

30 Reasons

Why It Would be Unwise for the PCA General Assembly to Adopt the Federal Vision Study Report and Its Recommendations.

By Jeffrey J. Meyers
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The Ad Interim Study Committee on Federal Vision, New Perspective, and Auburn Avenue Theologies appointed by the 34th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America has finished its work and published its Report (hereafter simply referred to as "the Report"). The Report can be accessed at www.byfaithonline.com.

The 35th General Assembly meeting in Memphis this year will consider and act on the committee's recommendations.

This response is an open letter to PCA presbyters and argues that the Report should not be adopted. I have listed 30 reasons why I believe that adopting the Report would be unwise. If anyone wants to interact with my analysis, please feel free to email me (jeffmeyers@mac.com).

This is a long response, I know. Four or five pages into it and you can probably get the gist of it. In order to facilitate a quick appraisal of the problems with the Report, I'm providing a summary list right up front.

You are not going to agree with everything I have written in this response, and that is healthy. There are four or five fatal problems with the committee's Report. So if I am wrong about some of the reasons listed here or if I have overstated how the Report may be used in the future, nevertheless serious objections remain. Even if I'm mistaken about one-third or even half of what I have written in this response, I believe that the Report is a very inadequate and in some cases dangerous response to the biblical theological issues raised in the current controversy.

A Quick Summary

Here is an abbreviated list of reasons why it would be unwise for the PCA General Assembly to adopt the Federal Vision Study Report and its recommendations.

- The committee was not balanced in its composition and therefore did not fairly represent the diversity of theological views in the PCA. It would be very unwise for our Assembly to adopt a badly skewed Report that was produced by a committee that did not properly represent all points of view in the PCA assembly.

- Many commissioners will not receive the Report until the day before it is considered in the Assembly. It is not being sent with the Commissioners Handbook to delegates. It will be given to men when they arrive at GA as part of supplemental materials. How can it be wise to call for a vote on a detailed document like this when many commissioners will not have had time to read it, let alone digest and evaluate it carefully?
- The Report entails a much stricter understanding of confessional subscription than the PCA currently practices.
- The Report effectively substitutes the Westminster Standards for the Bible as the supreme judge of all controversies of religion. The Federal Vision (hereafter FV) men have appealed to the Bible, but the committee repeats, "Westminster, Westminster, Westminster." This disregards our common commitment to *sola scriptura* and violates Westminster Confession 1.8 and 1.10.
- The Report's declarations presuppose that only one set of narrow theological terms and explanations can be compatible with the Reformed theological system of doctrine set forth in the Westminster Standards.
- The PCA men named in this document were not consulted before definitive explanations of their views were published and condemned. They will have no opportunity to defend themselves or their views before this is voted on and possibly adopted.
- By adopting the Report the PCA would be codifying an official view of the teaching of Wright, Leithart, Wilkins, Wilson, Lusk, etc. even though the Report's characterization of their views is sloppy and inaccurate as I will demonstrate later in this response.
- If the Report were adopted, then its language would seem to imply that PCA men would not be allowed to teach or preach on anything contained in the Bible that is not codified in the Westminster Standards.
- The Report falsely accuses Federal Vision men of denying and/or compromising unconditional election simply because they do not always use the words "elect" and "election" in the decretal sense of these terms. The Report gives no weight to their explicit, public affirmations of unconditional election.
- The committee is asking the Assembly to declare its own declarations to be a faithful exposition of the Standards and thereby classify other expositions of these theological issues as out of accord with Westminster. The effect of passing the Report will not simply be to condemn FV theology but also to effectively standardize a narrow tradition within Reformed Presbyterian confessional theology. The Report would require that all PCA presbyters, not just the FV men, line up on a very narrow theological line.
- The Report makes extra-confessional formulations part of the "vitals of the system of doctrine" contained in the Westminster Standards. Adoption of the Report would

effectively saddle the entire Assembly with extra-confessional formulations regarding "merit," Christ's "active obedience," and more.

- The Report makes sweeping claims about the Westminster Standards that are implausible and then does not adequately support them. There are too many errors in the Report for the Assembly to adopt it.
- The Report inexcusably misrepresents FV men's positions on crucial issues.
- The Report effectively orders the presbyteries to come to a "guilty" verdict on ministers in good standing. All of the PCA men named in the Report have already been examined by their presbyteries. Some have even undergone extensive questioning. Passing the Report would overrule local presbytery decisions and this without the men being given the rights accorded to the accused in our judicial system.
- Adopting the Report would effectively squelch the ongoing conversation and debate between Reformed brothers over the biblical and theological issues raised by the FV men. Why do we need a verdict from "on high" when the committee has not allowed the ministers in question a fair hearing?

Detailed Analysis.

The Meaning of the Westminster Standards and Subscription

1. The Report appears to introduce a much stricter understanding of confessional subscription than the PCA currently practices. Recommendation #2 asks the Assembly to confirm that the interpretations of the Westminster Standards offered in the Report are "a faithful exposition of the Westminster Standards, and further reminds those ruling and teaching elders whose views are out of accord with our Standards of their obligation to make known to their courts any differences in their views" (p. 27). The problem here is that even if the declarations of the Report are "a faithful exposition" of the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, that doesn't mean they are the *only* acceptable interpretation of our Standards.

The Westminster Confession and Catechisms are themselves committee documents, the result of months, even years of discussion, debate, and compromise between various parties at the Westminster Assembly. The Confessions and Catechisms are not always worded to restrict interpretation to a single authoritative meaning. It is a false assumption that the Confessions only authorize one position on each complex theological issue. Rather, the Westminster Standards are *consensus documents*, and are designed to be broad enough to embrace a wide range of theological positions within the family of Reformed theology.

The Report gives the impression that the Westminster divines only allow one particular view on any subject that they address, whereas historically, Presbyterians have allowed a

limited range of views that are all considered within confessional boundaries (e.g., the lapsarian debate [infra-, supra-], various millennial views, creation days, etc.). This becomes evident when we learn of the debates at the Westminster Assembly. The Standards were written to accommodate a diversity of acceptable positions held by various parties among the framers.

For example, the Report would have us canonize the convictions of one party within the Assembly in the debate about "the imputation of the active obedience of Christ" (p. 6, 11, 17, 18). Just to be clear here, there was no debate in the Assembly about the imputation of Christ's righteousness to us. But the debated question was and continues to be: did that imputed righteousness include the merit of Christ's good works performed during his life on earth? Not everyone agreed and the Assembly decided *not* to include the phrase "active obedience", but rather to adopt wording that would embrace *both* parties of theological opinion on the question. This is a matter of historical record.

I will discuss the details later in this essay, but for now I only want to call attention to what I believe is a dangerous narrowing of the PCA's normal practice of being generous with various theological formulations as long as men honestly affirm the Reformed theology centered on the "system of doctrine" taught in our Standards. The bottom line is that the Report asks the PCA to adopt as our official interpretation of the Standards one narrow interpretation of Westminster in these controversial doctrinal debates.

2. The Report has not convincingly established that the "Federal Vision" or "New Perspective on Paul" formulations are out of conformity with Westminster but rather has focused on whether they are in conformity with the committee's *interpretation* of Westminster.

The language of "in conformity with" the Standards can be confusing. When we say a position is "in conformity with" the Westminster Standards what do we really mean? The same thing as? Does not contradict? Is similar to? "Contrary," as it appears in the declarations (e.g., p. 26) often appears to mean little more than "different from," or worse, "not the way we are accustomed to speak." For example, the Report fails to demonstrate that N. T. Wright's understanding of the covenant is contradictory to Westminster. It only shows that Wright's formulations are somewhat different than what we have in our Standards. The Report's comment on the bottom of page 9 is unconvincing:

But 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. In fact, these two approaches to covenant and election are not complementary ways of looking at the biblical data, but irreconcilably contradictory alternative accounts of the biblical data (p. 9).

It is not "evident" at all. And the Report, as we shall argue, has not only not proven that the FV men have set forth "irreconcilably contradictory" explanations of the biblical data, but also has not accurately represented the FV men's positions.

Perhaps I misunderstand what we adopted a few years ago, but I thought that the "good faith subscription" debate settled how the PCA would use the Westminster Standards. We don't treat the Standards as some sort of razor edge that everyone must line up on. Rather, they are more like a fenced-in playground. The Westminster Standards set the boundaries and all we Reformed & Presbyterian pastors and theologians get to play in the yard together because we know where the boundaries are. The Report would require that all PCA presbyters, not just the FV men, line up on a very narrow theological line.

Administrative and Procedural Concerns

3. It would be unwise to adopt the conclusions of this committee because of problems with the composition of the committee. The makeup of the committee did not fairly represent the diversity of theological opinion in the PCA. Here I am not just complaining that no ruling or teaching elder sympathetic to the FV position was appointed to the committee. (That is a real problem and I will address that below.) Rather, the rich diversity of theological opinion in the PCA was not properly represented. The teaching elders who served on this committee are all Southern Presbyterian in their sympathies and commitments. I have no problem with this party within the PCA, but I don't think that other theological commitments should have been excluded. One might wonder if others were excluded because they might be more sympathetic to one or more dimensions of the Federal Vision.

4. More importantly, the current Moderator did not appoint a teaching or ruling elder associated with the FV nor even one who was sympathetic to the men or ideas being evaluated. All the prominent members of the committee (with the possible exception of the ruling elders) had made their opposition to the FV men and their ideas a matter of public record prior to the appointment.

Stacking the committee exclusively with *opponents* of the men and theological ideas being studied is without precedent in previous GA level study committees. In the past, study committees have been composed of both proponents and opponents of particular debates. Remember the study committees on creation days, women in the military, and paedocommunion, to name a few. These study committees produced reports with both majority and minority reports. Not everybody was in agreement. Moderators selected qualified men to represent both or all sides of the debate. Their desire was to see the two sides work together to try and reach a consensus through honest theological interaction. Why wasn't this done for this committee?

This Moderator appointed a study committee without any members of the so-called "Federal Vision." This means that a committee was appointed to speak for the denomination against other presbyters of our church that are just as much members in good standing. By what standard was it allowable to exclude ministers and/or elders associated with the Federal Vision from this committee? If the FV ministers are indeed heterodox, it wouldn't have hurt to have that come out through direct personal interaction.

At least one member of the committee expressed the opinion that the FV men did not deserve a place on the committee because they were threatening the integrity of the Gospel. But that was exactly the matter under discussion. Others, including the current Moderator, have made similar statements defending the exclusion of men sympathetic to FV ideas from the committee. This has led many to suspect that the committee was appointed to write up a suitable condemnation. Whether that is true or not, the evidence seems to indicate that there was no interest in having a conversation with those that were to be condemned.

Notice what different results emerged in local presbyteries that studied and/or examined some of the FV men in question. When the men themselves were treated with respect and given the right to answer their detractors, the results were more balanced and nuanced than those in this study committee's Report. It is no coincidence that every Presbytery that has been required to interact personally with the FV men has come to a much more moderate conclusion.

I have to wonder if the Moderator selected this committee in order to avoid the "unacceptable" conclusions of presbyteries like Missouri, Pacific Northwest, and Louisiana. Each of these Presbyteries produced documents and/or conducted evaluations of the positions of certain men associated with the FV. In each case the results were not outright condemnations but carefully worded analyses.

A few presbyteries have produced strongly worded condemnations of FV views, but in each case these committees were not able to interact with FV men personally and directly. It is easier to compose a report condemning a presbyter in another part of the country when you don't have to meet him face to face. Although it might sound conspiratorial, could it be that since the campaign against the FV men was not working at the local level, a new tactic had to be tried: condemn them without any representation by means of a General Assembly level study committee?

Even if this wasn't self-consciously done, the fact remains that the committee was not balanced in its composition and the results confirm this.

5. The failure to appoint men who could represent the FV viewpoint is probably a violation of *Robert's Rules of Order*. *Robert's Rules* (which the Assembly is required to follow unless it has adopted its own special rules) specifies that "special committees" (i.e. committees which are not permanent, standing committees but committees formed for particular purposes, such as for study, investigation, etc.) should be composed of representatives of "all points of view":

When a special committee is appointed for deliberation or investigation. . . *it should represent, as far as possible, all points of view in the organization*, so that its opinion will carry maximum weight (§49, "Appointment of Committees," subtitle "Proper Composition of Committees," emphasis added).

Robert's Rules goes on to state, "The usefulness of the committee will be greatly impaired, on the other hand, if any important faction of the assembly is not represented." Just as *Robert's Rules* warned, the usefulness of this Report is indeed greatly impaired because of the Moderator's failure to include qualified representatives of the assembly who could speak for the men associated with the FV.

It would be very unwise for the Assembly to adopt a badly skewed Report that was produced by a committee that did not properly represent all relevant points of view in the PCA.

6. Not only did the Moderator fail to appoint FV men to the study committee, but the committee itself did not make direct contact with any of the FV men for clarification and/or correction during this process. I've contacted each of the men cited in the Report and not one of them received a single letter, email, call, or any other personal communication from the committee or any of its members during this process. That is one major reason why the Report is filled with numerous misrepresentations, as I hope to show below.

Some may object to this and say that the FV men have books, essays, sermons, and lectures that are available to the public so there was no need for personal contact. While it is true that there is a great deal of information that is publicly available, there is also a great deal of slanderous misrepresentation in the public domain as well. It appears as if some of the conclusions of the committee were based on hearsay and not on the actual positions of the FV men.

Common courtesy, not to mention common Christian justice, would seem to suggest that fellow presbyters who are about to publicly condemn other presbyters whom they consider brothers might want to make sure that they are accurately interpreting what these brothers have said or written. There is nothing more helpful than personal communication when one hopes to achieve clarity and understanding of another's views. Some PCA officers may believe that the FV men stand condemned already, but does that mean they have no rights and privileges as members in good standing of our presbyteries and Assembly?

Our ordination vows as presbyters require us to seek the peace, purity, and edification of the church as well as to submit to our brothers, maybe especially when we think they are mistaken (why the need to "submit" when we are in agreement?). Our professed love and commitment to one another as brothers would seem to require some personal contact before sweeping judgments are made in public that jeopardize our brothers' standing in the church at large.

Even the Roman Catholic authorities practiced some level of common academic and ecclesiastical courtesy in calling Martin Luther to appear before them to answer charges. Unfortunately, the inflammatory public rhetoric and accusations against the FV men have poisoned many people's appreciation for the ministries of these presbyters. They are treated as if they are not worthy of a respectful hearing. Instead, their writings are mined

for any and all possible indications that they are "preaching another Gospel." It is worth pointing out again, that when the men under consideration have personally participated in the evaluations of their presbyteries, the results have been quite different from this GA committee's Report.

The GA committee ought to have made every effort to communicate personally with the men they were about to effectively condemn. The fact that they did not indicates to me that they failed to show proper respect and love for the men whose ministerial reputations and callings they risk damaging irretrievably. I doubt the committee *intended* to do this, so I am not criticizing their *motives*, but their *actions*.

7. There is one more significant administrative reason the Report should not be adopted at this year's General Assembly. I just received my Commissioner's Handbook and the Report was not included in it. Some commissioners will not get the Report until the day before it is discussed on the floor of the Assembly. A member of the *ad interim* committee has said that it will be distributed to GA commissioners when they show up on Tuesday, June 11, to register for the Assembly. The report can be found at the byfaithonline.com web site. But what of the many commissioners that don't have access to the internet? As of today (May 12th), the report has not yet made its way to the official 34th GA page on the PCA web site. How can commissioners have enough time to read, digest, and evaluate such a detailed report in one day? It's not possible. It would be very unwise even to move the adoption of the Report until everyone has had a chance to read and reflect on its contents and implications.

The Federal Vision men and their views are condemned without any interaction with their biblical arguments

8. The Report appears to substitute the Westminster Standards for the Bible as the supreme judge of all controversies of religion. According to our BCO, nothing that cannot be proved from Scripture is to be admitted as a matter of accusation. And yet we have an entire Report that brings accusations against fellow ministers of the Gospel without any attempt to prove that these men have contradicted or violated Scripture (BCO 29-1).

Early on, the Report (p. 2) cites the Westminster Confession of Faith when it establishes the Scriptures as the final arbiter of all controversies of religion. But then the Report proceeds to treat the Westminster Standards as the supreme judge of this controversy. It might be helpful to remember that our own confessional standards warn against elevating human theological formulations to the place where they become a rival authority for the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.

The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture (WCF 1.10).

What is most disturbing is that the Report contains little or in most cases no interaction with the biblical arguments of the men identified in the Report. In fact, no attempt has been made to exegete the Scriptures in an effort to judge the views of the FV men.

Perhaps the members of the committee have a legitimate argument for this. The committee was charged "to determine whether these viewpoints and formulations are in conformity with the system of doctrine taught in the Westminster Standards" (MGA 34:229-30). But should the limited mandate given to the committee excuse them for not doing biblical exegesis in their investigations? If they can be excused, then this would only shift culpability to the Assembly as a whole for a defective mandate.

In either case, the Scriptures were not used in this investigation as the "supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined." The Westminster Standards were. Are we content now to "rest" our case with the "decrees of councils" (i.e., Westminster), "the opinions of ancient writers" (17th-century theologians), and "doctrines of men" (the divines of Westminster)?

It is important to remember that the Standards do not provide authoritative guidance concerning everything the Scriptures teach. While those of us who have subscribed to the Westminster Standards believe that they are a faithful exposition of particular doctrines taught in Scripture, the Standards can by no means be a comprehensive hermeneutic for all of Scripture. The Standards deal with various subjects, but they do not exhaust how Scripture uses terminology, nor do they deal with every doctrine taught in the Bible. The Committee acknowledges this when their Report states, "It is certainly possible to say more than our Confession does about biblical truth, but this should not necessitate a denial of the vitals of our faith" (p. 2).

This is true. To say more than the Confession or Standards as a whole say or to say that language may be used differently in various contexts does not necessitate the denial of the vitals of our faith. Confessional language and doctrines may be affirmed while also affirming that the Bible uses terminology differently than our Standards.

The Report proceeds as if the Westminster Standards speak exhaustively on the subjects that they address, rather than substantially. For example, since the WS only address adoption from a present/now perspective (WCF 12; WLC 69; WSC 32, note "in this life"), would we want to argue that it would be un- or anti-confessional for Paul to speak of a future/not yet aspect of adoption in Rom. 8:23? But the Westminster Standards, in addressing adoption as a present benefit, are not trying to speak exhaustively in such a way to deny any sort of future aspect to it.

Often different terminology is not antithetical but symphonic. This is simply to acknowledge the richness of the inspired Word of God and the limited scope of our Confessional documents. Remembering the limited scope of our secondary standards compared to the Bible is essential, because the issues in debate are at least mostly extra-confessional (e.g., how exactly "union with Christ" relates to "justification"). Given that

fact, the only way to critique different perspectives on these issues is from the Bible (since the standards are silent). Therefore, it is regrettable that no substantive biblical critique is even offered in the Report.

Is it the case in the PCA that one cannot teach or preach on anything contained in the Bible that is not codified in the Westminster Standards?

The bottom line is that the FV men have all sought to exegete Scripture with care and faithfulness, even if that means correcting or modifying some cherished traditional formulations and categories. Instead of dealing with their biblical essays and argumentation, the committee chose to evaluate and judge their work using the very narrow terminology and formulations of 17th-century Reformed scholasticism. However highly one may value the Westminster Standards, they were never intended to be the final arbiter of what the Scriptures say. By not engaging the Scriptural arguments of the FV men, the committee has failed to engage and address the genuine issues and concerns of the FV men and has elevated the Confession to the place of final arbiter in a matter of religious controversy contra WCF 1.10.

Moreover, in defense of the Report's methodology some have warned that "every heretic appeals to Scripture." While true in many instances, this cannot honestly be appealed to as a reason for our failure to interact with Reformed brothers who through biblical exegesis and argument seek to participate in the continuing reformation of the church. After all, misuse does not nullify proper use (*abusus non tollit usum*). Just because heretics misuse Scripture does not mean that we should avoid the Bible and only use our Confession when dealing with brothers in Christ who offer biblical exegesis to support their theological positions. All cult leaders preach sermons, but that is no reason for Christian preachers not to do so. This argument is a flimsy and unconvincing way to keep the Bible on the shelf in this controversy. One of the most important reasons the Report should not be adopted by GA is that it doesn't argue its case from the Bible. There is no rationale that makes this acceptable.

Are there Arminians in the PCA? Using Theological Terms with Integrity

9. The Report makes it appear as if some of the FV men are at odds with the Reformed confession of unconditional election and decretal theology. Another way to put this is that the committee Report in effect accuses the FV men (all bona fide Calvinists) of being closet Arminians. While avoiding a direct accusation (the word "Arminian" itself is not used), the Report leads readers to believe that there are men in the PCA who deny unconditional election as it is confessed in the Westminster Standards. They do this here:

Moreover, to affirm the Standards, and then redefine the terms used in the Standards, *is not to affirm the Standards*. For example, to affirm the decretal view of election, and then to say that the Bible teaches that the elect may fall from their election, is to set the Bible over against the Standards. The committee holds that by receiving and adopting the Westminster Standards as containing the system of

doctrine taught in Scripture, we are saying that the terms used in the Confession faithfully represent what is taught in Scripture (p. 10, emphasis mine).

The clear implication of this paragraph is that FV men affirm decretal election while at the same time affirming that among those decretally elect are some who may fall from that election. It is true that this position would be contrary to the Westminster Standards. It is also true that none of the FV men in question believes that those elect to eternal life will ever fail to inherit eternal life, because they all affirm with one voice that God infallibly saves to the uttermost those he has chosen for that salvation.

Let it be clear from the beginning that all the FV men affirm the Confessional teaching on decretal election. The Report misleads even in its acknowledgement of this fact. In saying “It is true that *many* FV proponents affirm the decretal view of election found in the Westminster Standards”(p.8, emphasis added), it implies that not *all* FV proponents do so. Yet in the very next sentence they quote Douglas Wilson: “The fact of decretal election is affirmed by every FV spokesman that I know of” (p. 8). The committee provides no evidence that Wilson is wrong in this claim, even though they have just suggested this. The fact is that all FV men would join the Session of Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church in declaring:

From before the foundation of the world, God has sovereignly chosen a multitude no man can number for salvation. The basis of His election was solely His grace and mercy and nothing in the creature. The number of the elect can neither increase nor diminish. All who were chosen by God from the beginning will be surely saved eternally. Not one will be lost. (*Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church Session’s Responses to Charges of Heterodoxy*, adopted June 8, 2006)

The FV men are solid Calvinists and carry no brief for Arminianism. They affirm the eternal decree.

The Report's handling of "election" and "decretal" theology is extremely confusing, because it equivocates in its use of the term “election.” The report begins its treatment of election by noting that in the Westminster Standards “election is set in the context of God’s eternal decree” (p. 3). The Report proceeds to declare, “This election, *before the foundation of the world was laid*, was an election *unto life and unto everlasting glory* (WCF 3.5)” (p. 4, italics in original). In this way, the committee affirms decretal election of individuals to everlasting life, which is an election from which no one can fall.

It is true that *decretal* election of individuals is the primary focus of the Westminster Standards when treating election. But the Report also acknowledges another type of election found in our Standards: “The Confession is, of course, fully aware of the national, ethnic, external, covenant election of Israel (LC 101), as a church under age (WCF 19.3-4, 1.8, and 7.5)” (p. 4). In addition to *decretal* election, the Confession teaches there is also *covenantal* election unto the visible body of God’s people. Having acknowledged the realities of both decretal election and covenantal election, the Report repeatedly implies the FV men are speaking of the former when in fact they are speaking

of the latter. Because of this confusion, the committee's criticisms completely miss the mark.

Consider again the following sentence: "For example, to affirm the decretal view of election, and then to say that the Bible teaches that the elect may fall from their election, is to set the Bible over against the Standards." The conclusion is only warranted if the same type of election, *decretal* election, is meant throughout the sentence. It is not true if the second mention of election is a reference to covenantal election, and *this is the only kind of election that FV men say a person may fall from*.

The fallacy is seen when we look at the sentence again in light of this fact: "For example, to affirm the decretal view of election, and then to say that the Bible teaches that the [covenantally] elect may fall from their [covenantal] election, is to set the Bible over against the Standards." This conclusion now is clearly false, because all acknowledge that those who are covenantally elect and thus members of the visible church may fall from *that* election. Another way to state this is that not all members of the visible church are members of the invisible church. When the views of the FV men are thus stated accurately, the conclusion that they "set the Bible against the Standards" holds no water.

The Committee repeatedly fails to keep in mind their acknowledgement that the Confession does teach a covenantal election. The Report claims in I.D that "views which juxtapose 'election from the standpoint of the covenant' with the Standard's decretal view of election, offering this as an alternative and superior way of thinking about (e.g.) the visible church, the sacraments and assurance are not only forsaking the language of the Standards, but undermining its theology." Setting aside the dubious matter of "superiority," how can speaking of "election from the standpoint of the covenant" be an alternative to the Confession and an instance of "forsaking the language of the Standards" when the Report has previously acknowledged covenantal election as a Confessional teaching? The Report itself "juxtaposes" these concepts.

The FV men are trying to come to grips with the way the Bible speaks of "election." The report makes it appear as if whenever the Bible uses words like "elect," "election," "chosen," etc. that it always refers to the same decretal reality. But Reformed theologians have always recognized that the language of scripture is richer and more varied than that. Take Louis Berkhof as a typical example:

The Bible speaks of election in more than one sense. There is (1) the election of Israel as a people for special privileges and for special service, Deut. 4:37; 7:6-8; 10:15; Hos. 13:5. (2) The election of individuals to some office, or to the performance of some special service, as Moses, Ex. 3, the priests, Deut. 18:5; the kings, 1 Sam. 10:24; Ps. 78:70, the prophets, Jer. 1:5, and the apostles, John 6:70; Acts 9:15. (3) The election of individuals to be children of God and heirs of eternal glory, Matt. 22:14; Rom. 11:5; 1 Cor. 1:27,28; Eph. 1:4; 1 Thess. 1:4; 1 Pet. 1:2; II Pet. 1:10. The last is the election that comes into consideration here as a part of predestination (*Systematic Theology*, p. 114).

The FV men explore how the Bible uses election covenantally as well as decretally. They take seriously the richness and variety noted by Berkhof. This is standard in Reformed theology. Yet the Committee appears to believe our terminology must be delimited by our secondary Standards: “The committee holds that by receiving and adopting the Westminster Standards as containing the system of doctrine taught in Scripture, we are saying that *the terms used in the Confession faithfully represent what is taught in Scripture*” (p. 10, emphasis added). It must be said, however, that Confessional terminology may be faithful without exhausting the richness of Scripture, such as the variety of uses of “election” noted by Berkhof above.

Does subscription to the Westminster Standards mean we can't use terms the way the Bible does if we don't find that usage in our secondary Standards?

It appears the committee is troubled by the FV men's *emphasizing* covenantal election *more than* decretal election, thus departing from the *emphasis* of the Westminster Standards. But this is problematic for several reasons.

First, the Report assumes that the Standards perfectly capture the emphasis of Scripture. Not only is this not the claim of the Standards themselves; it is clearly impossible. As John Frame has noted:

It is impossible for theology to have precisely the same "emphasis" as Scripture does. To do that, theology would have to simply *repeat* Scripture from Genesis to Revelation. (*The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, p. 182).

Second, if we can never explore areas not emphasized in our Standards, we will not be able to declare the whole counsel of God. Scripture speaks to much not addressed in our Confession, and we must be able to teach and preach on the whole Bible. For example, there is not a great deal about missions in the Westminster Standards. But we certainly want to emphasize missions even if the Standards do not.

Third, theological exploration in areas outside the emphasis of our Standards can actually be a robust affirmation of the Standards. The fact that the Standards treat decretal theology so thoroughly ought to free us up to affirm its teachings in that area wholeheartedly while directing our energies to other biblical and theological topics not so thoroughly treated in our confessional documents. This should not be seen as detracting from the Standards in any way. It is simply a recognition that they don't exhaust the teaching of Scripture, which is something everyone in the PCA ought to be willing to affirm.

Fourth, Theological progress is possible only if we are willing to ask new questions of Scripture, so we can build upon the fine tradition handed down to us.

Once again I am dismayed by the lack of biblical exegesis on the part of the Committee. The FV men have presented detailed biblical arguments for their understanding of covenantal election and its relationship to decretal election. These arguments are not

answered by confusing these categories and criticizing FV claims about the former with Confessional statements about the latter. Yet that is what the Report does. This is an injustice to PCA Teaching Elders who deserve charitable biblical answers to biblical arguments.

Contrary to the impression of the Report, the FV men are not Arminians. To a man, they all confess election or predestination unto eternal life. They affirm everything the Westminster Confession and Catechisms confess about "election unto life." To substantiate this once again, consider these two paragraphs from *The Federal Vision* (Athanasius Press, 2004).

God, in eternity past, elected in Christ a great multitude to salvation. This election was wholly gracious and unconditional, having its source only in the free mercy and good pleasure of God. Those the Father elected to eternal salvation, he sent his Son to die for. His atoning work is fully sufficient for their salvation and completely accomplished their redemption. The Holy Spirit works in these same chosen ones to apply Christ's saving work to them and keep them faithful to Christ their whole lives. Because of the hardness of their hearts in sin, this work of grace must be, ultimately, irresistible. No elect person can be lost and no non-elect person can attain salvation.

God's eternal decree to gather his elect into a people for his name is worked out in history. We do not emphasize God's action in eternity at the expense of his work in history, or vice versa. Nor do we pit individual election versus corporate election. Chosen individuals only come to realize their election in the context of the elect community. One's election becomes manifest in the administration of Word and sacrament, as one responds to the gospel and enters the church in baptism. Christ is present in his church by his Spirit, to see to it that all his elect ones are brought to faith in him (p. 287).

Only Calvinists talk this way. What ought to concern every presbyter is that the FV men are being badly misinterpreted in the Report. I'll say again that this kind of terrible mistake might have been avoided had the committee been more balanced or had the committee bothered to get clarification and interaction from any of the FV men.

The Report often interprets the Westminster Standards in very narrow, sometimes idiosyncratic ways.

10. In the introduction, the Report affirms *sola scriptura* but then immediately conflates the principle with confessional authority given that the BCO affirms the Westminster standards as "standard expositions of the teachings of Scripture" and that the standards are affirmed as comprising a "system of doctrine." Westminster is repeatedly described as a "doctrinal system" a "system of doctrine" and even a "theology" throughout the study.

Yet the authors do not tell us *how* they read the Westminster Standards. The Standards are treated as though they are self-interpreting, bearing self-evident meanings. Thus the Report often resorts to arguments from force: e.g., "needless to say" (p. 7), "it is evident that" (p. 9), "the Standards are clear" (p. 10). But it is not evident or clear at all. That's why we are debating these issues.

The Report uses Westminster as a wax nose for molding a doctrinal orthodoxy that appears more read *into* Westminster than *out*. Just one example: on p. 6 the Report claims that "merit relates to the just fulfillment of the conditions of the covenant of works," and then cites LC 55, cf. WCF 30.4. But these "proof-texts" bear no relationship to the point. I'll have more to say about this particular issue later.

11. The 3rd and most substantial recommendation of the Study Committee Report goes too far.

That the General Assembly recommends the declarations in the Report as a faithful exposition of the Westminster Standards, and further reminds those ruling and teaching elders whose views are out of accord with our Standards of their obligation to make known to their courts any differences in their views (p. 27).

The reigning viewpoint in the PCA is that pastors subscribe to the system of doctrine contained in the Westminster Standards and that exceptions that do not strike at the heart of the system of doctrine are allowed on a case-by-case basis according to the judgment of their presbyteries.

But this recommendation to "remind" ruling and teaching elders goes along with recommendation #2 that asks the General Assembly to declare the contents of the Report to be a "faithful exposition of the Standards." This pairs the committee Report with the standards in a strong way:

- The Report's declarations are a "faithful exposition of Standards"
- The Westminster Standards are "standard expositions of the teachings of Scripture"

Yet, candidates and pastors subscribe to "the system of doctrine" in the standards, and the Report has declarations that do not all relate to the exposition of the Standards but in fact break new ground, as will be made clear shortly.

Furthermore, the Report broadly considered makes claims about N.T. Wright's teachings and the teachings of other scholars and pastors, some of whom are PCA members. Is it permissible for the General Assembly to declare how a man must interpret another man? Suppose a pastor understands N. T. Wright or Douglas Wilson differently than the committee? A church session or presbytery's concern ought to be what an ordinand or pastor believes and teaches, not what he thinks of Wright or Wilson. It sounds as if the

Report becomes part of the subordinate standards, but this adds quite a lot of specificity to the standards that one does not find in them explicitly.

An example of breaking new ground is point #8 of the Report's declarations (p. 27). It would technically rule out the strain of the Reformed tradition that holds that a seed of faith or a seed of regeneration is given to infants in their baptisms. Further, that point cuts off the debate concerning common grace and its relationship to Christ's work. It also rules out the "common operations of the Spirit" being the common operations of the *Spirit of Christ*, something the confession does not specify. This is not the place to flesh out an argument or to present biblical and theological arguments. The point I am illustrating is that some genuine theological advances may not state things precisely as the Westminster Standards do, but that doesn't mean that they are not "in conformity" with the system of doctrine found there.

There are so many narrow, idiosyncratic interpretations of the Westminster Standards in the Report that it would be unwise for the General Assembly to adopt this Report's recommendations. Perhaps this is unintended, but the effect of passing the Report will be to standardize a narrow tradition within Reformed Presbyterian confessional theology.

12. The committee mandates an idiosyncratic theology of merit that is not found in the Westminster Standards and is contrary to many mainstream Reformed theologians. In I.A.2, the committee defends the Confession's use of "merit" in the context of describing Jesus' fulfillment of the covenant of works (pp. 5-6). The uses of the term "merit" in the Standards, however, never have reference to Adam's obedience, but to the obedience of Christ. This becomes important when the Committee later says, "FV writers unanimously reject the concept of merit under the covenant of works" (I.C, p. 9). That is true, but there is no Confessional requirement to use the word "merit" to describe Adam's inheritance of life under the first covenant. Either the committee is mandating an extra-confessional standard here or they are interpreting the Standards in a very narrow way that is not required by our ordination vows.

The committee Report also claims that there is a "theological category of 'merit' in the Standards" (p. 16, 28), but that is not the case. The Westminster Divines occasionally use the word as a verb that is roughly equivalent to "earn," "deserve," or "be worthy of," and they use it as a noun *solely* in reference to Christ as a synonym for "worthiness." There is no chapter heading in the Confession, "Of Merit," nor is there a question in either catechism, "What is merit?" The word is never defined and we are left with context to figure it out.

Even odder is the Report's claim that "merit relates to the just fulfillment of the conditions of the covenant of works" (p. 6). In denying that our good works can merit salvation, the Westminster Confession plainly lays down criteria for merit that are out of reach for a sinless creature as well as a sinful one (WCF16.5). Furthermore, from Zacharias Ursinus to Francis Turretin there is a long line of Reformed authorities who categorically deny that sinless Adam could merit anything from God. The committee has no authority to bind us to an extra-confessional doctrine. And according to Rowland

Ward's treatment of this subject (*God and Adam*), virtually all 17th-century divines would have refrained from using "merit" to describe Adam's duties under the covenant of works.

Even so, the Report declares, "The view that strikes the language of 'merit' from our theological vocabulary so that the claim is made that Christ's merits are not imputed to his people is contrary to the Westminster Standards" (p. 18). The Report mandates something it has not shown the Westminster Standards mandate. The Standards say that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to his people. This is pretty much the language of the Bible. But the standards do not go on to describe that "righteousness" as the merit of his obedience to the law in fulfillment of the covenant of works.

If someone wants to adopt this position, that's fine. There are many Reformed theologians who argue for a view of merit that the Report defends. But it is not a touchstone of orthodoxy. Many orthodox Reformed ministers and theologians have disagreed with this way of putting things and not been judged as heretics. Furthermore, if a PCA minister thinks that "merit" is problematic for various reasons, but confesses that Christ's "worthiness" covers our unworthiness, why should a preferred term be enough to constitute a rejection of the system of doctrine of the Westminster Standards?

13. Related to the last point, the Report claims that Christ's work "satisfied the covenant of works." But where is this in the Westminster Standards? Not one of the citations listed in the Report prove such a link. Of course, Jesus had to perfectly obey the Father and did so. And his work does fulfill the calling and duties of Adam. All this is true and no FV man denies it. My concern here again is that the Westminster Standards have been misused. The references they list to prove that Christ had to satisfy the covenant of works (WLC 20, 32; WCF 3.5, 7.2, 11.1; WSC 12) do not say what the Report claims.

14. The Report is misleading because the FV men do not believe that the sacraments effect eternal salvation for all who receive them. The committee states (I.A.1) that "the Standards qualify sacramental efficacy with the assertion that the sacraments are efficacious and effectual to the elect (that is, the elect from the standpoint of the decree) and to them only (WCF 8.6, 8.1, 28.6; LC 154 [cf. 59])" (p. 4). This is true if we are thinking about "efficacy to eternal salvation." But the sacraments have efficacies of different sorts. Those who take the Supper wrongly eat and drink condemnation to themselves; that is an efficacious sacrament, but it is efficacious towards one who is (possibly) reprobate. Further, the Confession states that baptism admits the baptized into the visible church, marks a separation of the baptized from the world, and engages the baptized to serve God (27.1; 28.1). Baptism always does that. It efficaciously does that. Those effects of baptism are not dependent on eternal election to salvation. The Report is misleading because it wrongly indicates that the FV men believe that the sacraments effect eternal salvation for all who receive them. In fact, the FV men do not believe this.

15. The committee Report appears to canonize the Southern Presbyterian interpretation of the Westminster standards when it comes to sacramental efficacy. The Report claims

Water baptism does not effect this [ingrafting into Christ] on its own, nor does it do so necessarily at the time of administration (WCF 28:5). Rather, baptism serves to exhibit and confer the gracious promises of the Gospel to the elect recipient in God's appointed time (WCF 28:6). Further, baptism serves sacramentally to "strengthen and increase [our] faith" (LC 162); this is why we are urged to "improve" our baptisms (LC 167).

The Report is so concerned to limit and qualify the efficacy of the sacraments that it fails to notice Confessional language that indicates a stronger view of efficacy than it is willing to admit. The language of WCF 28:5 "the efficacy of baptism is not limited to its time of administration" has a long history of interpretation. Today it is often taken to mean that God normally works sometime after baptism to effect regeneration. But there is a great deal of historical precedent for the view that this clause means that baptism is efficacious not only at the moment when it is administered but also all through one's entire life. In other words, the clause does not necessarily teach that baptism may not be effectual at the time of its administration but may be sometime later. Rather, it can mean that not only is baptism effectual at the time of its administration but it continues to be effectual through the Christian's entire life. As Calvin says of the efficacy of our baptism:

But we must realize that at whatever time we are baptized, we are once and for all washed and purged for our whole life. Therefore as often as we fall away, we ought to recall the memory of our baptism and fortify our mind with it, that we may always be sure and confident of the forgiveness of sins (*Institutes* 4.15.3).

Therefore, there is no doubt that all pious folk throughout life, whenever they are troubled by a consciousness of their faults, may venture to remind themselves of their baptism, that from it they may be confirmed in assurance of that sole and perpetual cleansing which we have in Christ's blood (*Institutes* 4.15.4)

It should also be noted that the Westminster Directory for the Public Worship of God explains that the "inward grace and virtue of baptism is not tied to that very moment of time wherein it is administered" but rather "that the fruit and power thereof reacheth to the whole course of our life." (This phrase is also used to explain WCF 28.6 in the PCA BCO [§56-4]). If we allow Westminster to interpret Westminster, then the divines were not denying that baptism is efficacious when it is administered, but rather they were concerned to show that the power and efficacy of baptism are not *bound* to that one point in time.

Moreover, if we compare Westminster with earlier Reformed symbolic documents we find that many of them confirm this interpretation of baptismal efficacy. The Second Helvetic Confession confesses, "There is but one baptism in the Church of God; and it is sufficient to be once baptized or consecrated unto God. For baptism once received continues for all of life, and is a perpetual sealing of our adoption" (Chapt. 20). The Belgic Confession states, "Neither does this Baptism only avail us at the time when the water is poured upon us and received by us, but also through the whole course of our life"

(34). The Scots Confession says, "For baptism once received continues for all of life, and is a perpetual sealing of our adoption" (21). Finally, the French Confession teaches the same: "though we are baptized only once, yet the gain that it represents to us reaches over our whole lives and to our death, so that we have a lasting witness that Jesus Christ will always be our justification and sanctification" (35).

There's no reason to argue the details of this interpretation here, but only to note that the Westminster Standards can be interpreted in more ways than one with integrity. Indeed, the Westminster Standards were at many places composed to be read in more than one way. The formulations were often composed in ways that would please the various parties in the Assembly. The authors of the Report may not agree with this interpretation, but they have no right to limit the PCA to their own convictions. The Westminster Confession can be read in more ways than Southern Presbyterianism often cares to admit. It would be unwise to adopt a report that limits our reading to this one narrow option.

16. There is also a problem with the Report's narrow understanding of what "union with Christ" means and when it happens. The Report (p. 19) says

Finally, the claim of some FV proponents that all those who are baptized with water are savingly "united to Christ" flatly contradicts the Westminster Standards. The position of our Standards is that union with Christ occurs only to those who are effectually called (or who are the elect; LC 66-68). Further, the committee affirms that in baptism "the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost," with these qualifications, "to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God's own will, in His appointed time" (WCF 28:6). When FV writers tie together water baptism and baptismal efficacy in a fashion that may feel to some like *ex opera operato* (i.e., in the performance of the act), they run counter to WCF 28:6, which insists "the efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment wherein it is administered." Moreover, the efficacy of baptism is tied by our Standards to "the working of his [Christ's] Spirit in them that by faith receive them [the sacraments]" (WSC 91).

There's a great deal to comment on here, but since I've already dealt with the issue of what is meant by the "not tied to the moment" language of WCF 28:6, I should call attention to another problem related to the meaning of "union with Christ." The Report says that the "position of our Standards is that union with Christ occurs only to those who are effectually called" and not to all who are baptized. But this goes well beyond the language of the Westminster Standards. Consider Larger Catechism Question Q167: 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 serious and thankful consideration of the nature of it, and of the ends for which Christ instituted it, the privileges and benefits conferred and sealed thereby, and our solemn vow made

therein; by being humbled for our sinful defilement, our falling short of, and walking contrary to, the grace of baptism, and our engagements; by growing up to assurance of pardon of sin, and of all other blessings sealed to us in that sacrament; by drawing strength from *the death and resurrection of Christ, into whom we are baptized*, for the mortifying of sin, and quickening of grace; and by endeavoring to live by faith, to have our conversation in holiness and righteousness, as those that have therein given up their names to Christ; and to walk in brotherly love, as being baptized by the same Spirit into one body (emphasis mine).

Take note here of what baptism is said to do such that one can "improve upon it." Specifically, notice that we baptized Christians are to draw "strength from the death and resurrection of *Christ, into whom we are baptized*. . ." Note, too, that the last line in the Catechism answer is a reference to 1 Cor. 12, where the "one body" is quite clearly the body of Christ. I know that the Scripture references aren't binding and were appended to the Standards later, but it is interesting that this Scriptural allusion appears in the Catechism. 1 Cor. 12 is also the Scripture reference for the WCF 28.1 where it states that by baptism we are joined to the visible church; that suggests that the Westminster divines took the one body, the body of Christ, in 1 Cor. 12 as a reference to the visible church.

17. The Report makes extra-confessional formulations part of the "vitals of the system of doctrine" contained in the Westminster Standards. For example, the Report says,

Nevertheless, the truly problematic claims of the Federal Vision proponents come when some suggest that "Christ's active obedience" is not transferred to his people or that imputation is "redundant" because it is subsumed in "union with Christ." Such claims contradict the position of the Westminster Standards and strike at the vitals of the system of doctrine contained there (p. 18).

How can suggesting that Christ's active obedience is not transferred to his people be a blow to the "vitals of the system of doctrine" in our Standards when our Standards never use this terminology? One should note that there is no controversy among the FV men about the *forensic* character of justification, nor about the fact that Christ's righteousness is reckoned to us by faith. The controversy is about this notion of the merit of Christ's "active works" of obedience being transferred to us. They see no biblical support for such a conception. Neither did some in the Westminster Assembly. But whatever one may think of the FV claims here, the point is that an extra-confessional litmus test is being brought to bear against the FV men.

The Report refers to "the active obedience of Christ" at least six times (p. 6, 11, 17, 18). But the phrase never appears in the Westminster Standards. This looks like an attempt to revise all the way back to the Westminster Assembly and make affirming the imputation of the "active obedience of Christ" mandatory for PCA ministers. This is especially amazing because a few years ago I made a special point of listening to church historian Chad Van Dixhoorn on this issue because I heard from one of the committee's members that he was the one who had it right.

Dr. Van Dixhoorn spoke at a pre-GA conference on the Westminster Assembly. He was perfectly clear that the Assembly debated this issue and that the consensus compromise was to write the confession in such a way that allowed ministers who did not believe in the imputation of the active obedience of Christ to subscribe. How then can it be made a litmus test today when it is not stated nor even implied in the Westminster Documents? Consider what the Scottish theologian William Cunningham has to say about the debate:

It [the distinction between active and passive obedience] is to be traced rather to the *more minute and subtle speculations*, to which the doctrine of justification was afterwards subjected; and though the distinction is quite in accordance with the analogy of faith, and may be of use in aiding the formation of distinct and definitive conceptions,—it is not of any great practical importance and need not be much pressed or insisted on, if men heartily and intelligently ascribe their forgiveness and acceptance wholly to what Christ has done and suffered in their room and stead. There is no ground in anything Calvin has written for asserting, that he would have denied or rejected this distinction, if it had been presented to him. But it was perhaps more in accordance with the cautious and reverential spirit in which he usually conducted his investigations into divine things, to abstain from any minute and definite statements (*The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967], 404; emphasis mine).

To affirm the imputation of the active obedience of Christ may be traditional in some circles, and PCA ministers are free to believe it, but for the Assembly to adopt the Report would mean that assent to this doctrine would now be *required* of those who subscribe to the Westminster Standards. This is a form of extra-confessional binding that must not be allowed in our denomination.

18. The Report makes sweeping statements about the Westminster Standards that are implausible and then does not adequately support them. For example, the Report claims, "The Confession. . . carefully distinguishes conditions from requirements and reminds us that even the faith of the elect is the gift of God (WCF 11.1; LC 32)" (p. 6).

As far as I can tell, the citations only support the latter claim. But no one in the PCA disputes that the faith of the elect is the gift of God. Where, however, in any of the Westminster documents is a *careful distinction* made between "conditions" and "requirements"? These terms can, in many contexts in the English language, be synonyms. In fact, Larger Catechism Q32 uses these words as mutually interpretive of one another:

Q. 32. How is the grace of God manifested in the second covenant?

A. The grace of God is manifested in the second covenant, in that he freely provideth and offereth to sinners a mediator, and life and salvation by him; and *requiring* faith as the *condition* to interest them in him, promiseth and giveth his Holy Spirit to all his elect, to work in them that faith, with all other saving graces;

and to enable them unto all holy obedience, as the evidence of the truth of their faith and thankfulness to God, and as the way which he hath appointed them to salvation (emphasis added).

The committee seems to think that this is of great importance in their critique of the FV men. They go on to link "conditions" with "merit" to argue for a meritorious pre-fall covenant with Adam. But if it is that important, they need to show us where this distinction is in the Standards or how it can be derived from them. As it stands, this seems to be a false statement and one that is completely unsupported by our Standards. It has no place, as it stands, in an official church document spelling out the faith of the denomination.

19. It appears as if the committee Report replaces careful formulations of the Westminster Standards with popular theological slogans. Sometimes the committee Report says things that we all accept but then anchors these truisms to the Westminster standards in a way that misrepresents what Westminster actually says. For example, the committee Report claims,

Clearly, the Standards' doctrine of election unto life. . . provides the basis for the doctrines of final perseverance of the saints in the future, (WCF 17:1, 2) and the believer's assurance of eternal life (WCF 17.2; 18.3)" (p. 4).

Clearly? The statement about final perseverance is clear enough. But with regard to assurance, it is certainly true that the biblical writers tie election to assurance (i.e. Ephesians 1:3-14). Nevertheless, *nothing in the Standards* actually supports the statement that "the standard's doctrine of election unto life . . . provides the basis for . . . the believer's assurance of eternal life." WCF 17.2 says no such thing (and doesn't discuss assurance at all). Moreover, WCF 18.3 says:

This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties before he be partaker of it: yet, being enabled by the Spirit to know the things which are freely given him of God, he may, without extraordinary revelation, *in the right use of ordinary means*, attain thereunto. And therefore it is the duty of everyone to give all diligence to make his calling and election sure, that thereby his heart may be enlarged in peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, in love and thankfulness to God, and in strength and cheerfulness in the duties of obedience, the proper fruits of this assurance; so far is it from inclining men to looseness (emphasis added).

The committee has asserted that Christians have a basis for assurance *in their election*. But according to what this paragraph of the Westminster Confession actually says, *the question of whether or not we are elect is the challenge of assurance*. We must gain assurance of our calling and election by "the right use of ordinary means" as the Holy Spirit enlarges our hearts in peace and joy.

Quite frankly, while I don't think anyone has a substantial exception to the Confession here, the Confession is much more dour in tone than anything typically preached in the PCA. Even so, the fact remains that what the Committee claims to have found in the Standards is not found in WCF 18.3 and the Report ought not to appeal to a paragraph in the Confession that supports the exact opposite claim.

Likewise, the Report claims

While the Westminster Confession counsels us to exercise great care in our handling of the Bible's teaching on election, it positively celebrates the importance of the doctrine of decretal election for assurance (WCF 3.8) (p. 4-5).

The WCF "positively celebrates" the doctrine of decretal election for assurance? It does no such thing. Rather, it celebrates the importance of gaining a certainty of one's effectual vocation and the importance of sincerely obeying the Gospel for assurance. Here is what Westminster says:

The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care, that men, *attending the will of God revealed in his Word, and yielding obedience thereunto*, may, *from the certainty of their effectual vocation*, be assured of their eternal election. So shall this doctrine afford matter of praise, reverence, and admiration of God; and of humility, diligence, and abundant consolation to all *that sincerely obey the gospel*. (WCF 3.8, emphasis mine).

What is noticeable in this passage is that being assured *of one's election* is as much or more at issue than gaining assurance *from election*. Indeed, while "abundant consolation" is afforded by the doctrine of "the high mystery of predestination" (not "election," incidentally), that is only listed after "humility" and "diligence." Perhaps the Report glosses over "attending to the will of God" and "yielding obedience thereunto" as means of assurance so as not to appear to give credence to anything that resembles the formulations of the FV men. It appears at this point, however, that FV formulations are closer to Westminster than those offered in the Report.

The Report seems to gloss over the demand that this "high mystery" be "handled with special prudence and care," to get to the "celebration." But where is the celebration in the Confession? We are instructed in our Standards that Christians are to gain assurance of their election "from the certainty of their effectual vocation" [i.e. calling] which is done by "yielding obedience" to "the will of God revealed in his Word: (WCF 3.8).

There may not be any special problem with the Committee's different perspective, and it is probably not ultimately incompatible with the Confession's statements. But claiming to represent the Confession while editing it is irresponsible and another reason the Report lacks the integrity needed for approval. The Committee needs to revise these statements or show evidence of a better use of the Standards before we accept this Report.

The committee Report seriously misrepresents FV men's positions on crucial issues.

20. I believe it needs to be said that contrary to the impression given by the Report all of the FV men affirm without qualification justification by Christ through faith alone. They all enthusiastically embrace and teach the Reformation *solus* (Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone, and justification by Christ through faith alone, etc.). They believe that justification is forensic and declarative, based on the work of Christ and not based on or grounded in our moral transformation. They also all affirm the unmerited, free grace of God in Christ that flows from the unconditional election of God. They are not Pelagian, Arminian, Romanist, etc. when it comes to salvation. The controversial issues that are being debated have to do with more subtle dimensions of theology and exegesis. That is not to say these other issues are unimportant. But the differences do not rise to the level of "another Gospel." Debating about the mechanics of *how* Christ's death and the justification of the sinner are related is not necessarily the same thing as denying the Gospel.

21. In I.C, the Report quotes Peter Leithart's saying that the FV challenges Reformed culture as much or more than it does Reformed theology (p. 8). The Report considers this to be important for some reason. They cite a large paragraph from Leithart. Leithart writes about "boundary markers" of Reformed identity that are challenged by the FV. The committee goes on to say, "two of those identifying symbols or boundary-markers are the doctrines of election and covenant." Though the committee uses Leithart's language of "boundary-markers," he never mentioned election and covenant in his discussion of the Presbyterian identity crisis.

Leithart talks instead about the way Reformed theologians have often done theology – formulating their theology in direct opposition to Lutheran or Catholic formulations. He laments the fact that Reformed theology is all too often shaped by the negation of other traditions. FV theologians draw on sources outside the Reformed tradition, and attempt to follow Scriptural teaching and language, even when that means they may appear to end up sounding at points more like Lutherans than Calvinists. The Report should not be adopted as it stands because it misrepresents Leithart's essay.

Having included covenant and election as boundary markers of Reformed identity, the committee Report goes on to assert that "many FV proponents affirm the decretal view of election found in the Westminster Standards" (p. 8). But the word "many" is misleading. As the quotation from Douglas Wilson above (in reason #9) makes clear, every last one of the FV theologians affirms the decretal view of election found in the Standards. There are no exceptions. For the committee to go on to say that FV theologians also emphasize the need to recognize the varied use of the word "elect" in Scripture is disingenuous (p. 9-10). Consider this erroneous claim made by the Report in footnote #73:

FV writers frequently refer to John 15, where they use the allegory of the vine to make the point that the elect can be "cut off" (p. 31).

Again, let's be clear. No FV theologian *ever* says that the eternally elect can be cut off. The references the committee cites to prove that FV writers "frequently" say such things do not support their assertion. Moreover, that's not what John 15 says. John 15 says that there are those that are united to Christ in some genuine way that can be cut off.

It bears repeating: the FV men's formulations are no more confusing than the Committee's own recognition that the Standards acknowledge the general election of Israel (I.A.1, p. 3-4). Israel was "elect" but many were cut off and perished (1 Cor. 10:1ff.) One might even say that anyone who *limits* the terminology of election to its decretal sense, or who is hostile to using "election" in different senses, is out of accord with the Standards. Is the committee recommending that we never use the words "elect" or "election" in any other way than in their "decretal" sense? If not, then how can they criticize the FV men for calling attention to this biblical way of speaking?

22. In I.C, the Report states, "Rather than making distinctions between the 'first' and 'second' covenant in the fashion of the Westminster Standards, some either express hostility to the distinction while others simply collapse any distinction at all" (p. 8). The Committee provides no sources or references. Perhaps there's a good reason—there are no FV men who argue for making no distinctions between the Adamic covenant and the subsequent covenants. There are no references to cite. This is hearsay and does not belong in the Report. The charge of "monocovenantalism" gets thrown around a lot, but every FV man affirms that God's pre-fall covenant with Adam was not the same as the covenant(s) that came after the fall. The assertions of the committee are false and they give the impression that FV men hold bizarre views on the covenant.

It would have been more accurate for the Report to say that the FV men do not hold to the same *kind* of differences between the pre-fall covenant and the post-fall covenant. But to decide on these questions one has to argue details outside the scope of the Confession. Here again, the point is the liberty of PCA ministers to formulate biblical theological teaching on matters that the Confession does not address. The Report will severely limit that freedom.

23. In I.C, the committee Report declares:

"A major consequence of covenantal objectivity is that membership within the covenant is viewed in an undifferentiated manner. . . Most FV proponents also agree that the emphasis needs to rest on the 'visible' church as the 'people of God.' Union with this people, through baptism, is what is required for one to be elect; for the visible people of God is the 'body of Christ,' and Christ himself is the 'Elect One'" (p. 8).

There are two errors here. First, the consequence of covenant objectivity is *not* that there is *no difference* between those who are in covenant. The consequence is that the difference is not a difference having to do with whether they are in covenant or not. Whatever their differences, and every FV theologian acknowledges that there are many, *the baptized are in covenant*. The PCA BCO says that the presiding minister at a baptism

is "to admonish all that are present to look back to their Baptism, to repent of their sins against their covenant with God" (BCO §56-4). Denying that all baptized Christians are in covenant with God is not just unbiblical; it contradicts the PCA Constitution.

There's a second error: no FV man believes or has ever taught that something is "required for one to be elect" (p. 9). By its very nature, election is God's choice. That is true whether we are talking about the covenantal election of Israel or the decretal election of the invisible church. Israelites were Israelites only by God's sovereign choice. Those who are members of the body of Christ are "elect" in the same sense Israelites were; they are elect not because they have met the "requirement" of being baptized but because God has chosen to include them among His people.

It would be extremely unwise for us to adopt the Report given these falsehoods.

24. The Report erroneously asserts that some FV men "also proclaim that both elect and non-elect in the local church receive qualitatively the same grace. As Rich Lusk observed, 'We need to be willing to speak of the undifferentiated grace of God (or the generic, unspecified grace of God)'" (p. 22).

That is a quotation from Rich Lusk's "Covenant and Election FAQs" in the Auburn Avenue Colloquium volume. Yet reading in context, one discovers that *Lusk says just the opposite of what they claim here*. Here is a quote from the same section of Lusk's paper that the PCA Report cites above:

Are you saying there is NO difference at all between the covenant member who will persevere to the end and the covenant member who will apostatize?

No. God certainly knows (and decreed) the difference, and systematic theologians should make this difference a part of their theology. . .

This is not to say that there is no actual difference between the grace that the truly regenerate receive and the grace that future apostates receive. No doubt, there is a difference. . .

Lusk goes on to say that difference may not be *perceptible* to us and may not be a factor in every text that deals with apostasy (including Heb. 6). But contrary the Report's claim, Lusk does affirm a difference between the grace received by the elect and the reprobate. And what is more, in *The Federal Vision* (Athanasius Press, 2004), Lusk says the same thing, even using the "qualitative" language that the Report claims that he denies:

. . . this is not to say that there is no actual difference between the grace that the truly regenerate receive and the grace that future apostates receive. No doubt, there is a difference...Whatever grace reprobate covenant members receive is qualified by their lack of perseverance. Augustine rightly distinguished 'predestination unto grace,' which was only temporary, and did not lead to final salvation, from 'predestination unto perseverance,' which did issue forth in

eternal life... Rather, [the] presence or absence [of persevering faith] qualifies one's whole participation in the *ordo salutis*. The point here, however, is that this qualitative difference is not in view in warning passages such as Hebrews 6. . . (p. 275).

A Report that does not carefully cite sources cannot be adopted by our General Assembly as a trustworthy guide to the current controversies.

25. There are more inaccuracies. The Report says: "Doug Wilson has implied that all baptized covenant members are participants in Christ in the same 'strong sense,' writing that 'the person who did not persevere was not given less of Christ.'" (p. 23).

Douglas Wilson's own response reveals the committee's mistake:

I read that and thought something like, "Huh, that doesn't sound like me." So I went to the footnote and found a thread on this blog cited, a thread called "Life in the Regeneration." Here is the section they footnoted:

"In order to take all baptized covenant members as participants in Christ in the "strong sense," we would have to distinguish what is objectively given in Christ, and not what is subjectively done with those objective benefits. Perseverance would, on this reading, be what was subjectively done with what God has objectively given. In this view, the person who did not persevere was not given less of Christ. But this necessarily means that persevering grace is not an objective gift or grace. God's willingness to continue "the wrestling" would depend upon what kind of fight we put up, or cooperation we provide, and because no one's fundamental nature has been changed, those natures remain at 'enmity with God.' In this view, whatever total depravity means, it is not ontologically changed, just knocked down and sat upon. The Spirit pins one snarling dog, but not another. But this in turn leads to another thought—eventually at some time in the process we stop snarling and start cooperating (if we are bound to heaven), and what do we call this change or transformation. The historic name for this change has been regeneration, and I see no reason to change it."

In this section, I am arguing *for* the traditional use of the word regeneration, I am arguing *against* a particular view ("on this reading," "in this view"), and the PCA report here represented me as arguing 180 degrees from what I was in fact arguing. This is upside down and backwards. If they read that entire thread of posts, they would know that I believe it is incoherent to say that anyone receives "all of Christ" in the strong sense without receiving perseverance. This was simply sloppy (<http://www.dougwils.com/index.asp?Action=Anchor&CategoryID=1&BlogID=3848>).

The Report has misrepresented Douglas Wilson's position, imputing to him what he in fact clearly denies.

26. In one of their summaries (I.D) The Committee claims:

FV proponents have in effect provided an alternative hermeneutic for interpreting Scripture. They have done so 1) by concentrating their efforts on the "objectivity" of the covenant, 2) by stressing the "covenantal" efficacy of baptism, 3) by focusing on the undifferentiated membership of the visible church, 4) by holding the view that the "elect" are covenant members who may one day fall from their elect status, and 5) by highlighting the need for persevering faithfulness in order to secure final election (p. 10).

Disentangling all the problems here is difficult, but a few comments must suffice. First, the Report uses the phrase "'covenantal' efficacy of baptism," a phrase that they have not defined. Second, the FV men do *not* teach that the membership of the church is "undifferentiated." On the contrary, they teach that the membership of the church is *highly differentiated*. Third, FV theologians only affirm #4 if "elect" is used in its corporate sense. But the committee has already granted that this is a legitimate sense of the word. Finally, "final election" is secured by nothing but the sovereign choice of God. Election *manifests itself* in persevering faithfulness, but election is not secured by that. No FV man teaches such a monstrosity.

27. In II.C.1 (pp. 15-16) the committee summarizes Peter Leithart's article on justification, in which he argues that justification is both a verdict of "Righteous!" and a deliverance from Death and Sin. Leithart argues that justification and "definitive sanctification" are two ways of describing the same act, rather than distinct acts, and he suggests that Reformed theology has too rigidly separated justification and sanctification.

Three responses are in order. First, though this argument is grounded in examination of a number of texts in the Psalms and Prophets, the conclusion itself is not new in Reformed theology. Many Reformed exegetes have recognized that particularly in Romans 6:7 Paul uses the term "justify" when he is talking about an event that, systematically speaking, we would want to call "definitive sanctification."

Sinclair Ferguson says in *The Christian Life* (pp. 138-39) that while some "commentators limit Paul's words [in Rom. 6:7] to the idea of justification," Ferguson believes that "Paul's words cannot be limited to a forensic significance here." He gives three reasons: First, "In the context, he is explaining why we are no longer slaves to sin (Rom. 6:6)." Second, "as Paul applies his teaching, he states more directly that the believer is free from sin in the sense of deliverance from bondage to its authority: "you used to be slaves to sin" (Rom. 6:17) implies that they are so no longer."

Finally, Ferguson notes that "throughout this section of Romans, Paul seems to envisage sin as an alien power and virtually personifies it as 'The Sin.'" In sum, "Throughout the passage, then, Paul's focus is on the dominion or reign of sin, rather than on the guilt it brings. That reign has been broken for those who have been baptized into Christ, and who through the Spirit have come to share in Christ's death to sin and resurrection to new

life." Yet, he describes this liberation from the reign of sin as "justification." What Leithart has articulated is not new. It certainly is not heretical or un-Reformed.

Second, Leithart's suggestion that justification involves deliverance from sin is arguably inherent in the most rigidly forensic understanding of justification. The dominion of Sin is, after all, a judicial punishment for sin. Satan and Sin have no inherent rights over man, but after Adam's sin, God punished Adam and his seed by placing them under the dominion of sin. So long as mankind is guilty, that verdict remains in force. Christ's obedience unto death reverses that verdict, and through and in Him we are righteous before God. If the dominion of Sin is nothing but the sentence against guilty Adamic humanity, then the reversal of the verdict must immediately entail deliverance from the sentence. A verdict of "righteous" that leaves sinners under the dominion of Sin is not really a verdict of "righteous." A change in the sinner's life condition is not a danger to forensic justification; it is implied by it. If the status changes, and if slavery to sin is dependent on one's status, then the status change *means* liberation.

Third, the Shorter Catechism itself defines justification as both a forensic act and something more: "Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone" (Q. 33). Justification includes not only the act by which God constitutes us as righteous in His sight, because of the righteousness of Christ, but also His "acceptance" of us as righteous, His welcome of us. The Shorter Catechism teaches us that God the Judge not only regards us as righteous, but that the Judge accepts us as friends. The first is strictly judicial and forensic; but the acceptance is part of the same act, another dimension of justification.

Once again, passing the Report would canonize extra-Confessional language and categories, and the result would exclude not just FV men but many other Reformed pastors and theologians.

General Problems & Conclusion

28. If the PCA adopts the Report, it will be (for all practical purposes) adopting an official view of what the FV men teach, no matter what those men regarded as FV (or NPP) say about themselves. The PCA would be codifying an official view of the teaching of Wright, Leithart, Wilkins, Wilson, Lusk, etc. What these men actually believe and teach will no longer be a matter of open discussion. The same could be said about certain biblical texts (e.g., Jn. 15, Heb. 6) as well as sections of the Westminster Standards. Their interpretation will be fixed and will not be a matter of open discussion in the PCA.

The PCA professes to believe that there are not to be any additional secondary doctrinal standards beyond the Westminster Standards, but this document will quite likely end up functioning as a lens through which the confessional documents are read in the PCA (at least in most PCA presbyteries). This also makes it all too easy for presbytery

candidates to get shot down by "association." If you are asked about N. T. Wright or Steve Wilkins or Douglas Wilson in an ordination exam, and your interpretation of these men's work is different from the Report's, what do you think will happen?

One also has to wonder how the Report will function in places where a competing report has already been adopted at the presbytery level. Would a Report adopted by GA in any way trump the reports that Pacific Northwest and Missouri presbyteries have adopted for themselves? I would think not. But it might put those presbyteries in an awkward position.

29. This Committee Report will function like a judicial verdict against men who have been given none of the normal protections that court affords the accused. In a court proceeding, the accused gets the right to confront his accusers and cross-examine witnesses. None of that was done here and yet the Report asks us to sanction the proceeding and vote on a verdict of "heterodox" against ministers in good standing in their presbyteries.

Why has this issue not been dealt with through the courts? Presbyteries and court processes are supposed to be the way we decide if a minister in the PCA is orthodox. This committee Report effectively orders the presbyteries to come to a "guilty" verdict on ministers in good standing. How is that Presbyterian? Is it equitable and wise that a small committee can make judgments overruling the will of presbyteries in the denomination that have received these men as brothers in the Gospel ministry?

30. In conclusion, the last reason that it would be unwise to adopt the Report is that it would cut off the conversation just when it is getting started. What has been called "The Federal Vision" is a *conversation* among Reformed men, not a movement. Not everyone is singing from the same sheet of music or using the same talking points. But there are common interests and concerns. The kinds of biblical and theological issues raised by the FV men require a long, patient conversation between all sides of the debate. Why cut off constructive debate now with a Report that functions as a kind of top-down gavel to end the conversation?