

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Excursus: The Federal Vision Once Again (Part 2)

Cal Beisner, a long time friend who has contributed to two books I co-edited, and has followed the Federal Vision very closely writes: “After nearly three years of reading and listening widely and carefully to the Federal Vision’s proponents, including voluminous correspondence with many of them, I am convinced that what the Federal Vision offers is not a renewal or improvement of the historic Reformed faith but a wholesale replacement of it with a curious hybrid affecting soteriology, sacramentology, and ecclesiology, closely similar to and heavily influenced by the New Perspective on Paul associated with James D. G. Dunn, E. P. Sanders, and N. T. Wright.

“In soteriology, by redefining the traditional terms of the Reformed *ordo salutis* and viewing them all ‘through the lense of the covenant’ rather than ‘through the lense of the decree,’ the Federal Visionists offer a hybrid of three components. The first is a modified Amyraldianism. Original Amyraldianism posited a hypothetically universal atonement; the Federal Visionists hold that the atonement is hypothetically for all in the historical-objective covenant but effective only to the ‘elect,’ who equal those ‘justified’ by faith who don’t apostatize and wind up condemned by works. The second is a modified Arminianism. Original Arminianism affirmed that Christ died as substitute to pay the penalty for the sins of all people. The Federal Visionists will affirm that Christ died to pay the penalty for the sins of all in ‘the covenant,’ including some who wind up in hell. One’s ‘election’ ultimately depends on whether he is ‘faithful’ to ‘the covenant,’ and one can be ‘justified’ and wind up in hell through apostasy. The third is a modified Roman infusionism. We are ‘justified’ at first by grace through faith but at last by the merit (despite how much some proponents of that view hate the word *merit*) of the works produced in and through us by God.

“In sacramentology, Federal Visionists offer a modified sacerdotal sacramentalism that borders on affirming the Roman Catholic doctrine of *ex opera operato*. The sacraments are objectively effective means of *converting*, not only of sanctifying, grace because they are administered by properly ordained people in the community of the faithful. Thus, one of the most prominent of the Federal Visionists, Steve Wilkins, has said, ‘If [someone] has been baptized, he is in covenant with God;’ ‘covenant *is* union with Christ. Thus, being in covenant gives all the blessings of being united to Christ...Because being in covenant with God means being in Christ, those who are in covenant have all spiritual blessings in the heavenly places.’ It follows necessarily from these two statements that if someone has been baptized, he has all spiritual blessings in the heavenly places—which certainly seems to include salvation in the sense of being destined for heaven rather than hell. Yet, paradoxically, the sacraments’ efficacy can be frustrated by the recipients’ unfaithfulness.”¹

The Joint Federal Vision Profession, drafted by Doug Wilson and signed by John Barack, Randy Booth, Tim Gallant, Mark Horne, James Jordon, Rich Lusk, Jeff Meyers, Ralph Smith, Steve Wilkins, Doug Wilson and Peter Leithart, teaches: Those covenant members who are not elect in the decretal sense enjoy the common operations of the Spirit in varying degrees, but not in the same way that those who are elect do.

What are these common operations of the Spirit? As we have already seen, the Federal Visionists believe that baptism confers forgiveness, new life, adoption, and union with Christ *ex opera operato* upon all those who are baptized. Thus, *according to the Federal Visionists, union with Christ, forgiveness, new life, and adoption are said to be the common possession of all who are baptized.*

Steve Wilkins said: “All in covenant are given all that is true of Christ. If they persevere in faith to the end, they enjoy these mercies eternally. If they fall away in unbelief, they lose these blessings and receive a greater condemnation than Sodom and Gomorrah. Covenant can be broken by unbelief and rebellion, but until it is, those in

covenant with God belong to Him and are His. If they do not persevere, they lose the blessings that were given to them (and all of this works out according to God's eternal decree which He ordained before the foundation of the world). Thus, when one breaks covenant, it can be truly said that he has turned away from grace and forfeited life, forgiveness, and salvation."²

Rich Lusk said: These non-elect covenant members are truly brought to Christ, united to him and the church in baptism, receive various gracious operations of the Holy Spirit, and may even be said to be loved by God for a time...(Covenant and Election FAQ).

Notice that the FV states that the common operations include *temporary* forgiveness of sins. The FV teaches that Matt. 18:23-35 illustrates this: The unmerciful servant was moved from a state of condemnation to true and real forgiveness. This was no pretended forgiveness according to the FV. Yet the servant was finally apostate. He failed to live up to the grace shown to him, and so the privilege of that forgiveness was revoked. This approach is simply Arminian and *not* Calvinistic.

I. *The Westminster Standards Confines such Redemptive Benefits to the Elect Only*

This Confession very explicitly says that the only people who are justified, saved, effectually called, sanctified, and adopted are the elect: They who are elected, being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ, 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. Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only (WCF 3.6). This is the obvious meaning of the phrase, "Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only." The question is not really whether these words can be used in a different sense. The question is whether the Federal Visionists apply what the Confession means by justification, adoption, and sanctification to some of the reprobate. They clearly do this, but the Confession does not. The Standards teach that the reprobate do not receive forgiveness of sins, new life, and adoption; but they do teach that the reprobate get some common operations of the Spirit; therefore, the Standards do not teach that forgiveness of sins, new life, and adoption cannot be part of the common operations of the Spirit. This is taught throughout the Standards (WCF 10.1, 11.4-5, 17, WLC 65-69). It really could not be any more obvious that the Standards teach that the reprobate never receive any saving benefits. What the Federal Visionists say in response is that the Standards are speaking of the justification, sanctification, and adoption that the elect receive. They believe that the Confession does not preclude a different, temporary justification, sanctification, and adoption from being given to the reprobate. How are we to answer this? The Confession does not limit its own teaching this way. Instead, it describes these benefits and says that the thing that they are describing is not given to the reprobate. The Standards teach not merely that the reprobate do not receive salvation finally but that they do not receive it at all.

When the Standards say that the reprobate do not receive justification, adoption, and sanctification, we must not simply insert whatever content we like into these ideas abstracted from the rest of the Standards. We must look at how the Standards describe each of these benefits and recognize that it teaches what it is describing as justification, adoption, and sanctification to not go to the reprobate. Let me make this explicit:

- A. Justification** – The reprobate never have their sins pardoned, never have the righteousness of Christ imputed to them, never have the obedience and satisfaction of Christ imputed to them because they never receive and rest on Christ alone for salvation. They never do this because God never gives them saving faith.
- B. Adoption** – The reprobate never receive the grace of adoption. They never enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God. He never puts His name on them. He never gives them the Spirit of adoption. They cannot have boldness to enter the throne of grace, etc.
- C. Sanctification** – The reprobate never get a new heart and a new spirit within them. Consequently, they are not further sanctified and do not enjoy the blessings of Christ's death and resurrection. They always remain under the dominion of sin. They never practice true holiness. They do not have the image of God restored them.³
- D. FORGIVENESS and the Atonement** – The FV speak of the non-elect covenant members receiving a *temporary* forgiveness of sins. When pressed as to what this entails, they start hedging and speaking of this forgiveness in terms of God postponing judgment – The Bible *never* defines forgiveness in those terms. The Old Testament depicts this benefit using different names and images. Examples are (*nāšā'*, suspend, accept, pardon; 1 Sam. 15:25; Job 7:21; Pss. 32:1; 85:2; Isa. 33:24), (*sālah*, forgive; Exod. 34:9; Lev. 4:20; Pss. 25:11; 103:3), (*ābar*, Passover, through; hiph.: let pass by, put away; 2 Sam. 12:13; 24:10;

Job 7:21), (*kābaš*, tread underfoot, subdue, cast down; Mic. 7:19), (*kāsâ*, hide; pi.: cover; Pss. 32:1; 85:2; Prov. 10:12), (*kipper*; pi.: cover, make atonement [Lev. 16:17; etc.], and, hence, forgive; Pss. 65:3, 78:38; 79:9; Isa. 6:7; Jer. 18:23; Dan. 9:24), (*māhâ*, wipe, wipe out, eradicate; Ps. 51:1; Isa. 43:25; 44:22; Jer. 18:23), (*tāhēr*, be pure; pi.: cleanse, pronounce clean) and (*kābas*, wash, make clean; Ps. 51:2), (*sûr*, depart, cease; Isa. 6:7), and further expressions such as “not seeing” (Num. 23:210, “not imputing” (Ps. 32:2), “not entering into judgment” (143:2), “not remembering” (Isa. 43:25), “hiding one’s face” (Ps. 51:9), “casting behind one’s back” (Isa. 38:17), and “casting into the depths of the sea” (Mic. 7:19). In these connections, it is always God who grants forgiveness (Isa. 43:25; 45:21-25; 48:9-12). His divine nature shines out in forgiving the iniquity of his people (Mic. 7:18), for he forgives only for his name’s sake (Pss. 25:11; 79:9; Isa. 43:25; Ezek. 36:11). He acts out of sheer compassion (Ps. 78:38), for the sake of his covenant with Abraham and David, for the sake of the oath he swore to them (Psa. 89:3ff.; 105:8-9; 111:5; Jer. 11:5; Ezek. 16:60; Mic. 7:20), for the sake of his fame and honor among the Gentiles (Exod. 32:12; Num. 14:13, 16; Deut. 9:28; 32:27; Ezek. 36:23). Herman Bavinck notes, “After the exile, however, instead of expecting their righteousness and salvation from God, the Jews increasingly took the path of nomism and sought to construct a righteousness of their own out of works. John [the Baptist], accordingly, appears with the message that, despite their circumcision and descent from Abraham, the people of Israel need the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Matt. 3:2-10). Jesus then proclaims the good news that another and better righteousness is needed than that of the Pharisees (5:20), that this righteousness is a good gift from God (6:33), and that God grants this benefit, not to the righteous, but to publicans and sinners, to the lost, to the burdened and heavy laden, to children who do not look for their salvation in themselves but expect all their well-being from God. As proof of all this, he himself as the Messiah of the kingdom distributes the benefit of the forgiveness of sins (Matt. 9:2ff.; Luke 7:48ff.). Indeed, he gives his life as a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28), creates the new covenant in his blood, allows his body to be broken and his blood to be shed for the forgiveness of sins (26:26ff.), and promises eternal life to all who become his disciples (10:37ff.; 16:24ff.). All the apostles, consequently, unanimously and from the very beginning preach that in his name there is repentance and forgiveness of sins (Luke 24:47; Acts 2:38; 5:31; 10:36, 43; 13:38; 26:18).”⁴ The importance of seeing the forgiveness of sin in light of the atonement is absolutely critical. “It is highly important,” writes Shedd, “to notice that in the biblical representation ‘forgiveness’ is inseparably connected with ‘atonement,’ and ‘remission’ with ‘propitiation.’ The former stands to the latter in the relation of effect to cause. The Scriptures know nothing of forgiveness or remission of penalty in isolation. It always has a foregoing cause or reason. It is because the priest has offered the ram that the individual transgression is ‘forgiven,’ that is, not punished in the person of the individual. It is because the priest has offered the bullock upon whose head the elders have laid their hands that the national sin is ‘forgiven,’ that is, not visited upon the nation. Without this vicarious shedding of blood, there would be no remission or release of penalty (Heb. 9:22). Not until the transgression has been ‘covered over’ by a sacrifice can there be ‘peace’ in the conscience of the transgressor. Not until the Holy One has been ‘propitiated’ by an atonement can the penalty be ‘released.’ Neither of these effects can exist without the antecedent cause. The Bible knows nothing of the remission of punishment arbitrarily, that is, without a ground or reason. Penal suffering in Scripture is released or not inflicted upon the guilty because it has been endured by a substitute. If penalty were remitted by sovereignty merely without any judicial ground or reason whatever, if it were inflicted neither upon the sinner nor his substitute, this would be the abolition of penalty, not the remission of it.”⁵

CONCLUSION: On what basis does God forgive sins? Our text in Heb. 9:22 makes it clear that it can only be by an atonement. God forgives sin through the work of Christ on the Cross. According to the FV, it is possible to *lose* the forgiveness of sins. Look at what this does to the atoning work of Christ. If Christ’s death secures for the so called non-elect covenant members *only* a temporary forgiveness, are they punished again? Is God guilty of double jeopardy? If the FV responds and says that Christ atones for only some of their sin and they are held culpable for the rest, then the atonement is rendered null and void. Christ dies in vain since the ones for whom He dies perish. This is the dreadful outcome of the Federal Vision.

ENDNOTES

¹ Calvin Beisner, foreword to G. P. Waters, The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology: A Comparative Analysis (P & R, 2006) p. VIII

² S. Wilkins in The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros & Cons: Debating The Federal Vision ed. C. Beisner (Knox Seminary 2004) p. 263.

³ I have adopted this section from my friend Wes White, <http://johannesweslianus.blogspot.com/>

⁴ H. Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics IV (Baker, 2008) p. 183.

⁵ W. G. T Shedd, Dogmatic Theology Third Edition. Ed. A. Gomes (P & R, 2003) p. 698.