

May 30, 2007

Fellow Presbyters,

In a few short weeks we will meet in Memphis as a General Assembly to worship our great God, fellowship with one another and make important decisions for our denomination including voting on The Report of the Ad Interim Study Committee on Federal Vision, New Perspective and Auburn Avenue Theology.

Many PCA pastors and elders have not read much on Federal Vision (either for or against) and are dependent on the report to represent accurately and adequately FV teachings. A PCA General Assembly position paper should represent clearly and thoroughly all sides being debated and we believe the report leaves many questions unanswered. We are not FV men. We are PCA pastors and elders who believe that it would be premature and unwise to ratify this report as it now stands. We also have procedural questions related to the forming of this committee. In this letter, we cite statements from the report followed by related questions that we believe the report fails to answer adequately. Our questions are related to the following issues:

1. *Procedure.*
2. *Confessional Interpretations.*
3. *Election.*
4. *Covenant of Works/Grace.*
5. *Visible/Invisible Church.*
6. *Baptismal Efficacy.*
7. *Justification.*

Procedure

Committee Formation:

- Several members of the committee had already pronounced their condemnation of FV teaching, *prior* to being named to the committee. However, no FV men were appointed. Robert's Rules of Order states, "When a special committee is appointed for deliberation or investigation...it should represent as far as possible all points of view within the organization, so that its opinion will carry maximum weight."

Questions:

- Why did the moderator ignore this aspect of Robert's Rules when appointing the committee?
- Do we really want to adopt a report without broader representation on the committee and without a minority report?

Confessional Interpretations

Study Report:

- 2205- “The Westminster Confession... positively celebrates the importance of the doctrine of decretal election for assurance (WCF 3.8).”
- 2214- “The Westminster Standards only speak of a “union with Christ” as that which is effectual; or to say it another way, as that which is saving and belongs to the elect.”
- 2225- “The truly problematic claims of FV proponents come when some suggest that “Christ’s active obedience” is not transferred to his people... Such claims contradict the claims of the *Westminster Standards* and strike at the vitals of the system of doctrine contained there.”

Questions:

- How does the committee understand WCF 3.8 to “positively celebrate” the doctrine of decretal election?¹
- Why does the committee narrowly interpret our standards to speak “only” of union with Christ as belonging to the decretally elect when there are ways that our standards understand this more broadly?²
- Where is the case for the view that our standards demand adherence to the imputed active obedience of Christ when the term “active obedience” is not found in them?
- How does the committee reconcile their narrow understanding of the Confession in light of the PCA being a system subscription denomination?

Election

Study Report:

- 2204- “The *Confession* is of course fully aware of national, ethnic, external, covenant election of Israel as a church under age.”
- 2211- “Union with this people, through baptism, is what is required for one to be elect.”
- 2212- “It is evident that the version of covenant and election taught by the NPP and FV is incompatible with the views of the Westminster Standards.”
- 2212- “To affirm the decretal view of election and then to say that the Bible teaches that the elect may fall from their eternal election, is to set the Bible over against the standards.”

¹ 3.8 clearly indicates that “attending to the will of God” and “yielding obedience” unto God and humbly and diligently committing to “sincerely obey the gospel” help lead to assurance.

² For example, WLC 167 asks, “How is our Baptism to be improved by us? Answer: The needful but much neglected duty of improving our Baptism, is to be performed by us all our life long, especially in the time of temptation, and when we are present at the administration of it to others... by drawing strength from the death and resurrection of Christ, into whom we are baptized.” Isn’t this an instance when the standards encourage the entire visible church to draw strength from the one “into whom we are baptized?”

- 2233- “For FV, election becomes a benefit that can be lost.”

Questions:

- Is the emphasis of FV authors to understand covenantal election? If so, then shouldn't their writings be interpreted through this lens and not decretal election?
- If FV authors' "version" of election is primarily covenantal, how is this incompatible with our Standards except for emphasis?
- Do FV authors teach that one can fall away from decretal election or that decretal election is not secure or that decretal election can be lost? If so, where?
- Do FV authors teach that there is some sort of requirement for decretal election? If so, where?

Covenant of Works/Grace

Study Report:

- 2210- “Rather than making distinctions between “first” and “second” covenant in the fashion of the Westminster Standards, some express hostility to the distinction, while others simply collapse any distinction at all.”
- 2212- “Because the first covenant with Adam was a gracious covenant, coming from a gracious God...FV writers unanimously reject the concept of merit under the covenant of works.”
- 2225- “The truly problematic claims of FV proponents come when some suggest that “Christ’s active obedience” is not transferred to his people.”

Questions:

- The report addresses the issue of monocovenantalism and its dangers at various points, but never gives specific references to or citations where FV authors use this term. Do they? If so, where?
- Does the report intend to communicate that there was no grace whatsoever in the first covenant or that God wasn't gracious in any way toward Adam? If so, how does this square with WCF 7.1 on God's “voluntary condescension?”
- Does the report intend to bind all PCA pastors to believe in “the concept of merit under the covenant of works?” Isn't this a family debate within the reformed community that has been going on a long time, even during the writing of the Confession? ³

Visible/Invisible Church

Study Report:

- 2211- “A major consequence of covenant objectivity is that membership within the covenant is viewed within an undifferentiated manner.”

³ For example, many have understood WCF 16.5 which says, “We can not, by our best works, merit pardon of sin, or eternal life” to apply to pre-lapsarian Adam as well.

- 2214- “FV confuses the benefits of salvation by attributing them to non-elect members of the visible church and so undermines the security enjoyed by the believer.”
- 2227- “Our Standards imply some truths about the grace lost in apostasy.”

Questions:

- Where do FV authors teach the idea of an “undifferentiated manner” of all members of the covenant community?
- Is the committee saying that no benefits of Christ’s work are ascribed to non-elect members of the visible church or that Scripture never speaks of such non-saving benefits in terms that are at least analogous to a true state of salvation?
- If our Standards “imply some truths about the grace lost in apostasy,” then don’t we need ways to study and debate these issues?
- Why didn’t the committee provide exegesis on passages referring to “grace lost in apostasy?”

Baptismal Efficacy

Study Report:

- 2205- “The Standards qualify sacramental efficacy with the assertion that the sacraments are efficacious and effectual to the elect and to them only.”
- 2208- Those “who assert that all the benefits of the covenant of grace accrue to all who are baptized, do err and are out of accord with both Scriptures and the Confession.”
- 2211- “This confluence of “covenant objectivity” through baptism and “real and vital union” with Christ produces significant confusion about the relationship between the “sign” and “thing signified” and the nature of children who are “in this respect” within the covenant of grace.”
- 2225- “When FV writers tie together water baptism and baptismal efficacy in a fashion that may feel to some like *ex opera operato*...”

Questions:

- Don’t the standards teach various types of sacramental “efficacy?”⁴ Isn’t baptism always efficacious to solemnly admit the recipient into the “visible church” and to “engage them to be the Lord’s?”

⁴ Did the committee read works on baptismal efficacy by Westminster divines and authors of the chapter on baptism? (e.g. Thomas Blake’s *Infants Baptisme, Freed from Antichristianisme* or *The Birth-Priviledge or Covenant-Holinesse* or *Covenant Sealed: A Treatise of the Sacraments of Both Covenants* or Cornelius Burgess’ work *The Baptismal Regeneration of Elect Infants*.) If so, how does the committee reconcile their narrow interpretation of the Confession on this issue with the broader interpretation of the divines own writings?

Did the committee read the chapter on baptism in *Westminster Confession into the 21st Century Volume 1*, edited by Ligon Duncan who serves on this committee? If so, what is the committee’s opinion on what David F. Wright, scholar of Reformation theology at the University of Edinburgh, writes?

“What then about the efficacy of baptism according to the Westminster Confession? Its central affirmation seems clear: “the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost” (28.6). It is true that a variety of qualifications to this assertion are entered in the chapter on baptism...But

- Do FV writers really teach that *all* the benefits of the covenant of grace (narrowly defined and limited to the invisible church) are received by all the baptized or that only some receive these benefits, which are freely offered to all? If it's the former, where can that be found in their writings?
- The report quotes several FV authors regarding baptism and union with Christ where the term "real" is used but not "vital." Why did the committee add "vital" to what FV authors teach when there are no references to "vital?"
- Have FV writers completely denied the subjective side of being in covenant with God or have they merely concentrated on the objective side?
- If FV authors are trying to understand "covenantal efficacy," are they wrong to stress it in their writings?
- Do FV authors actually use the language "*ex opere operato*" or does it just "feel" like they do? If any have used it, have they used it in the same sense to which we rightly object? If so, where does this appear in their writings?

Justification

Study Report:

- 2215- "The standards assert that nothing that sinners do nor anything in them can serve as the ground of justification" and that "good works do not serve as the grounds for justification."
- 2224- "This orientation around corporate categories places theological reflection on a different trajectory than that of *the Standards*."
- 2234- "Our concern is that some of those who are baptized will simply presume upon God's grace, continuing in the covenant without "apostatizing" but also without justifying faith; others will be driven to despair working for a salvation out of "covenant faithfulness" instead of resting and receiving Jesus alone for their salvation."

Questions:

- Do FV authors teach that good works are the *grounds* for our justification? If so, where is this found in their writings?
- If NPP writers don't deny individual justification (as the report points out), is there substantial problem with them emphasizing corporate terms?
- Do FV authors see covenant faithfulness as including the fruit and evidence of a lively faith, which faith is the only instrument of justification? Or do they see

these qualifications serve in fact only to highlight the clarity of the core declaration, which is set forth as follows in the preceding chapter on sacraments in general:

Neither doth the efficacy of a sacrament depend upon the piety or intention of him that doth administer it, but upon the work of the Spirit, and the word of institution; which contains...a promise of benefit to worthy receivers (27.3).

*The Westminster divines viewed baptism as the instrument and occasion of regeneration by the Spirit, of the remission of sins, of ingrafting into Christ (cf. 28.1). The Confession teaches baptismal regeneration. (From "Baptism at the Westminster Assembly" in *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century*, volume 1, ed. by J. Ligon Duncan III, Mentor 2003:168-9)*

“covenant faithfulness” as the grounds of justification or as the instrument of justification inclusive of faith’s fruit and evidence? If the latter, where do they teach this?

- If FV authors teach that salvation comes by working and not receiving and resting upon Christ, where is this in their writings?

Fellow presbyters, until the committee clarifies these issues, it would be premature for us to ratify their report. We encourage you to carefully and prayerfully think through these issues and not enter into this vote hastily. We are convinced that the report as it now stands lacks the quality and scholarship of a PCA General Assembly position paper.

In the peace of Christ,

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Matt Brown
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Sam Downing
Josh Eby
John Haralson
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