

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Excursus: The Federal Vision Once Again (Part 3)

Thomas Manton, one of the great Puritan theologians who helped draft the Westminster Standards, declared: “A Christian’s life is a constant hymn to God, or a continued act of worship; ever behaving himself as in the sight of God, and directing all things as to his glory.”¹ The Christian life, contrary to popular opinion (even in many Christian circles) is not dominated by negatives. On the other hand the genuine Christian life is certainly not free from negatives. It must be noted, however, that the New Testament never promotes the Christian life merely in terms of ‘do this and don’t do that.’ The Christian life is seen in the light of motive. This is the key to understanding Christian conduct. This is the Apostle Paul’s point in the passage before us. ‘The apostle is not merely urging a new and higher standard of morality on people. That is an utterly futile thing. We cannot be genuinely better by mere moral suasion. That is not it at all. Rather, Paul is demanding a high form of behavior precisely because something decisive has already taken place. We have already been made new in Christ. That is why we should and must act like it. We like Lazarus, have been brought out of death into life by Christ. As part of that spiritual miracle our old grave clothes, which were appropriate for a corpse but not for a living body, have been taken off, and we have been reclothed in wedding garments in preparation for that great wedding supper of the Lamb. From this point on we should act like members of the wedding party.’²

Enter the Federal Vision. In their scheme of things, the Christian life is seen through the lenses of covenantal faithfulness and as such is very conditional. One FV representative actually says that Christ is the new Moses and God’s people are obligated to keep the Law which we are told is “very doable.”³ We have previously noted that the FV emphatically teaches that *any* and *all* who undergo water baptism are *automatically* brought into the covenant and made members of the Body of Christ and receive redemptive benefits specifically, Union with Christ, adoption and forgiveness of sin. Steve Wilkins declares that by water baptism a *real* vital blessed union is secured for all. In this union we have all spiritual blessings, including the forgiveness of sin.⁴ But, it turns out, according to the FV, *all* spiritual blessings do not include perseverance for *some* who have been baptized. It would also appear that regeneration is not one of the redemptive blessings that is granted to this group, which is strange indeed since how can a person possess the benefits of Union with Christ if they were never ‘born again’? If they are ‘born again’ then why do they lack perseverance? This group, called the non-elect covenant members, only have *temporal* redemptive benefits. The FV states that “by baptism one is joined to Christ’s body, united to Him covenantally, and given all the blessings and benefits of His work,”⁵ and yet it also states that perseverance is not guaranteed by baptism. The clear implication is that perseverance is not one of “all the blessings and benefits of [Christ’s] work.” But, Scripture teaches that perseverance *is* a benefit purchased by Christ. Thus, according to the FV, some who receive “all the blessings and benefits” of Christ’s work are not given “final salvation.” This means that “final salvation” is not a “blessing or benefit” of Christ’s work. G. P. Waters correctly notes that the result of such, “It must therefore be the result or fruit of someone else’s work. Such a doctrine is a straightforward rejection of *solo Christo* (‘by Christ alone’). It denies that the believer’s salvation has been completely and perfectly accomplished by Jesus Christ.”⁶ The Apostle has in the preceding section of Ephesians, enforced the general duty of holiness upon his readers. They are to “put off” the traits and characteristics of their old way of life and to “put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.” Paul now moves to the particulars; he insists on certain specific behavior. In this section (vv. 25-32) there are 12 verbal imperatives. There are FIVE areas of behavior that Paul pinpoints, areas where he actually demands a manifestation of change. For the most part, Paul’s method in this passage follows a definite pattern. He is making “practical” deductions from “theological” facts or truths. First, he addresses the negative, then enforces the positive and adds the motive for the prescribed behavior.

I. THE CHANGE FROM LYING TO TRUTH – v. 25.

- A. The negative – “put off (cf. v. 22) the lie.”
- B. The positive – “speak (present imperative) truth.”
- C. The motive – “for we are all members of one body. The theological truth of the church, the Body of Christ, Paul viewed as the motive for practical honesty in the Christian life.

II. THE CHANGE FROM SINFUL ANGER – vv. 26, 27.

- A. The positive – “Be angry” (permissive imperative). It is not a sin to be angry as such, but...
- B. The negative – “do not sin” (present imperative) “do not let the sun go down on your anger” – when anger is cherished and harbored, then it is sin. The word for anger in this last clause is PARORGISMŌI, refers to an angry mood or disposition. A violent irritation is meant, expressed by either hiding one’s self from others or by flaming looks, harmful words, inconsiderate actions.
- C. The warning - “do not give (presents imperative) the devil a place.” The expression refers to giving the DIABOLŌI, lit. slanderer, room or a sphere of operation in unbridled anger of all the sinful actions mentioned in this section, Paul pinpoints the “tongue” as the thing most susceptible to Satanic influence, comp. w/James 3:1-9.

III. THE CHANGE IN ACQUISITION v. 28.

- A. The negative – “do not steal” (present imperative).
- B. The positive – “labor in his work.” The word for “labor” is KOPIATŌ, present imperative, literally to grow weary, to labor with effort.
- C. The motive – “in order that (HINA purpose clause) he may have opportunity to share.” The “Christian work ethic” is not simply one of building our own nest egg, but is to extend to the needs of the Body of Christ.

IV. THE CHANGE IN SPEECH – vv. 29-30.

- A. The negative – “no foul speaking” (present imperative). The word “foul” is SAPROS, corrupt, putrid, rotten worthless, disgusting. It not only refers to filthy language but incorporates harmful and destructive, abusive speech.
- B. The positive – “only that which is helpful.”
- C. The motive – “for the up-building (edification) of others.” The lit. Greek rendering is “give grace to those who hear,” cf. Col. 4:6.

V. THE CHANGE IN TEMPER – vv. 31, 32.

- A. The negative - “get rid of” (ARTHĒTŌ, aorist passive imperative, to pick up and carry away, to make a clean sweep) all bitterness (PIKRIA, “a figurative term denoting that fretted and irritable state of mind that keeps a man in perpetual animosity – that inclines him to harsh and uncharitable opinions of men and things – that makes him sour, crabby and repulsive in his general demeanor – that brings a scowl over his face and infuses venom into the words of his tongue”⁷). And rage (THUMOS, a temporary outburst of anger at persons or things) and anger (ORGĒ, a deep-flowing, settled attitude) and brawling (KRAUGĒ, strife, clamor, loud shouting) and slander (lit. blasphemy) and all kinds of malice (KAKIAI, bad heartedness, the root of the rest). There is a natural progress: bitterness, rage, anger, loud shouting, and slander. The first three produce the last two, all are summed up under the term “malice.”
- B. The positive - “you be (present imperative) tenderhearted, forgive freely (present imperative).”
- C. The motive - “just as (KATHŌS, in this manner or after this pattern) also God in Christ forgave you.” The FV turns this into a *quid pro quo* and makes God’s forgiveness conditioned upon covenantal faithfulness.⁸ But, as Charles Hodge pointed out, “The verb means to give as a matter of favour, then to forgive, to pardon freely. *Even as*, i.e., because *God in Christ hath freely forgiven you*. This is the motive which should constrain us to forgive others. God’s forgiveness towards us is free; it precedes even our repentance and is the cause of it. It is exercised notwithstanding the number, the enormity and the long continuance of our transgressions. He forgives us far more than we can ever be called upon to forgive others. God forgives us *in Christ*. Out of Christ he is, in virtue of his holiness and justice, a consuming fire; but in him, he is long-suffering, abundant in mercy, and ready to forgive.”⁹

CONCLUSION: Noted New Testament scholar Donald Guthrie observed, “In spite of his profound teaching about the new life and the guidance of the Spirit, Paul was too much of a realist to suppose that his converts would at once reach maturity in their moral judgments. He deals with issues as they arise and this adds considerably to his value as an ethical teacher.”¹⁰ According to the FV, God’s redemptive blessings can be lost since they are *only* temporary. Waters alertly notes, “To affirm that a believer may genuinely possess Christ and his benefits and yet lost them raises

a host of theological problems. A reconciled believer is now unreconciled. A justified believer is now condemned. A sanctified believer is again under the dominion of sin. An adopted believer is again a child of the devil. God has withdrawn his everlasting love to this sinner and has severed a believer from vital union with Jesus Christ. The doctrine of distinguishing nonapostate from apostate by recourse to perseverance effectively reduces assurance to perseverance. This is counter to the Larger Catechism, which states that one objective of assurance is “that they are in the state of grace and shall persevere therein unto salvation” (LC 80). Assurance is unto perseverance, but assurance is not to be resolved into perseverance.”¹¹ In the FV scheme of things, Holiness becomes the ground not of assurance but of judicial standing before God. In other words, sanctification now becomes the constituent basis for justification. Failure to mature is seen as a lack of covenantal faithfulness and thus the very real loss of the forgiveness of sin. Believers are in a constant state of doubt about whether or not they are among the “decredal” elect or only “covenantal” elect. They are forced to be always checking their spiritual pulse and asking “have I been obedient enough?” Doubts about whether or not they have really been “covenantally faithful” lead more times than not to despair. This is another sad consequence of the FV.

ENDNOTES

¹ The Complete Works of Thomas Manton II (rpt. Maranatha, 1977), p. 25.

² J. M. Boice, Ephesians: An Expository Commentary (Baker, 1977), p. 167.

³ Steve Schlissel, in The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros & Cons: Debating the Federal Vision, ed. C. Beisner (Knox Seminary, 2004) p. 22-39.

⁴ S. Wilkins, “Covenant and Baptism,” Lecture at the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church Pastors Conference, Monroe, Louisiana, 2003.

⁵ The Federal Vision Summary Statement #7 cited by G. P. Waters, The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology: A Comparative Analysis (P & R, 2006) p. 156.

⁶ Waters, p. 157.

⁷ J. Eadie, A Commentary On the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians (T & T Clark, 1883), p. 219.

⁸ In Jewish and early Christian paraenesis the motivation for humans being compassionate and forgiving could be in order that God might forgive them (Matt 6:14; Mark 11:25) or because God had forgiven them (1 John 4:11). Here the motivating clause takes the latter form. Such statements introduced by KATHOS KAI have been called “the conformity pattern” and function within exhortations to show Christ’s or God’s saving activity as prototypical for believers’ conduct. Here, as in later instances in 5:2, 25, 29, KATHOS has both comparative and causal force. What God has done in Christ for believers, which has been the theme of the first half of the letter, now provides both the norm and the grounds for believers’ own behavior. God’s forgiveness of them becomes the paradigm for their mutual forgiveness. Whereas in the similar statement of Col. 3:13 it is the KURIOS who has forgiven the readers, and the Lord is almost certainly Christ, here in Eph 4:32 it is God in Christ who has brought about the forgiveness that must now be worked out in believers’ relationships. A. T. Lincoln, Ephesians: Word Biblical Commentary (Word, 1990) p. 309.

⁹ C. Hodge, Commentary on Ephesians, (rpt. Revell), 1976, p. 276.

¹⁰ D. Guthrie, New Testament Theology (IVP, 1981) p. 914.

¹¹ Waters, opp. cit. p. 166.