

1 **REPORT OF AD INTERIM STUDY COMMITTEE**
 2 **ON FEDERAL VISION, NEW PERSPECTIVE,**
 3 **AND AUBURN AVENUE**
 4 **THEOLOGY**

5
 6 **Preface**

7
 8 The 34th PCA General Assembly appointed an *ad interim* committee,

9
 10 *to study the soteriology of the Federal Vision, New Perspective, and Auburn*
 11 *Avenue Theologies which are causing confusion among our churches.*
 12 *Further, to determine whether these viewpoints and formulations are in*
 13 *conformity with the system of doctrine taught in the Westminster Standards,*
 14 *whether they are hostile to or strike at the vitals of religion, and to present a*
 15 *declaration or statement regarding the issues raised by these viewpoints in*
 16 *light of our Confessional Standards (M34GA, 34-57, III, pp. 229-30).*

17
 18 The committee was asked to study the soteriology of the “New Perspective” and the
 19 “Federal Vision.” It should be noted that “the New Perspective on Paul” (NPP) is an
 20 academic movement associated since the 1960s with scholars such as Krister Stendahl, E. P.
 21 Sanders, James D. G. Dunn, and N. T. Wright. The committee recognizes that there are a
 22 variety of viewpoints associated with the NPP; therefore, we are cautious in our analysis of
 23 the movement as a whole. However, there are common issues that characterize this
 24 theological movement. In particular, N. T. Wright has had a significant influence in recent
 25 years on the broader evangelical and Reformed communities; therefore, our study of NPP
 26 will focus primarily on Wright’s writings.

27
 28 The committee also understands that a major concern of the General Assembly at the present
 29 time pertains to the views of what has been called Federal Vision (FV) or Auburn Avenue
 30 Theology (AAT). These are one and the same, different names designating the same
 31 theological movement. The name “Auburn Avenue Theology” comes from its association
 32 with the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church in Monroe, Louisiana, which has hosted
 33 conferences where their ideas have been promoted. In addition, a symposium book was
 34 entitled *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros & Cons: Debating the Federal Vision*. The book
 35 included papers focused on their theological views.¹ The name “Federal Vision” appears to
 36 be the name preferred by proponents, who together authored a book entitled *The Federal*
 37 *Vision*.² Since both names refer to the same theological movement, and since proponents
 38 prefer the label “Federal Vision,” we will use the name Federal Vision (FV) when referring
 39 to their views in this report.

40

¹ E. Calvin Beisner, ed., *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros & Cons: Debating the Federal Vision; The Knox Theological Seminary Colloquium on the Federal Vision, August 11-13, 2003* (Ft. Lauderdale: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004). This volume is very important for understanding the various issues being debated.

² Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner, eds., *The Federal Vision* (Monroe: Athanasius Press, 2004).

1 We further recognize that there are a variety of viewpoints among FV teachers and writers.
2 For example, some hold to particular doctrines (e.g., monocovenantalism or
3 paedocommunion) while others do not. In addition, some have objected strenuously to the
4 labeling of their views, saying that there is no such thing as a “federal vision,” either as a
5 movement or a theological system. In response to the 2005 Mississippi Valley Presbytery
6 report, the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church Web site stated:

7
8 The “report” assumed that there is a well-defined movement labeled the
9 “Federal Vision.” This is highly debatable. . . . There is no organized
10 movement, formal or informal. Though there are some commonly held
11 perspectives, there are quite a few differences when it comes to specifics and
12 therefore there is no consistent system of theology which can be labeled
13 “Federal Vision” theology.³
14

15 Nevertheless, it is these “commonly held perspectives” that unite and distinguish the FV
16 from others within Reformed and Presbyterian communities. Their writings are largely
17 consistent on major points. They quote each other approvingly; they stress the same points;
18 they state many of their issues using virtually the same language; and they joined together to
19 produce a book called *The Federal Vision*.

20
21 We recognize that many Federal Vision proponents affirm loyalty to the Westminster
22 Standards and frequently appeal to the *Standards* when arguing their views. Nevertheless,
23 the General Assembly has charged the committee “to determine whether these viewpoints
24 and formulations [i.e., NPP and FV] are in conformity with the system of doctrine taught in
25 the Westminster Standards, whether they are hostile to or strike at the vitals of religion, and
26 to present a declaration or statement regarding the issues raised by these viewpoints in light
27 of our Confessional Standards.”
28

29 We proceed with the following principles in mind. First, we are a biblical church. We affirm
30 the principle of *sola scriptura* as articulated in our *Standards*: “The supreme judge by which
31 all controversies of religion are to be determined...can be no other but the Holy Spirit
32 speaking in the Scripture” (*WCF* 1:10).
33

34 In addition, we are a confessional church. The PCA has affirmed that “*the Confession of*
35 *Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Westminster Assembly*, together with
36 the formularies of government, discipline, and worship are accepted by the Presbyterian
37 Church in America as standard expositions of the teachings of Scripture in relation to both
38 faith and practice” (*BCO* 29-1; cf. 21-5.2; 26-1; 39-3). The church has historically
39 understood that this claim does not elevate the *Standards* over Scripture itself; and yet, our
40 Constitution does recognize the *Standards* as our “standard expositions of the teachings of
41 Scripture.” Because this is the case, the main focus of our study will be to determine
42 whether the views of the NPP and AAT/FV are in conformity with our *Westminster*
43 *Standards*.

³ Cf. the Auburn Avenue PCA Web site (www.auburnavenue.org).

1 Key in the present discussion is the definition of doctrines that have been crucial to our
2 identity as a biblical and confessional church. In the PCA, we use theological terms such as
3 “regeneration,” “election,” “justification,” and “perseverance” to define these doctrines in a
4 particular and agreed upon fashion through ecclesiastical action. The committee affirms with
5 the PCA that the *Confession’s* usage of these and related terms is faithful to the teachings of
6 Scripture. While we are aware that the biblical usage of some of these words may have
7 varying nuances in different contexts, our task is to study the theological claims that the
8 NPP and FV proponents make about such terms. Then, our purpose is to determine whether
9 the theological claims they make serve to undermine the system of doctrine taught in the
10 Scripture and *Confession*. It is certainly possible to say more than our *Confession* does about
11 biblical truth, but this should not necessitate a denial of the vitals of our faith.

12
13 The committee also affirms that we view NPP and FV proponents in the PCA as brothers in
14 Christ. Thus, we take their published statements and writings seriously. We have worked
15 hard to be fair and accurate in our study of their writings and in the statement of the issues
16 they raise.

17
18 Following this preface, the report has three major sections that outline soteriological issues
19 raised by the NPP and FV:

- 20 I. Election and Covenant;
- 21 II. Justification and Union with Christ;
- 22 III. Perseverance, Apostasy, and Assurance.

23 Each of these major sections opens with a brief exposition of the relevant materials in the
24 Westminster Standards; is followed by brief overviews of NPP and FV views on the same
25 issues; and concludes by analyzing and comparing the NPP/FV views with that of the
26 *Westminster Standards*. In this way, the committee fulfills the General Assembly’s direction
27 “to study the soteriology of the *Federal Vision, New Perspective, and Auburn Avenue*
28 *Theologies . . . in light of our Confessional Standards.*”

29
30 The fourth section sets forth nine features of NPP and FV teaching that the committee finds
31 to be contrary to the Westminster Standards. This section is worded to assist presbyteries as
32 they investigate these matters. In offering these declarations, the committee fulfills the
33 General Assembly’s direction “to present a declaration or statement regarding the issues
34 raised by these viewpoints in light of our Confessional Standards” and “to determine
35 whether these viewpoints and formulations are in conformity with the system of doctrine
36 taught in the Westminster Standards [or] whether they are hostile to or strike at the vitals of
37 religion.”

38
39 Finally, the committee brings five recommendations to the General Assembly and urges
40 their adoption. As we have prayed together, we have sensed the prayers of God’s people and
41 the power of God’s Spirit guiding our deliberations. We hope that our efforts will serve to
42 preserve the peace, purity and unity of the church. We urge our beloved church to stand
43 together committed to God’s Word, the *Westminster Standards*, and the Great Commission.

1 Committee Members:

- 2 TE Paul Fowler, Chairman
3 TE Grover Gunn, Secretary
4 TE Ligon Duncan
5 TE Sean Lucas
6 RE Robert Mattes
7 RE William Mueller
8 RE John White.

9 **I. Election and Covenant**

10
11 A. Westminster Standards

12
13 1. *Election*

14
15 The doctrine of election is vital to the whole doctrinal system set forth in the Westminster
16 Standards.⁴ As such, election is firmly set in the context of God’s eternal decree (*WCF* 3.1,
17 5, 6, 8). The Standards state that

18
19 Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, *before the foundation*
20 *of the world was laid, according to His eternal and immutable purpose, and*
21 *the secret counsel and good pleasure of His will, hath chosen, in Christ, unto*
22 *everlasting glory . . . (WCF 3.5; italics added)*

23
24 This election, *before the foundation of the world was laid*, was an election *unto life* and *unto*
25 *everlasting glory* (*WCF* 3.5). “As God hath appointed the elect *unto glory*, so hath He, by
26 the eternal and most free purpose of His will, foreordained all the means thereunto,” so that
27 the elect “are effectually called unto faith in Christ by His Spirit working in due season, are
28 justified, adopted, sanctified, *and kept by His power, through faith, unto salvation*” (*WCF*
29 3.6, italics added). Conversely, the same paragraph in the *Confession* goes on to state,
30 “Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified,
31 and saved, but the elect only.” Clearly, the *Standards*’ doctrine of election unto life is
32 anchored in God’s decree from eternity past, provides the basis for the doctrines of final
33 perseverance of the saints in the future, (*WCF* 17:1, 2) and the believer’s assurance of
34 eternal life (*WCF* 17.2; 18.3). For the present, only those eternally elect are justified,
35 adopted, and sanctified.

36 The *Confession* is, of course, fully aware of the national, ethnic, external, covenant election
37 of Israel (*LC* 101), as a church under age (*WCF* 19.3-4, 1.8, and 7.5). But the *Confession*, in
38 accord with Scripture, does not portray God’s decree of election to eternal salvation as

⁴ The terms used in the *Standards* most frequently include “elect,” “elected,” and “chosen”; the term “election” actually occurs only three times. The doctrine is featured, deployed, and applied variously even where the term is not found (*LC* 13, 30; *SC* 20). Other terms such as “predestined” and “effectually called” are frequently used as well.

1 coming to bear on all within the external boundaries of the covenant people. Neither in the
 2 Scripture nor in the *Confession* is membership in the covenant community (externally
 3 considered) identical with election to everlasting life (e.g., Rom. 2:17-29; 9:1-13).

4
 5 Indeed, according to the Standards, decretal election leads to a distinction even within the
 6 covenant community (*WCF* 7.5; *LC* 34; *SC* 88). This distinction is not between those who
 7 are elect and persevere, and those who are elect and do not persevere. Instead, the distinction
 8 is between those who are elect and non-elect, even though both are numbered amongst the
 9 people of God externally considered (*WCF* 10.4, 25.1-2, *LC* 31, 68). This is precisely one of
 10 the points of the *Confession's* visible/invisible distinction regarding the church: "All that
 11 hear the Gospel, and live in the visible church, are not saved; but they only who are true
 12 members of the church invisible" (*LC* 61). The church considered in its invisible aspect
 13 "consists of the whole number of the elect" (*WCF* 25.1, *LC* 64); in its visible aspect, it is
 14 made up of professing members and their children, some of whom may be non-elect (*WCF*
 15 25.2, 4, 5).⁵

16
 17 Consequently, the *Confession* and *Catechisms* repeatedly qualify their references to the
 18 "effectual means of salvation" by pointing to God's larger purposes of election (*LC* 161).
 19 For example, the Standards qualify sacramental efficacy with the assertion that the
 20 sacraments are efficacious and effectual to the elect (that is, the elect from the standpoint of
 21 the decree) and to them only (*WCF* 8.6, 8.1, 28.6; *LC* 154 [cf. 59]). Likewise, they also
 22 speak of the Word of God as effectual or refer to its efficacy in the same manner as they do
 23 the sacraments (*LC* 2, 155; *SC* 89).

24
 25 The decree of election also leads to a distinction in mankind, between those chosen and
 26 those passed by. "The rest of mankind God was pleased, according to the unsearchable
 27 counsel of His own will...to pass by; and to ordain them to dishonour and wrath for their
 28 sin, to the praise of His glorious justice" (*WCF* 3.7). This preterition is judicial in character,
 29 the just penalty for sin, and thus God's righteous judgment is vindicated.

30
 31 While the *Westminster Confession* counsels us to exercise great care in our handling of the
 32 Bible's teaching on election, it positively celebrates the importance of the doctrine of
 33 decretal election for assurance (*WCF* 3.8). Indeed, the doctrine of election is viewed as a
 34 matter "of praise, reverence, and admiration of God; and of humility, diligence, and
 35 abundant consolation" for all true believers (*WCF* 3.8).

36
 37 In summary, the *Westminster Confession*, because it views election as based upon God's
 38 decree, contemplates an election that possesses the qualities of God's decree. It is from all
 39 eternity, based on God's holy and wise will, and unchangeable (*WCF* 3.1). It is
 40 unconditional; that is, it is not based upon anything in us or done by us, foreseen by God or
 41 otherwise (*WCF* 3.2). It is an election to everlasting life, and thus a saving election in the
 42 fullest sense of the term (*WCF* 3.3,6). God elects particular individuals, and this decree is
 43 immutable, certain, definite and eternal (*WCF* 3.4,8).

⁵ The *Confession* does not entertain the idea that the elect do not persevere; rather, it grounds perseverance in the decree of election (*WCF* 17.2).

1 God's election is based on his "mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith, or
2 good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as
3 conditions, or causes moving him thereunto; and all to the praise of his glorious grace"
4 (*WCF* 3.5). Because God has appointed both the means and the end of his election, all of the
5 elect, and only the elect, are redeemed by Christ, effectually called to faith in Christ by the
6 Spirit, justified, adopted, sanctified, kept by the power of the Spirit, and saved (*WCF* 3.6,
7 11.4, 14.1, 29.2, 33.2, *LC* 32, 45, 66, 75).

8
9 2. *Covenant*

10
11 The Westminster Standards set forth a bi-covenantal structure of federal theology, with a
12 covenant of works before the Fall and a covenant of grace after the Fall providing the
13 outline to the biblical story of creation, fall and redemption (*WCF* 7.2-3).⁶ The *Confession*
14 explains that God himself is the blessedness and reward of his people, but that we could not
15 have enjoyed him as such apart from his voluntary condescension (*WCF* 7.1). This is
16 necessary because of the distance between God and man, which is not because of some
17 inherent defect or want in man, but due to the Creator-creature distinction and the greatness
18 of God (*WCF* 7.1). The *Confession* identifies God's voluntary condescension with covenant
19 in general, and the covenant of works in particular (*WCF* 7.1-2).

20
21 To say it another way, the *Confession* identifies the "first" and "second" covenants (i.e. the
22 covenants of works and grace) as ways in which God secures his people's enjoyment of
23 union and communion with him. Thus, the *Confession* teaches that the God of the Bible
24 relates to his creatures covenantally. Apart from any obligation determined by humanity or
25 imposed by just necessity, God extends life with him to his people first in a "covenant of
26 works" and then through the various administrations of the "covenant of grace" (*WCF* 7.5).
27 It is right then to see the covenant concept as an important architectonic principle of the
28 theology of the *Confession*.

29
30 The covenant made with man before the Fall, is called by our Standards a covenant of *works*
31 (respecting its terms or conditions) (*WCF* 7.2), a covenant of *life* (respecting its goal or end)
32 (*LC* 20), a covenant with *Adam* (respecting its party or representative) (*LC* 22), and the *first*
33 covenant (respecting its chronological priority and indicating that there is a successor) (*WCF*
34 7.2). All four names describe the same pre-Fall covenant and aspects essential to it.

35
36 This first covenant or covenant of works entailed both promises and conditions (*WCF* 7.2).
37 Furthermore, it comprehended Adam as federal head or representative, and required of him
38 perfect and personal obedience to the moral law (*LC* 22, *WCF* 19.1-3). When Adam fell,

⁶ By "federal theology," we mean to use the term interchangeably with "covenant theology," particularly stressing the representative aspect of two great "federal heads," Adam and Jesus. Federal simply derives from the Latin *foedus*, which means "covenant." We recognize that Reformed theologians such as John Murray argued against the language of "covenant" as applied to the "Adamic Administration." Yet, he also recognized a major difference between the way God dealt with Adam pre-Fall and post-Fall as well as the necessity for Adam's perfect and perpetual obedience in the Garden. These, we would suggest, represent the main points for setting forward a "bi-covenantal" structure for Reformed theology, even when the language is not used.

1 however, he made himself and all his posterity by ordinary generation incapable of life by
 2 the covenant of works, and plunged all mankind into a condition of sin and misery (*WCF*
 3 7.3, *LC* 22, 23-25).

4
 5 Yet God in his love and mercy (*LC* 30) “was pleased to make a second, commonly called
 6 the covenant of grace,” in which he offers salvation to sinners by faith in Jesus Christ and
 7 promises to the elect the Holy Spirit (*WCF* 7.3). The *Confession* indicates that testamentary
 8 themes and terms in scripture are to be subsumed under the rubric of the covenant of grace
 9 (*WCF* 7.4).

10
 11 The *Confession* affirms that there is one covenant of grace in the Old Testament era (“the
 12 time of the law”) and the New Testament era (“the time of the gospel”) (*WCF* 7.5). Hence
 13 the *Confession* asserts the unity of the covenant of grace in its various administrations (*WCF*
 14 7.6), while also affirming its diversity or progress. The *Confession* is clear in its insistence
 15 that salvation is by faith in the Messiah, in the Old Testament as in the New (*WCF* 7.5).

16
 17 The *Confession* does not equate the instrumentality of faith in relation to justification in the
 18 covenant of grace with the conditions of the covenant of works. It carefully distinguishes
 19 conditions from requirements and reminds us that even the faith of the elect is the gift of
 20 God (*WCF* 11.1; *LC* 32). Likewise, the *Confession* draws a line from the conditions of the
 21 covenant of works to the obedience and satisfaction of Jesus Christ, teaching us that it is not
 22 our faith or faithfulness but Christ’s work which satisfies the covenant of works (*LC* 20, 32,
 23 *WCF* 3.5, 7.2, 11.1, *SC* 12).

24
 25 This is precisely the point of the Standards’ use of the term and theological category of
 26 “merit.” Merit relates to the just fulfillment of the conditions of the covenant of works (*LC*
 27 55, 174). This no man can do since the Fall (*LC* 193) but Christ only (*WCF* 17.3). The
 28 Standards consistently assert our inability to merit pardon of sin (*WCF* 16.5),⁷ and contrast
 29 our demerit with Christ’s merit (*LC* 55, cf. *WCF* 30.4). Christ’s work (active and passive,
 30 preceptive and penal, perfect and personal, obedience and satisfaction) fulfills the conditions
 31 of the covenant of works (*WCF* 8.5, 11.1, 3, 19.6), and thus secures a just and righteous
 32 redemption that is at the same time freely offered and all of grace.⁸

33
 34 Though it is common in Reformed theology to use the term covenant of grace both broadly
 35 and narrowly – that is, to speak of it entailing everyone who is baptized into the Christ-

⁷ “We cannot by our best works merit pardon of sin, or eternal life at the hand of God, by reason of the great disproportion that is between them and the glory to come; and the infinite distance that is between us and God, whom, by them, we can neither profit, nor satisfy for the debt of our former sins, but when we have done all we can, we have done but our duty, and are unprofitable servants; and because, as they are good, they proceed from His Spirit; and as they are wrought by us, they are defiled, and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection, that they cannot endure the severity of God’s judgment” (*WCF* 16.5).

⁸ Hence, denial of the category of merit, or the substitution of the idea of maturity in its place, neither enriches our covenant theology nor makes God more gracious in his dealings with us, but instead compromises the Cross’s vindication of the righteousness of God, and diminishes the believer’s apprehension of the security that flows from the costly justice of free grace.

1 professing covenant community (broad) and in reference to those who are elect members of
2 the invisible church, united to Christ by the Spirit through faith (narrow) – nevertheless, the
3 *Confession* never speaks as if all those who are in the covenant of grace broadly considered
4 (the visible church) are recipients of the substance or saving benefits of the covenant of
5 grace narrowly considered (the invisible church). This is a vital distinction, and so those
6 who deny or confuse it, or who assert that all the benefits of the covenant of grace accrue to
7 all who are baptized, do err and are out of accord with both the Scriptures and the
8 *Confession* (LC 61; Rom. 9:6, 11:7).

9
10 B. New Perspective on Paul

11
12 The version of the NPP most attractive to Reformed evangelicals is taught by N. T. Wright.
13 Wright is more theologically conservative and has a higher view of scripture than other
14 major figures associated with the NPP (such as E.P Sanders and James D.G. Dunn). Wright
15 also sees himself standing in both continuity and discontinuity with the NPP, often preferring
16 to call his view a “fresh perspective” and disagreeing with key ideas that are affirmed by
17 other NPP exponents.⁹

18
19 What all the various versions of the NPP have in common, though, is the shared opinion
20 that:

21 (1) The dominant, Reformation tradition of Pauline interpretation requires substantial
22 revision and correction, especially in its (mis)understanding Paul on faith and works,
23 grace and law, synergistic Jewish soteriology and monergistic Christian soteriology.

24 (2) The various and diverse forms of Judaism contemporary to the NT era did not teach
25 that obedience to the law is the way to salvation. Different NPP authors posit different
26 views of the function of the law. Some view it, not as a means of “getting in” but rather
27 of “staying in.” Others, in contrast, view the law and obedience to it, as functioning as a
28 marker of unique religious-ethnic identity.

29 (3) The law’s function in first century Judaism was, thus, ecclesiological rather than
30 soteriological. That is, as a minority group within the dominant Hellenistic culture, the
31 Jewish loyalty to God was expressed in terms of fidelity to practices like circumcision,
32 food laws, and Sabbath-observance. These practices were an expression of divine
33 election, not the basis of it.

34 (4) Paul’s censure of his fellow Jews was thus not about a synergistic soteriology, but
35 rather about a Jewish exclusivism that failed to embrace God’s purposes for the Gentiles.

36 (5) Protestantism (and also Reformation-era Catholicism) thus misread Paul by
37 anachronistically imposing on him their own contemporary theological categories and
38 presuppositions, which were derived more from their own context than his. Hence,
39 proponents of the NPP argue that in light of their fresh understanding of first century
40 Judaism, the historic Protestant reading of Paul’s soteriology, whatever true and right
41 insights it may offer, must now be refined.

⁹ A recent formulation of Wright’s views, which is a consistent elaboration of his earlier work, can be found, for instance, in his *Paul: A Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

1 Wright emphasizes the importance of “covenant theology” in Paul’s thought and writings.
 2 According to Wright, what Paul “says about Jesus and the Law reflects his belief that the
 3 covenant purposes of Israel’s God had reached their climactic moment in the events of
 4 Jesus’ death and resurrection.”¹⁰ Wright argues that Paul has redefined the Jewish theology
 5 of monotheism and election, God and Israel, *via* the doctrines of the person and work of
 6 Christ and the Spirit.¹¹

7
 8 What is also striking in Wright’s version of covenant theology is the emphasis on corporate
 9 categories. Forensic language in Paul is seen to refer to “covenant membership.” Election is
 10 viewed as national and ecclesial. He roots election in Israel’s corporate election as God’s
 11 own people; as he observes, “All through [the Old Testament] was a basic belief that the one
 12 creator God had called Israel to be his special people, and as part of that call had given Israel
 13 the land to live *in* and the Law to live *by*.”¹² It is often this emphasis on the corporate that
 14 draws appreciation of Wright from those associated with the FV.

15
 16 As will be detailed in the next section, Wright’s redefinition of election will lead to a
 17 reworking of justification. Present justification is about how covenant membership is
 18 discerned, and thus about how Paul’s revised Christological election is ascertained. Writing
 19 on Galatians 2, he observes that “there then follows the first ever statement of Paul’s
 20 doctrine of justification, and, despite the shrill chorus of detractors, it here obviously refers
 21 to the way in which God’s people have been redefined.” Justification is not about “getting
 22 in” or “staying in” but about “how we know we are in.”¹³ Hence, we often hear the
 23 description that justification (in Wright’s version of the NPP) is more about ecclesiology
 24 than soteriology.

25
 26 Needless to say, this NPP version of Paul’s teaching on election and covenant stands in stark
 27 contrast to the confessional formulation of these themes. Both cannot be right as faithful
 28 presentations of the Pauline teaching on election and covenant.

29 30 C. Federal Vision

31
 32 Over the last decade, a handful of voices within the American Reformed community have
 33 been advocating for theological revision. Concerned that the Reformed churches have been
 34 too influenced by revivalism and rationalism, and believing that traditional Reformed
 35 doctrine itself has not escaped the blind spots of this context, these men have articulated a
 36 need for Reformed pastors and churches to undertake some serious theological
 37 reassessment. This diverse group of conversation partners has embraced the designation
 38 “Federal Vision” (FV) as a description of its collective aspirations.

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

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

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

¹³ *Ibid.*, 111.

1 Many FV proponents view this discussion as more about the boundaries of our community
2 and about Reformed identity than about theology. Some are more respectful of confessional
3 language, categories and formulations, while others are aggressively critical, but there are
4 those who openly admit that the FV is desirous of redrawing the boundaries between
5 Lutheran, Catholic, and Reformed theological systems (appreciating aspects of each). FV
6 advocates, of course, view this as refining our theology in light of Scripture in order to fulfill
7 the aspiration of *semper reformanda*. FV opponents, of course, dispute this.

8
9 Peter Leithart says:

10
11 "Federal Vision" theology messes with these boundaries. It attempts to follow
12 the lead of Scripture, even when that seems to conflict with Confessional
13 formulae and seems closer to Luther than Reformed orthodoxy. It develops a
14 baptismal theology that is not starkly at odds with Luther, appreciates de
15 Lubac on the doctrine of the church and Alexander Schmemmann on the
16 Eucharist, finds Barth and Lindbeck intriguing and helpful at a number of
17 points, and is stimulated by Anglican New Testament scholar N. T. Wright.
18 As a result, "Federal Vision" theology challenges conservative Reformed
19 culture as much or more than it does Reformed theology, for it questions the
20 performances and boundaries that once defined this culture. Though the
21 specifics of the debate can appear to be so much gnat-straining (particularly to
22 those few outside the Reformed world who pay attention), the debate touches
23 a nerve and provokes profound reactions because it's not just a theological
24 debate but an identity crisis. The Federal Vision challenges some of the
25 identifying symbols, the boundary-markers of Reformed communal identity,
26 and that kind of challenge cannot help but provoke a heated response.¹⁴

27
28 Two of those identifying symbols or boundary-markers are the doctrines of election and
29 covenant. It is true that many FV proponents affirm the decretal view of election found in
30 the *Westminster* Standards. As Douglas Wilson writes, "The fact of decretal election is
31 affirmed by every FV spokesman that I know of."¹⁵ This view of election is accompanied,
32 however, by an equally strong affirmation of the need to view election from Scripture and
33 from the viewpoint of the covenant. According to Steve Wilkins, "The term 'elect' (or
34 'chosen') as it is used in the Scriptures most often refers to those in covenant union with
35 Christ who is *the* Elect One."¹⁶

36
37 One of the real challenges in trying to understand the FV on these issues is the monolithic
38 way they write about "the Covenant." Rather than making distinctions between the "first"
39 and "second" covenant in the fashion of the *Westminster* Standards, some express hostility
40 to the distinction, while others simply collapse any distinction at all. Those who preserve the

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

¹⁵ Doug Wilson, "Three Extra Eggs in the Pudding; Topic: Auburn Avenue Stuff," in BLOG and MABLOG (2006, 26 July), [Http://www.dougwils.com/index.asp?Action=Anchor&CategoryID=1&BlogID=2586](http://www.dougwils.com/index.asp?Action=Anchor&CategoryID=1&BlogID=2586).

¹⁶ *The Federal Vision*, 56.

1 bi-covenantal distinction do so in such a way as to redirect the confessional understanding of
2 the covenant of works.¹⁷

3
4 Central to the FV understanding of “covenant” is their definition: “covenant” is defined as a
5 vital relationship with the triune God. “To be in covenant is to be in real communion with
6 God, attendant with real privileges and real blessings.”¹⁸ Coupled with this definition is their
7 understanding of the “objectivity” of the covenant. “A covenant is also objective, like your
8 marriage. It’s there whether the members of the covenant feel it’s there, or they believe it’s
9 there, whether they even believe in the covenant or not.”¹⁹ As Douglas Wilson states, “We
10 have noted repeatedly that baptism in water is objective, and it establishes an objective
11 covenant relationship with the Lord of the covenant, Jesus Christ.”²⁰ This concept of
12 covenant objectivity includes the view that “every baptized person is in covenant with God
13 and is in union, then, with Christ and with the triune God.”²¹ This confluence of “covenant
14 objectivity” through baptism and “real and vital union” with Christ produces significant
15 confusion about the relationship between the “sign” and “thing signified” and the nature of
16 children who are “in this respect” within the covenant of grace (*WCF 27:2, LC 166*).

17
18 A major consequence of covenantal objectivity is that membership within the covenant is
19 viewed in an undifferentiated manner. One upshot of this is that the *BCO* distinction
20 between “communing” and “non-communing” members is set aside or eliminated. Most FV
21 proponents also agree that the emphasis needs to rest on the “visible” church as the “people
22 of God.” Union with this people, through baptism, is what is required for one to be elect; for
23 the visible people of God is the “body of Christ,” and Christ himself is the “Elect One.”

24
25 Wilkins maintains that “Scriptures seem to use the terms ‘covenant,’ [and] ‘elect,’ ... in a
26 different way than the *Westminster Confession* uses them. Thus, in the Scriptures, the
27 Covenant is a structured relationship of love with the Triune God in which man participates
28 in Christ Jesus. The elect are all those who are presently ‘in Christ’ (as members of His
29 body, the Church).”²²

¹⁷ Ralph Smith, *The Eternal Covenant: How the Trinity Reshapes Covenant Theology* (MoSCow, ID: Canon, 2003).

¹⁸ Virtually all proponents of FV agree that a covenant is a real relationship with God. “Covenant is relationship. That is what covenant is. Relationship” (Steve Schlissel, “Covenant of Peace, Part 1”). “The persons of the Triune God are eternally united in a covenant bond of love” (Ralph Smith, *Paradox and Truth*, 73). “The Covenant is a personal-structural bond which joins the three persons of God in a community of life, and in which man was created to participate” (James Jordan, *The Law of the Covenant*, 4). “Covenant isn’t a thing that you can analyze – covenant is a relationship. It is a personal, ordered and formally binding relationship” (John Barach, “Covenant and History,” AAPCPC Sermon). “Covenant is a real relationship, consisting of real communion with the triune God through union with Christ. The covenant is not some thing that exists apart from Christ or in addition to Him (another means of grace) – rather, the covenant is union with Christ” (Steve Wilkins [Italics, his], Knox Colloquium, 262).

¹⁹ John Barach, “Covenant and History,” 2002 AAPCPC Sermon. The analogy of marriage is used by several FV proponents in the context of covenantal objectivity.

²⁰ Douglas Wilson, “‘Reformed’ Is Not Enough,” sub-titled, “Recovering the Objectivity of the Covenant.”

²¹ John Barach, “Covenant and History.”

²² Steve Wilkins, “Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation,” *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros & Cons*, 268.

1 He also urges his readers to rethink their theological categories and terminology “from the
2 perspective of the covenant,” and adds: “All that we as Calvinists have been concerned to
3 preserve (the absolute sovereignty of God in salvation, the absolutely gracious nature of
4 salvation, the supremacy of Christ over all, etc.) can be preserved without falling prey to the
5 error of forcing the Scriptures to submit to a preconceived logical or theological construct
6 and, thus, subtly departing from Scripture as the supreme rule of faith and life.”²³

7
8 Furthermore, because the first covenant with Adam was a gracious covenant, coming from a
9 gracious God, with the condition of the first covenant being the covenantal faithfulness of
10 Adam, not merit, FV proponents suggest that believers should recognize the essential unity
11 of the covenants from Adam through Christ. They are all basically the same with the same
12 condition, covenant faithfulness. In addition, FV writers unanimously reject the concept of
13 merit under the covenant of works: “God did not have an arrangement with Adam in the
14 garden based on Adam’s possible merit. Everything good from God is grace. If Adam had
15 passed the test, he would have done so by grace through faith.”²⁴

16 17 D. Comparative Analysis

18
19 We often hear proponents and sympathizers of the NPP and FV who are part of confessional
20 Reformed communities say, that while they go beyond the Westminster Standards in what
21 they affirm, they do not contradict the Westminster Standards. But it is evident that the
22 version of covenant and election taught by the NPP and FV is incompatible with the views
23 of the Westminster Standards. In fact, these two approaches to covenant and election are not
24 complementary ways of looking at the biblical data, but irreconcilably contradictory
25 alternative accounts of the biblical data.

26
27 The 1646 chapter title “God’s eternal decree” emphasizes the unitary and comprehensive
28 nature of God’s divine plan. Thus views which juxtapose “election from the standpoint of
29 the covenant” with the Standard’s decretal view of election, offering this as an alternative
30 and superior way of thinking about (e.g.) the visible church, the sacraments and assurance
31 are not only forsaking the language of *the* Standards, but undermining its theology.²⁵

32
33 Moreover, to affirm the Standards, and then redefine the terms used in the Standards, is not
34 to affirm the Standards. For example, to affirm the decretal view of election, and then to say
35 that the Bible teaches that the elect may fall from their election, is to set the Bible over
36 against the Standards. The committee holds that by receiving and adopting the Westminster
37 Standards as containing the system of doctrine taught in Scripture, we are saying that the
38 terms used in the *Confession* faithfully represent what is taught in Scripture.

²³ *The Federal Vision*, 67.

²⁴ Douglas Wilson, “Beyond the Five Solas,” *Credenda/Agenda* 16/2:15.

²⁵ See Rowland S. Ward’s comments on this chapter in *The Westminster Confession of Faith: A Study Guide* (Wantirna, Australia: New Melbourne Press, 1996, 2004), 63ff.

1 The Committee would suggest that the FV proponents have in effect provided an alternative
 2 hermeneutic for interpreting Scripture. They have done so 1) by concentrating their efforts
 3 on the “objectivity” of the covenant, 2) by stressing the “covenantal” efficacy of baptism, 3)
 4 by focusing on the undifferentiated membership of the visible church, 4) by holding the
 5 view that the “elect” are covenant members who may one day fall from their elect status,
 6 and 5) by highlighting the need for persevering faithfulness in order to secure final election.

7
 8 FV proponents also want to stress that covenant is a “relationship” but often assume their
 9 definition rather than closely Scrutinizing the covenant concept in Scripture. Scripturally
 10 speaking, a covenant is, first, a special way in which a binding relationship is secured (and
 11 thus, it has the function of confirming and assuring divinely established relationships
 12 between God and his people). Secondly, by metonymy, covenant stands for the relationship
 13 secured by means of the covenant. Hence, covenants do not effect relationships, they secure
 14 them.

15
 16 Because of their assumed definition of covenant as relationship, FV proponents are apt to
 17 ascribe an objectivity and efficacy to the covenant (almost always in the singular), covenant
 18 membership, and covenant signs that diminish or ignore the effectual character and priority
 19 of the word of promise, as well as the reality of the invisible/visible distinction. This
 20 tendency leads them to assign saving benefits ascribed to all members of the visible church,
 21 elect and non-elect covenant members alike.²⁶

22
 23 Some FV writers criticize the confessional doctrine of the covenant of works, and wrongly
 24 parallel the condition of Adam’s obedience in the covenant of works with the
 25 instrumentality of our faith in the covenant of grace. The Standards are clear that an
 26 obedience principle lies at the heart of the first covenant; and it parallels that obedience
 27 principle, not to our faith, but to the work of Christ under the second covenant. Often FV
 28 writers who criticize the covenant of works do so in reaction to theologians who stress
 29 “merit” as part of that covenant. Regardless of one’s stance on that issue, the major point of
 30 the Standards is not the merits gained by Adam, but the merit of Christ’s work.²⁷

²⁶ Of course, this presumes a more basic question: can non-elect people be covenant members? The Reformed have answered this in different ways, although no one has ever said that the line between elect and non-elect should be blurred. Witsius and a’Brakel, for instance, posit that only those who are elect are really in covenant with God. Gaffin and Robertson would say that covenant is broader than election. The latter authors speak of the internal and external aspects of the covenant. Either way, there is a difference between external and internal. See *The Federal Vision*, 58-62, especially, where definitive sanctification, calling, redemption, forgiveness of sins, and justification through baptism are ascribed to all, head for head, who are in the covenant, non-elect covenant members and elect covenant members alike, without any distinction of terms.

²⁷ What is key to the covenant of works is that the reward is conditioned on the performance of works, not on whether there is some sort of equivalence between the reward earned and the work performed. In the pivotal text of Romans 4:4, the idea of “what is due” need not invoke the idea that “what is due” has been earned by a work that is commensurate with the reward itself, but merely that there was a covenant which promised that reward if the work was performed. Thus, if Adam had obeyed in the probation, God would have owed him the reward of eternal life, because God had promised it to him on that condition. God would not have owed it to him because his obedience in the probation merited eternal life.

1 Finally, the FV confuses the benefits of salvation by attributing them to non-elect members
2 of the visible church and so undermines the security enjoyed by the believer in view of
3 Christ's perfect and personal fulfillment of the terms of the vitiated covenant of works.

4 5 **II. Justification and Union with Christ**

6 7 A. Westminster Standards

8 9 1. *Union with Christ*

10
11 The Westminster Standards only speak of a "union with Christ" as that which is effectual; or
12 to say it another way, as that which is saving and belongs to the elect (*LC* 65, 66). This is the
13 "work of God's grace" whereby the "Spirit applieth to us the redemption purchased by
14 Christ, by working faith in us, and thereby uniting us to Christ in our effectual calling" (*LC*
15 66; *SC* 30). This "thereby" of the catechism's statement is important: it conveys that the
16 Spirit uses faith to unite believers to Christ (cf. *WCF* 26:1).

17
18 This union is such that believers are "spiritually and mystically, yet really and inseparably,
19 joined to Christ as their head and husband" (*LC* 66). There is no sense in which believers are
20 made "in any wise partakers of the substance of his Godhead, or be equal with Christ in any
21 respect" (*WCF* 26:3). Rather, it is a spiritual union, whereby Christ is head and husband of
22 all who are eternally saved, both singly as individuals and corporately as the church (*WCF*
23 25:1). Not only is this union spiritual, it is *real* and *inseparable*; the union attested in our
24 Standards cannot be lost (*LC* 79). Confusing this "union with Christ" with visible
25 membership in the body of Christ through outward profession or sacramental expression is a
26 serious error and endangers our church's faithful testimony to the Gospel essential of
27 justification by faith alone.

28
29 From this union with Christ, believers in the invisible church have a "communion in grace"
30 in which they share all the benefits of redemption. By virtue of "Christ's mediation,"
31 "justification, adoption, sanctification, and whatever else, in this life, manifests their union
32 with him" are applied to believers (*LC* 69; cf. *SC* 32, 36). The Standards, taken as a whole,
33 view union with Christ as the umbrella category under which the individual aspects of
34 Christ's redemption fit. And yet, union with Christ does not make justification or the other
35 benefits redundant.

36
37 Interestingly, the Standards use different terms when talking about how baptism relates to
38 union with Christ: they speak of baptism serving as "a sign and seal...of [our] ingrafting into
39 Christ" (*WCF* 28:1; *LC* 165; *SC* 94). Water baptism does not effect this on its own, nor does
40 it do so necessarily at the time of administration (*WCF* 28:5). Rather, baptism serves to exhibit
41 and confer the gracious promises of the Gospel to the elect recipient in God's appointed time
42 (*WCF* 28:6). Further, baptism serves sacramentally to "strengthen and increase [our] faith"
43 (*LC* 162); this is why we are urged to "improve" our baptisms (*LC* 167).

1 2. *Justification*

2
3 When the Westminster Standards describe what happens in justification, they describe a
4 judicial “act” that has two elements: “pardoning their sins” and “accounting and accepting
5 their persons as righteous” (*LC 70; WCF 11.1*).²⁸ Hence, we can say that, according to our
6 Standards, justification involves both the forgiveness of sin and the accounting of sinners as
7 righteous.

8
9 When the Standards go on to describe how that accounting and accepting of sinners as
10 righteous occurs, they further specify that “accounting” involves imputation (“by God
11 imputed to them” *LC 70*). God imputes both the “obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto
12 them” (*WCF 11:1, 3; LC 70, 71*).²⁹ To put it differently, Christ’s “perfect obedience” (his
13 “active obedience” to the demands of the law) and his “full satisfaction” of God’s justice
14 (his “passive obedience” in which he suffered on the Cross for sinners) are both imputed to
15 sinners; they are then accounted to be and accepted as righteous in God’s sight. In other
16 words, the sole ground for justification is the “righteousness of Christ,” which is “imputed”
17 to sinners (*WCF 8:5; LC 77*).

18
19 Further, the Standards assert that nothing that sinners do nor anything in them can serve as
20 the ground of justification: “not for anything wrought in them, or done by them” (*WCF 11:1;*
21 *LC 70*). Faith serves as “the alone instrument” “by which [the believer] receiveth and
22 applieth Christ and his righteousness” (*WCF 11:2; LC 72*). This justifying faith “is a “saving
23 grace wrought in the heart of a sinner by the Spirit and Word of God” in which the
24 individual “not only assenteth to the truth of the promise of the Gospel, but receiveth and
25 resteth upon Christ and his righteousness” (*LC 72*). This faith will be “accompanied with all
26 other saving graces” (*WCF 11:2*) and yet, these other graces or good works do not serve as
27 the ground for justification; rather, the ground by which God justifies the ungodly is the
28 righteousness of Christ, his obedience and satisfaction (*LC 73*).

29
30 While sinners offer nothing as the ground of justification, that does not mean that their
31 faithfulness, or good works, is pointless. Rather, “good works” are accepted because of
32 God’s prior acceptance of sinners “through Christ” (*WCF 16:6*). These works are accepted
33 not because they are “wholly unblamable or unreprouable in God’s sight”; rather, in spite of
34 their “weaknesses and imperfections,” God “is pleased to accept and reward” these works
35 because he looks upon them “in his Son” and because they “proceed from his Spirit” (*WCF*
36 *16:3, 5*). Though these works serve to increase the Christian’s holiness in this life and so
37 encourage him toward “eternal life” (*WCF 16:2*), they in no way “merit pardon of sin, or
38 eternal life at the hand of God” (*WCF 16:5*). In fact, even good works done in faithfulness as
39 Christians, proceeding from God’s Spirit, cannot of themselves “endure the severity of
40 God’s judgment,” because they are “defiled and mixed with so much weakness and
41 imperfection” (*WCF 16:5*).

²⁸ Both *WCF 11:1* and *LC 70* have this language; *SC 33* only refers to “accepting.”

²⁹ Both *WCF 11:1* and *LC* have this language; *SC* summarizes this up as “the righteousness of Christ.”

1 Once sinners experience this judicial act of justification, they “can never fall from [this]
2 state” (*WCF* 11:5). That does not mean, however, that justified sinners may not know
3 “God’s fatherly displeasure” for their sins; nor does it mean that Christians will not wrestle
4 with their assurance of faith (*WCF* 18:4). It does mean that justified sinners cannot be
5 “unjustified”; they “whom God hath accepted in his beloved...can neither totally nor finally
6 fall away” (*WCF* 17:1). After death, these believers will be “made perfect in holiness and
7 received into the highest heavens” (*WCF* 32:1; *LC* 86), while they await the “full
8 redemption of their bodies” at the resurrection. At final judgment, which coincides with the
9 resurrection of all, “the righteous” will be “openly acknowledged and acquitted” (*LC* 90; *SC*
10 38) because of the prior act of justification, which “free[s] all believers from the revenging
11 wrath of God, and that perfectly in this life” and promises that “they [shall] never fall into
12 condemnation” (*LC* 77).

13

14 B. New Perspective on Paul

15

16 1. *E. P. Sanders*

17

18 One key area where the “New Perspective on Paul” has come under intense scrutiny is
19 justification by faith. Starting with E. P. Sanders’ *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, these NT
20 scholars suggest that our understanding of the Pauline context is shaped more by later,
21 Reformational doctrinal contexts, rather than the situation of the intertestamental period.
22 This period, also called “Second Temple Judaism,” has become a major historical battle
23 ground in seeking to understand the Pauline situation and teaching.³⁰

24

25 In sum, those who follow Sanders suggest that the Judaism which confronted Jesus and Paul
26 in the first century of the Christian era was not a “legalistic” religion, but a religion of grace.
27 This divine graciousness was demonstrated, first, by God’s election of Israel as his people;
28 this election and the establishment of covenant relationship was a demonstration of God’s
29 grace. Even further, by virtue of God’s election of corporate Israel, each individual Israelite
30 was “elected” until he rejected this election and abandoned the people of God.³¹

31

32 According to this view, Jews and Christians were fundamentally saying the same things
33 about the relationship between grace and works: grace was the way an individual “got into”
34 the covenant and so identified with the people of God; this grace was evidenced in the
35 election of the church to be God’s people; obedient works represented the way that
36 individual “stayed in” the covenant, demonstrating his or her covenant loyalty to God. The

³⁰ E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977). For recent evangelical attempts to determine the relationship between Second Temple Judaism and Pauline doctrinal development, see D. A. Carson, P. T. O’Brien, and Mark Seifrid, eds., *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003-4). Other major evangelical critics include Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The “Lutheran” Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); Guy Prentiss Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul: A Review and Response* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2004); Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *By Faith, Not By Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2006).

³¹ Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 75, 147.

1 major problem that Paul had with Judaism was that it was not Christianity; that is, Judaism
 2 did not properly assess the world-historical significance of Jesus as Lord.³²

3
 4 It is important to note that not everyone who sees themselves as working within Sanders'
 5 categories agrees with him on every particular. For example, Sanders suggests that Paul's
 6 justification language was not merely forensic, but also includes a transformative aspect to
 7 it. In fact, he argued that the notion of participation in Christ is central to Paul's thought and
 8 that forensic categories are subsidiary to this main concern. As a result, for an individual to
 9 be "righteous," it was necessary for him to "be-in-Christ," which ultimately meant being in
 10 Christ's covenant people, who are his own body. Not all NPP proponents, however, accept
 11 that the participatory language in Paul's thought swallows up, if you will, the forensic side
 12 of his theology.³³

13 14 2 N. T. Wright

15
 16 By far, the most influential NPP proponent for Presbyterian and Reformed believers is N. T.
 17 Wright. There are helpful insights in much of Wright's work. For example, in his series of
 18 major volumes on NT studies, he has proved to be a strong and noteworthy defender of the
 19 historicity of the Christian religion, especially on the key fundamentals of the historical
 20 Jesus and the reality of Christ's resurrection. By noting potential problem areas in his
 21 observations on Paul's theology, we do not mean to suggest that we have nothing to learn
 22 from Wright.³⁴

23
 24 The challenge comes in Wright's understanding of Paul's theology of justification. While
 25 acknowledging the forensic orientation of Paul's use of justification, Wright appears to read
 26 justification in corporate terms first: "'Justification' thus describes the coming great act of
 27 redemption and salvation, *seen from the point of view* of the covenant (Israel as God's
 28 people) on the one hand and the law court on the other (God's final judgment will be like a
 29 great law-court with Israel winning the case)." In Israel's view, this justification (or
 30 vindication) would occur at the end of the age, when God would cause his people to triumph
 31 over their enemies, vindicating or justifying them by raising them from the dead after they
 32 had suffered.³⁵

³² Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 442, 543, 552; cf. N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 19.

³³ Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 503-8.

³⁴ Wright's major publishing effort is his series on Christian Origins and the Question of God; three volumes have appeared to date: *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992); *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Fortress, 1996); and *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Fortress, 2003). He has published two "interim" reports on how his major Paul volume might proceed: *What Saint Paul Really Said*, and *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005). In addition, he has produced a major commentary on Romans for the New Interpreter's Bible: N. T. Wright, *Romans* in *The New Interpreter's Bible: Vol. 10* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 393-770. This section of the report will focus on these three major sources with additional attention paid to his essays found in *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

³⁵ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 33 (emphasis his), 36. Wright uses the terms justification and vindication interchangeably.

Supplement: **ADDITION**

1 Jesus overturns Israel's (and the pre-converted Paul's) understanding of justification,
2 according to Wright, because "*the one true God had done for Jesus of Nazareth, in the*
3 *middle of time, what Saul had thought he was going to do for Israel at the end of time.*" That
4 is, God had vindicated or justified Jesus, the true Israelite, by raising him from the dead.
5 This meant that the crucified and resurrected Jesus was exactly whom he claimed to be: the
6 promised Messiah who was Israel's true King or Lord. For Wright, this is what the "gospel"
7 is: the narrative proclamation that Jesus is Lord.³⁶

8
9 Not only was Jesus exactly who he claimed to be, but, through Jesus' resurrection, God
10 himself was shown to be "righteous" (i.e., faithful to His covenant promises). For Wright,
11 the term "the righteousness of God" primarily relates to God's own covenant faithfulness.
12 God had established his covenant with his people, a covenant that centered on the promise
13 he would be their Lord and Savior; and he demonstrated his "righteousness" by showing that
14 he was faithful to his covenant promises. By this, God did far more than demonstrate his
15 faithfulness to Israel; through the resurrection of Jesus, he showed his faithfulness to the
16 entire cosmos—in Jesus, God was demonstrating his righteousness to the entire creation by
17 renewing all things and vindicating himself as the one true God.³⁷

18
19 And so, this gospel was a proclamation to Israelite and Gentile to bow the knee to Jesus, to
20 confess him as Lord, and to join the elected people of God. The means of initiation into
21 God's people, or the "badge of membership," was faith in Jesus as Lord. Those who belong
22 to this people are "justified": justification "was about God's eschatological definition, both
23 future and present, of who was, in fact, a member of his people. In [E. P.] Sanders' terms, it
24 was not so much about 'getting in,' or indeed about 'staying in,' as about 'how you could
25 tell who was in.' In standard Christian theological language, it wasn't so much about
26 soteriology as about ecclesiology; not so much about salvation as about the church." To put
27 it briefly, according to Wright, justification is chiefly the status of covenant membership, the
28 status of belonging as a member of God's people. As he notes, for first century Jews and
29 Christians, justification was "*membership language*," focused on "covenant membership" in
30 the people of God.³⁸

31
32 Wright does recognize that some may take this more "ecclesiological" understanding of
33 justification too far. In 2005, he observed that while the NPP has succeeded in driving this
34 point home, it has failed to show "how this integrates with the traditional view that [Paul] is
35 talking about how sinners are put right with God." Wright believes that these two emphases
36 "are in fact part of the same thing, both to be equally stressed." And yet, though he claims
37 this, it does appear that his default mode for understanding justification is the more
38 corporate, expansive understanding: Paul "is not simply assuming an implicit narrative
39 about how individual sinners find a right relationship with a holy God...In so far as [Paul]
40 would be happy with the former way of stating matters at all, he would insist on framing it

³⁶ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 36-37, 45, 51-7 (emphasis his).

³⁷ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 48, 50-1, 97-111, 124 (emphasis his), 129.

³⁸ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 94, 119; Wright, *Paul*, 30, 113.

1 within the much larger question of how the creator God can be true to creation, how the
2 covenant God can be true to the covenant, and how those things are not two but one.”³⁹

3
4 With this understanding, Wright proposed that Galatians, especially, be re-read. The key
5 issue in that Pauline letter, according to Wright, was “how you *define the people of God*: are
6 they to be defined by the badges of Jewish race, or in some other way?” Paul employs
7 justification in Galatians to argue that the way to tell who belongs to God’s people is not by
8 pointing to Jewish circumcision, dietary laws, or feast days, but by pointing to faith—all
9 those who have faith belong to God’s people and, hence, are justified. In other words,
10 justification has to do with “covenant *membership*; it is the gift of God, not something
11 acquired in any way by the human beings involved; and this gift is bestowed upon faith.”⁴⁰

12
13 While Wright notes that justification (covenant membership) is a declaration that an
14 individual’s sins are already forgiven, it does not mean that there is a transfer of God’s or
15 Christ’s righteousness to sinners. As he argues, “*The righteousness they have will not be*
16 *God’s own righteousness*...God’s righteousness remains, so to speak, God’s own property.
17 It is the reason for his acting to vindicate his people. It is not the status he bestows upon
18 them in so doing.”⁴¹ Rather, justification means that sinners “are declared in the present, to
19 be what they will be seen to be in the future, namely the true people of God.” Or to put it
20 differently, “justification, for Paul, is a subset of election, that is, it belongs as part of his
21 doctrine of the people of God.” Both justification and election are re-read in corporate terms,
22 focused on belonging to the covenant people of God.⁴²

23
24 As a result, according to Wright, the traditional idea of “imputed righteousness,” whereby
25 sinners are accepted and accounted as righteous in God’s sight because of the righteousness
26 of Jesus, is incorrect: “If we use the language of the law court, it makes no sense whatever to
27 say that the judge imputes, imparts, bequeaths, conveys or otherwise transfers his
28 righteousness to either the plaintiff or the defendant. Righteousness is not an object, a
29 substance or gas which can be passed around the courtroom.”⁴³

30
31 In addition, Wright argues that Paul did not mean to suggest that “Jesus’ ‘obedience’ was
32 somehow meritorious, so that by it he earned ‘righteousness’ on behalf of others. That is an
33 ingenious and far-reaching way of making Paul’s language fit into a theological scheme very
34 different from his own.” Jesus, in his living, dying, and rising again, simply was faithful to
35 what God had intended the covenant to achieve.⁴⁴

³⁹ Wright, *Paul*, 36, 37.

⁴⁰ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 120, 124-5 (emphasis his); Wright, *Paul*, 120-1.

⁴¹ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 99 (emphasis his). Elsewhere, Wright observed that “justification in the present is possible, Paul argues, because the grace of God deals with the sins of the people through the death of Jesus. The people in question are, therefore, a forgiven family” (Wright, *Romans*, 466).

⁴² Wright, *Paul*, 121; Wright, *Romans*, 468.

⁴³ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 98, 99, 129, 131;

⁴⁴ Wright, *Romans*, 467.

1 Thus, the idea of a “gracious transfer” is simply not found in the biblical texts, according to
2 Wright. In dealing with Romans 4:3-5, Wright understands the “book-keeping metaphor” of
3 “counted” (ESV) as referring to the individual’s “status of being a member of the covenant;
4 ‘faith’ is the badge, the sign, that reveals that status because it is its key symptom.” This
5 badge of covenant membership is an act of sheer grace, granted by God to the ungodly. As
6 he observed in comments on Romans 4:22, “Faith is the sign of life; life is the gift of God.
7 Justification is God’s declaration that where this sign appears, the person in whom it appears
8 is within the covenant.” According to Wright, the language of Romans 4 does not represent
9 “imputation” of “Christ’s/God’s righteousness” to the ungodly.⁴⁵

10
11 Those who respond to Jesus in faith and are identified with God’s people are justified and
12 represent “the obedience of faith.” The Greek word *pistis* can be translated either as faith or
13 faithfulness: for example, Wright understands Romans 1:17 (“the righteousness of God is
14 revealed from faith for faith” ESV) to mean “from God’s faithfulness to human
15 faithfulness”: “When God’s action in fulfillment of the covenant is unveiled, it is because
16 God is faithful to what has been promised; when it is received, it is received by that human
17 faith that answers to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, that human faith that is also
18 *faithfulness* to the call of God in Jesus the Messiah.”⁴⁶

19
20 As might be expected, “union with Christ” is revised in line with this “covenantal” reading
21 of Scripture. Wright suggests that, for Paul, being in Christ “means ‘belonging to the people
22 of God as redefined around the Messiah.’ It is, in other words, a specifically *covenantal* way
23 of speaking.” And the means for being united to Christ is baptism. The sacrament of baptism
24 serves to unite the individual to the Messiah and so unites him to the Messiah’s people.
25 “That which is true of the Messiah is therefore now true of them; that is what happened to
26 him happens to them *with him*... Their status and condition now, therefore, is that they are *in*
27 *Christ*, so that his having died to sin and being alive to God is true of them also. This is the
28 logic of incorporative Messiahship, and hence of baptism.” Following Wright’s logic,
29 though unstated – to be baptized into the Messiah and, hence, into the Messiah’s body of
30 people means that the baptized one is justified and elect as well.⁴⁷

31 32 C. Federal Vision

33 34 1. *Peter Leithart*

35
36 While Federal Vision proponents frequently subsume the doctrine of justification under the
37 category of “union with Christ,” Peter Leithart, in one influential essay, deals with
38 justification language in the Bible. Leithart suggests that while the Bible does use
39 “justification” in a forensic sense, readers must broaden their understanding of what
40 “forensic” means in order to understand justification. That is to say, forensic usage in the

⁴⁵ Wright, *Romans*, 491-2, 501.

⁴⁶ Wright, *Romans*, 425 (emphasis his). Wright does recognize that a great deal of debate has occurred over this way of understanding *pistis*: see, for example, *Romans*, 467, n103.

⁴⁷ Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 152 (emphasis his); Wright, *Paul*, 9; Wright, *Romans*, 533-5 (emphasis his).

1 Bible could cover military, personal, and liberation contexts, as well as one oriented to the
2 court-room.⁴⁸

3
4 In order to broaden the traditional Protestant reading of justification, Leithart pays attention
5 to the biblical usage of the justification word-group as it is used in the OT Psalms and
6 Prophets. By focusing on these texts, he suggests that biblical readers will come to see that
7 God’s judgment is “never simply a declaration that changes one’s legal standing without
8 changing one’s condition or situation. When God condemns, He acts to enforce that
9 sentence.” Hence, the way most Protestants would understand “forensic” must be expanded
10 to include both the declaration *and* the execution of a sentence.⁴⁹

11
12 God especially acts to justify or vindicate ungodly Israel by bringing about their deliverance,
13 renewal and resurrection. “Israel’s ‘justification’ takes the form of Israel’s restoration and
14 rebirth,” Leithart suggests. “Israel’s justification looks like Abram’s, like death being
15 swallowed up by life...Justification does not refer merely to a declaration that changes the
16 legal status of Israel, but leaves them in ruin and defeat. Their justification is their
17 deliverance from ruin, exile, and the curse.”⁵⁰

18
19 This OT background, Leithart notes, informs Paul’s theology of justification, especially in
20 Romans. There are “echoes” of the Psalms in Romans 3, which should allow biblical
21 students to see that Paul and the Psalmists were agreed that justification was “a favorable
22 judgment of God rendered through deliverance from enemies.” The public means by which
23 this judgment was declared was the resurrection of Jesus, “the paradigmatic case of
24 justification.” And because this is so, “our justification must likewise involve deliverance
25 from the power of death and from the threat of enemies, including the enemies of sin and
26 Satan.”⁵¹

27
28 The upshot is that “in this sense, justification and definitive sanctification are two ways of
29 decribing the same act.” Drawing on Romans 6:7, Leithart argues that “to be justified from
30 sin is to be liberated.” Because sinners are united to Christ through baptism, they are “joined
31 with the vindicated Son.” Sinners share in Jesus’ prior vindication, evidenced in his
32 resurrection, and realize liberation from sin. This justification is realized in the present by
33 faith, but awaits the final judgment for the full and final vindication.⁵²

34
35 *2. Rich Lusk*

48 Peter Leithart, “Judge Me, O God: Biblical Perspectives on Justification,” in *The Federal Vision*, ed. Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner (Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2004), 209. Leithart observed that “the Reformation doctrine has illegitimately narrowed and to some extent distorted the biblical doctrine. As far as it goes, the Protestant doctrine is correct...The problem is, this is *not* the only setting for justification in Scripture.”

49 Leithart, “Judge Me, O God,” 216.

50 Leithart, “Judge Me, O God,” 222.

51 Leithart, “Judge Me, O God,” 225-7.

52 Leithart, “Judge Me, O God,” 227, 228, 231-2.

1 Another important discussion of issues related to justification can be found in Rich Lusk’s
2 response/essay in the Knox Seminary Symposium. Responding to Morton Smith’s essay on
3 the “biblical plan of salvation,” Lusk suggests that “bi-covenantal federalism begins to look
4 more and more like a theological grid imposed upon Scripture to satisfy the requirements of
5 a dogmatic system rather than an organic outgrowth of biblical reflection and exegesis.” In
6 particular, Lusk argues against any understanding of covenant theology that uses the
7 category of merit to describe God’s relationship with Adam or Jesus.⁵³

8
9 While the Federal Vision understanding of “covenant” is treated elsewhere in this report, it
10 is important to notice how Lusk’s reluctance to use the concept of merit affects his
11 understanding of justification and, especially, the way imputation functions within the
12 biblical doctrine of justification. First, Lusk argues that the purpose of law was to point the
13 way to maturity, not to establish merit. He suggests that “the law did not require perfect
14 obedience” and that Moses suggested that “the law was not too hard to keep, for it was a law
15 of faith.” He also claimed that “the Torah was not a law code in any modern sense.” Rather,
16 the law was intended to communicate “fatherly instruction,” wisdom and counsel to gain
17 blessing from God, and served as “the Gospel in pre-Christian form,” giving the “blue print
18 of the coming Gospel.”⁵⁴

19
20 And so, while affirming that “the perfect obedience of Jesus played a vital role in his salvific
21 work on our behalf,” Lusk elaborates on that claim by arguing that Christ’s active obedience
22 was a “precondition of his saving work in his death and resurrection.” That is, Christ’s
23 active obedience “is not saving in itself”; nor were these works that “would be credited to
24 Jesus’ people”; nor did Christ “merit” anything for himself or his people that would be
25 legally transferred to his people’s account. For Lusk, “justification requires no transfer or
26 imputation of anything,” especially the “merits” of Jesus.⁵⁵

27
28 Rather, what is required for God to justify sinners is union with Christ. Following others
29 who focus on this theological category, Lusk suggests, “If I am *in Christ*, he is my substitute
30 and representative. All he suffered and accomplished was for me. All he has belongs to me.
31 With regards to justification, this means my right standing before the Father is grounded in
32 Christ’s own right standing before the Father.” In fact, he states that “my in-Christ-ness makes
33 imputation redundant. I do not need the moral content of his life of righteousness transferred
34 to me; what I need is a share in the forensic verdict passed over him at the resurrection.”⁵⁶

⁵³ Rich Lusk, “Response to ‘Biblical Plan of Salvation,’” in *The Auburn Avenue Theology Pros and Cons: Debating the Federal Vision*, ed. E. Calvin Beisner (Ft. Lauderdale: Knox Seminary, 2004), 145.

⁵⁴ Lusk, “Response to ‘Biblical Plan of Salvation,’” 128, 130. At one point, Lusk did claim that “God certainly did require perfect and perpetual obedience of Adam” (121); and yet later, he claimed that the law did not require perfect obedience. It would seem, then, that God required more of Adam in a gracious garden than he would of Israel in a fallen world.

⁵⁵ Lusk, “Response to ‘Biblical Plan of Salvation,’” 140, 142; see also 137. Lusk also observes that “it is not Christ’s life-long obedience *per se* that is credited to us. Rather, it is his right standing before the Father, manifested in his resurrection” (141).

⁵⁶ Lusk, “Response to ‘Biblical Plan of Salvation,’” 142. Lusk later uses Richard Gaffin’s work to suggest that “imputation, as such, has no free standing structure of its own. It is simply a corollary of union with Christ” (143). Gaffin responds to Lusk’s usage of his work and the suggestion that union with Christ makes imputation

1 The way of incorporation or union with Christ is by faith, sealed in baptism. In a separate
 2 essay, Lusk holds that “the Westminster standards teach that in baptism, the thing
 3 signified—which is nothing less than union with Christ, regeneration, and forgiveness—is
 4 truly sealed, conferred, applied, and communicated.” Hence, baptism unites the individual to
 5 Christ effectually and, at that moment, the individual is justified—the forensic verdict
 6 passed over Christ at the resurrection is passed over the individual at baptism. Or as Lusk
 7 puts it elsewhere, “faith is the instrument of justification on our end, while baptism is the
 8 instrument on God’s side. God offers Christ and applies Christ to us through the instrument
 9 of baptism.”⁵⁷

10 3. *Steve Wilkins*

11
 12
 13 A similar way of thinking about justification, imputation, union with Christ, and baptism can
 14 be found in Steve Wilkins’ essay. Wilkins writes that “all the blessings and benefits of
 15 salvation therefore are found ‘in Christ’...By virtue of union with the Second Adam we
 16 have wholeness and restoration—new birth, regeneration, new life.” Individuals are united
 17 to Christ and so receive the benefits of salvation by baptism: “The Bible teaches us that
 18 baptism unites us to Christ and His body by the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13).
 19 Baptism is an act of God (through his ministers) which signifies and seals our initiation into
 20 the Triune communion...At baptism we are clothed with Christ, united to Him and to His
 21 Church which is His body.”⁵⁸ Hence, baptism unites individuals to Christ; and by virtue of
 22 union with Christ, all the benefits of salvation are received by the individual.⁵⁹

23
 24 Part of the salvific benefits received by union with Christ, which occurs in baptism, is
 25 justification. This is because Jesus “is the Justified One.” Because Jesus was “vindicated” by
 26 the Father at the resurrection, we too are “vindicated” or justified; we share in Jesus’
 27 “justification.” Elsewhere Wilkins states that “union with Christ means that all that is true of

“redundant” in *By Faith, Not By Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2006), 44-52.

⁵⁷ Lusk, “Response to the ‘Biblical Plan of Salvation,’” 134; Rich Lusk, “Paedobaptism and Baptismal Efficacy: Historic Trends and Current Controversies,” in *The Federal Vision*, 98; Rich Lusk, “Faith, Baptism, and Justification,” http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/faith_baptism_and_justification.htm. Lusk argues similarly in “Baptismal Efficacy and Baptismal Latency: A Sacramental Dialogue,” *Presbyterion* 32 (2006): 18-37. He would go on to suggest that grace is truly offered and conferred in baptism, but it would be possible to apostatize and hence “fall from grace” (cf. Lusk, “Paedobaptism and Baptismal Efficacy,” 103-4; Lusk, “New Life and Apostasy: Hebrews 6:4-6 as a Test Case,” in *The Federal Vision*, 271-99).

⁵⁸ Steve Wilkins, “Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation,” in *The Federal Vision*, 54, 55.

⁵⁹ One of the issues raised early on in the 2002 Auburn Avenue Pastor’s Conference was “baptismal regeneration.” For example, Wilkins said, “And you see, reading the Bible in this way, in this sense, we can speak of baptismal regeneration in this sense, not in the sense that there is some mystical power in the water of baptism that automatically transforms men if the water has been sufficiently sanctified. But, nor is it saying that God is bound to the water of baptism, that God, somehow, his blessing is always bound to that and can’t come part from that...What we, what I mean by this is we can speak of it in the sense that by the blessing of the Spirit, baptism unites us to Christ and his church and thus in him gives us new life...By our baptism we have been reborn, in this sense, having died with Christ, we have been raised with him” (Wilkins, “The Legacy of the Half-Way Covenant,” 2002 Auburn Avenue Pastors Conference, tape 11, side 2). Subsequently, Wilkins and other FV proponents have backed away from using “baptismal regeneration” as a category, even while they might defend ideas that suggest the same.

1 Christ is true of us.” While not directly addressing the issue of imputation, these statements
2 would seem to serve as Wilkins’ short-hand for understanding this view – that baptism
3 unites the individual to Christ in such a way that all that is true about Jesus (as the Justified
4 One) is true about the individual (as a justified one).⁶⁰
5

6 Faith plays a role in perseverance, or in “abiding in union with Christ”: “Covenant life is
7 always founded upon persevering faith in the faithful One. If we are to abide in union with
8 Him, we, by the grace and power of the Spirit, must be faithful.” Hence, it would be possible
9 for someone who is baptized, united to Christ, and shares in the blessings of Christ not to be
10 truly elect and so to apostatize: “the elect are marked by *abiding* in the Word of Christ.”
11 While these issues are treated later in the report, it is important to notice how, for Wilkins,
12 these issues relate to each other.⁶¹
13

14 D. Comparative Analysis 15

16 While the NPP, as represented by N. T. Wright, offers a thorough-going re-reading of the
17 theology of the Apostle Paul, there are several areas of concern for officers who subscribe to
18 the Westminster Standards. Wright’s re-reading of justification and union with Christ in
19 “covenantal” (or ecclesiological) terms leads to different and incompatible understandings
20 of those terms when compared with our Standards. What makes this terribly confusing is
21 that Wright will affirm an individual aspect of justification; and yet, he quickly turns the
22 focus back to the corporate: justification is “about God’s eschatological definition, both
23 future and present, of who was, in fact, *a member of his people*.” Likewise, while there may
24 be an individual aspect of union with Christ, Wright focuses attention on a corporate or
25 ecclesiological reading of the teaching: it means “‘belonging to *the people of God* as
26 redefined around the Messiah.’ It is, in other words, a specifically covenantal way of
27 speaking.” This orientation around corporate categories places theological reflection on a
28 different trajectory than that of *the* Standards.
29

30 Moreover, there is some question raised by Wright’s understanding of what Jesus came to
31 do, especially his obedience in relation to the status of his people. In his view, Jesus does not
32 stand as a representative head whose perfect obedience is imputed to his people by faith.
33 Rather, Jesus is the representative Israelite, who experiences in his own person all that
34 corporate Israel expected God to do for them. Jesus is vindicated by God in the resurrection,
35 and hence, is righteous. And yet, this “righteousness” is not transferred to anyone else. In
36 fact, Wright denies any understanding of “transfer” language in the NT, which also means a
37 denial of imputed righteousness. This is a position that contradicts our Standards and strikes
38 at the system of doctrine contained in them.
39

40 Likewise, the stance of Federal Vision proponents raises concerns for officers who subscribe
41 to *the Westminster Standards*. While the Committee would agree that *the Standards* use
42 “union with Christ” as an umbrella category for “Christ’s mediation,” the way Federal

⁶⁰ Wilkins, “Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation,” 55,58.

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

1 Vision proponents collapse the distinct benefits of this mediation (i.e. justification, adoption,
2 sanctification) into “union with Christ” creates significant confusion. Similarly, Federal
3 Vision’s appeal to “the biblical usage” of justification as a way to collapse forensic and
4 transformative categories also confuses doctrines that our Standards rightly distinguish (i.e.,
5 justification and sanctification).
6

7 Nevertheless, the truly problematic claims of the Federal Vision proponents come when
8 some suggest that “Christ’s active obedience” is not transferred to his people or that
9 imputation is “redundant” because it is subsumed in “union with Christ.” Such claims
10 contradict the position of the *Westminster Standards* and strike at the vitals of the system of
11 doctrine contained there. Further, to strike language of “merit” from our theological
12 vocabulary so that the claim is made that Christ’s merits are not imputed to his people
13 contradicts the position of the *Westminster Standards* (*WCF* 17:2; *LC* 55; 174).
14

15 Finally, the claim of some FV proponents that *all* those who are baptized with water are
16 savingly “united to Christ” flatly contradicts *the Westminster Standards*. The position of our
17 *Standards* is that union with Christ occurs only to those who are effectually called (or who
18 are the elect; *LC* 66-68). Further, the committee affirms that in baptism “the grace promised
19 is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost,” with these
20 qualifications, “to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to
21 the counsel of God’s own will, in His appointed time” (*WCF* 28:6). When FV writers tie
22 together water baptism and baptismal efficacy in a fashion that may feel to some like *ex*
23 *opera operato* (i.e., in the performance of the act), they run counter to *WCF* 28:6, which
24 insists “the efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment wherein it is administered.”
25 Moreover, the efficacy of baptism is tied by our *Standards* to “the working of his [Christ’s]
26 Spirit in them that by faith receive them [the sacraments]” (*WSC* 91).
27

28 **III. Perseverance, Apostasy and Assurance**

29 A. The Westminster Standards

30 1. *Perseverance*

31
32
33
34 *WCF* 17:1 states that those “whom God has accepted in His Beloved, effectually called, and
35 sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but
36 shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.”
37

38 Their perseverance is due not to “their own free will” (*WCF* 17.2), nor to their own
39 perseverance of faith or good works (*WCF* 3.5), but strictly to “the immutability of the
40 decree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father.” *WCF*
41 17.2 adds that “the certainty and infallibility” of their perseverance is also based on “the
42 efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ, the abiding of the Spirit, and of the
43 seed of God within them, and the nature of the covenant of grace.”
44

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

7 *The Westminster Confession* repeatedly teaches that the Holy Spirit applies the work of
8 redemption efficaciously to all the elect and only the elect (8:8, 10:1, 14:1, *WLC* 32).
9 Indeed, the “Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of
10 redemption” (*WCF* 18:2). The non-elect, however, “although they may be called by the
11 ministry of the Word, and may have some *common operations of the Spirit*, yet they *never*
12 *truly come unto Christ*, and therefore cannot be saved” (*WCF* 10:4, emphasis added). The
13 faith which the non-elect sometimes have is from the beginning a dead faith which does not
14 work by love (cf. *WCF* 11.2). The works performed by the non-elect in the church are not
15 pleasing to God because they are not “the fruits and evidences of a true and lively
16 faith”(*WCF* 16.2) and because “they proceed not from an heart purified by faith” (*WCF*
17 16.7).
18

19 All three of the Standards state that justification, adoption and sanctification are the benefits
20 that flow from effectual calling (*WCF* 3:6, *WLC* 79, *WSC* 32). And the benefits that flow
21 from justification, adoption and sanctification include “assurance of God’s love” and
22 “perseverance therein to the end” (*WSC* 36; cf. *WLC* 74, 77; *WCF* 11:5). In short, all those
23 whom God elected, all those for whom Christ died, all those for whom Christ intercedes, all
24 those whom the Spirit regenerates, all those in whom the Spirit dwells, and all those in vital
25 covenant union with Christ, all those justified, adopted and sanctified, will persevere. All
26 these benefits refer to the same specific set of individuals in history (*WCF* 17).
27

28 2. *Visible and Invisible Church* 29

30 As part of this teaching on perseverance and apostasy, the Standards distinguish between the
31 visible and the invisible church. The visible church consists of all in the world who “profess
32 the true religion [together with] their children” (*WLC* 62; cf. *WCF* 25.2). “The invisible
33 church is the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one
34 under Christ the head” (*WLC* 64; cf. *WCF* 25:1). *WLC* 61 states that not all those in the
35 visible church are saved, “but they only who are true members of the church invisible.”
36

37 *The Westminster Larger Catechism* specifically addresses the issue of the difference
38 between the grace experienced by the elect in the invisible church and the benefits available
39 to all in the visible church. The elect in the invisible church “enjoy union and communion
40 with him [Christ] in grace and glory.” This union is a “grace, whereby they are spiritually
41 and mystically, yet really and inseparably joined to Christ,” based “in their effectual calling”
42 (*WLC* 65-66). They also partake “of the virtue of [Christ’s] mediation, in their justification,
43 adoption, sanctification, and whatever else, in this life, manifests their union with him”
44 (*WLC* 69).
45

1 Both the elect and non-elect in the visible church have “the privilege of being under God’s
 2 special care and government; of being protected and preserved in all ages, notwithstanding
 3 the opposition of all enemies; and of enjoying the communion of saints, the ordinary means
 4 of salvation, and offers of grace by Christ to all the members of it in the ministry of the
 5 gospel, testifying, that whosoever believes in him shall be saved, and excluding none that
 6 will come unto him” (*WLC* 63). The benefits available to all within the visible church are
 7 sincere and genuine, just as is the grace of the free offer. Yet these benefits do not include
 8 that irresistible, efficacious grace which perseveres and which the elect alone receive. The
 9 teaching is not that the non-elect in the visible church receive irresistible grace and are saved
 10 but do not persevere in that salvation. The teaching is that the non-elect are not saved
 11 because they “never truly come to Jesus Christ” (*WLC* 68).

12 13 3. *Apostasy*

14
15 The *Confession’s* chapter on assurance refers to “hypocrites and other unregenerate men”
 16 who “may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of being in
 17 the favour of God, and estate of salvation (which hope of theirs shall perish)” (*WCF* 18:1).
 18 The *Confession* refers to “notorious and obstinate offenders” who can profane the church, to
 19 “purging out of that leaven which might infest the whole lump,” and to “excommunication
 20 from the church” (*WCF* 30:3, 4).

21
22 Our Standards imply some truths about the grace lost in apostasy. It speaks of those who
 23 have experienced “some common operations of the Spirit” but have “never truly come unto
 24 Christ” (*WCF* 10.4). On the other hand, we are reminded that all those who have been
 25 “effectually called unto faith in Christ” are also “kept by his power, through faith, unto
 26 salvation” (*WCF* 3.6). Therefore, those in whom God has begun the effectual work of
 27 salvation cannot apostatize.⁶²

28 29 4. *Assurance*

30
31 True believers may have a confident, subjective assurance that “they are in the estate of
 32 grace, and shall persevere therein for salvation.” This assurance is for those who “truly
 33 believe in Christ, and endeavour to walk in all good conscience before him” (*WLC* 80, *WCF*
 34 18:1). They receive this assurance “by faith founded upon the truth of God’s promises,” “by
 35 the Spirit enabling them to discern in themselves those graces to which the promises of life
 36 are made,” and by the Spirit “bearing witness with their spirits that they are the children of
 37 God.” Consequently, they may be “infallibly assured” that they will persevere (*WCF* 18:2;
 38 *WLC* 80).

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

1 The *Confession* emphasizes that this infallible assurance is “not a bare conjectural and
2 probable persuasion, grounded upon a fallible hope” (*WCF* 18:2). It is a healthy confidence
3 not based on any claim to know the secret things of God, but upon promises found in
4 Scripture. One proper foundation of full assurance is “the inward evidence of those graces
5 unto which these promises are made” (*WCF* 18:2). Among these inward graces are a
6 respectful fear of God and a dread of falling into sin and error. An inner trembling at the
7 warnings of Scripture should strengthen a sound assurance; the lack of such trembling
8 should call into question a false assurance. Warnings are one of the means God efficaciously
9 uses to enable the elect to persevere. The *Confession* teaches that a “true believer” responds
10 in faith to the Scriptures and thus “trembl[es] at the threatenings” found in the Word of God
11 (*WCF* 14.2; *WLC* 79).

12
13 The *Confession* also emphasizes that “this infallible assurance doth not so belong to the
14 essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long” for it. Nevertheless, “he may,
15 without extraordinary revelation...attain thereunto.” Christians receive assurance through
16 “the right use of ordinary means,” especially “the Word, sacraments, and prayer, all which
17 are made effectual to the elect for their salvation” (*WCF* 18:3; *WLC* 154).

18 19 B. New Perspective on Paul

20
21 The doctrines of perseverance and assurance do not appear prominently in the writings of
22 the NPP. In the section above on justification, we noted that proponents of NPP hold that
23 justification is the status of covenant membership; that faith is the ‘badge’ for covenant
24 membership; and that God’s righteousness has to do with God’s covenant faithfulness.
25 According to N. T. Wright, “‘Justification’ is not about ‘how I get saved’ but ‘how I am
26 declared to be a member of God’s people.’”⁶³ As a result, justification is a declaration
27 concerning who belongs to the people of God.

28
29 The question is then raised, when does this justification occur? For Wright, justification is
30 an eschatological judgment that is applied in the present time “as a proper anticipation of the
31 eventual judgment which will be announced, on the basis of the whole life led, in the
32 future.”⁶⁴ This “whole life” includes both the membership badge of “faith” as well as faithful
33 responses by the individual to life among God’s people.⁶⁵

34

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

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

⁶⁵ Wright, *Paul*, 57.

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

10
 11 Because Wright bases justification on “the whole life led,” perseverance must of necessity
 12 be viewed in the context of a person persevering in faithfulness until the final day of
 13 judgment and then being declared justified. Wright’s view is not grounded on the imputation
 14 of the righteousness of Christ or in the alone instrument of faith (i.e., receiving and resting
 15 on Christ alone), but on the Spirit-produced works of the believer. Indeed, it shifts the basis
 16 for justification from the finished work of Christ to the faithful works produced by the
 17 believer.

18 19 C. Federal Vision

20 21 1. *Perseverance*

22
 23 FV proponents have demonstrated a great desire to assure all those who have been baptized
 24 and are in the visible church that they are part of the elect of God. In the context of Romans
 25 8, one FV advocate concludes that “clearly, Paul is not stating promises that are true only for
 26 some unknown group called the ‘elect.’ Nor is he speaking only to a portion of the
 27 congregation whom he judges to be ‘regenerate.’ Rather, he is applying these promises to all
 28 the members of the Church who have been baptized and united to Christ in his death, burial,
 29 and resurrection.”⁶⁷ Behind this statement is the common assumption of FV proponents that
 30 when the apostles – especially Paul – addressed their readers as “elect,” they intended this to
 31 refer to all members present in the church.

32
 33 Further, they state their conviction that some individuals are elected from eternity past. And
 34 yet, some also proclaim that both elect and non-elect in the local church receive qualitatively
 35 the same grace. As Rich Lusk observed, “We need to be willing to speak of the
 36 undifferentiated grace of God (or the generic, unspecified grace of God).” In a similar
 37 fashion, other proponents view grace granted to biblical characters, such as Saul and David,
 38 as “the same initial covenantal grace”; interpret verses traditionally understood as referring
 39 to individual election in an undifferentiated fashion; and read statements from both the

⁶⁶ Wright, *Romans*, 438-9.

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

1 Gospels and epistles referring to the entire church's salvation as a salvation that could be
2 lost or the image of a branch that could be cut off.⁶⁸

3
4 A general theme of FV proponents is that "all those who are baptized are genuinely baptized
5 into Christ (Galatians 3:27), are brought into Christ's body, the church (1 Corinthians
6 12:13), and are members of God's covenant, at least until they are cut off, whether by
7 Christ's church (excommunication) or directly by Christ (death or judgment)." Many FV
8 proponents view everyone in the covenant community, elect and non-elect, as having a
9 common election as long as they remain in good standing in the covenant community. This
10 occurs through individual "covenant-keeping": "The covenant is not unconditional. It
11 requires persevering faithfulness . . . Covenant life is always founded upon persevering faith
12 in the faithful One." What happens to those who do not persevere? It was "God's choice to
13 have them belong to His covenant . . . [in order] to show them grace and love [only] for a
14 time." In fact, "the elect are those who are faithful to Christ Jesus. If they later reject the
15 Savior, they are no longer elect."⁶⁹

16 2. *Visible and Invisible Church*

17
18
19 Our *Standards* use the visible and invisible aspects of the church to help explain the
20 difference between the grace received by the elect and the benefits available to all in the
21 visible church. Some FV proponents have questioned this distinction. Doug Wilson has
22 promoted the use of the alternative terms the "historical" church and the "eschatological"
23 church.⁷⁰ Similarly, the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church's session has stated, "It seems
24 better to us to speak of the 'invisible' church simply as the 'eschatological' church—i.e., the
25 church in its perfection as it will exist at the last day."⁷¹

26
27 Furthermore, some FV writers have also denied that the covenant can be viewed from two
28 different aspects. John Barach observed that "the Bible doesn't know about a distinction
29 between being internally in the covenant, really in the covenant, and being only externally in

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

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

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

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

1 the covenant.” Likewise, Steve Wilkins argued that “all in covenant are given all that is true
2 of Christ.”⁷²

3 4 3. *Apostasy* 5

6 FV proponents have emphasized that the apostate has suffered a loss of real grace and have
7 argued that this implies that he must have possessed the same grace as the elect who
8 persevere. According to Steve Wilkins, “Because being in covenant with God means being
9 in Christ, those who are in covenant have all spiritual blessings in the heavenly places.” This
10 includes all the blessings listed in Ephesians 1:3-14: election, adoption, justification,
11 forgiveness of sins, sanctification, regeneration, possession of the Kingdom, and so forth. “It
12 is not accurate to say that they only ‘appeared’ to have these things but did not actually have
13 them—if that were so, there would be nothing to ‘forsake’ and apostasy is bled of its horror
14 and severity.” Nevertheless, the elect may “later reject the Savior” and “they are no longer
15 elect—they are cut off from the Elect One and thus, lose their elect standing. But their falling
16 away doesn’t negate the reality of their standing prior to their apostasy. They were really
17 and truly elect of God because of their relationship with Christ.” The point is that, for the FV
18 writers, the elect can become non-elect, the elect can possibly fail to persevere.⁷³

19 20 21 4. *Assurance* 22

23 FV proponents have argued that the warnings against apostasy cannot seem real to the elect
24 if the elect have an infallible assurance that they will indeed persevere. In the words of John
25 Barach, “When you proclaim the warnings, people brush them off because they figure that if
26 they’re elect they can’t incur God’s wrath and if they aren’t, there’s nothing they can do
27 about it anyway.”⁷⁴

28
29 While they all affirm that individuals are elected by God from eternity past, nevertheless,
30 they find pastoral problems with holding simply to this view. Problems surface because “we
31 cannot know the secret decrees of God or the hidden operations of the Spirit. The secret
32 things belong to God (Deuteronomy 29:29).” Steve Wilkins has said, “Whenever you focus
33 on subjective experience as the basis of assurance of salvation, you are ultimately
34 undermining assurance. You ask questions that cannot be answered with any certainty.

⁷² Barach, “Covenant and History,” quoted in *Auburn Avenue Theology*, 309; Wilkins, “Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation,” 263.

⁷³ Ibid, 261, 262, 264; cf. Barach, “Covenant and Election” in *The Federal Vision*, 28. FV writers frequently refer to John 15, where they use the allegory of the vine to make the point that the elect can be “cut off” (e.g., Wilkins, “Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation,” in *Federal Vision*, 62ff.; Barach, “Covenant and Election,” in *Federal Vision*, 37). Their reasoning is based on Norman Shepherd’s (see Shepherd, *The Call of Grace* [Phillipsburg: P&R, 2000], 89-90). For a biblical response, see E. Calvin Beisner, “Concluding Comments on the Federal Vision,” in *The Auburn Avenue Theology*, 312ff.

⁷⁴ Barach, “Covenant and Election” in *The Federal Vision*, 33.

1 Have you truly believed? Are you really converted? The decree of election is no ground
2 since no one can know if they have been chosen for salvation.”⁷⁵

3
4 For FV proponents as a whole, God establishes His covenant with all who have been
5 baptized. In baptism, a person is united to Christ and is cleansed, regenerated, forgiven,
6 justified and sanctified. As John Barach proclaimed, “How do you know [the promise of
7 election] is really for you? The answer is that you’ve had the special experience. You’ve
8 been baptized.” In pushing forward baptism as a “special experience,” the FV writers set it
9 over against “subjective experience”: “Men must have something objective and certain. But
10 if you refuse to look to your baptism, then all you are left with is experience.”⁷⁶

11 12 D. Comparative Analysis

13 14 1. *Perseverance*

15
16 In the *Westminster Standards*, the elect and non-elect in the church do not receive the same
17 non-differentiated, homogeneous grace. There is a definite distinction between the
18 irresistible saving work of the Spirit and the resistible common operations of the Spirit. The
19 reason, therefore, that some persevere and others do not is not an unrevealed mystery. The
20 elect alone persevere because of the distinctive quality of the grace which the elect alone
21 receive. God has decreed not only the elect’s final state of salvation but also the efficacious
22 application of all the means to the final state by the Spirit (*WCF* 3:6). The elect, with the
23 non-elect, experience the common operations of the Spirit, but the non-elect never
24 experience the efficacious work of the Spirit which actually saves. From regeneration to
25 glorification, the Holy Spirit applies the redemption accomplished by Christ to the elect in
26 terms of the secret decree of election. The non-elect may have a form of faith, but they never
27 have saving faith and never bear the fruit that is evidence of a lively faith and a vital union
28 with Christ (*WCF* 14:2, 16:2; *SC* 86).

29
30 One of the common arguments of FV proponents, drawn from their presupposition that
31 election should be viewed from the standpoint of the covenant, is that when the apostles
32 addressed their readers as “elect,” they intended this term to refer to “all in the church,” both
33 those who would inherit eternal life and those who would not. This view underlies their
34 claim that “all in the church” receive the saving benefits of being in union with Christ, that
35 is, until and unless they apostatize. However, this assumption claims too much. The apostles
36 clearly recognized that while the churches to whom they wrote included “saints” and those
37 who were “faithful in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 1:1; et. al.), they also included those who may be
38 false professors (Romans 8:9: “However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed

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

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

1 the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not
2 belong to Him”). In fact, while Paul does not feel the need to qualify every broad claim
3 regarding his letter’s recipient, it is striking that nearly every Pauline letter includes some
4 qualification (e.g. 1 Corinthians 15:1-2; 2 Corinthians 13:5-6; Galatians 3:4, 29; 4:11,20;
5 Ephesians 4:20-21; Philippians 2:16; Colossians 1:23; 1 Thessalonians 3:5).

6
7 The committee sees this FV claim—that the elect and those united to Christ can “lose” their
8 election and union—as doing major harm to the system of doctrine contained in the
9 Standards. If their claim stands, it would practically reverse the relationship between
10 election and perseverance. The Confessional view and the FV view cannot both be held at
11 the same time.

12 13 2. *Visible and Invisible Church*

14
15 While FV proponents raise important questions about the way Christians today may hear the
16 term “invisible” in reference to the church, the committee holds that the Standards’
17 distinction between the visible and invisible aspects of the church has important theological
18 and pastoral implications. First, we would point out that our Standards already recognize a
19 future, “eschatological” aspect for the church; however, this is not separated from the past or
20 present reality of the “invisible church” that God alone sees (*LC* 64).

21
22 But even more importantly, the committee notes that the FV proponents merge the visible
23 and invisible aspects of the church into the “body of Christ.” To belong to the visible church
24 is to belong to the “body of Christ” and to share in all the benefits of “Christ’s body” (i.e.
25 election, justification, adoption, and sanctification; but see *WCF* 25:1). This claim stands
26 against the Standards’ teaching that “all that hear the gospel, and live in the visible church
27 are not saved; but they only who are true members of the church invisible” (*LC* 61). This
28 also fails to reckon adequately with the reality that the visible church is always “more or less
29 pure” in every age (*WCF* 25:4).

30
31 The issue is joined with perseverance in this way: according to FV proponents, when
32 someone forsakes the visible church, they lose all the benefits of “Christ’s body”—the elect
33 become non-elect. This contradicts our Standards by misapplying the benefits of Christ’s
34 mediation to everyone who “profess[es] the true religion and...their children,” instead of to
35 those who are elect, who have received God’s effectual calling, and who share in union and
36 communion with Christ (*LC* 63-67). Moreover, this contradicts our Standards by divorcing
37 election from perseverance; for the FV, election becomes a benefit that can be lost (*WCF*
38 17:2).

39
40 As a result, this failure to hold the distinction between the visible and invisible aspects of the
41 church leads to a position on the perseverance of the saints that contradicts the Standards
42 and does damage to the spiritual confidence of God’s people.

1 3. *Apostasy*

2
3 Building from their understanding of the visible and invisible church, FV proponents stress
4 that those who leave the visible church lose real grace—the grace of election, forgiveness,
5 justification, and sanctification. However, the Standards make plain that the proper
6 categories for these apostates are “hypocrites” and “unregenerate” (*WCF* 18:1), those who
7 only experience the “common operations of the Spirit” and “who, for their wilful neglect and
8 contempt of the grace offered to them . . . do never truly come to Jesus Christ” (*WCF* 10:4;
9 *LC* 68).

10
11 By failing to use the *Confession’s* language, the FV proponents move in directions that
12 contradict the *Confession’s* teaching on perseverance: those who are accepted in the
13 Beloved, effectually called, united to Christ, and sanctified by his Spirit “can neither totally
14 nor finally fall away from the state of grace” (*WCF* 17:2; *LC* 66).

15
16 The committee does agree that those who forsake the visible church do lose “special
17 benefits”: namely, coming under God’s special care and government; being protected and
18 preserved from enemies; enjoying the communion of saints, the ordinary means of salvation,
19 and the free offer of the Gospel in the ministry of the Word (*LC* 63). Nevertheless, these
20 privileges are not the same as the benefits of Christ’s mediation to those who are effectually
21 called to salvation.

22
23 4. *Assurance*

24
25 We recognize that FV proponents point to a major failing in the modern evangelical church:
26 the easy terms upon which a Christian’s assurance may rest. Yet in seeking to challenge
27 these terms, these writers overstress the objective means of salvation and underplay the
28 subjective aspects of “an infallible assurance.”

29
30 While we know the importance of “improving our baptism” as a “needful and much neglected
31 duty . . . to be performed by us all our life long, especially in the time of temptation,” and we
32 know that there is a confirming and assuring grace offered in baptism to those to whom it
33 belongs, the committee reminds the church that our infallible assurance of faith rests upon
34 “the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto
35 which these promises are made, [and] the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with
36 our spirits that we are the children of God” (*LC* 167; *WCF* 18:2; 28:6). This assurance is
37 both “objective” and “subjective”; it rests upon the work of the Word and Spirit in the life of
38 the believer.

39
40 The Committee views the FV position as ultimately leading to presumption or despair, not
41 assurance. At the heart of their belief is the view that water baptism serves as the means for
42 uniting each participant to Jesus; those baptized receive all the benefits of Christ’s mediation
43 except final perseverance. Our concern is that some of those who are baptized will simply
44 presume on God’s grace, “continuing in the covenant” without “apostatizing” but also
45 without justifying faith (cf. Matthew 22:1-14); others will be driven to despair, working for
46 a salvation out of “covenant faithfulness” instead of resting and receiving Jesus alone for
47 their salvation.

IV. Declarations

In light of the controversy surrounding the NPP and FV, and after many months of careful study, the committee unanimously makes the following declarations:

1. The view that rejects the bi-covenantal structure of Scripture as represented in the Westminster Standards (i.e., views which do not merely take issue with the terminology, but the essence of the first/second covenant framework) is contrary to those Standards.
2. The view that an individual is “elect” by virtue of his membership in the visible church; and that this “election” includes justification, adoption and sanctification; but that this individual could lose his “election” if he forsakes the visible church, is contrary to the Westminster Standards.
3. The view that Christ does not stand as a representative head whose perfect obedience and satisfaction is imputed to individuals who believe in him is contrary to the Westminster Standards.
4. The view that strikes the language of “merit” from our theological vocabulary so that the claim is made that Christ’s merits are not imputed to his people is contrary to the Westminster Standards.
5. The view that “union with Christ” renders imputation redundant because it subsumes all of Christ’s benefits (including justification) under this doctrinal heading is contrary to the Westminster Standards.
6. The view that water baptism effects a “covenantal union” with Christ through which each baptized person receives the saving benefits of Christ’s mediation, including regeneration, justification, and sanctification, thus creating a parallel soteriological system to the decretal system of the Westminster Standards, is contrary to the Westminster Standards.
7. The view that one can be “united to Christ” and not receive *all* the benefits of Christ’s mediation, including perseverance, in that effectual union is contrary to the Westminster Standards.
8. The view that some can receive saving benefits of Christ’s mediation, such as regeneration and justification, and yet not persevere in those benefits is contrary to the Westminster Standards.
9. The view that justification is in any way based on our works, or that the so-called “final verdict of justification” is based on anything other than the perfect obedience and satisfaction of Christ received through faith alone, is contrary to the Westminster Standards.

1 **V. Recommendations**
2

- 3 1. That the General Assembly commend to Ruling and Teaching Elders and their
4 congregations this report of the Ad Interim Committee on NPP, AAT and FV for careful
5 consideration and study.
6
- 7 2. That the General Assembly remind the Church, its officers and congregations of the
8 provisions of *BCO* 29-1 and 39-3 which assert that the *Confession of Faith and the*
9 *Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Westminster Assembly*, while “subordinate to the
10 Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, the inerrant Word of God,” have been
11 adopted by the PCA “as standard expositions of the teachings of Scripture in relation to
12 both faith and practice.”
13
- 14 3. That the General Assembly recommend the declarations in this report as a faithful
15 exposition of the Westminster Standards, and further reminds those ruling and teaching
16 elders whose views are out of accord with our Standards of their obligation to make
17 known to their courts any differences in their views.
18
- 19 4. That the General Assembly remind the Sessions and Presbyteries of the PCA that it is
20 their duty “to exercise care over those subject to their authority” and “to condemn
21 erroneous opinions which injure the purity or peace of the Church” (*BCO* 31-2; 13-9f).
22
- 23 5. That the Ad Interim Study Committee on NPP, AAT and FV be dismissed with thanks.