

## SUBMITTED WRITTEN QUESTIONS FOR LOUISIANA PRESBYTERY'S EXAMINATION OF TEACHING ELDER STEVE WILKINS

[My responses are in boldface type, sw]

[It should be noted that I am indebted to the writings of numerous men who are not credited in the body of my response below. In these responses I have borrowed freely from the writings of Rich Lusk, Mark Horne, Peter Leithart, Jeff Meyers, Alastair Roberts, John Barach, James Jordan, and no doubt a number of others that I can't remember at present. Of course, none of these men should be held accountable for any errors that I might have expressed in the written responses below]

### I. THE *WESTMINSTER STANDARDS*

1. Regarding the *Westminster Standards*, what exceptions or reservations did you register with Louisiana Presbytery when you first became a member?

**In reviewing the minutes of Presbytery of May 13, 1989 (the meeting in which I was received into Louisiana Presbytery), the only exception recorded in the minutes was my exception to the teaching that the Lord's Supper is not to be given to baptized children prior to their admission to the table by the elders (WLC #177). I believe the Scripture teaches that baptized children who are capable of eating and drinking the elements of bread and wine on their own should be allowed admission to the Lord's table based upon their membership in the visible church. [It should be noted that I and our church have not practiced covenant communion but have continued to submit to the requirements of the PCA Book of Church Order which requires children to make profession of their faith before being admitted to the Lord's table. This has *always* been our practice and will continue to be unless our BCO is amended at this point.]**

**I also am fairly certain that I mentioned a few other quibbles and reservations. The following are what I remember mentioning:**

**1. I quibbled with the terminology of the so-called "covenant of works" (WCF 7.1) — I do not believe this to be the best way to refer to the pre-fall covenant between God and Adam since it is open to such wide misunderstanding regarding the whole matter of works and merit. I do not disagree, however, with the description of the "covenant of works."**

**2. I also took exception to the description of the Larger Catechism regarding what was acceptable activity for the Lord's Day. I do not believe all recreation should be prohibited as the catechism appears to prohibit.**

**3. I believe I also took exception to a certain interpretation of WCF 24.6. If this is understood to teach that divorce is only lawful in cases of adultery and willful desertion, then I disagree. It seems to me that the Scriptures allow for other serious forms of covenant-breaking (life-threatening abuse; refusal to keep marriage vows in other grossly immoral ways; etc.) to be forms of "fornication" which is the sole**

ground of lawful divorce (Matt. 5:32).

As I remember, these were the only exceptions I declared upon entering Presbytery.

[During the examination I was exhorted by one of our presbyters to use another word other than “quibble” to describe my reservations, because, he pointed out, the word “quibble” means to “to equivocate or evade or to dodge the question.” In fact, that is one meaning of the word. But it can also mean simply “to have a petty or very minor objection” which is precisely the way in which I am using it above. This illustrates once more how the same or similar words can mean different things depending upon the context. For this reason, I’ll stick with “quibble” though it is absolutely true that I could use such words as “scruple” or “minor objection” which would convey my intention equally accurately.]

2. Since becoming a member of Louisiana Presbytery, have your views regarding the *Westminster Standards* changed in any regard? Are there any additional or new exceptions that you have? Please explain.

**I would take exception to a particular reading of WLC #109. If this is understood to forbid pictures and all mental images of God then I would disagree with it. We are not to use pictures/images in worship or as aids to worship, but I do not understand the second commandment to forbid all representations of God. I do not believe the second commandment forbids pictures of Jesus or depicting the Holy Spirit by a dove, e.g.**

**I also would quibble with the language of WCF 7.1 which implies that the covenant is something added to the Creator-creature relationship. The implication is that God, after He created man, realized that there was a great distance between Himself and His creation and needed to do something additional to bridge the gap. I don’t think this is the best way to put it. This implies that the covenant bridges some metaphysical gap, as if man’s problem is his “creatureliness.” It seems to imply that being a creature *of itself* necessitates a relational distance between God and man. In contrast to this the Scriptures indicate that God enters into covenant with man by virtue of His role as Creator. Adam is constituted by creation in covenant with God. Genesis 1 uses the language of covenant-making to express God’s creative work (speaking, evaluating, separating, etc.). Genesis 2 is even more explicit. The covenantal name Yahweh is used there in connection with the creation of man. Man was a covenantal creature, under God’s covenantal lordship, responsible to God’s covenant laws and sanctions, enjoying God’s covenant love and favor, from the very moment that he was created from the dust of the earth. Furthermore, all men, by virtue of their creation, “know God” and live inescapably in relation to Him (Rom. 1:18ff).**

3. Do you believe any of your public teaching or writing since the beginning of the “Auburn Avenue Theology” controversy either contradicts or is inconsistent with the Standards? (Besides your registered exceptions).

**No I do not. My concerns I have not been with the Confession’s statements or**

definitions but rather with how we read the texts of Scripture which appear to contradict some of the statements and positions set forth in the Confession and Catechisms. I do not believe the scriptural texts do contradict the standards in fact but they are simply using terminology in a broader way than it is defined by our Confessional standards. This means that we must consider carefully the meaning of these terms in the particular contexts in which they are used. That has been my concern in regard to the so-called “Federal Vision” issues. I firmly hold to the Calvinistic system of doctrine set forth in the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms as the Biblical teaching.

This is probably, however, a good place to note the perspective from which the doctrines of salvation and the application of Christ’s redemption are discussed in the Westminster standards. The discussions regarding the application of redemption in the Westminster Standards beginning with the sections on effectual calling and continuing through the rest of the “ordo salutis” only properly apply to the elect as defined in WCF 3.5: “Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to his eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of his will, hath chosen, in Christ, unto everlasting glory, out of his mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith, or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving him thereunto; and all to the praise of his glorious grace.” Here, the “elect” are defined to be only those who are predestined to eternal life. This sets the parameters of the discussion concerning the application of redemption.

Thus, chapter 10 (“Of Effectual Calling”) begins by defining the effectual call as something belonging only to those “whom God hath predestinated unto life” i.e., the elect as defined in chapter 3 (see 3.5 for this precise phrase). The rest of the ordo salutis is consistently discussed in these terms.

- The justification described in chapter 11 is predicated of those “whom God effectually calleth.” None others can be said to be “justified” in the WCF sense.
- The adopted children of chapter 12 are those who are “never cast off, but sealed to the day of redemption; and inherit the promises, as heirs of everlasting salvation.” According to the Confession, the only people who are “sons of God” are those who in fact inherit eternal salvation at the last day.
- The sanctification defined in chapter 13 occurs to those who are justified in the sense defined in chapter 11. These alone are “sanctified” according to the definition of the Confession.
- “Saving” faith (WCF chapter 14) is only given to the elect (it is defined as “The grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls.”). None but the elect may have “saving faith.” Non-saving faith is not discussed in this chapter.
- Repentance is called “repentance unto life” and is thus that repentance that only the elect can have.

And so on. These chapters do not address the spiritual experience of those who are not elect (in the WCF 3 sense). Indeed, the Standards have very little to say about the spiritual experience of the non-elect who are members of the visible church. WCF 10.4 is perhaps the clearest and fullest statement. This section refers to those who are members of the church but who apostatize (those who received the “common operations of the Spirit”). The Confession makes clear that these who fall away “never truly come to Christ.”

But, the WCF does affirm that the Spirit works in some way in those who are not elect (it mentions the “common operations of the Spirit”). What are some of these “common operations of the Spirit”? The proof-texts give us some indication of what the writers of the Confession were thinking:

- Matt. 7:22 – the Spirit enables some to prophesy, cast out demons, and work miracles;
- Matt. 13:20,21 – Some receive the word with joy but only believe for a while;
- Heb. 6:4-5 – the Spirit enlightens, enables them to “taste of the heavenly gift; they become partakers of the Holy Spirit, taste the good word of God and the powers of the age to come; (and so on, the other proof texts are John 6:37, 64-66; 8:44; 13:18; cf. 17:12)

In the end, however, this gives us very little to go on, and the proof-texts themselves are not confessionally binding or authoritative. When the confession says that these non-elect people “never truly come unto Christ,” it means that they do not receive Christ with a faith that perseveres unto final salvation. The confession does not address the question of whether they are able come unto Christ in some other sense and participate in some sense in the blessings of redemption that ultimately fall short of the fullness of salvation.

Further, when the confession says that these non-elect people “cannot be saved,” one must recognize that the Standards use the word “save” and its cognates almost exclusively to refer to the fullness of salvation inherited when Christ returns. In this sense, apostates are not saved because they fail to persevere and fall short of receiving the fullness of redemption as it is described in WCF 10-18.

The other major text in the WCF that is relevant to the non-elect is WCF 25.2. Here we find the assertion that *all* members of the visible church are members of the kingdom of Christ and the house and family of God (at least *in some sense*). Since the visible church contains some who are non-elect, the WCF thus implies that some adults and their children are citizens of the kingdom and members of God’s family, and yet still do not inherit the fullness of redemption and eternal life. Given the fact that earlier chapters of the Confession restrict these blessings to the elect alone, we are given some sense that the writers are sensitive to the claims made for the members of the visible church in the Scriptures.

Again, the proof texts used in WCF 25.2 help us to see some of the things that were in the minds of the members of the Assembly. They refer to Colossians 1:13 to prove that the visible Church is “the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.” But this text illustrates the very concerns that I have raised in my teaching and writing. In the verse preceding (1:12) he includes them among the number of those who have been qualified “to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light.” Further, he goes on in the verses that follow to describe what has happened to the members of the Church in Colossae. They have not only been “delivered from the power of darkness” and “conveyed into the kingdom of the Son of His love” but also, in Christ, they “have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.” (1:13-14). In Col. 3:12 Paul calls the members of the church in Colossae, “the elect of God” and does not qualify this appellation at all, and calls upon them to forgive one another as Christ has forgiven them (3:13).

Does Paul mean that each and every member of this congregation is “elect” in the Westminster Confession sense? I don’t think so but that leaves the question of how exactly he does understand them to be “elect of God, holy and beloved.” And further, how exactly do they partake of “the inheritance of the saints”? And, though I am quite certain that only the elect will finally be redeemed through the blood of Jesus and only the elect will receive the forgiveness of sins (and I’m sure Paul would agree) how can Paul state that this reality was true of the members of the church in Colossae? These are the sorts of questions I’m seeking to address and to do so in a way that does no harm in the least to God’s absolute, sovereign, predestination.

In showing that the visible Church is the house and family of God, the Assembly points us to Ephesians 2:19 where we are told that the members of the church in Ephesus “are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.” The passage goes on to say that they “also are being built together [in Christ] for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.” Since Paul doesn’t exclude those members who might not be among those chosen for eternal salvation from before the foundation of the world, this apparently is true also of them (at least in some sense) as members of the Church. Now the question is “How is this true of the non-elect?” I have proposed a possible answer for this and it does not involve a rejection of anything the Confession says in chapters 10-18.

These are the sorts of questions that I’ve been concerned to understand. If we think that calling members of the visible church citizens of the kingdom, sons in the family, and members of the house of God requires us to reject what the Confession says about “the elect” in chapters 10-18, we are pitting the Confession against itself.

4. Has the controversy surrounding your teaching caused you to consider whether or not you need to take further exceptions to the Standards? If so, explain.

I always continue to think through the Confession to see if there are additional places where I need to take an exception — but apart from extremely minor

**quibbles with words, at present, I am not aware of any places where I would have to take further exceptions.**

5. Have you written to clarify/reformulate any of your teachings since the Ad Hoc Committee on Federal Vision Theology issued its recommendations during the 80<sup>th</sup> Stated Meeting, and if so, would you explain any clarifications/ reformulations that you have put forth?

**In the last revision of our “Summary Statement” we did make substantial clarifications regarding what I mean by “all blessings” being given to the members of the church as well as the issues of assurance and perseverance. I also wrote the “AAPC Session’s Response to Charges of ‘Heterodoxy”” which was adopted on June 8, 2006, and seeks to make clear my/our position on various vital topics. In any case, I have continued to refine the way in which I express my views in response to various critics and have sought to explain them more clearly to any who have asked.**

## II. THE MEMORIAL FROM CENTRAL CAROLINA

### ***Regarding the Doctrine of Election:***

*Central Carolina Presbytery asserts in its January 28, 2006, memorial the following: “TE Wilkins publicly teaches a doctrine of election in flagrant contradiction to our Standards. Whereas the Confession teaches that “God hath appointed the elect unto glory” (WCF III.6), TE Wilkins states that the elect are appointed to a conditional relationship which they can lose through unbelief. He writes: “The elect are those who are faithful in Christ Jesus. If they later reject the Savior, they are no longer elect – they are cut off from the Elect One and thus, lose their elect standing” (The Federal Vision, p. 58).”*

The memorial accuses you of teaching a doctrine of election “in flagrant contradiction to our Standards.”

1. Laying aside for a moment the argument that Scripture uses the word “elect” in different ways, can you provide an example(s) in your public teaching or writing where you affirm the Confession’s definition of election?

**I’m not quite sure how to answer this question. The fact is that I have never taught contrary to the Confession in regard to its view of election. I have taught this view to our inquirers’ class, our officer training classes, and have taught it in a Sunday School study where I taught through the entire confession. My article in the *Federal Vision* affirms the traditional, Confessional view on p. 56:**

**“It has been the common practice in Reformed circles to use the term “elect” to refer only to those who are predestined to eternal salvation. Since God has ordained all things “whatsoever comes to pass” (Eph. 1:11), He has certainly predestined the number of all who will be saved at the last day. This number**

**is fixed and settled, not one of these will be lost. The Lord will accomplish all His holy will.”**

**I then follow this affirmation of the traditional view with a discussion of how the word “elect” functions in various passages of the Bible.**

**Also in our “Response to the Charges of Heterodoxy” I wrote this:**

**“We affirm the teaching on ‘election’ in the Westminster Standards (WCF III.6). In our ‘Summary Statement’ we unanimously adopted this statement:**

**‘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.’**

**This continues to be our view. We do believe, however, that the terms ‘elect,’ ‘chosen,’ etc., are often used in the Scriptures to refer to those who are members of the visible church (e.g., Col 3:12; 2 Th 2:13; 1 Pe 1:1-2) and not restricted to those who were chosen to eternal salvation. To affirm this, however, does not require a denial of the teaching of the Confession. It is simply acknowledging the fact that our theological usage of these terms is often more narrow than the biblical usage.”**

2. Do you at all deny the definition of election as given in the Standards?

**Absolutely not, never have, and God willing, never will. I firmly believe in the absolute sovereignty of God over all things, including the salvation of man.**

3. Briefly explain why your statement: “The elect are those who are faithful in Christ Jesus. If they later reject their savior, they are no longer elect” (*Federal Vision*, p. 58) is NOT contradictory to or inconsistent with WCF III-6).

**The Presbytery in making this charge has ignored the context of what I have written and because of this, has completely missed my point. In the article, this statement comes in the context of a discussion of how the word “elect” is used in the Biblical text. God calls Israel His “elect or chosen” people (p. 56). Paul calls the members of the church in the New Covenant “elect and chosen” as well. On page 58, I discuss Paul’s statements in Romans 8 and II Thessalonians 2:13-14 where he calls the members of the church in Thessalonica “chosen from the beginning for salvation.” I then ask the question, “How could Paul say this?” (p. 57). In light of the decree of predestination and the reality that not everyone in the church is chosen in the Westminster sense of the word, how can he call the members of the church in Thessalonica “chosen before the foundation of the world”? If I didn’t believe WCF**

**chapter 3 to be true, I would have no problems at this point. My question arises in light of the fact that I am convinced that WCF chapter 3 is correct!**

**Thus, the questions I'm addressing do not in any way deny what the Confession says in chapter 3. In no way should this discussion be interpreted to mean that I deny what I just affirmed (and still believe) on p. 56. In the passage cited I am focusing the discussion upon how the term is used in the text of God's Word where over and over again, entire congregations are addressed as "elect" or "chosen" or with some equivalent term (e.g., Col 3:12; 2 Th 2:13; 1 Pe 1:1-2). I go on to suggest that we must understand Paul's language covenantally rather than decretively. To make this distinction in no way requires that I reject one in order to embrace the other.**

**It seems clear to me that Peter in particular views the "elect" in the same sense that the term was used of Israel under the Old Covenant since he applies the same descriptive terminology used for Israel to the Church (1 Pe 2:9). Paul and Peter do not appear to use the terms "elect" and "chosen" to apply *exclusively* to those who were chosen to eternal salvation (i.e., in the Westminster Confession sense). They had no knowledge of God's decrees and only could judge by what was revealed. What was revealed was that Jesus was the Elect One and all who are united to Him as elect *in Him*. (1 Pe 2:4-6).**

**It seems (at least to me) to be plain that Paul and other Biblical writers have no hesitation in identifying those who are members of the Church as "elect." This apparently was based upon the fact that the Church is, as our Confession states, "the household, family, and kingdom of God" (WCF 25.2) and is the body of Christ Jesus, God's chosen/elect Son. Thus, those who are members of the body of the Elect One are viewed as "elect" themselves. The writers of the New Testament, in numerous places, appear to use the word to refer to those who are united to the visible body of God's people and persevere therein by grace through faith.**

**What I am trying to set forth seems to be the position Calvin expounds in his sermons on Deuteronomy. Calvin asserts that being in the Church is a form of "election" which can be lost:**

**"Now then it is of God's free election that we have his Word purely preached unto us and that we have his Gospel and Sacraments. And therein we have reason to confess that he has shown himself generous to us . . . . So then, when the Gospel is preached in a place and it has the warrants that God gives men salvation - as when we have Baptism and the Lord's Holy Supper ministered uncorruptly - we may say it is an election of God. But yet for all that, in the meantime he holds to himself those he so wishes in order that people should not trust the outward signs except by faith and obedience, knowing that although we have been chosen to be of the Body of the Church, yet if we do not make that election to our profit, God can well enough cut us off again and reserve a final number to himself." (Sermons on Deuteronomy, Sermon 53, Saturday, 3 August 1555).**

### *Doctrine of the Church:*

*Central Carolina Presbytery asserts in its January 28, 2006, memorial the following:*

“TE Wilkins teaches a *doctrine of the church* in flagrant contradiction to that of our Standards, in that he denies the distinction between the visible and the invisible church. The Confession states that “The catholic or universal Church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect,” whereas “The visible Church... consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, and their children” (WCF XXV. 1-2). The sum of TE Wilkins’ erroneous view is to teach that all members of the church – without distinction to their actual faith and/or regeneration – partake of the saving benefits of Christ. Whereas the Standards state that the visible church enjoys “the ordinary means of salvation and offers of grace by Christ,” they grant only to the invisible church that they “enjoy union and communion with [Christ]” (WLC 62-65). As such, TE Wilkins denies that there is any distinction between believing and unbelieving members of the visible church, insisting that all baptized church members enjoy the benefits of union with Christ, only conditionally. See *The Federal Vision*, pp. 57-62, including the following statements:

“If God is for *us*, who can be against *us*? Christ died, rose again, and makes intercession for *us*, who can separate *us* from the love of God?”

Clearly, Paul is not stating promises that are true only for some unknown group called the ‘elect.’ Nor is he speaking only to a portion of the congregation whom he judges to be ‘regenerate.’ Rather, he is applying these promises to all the members of the Church who have been baptized and united to Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection (Rom. 6).” (*The Federal Vision*, p. 57).

“The reprobate may be in covenant with God. They may enjoy for a season the blessings of the covenant, including the forgiveness of sins, adoption, possession of the kingdom, sanctification, etc., and yet apostatize and fall short of the grace of God” (*The Federal Vision*, p. 62). Note that Wilkins here directly contradicts WLC 69, which ascribes these blessings only to the elect and denies them to the visible church.”

Central Carolina accuses you of teaching a “doctrine of the church in flagrant contradiction to that of our Standards” and denying the “distinction between the visible and invisible Church.”

1. Is it true that you deny the distinction between the visible and invisible church?

**Absolutely not. Indeed, the bare fact that I do not believe all members of the visible church will be infallibly saved proves that I do see a distinction between the “visible” Church (containing those who persevere in faith and those who don’t) and the “invisible” Church (which consists of the whole number of the redeemed, who persevere in faith so that not one is lost but all without exception attain eternal salvation).**

Contrary to the assertion of the memorial, I wholeheartedly affirm this distinction as the Westminster Confession defines the invisible church. The “invisible Church” is not a parallel entity that exists above or beyond the visible church but rather is the “whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof;”—in other words, the invisible Church does not yet exist though it is surely foreordained by God and will surely and certainly exist at the last day (but then of course, it will exist as a very *visible* body). It is only “invisible” in that we can’t see all the members of it now.

I think the category of “invisible church” can lead us to all sorts of misunderstandings and misconceptions. I fully agree with Professor John Murray’s assessment:

“There is no evidence for the notion of the ‘church’ as an invisible entity distinct from the church visible. . . . ‘the church’ in the New Testament never appears as an invisible entity and therefore may never be *defined* in terms of invisibility. . . . Strictly speaking, it is not proper to speak of the ‘visible church’. According to Scripture we should speak of ‘the church’ and conceive of it as that visible entity that exists and functions in accord with the institution of Christ as its Head, the church that is the body of Christ indwelt and directed by the Holy Spirit, consisting of those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be saints, manifested in the congregations of the faithful, and finally the church glorious, holy and without blemish.” (*Collected Writings*, I, 234-235)

Christ has only one Bride and she is a Bride that is in the process of being perfected (sanctified and cleansed) for Him through time (Eph. 5:25-27) until that day when she shall be “spotless and without blemish.” Thus, the Church which throughout history had blemishes and imperfections, will finally be glorified and perfectly holy at the last day.

It seems better to speak of the “invisible” church simply as the “eschatological church” — i.e., the church in its perfection as it will exist at the last day. My accusers are simply disagreeing with my argument rather than proving that I deny the WCF definition of the church. Indeed, it seems to me that they are often the ones who deny the distinction between the “visible” and “invisible” Church in that they attribute those things the apostles say to be true of the visible Church exclusively to the invisible Church. The visible Church is denigrated as being nothing more than a pale and imperfect reflection of the “true” church (which is, in their minds, the “invisible” church, the abode of the elect).

Ultimately, it is unquestionably true that *only* the “invisible Church” will partake of the blessings of eternal salvation. In history, however, the Church consists of those who are elect unto final salvation and those who are not. There are those who are members of the Church but who are not ordained to persevere in faith, yet they are, like unfaithful Israelites, still members of the Church, though in the sense that they

harbor unbelief, they can be said to be not “of” the Church. But in saying this, we are merely acknowledging that the Church in history is a mixed body.

It is important for us to recognize the fact of the mixed nature of the Church in history, but this does not mean that there is such a thing as an “invisible Church” of which you must become a member. The Bible speaks of only one Church which is the body and bride of Christ and thus our creeds assert that we believe in “*One, holy, catholic and apostolic church.*” That is the simplest and clearest way to speak of the Church.

It seems to me that this same charge could be brought against Calvin, for he also seeks to deal with some of the same passages of Scripture in a similar manner as I have done. Thus, for example in his commentary on 2 Peter 2:1-3 Calvin states: “Though Christ may be denied in various ways, yet Peter, I think, refers here to what is expressed by Jude, that is when the grace of God is turned into lasciviousness; for Christ redeemed us, that He might have a people separated from all the pollutions of the world, and devoted to holiness and innocency. They, then, who throw off the bridle and give themselves up to all kinds of licentiousness, are not unjustly said to deny Christ by whom they have been redeemed.”

In his commentary on Hosea 2:4-5: “it is not enough that God should choose any people for Himself, except the people themselves persevere in the obedience of faith; for this is the spiritual chastity which the Lord requires from all His people. But when is a wife, whom God has bound to Himself by a sacred marriage, said to become a wanton? When she falls away . . . from a pure and sound faith. Then it follows that the marriage between God and men so long endures as they who have been adopted continue in pure faith.”

In his *Institutes* Calvin states that in some sense, the reprobate may be said to have received “the gift of redemption” (3.2.11): “Yet, the reprobate [within the church] are justly said to believe that God is merciful toward them, for they receive the gift of reconciliation.”

In spite of these statements, I believe Calvin was a thorough-going Calvinist even though Central Carolina Presbytery apparently believes that Calvin's views are not compatible with the Westminster Confession of Faith.

2. Explain how your published views on the benefits that members of the “visible” church enjoy are NOT inconsistent with WLC # 69 (“The communion in grace which the members of the invisible church have with Christ, is their partaking of the virtue of his mediation, in their justification, adoption, sanctification, and whatever else, in this life, manifests their union with him.”).

First, it should be noted that the Presbytery has taken the quote they use to prove their point out of its context in the article. The full sentence reads,

***“The clear implication of these passages is that those who ultimately prove to be reprobate may be in covenant with God. They may enjoy for a season the blessings of the covenant, including the forgiveness of sins, adoption, possession of the kingdom, sanctification, etc., and yet apostatize and fall short of the grace of God.”***

**Note that I refer to “the clear implication of these passages” which is a reference to the sixteen passages to which I have just referred on the previous page. The passages cited attribute these very things to those who are warned against the danger of falling away and being eternally condemned. In other words, this is not something I am teaching. Rather, it is what *Paul himself* was teaching. The problem of the Presbytery is with Paul not with me.**

**The Larger Catechism is speaking about “members of the invisible church” who are by definition, the elect. I have no quarrel with that at all and nothing I have written contradicts that in the least. My questions have arisen because the apostles appear to attribute these same things to all the members of the visible church without distinction. For example, Paul says of the Corinthians (whom he sternly warns against apostasy, I Cor. 10:1-11) that they are sanctified (I Cor. 1:2); have been given the grace of God (1:4); and have been enriched in all things (1:5); they share in Christ’s righteousness, wisdom, sanctification and redemption (1:30-31); they have received the Spirit (2:14-16) and the Spirit dwells in them (3:16-17); all things belong to them (3:21-23); they have been born through the gospel preached to them (4:15); they have been washed and justified by the Spirit (6:9-11); they enjoy communion in the body and blood of Christ (10:15-17); they have been baptized into one body by the Spirit (12:13) and are individually members of Christ’s body (12:27).**

**My question in light of what WLC affirms (and which I also affirm) is this, “How can Paul say that these things are true of the members of the church in Corinth and in what sense are they true?” Whatever our answer to this question, it seems clear then that Paul is not using these terms in the same way that the Westminster Confession defines them. My accusers may disagree with my interpretation of these passages, but clearly these statements by Paul are not based upon a denial of God’s sovereignty in salvation or a denial of the doctrine of unconditional election or the perseverance of the saints as the WCF defines these teachings (which I affirm most happily). My contention is that our understanding of salvation from a systematic (Westminsterian) theology standpoint has difficulty accommodating these passages. I am suggesting that the understanding of covenant which I propose gives us a better way to deal with these statements in Scripture. My views do not require any departure from the teaching of the Confession at all. They simply require us to recognize that Paul is not thinking of these matters from precisely the same perspective as the writers of the Confession though he would very likely be willing to affirm the statements of the Confession wholeheartedly.**

3. Would you say that your published views about the benefits enjoyed by visible church members are the necessary consequence of the confessional statement that affirms that the *visible* church is “the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ and the house and family of God out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation” (WCF 25-2) and BCO Preliminary Principles #3 which states that the “visible church” is the Body of Christ?

**Yes, precisely. My suggestion is that these statements indicate *how* we are to understand the statements that Jesus, Paul, and the other writers of the New Testament speak about the blessings that belong to members of the visible church.**

4. How would you distinguish between the benefits enjoyed by a (decretively) elect member of the visible Church and a reprobate member of the visible church who has not yet manifested his apostasy?

**This is not an easy question to answer but it does seem to me that the benefits enjoyed by the “decretively elect” do differ from those received by the non-elect. First, they differ *qualitatively*. Thus, for example, though the non-elect are brought within the family of the justified and in that sense may be referred to as one of the justified, the elect person’s justification in time is not only a declaration of his present acquittal from the guilt of sin but also an anticipation of his final vindication at the last judgment. The non-elect church member’s “justification” is not. His “justification” is not the judgment he will receive from God at the last day. Second, the blessings conferred differ in their *duration*. The elect person perseveres and remains in a state of grace until the end of his life. The non-elect believer eventually forsakes the faith and falls away from the state of grace. There may also be other experiential differences between the elect and the non-elect, but these differences may not be discernible (to the individuals themselves or to others) until the non-elect person displays his unbelief in some very explicit and concrete ways.**

**God certainly knows (and has decreed) the difference between the elect and the non-elect, but from our creaturely, covenantal point of view there is often no perceptible difference (e.g., Saul and David were indistinguishable from one another to all outward appearances in the early phases of their careers; Judas looked like the other disciples for a time). It is only as history goes forward, as God’s plan unfolds, that we come to know who will persevere and who won’t. In the meanwhile, we are to view and treat all faithful members of the covenant community in the way we see them treated throughout the New Testament epistles — i.e., all covenant members are viewed and treated as elect, but also warned of the dangers of apostasy.**

**The language of the Bible forces us to acknowledge a great deal of mystery here. For example, the same terminology that describes the Spirit coming upon Saul in 1 Sam. 10:6 is used when the Spirit comes upon David (1 Sam. 16:13), Gideon (Jdg. 6:34), Jephthah (Jdg. 11:29), and Samson (Jdg. 14:6, 9; 15:14). But in four of these five cases (David, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson), the man in question was clearly regenerated and saved by the Spirit’s work (cf. Heb. 11:32). This means that at the outset of Saul’s career, the biblical narrative itself draws no distinction between his**

initial experience of the Spirit and the experience of those who would obtain final salvation. Saul appears to receive the same initial covenantal grace that David, Gideon, and other saved men received, even though God did not enable him to persevere in that grace. While God no doubt predestined Saul's apostasy (since he foreordains all that comes to pass), God was not the Author of Saul's apostasy (cf. WCF 3.1). His failure to persevere was due to his own rebellion. Herein lies the great mystery of God's sovereignty and human responsibility (cf. WCF 3.1, 8).

I agree with how this point is addressed in the AAPC "Summary Statement":

**"Once baptized, an individual may be truly called a 'Christian' because he is a member of the household of faith and the body of Christ (I Cor. 12). However, not all who are 'Christians' in this sense will persevere to the end. Some will 'fall from grace' and be lost (Gal. 5:4; 1 Cor. 10:1-5). *Though the difference between those who are predestined to eternal life and those who 'believe for a while' is not merely one of duration* (i.e., God works 'effectually' in those whom He has predestined to eternal life so that they do not fall away in unbelief), the Bible does not explain the distinction between the nature of the work of the Spirit in the reprobate and the nature of His work in the elect, and even uses the same language for both."**

This reality is reflected in the covenant relationship of marriage. Though men may be equally married in the eyes of the law, they may have quite different marriages in terms of the quality of their relationships with their wives. The presence or absence of biblical love makes a huge difference in the quality of the marital bond, though it does not affect their legal status as married men. So it is in the Church. Some members of the Church are "effectually" (savingly) joined in union with Christ by faith while others are not.

In addressing the issue of the *qualitative* difference between the communion the elect have with God as contrasted with that of the non-elect, I fully agree with Peter Leithart's statement explaining this distinction:

**"First, God has decreed the eternal destiny of elect and reprobate. That cannot help but color God's attitude toward someone who is ultimately reprobate. He is obviously conscious that any blessing He gives or favor He shows is blessing and favor to a reprobate.**

**Second, while God decrees before the foundation of the world all that comes to pass, He also is active in the outworking of those decrees, and in that activity He is interactive with His creation. We pray, and He answers, and that is not pretense; He really does answer prayers (albeit He had planned from eternity for the prayer and the answer). Similarly, His attitude toward sinners changes through time. An elect man is an object of God's wrath during the week before his conversion, and the object of God's mercy during**

**the time after. I submit that the same is true of the reprobate who receives the word of God with joy for a time: He is an object of favor while he responds in faith, and then becomes an object of disfavor. I take Saul as a concrete example of this reality. Again, this is qualified and complexified by point #1.**

**Third, I am favorable toward a teleological view of human nature. If you slice into the life of an elect man at a point of backsliding, and also slice into the life of the reprobate at a point when he is rejoicing in the gospel, it will appear that the reprobate's faith is strong, more living, more true, than that of the elect. Analyzed in that kind of punctiliar fashion, the two are well-nigh indistinguishable. But nature is determined by ends. We are what we are destined to become (which is what we are decreed to become). Thus, the quality of temporary faith, even the nature of temporary faith, is different from the nature of true and living and persevering faith. I've used the analogy of marriage to explain this: A marriage that ends in divorce differs from a happy marriage in its conclusion; but the conclusion of the marriages reveals that there was something fundamentally and permanently different in the two marriages. The differences are never merely differences at the end, because the end reveals the shape of the whole story-line.**

**How have they had communion with the Spirit? I am thinking of Hebrews 6 primarily there: they "have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit" (v. 4). That might manifest itself in acts of ministry that are empowered by the Spirit. It may manifest itself in acts of piety, devotion to and joy in worship, eagerness to hear the word of God. I believe that this all falls under what the WCF calls "common operations of the Spirit," taking "common" here as operations common to the elect and reprobate."**

### *Doctrine of Perseverance*

*Central Carolina Presbytery asserts in its January 28, 2006, memorial the following: "TE Wilkins' teaching directly contradicts our doctrine of perseverance. The Confession teaches that "They, whom God hath accepted in His Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved" (WCFXVI.1). But TE Wilkins teaches the opposite. See the above quote regarding the reprobate, who according to Wilkins were at one time forgiven, adopted, and sanctified. Wilkins adds, "The apostate doesn't forfeit 'apparent blessings' that were never his in reality, but real blessings that were his in covenant with God" (*The Federal Vision*, p. 62). In Wilkins' teaching, all church members share all the benefits of union with Christ, but only provisionally. He writes, "If they persevere in faith to the end, they enjoy these mercies eternally. If they fall away in unbelief, they lose these blessings and receive a greater*

condemnation than Sodom and Gomorrah... If they do not persevere, they lose the blessings that were given to them” (*The Federal Vision*, pp. 60-61).

The Central Carolina Memorial accuses you of directly contradicting the doctrine of perseverance as taught in *WCF* 17-1.

1. Explain how your statements in *Federal Vision*, pp. 60-62 are NOT inconsistent with *WCF* 17-1 (“They, whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.”).

**The Confession in Chapter 17.1 is referring exclusively to those who are “effectually called, and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.” I have no dispute or disagreement with this in the least. My statements are referring to how the Scriptures describe what is true of all members of the church (note pp. 58-60 of my article) and what is said to be true of those who are in danger of apostasy or who actually have apostatized (p. 61). It seems to me that the Presbytery’s argument would also have to be made against Paul, Peter, and Jesus as well since all apply the language of salvation to those whom they say are in danger ultimately of falling short of the grace of God.**

– Paul says that the members of the church in Corinth had communion with Christ (I Cor. 10:4-5) and then warns them of perishing like unfaithful Israel.

– The writer of Hebrews says that they have been “enlightened” and been made “partakers” of the Spirit (Heb. 6:4ff) and sanctified (Heb. 10:29) and sprinkled with the blood of Jesus (Heb. 12:22ff) and yet warns them of falling into destruction.

– Peter says that apostates have forgotten that they had been “cleansed from their former sins” (2 Pet. 1:9) and were “bought” by the Lord (2 Pet. 2:1) and had “escaped the pollutions of the world” (2 Pet. 2:20).

– Jesus says that those who fail to persevere will have their names *removed* from the book of life (Rev. 3:5; 22:19).

**Would the Presbytery be willing to bring their charges against the apostles or against our Savior? If not, why not? Are these not also denying the teaching of the Westminster Confession? Of course, to assume so would be ridiculous. This only shows that identical or similar language can be used in different ways. But this does demonstrate, I think, how irresponsible it is for the Presbytery to refuse to consider these statements apart from their context and the argument that I am seeking to make.**

**All of us recognize that the same words may not mean the same things in different contexts and this fact normally causes us no confusion in the least. We do this sort of thing all the time. Nearly every Presbyterian and evangelical minister understands**

**the word “justification” differently depending upon its context and he does so without feeling compelled to charge Paul or James with being confusing in their terminology!**

**We see this same phenomenon even within our Confessional documents. The *Directory for the Public Worship of God* when it speaks of the baptism of infants states that the children of believing parents are “Christians and Federally holy.” Yet we all know that not every covenant child perseveres to the end. Should we denounce the writers of the *Directory* for denying the teaching of the Confession of Faith 17.1? No we shouldn’t and for good reason. We all understand that they are using the term “Christian” in a covenantal sense and not with the same definition that the Confession uses to describe the elect of God.**

**If the Presbytery disagrees with my understanding they should simply say so and show where I am wrong. But to pretend that I am utilizing words with certain stipulated definitions when I have explicitly said I am not doing so, is simply misleading. I affirm the Westminster Confession of faith and its statements as true and the statements made in my article in no way require a rejection of these truths.**

You state that, “All in covenant are given all that is true of Christ. If they persevere in faith to the end, they enjoy these mercies eternally. If they fall away in unbelief, they lose these blessings and receive a greater condemnation than Sodom and Gomorrah. Covenant can be broken by unbelief and rebellion, but until it is, those in covenant with God belong to Him and are His. If they do not persevere, they lose the blessings that were given to them (and all this works out according to God’s eternal decree which He ordained before the foundation of the world)...“Thus, when one breaks covenant, it can be truly said that he has turned away from grace and forfeited life, forgiveness, and salvation.” (*The Federal Vision*, pages 60- 61)

You also state that, “The clear implication of these passages is that those who ultimately prove to be reprobate may be in covenant with God. They may enjoy for a season the blessings of the covenant, including the forgiveness of sins, adoption, possession of the kingdom, sanctification, etc., and yet apostatize and fall short of the grace of God.... *The apostate doesn’t forfeit ‘apparent blessings’ that were never his in reality, but real blessings that were his in covenant with God.*” (*The Federal Vision*, page 62)

2. Regarding those who ultimately fall away:

– Do you believe that those who ultimately fall away ever truly possessed eternal life?

**No, if they did, they would not have fallen away.**

– Do you believe that those who ultimately fall away ever truly possessed forgiveness of sins?

**If you mean by “truly possessed” that they had forgiveness in the same sense that**

those who are elect unto salvation have, then the answer is, “no.” The Bible speaks of members of the visible church, as those who are counted among the redeemed, washed, and sanctified and promises forgiveness for all who abide in Christ and persevere in faith. Thus, though we know that the elect are forgiven and shall surely be acquitted at the last day, the promise of forgiveness given to us is always conditional upon our continuing in the faith (which of course, is only possible by the grace of God and not the result of our own native strength, will power, or discipline). Thus, Jesus makes plain that those who refuse to forgive others will not be forgiven by the Father (Matt. 6:14-15). This seems clearly to be the teaching of the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matt. 18:21-35; see also Mark 11:25-26; Luke 6:27).

Note that the servant is actually *forgiven* his debt but he refuses to *forgive* the debt of his debtor. What made the servant’s sin so grievous is the fact that he really had been forgiven. If the parable was simply about the need for us to forgive others, then the first part of the story is unnecessary. Jesus could simply have told a story about a servant who didn’t forgive his debtor and was punished by his master. But He doesn’t because that isn’t the point (or at least, the entire point).

The point is that *those who are forgiven must forgive*. And that point depends upon the servant having genuinely been forgiven at the start of the story. That’s what drives the story and that’s what makes the ending of the parable so startling. This once-forgiven servant loses the forgiveness he had been granted because he didn’t forgive his own debtor. This seems to set forth a sort of “temporary forgiveness” (for lack of a better term) that is, in spite of its impermanence, real. If the servant wasn’t genuinely forgiven, the story loses its impact. He was given a real promise that he would not be held accountable for his debt. The point is that God has made such a promise to us in Christ, and therefore we must forgive our debtors or Jesus’ Father will treat us the way the master treated the unforgiving once-forgiven servant.

Forgiveness is only found “in Christ.” Apart from Him, there can be no forgiveness, no salvation. Those who are faithful members of Christ’s church, trusting in His work in their behalf are forgiven and must continue to believe in order to maintain this status. This is a difficult concept to express (and I don’t believe it is addressed in our Confession or catechisms) but it seems to me to be clearly taught in the Scriptures.

However we might state this, we would have to maintain that the “forgiveness” received by such a person is not identical to that received by the elect. To repeat what I’ve said earlier: *First, differs in its duration*. The elect person perseveres and remains in a state of grace until the end of his life. The non-elect eventually forsakes his faith and falls away from the state of grace. *And second, it differs qualitatively*. The elect person’s forgiveness in time is an anticipation of his final vindication at the last judgment. The non-elect’s “forgiveness” is not. Although the non-elect person has standing for a time in the church which is “realm” of the forgiven, his

**justification is not the judgment he will receive from God at the last day. Ultimately, it seems to me to be impossible systematically to define and enumerate what all these qualitative differences may be. To the degree that we can even identify any differences, we can only do so retrospectively, after an individual has moved significantly along the path of rebellion and unbelief toward apostasy.**

– Do you believe that those who ultimately fall away ever truly possessed salvation?

**Again I understand you to mean by “truly possessed” that they have salvation in the same sense that those who are elect unto salvation have it. If that is your meaning, then the answer is, “No they do not.” If they had salvation in that way, they would never have apostatized in the first place. The Bible, however, speaks of salvation in three tenses. In many instances, the biblical writers view salvation as an eschatological concept — i.e., it is something that will not come to pass until the last day. But salvation is also spoken of as a past reality (salvation was determined in eternity past when God chose you in Christ, it was purchased when Christ died on the cross and rose again and then applied to you at your conversion). But salvation is also spoken of as a present and progressive reality (e.g., we are in to “work out” our salvation in fear and trembling, Phil. 2). Ultimately, no elect person can lose his salvation, however much he may backslide. This is the point of Jesus’ teaching in John 10 — God the Father and God the Son will not lose their grip on those they have chosen for final salvation.**

**But the Biblical language becomes more complicated when speaking of the members of the visible Church. There is a sense in which we can say that all those in covenant are “saved.” They have been covenantally delivered out of the world and brought into the glorious new creation embodied in the resurrected Christ even though not all of them will persevere. Thus Jude (5) can speak of the Israelites as having been “saved,” and then destroyed, because they did not persevere. The preface to the Ten Commandments addresses Israel as God’s redeemed people even though many of the redeemed did not continue trusting their Deliverer and perished. Peter speaks of a similar class of people in 2 Peter 2. They were “redeemed” by Christ but then they later denied him and are destroyed. To take another example, 1 Peter 3 we read of the eight people who were “saved” from God’s wrath in Noah’s ark. But if we read the Genesis narrative, we find one of those who was saved, Ham, apostatized and came under a curse.**

**Again, there is no question that only God’s elect, those predestined for final salvation, will infallibly persevere to the end. They cannot fall away because God is determined to keep them in the path of life. But reprobate covenant members may for a time experience a quasi-salvation. They may be said to have been, in some sense, “bought” by Christ (1 Peter 2), “forgiven” (Matt. 18), “renewed” (Mk. 4), etc., and to have lost these things through unbelief.**

**One way to understand this is to think of salvation more in “relational” terms than**

**in metaphysical ones. “Salvation” is not a “thing” we possess that can be lost and found, like our car keys. Rather, it is a matter of being rightly related to God. But relationships are not static, timeless entities. They are fluid and dynamic. Some marriages start well; the couple is full of love. But then things go sour. Our salvation covenant with the Lord is like a marriage. If we persevere in loyalty to Christ, we will live with him happily ever after. If we break the marriage covenant, he will divorce us. It may not be wise to call this “losing one’s salvation,” but it would be unbiblical to say nothing at all was really lost. That would simply be a denial of the reality of the covenant.**

**The visible Church may be viewed as the realm of “salvation” since it is the body of Christ (WCF 25:2). Thus, there is a sense in which we may speak of those who are members of the church as those who are “saved” in the same way that we may address them as the “redeemed” and “saints.” But in regard to non-elect members of the church, this will prove to be only a temporary standing. If they never believe or cease to believe in Christ, they shall not be saved at the last day and we may say in one sense that they never had “salvation” — certainly not in the sense that our Confession uses the term.**

– If you answered yes to any of these questions, how do you reconcile your teaching with:

*Westminster Confession of Faith* 17.1 (“They, whom God hath accepted in His Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.”), and

*Westminster Larger Catechism* 79 (“Q. May not true believers, by reason of their imperfections, and the many temptations and sins they are overtaken with, fall away from the state of grace? A. True believers, by reason of the unchangeable love of God, and his decree and covenant to give them perseverance, their inseparable union with Christ, his continual intercession for them, and the Spirit and seed of God abiding in them, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation.”), and

*Westminster Larger Catechism* 68 (“Q. Are the elect only effectually called? A. All the elect, and they only, are effectually called: although others may be, and often are, outwardly called by the ministry of the word, and have some common operations of the Spirit; who, for their willful neglect and contempt of the grace offered to them, being justly left in their unbelief, do never truly come to Jesus Christ.”), and

**As I have shown, the Confession in each of these places speaks from a decretal perspective.**

- WCF 17.1 speaks of those who are “effectually called” and the Confession defines “effectual calling” as the gift of “saving faith” which cannot die out or be lost but which perseveres to the end.
- WLC #79 speaks of “true believers” (as opposed to temporary believers or hypocrites) as those who have the “unchangeable love of God and his decree” to give them perseverance — i.e., it is referring to those who are “kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation.”
- LC #68 speaks of the “elect” as the only ones who are “effectually called.”

Thus, in every case, the standards are not referring to apostates and what might be true of them prior to their apostasy, but they are speaking only and exclusively of those who are chosen to final salvation. My concerns are not with these statements of the Confession with which I wholeheartedly agree. My concerns center around understanding what the Scriptures say to be true of those who are members of the church but not elect. How is it that the “non-elect” can be said to have “forgotten that they were cleansed from their former sins” (2 Pet. 1:9)? How is it that they can “trample the Son of God underfoot and count the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing” (Heb. 10:29)? Clearly, they were not elect (in the WCF sense) or they wouldn’t have done these things. Thus, the Confession, because it doesn’t address these passages directly or deal with the issue of apostasy thoroughly is of little help to us at these points.

1 John 2:19 (“They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us.”)

There are a number of ways in which we can understand this passage. The key issue in the text concerns the “us” that the apostates have departed from. It could refer to the church and thus be saying that those who “went out” show themselves to be non-elect (by the fact that they left the church). Since the Church is the community of the elect, to leave the Church is to demonstrate that you are not of that number. Only those who persevere in faith are elect (in the WCF sense).

Another possible interpretation is that the “us” refers to the apostles. John may be referring to false teachers who were sent out from the apostles, but who departed from the message of the gospel. These “went out from us” i.e., they were sent out by the apostles, but they did not represent them or the gospel faithfully (thus, they “were not of us” and did not continue “with us”).

John could also be saying that these apostates claimed to be apostles, but their departure from the covenant community proves they never really were (they were not “of us”) — instead they were anti-Christ.

Whatever may be the case, there is no compelling reason to say that John is claiming these eventual apostates never experienced ANY blessing whatsoever while they remained in the covenant community. Note his continual references to “abiding” in

what has been received throughout his writings. John does not deny that they were “of us” in every possible sense. Exegetically and grammatically, it is possible that John is saying they *ceased* to be part of us, rather than that they *never* were part of us.

There seems to be various kinds of apostasy. Some apostates may be hypocrites all along, self-conscious in their unbelief. Others, however, may be like Saul, who seems to have had a genuine faith, hope, and love for a time before he fell away in unbelief and rebellion (he was one of those who believed “for a time,” Luke 8:13). The biblical writers rarely call into question whether or not their hearers have received grace; usually this is taken for granted by virtue of their membership in the body of Christ. What they question is whether or not their hearers will continue in the grace they have received.

### *Doctrine of Assurance:*

*Central Carolina Presbytery asserts in its January 28, 2006, memorial the following:* “TE Wilkins’ teaching directly contradicts our *doctrine of assurance*. The *Confession* teaches that we may have a certain assurance of salvation based on inward evidences of faith and salvation ( *WCFXVI.1-2*). Wilkins directly contradicts this teaching, stating instead that “The questions of *when* a man is ‘regenerated,’ or given ‘saving faith,’ or ‘truly converted,’ are ultimately questions we cannot answer and, therefore, they cannot be the basis upon which we define the Church or identify God’s people... [The covenant perspective] enables us to assure Christians of their acceptance with God without needless [sic] undermining their confidence in God’s promises (by forcing them to ask questions of themselves they cannot answer with certainty).” In a footnote defining the harmful questions, Wilkins specifies: “Questions like, “Have you truly believed?”; “Have you sincerely repented?”; “Do you have a new heart?”; “Have you been truly converted?”; etc.” (*The Federal Vision*, 67, plus footnote 15, p. 69.) But these are questions the *Confession* views as pastorally helpful and productive of assurance, not despair.”

Central Carolina asserts that you teach a doctrine that “directly contradicts our doctrine of assurance.”

1. Do you believe that your teaching on assurance contradicts *WCF* 18-2? If so, how?

**No, I do not believe my teaching contradicts *WCF* 18.2. In the quote from my article in *The Federal Vision* (p. 67; note 15 on p. 69), I am not denying the possibility of assurance or “infallible assurance” to which the *Confession* alludes. Rather, I am trying to show the appropriate grounds of such assurance and the appropriate way to attain it. We do not attain assurance by trying to discern the sincerity of our faith or repentance through introspection of our hearts and examination of our motives, affections, or feelings. Our hearts are deceitful and, thus, our assurance cannot be grounded upon what we feel or think we discern in the recesses of our souls. Our**

assurance is founded on Christ Himself and His work and the promises of God revealed in the Scriptures as well as the *visible fruit* of the Spirit's work in our lives.

Note how the Confession teaches that one obtains “infallible” assurance (WCF 18.1). Certain assurance can be obtained only by those who “truly believe” [i.e., have saving faith, WCF 14] and sincere love for the Lord Jesus, and who endeavor “to walk in all good conscience before him” [i.e., who repent, believe, and obey] — these may be assured that they are in a “state of grace” and rejoice in the hope of God's glory. Thus, assurance is grounded upon: believing the promises of God; the “inward evidence” of those graces (which is always manifested outwardly and according to the textual proofs include obedience to God's commandments; love of the brethren; honest conduct; and godliness); and the witness of the Spirit (Who confirms our faith through the fruit of holiness He produces in our lives).

How do we discern “saving faith”? In WCF 14.2, we are told the characteristics of saving faith: Saving faith believes to be true whatever is revealed in the Word and “acts” in accordance with what is revealed: “yielding obedience to the commands; trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life, and that which is to come.” Again, the marks of saving faith are not hidden but evident in the life of the believer.

Repentance unto life is also marked by outward fruit (WCF 15.2 “By it, a sinner, out of the sight and sense not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, as contrary to the holy nature, and righteous law of God; and upon the apprehension of his mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, so grieves for, and hates his sins, as to turn from them all unto God, purposing and endeavoring to walk with him in all the ways of his commandments.”). Paul points to this in 2 Cor. 7:11: “For observe this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly manner: What diligence it produced in you, *what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal, what vindication!* In all *things* you proved yourselves to be clear in this matter.”

These marks focus upon the fruit of the Spirit in the life, *not* upon some hidden reality that we are able to discern by introspection. Thus, as sin expresses itself in our bodily actions (i.e., lust embodies itself in a way of looking; anger in a way of speaking; rebelliousness in a way of hearing, etc.) so does obedience. Self-examination is a matter of paying careful attention to the way in which we are looking, hearing and speaking and not a matter of seeking to discover some disembodied, “internal” desires. Faith is not some secret invisible substance lurking in the soul. Rather, faith is a particular way of relating to the world outside of us. Faith is a way of seeing, a way of hearing, a way of speaking, a way of eating and drinking. Faith is always acted out in visible, observable ways. We see this illustrated in the way in which Paul speaks of the faith of the various churches. He does not regard their faith as essentially hidden or private but something that is evident and manifest (e.g. Romans 1:8; Colossians 2:5; 1 Thessalonians 1:8-10; 3:5-7; 2 Thessalonians 1:3; Philemon 5). Self-examination therefore, always involves

**examining what is visible and manifested in our lives and is not a matter of searching the depths of our souls for proper motives and feelings.**

**The promises of God are also sealed and confirmed by the sacraments (WCF 27.1 they serve “to confirm our interest in Christ”). Baptism means that I have been joined to Christ covenantally, united to His body by the Spirit (I Cor. 12); it means that I have put on Christ Jesus (Gal. 3). All the promises of God are delivered to me and are properly and truly mine. There is no reason to doubt these promises if I am clinging to Christ by faith. The very fact that baptism is a “sign” and a “seal” confirms my standing and I am to rejoice in the grace of God given to me in Christ Jesus. Assurance must not be sought *apart from* the ordained signs and seals of God’s mercy and grace.**

**My concern in the portion of the article quoted was not to deny the possibility of certain assurance, but the opposite. I am seeking to discourage the sort of introspection that can lead to a great deal of confusion and doubt and to point to the proper way to obtain certain assurance. Rather than looking into your heart, it is far better to look away from yourself to Christ as He has revealed Himself in His Word and sacraments as the ultimate ground of our assurance.**

2. Do you affirm the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit is at least one of the ways a believer can have assurance?

**Yes, as I explain above.**

You state that, “The covenant perspective enables us to assure the people of God of their blessedness without tolerating or condoning ungodly presumption upon the grace of God. It enables us to assure Christians of their acceptance with God without needlessly undermining their confidence in God’s promises (by forcing them to ask questions of themselves they cannot answer with certainty.” [Your footnote at this point identifies such questions as: “Have you truly believed?”; “Have you sincerely repented?”; “Do you have a new heart?”; “Have you been truly converted?” etc.] (*The Federal Vision*, page 67; note 15 on page 69)

1. How do you reconcile this with *Westminster Confession of Faith* 18.1? [“Although hypocrites and other unregenerate men may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of being in the favour of God, and estate of salvation (which hope of theirs shall perish): yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love Him in sincerity, endeavouring to walk in all good conscience before Him, may, in this life, be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, which hope shall never make them ashamed.”]

2. How do you reconcile this with *Westminster Confession of Faith* 18.2? (“This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion grounded upon a fallible hope; but an infallible assurance of faith founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God,

which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption.”)

**I believe I have answered both of these in my response above.**

### ***Doctrine of Baptism***

*Central Carolina Presbytery asserts in its January 28, 2006, memorial the following:* “TE Wilkins teaches a *doctrine of baptism* strikingly different from that of *Standards*. Wilkins states that “When someone is united to the Church by baptism, he is incorporated into Christ and into His body; he becomes bone of Christ’s bone and flesh of His flesh (Eph. 5:30). He becomes a member of the house, family, and kingdom of God’ (WCF 25.2). Until and unless that person breaks covenant, he is to be reckoned among God’s elect and regenerate saints” (Summary Statement of AAPC's Position on the Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation (Revised), para 4.).

But, while the Confession describes baptism as a *sign and seal* of Christ’s blessings – including regeneration (*WCF XXVI. 1*) – the *Standards* do not equate all baptized persons with the elect, nor do they equate baptism with regeneration.

Wilkins teaches that

“If [someone] has been baptized, he is in covenant with God” (*The Federal Vision*, p. 67)...

“covenant is union with Christ” (p. 58)... and

“being in covenant gives all the blessings of being united to Christ” (p. 58), which blessings he enumerates by appeal to Eph. 1:3, stating, “those who are in covenant have all spiritual blessings in the heavenly places” (p. 58).

The doctrine found in these representative statements from TE Wilkins’ teaching can be none other than that to be baptized is to have all the eternal blessings of salvation and, by inference, he teaches that all persons baptized in water must be eternally saved, unless they apostatize. This is made explicit as TE Wilkins applies all the blessings noted in Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians to those who receive water baptism, including the salvific blessings of union with Christ, reaching all the way back to election from before creation to final salvation at the end of history. Thus, in contrast to the Confession’s teaching that water baptism is a sign and seal of these salvific blessings, Wilkins plainly teaches that water baptism grants actual possession of these salvific blessings.

The Central Carolina Memorial asserts that your public teaching on the efficacy of baptism is “strikingly different” from the *Standards*.

1. Do you believe that every baptized person possesses “all the eternal blessings of salvation?”

**No. I do believe that baptism delivers over to us all the promises of God in Christ Jesus (for this reason the LC #167 imposes upon us the necessity of “improving our baptism” by “growing up to assurance of pardon of sin, and of *all other blessings*”**

sealed to us in that sacrament”). In the AAPC revised summary statement on Baptism, we state this:

“By baptism, one enters into covenantal union with Christ and is *offered* all his benefits (Gal. 3:27; Rom. 6:1ff; 2 Cor. 1:20). As Westminster Shorter Catechism #94 states, baptism signifies and seals “our ingrafting into Christ, and partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace.” Baptism in itself does not, however, guarantee final salvation. What is offered in baptism may not be received because of unbelief. Or, it may only be embraced for a season and later rejected (Matt. 13:20-22; Luke 8:13-14). Those who “believe for a while” enjoy blessings and privileges of the covenant only for a time and only in part, since their temporary faith is not true to Christ, as evidenced by its eventual failure and lack of fruit (1 Cor. 10:1ff; Hebrews 6:4-6). By their unbelief they “trample underfoot the Son of God, count the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified an unholy thing, and do despite to the Spirit of grace” (Heb. 10:29) and thus bring greater condemnation upon themselves.”

To say that the baptized individual is *offered* all Christ’s benefits is not saying that the baptized is given automatic salvation apart from faith. Rather, these promises are given over to him and are his, but they must be embraced by faith for him to enjoy their benefits in salvation. Charles Hodge in his commentary on Ephesians 6:1 states this view in a similar way. In speaking of the baptism of infants, he states that infants are baptized on the basis of the “faith of their parents” and then goes on to say that “their baptism secures to them *all the benefits of the covenant of grace*, provided they ratify that covenant by faith.” All the benefits of Christ and the new covenant are presented, delivered over to the baptized individual, but they cannot secure salvation apart from faith.

Since faith is a “gift of God” this in no way implies that we are saved by works (as if faith is a purely human work) but rather it is to emphasize that we are saved by grace through faith. Baptism, as the Confession teaches, obligates the baptized to believe in Christ. The baptized individual who refuses to believe or who ceases to believe in Jesus will suffer an even greater condemnation than the world. He has “received the grace of God in vain.”

2. What does baptism accomplish and what does it not accomplish?

I affirm precisely what the Westminster Confession teaches in regard to baptism. The Confession does not equate all baptized persons with the elect (“elect unto eternal salvation”); nor do I. The Standards do not equate baptism with regeneration (i.e., effectual calling which is only given to those who are elect unto eternal salvation); nor do I.

I do believe that baptism is a work of God the Holy Spirit (WCF 27.3) by which He brings about union with Christ by joining the baptized with the visible church. As

WCF 28.1 teaches: Baptism is “a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life.”

Biblically, a “sign” is not a picture but a powerful act of God which results in deliverance for God’s people (note the “signs” that God did in Egypt for example). Thus, baptism is a “sign” in that by this means the Holy Spirit transfers the baptized from union with the old Adam into Christ Jesus (the Confession’s scriptural proofs cite Gal. 3:27; Rom. 6:5 at this point), transferring him into Christ, the “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17). Thus, it is a sign and seal of regeneration (the proofs cite John 3:5; Titus 3:5 to prove this point). By the Spirit we are “given up unto God” — i.e., bound to walk in “newness of life” (repenting of our sins, trusting and obeying the Savior all our days).

If the visible Church is the body of Christ (as the confession and the Bible teach), and if baptism unites one to the visible Church (as the confession and the Bible teach), then we may say that we are united to the body of Christ by baptism (as the confession and the Bible teach).

And again, to be united to the body of Christ is to have all spiritual blessings and benefits of Christ *delivered over to you by promise*. This does not mean, however, that the one baptized is saved automatically by his baptism apart from his personal faith in the Savior. Salvation is always and only by grace through faith.

I’m not sure how these statements show that my views are “strikingly different” from that of the Standards (as the Presbytery charges). My views are amply supported by the historic views of many Reformed theologians and creeds as well as by our own Confession. Note the following for a few examples:

– The prayer after baptism from the Strasbourg rite of 1537: “Almighty God, Heavenly Father, we give you eternal praise and thanks, that you have granted and bestowed upon this child your fellowship, that *you have born him again to yourself through your holy baptism, that he has been incorporated into your beloved Son, our only Savior, and is now your child and heir*. Grant, most loving and faithful Father, that we in the whole course of our lives might prove our thankfulness for your great grace, faithfully bring up this child through all the situations of life and that we with this child as well, might more and more die unto the world, and joined to the life of your Son, our Lord Jesus, daily grow in grace, that we might ever praise you and be a blessing to our neighbor, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen” (cited in Hughes Old, *Reformed Baptismal Rites*, 167).

– The baptismal rite in the Genevan Psalter of 1542: The form begins with Jesus’ words to Nicodemus (one must be born again to enter the Kingdom of God) and outlines the plan of redemption and then explains baptism in these

**words: “All these graces are conferred upon us when he is pleased to incorporate us into his Church by baptism. For in this sacrament he testifies to us the remission of our sins. And for this cause, he has ordained the sign of water, to signify that as by this natural element the body is washed of its bodily odors so he wishes to wash and purify our souls.”** And later in the form: **“Here we have a sure witness that God wishes to be a loving Father, not counting all our faults and offenses. Secondly, that he will assist us by his Holy Spirit so that we can battle against the devil, sin, and the desires of our flesh, until we have victory in this, to live in the liberty of his kingdom.”** Futhermore: **“... those two things are accomplished in us, through the grace of Jesus Christ: it follows that the truth and substance of baptism is comprised in him. For we have no other washing than in his blood, and we have no other renewal than in his death and resurrection. But as he communicates to us his riches and blessings by his word, so he distributes them to us by his sacraments”** (cited in Old 173-174).

– We have very similar language used in our *Directory for Worship* where we read, **“children by Baptism, are solemnly received into the bosom of the Visible Church, distinguished from the world, and them that are without, and united with believers; and that *all who are baptized in the name of Christ, do renounce, and by their Baptism are bound to fight against the devil, the world, and the flesh.*”**

– Martin Bucer, Calvin’s mentor, wrote the following in his 1537 baptismal liturgy. This prayer is to be offered after the baptism: **“Almighty God, heavenly Father, we give you eternal praise and thanks, that you have granted and bestowed upon this child your fellowship, *that you have born him again to yourself through holy baptism, that he has been incorporated into your beloved son, our only savior, and is now your child and heir.*”**

– Irish Articles of Religion (1615) on baptism: 89. **“Baptism is not only an outward sign of our profession, and a note of difference whereby Christians are discerned from such as are no Christians; but much more a Sacrament of our admission into the Church, *sealing unto us our new birth (and consequently our Justification, Adoption, and Sanctification) by the communion which we have with Jesus Christ.*”**

– The Second Helvetic Confession (1564) teaches that God promises to give us Christ in the sacraments: **“But the principal thing that God promises in all the sacraments and to which all the godly in all ages direct their attention (some call it the substance and matter of the sacraments) is Christ the Savior...by whom all the elect are circumcised without hands through the Holy Spirit, and are washed from all their sins.”** Concerning baptism, the Confession teaches, **“Now to be baptized in the name of Christ is *to be enrolled, entered, and received into the covenant and family, and so into the***

*inheritance of the sons of God; yes, and in this life to be called after the name of God; that is to say, to be called a son of God; to be cleansed also from the filthiness of sins, and to be granted the manifold grace of God, in order to lead a new and innocent life. Baptism, therefore, calls to mind and renews the great favor God has shown to the race of mortal men. For we are all born in the pollution of sin and are the children of wrath. But God, who is rich in mercy, freely cleanses us from our sins by the blood of his Son, and in him adopts us to be his sons, and by a holy covenant joins us to himself, and enriches us with various gifts, that we might live a new life. All these things are assured by baptism. For inwardly we are regenerated, purified, and renewed by God through the Holy Spirit and outwardly we receive the assurance of the greatest gifts in the water, by which also those great benefits are represented, and, as it were, set before our eyes to be beheld.”*

The 1560 Scots Confession of John Knox is equally forthright: “And so we utterly condemn the vanity of those who affirm the sacraments to be nothing else than naked and bare signs. No, we assuredly believe that *by baptism we are engrafted into Christ Jesus, to be made partakers of his righteousness, by which our sins are covered and remitted.*”

The French Confession (1559) makes the same point: “We acknowledge only two sacraments, common to the whole church, the former whereof is baptism, given unto us to witness to our adoption, for *by it we are grafted into the body of Christ, that being washed with his blood we might be renewed by his Spirit unto holiness of life. . . . [I]n baptism, God gives us really and in fact that which he there sets before us; and that consequently with these signs is given true possession and enjoyment of that which they present to us.*”

Casper Olevianus (Co-Author of Heidelberg Catechism): “When a baby is baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, the parents should be assured that just as certainly as the water cleanses his or her body, so certainly does the Father through the Holy Spirit seal in his or her heart *gemeinschaft* [meaning community, fellowship and common identity] with the body and blood of Christ and, through that communion, the double benefit of the covenant—the forgiveness of sins and the beginnings of righteousness and holiness.” (Quoted in Lyle D. Bierma, *German Calvinism in the Confessional Age: The Covenant Theology of Caspar Olevianus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 99.)

Scottish Baptismal Rite from the 1556 *Book of Common Order* of John Knox, gives these directives:

**Minister:** Do you here present this child to be baptized, earnestly desiring that he may be engrafted in the mystical body of Jesus Christ?

**Answer:** Yes, we require the same.

**The minister proceedeth: Then let us consider, dearly beloved, how Almighty God hath not only made us his children by adoption (Rom 8; Gal 4; Eph 1) and received us into the fellowship of his church, but also hath promised that he will be our God and the God of our children, unto the thousand generation (Gen 17; Isa 56). Which things, as he confirmed to his people of the Old Testament by the sacrament of Circumcision, so hath he also renewed the same to us in his New Testament by the sacrament of Baptism, doing us thereby to wit [i.e., in order that we might know] that our infants appertain to him by covenant and, therefore, ought not to be defrauded of those holy signs and badges, whereby his children are known from infidels and pagans (Gen 17; Col 2: Acts 10).**

**Neither is it requisite that all these that receive this sacrament have the use of understanding and faith, but chiefly that they be contained under the name of God's people, *so that remission of sins in the blood of Christ Jesus doth appertain unto them by God's promise; which thing is most evident by Saint Paul who pronounceth the children begotten and born (either of the parents being faithful) to be clean and holy (1 Cor 7). Also our Saviour Christ admitteth children to his presence, embracing and blessing them (Mark 10; Matt 10; Luke 18; Psalm 22). Which testimonies of the Holy Ghost assure us, that infants be of the number of God's people and that remission of sins doth also appertain to them in Christ. Therefore, without injury they cannot be debarred from the common sign of God's children. And yet is not this outward action of such necessity that the lack thereof should be hurtful to their salvation, if that, prevented by death, they may not conveniently be presented to the church.***

**Note Calvin's words:**

**“Let us know, that the Apostle does not simply exhort us to imitate Christ, as though he had said that the death of Christ is a pattern which all Christians are to follow; for no doubt he ascends higher, as he announces a doctrine, with which he connects, as it is evident, an exhortation; and his doctrine is this – that the death of Christ is efficacious to destroy and demolish the depravity of our flesh, and his resurrection, to effect the renovation of a better nature, *and that by baptism we are admitted into a participation of this grace.* This foundation being laid, Christians may very suitably be exhorted to strive to respond to their calling. Farther, it is not to the point to say, that this power is not apparent in all the baptized; for Paul, according to his usual manner, where he speaks of the faithful, connects the reality and the effect with the outward sign; for we know that whatever the Lord offers by the visible symbol is confirmed and ratified by their faith. In short, he teaches what is the real character of baptism when rightly received. So he testifies to the Galatians, that all who have been baptized into Christ, have put on**

Christ. (Galatians 3:27.) Thus indeed must we speak, as long as the institution of the Lord and the faith of the godly unite together; for we never have naked and empty symbols, except when our ingratitude and wickedness hinder the working of divine beneficence. (Commentary on Romans 6:3-4).

And in the *Institutes*:

“Baptism is the initiatory sign by which we are admitted to the fellowship of the Church, *that being ingrafted into Christ we may be accounted children of God*. Moreover, the end for which God has given it (this I have shown to be common to all mysteries) is, first, that it may be conducive to our faith in him, and secondly, that it may serve the purpose of a confession among men. The nature of both institutions we shall explain in order. Baptism contributes to our faith three things, which require to be treated separately. The first object, therefore, for which it is appointed by the Lord, is to be a sign and evidence of our purification, or (better to explain my meaning) it is a kind of sealed instrument by which he assures us that all our sins are so deleted, covered, and effaced, that they will never come into his sight, never be mentioned, never imputed. For it is his will that all who have believed be baptised for the remission of sins (Matt. 28:19; Acts 2:38).” (*Institutes* 4.15.1)

And again:

“So then we must ever come to this point, that the Sacraments are effectual and that they are not trifling signs that vanish away in the air, but that the truth is always matched with them, because God who is faithful shows that he has not ordained anything in vain. *And that is the reason why in Baptism we truly receive the forgiveness of sins, we are washed and cleansed with the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are renewed by the operation of his Holy Spirit*. And how so? *Does a little water have such power when it is cast upon the head of a child? No. But because it is the will of our Lord Jesus Christ that the water should be a visible sign of his blood and of the Holy Spirit*. Therefore baptism has that power and whatsoever is there set forth to the eye is forthwith accomplished in very deed.” (*Sermons on Deuteronomy*, Sermon 200, Wednesday, 15 July 1556).

“So then, when the Gospel is preached in a place and it has the warrants that God gives men salvation—as when we have Baptism and the Lord’s Holy Supper ministered uncorruptly—we may say it is an election of God . . . . Do we have his Word? It is free grace to us, where he has bound us to himself. Do we have his sacraments? They are the badges of his fatherly election. We have not deserved these things.” (*Sermons on Deuteronomy*, Sermon 53, Saturday, 3 August 1555).

“*We assert that the whole guilt of sin is taken away in baptism, so that the remains of sin still existing are not imputed. That this may be more clear, let*

my readers call to mind that there is a twofold grace in baptism, for therein both remission of sins and regeneration are offered to us. We teach that full remission is made, but that regeneration is only begun and goes on making progress during the whole of life. Accordingly, sin truly remains in us, and is not instantly in one day extinguished by baptism, but as the guilt is effaced it is null in regard to imputation. Nothing is plainer than this doctrine.”  
*(Antidote to the Council of Trent)*

And

“If we do not profit from the good things God has given us, He will not spare us, especially since He has shed more praiseworthy grace upon us than He did upon the people of Israel: He was not merely content to choose us as His people, He gave us his Son as a sure and certain sign of the great love He bears us. Furthermore, He has seen to it that the Devil and all the armed forces of Hell can do nothing against us, as He has ransomed us by the death and passion of His Son. Since the time He began our salvation, He has sustained us daily by His grace; so we can be sure He will continue to multiply His grace upon, provided that we praise the mercy He has shown us and provided that we are truly repentant and beg His pardon for our sins.”  
(sermon on Micah).

I think it is simply inconceivable that the Westminster Standards would so depart from this pervasively Reformed sacramental view as to teach anything which is remarkably different and out of accord with the confessional tradition of the Reformed Church. It seems, rather, that the language of the Confession regarding baptism actually reflects this tradition quite strongly. Thus:

WCF 28.1 “Baptism is a sacrament of the new testament, ordained by Jesus Christ,[Matt. 28:19] not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible church;[I Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:27-28] but also, to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace,[Rom. 4:11; Col. 2:11-12] *of his ingrafting into Christ*,[Gal. 3:27; Rom. 6:5] *of regeneration*,[John 3:5; Tit. 3:5] *of remission of sins*,[Mark 1:4; Acts 2:38; 22:16] *and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life*. [Rom. 6:3-4]”

WCF 28.6 “The efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered;[John 3:5, 8] yet, notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited, and conferred, by the Holy Ghost, 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.[Rom. 6:3-6; Gal. 3:27; I Peter 3:21; Acts 2:38, 41]”

That they are “effectual means of salvation” (WSC Q #91: How do the sacraments become effectual means of salvation? A91: “The sacraments

become effectual means of salvation, not from any virtue in them, or in him that doth administer them; but only by the blessing of Christ, and the working of his Spirit in them that by faith receive them.”)

And that they are required if we are to (ordinarily) escape God’s wrath and curse due to us for sin (WSC Q #85: What doth God require of us, that we may escape his wrath and curse due to us for sin? A: To escape the wrath and curse of God due to us for sin, God requireth of us faith in Jesus Christ, repentance unto life, with the diligent use of all the outward means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption.”)

Dr. David F. Wright in his article on the Westminster Confession of Faith’s view of baptism makes this comment: “What then about the efficacy of baptism according to the Westminster Confession? Its central affirmation seems clear: ‘the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost’ (28:6). It is true that a variety of qualifications to this assertion are entered in the chapter on baptism: efficacy is not tied to the moment of administration (ibid.), grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed to baptism that no person can be regenerated or saved without it (28:5) or that all the baptized are undoubtedly regenerated (ibid.). But these qualifications serve in fact only to highlight the clarity of the core declaration, which is set forth as follows in the preceding chapter on sacraments in general: . . . neither doth the efficacy of a sacrament depend upon the piety or intention of him that doth administer it, but upon the work of the Spirit, and the word of institution; which contains . . . a promise of benefit to worthy receivers (27:3). The Westminster divines viewed baptism as the instrument and occasion of regeneration by the Spirit, of the remission of sins, of ingrafting into Christ (cf. 28:1).” (“Baptism at the Westminster Assembly,” *The Westminster Confession into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Ligon Duncan, ed. Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2003, 1:168-169)

3. Explain how your view of the efficacy of baptism is consistent with the Westminster Standards.

**I believe this has been answered above (and below).**

4. Please address whether you believe a baptized person who is never excommunicated from the Church during his lifetime can still be one who is not justified as described in Westminster Confession, Chapter 11.

**Yes, it seems to me this is very possible since excommunication may not always be exercised consistently or faithfully. Thus, it is very possible for a lifelong hypocrite or a rebel against God to continue in “good standing” in the visible church (because of a church’s unwillingness to excommunicate) and yet at the Last Day be turned away by Christ (“Depart from Me, I never knew you”).**

You state that, “Everyone who has been baptized is a Christian.” (*Hospitality*, page 99), and “The Bible teaches us that baptism unites us to Christ and His body by the power of

the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13).” (*The Federal Vision*, page 55), and “If he has been baptized, he is in covenant with God and is obligated to walk in faithfulness, loving God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength. (*The Federal Vision*, page 67)

How do you reconcile this with *Westminster Confession of Faith* 28.5? (“Although it be a great sin to condemn or neglect this ordinance, yet grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto it, as that no person can be regenerated, or saved, without it: or, that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated.”).

**When I say “everyone who has been baptized is a Christian,” I am speaking of the objective covenantal reality — i.e., the one baptized has been baptized into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and thus bears the name of the Triune God and has been brought into covenant union with Christ by the power of the Spirit as Paul says in I Cor. 12:13. Paul doesn’t seem to view this as something true only for some of the baptised but rather this is true for all (note v. 27 “Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually.”).**

As I alluded to above, it is interesting that in our *Directory for the Public Worship of God* we read that the children of believers “*are Christians, and federally holy before baptism, and therefore are they baptized.*” What is meant by this astonishing statement? Is the *Directory* saying that all covenant children are “elect” in the Confessional sense? Is it claiming that they are “effectually called” and thus, have no need for conversion, for repentance and saving faith? It is saying that they are already “regenerated,” “justified,” “forgiven,” and will infallibly persevere to the end? Is this a denial of Paul’s statement that all by nature are “dead in trespasses and sins”? This is certainly what we would tend to think if we only allowed the definition of “Christian” as it is given us in the teaching of the Confession (regarding the elect, effectual calling, saving faith, etc.) to inform our reading of this statement.

But, clearly, this would be a terrible *misreading* of what is intended by this statement. It seems evident that the writers of the *Directory* are speaking covenantally when they call the children of believers “Christians.” They (and we) mean something like this: “Covenant children are claimed by God in covenant, His promise to be their God rightly and truly belongs to them, and they have rightful place among God’s people and a right to be baptized into the name of the Triune God and to be viewed and treated as Christians by virtue of their membership in the covenant community, the visible church which is the body of Christ and the kingdom, family, and house of God.” I think the writers of the *Directory* intend to say very much the same thing that I am trying to set forth. The difference is we are willing to allow them to speak covenantally and not read into this statement all that the Confession teaches regarding the elect. Thus, this claim is not controversial to anyone when we read it in our *Directory for Public Worship*. But ironically, my position which is exactly the same, is viewed as a departure from the teaching of the Confession. We must ask why this is so?

**I don't mean (and neither does Paul or the writers of our *Directory*) that baptism automatically saves apart from faith in Christ. Baptism joins you to the visible church which is the house, family, and kingdom of God (WCF 25.2). Baptism obligates the baptized to believe in Christ and persevere in faith (note WCF 27.1; LC #167). If the baptized fall away in unbelief, they suffer a greater condemnation than those who have never known the privilege of membership in the visible church.**

**WCF 28.5 emphasizes the fact that salvation is not so inseparably connected to baptism that there can be no salvation apart from it. I agree with this entirely as I agree that not all who are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated in the Confessional sense. This is why I believe that the apostasy of the baptized is a very real possibility.**

***Additional Areas of Questions Related to the Memorial***

Are there any views that you hold which is either an exception to or inconsistent with the Confession's teachings on the doctrine of election, the doctrine of the church, the doctrine of perseverance, the doctrine of assurance, and the doctrine of baptism. If any, explain.

**As I have said many times, I have no exception to the Westminster Confession's teaching on any of these points. My concern is not with the Confession's teaching but seeking to understand what the Scriptures mean when they appear to state things contrary to these teachings. Because the Bible plainly teaches the absolute sovereignty of God over all things (including the eternal destinies of men), I do not believe there is any inconsistency between the Scriptures and the Confession at these points. There are, however, numerous apparent contradictions and I believe they are explained by the fact that, for the most part, the writers of Scripture are viewing the work of God in salvation from a covenantal perspective rather than the decretal perspective of the Confession.**

**As one example, I have cited Paul and Peter who address entire congregations as "chosen of God" and "elect" even though they do not know God's secret decree. It seems that one explanation of this is that they view members of the church to be members of the body of Christ (who is the Elect One) and thus they are able to view and address the members of the church as "elect" unto salvation and call upon them to persevere in faith and not be like unfaithful, apostate Israel who fell under God's judgment in the wilderness. The Confession, however, restricts the definition of the "elect" to those who will be saved eternally and does not use the term to describe members of the visible Church.**

**In spite of this, however, the Confession actually embraces a much broader view of the visible church than is held by some in our day, when it states that the visible Church is "the household, family, and kingdom of God" (WCF 25.2) and is the body of Christ Jesus, outside of which there is ordinarily "no possibility of salvation." This, it seems to me, does clearly reflect the way the authors of Scripture speak of**

**the visible Church. According to this definition, believers and their children are to be viewed and treated as members of the household, children in God’s family, and citizens of the Kingdom — which seems to be exactly how Paul and the other apostles address members of the church.**

**But on the whole the Confession seems to be mostly concerned with defending and demonstrating the sovereignty of God in salvation in contrast to the co-operationist views of the Pelagians and Arminians. The fact that there is no discussion of apostasy may indicate that the concerns of the Assembly focused more upon the “decretal” side of salvation than upon a more covenantal perspective. Given the “environment” of the Confession and its concerns (which I fully agree with) I have no exceptions to its teaching regarding election, the church, perseverance, assurance, or baptism.**

Having read the Memorial from Central Carolina and the SJC report, is there anything you would like to place, on the record, in your defense?

**The Memorial exhibits a catastrophic misunderstanding of the position I am seeking to set forth and asserts that I hold positions which I explicitly deny. The Memorial ignores the fact that I have repeatedly said that blessings are not *automatically* granted because of baptism, but Christ who is offered with all His benefits in baptism must be embraced with living faith before one can enjoy the blessings of His Person and work. The Memorial demonstrates an unwillingness to seek to understand the perspective which governs the position I’m attempting to set forth. I view the Memorial as uncharitable as it is unreasonable.**

**Thus, I am forced to say that the charges leveled by the memorial are false, ill-considered, and misplaced. I do not disagree with the Confession at the places alleged by the Presbytery. They are seriously mistaken about my views and have seriously misread what I have written in drawing their conclusions.**

**Regarding the Standing Judicial Report:**

**On page 6 of the SJC report the assertion is made that Louisiana Presbytery did not respond to the “specific concerns” raised initially by the Central Carolina Presbytery. This is untrue. Presbytery appointed a committee (of three men) to examine me in light of the concerns of CCP. In this examination, the committee covered all of the concerns raised by CCP along with a number of other issues not mentioned by the presbytery. In addition, a number of presbyters contacted me privately with other specific questions which I attempted to answer. There was no one with whom I spoke who believed my views were contrary to the doctrinal standards of our church.**

**The committee was charged with negligence by the SJC for a number of reasons. First it stated that “The committee charged with investigating the views of TE Wilkins kept no minutes and has no transcript, or even a detailed summary of its**

**examination of TE Wilkins.” In response it is important to remember that this examination was done at the REQUEST of two other presbyteries who asked Louisiana presbytery to examine my views (no charges were brought by them or by anyone in Louisiana presbytery). The presbytery was under no obligation to respond in any way, but thought it wise to go ahead and have an examination in light of the concerns raised (and I was in complete agreement with this judgment). This was not a TRIAL where a more formal proceeding would have taken place (along with, no doubt, more formal and thorough minutes). Even during the examination of applicants for ordination, only the briefest of minutes are kept (I’ve never heard of any presbytery keeping a detailed record of the responses to the questions asked of ordinands). But this was not even an ordination exam, it was, rather, an examination of a ordained minister who has been in good standing in the church for over 30 years who has served in the presbytery for 17 years. The exam was lengthy and very thorough, the committee continued to meet afterwards to discuss their conclusions before drawing up their report for the Presbytery. They presented their summary of the exam and their conclusions which they had adopted unanimously and then presbytery adopted the report unanimously (with one abstention) as well. It is difficult for me to find negligence in these actions.**

[Further, the fact is that neither the PCA Book of Church Order nor Robert’s Rules of Order require committees to keep minutes. Neither is there any requirement for the committee to present formal minutes to the body which appointed it. Brief reports, such as the one given by our committee to presbytery are sufficient and, according to Robert’s Rules, these reports may even be presented orally.]

**Second, the SJC cites as evidence of negligence the fact that there was no “face to face” examination (“Neither the Committee nor Presbytery held a face-to-face meeting with TE Wilkins to examine his views”). That is true but it is not a sign of negligence on our Presbytery’s part. The examination was done over the phone with the three members of the committee and me – one member from extreme Southwest Louisiana (Lake Charles), one member from extreme Southcentral Louisiana (Lafayette), one member from the extreme Northwest border (Shreveport) and me in the Northeast corner (Monroe). We all knew each other well and have been “face to face” many times, but because of the expense and time it would have taken to travel to a central meeting place, the committee decided to do it all by phone. This is not out of the ordinary for committees in our presbytery or in other presbyteries. Again, this was not a trial (which surely would have been conducted in a formal meeting) but an examination of my views in response to requests from others. I don’t believe think anything was lost that could have been gained by a face to face meeting.**

**For these reasons, and others that could be cited, I believe the judgment of negligence against our presbytery is unwarranted and not supported by the facts.**