

## **FOR THOSE JUST TUNING IN: WHAT IS THE FEDERAL VISION?**

By R. Scott Clark

In talk radio the host is supposed to "re-set" the show at regular intervals. He is to remind listeners to which show they are listening and on what network or station. One reason why the host does this is because some listeners are just tuning in.

Some people are "just tuning in," as it were, to the Federal Vision controversy and this might be a good time to re-set the show.

The FV is 33-year old movement that originated, at least in this episode, with the Rev Mr Norman Shepherd who was then teaching systematic theology at WTS/P. In 1974 he defined faith, in the act of justification, to be "faith and works." It wasn't that, in justification, faith is "receiving and resting" and works are evidence and thus a sort of vindicatory justification of the claim that one believes. Nothing so nuanced or Reformed. Rather, he flatly claimed that there are two parts to faith in justification. When that created a predictable uproar, he modified his language to "faithfulness." At the same time he, and others, was about revising covenant theology. In baptism, he wrote, we are all united to Christ and receive the benefits of Christ temporarily and conditionally. What is the condition of retaining them? Faithfulness!

After a long struggle he was dismissed from WTS/P in 1981. The movement went silent and, to some degree, underground. He had faced charges in his OPC presbytery but survived the charges the first time. After his dismissal charges were to be filed laid before presbytery again but his request to be transferred to the CRC came before them on the docket. He served the CRC as a "conservative" minister arguing against the ordination of females to pastoral office (thus gaining adherents in the CRC now) and gave a series of three lectures at Mid-America Reformed Seminary. The tapes of those lectures (the same stuff he had taught at WTS/P and the stuff that appeared in his booklet, *The Call of Grace*) would influence a number of people, including John Barach, and helped to advance the FV movement. When he retired (c. 1998) he began to speak and write on justification and covenant again helping to stimulate the current controversies.

All the time this was happening New Testament scholarship was being rocked by a movement to re-consider the nature of 1st century (2nd Temple) Judaism. It was being argued (about the same time Shepherd was revising the doctrines of covenant and justification) in 1974 that the rabbis had a religion of grace not works. This claim led to revision of the understanding of Paul (which had been ongoing since the 19th century). Paul, they argue, wasn't as worried about how we stand before God (no, we only thought that because we were reading Luther back into Paul) but rather who is "in" or "out" of the covenant. This movement came to be known as the New Perspective(s) on Paul.

Together these parallel movements converged in a series of conferences at Auburn Avenue Church and they gave themselves the name: The Federal Vision. Initially they claimed to be recovering authentic Reformed theology. They claimed that American Reformed theology had been corrupted by revivalism (about which they were at least

partly correct). They were deeply influenced by Shepherd and also inspired by the insights of the NPP writers. Many of the leaders had also identified with theonomy in the 1970s and 80s. James Jordan, one of the godfathers of that movement, was also influencing this new movement.

The FV movement was (and is) disparate. Some of the leaders lack formal theological education (e.g. Doug Wilson). Some have PhDs (e.g. Peter Leithart and Jeff Myers). Their original claim to be recovering historic Reformed Christianity is no longer tenable so now they generally claim to be discovering a "more biblical" form of Christianity, to be carrying on the work of Reformation. The claim to have discovered something new and interesting and to be more biblical, of course, attracts attention from, if I may be blunt, naive evangelicals who don't know the Reformation or the history of Reformed theology and exegesis in the first place but who are perhaps attracted to the doctrine of predestination and disposed toward novelty already.

The difficulty with the claim to be reforming the Reformed churches, of course, is that the FV ends up advocating views already considered and rejected by the Reformed churches. Most of what the FV is peddling is little different in substance from what the medieval church taught and from what the Remonstrants taught in reaction to the Reformation doctrine of justification *sola gratia, sola fide*.

From the late 90s there was a spate of books and before them a list of blogs (several Federal Visionists were early adopters of the medium and that did much to advance their cause), websites, and discussion lists that propagated the FV widely across the web. The confessional and orthodox churches, seminaries, and pastors were slow to respond. It was not until an elder in the OPC was convicted (which conviction was overturned on appeal) of teaching something like the FV that many confessional folk started paying attention to this controversy.

The other difficulty in evaluating the movement is that it was a shifting, amorphous thing. If they seemed to be making it up as they went along it was because they were! It was a hydra-like movement that seemed to be growing a new head each time one was lopped off. Nevertheless, by the early 2000s the main lines of the movement were coming into focus:

In baptism every baptized person receives all the benefits of Christ (election, union with Christ, justification, adoption) so that one is in "the covenant" by grace but one retains these benefits and either remains or becomes (they've said both) elect, united to Christ, and justified by cooperating with grace through trusting and obeying. This was their scheme to combat evangelical antinomianism. Of course it's an old brew called moralism and it's been on tap forever. At the same time, the FV movement also re-defines covenant theology to say that there is but one covenant. Historic Reformed theology had affirmed three covenants:

a pre-temporal covenant between the Father and the Son (and implicitly the Holy Spirit) to accomplish the redemption of the elect and to apply it to them;

a covenant of works before the fall;  
a covenant of grace after the fall.

The FV affirms only one covenant: a gracious conditional covenant before the fall and a conditional gracious covenant after the fall. The FV generally rejects the pre-temporal covenant. This version of covenant theology has also had support among certain Dutch Reformed theologians in the 20th century (which served as a background to the current controversy). This re-construction of covenant theology served the FV movement well as it allows them to emphasize grace -- who can criticize grace? -- and it allowed them to insinuate conditions into the covenant of grace which supported their doctrine of justification through faithfulness (trust, Spirit-wrought sanctity, and cooperation with it in good works).

This apparently gracious version of covenant theology is very much a child of the spirit of the age. In the 20th century, there had been serious criticism of historic Reformed theology as being "legalistic" (for teaching a pre-fall covenant of works and for teaching that Jesus' obedience is the legal ground of our justification). It allowed them to market their views not only as gracious --which was attractive to those just discovering the doctrines of grace, who are fleeing fundamentalist legalism -- but as new and improved.

Of course neither the FV nor the new comers attracted to it recognized or admitted that, having taken away the covenant of works from Adam and Christ, it is now up to us to cooperate with grace and thereby to fulfill "our part" of the covenant. This has the effect of placing the Christian in a covenant of works! So much for a "gracious" covenant theology.

Along with this package the FV movement also offers paedocommunion (infant communion) which enticed Baptists newly converted to paedobaptism (infant baptism) who do not yet see the Reformed distinction between baptism as a sign/seal of initiation into the visible covenant community and the Supper as a sign/seal of covenant renewal, i.e. taking up the promises of the covenant by grace alone, through faith alone. The movement toward paedocommunion was attractive to and fueled by those in the FV movement who, dissatisfied with what they regard as the "sterile" Reformed distinction between God and man, are attracted to Greek orthodoxy. Remember, this movement is very much on the margins of Reformed theology, piety, and practice and serves as a sort of half-way house for those entering the Reformed churches and also for those leaving them. As such, the FV movement has had disproportionate influence on ex-fundamentalists who've discovered Reformed theology. Instead of discovering Calvin, Ursinus, and Hodge, they've discovered Rushdooney and Bahnsen (who gave them virtually divinely-approved answers to all their ethical questions) and Wilson and Barach and Schlissel (online) and the other leaders of the FV movement.

Just as with the original "Shepherd Controversy" at WTS/P (1974-81), the orthodox rejected the FV quite soundly. Westminster Seminary California issued a statement against it which they released at a conference. A couple years later they produced a book length response to the FV and NPP movements. This volume and several others like it by

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Guy Waters, Cornel Venema, the MARS faculty, the OPC Justification Committee (recommended by the OPC GA) and volumes edited by Gary Johnson and Guy Waters all constituted a thorough and, to most Reformed folk, compelling response to the FV/NPP and re-statement of the biblical view as understood by the Reformed churches. Here is a list of these resources.

Today the FV movement has been rejected by several of the major denominations in the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC). Among those denominations that have rejected the FV: The Presbyterian Church in America, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the United Reformed Churches, the Reformed Church in the U. S., and the Orthodox Christian Reformed Churches. The Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America has a study committee. The URCs have rejected the FV by affirming justification by faith alone, without works, and by affirming the imputation of active obedience. The URCs also adopted a statement of Nine Points in which the URCs rejected the FV root and branch. They also established a study committee to explain to the churches in more detail the grounds for rejecting the NPP and FV movements. That report is due in 2010. There is one FV related discipline case pending in the PCA.

Since most of the NAPARC churches have rejected the FV, the principal ecclesiastical home of the FV movement has become a group called the Confederation of Reformed Evangelical Churches (CREC). This denomination is led by Douglas Wilson, an articulate but confused and confusing religious, social, and educational conservative. A former evangelical Arminian (from the Evangelical Free churches) he has founded his own pluralistic denomination (which allows Baptist and Paedobaptist congregations) with its own confession. Along with his own federation, he has his own publishing house, his own college, and his own seminary. Several of the leading Federal Visionists have realigned themselves with the CREC and others are expected to do the same in the future. The CREC is not recognized by NAPARC as a Reformed denomination and is not in formal ecclesiastical fellowship with the OPC, the URCs, the PCA, or the RCUS.

If you're new to the Reformed faith, welcome! Please understand that, even though these questions may be new and exciting to you, many of us have already worked through them. If you only know these issues via the web or personal conversation and the like and if you haven't taken the time to read the orthodox account of the doctrines of covenant and justification in print, please, before you make up your mind, take the time to read the written, published responses to the FV/NPP.

Over the years I've had a number of posts from young people who were initially enamored of the FV who, after time and reflection, have come to reject it for the reasons given here. As my old friend Norman Hoeflinger used to say about Shepherd's theology (Hoeflinger was on the WTS/P board and voted against Shepherd in 1981): It just isn't good news.

"Here's a gift and here's what you have to do to keep it" isn't good news for sinners who cannot do "their part," not even with the help of grace. If "grace and cooperation with grace" is such good news, why not skip the FV and simply become Roman Catholic?

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Honestly? That's been the consistent Roman doctrine since the early middle ages. It's been the official Roman doctrine since the session 6 of the Council of Trent.

According to the Reformed understanding of Scripture, Jesus has kept the law for all his people fulfilling the promise he made to his Father. Christ's obedience in fulfilling Adam's duty is the basis for God's declaration to and about all those who trust in Christ alone and in his finished work: you are righteous. That's good news and that's the biblical covenant theology and doctrine of justification. The covenant of grace isn't just another covenant of works with a little grace drizzled on top. No, the covenant of grace is really gracious. It's free. You can't earn anything with God. It's unconditional. In justification, faith isn't trusting and obeying. It's only trusting in Christ and in his finished work for sinners.

Yes, we must obey God's holy law, but we do so by grace and out of gratitude and only as evidence of the new life that God has given us in Christ by grace (HC 86-129). If we don't get our covenant theology and our doctrine of justification right, however (HC 21, 60), we have no basis for a Christian life and we will find ourselves trapped again in the very sort of legalism from which the Reformation (and before then, the Apostle Paul!) set us free.