

Federal Vision
heresy at the root

DAVID J. ENGELSMAN

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Reformed Free Publishing Association

1894 Georgetown Center Drive
Jenison, Michigan 49428-7137
Phone: 616.457.5970
Fax: 616.457.5980
www.rfpa.org
mail@rfpa.org

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It is easy to perceive that this opinion [the doctrine of a gracious but conditional covenant with all the baptized children alike—a covenant cut loose from election] must have great influence on the preaching and that by necessary logical consequence the idea of the covenant of redemption, election and reprobation, limited atonement, and such truths [the doctrines of grace as confessed in the three forms of unity] must undergo enormous change.

Simon van Velzen, *De Bazuin*

In thankful acknowledgment of the work of my theological and spiritual ancestors, Hendrik de Cock, Simon van Velzen, and Hendrik Joffers, on behalf of God's covenant of sovereign grace. Some "fathers" and all stalwarts of the Secession of 1834 in the Netherlands, they preached the truth, contended for the faith, suffered for their witness (at the hands of enemies within, as well as enemies without), and gave God the glory.

THEY LED THE WAY

They are not forgotten

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PREFACE

The first part of this book is an expanded version of a speech commemorating the sixteenth-century Reformation of the church.

Commemoration of the Reformation by Protestant churches becomes a rarity in the twenty-first century. In a time when Protestant churches are deep in ecumenical relations with the Roman Catholic Church, the Reformation and its gospel of salvation by grace alone are an embarrassment to Protestants.

Where the Reformation is still observed, there is the danger that the commemoration is hypocritical. In the language Jesus used in exposing such hypocrisy on the part of the church officials of his day, Protestant churches build the tomb of Martin Luther and garnish the sepulcher of John Calvin. However, in reality they are the theological and spiritual children of those who hated and opposed the reformers (Matt. 23:29–31), for the Protestant churches confess, or tolerate, another gospel than the gospel of the Reformation. It is the false gospel of a grace of God dependent on the will of the sinner; of a justification of the sinner that takes into account the sinner's own obedience; and of a salvation conditioned by the sinner's works.

Genuine commemoration of the Reformation consists of maintaining the Reformation's confession of the one, true gospel of salvation by sovereign grace.

It consists also of anathematizing—cursing in the name of God—the false gospel of the works, will, and worth of the sinner, that is, the false gospel of a conditional, resistible grace and a conditional, losable salvation, as well as those who preach it. “If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:9).

Especially is the church that is truly the heir of Christ's work in the Reformation called to expose and condemn the false gospel in its contemporary form.

Hence this book: *Federal Vision*.

The theology that calls itself the federal vision is a grave threat, if not the *chief* threat, to the Reformed faith—the Reformation’s gospel of grace—in our time. The heretical fruit of this theology is the bold teaching of justification by faith and works. Its heretical root is the doctrine of a conditional covenant.

Some avowed opponents of the federal vision busy themselves with the fruit. None touches the root—with the proverbial ten-foot pole. Their efforts, therefore, are vain and deceiving.

This book purposes the eradication of the heresy of the federal vision.

Hence the subtitle: *Heresy at the Root*.

This uprooting of the heretical doctrine of the federal vision ardently desires the planting in Reformed and Presbyterian churches, or replanting, as the case may be, of the truth of the unconditional covenant. This truth is the gospel of the Reformation. Only this truth moves covenant children to keep God’s commandments out of love for him. Only this truth gives assurance of salvation to the baptized children of believers, old and young. Only this truth gives God the glory for covenant salvation.

The second section of the book consists of answers to questions concerning the federal vision and the covenant from the audience at the Reformation Day lecture. These questions with their answers shed light on the great covenant controversy of our day.

PART 1

Eradicating the Federal Vision

INTRODUCTION TO THE FEDERAL VISION CONTROVERSY



*The Coming of the Vision | A Heretical Vision
A Real and Present Danger*

The federal vision is a theology—a body of teachings—within the conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches in North America. This theology denies all the doctrines of sovereign grace, centering on justification by faith alone. As all the world knows, the truth of justification by faith alone was the heart of the sixteenth-century Reformation of the church. As Romans and Galatians teach, as all the reformers testified, and as all the Reformation creeds confess, justification by faith alone is the heart of the gospel. The federal vision, therefore, denies the heart of the gospel.

The federal vision is favorable to, and closely allied with, the new perspective on Paul. This exegetical and doctrinal movement dismisses as mistaken the Reformation's understanding of the gospel as taught especially in Romans and Galatians. It is, therefore, a movement that at one stroke annihilates all the Reformation creeds, from the Heidelberg Catechism to the Westminster Confession of Faith. All the Reformed and Presbyterian confessions express as gospel truth the Reformation's understanding of the gospel, especially in Romans and Galatians.

The fascination with and dependence on the new perspective on Paul on the part of the federal vision are evident in all its proponents. Rich Lusk boldly shoved the federal vision's basic agreement with the new perspective on Paul in the faces of all the theologians at the Knox Theological Seminary Colloquium

on the federal vision. This was a high-powered conference of advocates and critics of the federal vision in 2003.

At this conference, having criticized the reformers for their erroneous understanding of Paul's condemnation of those who taught justification by works of the law, Lusk explained Galatians 3 and 4. Contrary to the Reformation, "Paul was not battling legalism" in these chapters. Rather, the apostle was opposing Jewish teachers who "were suggesting submission to the old covenant identity badges as the way of entrance into the true people of God." Everyone in the least familiar with the new perspective on Paul immediately recognizes the new perspective lingo and line. Lest anyone at the colloquium fail to notice that he was parroting the new perspective line, Lusk referred the theologians in attendance to a book by N. T. Wright—new perspective darling of the men of the federal vision—"for complete exegesis."¹

The federal vision is furthered by a widespread and aggressive promotion of "biblical theology" at the expense of "systematic theology." The contemporary promotion of "biblical theology" is a thinly disguised attack on the Reformed and Presbyterian creeds, especially the Canons of Dordt and the Westminster Confession of Faith. The attack on the creeds in the name of "biblical theology" becomes increasingly open and bold. Federal vision theologian Don Garlington has recently savaged the Canons of Dordt: "The 'five points' [of Calvinism]...are schematized and tend to be artificial, as...based on a systematic rather than a biblical theology."²

Since the struggle of orthodoxy with the Arminian heresy at Dordt in the early seventeenth century, the federal vision is one of the most deadly threats to the gospel of grace that Christ restored to the church by the sixteenth-century Reformation.

1 Rich Lusk, "A Response to 'The Biblical Plan of Salvation,'" in *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros & Cons: Debating the Federal Vision*, ed. E. Calvin Beisner (Fort Lauderdale, FL: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004), 132–33.

2 Don Garlington, "Covenantal Nomism and the Exile," in *A Faith That Is Never Alone: A Response to Westminster Seminary California*, ed. P. Andrew Sandlin (La Grange, CA: Kerygma Press, 2007), 391.

THE COMING OF THE VISION

Briefly, the historical background of the theology and movement within conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches in North America that calls itself the federal vision is this. In 2000, Norman Shepherd published a book titled *The Call of Grace*.³ The subtitle is significant, indicating that the book advocates and defends a certain doctrine of the covenant: *How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism*.

At the time he published the book, Shepherd was a minister in the Christian Reformed Church. Earlier, for much of his career, he had been a theologian in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, teaching systematic theology in Westminster Seminary (Philadelphia) for eighteen years.

In the book Shepherd openly and explicitly attacks all the doctrines of sovereign grace confessed by the Reformed churches in the three forms of unity and in the Westminster standards. On the foreground in the book, although not at the heart of it, is the denial of justification by faith alone, altogether apart from any good work of the believer.⁴

The publication of Shepherd's book brought to light the reprehensible handling of Shepherd and his heresies by the faculty and board of Westminster Seminary (Philadelphia) and by the ecclesiastical assemblies of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in the late 1970s and early 1980s, while Shepherd was dogmatics professor at Westminster Seminary. This shameful history was kept hidden until Shepherd's publication of his book made the suppression impossible. Westminster Seminary and a presbytery of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church handled Shepherd and his teachings by approving the teachings and by exonerating and protecting Shepherd.⁵

3 Norman Shepherd, *The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000).

4 For demonstration of these observations, see David J. Engelsma, *The Covenant of God and the Children of Believers: Sovereign Grace in the Covenant* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2005), 133–232.

5 For this history see O. Palmer Robertson, *The Current Justification Controversy* (Unicoi, TN: Trinity Foundation, 2003); A. Donald MacLeod, "A

The publication of Shepherd's book also occasioned the opening of the floodgates of public defense of Shepherd's teachings and aggressive promotion of them within many of the reputedly conservative Reformed and Presbyterian denominations in North America, including the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the Presbyterian Church in America, and the United Reformed Churches.

The publication of *The Call of Grace* was the birth of the federal vision. The result of the book has been a spate of writings in books and periodicals; high-level colloquiums; conferences; official church decisions on concrete cases; reports of study committees; and, it is reported, endless discussions on the Internet.

Virtually all the conservative Reformed churches have had to concern themselves with the federal vision.

The advocates of the doctrines published by Shepherd call their distinctive theology federal vision. One thing about this name should be noted, the main thing: derived from the Latin *foedus*, "federal" means covenant.

A HERETICAL VISION

The federal vision is a heresy. It is a stubborn, persistent, deliberate departure from and denial of a cardinal truth of Scripture, as this truth is rightly and authoritatively summarized and systematized in the Reformed creeds. Specifically, the federal vision is heretical in the doctrine that it puts on the foreground: justification by faith and works. By this doctrine the federal vision denies justification by faith alone.

Already in 1976, it now comes out, Shepherd informed the authorities at Westminster Seminary that he taught that "to insist

Painful Parting, 1977–1983: Justifying Justification," in *W. Stanford Reid: An Evangelical Calvinist in the Academy* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), 257–79; Paul M. Elliott, *Christianity and Neo-Liberalism: The Spiritual Crisis in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and Beyond* (Unicoi, TN: Trinity Foundation, 2005); and W. Robert Godfrey, "Westminster Seminary, the Doctrine of Justification, and the Reformed Confessions," in *The Pattern of Sound Doctrine: Systematic Theology at the Westminster Seminaries*, ed. David van Druenen (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 127–48.

on faith alone for justification is a serious impoverishment.”⁶ Shepherd added that it is possible to lose the grace of justification and that justification can increase and decrease.⁷ These teachings are implications of the false doctrine of justification by works. The righteousness of Christ, imputed to the elect sinner by faith alone, does not increase or decrease. It cannot be lost.

The federal vision’s teaching concerning justification is the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church, condemned by the Reformation. It is the doctrine of justification by works that Scripture condemns in Romans 3–5 and in the epistle to the Galatians. “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law” (Rom. 3:28). “No man is justified by the law in the sight of God...for, the just shall live by faith” (Gal. 3:11).

The federal vision’s doctrine of justification flatly contradicts question and answer 60 of the Heidelberg Catechism: “How art thou righteous before God? Only by true faith in Jesus Christ.”⁸ It contradicts question and answer 62 of the Catechism as well:

But why can not our good works be the whole or part of our righteousness before God?

Because the righteousness which can stand before the judgment-seat of God must be perfect throughout, and wholly conformable to the divine law; whereas even our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin.⁹

The federal vision’s doctrine of justification by faith and works is the rejection of the sixteenth-century Reformation of the church at its heart. It is the denial of the gospel of grace at its heart.

6 Martin Downes, *Risking the Truth: Handling Error in the Church* (Fearn, Rosshire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2009), 137.

7 Ibid.

8 Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 60, in *Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, 6th ed., 3 vols., ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Harper and Row, 1931; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), 3:326.

9 Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 62, in *ibid.*, 3:327.

Since justification by faith alone is the heart of the gospel, the men of the federal vision also, necessarily, deny *all* the doctrines of grace as confessed by the Reformed believer in the three forms of unity and in the Westminster standards: sovereign, eternal predestination as the source of all salvation; limited, efficacious atonement as the basis of all salvation; irresistible grace as the power of all salvation; and the preservation of saints as the benefit and comfort of gracious salvation.

The federal vision denies all these doctrines of grace *openly and explicitly*.

The federal vision is heresy—gross heresy.

A REAL AND PRESENT DANGER

The threat of the federal vision to Reformed and Presbyterian believers and their children has not diminished in the slightest in the past ten years or so since Shepherd published *The Call of Grace*. On the contrary, the danger to Reformed churches and church members is greater today than ever before.

Some might suppose that the danger has lessened, indeed, passed altogether. There are ministers and theologians in the churches who would very much like to convince the members that there is no longer a danger. Their reason for supposing or contending that the danger has passed is that some prominent theologians have condemned the federal vision's teaching of justification by works. Some Reformed churches have adopted reports affirming justification by faith alone in opposition to the federal vision.

"All is well once again!" "We have resisted the error!"

But the notion that there is no longer any danger is a mistake. The mistake is fatal to the churches where it lodges. The danger of the federal vision remains. It is the more dangerous because now, supposedly overcome, it is being ignored.

The federal vision remains a danger, first, because prominent, influential men in the Reformed churches continue to defend and promote the theology of the federal vision. There is Shepherd who, although a member of the Christian Reformed Church, exercises great influence upon many in the Orthodox

Presbyterian Church, the Presbyterian Church in America, the United Reformed Churches, and other denominations.

There is the Orthodox Presbyterian theologian Richard B. Gaffin Jr. who vigorously defended Shepherd's theology for seven years at Westminster Seminary and before the assemblies of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, praised Shepherd's *The Call of Grace* as "valuable instruction on what it means to live in covenant with God" and as beneficial to "anyone concerned about biblical growth in Christian life and witness," and has risen to the defense of the theology of the federal vision when it has been called into question before the assemblies of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.¹⁰

There is John Frame, professor of theology in the Presbyterian Church in America, who also defended Shepherd during the controversy over Shepherd's theology at Westminster Seminary. Incapable of rousing himself to holy anger over the denial of justification by faith alone, Frame has, however, vented unholy rage against all those who criticize the federal vision as heretical, calling the critics "stupid, irresponsible, and divisive."¹¹

10 On Gaffin's powerful role in defending Shepherd and his doctrine, see Robertson, *The Current Justification Controversy*; Elliott, *Christianity and Neo-Liberalism*; and John W. Robbins, *A Companion to the Current Justification Controversy* (Unicoi, TN: Trinity Foundation, 2003). For Gaffin's hearty recommendation of Shepherd's *The Call of Grace*, see the back cover of *The Call of Grace*. For Gaffin's later spirited defense of a proponent of the federal vision before the general assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, see Elliott, "The Kinnaird Case and Its Aftermath," in *Christianity and Neo-Liberalism*, 175–237.

11 On Frame's defense of Shepherd, see Elliott, *Christianity and Neo-Liberalism*, 130. For Frame's angry denunciation of criticism of the federal vision, see foreword, in *Backbone of the Bible: Covenant in Contemporary Perspective*, ed. P. Andrew Sandlin (Nacogdoches, TX: Covenant Media Press, 2004), xii. To this denunciation, Frame added, "Theological professors who make such comments [criticizing the federal vision as heresy]...do not have the intellectual, theological, or spiritual maturity to prepare students for gospel ministers." The truth is that any professor of theology in a Reformed seminary who will *not* condemn the federal vision as heresy ought to be deposed from office as unfaithful to his sacred calling. This calling includes cautioning his students "in regard to the errors and heresies of the old, but especially of the new day" (Form for the Installation of Professors of Theology, in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* [Grandville, MI: Protestant

There are the board and faculty of Westminster Seminary, who defended Shepherd to the end. They have never confessed their sins of approving the doctrine of justification by faith and works and of unleashing the federal vision upon the Reformed and Presbyterian churches in North America by releasing Professor Shepherd with a good testimonial.

There are the hundreds of pastors, professors, and missionaries trained by Professor Shepherd, Professor Gaffin, and other likeminded Westminster Seminary professors in the theology of the federal vision.

There is the peripatetic independent Steve Schlissel, who spreads the covenant theology of the federal vision to the ends of the earth.

There is the popular Douglas Wilson with all his zealous Christian reconstructionist colleagues, within and without Wilson's Confederation of Reformed Evangelical Churches.

Second, and even more importantly, the federal vision remains a danger because with the exception of the radical criticism of the federal vision by the Protestant Reformed Churches (that falls on deaf ears), no Reformed theologian, denomination, or study committee report has taken hold of the federal vision *at its root*. None has so much as addressed the root of the heresy.

The denial of justification by faith alone and, with this fundamental gospel truth, *all* the doctrines of grace is only the bad fruit of the theology of the federal vision. It is not the root of the federal vision. Some critics have lopped off the bitter fruit—the denial of justification by faith alone—but all have left the root, whence this fruit grows, strictly alone. All have refused to touch the root.

And this makes all the criticism of the federal vision, and what mild condemnation of it there has been—"error" not heresy—an exercise in futility. Indeed, such criticism of the federal

Reformed Churches in America], 297); "vindicat[ing] sound doctrine against heresies and errors" (Church Order of Dordt, Art. 18, in *ibid.*, 386); and refuting and contradicting all errors that militate against the doctrines of the three forms of unity, "particularly those which were condemned by the [Synod of Dordt]," namely, Arminianism (Formula of Subscription, in *ibid.*, 326).

vision renders the heresy all the more dangerous, because the members of the churches are deluded into thinking that the evil has been eradicated when, in fact, it remains untouched in its pernicious root.

The obvious example that is readily understood by everyone is cancer in the physical body. What doctor is satisfied with cutting off the external lumps, while neglecting to get at the malignant tumor deep within, and then assuring the anxious patient, “You are healed; all is well”? And what cancer patient goes home in peace, knowing that such malpractice was his treatment?

There is a cancer in the body of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches. It is seated deep in the body. By this time it has spread its tentacles widely. Denial of justification by faith alone is a manifestation of the cancer—a symptom—bad enough, alarming to be sure, but only the fruit, not the root, of the deadly evil.

In this book, in love for the Reformed faith, in love for the Reformed churches, in love for the members of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches, and in love for Jesus Christ, whose faith and church they are, but also in hatred of the lie that corrupts the gospel of grace and of those who deliberately and stubbornly teach the lie, I expose the root of the federal vision.

I intend to destroy it.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CONDITIONAL COVENANT

2

*The Distinctive Covenant Doctrine of the Federal Vision
Origins of the Conditional Covenant*

The federal vision is a theology of the covenant—a body of teachings about the covenant. This is what the federal vision is fundamentally. Only secondarily is it a doctrine of justification, of predestination, of sanctification, and of perseverance. All of the controversial teachings of the federal vision regarding a salvation that is dependent upon man’s own works stand or fall with its covenant doctrine.

That the federal vision is essentially a doctrine of the covenant, the movement itself declares by its name. “Federal” means covenant. The federal vision is a distinctive doctrine of the covenant of God with his people in Jesus Christ.

About this covenant in Christ, the federal vision is a vision, according to its proponents. By “vision” in the name of their theology, the men of the federal vision propose that their covenant doctrine is new and different. It is certainly new and strange in comparison with the covenant doctrine of the Reformed creeds. This is evident from the fact that the covenant doctrine of the creeds, whatever it may be, does not produce a teaching of justification by faith and works, nor a teaching of an election unto grace that nevertheless fails to save, nor a teaching that covenant saints can fall away from Christ and perish.

The very name of the theology and movement demands that any criticism of the federal vision treat its doctrine of the covenant. That the Reformed critics of the federal vision fail to do so is inexcusable. Were I to assign a seminary student to

critique the federal vision, and the result was a paper that examined all aspects of the federal vision except the fundamental teaching expressed by its name, I would mark the paper with an “F”—not for federal, but for failure.

That the federal vision is a doctrine of the covenant is also evident from the fact that the men of the federal vision defend their various teachings, when they come under attack, by appeal to their doctrine of the covenant. This was their defense at the well-known Knox Theological Seminary Colloquium in 2003. Leading proponents and some carefully selected, mild critics of the federal vision gathered to discuss the theology of the federal vision. The papers of both the proponents and the critics concentrated on the federal vision’s doctrine of the covenant. Justification, perseverance, baptism, election, and other doctrines necessarily came up in the discussion, but the main subject was the covenant.¹

More precisely, the main subject was the covenant of God *with the children of believing parents*. Opening the colloquium, Douglas Wilson forthrightly confronted the assembled theologians with the fundamental issue at the meeting and with a “fundamental concern” of the federal vision.

One of the fundamental concerns is this: we want to insist upon believing God’s promises concerning our children. This is just another way of believing that God will preserve His covenant people over time. We affirm the perseverance of the *saints*, and not just the perseverance of one individual saint. But the saints extend over generations. The promises do not come to detached individuals. Covenant children are placed in covenant homes by a sovereign God, and we are required as Christians to believe the promises of Scripture concerning these children.²

1 The papers have been published as the book *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros & Cons: Debating the Federal Vision*.

2 Douglas Wilson, “Union with Christ: An Overview of the Federal Vision,” in *ibid.*, 2–3.

Summing up the conference in the last chapter, the moderator, indicating what the federal vision is all about, applauded the federal vision for its “renewed emphasis on the importance of the covenant.”³

Further evidence that the federal vision is fundamentally a doctrine of the covenant is that the men of the federal vision promote their theology by explaining and arguing their distinctive doctrine of the covenant. Shepherd’s seminal book, *The Call of Grace*, is subtitled *How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism*. Attempting to ground the covenant doctrine of the federal vision in the reformers, Peter Lillback has written a book titled *The Binding of God: Calvin’s Role in the Development of Covenant Theology*.⁴

Indeed, the *critics* of the federal vision perceive the federal vision as a certain, definite doctrine of the covenant. They never act on the perception, but they recognize what is, after all, unmistakable. Guy Waters, who is touted as one of the most reliable critics of the federal vision, titled his critique of the federal vision *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology*.⁵ Waters did not, in fact, do what the title of his book promises, namely, expose and refute the covenant doctrine that is the root of the federal vision—not at all!—but he did at least acknowledge the root of the federal vision.

In 1982, after seven years of continual controversy over his teachings, especially his denial of justification by faith alone, the board of Westminster Seminary finally “removed” Professor Norman Shepherd. Their explanation to the public stated that “the problems in his teaching [especially his teaching of justification by faith and by works]...are *inherent in his view of the ‘covenant dynamic’*...*It is in the distinctive elements*

3 E. Calvin Beisner, “Concluding Comments on the Federal Vision,” in *ibid.*, 305. Commending the federal vision for renewing emphasis on the covenant is akin to praising al-Qaeda for renewing emphasis on bomb making.

4 Peter A. Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin’s Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001).

5 Guy Prentiss Waters, *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology: A Comparative Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006).

and emphases of his theology of the covenant that the problem [especially his doctrine of justification by works] appears.”⁶

Of particular concern in Shepherd’s teaching, the board went on to say, was “the omission of any clear treatment of Christ as the covenant Head.”⁷ Rejection of Christ’s headship of the covenant of grace is basic to, and a hallmark of, the covenant doctrine that Shepherd and the other men of the federal vision embrace and develop.

Because the federal vision is a theology of the covenant, no criticism of the federal vision is effective that does not address the federal vision’s doctrine of the covenant. No criticism that fails to address the federal vision’s covenant doctrine can be taken seriously. All such criticism is superficial, even irrelevant, indeed dangerous. The malignant tumor remains securely in the body of Reformed and Presbyterian churches.

THE DISTINCTIVE COVENANT DOCTRINE OF THE FEDERAL VISION

What is the distinctive covenant doctrine of the federal vision? What is its supposedly new vision regarding the covenant of God in Jesus Christ? What is this covenant doctrine that manifests itself in the teaching of justification by works? in the teaching of an election of many unto grace and salvation in time that nevertheless fails to assure their eternal salvation? in the teaching of a saving grace that can be resisted and lost? in the teaching of the falling away of many into hell who once truly believed and enjoyed union with Christ?

It is the distinctive teaching of the federal vision’s fundamental doctrine of the covenant that the covenant is conditional. The covenant of God depends upon us humans with whom God establishes his covenant. Because the federal vision is especially a doctrine of the covenant with regard to the baptized babies of

6 “Reasons and Specifications Supporting the Action of the Board of Trustees in Removing Professor Shepherd, Approved by the Executive Committee of the Board, February 26, 1982,” in Robbins, *Companion to the Current Justification Controversy*, 148; emphasis added.

7 *Ibid.*, 154.

believers, the distinctive covenant doctrine of the federal vision holds that the covenant depends upon baptized infants.

There cannot be any doubt about this description of the covenant doctrine of the federal vision. No one can successfully challenge this analysis. The men of the federal vision themselves tell us that this is their covenant doctrine.

For seven years Norman Shepherd informed his interrogators at Westminster Seminary and his judges at the presbytery of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church that his teaching of justification by works is an aspect of his doctrine of a conditional covenant. At one point in the proceedings, therefore, a critic of Shepherd's teaching on justification called attention to the fact that Shepherd's doctrine of justification is embedded "in the context of his distinctive 'covenantal perspective.'" The attempt to have the faculty and board of Westminster Seminary consider Shepherd's "'covenant concept' in relation to justification" was shot down.⁸

When O. Palmer Robertson, a participant in the Shepherd controversy at Westminster Seminary, "summarize[s] the distinctiveness of Shepherd's formulations that generated this controversy," his first observation concerning the source and cause of the controversy is Shepherd's distinctive doctrine of the covenant. In defense of his teachings, particularly justification by works, Shepherd insisted that "justification be understood in terms of the dynamic of the covenant model."⁹

Shepherd's "covenant model" is a conditional covenant.

Shepherd tells the world in *The Call of Grace* that the root of all his teachings is the doctrine of a conditional covenant. In the book Shepherd denies that the covenant with Abraham—the covenant that becomes the new covenant in Jesus Christ—is unconditional. Rather, "conditions were, indeed, attached to the fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham."¹⁰ With explicit reference to the new covenant in Christ, Shepherd

8 Robertson, *The Current Justification Controversy*, 54–55.

9 *Ibid.*, 90.

10 Shepherd, *Call of Grace*, 14.

writes, “Grace is not without condition.”¹¹ Shepherd is saying that the fundamental explanation of all his teachings, particularly justification by good works, is the doctrine of a conditional covenant. Justification by works is fruit; the root is a conditional covenant.

In the book that the men of the federal vision wrote to explain and defend their teachings, John Barach, then a minister in the United Reformed Churches, was given the honor of authoring the first chapter of exposition. The reason is that his topic lays the foundation for all the doctrines that follow, including justification. Barach’s topic is the covenant. Indicating that the men of the federal vision are well aware of the basic issue in the current controversy over the covenant (which all the non-Protestant Reformed critics of the federal vision pretend not to notice and are determined not to see—the proverbial four-hundred-pound gorilla in the kitchen), the precise topic of Barach’s foundational contribution is “Covenant and Election.”

Barach is clear and forthright concerning the distinctive covenant doctrine of the federal vision: “God truly brings those people into His covenant, into union with Christ...[causes them] to share in His blessings [and] experience His love.” Nevertheless, they eventually fall away and perish eternally in hell. The reason, declares Barach, is that “the covenant relationship is conditional.”¹²

ORIGINS OF THE CONDITIONAL COVENANT

This doctrine of a conditional covenant, which is the root of all the teachings of the federal vision, is not new with the men of the federal vision, as the word “vision” in their name for their theology might suggest. This covenant doctrine did not spring full-blown from the head of Norman Shepherd, as Athena from the head of Zeus. It is not a doctrine of the covenant that Reformed theologians had never heard of before Shepherd, Gaffin, Barach, Schlissel, and Wilson came on the scene.

11 *Ibid.*, 63.

12 John Barach, “Covenant and Election,” in *The Federal Vision*, ed. Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner (Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2004), 7.

What is new about the federal vision, what is visionary about it, is its *bold development* of an old doctrine of the covenant.

The conditional covenant doctrine of the federal vision is the doctrine of the covenant of the Dutch Reformed theologians Klaas Schilder, Benne Holwerda, and Cornelis Veenhof; of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated); of the Canadian Reformed Churches and the American Reformed Churches in North America; and of the Free Reformed Churches in Australia.

The men of the federal vision *advertise* their theology as the covenant doctrine of Schilder and the liberated churches. The federal vision *claims* to be the development of the liberated doctrine of the covenant—such a development as teaches justification by works; as teaches the divine election, *in the sense of Ephesians 1:4*, of every baptized child, Esau as well as Jacob, implying that election can fail to save or, as Douglas Wilson expresses it, “devolve[s] into reprobation”;¹³ as teaches an ineffectual death of Christ for all the baptized babies of believers; and as teaches the possibility of the falling away of saved covenant saints.

The critics of the federal vision know that the federal vision is developing Schilder’s and the liberated churches’ covenant doctrine. At the Knox Colloquium, Carl Robbins, one of the critics, said to the house:

I’ve finally grasped that he [John Barach, as a spokesman of the federal vision] is simply re-stating the distinctive [covenant theology] of the “Liberated” Reformed Churches. Therefore, it must fairly be pointed out that Pastor Barach cannot be charged with “theological novelty,” for his views were first propounded by Klaas Schilder in the 1940s and (before him) Calvin Seminary

13 Douglas Wilson, *“Reformed” Is Not Enough: Recovering the Objectivity of the Covenant* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2002), 140–41. Wilson is quoting another writer with approval: “We should not drive a wedge between ‘special’ and ‘covenantal’ elections, for special election simply is covenantal election for those, who by God’s sovereign electing grace, persevere. For those who fall away, covenantal election devolves into reprobation.”

Professor William W. Heyns from the early 1900s. In fact, Pastor Barach has simply and faithfully re-stated those covenantal understandings.¹⁴

In fact, the doctrine of a conditional covenant, now being developed by the federal vision, goes back a long way further than Klaas Schilder and William Heyns. It is the covenant doctrine of two nineteenth-century Dutch Reformed ministers, K. J. Pieters and J. R. Kreulen, who grievously troubled the Reformed churches of the Secession in the Netherlands.¹⁵ The doctrine of the covenant of Pieters and Kreulen was that of Jacob Arminius in the late sixteenth century, as subtly adjusted by Moyses Amyraut in the early seventeenth century.¹⁶

It is a doctrine of the covenant that teaches that God is gracious to all the baptized infants of believers without exception. In his grace he establishes the covenant of grace with all without exception. However, whether a particular infant is saved in the covenant, by this covenant grace, depends upon the infant's performing conditions.

14 Carl D. Robbins, "A Response to 'Covenant and Election,'" in *Auburn Avenue Theology*, 157.

15 For a description of the covenant doctrine of K. J. Pieters and J. R. Kreulen and an account of the controversy it caused in the churches of the Secession (*Afscheiding*), see David J. Engelsma, "The Covenant Doctrine of the Fathers of the Secession," in *Always Reforming: Continuation of the Sixteenth-Century Reformation*, ed. David J. Engelsma (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2009), 100–136. See also David J. Engelsma, *Covenant and Election in the Reformed Tradition* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2011), 9–14.

16 For the covenant doctrine of Jacob Arminius, of which the hallmark was conditionality and of which the doctrine of Moyses Amyraut was only a clever variation, see William den Boer, *God's Twofold Love: The Theology of Jacob Arminius (1559–1609)*, trans. Albert Gootjes (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010). Th. Marius van Leeuwen correctly describes Amyrauldism as "a covenant theology" of "two covenant parties: God with his universal offer of salvation...and Man, who gives or gives not his response to that offer" (*Arminius, Arminianism, and Europe: Jacobus Arminius [1559/60–1609]*, ed. Th. Marius van Leeuwen, Keith D. Stangelin, and Marijke Tolsma, Brill's Series in Church History, vol. 39 [Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2009], xix). In Amyrauldism God's covenant offer is conditioned by man's covenant response. Substitute "promise" for "offer" and you have the doctrine of the covenant of Pieters and Kreulen, of Schilder and the liberated, and of the federal vision.

The doctrine of the covenant now being developed by the federal vision holds that the grace of the covenant, particularly with regard to the baptized infants of believers, does not have its source in, nor is determined by, the eternal decree of election. Grace in the covenant is wider than the eternal decree (if, in the thinking of those who hold this covenant doctrine, there is an eternal decree at all).

The covenant doctrine of the federal vision, therefore, is essentially that condemned by the Synod of Dordt. Against the Arminian doctrine that the death of Christ merely allowed God to make his covenant with all humans alike, *conditionally* (the condition being their faith), the Canons of Dordt affirm that, in accordance with the eternal decree of predestination, the death of Christ “confirmed” the covenant with the elect. In addition, striking deliberately—and fatally—at the Arminian notion that faith is a condition unto the continuation of the covenant and unto final covenant salvation, the Canons affirm that the death of Christ purchased faith for the elect and that Christ confers faith upon the elect. Faith is a covenant gift, not a covenant condition.

It was the [eternal, unconditional] will of God, that Christ by the blood of the cross, *whereby he confirmed the new covenant*, should effectually redeem out of every people, tribe, nation, and language, all those, and those only, who were from eternity chosen to salvation...[and] that he should *confer upon them faith, which...he purchased for them by his death.*¹⁷

The Canons reject the teaching that God makes the new covenant conditionally with elect and nonelect humans alike, whether adults or baptized infants.

Synod *rejects* the errors of those...who teach that it was...the purpose of the death of Christ...only that He should acquire for the Father the mere right to establish with man such a covenant as He might please, whether of grace or works...[and]

17 Canons of Dordt, 2.8, in *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:587; emphasis added.

who teach that Christ...merited for the Father only the authority or the perfect will to deal again with man, and to prescribe new conditions as He might desire...[and]

who teach that the new covenant of grace...does not herein consist that we by faith, inasmuch as it accepts the merits of Christ, are justified before God and saved, but in the fact that God, having revoked the demand of perfect obedience of the law, regards faith itself and the obedience of faith, although imperfect, as the perfect obedience of the law, and does esteem it worthy of the reward of eternal life through grace.¹⁸

Regardless of the further, ignoble ancestry of the covenant doctrine of the federal vision, both the men of the federal vision and their critics agree that the conditional covenant doctrine of the federal vision is that of the liberated Reformed churches.

The Canadian Reformed Churches are disingenuous, therefore, when they profess that the federal vision is not an issue in their churches. Of course it is not an issue. It is their doctrine of the covenant that the federal vision is developing and spreading far and wide.

The conditional covenant doctrine of the federal vision is the doctrine of the covenant that the Protestant Reformed Churches rejected and condemned in the early 1950s, when this doctrine gained entrance into the churches by the direct, personal efforts of Klaas Schilder. The Protestant Reformed Churches condemned the liberated doctrine of a conditional covenant as Arminianism in the covenant. This the federal vision is proving it to be, beyond any shadow of doubt.

Inasmuch as the federal vision is the development of the covenant doctrine of the liberated Reformed, the Declaration of Principles of the Protestant Reformed Churches, concerning the covenant, ought to be the most sought after and highly prized document in the community of Reformed and Presbyterian

¹⁸ Canons of Dordt, 2, Rejection of Errors 2–4, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 164–65. Schaff does not include the rejection of errors sections of the Canons in English.

churches in North America. This is the document by which the Protestant Reformed Churches exposed and condemned the liberated doctrine of a conditional covenant. It is *the* manual for detecting and eradicating the root of the heresy in the Reformed churches that is the federal vision.¹⁹

19 The Declaration of Principles is found in *Confessions and Church Order*, 409–31.