

Materials: Overture 1; Report from the Committee to Study the Federal Vision

The assembly resumes consideration of the report of Advisory Committee 5, beginning with Recommendation 6.

Recommendations:

6. That Synod:
  - a. Distribute sections 1-5 of the study committee report, together with Synod's decisions on this matter, to all the consistories of the URCNA, commending it for study;
  - b. Post the study committee report, together with Synod's decisions on this matter, on the federation website; and
  - c. Instruct the Stated Clerk to mail copies of the study committee report, together with Synod's decisions on this matter, to those denominations with which the URCNA enjoys ecumenical relations.

*Adopted*
7. That Synod publish the study committee report, together with Synod's decisions on this matter, within six months of Synod, separate from the Acts of Synod, for the sake of greater accessibility to the churches. 

*Defeated*
8. That Synod thank the study committee for its excellent work. 

*Adopted*

## **Report of the Synodical Study Committee on the Federal Vision and Justification**

**Adopted by the  
United Reformed Churches  
of North America**

**July, 2010**

imperfect and corrupted by sin, and are performed out of gratitude for God's grace in Christ (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 3, 24, 32, 33; Belgic Confession, Article 24).

11. The justification of true believers is a definitive and irrevocable blessing of Christ's saving work, and therefore cannot be increased by the good works that proceed from true faith or be lost through apostasy. (Canons of Dort, 1:9; Rejection of Errors 1:2, 2:8, 5:7; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 20 and 21)

12. The sacrament of Baptism does not affect the believer's union with Christ *or* justification but is a confirmation and assurance of the benefits of Christ's saving work to those who respond to the sacrament in the way of faith (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 25 and 27).

13. The sacrament of the Lord's Supper is a means to strengthen and nourish the believer in Christ when it is received by the "mouth of faith" and therefore the children of believing parents shall make public profession of faith before receiving the sacrament (Belgic Confession, Article 35; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 28-30).

14. The assurance of salvation springs from true faith, which looks primarily to the gospel promise and the testimony of the Holy Spirit as the basis for confidence before God. Although good works confirm the genuineness of faith, they are not the primary basis for such assurance of salvation (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 7, 23, 32; Belgic Confession, Article 22-23; Canons of Dort, 5:8-13).

15. According to God's electing purpose and grace revealed in the gospel, true believers may be confident that God will preserve them in the way of salvation and keep them from losing their salvation through apostasy (Canons of Dort, 1:12, 5:8-10)

4. That recommendations 2 and 3 above be Synod's answer to Overture 1, points 1 and 2.

*Adopted*

5. "That Synod remind and encourage individuals that, if there are office-bearers suspected of deviating from or obscuring the doctrine of salvation as summarized in our Confessions, they are obligated to follow the procedure prescribed in the Church Order (Articles 29, 52, 55, 61, 62) and the Form of Subscription for addressing theological error" (Acts of Synod 2007, Art. 67.4).

*Adopted*

(Advisory Committee 5 continued in Art. 116.)

ARTICLE 116

Advisory Committee 5 (continued from Art. 113)

1. In God's unchangeable purpose, He elects His chosen ones to salvation and effectively draws them into fellowship with Christ through His Word and Spirit, granting them true faith in Christ, justifying, sanctifying and preserving them in Christ's fellowship until He glorifies them (Canons of Dort, 1.7).
2. The election of God is of one kind only, and is to everlasting life, and not to a mutable relationship dependent on the good work of man, which can be forfeited (Canons of Dort, 1.8). Those who finally fall away have not forfeited their election, but demonstrate they never were elect, though members of the covenant community (Canons of Dort, 5.7).
3. Some members of the church or covenant community "are not of the Church, though externally in it" (Belgic Confession, Article 29).
4. Those who are truly "of the Church" may be known by the "marks of Christians; namely, by faith, and when, having received Jesus Christ the only Savior, they avoid sin, follow after righteousness, love the true God and their neighbor, neither turn aside to the right or left, and crucify the flesh with the works thereof" (Belgic Confession, Article 29).
5. Adam was obligated to obey "the commandment of life" in order to live in fellowship with God and enjoy His favor eternally (Belgic Confession, Article 14; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 3).
6. All human beings have fallen in Adam, are subject to condemnation and death, and are wholly incapable of finding favor with God on the basis of obedience to the law of God (Belgic Confession, Article 14; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 3 and 24).
7. The work of Christ as Mediator of the covenant of grace fully accords with God's truth and justice, satisfies all the demands of God's holy law, and thereby properly "merits" the believer's righteousness and eternal life (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 5-7, 15, 23-24; Belgic Confession, Article 22; Canons of Dort, Rejection of Errors 2:3).
8. The entire obedience of Christ "under the law," both active and passive, constitutes the righteousness that is granted and imputed to believers for their justification (Belgic Confession, Article 22; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 23).
9. Faith is the sole instrument of the believer's justification, so that believers may be said to be justified "even before [they] do good works" (Belgic Confession, Article 24).
10. The good works of believers, though necessary fruits of thankfulness, contribute nothing to their justification before God since they proceed from true faith, are themselves the fruits of the renewing work of Christ's Spirit, are

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## I. Background

### A. Mandate and Composition of the Study Committee

At its meeting in Palos Heights, Illinois, in July, 2007, Synod Schererville adopted the following recommendation:

That Synod 2007 [of the United Reformed Churches in North America] appoint a study committee to examine by the Word of God and our Confessions the teachings of the so-called Federal Vision and other like teachings on the doctrine of justification; and present a clear statement on these matters to the next synod for the benefit of the churches and the consistories. (*Acts of Synod Schererville 2007*, Article 72.2)

Synod Schererville also appointed fourteen members to the study committee, two from each classis of the federation:

Rev. Mark Stewart (Classis Eastern US)  
Rev. Steve Arrick (Classis Eastern US)  
Rev. Dick Wynia\* (Classis Southern Ontario)  
Rev. Christo Heiberg (Classis Southern Ontario)  
Rev. Brian Vos, Secretary (Classis Michigan)  
Rev. Rick Miller (Classis Michigan)  
Dr. Cornelis Venema (Classis Central)  
Rev. Patrick Edouard, Chairman (Classis Central)  
Rev. Chris Gordon (Classis Pacific Northwest)  
Rev. Kevin Efflandt (Classis Pacific Northwest)  
Rev. Bill Pols (Classis Western Canada)  
Rev. Eric Fennema\* (Classis Western Canada)  
Dr. Michael Horton (Classis Southwest)  
Rev. Marcelo Souza (Classis Southwest)

\*Note: Due to his decision to accept a call from a congregation of the Canadian Reformed Churches, Rev. Wynia resigned from service on the Committee and did not take part in its deliberations or the preparation of this report. On September 6, 2008, the Lord unexpectedly called home, Rev. C. Eric Fennema, a faithful member of our Committee.

The decision of Synod Schererville to appoint our study committee was taken in response to an overture from Classis Michigan (Overture #5), which asked Synod to adopt the 2004 RCUS *Report of the Committee to Study Justification in Light of the Current Justification Controversy*. Rather than adopt a study committee report of another denomination, Synod Schererville decided that the URCNA would be better served with a study committee report of its own.

In addition to the decision to appoint a study committee, Synod Schererville also adopted the following motions:

### Canons of Dort, V, Article 6

But God, who is rich in mercy, according to His unchangeable purpose of election, does not wholly withdraw the Holy Spirit from His own people even in their grievous falls; nor suffers them to proceed so far as to lose the grace of adoption and forfeit the state of justification, or to commit the sin unto death or against the Holy Spirit: nor does He permit them to be totally deserted, and to plunge themselves into everlasting destruction.

### Canons of Dort V, Article 7

For in the first place, in these falls He preserves in them the incorruptible seed of regeneration from perishing or being totally lost. ...

### Canons of Dort V, Rejection of Errors, Paragraph 7

[We reject the errors of those] Who teach: That the faith of those who believe for a time does not differ from justifying and saving faith except only in duration.

For Christ Himself, in Matt. 13:20, Luke 8:13, and in other places, evidently notes, besides this duration, a threefold difference between those who believe only for a time and true believers, when He declares that the former receive the seed in stony ground, but the latter in the good ground or heart; that the former are without root, but the latter have a firm root; that the former are without fruit, but that the latter bring forth their fruit in various measure, with constancy and stedfastness.

### Belgic Confession, Article 22

... Therefore we justly say with Paul, that we *are justified by faith* alone, or *by faith apart from works*. However, to speak more clearly, we do not mean that faith itself justifies us, for it is only an instrument with which we embrace Christ our righteousness. But Jesus Christ, imputing to us all His merits, and so many holy works which He has done for us and in our stead, is our righteousness. And faith is an instrument that keeps us in communion with Him in all His benefits, which, when they become ours, are more than sufficient to acquit us of our sins.

3. That Synod affirm the following teachings of Scripture and the Three Forms of Unity.

#### Grounds:

- a. Clearly distinguishing direct quotations from the Confessions from the formulations of the 15 points respects the binding nature of our Confessions as our doctrinal standards. The Scriptures, Ecumenical Creeds, and Three Forms of Unity alone may serve as grounds in matters of discipline.
- b. Moving the affirmations as proposed in Overture 1 diminishes the weight of the statements addressing the Federal Vision errors.
- c. Overture 1's proposal to move these affirmations to summary statements would disrupt the coherence and logical flow of the report.
- d. The churches have a responsibility to address contemporary theological errors in a language that is applicable to those errors.

*Adopted without dissent*

- c. The highlighted articles and statements pertain to the theological teachings which the Federal Vision movement has affected, as noted in the report.
- d. Our Form of Subscription requires us to refute all errors that militate against our confessional documents.
- e. In addition, see Recommendation 3.

*Adopted without dissent*

**Canons of Dort I, Article 7**

Election is the unchangeable purpose of God, whereby ... God has decreed to give to Christ to be saved by Him, and effectually to call and draw them to His communion by His Word and Spirit; to bestow upon them true faith, justification, and sanctification; and having powerfully preserved them in the fellowship of His Son, finally to glorify them. ...

**Canons of Dort I, Article 8**

There are not various decrees of election, but one and the same decree respecting all those who shall be saved, both under the Old and the New Testament; since the Scripture declares the good pleasure, purpose, and counsel of the divine will to be one, according to which He has chosen us from eternity, both to grace and to glory, to salvation and to the way of salvation, which He has ordained that we should walk therein (Eph. 1:4, 5; 2:10).

**Canons of Dort I, Article 15**

... Not all, but some only, are elected, while others are passed by in the eternal decree; whom God, out of His sovereign, most just, irreprehensible, and unchangeable good pleasure, has decreed to leave in the common misery into which they have willfully plunged themselves, and not to bestow upon them saving faith and the grace of conversion. ...

**Canons of Dort I, Rejection of Errors, Paragraph 2**

[We reject the errors of those] Who teach: That there are various kinds of election of God unto eternal life: the one general and indefinite, the other particular and definite; and that the latter in turn is either incomplete, revocable, non-decisive, and conditional, or complete, irrevocable, decisive, and absolute. Likewise: That there is one election unto faith and another unto salvation, so that election can be unto justifying faith, without being a decisive election unto salvation.

For this is a fancy of men's minds, invented regardless of the Scriptures, whereby the doctrine of election is corrupted, and this golden chain of our salvation is broken. *And whom he foreordained, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified (Rom. 8:30).*

**Canons of Dort, V, Article 1**

Those whom God, according to His purpose, calls to the communion of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and regenerates by the Holy Spirit, He also delivers from the dominion and slavery of sin. ...

a. That Synod 2007 reaffirm the statement of Synod 2004, “that the Scriptures and Confessions (Heidelberg Catechism Q/A 59-62; Belgic Confession articles 20-23) teach the doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, based upon the active and passive obedience of Christ alone” (*Acts of Synod Calgary 2004*, Article 66; *Acts of Synod Schererville 2007*, Article 67.2)

b. That Synod 2007 affirm that the Scriptures and Confessions teach that faith is the sole instrument of our justification apart from all works (Heidelberg Catechism, Answer 61, “Not that I am acceptable to God on account of the worthiness of my faith, but because only the satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ is my righteousness before God, and I can receive the same and make it my own in no other way than by faith only.” Cf. Belgic Confession Articles 22, 24). (*Acts of Synod Schererville 2007*, Article 67.3)

c. That Synod 2007 present the following statement to the churches as pastoral advice:

“Synod affirms that the Scriptures and confessions teach the doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, and that nothing that is taught under the rubric of covenant theology in our churches may contradict this fundamental doctrine. Therefore Synod 2007 rejects the errors of those:

1. who deny or modify the teaching that “God created man good and after His own image, that is, in true righteousness and holiness,” able to perform “the commandment of life” as the representative of mankind (HC 6, 9; BC 14);
2. who, in any way and for any reason, confuse the “commandment of life” given before the fall with the gospel announced after the fall (BC 14, 17; HC 19, 21, 56, 60);
3. who confuse the ground and instrument of acceptance with God before the fall (obedience to the commandment of life) with the ground (Christ who kept the commandment of life) and instrument (faith in Christ) of acceptance with God after the fall;
4. who deny that Christ earned acceptance with God and that all His merits have been imputed to believers (BC 19, 20, 22, 26; HC 11-19, 21, 36-37, 60, 84; CD I.7, RE 1.3, RE II.1);
5. who teach that a person can be historically, conditionally elect, regenerated, savingly united to Christ, justified, and adopted by virtue of participation in the outward administration of the covenant of grace but may lose these benefits through lack of covenantal faithfulness (CD I, V);
6. who teach that all baptized persons are in the covenant of grace in precisely the same way such that there is no distinction between those who have only an

outward relation to the covenant of grace by baptism and those who are united by grace alone through faith alone (HC 21, 60; BC 29);

7. who teach that Spirit-wrought sanctity, human works, or cooperation with grace is any part either of the ground of our righteousness before God or any part of faith, that is, the “instrument by which we embrace Christ, our righteousness” (BC 22-24; HC 21, 60, 86);

8. who define faith, in the act of justification, as being anything more than “leaning and resting on the sole obedience of Christ crucified” or “a certain knowledge” of and “a hearty trust” in Christ and His obedience and death for the elect (BC 23; HC 21);

9. who teach that there is a separate and final justification grounded partly upon righteousness or sanctity inherent in the Christian (HC 52; BC 37).” (*Acts of Synod Schererville 2007*, Art. 72)

## **B. The Committee’s Work and Approach to its Mandate**

In order to fulfill the mandate of Synod Schererville, the Committee first met at Mid-America Reformed Seminary on June 17-18, 2008. In preparation for this meeting, the chairman assigned the writing of background papers on various aspects of the teachings of the Federal Vision (hereafter FV) by specific members of the Committee. The bulk of the time of this initial meeting was devoted to a discussion of the Committee’s mandate and a review of these papers. The Committee enjoyed from the beginning a spirit of unity and collegiality regarding the doctrinal issues and controversy relating to the FV. At this first meeting of the Committee, it was agreed that a draft report should be prepared by October 31, 2008, and that the Committee would meet again in plenary session, March 17-18, 2009, to finalize its report to the churches and synod.

In its initial deliberations, the Committee discussed at some length the mandate that was adopted by Synod Schererville. In the course of this discussion, several questions were addressed: What role should the reports of other confessionally Reformed churches play in the preparation of our report? Should our report concentrate almost exclusively upon the FV reformulation of the doctrine of justification, or does the language of “other like teachings” refer to a number of related teachings within the writings of FV authors? What is the nature and extent of the influence of FV views within the United Reformed Churches in North America? In our description of the FV, should we rely upon printed materials that belong to the public domain, or should we address questions directly to proponents of the FV? One question that was also discussed at some length was: What is the status of a study committee report on these doctrinal issues? Should we, for example, recommend to the synod the adoption of a “short statement” of the biblical and confessional doctrine of justification? And, if we were to do so, would such a statement be viewed as a supplement to our confessional documents or an application of confessional teaching to a contemporary controversy?

After an extensive discussion of these questions, the Committee reached the consensus that our report should focus upon the doctrine of justification in the writings of FV authors. However, since a number of the teachings associated with the FV in other

the assurance of favor and acceptance with God, which the confessional teaching undergirds, is undermined in the formulations of FV proponents. Rather than resting entirely in the perfect righteousness of Christ, believers are encouraged to think that their covenantal faithfulness plays some role “in order to” their justification before God. As a result, the testimony of the gospel is compromised and the confident assurance of believers in God’s justifying verdict is undermined. The church must proclaim clearly that justification is “by grace alone through faith alone,” for only then will she truly give glory “to God alone.”

## **VI. Synodical Action**

The Minutes of Synod London 2010 record the following actions.

### ARTICLE 113

#### **Advisory Committee 5**

Materials: Overture 1; Report from the Committee to Study the Federal Vision

#### Recommendations:

1. That Synod grant the privilege of the floor to Rev. Brian Vos (secretary), and to Dr. Cornelis P. Venema (substitute for the chair) as well as any other members of the study committee present during the discussion of this report.

#### Grounds:

- a. These two brothers were present during our deliberations and would be able to give a fuller defense and explanation of the recommendations from the Report that the committee has proposed to adopt.
- b. This is consistent with rule 5.4.2 of the Regulations for Synodical Procedure.

*Granted*

2. That Synod urge all office-bearers to repudiate Federal Vision teachings where they are not in harmony with the following articles from the Three Forms of Unity (with underlining emphasis added).

#### Grounds:

- a. It is in keeping with the original intent of Overture 1 to address the Federal Vision controversy from the perspective of the confessions.
- b. Urging office-bearers to refute Federal Vision teachings where they are not in harmony with the specific citations of the confessions strengthens the report, and thus serves the churches in a way that avoids controversy.

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perfect, or else trust wholly to Christ’s completed work; you cannot do both; you cannot combine merit and grace; if justification even in slightest measure is through human merit, then Christ died in vain.”

truth is more precious or worthy of more ardent defense. In the words of John Calvin, “For this is the key which openeth whatsoever is requisite to our salvation; this is the means to decide all controversies; this is the foundation of all true religion; to be short, this is that setteth open the heavens unto us.”<sup>130</sup>

In our survey of the revisions to the doctrine of justification that are advocated by writers of the FV, we have identified several serious errors that imperil this gospel of free acceptance in Christ. The justification of believers is diminished to refer only to the forgiveness of sins. Rather than a rich and fulsome pronouncement of the believer’s positive righteousness before God, justification is reduced to the pronouncement that the believer is no longer regarded to be guilty. Because justification means only the forgiveness of sins, it does not include the glorious pronouncement that *all the requirements of obedience to the law have been met in Christ and are the believer’s through gracious imputation*. The denial of the imputation of Christ’s entire obedience for justification, which is an inevitable consequence of this reductionist view of justification, has a most undesirable, yet unsurprising, consequence: believers must maintain and secure their justification before God in the way of the obedience of faith or by means of a living, obedient faith. The good works that faith produces by the ministry of the Holy Spirit are inserted into faith as the instrument of justification. Therefore, by denying the imputation of Christ’s active obedience, believers are merely restored to the position Adam, the original representative head of the human race, possessed before the Fall into sin. In order to maintain and secure their justification before God, believers find themselves under the same obligation that existed in the original covenant relationship between God and man before the Fall. The irony of the FV denial of Christ’s fulfillment of all the requirements of the law on behalf of His people, is that it turns the gospel into a renewed and restored form of the original covenant between the Triune God and His people. To use the language of the Reformed tradition, the covenant of grace becomes a “covenant of works,” and the gospel is transformed into a new “law.”

By the standard of biblical and confessional teaching, this reformulation of the doctrine of justification by FV writers stands condemned. Contrary to the biblical teaching, which ascribes everything necessary to justification to the works and merits of Christ, the unwillingness of some FV writers to affirm the imputation of Christ’s entire obedience for justification leaves believers “under the law” so far as their justification before God is concerned. Rather than a radical contrast between justification by grace alone through faith alone, apart from works of any kind, a distinction is drawn between “meritorious” works, which play no role in justification, and “non-meritorious” works, which do play a role in justification. To the degree that Christ’s works and merits in their entirety are excluded from the basis for the believer’s justification, to that degree the works of faith are included within faith as an instrument for justification. It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that this reformulation of the doctrine of justification diminishes the work of Christ and enlarges the role played by the works of believers (cf. Gal. 2:21b, “For if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain.”).<sup>131</sup> Furthermore,

areas are of special importance to our understanding of justification, it was also determined that these teachings should be identified, particularly in terms of their implications for a proper understanding of justification. The Committee also agreed that our report would make grateful use of the study reports of other confessional Reformed churches in North America. However, since our churches subscribe to the three Forms of Unity, not the Westminster Standards, it was the Committee’s judgment that our mandate called for an independent report that would evaluate the FV understanding of justification and other related teachings from the standpoint of the Scriptures and these confessional standards. As to the question whether our Committee was obliged to communicate directly with FV authors regarding their views, the Committee determined that our mandate was to study the doctrinal formulations of the FV and to offer the churches a helpful guide in their assessment of these formulations. Our Committee is not a judicial committee, but a committee mandated “to examine by the Word of God and our Confessions the teachings of the so-called Federal Vision and other like teachings on the doctrine of justification.” The Committee is keenly aware of the fact that not all FV proponents agree on a number of features of these teachings, and that it would violate biblical standards of conduct to proceed on this assumption. However, the Committee believes that the published writings of FV authors contain reformulations of the doctrine of justification and other related teachings that have not only created considerable controversy and confusion within the family of confessionally Reformed churches in North America, but continue to exercise influence in these churches, including the URCNA. When there is uncertainty within the Reformed churches regarding the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone, it is the duty of every confessionally Reformed officebearer to exert himself in propagating the truth of the gospel and opposing error of every kind. On the difficult question of the status of the Committee’s report, it was also agreed that this report would not present a supplement to the Confessions, but an *application of the Confessions* to a contemporary controversy.

The Committee offers the following report to the churches with the earnest prayer to the Lord of the church that He will preserve us in the way of truth, and that our testimony to the free grace of God in Jesus Christ will continue to be sounded with ringing clarity in our time. The report begins with a short background, which describes the development and advocacy of what is known in shorthand as the FV in the Reformed and Presbyterian churches in North America. The second section of the report describes several of the “related teachings” of the FV that are of special importance to its formulation of the doctrine of justification. The third and most important section of the report offers an extensive summary and evaluation of the FV understanding of justification. On the basis of the report’s study, the fourth and concluding section presents a summary of the biblical and confessional teaching on justification, together with several recommendations to synod.

## II. A Brief Sketch of the Emergence of the Federal Vision

In the mandate given to our Committee by Synod Schererville, reference is made to the “so-called Federal Vision and other like teachings on the doctrine of justification.” Before we enter into the main body of our study, it may be beneficial to the churches to

<sup>130</sup> *Sermon on Melchizedek & Abraham* (Willow Street, PA: Old Paths Publications, 2000), p. 95.

<sup>131</sup> Cf. J. Gresham Machen, *Machen’s Notes on Galatians* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1972), p. 161: “This verse is the key verse of the Epistle to the Galatians; it expresses the central thought of the Epistle. The Judaizers attempted to supplement the saving work of Christ by the merit of their own obedience to the law. ‘That,’ says Paul, ‘is impossible; Christ will do everything or nothing; earn your salvation if your obedience to the law is

identify what is meant by this language of “Federal Vision” and to identify the way those associated with the FV have contributed to the contemporary controversy in a number of North American Reformed and Presbyterian churches regarding the doctrine of justification.<sup>1</sup>

Though some advocates of positions associated with FV do not believe it is appropriate to refer to it as a well-defined movement, there is no doubt that such a movement exists. Whatever differences may exist among its proponents, the FV represents at least a number of common emphases and teachings that have particular significance for our understanding of the covenant of grace and the gospel blessing of justification by faith. Proponents of the FV have vigorously promoted their views through their public writings, theological conferences, and a variety of internet media. One of the pervasive themes of the FV, as the name “Federal” Vision itself confirms, is that the biblical doctrine of the covenant has not been adequately understood in many Reformed churches, and that the implications of the covenant for the church’s life and ministry have also not been fully appreciated.<sup>2</sup> The controversial nature of FV stems from the way a number of FV writers have reformulated, revised, or even rejected aspects of the understanding of the covenant in the Reformed tradition, whether in its confessional or theological expressions.

It is important to observe that the language of “Federal Vision” did not originate with those who have criticized some of its themes and emphases. In January 2002, Rev. Steven Wilkins, pastor at the time of the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Monroe, Louisiana, invited a number of speakers to the church’s annual pastor’s conference to articulate and defend their advocacy of the “Federal Vision.” These speakers included Rev. Wilkins himself; Rev. Steve Schlissel, pastor of Messiah’s congregation in New York City; Rev. Norman Shepherd, a retired CRC pastor and former professor of systematic theology at Westminster Theological Seminary; and Rev. Douglas Wilson, pastor of Christ Church in Moscow, Idaho. Since Rev. Shepherd was unable to attend this meeting, Rev. John Barach, at the time a pastor of the Grande Prairie URC, was invited to speak in his place.<sup>3</sup> Though it is sometimes suggested that the FV is a movement outside of the URCNA, and that it is largely an intramural debate among North American Presbyterians, the roster of speakers at this conference illustrates that the FV has had significant representation in a broad spectrum of Presbyterian and Reformed denominations in North America, including the URCNA.

The 2002 Auburn Avenue Conference can be regarded as the point at which a growing debate about the FV commenced within several Presbyterian and Reformed church communions. Shortly after the 2002 Conference, the Reformed Presbyterian Church in the United States strongly condemned the FV as being out of accord with the

g. The FV teaching that the sacrament of baptism effectively incorporates all of its recipients into Christ, and puts them in possession of all the benefits of His saving work, including justification.

h. The FV insistence that all covenant children be admitted to the Lord’s Supper without having professed the kind of faith that is able to discern the body of Christ, remember His sacrifice upon the cross, and proclaim His death until He comes again.

i. The FV attempt to resolve the problem of assurance by an appeal to the “objectivity” of church membership and the sacrament of baptism, while insisting that some believers may lose their salvation because of a non-persevering faith.

## 2. The FV Distortion of the Doctrine of Justification

In the judgment of our Committee, the seriousness of the errors of the FV movement is most apparent in relation to the doctrine of justification. Though it is never satisfactory for office-bearers in Reformed churches to formulate their views in a confusing manner, or in a way that hardly seems consistent with the Confession’s summary of Scriptural teaching, confusion and inconsistency on the doctrine of justification by those who hold to the Reformed Confessions is inexcusable. It is the opinion of our Committee that, on the doctrine of justification, the FV movement has not only contributed to confusion in the churches but also failed to guard the gospel of free justification on the basis of Christ’s work alone from serious error. We agree with those Presbyterian and Reformed churches that have issued similar reports, and that have called FV proponents to repentance, urging them to proclaim and promote the biblical truths of the Reformation. Only in this way will the churches be built up in the most holy faith, once for all entrusted to the saints, and God be glorified in the salvation of His people.

The doctrine of justification is more than simply one biblical teaching among many. Justification is, as Calvin termed it, the “main hinge of the Christian religion.” It is “the article of the standing and falling of the church” (Luther: *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*). Though the grace of free justification does not encompass the whole of the message of the gospel, it does lie at its core. Unless sinners are restored to favor and acceptance with God upon the basis of the works and merits of Christ alone, they will ever remain liable to condemnation and death. Guilty, disobedient sinners have no hope for restored communion with the living God apart from the perfect work of Christ as Mediator on their behalf. The glory of Christ’s work on behalf of His people is that He has “fully satisfied for all their sins.” Every obligation “under the law” has been met for believers by the obedience, satisfaction, and righteousness of Christ. The gospel promise of free justification in Christ is, indeed, what Calvin termed the “main hinge” of the Christian religion. Consequently, when the Heidelberg Catechism raises the question, “What profit is there now that you believe all this?” (that is, the Christian faith as it is summarized in the words of the Apostles Creed), the answer is: “I am righteous before God in Christ, and an heir of eternal life.”<sup>129</sup> For Reformed believers and churches, no

<sup>1</sup> For treatments of the history and emergence of the FV, see *Justification: A Report from the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Willow Grove, PA: The Committee on Christian Education of the OPC, 2007), pp. 11-18; and Guy Prentiss Waters, *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology: A Comparative Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2006), pp. 1-29.

<sup>2</sup> The term “federal” in “Federal vision” stems from the Latin term for covenant, *foedus*. Thus, one way to interpret the FV is to regard it as an attempt to articulate a comprehensive understanding of the covenant of grace that will resolve a number of long-standing questions in the Reformed tradition.

<sup>3</sup> Recordings of the lectures that were delivered at this conference are available at [www.auburnavenue.org](http://www.auburnavenue.org).

<sup>129</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 23.



instrumental efficacy apart from the proper use of the sacrament in the way of faith. The inevitable fruit of the FV emphasis upon the efficacy of the sacrament of baptism is the advocacy of a quasi-Roman Catholic doctrine of baptism as an instrument of justification. However, the biblical and confessional doctrine of justification ascribes such instrumentality to faith alone. Baptism does not confer the grace of justification apart from faith in the gospel promised, which is produced by the Spirit through the Word.

## V. Summary and Conclusion

Throughout our report on the distinctive emphases of the FV movement, we have been conscious of our obligation to focus primarily on its reformulation of the doctrine of justification. For this reason, we attempted, even in our summary of the distinctive themes of the FV, to bear in mind the way these themes relate to our understanding of the believer's justification before God. To conclude our report, we wish to identify those features of the FV that have special significance to its understanding of the doctrine of justification. We will then offer a few comments on the importance of the doctrine of justification, and the seriousness of the FV reformulations of it.

### 1. FV Distinctives and the Doctrine of Justification

In our summary of a number of distinctive themes in the FV movement, we identified several that are of particular significance for the doctrine of justification. In our judgment, the following FV themes have implications that are inconsistent with the Scriptural and confessional view of justification:

- a. The FV insistence upon the close connection, even coincidence, between election and covenant, which leads to the unqualified claim that all members of the covenant community enjoy the gospel blessing of justification in Christ.
- b. The FV claim that all members of the church are savingly united to Christ, even though some do not persevere in the way of faith and obedience and lose the grace of justification through apostasy.
- c. The FV emphasis that the obligations of believers in the covenant of grace parallel the obligations of Adam in his fellowship with God before the fall, thereby undermining the sheer graciousness of the believer's justification and salvation in Christ.
- d. The FV denial of the meritorious character of Christ's work as Mediator, who fulfills all the obligations of the law on behalf of His people and secures their inheritance of eternal life.
- e. The FV tendency to reduce justification to the forgiveness of sins, which is based upon the imputation of Christ's passive obedience alone.
- f. The FV emphasis upon a "living" or "obedient" faith in the definition of its role as the instrument for receiving the grace of justification in Christ.

Westminster Standards on the doctrines of the covenant and justification.<sup>4</sup> Among the objections raised against the FV, the following were most important: the denial of a pre-fall "covenant of works"; the blurring of the distinction between the law and the gospel; the rejection of the teaching of the imputation of the "active obedience" of Christ as a ground for the believer's justification before God; the tendency to include the "works" faith produces as part of faith in its instrumentality for justification; a kind of sacramentalism that ascribes efficacy to the sacraments apart from the response of faith on the part of their recipients; and a tendency to identify covenant membership with election to salvation in Christ. Despite some diversity of expression and viewpoint among proponents of the FV, these issues have continued to lie at the center of the debate regarding the compatibility of the FV with the Reformed Standards or Confessions.

In response to the serious criticisms that were brought against some aspects of the FV, Rev. Wilkins invited Revs. Barach, Schlissel, and Wilson to join him in a discussion with critics of the FV at Monroe, LA, in January 2003. Participants in this discussion also included Dr. Joseph Pipa, president of Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary; Rev. Carl Robbins, pastor of the Woodruff Road Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Greenville, South Carolina; Dr. Morton Smith, professor at several Presbyterian seminaries and former stated clerk of the PCA; and Rev. R.C. Sproul, Jr., editor of *Tabletalk* and director of the Highlands Study Center. When this discussion did not achieve a resolution of the controversy over FV, another conference was held in Florida in August 2003 under the auspices of Knox Theological Seminary. Participants in this private discussion included not only those who had met earlier in January in Monroe, LA, but also several others who were sympathetic or critical of FV teachings.<sup>5</sup> Though this discussion did not take place before an ecclesiastical audience, the various presentations, including several critical evaluations of the FV, were later published in book form.<sup>6</sup>

Since the time of these early discussions between proponents and critics of the FV, debate regarding its emphases has continued in a variety of Reformed and Presbyterian churches. Proponents of a number of FV teachings have held conferences and published books that defend the FV positions against their critics.<sup>7</sup> Several Presbyterian and Reformed denominations have mandated studies of the FV, including the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the Reformed Church in the United States, the Presbyterian Church in America, and the Orthodox Christian Reformed Churches. All of the study committee

<sup>4</sup> The decisions of the General Assembly of this denomination are available at [www.rpcus.com](http://www.rpcus.com). A minister of this denomination, John Otis, has written a book-length critique of the FV. See John M. Otis, *Danger in the Camp: An Analysis and Refutation of the Heresies of the Federal Vision* (Corpus Christi, TX: Triumphant Publications, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Participants at this conference who were sympathetic to FV included Dr. Peter Leithart, pastor of Trinity Reformed Church in Moscow, ID; Rev. Rich Lusk, assistant pastor at the time of AAPC; and Rev. Tom Trouwborst, pastor of Calvary OPC in Schenectady, NY. Participants who were critical of FV included Rev. Christopher A. Hutchinson, associate pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Statesboro, GA; Dr. George Knight III, adjunct professor of New Testament at GPTS; and Rev. Richard Phillips, pastor of First Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Coral Springs/Margate, FL (currently pastor of 2<sup>nd</sup> Presbyterian [PCA] in Greenville, SC.).

<sup>6</sup> E. Calvin Beisner, ed., *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros and Cons: Debating the Federal Vision. The Knox Theological Seminary Colloquium on the Federal Vision, August 11-13, 2003* (Ft. Lauderdale, FL: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Among these books, the following are of special importance: P. Andrew Sandlin, ed., *Backbone of the Bible: Covenant in Contemporary Perspective* (Nacogdoches, TX: Covenant Media Press, 2004); and Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner, eds., *The Federal Vision* (Monroe, LA; Athanasius Press, 2004).

reports of these denominations have reached conclusions sharply critical of a number of FV emphases.<sup>8</sup>

Several developments in the ongoing evaluation of the FV movement are of particular interest to the URCNA. Both Westminster Seminary in California and Mid-America Reformed Seminary have offered public testimonies that judge elements of the FV movement to be contrary to the Word of God and the Reformed Confessions.<sup>9</sup> The faculty of Westminster Seminary in California and Mid-America Reformed Seminary have also published books and articles and conducted public conferences that criticize a number of FV teachings, particularly its denial or uncertainty regarding the imputation of Christ's active obedience in the justification of believers.<sup>10</sup> In recent years, a number of internet discussions among URCNA members have focused upon FV. Some former ministers and members in the URCNA remain vocal and active proponents of the FV. Articles, both pro and con the FV, have been published in periodicals that are well-known to and read by URC members (e.g., *The Outlook, Christian Renewal*). The advocacy of children at the Lord's Table, which is one of the most common practical fruits of the FV understanding of the covenant of grace, has been addressed by the broader assemblies of the federation. Two successive synods of the URCNA have felt it necessary to affirm the imputation of Christ's active obedience in justification. We do not mention these items to suggest that the FV has had a significant influence upon the understanding of many URCNA office-bearers or members. Rather, we mention them to illustrate the widespread controversy regarding the FV among the confessionally Reformed and Presbyterian churches in North America. This controversy has not only taken place outside of the URCNA, but within the URCNA as well.

In the opinion of our Committee, therefore, there is ample reason to believe that a URC study committee report on the FV could be beneficial to the churches. The Reformed churches in North America, including the URCNA, need to be clear rather than confused on the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone. Our testimony to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, which is so richly set forth in our Three Forms of Unity, demands that we carefully examine the claims of the FV and its proponents.

### III. Characteristic Themes of the Federal Vision

The synodical mandate for our Committee focuses especially upon the FV formulation of the doctrine of justification. However, it also speaks of "other like teachings," which the Committee understands to refer to the distinctive emphases or themes of the FV that are of special significance to our understanding of the doctrine of justification. As we noted in the previous section of our report, the FV movement is not monolithic. There are a variety of viewpoints represented among proponents of the FV. In the development of the FV, however, certain themes recur that have provoked

<sup>8</sup> As noted earlier, the OPC study committee report is available in book form. The reports of the PCA ([www.byfaithonline.com](http://www.byfaithonline.com)) and the RCUS ([www.rcus.org](http://www.rcus.org)) and the OCRC are available online or in the respective Acts of their synods or general assemblies.

<sup>9</sup> The statement of the Westminster Seminary in California is available at [www.wscal.edu](http://www.wscal.edu). The statement of the Board and Faculty of Mid-America Reformed Seminary is available in booklet form: *Doctrinal Testimony Regarding Recent Errors* (Dyer, IN: Mid-America Reformed Seminary, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., R. Scott Clark, ed., *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2007); and Cornelis P. Venema, *The Gospel of Free Acceptance in Christ: An Assessment of the Reformation and New Perspectives on Paul* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2006), pp. 232-56.

perfect righteousness that is revealed in the holy law of God. Such works cannot be the whole or the part of our righteousness before God. They merit nothing so far as our righteousness before God is concerned. The persistent and studied ambiguity of FV authors like Norman Shepherd compromises this truth in the most fundamental manner. By redefining faith in its instrumental role for justification to include the non-meritorious works that true faith produces, human works are made to be constitutive of the way believers are justified.

### 5. The Role of Baptism as an Instrument of Justification

One of the recurring themes in the writings of FV authors is an emphasis upon the efficacy of the sacraments, particularly the sacrament of baptism, in the communication of the grace of Christ to His people. Some authors even use the language of "baptismal regeneration" to underscore the constitutive significance of baptism, not only as a sign and seal of the covenant promise in Christ, but as the instrument that actually effects saving union with Christ and all His benefits.<sup>127</sup> All those who are baptized, head-for-head, are not merely to be regarded as recipients of the gospel promise in an "objective" sense; they actually possess immediately, on account of their baptism, all that the sacrament visibly declares and confirms. The consequence of this unqualified and exaggerated view of baptismal efficacy for the doctrine of justification is not difficult to ascertain. Because baptized believers and their children are savingly united to Christ and therefore in possession of the grace that the sacrament attests, the grace of justification may also be viewed as a grace conferred by the sacrament itself. In the writings of FV authors, it is sometimes asserted that all those who are embraced by the administration of the covenant should be regarded as already possessing the fullness of salvation in Christ.<sup>128</sup>

The FV emphasis upon the efficacy of baptism is difficult to distinguish from the traditional Roman Catholic view. Like the Roman Catholic doctrine, it distorts the relation between the Word and sacraments as "means of grace." In the biblical and Reformed view, the Holy Spirit uses principally the preaching of the Word and promise of the gospel to produce faith and thereby savingly join believers with Christ. The sacraments are appointed as a means whereby the Spirit confirms and strengthens faith. However, ordinarily neither the Word nor the sacraments work effectively as "means of grace" apart from the response of faith that they produce and confirm. Without the response of faith, which the Holy Spirit authors through the use of these means, we may not say that every recipient of the gospel promise or sacramental sign and seal of that promise is in possession of the grace of Christ. In the confessional and biblical understanding of justification, faith is the sole instrument whereby the grace of free justification is received. Though the sacraments are not to be disparaged or diminished in their importance as a means of grace, we may not ascribe to baptism a kind of

<sup>127</sup> See, e.g., Douglas Wilson, "*Reformed*" is Not Enough: *Rediscovering the Objectivity of the Covenant* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon, 2002), pp. 103-4; Richard Lusk, "Some Thoughts on the Means of Grace: A Few Proposals," [http://www.homes.org/theologia/content/rich\\_lusk/some\\_proposals\\_about\\_the\\_means\\_of\\_grace.htm](http://www.homes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/some_proposals_about_the_means_of_grace.htm); idem, "Paedobaptism and Baptismal Efficacy," pp.

<sup>128</sup> E.g. John Barach, "Covenant and Election," *The Auburn Avenue Theology*, pp. 15-44; Rich Lusk, "Paedobaptism and Baptismal Efficacy: Historic Trends and Current Controversies," in *The Federal Vision*, pp. 71-126; Steve Wilkins, "Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation," in *The Federal Vision*, pp. 47-70; and Douglas Wilson, "Sacramental Efficacy in the Westminster Standards," in *The Auburn Avenue Theology*, pp. 233-44.

One of the characteristic features of the FV view of the role of faith in justification is a persistent ambiguity of definition. In the Confessions and the Scriptures, justifying faith is viewed as a “receptive” instrument that rests in the perfect work of Christ alone for justification. Believers are not justified “on account of” their faith but “through faith.” As the apostle Paul insists in Romans 4:16, justification is by faith “in order that it might be by grace.” What distinguishes faith in its role as the instrument of justification is that it receives and rests alone in the righteousness of Christ. Faith is not a human work in lieu of obedience to the law of God. Faith is the cessation of all human work or effort, and a confident resting in the work and merits of Jesus Christ.

In the writings of FV authors, however, faith, even in respect to its instrumentality for justification, is defined differently. Norman Shepherd, for example, persistently speaks of the instrument of justification as a “living,” “obedient” faith (or “faithfulness”).<sup>123</sup> Rather than distinguishing between faith as instrument of justification and the works that such faith produces, Shepherd insists that faith justifies by virtue of the obedience it produces. The “works” that are excluded, when we speak of justification “by faith alone,” are only those works that are performed in order to “merit” acceptance and favor with God. Once the whole idea of “merit” or “meritorious” works is rejected, we may speak of *one* “method of justification” that holds for Adam (and all men in Adam) before the Fall, for Christ himself, and for all believers.<sup>124</sup> The one method of justification in the covenant relationship before the Fall and after the Fall involves God’s crediting the believer’s obedient faith for righteousness. Though Shepherd acknowledges that there is an additional factor in the post-Fall state, namely, the provision for the believer’s forgiveness on the basis of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, he maintains that justification always is obtained by way of an active, obedient faith. It is by way of the obedience of faith that the believer finds, maintains, and ultimately enjoys acceptance and favor with God.<sup>125</sup>

The problem with this understanding of faith in relation to justification is that it commits what Ursinus in his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism calls a “fallacy of composition.”<sup>126</sup> Though it may be true that justifying faith is “not alone,” it is not true that the works of faith belong to faith as an instrument of justification. The contrast between faith and works in respect to the believer’s justification is absolute (Rom. 3:27; 4:6, 13; 9:11; 11:6; Gal. 2:16; Tit. 3:5; Eph. 2:9). No human works, not even those “fruits of thankfulness” that God graciously rewards in the believer, play any role instrumental to the justification of believers. All of our works are unable to meet the standard of

<sup>123</sup> Law and Gospel in Covenantal Perspective,” *Reformation and Revival Journal* 14/1 (2005): 76. See also Shepherd, *The Call of Grace*, p. 50; “Justification by Faith Alone,” *Reformation & Revival* 11/2 (Spring, 2002): 82; idem, “Faith and Faithfulness,” in *A Faith That is Never Alone*, 53-72.

<sup>124</sup> “Law and Gospel in Covenantal Perspective,” p. 76. Shepherd even ascribes this “method of justification” to Christ himself whose “living, active, and obedient faith” took him all the way to the cross (*The Call of Grace*, p. 19). For a careful critique of Shepherd’s formulations, see Wesley White, “Saying ‘Justification by Faith Alone’ Isn’t Enough,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 17 (2006): 239-65.

<sup>125</sup> “Thirty-Four Theses on Justification in Relation to Faith, Repentance, and Good Works,” Theses 20-25, <http://www.homes.org/theologia/content/normanshepherd/the34theses.htm>. Cf. Rich Lusk, “Future Justification: Some Theological and Exegetical Proposals,” in *A Faith That is Never Alone*, pp. 309-56.

<sup>126</sup> Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans reprint, 1954), p. 337. Unlike Shepherd, whose chapter, “Faith and Faithfulness” (in *A Faith That is Never Alone*) trades upon this “fallacy of composition,” Ursinus treats the relation of faith and works in a wonderfully clear manner. For example, Ursinus notes that “good works, although they are necessarily connected with faith, are nevertheless not necessary for the apprehension of the merits of Christ” (p. 337).

considerable discussion and criticism. Before we turn in the main section of our report to the doctrine of justification, therefore, we wish to identify several of these themes and summarize the revisions that proponents of the FV have proposed to confessional Reformed teaching. At the conclusion of our summary of these themes, we will also offer some evaluative comments regarding the extent to which these FV emphases meet the test of the Scriptures and the Reformed Confessions.

## A. The Doctrine of the Covenant

The FV movement, as its name indicates, focuses primarily upon the doctrine of the covenant. In this respect, it is a movement that must be of special interest to the Reformed churches, which have always viewed the relationship between the Triune God and His people, whether before or after the fall into sin, as a covenantal relationship. It could even be said that the original “covenant vision” is not the FV movement, but the Reformed faith in its understanding of God’s gracious initiative in establishing His covenant with His people in Christ. That the FV movement emphasizes the covenantal character of God’s dealings with His image-bearers is, for this reason, unexceptional and even to be commended. However, there are some features of the FV understanding of the covenant relationship between God and His people that are distinctive. These distinctive features of the FV viewpoint on the covenant are the reason that this movement has generated so much controversy in the churches.

### 1. Covenant and Salvation

In the writings of proponents of the FV, the saving significance of the covenant that God establishes with His people is strongly emphasized. The covenant relationship, especially the covenant of grace that God initiates between Himself and believers and their children, is not simply a means whereby God accomplishes the salvation of fallen sinners. The covenant relationship itself is a saving relationship, which unites believers and their children in true communion and fellowship with God through Jesus Christ, the Mediator of the covenant of grace. The covenant relationship is salvation, and all who are members of the covenant people of God—believers together with their children and all whom God calls into membership in the church of Jesus Christ—enjoy all the benefits of saving union with Christ. Rich Lusk, a proponent of the FV, offers a clear statement of this emphasis:

On the one hand, some so totally identify covenant and election that to be in covenant and to be elect are one and the same .... At the other extreme are those who identify the covenant with the visible church, but make covenant membership a matter of mere externals .... Against both of these distortions, we must insist that *the covenant is nothing less than union with the Triune God, nothing less than salvation*. ... So when someone is united to the church by baptism, that person is incorporated into Christ and into his body; that person becomes bone of Christ’s bone and flesh of his flesh.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> “Covenant and Election FAQs,” [http://www.homes.org/theologia/content/rich\\_lusk](http://www.homes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk). Emphasis ours.

In this statement, Lusk distinguishes between election and covenant but still insists that all who are included in the covenant are, in the proper sense, truly and savingly joined to Christ. All who are members of the covenant community are genuinely united to Christ and participants in all the benefits of His saving work.

Another proponent of the FV, John Barach, makes similarly strong and remarkable claims regarding what it means to be a member of the covenant people of God. According to Barach, “[t]he covenant is not just a bare legal relationship. The covenant is not just a means to an end, the goal of salvation. The covenant in history is the early form of that final goal. It is a bond of love with the triune God of Scripture. God chose you to have the bond with Him in Christ.”<sup>12</sup> In this understanding of the administration of the covenant of grace in the course of the history of redemption, all those with whom God covenants genuinely enjoy salvation in union with the Triune God. While Barach does acknowledge that not all who begin to enjoy covenant salvation will persevere, since God has only chosen them to salvation “for a time,” he insists that all who are embraced within the covenant are thereby truly saved, at least for a period.<sup>13</sup> In Lusk’s and Barach’s view of the covenant of grace, membership in the covenant community, which includes believers and their children, must be understood in the strongest sense to include full participation in the saving blessings of Christ’s work as Mediator. Consistent with this identification of covenant membership and true, saving communion with Christ, proponents of the FV reject any distinction, however it is expressed, between those members of the “visible” church who may truly be members of Christ by faith and those who are only “externally” members of the covenant people of God. Distinctions between the covenant in its historical administration and the covenant as a saving communion of life, between the “visible” and “invisible” church, between “external” membership in the covenant and “internal” or saving membership, are frequently rejected by FV proponents, who insist that all members of the covenant community are savingly united to Christ.<sup>14</sup>

## 2. Covenant and Election

Closely allied to the FV emphasis upon the identity of covenant and salvation is its emphasis upon the “objectivity” of the covenant and its significance for our knowledge of God’s election of His people in Christ. Though FV proponents do acknowledge that not all members of the covenant community are “elect” in the strict and confessional sense of this language,<sup>15</sup> they often employ the language of “election” in a way that suggests the election of all members of the covenant community. Consistent with their undifferentiated view of all who are covenant members, some proponents of the FV speak at times as though covenant membership and election coincide. In doing so they leave the distinct impression that not all those who are “saved” in the covenant for a time, or who are “elect” by virtue of their inclusion within the covenant, are necessarily saved or elected to perseverance in the way of salvation.

<sup>12</sup> “Covenant and Election,” in *The Auburn Avenue Theology*, p. 154.

<sup>13</sup> “Covenant and Election,” in *The Auburn Avenue Theology*, p. 154.

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Barach, “Covenant and Election,” in *The Auburn Avenue Theology*, p. 154; Steve Wilkins, “Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation,” in *The Auburn Avenue Theology*, pp. 262-67; and Rich Lusk, “Covenant and Election FAQs.”

<sup>15</sup> See “A Joint Federal Vision Statement,” [www.federal-vision.com](http://www.federal-vision.com).

[I]t is prejudicial to the grace and nature of justification to construe it merely in terms of remission. This is so to such an extent that the bare notion of remission does not express, nor does it of itself imply, the concept of justification. The latter means not simply that the person is free from guilt but is accepted as righteous; he is declared to be just. In the judicially constitutive and in the declarative sense he is righteous in God’s sight. In other words, it is the positive judgment on God’s part that gives to justification its specific character.<sup>121</sup>

### *God’s Justice and the Believer’s Justification*

A fourth biblical and confessional consideration that argues for the imputation of the entire obedience of Christ in justification, is the doctrine of Christ’s mediatorial work as a complete *satisfaction of all the demands of God’s righteousness*. If justification involves God’s pronouncement of the believer’s righteousness, this pronouncement must surely accord with the dictates of God’s own truth and righteousness. God will not declare righteous or positively holy, and an heir of eternal life, human beings who have not met the demands of His righteousness, either in their own person or in the Person of Jesus Christ, their substitute. If Christ as Mediator “satisfied” all the requirements of God’s justice on behalf of believers, then believers must fully share through imputation in the fullness of His righteousness. This follows from the Scriptural teaching that God, in the justification of believers, demonstrates His own justice or righteousness (Rom. 3:26).

This consideration can be illustrated by a simple analogy. Suppose a father were to promise to give his son an inheritance, provided his son fulfills certain filial obligations of obedience. Failure to fulfill these obligations would nullify the son’s right to receive the inheritance promised. Suppose further that this son should forfeit his inheritance through disobedience, and become worthy of punishment instead. Suppose still further that, in a remarkable and undeserved display of fatherly mercy, the father were to assume the burden of suffering in the place of his son the punishment that was due him. Would the father’s substitutionary endurance of his son’s just punishment be sufficient to support the son’s insistence that he receive his promised inheritance? Not at all. Though the son would not be liable to punishment, he would scarcely have a right to the promised inheritance, since he would not yet have fulfilled his filial obligations of obedience. The point of this simple analogy is that the grace of justification, which is based upon the imputation of Christ’s entire obedience and satisfaction, “entitles” the believer to eternal life. No obligation of obedience under the law of God has been left unfulfilled, since Christ has undertaken to fulfill all righteousness on behalf of His own.<sup>122</sup> In this way, the glorious inheritance of eternal life, which is the believer’s through faith in Christ, is secured in a manner that fully accords with God’s truth and justice.

## 4. Justification by the Instrument of an “Obedient Faith”

<sup>121</sup> *Collected Writings*, 2:218.

<sup>122</sup> Cf. Robert L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (1871; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985), pp. 624-5. Dabney observes that “[p]ardon would release from the punishment of its [the law’s] breach, but would not entitle to the reward of its performance.”

the believer's by virtue of his or her faith-union with Christ.<sup>118</sup> To deny that this transaction involves a legal component, equivalent to the declaration of a person's innocence in a court of law, would expunge the theme of justification from the gospel. Imputation language functions to express the believer's status before God on the basis of Christ's work on his or her behalf. To argue that the theme of incorporation into Christ offers an alternative explanation of how believers become righteous makes no sense, if justification essentially refers to the believer's standing in God's court. For the believer's justification on the basis of the imputation of Christ's righteousness, is but a way of saying that the believer is justified by virtue of his or her judicial connection with the work of Christ. Imputation is a corollary of union with Christ, and not an alternative to it.<sup>119</sup>

### *Justification Declares the Believer Righteous*

Third, unless believers are granted and imputed the righteousness of Christ in His obedience to the law as well as in His suffering of its curse, they could not, strictly speaking, be justified in the proper sense of being "declared righteous" before God. The justification of believers upon the basis of the righteousness of Christ involves a favorable verdict that goes beyond the mere forgiveness or non-imputation of the guilt of sin to believers. When God justifies the ungodly for the sake of Christ's saving work, He declares believers to be in a positive state of innocence or righteousness. Justified believers are not simply declared to be without sin; they are declared to be positively righteous before God. In Christ the justified person enjoys a righteous standing before God that properly belongs to someone who has not only borne the curse of the law but also met all of its demands.<sup>120</sup> In the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is the ground for the believer's justification, God vindicates His own righteousness and establishes the believer's right to be received into His favor as a righteous person. Not only is there now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, but there is no longer any possible basis for a charge to be brought against them (Rom. 8:33-34). As those who were crucified and raised with Christ, believers enjoy the privileged status of full acceptance with God. As John Murray observes,

<sup>118</sup> Cf. Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul's Soteriology* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1987), p. 123: "Jesus' being delivered up (his death) on account of our transgressions identified him with us in the condemnation inevitably attendant on our transgressions; in fact his death is the pointed manifestation of this solidarity in condemnation. Consequently, his being raised on account of our justification identifies him with us in the justifying verdict inevitably attendant on the righteousness which he himself established for us (better, which he established for himself as he was one with us) by his obedience unto death; his resurrection is the pointed manifestation of this solidarity in justification."

<sup>119</sup> Cf. John Murray, "Justification," in *Collected Writings* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 2:214: "In reality the concept is richer than that of imputation; it is not simply reckoned as ours, but it is reckoned to us and we are identified with it. Christ is ours, and therefore all that is his is ours in union with him and we cannot think of him in his vicarious capacity or of anything that is his in this capacity except in union and communion with his people. ... These are not legal fictions. They are the indispensable implicates of what union with Christ entails."

<sup>120</sup> In this connection, appeal may be made to passages like Romans 10:5 and Galatians 3:12, which enunciate the principle that the law as such promises life only to those who do what it requires. Christ's active and passive obedience, accordingly, are understood to have met all the claims (perceptive and penal) of the law on behalf of his people. In this way, the law is upheld in the gospel of Christ, and God is both just and the one who justifies those who believe in him (cf. Rom. 3:26).

John Barach, for example, has emphasized the FV's teaching that election and covenant are virtually coincident.

But then who is in Christ? Those who have been incorporated into Christ, brought into Christ, those who have been baptized into Christ. ... Covenantal election and individual election aren't actually all that far apart. We can distinguish them perhaps, but we cannot and may not divide them completely. What is the connection? The connection has to do with God's promise, God's speech to us. God has promised every covenant member that he or she is elect in Christ. ... When God speaks to his people and calls them elect, he is not simply predicting that this will happen, he is making a pledge to them. ... His promise is that he administers his salvation to us by speaking to us .... And God in the gospel and through baptism, promises us that he unites us to Christ .... What's missing in Jesus? In him you have redemption, righteousness, justification, sanctification, the Holy Spirit, glorification, and election. The whole package of salvation ... is found in Christ.<sup>16</sup>

This remarkable statement is typical of the way some FV writers equivocate in their use of the language of "election." On the one hand, Barach's statements could be interpreted to mean that there is a kind of "corporate election" which encompasses the entire number of those who belong to the covenant community, though not all of these members are "savingly elect" in the sense of the Reformed Confessions' use of the language of election. On the other hand, Barach seems to reject any distinction between covenantal election and individual election. Without emphasizing the necessary response of faith to the covenant promise, a faith that savingly unites the believer to Christ and His benefits, Barach wants to affirm that all covenant members are individually elect and true beneficiaries of the Christ's saving work with all of its benefits. Since membership in the covenant is salvation, and since election is unto salvation, what Barach calls a "connection" between covenant and election becomes more than a connection. For this reason, he rejects the idea that we should regard covenant members to be elect in the sense of a "charitable judgment" about them.<sup>17</sup> Covenant and election are identified and, as we shall see in the following, serious problems are created when it is further acknowledged that not all saved and elect members of the covenant persevere in the way of faith.

### **3. The Pre-Fall Covenant**

Another common theme in the writings of FV proponents is that the historic Reformed view of the pre-fall covenant between the Triune God and the human race in Adam needs to be significantly revised. The problem with the Reformed understanding of the pre-fall covenant, which is commonly termed a "covenant of works," is that it introduces the unbiblical idea of "merit" into the relationship between God and man. Furthermore, the Reformed understanding fails to acknowledge the underlying unity of

<sup>16</sup> "Covenant and Election," 2002 Auburn Avenue Pastor's Conference lecture transcript, pp. 87-90.

<sup>17</sup> John Barach, "Covenant and History" (2002 AAPCPC lecture). Cf. Cal Beisner, "Concluding Comments on the Federal Vision," in *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros & Cons*, p. 311.

the covenant between God and His people, whether that covenant is administered before or after the Fall.

In the Reformed view of the pre-fall covenant of works, the Triune Creator “voluntarily condescended” to establish a covenant relationship between Himself and the human race in Adam.<sup>18</sup> The aim of this covenant was to grant to Adam and his posterity the blessing of eternal life and glorification in unbreakable communion with God “upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.” The promise of this original covenant relationship was an implicit promise of eternal life, which was sacramentally signified and sealed by means of the “tree of life” in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:24). The sanction of this original covenant relationship was the explicit threat of death, both physical and spiritual, in the event of human disobedience and transgression. When God stipulated the command that Adam should not eat of the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen. 2:16-17), He subjected Adam, as covenant representative and head of the human race, to a “probationary testing,” which concentrated the absolute demand of obedience to God’s law in the form of a particular prohibition. As a result of Adam’s sin and disobedience, the entire human race has come under condemnation that brings death. Though all human beings are subject to this original covenant relationship as fallen sinners in Adam and are incapable of obtaining life in the way of obedience to the law, Christ, the “last Adam,” has fulfilled all of the obligations of the law on behalf of His people and thereby obtained for them justification and life in restored fellowship with God (Rom. 5:12-21). The significance of the Reformed formulation of the “covenant of works” is that it provides the biblical framework that is indispensable to any proper appreciation of the mediatorial work of Christ in the covenant of grace. Whereas Adam was obliged to perfect obedience in order to obtain the promised reward of eternal life in fellowship with God, believers are obliged to receive the super-abounding grace of God in Christ by means of the empty hand of faith alone, which rests in the perfect and sufficient obedience of Christ that secures their covenant inheritance. In the historic Reformed view, the “condition” that must be met in the covenant of grace is not the believer’s personal and perfect obedience to the law, but a heartfelt trust in Christ whose righteousness is wholly sufficient to restore His people to full and indefectible communion with God.<sup>19</sup>

According to a number of proponents of the FV, the Reformed view fails to account for the structural similarities between the pre-fall and post-fall covenants. In both covenants, union and communion with God is based entirely upon God’s grace or undeserved favor toward those with whom He covenants. When we distinguish between a pre-fall covenant of “works” and a post-fall covenant of “grace,” our language fails to do

<sup>18</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith, VII. i-ii: “The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God’s part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant. The first covenant made with man was a *covenant of works*, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.”

<sup>19</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith, Chap. VII, iii: “Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant [of works], the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly call the *covenant of grace*; wherein he freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life his Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe”; Belgic Confession, Arts. 21 & 22: “We believe that, to attain the true knowledge of this great mystery, the Holy Spirit kindles in our hearts an upright faith, which embraces Jesus Christ with all His merits, appropriates Him, and seeks nothing more besides Him. For it must needs follow, either that all things which are requisite to our salvation are not in Jesus Christ, or if all things are in Him, that then those who possess Jesus Christ through faith have complete salvation in Him”; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 23.

### *The Substitutionary Nature of Christ’s Obedience*

Second, the FV denial of the imputation of the active obedience of Christ to believers for their justification also fails to do justice to the biblical teaching that Christ’s work as Mediator was a comprehensive work of *substitution*. Even as imputation corresponds to what is expressed by the language of “faith alone” and “Christ alone,” it also expresses what is implicit in the biblical themes of Christ’s substitutionary atonement and the believer’s union with Christ. If Christ’s life, death and resurrection occurred by God’s design *for or in the place of* His people, then it follows that all that He accomplished *counts as theirs*, so far as God is concerned. How could Christ’s work on their behalf and for their benefit not be reckoned to their account, if indeed it is *just as though they had performed it*?<sup>116</sup> Furthermore, when believers become united to Christ through faith, they participate in all the benefits of His saving work. Faith is the “empty hand” by which believers receive all that Christ has accomplished for them. To say that God grants and imputes the righteousness of Christ to believers is, accordingly, to acknowledge what is required by the doctrines of Christ’s substitutionary atonement and the believer’s union with Christ through faith.

The link between the themes of Christ’s substitutionary work, union with Christ, and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to believers, sheds light on recent claims that Paul has no doctrine of imputation but only of incorporation into Christ. It has been argued, for example, that the “modality” for the believer’s becoming the “righteousness of God” is union with Christ, not the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to believers.<sup>117</sup> The element of truth in this claim is certainly that the believer’s justification by faith only occurs by virtue of his or her incorporation into Christ. Nothing that God does for believers in Christ can benefit them, unless they are joined to him by faith. So far as the justification of believers is concerned, the governing theme of Paul’s gospel is that Christ was put to death on account of their sins, and raised on account of their justification (Rom. 4:25). However, if justification refers to the believer’s status in union with Christ, which is based upon the judicial verdict that God first declared in raising Christ from the dead, then imputation precisely corresponds to the nature of the justifying verdict itself. In justification, God declares the believer to be in the same judicial circumstance before him as Christ is. This declaration presumes that all that Christ is and has done is equally

<sup>116</sup> D.A. Carson, “Atonement in Romans 3:21-26,” in *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Historical & Practical Perspectives*, ed. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), p. 134, fn53, makes an important observation regarding the connection between substitution and imputation: “Part of the contemporary (and frequently sterile) debate over whether or not Paul teaches ‘imputation,’ it seems to me, turns on a failure to recognize distinct domains of discourse. Strictly speaking, Paul never uses the verb *logizomai* to say, explicitly, that Christ’s righteousness is imputed to the sinner or that the sinner’s righteousness is imputed to Christ. So if one remains in the domain of narrow exegesis, one can say that Paul does not explicitly teach ‘imputation,’ except to say slightly different things (e.g., that Abraham’s faith was ‘imputed’ to him for righteousness). But if one extends the discussion into the domain of constructive theology, and observes that *the Pauline texts themselves* (despite the critics’ contentions) teach penal substitution, then ‘imputation’ is merely another way of saying much the same thing.”

<sup>117</sup> Cf. Don Garlington, “Imputation or Union with Christ? A Response to John Piper,” *Reformation & Revival Journal* 12/4 (Fall, 2003): 97: “Hand in hand with the preeminence of the person of Christ is that union with him bespeaks a personal (covenant) relationship that is obscured when legal and transactional matters are given as much prominence as they are in Reformed thought. ‘Imputation’ is the transferal of a commodity from one person to another; but ‘union’ means that we take up residence, as it were, within the sphere of the other’s existence.”

Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness, under the law blameless.”

Unlike these opponents, however, Paul’s boast or confidence is not in “a righteousness of my own that comes from the law.” His boast, rather, is in “the righteousness from God that depends on faith.” This righteousness of God comes “through faith” to those who are “found in Christ.” Though Paul does not explicitly speak of God imputing or reckoning the righteousness of Christ in these verses, the idea is certainly present. Those who are *united with Christ through faith* receive, *on that account*, a righteousness from God. This righteousness, Paul insists in the most emphatic terms, is not his own righteousness but a righteousness that comes from “outside of himself” as God grants it to him. Paul’s righteousness, as is true of any believer’s, consists in the free bestowal of an “alien” righteousness by God to all who are in union with Christ.

The final passage we consider is 2 Corinthians 5:19-21 (“In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake He made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”). Perhaps no passage in Scripture more clearly teaches the doctrine of imputation than this one. The reconciling work of God in Christ took place when Christ, who “knew no sin,” was “made to be sin.” In an inscrutable manner, God regarded the sinless Christ as though He were sin. On the other hand, God did “not count [our] trespasses against [us]”; He did not treat or regard us in a manner consistent with our condition and circumstance as sinners. By these means – not counting our sins against us, making and treating Christ as though He were sin – we “become the righteousness of God *in him*.” In this passage, as in those previously considered, the apostle Paul does not expressly speak of the granting and imputing of Christ’s righteousness to believers. However, no other interpretation can legitimately claim to do justice to this passage. It is only by virtue of our union and participation in Christ that we benefit from His saving and reconciling work. Charles Hodge’s comments on this passage express this truth well:

Our sins were imputed to Christ, and his righteousness is imputed to us. He bore our sins; we are clothed in his righteousness. ... Christ bearing our sins did not make him morally a sinner ... nor does Christ’s righteousness become subjectively ours, it is not the moral quality of our souls. ... Our sins were the judicial ground of the sufferings of Christ, so that they were a satisfaction of justice; and his righteousness is the judicial ground of our acceptance with God, so that our pardon is an act of justice.... It is not mere pardon, but justification alone, that gives us peace with God.<sup>115</sup>

According to this reading of 2 Corinthians 5:19, the justification of believers on account of the work of Christ involves a great transaction: the sins of believers are imputed to Christ and the righteousness of Christ is imputed to believers.

<sup>115</sup> Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the Second Letter to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), pp. 150-151.

justice to the grace upon which the original (and all) covenant relationship(s) depends. Furthermore, in all covenant relationships, union and communion with God requires that those with whom God covenants live in obedience to His law, an obedience that springs from gratitude and filial devotion. When Adam was obliged to obey God perfectly, he was obligated to render the obedience of faith, namely, to serve God from a “heart of faith alone, in a spirit of loving trust.”<sup>20</sup> Similarly, when believers in Christ are graciously restored to covenant fellowship with Christ, they are placed under the renewed obligation of the obedience of faith. Without the obedience of faith, which is the condition of the covenant of grace even as it was the condition of the “covenant of life” before the fall, believers cannot be justified or assured of their covenant inheritance or eternal life. Due to these common features of the pre-fall and post-fall covenants, we may speak of the way of blessedness in all covenants as “by grace through [the obedience of] faith.”<sup>21</sup>

In their reformulation of the doctrine of the covenant, especially the distinction between the pre-fall and post-fall covenants, FV writers often criticize the Reformed view for continuing to uphold the idea of “merit” in the relationship between the creature and the Creator. In the older view, according to FV authors, the relationship between Adam and the triune Creator is construed on analogy to that between an employee and an employer, or a servant and a master. Adam’s obedience is the required payment or “wages” that he owes God, the basis upon which he would receive what was “due” him as an obedient servant. Furthermore, in the older doctrine, the work of Christ is also viewed in terms of the idea of “merit.” By His entire obedience under the law, Christ “merited” justification and life for all those who by faith receive His righteousness as a free gift. The problem with this entire conception of the covenant relationship, and even of the work of Christ in redemption, is that it fundamentally misconceives the nature of the covenant fellowship between God and His people. Not only does it deny what is true of the covenant before and after the Fall into sin, namely, that it is based upon God’s grace or undeserved favor, but it also undermines the obedience of faith in the covenant of grace as a necessary (pre-) condition for the believer’s inheritance of eternal life. On the one hand, the older view diminishes the grace of God in the pre-fall covenant. And on the other hand, the older view undermines the legitimate obligations of obedience in the post-fall covenant of grace.

#### 4. Law and Gospel in the Covenant

To appreciate the significance of the FV criticism of the formulation of the pre-fall and post-fall covenants, it is important to note the way FV authors treat the distinction between the “law” and the “gospel.” In the Reformed tradition, a sharp distinction is drawn between the law of God, which requires that human beings created in God’s image obey perfectly all of its commandments, and the gospel of Jesus Christ, which promises believers free justification and acceptance with God on the basis of the righteousness of Christ alone. In the Reformed view of the gospel benefit of justification, only the perfect obedience of Christ under the law, whether to its precepts (active obedience) or its

<sup>20</sup> “A Joint Federal Vision Statement,” [www.federal-vision.com](http://www.federal-vision.com).

<sup>21</sup> Norman Shepherd, “Law and Gospel in Covenantal Perspective” (Norman Shepherd, 2004), p. 9 *et passim*. Shepherd nicely captures the FV tendency to diminish the differences between the pre-fall and post-fall covenant relationship, when he says “[w]hat is promised [in the Adamic, Noachic, and Abrahamic covenants] is a gift of grace and it is received by a living, active, and obedient faith.”

penalties (passive obedience), is a sufficient basis for satisfying the requirements of God's justice and enabling the believing sinner to be right with God. When the believer is clothed with the fullness of Christ's righteousness under the law, he is able to be justified or placed in the status of innocence and holiness before God. Though the Reformed Confessions affirm the continued use of the law of God as a "rule of gratitude," they clearly distinguish between the law and the gospel when it comes to the great question of the believer's justification. No "works of the law" of any kind constitute even a part of the believer's righteousness before God or the basis upon which he is justified.<sup>22</sup>

In the judgment of a number of FV writers, this contrast between the law and the gospel depends upon an unbiblical understanding of the pre-fall "covenant of works." In the FV view, because the Reformed view teaches that Adam's obedience would "merit" his inheritance of eternal life under the covenant of works, it also teaches that the work of Christ, the last Adam, graciously fulfills the requirements of this covenant and thereby "merits" for believers their acceptance before God. Furthermore, since it is alleged that the Reformed view regards any works performed in obedience to the law within the framework of a "works-merit paradigm," FV writers believe it is unable to do justice to the obligations of obedience to the law within the covenant of grace. However, when we view the pre-fall covenant as a gracious covenant, which required Adam to live before God in grateful obedience, FV writers claim that there is no basis for regarding Adam's works as meritorious. Similarly, when we recognize that the covenant of grace also requires that God's people respond to His grace with an obedient faith (or: the obedience of faith) in order to be justified and secure their inheritance, they believe we have no reason to fear that this introduces any "merit" into the covenant relationship. The "works of the law" that the Scriptures condemn, when they speak of justification by faith and apart from works, are not the works that belong to faith but works that are performed in order to merit acceptance with God.<sup>23</sup> Just as the pre-fall covenant promised blessing to Adam in the way of an obedient faith, so the post-fall covenant of grace promises blessing to those who respond to it in the way of an obedient faith. Rather than drawing a sharp contrast between the law and the gospel, we need to recognize, according to FV authors, that grace (or gospel) and law are like two sides of one coin.<sup>24</sup>

## B. The Doctrine of the Church and Sacraments

Upon the basis of the FV's reformulation of several features of Reformed teaching regarding the doctrine of the covenant, the FV also argues for a particular understanding of the doctrine of the church and the sacraments. If we properly understand the nature of the covenant relationship between God and His people, particularly in the administration of the covenant of grace, we must revise some features of the historic Reformed understanding of the church as a covenant community. In the writings of FV authors, this becomes apparent in three areas: 1) the Reformed distinction between the "visible" and

<sup>22</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 2, 3-7, 23-24, 33; and Belgic Confession, Arts. 22-23.

<sup>23</sup> Norman Shepherd, "Law and Gospel in Covenantal Perspective"; and idem, "Thirty-four Theses on Justification in Relation to Faith, Repentance, and Good Works," Thesis 24 ([www.homes.org/theologia/norman-shepherd/the-34-theses](http://www.homes.org/theologia/norman-shepherd/the-34-theses)).

<sup>24</sup> See Rich Lusk, "A Response to 'The Biblical Plan of Salvation,'" in *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros & Cons*, p. 128: "The law did not require perfect obedience. It was designed for sinners, not unfallen creatures. Thus the basic requirement of the law was covenant loyalty and trust, not sinless perfection."

compact unity in parallelism with the one trespass, and there is good reason for speaking of it as the one righteous act because, as the one trespass is the trespass of the one, so that one righteousness is the righteousness of the one and the unity of the person and his accomplishment must always be assumed.<sup>113</sup>

Christ's obedience upon the cross epitomizes His whole life of obedience. The cross does not exhaust Christ's obedience but reveals it in its most striking form (cf. Phil. 2:8, "becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross"). Indeed, were it not for the entirety of Christ's obedience from the beginning to the end of His ministry, it would not be possible to speak of His having died "*the righteous* for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God" (1 Pet. 3:18). Even though the reference to the "one act of righteousness" in Romans 5 describes Christ's death upon the cross, it is not possible to separate this act of obedience from His entire life "under the law" (cf. Gal. 4:4). To distinguish between Christ's "active" and "passive" obedience in this way is artificial. The so-called "passive obedience" of Christ cannot be restricted to a single act or event. The cross of Christ represents the apex and culmination of a life marked by suffering under the consequence of human sinfulness (Rom. 8:1-4).<sup>114</sup> The passive obedience of Christ may not be reduced to a "point," namely, the cross. It should rather be regarded as a "line" that took him from conception to death, even the death of the cross. Furthermore, in all of His suffering, Christ was actively offering himself in obedience to the Father and on behalf of His people. It should also be observed that, whereas the "one act of disobedience" on the part of the first Adam was sufficient to constitute him and his posterity liable to condemnation and death, only the entire "curriculum" of Christ's perfect and constant obedience was sufficient to restore His people to righteousness and life. Christ's seamless obedience in all of its richness and fullness under the law was alone sufficient to procure everlasting life for believers.

Another important passage for an understanding of the imputation of Christ's righteousness as the basis for the believer's justification is Philippians 3:8-9.

Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.

This remarkable testimony of Paul was written in the context of his fierce and unyielding opposition to certain persons who were placing their confidence before God in their own flesh (v. 3). Though the apostle does not explicitly identify his opponents, it appears that they were persons who were boasting of their own religious pedigree and credentials, particularly circumcision, on the basis of which they sought to commend themselves before God. In his initial reply to these opponents, the apostle engages in an extended *ad hominem* argument. If his opponents would place their confidence before God in such things, the apostle Paul has even more right to do so: "circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a

<sup>113</sup> *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1, pp. 201-202. Cf. Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ*, pp. 110-114.

<sup>114</sup> See Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 15, Q. & A. 37: "That all the time He lived on earth, but especially at the end of His life, He bore, in body and soul, the wrath of God against the sin of the whole human race."



account of His “one act of righteousness.” Though this passage bristles with difficult questions of interpretation, it is of special importance to our understanding of the obedience of Christ, which is imputed to believers for their justification.<sup>112</sup> The burden of Paul’s argument in this passage is that there is an *immediate link* between *the one trespass of the one man, Adam*, on the one hand, and the reign of death *and the judgment that brings condemnation upon the many*, on the other. For this reason, he emphasizes that death reigned from Adam to Moses, “even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come” (v. 14). Even though the trespass was Adam’s, and Adam’s alone, the consequence of this trespass, death, reigned over all. Accordingly, the apostle insists that the “one trespass led to condemnation for all men” and “the many were made sinners” (vv. 18-19). Because of the union of all with Adam in his one trespass, God imputes or reckons to all men the guilt of this trespass and its judicial consequence, death. This is the sense in which we may say that “all sinned” in Adam, and all bear, as a consequence, the judicial liability of condemnation and death.

In a similar way, the apostle links the one man’s obedience (lit., “the act of righteousness of one”) with the making righteous of the many. Just as death reigned through the disobedience of the first Adam, so “the free gift of righteousness reign[s] in life through the one man Jesus Christ.” So far as the doctrine of imputation is concerned, the critical phrase in these verses is “the free gift of righteousness.” The many who are constituted righteous, who receive justification and life through the work of Christ, are not made righteous through their own deed or deeds. Nothing believers do in obedience to the law constitutes them righteous or beneficiaries of God’s favorable verdict and acceptance. Rather, God’s grace “super-abounds” toward the many who become, through union with Christ, partakers of His righteousness. For understanding the doctrine of imputation, the critical point in Paul’s argument is his insistence upon the direct (or immediate) participation of all who are united with Christ in His one act of obedience. Just as Adam’s sin (and not the sins of all men) constitutes all as sinners under the judicial sentence of condemnation and death, so Christ’s obedience (and not the obedience of the many) constitutes the many as righteous and under the judicial sentence of justification and life. The dominant thread in Paul’s argument is the *judicial implication* of our union with the first and second Adams. God counts or reckons as guilty all who are in Adam; and He counts or reckons as innocent all who are in the second Adam, Christ.

A critical question that arises in this connection relates to the meaning of Paul’s expression, “the one act of obedience/righteousness.” Does this refer to Christ’s passive obedience alone (his cross)? Or does it refer to Christ’s active and passive obedience, using the language of “one act” to summarize the whole of His life of obedience? John Murray provides a helpful answer to this question:

If the question be asked how the righteousness of Christ could be defined as “one righteous act,” the answer is that the righteousness of Christ is regarded in its

<sup>112</sup> For a more extensive treatment of Romans 5:12-21 and its implications for the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, see John Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ: Should We Abandon the Imputation of Christ’s Righteousness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002), pp. 90-114; John Murray, *The Imputation of Adam’s Sin* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed reprint, 1959); and Cornelis P. Venema, “N. T. Wright on Romans 5:12-21 and Justification,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 16 (2005): 29-81.

“invisible” church; 2) the efficacy of the sacraments; and 3) the admission of covenant children to the Lord’s Supper.

### 1. The Distinction Between the “Visible” and “Invisible” Church

In the history of the Reformed churches, a distinction is commonly drawn between the so-called “visible” and “invisible” church. Though this distinction is variously defined, its most basic function is to acknowledge that not all professing believers and their children, who belong to the concrete, visible expression of Christ’s church in the world, are truly saved and members of Christ by faith. Since the visible church includes some who are not genuinely “of” the church, or who are not “elect” in the strict sense, this language serves to distinguish between the church as a community of professing believers and their children, not all of whom properly and savingly belong to Christ by faith, and the church as God alone knows it as the “whole company of the elect.”<sup>25</sup>

Several proponents of the FV have rejected this Reformed distinction because it is incompatible with the FV’s claim that covenant membership and saving union with the Triune God coincide. They have also objected to this distinction because it suggests too sharp a distinction between the circle of the covenant and of election. For example, John Barach has argued that, because “the doctrine of election goes hand in hand with the doctrine of the church,” we may affirm, upon the basis of their baptism, that believers and their children “are among the elect *now*.”<sup>26</sup> Though it is unclear how literally he wants to use this language, Barach also adds that this affirmation is no mere “wish or boast,” but ought to be the confident conviction of all who are baptized.<sup>27</sup> Douglas Wilson, another advocate of the FV, has expressed similar reservations regarding this distinction, since it allegedly undermines the importance of membership in the visible church.<sup>28</sup> Wilson proposes that we should distinguish between the “historical” (as it visibly exists now) and “eschatological” (as it will perfectly exist in the future consummation) church. According to FV writers, the distinction between the “visible” and “invisible” church or a similar distinction between an “internal” or “external” membership in the covenant of grace, creates insoluble pastoral problems of assurance (Am I truly a member of Christ? Am I elect?). Contrary to the implications of the distinction between the visible and invisible church, FV authors argue that we should affirm that all members of the covenant community are truly and savingly in Christ. As we noted previously, while FV writers acknowledge that some members of the covenant people of God may not persevere in the way of salvation, they want to insist that all members of the covenant are nonetheless in true and saving union with Christ.<sup>29</sup> In the FV view, the “objective” character of

<sup>25</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith, XXV. i-ii. Cf. Belgic Confession, Art. 29, which in treating the marks of the true church notes that “we speak not here of hypocrites who are mixed in the church with the good, yet are not of the church, though externally in it . . .”

<sup>26</sup> “Covenant and Election,” in *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros & Cons*, p. 155.

<sup>27</sup> “Covenant and Election,” in *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros & Cons*, p. 155. Cf. E. Calvin Beisner, “Concluding Comments on the Federal Vision,” in *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros and Cons*, pp. 308-9.

<sup>28</sup> See Douglas Wilson, *Reformed is Not Enough: Recovering the Objectivity of the Covenant* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2002), p. 59: “... a Christian is one who would be identified as such by a Muslim. Membership in the Christian faith is objective—it can be photographed and fingerprinted.”

<sup>29</sup> John Barach, “Covenant and Election,” 2002 AAPCPC lecture. Cf. Beisner, “Concluding Comments on the Federal Vision,” in *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros & Cons*, pp. 308-9.

membership in the covenant and church of Jesus Christ is undermined, when we distinguish between the church as it visibly exists and as it known only to God.

## 2. The Efficacy of the Sacraments (Baptism)

While there are differences of opinion among advocates of the FV on the doctrine of the sacraments, one of the primary themes of the FV is that the Reformed churches need a renewed appreciation for the efficacy of the sacraments in the communication of God's grace in Christ. Corresponding to their emphasis upon the close connection between covenant and salvation, or between covenant and election, FV writers frequently maintain that the sacraments are effectual means of grace, which genuinely communicate the grace of Christ and participation in His saving work to all their recipients. In the view of many FV writers, the Reformed churches have not adequately developed a strong view of the effectiveness of the sacraments in the salvation of those who belong to the covenant community.

This FV emphasis upon the efficacy of the sacraments comes to prominent expression in the understanding of the sacrament of baptism, especially the baptism of children of believers. For example, in his defense of paedobaptism, Rich Lusk insists that the sacrament of baptism does something that even the Word preached does not accomplish. In his interpretation of Acts 2, especially verse 37, Lusk argues that

[p]reaching alone is insufficient to make them [believers and their children] participants in Christ's work of redemption. ... Baptism, not preaching per se, is linked with forgiveness and the reception of the Spirit. Clearly, Peter believes God will give them something in baptism that they have not received through preaching alone. Baptism will consummate the process of regeneration begun by the Word preached.<sup>30</sup>

In this statement, the sacrament of baptism is understood to be *constitutive* of its recipients' membership in the covenant of grace. Whereas Reformed sacramental theology would speak of the Spirit producing faith through the Word and *confirming* faith through the use of the sacraments, Lusk's view of sacramental efficacy ascribes to the sacraments the power to effect communion with Christ in the fullest sense of the term. By virtue of their baptism, believers and their children are constituted members of Christ and participate in the fullness of His redemptive work on their behalf. All of the benefits of Christ's saving mediation are imparted to all those who are incorporated into the covenant community by means of baptism.

Another example of this emphasis upon baptism as an effectual means of incorporating believers and their children into Christ is provided by Steve Wilkins. As we have previously noted, in his understanding of the relation between covenant, baptism, and salvation, Wilkins also proceeds from the conviction that covenant membership involves full, saving communion with the Triune God. All persons who are incorporated into the covenant of grace enjoy "a real relationship, consisting of real communion with the Triune God through union with Christ. The covenant is not some *thing* that exists

<sup>30</sup> "Some Thoughts on the Means of Grace: A Few Proposals" (document online: [http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich\\_lusk/some-thoughts-on-the-means-of-grace](http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/some-thoughts-on-the-means-of-grace)).

no direct role in God's declaration of the righteousness of believers is contrary to the explicit teaching of the Confessions.<sup>111</sup>

## 3. Biblical and Confessional Evidence for the Imputation of Christ's Entire Obedience

Since some FV writers argue that the Bible nowhere teaches the imputation of the "active obedience" of Christ to believers, it is necessary that we consider several biblical and confessional reasons why the basis for the believer's justification includes the entire obedience of Christ.

First, the biblical descriptions of Christ's relation to the law of God in His state of humiliation are comprehensive. Throughout the whole course of Christ's life, from His conception of the virgin Mary to His sacrifice upon the cross, He was lovingly obedient to His Father's will and devoted to His people for whom He laid down His life. The obedience of Christ is a "seamless" garment of active conformity to the requirements of the law of God. In Galatians 4:4, for example, the apostle Paul declares that "when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His son, born of a woman, born *under the law*." In this pivotal verse, the expression "under the law" refers to the state from which believers in Christ have been redeemed or set free (cf. Gal. 4:21; Rom. 6:14-15). In the first instance, this freedom from the law is a freedom from the "curse" of the law, since Christ voluntarily subjected himself to this curse even though He continued in all things written in the book of the law to do them (Gal. 3:13; cf. Rom. 3:21-24). But in the second instance, this freedom from the law refers in the context of Paul's writings to a freedom from the obligation to obtain life on the basis of doing perfectly what the law requires (Gal. 3:11-12; 4:5; 5:3-4; Rom. 9:30-10:10). Christ assumed our flesh and was born "under the law" in order that He might "fulfill all righteousness" and meet all the obligations of the law on behalf of His own (Matt. 3:15; Rom. 8:1-4).

Another passage of particular importance is Romans 5:12-19, which closes the apostle Paul's summary treatment of the doctrine of justification in Romans 3-5. This passage sets forth a remarkable comparison and contrast between the first Adam and the last or second Adam, Christ. Just as all who are "in Adam" are subject to condemnation on account of his one trespass, so all who are "in Christ" receive justification and life on

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& A. 16; Lord's Day 7, Q. & A. 21; Lord's Day 15, Q. & A. 40; Lord's Day 21, Q. & A. 56; Lord's Day 23, Q. & A. 60, 61; Belgic Confession, Arts. 22, 23, 24, 29; Canons of Dort, 1:8, 9; Rejection of Errors, 1:3, 6; 2:8; Rejection of Errors, 2:1, 3, 4; Rejection of Errors, 5:1. Objections to the idea of "merit" among FV authors are common. See, e.g., Lusk, "A Response to 'The Biblical Plan of Salvation,'" in *The Auburn Avenue Theology*, pp. 118-48; James B. Jordan, "Merit versus Maturity: What Did Jesus Do for Us?" in *The Federal Vision*, pp. 151-202; P. Andrew Sandlin, "Covenant in Redemptive History: 'Gospel and Law' or 'Trust and Obey'," in *The Backbone of the Bible*, pp. 63-84; Norman Shepherd, *The Call of Grace* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2000), pp. 25-6; idem, "Justification by Works in Reformed Theology," in *Backbone of the Bible*, pp. 111-18.

<sup>111</sup> It is disingenuous to insist that the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 23, Q. & A. 60, does not teach the imputation of Christ's entire obedience, when you consider how Ursinus, one of its principal authors, interpreted its teaching. Ursinus, in his *Larger Catechism* (which was written as a basis for his university lectures on the Catechism) Q. & A. 135, makes this clear: "Why is it necessary that the satisfaction and righteousness of Christ be imputed to us in order for us to be righteous before God? Because God, who is immutably righteous and true, wants to receive us into his covenant of grace in such a way that he does not go against the covenant established at creation, that is, that he neither treats us as just nor gives us eternal life unless his law has been perfectly satisfied, either by ourselves or, since that cannot happen, by someone in our place" (as quoted and translated in *An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism: Sources, History, and Theology*, by Lyle Bierma [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005], p. 188).

most serious problems with the FV reformulation of the doctrine of justification relate to the critical questions of the basis for the believer's acquittal before God and the instrumentality of faith in receiving the grace of justification.

## 2. The Basis for Justification: Christ's "Passive Obedience" Alone

That writers of the FV reduce the meaning of justification to the forgiveness of sins is not accidental. This becomes especially evident when we consider the basis for the justification of believers. Among FV authors, it is sometimes argued that the basis for the justification of believers is not the imputation of the whole of Christ's obedience to the law. Some authors will acknowledge the importance of the act of imputation for the justification of believers; however, the "righteousness" that is imputed to believers is solely the righteousness of Christ's so-called "passive obedience" or substitutionary endurance of the penalty of the law. Christ's so-called "active obedience," namely, His life-long obedience to the Father's will and voluntary subjection to the requirements of the holy law of God, may "qualify" Christ to offer Himself as an unblemished sacrifice for the sins of His people.<sup>107</sup> But some FV proponents deny that Christ's entire obedience to the law is attributed to believers for their justification so that they are no longer under obligation to obey the law in order to be justified before God. Provided the works of faith are "non-meritorious" works, they belong to faith as the proper instrument of justification and are necessary in order for believers to obtain final justification.<sup>108</sup> Furthermore, among other authors of the FV, it is sometimes suggested that the believer's "union with" or "incorporation" into Christ through faith is a sufficient basis for justification.<sup>109</sup> The idea of imputation is said to become superfluous by virtue of the believer's union with Christ.

In our summary of the confessional understanding of justification, we have already had occasion to note that the righteousness of Christ, which is granted and imputed to believers by sheer grace, includes His entire obedience. The language of the Confessions, though it does not use the theological distinction between Christ's "active" and "passive" obedience, clearly affirms that the entirety of Christ's obedience "under the law" is imputed to believers as the basis for their justification. This could not be more clear than in Article 22 of the Belgic Confession and in Lord's Day 23 of the Heidelberg Catechism.<sup>110</sup> Therefore, the claim of FV writers that the active obedience of Christ plays

<sup>107</sup> See, e.g., Norman Shepherd, "Justification by Works in Reformed Theology," *Backbone of the Bible*, pp. 103-20.

<sup>108</sup> Norman Shepherd, "Thirty-Four Theses on Justification in Relation to Faith, Repentance, and Good Works," Thesis 24, <http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/normanshepherd/the34theses.htm>.

<sup>109</sup> E.g., Richard Lusk, "A Response to 'The Biblical Plan of Salvation,'" in *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros & Cons, Debating the Federal Vision*, ed. E. Calvin Beisner (Fort Lauderdale, FL: Knox Theological Seminary 2004), pp. 141-43; Don Garlington, "Imputation or Union with Christ? A Response to John Piper," *Reformation & Revival Journal* 12/4 (Fall, 2003): 45-113; and Michael F. Bird, "Incorporated Righteousness: A Response to Recent Evangelical Discussion concerning the Imputation of Christ's Righteousness in Justification," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47/2 (June, 2004): 253-76.

<sup>110</sup> See Nicolaas Gootjes, "Christ's Obedience and Covenant Obedience, *Koinoonia* 19/2 (Fall, 2002): 6-10. Gootjes provides evidence that the language of the Belgic Confession, Art. 22, was slightly edited and revised at the Synod of Dort from its original form in order to express explicitly the imputation of Christ's active obedience. These changes were made in order to refute some in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century who denied the imputation of Christ's active obedience. Contrary to the FV tendency to deny that Christ's entire obedience to the law "merits," in accordance with God's truth and justice, the believer's acceptance before God, the Confessions often speak of Christ's "merits" or his "meriting" of the grace of free justification, or of his fully "satisfying" the requirements of God's justice. See, e.g., Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 5, Q. & A. 12, 13, 14; Lord's Day 6, Q.

apart from Christ or in addition to Him (another *means* of grace) – rather, the covenant is union with Christ. Thus, being in covenant gives all the blessings of being united to Christ.<sup>31</sup> According to Wilkins, the sacrament of baptism is the instrumental means whereby this covenant union with Christ is effected. All who are baptized, accordingly, enjoy the fullness of participation in Christ and are the recipients of all the blessings of such participation, including regeneration, justification, and sanctification.<sup>32</sup> Though it is possible for such persons who through baptism are united to Christ to fall away in unbelief and impenitence, thereby losing the real benefits of salvation that were once their possession, Wilkins maintains that baptism is the means of incorporation into Christ and places its beneficiaries in possession of all the benefits of His saving work.<sup>33</sup>

These kinds of unqualified affirmations of the saving efficacy of the sacraments in FV writings are not incidental. They follow naturally from the kind of undifferentiated view of covenant and church membership that characterizes FV teaching generally. If membership in the covenant community entails salvation and warrants a confident affirmation of the election of its members, the sacraments, which signify and seal to all their recipients the promises of the gospel, should be viewed as saving ordinances, which effectively unite believers and their children with Christ and His church. Since membership in the covenant community is tantamount to saving union with Christ, and since baptism is the means to effect such membership, it seems to follow that baptism saves by uniting covenant members to Christ so that they are flesh of His flesh, bone of His bone.

## 3. Children at the Lord's Table

A particularly instructive example of the implications of these FV teachings is the question whether the children of believing parents should be admitted to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Since "ideas have legs," it is not surprising that one of the most obvious and practical implications of FV teaching is that all children should be admitted to the Lord's Table.

We have had occasion at several points to observe the claim of FV authors that *all* covenant members without exception – believers and their children who are recipients of the covenant promise and the accompanying sacrament of covenant incorporation, baptism – enjoy a full and saving union with Christ. Though Reformed theologians have historically distinguished between those who are "under the administration" of the covenant of grace and those who truly enjoy the saving "communion of life" that the covenant communicates, we have had occasion to see how FV proponents often reject as inappropriate any such distinction between covenant members. Within the framework of this unqualified definition of what it means for all believers and their children to be

<sup>31</sup> Steve Wilkins, "Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation," in *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros & Cons*, p. 262.

<sup>32</sup> Steve Wilkins, "Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation," in *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros & Cons*, pp. 262-4.

<sup>33</sup> Similar unqualified statements of the efficacy of the sacraments, especially the sacrament of baptism, can be found sprinkled throughout the writings of FV authors. See, e.g., Douglas Wilson, "Sacramental Efficacy in the Westminster Standards," in *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros & Cons*, p. 236: "Worthy receivers of the sacrament of baptism and the Lord's Supper are effectually saved by these sacramental means through the working of the Holy spirit and the blessing of Christ." Waters, *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology*, pp. 198-257, offers extensive evidence of FV statements relating to the efficacy of the sacraments. For a critical evaluation of the FV exaggeration of the efficacy of the sacraments, see William B. Evans, "'Really Exhibited and Conferred . . . in His Appointed Time': Baptism and the New Reformed Sacramentalism," *Presbyterion* 31/2 (Fall 2005): 72-88.

members of the covenant of grace, we have also seen that FV writers strongly emphasize the efficacy of baptism as a sacrament of incorporation into Christ. The FV emphasis upon the significance and efficacy of baptism is of particular relevance to the question whether children of believing parents should be admitted to the Table of the Lord. Since the baptism of the children of believers effectively unites them to Christ and grants them full participation in His saving work, baptism by itself is thought to provide a sufficient warrant for admitting such children to the Table of the Lord without requiring a preceding profession of faith.<sup>34</sup>

The common advocacy of paedocommunion on the part of most FV writers, therefore, is no accident, but follows from the most basic features of the FV itself. The advocacy of paedocommunion is a necessary consequence of the FV doctrine of the covenant of grace and its sacraments. Within the framework of the FV understanding of what is true of all members of the covenant community, and of the effectiveness of baptism as constitutive of their incorporation into Christ, the warrant for the admission of children of believers to the Table of the Lord should be apparent. It is a simple matter of theological and covenantal consistency to move from the reality of covenant membership and saving union with Christ, which are the possession of all believers and their children under the covenant of grace, to the reception of children of the covenant at the Lord's Table. In the view of many of FV writers, to exclude children from the Table of the Lord denies them privileges that are theirs as members of Christ. The children of believing parents, who already possess Christ in His fullness, may scarcely be denied a participation in Christ by means of the sacrament that Christ appointed to strengthen communion with himself and to nourish faith. At stake in the debate regarding the admission of children to the Lord's Table is nothing other than a consistent covenantal hermeneutic or way of interpreting Scripture. Consequently, those who advocate the admission of children to the Lord's Table upon the basis of their covenant membership regard the historic practice of the Reformed churches on this question to be baptistic and inconsistent.<sup>35</sup>

### C. Assurance, Perseverance, and Apostasy

One of the primary motivations that underlies the FV is the desire to resolve certain pastoral problems that have surfaced in the history of the Reformed churches. A frequent charge of FV writers is that many Presbyterian and Reformed churches have aggravated the problem of the assurance of salvation by failing to articulate a biblical view of the covenant of grace. Furthermore, because many Reformed believers have viewed the covenant of grace from the perspective of the doctrine of election, they have also failed to do justice to the biblical warnings against apostasy and covenant breaking on the part of those who belong to the covenant people of God.

<sup>34</sup> Perhaps recognizing the danger of this kind of understanding of paedobaptism as an effectual instrument of salvation, Rich Lusk has posited the notion of a kind of "paedofaith" that embraces the promise that baptism communicates. See Rich Lusk, *Paedofaith: A Primer on the Mystery of Infant Salvation and a Handbook for Covenant Parents* (Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2005); and Rich Lusk, "Baptismal Efficacy and Baptismal Latency: A Sacramental Dialogue," *Presbyterian* 32/1 (Spring, 2006): 36.

<sup>35</sup> For a brief summary of this argument, see Gregg Strawbridge, "The Polemics of Infant Communion," in *The Case for Covenant Communion*, pp. 147-65. For a recent critical evaluation of this argument, see Cornelis P. Venema, *Children at the Lord's Table? Assessing the Case for Paedocommunion* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2009).

(promise) of everlasting life in unbreakable communion with God, they also reject the teaching that Christ's entire obedience to the law of God (all of His holy works or "merits") is the exclusive and just basis for the believer's inheritance of eternal life. Thus, the serious errors present in the FV reformulations of the doctrine of justification are symptoms of an erroneous understanding of the covenants between the Triune God and His people before and after the Fall into sin. These errors are the inevitable consequence of a failure to acknowledge the implications of God's "righteousness" in the administration of the covenants before and after the Fall, including the obligation of perfect obedience to His righteous law.

### 1. Justification as the "Forgiveness of Sins"

Proponents of the FV often define what is meant by justification in a way that conforms to the historic Reformed view, or appears to be conformed to it. Though at least one author has suggested that the language of justification be enlarged to include the idea of "definitive sanctification,"<sup>104</sup> most of the proponents of the FV acknowledge that justification is a judicial declaration of the believer's right standing (or status) before God, and that it ought to be clearly distinguished from sanctification. Justification does not refer to the process of renewal in righteousness that occurs by the working of the Holy Spirit in the believer's heart and life. Rather, it refers to God's gracious acquittal of believing sinners on account of the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

However, despite the acknowledgment among FV proponents that justification is a judicial act of God (declaring the believer's innocence), there is a tendency to define this act as consisting only in the "forgiveness of sins" or the non-imputation (reckoning) of the guilt of sin to believers. In the writings of Norman Shepherd, an influential figure among those associated with the FV, it is explicitly asserted that justification consists only in the forgiveness of sins and does not include the imputation of the entire righteousness of Christ to believers.<sup>105</sup> Though we will return to this subject more directly in the next section of our report, it should be noted that this identification of justification with the forgiveness of sins represents a significant change in the usual Reformed doctrine of justification. It is one thing to say that justified believers are not regarded by God as guilty sinners who are obliged to suffer the penalty due them for their sins. It is another thing to say that justified believers are regarded by God as holy and righteous, even as Christ is holy and righteous.<sup>106</sup> When justification is defined simply as the forgiveness of sins, it cannot grant title to eternal life. The forgiveness of sins removes the guilt of sin, but it does not declare that the forgiven sinner has met the full requirement of the law in order to obtain the inheritance of eternal life. Since the implications of this difference will become more clear in what follows, we will refrain from further evaluation of this reduction in the meaning of justification at this point. The

<sup>104</sup> Peter Leithart, "Judge Me, O God": Biblical Perspectives on Justification," in *The Federal Vision*, ed. Steve Wilkins and Duane Spencer (Monroe, Louisiana: Athanasius Press, 2004), pp. 203-36.

<sup>105</sup> "Justification by Faith in Pauline Theology," in *Backbone of the Bible*, ed. P. Andrew Sandlin (Nacogdoches, TX: Covenant Media Press, 2004), p. 89 *et passim*; idem, "Justification by Works in Reformed Theology," *Backbone of the Bible*, pp. 103-20; idem, "The Imputation of Active Obedience," in *A Faith That is Never Alone*, ed. P. Andrew Sandlin (La Grange, CA: Kerygma Press, 2007), pp. 249-78.

<sup>106</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 23, Q. & A. 60: "as if I had never had nor committed any sin, and myself had accomplished all the obedience which Christ has rendered for me; if only I accept such benefit with a believing heart"; Lord's Day 23, Q. & A. 61.

Another feature of the Confessions' understanding of justification concerns the role of the sacraments in confirming and nourishing faith. In traditional Roman Catholic teaching, the sacraments confer grace to their recipients by their administration, provided no obstacle nullifies their efficacy. The sacraments "infuse" grace in an *ex opera operato* ("by the work performed") fashion. Furthermore, the grace infused by the sacraments, when the recipient freely concurs with this grace and performs good works, makes the believer a righteous or holy person. So far as the doctrine of justification is concerned, the Roman Catholic view is that baptism entirely removes original sin and makes the baptized person inherently righteous.<sup>100</sup> For this reason, the "instrumental" cause of "first justification" is the sacrament of baptism. So long as those who are baptized do not commit "mortal sin" and fall out of a state of grace, the use of the other sacraments provides a continual infusion of grace whereby the faithful are able to enjoy "further" or "second" justification as they increase in good works and "merit" further grace and finally the grace of eternal blessedness. In this conception of the sacraments, justification, as a process of renewal in righteousness, is first given and then increased by means of the sacraments.<sup>101</sup>

According to the Reformed Confessions, the Holy Spirit produces the response of faith by means of the holy gospel, and confirms or strengthens faith by the proper use of the sacraments.<sup>102</sup> As visible signs and seals, which the Lord has appointed in view of the weakness of believers, the sacraments do not add anything to the Word but rather serve as visible words and tokens of the gospel promise of salvation on the basis of the work of Christ.<sup>103</sup> So far as the believer's justification is concerned, faith alone is the instrument of justification, and the sacrament strengthens faith by confirming the gospel promise of free justification on the basis of the merits of Christ. Though the sacraments are a means of grace, they serve to communicate Christ and His saving benefits only in the way of faith and never apart from the preceding Word to which the sacraments are added. To ascribe to the sacrament by itself the power to effect a saving union with Christ, which imparts all of the benefits of His work as Mediator, including justification, is contrary to the biblical and confessional understanding of the sacrament.

## B. An Evaluation of the FV Revisions of the Doctrine of Justification

Though there is a diversity of positions on the doctrine of justification among authors of the FV, there are several significant revisions to the confessional view we have outlined that have been proposed by some proponents of FV. These revisions are the consequence of a number of key themes in the FV reformulation of the doctrine of the covenant, particularly the obligation of obedience to the law of God in the pre-Fall covenant between the Triune God and Adam, the representative head of the human race. Because proponents of the FV reject the teaching that Adam's whole-hearted obedience to the law of God was the only way whereby he could justly inherit or secure the blessing

<sup>100</sup> The Belgic Confession, Art. 15, has in mind this view of the sacrament, when it notes that original sin is not "altogether abolished or wholly eradicated even by baptism."

<sup>101</sup> *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, Sixth Session, Chap. 10 (Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 2:89-118).

<sup>102</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 25, Q. & A. 65.

<sup>103</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 25, Q. & A. 66; Belgic Confession, Art. 33.

## 1. Assurance of Salvation

The FV solution to the problem of the believer's assurance of salvation should be readily apparent from what we have already noted in respect to the FV's doctrine of the covenant and the sacraments. According to FV authors, the Reformed churches historically have been plagued by the question as to how believers ought to be assured of their own salvation. Rather than basing such assurance upon the "objective" promises God makes in the covenant of grace, or upon the efficacy of the sacramental communication of the grace of Christ in baptism, believers have been encouraged to look within themselves for concrete signs of their regeneration and conversion. Several FV authors maintain that this accounts for the tendency to engage in a kind of "morbid introspection," a looking inward to ascertain evidences of the work of God's grace in the individual believer's life, as the pathway to obtaining assurance of salvation.<sup>36</sup> Because of the uncertainty and unreliability of Christian experience, however, this introspective or subjective approach to the assurance of salvation is unable to grant the believer any secure confidence before God.

The solution to the problem of assurance that is proposed by FV authors is to base the assurance of salvation on the status of believers as members of the covenant community, and to appeal to the efficacy of the sacraments as a reliable basis for confidence. A common theme among writers of the FV is that their view of the covenant and its sacraments resolves a problem that many Reformed churches have only aggravated. John Barach offers an especially clear statement of this solution:

[H]ow do you know that promise [of the covenant] is really for you and not just for other people in the church, people who've advanced further in their sanctification or who've had some special experience that convinced them of God's love? The answer is that you've had a special experience. You've been baptized. All God's salvation—from election to glorification—is found in Christ. And when you were baptized, God promised to unite you to Jesus Christ. That's what it means to be baptized into Christ. You're united to Jesus and all His salvation is for you. At baptism, God promises that you're really one of His elect: I will be your God and you will be my child. And God never hands out counterfeit promises.<sup>37</sup>

In his comments on the problem of assurance in the Reformed churches, Steve Wilkins makes a similar claim. Rather than look to a subjective experience of conversion as the basis for assurance, believers and their children should be directed to their membership in the covenant and their reception of the sacrament of baptism. When believers look to their "objective" membership in the covenant community, they have a sure basis for the assurance of salvation. Moreover, this assurance is more than a "judgment of charity." It

<sup>36</sup> See, e.g., John Barach, "Covenant and Election" (2002 AAPCPC); idem, "Covenant and Election," in *The Federal Vision*, p. 38; Steve Wilkins, "Apostasy and the Covenant II" (2001 AAPCPC); and Waters, *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology*, pp. 125-56.

<sup>37</sup> "Baptism and Election" (August 21, 2002, AAPCPC), a response to a question posed to Steve Schlissel. As cited by Waters, *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology*, pp. 134-5. Also see John Barach, "Covenant and Election," in *The Federal Vision*, p. 38 *et passim*.

is an assurance that is based upon what we know to be true in the strongest possible sense.<sup>38</sup> As another FV writer concisely expresses it, “The gospel is preached, the water was applied, the Table is now set. Do you believe? The question is a simple one.”<sup>39</sup>

## 2. Perseverance and Apostasy

Even though the FV emphasis upon the assurance of salvation, which is based upon objective covenant membership and efficacy of the sacraments, might appear “presumptuous,” it is interesting to observe that there is another emphasis also present in the teaching of the FV. Since the covenant is always “conditional,” requiring the obedience of faith on the part of those with whom God covenants in order to secure the covenant blessing of eternal life, FV writers stress the need for an obedient faith that perseveres to the end, and that does not fall away into apostasy. Because all members of the covenant community are obliged to new obedience, failure to continue in the way of faithfulness to the covenant will ultimately prove spiritually fatal. One of the themes of FV writers, accordingly, is the theme of perseverance in the way of covenant faithfulness, lest covenant members lose their salvation through their disobedience.

We have already noted the way some FV writers speak of the salvation of those who belong to the covenant community as one that may be experienced only “for a time.” Since “covenant election” does not coincide with “election” in the proper sense of God’s eternal purpose, it is possible for covenant members to fall away from a salvation that they once possessed. In September 2002, the session of the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church adopted a “Summary Statement of AAPC’s Position on the Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation.” In this statement, the possibility of covenantal apostasy on the part of persons who have genuinely experienced saving union with Christ is affirmed.

God mysteriously has chosen to draw many into the covenant community who are not elect in the ultimate sense and who are not destined to receive final salvation. These non-elect covenant members are truly brought to Christ, united to Him in the Church by baptism and receive various operations of the Holy Spirit. Corporately, they are part of the chosen, redeemed, Spirit-indwelt people. Sooner or later, however, in the wise counsel of God, these fail to bear fruit and fall away. In some sense, they were really joined to the elect people, really sanctified by Christ’s blood, really recipients of new life given by the Holy Spirit. God, however, withholds from them the gift of perseverance, and all is lost. They break the gracious new covenant they entered into at baptism.<sup>40</sup>

Among FV writers, it is frequently argued that Christ’s words in John 15:1-8, which speak of some who do not abide in the vine and bear its corresponding fruit, describe the reality of some who enjoy a true communion with Christ but subsequently fall away

<sup>38</sup> See, e.g., John Barach, “Covenant and History” (2002 AAPCPC); and Wilkins, “Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation” in *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros & Cons*, pp. 259ff.

<sup>39</sup> Douglas Wilson, “Reformed” is Not Enough: *Recovering the Objectivity of the Covenant* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2002), p. 130.

<sup>40</sup> “Summary Statement of AAPC’s Position on the Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation,” [www.auburnavenue.org](http://www.auburnavenue.org). For a survey of similar statements by FV authors, see Waters, *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology*, pp. 146-67.

human achievement before God. Because such faith finds its sufficiency in Christ’s saving work, it also produces a confident assurance of His favor.<sup>94</sup>

## 4. Faith and Works (Justification and Sanctification)

Before we turn to the way in which the FV revises the confessional doctrine of justification, we need to note briefly two additional features of the Confessions’ doctrine of justification. The first of these features is the confessional understanding of the relation between faith as the alone instrument of justification and the good works that justifying faith necessarily produces.

In the Confessions, a clear distinction is drawn between faith, which is the alone instrument of justification, and the works that faith produces in the way of sanctification. Though the Confessions, echoing Scriptural teaching (Gal. 5:16), insist that true faith always and necessarily produces good works, they are careful to exclude the works that are the fruits of faith from the instrumentality of faith in justification.<sup>95</sup> For example, in the Heidelberg Catechism, it is noted that “good works” are only those works that flow from true faith, are conformed to the standard of the law of God, and are performed in order to glorify God.<sup>96</sup> In the Belgic Confession, it is clearly affirmed that faith justifies believers “before [they] do good works; otherwise they could not be good works, any more than the fruit of a tree can be good before the tree itself is good.”<sup>97</sup> This language should not be understood to imply a temporal relationship between faith and good works, as though believers could first be justified and sometime later begin to be sanctified. The precedence of faith here is a theological precedence. Only believers, who are acceptable to God and dearly loved for the sake of Christ’s work alone, can please God, even though the works that flow from faith are never perfect or such as could contribute anything to their justification.<sup>98</sup> The inseparability of faith and works, of justification and sanctification, is based upon the fullness of Christ’s work for and in believers. Christ, whose righteousness alone is the basis for the believer’s justification, also renews the believer after His own image by the Holy Spirit.<sup>99</sup> However, the necessity and obligation of new obedience in the life of the believer is not motivated by any suggestion that good works play a role in the believer’s justification. Rather, the new obedience of the believer is a “free” and “grateful” response to the gracious provision of redemption through the work of Christ, and is not motivated fundamentally by the prospect of reward or obtaining final salvation on this basis.

## 5. Justification and the Sacraments

<sup>94</sup> The formulation, “faith alone,” does not mean to imply that faith, which is the exclusive instrument of justification, is a lonely or work-less faith. According to the Reformers, true faith always produces fruits in good works. Cf. Calvin’s well-known comment in his “Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, with the Antidote,” in *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters* (ed. Henry Beveridge; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House reprint, 1983 [1851]), 3:152: “It is therefore faith alone which justifies, and yet the faith which justifies is not alone; just as it is the heat alone of the sun which warms the earth, and yet in the sun it is not alone, because it is constantly conjoined with light.”

<sup>95</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 24, Q. & A. 64; Lord’s Day 32, Q. & A. 86; Lord’s Day 33, Q. & A. 91; Belgic Confession, Art. 24.

<sup>96</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 33, Q. & A. 91.

<sup>97</sup> Belgic Confession, Art. 24.

<sup>98</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 24, Q. & A. 62.

<sup>99</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 32, Q. & A. 86.

they cannot do.<sup>89</sup> No one can be justified by the works of the law because no one actually does perfectly what the whole law requires. Contrary to the law's function to expose human sin and guilt, the gospel proclaims the good news that God freely grants to believers in Christ what the law could never achieve: acceptance and favor with Himself on account of the righteousness of Christ.

### 3. "Through Faith Alone": The Instrument of Justification

The Confessions' insistence that believers are justified by faith alone is an obvious implication of their insistence that justification is a free gift of God's grace in Christ. If justification is a free gift, which is based upon a righteousness graciously granted and imputed to believers, it most emphatically is not by works. "Grace alone," "Christ alone," and "faith alone" are inter-related expressions. To say the one is to say the other. To deny the one is to deny the other. If we are saved by grace alone, then works must be excluded as a necessary condition for our being accepted into favor with God. If we are saved by the person and work of Christ alone, then nothing believers do before God in obedience to the law could possibly complete or compensate for anything lacking in His righteousness. In the Confessions, this is precisely why "faith alone" is the instrument whereby believers receive the free gift of justification upon the basis of the righteousness of Christ alone.<sup>90</sup>

To express the unique role of faith in the reception of the gift of free justification, the Reformers used a variety of expressions. Calvin, for example, spoke of faith as an "empty vessel" in order to stress its character as a receptacle that brings nothing to God but receives all things from him.<sup>91</sup> Luther used the striking analogy of a ring that clasps a jewel; faith has no value of itself, but clasps the jewel that is Christ and His righteousness.<sup>92</sup> Calvin also remarked that, in a manner of speaking, faith is a "passive thing," because it is the cessation of all working and striving to obtain favor and acceptance with God in order to rest in a favor freely given in Christ.<sup>93</sup> What makes faith a suitable instrument for the reception of free justification is that it is marked by a humble acknowledgement that all honor in salvation belongs to God in Christ. As a receptive and passive acknowledgement of the sheer graciousness of free justification, faith is an act of trustful acceptance of what God freely grants believers in Christ. When believers accept the free gift of justification by faith, they look away from themselves and focus their attention upon Christ who is their righteousness. Faith is the antithesis of any boasting in

through apostasy and lose what was once theirs.<sup>41</sup> Because the covenant is always conditioned upon a persevering and obedient faith, those who fall away through unbelief and disobedience lose their salvation in union with Christ and all its accompanying blessings.

Though it would not be difficult to multiply examples of this kind of emphasis within the writings of FV proponents, the FV understanding of perseverance and apostasy should be fairly transparent. Because all those who belong to the covenant people of God by baptism are genuinely incorporated into Christ and thereby participate in the saving benefits of His work of Mediator, failure on their part to meet the conditions of the covenant may entail the loss of saving blessings that were once their possession. Since FV authors resist any distinctions between some within the covenant community who are only "externally" or "apparently" in union with Christ and others who are truly and savingly in union with Christ, they are compelled to regard covenant apostasy as tantamount to a kind of "falling from grace" or the loss of a temporary election and salvation. Even though the FV emphasizes the close connection between covenant, election, and salvation, the FV also stresses the necessity of meeting the obligations of the covenant in order to ensure the blessings of salvation in Christ. This means that covenant members must be faithful in the way of an obedient and persevering faith, lest they risk the loss of what was once theirs when they were first incorporated into Christ through baptism.

### D. Evaluating these FV Emphases

Since the mandate of our Committee focuses upon justification, our evaluation of the emphases of the FV that we have identified will be restricted primarily to their implications for our understanding of this doctrine. Since these emphases are comprehensive and far-ranging, and include subjects that have been disputed throughout the history of the Reformed churches, we believe it would exceed our mandate to consider them in great detail or to attempt to offer "the" Reformed or confessional view of these issues. In the history of the Reformed churches, there has always been room for a diversity of opinion and formulation within the boundaries of the Confessions' summary of the Word of God. With respect to some of these FV emphases, we wish to honor legitimate differences of expression within the framework of the "Forms of Unity" to which the URCNA as a federation subscribes. However, we also believe that some of these emphases are problematic and at odds with the Confessions at important points, particularly in terms of their implications for the doctrine of justification.

### 1. Covenant, Election, and Salvation

As we noted in our survey of the claims of the FV movement, several proponents argue for the closest possible relationship between covenant, election, and salvation. When God covenants with His people (believers and their children), He graciously elects them to a true and saving communion with Himself. All who are members of the

<sup>89</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 24, Q. & A. 62: "while even our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin."

<sup>90</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 23, Q. & A. 61: "Why do you say that you are righteous only by faith? Not that I am acceptable to God on account of the worthiness of my faith, but because only the satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ is my righteousness before God, and I can receive the same and make it my own in no other way than by faith only"; Belgic Confession, Art. 22. The Scriptures speak of faith as the instrument or occasion of the believer's justification, but never speak of faith as that "on account of which" believers are justified. See, e.g., Gal. 2:16 ("through faith"); 3:28 ("by faith"); and Rom. 5:1 ("by faith").

<sup>91</sup> *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John T. McNeill; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), III.xi.7.

<sup>92</sup> *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 55 vols. (American ed.; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, and Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-1986), 26:89, 134.

<sup>93</sup> *Institutes*, III. Xiii.5.

<sup>41</sup> See, e.g., Steve Wilkins, "Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation," in *The Federal Vision*, p. 63-4; Norman Shepherd, "The Covenant Context for Evangelism," in *The New Testament Student and Theology*, ed. J.H. Skilton (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1976); and Douglas Wilson, "The Objectivity of the Covenant," *Credenda/Agenda* 15:1,4-5.

covenant people of God may legitimately proceed from the conviction that they are “elect in Christ” and possess accordingly all the saving benefits of Christ’s work as Mediator. With respect to the doctrine of justification, this means that all covenant members enjoy all gospel benefits, including justification, by virtue of their membership in Christ and His church.

From the standpoint of the Confessions, this FV identification of covenant, election, and salvation is at best overstated and at worst seriously unbiblical. By identifying covenant, election, and salvation, FV proponents are unable to maintain clearly that those whom God elects in Christ will unfailingly be granted the fullness of salvation in unbreakable communion with God. Since not all those with whom God covenants in history are “elect” in the proper sense of the term, especially as election is defined in the Belgic Confession (Article 16) and the Canons of Dort, we may not assert in an unqualified manner that they are all elected unto salvation and participant in the saving benefits of Christ’s work as Mediator. Within the framework of this identification of election and covenant, some FV authors speak of covenant members who, though elect and saved in Christ, do not persevere in the covenant and subsequently lose their salvation. However, in the Reformed Confessions, God’s gracious purpose of election infallibly ensures that the elect will be granted every saving blessing in Christ, including the blessing of free justification, and that they will be preserved by God’s steadfast love and faithfulness in this salvation. According to the Canons of Dort, God eternally elected to give His people to Christ. In order to accomplish this purpose, God in time redeems, effectually calls, justifies, and glorifies them.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, the Canons of Dort expressly repudiate the error of those who teach that Christ has purchased any temporal saving benefits for the non-elect, even those who may be members of the church for a time, as though they were temporally justified or sanctified.<sup>43</sup> The simple identification of covenant, election, and salvation, which is a principal theme of several FV proponents, can only leave the impression that there is a kind of covenant election that depends upon the covenant member’s faithfulness and obedience. Such covenant election does not ensure anything more than a “temporary salvation” and can be subsequently lost through covenant apostasy. Though some FV authors insist that the covenant of grace is tantamount to election unto salvation in Christ, they are compelled to equivocate in their use of the language of “election,” “justification,” and “salvation,” since by their own admission not all of the elect or justified persevere in the way of an obedient faith. In this FV teaching, elect and justified persons can cease to enjoy a salvation that they once possessed.

There are at least two ways in which FV authors diverge at this point from the teaching of the Three Forms of Unity. In the first place, the Canons of Dort are quite explicit in rejecting the teaching of various “kinds of election,” as though some are elected to grace but not to glory, or to salvation but not to “the way of salvation, which he

<sup>42</sup> Canons of Dort, 1:7: “And so he decided to give the chosen ones to Christ to be saved, and to call and draw them effectively into Christ’s fellowship through his Word and Spirit. In other words, he decided to grant them true faith in Christ, to justify them, to sanctify them, and finally, after powerfully preserving them in the fellowship of his Son, to glorify them”; 2:8: “it was God’s will that Christ through the blood of the cross (by which he confirmed the new covenant) should effectively redeem from every people, tribe, nation and language all those and only those who were chosen from eternity to salvation and given to him by the father; that he should grant them faith ... that he should faithfully preserve them to the very end.”

<sup>43</sup> Canons of Dort, Rejection of errors 1:2.

believers by grace, but partly upon the basis of the work and merits of believers, which are the fruit of God’s grace at work in them.<sup>85</sup>

In their rejection of this Roman Catholic understanding of the basis for the justification of believers, the Reformed Confessions affirm that justification is wholly a free gift of God’s grace. Grace alone – not grace plus the working of believers prompted by grace – is the exclusive basis for the justification and salvation of believers. So far as their acceptance with God is concerned, believers rest their confidence, not in anything they might do in obedience to God, but in God’s gracious favor demonstrated in the free provision of redemption through Jesus Christ. Consequently, the Confessions emphasize that the righteousness that justifies believers is an “imputed” righteousness, not a personal or inherent righteousness.<sup>86</sup> Though this language is frequently criticized for suggesting that justification involves a kind of “legal fiction,” the Confessions use it on the basis of the Scriptural teaching that the believer’s justification rests upon the righteousness of Another, namely, Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:12-21; Phil. 3:9; 2 Cor. 5:19). By means of His suffering and cross, Christ bore the penalty and suffered the curse of the law on behalf of His people (Rom. 3:21-26; 4:25; Gal. 3:13; 1 Pet. 3:13). Christ satisfied God’s justice by His endurance of the condemnation and death due those who violate the law of God. Furthermore, by means of His obedience and fulfillment of all the requirements of the law, Christ met all the demands of righteousness on their behalf. Christ alone, upon the basis of “all his merits, and so many holy works which He has done for us and in our stead,” secures the justification of His people before God.<sup>87</sup>

Consistent with this understanding of the basis for the justification of believers, the Confessions sharply distinguish between the law and the gospel in relation to justification. When distinguished from the gospel, the law of God refers to the righteous requirements that God imposes upon human beings as His image bearers. Whether Jews, who received the law of God in written form through Moses, or Gentiles, who have the works of the law written upon their consciences, all human beings fail to live in perfect conformity to the law’s demands (Rom. 2-3).<sup>88</sup> By the standard of the perfect law of God, all human beings stand condemned and are worthy of death as the wages of sin (Rom. 6:13). Though the law of God is good and holy, it can only demand from believers what

<sup>85</sup> *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, Sixth Session, Chap. 10 (Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 2:99). This has two serious and acknowledged consequences: first, Christ alone is no longer the believer’s righteousness before God; and second, the believer cannot have any assurance of salvation (unless by special dispensation and revelation) since his own righteousness can scarcely provide any sure footing in the presence of God.

<sup>86</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 23, Q. & A. 60: “God grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ”; Lord’s Day 24, Q. & A. 62; Belgic Confession, Art. 22: “But Jesus Christ, imputing to us all His merits.”

<sup>87</sup> Belgic Confession, Art. 22. Cf. Louis Berkhof’s definition of justification in his *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans reprint, 1939, 1941), p. 513: “Justification is a judicial act of God, in which He declares, on the basis of the righteousness of Jesus Christ, that all the claims of the law are satisfied with respect to the sinner.” Reformed theology distinguished in this connection between the “active” and “passive” obedience of Christ. The purpose of this distinction was not to divide Christ’s obedience into two chronological stages (the first being his earthly ministry, the second being his sacrificial death upon the cross) or even into two parts, but to distinguish two facets of the one obedience of Christ. Christ’s active obedience refers to his life of conformity to the precepts of the law; Christ’s passive obedience refers to his life of suffering under the penalty of the law, especially in his crucifixion (Rom. 5:12-21; Phil. 2:5ff; Gal. 4:4). For presentations of this distinction and its significance for justification, see Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 379-82, 513ff.; Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 2:646-59; and James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1997 [1867]), pp. 314-38.

<sup>88</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 2.



transformation equivalent to what in the Reformed conception is regarded as the work of sanctification.<sup>80</sup>

Though the language of justification is metaphorical, depicting sinners in legal terms as persons called to appear before God as their Judge, this language represents the real circumstance of sinners in relation to God. As creatures originally created in God's image, but now fallen into sin in Adam, all human beings are accountable before God and deserving of condemnation and death (Rom. 2-3).<sup>81</sup> Consequently, the problem that justification addresses can hardly be exaggerated. To be judged innocent or guilty by a human court is a matter of some importance. But to be judged in God's court is a matter of ultimate religious importance. Everything finally depends upon the sinner's "reputation" in God's judgment. The question of justification is not merely one question among many, but *the* religious question, the paramount question in life and in death. The justification of believers is a definitive act, which declares the forgiveness of their sins and righteousness before God. It anticipates the final judgment and declares that "all the curse" of the law has been removed for believers.<sup>82</sup> Therefore, in the biblical and confessional understanding of the gospel, justification is the principal benefit of Christ's saving work, revealing God's grace toward undeserving sinners whom he saves from condemnation and death (Rom. 5:12-21).<sup>83</sup>

## 2. "By Grace Alone", "On Account of Christ Alone": The Basis for Free Justification

Though the Confessions reject the traditional Roman Catholic view that confuses justification and sanctification, treating justification as though it involved a process of moral renewal, this is not their basic objection to it. According to the Confessions, the basic error of Roman Catholicism resides in its wrong conception of *the basis* of the verdict of innocence and righteousness that justification declares. In Roman Catholic teaching, God justifies believers in part on the basis of their own righteousness. Because justification includes a process of moral renewal, the righteousness that justifies believers is said to be an inherent righteousness.<sup>84</sup> When God justifies believers, He does not do so solely upon the basis of the work and merits of Christ, which are granted and imputed to

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<sup>80</sup> Cf. the definition of justification in *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, Sixth Session, Chapter 7 (quoted from Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* [reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985 (1931)], 3:94): "This disposition, or preparation, is followed by Justification itself, which is not remission of sins merely, but also the sanctification and renewal of the inward man, through the voluntary reception of the grace, and of the gifts, whereby man of unjust becomes just [*fit iustus*] ...."

<sup>81</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 3, Q. & A. 10.

<sup>82</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 19, Q. & A. 52: "What comfort is it to you that Christ *shall come to judge the living and the dead*? That in all my sorrows and persecutions, with uplifted head I look for the very same Person who before has offered Himself for my sake to the tribunal of God, and has removed all curse from me, to come as Judge from heaven."

<sup>83</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 23, Q. & A. 59: "But what does it profit you now that you believe all this? That I am righteous in Christ before God, and an heir to eternal life"; Belgic Confession, Art. 23.

<sup>84</sup> Cf. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 2:95-6: "For, although no one can be just, but he to whom the merits of the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ are communicated, yet is this done in the said justification of the impious, when by the merit of that same most holy Passion, *the charity of God is poured forth*, by the Holy Spirit, *in the hearts of those that are justified*, and is inherent therein [*atque ipsis inhaeret*]."

(that is, God) prepared in advance for us to walk in."<sup>44</sup> According to the Canons of Dort, all the fruits of election, which include "faith, holiness, and the other saving gifts," are included within God's purpose of election and are granted in time to those whom He elects.<sup>45</sup> The formulation of some FV authors that allows for an election to salvation "for a time," which can then be lost through subsequent disobedience and apostasy, is expressly included among the views that the Canons reject.<sup>46</sup> In our survey of FV emphases, we noted how some authors speak of an election to a temporary salvation and non-persevering faith. As it stands, this FV emphasis is incompatible with the express language of the Canons of Dort, when they reject the position of those

[w]ho teach that God's election to eternal life is of many kinds: one general and indefinite, the other particular and definite; and the latter in turn either incomplete, revocable, nonperemptory (or conditional), or else complete, irrevocable, and peremptory (or absolute). Likewise, who teach that there is one election to faith and another to salvation, so that there can be an election to justifying faith apart from a peremptory election to salvation.<sup>47</sup>

Contrary to the teaching of a temporary salvation and a non-persevering faith, the last main point of doctrine set forth in the Canons of Dort deals with the believer's perseverance in the way of faith and salvation. The teaching of the perseverance of the saints follows properly from the other main points of doctrine that the Canons summarize. Since God's purpose of election will be infallibly accomplished, believers may be assured that God will preserve them in the way of faith and salvation. In the beautiful language of the *Canons*, God's "plan cannot be changed, his promise cannot fail, the calling according to his purpose cannot be revoked, the merit of Christ as well as his interceding and preserving cannot be nullified, and the sealing of the Holy Spirit can neither be invalidated nor wiped out."<sup>48</sup>

In the second place, the FV tendency to equate election and membership in the covenant of grace compromises the Canons of Dort's teaching of *unconditional* election. Though FV writers maintain that all covenant members are elect in Christ, they also want to stress the *conditionality* of the covenant relationship. If those with whom God covenants do not meet the conditions of the covenant, namely, persevering faith and repentance, they can lose their salvation and become subject to God's covenant wrath. Since the covenant obliges believers and their children to embrace the promise of the gospel in the way of a living faith, it is possible that some covenant members can lose the grace of communion with God in Christ that was once theirs. The problem with the FV formulation at this point is not that it emphasizes the "conditionality" of the covenant relationship. It is undoubtedly true that the covenant promise demands the response of faith and repentance. The Reformed Confessions consistently maintain that believers and

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<sup>44</sup> Canons of Dort, 1:8.

<sup>45</sup> Canons of Dort, 1:9.

<sup>46</sup> Canons of Dort, Rejection of Errors 1:5-6: "Who teach that not every election to salvation is unchangeable, but that some of the chosen can perish and do in fact perish eternally, with no decision of God to prevent it."

<sup>47</sup> Canons of Dort, Rejection of Errors, 1:2.

<sup>48</sup> Canons of Dort 5:8. Cf. Canons of Dort, Rejection of Errors, 5:3: "Who teach that those who truly believe and have been born again not only can forfeit justifying faith as well as grace and salvation totally and to the end, but also in actual fact do often forfeit them and are lost forever. For this opinion nullifies the very grace of justification and regeneration as well as the continual preservation by Christ ...."

their children are ordinarily saved in Christ in the way of faith and repentance.<sup>49</sup> However, the FV tendency to identify election and covenant in an unqualified manner renders saving election losable, election being conditional upon covenant faithfulness. In this way, faith and repentance, as conditions of the covenant, cease to be the fruits of God's gracious purpose of election (cf. Phil. 2:12-13; Eph. 2:10; Tit. 3:4-8; Rom. 8:1-4). It is proper to emphasize, as FV authors do, the decisive importance of persevering faith and obedience within the covenant relationship. However, it is improper to formulate the relation between election and covenant so that persevering faith and obedience are not themselves the fruits of God's gracious election and work on behalf of His own through the ministry of the Spirit. In some of the writings of FV authors, covenant faithfulness and covenant unfaithfulness are conditions, respectively, for election unto final salvation and election unto temporary salvation. From the standpoint of the Reformed Confessions, however, it must always be emphasized that what the Lord requires in the way of faith and repentance, He also gives by the operations of the Holy Spirit through the gospel Word and its accompanying sacraments. Even the so-called "conditions" of the covenant of grace are graciously met in accordance with God's purpose of election.<sup>50</sup>

## 2. The Pre-Fall Covenant

One of the most significant features of FV teaching, and one that directly bears upon the doctrine of justification, is its position on the pre-fall covenant relationship between God and all human beings in Adam. FV proponents do not approve the Reformed language of a pre-fall "covenant of works," and reject the idea that Adam's obedience within this covenant relationship would in any sense "merit" the reward of eternal life that was promised to him. Furthermore, since there is a close biblical parallel between the fall and disobedience of the first Adam, which is the basis for the condemnation and death of all men, and the obedience of Christ, which is the basis for the justification and life all who are members of Christ by faith, FV authors oppose some features of the historic Reformed view of Christ's saving work. In the Reformed tradition, the obedience of Christ in its entirety (active and passive) is viewed as an obedience that justly "merits" eternal life for believers. Christ's righteousness is viewed in terms of His fulfillment of all the obligations "under the law" that Adam failed to meet, but that Christ met on behalf of His own for their justification. The manner in which FV writers reject the doctrine of a pre-fall "covenant of works" compels them to reject the teaching that the believer's justification is based upon Christ's entire obedience under the law, which "merits" righteousness and eternal life for His people.

There are especially two questions that this FV denial of a pre-fall covenant of works raises, when evaluated by the standard of the Three Forms of Unity: 1) do the Three Forms of Unity teach a doctrine of a pre-fall "covenant of works," as is evidently the case in the Westminster Confession of Faith (Chap. 7)?; and 2) do the Three Forms of Unity affirm the teaching that Christ "merited" righteousness and life for His people?

<sup>49</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 7, 20, 21, 25, 32, 33; Belgic Confession, Arts. 22-24; Canons of Dort, 1:4, 7; 2:6, 7, 8; 3/4:10-17.

<sup>50</sup> See, e.g., Canons of Dort, Rejection of Errors 5:1: "Who teach that the perseverance of true believers is not an effect of election or a gift of God produced by Christ's death, but a condition of the new covenant which man, before what they call his 'peremptory' election and justification, must fulfill by his free will."

historic Reformed understanding, we will identify and evaluate several revisions of the doctrine that have been proposed by authors of the FV. In the third and last section of this part of our report, we will offer an assessment of the seriousness of these FV departures from the biblical and confessional understanding of justification.

## A. The Biblical and Confessional Doctrine of Justification

When considering the confessional doctrine of justification, we must be careful to formulate the doctrine as clearly as possible. Saying merely that believers are "justified by grace through faith" does not adequately state the biblical teaching. In the biblical and confessional view, believers are said to be justified before God *by grace alone (sola gratia)* on account of the work of *Christ alone (solo Christo)*, and this free justification becomes theirs *by faith alone (sola fide)*. Each of these expressions is an essential part of the Reformed understanding of justification. In our summary of the confessional understanding of justification, therefore, we will successively treat each of these phrases. The questions we need to answer are: 1) what do the Confessions mean when they speak of the believer's "justification"?; 2) why do the Confessions insist that this justification is "by grace alone" on account of the work of "Christ alone"?; and 3) why do they also emphasize that the gracious justification of believers is "by faith alone"?

### 1. "Justification": A Judicial Declaration of Acceptance with God

One common way of expressing the nature of the Reformed understanding of justification is to note that it views justification as a *judicial* declaration of God. Unlike the classic Roman Catholic doctrine, which regards justification as including a *moral transformation* of believers, the Protestant conception identifies justification with the pronouncement of the believer's innocence in God's court. According to the Reformation view, justification is a legal declaration by God, which declares the justified person righteous and acceptable to him.<sup>79</sup> For this reason, the apostle Paul contrasts "justification" with "condemnation" in Romans 8:33-4. In contrast to this view, the Roman Catholic view maintains that justification includes a process of moral

<sup>79</sup> The descriptions of justification in the Heidelberg Catechism and Belgic Confession confirm that it refers to the judgment God pronounces regarding believers who entrust themselves to Jesus Christ. Cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 3, Q. & A. 60: "How are you righteous before God? Only by a true faith in Jesus Christ; that is, though my conscience accuse me that I have grievously sinned against all the commandments of God and kept none of them, and am still inclined to all evil, yet God, without any merit of mine, of mere grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never had nor committed any sin, and myself had accomplished all the obedience which Christ has rendered for me; if only I accept such benefit with a believing heart"; Belgic Confession, Art. 22: "... we are justified by faith alone, or by faith apart from works. However, to speak more clearly, we do not mean that faith itself justifies us, for it is only an instrument with which we embrace Christ our righteousness. But Jesus Christ, imputing to us all His merits, and so many holy works which He has done for us and in our stead, is our righteousness. And faith is an instrument that keeps us in communion with Him in all His benefits, which, when they become ours, are more than sufficient to acquit us of our sins." Cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 24, Q. & A. 62: "But why cannot our good works be the whole or part of our righteousness before God? Because the righteousness which can stand *before the tribunal of God* must be absolutely perfect and wholly conformable to the divine law ...."

Accordingly, this assurance [of perseverance] does not derive from some private revelation beyond or outside the Word, but from faith in the promises of God which he has very plentifully revealed in his Word for our comfort, from the testimony of *the Holy Spirit testifying with our spirit that we are God's children and heirs* (Rom 8:16-17), and finally from a serious and holy pursuit of a good conscience and of good works.<sup>78</sup>

Unlike the FV, the Three Forms of Unity present a carefully balanced view of the basis for the believer's assurance of salvation. On the one hand, this assurance is born out of faith's confidence in the perfection and sufficiency of the work of Christ as Mediator. Nothing tends to buttress the believer's assurance more than the gospel promise of free justification on the basis of Christ's righteousness, and the solid conviction that God's saving purpose of election will preserve the believer in the way of salvation until its completion. Contrary to the covenantal objectivism of the FV that appeals to covenant membership and baptism as a sufficient basis for such assurance, the Confessions always emphasize the necessity of faith as the means whereby the gospel promise and its sacramental confirmation are received. Furthermore, when the Confessions acknowledge the legitimate role of self-examination and good works to the confirmation of the genuineness of the believer's faith, they do not do so in a way that undermines the assurance of salvation. The Confessions base their confidence on the Scriptural teaching that perseverance itself belongs to the "better things that belong to salvation" (Heb. 6:9). From the perspective of the Three Forms of Unity, nothing could be more harmful to the cultivation of the assurance of salvation than the teaching that believers can be saved or elect "for a time," but not preserved in this salvation. Unlike the FV attempt to resolve the alleged problem of assurance, the Confessions offer a careful and balanced view that provides a sure basis for assurance, but without giving any place to presumptuousness or complacency.

#### IV. The Doctrine of Justification and the Federal Vision

The central point of doctrine in the present controversy regarding the FV and related views is, undoubtedly, the doctrine of justification. Were it not for the way various writers within the orbit of the FV have reformulated this doctrine, it is hard to imagine that the FV would have provoked as much concern as it has. Since the grace of free justification is a principal theme of the gospel of Jesus Christ, uncertainty regarding what this grace entails must be a matter of grave concern to any Reformed believer or church. In order to evaluate the way in which FV authors have compromised the biblical and Reformed understanding of this doctrine, we will begin this section of our report with a brief statement of the historic understanding of justification. After this review of the

<sup>78</sup> Canons of Dort, 5:10. The balance of the Confessions is evident in their treatment of the role of good works in the believer's confidence before God. Though good works may confirm the genuineness of faith and provide confirmation of salvation, they may never become the principal foundation for the assurance of salvation. The believer's assurance rests upon the fullness and perfection of Christ's work for free justification. Cf. Belgic Confession, Art. 24: "Moreover, though we do good works, we do not found our salvation upon them; for we can do no work but what is polluted by our flesh, and also punishable; and although we could perform such works, still the remembrance of one sin is sufficient to make God reject them. Thus, then, we would always be in doubt, tossed to and fro without any certainty, and our poor consciences would be continually vexed if they relied not on the merits of the suffering and death of our Savior."

Both of these questions are of special importance to an evaluation of the FV and its doctrine of justification.

With respect to the first question – do the Three Forms of Unity teach a pre-fall "covenant of works" doctrine? – the answer might appear at first glance to be relatively easy. Since the Confessions nowhere use the language of a pre-fall "covenant" or "covenant of works," it appears that this is a confessional teaching that belongs only to the Presbyterian tradition. The negative answer to this question, however, is too hasty. Though the language of "covenant" or "covenant of works" may not be used in the Three Forms of Unity, what matters is whether the components of a "covenant of works" doctrine are present. No one who subscribes to the Three Forms of Unity is obliged to use the language of a pre-fall "covenant of works." Nor is a subscriber to the Three Forms of Unity obliged to agree with every formulation or view of the pre-fall relationship between God and (all men in) Adam. Such persons are obliged, however, to subscribe to the confessional descriptions of the pre-fall relationship, and to do so particularly in terms of the way they inform the confessional understanding of Christ's saving work as the Mediator of the covenant of grace.

There are several key elements that belong to the Confessions' summary of the relationship between God and Adam in the pre-fall state. First, the Confessions teach that Adam's obedience to God's holy law was indispensable to his life in blessed fellowship with God. The life promised Adam (cf. Gen. 3:22) in this fellowship is not viewed as a "free gift" of God's *saving grace*, but as an inheritance that depends upon Adam's perfect obedience to the law of God. If Adam were to have perfectly obeyed the holy law of his Triune Creator, he would have continued to enjoy fellowship with God and receive the reward of eternal life. The reward of eternal life promised Adam would have been granted Adam in full harmony with God's truth and justice.<sup>51</sup> Second, in the confessional view of the pre-fall relationship between God and Adam, Adam's status of favor and acceptance with God was not based upon the righteousness of Another, but upon a righteousness that was his own (though his by virtue of God's gracious enablement and provision). Prior to Adam's fall into sin, he was properly reckoned to be righteous by God, and this was not an act of God's saving grace in Christ (cf. Romans 5:12-21). Even though the Confessions do not say that Adam's acceptance with God and eternal life would have been "merited" through his obedience, they do insist that Adam's inheritance of eternal life and blessedness was dependent upon his obedience to the "commandment of life."<sup>52</sup> And third, the Confessions view the work of Christ, as Mediator of the

<sup>51</sup> See Belgic Confession, Art. 14: "We believe that God created man out of the dust of the earth, and made and formed him after His own image and likeness, good, righteous, and holy, capable in all things to will agreeably to the will of God. But *being in honor, he understood it not*, neither knew his excellency, but willfully subjected himself to sin and consequently to death and the curse, giving ear to the words of the devil. For the commandment of life, which he had received, he transgressed; and by sin separated himself from God, who was his true life"; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 3, Q. & A. 8: "so that [aus dass] he might live with Him in eternal blessedness"; Lord's Day 16, Q. & A. 40.

<sup>52</sup> Belgic Confession, Art. 14. Since the Reformed Confessions do not use the term "merit" in their descriptions of the obedience Adam was obliged to render to God in order to enjoy life, subscribers to these Confessions are not required to do so. However, subscribers to the Confessions are required to recognize that Adam's obedience was the stipulated condition for his enjoyment of God's favor and eternal life, and that his disobedience justly forfeited (demerited) God's favor. Reformed theologians who have used the language of "merit" in the pre-fall covenant context, typically recognize that the language is being used "improperly," and merely expresses the "connection" between God's covenant promise and the reward of eternal life. It is a kind of "covenantal merit" (*meritum ex pacto*) that accords with divine truth and justice, but ultimately originates with God's unmerited favor in conferring upon Adam a "right" to eternal life that surpasses anything he "deserved" as a creature in the presence of his Creator.

covenant of grace, within the framework of their understanding of the pre-fall relationship between God and (all men in) Adam.<sup>53</sup> In the covenant of grace, Christ, the “last Adam,” fulfills all the requirements of God’s holy law on behalf of His people. In this way, Christ’s work of redemption obtains eternal life for His people in a way that upholds God’s truth and justice.

Therefore, the absence of the terminology of a “covenant of works” in the Confessions does not alter the fact that all of the elements or components of the Reformed doctrine are present “materially” in them.<sup>54</sup> The Three Forms of Unity clearly affirm the original state of integrity in Adam, the obligation of perfect obedience to the law of God, the promise of life upon condition of such obedience, and the consequence of Adam’s sin and fall for the whole human race. Because Adam transgressed the law of God and broke fellowship with his Creator, he forfeited for himself and all his posterity any possibility of eternal life in unbreakable communion with God in the way of obedience to God’s holy law. After the fall and disobedience of Adam, the only way to obtain eternal life is through faith in Christ, the last Adam, who alone is able to grant the fullness of life and glory to those who belong to him. Consequently, though the language of a “covenant of works” may be disputed, the substance of the historical Reformed understanding of this covenant is present in the Three Forms of Unity.<sup>55</sup>

Consistent with the FV denial of the teaching of a pre-fall covenant that required obedience to the law as a condition for obtaining eternal life, FV writers reject the language of “merit” even when it is applied to the work of Christ. However, the Confessions often speak of Christ’s “merits” to refer to His entire obedience under the law on behalf of His people. Just as the disobedience of the first Adam brings condemnation and death to the whole human race whom He represented, so the obedience of Christ brings justification and life to those whom He represented as Mediator of the covenant of grace. The justice and truth of God satisfied through the work of Christ, the last Adam, consists in His active obedience to all the requirements of

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Since God promises to bless human obedience to His will, God’s bestowal or granting a blessing to Adam for obedience to His will is a matter of being true to Himself (that is, His promise) and therefore a matter of covenanted justice. Contrary to the claims of some FV writers, this understanding of the connection between Adam’s obedience and the promised reward of eternal life does not represent a Reformed appropriation of the Roman Catholic doctrine of human “merit,” whether “condign” (full) merit or “congruent” (half) merit. In the Roman Catholic view, “condign” merit is the intrinsic merit or worth of human obedience as it is prompted by God’s grace and Spirit; “congruent” merit is the “half-merit” of human works that receive a reward that exceeds their intrinsic worth. For classic Reformed treatments of this question, see Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1994), 2:710-23; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), II:569-71; and J. Mark Beach, *Christ and the Covenant: Francis Turretin’s Federal Theology as a Defense of the Doctrine of Grace* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), pp. 112-119, 196-202, 326-328. The following observation of Turretin is of particular significance to an understanding of the Reformed view: “Hence also it appears that there is no merit properly so called of man before God, in whatever state he is placed. Thus Adam himself, if he had persevered, would not have merited life in strict justice, although (through a certain condescension [*synchatabasin*]) God promised him by a covenant life under the condition of perfect obedience (which is called meritorious from that covenant in a broader sense ....)” (2:712).

<sup>53</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Days 3-6.

<sup>54</sup> Belgic Confession, Arts. 14, 15; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Days 3 & 4; Canons of Dort, 3/4.

<sup>55</sup> See Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, II:569, who notes that “though the name may be disputed, the matter is certain” (*de vocabulo dubitetur, re salva*). In the history of Reformed theology, the pre-fall covenant between God and humanity in Adam has been variously designated. Sometimes it is termed a “covenant of nature,” since this covenant required obedience to the moral law of God that man knew by nature and was able to obey by virtue of the created gifts and integrity with which he was originally endowed. However, it is most commonly designated a “covenant of works,” since the eternal life promised in the covenant was able to be obtained only in the way of works, that is, in the way of keeping God’s commandments.

obedience, righteousness and satisfaction of Christ, believers ought to enjoy a heartfelt confidence in God’s mercy and grace.<sup>74</sup> The absolute exclusion of good works from playing any role instrumental to the believer’s justification before God and inheritance of eternal life is decisive to the Confessions’ insistence that such assurance belongs ordinarily to true faith. In the Heidelberg Catechism, the believer’s comfort is founded upon the conviction that Jesus Christ, to whom the believer belongs body and soul, “has fully satisfied for all my sins” (Lord’s Day 1). In the Belgic Confession, the close link between justification through faith alone and the believer’s confidence with God is particularly emphasized:

And therefore we always hold fast this foundation, ascribing all glory to God, humbling ourselves before Him, and acknowledging ourselves to be such as we really are, without presuming to trust in any thing in ourselves, or in any merit of ours, relying and resting upon the obedience of Christ crucified alone, which becomes ours when we believe in Him. This is sufficient to cover all our iniquities, and to give us confidence in approaching to God; freeing the conscience of fear, terror, and dread, without following the example of our first father, Adam, who, trembling, attempted to cover himself with fig-leaves.<sup>75</sup>

The Confessions consistently link the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone to the joyful confidence that it grants to believers. When faith rests in the perfect work of Christ, it finds a solid basis for assurance before God. However, when believers seek to base this assurance before God upon their own righteousness or good works, the consequence is loss of confidence before God.

Now it should be noted that the Confessions do draw a connection between the believer’s assurance of salvation and the good works that genuine faith produces by the renewing work of the Holy Spirit. The Heidelberg Catechism, for example, affirms that good works serve to “assure” believers of the genuineness of their faith.<sup>76</sup> Just as a good tree is known from the fruits that it produces, so genuine faith is confirmed by the good works that such faith necessarily produces. Even though the Catechism ascribes this confirmatory role to good works in relation to the genuineness of faith, it must be observed that this role is not primary or foundational to the believer’s assurance of salvation. Since the good works of believers stem from true faith, which is a necessary precondition for them to be good works,<sup>77</sup> they can hardly constitute the basis for the believer’s confidence before God. In the Canons of Dort, the assurance of salvation and perseverance is likewise based, firstly, upon the gospel promise and the testimony of the Holy Spirit with the Word, and only secondarily, upon the good works that true faith produces.

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<sup>74</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Days 7, Q. & A. 21: “True faith is not only a sure knowledge ... but also a firm confidence which the Holy Spirit works in my heart by the gospel, that not only to others, but to me also, remission of sins, everlasting righteousness and salvation are freely given by God, merely of grace, only for the sake of Christ’s merits”; Lord’s Day 23, Q. & A. 60.

<sup>75</sup> Belgic Confession, Art. 23.

<sup>76</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lords’ Day 32, Q. & A. 86: “that each of us may be assured in himself of his faith by the fruits thereof.”

<sup>77</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 33, Q. & A. 91: “But what are good works? Only those which are done from true faith ....”

the believer to live in gratitude to God. When the children of believing parents, who have received the sign and seal of incorporation into Christ through the sacrament of baptism, are instructed in these principal elements of the Christian religion, they are being invited to respond in faith to their baptism and to come believingly to the Lord's Supper. Though this is not the place to answer the objections of proponents of paedocommunion, the teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism does not seem to create an artificial and unnecessary barrier before children who might otherwise be received at the Lord's Table. All believers who are received at the Lord's Table come in the same way and with the same obligations. Consistent with the nature of true faith, all believers who come to the Table of the Lord in order to be nourished in faith are expected to come believingly. If the sacrament is to be used to strengthen faith, it is only appropriate that those who receive the sacrament do so as professing believers.

### 5. Assurance, Perseverance and Apostasy

Though the occasion for a number of the emphases of the FV is to resolve the problem of assurance, it is likely that the FV aggravates this problem by its particular understanding of assurance in relation to perseverance and apostasy.

On the one hand, the FV places a great deal of emphasis upon the "objectivity" of the covenant. All who are embraced within the covenant of grace, and who receive its sacraments, especially baptism, may conclude that they are elect and saved in Christ, and in possession of all the saving benefits of this union. From this point of view, the FV claims to have provided a sure and reliable basis for confidence and assurance of salvation. If someone has been baptized and incorporated thereby into the covenant community, there is no need to look inward or to engage in any form of self-examination to determine whether he or she is in the faith or saved. On the basis of covenant membership, and on the basis of an appeal to what has been communicated through baptism, all believers and their children ought to be convinced of their election and salvation, including the benefit of free justification. On the other hand, however, the FV view of the conditions or obligations of the covenant tends to undermine whatever assurance is gained through membership in the covenant with its sacraments. Since election and salvation, at least in terms of covenantal membership, may be election and salvation only for a time, it is possible for covenant members to lose what was once theirs. Covenant election and salvation are losable election and salvation. Unless the covenant member perseveres in the way of an obedient faith, there remains the fearful prospect of falling away irrevocably and forfeiting the salvation that was once his or hers. To put the matter in rather blunt terms: the FV attempt to solve the problem of assurance ends up making the believer's assurance hang by the thin thread of an obedient and persevering faith. The believer is cast upon his own persevering faithfulness instead of upon Christ and His saving work on the believer's behalf.

Though FV proponents often claim that their understanding of the covenant resolves the alleged problem of assurance in the Reformed churches, it actually undermines the kind of basis for assurance that is highlighted in the Three Forms of Unity. In the Three Forms of Unity, faith, which is worked by the Holy Spirit through the gospel and strengthened by the accompanying sacraments, produces a strong assurance of acceptance and favor with God. Because the promise of the gospel is especially the promise of free justification and acceptance with God, which is based upon the perfect

His Father's holy will and His passive obedience to the penalty due those who transgress God's holy law. For this reason, the Confessions expressly use the language of Christ's "merits" or "meriting" eternal life for His people.<sup>56</sup> The following affirmations in the Confessions are especially important in this respect:

We believe that God, who is perfectly merciful and just, sent His Son to assume that nature in which the disobedience was committed, to make satisfaction in the same, and bear the punishment of sin by His most bitter passion and death. (Belgic Confession, Art. 20)

We believe that, to attain the true knowledge of this great mystery, the Holy Spirit kindles in our hearts an upright faith, which embraces Jesus Christ with all His merits .... For it must needs follow, either that all things which are requisite to our salvation are not in Jesus Christ, or if all things are in Him, that then those who possess Jesus Christ through faith have complete salvation in Him. Therefore, for any to assert that Christ is not sufficient, but that more is required besides him, would be too great a blasphemy; for hence it would follow that Christ was but half a Savior. ... But Jesus Christ, imputing to us all His merits, and so many holy works which he has done for us and in our stead, is our righteousness. And faith is an instrument that keeps us in communion with Him in all His benefits, which, when they become ours, are more than sufficient to acquit us of our sins. (Belgic Confession, Art. 22)

And therefore we always hold fast this foundation, ascribing all the glory to God, humbling ourselves before Him, and acknowledging ourselves to be such as we really are, without presuming to trust in any thing in ourselves, or in any merit of ours, relying and resting upon the obedience of Christ crucified alone, which becomes ours when we believe in Him. (Belgic Confession, Art. 23)

[T]hat not only to others, but to me also, remission of sins, everlasting righteousness and salvation are freely given by God, merely of grace, only for the sake of Christ's merits. (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 7)

God, without any merit of mine, of mere grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never had nor committed any sin, and myself had accomplished all the obedience which Christ has rendered for me; if only I accept such benefit with a believing heart. (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 23, A. 60)

<sup>56</sup> See, e.g., Belgic Confession, Arts. 20-23; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 2-7, 16, 23-24; and the Canons of Dort, Rejection of Errors, 2:3-4. When the Confessions speak of the "merit" of Christ's work, they affirm that the work of Christ, though entirely the fruit of God's gracious purpose to provide for the redemption of the elect through the work of the Mediator, *truly and properly merits*, in full conformity to the requirements of God's exact justice, eternal life and favor for His people. Unlike the improper use of "merit" to describe the connection between Adam's stipulated obedience and the promised reward of eternal life, the language of "merit" is entirely appropriate in respect to the perfect righteousness of Christ, who fulfills all the obligations of the law in His Person as true God and true man on behalf of His people (cf. Rom. 3:26; 8:1-4; Gal. 3:10-14). See the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 4-6; and John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), II. xvii, "Christ Rightly and Properly Said to Have Merited God's Grace and Salvation for Us."

[We reject the error of those] Who teach that Christ, by the satisfaction which he gave, did not certainly merit for anyone salvation itself and the faith by which this satisfaction of Christ is effectually applied to salvation, but only acquired for the Father the authority or plenary will to relate in a new way with men and to impose such new conditions as he chose, and that the satisfying of those conditions depends on the free choice of man.... Who teach that what is involved in the new covenant of grace which God the Father made with men through the intervening of Christ's death is not that we are justified before God and saved through faith, insofar as it accepts Christ's merit, but rather that God, having withdrawn his demand for perfect obedience to the law, counts faith itself, and the imperfect obedience of faith, as perfect obedience to the law, and graciously looks upon this as worthy of the reward of eternal life. (Canons of Dort, Rejection of Errors, 2:3-4)

Contrary to the claims of many FV authors, therefore, the Three Forms of Unity clearly teach that the entire obedience of Christ under the law was performed in His office as Mediator, and that this obedience remedies the failure of Adam to live in obedience to God. With respect to the doctrine of justification, the Confessions treat the righteousness of Christ, which is granted and imputed to believers for their justification, to include "all His merits, and so many holy works which He has done for us and in our stead" under the law.<sup>57</sup> This means that what some FV authors disparage as a "works-merit" paradigm is expressly set forth in the Confessions, particularly in their description of Christ's saving *work* on behalf of His people.

### 3. Law and Gospel in the Covenant

In our summary of the FV, we noted that FV proponents oppose a sharp distinction between the law and the gospel in their understanding of the covenant of grace, and even in the understanding of the difference between the pre-fall and post-fall relationship between God and His people. Just as Adam was required to respond to God's grace in the way of an obedient faith in order to obtain what was promised to him, so believers are required to respond to the gospel of Christ in the way of an obedient faith in order to secure their inheritance of eternal life. Though the language of "gospel" is appropriately used only with respect to the covenant of grace, it remains true that the "way" to covenant blessing is always "by grace" through an obedient faith, whether before or after the fall into sin.

The problem with this FV tendency to blur the difference between Adam's obligations of obedience under the law in the pre-fall state and the believer's obligations to the law in the post-fall covenant of grace, is that it undermines the biblical and confessional view of justification. When it comes to the justification of believers, it is imperative that a sharp distinction be drawn between the "law" and the "gospel." As a result of the sin and disobedience of Adam, no one is able to obey the law perfectly, not even the believer who enjoys the grace of the Spirit's work in sanctification. According

<sup>57</sup> Belgic Confession, Art. 22. See also Belgic Confession, Arts. 14, 20, 23, 24; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 3-6, 15-17, 23-24; Canons of Dort, Rejection of Errors, 2:3-4.

unbelieving or the impenitent to partake. Unworthy participation, that is, participation on the part of those who have not properly examined themselves or who are unbelieving, would profane the table of the Lord and be contemptuous of its ordained purpose.

Since this feature of the Reformed Confessions' teaching touches directly upon the propriety of paedocommunion, we need to take particular note of the Confessions' teaching regarding the proper recipients of the sacrament. The Belgic Confession, after noting that the recipient of the Lord's Supper receives the body and blood of the Lord "by faith (which is the hand and mouth of our soul)," speaks directly to this subject.

[W]e receive this holy sacrament in the assembly of the people of God, with humility and reverence, keeping up among us a holy remembrance of the faith and of the Christian religion. Therefore no one ought to come to this table without having previously rightly examined himself, lest by eating of this bread and drinking of this cup he eat and drink judgment to himself. In a word, we are moved by the use of this holy sacrament to a fervent love towards God and our neighbor.<sup>72</sup>

According to the language of this article, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper requires the active engagement of its recipients. Only believers who are capable of remembering the faith and the Christian religion, may come to the Table in order to be nourished and fortified in the way of faith and love. With an obvious allusion to the apostle Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 11, this Confession also insists upon a proper preparation on the part of believers for the reception of the sacrament. Only those who have previously examined themselves should partake of the bread and the cup, lest they should eat and drink judgment unto themselves.

In its extensive treatment of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the Heidelberg Catechism also expressly addresses the question of those for whom the sacrament is instituted.

Q. For whom is the Lord's supper instituted? A. For those who are truly displeased with themselves for their sins and yet trust that these are forgiven them for the sake of Christ, and that their remaining infirmity is covered by His passion and death; who also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and amend their life. But hypocrites and such as turn not to God with sincere hearts eat and drink judgment to themselves.<sup>73</sup>

It is important to observe that the three marks of true faith, which are identified in this question and answer, are the same as the three general headings of the Heidelberg Catechism. This is not accidental, since the purpose of the Catechism is to provide an instrument for the instruction of the children of believers in the Christian faith. True faith always includes three elements: 1) a conscious awareness of the believer's sin and misery; 2) an understanding of the person and work of Christ, who satisfied for the believer's sins by His cross and passion; and 3) a Spirit-worked readiness on the part of

<sup>72</sup> Belgic Confession, Art. 35.

<sup>73</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 30, Q. & A. 81. It should be noted that the Scripture proofs cited for this answer are: 1 Cor. 11:20, 34; 10:19-22. In earlier questions and answers, additional passages are cited to show that faith is required on the part of the recipient of the sacrament (e.g., John 6:35, 40, 47, 48, 50, 51, 53, 54).

baptized. Only the blood of Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit are able to wash or cleanse believers from their sins.<sup>71</sup> Any doctrine of sacramental efficacy, therefore, that ascribes to the sacrament in its administration the power to effect what it signifies, and that without clearly emphasizing the necessary appropriation of God's grace in Christ by faith, is not in harmony with the Three Forms of Unity. But this is precisely the kind of emphasis that can be found in the writings of FV advocates. Because the FV wants to stress the objectivity of the covenant and its sacraments, it often neglects to emphasize equally the necessity of the Spirit's work in the application of redemption, particularly in authoring the kind of faith that is necessary in order to benefit from the Word and its accompanying sacraments.

The FV advocacy of admitting children to the Lord's Table is of one piece with its tendency to identify covenant membership with election and saving communion with Christ. Since children are truly and savingly united to Christ, possessing all the benefits of such union, they ought to be received at the Table of the Lord in order to be further nourished in Christ. Failure to admit covenant children to the Table of the Lord is an intolerable act of "excommunication," since it excludes them from partaking of Christ even though they are full members of Him. As noted in the foregoing, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, because it is a visible representation and confirmation of the gospel promise in Christ, *requires faith* on the part of its participants. Because the sacrament visibly signifies and seals the promises of the gospel, it demands the same response as the gospel. Neither the gospel Word nor the sacrament works merely by virtue of administration (*ex opera operato*). Only by a spiritual eating and drinking by the mouth of faith does the sacrament work to communicate Christ to His people. Therefore, the Roman Catholic teaching of an objective presence of Christ in the sacramental elements, irrespective of a believing response to the gospel Word that the sacrament confirms, is rejected. Not only does this Roman Catholic view improperly identify the sacramental sign and the spiritual reality it signifies, but it also maintains that Christ is objectively present before, during, and even after the administration of the elements whether or not those participating (or not participating) actively accept the gospel in faith and repentance.

In the Reformed Confessions, moreover, the kind of faith that is competent to remember, proclaim, and receive Christ through the Lord's Supper is carefully defined. Before members of the church may receive the sacrament, they have a biblical mandate to engage in self-examination. This self-examination requires that the believers test their faith against the normative requirements of the Word of God. Essential to such faith are the acknowledgement of the believer's sin and unworthiness, the recognition that Christ alone by His mediatorial work has made atonement for the sins of His people, and a resolution to live in holiness and obedience to His will. In this way believers are called actively to embrace the promises of the gospel that the sacrament visibly confirms in the same way as they respond to the preaching of the gospel. Furthermore, it is the duty of the ministers and elders of the church to oversee the administration of the sacrament, preventing so far as they are able those from participating who are unbelieving or living an ungodly life. Since Christ has instituted the sacrament for the purpose of nourishing the faith of believers, it would violate the nature of the sacrament to invite the

<sup>71</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 27, Q. & A. 72: "Is, then, the outward washing with water itself the washing away of sin? No, for only the blood of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit cleanse us from all sins."

to the Reformed Confessions, the believer's obedience to the law of God plays no role whatsoever in obtaining the grace of free justification.<sup>58</sup> Under the conditions of human sinfulness, the holy and good law of God can only expose our sin and misery.<sup>59</sup> The only way back for sinners to renewed fellowship with God is through faith in Jesus Christ, who fulfilled all the obligations of the law on behalf of His people.<sup>60</sup> So far as the believer's justification is concerned, the radical contrast between the "righteousness of faith" and the "righteousness of the law" cannot be overstated. No human works, not even the good works of believers that are prompted by the Holy Spirit and performed in gratitude for God's grace in Christ, can contribute anything to the believer's acceptance with God.<sup>61</sup> Of course, this does not mean that the Confessions deny the believer's obligation to live before God in grateful devotion and conformity to the holy requirements of His law. However, such obedience is itself a gift of God's grace in Christ, who renews His own by the working of the Holy Spirit, and is performed out of gratitude for a salvation that is a free gift of God's grace.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, believers are not "under the law" in the sense in which Adam was obliged to live in obedience to its requirements. Since Christ has discharged all of the obligations of the law in the place of His own, the obedience of believers is a free response to God's grace and can be pleasing to God only upon the basis of a prior acceptance with Him.<sup>63</sup> Contrary to the FV claim that believers are obliged to secure their inheritance in the covenant in the same way as Adam, namely, in the way of an obedient faith, the Confessions teach that Christ has secured this inheritance for them through His perfect obedience and atonement.<sup>64</sup>

It should be noted that, though the Confessions insist upon a sharp distinction between the law and the gospel when it comes to the justification of believers, they also maintain the perpetual validity of God's holy law in their understanding of Christ's saving work. Though Adam (and all men in him) failed to keep the law of God perfectly, and thereby brought himself and all his posterity under the curse and judgment of God, Christ assumed our human nature in order, as Mediator, to perform on behalf of His people all that the law required.<sup>65</sup> The difference between man's fellowship (or covenant) with God before and after the fall does not mitigate the fact that in both circumstances the

<sup>58</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 23; 24, Q. & A. 62: "But why cannot our good works be the whole or part of our righteousness before God? Because the righteousness which can stand before the tribunal of God must be absolutely perfect and wholly conformable to the divine law, while even our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin"; Belgic Confession, Arts. 21-24.

<sup>59</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 2.

<sup>60</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 4-7; 23, Q. & A. 60: "God, without any merit of mine, of mere grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ."

<sup>61</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 24; Belgic Confession, Arts. 22-24.

<sup>62</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 24, Q. & A. 64: "it is impossible that those who are implanted into Christ by a true faith should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness"; Lord's Day 32, Q. & A. 86: "Christ, having redeemed us by His blood, also renews us by His Holy Spirit after His own image, that with our whole life we may show ourselves thankful to God for His benefits"; Lord's Day 33, Q. & A. 91: "But what are good works? Only those which are done from true faith, according to the law of God, and to His glory; and not such as are based on our opinions or the precepts of men."

<sup>63</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 33, Q. & A. 91; Belgic Confession, Art. 24: "These works, as they proceed from the good root of faith, are good and acceptable in the sight of God, forasmuch as they are all sanctified by His grace. Nevertheless they are of no account towards our justification, for it is by faith in Christ that we are justified, even before we do good works; otherwise they could not be good works, any more than the fruit of a tree can be good before the tree itself is good."

<sup>64</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 19, Q. & A. 52; Lord's Day 23, Q. & A. 59: "But what does it profit you now that you believe all this? That I am righteous in Christ before God, and an heir to eternal life."

<sup>65</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 2, 21, 23-24, 44; Belgic Confession, Arts. 20-23.

law of God is fully upheld. Because God is unchangeably holy and righteous, the demand of His holy law is maintained not only before the fall under the covenant of works but after the fall in the administration of the covenant of grace. No human being can find favor with God without doing what the law of God requires. This is as true in the covenant of grace as it was in the covenant of works. Therefore, in the covenant of grace, God does not act capriciously or arbitrarily. He always acts in a way that maintains and upholds the righteous requirements of His holy law (cf. Rom. 3:21-26). Indeed, after the fall into sin, the whole human race comes to stand “under the law” in two respects: first, all remain obligated to do what the law requires in order to be pleasing to God; and second, all now come under the law in terms of its liability and penalty. After the fall into sin, the requirement of perfect obedience in order to obtain eternal life remains, but it has now been complicated by the additional requirement that payment be made for the debts or demerits that disobedient sinners now owe God for their sins.

#### 4. The Doctrine of the Church and Sacraments (Baptism)

In our summary of some of the characteristic features of the FV, we called special attention to three aspects of its doctrine of the church and sacraments: 1) a repudiation of the Reformed distinction between the “visible” and the “invisible” church; 2) a strong doctrine of the efficacy of the sacraments; and 3) a common advocacy of admitting children to the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. On each of these aspects, there are elements of the FV that are out of accord with the teaching of the Confessions.

While it is true that the Three Forms of Unity do not explicitly distinguish between what some Reformed Confessions term the “visible” and “invisible” church,<sup>66</sup> the most important elements of this distinction are present in them. The primary use of this distinction in the history of the Reformed churches is to observe that not all members of the covenant community, the church of Jesus Christ, are “elect” persons and therefore truly and savingly joined to Christ by faith. God alone knows those who are His (2 Tim. 2:19), and some of those who are embraced under the covenant of grace in time do not genuinely belong to God. The church is comprised of genuine believers and hypocrites, persons who do not have a true faith and who do not persevere in the way of faith and obedience. It is inappropriate, therefore, to affirm the election and salvation of all who belong to the covenant community, and to do so in an unqualified and undifferentiated manner.

Perhaps the clearest statement in the Three Forms of Unity that has a direct bearing upon this question is to be found in Article 29 of the *Belgic Confession*. In this Article, which identifies the “marks of the true church” and the “marks of Christians,” the church is said to include “hypocrites, who are mixed in the Church with the good, yet are not of the Church, though externally in it.” This language coincides with the usual way in which the “visible” church is distinguished from the “invisible” church in the history of the Reformed churches. It reflects the common teaching of Scripture (and, for that matter, of Christian experience) that not all who fall under the administration of the covenant of grace in time (professed believers and their children) are genuine members of Christ by faith. Remarkably, this Article also goes on to note, with respect to the “marks of Christians,” that the primary mark is faith: “With respect to those who are members of

<sup>66</sup> See the Westminster Confession of Faith, Chap. XXV. i-ii; Belgic Confession, Art. 29.

the Church, they may be known by the marks of Christians; namely, by faith, and when, having received Jesus Christ the only Savior, they avoid sin, follow after righteousness, love the true God and their neighbor, neither turn aside to the right or left, and crucify the flesh with the works thereof.” This language clearly implies that those who are properly members of the church are only those who receive the gospel promise in the way of persevering faith. Though this acknowledgment that not all who belong to the church “externally” are genuinely “of” the church is explicit in the Belgic Confession, it is also clearly implied in the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dort. In the Heidelberg Catechism, those who are savingly joined to Christ are joined to Him by a “true faith.”<sup>67</sup> This faith, which is produced by the Holy Spirit and confirmed by the sacraments, is a persevering faith.<sup>68</sup> It is not a faith that grants a temporary salvation, but a faith that confidently professes that God will preserve His own and make all things subservient to their salvation.<sup>69</sup> Throughout the Heidelberg Catechism, a strong emphasis is placed upon membership in the covenant community or church of Christ, and upon the use of the Word and the sacraments in the communication of the gospel. But such membership and reception of the “means of grace” does not automatically confer salvation in Christ, since the “means of grace” are only effective when the Spirit of God accompanies them and produces the kind of faith that confidently believes the gospel promise.

The necessity of true faith, which the Holy Spirit works through the gospel, for possessing Christ and His saving benefits, is also evident in the Confessions’ treatment of the sacraments. Though the FV emphasis upon the importance of the sacraments is laudable and not out of accord with the Confessions, it often leads FV authors to neglect the indispensability of faith to the appropriation or reception of the grace communicated in the sacraments. However, in the Three Forms of Unity, the sacraments are consistently defined as visible signs and seals of the promise of the gospel that require the same response of faith as does the Word. It is only when and as the Spirit authors faith through the Word of God, to which the sacraments are appended as confirmatory signs and seals, that the grace of Jesus Christ is communicated.<sup>70</sup> Consequently, in all of the confessional statements about the sacraments as means of grace, the necessity of faith to the right use and efficacy of the sacrament as a means of grace is affirmed.

Contrary to the FV conception of sacramental efficacy, the Three Forms of Unity do not countenance any view of the sacrament of baptism, for example, that would ascribe to the sacrament the power to “regenerate” its recipient. Nor do they teach that all recipients of baptism are savingly incorporated into Christ. The Heidelberg Catechism speaks of the sacraments in general, including baptism, as a means that the Holy Spirit uses to “confirm” faith. Just as is true of the preached Word, the visible Word of the sacrament requires that it be received in the way of faith. It is especially important to observe the way the Heidelberg Catechism distinguishes between the “sign” of baptism and the “reality” to which it points. Without diminishing the importance of the sacrament of baptism to the confirmation and strengthening of faith in its recipient, the Catechism rejects the idea that the water of baptism itself washes away the sin of the person

<sup>67</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 7.

<sup>68</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Days 20, 21, 25.

<sup>69</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 1.

<sup>70</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 25, Q. & A. 65: “Since, then, we are made partakers of Christ and all His benefits by faith only, whence comes this faith? From the Holy Spirit, who works it in our hearts by the preaching of the holy gospel, and confirms it by the use of the holy sacraments.”