

Chapter 23

Concluding Comments on the Federal Vision

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1 **Introduction**

2 With Joey Pipa in chapter 2 above, I wish first to applaud and join advocates of the Federal Vision
3 (whom, henceforward, I shall call “Federal Visionists”) in their criticism of modern evangelicalism’s
4 over-subjectivism—indeed, not only that but also its individualism and its strong tendencies, in some
5 circles, toward antinomianism and, in others, toward morbid introspection in the quest for assurance.
6 I also applaud their renewed emphasis on the importance of the covenant to both systematic and
7 Biblical theology and to the everyday life of individual believers, of congregations, and of the Church
8 universal. When I look at the superficiality, democratism, latitudinarianism, worldliness, and multitude
9 of other ills afflicting the church in North America—including the Reformed church—I find myself
10 feeling much more comfortable in the company of the Monroe Four and their associates than in that
11 of the broad generality of professing Christians and their pastors. When I read Doug Wilson’s lament
12 over how parents and church officers, by refusing to admit children to baptism (in Baptist churches)
13 or the Lord’s Supper (in Presbyterian churches) despite their professions of love for Jesus, effectively
14 teach their children to doubt rather than to believe,¹ I respond, “Amen! Preach it, Brother!”—and I join
15 heartily in his call for repentance. I thrill at Steve Schlissel’s saying, “We have drumming rights as the
16 people of the atonement, the people who have forgiveness, the people who have reconciliation, the
17 people who have access to God, the people who have the law, the people who have wisdom, the
18 people who have fellowship with God and with one another, the people who have a history like no

¹Douglas Wilson, “Curses of the New Covenant,” 2002 AAPC lecture transcript, p. 113, lines 12-18, and p. 114, lines 11-12.

19 other, the people who have a future like no other.”² The church needs to learn that God’s intention
20 is for it to be not the tail but the head (Deuteronomy 28:13). My broad commitments, concerns, and
21 postures are solidly with these brothers.

22 However, extensive study of their oral and written teachings on the special concerns of the
23 Federal Vision convinces me that they have taught, alongside some wonderful truths, some serious
24 errors about covenant theology and its implications for salvation, personal and corporate spirituality
25 and piety, the use and understanding of the sacraments, and the conduct of theology and Biblical
26 studies in general. Sadly, their mistakes undermine their very laudable goals. Their attempt to assure
27 tender souls who doubt their salvation while they trust in Christ collapses, and the poor souls are left
28 more confused than before, because the objectivity of the covenant is inadequate to the task—while
29 the presumptuous who hear that aspect of their message may be led, inadvertently, to the false
30 assurance of formalism.³ At the same time, their attempt to destroy the complacency of the
31 presumptuous is in profound danger of promoting a legalistic notion of works righteousness. Exten-
32 sive discussion of all my concerns is impossible here and would, even if possible, encroach on the
33 chapters that are the body of this book. I hope it will be more helpful for me, in this context, to set
34 forth some of my most crucial critiques and a few thoughts on underlying problems.

35

36 **Nontraditional Use of Traditional Terms**

37 One thing that became clear through the colloquium papers and discussions is that the Federal
38 Visionists are using some traditional terms in nontraditional ways, and that this has caused some
39 misunderstanding. Although some of the responsibility for the misunderstanding rests with their
40 critics, who often have failed to notice this, some undoubtedly rests with the Federal Visionists for
41 not making their distinct, nontraditional definitions explicit in the contexts in which they use them.
42 Consider just two examples. If in Reformed circles one is going to speak of election and mean by it
43 not God’s choice from eternity past that Robert is going to go to heaven but His choice that Robert
44 is going to be joined to the outward, objective, covenant community—from which he might through
45 apostasy be separated and wind up in hell—one really ought to make that unmistakably clear.
46 Likewise, if one is going to claim that in the very act of baptism one is regenerated and mean by it
47 not that Patricia is going to be translated from spiritual death to spiritual life, given saving faith and
48 repentance, and savingly united to Christ, but (among other possible notions) that Patricia is going
49 to be transferred from outside the objective covenant community to inside it, again, one ought to
50 make that clear.

51 I cannot speak for others, but I must admit that, having read, carefully and often repeatedly,
52 hundreds of pages of the Federal Visionists’ discussion of such things, while I find it crystal clear that

²Steve Schlissel, “Covenant Hearing,” 2002 AAPC lecture transcript, p. 138, lines 21-24.

³Let me clarify: The historical covenant, membership in which is clear through birth to covenant parents or baptism, is inadequate to the task, because membership in it is predicated on the faith and obedience of sinners, however faithful and obedient they may be, and therefore it is revocable. The transcendent covenant, which may be seen as having two aspects, first, the covenant of redemption between the Father and the Son, and second the covenant of grace between God, on the one hand, and Christ and all who are His on the other, is thoroughly adequate. The Federal Vision offers the former, not the latter, as the basis for assurance of salvation. For further on this, see the last four paragraphs of chapter 15 above.

53 *sometimes* this is happening, *often* I simply cannot tell whether they are using the terms in their
 54 traditional senses and thus actually teaching substantively different doctrines from those propounded
 55 in historic Reformed confessional standards and theological writings, or using the terms in
 56 nontraditional senses and thus not teaching different doctrines. *Sometimes*, too, I find it impossible
 57 not to think they are using the terms in their traditional senses while teaching contrary to the
 58 standards—and, much more importantly, to the Scriptures.

59 The Federal Visionists repeat often that they are propounding a new paradigm, a new way of
 60 seeing (as suggested in the title of Schlissel's chapter 3 in this book, adapted from talks he gave at
 61 the 2002 and 2003 AAPCs). New paradigms often introduce new (or recovered) ways of using terms,
 62 and there is nothing wrong with that. But it is essential, if they are to be understood and thus not
 63 needlessly criticized, that those who promote the new paradigms clearly and carefully define their
 64 terms. This the Federal Visionists often fail to do. This said, it remains true that their critics have an
 65 equal responsibility to read them carefully to determine how they are using terms and so not to erect
 66 and attack straw men.⁴ Although those who participated in the colloquium seem, mostly, to have
 67 succeeded pretty well at this, many of their other critics have not.

68

69 **Assurance and the Objectivity of the Covenant**

70 One of the Federal Visionists' driving motivations is clearly to give badly needed comfort and
 71 assurance to Christians plagued by unnecessary fears about their salvation. That is laudable. It is also
 72 laudable to point these troubled souls away from excessive subjectivism that so often expresses itself
 73 in morbid introspection. Like them, I have counseled dear souls who, despite their clearly expressing
 74 trust in Christ alone for their salvation, and despite their lives' showing the fruits of salvation, have
 75 struggled grievously with doubts about their salvation. Like the Federal Visionists, I believe we must
 76 direct such saints to a more objective means of assessing their standing before God.

77 But they err by going to the opposite extreme. Their answer seems to be, "Don't get all tangled
 78 up trying to see whether you have sincere faith in Christ. Look to your baptism!" Thus Wilkins said,
 79 "when we say . . . 'Look to your baptism,' we're talking about looking to Christ in the covenant, and
 80 realizing what you can *know for certain*. You *cannot know if you were ever sincere*. You *cannot*
 81 *know* if you really meant it when you asked Jesus into your heart and threw the pine cone into the fire.
 82 You can't know those. Those questions are *unanswerable*. Were you *really* given a new heart? Well,
 83 you can't answer that question. *God knows*. *You don't know*. What you *can know* is that *you have*
 84 *been baptized and you have the Lord's Supper*."

85 Now, this only helps the troubled Christian if somehow being baptized (or partaking of the Lord's
 86 Supper—but Wilkins focused on baptism, so I shall do likewise) and being saved can be equated. Just
 87 that seems to be Wilkins's point, for he went on to say that this view helps pastorally in that "It makes
 88 our standing before God and that of our children *plain*, and yet it prevents presumption. . . . We
 89 belong to Christ. Baptism is the **infallible** sign and seal of this And in regard to our assurance,
 90 we are pointed away from ourselves and what we think we perceive to be true of us inwardly, *which*

⁴I am not convinced, for example, despite many critics' saying so, that any of the Federal Visionists actually believes that the rite of baptism effects (whether *ex opere operato* or otherwise) regeneration in the traditional sense of one's passing from dead in trespasses and sins to alive in Christ. Some of them definitely assert baptismal regeneration in a very different sense, but critics must not confuse the one with the other.

91 *no one can know*, and pointed to Christ, the only ground of our assurance.”⁵ More conclusively,
 92 Wilkins wrote in his paper for the colloquium, “If [someone] has been baptized, he is in covenant with
 93 God” (chapter 19 above, line 535); “covenant *is* union with Christ. Thus, being in covenant gives all
 94 the blessings of being united to Christ. . . . Because being in covenant with God means being in
 95 Christ, those who are in covenant have all spiritual blessings in the heavenly places” (lines 305-306,
 96 309-310). It follows necessarily from these two statements that if someone has been baptized, he has
 97 all spiritual blessings in the heavenly places.⁶ But what is it to have “all spiritual blessings in the
 98 heavenly places”? The phrase originated in Ephesians 1:3, and in that context Paul includes among
 99 such “spiritual blessings” election to holiness and blamelessness before God, predestination for
 100 adoption and to be to the praise of God’s glory, redemption through Christ’s blood, forgiveness of
 101 trespasses, an inheritance in Christ, and reception of the Holy Spirit as seal and guarantee of
 102 inheritance “until we acquire the possession of it” (Ephesians 1:3-14). These blessings are certainly
 103 salvific, and they reach all the way from election before creation to final salvation at the end of
 104 history. That Wilkins had such in mind in his own use of the phrase “all spiritual blessings in the
 105 heavenly places” is clear from his list drawn from 1 Corinthians—a list that includes sanctification,
 106 calling, the grace of God, being confirmed blameless to the end, redemption, possession of the Holy
 107 Spirit, new birth, Christ’s sacrifice on one’s behalf, justification, being purchased by Christ, and
 108 communion with the body and blood of Christ and thus being one body with Him (lines 313-347).

109 According to Wilkins, the apostles viewed “the covenant . . . as salvation, because it means
 110 fellowship and communion with the triune God. It *is* [emphasis added] union with Christ in His
 111 obedient life, sacrificial, substitutionary death, triumphant resurrection, and glorious ascension and
 112 session at the right hand of the Father.” In short, “All in covenant are given all that is true of Christ”
 113 (lines 361-365). It is difficult—nay, impossible—to see how “all spiritual blessings in the heavenly
 114 places” can be understood to mean anything less than the whole of what Reformed theology tends
 115 to call the *ordo salutis*: foreknowledge, election, effectual calling (regeneration and conversion
 116 [conversion = faith and repentance]),⁷ justification, sanctification, perseverance, and final glorification.
 117 Certainly none of these is a blessing to be found *apart from* Christ. But if this is so, then it is
 118 impossible to avoid the inference, from Wilkins’s statements, that no baptized person will wind up
 119 in hell.

120 Barach, in his 2002 AAPC lecture “Covenant and History,” spoke even more strongly in the same
 121 direction. “There is nothing better, nothing more glorious than living in covenant with God, being
 122 brought right into the family life of the Triune God” He then equates being in covenant with
 123 being “in Christ.” Shortly he added, “Because we are united with Christ, because He is our
 124 covenantal representative, when He was raised from the dead and vindicated by God, we were
 125 vindicated by God, justified. In Christ we have sanctification. . . ., we have new life . . . [and] the

⁵Steve Wilkins, “Covenant and Baptism,” taped lecture at the 2003 Auburn Avenue Pastors’ Conference, transcript, 11-12, italicized emphases original to the transcript and reflecting the speaker’s voice in delivery; boldfaced emphasis added.

⁶The inference is valid: (1) All baptized are in covenant. (2) All in covenant have all spiritual blessings in heavenly places. (3) Therefore all baptized have all spiritual blessings in heavenly places. More abstractly, if all A are B and all B are C, then all A are C.

⁷WLC 67; WSC 31.

126 Spirit . . . [and] have been glorified.” Who are the “we” in these statements? Barach answered
 127 explicitly: “But who shares in those blessings? . . . who is in Christ? The answer that the Bible gives
 128 is that those people are in Christ who have been baptized into Christ. . . . there is an objective
 129 covenant made with believers and their children. Every baptized person is in covenant with God and
 130 is in union then with Christ and with the Triune God. The Bible doesn’t know about a distinction
 131 between being internally in the covenant, really in the covenant, and being only externally in the
 132 covenant Every baptized person is truly a member of God’s covenant. . . . every baptized person
 133 is in Christ and therefore shares in his new life, . . . and still receives, not only the covenant promises,
 134 but also the covenant’s demands and the covenant warnings.” Immediately he added, “Doug [Wilson]
 135 is going to be speaking more of the covenant warnings and apostasy from the covenant later on.”⁸

136 Barach’s words should give us pause. “There is *nothing better* . . . than living in covenant with
 137 God.” Nothing? But apparently it is possible to be in covenant with God and still run the risk of
 138 apostasy and going to hell. Would it not be better to be one whom God foreknew, predestined to be
 139 conformed to the image of His Son, [effectually] called, justified, and glorified (Romans 8:29-30)—i.e.,
 140 one who cannot go to hell? (Or have all the Reformed commentators through the centuries
 141 misunderstood those verses?) Further, being in covenant means being “in Christ,” i.e., “united with
 142 Christ,” and that means being raised from the dead with Him, justified, sanctified, and glorified. So
 143 apparently every person in covenant is united with Christ, raised from the dead, justified, sanctified,
 144 and glorified. Finally, “*Every baptized person* is in covenant with God and is in union then with
 145 Christ” and therefore raised from the dead with Him, justified, sanctified, and glorified. *Every*
 146 *baptized person*. If that is so, then either the Reformed world has been quite mistaken in thinking that
 147 those raised from the dead, justified, sanctified, and glorified all wind up in heaven, or else every
 148 baptized person winds up in heaven.

149 As I read his words, I hoped Barach was writing in terms of charitable judgment: We express
 150 these things without differentiation, charitably counting all baptized as actually united with Christ and
 151 partaking of all those benefits, not because each and every one really is, but because with our finite
 152 knowledge we cannot safely differentiate. But Barach immediately took that charitable reading away,
 153 writing:

154
 155 . . . we need to be able to tell our congregations . . . and tell individual members . . . , “Jesus
 156 died for you personally,” and we mean it, to them, head for head, every one of them. How do
 157 we know that? Because they are in covenant with God and we view them as brothers and
 158 sisters because that’s who they really are. But we look around the congregation and . . . we
 159 do not give them a judgment of charity that says, “Well, I don’t know. Maybe he is a
 160 Christian, maybe he isn’t, so I will be charitable. I will regard him as a Christian.” . . . Instead
 161 we go by God’s promise. He has said that this person is in Christ and, therefore, believing
 162 God’s promise, we treat that person as who he really is, someone who is in Christ.⁹

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⁸John Barach, “Covenant and History,” 2002 AAPC lecture transcript, pp. 45-48; compare Barach, “Covenant and Election,” 2002 AAPC lecture transcript, p. 86, lines 15-27, for the same point.

⁹Barach, “Covenant and History,” p. 47.

164 One hastens to ask, "Where in Scripture did God say that, e.g., Sally or George was in Christ?"
 165 Neither Sally nor George appears in any exhaustive concordance of the Bible. Barach must realize
 166 that. How could he say, then, that God "has said that *this person* is in Christ"? Apparently he inferred
 167 it from something. Perhaps he inferred it from Romans 6:1-3,¹⁰ which teaches that whoever has been
 168 baptized into Christ has been baptized into His death, buried with Him, and raised with Him. But to
 169 use the passage thus is to assume something the Federal Visionists need to prove: that *baptized* there
 170 (and in a host of other places) denotes a liturgical application of water and not inward baptism, of the
 171 heart, by the Spirit and not by the letter, made without hands (Romans 2:28-29; Colossians 2:11-
 172 12)—a point to which we shall return. To read Paul in Romans 6:1-11 as affirming anything less than
 173 the certainty of eternal salvation for all about whom he writes is to misread him badly.

174 To their credit, both Wilkins and Barach reject the conclusion that no baptized person will wind
 175 up in hell.¹¹ Like Barach (as we saw above in his warning that covenant members can apostatize),
 176 Wilkins warned against it. "Thus, when one breaks covenant, it can be truly said that he has turned
 177 away from grace and forfeited life, forgiveness, and salvation. . . . The apostate fails to persevere in
 178 the grace of God and, thus, has his name removed from the book of life [T]hose who ultimately
 179 prove to be reprobate may be in covenant with God. They may enjoy for a season the blessings of the
 180 covenant, including the forgiveness of sins, adoption, possession of the kingdom, sanctification, etc.,
 181 and yet apostatize and fall short of the grace of God" (lines 371-372, 393-394, 402-405). But this
 182 *unavoidably* implies that perseverance is not one of the "spiritual blessings in heavenly places in
 183 Christ." Yet Wilkins's list of such blessings, already mentioned, included being assured that one
 184 would be "confirmed to the end blameless" (lines 318-319, citing 1 Corinthians 1:7-8), and it is
 185 difficult to imagine what this means other than perseverance. Further, does Wilkins really want to say
 186 that perseverance is *not* one of the blessings in Christ? Where else is it to be found? Wilkins simply
 187 cannot, without embracing contradictions, have it both ways: either all who are baptized are in
 188 covenant and all who are in covenant have all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ and
 189 *therefore* all who are baptized have all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ—and so will
 190 persevere to the end and go to heaven—or some who are baptized will apostatize and wind up in hell
 191 and *therefore* do not have all spiritual blessings in Christ, and, consequently, either being baptized
 192 does not necessarily place one in covenant with God or being in covenant with God does not entail
 193 having all spiritual blessings in Christ—or both. One simply cannot deny the conclusion of a valid
 194 argument without denying at least one of the premises—unless one wishes to reject logic, a topic to
 195 which we shall return.

¹⁰Barach made just this inference in his lecture "Covenant and Evangelism," 2002 AAPC lecture transcript, p. 69, lines 7-18, and during Question and Answer Session 1 at the same conference, transcript, p. 122, lines 3-11.

¹¹Barach in "Covenant and Election," 2002 AAPC lecture transcript, p. 83, line 25, writes, "not every baptized person perseveres to the end." Douglas Wilson explicitly denied that baptism guaranteed salvation in "Visible and Invisible Church Revisited," 2002 AAPC, transcript p. 27, line 1: "Just because you are baptized doesn't mean you are going to go to heaven when you die." Peter Leithart wrote similarly, "In baptism, God marks me as His own, with His name. . . . It may turn out, of course, that God's final name for a baptized person is 'prodigal son'" (Peter J. Leithart, *Against Christianity* [Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003], 91-2). If that is so, then the assurance one can receive from his baptism, apart from faith, is nil, and one is driven back to asking the "unanswerable" question, "Have I sincerely believed?"

196 Barach is similarly inconsistent. In speaking extensively about election in Ephesians 1, he insisted
 197 that the things Paul affirmed there about the "elect" applied "to the entire church, head for head, men,
 198 women, and little children at Ephesus," and he pointed out that Paul used similar language in
 199 addressing other churches. Still, he acknowledged that Paul "warns these people . . . about the
 200 genuine possibility that they could be excluded from God's kingdom" and that, according to Acts
 201 20:30, "Paul even knows that not everybody in Ephesus [presumably he means the church there] is
 202 going to persevere." He then explained that it is Christ who is preeminently the elect one and that
 203 anyone else's election is in Him. Then he added,

204
 205 But then who is in Christ? Those who have been incorporated into Christ, brought into
 206 Christ, those who have been baptized into Christ. . . . Covenantal election and individual
 207 election aren't actually all that far apart. We can distinguish them perhaps, but we cannot and
 208 may not divide them completely.¹² What is the connection? The connection has to do with
 209 God's promise, God's speech to us. God has promised every covenant member that he or she
 210 is elect in Christ. . . . When God speaks to his people and calls them elect, he is not simply
 211 predicting that this will happen, he is making a pledge to them. . . . His promise is that he
 212 administers his salvation to us by speaking to us And God in the gospel and through
 213 baptism promises us that he unites us to Christ What's missing in Jesus? In him you have
 214 redemption, righteousness, justification, sanctification, the Holy Spirit, glorification, and
 215 election. The whole package of salvation . . . is found in Christ.

216
 217 As if to remove all doubt about what he was asserting, he added, "you don't need a special, dramatic,
 218 revivalistic conversion¹³ to let you know that you are elect. You had the special experience that God
 219 gives you. It was called baptism."¹⁴

220 The trouble with Barach's statements is like that in Wilkins's. They are inconsistent. If God
 221 promises everyone in the covenant that He "administers salvation" to him and unites him to Christ,
 222 and if in (union with) Christ are "redemption, righteousness, justification, sanctification, the Holy
 223 Spirit, glorification, and election," indeed, "[t]he whole package of salvation," then it follows that
 224 everyone "in Christ" *in the very sense in which Barach is using it here—which is covenantal*—will
 225 finally be saved. Barach denies the conclusion, but it is difficult to see how it can be avoided as the
 226 logical consequence of what he affirms. The only way to do so seems to be to make the truth of
 227 God's "pledge" or "promise" depend on whether its recipient believes it. Had Barach said all along
 228 that what God pledged (salvation) was conditioned (not meritoriously but instrumentally) on the

¹²Thus far I would agree with Barach: all who are individually elected to final salvation are covenantally elect. However, as we shall see momentarily, Barach seems to contradict his earlier acknowledgment that some covenantally elect will be excluded from the kingdom. I.e., he will affirm that all covenantally elect are individually elect. That is the heart of the trouble.

¹³Pejorative language ("special, dramatic, revivalistic") aside, one wonders if Barach thinks you need to be converted, i.e., translated "into a state of grace" (*WCF* 9.4), at all.

¹⁴Barach, "Covenant and Election," 2002 AAPC lecture transcript, pp. 87-90. Later he added, "How do I know [I am elect]? I have been baptized into the church, I belong to Christ's people. . . . How do you know you are in him? God gave you the sign and seal of baptism" (p. 94, lines 4-5, 7).

229 hearer's believing the promise, he would have spoken consistently with historic Reformed theology.
230 But he did not.¹⁵

231 The Federal Visionists' view on this is irreconcilable with Romans 8:28-30: "And we know that
232 for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his
233 purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son,
234 in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also
235 called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified." As
236 Calvinists have insisted for centuries, this "golden chain" is unbroken: All foreknown are predestined;
237 all predestined are called; all called are justified; all justified are glorified; therefore all foreknown are
238 glorified. And who are the foreknown? Those "who love God." We have seen already that each of
239 these blessings—being foreknown, predestined, called, justified, glorified—is among "all spiritual
240 blessings in heavenly places in Christ." If, as Wilkins emphatically insists, being baptized puts one in
241 covenant, and being in covenant means having all spiritual blessings in heavenly places, then being
242 baptized means having each of *these* blessings. But Paul insists that *everyone* who has *any one* of
243 them has the last one—glorification—and adds, in verses 31-39, that indeed *nothing* can separate such
244 a one from the love of God in Christ.

245

246 **The Vine and the Branches—John 15:1-8 and Apostasy**

247 Federal Visionists¹⁶ believe Wilkins's view—that one who has been made a partaker of all spiritual
248 blessings in heavenly places in Christ can yet apostatize and wind up in hell—finds expression in
249 Christ's parable of the vine and the branches in John 15:1-8.¹⁷ Thus Wilkins writes, in his colloquium
250 paper, "Jesus here declares that He is the vine and His hearers are branches united to Him. He then
251 exhorts them to continue abiding in Him so that they might bear fruit. If they refuse to abide in Him,
252 they will be fruitless and incur the wrath of the Divine husbandman and, finally, will be cast into the
253 fire. Here then we have those who are joined to Christ in a *vital union* [emphasis added] (i.e. a union
254 that could and should be fruitful) and yet who end up cursed and condemned" (lines 413-418). Barach
255 emphasizes the reality and vitality of this union by insisting that Jesus "doesn't say, 'Every bit of
256 tumbleweed stuck in my branches.' He says, 'Every branch *in me*.' These branches were not stuck

¹⁵Barach did say later in the same lecture, "For those who have been baptized into Christ *and who trust in him* [emphasis added], who believe God's promise, your covenantal election just is God's election of you as an individual into eternal life" (Barach, "Covenant and Election," 2002 AAPC lecture transcript, p. 92, lines 27-29). But the qualification, "who trust in him," plunges him right back into the very questions the Federal Visionists want to avoid: Do I really believe? Have I been truly converted? Did I sincerely repent of my sins? If one must still answer such questions before knowing that he is individually (not just covenantally) elect, how can Barach say that the special experience that tells one he is individually elect is his baptism? If he can be baptized but not individually elect because he does not believe, then baptism—apart from conversion (or faith)—simply cannot tell him that he is individually elect.

¹⁶See Barach, "Covenant and Election," chapter 11 above, lines 43-50; Wilson, response to White, chapter 16 above, lines 192-201.

¹⁷The Federal Visionists' treatment of John 15:1-8 seems indebted to Norman Shepherd's more extensive discussion, reaching the same conclusions, in "The Covenant Context for Evangelism," in *The New Testament Student and Theology*, ed. J. H. Skilton (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1976). Wilkins quotes it approvingly in his "Covenant and Baptism." I have written a rough critique of Shepherd's exegesis there in "Thoughts on John 15:1-8 in response to Norman Shepherd," unpublished but available on request.

257 to the tree with Scotch tape. They were genuinely in Christ”¹⁸ Wilson does likewise by saying
 258 that the branches had “sap” in them (line 216), and, more fully, “The fruitless branches had sap
 259 flowing through them—the same gracious sap that the fruitful branches received.”¹⁹ Their use of this
 260 passage, however, is fundamentally flawed.

261 First, there is no better justification for an appeal to “sap” as a sign that the fruitless branches had
 262 a “vital” union with Christ than there would be for an appeal to “bark” as a sign that all the branches
 263 enjoyed the immunity to disease and pests provided by bark and therefore none could apostatize. The
 264 parable mentions neither sap—much less “gracious sap”—nor bark. It is dangerous enough to draw
 265 doctrines from parables; it is more dangerous to draw doctrines from details within parables; it is
 266 exegetically fatal to draw doctrines from details that are not even there!

267 Second, they neglect crucial distinctions Jesus draws between the fruit-bearing and nonfruit-
 268 bearing branches—distinctions beyond their bearing or not bearing fruit. Although this mistake is
 269 exegetically less fundamental than one of reading into the text words that are not there, in this
 270 instance it has more serious consequences. The Federal Visionists’ use of this passage implies that
 271 fruit-bearing branches could become nonfruit-bearing and thus be cut off and burned. However,
 272 according to the parable, *every branch* that bears fruit the Father “prunes, that it may bear more
 273 fruit,” while *every branch* that bears no fruit the Father “takes away” (v. 2). *No branch* that bears no
 274 fruit abides in the vine (v. 4) (which entails that *every branch* that bears fruit abides in the vine), but
 275 *every branch* that abides in the vine “bears much fruit” (v. 5). Thus, every branch that bears fruit
 276 abides in the vine, and every branch that abides in the vine bears fruit, while every branch that does
 277 not bear fruit does not abide in the vine, and every branch that does not abide in the vine does not
 278 bear fruit. Jesus’ words make it impossible for a fruit-bearing branch to become a nonfruit-bearing
 279 branch and thus to be cut off and burned. Far from a warning that fruit bearers might apostatize and
 280 go to hell, this parable is a marvelous assurance that fruit bearers will be kept by the power of God
 281 to salvation (1 Peter 1:5).

282 Third, what does it mean for branches to *abide* in the vine (Christ)? Clearly it does not mean the
 283 same thing as to *be* a branch in the vine, for Christ explicitly distinguishes between branches *in the*
 284 *vine* that abide and branches *in the vine* that do not abide. Norman Shepherd interpreted not abiding
 285 as denying Christ and becoming disobedient.²⁰ However, that this is not so should be clear from the
 286 ensuing experience of Peter, who, later in the same night on which he heard Christ say to him (and
 287 the other apostles—significantly excluding Judas), “Already you are clean” (v. 3), would deny Christ
 288 three times and disobey Him by cutting off the ear of the high priest’s servant (18:17, 25-27, 10). Yet
 289 Peter, far from being cut off and cast out to be burned (the fate of *every branch* that does not abide),
 290 was confirmed in the faith and made one of the chief apostles. What, then, does it mean to abide in
 291 the vine—to abide in Christ? The best interpretive pointer we have in the immediate context is what
 292 Christ says in 15:7: “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it
 293 will be done for you.” The association between the apostles’ abiding in Christ and His words’ abiding
 294 in them implies that abiding in Christ means *believing* in Him—that is, believing the *words* of the

¹⁸Barach, “Covenant and Election,” chapter 11 above, lines 46-47.

¹⁹Douglas Wilson, “The Objectivity of the Covenant,” *Credenda/Agenda*, 15:1, 4-5, at 5. See also Wilson, “Visible and Invisible Church Revisited,” transcript p. 29, line 14, and p. 33, line 5.

²⁰Shepherd, “Covenant Context,” 64.

295 gospel. Another crucial interpretive pointer comes from a different context, but still in the words of
 296 Jesus:

297
 298 Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you
 299 have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will
 300 raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. *Whoever*
 301 *feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.* [John 6:53-56]
 302

303 Many of His disciples were offended at this shocking, gruesome statement. In response, Jesus
 304 explained, "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is of no avail. The words that I have spoken to you
 305 are spirit and life. *But there are some of you who do not believe*" (verses 63-64). When some disciples
 306 forsook Him and He asked the twelve, "Do you want to go away as well?", "Simon Peter answered
 307 him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? *You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have*
 308 *come to know, that you are the Holy One of God*" (verses 67-69). That is, the one who feeds on
 309 Christ's flesh and drinks His blood (and therefore has eternal life) is precisely the one who *believes*
 310 (cf. John 3:16-18; 6:47: "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life."). It is not
 311 physical eating of the Lord's Supper (or physical baptism) but faith that unites one to (causes one to
 312 abide in) Christ.²¹ Abiding in Christ is precisely having faith in Him. And—and this is important in the
 313 debate over the Federal Vision—this faith is not bare assent²² but fruit-bearing assent: "Whoever abides
 314 in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit . . ." (v. 7).

²¹John Calvin made this point in *Institutes*, 4.17.33-34, where in opposition to the "false interpretation of the sacramental eating . . . that even the impious and the wicked eat Christ's body, however estranged from him they may be," he argued that

all whose who are devoid of Christ's Spirit can no more eat Christ's flesh than drink wine that has no taste. Surely, Christ is too unworthily torn apart if his body, lifeless and powerless, is prostituted to unbelievers. And this is contradicted by his plain words: "Whosoever will eat my flesh and drink my blood will abide in me and I in him" [John 6:56]. . . . I hold that men bear away from this Sacrament no more than they gather with the vessel of faith. . . . the wicked go away empty after outward participation in it. . . . in the case of *unbelievers* their own hardness is the hindrance which prevents Christ from coming into them. . . . Anyone who desires our salvation to be helped by this Sacrament will find nothing more fitting than that *believers*, led to the well [cf. John 4:6-15], may draw life from the Son of God. [Emphases added.]

Calvin went on to express his agreement with Augustine that the sacrament of the Lord's Supper—eating Christ's flesh and drinking His blood—actually imparted life only to him who, as Augustine put it, "received the power of the Sacrament, not only the visible Sacrament; and indeed inwardly, not outwardly; and who eats with the heart, not who presses with the teeth." From this, Calvin reasoned, "it follows that unbelievers communicate only in a visible symbol," since "the Sacrament is one thing, the power of the Sacrament, another," or, as Augustine put it, "he who does not abide in Christ and in whom Christ does not abide, doubtless does not spiritually eat his flesh or drink his blood, although he may carnally and visibly press the sign of the body and blood with his teeth." "Let my readers weigh this antithesis between eating sacramentally and reality," Calvin went on, "and no doubt will remain," and then he quoted Augustine again, that "It is not what is seen, then, but what is believed, that feeds." Calvin concluded, "sacramental eating, where unbelief closes the door to the reality, has no more value than visible or outward eating. . . . It is clear . . . that those who only sacramentally eat Christ's body, which cannot be separated from its power, are deprived of its true and real eating; and that there is here no reason to lose faith in the promises of God, who does not stop the rain from falling from heaven, although rocks and stones do not receive the moisture of the rain."

²²If there is such a thing; see Proverbs 23:7, *AV*, and James 2:14-26.

315 Fourth, the Federal Visionists mistakenly object to such an interpretation on the grounds that it
 316 makes the warnings of the passage useless. Wilkins wrote:

317
 318 Often this passage is interpreted along these lines: There are two kinds of branches. Some
 319 branches are not really in Christ "in a saving way," but only in an *external* sense—whatever
 320 fruit they bear is not genuine and they will eventually be destroyed. Other branches are truly
 321 joined to Christ *inwardly* and savingly, and they bear more and more fruit as they are pruned
 322 and cultivated by the Father." As Norman Shepherd has noted, "If this distinction is in the
 323 text, it is difficult to see what the point of the warning is. The outward ("external") branches
 324 cannot profit from it, because they cannot in any case bear genuine fruit. They are not related
 325 to Christ inwardly and draw no life from him. The inward branches do not need the warning,
 326 because they are vitalized by Christ and therefore cannot help but bear good fruit. Cultivation
 327 by the Father, with its attendant blessing, is guaranteed."²³

328
 329 But this argument is unconvincing regarding both sorts of branches. It ignores the possibility of
 330 conversion for the "outward" branches—those "in" but not "abiding in" the vine. Christ said that
 331 branches that did not bear fruit would be removed, cast away, and burned; He did not mention that
 332 some fruitless branches might be converted and become fruit bearing before that. Yet unless each and
 333 every one of the elect is converted at the moment of conception, so that there is never a time in his
 334 life when he does not abide in Christ and bear fruit, if anyone winds up in heaven it must be because
 335 once-fruitless branches are converted into fruitful ones—because branches (whether in or out of the
 336 vine) that once did not abide in Christ are converted and begin to abide (that is, believe) in Him. Just
 337 such a possibility is implicit in Christ's words, "*Already* you are clean" (v. 3)—implying that some who
 338 are not already will be later. The powerful, converting Word has already worked regeneration in them
 339 (2 Peter 1:23); by that new birth they have been made to abide in Christ; by that abiding they have
 340 been made to bear fruit. So long as conversion is possible, it is the task of the evangelist to preach
 341 the warnings of Scripture as instruments by which the Spirit of God might renew the lost by granting
 342 them faith. The warning, then, is not lost on the lost. If they do not begin to *abide* in the vine, they
 343 will be cut off and cast away for burning. Neither is the warning lost on the saved, for it may be an
 344 instrument by which God causes them to persevere.

345 Ironically, the Federal Visionists bemoan, as Shepherd put it, "the fact that the covenant is
 346 prevailingly viewed from the perspective of election, rather than election from the perspective of the
 347 covenant."²⁴ But while, hypothetically and abstractly, the warning might seem wasted on the
 348 elect—that is, *if* Richard abides in Christ he *will* bear fruit, be pruned, and go to heaven, so it matters
 349 not whether he ever hears the warning—concretely the warning is *not* wasted, because neither the
 350 preacher nor the hearer knows, *a priori* or infallibly, what Shepherd's argument requires him to know

²³Wilkins, "Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation," chapter 19 above, lines 419-428, citing Shepherd, "Covenant Context," 64-5.

²⁴Shepherd, "Covenant Context," 65. Wilson, in the same article in which he wrote of the "gracious sap" in all the branches, likewise wrote, "we are to view election through the lens of the covenant rather than the other way around" ("Objectivity of the Covenant," 4).

351 to make the warning useless: whether Richard is elect.²⁵ It is not that Richard *cannot* know this, but
 352 that he may come to know it only as an inference from his believing and bearing fruit. As *WCF* 18.2
 353 puts it, assurance of salvation

354
 355 is . . . an infallible assurance of faith founded upon the divine truth of the promises of
 356 salvation [Hebrews 6:17-18], the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises
 357 are made [2 Peter 1:4-5, 10-11; 1 John 2:3; 3:14; 2 Corinthians 1:12], the testimony of the
 358 Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God [Romans 8:15-
 359 16], which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of
 360 redemption [Ephesians 1:13-14; 4:30; 2 Corinthians 1:21-22].

361
 362 The Federal Visionists' passion for viewing election through the lens of the covenant rather than
 363 vice versa robs believers of the very assurance they intend to provide for them. The great benefit of
 364 embracing Wilkins's view of covenant and baptism²⁶ is purported to be delivering people from morbid
 365 introspection and giving them an objective, outward sign that assures them of their salvation.²⁷ But
 366 what the Federal Visionists give with one hand they take away with the other. Wilkins wrote, "We
 367 cannot judge men based upon the secret decrees of God or the hidden operations of the Spirit"²⁸—as
 368 if traditional Reformed theology said otherwise. But no Reformed theologian has said that we are to
 369 "judge men based upon the secret decrees of God." Reformed theologians, with Jesus, have insisted
 370 that we know men by their fruits (Matthew 7:15-20; John 15:1-11). With James they have said, "I
 371 will show you my faith by my works" (James 2:18). Fruits—works—are the *revealed effects* of the
 372 *secret causes* that are God's elective decree and effectual call (regeneration, enlightenment, the gifts
 373 of faith and repentance). Wilkins's insistence that a baptized covenant member can apostatize and go
 374 to hell—about which he is absolutely right—demolishes the assurance any baptized covenant member
 375 can have of his salvation *from his baptism and covenant membership* in isolation from answering the
 376 very kinds of questions he says cannot be answered: "Questions like, 'Have you truly believed?';
 377 'Have you sincerely repented?'; 'Do you have a new heart?'; 'Have you been truly converted?';
 378 etc."²⁹ If being a branch in the vine—i.e., being objectively in the covenant—does not guarantee final
 379 salvation (and it certainly does not), it is no proper basis of assurance. The "objectivity of the
 380 covenant" on which the Federal Visionists so adamantly insist does not serve their intended purpose.
 381 Wilson acknowledges that one cannot infer "individual election" from "covenantal election" and says

²⁵Shepherd's and Wilkins's objection rests on a confusion familiar to logicians:

Some people . . . disparage the syllogism on the ground that it teaches nothing new. The conclusion is already contained in the premises.

Of course the conclusion is contained in the premises; but the way these people make their complaint depends on the equivocal use of the word *contained*. The conclusion is always logically contained [if the syllogism is valid], but it is not always contained psychologically. That is to say, a person by putting together two pieces of information he knows may derive a third proposition he has not previously been aware of.

Gordon H. Clark, *Logic*, 2d ed. (Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1988), 57.

²⁶Or "The Objectivity of the Covenant," as Wilson put it.

²⁷Wilkins, "Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation," chapter 19 above, lines 526-544.

²⁸Wilkins, "Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation," chapter 19 above, lines 526-527.

²⁹Wilkins, "Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation," chapter 19 above, footnote 29.

382 that the "elect" (in context, the individually elect) cannot lose their salvation. But he offers no way
 383 for one to tell whether he is individually elect (and so assured of salvation) or only covenantally elect
 384 (and so in danger of apostasy and winding up in hell). Rather, he says, "You can be on the tree,
 385 someone can be on the tree right next to you, and he is as much on the tree as you are, he's as much
 386 a partaker of Christ as you are, he is as much a member of Christ as you are, and he is cut away and
 387 you are not . . ."³⁰ Ironically, the assurance the Federal Visionists lose while seeking to gain it by
 388 turning from election to covenant the Westminster Divines preserved precisely by their focus on
 389 election *and its fruits*. In the concluding paragraph of their chapter "Of God's Eternal Decree" they
 390 wrote:

391
 392 The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence
 393 and care [Romans 9:20; 11:33; Deuteronomy 29:29], that men, attending the will of God
 394 *revealed in His Word, and yielding obedience thereunto, may, from the certainty of their*
 395 *effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election* [2 Peter 1:10]. So shall this doctrine
 396 afford matter of praise, reverence, and admiration of God [Ephesians 1:6; Romans 11:33];
 397 and of humility, diligence, and abundant consolation to all that sincerely obey the Gospel
 398 [Romans 11:5-6, 20; 2 Peter 1:10; Romans 8:33; Luke 10:20]. [*WCF* 3.8, emphases added]
 399

400 By "the will of God revealed in His Word" the Divines meant not His decretive will (in this context,
 401 election) but His moral will (the law), the believer's obedience to which (i.e., his fruit) is a sign of his
 402 effectual calling and hence of his election. Their reasoning was identical to that of the Synod of Dort,
 403 which wrote:

404
 405 The elect, in due time, though in various degrees and in different measures, attain the
 406 assurance of this their eternal and unchangeable election, *not by inquisitively prying into the*
 407 *secret and deep things of God, but by observing in themselves, with a spiritual joy and holy*
 408 *pleasure, the infallible fruits of election* pointed out in the Word of God; such as a true faith
 409 in Christ, filial fear, a godly sorrow for sin, a hungering and thirsting after righteousness, etc.³¹
 410

411 **Structural Failures in Argument**

412 In many instances, I am convinced, the Federal Visionists fall into faulty conclusions because they
 413 structure their arguments poorly. This criticism is implicit in the two preceding subsections, but
 414 consider one more example, namely, the structure of Barach's argument in "Covenant and Election."³²

³⁰Wilson, "Visible and Invisible Church Revisited," p. 33, lines 7-8, and p. 34, lines 17-21.

³¹*Canons of the Synod of Dort*, 1.12; in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3 vols., 4th ed. (1877; reprint edition, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 3:581-97, at 583-4; emphasis added. Because the Conclusion of the *Canons* went to considerable lengths to warn against the Remonstrants' misuse of the doctrine of election to impugn the justice of God, it has become commonplace to think that their exhortation to believers "to conduct themselves piously and religiously in handling this doctrine" (Schaff, 597) and the Westminster Divines' exhortation to handle the doctrine "with special prudence and care" (*WCF* 3.8) imply that the doctrine holds more danger of abuse than promise of comfort. That was certainly not the belief of the authors of either document.

³²Barach delivered this message in slightly different forms but with the same essential structure in his 2002 and

415 After navigating through that lecture repeatedly, as he delivered it at the 2003 AAPC, I am compelled
 416 to see his argument as follows:

- 417
- 418 a. God predestines some to eternal glory (lines 87-88).
- 419 b. If Scripture did not tell us who those elect to eternal glory are, that truth would be useless to
 420 us (lines 91-98).³³
- 421 c. But Scripture tells us who they are (lines 100, 127, 131-132).
- 422 d. The elect to eternal glory are not (as Arminians think) merely a general category or class of
 423 people (lines 141-149).³⁴
- 424 e. The elect to eternal glory are not (as some Calvinists think)³⁵ the only people in the covenant
 425 (lines 151-153, 174-176, 197-210, 215, 225-233).³⁶
- 426 f. Not all in covenant are elect to eternal glory (lines 233, 241-242, 262).³⁷
- 427 g. God's faithful people, a remnant, are the elect to eternal glory (lines 268-269, 272).

428 But:

- 429 h. The whole of the covenant people is elect [to eternal glory?] (lines 271, 389-391, 452-454).
- 430 i. Election [to eternal glory?] of the whole implies election [to eternal glory?] of each member
 431 (lines 319-321, 359-367).
- 432 j. Election [to eternal glory?] is of those "in Christ" (or is it that those "in Christ" are elect [to
 433 eternal glory?]) (lines 381-383).
- 434 k. Christ is *the* elect [to eternal glory] One (line 384).
- 435 l. Some elect [to eternal glory?] may apostatize and go to hell (lines 406-407, 603-606),
 436 namely, those whom God predestines to do so (line 622).
- 437 m. All baptized persons are in the covenant and therefore in Christ (lines 590-597) (and therefore
 438 elect to eternal glory?).
- 439

440 This brief, condensed recitation of Barach's flow of thought makes it immediately clear that there are
 441 significant problems with it. The bracketed instances of the words *to eternal glory*, each followed by
 442 a question mark, indicate points at which it is simply impossible to tell, from the context of Barach's
 443 own words, whether *election* denotes election to eternal glory or election simply to membership in
 444 the covenant people. That is, equivocation vitiates the whole of Barach's treatment of the relationship
 445 between covenant and election, because he fails to use *election* in the same sense through every
 446 step.³⁸ More significantly, Barach loses track of the problem he set out to solve: how do we know

2003 AAPC appearances, and in a condensed form in his colloquium paper. I interact here with the 2003 AAPC version both because the structural difficulties are more obvious there than in the others and because that is the version I was reading when the difficulties first became clear to me.

³³Compare colloquium version, lines 18-32.

³⁴Colloquium version, lines 12-14.

³⁵Barach attributes this view to the Protestant Reformed Churches, the Netherlands Reformed Churches, Reformed Baptists, and "many Presbyterians," adding that *WLC* 31 appears to support it (lines 157-164).

³⁶Colloquium version, lines 15-17.

³⁷Colloquium version, lines 49-50.

³⁸The concluding paragraphs of Fowler White's "Covenant and Apostasy," chapter 15 above, offer significant help along these lines.

447 who are elect to eternal glory? If God does not tell us who they are, he has already said, the doctrine
 448 of election is useless. But when all is said and done, he himself never can tell us who are the elect to
 449 eternal glory—except to say that they are the faithful remnant. But how are *they* to be identified? By
 450 their membership in the covenant? No, for some in covenant, he says, are not elect to eternal
 451 glory—even though the whole covenant people is elect *in some sense*.

452 It appears, in short, that Barach wants to identify the elect to eternal glory as those who are in
 453 covenant, but he cannot. The result is that those elect to eternal glory remain unidentified, even on
 454 Barach's scheme. But according to him, if that is so, the doctrine of election becomes useless.

455 In contrast, as we have seen, the *Westminster Confession* identifies the elect by reference not to
 456 their covenant membership but to the fruit of the Spirit in their lives, saying "that men, attending the
 457 will of God *revealed in His Word, and yielding obedience thereunto, may, from the certainty of their*
 458 *effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election [2 Peter 1:10]."* Far from the doctrine's being
 459 useless, it thus "afford[s] matter of praise, reverence, and admiration of God [Ephesians 1:6; Romans
 460 11:33]; and of humility, diligence, and abundant consolation to all that sincerely obey the Gospel
 461 [Romans 11:5-6, 20; 2 Peter 1:10; Romans 8:33; Luke 10:20]" (*WCF* 3.8, emphases added).

462 Although time and space prohibit developing other examples, I believe similar structural failures
 463 occur repeatedly in other Federal Vision arguments. Barach's failure in all of this is rooted in his
 464 failure to use his terms in the same sense from premise to premise in his argument, and this leads to
 465 a criticism not of particular doctrines or exegeses by the Federal Visionists but of a crucial element
 466 of their whole theological method.

467

468 **The Root of the Problem**

469 The Federal Visionists tend to object to their statements' being subjected to logical critique
 470 (testing for consistency) and logical inferences (leading to conclusions that they do not wish to
 471 embrace). At least Schlissel, as can be seen from chapter 3, "A New Way of Seeing?", in this volume,
 472 and other writings, seems hostile to systematic theology.³⁹ I suspect that this objection to logical

³⁹Schlissel, "A New Way of Seeing?", lines 81-89, 178-193, 233-239, 312-315, 651-652; Steve Schlissel, "The Versified Church," in *Chalcedon Report*, November, 2000, at www.chalcedon.edu/report/2000nov/schlissel.shtml, and Schlissel's 2002 Auburn Avenue Pastors' Conference lecture "Covenant Reading." Schlissel posted his own edited version of that address at www.christian-torah.com/covenantreading.pdf. There he wrote,

Among the biblical Jewish conceptions of the Word of God is that the Word of God comes to them and owns them. "The very idea of the word of God," wrote one modern theologian, "is different for the biblical Jew than it is for the Greek or the Hellenic-minded Christian. The word of God seems to interest us only to the extent that it reveals certain truths inaccessible to human reason. These truths themselves are conceived as separate doctrinal statements, and the word of God is finally reduced to a collection of formulas. They are detached from it, moreover, so that they can be reorganized into a more logically satisfactory sequence, even to the point of retouching them or remodeling them to make them clearer and more precise. After that the only thing that remains of the divine word seems to be a sort of residuum, a kind of conjunctive that of itself has no interest." In other words, we suck the doctrine out with our theological vacuum cleaner. Whatever is left over we just throw away, as if it was of no use.

The author continues: "Whether we realize it or not, the result is that the word of God appears as a sort of nondescript hodge-podge from which the professional theologian extracts, like a mineral out of its matrix, small but precious bits of knowledge which it is his job to clarify and systematize. In this view the word of God is no longer anything but an elementary, rough, and confused presentation of more or less shrouded truth.

473 systematization—and to its use as a critical tool to test for falsehood by uncovering logical
 474 inconsistency—rests, for at least some of them, on their embrace of Cornelius Van Til’s epistemology
 475 and apologetic, an important element of which is reticence as to (or perhaps even hostility to) the use
 476 of logic in theology.⁴⁰ But antipathy to logic is contrary both to Scripture (Isaiah 5:29: “Woe to those
 477 who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter
 478 for sweet and sweet for bitter!”) and to the overwhelming practice of Reformed theologians.

479 Not the least of these, John Calvin, readily used syllogistic logic in his exegesis of Scripture. In
 480 interpreting the decision of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) Calvin wrote, “The Lord’s command is
 481 that you should not wound a weak brother; you cannot eat meat offered to idols, things strangled,
 482 and blood, without offending weak brethren. Therefore we command you in the Word of the Lord
 483 not to eat with offense.”⁴¹ His commitment to logic in general and to the law of contradiction in
 484 particular is inherent in his wry, ironic comment, “Now, for my part, when there is a dispute
 485 concerning anything, I am stupid enough to refer everything back to the definition itself, which is the

The theologian’s task is to bring them out and to put them in order. But for the pious Jew [i.e., the biblical Jew in the Bible], who mediated the divine word at the end of all that we call the Old Testament, the divine word signified an intense living reality. It is not merely an idea. It is even less a proposition. It is God speaking to us, and God in speaking to us does not make himself a theology professor.” Does that explanation mean that we don’t need theology professors? No, but based on a Hellenic notion, our seminaries treat theology and practical theology as separate departments of study. The mistaken idea is that *real theology* is not practical, so we invent something called *practical theology*, which is theology we can do something with.

In neither document did Schlissel identify the “modern theologian” or “gleg author” who is the source of the quotation. In an e-mail to me of July 5, 2003, Schlissel identified him as Louis Bouyer and the source as Bouyer’s *Eucharist: Theology and Spirituality of the Eucharist* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968). We may question the prudence of trusting this source on theological method when we learn that he is author also of *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism* (1956; New York: Scepter Publishers, 2002 reprint), in which he argues “that the only way to safeguard the positive principles of the Reformation is through the Catholic Church. For only in the Catholic Church are the positive principles the Reformation affirmed found without the negative elements the Reformers mistakenly affixed to them” (Mark Brumley, “Why Only Catholicism Can Make Protestantism Work: Louis Bouyer on the Reformation,” at www.catholiceducation.org/articles/apologetics/ap0097.html, reprinted from Brumley, “Why Only Catholicism Can Make Protestantism Work: Louis Bouyer on the Reformation,” *Catholic Dossier*, vol. 7, no. 5 (September-October 2001): 30-35. Brumley’s review goes on to say that Bouyer wrote that Catholicism affirmed *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, and even *sola Scriptura* (though he defines each very differently from how Protestantism does!), though he admits that Catholicism rejects extrinsic justification and the belief that the Word of God in an authoritative form is found only in the Bible. Bouyer was a convert to Catholicism from Protestantism, and Brumley’s like conversion came from reading Bouyer’s *Spirit and Forms of Protestantism*.

⁴⁰For discussion of the role of logic in theology, or antipathy toward its use, in the controversy between Herman Hoeksema and Klaas Schilder in Dutch Reformed circles in the mid-twentieth century, see Bernard Woudenberg, *The Hoeksema and Schilder Debate*, online at <http://www.sibd.org/sibd/hoeksema/>, especially articles 14-17 and 30. Indeed, all forty-four of Woudenberg’s essays at that site are tremendously helpful for understanding not only that earlier debate but also the present one. See also John W. Robbins, *Cornelius Van Til: The Man and the Myth*, Trinity Papers 15 (Unicoi, TN: Trinity Foundation, 1986). Roelof Janssen criticizes Woudenberg’s articles in his introduction to Jelle Faber’s *American Secession Theologians on Covenant and Baptism* and Klaas Schilder’s *Extra-Scriptural Binding: A New Danger* (bound together; Pella, IA: Inheritance Publications, 1996).

⁴¹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), IV.x.22 (p. 1200).

486 hinge and foundation of the whole debate."⁴² Insistence on proper definition and rejection of
 487 equivocation lay at the heart of his arguments against the Lutheran doctrine of consubstantiation.⁴³
 488 In refuting one argument for that doctrine he complained, "if this evasion is granted, we are not
 489 permitted to reason from the general to the particular"—i.e., syllogistic, deductive logic must be
 490 abandoned, and that Calvin was not willing to do.⁴⁴ Shortly he wrote, against those who asserted the
 491 same doctrine, "Madman, why do you demand that God's power make flesh to be and not to be flesh
 492 at the same time! It is as if you insisted that he make light to be both light and darkness at the same
 493 time! But he wills light to be light; darkness, darkness; and flesh, flesh. Indeed, when he pleases he
 494 will turn darkness into light and light into darkness; but when you require that light and darkness not
 495 differ, what else are you doing than perverting the order of God's wisdom"—i.e., abandoning the law
 496 of contradiction.⁴⁵ Against those who thought it was enough, in arguing, simply to assume the
 497 conclusion, he wrote, "this is the very point of their quarrel with us—so far is it from obtaining the
 498 place of a principle!"⁴⁶ In short, Calvin was committed to logic and saw it as indispensable to proper
 499 exegesis and theology.⁴⁷

500 Commitment to logic among the Westminster Divines was so strong that they required, in *The*
 501 *Presbyterial Form of Church Government's* "Directory for the Ordination of Ministers," that when
 502 a candidate stood for ordination to the ministry of the Word, "He shall be examined touching his skill
 503 in the original tongues, and his trial to be made by reading the Hebrew and Greek Testaments, and
 504 rendering some portion of some into Latin; and if he be defective in them, enquiry shall be made more
 505 strictly after his other learning, and whether he hath skill in *logick and philosophy*." They recognized
 506 that logic could aid in exegesis by preventing the affirmation of mutually contradictory interpretations
 507 (especially likely for one deficient in knowledge of the original language) of different passages. This
 508 same concern is implicit in their affirming that "the consent of all the parts" of Scripture is one of
 509 those "arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God" (*WCF* 1.5). And
 510 it will not do for the Federal Visionists to call this Enlightenment rationalism—Calvin,⁴⁸ the
 511 Westminster Divines, even Francis Turretin long predated the Enlightenment.

512 Anyone who embraces this historic commitment of the Reformed faith and its great theologians

⁴²Calvin, *Institutes*, III.iv.1.

⁴³Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.17.29 (Christ "proves himself no specter, for he is visible in his flesh. Take away what he claims as proper to the nature of his body; will not a new definition of body then have to be coined?" And "they make a spirit out of Christ's flesh. And not content with this, they endow it with utterly contrary qualities."), 30 ("Christ's body was circumscribed by the measure of a human body").

⁴⁴Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.17.21.

⁴⁵Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.17.24.

⁴⁶Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.17.29.

⁴⁷Calvin's Barthian editor McNeill was quite mistaken when, in I.xviii.3n6 (p. 234), he wrote that by "consciously mak[ing] self-contradictory statements about God 'willing' what he 'forbids,' yet with a will that remains 'one and simple,'" "Logic is thus subordinated to Scripture, and, characteristically for Calvin, is rejected as a device for understanding what is beyond the limits of the revealed mysteries." Whether McNeill knew it or not, Calvin knew that affirming something *in one sense* and denying it *in another* was not contradiction. He distinguished between God's decretive (secret) will and His moral (revealed) will (cf. I.xvii.1-3). Consequently he could affirm that God could will decretively what He forbade morally.

⁴⁸And with him the other major early Reformed theologians, who also insisted on logic.

513 to logic must greet the Federal Visionists' objections, in principle, to logical critique of their
 514 statements with skeptical concern. Wilson, who co-authored an introductory text on logic,⁴⁹ ought
 515 to know better. Yet, in his overview paper for this volume, he seeks to shield the Federal Visionists'
 516 inconsistent assertions about how covenant, election, salvation, baptism, and assurance are related
 517 from criticism by writing,

518

519 In faith, we want to say that children of believers are saved. But we are not making a
 520 categorical statement of the "All P are Q" kind. We are saying that we believe God's
 521 statements and promises concerning covenant children, and we think others should believe
 522 them, too. Now these promises (in all our theological systems) have apparent instances of
 523 non-fulfillment. How are we to account for this? We all acknowledge that some of our
 524 children grow up and depart from the living God. We see the same kind of thing with adult
 525 converts. Many of them have fallen away also. Have the promises of God fallen to the ground
 526 in either instance?

527 The question of levels of discourse is central in understanding this. On one level, all of us
 528 confess that some children of believers are reprobate, and will eventually fall away. On
 529 another level of discourse, we say that God is God to our children. In preaching, in catechesis,
 530 in liturgy, the second level of discourse is operative. This level is operative because faith in
 531 the promises requires it. But an important point to note is that we are *not* saying contradictory
 532 things within one level of discourse. Nor are we denying the first level of discourse.⁵⁰

533

534 Wilson ought to know that *children of believers are saved* simply is a categorical statement. Between
 535 the categories (a) children of believers and (b) people who are saved, there can be only four
 536 relationships: (1) All children of believers are people who are saved [All a are b.]. (2) No children of
 537 believers are people who are saved [No a are b.]. (3) Some children of believers are people who are
 538 saved [Some a are b.]. (4) Some children of believers are not people who are saved [Some a are not
 539 b.]. If, when the Federal Visionists, as part of their strategy to deliver people from "unanswerable"
 540 questions about whether they are true believers and direct them instead to the objectivity of the
 541 covenant, insist that the children of believers are saved (as Schlissel wrote on the whiteboard during
 542 discussion at the colloquium),⁵¹ then they must be asserting either (1) or (3) above. If they are
 543 asserting (1), then it follows inexorably that no children of believers are not saved, i.e., that (2) and
 544 (4) are false, and they have provided (rightly or wrongly—but at least validly) the assurance they

⁴⁹Douglas Wilson and Jim Nance, *Introductory Logic*, 3d ed. (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1997).

⁵⁰Chapter 1 above, lines 246-258.

⁵¹To his credit and my relief, Schlissel, in the appendix to chapter 3, backed off from such unqualified language, where he wrote that he thinks Federal Visionists and their critics "could meet, especially if the critical portion of the Berkhof/De Jong summation [which he outlined earlier in the addendum] is heartily affirmed, viz., that *the children presented for baptism by believing parents will, as a rule, under faithful covenant administration, find full realization of all God's promises in the communion of life*. How close can we get before much of the aftermath appears to be a forbidden 'quarreling about words'?" (lines 891-894). I am not persuaded, however, that Schlissel is correct there in asserting that the Berkhof/De Jong summation "is virtually indistinguishable from what was taught in Monroe, except that De Jong and Berkhof may be slightly less clear in their sentiments due to 'hedging'" (lines 872-873).

545 intend. But if they are asserting (3), then they can infer absolutely *nothing* about the truth of (4), and
546 their attempt to provide assurance by appeal to the objectivity of the covenant collapses.

547 Wilson's attempt to justify such inconsistencies by appeal to "levels of discourse" does not suffice.
548 What it really leads to is precisely the sort of upper-story/lower-story dualism against which the late
549 Francis Schaeffer indefatigably warned. Does Wilson, after all, mean to tell us that at one "level of
550 discourse"—whatever that means—all children of believers are saved, while at another "level of
551 discourse" some are not saved? What parents crave regarding their children is not "Well, on this level
552 of discourse, your child is saved, but on another level, he might not be." What fretting church
553 members crave regarding their own assurance is not "Well, on this level of discourse, your baptism
554 assures you that you're saved, but on another level it doesn't." Such equivocation is not the
555 responsibility of the minister of the Word of God, who is called to sound a clear trumpet (1
556 Corinthians 14:8), whose "Yes" should be "Yes" and whose "No" should be "No" (Matthew 5:37),
557 whose message is to be "not Yes and No, but . . . always Yes" because in Christ "all [not just some!]
558 of the promises of God" are "Yes" and "Amen" (2 Corinthians 1:19-20). No one will spend eternity
559 blessed in heaven in one "level of discourse" and cursed in hell in another.

560 The Federal Visionists have not provided any promises of God of type (1) (All are b.) for the
561 salvation of the children of believers (or of baptized persons). Consequently it is of no use for Wilson
562 to say, "we believe God's statements and promises concerning covenant children, and we think others
563 should believe them, too," and think that is adequate ground for assuring believers, because of the
564 objectivity of the covenant, of their children's salvation (or for assuring baptized persons of their
565 own). A major part of this debate is precisely over whether indeed the Bible does teach that all
566 children of believers (or all baptized persons) are saved; it will not do simply to assume that
567 conclusion as a premise. Neither is it of use for Wilson to say, "these promises (in all our theological
568 systems) have apparent instances of non-fulfillment." That in itself assumes what the Federal
569 Visionists must prove—that God has promised the salvation of all children of believers (or all baptized
570 persons). For if instead God has promised the salvation of only *some* children of believers (and of
571 *some* baptized persons), then the damnation of some (of either) cannot be raised as an instance of the
572 non-fulfillment of His promises. Scripture clearly teaches us that all God's promises are perfectly
573 fulfilled (2 Corinthians 1:20; Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:13-20). If it appears to us that one of them goes
574 finally unfulfilled, then we have misunderstood either the promise (as I believe the Federal Visionists
575 do God's promises regarding believers' children and the baptized) or the phenomena (i.e., the child's
576 parents or the baptized were not really believers). That is, we have mistaken either the major or the
577 minor premise (or both). Take the syllogism, (i) All children of believers are people who are saved;
578 (ii) Richard is a child of believers; (iii) Therefore Richard is saved. In their attempt to comfort parents
579 by reference to the objectivity of the covenant, the Federal Visionists want to affirm this. But they
580 know that, as Wilson put it, "some of our children grow up and depart from the living God."
581 Consequently, when challenged, they (rightly, though inconsistently!) shrink back from the
582 conclusion. But they can avoid the conclusion only if they deny one of the premises. When Wilson
583 writes that "some of *our* children grow up and depart from the living God," he uses *our* to denote
584 believers, so he cannot deny (ii) (the minor premise). He must then deny (i) (the major premise). He
585 must confess that it is really true that only (i') *some* children of believers are saved. But from (i') and
586 (ii) *nothing* follows, for nothing in the premises tells us whether Richard is among those children of
587 believers who are saved or those who are not.

588 Federal Vision theology will continue to be unstable and plagued with error so long as its
 589 adherents continue to resist the universal application of logic to theology—which is, in the final
 590 analysis, all that is meant by *systematic theology*.⁵²

591

592 Conclusion

593 There are other items I could wish to address at some length here,⁵³ but they will have to await

⁵²The common penchant for opposing “biblical theology” and “systematic theology,” as if the latter were dedicated to systematization and the former simply to letting the Bible speak for itself in its redemptive-historical narrative, is naive. Biblical theology and systematic theology both systematize; they simply systematize different things and in different categories.

⁵³Two examples: [a] I believe many of the Scripture passages on which the Federal Visionists rely for their theology of baptism use the term (or its cognates) to denote not the rite but the spiritual reality signified by it (for instance, Romans 6:1ff; 1 Peter 3:21). The nineteenth-century Presbyterian James Wilkinson Dale’s five-volume study on *baptizo* persuades me that in many instances the original readers of the New Testament would not have taken *baptize* or *baptism* to denote the rite at all. See Dale, *Christic and Patristic Baptism: An Inquiry into the Meaning of the Word as Determined by the Usage of the Holy Scriptures and Patristic Writers* (1874), *Classic Baptism: An Inquiry into the Meaning of the Word as Determined by the Usage of Classical Greek Writers* (1867), *Johannic Baptism: An Inquiry into the Meaning of the Word as Determined by the Usage of the Holy Scriptures* (1898), and *Judaic Baptism: An Inquiry into the Meaning of the Word as Determined by the Usage of Jewish and Patristic Writers* (1869) (all reprinted, Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1995, 1989, 1993, and 1991, respectively). Peter Leithart, who is ordinarily much too good a theologian and exegete to make this mistake, simply begged the question when he wrote, “Paul wrote that Christians have all been united to Christ in His death and resurrection because they have all been baptized (Rom. 6). Many preachers cannot take Paul at his word. ‘Baptism’ doesn’t refer to the ‘sign’ of water but to the ‘thing’ that the water symbolizes. Paul wasn’t referring to the baptismal rite itself. He wasn’t telling the Romans that they were dead and risen with Christ by baptism, but by that to which baptism points. [para] Which raises three basic questions: First, if he didn’t mean baptism, why did he say baptism? Second, how do these commentators know that Paul wasn’t referring to baptism? Third, and most fundamentally, what kind of assumptions about the world drive this interpretation? Why would anyone doubt that Paul is talking about water?” (Peter Leithart, “Starting Before the Beginning,” *Credenda/Agenda*, 14/6, online at <http://www.credenda.org/issues/14-6liturgia.php>.) Leithart’s case here depends on assuming that the rite is more fundamental in the term’s usage than the transforming experience or overwhelming influence that the rite signifies. But if Dale’s arguments are sound—and I am persuaded that they are—the opposite is true. To answer Leithart’s questions: First, Paul *did* mean baptism—and the term *baptism* did *not* mean, primarily, a ritual application of water. Second, commentators argue in two ways that in Romans 6:1ff *baptism* does not denote the rite: (a) consistent application of that sense in the immediate context (verses 1-10) would yield the conclusion (contrary to other passages of Scripture) that all, without exception, who undergo the rite are regenerate, converted, justified, sanctified, and finally glorified, and (b) Paul himself, who certainly views circumcision and baptism as type and antitype (Colossians 2:11-12), had already written in the same epistle that it was not the *rite* of circumcision but the *spiritual reality* designated by it that differentiated the true (inward) Jew from the false (outward) Jew (Romans 2:28-29). It stands to reason that he would affirm the same of baptism. The commentators do not, *pace* Leithart’s tacit implication, simply truck in their conclusion without reason. Third, the assumptions (if we may call them that) that drive that interpretation are founded on sober attention to Biblical teaching about the difference between rites (sacraments) and realities (things signified), per, e.g., Isaiah 1:10-19; 29:13; Ezekiel 33:31; Matthew 15:8-9.

[b] I am convinced that Rich Lusk’s (following Norman Shepherd’s in *The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 2000] rejection of the covenant of works (not a mere reworking of it, as he chose to call it in his title to chapter 10), by whatever name (covenant of life, covenant of creation), will, if carried through, require a wholesale revision of the entire Westminsterian soteriology, for that covenant plays a crucial role in Westminster’s understanding of how Christ, in

594 another time and venue. Because my comments above have been largely critical, I wish to end by
595 repeating the warm sympathy I expressed at the start of this chapter for the concerns that I believe
596 drive the Federal Visionists. It is especially important that covenantal theology be restored to its
597 rightful place at the very heart of Reformed theology and practice. Success at that would do much
598 to help our churches overcome the common resistance to church discipline in the milieu of our
599 American individualist "liberty" that as often as not is merely a "cloak for vice" (1 Peter 2:16; cf.
600 Galatians 5:13). Such discipline is of the very essence of covenantalism. It was a hallmark of
601 Reformed churches in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries in Europe, Britain, and
602 North America. Its scarcity in American churches is doubtless a fruit of the impact of the revivalism
603 and individualism of early nineteenth-century American experience, especially as expressed in the
604 Second Great Awakening. It is also a symptom of the scarcity of a truly covenantal understanding
605 of every aspect of the Christian life in family, church, and society. To the extent that the Federal
606 Visionists are rousing the Reformed community, or at least parts of it, from a long and costly slumber,
607 we can only be thankful.

Soli Deo Gloria!

both His life and His death, accomplished our salvation. Lusk's arguments against it hinge on the assumption that the creature can never merit anything from the Creator, but Lusk fails to carry through a distinction that he acknowledges early in his chapter between strict justice, on the one hand, and covenantal justice, on the other—a distinction that implies a coordinate distinction between strict and covenantal merit. Reformed systematicians who have defended the covenant of works (or of nature, as Turretin named it) have consistently affirmed the impossibility of a creature's having strict merit in relation to the Creator, but they have argued that creatures can have covenantal merit—that is, by fulfilling a condition the Creator condescends to establish (see, e.g., Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3 vols., trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992, 1994, 1997], Eighth Topic, Q. III, at 1:574-578). Unless opponents of the covenant of works demonstrate why the notions of covenantal justice and covenantal merit are unbiblical—which they have not done—their opposition to the covenant of works on that basis rests on mere assumption. Calvin certainly embraced the idea of covenantal merit and made it integral to his soteriology, writing that whoever is engrafted into Christ obtains "all the merits of Christ, for they are communicated to" him (*Institutes*, 3.15.6; cf. 3.15.3,5).