

CHAPTER 1

An Introduction to the Federal Vision

In this book, we are expounding and analyzing a theological system and movement that, in many respects, strikes very close to home: the Federal Vision (FV), or the Auburn Avenue Theology. There are at least three reasons why the FV has rapidly gained the attention of many within Reformed churches. First, recognized proponents of the FV are cross-denominational (within the Presbyterian Church in America [PCA], the United Reformed Churches [URC], the Confederation of Reformed Evangelical Churches [CREC], as well as independent churches). They are distributed geographically across the United States and Canada, and have effectively used new technologies to disseminate and promote their views into the homes and offices of many ministers, elders, and nonofficers. Specifically, they have used the Internet to create communities that transcend geographical and denominational boundaries and limitations, that are resistant to the oversight and accountability that published discourse and ecclesiastical discourse would otherwise afford, and that permit more democratized and coarsened theological dialogue than conventional print media have generally allowed.

A second reason explaining recent interest in the FV is that the FV has purportedly developed its system from covenant theology. Covenant theology, of course, is near and dear to the Reformed faith.

Any theological system that claims its origin and genius from covenant theology understandably gains the ear of many Reformed men and women.

Third, the FV, as its name indicates, offers a vision that is comprehensive and sweeping. It articulates an epistemology, a Trinitarian theology, a doctrine of redemption and its application, and a conception of the church, culture, and Christian living in this world. Many FV proponents not only promote this vision as stemming from their understanding of covenant theology but also charge the Reformed world with having failed to live up to what covenant theology entails for belief and practice. Consequently, ministers, elders, and laypersons are being pressed anew with the question, what does it mean to be Reformed?—a question that few Reformed church officers can now afford to ignore.

In the remainder of this chapter, we will address six matters: (1) the terminological options that have been proposed to label this system; (2) the sources we have consulted in preparing this material; (3) a brief historical account of the rise and progress of the FV; (4) a brief biographical introduction to the major proponents of the FV; (5) the FV's definition of the term *covenant*; and (6) the FV's attempt to reformulate the doctrine of the Trinity in view of *covenant*.

Terminology

Leaving aside such pejorative labels as the “Monroe Four,” not fewer than three terms have circulated in connection with the theology that we are about to study.

(1) “The New Perspective on Paul,” as a label, was applied by the Reformed Presbyterian Church in the United States (RPCUS) to the views expressed by participants of the 2002 Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church (AAPC) Pastors' Conference (AAPCPC).¹ Others have spoken of the FV's “inclusion of doctrinal innovations such as the New Perspective on Paul.”²

While there is, to be sure, some overlap between the concerns of the NPP and the concerns of the FV, it is not accurate to describe them as a single movement.³ They properly represent different theological traditions and different constituencies, and have separate aims and

objectives. Although the label “New Perspective on Paul” appears to have gained some currency within the church, it seems wisest to reserve this to describe the academic movement formally launched by E. P. Sanders and sustained by James D. G. Dunn and N. T. Wright.⁴

(2) A second label that has gained some attention and use is “Auburn [Avenue] Theology.”⁵ This name, of course, derives from a significant nerve center of this movement, the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church, Monroe, Louisiana, the congregation that has occasioned the controversy surrounding these doctrines. This church has sponsored the conferences at which the doctrines of the FV have been advanced and defended.⁶ It has also drafted a statement that defends FV doctrines of election, covenant, and baptism;⁷ has supplied two ministers (Steve Wilkins, Rich Lusk) who have prolifically written in support of these views; and has sponsored a press that has promoted the doctrines of the FV.⁸

This label is, in many respects, an improvement upon “NPP”; it is nevertheless deficient. It risks misstating certain FV proponents’ views. While, for example, Wilkins and Lusk are proponents of paedocommunion, Steve Schlissel is currently not.⁹ Wilkins and Lusk, furthermore, articulate a distinctive view of baptism that is not paralleled in Schlissel’s writings on the subject.¹⁰ The term “Auburn [Avenue] Theology” can also suggest that the FV originated from the AAPC. Unquestionably the proximate origins of the FV lie partially in the AAPC. As we shall argue below, however, the ultimate origins of the FV likely lie elsewhere.

(3) One of the reasons a third label, “The Federal Vision,” is preferable to the others is that it has been adopted both by Wilkins¹¹ and Wilson¹² and by critics of its doctrines.¹³ It appears then to have been met with broad-based acceptance and to be as unencumbered with pejorative overtones as such a label can be. Another reason why this label is appropriate is that it addresses the root concern of the system for which it stands: federal theology, or covenant theology. It also fairly represents this system as broadly casting a theological, ecclesiastical, and social “vision” from the standpoint of its understanding of covenant theology.

At this stage, we might address an understandable objection against the use of any labels whatsoever to describe the theological

views in question. Some proponents of the FV have strenuously objected that there is no such thing as a “federal vision”—whether in the sense of a movement or a theological system.¹⁴ We may certainly recognize that there are genuine limitations and conceivable liabilities inherent to the label “FV.” At the same time, we shall be arguing that the men who have identified themselves or have come to be identified with this movement have much in common that distinguishes them theologically from many others within the contemporary Reformed and Presbyterian world.

In view of this state of affairs, we have before us both a task and a caution. Our task is to define what, theologically, unites and distinguishes these men. We are interested in examining and analyzing the theological system that emerges from a concentrated study of the theological writings of these men. Our caution is to avoid defining the FV in such a way as to impute one FV proponent’s views to another FV proponent who does not share those views, or to assume that one FV proponent’s rhetorical expression of a doctrine would necessarily and in all respects be approved by all other FV proponents.

At the same time, we can be *too* cautious. If a FV proponent articulates a distinctive and otherwise unparalleled view, we must ask what, theologically speaking, has made that view possible. In some instances, we will see that what makes such distinctive views possible are other and prior distinguishing views held in common among FV proponents. It is here that we will see some of the clearest indications that the FV is a theological system.

Sources

What materials have I consulted in this study of the FV? Part of the difficulty in addressing this issue is the fact that FV proponents have made effective use of the Internet. They operate well-maintained Web sites and post articles, sermons, and essays with frequency. Many make use of private presses (Canon, Athanasius), which enable swift and prodigious dissemination of book-length material. Both of these considerations mean that quantities of information are being added on a regular basis.

In view of this unceasing influx of information, one might be tempted to say that to draw theological conclusions at this stage is premature. In view of the nature and amount of the existing literature, however, the newest literature that continues to be posted on the Web or that is being privately published in one important sense adds little to our understanding of the basic positions of the FV that had not hitherto been known. Even responses to criticisms frequently restate the positions rather than offering substantial refinements or modifications of previously articulated positions.

Given this state of affairs, let us outline the sources that I have consulted for this project. In general, I have accessed and quoted from sources that were intended for public consumption. Paramount have been the AAPCPC Lectures, from both the 2002 and the 2003 conferences. I have made use of transcriptions of the original addresses.¹⁵ Given the impromptu nature of the conference format, I have not made recourse to the question and answer sessions of either conference. I have also made use of the Knox Colloquium, *The Auburn Avenue Theology*, and the recently published collection of essays, *The Federal Vision*. For other writers, I have consulted the pages of *Credenda/Agenda* and *Biblical Horizons*, the writings of Canon Press (Moscow, Idaho), and the Web sites maintained by individual authors or congregations.¹⁶ These Web sites were accessed between May and August 2004.

Generally, when titles appear in a stand-alone fashion—that is, without facts of publication in the bibliography and in the first citations of sources in each chapter's notes—they are unpublished articles that appeared on the Internet.¹⁷ Owing to the unedited nature of some of these sources, quotations from FV spokesmen are sometimes, understandably, roughly stated. I have noted a few typographical errors with the word *sic*, but have not wanted to call attention to all such occurrences.

The literature in this work is current through July 1, 2005. At times, FV proponents have revised their literature. Where appropriate, revisions that have come to my attention at a later stage in the composition and preparation of this book have been entered in the footnotes for readers' benefit.

The Rise and Progress of the Federal Vision

While we shall reserve more extended consideration of the theological origins and ultimate causes of the FV to the final chapter, we may now trace the development of the FV in the recent past. In that chapter, I will argue that the FV is peculiar to the theological concerns and conclusions of that form of reconstructionism frequently termed “theonomy.”

While one can trace rumblings of the concerns for sacramental objectivity that would be incorporated into the FV as early as the 1980s,¹⁸ and the mid 1990s,¹⁹ the FV may properly be said to have taken its beginning in late 2001. In October 2001, Steve Schlissel delivered a controversial address at Redeemer College (Ancaster, Ontario), “More than Before: The Necessity of Covenant Consciousness.” This address elicited critical replies by David Linden, a URC elder in Alberta, and Cornelis Venema, theological professor at Mid America Reformed Seminary (MARS).

In this address, Schlissel argued for a couple of things that would characterize his subsequent addresses and that would be paralleled in other FV pieces. First, Schlissel charged the Reformed tradition with succumbing to dispensationalism, to “fundamentalistic” and “baptistic” theologies. The Reformed, he argued, had unwittingly followed Luther’s bifurcation of the Old Testament and the New Testament. In so doing, the Reformed had neglected the genius of their key biblical insight: covenant. Schlissel asked, then, “What’s new about the New Testament? Grace? NO. Faith? NO. Christ? NO. The new thing about the New Testament is Gentiles are incorporated into Israel. THAT IS IT.”²⁰ The NT, for instance, was not consumed with the question of “salvation by faith as opposed to works,” but “salvation that included Gentiles as Gentiles.”²¹

Second, Schlissel also argued that the Reformed had succumbed to a hermeneutical problem. We have not read the Bible in the manner in which it was intended to be read. “One difficulty, then, is the Greek versus the Hebrew way of thinking.”²² What does Schlissel mean by the “Greek” and the “Hebrew” epistemologies? By the former, Schlissel has in mind an interest in or concentration upon propositional truth. He approvingly summarizes another writer’s analysis of “the Word of God for Western Christians.”

The Word of God seems to interest modern Christians only to the extent that it reveals certain truths, propositions, inaccessible to human reason. We open the Bible to find out certain articulations. These truths themselves are conceived as certain doctrinal statements, and the Word of God finally is reduced to a collection of formulas. They are detached from it, moreover, so they can be reorganized into a more logically satisfactory sequence.

Schlissel then amplifies this concern.

Whether we realize it or not, the result is that the Word of God appears as a sort of nondescript hodgepodge from which the professional theologian extracts, like a mineral out of its matrix, small but precious bits of knowledge, which it is his job to clarify and systematize.

We've gone so deeply into the systematization that we become system worshippers.²³

By the latter, Schlissel appears to have in mind a certain understanding of what a covenant is,²⁴ one that is “organic” and is “not abstract,” but “active and dynamic.” What is the value of such an understanding? For one thing, we will be able to “live in the cusp of the tension of the covenant,” namely, how it is that God “is able to fulfill His promises generationally while denying them to unbelief in any given generation.”²⁵ Schlissel chides Reformed preaching for “telling [congregants] that they are bound for hell because of all sorts of various inconsistencies in their internal organs—gross willful ignorance, secret reserves in closing with Christ.” To do so is evidence of our “Pharisaism,” that is, our “perfect propositions, and our internal observations, and our morbid introspectionism.”²⁶

What then does covenantal Christianity look like? In place of “Luther’s question, ‘How can I be saved?’” the question we embrace is “What does God require?”²⁷ In other words, rather than attempting to resolve the above-mentioned “tension” of subjecting one’s affections to scrutiny, believers and their children should get about the business of obeying what God commands.²⁸ In fact, such obedience *is* the gospel of God: “That’s what God requires: to love Him with all

your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself. That is the gospel that Gentiles have been incorporated into through Jesus Christ.”²⁹

It was shortly after Schlissel’s address that the 2002 AAPCPC Lectures were delivered to the public. The response of the RPCUS in June 2002 has already been noted. This response elicited several replies and counter-replies from Douglas Wilson, Steve Schlissel, and their respective congregations, and the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church in the summer and fall of 2002.³⁰ Douglas Wilson in particular responded with a volley of statements and responses to the RPCUS charges,³¹ culminating in his fall 2002 book, “*Reformed*” *Is Not Enough*.³²

In January 2003, the AAPC sponsored another pastors’ conference in which many of the 2002 speakers were invited to speak, along with responses from critics of the theology promoted by the previous year’s conference. The fact that two of these critics were a long-standing professor of theology (Morton Smith) and the president of a Reformed Seminary (Joseph A. Pipa) helped to launch the AAPC controversy to a broader scale of attention within the Reformed community.

In August 2003, Knox Seminary hosted a colloquium in which several proponents of the FV and their critics presented papers and responses. An edited version of these papers, as has been mentioned, was published in the spring of 2004. At present, sessions and presbyteries of many Reformed denominations have formally or informally begun discussions and deliberations concerning the FV theology. At stake is the acceptability of the FV theology within denominations that subscribe to the Three Forms of Unity or the Westminster Standards. The debate, at present, shows no signs of abatement.

Introducing the Major Proponents of the FV

We will now take the opportunity to present the *dramatis personae*—the individuals whose theological output we shall study and critique. Each of these individuals has identified himself or has been identified, in some way, with the FV.

(1) *Douglas Wilson* is pastor of Christ Church, Moscow, Idaho (Confederation of Reformed Evangelical Churches [CREC]). Wil-

son began his ministry as an independent pastor of broadly evangelical convictions, but without formal theological training. He has recently described himself as an adherent of “postmillennial, Calvinistic, Presbyterian, Van Tillian, theonomic, and reformed thought.”³³ His influence has come, over the last decade, through his magazine, *Credenda/Agenda*, and his press, Canon Press, which has published not fewer than two dozen of his books, as well as those of Peter Leithart, Ralph Smith, Steve Wilkins, and Mark Horne. He has also founded New St. Andrews, an alternative undergraduate institution, at which Peter Leithart serves as senior fellow of theology and literature. Wilson has played an important role in establishing the classical Christian school in North America. His impressive rhetorical abilities and his distinctive satire and humor have also helped to attract a substantial following within the Reformed community.

(2) *Peter Leithart* is a senior theological instructor at New St. Andrews, Moscow, Idaho, and a longtime associate of James Jordan’s.³⁴ Leithart is one of the most intellectually precocious and broadly read of FV proponents, having completed doctoral studies under John Milbank at Cambridge.³⁵ He has also undertaken studies that have acquainted FV audiences with the sacramental theology both of Eastern Orthodoxy and of post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism. Unlike Wilson, whose ministerial credentials are in the CREC, Leithart holds his ministerial credentials in the PCA. Leithart, however, is currently serving a CREC congregation in Moscow, Idaho.

(3) *James Jordan* does not hold ecclesiastical office but has formal theological training. Jordan’s influence has come largely through well over two decades of newsletters and self-published books and symposia, through which he has promoted both theonomic Christianity and his ingenious biblical-theological readings of Scripture. In many respects, he bears a large share of the responsibility for generating the critical mass within the theonomic movement that has resulted in the FV, a movement with which he has identified himself.³⁶

(4) *Steve Schlissel* is pastor of Messiah’s Congregation, New York City, a congregation formerly affiliated with the Christian Reformed Church, but now independent. He was an invited speaker at both the 2002 and 2003 AAPCPC and has become known for his rhetorical flamboyancy.

(5) *John Barach* is presently pastor of a URC church in Alberta. Barach has been heavily influenced by the theology of Norman Shepherd and the concerns of the Liberated churches.

(6) *Ralph Smith* is a minister in the CREC who serves overseas in Japan. An aficionado of Jordan's covenant theology,³⁷ Smith is perhaps best known for his attempts to reshape the doctrine of the Trinity in view of FV concerns.³⁸

(7) *Steve Wilkins* is a longtime PCA minister who serves as senior pastor of the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church, Monroe, Louisiana.

(8) *Rich Lusk* is a former PCA minister who once served as the assistant pastor of the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church. He is pastor of the Trinity Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama.

(9) *Joel Garver* is a PCA officer in the Philadelphia area. Garver serves as assistant professor of philosophy at LaSalle University and is well regarded by FV proponents as an able defender of their views. His theological influence has come largely through his essays posted on his Web site.

(10) *Mark Horne* is serving as assistant pastor, Providence Presbyterian Church, in St. Louis. Horne's well-maintained Web site has served to collate and promote essays and articles that are sympathetic to the FV.

The Federal Vision and Covenant: A Definition

We may begin our exposition and critique of the FV by asking a very basic question: What, to FV proponents, is a covenant? On this issue of definition, we find a broad-based consensus—both negatively (what a covenant is *not*) and positively (what a covenant *is*).³⁹

Most proponents are agreed that a covenant is essentially a relationship,⁴⁰ as seen in a representative sampling of their descriptions:

It is most important that we ourselves understand what covenant is and I am going to tell you in the most simple words what covenant is. Covenant is relationship. That is what covenant is. Relationship.

Now, when we speak of covenant, specially, we speak of it as a defined relationship.⁴¹ (Steve Schlissel)

Covenant isn't a thing. Covenant isn't a thing that you can analyze—covenant is a relationship. It is a personal, ordered and formally binding relationship. It's personal; it's not just a legal relationship. Sometimes people present the covenant as if it were something somewhat cold and impersonal, like a business contract.⁴² (John Barach)

Covenant as it relates to man, simply and perhaps too simplistically stated, is the relationship of love and communion with the living, Triune God.⁴³ (Steve Wilkins)

A covenant is a relationship between persons. That relationship has conditions, stipulations, and promises. Put another way, there is no such thing as a personless or abstract covenant. Put yet another way, a covenant does not consist of a list of names, but is rather a relation between persons (whose names can certainly be formed into a list).⁴⁴ (Douglas Wilson)

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.⁴⁵ (James Jordan)

Attendant to these definitions, as may be seen especially from Barach's quotation above, is a resistance to defining a covenant in legal or administrative terms or in terms of an agreement. Even Ralph Smith's recognition that "agreement" may still be considered part of one's definition of a covenant must be seen against the background of his argument that "relationships also involve making agreements which express the relationship."⁴⁶ When we come to our study of the covenant of works in the next chapter, we will find this priority assigned to relationship expressed in explicit terms by a number of writers.

How do FV proponents defend their claim that a covenant is essentially a relationship? Many do so by pointing to biblical metaphors, most notably that of marriage.

But when the Bible talks about covenant, it talks about it in terms of a marriage, for instance. You may choose to view your marriage as a legal contract—your wife wouldn't appreciate that—hopefully your marriage is more than just a legal contract.⁴⁷ (John Barach)

To define the covenant biblically, we also must take into account the fact that of all the covenants that appear in the Bible, no type of covenant is used to describe the relationship of God with His people with greater frequency or deeper emotion than the marriage covenant.⁴⁸ (Ralph Smith)

A covenant does not consist of a list of names, but is a relation between persons (whose names can certainly be formed into a list). But these names are not the covenant any more than the two names on an invitation constitute a marriage. They may accurately describe the parties to the marriage, but they are not the marriage itself.⁴⁹ (Douglas Wilson)

Before we proceed to show how FV proponents draw their doctrine of covenantal objectivity from the above consideration, let us summarize and make some critical observations. FV proponents (quoted above) are not simply saying that a covenant entails a relationship. Few Reformed individuals would deny this point. *FV proponents are saying, however, that a covenant is itself essentially a relationship.* Frequently, this claim is asserted, not argued. The problem with this claim is twofold. First, proponents are not entirely clear about what they mean by the term *relationship*. Wilkins is clear that relationship entails vital union and communion between God and the soul.

In fact, covenant is a real relationship, consisting of real communion with the triune God through union with Christ. The covenant . . . is union with Christ. Thus being in covenant gives all the blessings of being united to Christ. There is no salvation apart from covenant simply because there is no salvation apart from union with Christ. And without union with Christ there is no covenant at all.⁵⁰

While other definitions are at best less clear, frequent use of the marriage metaphor from Scripture to illustrate FV definitions of covenant suggests that Wilkins's definition is not unique to him. To say, however, that relationship (as Wilkins defines it) lies at the essence of covenant jeopardizes the integrity of the legal or formal relationships within the covenant of grace that Reformed theologians have under-

stood the Scripture to teach.⁵¹ Few FV proponents will categorically deny that the covenant of grace has legal or forensic dimensions. The emphasis, however, decidedly lies in the personal-vital dimensions. This is made possible by equivocal uses of the term *relationship*. In so doing, FV proponents practically deny multiple senses of membership (legal/vital) within the covenant of grace, resolving them into a single undifferentiated way of the covenant member relating to God. Note again Wilkins:

According to the Bible the privileges of covenant membership go far beyond opportunity, mere opportunity, or privilege. According to the Scriptures to be in covenant with God is to really and truly be swept up into the glorious communion and fellowship of the Triune God, and be part of His family. Being in covenant involves then a concrete, substantial reality, and thus the Apostles could declare the blessings of salvation that are true of everyone who is a member of Christ, and declare them to be true without qualification, even though they didn't know the decrees.⁵²

This raises two further questions, which we will probe in subsequent chapters: (1) Given that FV proponents universally understand children of believers to be members of the covenant of grace, what does this membership entail? (2) Given the diminished concern with a covenant as a legal or forensic entity, and the enhanced concern for a covenant as a vital relationship, what implications does this have for the doctrine of justification?

A second problem with FV claims that a covenant is essentially a relationship is that proponents offer dubious biblical support for their doctrine. Much of the evidence they cite does prove that Scripture *can* speak of covenant in terms of a marital relationship, and that in its personal and vital dimensions. This, however, does not prove that the marriage metaphor exhausts all that is entailed in membership within the covenant of grace. In other words, just because *some* persons in covenant relate to God in that way does not necessarily prove that *all* persons in covenant relate to God in similar terms.

Much of the biblical language in describing covenants, furthermore, is patently legal or forensic, and speaks of covenants in terms of an agreement.⁵³ FV proponents do not necessarily deny this, but

they practically neglect these data in their discussions of covenant. Their discussion, then, is selective and produces an unbalanced picture of a covenant. FV proponents illegitimately privilege the marriage metaphor at the expense of the total witness of the biblical data.

Covenantal Objectivity

Understanding covenant to be a relationship and the biblical metaphor of marriage to describe the essence of covenant, many proponents articulate what has come to be known as the doctrine of covenantal objectivity. Before we proceed, it will be important to emphasize that no FV proponents presently deny that some within the covenant community prove in the end not to have been genuine believers, or that covenant faithfulness includes more than external obedience to the commands of God.⁵⁴ What is under question is how any member of the covenant of grace at any given time may regard himself and his standing before God; and how members of the covenant of grace are to be addressed by and regarded in the public teaching of the church.

Proponents sometimes contend that a covenant is an objective relationship independent of the covenant member's subjective considerations of the strength or nature of his membership.

And a covenant is also objective, like your marriage. It's there whether the members of the covenant feel it's there, or they believe it's there, whether they even believe in the covenant or not. If you were to stop believing that you were married, you would still be married. If you stopped feeling married, you would still be married. Your marriage exists.⁵⁵ (John Barach)

Such an understanding of a covenant is not infrequently framed polemically against the subjectivism thought to leaven much of Reformed Christianity.

And here is the basis of visible covenant faithfulness—here is our central duty. Morbid introspection is a counterproductive fight with a tarbaby. Are you a Christian? Look by faith to Christ—in the Scriptures, in the preached Word, and in the sacraments.⁵⁶ (Douglas Wilson)

Objective assurance is found in real faith responding to an objective gospel. Objective assurance is never found through trying to peer into the secret counsels of God, or into the murky resources of one's own heart. The gospel is preached, the water was applied, the Table is now set. Do you believe? The question is a simple one.⁵⁷ (Douglas Wilson)

We might note parenthetically that Wilson's question ("Do you believe?") is one that Wilkins argues cannot be competently answered by the believer within the realm of assurance. This state of affairs underscores an important inconsistency between two FV proponents.

The chief consequence of covenantal objectivity is that a premium is placed on that which is visible, external, and tangible.⁵⁸ Distinctions within the covenant of grace based on subjective considerations are either muted or rejected.

As in the old covenant, so in the new covenant. There is an objective covenant made of believers and their children. Every baptized person is in covenant with God and is in union, then, with Christ and with the triune God. The Bible doesn't know about a distinction between being internally in the covenant, really in the covenant, and being only externally in the covenant, just being in the sphere of the covenant. The Bible speaks about the reality, the efficacy of baptism. Every baptized person is truly a member of God's covenant.⁵⁹ (John Barach)

Negatively, this means, to the session of the AAPC, that many Reformed Christians have been mistaken in their efforts to discern the difference between a true and a spurious work of grace.

It would appear that we must be willing to speak of the undifferentiated grace of God (or the generic, unspecified grace of God). In their reading of Heb. 6:4–5, some theologians try to draw subtle distinctions to make highly refined psychological differences between blessings that do not secure eternal salvation and true regeneration, which does. . . . Thus, the solution to Heb. 6 is not developing two psychologies of conversion, one for the "truly regenerate" and one for the future apostate, and then introspecting to see which kind of grace one has received. This is a task beyond our competence.

The solution is to turn from ourselves and to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith (Heb. 12:1ff).⁶⁰

Rich Lusk, a former pastor of the church whose session adopted the statement above, explicates this position in an essay on Hebrews 6:4–8. Lusk rejects the conventional Reformed view that “there is some qualitative difference between what the truly regenerate experience and what future apostates experience, *and* that this distinction is in view in Hebrews 6:4–6.”⁶¹ “The difference between the truly regenerate person and the person who will fail to persevere is not clear on the front end; rather, it only becomes clear as the one continues on in the faith and the other apostatizes.”⁶² Genuine covenantal membership, therefore, is not to be measured inwardly and subjectively, but outwardly and objectively.

Positively, this means that one may speak in very strong terms about what is true of the member of the covenant of grace. Citing Paul’s address to the Ephesians in Ephesians 1, Steve Wilkins argues that the reason that Paul can say that his audience has been blessed “with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,” “chosen in Christ Jesus before the foundation of the world,” “rede[emed] through his blood,” and the like, is because of their relationship to the covenant.

[Paul is] speaking to a particular, living group of people—real people, who were sinners, that he didn’t know the decrees of God about, but what he knows is what the covenant means. That’s what he knows. He didn’t know the decrees, he didn’t know their hearts, he didn’t know the genuineness of their conversion, or the genuineness of their faith. He didn’t know any of that. What does he know? How could he talk like this? Because he knows what the covenant means. The covenant is communion—living communion—with the triune God. It’s a living relationship with the living God.⁶³

In other words, the reason that the apostle addresses believers in the manner he does is derived from the nature of covenantal membership.

Barach confirms such a view, rejecting the traditional view that the apostle addresses believers in such terms according to a “judgment of charity”—that the apostles speak of believers according to their profession.

When we look around the congregation and we see other people in the congregation, we do not give them a “judgment of charity” that says “Well, I don’t know; maybe he’s a Christian; maybe he isn’t. So I’ll be charitable and I’ll regard him as a Christian and I’ll treat him as a Christian. I’ve got my doubts.” Instead we go by God’s promise. He has said that this person is in Christ and therefore believing God’s promise, we treat that person as who he really is—someone who is in Christ.⁶⁴

Such a view extends even to the covenantal membership of duly baptized children, as Wilkins makes plain.

Traditionally, the Reformed have said, we have to view our children as presumptively elect or presumptively regenerate. And therefore, Christian, if we are willing to take the Scriptures at face value, there is no presumption necessary. Just take the Bible. And this is true, of course, because by the baptism, by baptism the Spirit joins us to Christ since he is the elect one and the Church is the elect people, we are joined to his body. We are therefore elect. Since he is the justified one, we are justified in him. Since he is the beloved one, we are beloved in him. . . . Children are joined to Christ by their baptisms and must be viewed and treated in the light of this reality. They are to be nurtured in the faith.⁶⁵

In this rejection of the conventional Reformed explanation of the doctrine of the “judgment of charity,” and in the absence of a distinction between the membership of children of the covenant of grace and of adult believers, we find that what characterizes FV conceptions of covenant is that *membership in the covenant of grace is to be understood in an undifferentiated sense*. In other words, we are not to define membership within the covenant community by drawing distinctions along the lines of the doctrines of regeneration and conversion.

To do so, FV proponents often aver, is to violate the spirit and letter of Deuteronomy 29:29.

We can never, in this life, know with absolute certainty who are elect unto final salvation. For this reason, we have to make judgments and declarations in terms of what has been revealed, namely, the covenant (Dt. 29:29).⁶⁶ (AAPC Summary Statement)

We are to take the baptisms of others at face value. We also take the teaching of Scripture at face value, and the behavior and the words of these covenant members at face value. If there is conflict between what baptism means and what the baptized are openly doing and saying, then we are at liberty to point to the inconsistency and say that it constitutes covenantal faithlessness. But we need to be extremely wary of pronouncing on the secret things (Deut 29:29). We have cited this verse a number of times in this book—it would be a good verse to memorize.⁶⁷ (Douglas Wilson)

We therefore do not publicly distinguish among covenant members along the conventional lines of a profession of saving faith. Within the covenant of grace, the working admissible public distinction is between “covenant keepers” and “covenant breakers.”⁶⁸ Perseverance, FV proponents generally argue, is that which distinguishes the covenant keeper from the covenant breaker. We shall examine this doctrine in more depth in a subsequent chapter. We may observe that Wilson’s statement (above) closely resembles the doctrine of the judgment of charity.⁶⁹ This appears to place him in conflict with Barach’s rejection of this doctrine. This difference represents a significant hermeneutical inconsistency among certain FV proponents.

In many respects the doctrine of covenantal objectivity will resurface in our consideration of the FV’s understandings of perseverance and apostasy, and of the sacraments. Given the importance of the doctrine to the FV, we may make a few preliminary critical comments. First, it seems that the doctrine of the judgment of charity has been too hastily discarded by FV proponents. The question at hand, of course, is how the apostles can speak of believers as “elect,” “sanctified,” “heirs of glory,” and in terms of similar expressions, mindful that some in the audience may prove in the end to be unregenerate. All are agreed that the apostles had no infallible knowledge of the state of the hearts of their audience.

One important passage in this regard, and one that has been untreated in the FV literature I have studied, is 1 Peter 5:12: “Through Silvanus, our faithful brother (for so I regard him), I have written to you briefly, exhorting and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it!” What does this passage tell us? We gain a window into the mode of the way that the apostles speak of fellow believers.

The affirmation that Silvanus is a “faithful brother” is the way, Peter tells us, that he “regard[s] him.” In other words, Peter receives Silvanus according to his profession and according to the life that accompanies, corroborates, and adorns that profession.

Second, the doctrine of covenantal objectivity also fails to account for biblical teaching that speaks of the covenantally unfaithful as those who were never truly members of the covenant of grace in the first place.⁷⁰ We may consider two representative passages, 1 John 2:19–20 and Matthew 7:22–23. In 1 John 2:19–20 (“They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us, but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us. But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you all know.”), we may notice what John says: “they were not really of us”—not “they failed to persevere.” In this statement is a distinction drawn within the covenant community: “those who are really of us” and those who are not. The apostasy of the latter, John says, proves that they were never really believers at the outset.⁷¹ This conclusion is confirmed by the reassurance given to believers in verse 20: they are said to have an “anointing from the Holy One.” Those who departed, we may fairly infer, did not possess this anointing.⁷² The difference, then, between apostates and believers does not consist merely of the fact that the latter persevere and the former do not. The difference, John says in both verse 19 and verse 20, is *qualitative* in nature and is inherent from the beginning.⁷³

In Matthew 7:22–23 (“Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; Depart from Me, You who practice lawlessness.’”), Jesus says of individuals who, notwithstanding their religious activity and usefulness to the kingdom, are proven to have been false, “I never knew you.” Jesus does *not* say, “Once I really knew you, but now I don’t.”⁷⁴ Although they were members of the covenant community and recognized as such, Jesus’ verdict is that he never knew them. They were not his, and they never were.⁷⁵ This proves that we are not at liberty to understand membership in the covenant of grace in an undifferentiated way.