

***A Personal Response to the Nine Declarations of the
Adopted by the 35th General Assembly concerning
the Federal Vision and New Perspective on Paul***

In light of the recent adoption of the Ad Interim Study Committee's Report regarding the Federal Vision (FV) and the New Perspective(s) on Paul (NPP), and because I have been labeled as being identified with one or both ideologies, I thought it prudent, for the sake of the congregation I pastor, to give a brief reply to the nine Declarations adopted by the 35th General Assembly of our denomination. These are certainly not exhaustive, but I believe that they will serve the purpose of stating what I believe in regards to what has been condemned to be in error and/or out of accord with the Westminster Standards.

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."

Response: In referencing the "bi-covenantal structure of Scripture," the Report is referring to distinction in our Standards concerning the "Covenant of Works" and the "Covenant of Grace." The Covenant of Works, it is maintained, is the original covenant God made with man. It is the pre-fall (or prelapsarian) covenant. The Covenant of Grace is the covenant that God made after the fall (or postlapsarian) and is in effect from the time of the fall to the end of history.

I accept the discontinuities between the pre-fall covenant and the post-fall covenant. I have quibbled with the word "works," but I accept the substance of what is being stated in the *Confession*. *I accept* that there are radical differences in the way that God deals with man pre-fall and post-fall. For instance, before the fall the way of communion was through the Tree of Life in the Garden. Post-fall man is cut off from the Tree of Life and must wait for access that will come ultimately in Jesus Christ.

If the Report is presupposing a fundamental difference in the way man is to relate to God and receive what God promised—i.e., meritorious works in the Covenant of Works versus faith and grace in the Covenant of Grace—that *I reject*. I believe that man by his very creation is in a relationship of grace with God and is called always—pre- and post-fall—to respond to God's word in faith. So, while Adam had no sin to deal with initially, he was in a gracious relationship with God and must believe God's Word, which would be expressed in obedience. Adam was not called to "earn points" with God in a system of merit by which he would achieve glory. Adam was promised life and was to live faithfully in obedience to God's Word and would be granted his inheritance because of God's grace. *I accept* the fact that Adam was required to continue in perfect and perpetual obedience in order to inherit the life that God promised. *I reject* the fact that this could be in any way construed as being "earning enough points" to receive the promise. Furthermore, I do not believe that our Standards require me to believe in a system that would have Adam "earning" what God had promised.

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.

Response: In this Declaration the Report employs the logical fallacy of *equivocation*. That is, the Report uses a word differently than the way others have used the word. By this, they have attributed to people something that they do not believe. For instance, if I were to say that George Bush has been elected, and by that I mean that he has been elected President, but someone says that I mean that George Bush has been chosen by God before the foundation of the world to inherit eternal life (when they know that is not what I mean), that would be a form of equivocation. They are using the same word with a different usage to attribute a belief that one does not hold.

I believe the term “elect” (and the family of words with which it is associated) can be used in different ways throughout Scripture. “Elect” can refer to a general election and it may refer to a special election. The Report itself even points out that this is understood in the *Confession* when it states, “The *Confession* is, of course, fully aware of the national, ethnic, external, covenant election of Israel (*LC* 101), as a church under age (*WCF* 19.3-4, 1.8, and 7.5).” (2204, lines 36-37) After affirming this, the Declaration does not acknowledge that this may be a way in which some people are using the term when referring to membership in the visible church. If election is understood in a general sense like this, it is possible to speak of “losing one’s election.” For if the church is the elect body and you are a member of it and then you are excommunicated, then you have lost that elect status.

I affirm that there are different senses in which the Bible uses the term “elect” and its cognates. *I also affirm* the substance of the stipulated definition in our Standards that speaks of the “elect” as those who are decreed by God to inherit eternal life, who receive and cannot lose the benefits secured for them by Christ, their Representative. Those, and only those, in their full, pre-ordained, unchangeable number will stand justified before God at the last day.

I further affirm that those who are members of the visible church but are not chosen to inherit eternal life *do* enjoy great benefits that come with being members of this body. To what extent they enjoy certain privileges remains a mystery. Hebrews 6 and 10 say that they enjoy great privileges. They are accounted, as our *Confession* states, to be a part of the “kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ” and “the house and family of God.” Those who forsake Christ from this position are equivalent to those who were delivered from Egypt but fell in the wilderness because of their unbelief. This is the parallel that the apostle Paul makes in 1 Cor 10 and the writer of Hebrews makes in chapters 3 and 4. In short, there is a context in which you are able to “lose your election” and there is a context in which you cannot. *I affirm* and believe that the Bible teaches both and that they are not at odds with one another.

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.

Response: This Declaration uses the language of our Standards at various places (WCF 11.1, 3; LC 194) to refer to the benefits we receive because of Christ by faith. With this statement, as it stands, I fully agree. But the body of the Report makes it clear that what is at issue is a specific and technical theological category of the imputation of the active obedience of Christ (2215, lines 9-17). This theological point has been argued about for the past 400 or 500 years. (If you want to read about it, you may read Rowland Ward's book *God & Adam: Reformed Theology and the Creation Covenant*.) This was a point of dispute at the Assembly itself, and, it seems, that various views were tolerated.

The issue of the imputation of the active obedience of Christ is, simply put, "Are the acts of specific law-keeping by Christ imputed to us as believers?" The passive obedience of Christ deals with his death; i.e., his *passion*. Some say that the works of the Law kept perfectly by Christ are imputed to us. This is ordinarily based on a belief that salvation had to be "earned" on a merit-based system. Crassly put, Jesus earned enough points for us and imputed those points to us so that we could be accepted by God. Others say that all we needed was the obedient death of Jesus as per what Paul says in Rom 5.18 ("one righteous act").

I affirm that Jesus *is* our Representative. *I affirm* that Jesus was perfectly obedient. *I affirm* that all that Jesus is and does is effective for his people, including his obedience to the Law. All that belongs to Christ belongs to those who are united to Christ. *I affirm* that his perfect obedience and satisfaction are imputed to individuals who believe in him.

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.

Response: I answer this in partial reference to my answer on Declaration #1. If the stipulated definition of "merit" involves God setting up a way apart from grace to earn his promises, then I reject it. I do not believe that *God* sets up any such system. Knowing the sinfulness of man, I believe that men have distorted God's commands into a legalistic arm-twisting, ground-for-boasting-before-God system. But the Bible clearly teaches that we do not have anything that we have not received from God; and if we have received what we have, then we have no ground for boasting (1 Cor 4.7). If Christ's "merit(s)" refers to his worth/worthiness, then I am in complete accord with that understanding. Christ's worth/merit is reckoned to us. But I will say that I do not like the word "merit." It is not a biblical word and can cause confusion.

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.

Response: I do believe that all of Christ's benefits given to his people can be "subsumed" under the heading of "union with Christ." The "imputation" of Christ's benefits is not something done outside of union with Christ but in conjunction (or "union!") with it. That is Christ does not unite us to himself and then give us a "thing" called "righteousness," for example, that is somehow distinct from him. As Paul says in 1 Cor 1.30, Christ is wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. These are not "things" that are distributed by Christ, but Christ himself possesses all of these things and we possess these things by virtue of being united to him.

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.*

Response: Baptism does create a “covenantal union” with Christ. Being baptized in the Triune name in accordance with the command of Christ and being incorporated into the visible church which is the “kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, outside of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation” (WCF 25.2), is the entrance into a covenant body. Inasmuch as Jesus Christ is the Head of this body (BCO, *Preliminary Principles* II.3), those who enter this body *do* enjoy benefits of Christ’s mediation. These privileges may be unto their damnation finally, but they do enjoy those benefits just as Israel who ate the manna in the wilderness and drank water from the Rock, who was Christ (1 Cor 10.1ff), enjoyed similar benefits. This person may trample under foot the Son of God, count the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified an unholy thing, and insult the Spirit of grace (Heb 10.29), but he did enjoy some privileges for a while; even though he was not chosen to inherit final salvation. Furthermore, our Standards state that Christ communicates the benefits of his mediation to us through the *word, the sacraments, and prayer* (i.e., the means of grace). While the full and final benefits of these things can only be enjoyed by faith, those who are members of the visible church do enjoy privileges. Again, the extent and/or nature of these benefits for those who do not persevere are mysterious. But this does not negate the fact that they do enjoy some common operations of the Spirit within the church. Our LC says in 167 that benefits are “conferred and sealed” to us by baptism, and that we are baptized into Christ when we receive the sacrament of baptism. We are thus, in the least, separated from the world and counted to be among God’s people; i.e., in covenant with God. The only way to enjoy the full salvation accomplished by Christ and promised in baptism is by faith.

The fact that all who are thus in covenant and enjoy blessings of the covenant but do not persevere in the faith does not, in any way, stand as a “parallel soteriological system to the decretal system of the Westminster Standards.” I believe that God works his eternal decrees in and through the historical or “visible” church. Those who do not persevere in the faith were not predestined to persevere in the faith. Those who do persevere were predestined to do so. The means God uses for the sorting out of those whom he has chosen from those whom he hasn’t chosen includes the ordinary life of the church as it exists in history (e.g., through inclusion and through excommunication). God’s decrees do not negate, as the *Confession* says, “second causes.” God has foreordained the means to the accomplishing his decree as well as the end (cf. WCF 3.1, 6).

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.*

Response: I have already dealt with this in my response to #6. I do believe that there is a way to be united to Christ and not persevere in the faith. This declaration uses the language of “effectual union.” This is a concept that the Standards use to speak of those who have been eternally decreed to inherit final salvation (cf. e.g., LC 66). When “effectual union” is used in this

stipulated way, I have no problem affirming that those, and only those, receive the fullness of salvation. But there are some who are united to Christ who do not persevere (cf. John 15).

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.*

Response: Again, I refer to my responses under numbers 6 and 7. Regeneration, as it is defined by our Standards, refers to the new life that is given to the elect as a result of their effectual calling. This life can never die in those whom God has chosen. Understood in that way, I can fully agree. Biblically and historically the word "regeneration" is not used this way all the time. Jesus refers to *the Regeneration* in Matt 19.28 as the new age that is/will be ushered in by his coming, death, and resurrection. Titus 3.5 connects *regeneration* with baptism (i.e., "the laver of regeneration"). It can be said that *the regeneration* is found in the church that Christ established. That is, the church is the manifestation of the new age, the new creation. Therefore, to be a part of the church is to be a part of the regeneration. Again, it is possible to understand the term "regeneration" differently in different contexts. The questions must be answered at the level of substance and not merely superficial semantics.

I affirm that the elect who are given the gift of regeneration (in the way our Standards define the term) will persevere unto the end.

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.*

Response: *I affirm* that we stand as righteous before God by faith on the basis of Christ's righteousness. *I deny* that our works form the ground by which we are accepted by God.

Since I do not believe that anyone at anytime or anywhere could merit any favor from God, meritorious works cannot be the basis of our acceptance before God as righteous. Only as we are found in the one who was declared to be the Righteous One in his resurrection, Jesus Christ, can we be found righteous.

This belief does not contradict but is complimentary to what James says when he says that we are "justified by works and not by faith alone" (James 2.24). James, I believe, is dealing with the nature of saving faith. The faith that justifies before God is a faith that works through love (Gal 5.6). That faith, and only that faith, is justifying faith.

I do believe that there will be a final judgment according to works. Jesus teaches this in Matt 25. Paul speaks of this explicitly in 2 Cor 5.10. Our Standards affirm this in WCF 33.1, LC 90, and SC 38. We will be judged according to what we have done in our bodies, whether good or evil. The righteous will be acquitted/vindicated/justified and the wicked will be condemned. Our good works are *only* accepted in union with Christ. They are, in this way, necessary for final justification but they are not the "basis" of our salvation. They are necessary in that they are the expression of a justifying faith. That is, if a person does not have this kind of living and active

faith, then he will not be acquitted by God at the last day.

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