

An Evangelical Introduction to the Federal Vision

Steve Jeffery

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3)

1. Introduction

In recent months, the phrase ‘Federal Vision’ has been heard with increasing frequency in British evangelical circles. It is generally accompanied by a quizzical expression – quite understandably, for its meaning is far from obvious. What is the ‘Federal Vision’?

‘The Federal Vision’ was originally the title of a Pastors’ conference held in 2002 at Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church in Monroe, Louisiana. The speakers (John Barach, Steve Schlissel, Douglas Wilson and Steve Wilkins – all pastors in North American Reformed churches) addressed various aspects of Reformed covenant theology. The English word ‘covenant’ translates the Latin *foedus*, from which the English ‘federal’ is derived, hence the conference title. This conference was part of an ongoing series of interactions, but because of fairly high profile of the event, the name ‘Federal Vision’ (hereafter ‘FV’) caught on.¹

The FV was thus not conceived as a well-defined theological system. It has no central ‘organisation’; there is no one ‘in charge’; there is no ‘list’ of ‘members’. Rather, the FV is an ongoing conversation about a set of issues connected with Reformed covenant theology. Trying to define the FV is rather like trying to define ‘evangelicalism’ or ‘Puritanism’ – they emerged as an identifiable group, sharing similar concerns but defying simple theological delineation.

Recently the situation has become more complicated still, for some of those involved in this conversation have been accused of serious theological unorthodoxy. Unfortunately, the critics have not always understood the issues very well, and have denounced some associated with the FV for holding heterodox views they in fact deny, or denying orthodox doctrines they wholeheartedly affirm. Much of the discussion has taken place on the internet, where criticisms have been flying around in highly abbreviated form and (sadly) often in extremely inflammatory terms.

In an effort to bring clarity to this confused situation, a number of participants in the FV conversation issued ‘A Joint Federal Vision Statement’ (hereafter, ‘the Statement’) in 2007.² Though they differ on some points, the authors identified a set of key conclusions on which they agree. Consequently, whereas the FV could previously only be defined in sociological terms, a theological definition is now possible.

Following an introductory preamble, the Statement contains 18 sections of affirmations and denials, all of which ‘can be fairly represented as part of the Federal Vision.’ The final section, entitled ‘Some Areas of Intramural Disagreement’, identifies ‘important areas of disagreement or ongoing discussion among those who are identified as “Federal Vision” advocates,’³ which cannot accurately be described as part of the FV.

This article is not a comprehensive evaluation of the FV. It does not discuss the numerous subtle differences among participants in the FV conversation, and it certainly does not purport to offer a comprehensive biblical case for or against any of the doctrines discussed. Rather, it seeks simply to introduce the FV by expounding the Statement, highlighting connections between the theological issues it raises and locating them in their historic Reformed context. All of the 18 affirmations and denials are quoted in full and discussed, and all the areas of intramural disagreement are examined. It is certainly not the last word, but perhaps it may be a useful start.

It must be emphasised that the Statement does not represent the things that are most important to its authors. Some of its affirmations are of course central (the doctrine of the Trinity, for example), but most concern lesser matters, and many significant issues are omitted simply because on these all sides in the debate agree. The Statement certainly does not seek to define theological boundaries, emphasising for

¹ The original speakers at the 2002 conference later collaborated with several others to expand and publish their work in a book entitled *The Federal Vision*, ed. Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner (Monroe: Athanasius Press, 2004).

² John Barach, Randy Booth, Tim Gallant, Mark Horne, James Jordan, Peter Leithart, Rich Lusk, Jeffrey Meyers, Ralph Smith, Steve Wilkins and Douglas Wilson, ‘A Joint Federal Vision Statement.’ Online www.federal-vision.com/pdf/fvstatement.pdf.

³ ‘Statement,’ p. 7.

example that eschatological views should not be ‘a test of fellowship between orthodox believers.’⁴ The Statement is a response to a particular situation, not an attempt to identify the heart of the Christian faith.

This is vital to remember in Britain, where in recent years evangelicals from different backgrounds have increasingly been working together in joint evangelistic initiatives, ministry training courses and so on. We have learned to overlook disagreements about minor issues in order to work together for the sake of the gospel. The Statement encourages this, declaring that ‘because we are justified through faith in Jesus alone, we believe that we have an obligation to be in fellowship with everyone that God has received into fellowship with himself.’⁵ If our ongoing struggles to refine our understanding of Scripture uncover some previously unidentified differences between us, we must strive to avoid being driven apart. The gospel is too important for that.

My prayer is that this article may help in some small way to prevent division among evangelicals in Britain. It would be tragic if we witnessed a repeat of the bitter quarrels caused by misunderstandings of the FV in America. We can scarcely afford to spend time squabbling when we are surrounded by millions of people who are lost without Christ.

2. Our Triune God

The first declaration in the Statement concerns the doctrine of the Trinity.

We affirm that the triune God is the archetype of all covenantal relations. All faithful theology and life is conducted in union with and imitation of the way God eternally is, and so we seek to understand all that the Bible teaches—on covenant, on law, on gospel, on predestination, on sacraments, on the Church—in the light of an explicit Trinitarian understanding.⁶

This reflects the familiar biblical teaching that all created things reflect the character of the Creator. As Herman Bavinck puts it, ‘Because the universe is God’s creation, it is also his revelation and self-manifestation.’⁷

The claim that Trinitarian theology should shape all our ‘theology and life’ underlies the subsequent denial, which warns against the danger of lapsing into either practical polytheism (implicitly denying God’s oneness) or functional unitarianism (implicitly denying his threeness).

We deny that a mere formal adherence to the doctrine of the Trinity is sufficient to keep the very common polytheistic and unitarian temptations of unbelieving thought at bay.⁸

Broughton Knox has insisted similarly that we cannot be merely theoretical Trinitarians. The doctrine of the Trinity ‘is the glory of the Christian religion. Through it we understand not only God’s nature and his relationship to us, but our own nature and our relationships to one another.’⁹ For ‘God is ultimate reality, and is the ground of all other reality.’¹⁰

This conscious, explicit Trinitarianism is reflected in numerous writings by FV proponents. For example, Peter Leithart has written on the implications of Trinitarian theology for anthropology, soteriology, ecclesiology and eschatology, and Douglas Wilson draws on the mutual bestowal of glory between the Father and the Son to elucidate the glory of submission between husband and wife.¹¹

⁴ ‘Statement,’ p. 2.

⁵ ‘Statement,’ p. 4.

⁶ ‘Statement,’ p. 2, italics original.

⁷ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Volume II: God and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), p. 109 (cf. pp. 95–110). See further John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 Vols; ed. John T. McNeill; tr. F. L. Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), Li–v (1:35–69); John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), p. 230.

⁸ ‘Statement,’ p. 2, italics original.

⁹ D. B. Knox, *The Everlasting God*, in D. Broughton Knox, *Selected Works, Volume I: The Doctrine of God* (Sydney: Matthias Media, 2000), p. 74.

¹⁰ Knox, *Everlasting God*, p. 75. See further John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002), p. 735; Bavinck, *God and Creation*, pp. 329–334.

¹¹ Peter J. Leithart, ‘Trinitarian Anthropology: Toward a Trinitarian Re-casting of Reformed Theology,’ pp. 58–71 in *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros and Cons: Debating the Federal Vision*, ed. E. Calvin Beisner (Fort Lauderdale: Knox Theological

3. Scripture

Sola Scriptura

The Statement declares that the Bible, and only the Bible, is God's authoritative word to man.

We affirm that the Bible in its entirety, from Genesis to Revelation, is the infallible Word of God, and is our only ultimate rule for faith and practice. Scripture alone is the infallible and ultimate standard for Christians.¹²

This robust affirmation of the plenary inspiration, infallibility, sole authority and sufficiency of Scripture is familiar evangelical territory. It firmly rejects the Roman Catholic doctrine that Scripture must be supplemented by sacred tradition and the Magisterium of the church. The Bible needs no supplement and brooks no rivals – no private revelations, worldly presuppositions or ecclesiastical pronouncements may stand against it.

Principles of biblical interpretation

According to the Statement, Scripture interprets Scripture. The New Testament is our guide to the interpretation of the Old, and the whole Bible finds its fulfilment and coherence in Jesus Christ.

We affirm further that Scripture is to be our guide in learning how to interpret Scripture, and this means we must imitate the apostolic handling of the Old Testament, paying close attention to language, syntax, context, narrative flow, literary styles, and typology—all of it integrated in Jesus Christ Himself.¹³

This calls to mind the oft-quoted maxim that 'Bible words have Bible meanings'. When we read of 'redemption' in the book of Romans, we should turn first to the Old Testament, not an encyclopaedia of first-century culture or a 17th-century confession of faith, in order to understand Paul's meaning. This does not necessarily mean that extra-biblical data has no place in biblical interpretation; it does mean, however, that the Bible should be privileged as a guide to its own interpretation.

The Statement's insistence that 'we must imitate the apostolic handling of the Old Testament' elucidates this affirmation further. Our reading of Scripture should be informed by the numerous New Testament citations of Old Testament texts. If an apostle interprets an Old Testament text in a certain way, we should ask what principles led him to this reading, and seek to imitate those principles ourselves.

The Statement's insistence that Scripture provides the key to its own interpretation also implies that the imposition of extra-biblical interpretative frameworks will inevitably distort the Bible's teaching.

We deny that the Bible can be rightly understood by any hermeneutical grid not derived from the Scriptures themselves.¹⁴

Thus the Statement opposes both modernism's antisupernaturalism and historical scepticism, and postmodernism's deliberate attempts to re-interpret Scripture through extra-biblical philosophical lenses.

The 'law-gospel hermeneutic'

These affirmations concerning biblical interpretation are also directed against another hermeneutical system. This becomes clearer in a later section entitled 'Law and Gospel':

We deny that law and gospel should be considered as a hermeneutics, or treated as such. We believe that any passage, whether indicative or imperative, can be heard by the faithful as good news, and that any passage, whether containing gospel promises or not, will be heard by the rebellious as intolerable demand. The fundamental division is not in the text, but rather in the human heart.¹⁵

Seminary, 2003); Peter J. Leithart, *Deep Comedy: Trinity, Tragedy and Hope in Western Literature* (Moscow: Canon Press, 2006); Douglas Wilson, *For a Glory and a Covering: A practical theology of marriage* (Moscow: Canon Press, 2006), pp. 3–9, cf. pp. 66–68.

¹² 'Statement,' p. 2, italics original.

¹³ 'Statement,' pp. 2–3, italics original.

¹⁴ 'Statement,' p. 3, italics original.

¹⁵ 'Statement,' p. 6, italics original.

This opposes the so-called ‘law-gospel hermeneutic’. This hermeneutical approach seeks to divide the Bible into two distinct types of passage – ‘law’ and ‘gospel’ – claiming that the purpose of the ‘law’ passages is to drive us to despair, forcing us to take refuge in the promise of forgiveness found in the ‘gospel’ passages.¹⁶ Though the law-gospel hermeneutic originated in confessional Lutheranism, it has more recently found its way into Reformed circles. In his lecture at the 2002 FV conference, Steve Schlissel lamented that ‘we actually have people who divide the Bible into discreet verses, every one of which is regarded as a proposition or demand for law *or* Gospel.’¹⁷

The Statement claims that the law-gospel hermeneutic is an illegitimate extra-biblical framework imposed on Scripture. Our Bibles do not come with colour-coding, telling us that one passage must be interpreted as ‘gospel’ and another as ‘law’. Besides being mistaken in principle, the law-gospel hermeneutic is impossible in practice.

This does not mean abandoning the so-called ‘second use of the law’ – to reveal our sin and drive us to Christ. Neither does it ignore the obvious fact that some passages of Scripture contain clear ethical instruction, whereas others express more clearly the promise of the gospel. It does not reject the concepts of ‘law’ and ‘gospel’ as such, nor does it blur the distinction between them. It merely rejects *this particular application* of the law/gospel distinction, which attempts to divide up the Bible, deciding in advance how each verse should be read. For any part of the Bible can be read either as ‘good news’ or ‘intolerable demand’, depending on who the reader is. Unrepentant sinners will be no less repulsed by the offer of the gospel than the commands of the law, while believers love both the gospel and the law: ‘I long for your salvation, O LORD, and your law is my delight’ (Psalm 119:174).

We affirm that those in rebellion against God are condemned both by His law, which they disobey, and His gospel, which they also disobey. When they have been brought to the point of repentance by the Holy Spirit, we affirm that the gracious nature of *all* God’s words becomes evident to them. At the same time, *we affirm* that it is appropriate to speak of law and gospel as having a redemptive and historical thrust, with the time of the law being the old covenant era and the time of the gospel being the time when we enter our maturity as God’s people. We further affirm that those who are first coming to faith in Christ frequently experience the law as an adversary and the gospel as deliverance from that adversary, meaning that traditional evangelistic applications of law and gospel are certainly scriptural and appropriate.¹⁸

Even Guy Prentiss Waters, a strong critic of the FV, agrees that this concern about the law-gospel hermeneutic is well-founded. Responding to Schlissel’s concerns, he describes it as ‘an extreme adaption of the law/gospel distinction,’ agreeing that ‘the law/gospel distinction can be and has been put to mischievous uses.’ Waters expresses frustration that Schlissel ‘does not cite examples among contemporary Reformed writers,’ but in fairness Schlissel was giving a lecture, not writing a book.¹⁹ In any case, the law-gospel hermeneutic seems to be a popular-level misunderstanding not generally found in print – unsurprisingly, since it is difficult to imagine many Reformed scholars and ministers seriously commending it.

Scripture, creeds and confessions

The Statement’s high view of Scripture raises the question of how the authors view secondary doctrinal standards such as creeds and confessions. Many FV advocates are Ministers in American Presbyterian denominations such as the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) that require subscription to the Westminster Standards, and many of the authors are ‘confessionally bound to the Three Forms of Unity or to the Westminster Confession of Faith.’²⁰ While it is perfectly normal in Presbyterian denominations for

¹⁶ The Lutheran theologian Philipp Melancthon advocated such an approach in Article IV of his *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, claiming that ‘all Scripture should be divided into these two chief doctrines, the law and the promises. In some places, it presents the law. In others it presents the promise of Christ’ (quoted in Horace Hummel, ‘Are Law and Gospel a Valid Hermeneutical Principle?’ *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 46 [1982], pp. 181–207 [p. 184]. Online www.ctsfw.edu/library/files/pb/1571).

¹⁷ Quoted in Guy Prentiss Waters, *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology: A Comparative Analysis* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2006), p. 51, italics original.

¹⁸ ‘Statement,’ p. 6, italics original.

¹⁹ Waters, *The Federal Vision*, pp. 51, 274.

²⁰ ‘Statement,’ p. 1.

church officers to take exceptions to some minor matters, these exceptions must be formally approved. The Statement's authors clearly take such formal protocol seriously:

In any place where statements here would constitute an exception to whatever confessional standards we are under, they are exceptions that have been noted and approved by our respective presbyteries or classes.²¹

Furthermore, the Statement emphasises the need for scrupulous integrity in subscribing to confessions:

We affirm that all who subscribe to creeds and confessions should do so with a clean conscience and honest interpretation, in accordance with the plain meaning of words and the original intent of the authors, as can best be determined.²²

Nonetheless, despite this high regard for confessional commitments, Scripture remains the supreme authority.

We deny that creedal or systematic understandings of scriptural truth can ever be given a place of parity with Scripture, or primacy over Scripture. In line with this, we continue to honor and hold to the creeds of the ancient Church and the confessions of the reformational Church.²³

This attitude will be familiar to British evangelicals, for the supreme authority of Scripture is upheld in many of our doctrinal standards. For example, the Basis of Faith of the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches declares, 'The Bible alone speaks with final authority and is always sufficient for all matters of belief and practice.'²⁴ Anglican evangelicals frequently appeal to Canon A5 of the Canons of the Church of England, which states, 'The doctrine of the Church of England is grounded in the Holy Scriptures, and in such teachings of the ancient Fathers and Councils of the Church as are agreeable to the said Scriptures.'²⁵

The primacy of biblical language and phrasing

The Statement pursues further the implications of the divine origin of Scripture, arguing that Scripture is perfect not only in its doctrinal content, but also in its rhetorical form. This follows from the doctrine of plenary inspiration: since God deliberately and purposefully spoke every single word of the Bible, no better words could have been chosen.

We affirm that God's Spirit has chosen the best ways to express the revelation of God and reality, and that the divine rhetoric found in Holy Scripture is designed to strike the richest of all chords in the hearers of the Word of God. For this reason, we believe that it is pastorally best to use biblical language and phrasing in the preaching and teaching of the Bible in the Church.²⁶

Perhaps the claim that 'it is pastorally best to use biblical language and phrasing in the preaching and teaching of the Bible in the Church' is a touch overstated. Might it not be more accurate to say that it is *generally*, but not *always*, 'best to use biblical language and phrasing' in the church? In some situations it might be advantageous to use language not found in Scripture, such as when explaining the doctrines of the Trinity or the incarnation.

The Statement seems to anticipate this suggestion, pointing out that in some circumstances it can be helpful to employ specialized theological terminology not found in the Bible itself:

We deny that it is necessarily unprofitable to 'translate' biblical language into more 'philosophical' or 'scholastic' languages in order to deal with certain problems and issues that arise in the history of the Church.²⁷

²¹ 'Statement,' p. 1.

²² 'Statement,' p. 3, italics original.

²³ 'Statement,' p. 3, italics original.

²⁴ 'The Basis of Faith of The Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches.' Online www.fiec.org.uk/AboutUs/Beliefs/tabid/509/Default.aspx.

²⁵ 'The Canons of the Church of England.' Online www.cofe.anglican.org/about/churchlawlegis/canons.

²⁶ 'Statement,' p. 3, italics original.

²⁷ 'Statement,' p. 3, italics original.

Nonetheless, proponents of the FV are concerned to respect the language of the Bible. Indeed, the Statement claims, a disproportionate reliance on ‘philosophical’ or ‘scholastic’ language at the expense of the Bible can be pastorally unhelpful.

At the same time, we do deny that such translations are superior to or equal to the rhetoric employed by the Spirit in the text, and we believe that the employment of such hyper-specialized terminology in the regular teaching and preaching of the Church has the unfortunate effect of confusing the saints and of estranging them from contact with the biblical use of the same language.²⁸

The Statement does not oppose the use of biblical words to mean something different from what they mean in the Bible. Systematic theologians often give very precise definitions to terms that in Scripture have a wider range of meanings, and the statement raises no objection to this. However, it does deny that such ‘theological’ definitions of biblical terms should arbitrarily be privileged over the meanings those words have in the Bible itself. Thus the Statement continues:

For this reason we reject the tendency to privilege the confessional and/or scholastic use of words and phrases over the way the same words and phrases are used in the Bible itself.²⁹

Again:

We deny that confessional commitments in any way require us to avoid using the categories and terms of Scripture, even when the confessional use of such words is necessarily more narrow and circumscribed.³⁰

This all seems fairly obvious and uncontroversial. One can hardly object to using biblical words in biblical ways simply because different ‘theological’ meanings have subsequently been attached to them. Unfortunately, however, some confusion has arisen over this issue in relation to one particular biblical word: ‘elect’. To this we turn in the next section.

4. Election, covenant and church

Unconditional election

The Statement affirms without reservation the doctrines of divine sovereignty and unconditional election.

We affirm that the triune God is exhaustively sovereign over all things, working out all things according to the counsel of His will. Because this necessarily includes our redemption in Christ, God alone receives all the glory for our salvation. Before all worlds, God the Father chose a great host of those who would be saved, and the number of those so chosen cannot be increased or diminished. In due time, Jesus of Nazareth died on the cross, and in that sacrifice He secured the salvation of all those chosen for salvation by the Father. And at some time in the earthly life of each person so chosen, the Holy Spirit brings that person to life, and enables him to persevere in holiness to the end.³¹

Accordingly, FV proponents frequently use the term ‘elect’ to refer to those predestined by God for eternal salvation.³² This is how the term is most commonly used in historic Reformed theology, and Calvinist evangelicals will need little persuasion that this reflects the teaching of Scripture.

Another meaning of ‘elect’ in the Bible and Reformed theology

Alongside this, the Bible also uses ‘elect’ and related terms in another sense, to describe those within the visible people of God, including some who are not predestined for eternal salvation. For example, God ‘chose’ (literally, ‘elected’; LXX *eklegō*) all those whom he ‘brought ... out of Egypt’ (Deuteronomy 4:37),

²⁸ ‘Statement,’ p. 3.

²⁹ ‘Statement,’ p. 3.

³⁰ ‘Statement,’ p. 3, italics original.

³¹ ‘Statement,’ p. 3, italics original.

³² See for example ‘Statement,’ pp. 3–4, 7; Douglas Wilson, *Mother Kirk: Essays and Forays in Practical Ecclesiology* (Moscow: Canon Press, 2001), p. 249; *Reformed’ Is Not Enough: Recovering the Objectivity of the Covenant* (Moscow: Canon Press, 2002), pp. 25, 27–29, 38, 72.

but among this number were Korah, Dathan and Abiram, who rebelled against God and perished in the wilderness (Numbers 16). Similarly, Peter wrote his first letter to the ‘elect [*eklektois*] exiles of the dispersion’ (1 Peter 1:1), but later warned that some of them would ‘secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction’ (2 Peter 2:1). Thus the term ‘elect’ in Scripture can refer not only to those predestined for final salvation, but also to members of the visible church, not all of whom persevere to the end.³³

Mainstream Reformed theology also uses the term ‘elect’ in this latter sense. John Owen, for example, writes that ‘God *chooseth* some men unto some *office* in the church, or unto some *work* in the world’, and this choosing, Owen states, ‘we call ... *election*.’ Yet not everyone who is ‘elect’ in this sense will finally be saved. As Owen explains, Christ ‘chose’ all twelve of his disciples, but Judas was ‘certainly appointed unto destruction’ (cf. John 6:70–71).³⁴ Thus Owen uses the word ‘election’ in connection with a mixed group of people, part of the visible church, some of whom fell away.

The Statement likewise recognises that the term ‘elect’ can legitimately be used in this latter sense. Having affirmed God’s unchangeable decree of election, it continues:

We deny that the unchangeable nature of these decrees prevents us from using the same language in covenantal ways as we describe our salvation from within that covenant.³⁵

It is important, of course, to avoid confusing these two senses of the term ‘elect’. One helpful way to do this is to speak of the ‘decretally elect’ and the ‘covenantally elect’. The *decretally* elect are all those whom God has *decreed* will inherit eternal salvation. The *covenantally* elect are all those who at one time or another are part of God’s *covenant* people, whether under the Old Covenant or the New. When the Statement refers to ‘covenantal’ language, it means using terms like ‘elect’ in this latter sense. As we shall see, it is vital to remember this distinction between decretal and covenantal language to avoid misunderstanding the FV.

We should note in passing that this terminology reflects the view that the visible church is in some sense the New Covenant people of God. This is by no means unique to the FV. Calvin took this position, and it is common among paedobaptist Reformed theologians.³⁶ For example, listen to John Frame:

The church is not, however, just any people. *It is the people in covenant with God*, through Jesus Christ. In one sense, the church is the elect, those joined to Christ in eternity past and through eternity future. In another sense, it is the people who sincerely or insincerely have identified themselves with God’s people by profession and baptism. Don’t forget the discussion of the last chapter, that the visible church contains both elect and nonelect. *The nonelect are covenant breakers, not covenant keepers; but they, too, are in the covenant*. They are branches in the vine of Christ that one day will be broken off.³⁷

The visible and invisible church

The distinction between the covenantally elect and the decretally elect corresponds to the distinction between the ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’ church. Imagine yourself on Judgment Day, surveying the whole human race. In the words of the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF), the *invisible* church comprises ‘the whole

³³ For additional biblical references see Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (1941; London: Banner of Truth, 1959), p. 114.

³⁴ John Owen, *Discourse of Spiritual Gifts*, in *Works*, Vol. 4; ed. William H. Goold (1674; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967), p. 430, italics original.

³⁵ ‘Statement,’ p. 4, italics original.

³⁶ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Last Four Books of Moses*, Vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), p. 342. Reformed Baptists tend to take a different view, arguing that only the decretally elect (i.e. the invisible church, see below) are members of the New Covenant. Professing believers who fall away, according to Reformed Baptists, were never in covenant with God at all. I struggle to see how the Reformed Baptist position can adequately explain Hebrews 10:29, which states explicitly that professing believers who fall away have ‘profaned the blood of the *covenant*’, or passages like John 15:1–6 which use covenantal language and imagery (‘branches’ in the ‘vine’) to describe professing believers who eventually turn away from Christ. There is, of course, a great deal more to be said on this issue, but do to so here would take us beyond the scope of this article.

³⁷ John M. Frame, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord: An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2006), p. 236, italics added. Similarly, Berkhof explains that ‘unregenerate and unconverted persons may be in the covenant,’ and therefore ‘it is possible for those who are in the covenant to break it’ (*Systematic Theology*, pp. 288–289; see further pp. 284–289).

number of the elect' (WCF XXV.1), all of whom will be saved on that Day. The *visible* church is a larger group, comprising all who have ever 'identified themselves with God's people through profession and baptism.'³⁸ It includes everyone in the invisible church, and also some others as well – people who at some point professed faith and/or were baptized but subsequently turned away from Christ.

The term 'elect' can refer to either the invisible church or the visible church. When we use it to speak of those predestined for final salvation, it corresponds to the invisible church. When we use it to refer to a larger group, some of whom fall away, it corresponds to the visible church.

The distinction between the visible and invisible church should not be misunderstood to imply that there are 'two churches'. There is one church, and the labels 'visible' and 'invisible' are intended to make distinctions within it. They 'give us language to express the presence of both believers and unbelievers in the church.'³⁹ The visible church is 'the church'; the invisible church comprises those within the church who will be saved on the Last Day.

The Statement recognises the value of this distinction between the invisible and visible church.

We affirm that there is only one true Church, and that this Church can legitimately be considered under various descriptions, including the aspects of visible and invisible. We further affirm that the visible Church is the true Church of Christ, and not an 'approximate' Church.⁴⁰

Although the visible/invisible distinction works very well from the standpoint of the Last Day, it can create confusion if applied to the present situation. For example, consider someone who is decretally elect but not yet converted, or perhaps not even born. On the Last Day it will make perfect sense to say that they are in both the visible and invisible church, but at present this is rather strange, because they are not yet a member of the church at all!

The visible/invisible distinction can also sometimes lead to a disparagement of the visible church. 'After all,' someone might say, 'only those in the invisible church will finally be saved. Membership in the visible church doesn't guarantee anything about our eternal destiny, so surely the visible church is not so important.' This overlooks the fact that the invisible church is a *subset* of the visible church, so under normal circumstances membership of the invisible church should be reflected in commitment to a particular (visible) congregation, 'not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some' (Hebrews 10:25).⁴¹

The Statement suggests an additional distinction to help avoid these misunderstandings. Having affirmed the validity and usefulness of the visible/invisible distinction, it continues:

We deny that such a distinction excludes other helpful distinctions, such as the historical church and eschatological church. The historical Church generally corresponds to the visible Church—all those who profess the true religion, together with their children—and the eschatological Church should be understood as the full number of God's chosen as they will be seen on the day of resurrection.⁴²

The historical/eschatological distinction takes into account the progress of history, and thus avoids the misunderstanding that there are two different churches existing *at the same time*. It clarifies that there is one church, which prior to the Last Day is called the 'historical church,' and on the Last Day will be called the 'eschatological church'. The 'membership list' of the historical church is growing as people turn to Christ, while tragically some names are also being removed as people who formerly professed faith turn away and leave the church. On the Last Day, what had previously been called the historical church will have become the eschatological church.⁴³

³⁸ Frame, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord*, p. 236.

³⁹ Frame, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord*, p. 236.

⁴⁰ 'Statement,' p. 4, italics original.

⁴¹ Of course, some members of the invisible church are unable to express such commitment to a visible church – believers imprisoned for their faith, for example. But the point stands, for these people would love to be free to join a (visible) local church; their plight is all the more dreadful because they are prevented from doing so.

⁴² 'Statement,' p. 4, italics original.

⁴³ For a more detailed discussion see Wilson, *Reformed' Is Not Enough*, pp. 69–78.

This helps to prevent disparagement of the church we now see, for the historical church has a glorious future – it is in the process of becoming the eschatological people of God. It also enables us to describe unambiguously those who are decretally elect but not yet born or converted: they will one day become members of the historical church (and subsequently of the eschatological church), but they are not yet because ‘history’ has not yet reached them.

Apostasy and regeneration

These distinctions raise an important question: what does a person have by virtue of his membership in the visible church if he or she is not a member of the invisible church? To put the question another way, what do those who are covenantally elect but not decretally elect lose when they apostatize, that is, turn away from Christ, never to return?

Though such people were never chosen by God for eternal salvation, the Bible is clear that before they fell away they nonetheless possessed something. They had ‘escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ’ and ‘known the way of righteousness’ (2 Peter 2:20–21); they were ‘branches’ in Christ, ‘the true vine’ (John 15:1–6; cf. Romans 11:17–24; Hebrews 6:4–6). Similarly, having warned that ‘no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly ... a Jew is one inwardly,’ Paul immediately reminds his readers that even outward membership of the covenant brought great privilege: ‘Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? *Much in every way*’ (Romans 2:28–3:2).

According to WCF X.4, covenant members who are not decretally elect enjoy ‘common operations of the Spirit’ before they apostatize. This phrase is intended to describe a temporary experience of the Christian life, such as fellowship in a Christian community, sharing in some of the blessings of God’s work in and through his people, and so on, and is echoed explicitly in the Statement:

Those covenant members who are not elect in the decretal sense enjoy the common operations of the Spirit in varying degrees, but not in the same way that those who are elect do.⁴⁴

The crucial point is that those who are covenantally elect but later fall away do *not* experience the same work of the Spirit as those who are decretally elect. We may not be able to tell the difference between them, but God certainly can. Nonetheless, both the WCF and the Statement affirm that the Spirit is at work *in some way* in covenant members who fall away. Thus speaking of the covenantal use of terms like ‘elect’, the Statement says:

We further deny this covenantal usage is ‘pretend’ language, even where the language and terminology sometimes overlaps with the language of the decrees. The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children, that we may keep the words of this law. We affirm the reality of the decrees, but deny that the decrees ‘trump’ the covenant. We do not set them against each other, but expect them to harmonize perfectly as God works out all things in accordance with His will.⁴⁵

When someone who formerly professed faith apostatizes, he loses these covenantal blessings.

We affirm that apostasy is a terrifying reality for many baptized Christians. All who are baptized into the triune Name are united with Christ in His covenantal life, and so those who fall from that position of grace are indeed falling from grace. The branches that are cut away from Christ are genuinely cut away from someone, cut out of a living covenant body. The connection that an apostate has to Christ is not *merely* external.⁴⁶

But this still leaves the crucial question unanswered: what exactly do apostates lose when they turn away from Christ? This question is important because Reformed theology has historically identified *personal regeneration* as one of the changes that occurs at conversion, insisting that this is only experienced by the decretally elect. Covenant members who apostatize were never in fact regenerated at all. Regeneration,

⁴⁴ ‘Statement,’ pp. 3–4.

⁴⁵ ‘Statement,’ p. 4.

⁴⁶ ‘Statement,’ p. 7, italics original.

according to the Reformed tradition, is unlosable.⁴⁷ Does the FV agree that personal regeneration is granted only to the decretally elect?

There are a range of views among FV advocates on this question. Douglas Wilson represents one end of the spectrum, believing that ‘the grace experienced by the apostate and the persevering grace experienced by the elect *differ*.’ Moreover, he insists, ‘they differ in the hearts of those concerned ... the difference is not just found in the inscrutable decrees of God.’ The difference between apostates and the decretally elect concerns ‘whether or not the moral nature of the man in question has been changed in what we have come to call regeneration.’⁴⁸ Thus Wilson stands firmly in line with the historic Reformed position that regeneration is unlosable, and that apostates were never in fact regenerate in the first place.

Some of the Statement’s authors take a different view. The ‘areas of disagreement’ listed in the final section include ‘whether or not personal regeneration represents a change of nature in the person so regenerated.’ Some of the authors affirm this, ‘while others question whether we actually have such an “essence” that can *be* changed.’⁴⁹

James Jordan has tentatively suggested the latter position. In a 2003 paper, he advances the following thesis:

Everyone who is baptized has been given the same thing. No one has been given a permanently changed ‘regenerated’ heart. Everyone alike has been drawn into personal fellowship with God and has been placed in union with Christ.⁵⁰

This view would imply that the experience of apostates prior to their apostasy differs from that of the decretally elect in duration and in the mind of God, but not (*contra* Wilson) in their hearts.

Jordan knows that at this point he is questioning the Reformed tradition, and he does so with immense caution. His paper is subtitled ‘Some Tentative Explorations,’ and is intended as ‘an invitation to converse, not an attempt to settle every detail.’⁵¹ He freely admits, ‘I have not been able to resolve all the difficulties with my thesis,’ and emphasises, ‘I am not saying that I regard this thesis as certain ... I’m confident that more needs to be said.’ He simply wants the matter to ‘be opened up for discussion.’⁵² He had apparently not made up his mind when the Statement was published, for although some of the authors *question* the Reformed doctrine, none of them *deny* it.

Some have suggested that Peter Leithart’s view is somewhat similar to Jordan’s. Leithart writes:

When asked, Do the baptized receive all the benefits of Christ, save persevering faith? I object to the form of the question. The baptized are implanted into Christ’s body, and in Him share in all that He has to give.⁵³

It is possible that Leithart shares Jordan’s view that ‘no one has been given a permanently changed “regenerated” heart.’⁵⁴ However, to my knowledge Leithart has not explicitly affirmed this. Moreover, the fact that he objects to the form of the question indicates that he would want to qualify and nuance his answer in ways that may affect the implications that can legitimately be drawn from it. In my judgment, it is not possible to infer Leithart’s doctrine of regeneration from this statement alone.

It must be emphasised that this is a debate between some FV proponents (and doubtless some others as well), not a feature of the FV as a whole. The FV does not represent a single position on this issue; the Statement merely outlines the contours of the discussion. Moreover, Jordan and Leithart’s proposals must be read alongside their unequivocal affirmations that God has predestined for eternal life a definite number

⁴⁷ See Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (1955; London: Banner of Truth, 1979), pp. 95–105 for an exposition of the mainstream Reformed doctrine.

⁴⁸ Douglas Wilson, ‘A Response to “Covenant and Apostasy”’, pp. 224–232 in *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros and Cons: Debating the Federal Vision*, ed. E. Calvin Beisner (Fort Lauderdale: Knox Theological Seminary, 2003), p. 226, italics original.

⁴⁹ ‘Statement,’ p. 7, italics original.

⁵⁰ James B. Jordan, ‘Thoughts on Sovereign Grace and Regeneration: Some Tentative Explorations,’ Biblical Horizons Occasional Paper No. 32 (Niceville: Biblical Horizons, 2003), p. 7.

⁵¹ Jordan, ‘Thoughts on Sovereign Grace and Regeneration,’ p. 2.

⁵² Jordan, ‘Thoughts on Sovereign Grace and Regeneration,’ pp. 1, 7.

⁵³ Peter J. Leithart, *The Baptized Body* (Moscow: Canon Press, 2007), p. 78.

⁵⁴ Jordan, ‘Thoughts on Sovereign Grace and Regeneration,’ p. 7.

of specific individuals, every one of whom will certainly be in glory. This is not a debate about the sovereignty of God in election and preservation; it is a technical discussion about human ontology.⁵⁵

The preservation of the saints

The Statement resolutely affirms the Reformed doctrine of the preservation of the saints. Though apostasy is possible for some who profess faith in Christ, it is not possible for the decretally elect, whom God predestined for glory.

We deny that any person who is chosen by God for final salvation before the foundation of the world can fall away and be finally lost. The decretally elect cannot apostatize.⁵⁶

Sadly, the FV has been widely misunderstood at this point, leading some to criticise FV proponents for denying the preservation of the saints. For example, a 2007 PCA Report on the FV repeatedly censures men associated with the FV for allegedly claiming that ‘the elect’ can apostatize.⁵⁷ Sadly, the PCA Report persistently fails to recognise the basic distinction between covenantal and decretal categories that lies at the heart of the FV. Advocates of the FV, along with other Reformed theologians, believe that *covenant members* can apostatize,⁵⁸ but emphatically deny that the decretally elect can do so.

Perhaps this misunderstanding is understandable, for Reformed theology has historically tended to use the term ‘elect’ predominantly in the decretal sense. Presumably the authors of the PCA report encountered statements by FV authors about apostasy among the *covenantally* elect, and wrongly imagined that the *decretally* elect were in view. Perhaps this confusion serves to remind us that we must take great care during theological disagreements to ensure that we understand each other correctly.⁵⁹

Ironically, far from undermining the preservation of the saints, the Statement’s position actually serves to defend it, whereas rejecting the FV view at this point threatens to undermine Calvinist soteriology. As we saw previously, Deuteronomy 4:37 describes as ‘elect’ some who perished in the wilderness; 1 Peter 1:1 describes as ‘elect’ some who would ‘[bring] upon themselves swift destruction’ (2 Peter 2:1), and John 6:70–71 says that Jesus chose (literally ‘elected’) Judas Iscariot. It is undeniable, then, that some people whom the Bible calls ‘elect’ fall away. We therefore have a choice: Either we insist that the Bible only uses the term ‘elect’ to mean ‘decretally elect’, or we recognise that the term can also refer to God’s covenant people, the ‘covenantally elect’. The first option denies the preservation of the saints. The second route is taken by the Statement. It is surprising to hear proponents of the FV accused of denying a doctrine that their theological framework equips them so comprehensively to defend.

Summary

The Statement affirms without reservation the Reformed doctrine of unconditional election. Its high view of biblical language leads it to take seriously the Bible’s application of the term ‘elect’ to God’s covenant people, the visible church. God’s covenant people can legitimately be described as ‘elect’, though not in the same sense as those whom God ‘elected’ for eternal salvation.

The terms ‘covenantally elect’ and ‘decretally elect’ highlight this distinction, which corresponds to the standard Reformed distinction between the visible and invisible church. At the same time, the additional distinction between the historical church and eschatological church helps to prevent some of the misunderstandings that can arise from the invisible/visible terminology.

Though the decretally elect cannot apostatize, some of the covenantally elect do. The Statement affirms that apostates experience a different work of the Spirit from that enjoyed by those who persevere. There is a

⁵⁵ Personally, I stand with Wilson on this point, not with Leithart and Jordan. I affirm the Reformed doctrine that the decretally elect, and only the decretally elect, are regenerated, and that this regeneration entails an irreversible internal transformation of heart.

⁵⁶ ‘Statement,’ p. 7, italics original.

⁵⁷ ‘Report of Ad Interim Study Committee on Federal Vision, New Perspective, and Auburn Avenue Theology’ (2007), pp. 2230–2231, 2233, 2235. Online www.pcahistory.org/pca/07-fvreport.pdf.

⁵⁸ See for example Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 284–289; Frame, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord*, p. 236.

⁵⁹ Strangely, ‘the PCA men named in [the PCA report] were not consulted before definitive explanations of their views were published and condemned’ (Jeffrey J. Meyers, ‘30 Reasons Why It Would Be Unwise for the PCA General Assembly to Adopt the Federal Vision Study Report and Its Recommendations,’ p. 2; cf. p. 7. Online www.federal-vision.com/pdf/jjm30reasons.pdf). In view of the seriousness of the PCA Report’s criticisms, this is rather disappointing.

disagreement among FV advocates about the Reformed doctrine of personal regeneration. Some (e.g. Wilson) unequivocally affirm it, while others (e.g. Jordan) have questioned it. An individual's stance on the FV therefore implies nothing about their view on this subject.

Some critics, failing to perceive the covenantal/decretal distinction, have claimed that the FV denies the preservation of the saints. This criticism is completely unfounded, as the Statement makes clear. Indeed, far from undermining Calvinist soteriology, the Statement serves to defend it from Arminian criticisms.

5. The sacraments

Baptism and church membership

The section of the Statement entitled 'The Church' begins as follows:

We affirm that membership in the one true Christian Church is visible and objective, and is the possession of everyone who has been baptized in the triune name and who has not been excommunicated by a lawful disciplinary action of the Church. We affirm one holy, catholic and apostolic church, the house and family of God, outside of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation. In establishing the Church, God has fulfilled His promise to Abraham and established the Regeneration of all things. God has established this Regeneration through Christ—in Him we have the renewal of life in the fulness of life in the new age of the kingdom of God.⁶⁰

This affirmation is saturated with confessional, credal and Scriptural language. The assertion that outside the church 'there is no ordinary possibility of salvation' is taken from WCF XXV.2. The Statement echoes the Nicene Creed's declaration that there is 'one holy, catholic and apostolic church'. It reflects the Bible's teaching that the church is 'the household of God' (1 Timothy 3:15; cf. Ephesians 2:19; 1 Peter 4:17), in which God has 'fulfilled His promise to Abraham' (cf. Romans 4:16; Galatians 3:7–9, 14, 29) and 'established the Regeneration,' that is, the New Creation in Christ (cf. Matthew 19:28; 2 Corinthians 5:17).

The claim that baptism admits a person into the church is expanded later in the Statement:

We affirm that God formally unites a person to Christ and to His covenant people through baptism into the triune Name, and that this baptism obligates such a one to lifelong covenant loyalty to the triune God, each baptized person repenting of his sins and trusting in Christ alone for his salvation. Baptism formally engrafts a person into the Church, which means that baptism is into the Regeneration, that time when the Son of Man sits upon His glorious throne (Matt. 19:28).⁶¹

Baptism, according to this affirmation, admits a person into the church, God's New Covenant People. The church is the body of Christ, and therefore in this sense baptism 'formally unites a person to Christ.'⁶² It would be easy to misunderstand these affirmations, so let us reflect briefly on their biblical basis and historic pedigree.

What does baptism do?

1 Corinthians 12:13 states that 'in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit.' Some have claimed that Paul is speaking here about baptism in the Spirit, not water baptism, but John Calvin disagrees.⁶³ He quotes from or alludes to 1 Corinthians 12:13 at several places in his *Institutes*, and in every case water baptism is in view.⁶⁴ Similarly, he writes in his commentary on 1 Corinthians that when believers receive the 'sacrament' of baptism they also 'receive the reality', for 'baptism is an engrafting into the body of Christ,' which serves 'to connect us with

⁶⁰ 'Statement,' p. 4, italics original.

⁶¹ 'Statement,' p. 5, italics original.

⁶² 'Statement,' p. 5.

⁶³ For a defence of Calvin's reading see Leithart, *Baptized Body*, pp. 38–41.

⁶⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xiv.7; IV.xv.15; IV.xvi.22 (2:1282, 1315, 1345).

Christ's body.⁶⁵ This is simply another perspective on Calvin's familiar argument that baptism is the New Covenant 'equivalent' of Old Covenant circumcision.⁶⁶

The Statement thus reflects Calvin's view that baptism marks our entry into the body of Christ, God's covenant people. Baptism is a 'marker' of covenantal election. This explains the Statement's declaration that 'membership in the one true Christian Church is visible and objective.'⁶⁷ Membership of the church, no less than baptism, is visible and objective.

Baptism does not guarantee eternal salvation

FV proponents do not believe that baptism achieves or guarantees a person's salvation. Baptism does not confer regeneration. Indeed, the Statement rejects such a notion of 'baptismal regeneration', along with the idea that baptism 'automatically' saves.

We deny that baptism automatically guarantees that the baptized will share in the eschatological Church. *We deny* the common misunderstanding of baptismal regeneration—i.e. that an 'effectual call' rebirth is automatically wrought in the one baptized. Baptism apart from a growing and living faith is not saving, but rather damning.⁶⁸

The Statement reiterates this point in the section entitled 'The Church':

We deny that membership in the Christian Church in history is an infallible indicator or guarantee of final salvation. Those who are faithless to their baptismal obligations incur a stricter judgment because of it.⁶⁹

Great care must be taken at this point to understand the FV accurately. FV proponents are sometimes wrongly criticised for teaching that baptism guarantees eternal salvation, whereas in fact they believe no such thing. Like Calvin, FV proponents argue that baptism admits a person to the visible church, the body of Christ, and following Scripture and mainstream Reformed theology they sometimes refer to the visible church as the 'elect', meaning 'covenantally elect'. Thus an FV advocate might say something like, 'Baptism admits a person into God's elect.' This could easily be misunderstood as a statement about the *decretally* elect, whereas in fact baptism marks *covenantal* election. Once again, the covenantal/decretal distinction is central to the FV.

The Statement asserts that someone who has been baptized but then falls away will 'incur a stricter judgment' than an unbeliever who was never baptized at all.⁷⁰ As the apostle Peter explains, 'the last state has become worse for them than the first' (2 Peter 2:20). FV writers often illustrate this using the analogy of marriage.⁷¹ A baptized person who apostatizes is like a husband who has an affair with a female colleague at work. Sex outside marriage would be bad enough for a single man, but this man's sin is compounded by his violation of his marriage promises, his abuse of his wife's trust, the harm done to his children, and so on. Neither marriage nor baptism guarantees a permanent relationship, but they both raise the price of failure.

A cynic might retort at this point that baptism, like marriage, is best avoided altogether. But this ignores the fact that both are a source of great blessing, for just as marriage is part of God's design within human families, so also baptism is part of God's design for his relationship with his church. Thus while insisting rightly that baptism does not guarantee eternal salvation, the Statement does not fall into the opposite error of suggesting that baptism means nothing at all. Baptism admits a person into the church, where God is graciously at work to bless his people. Accordingly, the Statement affirms that 'God gives baptism as assurance of His grace to us personally, as our names are spoken when we are baptized.'⁷²

⁶⁵ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), p. 406.

⁶⁶ See Calvin *Institutes*, IV.xv–xvi (2:1303–1359), especially IV.xvi.3–4 (2:1325–1327).

⁶⁷ 'Statement,' p. 4.

⁶⁸ 'Statement,' p. 5, italics original.

⁶⁹ 'Statement,' p. 4, italics original.

⁷⁰ 'Statement,' p. 4.

⁷¹ See for example Wilson, *'Reformed' Is Not Enough*, p. 106; 'Response to "Covenant and Apostasy",' pp. 231–232; Jeffrey J. Meyers, *The Lord's Service: The Grace of Covenant Renewal Worship* (Moscow: Canon Press, 2003), pp. 35–36.

⁷² 'Statement,' p. 5.

Revisiting the Reformed doctrine of the sacraments

Before turning to the Statement's affirmations about the Lord's Supper, it may be helpful to revisit briefly the Reformed doctrine of the sacraments. We will focus our attention on the WCF and Calvin's *Institutes*, which will help to set the Statement in its historical context.⁷³

At the heart of the WCF's view of the sacraments is that God has established 'a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified: whence it comes to pass, that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other' (WCF XXVII.2). Thus we can rightly say (as the Statement does), that the *sign* of baptism 'unites a person to Christ and to His covenant people'⁷⁴ precisely because this is what baptism *signifies*.

The WCF does not thereby teach that the sacraments confer these blessings 'by themselves', or 'automatically'. Rather, God, who established the union between the sign and the thing signified, works in and through the sacraments to confer the blessings they represent. The sacraments depend 'upon the work of the Spirit' (WCF XXVII.3). Thus when we say that the sacraments confer what they signify, we mean strictly speaking that *God* has committed himself (in the ordinary course of events) to confer these blessings through the sacraments. A minister washes the believer with water; God engrafts the believer into the church.

This connection between 'sign' and 'signified' also underlies Calvin's exposition of the sacraments in the *Institutes*. Expanding on Augustine's description of a sacrament as 'a visible form of an invisible grace,' Calvin writes that a sacrament is 'an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promise of his good will toward us.' There is a union between the sacramental sign and the reality it signifies, such that God 'truly executes whatever he promises and represents in signs.'⁷⁵

In keeping with this, Calvin repeatedly emphasizes that the sacraments are a means of assurance, by which our faith is strengthened. God 'nourishes faith spiritually through the sacraments.' Baptism is a gift of God, 'given for the arousing, nourishing and confirming of our faith,' through which 'believers are assured that [their] condemnation has been removed and withdrawn from them.'⁷⁶ The Statement reflects the same view: 'God gives baptism as assurance of His grace to us personally, as our names are spoken when we are baptized.'⁷⁷

Like the Statement, Calvin denies that baptism infallibly guarantees our salvation. He rejects the notion that God's grace is 'bound and enclosed in the sacrament so as to be conferred upon us by its power,' and denounces the 'false doctrine' that 'the cause of justification and the power of the Holy Spirit are enclosed in elements.' Calvin's doctrine of sacramental efficacy is built around the proper use of the sacraments, not their abuse. In Calvin's view, the sacraments 'avail and profit nothing unless received in faith.'⁷⁸

Calvin's belief that God works through the sacraments does not imply that God's grace can be conferred through a human work. 'God accomplishes within what the Minister represents and attests by outward action, lest what God claims for himself alone should be turned over to a mortal man.' Indeed, baptism is not to be regarded as a merely human act, but 'is to be received as from the hand of the Author himself.'⁷⁹ Again, the Statement expresses the same view: '*God* [not man] gives baptism as assurance of his grace,' and '*we deny* that trusting God's promise through baptism elevates baptism to a human work.'⁸⁰

If Calvin's high view of the sacraments sounds unfamiliar, perhaps this is because we have become wearied by the widespread nominal Christianity that infests the Western world. Nonetheless, although the Bible (like

⁷³ There are of course a range of views on the sacraments in the Reformed tradition. Besides the primary sources, readers may find the following works useful: Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992); John W. Riggs, *Baptism in the Reformed Tradition: An Historical and Practical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

⁷⁴ 'Statement,' p. 5.

⁷⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xiv.1, quoting Augustine, *De Catechizandis Rudibus*, xxvi.50; IV.xiv.17 (2:1277, 1293). Cf. IV.xiv.12; IV.xv.14–15 (2:1287, 1314–1315).

⁷⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xiv.12; IV.xv.10, 14 (2:1287, 1311, 1314). Cf. IV.xiv.7, 17; IV.xv.14 (2:1282, 1292–1294, 1314).

⁷⁷ 'Statement,' p. 5.

⁷⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xiv.17; IV.xv.14 (2:1293, 1314).

⁷⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xiv.17, IV.xv.14 (2:1293, 1314).

⁸⁰ 'Statement,' p. 5, first italics added, second italics original.

the Statement) envisages that some baptized people may tragically fall away, in biblical terms this is an exception to the norm. The normal biblical expectation is that a baptized person will grow in faith by God's grace throughout their lives.

The Lord's Supper

The Statement's position on the Lord's Supper reflects Calvin's view that the sacraments strengthen and nourish our faith, and the WCF's affirmation that Christ instituted the Lord's Supper for our 'spiritual nourishment and growth in him,' and as 'a bond and pledge of their communion with him, and with each other, as members of his mystical body' (WCF XXIX.1).

We affirm that by faithful use of the humble but glorious elements of bread and wine (remaining such), we are being grown up into a perfect unity with our Head, the Lord Jesus.⁸¹

Unsurprisingly, the Statement endorses the strong historic Reformed opposition to the doctrine of transubstantiation.

We deny that the Supper is merely symbolic, but we also deny that any metaphysical changes are wrought in the bread or wine. We believe in the real presence of Christ with His people in the Supper, but *we deny* the local presence of Christ in the elements.⁸²

The Statement's affirmation of 'the real presence of Christ with His people in the Supper' once again reflects an underlying Calvinist sacramentology. Calvin denied both the Roman Catholic doctrine of Christ's substantial presence in the elements and also the Lutheran view that Christ is located 'in, with and under' the elements.⁸³ But Calvin nonetheless believed that Christ was present at the Supper. Calvin's 'argument with the Roman Catholics and Lutherans was over the mode of Christ's presence, not the fact of that presence.'⁸⁴ Calvin contended that Christ is present with us at the Lord's Supper not in the elements themselves, but because we are lifted up to heaven by faith, through the Spirit, and seated with him. Christ is (spiritually) present with us because we are (spiritually) present with him:

There is no ground ... for any individual to charge us with holding that [Christ] is absent from us, and thus separating the head from the members ... but, dwelling in us by his Spirit he raises us to heaven to himself.⁸⁵

Calvin combines this insight with his view of the union between the sign and the signified to explain how our physical eating and drinking relates to our spiritual feeding on Christ. Matthew Mason summarises Calvin's view:

The Spirit raises us to heaven to feed spiritually on Christ, even as we feed physically on the bread and wine. Thus, a double feeding takes place: 'our souls are fed by the flesh and blood of Christ in the same way that bread and wine keep and sustain physical life.'⁸⁶

Paedocommunion

The Statement departs from Calvin's view on the doctrine of paedocommunion. Whereas Calvin refused communion to children too young to understand it, the Statement declares that 'unless there has been

⁸¹ 'Statement,' p. 5, italics original.

⁸² 'Statement,' p. 5, italics original. The denial that Christ's presence is 'merely symbolic' sets the Statement apart from Zwingli's purely memorialist view of the Lord's Supper. See further Matthew W. Mason, 'A Spiritual Banquet: John Calvin on the Lord's Supper,' *Churchman*, 117.4 (2003), pp. 329–346 (pp. 331–336).

⁸³ The Lutheran view arises from their view of the communication of attributes between Christ's two natures and the consequent ubiquity of Christ according to his human nature. For a helpful discussion see Frame, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord*, pp. 144–145; Mason, 'A Spiritual Banquet,' pp. 332–333; cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xvii.19–20 (2:1381–1385). For more on the Lutheran doctrine see 'The Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord,' VII.

⁸⁴ Mason, 'A Spiritual Banquet,' p. 336, quoting Keith A. Mathison.

⁸⁵ John Calvin, 'Mutual Consent in Regard to the Sacraments; between the Ministers of the Church of Zurich and John Calvin, Minister of the Church of Geneva,' in *Tracts: Containing Treatises on the Sacraments, Catechism of the Church of Geneva, Forms of Prayer, and Confessions of Faith*, Vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849), p. 240, quoted in Mason, 'A Spiritual Banquet,' p. 336.

⁸⁶ Mason, 'A Spiritual Banquet,' p. 337, quoting Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xvii.10 (2:1370).

lawful disciplinary action by the Church, *we affirm* that any baptized person, children included, should be welcome at the table.⁸⁷

Most (though by no means all) contemporary evangelicals share Calvin's view at this point.⁸⁸ Although a full discussion of paedocommunion is beyond the scope of this article, we will outline briefly the FV's theological rationale for the practice, and make some comments on its historical pedigree.

Paedocommunion is embraced by the FV not in a spirit of sentimental indulgence, nor from a Roman Catholic doctrine of *ex opere operato* sacramental efficacy. Rather, it follows logically from the inclusion of children in God's covenant people. Here, for example, is Tim Gallant:

The children of believers are granted full membership in the new covenant. The new covenant accords to all its members full participation in its privileges ... The Supper is the sacramental sign, seal and enactment of the realities which covenant children enjoy, and therefore belongs to them.⁸⁹

Paedocommunion has a long history in the church. Augustine endorsed it, and it was widespread in the early centuries AD.⁹⁰ Indeed, it appears to have been standard practice for the first thousand years after Christ.⁹¹

Moreover, although most of the Reformed opposed paedocommunion, it was not unknown among them. The 16th-century Reformer Wolfgang Musculus, numbered by Richard Muller alongside Calvin, Vermigli and Hyperius as one of 'the important second-generation codifiers of the Reformed faith,'⁹² advocated paedocommunion. Like Gallant, Musculus argued that children should be welcome at the Lord's Table on the grounds that they are members of the church:

If our little children be parcel of the Church, which is the body of Christ, it followeth that they do pertain also to the communion, whereby according unto the saying of the Apostle, we be one body, which do participate of one bread, and of one cup.⁹³

Paedocommunion fell into decline several centuries before the Protestant Reformation largely because of the increasing prevalence of the doctrine of transubstantiation, which fed a deep superstition about the elements. Another factor was the increasing insistence on Episcopal confirmation as a necessary prerequisite to communion, which led to an increasing lapse of time between baptism and first communion.⁹⁴

Evangelical proponents of paedocommunion would of course insist that the doctrine must stand or fall according to the teaching of Scripture. Nonetheless, they can claim some support from the Reformed tradition and considerable precedent in the early church, and their view has a demonstrable affinity with Reformed theology as a whole.⁹⁵

⁸⁷ 'Statement,' p. 5, italics original. For Calvin's view, see *Institutes*, IV.xvii.30 (2:1352–1353).

⁸⁸ I know of several British evangelical churches that practice paedocommunion, but most do not.

⁸⁹ Tim Gallant, *Feed My Lambs* (Grande Prairie: Pactum Reformanda, 2002), p. 22.

⁹⁰ See Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xvi.30 (2:1352).

⁹¹ For helpful surveys of the historic pedigree of paedocommunion, see Blake Purcell, 'The Testimony of the Ancient Church,' pp. 131–145 in *The Case for Covenant Communion*, ed. Gregg Strawbridge; Christian L. Keidel, 'Is the Lord's Supper for Children?' *Westminster Theological Journal* 37 (1975), pp. 301–341; Gallant, *Feed My Lambs*, pp. 106–133.

⁹² Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), p. 31.

⁹³ Wolfgang Musculus, *Loci Communes Sacrae Theologiae* [*The Common Places of the Christian Religion*], tr. John Man; (1560: London, 1578), p. 763. See also Tim Gallant, 'Wolfgang Musculus on Paedocommunion: The Validity of Children at the Lord's Table in the Words of an Early Reformed Theologian.' Online www.paedocommunion.com/articles/musculus_common_places.php.

⁹⁴ Gallant, *Feed My Lambs*, pp. 125–128 and Christian L. Keidel, 'Is the Lord's Supper for Children?' p. 302.

⁹⁵ For more on paedocommunion see Gallant, *Feed My Lambs*; Keidel, 'Is the Lord's Supper for Children?'; Matthew W. Mason, 'Covenant Children and Covenant Meals: Biblical Evidence for Paedocommunion,' *Churchman* 121.2 (2007), pp. 127–138; *The Case for Covenant Communion*, ed. Gregg Strawbridge (Monroe: Athanasius Press, 2006).

The faith of children and infants

The Statement's stance on paedocommunion resonates with its claim that children and infants, no less than adults, are capable of trusting in Christ. 'Justifying faith,' according to the Statement, 'encompasses the elements of assent, knowledge, and living trust in accordance with the age and maturity of the believer.'⁹⁶ The mention of 'assent, knowledge, and living trust' alludes to a well-known set of Reformed distinctions.⁹⁷ The claim that justifying faith is exercised 'in accordance with the age and maturity of the believer' reflects the view that children and infants are capable of believing in Christ in a manner consistent with their intellectual and volitional faculties.

This is not unique to the FV. As Hughes Oliphant Old states, "The Reformers were quite willing to admit the existence of faith in children before the development of understanding."⁹⁸ Martin Luther, for example, argued that the practice of infant baptism presumes that the infant has faith.⁹⁹ John Calvin took a similar view. Defending infant baptism against the criticism that infants cannot believe and therefore should not be baptized, he replied that circumcision was 'the seal of the righteousness of *faith*,' and that children circumcised under the Old Covenant must therefore have been capable of believing.¹⁰⁰ Calvin recognised that infant faith differs from adult faith. Infant faith is the 'seed' of adult faith – organically related to adult faith, and destined to grow into mature adult faith throughout a Christian child's upbringing.¹⁰¹

6. Salvation by grace

Justification by faith alone

The Statement contains a robust affirmation of the doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone.

We affirm we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone. Faith alone is the hand which is given to us by God so that we may receive the offered grace of God. Justification is God's forensic declaration that we are counted as righteous, with our sins forgiven, for the sake of Jesus Christ alone.¹⁰²

Again:

We affirm that justification is through faith in Jesus Christ, and not through works of the law, whether those works were revealed to us by God, or manufactured by man.¹⁰³

The authors are anxious to avoid the suggestion that justification by faith is in any way undermined by the Reformed doctrine that we are judged on the evidence of our deeds on the Last Day.¹⁰⁴ Although 'some of [them] are comfortable using the language of justification to describe the "deliverdict" of the last day, while

⁹⁶ 'Statement,' p. 6.

⁹⁷ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3 Vols; tr. G. M. Giger; ed. J. T. Dennison (1679–1685; Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1994), XV.8.i–ii (2:561–2).

⁹⁸ Old, *Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite*, p. 135.

⁹⁹ Rich Lusk, *Paedofaith* (Monroe: Athanasius Press, 2005), p. 80.

¹⁰⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xvi.20 (2:1342), italics added. Cf. Romans 4:11.

¹⁰¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xvi.20 (2:1343); cf. Lusk, *Paedofaith*, 80–84. Beza held a similar view, recognising that children 'do not have in themselves that quality of faith which is in the adult believer,' but insisting nonetheless that they may 'have the seed and germ of faith' (quoted in Geerhardus Vos, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr [Phillipsburg, Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980], p. 263). For more on the Reformed heritage of infant faith see Vos, *Redemptive History*, pp. 263–267 and Lusk, *Paedofaith*, pp. 80–119.

¹⁰² 'Statement,' p. 6, italics original.

¹⁰³ 'Statement,' p. 4, italics original.

¹⁰⁴ Matthew 12:36–37; 16:27; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Revelation 22:12. On the Reformed doctrine see for example William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology* (1629; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997) I.xli.25–27 (p. 216); Jonathan Edwards, *Justification by Faith Alone*, in *Works*, Vol. 19; ed. M. X. Lesser (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 230–237; Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3 (London: James Clarke, 1960), pp. 849–850; Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, pp. 178–181; Turretin, *Institutes*, XX.6.xix–xx (3:603); James Ussher, *A Body of Divinity* (Watford: Church Society, 2007), p. 560; WCF XXXIII.1.

others would prefer to describe it in other ways,' they emphasise their agreement that 'no one is justified at any time because they personally have earned or merited anything.'¹⁰⁵

Consistent with its affirmation of the preservation of the saints, the Statement declares that justification guarantees our final salvation:

We affirm that those who have been justified by God's grace through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are saved to the uttermost and will spend eternity with Christ and his saints in glory forever.¹⁰⁶

God's covenant with Adam

The Statement's commitment to salvation by grace finds expression in the description of the covenant between God and Adam in the Garden of Eden. Adam was required not merely to obey God, but also to trust him. His reward, had he attained it (which of course he did not), would have been a 'gift of grace'.

We affirm that Adam was in a covenant of life with the triune God in the Garden of Eden, in which arrangement Adam was required to obey God completely, from the heart. We hold further that all such obedience, had it occurred, would have been rendered from a heart of faith alone, in a spirit of loving trust. Adam was created to progress from immature glory to mature glory, but that glorification too would have been a gift of grace, received by faith alone.¹⁰⁷

This excludes any suggestion that Adam could have 'earned' his eschatological reward, placing God in his debt. As a creature, Adam could never have 'merited' anything from his Creator. Adam was already free to eat the fruit of 'every tree of the garden' (Genesis 2:16), including the tree of life; only the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was forbidden (v. 17).¹⁰⁸ The life that God promised Adam would, had he obeyed, have been received as a gift.

We deny that continuance in this covenant in the Garden was in any way a payment for work rendered. Adam could forfeit or demerit the gift of glorification by disobedience, but the gift or continued possession of that gift was not offered by God to Adam conditioned upon Adam's moral exertions or achievements. In line with this, we affirm that until the expulsion from the Garden, Adam was free to eat from the tree of life. *We deny* that Adam had to earn or merit righteousness, life, glorification, or anything else.¹⁰⁹

The WCF agrees that though Adam was required to display 'perfect and personal obedience,' the covenant was an act of 'voluntary condescension on God's part' (WCF VII.1–2). Turretin likewise affirms that this covenant was gracious, that Adam needed to trust in God, and that Adam's obedience (had it been rendered) would itself have been a gift from God.¹¹⁰

To emphasise the gracious character of this covenant, the Statement uses the phrase 'covenant of life' from the Westminster Catechisms rather than 'covenant of works' found in the WCF (many other names are found within the Reformed tradition).¹¹¹ This does not reflect a rejection of the *concept* of a covenant between God and Adam, but rather a concern that the *terminology* of a 'covenant of works' could be

¹⁰⁵ 'Statement,' p. 7.

¹⁰⁶ 'Statement,' p. 7, italics original.

¹⁰⁷ 'Statement,' p. 5, italics original.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, WBC 1 (Nashville: Word, 1987), p. 85.

¹⁰⁹ 'Statement,' p. 5, italics original.

¹¹⁰ Turretin, *Institutes*, VIII.2–3 (1:571–578).

¹¹¹ Westminster Larger Catechism, 20; Westminster Shorter Catechism, 12; WCF VII.2. Other names include 'covenant of nature' (Turretin, *Institutes*, VIII.iii [1:574–578]), 'covenant of creation' (O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* [Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980], p. 57), 'Edenic covenant', 'Adamic covenant', 'covenant of friendship' and 'covenant of love' (S. Joel Garver, 'The Covenant of Works in the Reformed Tradition.' Online www.joelgarver.com/writ/theo/covwor.htm). See Rich Lusk, 'A Response to "The Biblical Plan of Salvation"', pp. 118–148 in *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros and Cons: Debating the Federal Vision*, ed. E. Calvin Beisner (Fort Lauderdale: Knox Theological Seminary, 2003) and James B. Jordan, 'Merit Versus Maturity: What Did Jesus Do for Us?' pp. 151–200 in *The Federal Vision*, ed. Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner, for more on this concern with the phrase 'covenant of works'.

misunderstood to imply a meritorious structure – an anxiety shared by other theologians unconnected with the FV.¹¹²

The imputation of Christ's righteousness and obedience

Before considering what the Statement says about imputation, let us pause briefly and remind ourselves of some important distinctions.

First, we must distinguish between Christ's *righteousness* and Christ's *obedience*. Christ's *righteousness* is his *status* before God: Christ is 'righteous', or 'justified', in God's sight.¹¹³ Christ's *obedience*, on the other hand, refers not to his status but to his *actions*: Christ always submitted to his Father's will, living a perfect life in obedience to the Law.

Second, we must distinguish further between two different aspects of Christ's obedience: his *passive obedience* and his *active obedience*. Christ's *active obedience* is his obedience to the positive demands of God's law: he always obeyed the Law's requirements. Christ's *passive obedience*, on the other hand, is his subjection to the penal sanctions of the Law: he suffered the punishment due to us for our Law-breaking.¹¹⁴

All the Reformed (along with all FV proponents) agree that Christ's *righteousness* and *passive obedience* are imputed to believers.¹¹⁵ However, there is some disagreement within the Reformed tradition about whether Christ's *active obedience* is imputed to believers.¹¹⁶

It is vital to recognise that this debate does not concern the *necessity* of Christ's active obedience. Like proponents of the FV, historic Reformed theologians affirm unanimously that Christ did *in fact* live a blameless life under the Law. This was necessary for him to be our perfect sacrifice, to serve as our example, and so on. The disagreement concerns the *imputation* of Christ's active obedience. Most of the Reformed affirm this doctrine, but a minority do not.

This debate surfaced during the formulation of the WCF, when William Twisse, Richard Vines and Thomas Gataker argued against the imputation of Christ's active obedience.¹¹⁷ The phrase 'whole obedience and satisfaction' (where '*whole* obedience' was understood to include Christ's active and passive obedience) was proposed by advocates of the imputation of Christ's active obedience, but excluded from the WCF in order to accommodate those who did not affirm this doctrine.¹¹⁸ Instead, the WCF affirms simply that God justifies 'those whom [he] effectually calls ... by imputing the *obedience and satisfaction* of Christ unto them' (WCF XI.1). Chad Van Dixhoorn, whose seven-volume (!) PhD dissertation contains a painstaking study of the minutes of the Westminster Assembly, emphasises that this neither affirms nor denies the imputation of Christ's *active* obedience. Indeed, he observes, anyone who had wanted the WCF and the Westminster Catechisms to *require* an affirmation of the imputation of Christ's active obedience was 'bound to be dissatisfied.'¹¹⁹

¹¹² See for example Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, p. 56.

¹¹³ The two English words 'righteous' and 'justified' both translate words from the Greek *dikaioō* word-group.

¹¹⁴ See further Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, pp. 20–24; Turretin, *Institutes*, XIV.13 (2:445–455).

¹¹⁵ In a 2003 article, Rich Lusk stated that 'my in-Christ-ness makes imputation redundant,' leading some critics to conclude (wrongly, though perhaps understandably) that he denies the imputation of Christ's righteousness (Lusk, 'Response,' p. 142). Realising he had been misunderstood, Lusk subsequently retracted this statement, explaining that he had intended merely to criticise an unbiblical caricature of imputation (Rich Lusk, 'From Birmingham, With Love: "Federal Vision" Postcards,' pp. 109–161 in *A Faith That Is Never Alone*, ed. P. Andrew Sandlin [La Grange: Kerygma Press, 2007], p. 131).

¹¹⁶ These distinctions are not always made explicit. Indeed, Reformed theologians sometimes use the phrases 'Christ's righteousness' and 'Christ's obedience' synonymously. When the terms are used in this way, a denial of the imputation of Christ's active obedience would of course entail a denial of the imputation of Christ's righteousness. Only where the above distinctions are observed, such that Christ's active obedience is distinguished from his righteousness, could one legitimately deny the imputation of Christ's active obedience while remaining within the Reformed tradition.

¹¹⁷ Alexander F. Mitchell, *The Westminster Assembly* (Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1897), pp. 154–160; William S. Barker, *Puritan Profiles* (Mentor, 1999), pp. 158, 176.

¹¹⁸ Jeffrey K. Jue, 'The Active Obedience of Christ and the Theology of the Westminster Standards: A Historical Investigation,' pp. 99–130 in *Justified in Christ: God's Plan for Us in Justification*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint (Fearn: Mentor, 2007), pp. 100–101, 115.

¹¹⁹ Chad B. Van Dixhoorn, 'Reforming the Reformation: Theological Debate at the Westminster Assembly 1643–1652,' 7 Vols (Cambridge: Unpublished PhD dissertation, 2004), pp. 328. Strangely, the authors of the PCA Report fail to appreciate

Those divines who did not hold to the doctrine of the imputation of the active obedience of Christ could be satisfied with the statement if they believed that it was a consensual construction, not teaching their position, but not excluding it either. Members who held to the doctrine of the imputation of the active obedience of Christ but still wanted a consensual statement of the matter could likewise vote for this formulation, for it allowed their doctrine.¹²⁰

The WCF thus reflects the view that differences over the imputation of Christ's active obedience should not cause division among Reformed Christians.¹²¹ Historically, even Reformed theologians who upheld the doctrine did not regard it as a matter of central importance. William Cunningham, for example, argued that the doctrine 'need not be much pressed or insisted on,' and John Owen took a similar view.¹²²

The Statement adopts the stance taken by Cunningham and Owen. It affirms the doctrine, while recognising that it is not a foundational issue.

We affirm Christ is all in all for us, and that His perfect sinless life, His suffering on the cross, and His glorious resurrection are all credited to us. Christ is the new Adam, obeying God where the first Adam did not obey God. And Christ as the new Israel was baptized as the old Israel was, was tempted for 40 days as Israel was for 40 years, and as the greater Joshua He conquered the land of Canaan in the course of His ministry. This means that through Jesus, on our behalf, Israel has finally obeyed God and has been accepted by Him. *We affirm* not only that Christ is our full obedience, but also that through our union with Him we partake of the benefits of His death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and enthronement at the right hand of God the Father.

We deny that faithfulness to the gospel message requires any particular doctrinal formulation of the 'imputation of the active obedience of Christ.' What matters is that we confess that our salvation is all of Christ, and not from us.¹²³

The authors of the Statement take different views on how the imputation of Christ's active obedience should be articulated. Some of them agree that 'the imputation of the active obedience of Christ (as traditionally understood) is to be affirmed in its classic form,' whereas others do not.¹²⁴

The nature of this disagreement is not immediately obvious. Given that the authors unanimously affirm the imputation of Christ's active obedience, what is this 'classic form' of the doctrine that some of them deny?

The disagreement seems to concern the terms used to describe the imputation of Christ's active obedience. Many proponents of the doctrine speak of the imputation of Christ's 'merit' to the believer. This, one might say, is the 'classic form' of the doctrine. But Rich Lusk and James Jordan, two of the Statement's authors, have argued elsewhere that although 'merit' vocabulary can be deployed in a biblical sense, it can sometimes be misleading.¹²⁵ The Statement confirms that the authors take a range of views on the use of this language:

Some of us robustly affirm Christ's unique merit in His person and work as the answer to our demerit. Others think there are better words to describe the value and worthiness of Christ's

the significance of this distinction, wrongly implying that 'obedience' and 'active obedience' are synonymous ('Report of Ad Interim Study Committee,' p. 2215).

¹²⁰ Van Dixhoorn, 'Reforming the Reformation,' pp. 328.

¹²¹ Jue argues that the reference to Christ's 'perfect obedience' in WCF VIII.5 and the Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 70 indicate that the theological structure of the Westminster Standards as a whole 'supports a doctrine of justification that includes, in substance, the active obedience of Christ' (Jue, 'Active Obedience,' p. 128). I agree with Jue that the Westminster divines intended to *allow* an affirmation of the imputation of Christ's active obedience. However, the phrase 'whole obedience', to which such significance was attached in the earlier debates, is conspicuously absent throughout the Westminster Standards. I therefore agree with Van Dixhoorn (see above) that neither the WCF nor the Westminster Catechisms would have satisfied those who wanted to *require* an affirmation of the imputation of Christ's active obedience.

¹²² William Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (1862; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967), p. 404; John Owen, *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith, in Works*, Vol. 5; ed. W. H. Goold (1677; London: Banner of Truth, 1967), p. 63.

¹²³ 'Statement,' p. 6, italics original.

¹²⁴ 'Statement,' p. 7.

¹²⁵ Lusk, 'Response,' esp. pp. 136–145; Jordan, 'Merit Versus Maturity,' esp. pp. 151–158, 192–195. For an acknowledgment of the biblical validity of the term see Jordan, 'Merit Versus Maturity,' p. 192 n. 46 and Lusk, 'Response,' pp. 144–145.

sacrifice without recourse to the term ‘merit’ because it is not biblical language and its use in the history of the church and currently shows that it can cause confusion.¹²⁶

This is related to the above-mentioned concern about the phrase ‘covenant of works’. Lusk and Jordan are among those most anxious to avoid any suggestion that Adam could have earned, or merited, his eschatological reward, and are similarly unwilling to apply such language to Christ. Others associated with the FV are apparently less worried about this, provided that the term is defined appropriately.

In summary, the Reformed tradition is divided on the imputation of Christ’s active obedience. The Statement affirms the doctrine while recognising that it is not central to the gospel, which places it firmly among the Reformed majority. At the same time, some of the Statement’s authors are uncomfortable about expressing the doctrine in terms of ‘merit’, but this unease is not itself an aspect of the FV.

Saving faith and repentance

The Statement rejects the ‘easy-believism’ that disfigures some modern gospel presentations. Mere doctrinal orthodoxy saves no one.

We deny that correct formulations of the doctrine of *sola fide* can be substituted for genuine faith in Jesus, or that such correct formulations can be taken as infallible indicators of a true faith in Jesus.¹²⁷

Furthermore, saving faith is always accompanied by good works. Faith and repentance go together:

We deny that the faith which is the sole instrument of justification can be understood as anything other than the only kind of faith which God gives, which is to say, a living, active and personally loyal faith. Justifying faith encompasses the elements of assent, knowledge, and living trust in accordance with the age and maturity of the believer. *We deny* that faith is ever alone, even at the moment of the effectual call.¹²⁸

This echoes Calvin’s declaration that ‘we dream neither of a faith devoid of good works nor of a justification that stands without them.’ Calvin reasoned that ‘to attain righteousness in Christ’ we must ‘obtain Christ.’ But Christ is also the source of sanctification, so ‘in our sharing in Christ, which justifies us, sanctification is just as much included as righteousness.’¹²⁹

The Statement similarly maintains that sanctification is part of the normal Christian life. It contributes to the assurance experienced by true believers, while professing Christians whose lives lack evidence of God’s sanctifying grace have no grounds for assurance.

We affirm also that though salvation is granted through the instrument of faith alone, those who have been justified will live progressively more and more sanctified lives until they go to be with God. Those believers for whom this is true look to Christ for their assurance—in the Word, in the sacraments, in their fellow believers, and in their own participation in that life by faith.

We deny that anyone who claims to have faith but who lives in open rebellion against God and against his Christ has any reason to believe that he will be saved on the last day.¹³⁰

7. Eschatology

Postmillennialism

The Statement reflects the FV’s commitment to postmillennialism – the view that the great majority of the world will be converted before Christ returns in glory on the Last Day.¹³¹

¹²⁶ ‘Statement,’ p. 7.

¹²⁷ ‘Statement,’ p. 5, italics original.

¹²⁸ ‘Statement,’ p. 6, italics original.

¹²⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xvi.1 (1:798).

¹³⁰ ‘Statement,’ p. 7, italics original.

¹³¹ Postmillennialism gets its name from the claim that Christ will return after the ‘millennium’ – the thousand years mentioned in Revelation 20:2 during which Satan is bound ‘so that he might not deceive the nations any longer.’ The other major eschatological positions are premillennialism and amillennialism. The many different forms of premillennialism all

We affirm that God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but rather so that the world through Him would be saved. Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world—He is the Savior of the world. All the nations shall stream to Him, and His resting place shall be glorious. *We affirm* that prior to the second coming of our Lord Jesus, the earth will be as full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.¹³²

These affirmations consist largely of allusions to biblical texts, reflecting the desire of FV proponents to express theological truths in biblical language.¹³³ This has obvious strengths – it is more rousing than a ‘theological’ equivalent – but it also creates some problems. By effectively conflating exegetical and theological claims, the Statement presents something of a dilemma for those who uphold postmillennialism but deny that it is taught in these texts! Thus while one might share the authors’ preference in pastoral contexts for ‘the divine rhetoric found in Holy Scripture’, perhaps in this portion of the Statement more “‘philosophical” or “scholastic”” vocabulary might have been helpful.¹³⁴

Notwithstanding this minor quibble, the theological substance of this affirmation is entirely at home in the Reformed tradition. Though postmillennialism is less widespread than amillennialism and premillennialism among contemporary British and American evangelicals, its Reformed pedigree is substantial: Loraine Boettner, Robert L. Dabney, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Hodge, John Owen, W. G. T. Shedd, A. H. Strong and B. B. Warfield were all postmillennialists.¹³⁵ Indeed, the seeds of the doctrine can be traced right back through the medieval period to the church Fathers.¹³⁶

These historic credentials need to be emphasised because eschatological views tend to be strongly tied to well-defined ecclesial and denominational communities. This rather ‘tribal’ landscape can breed hostility between evangelicals with different eschatological outlooks. This is quite unwarranted. All three major eschatological views – premillennialism, amillennialism and postmillennialism – have considerable followings among Bible-believing Christians around the world. Eschatology is not unimportant, but eschatological views should not be regarded as a test of orthodoxy among evangelicals.

This sense of perspective is reflected in the Statement:

We deny that eschatological views are to be a test of fellowship between orthodox believers, but at the same time we hold that an orientation of faith with regard to the gospel’s triumph in history is extremely important. *We deny* that it is wise to imitate Abraham in his exercise of faith while declining to believe the *content* of what he believed—that through him all the nations of the world would be blessed, and that his descendants would be like the stars in number.¹³⁷

There are many different forms of postmillennialism. A few postmillennialists believe that the millennium will last for a literal thousand years, whereas the vast majority of contemporary postmillennialists argue that the term is figurative. Some claim that there will be a distinct revival of the gospel among ethnic Jews, whereas others do not. Some maintain that there will be a final eruption of opposition to the gospel just before Christ returns in glory; others disagree. Some envisage a sudden outpouring of the Spirit leading to rapid church growth; others anticipate that the gospel will spread much more gradually, with many ups and downs over thousands of years. All of these views are found within the Reformed tradition, and the Statement does not adjudicate between them.

agree that Christ will return at the start of the millennium to rule over the world prior to the Final Judgment. Amillennialism denies both the premillennial claim that Christ will reign on earth for a long period prior to the Final Judgment, and the postmillennial claim that the world will be largely converted to Christ before Christ returns. Some amillennialists (‘optimistic amillennialists’) agree that the gospel might spread very widely across the world before Christ’s return, but they disagree with the postmillennial claim that this is certain.

¹³² ‘Statement,’ p. 2, italics original.

¹³³ John 1:29; 3:17; 4:42; 1 John 4:14; Isaiah 2:2; 11:9–10; Micah 4:1; Habakkuk 2:14.

¹³⁴ ‘Statement,’ p. 3.

¹³⁵ See further Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology* (Tyler: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992), pp. 65–69, 77–79, 87–93.

¹³⁶ Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, pp. 65–93.

¹³⁷ ‘Statement,’ p. 2, italics original.

The impact of the gospel on the world

The Statement anticipates that the gospel will eventually have a significant impact on the wider structures of human society, transforming not just individuals, but also entire nations.

We affirm that Jesus Christ is the King of kings, and the Lord of lords. We believe that the Church cannot be a faithful witness to His authority without calling all nations to submit themselves to Him through baptism, accepting their responsibility to obediently learn all that He has commanded us. *We affirm* therefore that the Christian faith is a public faith, encompassing every realm of human endeavor. The fulfillment of the Great Commission therefore requires the establishment of a global Christendom.¹³⁸

Since the idea of ‘a global Christendom’ may sound rather unfamiliar, it may be helpful to explain what the Statement does not mean by it. It does not constitute approval of the claim that America (or indeed any other country) is a ‘Christian nation’. FV proponents do not advocate a return to the particular form of Christendom established by the Roman Emperor Constantine, nor do they endorse the various atrocities which have in previous centuries resulted from the pursuit of Christendom. Peter Leithart passes a damning verdict on Constantinian and medieval Christendom: ‘The modern West is not Christendom in any meaningful sense ... Nor is there any disagreement whether the end of Christendom is a good thing; it is a good thing.’¹³⁹

The Statement’s position on Christendom reflects the conviction that the gospel ought to transform every sphere of human life, including political life, and that as it advances it will indeed do so. John Owen similarly declared that Christ will one day ‘lay the nations in a subserviency to him,—the kingdoms of the world shall become his; that is, act as kingdoms and governments no longer against him, but for him.’¹⁴⁰

Underlying the Statement here is the influence of Cornelius Van Til’s presuppositional apologetics. Van Til denied the possibility of ethical neutrality, and insisted that the only consistent way (and therefore ultimately the only fruitful and productive way) to live in God’s world is in accordance with God’s word.¹⁴¹ God’s ways are right, and all other ways are wrong; God’s ways work, and all other ways fail.

We deny that neutrality is possible in any realm, and this includes the realm of ‘secular’ politics. We believe that the lordship of Jesus Christ has authoritative ramifications for every aspect of human existence, and that growth up into a godly maturity requires us to discover what those ramifications are in order to implement them. Jesus Christ has established a new way of being human, and it is our responsibility to grow up into it.¹⁴²

According to the FV, therefore, Christendom will come about as a result of Spirit-empowered faith and repentance on the part of national leaders, which in turn will not happen until the vast majority of a country’s citizens are converted. The transformation of nations, like the transformation of families and individuals, can only come about through repentance and faith in the gospel. FV proponents deny that political action can extend Christ’s kingdom. Political reform is the result of kingdom growth, not a means to it. The kingdom of God grows through evangelism. As Peter Leithart insists, ‘It is through the Spirit-filled church, proclaiming the gospel, that the kingdom of Christ extends throughout the world.’¹⁴³

Accordingly, the Statement regards reform in the church as vital to kingdom growth, and expresses a commitment to ‘a high view of covenant renewal liturgy.’¹⁴⁴ This refers to the form of corporate worship

¹³⁸ ‘Statement,’ p. 2, italics original.

¹³⁹ Peter J. Leithart, *Against Christianity* (Moscow: Canon Press, 2003), p. 125.

¹⁴⁰ John Owen, ‘Christ’s Kingdom and the Magistrate’s Power’, in *Works*, Vol. 8; ed. W. H. Goold (1850–1853; London: Banner of Truth, 1967), p. 385. See further Owen, *Works*, Vol. 8, pp. 163–206, 367–395.

¹⁴¹ See further Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967); *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969); *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972); *Christian Apologetics* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976); John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of his Thought* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995) and Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings & Analysis* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1998).

¹⁴² ‘Statement,’ p. 2, italics original.

¹⁴³ Gary DeMar and Peter J. Leithart, *The Reduction of Christianity: A Biblical Response to Dave Hunt* (Atlanta: American Vision, 1988), p. 220.

¹⁴⁴ ‘Statement,’ p. 7.

favoured by FV proponents. Though they take different views on some details, they agree that church services should be quite formally structured, incorporating the Lord's Supper, and seeking to reflect typological patterns found throughout Scripture.¹⁴⁵ God's people should meet together to pray that God would keep his covenant promises to bless his people and extend his kingdom.¹⁴⁶ The formality of these services would contrast with some contemporary evangelical services; they resemble more closely the older Reformed liturgies such as those found in the Book of Common Prayer.

8. Conclusion

The FV began as a sociological phenomenon – a 'conversation' about a range of theological issues that defied simple theological delineation. The 2007 Statement was an attempt to bring theological clarity by indicating areas of theological consensus among the participants in this conversation. This Statement now provides a theological definition of the FV.

The Statement stands demonstrably within the Reformed tradition at every point. Its stance on paedocommunion reflects a minority position within the Reformed tradition, though it has considerable support in the early church.

Some participants in the FV conversation, such as James Jordan, have raised questions about the Reformed doctrine of regeneration. However, Jordan advances his suggestions with great caution, and holds no settled view on this subject. Other authors of the Statement, such as Douglas Wilson, have publicly declared that they stand with historic Reformed theology at this point. The Statement takes no view on this subject.

So what should British evangelicals make of the FV? To begin with, it is abundantly clear that FV advocates do not in fact hold a number of the views ascribed to them by their critics. The FV does not represent a denial of justification by faith alone, an Arminian rejection of unconditional election and the preservation of the saints, or a reversion to Roman Catholic views of baptism and the Lord's Supper. It does not undercut the distinction between the visible and invisible church, or downplay the importance of Christ's second coming, or capitulate to the so-called 'social gospel', or deny the distinction between God's covenant with Adam and the covenant of grace, or confuse justification with sanctification, or reject the imputation of Christ's obedience or righteousness, or undermine the possibility of Christian assurance, or entail a legalistic obsession with good works at the expense of free grace. Let us be clear: none of these doctrinal errors is found in the FV. These are misunderstandings of the FV.¹⁴⁷

Moreover, since the Statement covers a range of theological loci, the question 'What do you think of the FV?' is insufficiently precise to be given a simple answer. It is quite conceivable that one might agree at some points, yet disagree at others. Only by getting behind the headlines to the underlying theological substance will a fruitful conversation be possible.

Though all evangelicals will presumably concur wholeheartedly with the Statement at many points (e.g. Scripture, justification by faith and the Trinity), some will doubtless take issue on other matters such as paedocommunion and postmillennialism. It may be helpful in such cases to have in mind a familiar (though often unspoken) scale of theological disagreements.

At one end of the scale, there are liberals who deny the resurrection of the dead and the uniqueness of Christ. Such matters are clearly central to the gospel, and we therefore fear that such people are headed for hell.

¹⁴⁵ A detailed treatment may be found in Jeffrey J. Meyers, *The Lord's Service*. For a shorter summary see Douglas Wilson, *A Primer on Worship and Reformation: Recovering the High Church Puritan* (Moscow: Canon Press, 2008).

¹⁴⁶ For more on the relationship between covenant renewal worship and kingdom growth see Peter J. Leithart, *The Kingdom and the Power: Recovering the Centrality of the Church* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1993) and Wilson, *Mother Kirke*, esp. pp. 16–22.

¹⁴⁷ Neither does the FV unreservedly embrace the so-called 'New Perspective on Paul' (NPP), as some have claimed. There are certainly commonalities, such as a biblico-theological approach to Scripture and an emphasis on the covenant and on union with Christ. Thus FV writers such as Peter Leithart sometimes draw on the work of NPP scholars, especially N. T. Wright (Leithart, *Against Christianity*, pp. 8, 29, 52, 61, 146, 148, 149). But elsewhere Leithart criticises Wright, and other FV writers such as Douglas Wilson are even less positive about the NPP (see www.leithart.com/2004/01/06/nt-wrights-rutherford-house-lecture; Wilson, *'Reformed' Is Not Enough*, pp. 199–204; and Douglas Wilson's blog [www.dougwils.com] under the topic heading 'N. T. Wrights and wrongs'). The idea that the FV has bought wholesale into the NPP is quite false.

Next along the scale are disagreements between evangelical and non-evangelical Christians such as denials of the inspiration and authority of Scripture. Such differences are very important, and make joint ventures between churches practically impossible. However, they would not in themselves cause us to doubt a person's salvation. It is possible to be saved yet not to be evangelical (though of course it is far better to be both).

Further along the scale lie differences within the Reformed evangelical tradition, such as divergent views of the proper subjects of baptism. Both sides regard such matters as important, yet recognise that those taking the opposite view can claim support from within our Reformed heritage. Most of the time, such differences do not impede fellowship at all. Moreover, though it might be difficult for churches holding different views on such matters to work together on some projects (for example, a joint church plant), none of us would dream of anathematising a fellow believer on the basis of such a disagreement. On the contrary, we would presumably seek to work together wherever possible despite these differences, and to keep talking about these issues in an attempt to understand each other and (perhaps eventually, God willing) reach a common mind.

Finally, at the other end of the scale lie numerous comparatively peripheral issues – infralapsarianism versus supralapsarianism, for example. Though we would hesitate to regard any theological issue as irrelevant, issues of this nature have little practical significance, and certainly should not hinder cooperative gospel work among evangelicals.

As we have seen, every single affirmation and denial within the Statement lies firmly within the Reformed tradition. At no point could an evangelical justifiably charge the FV with being beyond the bounds of historical Reformed orthodoxy. FV theology is Reformed theology.

Moreover, anyone inclined to censure James Jordan for straining the bounds of the Reformed tradition would do well to consider first their own position. Many contemporary evangelicals, for example, deny the doctrine of limited atonement, which places them in an uncomfortable minority among the Reformed. Though Reformed theologians disagree about whether there is an abiding Christian Sabbath, they affirm without exception that Christians should assemble for corporate worship on Sundays – anyone who thought 'Wednesday night church' an adequate substitute for Sunday worship would be well beyond the bounds. The preference for 'kingdom' rather than 'covenant' as the governing category for the interpretation of Scripture, and the neglect of the covenantal structure of God's redemptive work, both entail significant departures from the Reformed tradition. And none of the Reformed would have countenanced for a moment the near-total abandonment of Psalms in favour of hymns and songs found in many evangelical churches. Let us be honest: the modern evangelical movement of which we are a part and to which we all owe an incalculable debt has embraced all these innovations and many more besides, perhaps unaware that this theological drift leaves us an uncomfortable distance outside mainstream Reformed theology and piety. This contrasts rather embarrassingly with Jordan's thoughtful, cautious questioning of individual elements within Reformed thought. People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.

Frankly, I am grateful for the opportunity afforded by the FV to think through some important, but neglected, theological issues. If we find ourselves in disagreement after returning to the Scriptures to consider these matters afresh, perhaps we would be wise to heed the advice of John Frame. In a recent interview, he explained, 'I am about 180 degrees removed from the general mentality of the FV.' Yet he insisted that the FV is 'within the bounds of orthodoxy'. FV proponents, he observed, have 'precedents in the Reformation and post-Reformation periods,' and indeed 'at points they are closer to the Reformed confessions than their opponents are.' In Frame's view, the FV debate is one of a number of 'battles that have divided Reformed Christians' that 'should not have been made tests of orthodoxy.'¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ 'Reflections of a Lifetime Theologian: An Extended Interview with John M. Frame,' pp. 6, 25–26. Online web.mac.com/pandrewsandlin/iWeb/Site/Resources_files/Frame%20Reflections%20Interview.pdf.

A previous version of this article (dated 2008) contained a factual error in the second paragraph (wrongly describing the speakers at the 2002 Auburn Avenue Conference as 'Pastors in American Presbyterian churches') and also a few minor typos. These have been corrected in this version (dated 2009). None of these changes affect the pagination of the article. Many thanks to the readers who pointed out these errors.