burst on the scene, a number of Reformed denominations have explicitly condemned it. These include the PCA, the OPC and the URC. One of the first to recognize the dangerous components of the Federal Vision was RPCUS. Here is their assessment.

“Covenant Presbytery of the RPCUS declares that the teaching presented in the 2002 Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Pastors Conference involves a **fundamental denial of the essence of the Christian Gospel in the denial of justification by faith alone.**

“That the teaching of the various speakers: **Douglas Wilson, Steve Schlissel, John Barach, and J. Steven Wilkins,** has the effect of destroying the Reformed Faith through the introduction of **false hermeneutic principles;** the infusion of **sacraments, election, effectual calling, perseverance, regeneration, justification, union with Christ,** and the **nature and instrumentality of faith.**

“That the rejection of the Bible as propositional and the introduction of an illegitimate post-exilic Jewish mindset as an interpretive scheme, **denies the role of Scripture in interpreting itself.** This view, while affirming the written word, yet gives license to reformulate and reinterpret that word through the glasses of an unrevealed and antipropositional mindset that is **closely akin to the old liberal higher criticism of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.**

“That the **denial of the distinction of visible and invisible church** and the introduction of an historical and eschatological church, opens the door to new and mystical meanings being applied to the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper that are **sacerdotal in orientation;** makes **justification an eschatological process instead of a definitive legal act;** **obscures the reality and necessity of the new birth;** and **corrupts Gospel preaching by eliminating the call to repentance and faith** within the congregation.

“That **baptismal regeneration** constructed upon the principle of linking the sign and the reality in effect differs little from Roman Catholicism.

“That the doctrine that maintains union with Christ is an external position and place in the church **confounds regeneration, union with Christ, and the outward ordinances.**

“That the maintenance of the language of Calvinism in these speakers is superficial and misleading: their **doctrine of perseverance is made to deny effectual calling;** their **doctrine of corporate election is made to deny particular redemption;** and the **native depravity of man is made to be removed in the outward administration of water baptism** which thereby sufficiently qualifies the recipient for the Lord’s Supper.

“**We therefore resolve that these teachings are heretical.** We call these men to repentance. We call upon the church of Jesus Christ to hold these teachings in contempt. We call upon the courts of the churches that are responsible for these men to institute judicial process against them and to vindicate the honor of Christ and the truth of the Christian Gospel by bringing judgment upon them, suspending them from office, and removing them from the communion of the church should they not repent.

“**May God have mercy upon their souls.**

- Adopted unanimously by Covenant Presbytery, Reformed Presbyterian Church in the United States, June 22, 2002.”

## **ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup> For an overview see sermon notes number 60 in this series “THE THEOLOGICAL CONFUSION OF THE FEDERAL VISION.”

<sup>2</sup> The book was Whatever Happened to The Reformation? P & R 2001). It should be noted that this happened sometime before the Federal Vision Controversy erupted.

<sup>3</sup> I am citing this from Wes White, a PCA pastor (and friend). See his <http://johannesweslianus.blogspot.com/2010/02/reply-to-joint-fv-profession.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries II (Eerdmans, 1974) p. 97.

<sup>5</sup> <http://pauliscatholic.com/2007/the-catholic-perspective-on-the-federal-vision/>. Marshall shows himself to be less than objective when he says out of one side of his mouth that the PCA is ‘Zwinglian/Anabaptist’ while at the same time blaming the PCA for holding firmly to the Westminster Standards which were explicit in their affirmation of staunch Calvinism. Other converts to Rome from the FV ranks include Kevin Branson, see his blog, <http://journeytorome.wordpress.com/2009/06/27/taylor-marshall-gives-the-catholic-perspe...>

<sup>6</sup> H. Bavnick, Reformed Dogmatics IV (Baker, 2006) p. 515.

<sup>7</sup> I owe this analysis to Shane Lems, See <http://TheReformedReader.com>.

<sup>8</sup> <http://johannesweslianus.blogspot.com/>