

STATEMENT REGARDING JUSTIFICATION AND THE FEDERAL VISION

A Statement on Justification by Faith Alone

The following is a brief summary of the Grace Reformed Presbyterian Church stand on the doctrine of Justification:

Definition: Justification is a judicial act of God in which He declares, on the basis of the righteousness of Jesus Christ, that all the claims of the law are satisfied with respect to the elect.

Therefore: The believer is justified by faith alone; the gift of faith is the only instrument by which we receive the merit of Christ; justification removes the guilt of sin and restores the sinner to all the rights as a child of God; justification takes place and is instantaneous, complete, and it does not depend on some further satisfaction for sin; good works are neither the ground nor the instrument of our justification; the merit of Christ (in both His active and passive obedience) imputed to us is the only ground of justification.

Statement on the Federal Vision

We believe the following teachings, found among proponents of the Federal Vision (FV) movement are not in accord with the Westminster Confession of Faith and, despite any perceived benefits they may have, may lead to further error. In order to take a clear stand on this issue, we offer the following statement on FV. (The following is a statement issued by the session of the Woodruff Road Presbyterian Church, adopted by the Session of Grace Reformed Presbyterian Church on January 12, 2006).

1. We reject the FV use of a separate theological language concurrent with, but separate from traditional systematic theology.

Whether the FV supporters realize it or not, this dual language methodology is inherently deceptive. When the FV proponents speak, in what they call, their “decretal” language, they speak in the realm of the confession. When they speak, in what they call, their “covenantal” language, they communicate in their own created alternate theological sphere or paradigm. As will be seen in the following points, this alternate theological sphere allows them to affirm the words of the Westminster Standards when speaking “decretally,” all words of the Westminster Standards when speaking “decretally,” all the while rendering its content meaningless when speaking “covenantally,” especially as it relates to everyday life.

Such teaching creates confusion in the flock. Words given opposing meanings in parallel spheres cannot but do otherwise. God is not the author of confusion. It is detrimental to the Truth and contrary to God's Word. Thus confusion creates division. And we deplore what this teaching has done to the flock by setting brother against brother, producing division where there was once peace (1 Cor. 14.33).

2. We reject the FV redefinition and misuse of theological terminology.

Much of the content of this point is an unpacking of the previous point; however it is crucial in the discussion of FV. Because of the dual languages used in FV theology, the definitions of some technical theological terms, which many orthodox men had fought and died for in the Church's history, are radically changed and made to mean what is essentially, theologically, the opposite of their established usage.

For instance, the standard Reformed view rightly sees justification as an instantaneous and complete legal/forensic act in which the sinner is declared righteous. However, when speaking "covenantally," the FV introduces the concept of a period of time or incompleteness into the definition, which, in turn, introduces works righteousness into salvation. They do this by referring to a justification that is not finalized, or complete, until the last judgment. FV defenders teach that those who profess Christ will be judged at that time on the basis of their works. This perceived injection of works righteousness is only reinforced by many of their proponents' hesitancy to affirm salvation sola fide ("by faith alone").

The FV also introduces a relational aspect to justification. While they attempt to "decretally" affirm the legal/forensic, in the FV's usage of the term, the legal/forensic is swallowed up in the relational. In the Reformed works we have consulted, none of them move beyond the legal/forensic definition of justification. And while there certainly is a relational aspect to salvation, theologically speaking, "adoption" or our "union with Christ" is the Biblical way to refer to it, not justification. Therefore, we believe this expansion of the concept is also in error.

Other words that have been theologically changed or redefined by the FV include covenant, baptism, elect/election, and perseverance (each will be noted below).

3. We reject the FV views of the nature of God's Covenant of Grace with man, more specifically the issue of covenantal objectivity, where "a premium is placed on that which is visible, external, and tangible" and where "distinctions within the covenant are either muted or rejected."

Proponents of FV teach that, "Genuine covenantal membership...is not to be measured inwardly and subjectively, but outwardly and objectively." This viewpoint means that practically speaking, "[M]embership in the covenant is to be understood in an undifferentiated sense." Thus, there is no difference between the covenantal membership of an adult, who has made a profession of faith, and a baptized child, who has not. Thus children, who have not yet expressed faith in Christ, are still considered to be covenantally part of the elect and engrafted into Christ.

This view of the Covenant of Grace creates several problems. First, the subjective aspects of the covenant, for all practical purposes, become excluded (i.e. the testimony and inward working of the Holy Spirit; WCF XVIII.2). One's salvation would then become a works based system that could never truly grant assurance. Second, as will be discussed below, the sacraments take on a weight and importance that they were never meant to carry. Third, this view of the covenant destroys the visible/invisible church distinction as is stated in the Confession (WCF XXV; LC61-65). Fourth, evangelism need only become an exercise into inquiring whether one has been baptized and then encouraging that person to live up to his baptism. Evangelism, then, becomes merely an exercise in ensuring that baptized persons stay within the broad boundaries of outward conduct that prevent their being disciplined by the Church. Thus, practically speaking, salvation is divorced from faith, and regeneration is subsumed under

obedience. Fifth, because of their emphasis on the “visible, external, and tangible,” many proponents of FV theology have logically moved into the realm of using icons in their worship. This practice is a clear breaking of the Second Commandment (LC109). [Note: All quotes in point #3 are taken from Guy Waters, “Covenant Theology Improved? Assessing the Federal Vision,” forthcoming, pp. 9-10.]

4. We reject the FV views on the nature of the sacraments.

The FV views in this area are de facto *opus operatum* Sacramentalism [i.e. that grace is necessarily conveyed through the sacramental ritual]. Again, works righteousness is injected where God's sovereign grace should be standing alone. This error is exhibited through their positions on both alone. This error is exhibited through their positions on both baptism and the Lord's Supper.

FV proponents have been accused of teaching baptismal regeneration [i.e. that the mere act of baptism gives grace unto salvation]. That accusation is not strictly true in the traditional sense. FV defenders publicly reject baptismal regeneration; however their arguments, concerning the objective nature of the covenant as it relates to baptized children, speak of absolute promises made by God only to the redeemed. This view, known as “covenant succession,” applies these promises to each individual baptized child, “Covenantally” securing salvation for them in their baptism. Thus baptism is no longer just a sign and seal. It becomes, in effect, the reality of the promises of salvation given within the covenant, and thus actually carries grace in the receiving of it apart from and prior to the exercise of faith.

Sadly, we know that not all covenant children will necessarily trust Christ. Some of them may never know God's regenerate work in their hearts. How does the FV explain this phenomenon? After all, each child had the promises made to him personally. Some FV go so far as to say that every thing needed for salvation was given to the child, excepting perseverance. Others say that the rebellion of the child and the lack of faithfulness by the parents both play a part in the child's rejection of the benefits and responsibilities of his baptism. Thus either way, a child can covenantally lose his elect status.

These views run against Scripture and the Confession, and place an enormous burden of guilt upon the parents of the unbelieving child. Scripture promises a faithful seed through families (Gen. 17:7, 9; Acts 2:38-39). It does not give a promise that each child will be saved, though in God's sovereignty that may occur. Therefore, we reject the FV position on baptism.

Concerning the Lord's Supper, the vast majority of the FV proponents hold to paedocommunion. One should immediately see why paedocommunion is the logical conclusion of the above position on the covenant. If an adult may take communion, and there is no difference in the covenant status between the adult and a baptized child, then logically the child has the right to take communion as well.

If each baptized, covenant child is to be considered covenantally a believer and each believer, including a young child, has the right to the Lord's Table, then the requirements for self-examination must be lessened and redefined (1 Co 11.27-28; LC 171, 174-175, 177). In addition, the Confessional working definition of “Christian” must be ignored in order for young children to take the Lord's Supper (compare LC 172 and 175 with 177).

The logical outcome of such a position is *opus operatum* sacramentalism. For if a child is not able to meet the Biblical requirements of self-examination, and yet is brought to the Lord's Table anyway, then the proper taking of the sacrament has become secondary to the necessity of partaking of it. Therefore,

grace must logically be given regardless of whether one properly takes communion or not, otherwise judgment would be brought upon the child (1Co 11.27-28). We reject this position and logic as unbiblical and anti-confessional.

5. We grieve over the FV practice of by-passing God's ordained means in the church of formulating their views through constructive interaction with their fellow teaching and ruling elders prior to disseminating their views.

While we applaud their concern and emphasis on covenant families and, in particular, covenant children, they have formulated their views to the church at large at conferences, in books, and over the Internet rather than testing their novel views privately for error within the confines of Presbytery. This public preaching and teaching of their views, before the church has had the opportunity to refine and correct, has created confusion and division, and has led many into their errors.

To some, at least, the word “heretic” includes the thought of one holding to a soul-condemning error. There is the implication for some that if the person does not repent of a particular error then he is to be deemed as not saved. If one were to consult a theological dictionary, technically a heretic is one who believes or teaches that which is contrary to Scripture.

The words “heretic” and “heresy” conjure up very emotive responses in our culture. Thus those words should be used carefully and sparingly as it is scripturally appropriate. We would follow Peter’s lead (2 Pet. 2:1ff) by understanding heresy to be a serious error regarding a fundamental doctrine that will bring destruction upon the teachers of that error and, if embraced by the church, would ultimately lead it to apostasy. Heresy also denotes a form of error which brings unnecessary schism and sectarianism into the Church.

The difficulty with labeling FV as a heretical movement is two-fold. First, FV is not a monolithic movement. Not every proponent is deeply enmeshed in it nor does every teacher take its teachings to their logical conclusions. Second, the proponents of FV still assert Biblical orthodoxy when speaking their “decretal” language. Nevertheless, the FV introduction of works righteousness through their “covenantal” language, the conclusions stemming from their view of the objectivity of the Covenant of Grace, and their type of sacramentalism all qualify as heresy according to our understanding of Scripture. And as the FV views have spread, they have left a party spirit, and even division, in their wake.

Our love for the flock and for those who have fallen into these errors has necessitated this statement. And though we have as a court of the church fulfilled our duty, we take no pleasure in conflict. We plead with our brothers and sisters who have embraced these heretical beliefs to reject them as we have and return to the solid Biblical and Reformed footing of our forefathers.

Soli Deo Gloria.