



**“REFORMED”
IS NOT
ENOUGH**

Recovering
the Objectivity
of the Covenant

DOUGLAS WILSON

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Preface to the Second Printing

As I write this, the year 2010 approaches, and this means that the Federal Vision controversy is about eight years old now. In some ways, the years have done it some good—in some places the controversy has just gone away. And where it continues, for the most part it has settled down into a robust debate, and in some sectors it has even turned into a discussion. This is all to the good because the issues, while not constituting heresy, are important and should still be worked through.

Apart from the cover, typesetting, some grammatical edits, and this preface, this printing of the book is unchanged from the original. This is not because no qualifications from our side of the debate needed to be made, but rather because those qualifications have been made in other places. This book, as it was printed, is part of the record, and so changing things around in it would only open me up to charges of disingenuous sneakiness. The one exception to this can be found on the original page 134, where I said, “Breaking covenant occurs because of *unbelief*, lack of faith, and because of lack of good works.” This was a most unfortunate typo, and that last phrase should have read, “and *not* because of lack of good works.” Other than that change, the book is the same.

The subsequent qualifications that have been made in the course of the controversy are nevertheless important. The most important of them can be found in “A Joint Federal Vision Profession,”

in *Credenda Agenda* magazine (Vol. 19.3, available online at <http://credenda.org/images/stories/pdf/19-3.pdf>). This statement was signed by many of the FV leaders, and should be considered as a definitive statement of what we affirm and what we deny. For those who are really into this stuff, more material on the controversy—running to hundreds of thousands of words—can be found at www.dougwils.com in the Archives, listed under “Auburn Avenue Stuff.” These words may one day be collected by an enterprising editor into a whacking big book, as a cautionary tale for young theologians.

Douglas Wilson

Feast of the Nativity of St. Sebastian's Cat, 2009

Foreword

On June 22, 2002, Covenant Presbytery of the RPCUS declared that certain teachings at a pastors' conference presented by Steve Schlissel, Steve Wilkins, John Barach and, as the Victorians would have put it, the present writer, involved a "fundamental denial of the essence of the Christian Gospel in the denial of justification by faith alone." Consequently, the four of us were declared to be heretics.

This book project was already well underway when all of this happened, and so it cannot be understood as a full-orbed response to the charges. At the same time, given the nature of the subject this book addresses, the material here *can* be considered as part of the provocation and something of a response. The basic theme of this book is what brought about the charges in the first place, and in more than a few passages I have written responsively with the charges in mind.

The charges assumed (which is incidentally not the same thing as proved) that the positions taken by the speakers were "contrary to the Bible and the Westminster Standards." As a result, in the following pages, there is a closer interaction with the teaching of the Westminster Confession than there would have been otherwise. This was not done in order to "get around" anything in the historic Reformed faith, but rather the reverse. It is our conviction that certain epistemological developments since the Enlightenment have caused many *modern* conservative Calvinists to read their confessions in a spirit alien to that which produced them. As

a result, we were taken to task for denying our confessional heritage at just those places where we were in fact upholding it. This of course does not make us right—as the Westminster theologians themselves told us, and as Steve Schlissel continues to tell us in a loud voice. Something can be “confessional” and wrong. But we are like the obedient boy in the parable—we say the confession *could* be wrong, but then we affirm the confession. Our opponents say the confession is as right as it gets—biblical Christianity in “its purest human expression”—and then proceed to merrily disregard what the confession actually teaches in this area.

What we always want in all “controversies of religion” is a plain and honest resort to Scripture primarily. But when we do this, we are still mindful of our confessional riches and we love that heritage. Given this, it is a bit much to be charged with abandoning our inheritance when those making the charge abandoned the standards long enough ago to give it the color of “a historic position.”

No single issue in this collective charge against us is very complicated, but, taken all together, things can become significantly tangled. This is because this was a heresy trial on the cheap—it was a veritable broadside of charges with no apparent need to contact us to get any clarification, no need to document the charges with quotations, no need to distinguish four men with different emphases, and so forth. Simple issues when collectively heaped can still make a big mess.

At the same time, this published response seeks to *name* this imbroglio appropriately. Apart from the specific charges, what exactly is going on here? Which worldviews are colliding? This might seem like a nonsensical question to some—“what do you mean *worldviews*?” Both sides of this dispute hold to some variation of postmillennial, Calvinistic, presbyterian, Van Tillian, theonomic, and Reformed thought, with additional areas of agreement standing off to the side. I bet none of us voted for Clinton. How could there possibly be enough *material* left over for a fracas?

1

Judas Was a Christian?

The Church today is in dire need of reformation. This is not said with any denominational exclusivity. Reformed churches today need reformation as much as anyone else. I say this as one who embraces the richness of the Reformed faith, as will become apparent enough later. But at the same time, *because* of this Reformational commitment, it is still necessary to say that to be Reformed is not enough. We must certainly live up to what we have already attained, but together with this we must not be allowed to assume that the last significant attainment was in the middle of the seventeenth century. *Semper reformanda* is not something we should all chant together right up until someone actually tries it.

One of the great reformational needs in the Church today is the need for us to understand the objectivity of the covenant, and so that is the thrust of this book. Because this covenant is our life, we are called to understand it, embody it, and love the members of it. Not surprisingly, in order to do this, we will have to clear away a good bit of theological debris, which is what I am seeking to do here.

As we undertake the task, one caution should be mentioned at the outset: it is important for us to grasp *all* the issues that will be raised, and this means waiting patiently for some assembly of them later. On a subject of this complexity, the last thing we need is a rush to judgment, which can only result in misunderstanding

and confusion. Considerable confusion has already occurred in some quarters, and we need to study the Bible, the theological issues, and our own hearts carefully so that we do not fall into this trap.

With that said, we may get right into it. The first question we must consider is this: What is a “Christian” when we use the word in the New Testament sense? Considered from one angle, this question is one of the most important questions a man can ask himself. Tied in with it are all the related questions about God, man, sin, salvation, and revelation. Additionally connected are all the great questions concerning a man’s destiny after his course in this life is over.

Given the importance of the question, many may be surprised to learn that the Scriptures say very little about the word *Christian*, which occurs in only three places. And in none of these places is the word used in the way we tend to use it. Our application of the word is certainly a legitimate one, which should be defended and continued, but only if we understand what we are doing.

The first usage in the Bible is a simple reference to what the followers of Christ came to be called—by outsiders. The Scripture tells us that the word *Christian* first came to be applied to the church at Antioch, which consisted of the followers of Christ in that city. “And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch” (Acts 11:26). In this passage, the word is used in the same way other nouns are used—to distinguish one thing from another. Just as we indicate the differences between tables and airplanes by giving them different names, so the pagans of Antioch decided to distinguish the Christians from the Jews and from the many other religious groups that swirled around the empire of that time. No statement was being made about the great questions mentioned above as they might have applied to an individual member of that church.

The word was used as a simple noun, as a newspaper writer might have used it.

The second instance is also found in the book of Acts. The apostle Paul was giving an account of himself in front of Festus and Agrippa. As was evident to his judges, his learning was considerable and his presentation of the gospel was serious and affecting. That Festus was stirred can be seen in his outburst, and that Agrippa was unsettled can be seen in his application of the truths of the gospel to himself:

And as he thus spake for himself, Festus said with a loud voice, Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad. But he said, I am not mad, most noble Festus; but speak forth the words of truth and soberness. For the king knoweth of these things, before whom also I speak freely: for I am persuaded that none of these things are hidden from him; for this thing was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest. Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian. And Paul said, I would to God, that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost, and altogether such as I am, except these bonds.
(Acts 26:24–29)

In this instance, the context is the presentation of the gospel to those who had not heard or believed it. The apostle wanted them to consider these things, and since the charge had been given to him (along with the other apostles) to preach the gospel to every creature, this is clearly a plea to those in darkness to enter into true light. Obviously, Paul is inviting them to genuine faith, saving belief, and not simply to membership in a new religious club. But even here there is no distinction made between a false profession of Christ and a true profession of Christ. A true profession is assumed, but the contrast is between pagan unbelief and Christian belief. Spurious Christianity as opposed to the real thing is not under discussion.

The third and last application of the name *Christian* comes from within the body of Christ, and it shows that the name has stuck. The apostle Peter, when writing to a body of believers, tells them that they should not suffer as evildoers. They have left that way of life behind. If any of them stumble into sin and suffer its consequences, then of course they should be ashamed of themselves.

If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men's matters. Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf. For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God? (1 Pet. 4:14–17)

In the first part of this passage, Peter says that they are happy if they are “reproached for the name of Christ.” He then says a moment later that “if any man suffer as a Christian,” he should not be ashamed. It is difficult to miss the parallel. To be a Christian is to bear the name of Christ. If someone receives the world's hatred because he bears the name of a hated Christ, then there is no shame in it. Again, the judgment is being made from a distance—a persecutor hates Christ and attacks anyone associated with him.

These are the three places where the Bible indicates what the word *Christian* means. In two places, pagan unbelievers are applying the name to believers. In the third, an invitation is given to Christians to be in a certain frame of mind when persecutors come after them for being Christian. In all three places, the word is used by pagans. In Antioch, the pagans call the Christians by this name. In Paul's hearing, Agrippa speaks it in his summary of what he thinks Paul was trying to do to him. In the passage from

Peter, an apostle imputes a hatred of the name of Christ, and this use of the word *Christian*, to pagan persecutors.

And this means we have no distinctively Christian handling of the word *Christian*. We have no direct teaching on what to make of statements like, “I grew up in the church but I became a Christian when I prayed a prayer something like this. . . .” Here “becoming a Christian” means passing from one spiritual state to another, from darkness to light. It refers to conversion as an internal reality, but the Bible does not apply the word *Christian* to this or describe the process as that of becoming a Christian.

This of course does not mean that the subject is closed or that there is no such thing as genuine heart conversion. But it does mean that the remainder of the discussion, if it is to go beyond these three passages, is a matter of systematic and biblical theology and not a question of exegesis. Fortunately, we can still learn a great deal. But we have to be very careful as we undertake the task. The phrase “becoming a Christian” is strongly entrenched in our evangelical traditions and is an essential part of evangelical “systematics.” Invariably, it is used to refer to the moment of regeneration.

Now such a moment is important to the teaching of Scripture as a whole, and, for each person, it is crucial to be able to answer the question of individual regeneration. The reason we have to address this is that in our culture many have grown up in the church: they were baptized in infancy or when they were ten in a Baptist church, they sang in the choir and went through catechism class, and they are not Buddhists. They have been Christians their whole lives. But if, like Nicodemus, they are not born again, what must they become? Does it make sense for them to “become a Christian”? There is *something* which they must become—spiritually alive. But how does the Bible describe this kind of change?

To answer the question, we have to look at some analogies from the Old Testament. There we see that someone could be

outside the covenant entirely—a worshiper of Baal. A second category would be someone within the covenant people of Israel, who did not serve the God of Israel in truth. His service of God was externally formal and correct, but his heart was far from God. And lastly, there were true Israelites in whom there was no guile. Paul writes of this distinction at the end of the second chapter of Romans:

For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God. (Rom. 2:28–29)

Circumcision was a sign of the covenant, but Paul points out that the mere possession of the external sign was not sufficient to guarantee a genuine spiritual reality. We can reapply these truths this way: “For he is not a Christian who is one outwardly; neither is that baptism, which is outward and external. But he is a Christian who is one inwardly; and baptism is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.” Paul’s statement is blunt—he is *not* a Christian who has only the externals. But we see in his next breath that Paul’s statement was hyperbolic. Jews who had circumcision only were not Jews at all in one sense, but they were of course Jews in another. Lest anyone be tempted to think that this made external membership in the covenant a big nothing, Paul hastens to add that such membership was actually quite important:

What advantage then hath the Jew? or what profit is there of circumcision? Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God. For what if some did not believe? shall their unbelief make the faith of God without effect? God forbid: yea, let God be true, but every man a liar; as it is written, That thou mightest be justified in thy sayings, and mightest overcome when thou art judged. (Rom. 3:1–4)

2

Calvinistic Bona Fides

When we talk about the covenant, we must always remember that God is the sovereign Lord of the covenant. Covenantal faithfulness on our part means remembering, constantly, the *Godness* of God. Before we go on to have some typical contemporary “Calvinist” assumptions challenged by the authority of this sovereign God, it is important to remember how effectively and completely God challenged our previous “non-Calvinist” assumptions. In other words, we want to grow our roots deeper into sovereign grace, which is a different thing from being blown about by every wind of doctrine.

The Bible teaches the exhaustive sovereignty of God. It does so in countless places, but one place where the summary is gloriously made is in the first chapter of Ephesians: “In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his will” (Eph. 1:11).

As we think about these things we have to make the connection between easy assumptions and hard consequences. Most Christians do not have a problem acknowledging God’s control over the physical creation. Not a sparrow falls to the ground apart from the Father, and He foreordained the number of atoms that make up the planet Jupiter, along with their current locations. What Christians *do* have a problem with are the consequences of saying this, with particular regard for our own prideful choices.

What does this doctrine look like when spread out into the corners? We do not begin understanding the objectivity of the covenant by inching away from black-coffee Calvinism; rather, we begin by asserting it in the strongest possible terms. God is the God of *everything*.

We do have free choices, but they are all under God. Modern Christians like to say that He has the whole world in His hands—which in our folly we make our personal comfort when we want and a grand theological discomfort the rest of the time. But there are countless passages which assert this. Let us consider just a few.

Job spoke the truth about a man's life when he said "seeing his days are determined, the number of his months are with thee, thou hast appointed his bounds that he cannot pass" (Job 14:5). Until that day arrives which God has established, every man is immortal.

As far as God's determination is concerned, we cannot lengthen or shorten our lives. Humanly speaking, can we? Of course. But whatever we do will not alter God's decree. Whatever we do will be *His* instrument for accomplishing *His* decree, a decree that was settled before the worlds were made. We have the same teaching elsewhere (e.g., Ps. 139:16). Before we were born, our biography was already written.

And this was not a sketch of the broad outlines either. "The preparations of the heart in man, and the answer of the tongue, is from the Lord" (Prov. 16:1). What is more indicative of a man's freedom than that which he wills to speak? When you ask him a question, he answers the way he wishes. Is God somewhere else? No, God is Lord of all.

And yes, this even includes our sin. Many people have a problem with God's control of free actions because they do not want to say that men are nothing more than puppets. We think we should have a problem with God's control of sin because we think that this would make God Himself sinful.

But first, the teaching of Scripture: “But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive” (Gen. 50:20; see also Is. 45:7; Amos 3:6). Remember how Jesus foretold Peter’s denial (Mk. 14:30). This does not exclude human responsibility for sin. “And truly the Son of Man goeth, as it was determined: but woe unto that man by whom He is betrayed!” (Lk.22:22). God’s sovereignty over sin involved far more than simply Judas. “For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, for to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done” (Acts 4:27–28).

Nothing happens outside the decretive will of God. But because one charge against those who hold to the objectivity of the covenant is that we are drifting away from the predestinarian foundation of the Reformed faith, a few additional comments on the Westminster Confession are necessary at this point. The Westminster Confession of Faith speaks of God’s sovereignty this way:

God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established. (3:1)

This refers to what is usually called predestination, but should more properly be called foreordination. The word *predestination* is usually applied in Scripture to the surety that the elect will be brought by God to the resurrection of the body. But the truth represented by the common use of this word is sure; before the world was made, from all eternity, God decreed the number of hairs on that yellow dog’s back, the one across the street. This is

something He did in all wisdom. What was so decreed is therefore settled, both freely and unalterably.

This was done in such a way that God cannot be charged with sin. This is of course true by definition, but it is important to reiterate the point. God is the Creator of a world which is now full of sin, and yet He cannot be charged with the guilt of it. The Confession says that God ordains that sinful action x will take place, and yet He is not the author of it. Another position holds that God foreknows x and yet is not the author of it. Still another position says that God does not know the future and created the world anyway. But if men can charge God with being implicated in evil, then they may with justice continue to charge Him as long as the doctrine of creation is affirmed. There is no escape; if God is the Creator, then He is responsible for the presence of x . We might as well face it.

At the same time, this does not make God the master puppeteer. What He foreordained was a world full of free choices. He not only ordained that a man would be in the ice cream store choosing one of thirty-one flavors; He also decreed which flavor he would choose. But that is not all: He ordained that the cookie dough ice cream would be chosen by this man *freely*. God ordains *noncoercively*. This makes no sense to some people, but how many basic doctrines do make sense? We do not understand how God made the solar system from nothing any more than how He determined my actions today without annihilating me. But He did. Remember, the point being made here is not that divine sovereignty is merely consistent with secondary freedom but rather is that which *establishes* it.

Although God knows whatsoever may or can come to pass upon all supposed conditions, yet hath He not decreed any thing because He foresaw it as future, or as that which would come to pass upon such conditions. (3:2)

God does foreknow all things, and He knows all the possibilities and contingencies. And yet we are not to suppose that God foreordains anything based upon His knowledge of what the world would have done without Him anyway. He does not peer down the corridors of time, see what is happening, and then decree that it will happen just as it would have happened anyway.

By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life; and others foreordained to everlasting death. (3:3)

God does what He does, by His decree, and for His glory. This includes the apportionment of everlasting life, both to men and angels. Some are predestined to life, while others are foreordained to everlasting death.

The use of different verbs here is significant. God's predestination to life is assigned to men who are in a state of death. God's decision to leave someone in his death is different in kind from His decision to remove someone from that death. Consider ten men on death row, all of whom deserve to die. The governor, for good and sufficient reasons, decides to pardon three of them. Has he done an injustice to the other seven? His action affects all ten, but his action toward the three is of a different nature than his lack of action toward the seven.

These angels and men, thus predestinated, and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed, and their number so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished. (3:4)

This paragraph in the Confession keeps men from trifling with the words—which, on a subject like this, they always want to do. Because the word *predestination* is in the Bible something must be done with it, and men try to make the elect an elastic category. But we are basically dealing with two lists of names which are