The Federal Vision

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The purpose of this book of essays is to introduce (or, more properly, to re-introduce) the modern Church to covenantal reading and thinking. Covenant is the central teaching of the Word of God; it describes a relationship with the Triune God through Jesus Christ, His only Begotten Son. To be in covenant is to be in real communion with God, attendant with real privileges and real blessings. It is to be brought into the circle of the eternal fellowship that has always existed between Father, Son, and Spirit (John 14:23–24; 17:20–23). It is to be made partaker of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:2–4). It is to be beloved of the Father for the sake of His Son and is founded upon union with Christ (John 17:20–23).

Sadly, most Christians have lost sight of the glorious reality of covenant and consequently ended up (inadvertently) looking more to their own experiences for assurance of salvation than they have to Christ. The gospel has been abstracted and reduced to a collection of propositional statements about Christ which require intellectual assent. The Church has been reduced to an institution that is merely a place of potential blessing rather than the Spirit-filled, blessing-filled body of Christ. The sacraments have become nothing more than mere symbols that visibly picture the gospel but do not actually accomplish anything when they are administered according to the Scriptures. To many in the Church, the covenant is a meaningless, indefinable concept which merely allows infants to be baptized (for some unknown reason).

Even those whose knowledge is better than this have fallen into a trap. We have allowed our theological system to become a filter

through which we read the Word of God. Consequently, it becomes almost impossible to refine or even seriously examine the system by the Word. If an interpretation of the Scriptures is suggested that contradicts a particular point of the system, it is rejected out of hand. The assumption is that since the system is biblical the Scriptures cannot contradict it. Rather than allowing the Scriptures to mold our system, we now force the Scriptures into the mold of the system. Strangely, in our zeal to avoid becoming like Rome, we have become as Romish as could be. We have identified the teaching of the Scriptures with our confessions and catechisms and thus have embraced the very position we profess to abhor—that of allowing man-made theological formulations to have supremacy over the Scriptures.

We have lost the perspective of our fathers in the faith and even more, we have lost the perspective which the apostles, prophets, and our Lord Himself had. We find ourselves afraid to speak as the Bible speaks, indeed, in some circles, even quoting certain passages from the Scriptures provokes the raised eyebrow of suspicion. For these and other reasons, it seems clear to the authors that we have strayed from the paths which our fathers walked with confidence and joy—and the time has come to examine ourselves.

The 2002 Auburn Avenue Pastors Conference ("The Federal Vision") brought together four men to speak on the covenant and its nature. There was nothing novel or particularly creative about the lectures given (most if not all of the points made by the speakers had been made by numerous theologians at one time or another in the past), but the conference became the catalyst to provoke a great deal of discussion on the covenant and its practical outworkings. The papers that follow seek to expound what was set forth only cursorily in January 2002.

It should be noted that many of the things written in the following articles have been written by others long before us. These things have been taught in every age of the Church. You find statements, allusions, and clear teaching of these matters in the early fathers (Justin Martyr, Cyril, Irenaeus, Augustine); in the Medieval fathers and the Reformers (Anselm, Aquinas, Calvin, Bucer, Luther, Cranmer, Ursinus); in many theologians of the seventeenth–nineteenth centuries (Cornelius Burges, Richard Hooker, Jonathan Edwards, M. F. Sadler, John Nevin); and we could add many contemporary theologians as well.

The views expressed herein are also reflected in many of the creeds and confessions of the Church (the Nicene Creed, Calvin's Strasbourg and Geneva catechisms, the baptismal liturgy of the French Reformed Church, the Book of Common Prayer, the Second Helvetic Confession, the 1560 Scots Confession, the French Confession, the Gallican Confession, the Augsburg Confession, the Belgic Confession, and the Westminster Confession). Though no one of these witnesses held all the things set forth here, all the things set forth here have precedent in the history of the Church and we are self-consciously seeking to build upon this foundation.

By putting forth this collection (and the one that will follow, D.V.), we do not intend to make a bad situation worse. We have not (and will never) fling charges of heresy against our brothers who disagree with our position. We refuse to do this because such charges are utterly unwarranted. We have the greatest confidence in the sincerity of those who differ from us, of their love for the Savior, and their desire to preserve the purity of the faith once for all delivered to the saints. We are confident that we will spend eternity with these brothers and would welcome them at any time into our congregations to commune with us. Our own frailties and shortcomings are so great that we say all that we say with an eye to ourselves, lest while seeking to pluck splinters out of our brothers' eyes, we neglect the telephone poles in our own.

Nor do we have any delusions of our own importance. We haven't the slightest notion that our views will "straighten out everything that's wrong with the Church." Our desire is far less ambitious: we simply hope to further more reasonable and charitable discussion of these issues among our fathers and brethren to the end that we all come to understand the Word of God more clearly so as to proclaim it more faithfully.

We intend no disrespect toward any who take a different position; indeed, we welcome their comments and critique. We are all firmly convinced that our formulations need refinement and clarification at numerous points. It is our prayer, however, that these essays will be of service in assisting the Church to consider the teaching of God's Word afresh from the perspective of covenant, all to the glory of God.

Chapter One

The relationship between covenant and election is a controversial topic today. But it also has been controversial in the past. One of my great theological heroes, Klaas Schilder, discovered it to be somewhat controversial in his own ministry.[1]

We have to recognize that when we start talking about election we are dealing with a subject that many people would rather not discuss. It is tempting not to talk about election. There are many evangelical churches where preachers don't talk about election at all because they know that many people in their congregations have questions about it and throughout history people have held diverse views on it. So they shy away from getting into something so controversial.

Even in Reformed churches there are people who see election as a problem: "Am I elect? How do I know? Can I really be confident of these things?" Unfortunately, there are also others in Reformed churches who treat election as an academic subject, a theological datum with little relevance for us today, something that can easily be set to the side. It is tempting to avoid the subject of election and many churches do, but we must not give in to that temptation. Scripture speaks and so we must speak.

The Canons of Dort were one of the Reformed Church's first great formulations of the doctrine of election. They were written largely in response to the Arminian Remonstrants and they talk about how to teach election properly. The First Head of Doctrine, Article 14, says:

> Just as, by God's wise plan, this teaching concerning divine elec-

> tion has been proclaimed through the prophets, Christ Himself, and the apostles, in Old and New Testament times, and has subsequently been committed to writing in the Holy Scriptures, so also today in God's Church, for which it was specifically intended, this teaching must be set forth—with a spirit of discretion, in a godly and holy manner, at the appropriate time and place, without inquisitive searching into the ways of the Most High. This must be done for the glory of God's most holy name, and for the lively comfort of His people.

In the very conclusion to the Canons of Dort something more is said about the way we teach election:

> This Synod urges all fellow ministers in the gospel of Christ to deal with this teaching in a godly and reverent manner, in the academic institutions as well as in the churches; to do so, both in their speaking and writing, with a view to the glory of God's name, holiness of life, and the comfort of anxious souls; to think and also speak with Scripture according to the analogy of faith; and, finally, to refrain from all those ways of speaking which go beyond the bounds set for us by the genuine sense of the Holy Scriptures and which could give impertinent sophists a just occasion to scoff at the teaching of the Reformed churches or even to bring false accusations against it.

Notice that, in that last sentence about giving "impertinent sophists a just occasion to scoff" at the Reformed churches, the "sophists" referred to there are the Arminians. The Synod of Dort was afraid that the Arminians would be given opportunity and occasion to scoff at the Reformed teachings if Reformed pastors spoke in the way that would make God look stingy ("unjust, a tyrant"), that would make people "carnally self-assured," teaching them to ignore the warnings of Scripture, or that would suggest that God has predestined "the greater part of the world to sin and to eternal condemnation" or that "reprobation is the cause of unbelief and ungodliness" or "that many infant children of believers are snatched in their innocence from their mothers' breasts and cruelly cast into hell so that neither the blood of Christ nor their baptism nor the prayers of the Church at their baptism can be of any use to them." The Canons of Dort identify these as

Chapter Two

Covenant, Baptism and Salvation

Steve Wilkins

The foundation of all of God's dealings with man is covenant. It is the basis of all that God has done, is doing, and will do in time and on earth. Nothing can be understood rightly apart from an understanding of covenant.

Yet, the truth is, very few Christians have seriously considered the covenant and its implications for their lives and the lives of their children. Even those churches that profess to believe in "covenant theology" seem to have little understanding of covenant as it is revealed to us in the Scriptures. This has greatly contributed to the weakness and ineffectiveness of the Church in this century. If we are to be what God commands us to be, we must understand and rejoice in the covenant God has established with His people. Covenant as it relates to man, simply and perhaps too simplistically stated, is the relationship of love and communion with the living, Triune God. But to understand this, we need to look at God Himself.[1]

The Covenant and God

All things find their origin in the Triune God, covenant included. There is no explicit reference in the Scripture to any covenant existing between the three persons of the Godhead. Usually, Reformed theologians, if they speak of any covenant within the Godhead, are referring to the idea of a pretemporal "covenant of redemption"—the agreement in which the Son voluntarily placed Himself under obligation to the Father to carry out the work of redemption.

In fact, the reality that God is not only one but eternally three persons implies the very thing that covenant is about. Indeed, for God

to have personality at all implies that He experiences relationships within Himself. It is this that distinguishes the Triune God from the Unitarian divinity of the Jews or the Muslims. Ralph Smith observes, "The most exalted non-Christian idea of deity involves a being who is eternally alone—with no other to love, no other with whom to communicate, and no other with whom to fellowship." The implications of this are momentous. This means that love, fellowship, and communication are not essential to his being. That is, the Unitarian monad is and must be reduced to an impersonal force. As Smith observes, "A god for whom a relationship with another is eternally irrelevant is an abstraction, an idea or a thing more than a person."[2] Sadly, because of a lack of understanding of the Trinity, this is precisely the view of most Christians.

Unitarianism cannot posit love in God, because there is nothing in Him to be the object of that love. If they say, "God demonstrates His love to the world after He creates it," then they are forced to admit that God changes in time. If they say, "No, He loved the world from eternity," then they are forced to maintain that His personhood (at least His attribute of love) was dependent upon something outside of Himself—in this case the world that He planned to create. In either case (whether God changes or is dependent upon something outside of Himself to mold His character), you end up with something less than the Triune God of Scripture who is infinitely, eternally, and unchangeably, perfect love. The Unitarian god ends up inevitably becoming nothing more than "the Force"—a god who manifests himself primarily through raw, arbitrary power.

Ralph Smith raises a further problem here:

> If Muslims and Jews applied their notion of god consistently to their worldview, man's personality, too, would be found to lack ultimate meaning. That man speaks, laughs, and loves can only be accidental truths at best. There would be nothing in the deity to correspond to such things. And what could it mean for man to be created in the image of such a god? If man is to be like such a god, would that mean that the ideal life in this world is one that lacks these personal qualities? Should man look forward to an eternity of silent self-contemplation?[3]

Unitarianism leads to a dreadful and nightmarish dead end.

Chapter Three

Paedobaptism and Baptismal Efficacy:

Historic Trends and Current Controversies

In 1857, Charles Hodge wrote an essay in the Princeton Review lamenting the decline of the practice of infant baptism in America.[1] Using statistics provided by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, Hodge pointed out that from 1812 onward, the number of children being brought for baptism was radically declining in relation to the overall number of communicants. In 1811, there had been 20 paedobaptisms per hundred communicants; by 1856, the ratio was just over 5 per hundred. Hodge sounded the alarm: "[M]ore than two-thirds of the children of the Church have been 'cut off' from the people of God by their parents' sinful neglect, and by the Church's silent acquiescence therein."

Hodge reported a similar downgrade was occurring in other ostensibly Reformed denominations. The Dutch Reformed ratio was only slightly better than the Presbyterian in 1856, at around 7 paedobaptisms per hundred communicants. Things were even worse in other bodies. The New School Presbyterians were leaving six out of seven children unbaptized. Paedobaptism was so rare among Congregationalists by the mid-1850s that Hodge could truthfully claim, "in the Congregational churches in New England, infant baptism is, beyond doubt, dying out." Only the high church Episcopalians seemed relatively unaffected by the trend.

What caused this sharp decline in the maintenance of covenant baptism? Why did the Church's historic practice lose so much ground in America so quickly? It is far beyond the scope of this essay to enter into all the theological and social forces that factored into the decline of paedobaptism in our culture. One thing is certain: America became

progressively "baptist" on a massive scale in the early-to-mid-nineteenth century.[2] Without going into detail, a few obvious connections can be made between two powerful cultural-theological movements and the loss of paedobaptism: namely, experiential Revivalism and Enlightenment rationalism. Let us look at each of these in turn.

The Effects of Revivalism

Note that the 50 year period of decline Hodge traced out coincides, more or less, with the institutionalization of Revivalism in American Christianity. While the First Great Awakening of the eighteenth century had been a mixed blessing, it remained basically Calvinistic in doctrinal orientation. Preachers such as Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and Gilbert Tennant injected new life into decaying, dying churches. The Awakening did not always foster a high view of the Church, particularly because of itinerancy, but it did cultivate a warm and deep love for classic Reformational orthodoxy.[3]

The Second Great Awakening of the early nineteenth century brought with it a significant shift away from the earlier pattern of Protestantism. This rapidly expanding movement was full of anti-doctrinal, anti-ecclesiastical tendencies, all of which fanned the flames of the anti-paedeobaptist fire. Leaders such as Charles Finney, Lorenzo Dow, Francis Asbury, and Alexander Campbell all wielded enormous influence in remaking American Christianity. Low church Revivalism trumped high-church Puritanism, pushing to the periphery of American society traditional Calvinistic and paedobaptistic bodies.

The revivals of the Second Great Awakening totally restructured American religious life in radical fashion. While there is some danger in characterizing broad historical movements, we can safely identify several features commonly attributed to the second wave of revivals.

First, these revivals undermined a traditional high view of ecclesiastical office and authority. The Protestant Reformation had insisted on an educated clergy, in contrast to the late medieval period, when priests were often ignorant and even illiterate. Because pastors were scholarly and articulate, they had become powerful leaders in society, influencing politics, economics, literature, art, and so forth. Church discipline was respected as the most powerful deterrent placed in the hands of mortal men. Pastors often wore special vestments to

Chapter Four

What's for Dinner?

Calvin's Continuity with the Bible's and the Ancient Church's Eucharistic Faith

Sometimes the best way to get at the truth is to begin by telling a lie. With that in mind, consider the following falsehood:

> Once upon a time, God made two creatures named Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve were pure spiritual beings without bodies and without passions. They did not need to sleep. More importantly they did not need to eat, burp, chew, swallow, pass gas, relieve themselves, or do any of the other gross and "carnal" things which are associated with physical food. All they did was meditate on the nature of God without any of the distractions and temptations which beset us because we are imprisoned in this material environment. They were simply disembodied minds, without anything to do but contemplate God.
>
> But somehow these two spirits sinned. As punishment, Adam and Eve were cursed by God to dwell in physical bodies which needed food and drink in order to live. Furthermore, their relationship to God was no longer a purely mental or spiritual affair, involving pure contemplation of God. On the contrary, Adam and Eve were now reduced to gross physical symbols through which God maintained His relationship with them. God set apart special food by which Adam and Eve were given merely symbolic communion with Him.

Now, the story you just read is utterly false. But more than that, it is positively perverse. What do I mean by perverse? According to my story, among other problems, Adam and Eve were cursed for their sin by being given food as a symbolic means of communion with God. That's not simply inaccurate, it is exactly the opposite of what

actually took place when Adam and Eve sinned. Adam and Eve were given sacramental food, the fruit of the Tree of Life, when God first created them in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. After they sinned, their punishment was to be banned from the Tree of Life by the Cherubim and the flaming sword. In other words, it was because of sin that Adam and Eve were reduced to purely non-material communion with God.

Before I comment any further on this lie, however, I'd like to give you another story. After all, anyone who tells one lie usually finds himself forced to tell more lies to cover for the first. Thus, consider the following:

> Once upon a time, thousands of years after Adam and Eve, Jesus met with His twelve disciples in an upper room during the Old Testament feast of Passover. The disciples noticed that Jesus was not eating anything. So, after they talked among themselves, Peter was selected to ask Jesus about his behavior.
>
> "Lord, why are you not eating with us?"
>
> Jesus answered and said, "Truly, truly, I say unto you, no longer shall you take part in carnal meals when you worship God, for you are not of the flesh but of the Spirit."
>
> And Peter said, "But what shall we do if we do not eat and drink the Passover meal?"
>
> Jesus replied, "From now on, he who would be My disciple, must go off by himself away from his brethren and must close his eyes and simply contemplate the Father, or meditate on Me and My work."

Here again, not only is this second story false, but it is completely backwards. Jesus did not reject the Passover feast nor the other sacramental celebrations of the older covenants as the means by which God is to be worshiped. Rather he built on them and transfigured them at the Last Supper. Jesus could have established a special form of private meditation or Bible reading if He had wanted to, but instead He instituted a public feast.

Chapter Five

Merit Versus Maturity:

What Did Jesus Do for Us?[1]

When I was in theological seminary in the late 1970s, it was fairly common for men to express reservations about the traditional Reformed doctrine called "the covenant of works." The gist of that doctrine was that Adam was somehow supposed to earn something while he lived in the garden of Eden, that something being "eternal life." Because of his sin, Adam fell into death, and so did all of his posterity. Jesus, however, lived a sinless life as a new Adam, and by His merits earned eternal life, which is now given to all who are in union with Him.

That there were to be two stages in human existence is clear from Romans 5, which tells us repeatedly that what we have in Christ is "much more" than what Adam lost.[2] Hence, there is an Adamic stage of human life and then a glorified stage which Adam failed to attain. Paul makes the same affirmation in 1 Corinthians 15:44: "If there is a natural body, there is also a Spiritual body," which means that the existence of a "natural body" implies the future existence of a "Spiritual body."[3] Paul assumes that it is clear from the creation account that there are two stages of human existence. The purpose of this essay is to clarify what is involved in those two stages.

What, then, is the nature of these two stages of life? On the face of it, the two stages would seem to be childhood and maturity. Indeed, this is the language Paul uses to describe the change of ages brought about by Jesus (Gal. 3:23–4:11). A person does not become a mature adult by "earning" or "meriting" it by doing good works. Rather, a child is supposed to grow up to be an adult, unless he dies before attaining mature age. Adam came under death as a child, and hence did not

attain maturity and glory. It is the thesis of this paper that maturation rather than meriting is the proper way to understand the two phases of human life.

The notion of a "covenant of works" had become problematic in conservative American Presbyterian theology by the late 1970s for several reasons. First, there were the criticisms put forth by John Murray. For Murray, there was an "Adamic administration" but not a "covenant" with Adam.[4] A series of taped lectures on "The Adamic Administration" by Murray was in circulation, as was his article on "Covenant Theology" in The Encyclopedia of Christianity.[5]

Contact with conservative continental Reformed theology, which, unlike Presbyterianism, does not have a confessional tie to the phrase "covenant of works," also served to open up the discussion. Most professors at the various conservative Presbyterian seminaries in America at that time had taken advanced degrees in the Netherlands, and so had been exposed to continental views. The first volume of S.G. De Graaf's Promise and Deliverance was published in English in 1977.[6] My seminary contemporaries and I read:

> We are accustomed to speaking of this covenant as the covenant of works. However, we should not take this name to mean that man was expected to earn eternal life as a reward for doing good works, as though eternal life was man's payment for services rendered. Because man owes everything he has to God, we may never speak of man earning wages paid out by God. Therefore it might be wiser to speak of the covenant of God's favor. Grace, in general, also means favor, but in the Scriptures grace always has the special meaning of favor that forgives guilt. We could express the difference by saying that God made a covenant of favor with Adam and a covenant of grace with Christ. The only demand made of Adam was that he choose consciously for the favor given him by God if he and his posterity were to abide forever in that favor.[7]

As can be seen, a rejection of the idea of a covenant of meritorious work was commonly entertained in Continental Reformed circles.[8]

Moreover, the phrase "covenant of works" was seen as problematic. What did it mean? Better, what did this phrase quickly communicate to people not rigorously schooled in systematic theol-

Chapter Six

"Judge Me, O God":

Biblical Perspectives on Justification[1]

Contrary to modern rationalistic accounts, metaphor is not an adornment to thought and speech, but a primary medium of both. It is not the case that we think and speak literally, and subsequently cast about for appropriate metaphors and symbols to express those literal ideas. Rather, our thinking and speech is metaphorical from the ground up. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have written, "conceptual metaphors are mappings across conceptual domains that structure our reasoning, our experience, and our everyday language" (emphasis added). Lakoff and Johnson give numerous examples of what they call "primary metaphors" that shape experience: the metaphorical association of intimacy with physical proximity ("we used to be close"), the link between quantity and height ("stock prices are sharply higher"), the notion that organization is similar to physical structure ("he pieced together the theory of quantum gravity"), the metaphorical link of purposes and destinations ("I'm working on it, but I'm not there yet"), and so on.[2] These metaphors are so much a part of our basic mental and linguistic equipment that we rarely recognize them as metaphors.

"Foundation" is one of the primary metaphors of philosophy, particularly of modern philosophy. Descartes is the supreme example of what today's philosophers call a "foundationalist," who attempted to "clear the ground" of earlier philosophy through the systematic use of doubt, so he could come to a "foundation" that no one could question, an uncorrupted foundation on which he could "rebuild" an entire edifice of philosophy. Dooyeweerd employed a similar metaphor in talking about the "ground motives" of Christian and unbelieving

thought. Or, think of the key role that notions of "purity" have played in modern philosophy, or the centrality that visual metaphors like "mirrors" have played in Western conceptions of knowledge.

Root or primary metaphors also play a formative role in theology and Christian piety. Paul H. Jones has argued that for centuries eucharistic theology has gotten sidetracked because it has been pursued under the metaphor of "tomb" rather than "table," and eucharistic piety has often worked from the metaphor of the Supper as "fast" rather than "feast." My objection to these metaphors is not that they exist; they are all but unavoidable. My objection is that the particular metaphors of "tomb" and "fast" are inappropriate to the Supper, and that they therefore lead theology and piety into side-roads and blind alleys. Metaphors, especially unrecognized ones, take on a life of their own, determining the questions we ask and putting their particular stamp on our answers. To change the terminology slightly, the "picture" of communion that a theologian assumes goes a long way to determining his theology of the Supper. If we begin by picturing the Supper as a miramorphocle, then we will ask questions like, "How does the bread change into body?" and "Why does it still look and taste like bread?" If, similarly, we begin thinking about baptism by picturing baptism as a "sign," then our main question will be, "What does it signify?" and we may neglect to notice that baptism accomplishes something. If we begin with the root picture of "ritual," our questions will be more about what baptism does. Theologians, of course, are called to submit to the root metaphors that Scripture provides, and to teach in accord with what the Scriptural metaphors dictate. And if theologians adopt metaphors or basic pictures that are not directly derived from Scripture, then we should recognize that, and pay attention to the limitations of our metaphors.

The purpose of this essay is to explore the "picture" (more accurately, the pictures) surrounding the Bible's use of "justification" and related terms. In what kind of "scene" or scenes does justification come into play? By examining the variety of Scriptural "scenes" where justification is at work, I hope to show a glimpse of the fullness of the biblical doctrine of justification and to draw some conclusions about what "justify" means in Scripture. There are a host of other related issues currently in debate concerning the doctrine of justification: the nature of faith, the relation of faith and works, the basis for justifica-

Chapter Seven

Justification and the Gentiles

We must settle theological differences by appeal to the Bible. That's what the Reformed standards demand. The Westminster Confession, for example, insists that "The Supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions . . . (and) doctrines of men . . . are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture" (1.10).

Further, it is evident throughout our Confessions that we recognize the necessity of covenantal obedience (not works-righteousness) for salvation. Consider, for example, a statement made in the Westminster Confession of Faith at 1.7. Dealing with the perspicuity of Scripture, the Confession teaches that:

> Those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.

Note carefully: salvation, according to this, requires knowledge, belief and observance; all, it says, are necessary.

Again, the Confession at 14.2 expounds saving faith as that which "yield(s) obedience to the commands" of God. While faith is extolled as the alone instrument of justification, it is freely and plainly admitted in the Westminster Confession (11.2) that such faith never appears on Planet Earth by itself. If you want life, you don't choose between heart and lungs: you need both. Faith is never "alone in the person

justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love." Well, there ya go.

We ask you to remember John Owen's explicit statement on this very point. He said, "We absolutely deny that we can be justified by that faith which can be alone; that is, without a principle of spiritual life and universal obedience, operative in all the works of it, as duty doth require" (Justification By Faith, p. 73; italics his). Owen categorically rejects the idea that justifying faith can be separated from "holy obedience": "We allow no faith to be of the same kind or nature with that whereby we are justified, but what virtually and radically contains in it universal obedience." Note what Owen is asserting: Obedience is not merely a test or evidence of saving faith; it is inseparably bound up in its character. There is no disobedient yet saving faith. It is not faith+obedience, but the obedience of faith.

Further still, Westminster Shorter Catechism (85) asks, "What doth God require of us, that we may escape his wrath and curse due to us for sin?" The answer? "To escape the wrath and curse of God due to us for sin, God requireth of us faith in Jesus Christ, repentance unto life, with the diligent use of all the outward means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption." Repentance unto life is defined in answer 87 as a saving grace whereby a sinner turns from sin to God "with full purpose of, and endeavour after, new obedience." This, the Westminster Standards affirm, is required for salvation, for "it is of such necessity to all sinners, that none may expect pardon without it." There is no such thing as an alone faith. Period.

If any doubt remains, Heidelberger 87 tries to remove it: "Can they be saved who do not turn to God from their unthankful, impenitent life?" Answer? "By no means, for, as Scripture says, no unchaste person, idolater, adulterer, thief, covetous man, drunkard, slanderer, robber, or the like shall inherit the kingdom of God." Methinks this is plain enough.

Yet the value of the Reformation's rediscovery of Scripture's authority is mitigated by the insistence that the Bible be read through the lens of downstream systematics. We must learn to read Scripture according to its own categories rather than sifting it through ours. A curse be on abstractions!

I'm afraid that what God has actually written cannot be clearly read in Luther's shadow. The cure? Our post-Reformational obsession

Chapter Eight

The Church: Visible or Invisible

Since a great deal of attention is likely to be paid to what is said here, I want to begin by simply stipulating a few things for the record. In no way have I altered my views of decretal theology; I remain a high Calvinist. If the Synod of Dordt had come up with seven points of Calvinism, I would gladly affirm the extra two as well. As an historic evangelical, in no way have I altered my conviction that a man must be converted to God in order to see the kingdom of heaven. In no way have I changed my conviction that the sole instrument by which an individual may appropriate the righteousness of Christ is a living faith, which also is a gift from God, lest any think to boast. Has nothing changed then? No, there have been changes in my thinking—but these changes amount to me saying more than all this—not less than this.

Why the hubbub then? Since the controversy broke, I have found that when I affirm what I believe in confessional language, I am not believed. When I try to clarify in my own words, I am asked why I don't think the confessions are good enough. When I get out the fiddle there are those who will not dance, and when I play the violin, they do not mourn—and one would think that everyone would mourn when I play the violin.

We are all eager to maintain a biblical peace, and I would urge us all to heed the words of Isaiah—come, let us reason together. We're not here to shout about how great Diana of the Ephesians is. We all intend to do this remembering the context of Isaiah's great invitation. Nothing is more important than keeping the gospel straight—so that our sins, like scarlet, may be white as snow.

Introducing Our Mother

We are accustomed to talk about the visible and invisible Church, but this is strange. The issue is important because the Church is our mother, and the law of God requires us to honor our mothers.

> But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all. For it is written, Rejoice, thou barren that bearest not; break forth and cry, thou that travailest not: for the desolate hath many more children than she which hath an husband (Gal. 4:26–27).

Calvin notes this in his Institutes, referring to the famous statement of Cyprian. But who talks about the distinction between a visible and invisible mother? Put this way, the expression makes you think of two mothers, not one, and then the natural question arises. Which is the true mother?

Background

Christians know that God is our Father (Eph. 3:14–15) and that Christ is the Bridegroom (Eph. 5:25). But few modern Christians know that we have a spiritual mother. The Christian Church is called the New Jerusalem and is the bride of Christ. "And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev. 21:2). In the same chapter the Church, again, the new Jerusalem, is called "the bride, the Lamb's wife" (v. 9). And in Hebrews 12:22–24, the Church is called "the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem." Putting this all together, we see that our mother is a holy city, a lovely bride. In the passage quoted already from Galatians, this Jerusalem above is plainly identified as the mother of us all.

So we are not talking about an abstraction, but rather about her, our glorious Mother Kirk. However detailed and theological the discussion gets, we should still stand up in respect when she—one woman—comes into the room.

Visible and Invisible Somehow

Chapter Nine

New Life and Apostasy:

Hebrews 6:4–8 as Test Case[1]

Rich Lusk

Hebrews 6:4–8 is a highly controversial passage in Calvinistic circles. This essay will not attempt an exhaustive interpretation,[2] but rather debunk some flawed readings of the passage that have become quite commonplace. After a brief examination of the passage, we will look at broader theological questions raised by our reading of the text and seek to understand how it fits into pastoral practice and systematic theology.

Basically, the problem is in reconciling the notion of "falling away" with the five points of Calvinism, sometimes summarized by the acronym TULIP: total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints.[3] If God is sovereign in salvation, His elect cannot fail to persevere to the end. So what is going on in this troubling passage? What kinds of people are being described and what happens to them? Is apostasy real or illusory? What bearing does this passage have on Christian assurance?

Some Reformed commentators claim the warnings found here and elsewhere are hypothetical. This reading is hardly worthy of refutation. Why would an inspired writer use such terrifying language to scare his readers into avoiding something that could never come to pass anyway? Doug Wilson has humorously compared this approach to placing "Watch out for the cliffs" signs in Kansas. Moreover, there are enough recorded cases of actual apostasy in the pages of Scripture that we can put the hypothetical theory to bed (e.g., 1 Tim. 1:19, 20; Judas).

Other Reformed commentators claim the package of blessings in Hebrews 6:4–5 is less than full regeneration. After all, if these persons

were regenerate, they would not fall away. The fact that they do (or may) fall away proves whatever grace they experienced was something less than full saving grace. This is true enough, perhaps. But there are still several problems with this way of reading the text.

Let us imagine, for the sake of the argument, 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. The question every believer has to ask himself, then, is, "How do I know I won't apostatize? How do I know I won't fall away?" To take one example, Puritan John Owen, in his work Nature and Causes of Apostasy from the Gospel, says we must distinguish between merely "tasting" (6:5) the heavenly gift (which future apostates may do) and really "feeding" upon it (which the genuinely regenerate do).[4] But subtle psychological distinctions of this sort are bound to make one hopelessly introspective, always digging deeper into the inner recesses of one's heart to find some irrefutably genuine mark of grace. We are always left asking, "How do I know I am feeding on the heavenly gift, and not merely tasting of it? How do I know I've experienced real regeneration, and not its evil apostate twin? How do I know I have the real thing and not merely a counterfeit?" One's assurance is swallowed up in the black hole of self-examination.

As Scripture continually testifies, no man can know the depths of his own heart. Introspection has its limits. Frankly, our tools of self-analysis are not nearly as refined as the subtle linguistic analysis Owen and others apply to Hebrews 6. Therefore, on this model, assurance becomes virtually impossible.

But there is a more serious problem with this way of reading Hebrews 6. Nothing in the text calls those warned to engage in a process of self-examination. Rather, Hebrews as a whole functions as an extended exhortation to perseverance. In fact, the writer never calls into question whether or not he and his readers have experienced the grace of God. That is taken for granted. What is called into question, again and again, is whether or not they will continue in that grace. In terms of the theology of the book of Hebrews, 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.[5] Hebrews does not call us to construct two differing psychologies of conversion (or