

A Layman's Response to the MVP Report

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On February 1, 2005, the Presbytery of the Mississippi Valley (PCA) unanimously adopted a report on the issue of Federal Vision theology and the influence of the so-called New Perspective(s) on Paul in the PCA. This report was intended to summarize the dangers which FV theology poses to the theological health of the PCA. Since that time, other presbyteries within the PCA have endorsed the report, indicating their agreement with its central thrust. Since this report is being used as a basis for calling into question the doctrinal soundness of certain persons within the Reformed community, it certainly deserves a critical analysis. As a layperson within the PCA, I intend to provide an analysis of some of the contents of this report in the present essay, in an attempt to provide some balance in this whole discussion. I will focus my attention upon certain items of concern which are highlighted in the cover letter of the report.

In the cover letter, this report identifies seventeen views which are declared to be “out of the bounds of acceptable diversity in this presbytery and in the PCA.” Presumably, these seventeen points of contention summarize the heart of the dispute over FV theology. I would like to address each of them in order. The following views are declared to be theologically outside the limits of Reformed orthodoxy in the PCA:

1. Views “that assert that ‘final justification’ is a matter of performance, not possession, and therefore based in some sense intrinsically rather than being wholly extrinsic.” I have to wonder what could possibly be the meaning of this anathema. Are we really to believe that a person’s “performance” is *not* relevant for final justification? I am utterly amazed if that is what is actually being asserted. What could be more plainly in conflict with the teaching of the New Testament (Rom. 2:6-7)? Did Jesus not say that you must obey the will of the Father to enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 7:21-23)? Did the author of Hebrews not warn us that without personal holiness nobody will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14)? Does the book of Revelation not make it plain that people whose lives are given over to certain patterns of sinful behavior will not inherit the eternal city (Rev. 22:15)? Did Paul not say that the sanctification and righteousness which follows our deliverance from the power of sin is a necessary condition for eternal life in the future (Rom. 6:16, 21-22)?

And what could be more obviously in conflict with the teaching of the Westminster Confession of Faith? WCF 16.2 affirms that good works, which are “the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith,” have eternal life as their “end” (i.e., goal or result). And WCF 33.1 says that on the Day of Judgment each person will “receive according to what they have done in the body, whether good or bad.” What will each person receive according to what they have done? Only two options are given in 33.2: everlasting life or everlasting destruction. Knowing that we will fall into one or the other of these categories according to what we have done in the body, we are to “shake off all carnal security” (33.3). What could be plainer? The Westminster divines were obviously

not afraid to teach that people will be judged according to their works, because those works will be the evidence of the condition of a person's heart, as it is manifested over the course of the whole life.

Justification by faith alone is not inconsistent with a final justification according to works, when the elect are “openly acknowledged and acquitted” (WLC 90). This is easily reconciled when we recognize: 1) those works are simply the *evidences* of true justifying faith (James 2:14, 18, 24), and a *public* judgment must be based upon evidences for others to see; 2) the works according to which believers are judged and acquitted are themselves the fruits of the work of the sanctifying Spirit in the lives of God's people (Rom. 2:29; 7:6; 8:4), not the natural capacities of the flesh—hence they themselves are the effect of God's work in us (Eph. 2:10); 3) the imputation of Christ's righteousness (which precedes all of our good works) will cover over any imperfections in the works of believers (Phil. 3:8-14; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 2:20-21; Rev. 19:8). As Calvin writes: “Therefore, as we ourselves, when we have been engrafted in Christ, are righteous in God's sight because our iniquities are covered by Christ's sinlessness, so our works are righteous and are thus regarded because whatever fault is otherwise in them is buried in Christ's purity, and is not charged to our account. Accordingly, we can deservedly say that by faith alone not only we ourselves but our works as well are justified” (Institutes, 3.17.10).

2. Views “that assert that new discoveries regarding ‘Second Temple Judaism’ require us to reject or radically modify the Reformers’ and our Confession’s understanding of the Pauline Gospel.” This alarming language is needlessly dramatic, and is misleading in the extreme. Neither N. T. Wright nor James Dunn is abandoning a basically Reformational understanding of the Pauline gospel. They both affirm that justification is based upon faith, not upon our personal works of righteousness. (Has anyone produced a quote from either of them which says otherwise?) Neither Dunn nor Wright argues for a Roman Catholic understanding of justification, which is usually conceived as transformational rather than strictly forensic. Wright states in the plainest of terms that justification is to be understood in the context of a law court—it is a *declaration* of righteousness, and not a transforming event in itself (see *What St. Paul Really Said*, pp. 97-98). And Dunn sees justification as entailing God's view of a person as a faithful covenant partner, *despite* the partner's continued failure (not *because* of their personal achievement); though he rightly insists that a person cannot but then be transformed by their covenant relationship with God—in other words, justification will necessarily be accompanied by sanctification as its inevitable consequence (see Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, p. 344). Dunn also has an extended discussion of the theme of justification by faith **alone** in Paul—hardly a Romanizing emphasis (*The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, pp. 371-379)!

Now it is true that these scholars have insisted that the historical argument between Paul and his Jewish and Judaizing opponents centered upon issues of covenantal inclusion, rather than individualistic soteriological concerns. Many Reformed interpreters (myself included) will continue to be unconvinced by their exegesis of pertinent Pauline texts which seem to accuse Jews of the time of a legalistic framework (at least in some fashion) in their understanding of their personal relationship with God

(e.g. Rom. 4:4-5; 10:2-4; Phil. 3:7-9). But even if Presbyterian expositors were to accept these NPP readings of such passages, what would the consequence be?

What if Paul is primarily criticizing the ethnocentric practice of excluding Gentiles from the boundaries of the covenant because of their failure to observe certain identity markers? Does this still not amount to a kind of legalism at the end of the day? Is adding extra conditions to faith in the atoning work of Jesus in order to be recognized within the boundaries of the covenant (as NPP scholars argue to be the case) not still relevant to the Reformational complaint against Roman Catholicism? To refuse to accept a person within the boundaries of the covenant *is* to exclude them from the number of the elect who can anticipate vindication at the final judgment. Hence, a person's failure to observe certain requirements (circumcision, Sabbath observance, food regulations) would ultimately imply the condemnation of a person when they stand before God—and Paul would then have been objecting to making such observances conditional for that present inclusion which marks out the elect who will ultimately be saved. So at the end of the day then, we are not so far after all from the Reformational protest that the Roman Catholic Church had added requirements for salvation which encouraged self-righteousness, promoted superstition, and robbed God's people of their present assurance of divine pardon.

Much has been made of the view of NPP scholars that the expression "righteousness of God" in the Bible refers to God's covenantal faithfulness, not to God's immutable justice, or to the gift of imputed righteousness. Supposedly, this insight is some sort of threat to a Reformational outlook. Yet Calvin made this mundane observation long ago, in commenting on Psalm 51:14: "By the righteousness of God . . . we are to understand his goodness; for this attribute, as usually ascribed to God in the Scriptures, does not so much denote the strictness with which he exacts vengeance, as his faithfulness in fulfilling the promises and extending help to all who seek him in the hour of need." How is this radically different from Wright's claim that the "righteousness of God" in the Bible typically denotes "the actions which embody God's covenantal faithfulness" (*What St. Paul Really Said*, p. 103)?

3. Views "that reject or radically modify the Confession's presentation of the Bible's teaching on the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers (including the imputation of Christ's active and passive obedience)." I would agree that the doctrinal standards of the PCA rule out any view which would replace an imputation of Christ's righteousness in justification with either an infusion of righteousness (as in Roman Catholicism), or an imputation of faith as righteousness for justification (a view which has been held by many Arminians, and historically even some Calvinists such as Richard Baxter). But where are the proponents of such views within the PCA? I am not aware of any.

However, WCF 11.1 does not specify the relation between the imputation of righteousness in justification and union with Christ, and this is where some modern Reformed thinkers are attempting to clarify their own stances. Does imputation logically precede union with Christ, or is union with Christ the necessary context of the imputation

of righteousness? Many Lutheran theologians, for example, object to making union with Christ the cause of justification, insisting that this effectively places sanctification prior to justification (see F. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, II.410). By contrast, Calvin spoke as if union with Christ was the necessary condition for the imputation of righteousness (Institutes, 3.11.10). The fact of the matter is, the Confession leaves this question open-ended, and those within the PCA should be allowed the freedom to articulate their own positions. For example, I would personally place justification (understood as the imputation of Christ's perfect righteousness) prior to union with Christ (with the Lutherans), but would make our union with Christ (in baptism) the occasion for receiving the saving *benefits* which flow from the imputation of Christ's righteousness—namely pardon and adoption (cf. WCF 11.4). Thus I would want to distinguish between objective justification (prior to the union with Christ effected by the indwelling Spirit), and subjective justification (effected by union with Christ in baptism). But various formulations are possible here.

It is rather amazing to find the insistence in the report that *both* Christ's active and passive obedience must be viewed as imputed to the believer. The Westminster Confession nowhere specifies this understanding, and it is a matter of record that among the Westminster divines, William Twisse (the presiding officer of the assembly), Thomas Gataker and Richard Vines insisted that it was only the passive obedience of Christ which was imputed to the believer in justification. They were successful in getting the word "whole" omitted from article 11 of the Confession, so that it simply reads "by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them," and not the "*whole* obedience and satisfaction of Christ." On what grounds does the MVP report insist on theological positions which are more specific than those demanded by the Confession itself?

4. Views "which confuse infused and imputed righteousness, or which do not recognize the legitimacy of the important biblical and confessional distinction between faith as the 'alone instrument of justification' and yet a faith which is 'not alone in the person justified.'" I find this point somewhat bizarre. Who in the PCA, or in the Auburn Avenue circles generally, "confuses" infused and imputed righteousness? To "confuse" these things would be to fail to recognize the basic distinction between them, and I can think of no modern Reformed thinker who would fit that category. Likewise, who does not "recognize the legitimacy" of the distinction between faith as the alone instrument of justification, and a faith which is not alone in the person justified? Having read many of the works of most of the major Federal Vision writers, I honestly cannot imagine who such criticisms are being directed at, and it is difficult not to suspect that this doctrinal anathema is being aimed at a straw man.

I can only speculate, but I wonder if this is not simply a misdirected criticism of the writings of some FV thinkers, who have noted that the biblical vocabulary for justification includes more than acquittal, but also has connotations of deliverance from the power of sin. But this is simply to recognize the realities of biblical texts like Romans 5:19; 6:7; 6:16-18 (as well as the prevalent Old Testament connection between justification and God's acts of deliverance on behalf of his people). The Bible uses "righteousness" language to speak of our deliverance both from the penalty and the

power of sin. Our acquittal effects our deliverance from sin's mastery—and a person who is no longer enslaved to sin is righteous both by status and in reality. This is why Paul can describe justification as “redemption” or “liberation” in Romans 3:24. In other words, we must insist that justification not only precedes, but also effects our freedom from sin's tyranny, which is the beginning of our sanctification. Why should any textually sensitive exegete of Scripture have a problem with recognizing this reality?

The Bible speaks both of an imputation of righteousness (Rom. 4:4-5), and of making people righteous (Rom. 5:19; 1 John 3:7) by the internal work of the Spirit—and these two realities are inseparable. Justification causes people to live righteously, even though living righteously is not properly entailed in the *definition* of justification. To illustrate: The acquittal of an accused criminal causes her to be free to leave the courtroom and get on with her life, even though the freedom to leave the courtroom and resume a normal life is not included within the definition of an acquittal. So it is with justification (being declared righteous) and sanctification (being made righteous). Our acquittal frees us from our slavery to sin, which cannot but have an effect upon our personal conduct. The occasion of our acquittal (justification) is also the occasion of our deliverance from the power of sin (sanctification). Reformed theologians such as Calvin and Bucer, recognizing the necessary connection between imputed and actual righteousness, were happy to speak of a simultaneous double justification (a doctrine which provided the basis for theological agreement between Protestants and Roman Catholics at the Regensburg Colloquy). Why should theologians and pastors within the PCA not have the freedom to articulate the relation between justification and sanctification in similar terms today?

5. Views “which reject the traditional bi-covenantal theology of the Westminster Confession (that is, views which do not merely take issue with the terminology but reject the essence of the bi-covenantal, covenant of works/covenant of grace framework of God's dealings with humanity).” Who would not agree that to reject the doctrine of a pre-Fall covenant of works and a post-Fall covenant of grace (even if one quibbles over the best terminology) is out of accord with WCF 7.2-3? It is true that some theologians, even Reformed theologians, reject the belief in a pre-Fall “covenant” between God and Man. That is plainly out of accord with our doctrinal standards. But the precise nature of the contrast between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace is not delineated in WCF 7. Nowhere are we required to confess that if Man had kept the covenant of works, they would have “merited” eternal life. We are simply told that Man was “promised” life upon the condition of “perfect and personal” obedience. God would, in a sense, have been bound to give life to Man had they kept the original covenant, not because they had strictly “earned” or “merited” life, but because God is ever bound to be consistent with his own faithful, promise-keeping character. It is the avoidance of the idea of strict “merit” in the original covenant which is the concern of various FV writers, so far as I can ascertain.

So what is the nature of the contrast then? Clearly, under the covenant of grace, “perfect and personal” obedience is not the condition for receiving life. Rather faith in the “perfect and personal” obedience of Jesus Christ is the sole condition, and the

capacity to meet this condition is supplied by the Holy Spirit (WCF 7.3). Now this certainly does not mean that personal obedience (faithfulness) is not still required under the covenant of grace; it simply means that it is not required as the condition for *receiving* life and salvation—in other words, obedience is not ruled out as a consequent necessity. After all, the contrast between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant lies precisely in its effectiveness in producing covenantal obedience and faithfulness in the lives of God’s people (Jer. 31:32-33). To the extent that the Old Covenant failed to produce thankful obedience through the revelation of God’s holy will, it functioned as a repetition of the original covenant of works for unbelieving Israel (WCF 19.1-2); but in its capacity to anticipate, stir up and drive the elect to faith in the perfect redemption to be accomplished by Jesus Christ, it was an expression of the covenant of grace (WCF 19.6).

But again, the contrast between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace is not between the requirement of obedience under the first covenant and no required obedience under the second covenant; rather the contrast is between perfect and personal obedience as a condition for life, and faith (i.e., a true faith which does produce good works) in the perfect obedience *of a substitute* as the condition for life. Because true faith is inevitably accompanied by good works, we must still insist that good works *are* necessary under the covenant of grace, not as the condition for the reception of life, but as a necessary consequence. As our Confession tells us: “Neither doth Christ in the gospel any way dissolve, but rather strengthen the obligation” (WCF 19.5).

So was faith required under the covenant of works? Obviously, the answer is both yes and no. Yes, faith was required, because Man was obligated to believe God’s word (Gen. 2:16-17), and to act accordingly. But no, faith was not required, in the sense that under the original covenant, life was to be secured by perfect and personal (and we might add, thankful) obedience, not by trusting in the perfect and personal obedience of a substitute (as in the covenant of grace). God did not originally tell Man in the Garden to place their faith in the work of the coming Messiah, and in that sense, faith was not a condition for life under the original covenant of works.

Now some will insist on retaining the language of “merit” in the original covenant of works, because of the belief that Christ secured our salvation when he kept the covenant which Adam broke on behalf of his people (Rom. 5:15-19; WCF 7.3; 8.4). But the obedience of Adam and the obedience of Christ are not parallel in every detail. Man was placed in the Garden and *obligated* to keep the covenant of works. They had no choice in the matter; and had they obeyed the original covenant, they would merely have fulfilled their creaturely obligations (cf. Luke 17:10). The involuntary fulfillment of creaturely obligations does not accrue merit. The circumstances of Christ’s obedience are far different. He willingly and voluntarily undertook the requirement of perfect obedience to the Law (Gal. 4:4). Rather than hold on to his divine rights and privileges, he became incarnate for us and subject to the demands of God’s word (Phil. 2:5-8). He humbled himself in accepting the yoke of the Law (Matt. 3:15) on our behalf. Therefore, far from merely doing what he was obligated to do in any case, God the Son can be said to have truly merited salvation for his elect by *voluntarily* taking upon himself the requirement of perfect creaturely obedience which was originally delivered to Man in the

Garden. The contrast between Adam and Christ could not be more striking. Adam failed to do what he was obligated to perform; Christ perfectly performed the terms of obedience *which he voluntarily accepted* in his incarnate mission.

6. Views “that undermine the forensic aspect of justification by appealing to the ‘relational elements’ or which suggest that justification is primarily a matter of ecclesiology and less so soteriology.” It seems likely here that the views of N. T. Wright are what the report is criticizing, but it is far from obvious how it follows that the emphasis on relational elements undermines the forensic reality of justification. Wright insists that justification involves the recognition in the present that a person belongs to the community which will be vindicated before God at the final judgment (*What St. Paul Really Said*, p. 129). To be justified is to be recognized as a member of God’s covenant, and it is the members of the covenant who will ultimately be vindicated at the great assize. How does this undermine the forensic aspect of justification? Wright is quick to insist that justification *is* a forensic reality, which draws its context from the law court (*What St. Paul Really Said*, pp. 97-99). Why should the one affirmation negate the other? Nowhere does Wright maintain that justification is based upon an infusion of righteousness, wrought in us by the transforming gift of the Spirit. In his essay, “The Shape of Justification,” he explicitly denies this: “‘Justification’ itself is not God’s act of changing the heart or character of the person; that is what Paul means by the ‘call,’ which comes through the word and the Spirit. ‘Justification’ has a specific, and narrower, reference: it is God’s *declaration* that a person is now in the right, which confers on them the *status* ‘righteous.’”

Perhaps what is in view is Wright’s denial that the righteousness of God which justifies us is *imputed* to the believer (*What St. Paul Really Said*, pp. 99-103). It remains God’s own righteousness. Yet some of the consternation here is caused by the fact that Wright is trying to speak first as a New Testament scholar, and not as a systematic theologian. When Wright denies that the righteousness of God is imputed to the believer, he does not do so in favor of the Roman Catholic view, which sees justification as an internalized, infused, transforming event. For Wright, we are justified when we are recognized as belonging to the community which will be finally vindicated at the eschatological judgment; but this justification is not based on anything in us—it is based solely on God’s own covenantal faithfulness which brings salvation to those who believe in Jesus, apart from any additional requirements.

Now I happen to disagree with Wright on a number of points, as do other Presbyterians who are sympathetic to FV theology. I am not convinced that justification is not in fact entry language, which has as its primary focus the individual’s escape from the prospect of divine wrath. I continue to see justification as foremost an issue of the standing of the individual before the bar of divine justice, and only secondarily a matter of covenantal inclusion and identity. In other words, the ecclesiological issues stem from the soteriological foundation, not vice versa. I am not convinced by Wright’s argument that justification is not a matter of how you “get saved,” but rather who should be recognized as already a member of the covenant family (*What St. Paul Really Said*, pp. 119, 132). Though Wright is correct in noting that the effectual calling of the Spirit

precedes justification (as he highlights in his essay, “The Shape of Justification;” cf. *What St. Paul Really Said*, p. 117), I would not see calling as a separate item in the *ordo salutis* which secures a person’s salvation in its own right. Calling has justification as its soteriological goal and is not really complete until it arrives at its intended end. Justification is the *completion* of the effectual call (WLC 66, 67), not a discrete and subsequent event. To be effectually called is to awaken to faith and be justified; it is the means by which justification is effected.

But despite these reservations, there is nothing in Wright’s views which need undermine a forensic understanding of justification, and we would all do well to consider more fully the ecclesiological dimensions of justification which Wright has highlighted (even if he has overstated the case). Passages such as Galatians 2:11-16 and 3:24-28 offer fruitful material for exegetical reflection regarding the capacity of the doctrine of justification to speak to issues of ethnicity and gender within the church; and we should be thankful for any role Wright might play in the providence of God in reminding the Presbyterian church of the social and communal implications of the gospel.

7. Views “that categorically reject ‘merit’ in relation to the atoning work of Christ.” I would agree that views which “categorically” reject the idea of merit in relation to the atoning work of Christ are out of step with Scripture and with WCF 11.1-3; but I would not want to rule out the freedom of individuals to qualify what they do and do not mean by the term “merit.” The point which must be maintained is that Christ, by his perfect obedience in the place of Adam’s failure, secured for the elect the full scope of their saving benefits which *they* do not in themselves deserve. If a person agrees with this, what need is there to quibble over the term “merit”?

8. Views “which deny or undercut the biblical and theological legitimacy of the distinctions between true/nominal believers, the invisible/visible church, and the outward/inward aspects of the covenant of grace.” I do not believe that most of those who are sympathetic to FV theology would deny that there is an ultimate distinction between the elect within the church, who truly come to faith, and nominal Christians who have something less than genuine saving faith. The point is, how do we distinguish between the two groups on a pastoral level? Do we treat all of the baptized as true Christians, unless they demonstrate otherwise by willful apostasy? Or do we treat those who are baptized as infants as still spiritually lost and dead in their sins until they give a “credible” confession of faith?

The consensus of the Reformed tradition is plainly in favor of the former option, though southern Presbyterianism has historically inclined toward the latter. For example, treating baptized children of believers as only outwardly attached to the covenant of grace goes against the *Form of Administering Baptism* which was used by Calvin in Geneva, which, after discussing the graces of regeneration and forgiveness, directly states: “All these graces are bestowed upon us when he is pleased to incorporate us into his Church by baptism. . . . Thus we receive a twofold grace and benefit from our God in baptism.” This is why Calvin’s baptismal prayer over the infant includes the request that God would “deign to receive it under thy holy protection, declaring thyself to be its God

and Saviour, by forgiving it the original sin of which all the race of Adam are guilty, and thereafter sanctifying it by thy Spirit, in order that when it shall arrive at the years of discretion it may recognize and adore thee as its only God.” Plainly, there is more than an outward union with the Church and the covenant effected in infant baptism; there is the expectation of the working of spiritual grace which will cause the child to actively believe in and worship God as she matures.

Seeing infant baptism as only effecting an outward connection with the Church is also directly contradicted by WCF 28.1 which says that baptism is “not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible church,” but also as a sign and seal “unto him” (that is any properly baptized person, not simply of mature believers) of union with Christ, regeneration, forgiveness, and repentance in the covenant of grace. This is true, not only for adult converts, but for all the properly baptized—which strongly implies that even in the case of infants, the beginning of all these spiritual graces is to be traced to baptism, which is a sign and seal of God’s promises to believers and their children. These graces, which are “conferred” by the ordinance of baptism (WCF 28.6), are promised to believers and their seed (Gen. 17:7-8; Acts 2:39), and are *not* restricted to believers and their mature (and able to give a credible confession of their faith) seed.

Now I personally do not believe that any of this necessarily leads to the support of paedocommunion. WLC 177 restricts the celebration of the Lord’s Supper to those who are able to examine themselves and worthily partake of the sacrament. Unlike baptism, participation in the Lord’s Supper is a privilege to be enjoyed by those already incorporated into the covenant; it is not a means of entrance into the covenant. Hence, to withhold participation in the Lord’s Supper to infants is not to exclude them from the visible kingdom of God (Mark 10:14), as would be the case with water baptism. It is merely to withhold from them certain benefits which are entered into with a coming of age. To illustrate: a son is still an heir, even before he comes of age and is no longer in need of close supervision (cf. Gal. 4:1-2). An heir is not a slave, even if he has yet to enter into the full privileges which belong to him as a son. In like manner, infants, though belonging to the family of God, are not yet ready to enter into the fullness of their covenantal privileges, though those privileges already belong to them in a sense by virtue of their family tie. The exclusion from the Lord’s Supper is an exclusion from certain covenantal privileges; the exclusion of infants from baptism would be to exclude them from the covenant family altogether.

In any case, whether or not the doctrine of paedocommunion ought to be allowed as a permissible exception to our doctrinal standards is an entirely separate question. I personally think it should be allowed as an exception which does not affect our system of doctrine as a whole. Such decisions are of course well out of my jurisdiction. But the wording of this report is so vague and open-ended, that it would seem designed to be used as a weapon, not only against those who advocate paedocommunion, but against all who do not accept the typical southern Presbyterian view of children, which presumes that those who are baptized as infants are unregenerate until they are able to give a credible confession of faith later in life. That is a decidedly un-Reformed, and baptistic

view of the efficacy of water baptism, which should not be required as a standard of doctrinal orthodoxy within the PCA.

9. Views “that relate water baptism to regeneration in such a way as to suggest that water baptism (rather than that which it signifies) unites us to Christ.” The way in which this anathema is worded is highly problematic. It is directly contrary to the teaching of both Scripture and the Westminster Standards. It is contrary to Scripture because the New Testament plainly teaches that water baptism *does* unite people to Christ (Rom. 6:3-4; Gal. 3:27). Baptism unites to Christ all to whom the sacrament is rightly administered—namely, believers and their children. As Herman Ridderbos rightly notes, “the meaning of baptism is certainly not to be expressed exclusively in noetic categories. Baptism is also the means by which communion with the death and burial of Christ comes into being (*dia tou baptismatos*; Rom. 6:4), the place where this union is effected (*en to baptismati*; Col. 2:12), the means by which Christ cleanses his church (*katharisas to loutro*; Eph. 5:26), and God has saved it (*esosen hemas dia loutrou*; Tit. 3:5), so that baptism itself can be called the washing of regeneration and of the renewing by the Holy Spirit (Tit. 3:5). All these formulations speak clearly of the significance of baptism in mediating redemption; they speak of what happens in and by baptism and not merely of what happened before baptism and of which baptism would only be the confirmation” (*Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, p. 409).

But the MVP report is also blatantly in conflict with the Westminster Standards. The report creates a false dichotomy when it says that baptism itself does not unite us to Christ, but rather that which baptism signifies. That statement drives a wedge of separation between the sacramental sign and the thing signified. We should rather say that the signified grace is “conferred” (WCF 28.6) upon us through the instrumentality of the sign: “There is in every sacrament a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified; whence it comes to pass, that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other” (WCF 27.2). Here we are expressly told that *we are* to attribute to baptism the name *and the effects* of what baptism signifies. This is because the sacraments are not only outward signs (as Zwingli taught), but *instruments* of the Spirit’s saving activity: “The sacraments become effectual means of salvation, not by any power in themselves, or any virtue derived from the piety or intention of him by whom they are administered, but only by the working of the Holy Ghost, and the blessing of Christ, by whom they are instituted” (WLC 161).

10. Views “that suggest that justification in the NT always contemplates faith and the works of faith, or that deny that faith is uniquely receptive in the act of justification.” I would be the first to condemn any who would say that justification in the NT always contemplates faith *and the works of faith*. God does not contemplate our works *at all* in justification (unless we are speaking of justification in terms of our future acquittal on the Day of Judgment, which only confirms and finalizes the status true believers already enjoy in this life). Nevertheless, the faith which *does* receive justification is from the beginning a working faith (Gal. 5:6); it is a genuine faith which *will* produce good works (James 2:14-26). A non-working faith which will not produce good works is not the sort of faith which receives justification (WCF 11.2).

Faith is the proper response to God's word; it is taking God at his word and believing his promise, rather than wavering in doubt (Rom. 4:20-22). In that sense, as the proper response to God's word, it is the beginning of a life of faithfulness (and not only passively receptive), so that faith and faithfulness cannot be separated into two different things. Our doctrinal standards identify faith as "evangelical obedience" (WCF 11.1). Nevertheless, *in the act of justification*, it is not the believer's faithfulness which is contemplated as such; but rather, in the act of responding to God's word appropriately, the perfect righteousness of Christ is imputed to the ungodly (Rom. 4:5). So justifying faith is not *only* receptive, it is active, obedient and working; yet it is not faith's activity *which is contemplated* in justification, but only faith's receptivity to the word of promise. I would be surprised if there is anyone sympathetic to the FV theology who intends to say anything substantially different than what I have expressed above. If indeed, anyone is teaching that our works are contemplated by God in the act of justification, this would plainly be out of step with our doctrinal standards.

11. Views "that understand a believer's 'final justification' to be a justifying verdict that embraces the believer's covenantal obedience [and not a merely public declaration of the justification declared at the outset of the believer's Christian experience]." This statement is vague because it does not exactly define what is meant by the term "embraces." Our final justification *will* be "according to" our works (Rom. 2:6), but not "because of" our works. The statement also introduces a false dichotomy, for if by "embraces" one merely means to affirm the biblical truth that we will all be judged according to our works in the future (cf. 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 20:12), then we must insist *both* that the verdict "embraces" our covenantal obedience, *and* that it is a public declaration of the justification declared at the outset of the believer's Christian experience. It is going to be a public declaration which is based upon visible evidence (as are all deliberations in courts of justice), and what visible evidence could possibly be subject to examination on that Day other than the faithful works of believers?

Many will claim to have faith on that Day, but what will be the proof? Those who, when examined, are found to be "workers of lawlessness" (Matt. 7:23), will have demonstrated by the way they conducted their lives that their profession of faith was not genuine. They were never truly justified. The elect, who genuinely believed in Christ, will be recognized "by their fruit" (Matt. 7:20). This evidentiary role of good works explains why it is that "the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying" (Rev. 22:15) will be shut out of the heavenly city. The lives of true believers will not be given over to such sinful patterns of behavior. Indeed, we must agree with the clear teaching of Scripture, which tells us that "the one who practices righteousness is righteous" (1 John 3:7), and that no person "who is born of God practices sin" (3:9). We must allow the Bible to warn us that "if you are living according to the flesh you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live" (Rom. 8:13). What do such verses teach us, if not that the final judgment will in some respect take into consideration our personal conduct? Frankly, the denial of this explicit scriptural teaching must be identified for what it is—a dangerous form of antinomianism. And again, it is *directly* contradicted by WCF 33.1-3.

12. Views “that entail multiple instruments in justification (whether the terminology ‘instrument’ is used or not).” This statement is problematic, because it seems clearly designed to exclude the biblical teaching that baptism is instrumental in effecting forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38; 22:16). This is also directly contradictory to the teaching of our doctrinal standards, which explicitly says that forgiveness of sins (among other graces: WCF 28.1) is not only offered, but actually “conferred” by the right use of the sacrament of baptism (WCF 28.6). Water baptism is the instrument of the Holy Spirit in bestowing the saving benefits of Christ’s mediation (WLC 161, 162).

None of this contradicts the Reformational teaching that justification is by “faith alone,” for faith is the sole instrument for receiving justification from the human end; baptism and the preached word are instrumental in conferring forgiveness of sins from the divine end. It is not faith or baptism, but faith and baptism. Herman Ridderbos provides an excellent explanation of how this works within a biblical and Reformed soteriology: “Baptism can add nothing to the content of faith. Baptism and faith are both means to the appropriation of the content of the gospel. However, while faith according to its nature is an act of man, baptism according to its nature is an activity of God and on the part of God. That which the believer appropriates to himself on the proclamation of the gospel God promises and bestows on him in baptism. One can therefore speak of a sequential order only in part. For although baptism presupposes faith, the place of faith is not only prior to baptism, but in and after baptism as well. . . . For this reason faith is not without baptism, and baptism is not without faith. For faith responds to the call of God through the gospel, and in baptism God takes the one thus called under his gracious rule and gives him a share in all the promises of the gospel” (*Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, p. 412).

13. Views “which posit the false antithesis of reading Scripture through the ‘lens of the covenant’ rather than the ‘lens of the decree.’” What does this mean? What specifically would constitute a false antithesis in teaching on this subject? It is clearly directed toward the FV view that the biblical writers think primarily in covenantal categories. Now I agree that we must not swallow up distinctions based upon God’s decrees within the category of the covenant. Scripture plainly speaks of some people who are predestined to glory (Rom. 8:29-30), and obviously, those within the Church who have only a nominal faith, and do not persevere to the end, are not among that number. Romans 9 explicitly teaches that not all who partake of God’s outward covenant are among the elect who will ultimately be saved. When Ephesians 1:3-13 speaks of those who were chosen before the foundation of the world (1:4), and predestined according to God’s purpose (1:11), I think that the traditional Calvinistic interpretation remains basically sound. Paul speaks of the Church as a whole as the elect in the judgment of charity. Those who have not willfully apostatized are presumed to be among the elect, though in reality, it may be the case that some of those whom Paul addressed in his letter to the Ephesians were reprobates according to God’s secret decree. We should not conclude from such passages that every person who is baptized is in fact one of the elect in the sense of which Paul speaks here. I agree, that some of the FV writers have gone too far in their pastoral desire to discourage people from unhealthy introspection, and to

dispel people's fears over whether or not they are among the elect. Rather than insisting that every member of the covenant is one of the elect in an individual sense (as opposed to a corporate sense which does include the whole Church), we should rather tell people not to inquire into God's secret decrees (Deut. 29:29), but instead to cling to the objective promises of scripture (1 John 5:1-2; John 3:16).

I also agree that the traditional Calvinistic reading of the biblical warning passages remains the best approach. We ought not to obliterate proper biblical distinctions between the spiritual experiences of the elect within the Church and non-elect people within the Church. Apostates should be viewed as those who have only "tasted" the salvation which the elect fully participate in (Hebrews 6:4-6 cf. 3:14). There are some within the covenant community who experience God's salvation on some level (though not identically to the effectual salvation of the elect), but it is not combined with a true, persevering faith (Heb. 3:16-4:2; 1 Cor. 10:1-11; 2 Pet. 2:20-21; Jude 5). Persevering faith is a gift that God gives only to the elect (2 Pet. 1:5-11; Phil. 1:29).

It should be clear from what I have written above that I do not agree with every nuance of what has been written by some FV thinkers. Nevertheless, it is far from obvious to me why their views should be excluded from the PCA. How do they deny anything essential to our system of doctrine? None of the FV writers denies that there is *ultimately* a distinction between elect and non-elect based upon God's unconditional decree. None of the FV writers denies that *ultimately*, the elect and the non-elect do not experience God's saving grace in precisely the same manner. The difference boils down to some exegetical decisions regarding a handful of biblical passages which speak directly to these issues, as well as pastoral theology and practice. Their concern is to provide an objective ground of assurance for Christians, which discourages introspective questions regarding one's relation to God's decrees. They are not denying anything essential to Reformed theology—they are merely applying it somewhat differently on the exegetical and pastoral levels. It is far from obvious that this should disqualify these men from having a place of ministry within the PCA.

14. Views "which cannot sustain the difference between the saving and common operations of the Spirit." This is closely related to number 13, and I believe I have adequately addressed this in my above discussion of the warning passages.

15. Views "of sacramental efficacy that speak of the salvific effects of baptism and the Lord's Supper, but fail to maintain adequately the crucial distinction between the sign and the thing signified." I have already addressed this in my discussion under number 9. But in any case, who is to determine what constitutes a failure to "adequately" maintain the distinction between the sign and the thing signified?

Obviously, the adoption of a Lutheran or Roman Catholic view of the sacraments would be out of bounds within any Reformed denomination. The sacraments do not contain grace, they are only instruments which confer grace upon the elect. The sacerdotalist view of the sacraments might be illustrated with fire, since fire contains the power to burn within itself. The Reformed view of the sacraments would see them, not

as analogous to fire, but as analogous to a match, which can be used to cause a fire. But whereas fire automatically burns, a match must be struck in order to burn. For the Reformed, the word and the sacraments are like matches, which the Holy Spirit uses to enflame the hearts and warm the souls of the elect (WLC 161). The basic distinction would be that Lutheran and Roman Catholic sacerdotalists teach that there is grace “in” the sacraments, whereas the Reformed teach that there is grace “with” and “by” the sacraments. I know of no FV writer who teaches that the sacraments automatically and always confer grace upon those who receive them—unless one defines “grace” strictly as a visible incorporation into the catholic church. And who would wish to deny that water baptism, performed upon those who “profess the true religion, together with their children” (WCF 25.2) *does* automatically effect an admission into the “visible” church (WCF 28.1)?

16. Views “that suggest that water baptism conveys all the saving benefits of union with Christ, except for the ‘gift of perseverance’ and final salvation.” See my discussion under numbers 9 and 15 above.

17. Views “which undermine the doctrine of the imputation of Adam’s sin or which call into question the doctrine of individual regeneration.” Again, this is vaguely stated. Who is to determine what does and what does not constitute a teaching which “undermines” the doctrine of the imputation of Adam’s sin? Obviously, any denial of this truth would conflict with WCF 6.3; but does this rule out of court any and all attempts to qualify one’s understanding of the manner in which Adam’s sin is imputed to us? Likewise, WCF 28.1 plainly speaks of a regeneration which is individual to the extent that it takes place in connection with each person’s baptism. The fact that Matthew 19:28 speaks of a cosmic regeneration need not undermine this teaching, since we can simply say that our individual regeneration is a participation in the cosmic renewal of all things. This is analogous to the way that our becoming a new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17) is a participation in the restoration of the heavens and the earth (Rev. 21:1, 5).

With that, I conclude my thoughts. On the whole, while I believe that the MVP report raises a few legitimate concerns, the overall effect of its declarations must be viewed as negative. It is not carefully worded for the most part, and in places it effectively excludes teachings which are plainly supported by the Bible and the Westminster standards. On several occasions, it excludes teachings which are obviously non-scriptural, or out of step with Reformed theology, but one suspects that the views as stated would not be maintained by any FV thinker. And oftentimes, it is worded so vaguely as to be of little practical use, such as when it speaks of those views which “radically modify” or “confuse” or “reject the essence” or “undermine” or “undercut” Reformed theology, and of views which “suggest” supposedly incorrect understandings of biblical teaching, and of views which do not “adequately” maintain necessary distinctions. Exactly who is to make these highly subjective determinations? One suspects that the particular doctrinal constructions of a specific group within the PCA are simply assumed to be the correct way of understanding and articulating these contested issues, which runs the danger of engaging in a protracted exercise of “begging the question.” And that, at the end of the

day, is probably the best way I can think of to summarize the tone and outlook of the MVP report.

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