

Steve Wilkins' Letter to Louisiana Presbytery Regarding the "9 Declarations" of PCA General Assembly's Ad-Interim Committee's Report on the Federal Vision/New Perspective

To Louisiana Presbytery:

On June 13, 2007 the General Assembly approved the declarations and recommendations of the Ad-Interim Study Committee Report on the Federal Vision. The report enumerated nine "Declarations" which, according to Dr. Lucas, were the chief concerns of the committee. Dr. Lucas stated, "There are other things in the body of the report that we did not believe rose to the level of being stated as declarations. . . . For example, issues related to merit and the covenant of works—we didn't think those things rose to the level of a declaration. We tried to focus our declarations on the heart of the matter as the committee saw it." Since I am accountable and submissive to the judgment of Louisiana Presbytery I thought it might be helpful to reiterate my views to Presbytery by responding to the "Declarations" of this report. If any of my statements are unclear, I am happy to explain more fully to Presbytery as a whole or to any member(s) in particular.

I will first state the committee's declaration and then give my response **in bold print**.

1. The view that rejects the bi-covenantal structure of Scripture as represented in the Westminster Standards (i.e., views which do not merely take issue with the terminology, but the essence of the first/second covenant framework) is contrary to those Standards.

Response: In regard to "the bi-covenantal structure of Scripture" I assume that the committee is referring to the "covenant of works" and the "covenant of grace" as outlined in the Westminster Confession (WCF VII.2-3). If this is what the committee means, then I embrace this "bi-covenantal structure." However, I prefer to call the Pre-Fall covenant a "covenant of life" rather than a "covenant of works" in order to avoid any suggestion that Adam could have earned glorification by his works of obedience. I do believe that God's purpose was to "glorify" Adam if Adam had abided faithful. But this "glorification" would have been a gift from God and not something earned or "merited" by Adam's works of obedience. If Adam had been obedient, that obedience would have been the fruit of the grace and power of the Spirit who had been given to him and not the fruit of his own native strength or ability. Other than this qualification, I agree with "the essence of the first/second covenant framework."

I also believe that Adam was created in a state of grace/favor with God and was commanded to abide in God's favor by trusting God's word and obeying Him implicitly. This is also what God expects of us when He brings us sovereignly into a state of grace. We are called to walk by faith, trust Christ alone for our salvation, obey His word and confess our sins. Adam was created in God's favor. We, however, must be redeemed from sin by the blood of Christ in order to enter the state of favor — but in both cases all is of grace.

2. The view that an individual is "elect" by virtue of his membership in the visible church; and that this "election" includes justification, adoption and sanctification; but that this individual could lose his

"election" if he forsakes the visible church, is contrary to the Westminster Standards.

Response: Dr. Lucas explained that the committee is referring here to decretal election (i.e., the secret decree which results in eternal salvation) as described in the Westminster Confession (WCF III.6). I do not believe that one is decretally elect by virtue of his membership in the visible church. Election is the sovereign act of God.

I assume that the second part of the sentence — "that this 'election' includes justification, adoption and sanctification" — refers to what I would call "covenantal election" (the idea that Paul addresses all the members of the visible church as "elect"). Here it appears, however, that the committee is using the terms "justification, adoption and sanctification" as the Westminster Confession defines them, i.e., as blessings given exclusively to the decretally elect and not to each member of the visible church. If I am correct with this assumption, then I agree with this declaration. However, I do believe that Paul uses these same terms in a broader way in the Scriptures. For example:

1. He speaks of all who are washed (which I take as a reference to baptism) as being "justified" (I Cor. 6:9-11). If I am correct, Paul is not using this term the same way that the writers of the Confession are, because these same people are later warned against the possibility of falling away and being condemned (I Cor. 10:1-11). Thus, Paul is not referring to something that is only given to the decretally elect here.

2. Paul addresses all the members of the visible church as "members of God's household" (Eph. 2:19) and thus seems to view every member as "adopted" in some sense. The apostle does not appear to restrict the phrase "members of God's household" only to the decretally elect. The Westminster Confession seems to embrace this same view in chapter XXV where it describes the visible church as "the household, family, and kingdom of God" (indeed, the Confession cites Eph. 2:19 as one of the proof texts for this assertion). Members of the visible church are in the "family" of God by "adoption" (since they were by nature, children of wrath) — even though not all of the members of the visible church will persevere in faith to the end. If this is correct, then Paul is not thinking of "adoption" in the precisely the same way as it is defined by the WCF, for in this case, not all of the members of the visible church or those "adopted into God's household" are among the decretally elect.

3. Paul commonly refers to the members of the visible church as "sanctified" or "saints" (e.g., I Cor. 1:30-31) and thereby indicates that all members are sanctified in some sense. Paul, however, frequently warns these same "saints" against falling into condemnation. In light of these warning, it seems clear that Paul is applying this term more broadly than the Westminster Confession which restricts "sanctification" to the decretally elect.

If I am wrong in my reading of these texts, then I am left with two other ways of understanding them that would also be consistent with the WCF. Paul could be addressing these statements exclusively to those who are decretally elect and not to the rest (i.e., in accordance with the Westminster Confession's stipulated definitions). Or, he could be giving, as some suggest, a form of "charitable

judgment" to all the members of the church (i.e., rather than saying what is objectively or covenantally true, he is simply saying what he charitably assumes to be true, though he cannot be certain). Though neither of these options seem as compelling to me, they would be consistent with the Confession.

In short, I do not believe that decretal election can be lost, but I do believe that those who are "covenantally elect" as signified by their membership in the visible church can fall away from the faith and be lost. I believe that membership in the visible church brings with it a covenantal form of justification, adoption, and sanctification which would not be identical to the stipulated definitions given to these terms in the WCF. If I am correct here, then this would not contradict the Confession (since the Confession speaks of all these blessings from a decretal perspective and blessings which are give to the decretally elect exclusively), but it would mean that these terms are used in a broader way in the Scriptures (i.e., they are applied to all members of the visible church).

3. The view that Christ does not stand as a representative head whose perfect obedience and satisfaction is imputed to individuals who believe in him is contrary to the Westminster Standards.

Response: I agree completely. Christ is the representative head of all His people and His perfect obedience and satisfaction are imputed to all who believe in Him.

There is dispute over whether delegates of the Westminster Assembly intended to *require* belief in the imputation of Christ's *active* obedience. In any case, I affirm that Christ obeyed God at every point throughout this life and that His obedience is absolutely necessary for our salvation. Our right standing before God is grounded, founded, and based upon Christ's righteousness alone.

4. The view that strikes the language of "merit" from our theological vocabulary so that the claim is made that Christ's merits are not imputed to his people is contrary to the Westminster Standards.

Response: Dr. Lucas said that WCF XVII.2 and LC 70-71 guided the committee at this point. I agree with the Confession at these points. But I do not believe that Adam (or any other man) could merit (in the sense of earn or deserve) anything from God. God doesn't *owe* anything to man as wages earned.

He is never placed under obligation to us because of what we do. He is never in our debt.

Nor do I believe that Jesus, as the incarnate Son, had to do anything to earn the favor of His Father (and I do not believe that WCF XVII.2 *requires* that particular understanding of "merit"). He was always (and has always abided) in the favor of His Father. He entered the world in God's favor and lived out His life in the favor of God the Father (and thus, we are enabled by God's grace to share in the favor He has by being united to Him; we are "accepted in the Beloved"). This is not to say that His work doesn't have infinite and inherent worth or that it is beyond anything any mere human could have before God. Indeed, if this is what the committee understands by the term "merit" then I am in complete agreement.

5. The view that "union with Christ" renders imputation redundant because it subsumes all of Christ's benefits (including justification) under this doctrinal heading is contrary to the Westminster Standards.

Response: Dr. Lucas said that the committee had in mind here Larger Catechism questions 66 and 69. According to the Confession's definition of "union with Christ," such "union" is always saving and does "subsume" all of Christ's benefits (the Larger Catechism #66 stipulates this as something only the decretally elect have). In this view, "imputation" would be part and parcel of union with Christ and though not identical (or "redundant"), surely could not be seen as somehow "separable" from union with the Savior (as if one could be united to Christ and *not* be clothed in His righteousness).

If, however, the committee means by "union with Christ" the union brought about by baptism (i.e., "covenantal union" or the union we have by virtue of being made members of His visible body, the church — as alluded to in Larger Catechism 167 which speaks of "Christ, into whom we are baptized") then, clearly, "covenantal union" does not "subsume" all of Christ's benefits (if by "subsume" they mean "infallibly convey"). I do believe that by baptism and membership in the visible church we have Christ and the benefits of the covenant of grace presented to us or delivered over to us by way of promise (Shorter Catechism 94). Christ must be embraced by faith for all the benefits of His work and the blessings of His salvation to be ours (and, of course, the faith that embraces Christ is itself a gift of God's grace, Eph. 2:8-9).

6. The view that water baptism effects a "covenantal union" with Christ through which each baptized person receives the saving benefits of Christ's mediation, including regeneration, justification, and sanctification, thus creating a parallel soteriological system to the decretal system of the Westminster Standards, is contrary to the Westminster Standards.

Response: I do indeed believe that baptism unites the baptized in covenant with Christ. As I mentioned above, however, baptism is never efficacious apart from the exercise of saving faith on the part of the recipient. I do not see this as a "parallel" soteriological system to the decretal system. Rather, I believe God works out His decrees in history through the various covenantal structures of biblical history and in and through the visible church.

Paul appears to attribute justification and sanctification to all the members of the visible church (I Cor. 1:30-31; 6:9-11, etc.). At this point, I understand that Paul views the visible church as the realm of salvation (because it is the body of Christ, the household, family, and kingdom of God, according to WCF XXV.2). This "justification and sanctification" is not infallibly saving, however, since Paul warns these same people against the possibility of falling away. If I am wrong in my reading, then these texts could only be speaking of the decretally elect (or again, some would say that Paul is giving a charitable judgment of the members of the church). But I fail to see how this covenantal "justification and sanctification" contradicts the teaching of the Confession at these points.

I reject "baptismal regeneration" if one means by this phrase the infallible transformation of a man and the giving of saving faith in effectual calling. I do not

believe that baptism accomplishes this. Thus, the only biblical way one can speak of "baptismal regeneration" it seems to me, is by referring to the transfer that occurs in baptism from being united in covenant to Adam to being united in covenant to Christ Jesus. I reject "baptismal regeneration" if one means that all who are baptised are, head for head, given saving faith and effectually called.

7. The view that one can be "united to Christ" and not receive *all* the benefits of Christ's mediation, including perseverance, in that effectual union is contrary to the Westminster Standards.

Response: Dr. Lucas explained that the committee had Larger Catechism question 69 (which refers to the communion "which the members of the invisible church have with Christ") and WCF XVII.1 (which refers to those who are "effectually called") in mind here. I do not believe that the communion that the decretally elect have with Christ can be lost. And further, I believe this union conveys "all the benefits of Christ's mediation, including perseverance." Clearly, the members of the invisible church as those predestined unto eternal life, are "effectually called" and will infallibly persevere.

However, I do believe that there is a union with Christ that is not ultimately saving, or to utilize the terminology of the committee, a "non-effectual" union (John 15; Rom. 11, etc.). Those who are not elect unto everlasting life do not persevere in this union and are condemned. Paul speaks of the members of the church in Corinth as those who have been baptized into one body by the Spirit (I Cor. 12:13) and who are all individually members of Christ's body (12:27) and yet, he warns these same people against the danger of apostasy. I believe that the non-elect do receive benefits from Christ through the Spirit and may enjoy real communion with Jesus during the time in which they are branches in the vine, members of the covenant olive tree, and members of the body of Christ.

I do not believe, however, that the relationship the non-elect have with Christ is identical to the relationship sustained by the decretally elect. To repeat what I have previously written,

"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."

I went on to say that there may also be "other experiential differences between the elect and the non-elect," but these differences may not be discernible to others (or even to the individuals themselves) until "the non-elect person displays his unbelief in some very explicit and concrete ways." The relationship with Christ which the non-elect have may be compared to the relationship that a married couple sustain prior to their divorce. They may have been sincere in their love for one another at times in their marriage, but the relationship taken as a whole is not qualitatively equal to the relationship sustained by a couple who remain truly faithful to one another throughout their lives. Covenant relationships are dynamic and subject to

change in both good and bad directions.

Clearly, those who are "covenantally united" to Christ do not receive "all the benefits of Christ's mediation" that are described in the "effectual union" with Christ set forth in the WCF. At this point, I agree with the declaration.

8. The view that some can receive saving benefits of Christ's mediation, such as regeneration and justification, and yet not persevere in those benefits is contrary to the Westminster Standards.

Response: Dr. Lucas said that the committee had in mind WCF XVII and texts like Philippians 1:6. WCF chapter XVII refers exclusively to those who are "effectually called, and sanctified by his Spirit," who "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 agree completely. It is impossible for those who are "effectually called" to fall away from the state of grace. All of these will indeed persevere in faith to the end and be eternally saved.

My concern has never been to contradict or disagree with the Confession at this point. I agree with the Confession wholeheartedly. Rather, my concern is (and has been) to deal with what *the Scriptures* declare to be true of all members of the church (note pp. 58-60 of my article in *The Federal Vision*) and how we should understand what is said to be true of those who are in danger of apostasy or who actually have apostatized (cf. p. 61 of *The Federal Vision*). Paul, Peter, and Jesus apply the language of salvation to those who are in danger ultimately of falling into condemnation (I Cor. 10:4-5; Heb. 6:4ff; 10:29; 12:22ff; 2 Pet. 1:9; 2:1,20; Rev. 3:5; 22:19). Whatever our understanding of these texts, we are *not* free to expound them in a manner which would contradict WCF XVII. My question is, therefore, *how* should we understand these texts in light of the truth of WCF XVII? In attempting to answer that question, I have suggested a possible explanation which does not necessitate a rejection of WCF XVII.

9. The view that justification is in any way based on our works, or that the so-called "final verdict of justification" is based on anything other than the perfect obedience and satisfaction of Christ received through faith alone, is contrary to the Westminster Standards.

Response: I do not believe that justification is "based upon our works." Our Session adopted the following on June 8, 2006:

"1. We affirm that justification is received by faith alone and is not grounded in any sense upon man's works.

We further affirm the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the sinner. We have never viewed human works as the ground (either partial or total) of justification before God. We have never taken any exception to the statement of this truth found in the Westminster Confession of Faith and catechisms. We unanimously adopted our summary statement on 'Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation' (adopted April 3, 2005) which included this affirmation in the first point:

‘Salvation is by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and not of works. It is founded upon the obedience, death, and resurrection of the faithful Second Adam, Jesus Christ. Justification is an act of God’s free grace wherein sinners are accepted as righteous in God’s sight by virtue of the righteousness of Christ imputed to them and received by faith alone (WSC Q. 33). This justifying faith is always accompanied by all other saving graces and virtues (WCF 11.2). Justifying faith, therefore, is never vain but one that works by love (Gal. 5:6).’

This is the position we have always held, never denied, and, God willing, a position from which we will never depart."

Dr. Lucas said that WCF XVI.5 and Larger Catechism 77 were in view at this point. I agree that our works cannot merit our salvation or justification. But the committee seems to say that the "final verdict" is something that does not involve our works at all ("the so-called ‘final verdict of justification’ is" not based upon "anything other than the perfect obedience and satisfaction of Christ received through faith alone"). This appears to contradict the teaching of WCF XXXIII.1, which says that at the final judgment "all persons that have lived upon earth shall appear before the tribunal of Christ, to give an account of their thoughts, words, and deeds; and to receive according to what they have done in the body, whether good or evil." This certainly is the plain teaching of the Scriptures as well (as the proof texts show: II Cor. 5:10; Eccl. 12:14; Rom. 2:16; 14:10, 12; Matt. 12:36-37).

The final judgment is according to our works (and, of course, for Christians our works are also gifts from God and the fruit of His gracious work in us; thus, Augustine says when God rewards our works, He is crowning His own works). Clearly, it is on the basis of these works that men receive "according to what they have done in the body, whether good or evil." The Scriptures teach that God the Father has given all judgment into the hands of the Son. The Son, in turn, judges the works we have done, which are the fruits of the Spirit’s work in us. Thus, the rewards given on the basis of our works are also *gracious gifts* not "payment for services rendered." I may be misunderstanding the intention of the committee at this point, but it is difficult for me to reconcile this statement with the teaching of the Confession and the clear teaching of Scripture.