

Introduction

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1 **A Little History**

2 In early October, 2002, I was just coming up for air after spending seven years immersed in
3 doctoral studies on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Scottish Covenanter political and ecclesiastical
4 history. Imagine my surprise when I heard that there was controversy—yes, *controversy*—among some
5 of my Reformed brethren in North America! How uncharacteristic!

6 Well, anyone who knows the history of the Reformed faith—or who has served on a session or
7 consistory, or in a presbytery or classis, or in a synod or general assembly—knows the irony behind
8 those words. Controversy is nothing new to the Reformed, who are no less prone to it than other
9 branches of Christianity. But this one caught my attention because some men at its center were friends
10 of mine—even heroes. I heard that they had, in talks at the 2002 Auburn Avenue Pastors' Conference
11 (AAPC) at Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Monroe, Louisiana, jeopardized orthodox
12 Reformed doctrines of justification by faith alone, of the covenants, of election and perseverance, and
13 of the sacraments. Two—Douglas Wilson and Steve Schlissel—I knew personally and considered my
14 friends. A third, Steve Wilkins, was a respected friend of my own dear friend and former pastor. Of
15 the fourth, John Barach, I had never heard, but I was sure that if he were in their company, he
16 couldn't be promoting doctrines at odds with historic Reformed orthodoxy. My wife and I had given
17 away many of Wilson's and Schlissel's books and tapes. Wilson's online sermons we had found
18 instructive and encouraging through the years. We shared these brothers' underlying motives of
19 correcting both the antinomianism and the morbid introspectionism in some Reformed circles. Their
20 insight and courage in confronting the culture with the claims of Christ we found exemplary. Their
21 teachings on the application of covenant theology to marriage and child raising had helped us and
22 many to whom we had given their books and tapes. We had recommended these brothers to
23 hundreds, perhaps thousands. The publishing house Wilson had founded had published two of my
24 books. Surely the charges must stem from misunderstanding!

25 I began gathering background information—articles, printed sermons, lectures, tapes, and other
26 items.¹ I gave transcripts of the 2002 AAPC lectures as charitable reading as I could, even when I
27 encountered some things I thought were at best very poorly put.² Continuing confident that the
28 controversy was largely due to misunderstanding, I decided to attend the 2003 AAPC and hear these
29 brothers and four of their critics firsthand. When I first learned who the critics were, perhaps my
30 confidence should have waned. Joey Pipa and Morton Smith were no mean theologians, and Pipa was
31 Wilkins's close friend; Carl Robbins was a fine pastor and churchman and another dear and respected
32 friend of my former pastor, as well as a friend of some of the Monroe Four; and R. C. Sproul, Jr., was
33 a fine pastor and thinker and had even been associated with some of the Monroe Four in other
34 endeavors. But my confidence did not waver. I was sure the dispute was caused by mutual
35 misunderstanding. I also hoped that if I could hear both sides together, perhaps the Lord would use
36 me to help reconcile them.

37 At the 2003 AAPC, my belief that much of the contention was over misunderstandings was
38 confirmed. But at the same time I began hearing things with which I could not dispense so easily. I
39 began to wonder whether some of the accusations might have credibility. But what impressed me
40 more was that the setting was not conducive to the kind of trusting, open communication necessary
41 to successfully clarify, persuade, and reassure. Strong, devout men with deep theological
42 commitments, criticizing each other's theology in front of a large, partisan, and sometimes vocal
43 audience of strong, devout men with their own deep theological commitments, would not find it easy
44 to sit back and say, "You know, I think you may have something there. I might be wrong. Tell me
45 more." I went away thinking it would be crucial, if the misunderstandings were to be cleared away
46 and the real points of serious, substantive disagreement identified, for these men to come together
47 under different circumstances. I began to form the idea of a small, private, invitation-only colloquium
48 at which these eight and a few more whom they would choose for each side would present and
49 discuss papers on the specific issues of controversy. I discussed the idea sketchily with a few of the
50 speakers from both sides, and they welcomed it.

51 The matter continued much on my mind and in my prayers during the next two months. The men
52 involved, on both sides—and not only the eight, but many others also—were shepherds in God's flock
53 and worthy of respect. I learned that sad personal divides had arisen. I hoped that such a colloquium
54 would result in the whole group's being able to say, "The vast majority of charges against these men
55 rest on misunderstandings of what they've said. Here's what they've really said, and in all but a few
56 instances—and those largely peripheral—they're solidly within the boundaries of Reformed, orthodox

¹See the bibliography in this volume for what grew into an extensive (though by no means comprehensive) list of relevant materials.

²This should not be overlooked. While the Monroe Four have alleged occasionally that their critics have not read them charitably, some critics have both claimed and demonstrated their charity. For example, Howard Douglas King, in "The Auburn Avenue Theology: Is It Biblical?" (online on October 31, 2003, at <http://www.littlegeneva.com/foundations/aatbiblical.htm>) wrote, "When I came to this controversy, I thought it unlikely in the extreme that these men really meant the things that I was reading in the way that I was understanding them. I was sufficiently acquainted with Steve Schlissel and Steve Wilkins in particular that I held them and their work in high regard. But as I pondered their words, interpreting them the way I would any other confessional document (that is, as a systematic whole), there was no way to avoid the conclusion that they had deviated from Scripture." Ill will does not adequately explain the serious criticisms King and others have expressed.

57 confessionalism." That certainly was my hope. I kept dreaming (sometimes literally) of the colloquium
58 but never hitting on a way to fund it.

59 Then, at a conference, I met a businessman who, learning that I taught historical theology, asked
60 my opinions about the AAPC controversy. He told me that he highly respected men on both sides,
61 that he believed much of the debate was rooted in misunderstanding, and—without having heard my
62 own idea—that he thought the men needed to be brought together privately for better communication.
63 When I replied that I'd had the same idea, he said, "If you'll host it, I'll pay for it." And that he did.
64 He insisted on paying all the expenses and bringing these pastors and theologians together at a
65 luxurious resort, feeding them gourmet meals, and doing everything possible to make them
66 comfortable to enhance the fruitfulness of their meeting. He also insisted on remaining anonymous.
67 Our Savior said, "when you give . . . , do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,
68 so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (Matthew
69 6:3-4). I doubt not that this fine gentleman, who has since become a cherished friend, has a fine
70 reward in store.

71 Shortly I sent formal invitations to the eight AAPC 2003 speakers. All were willing, but Sproul
72 had a schedule conflict. Several asked me to moderate, and the others agreed. Each group identified
73 others it would like to have join in representing its views, and eventually we wound up with seven
74 men on each side. The Monroe Four, who had begun referring to their distinctive set of ideas as the
75 "Federal Vision," were joined by Rich Lusk, Peter Leithart, and Tom Trouwborst—the last bravely
76 and generously stepping in on just two weeks' notice when James Jordan had to bow out because of
77 his wife's serious health crisis. The "critics' side"—for lack of a better name—was joined by Fowler
78 White, George Knight, Rick Phillips, and Chris Hutchinson. Five men from each group agreed to
79 write original papers, and five from each side responses. The critics' side also assigned Pipa to write
80 an overview of what they considered the significant errors of the Federal Vision. Although the Federal
81 Vision side declined to prepare a correlative paper in advance, it assigned Wilson to do it afterward.
82 The twenty original papers and responses and the critics' overview were disseminated in advance, and
83 when the men gathered at Lago Mar in Ft. Lauderdale August 11-13, they spent an hour and a half
84 discussing each paper and response. The participants agreed in advance that their discussions would
85 be private, with no observers present, no reports made, and the papers and responses not to be
86 quoted outside the colloquium group, unless the participants unanimously voted otherwise *after* the
87 last session. The aim was to ensure that everyone could speak openly without fear of his words' being
88 raised in ecclesiastical charges—an assurance that we believed important for effective communication
89 and persuasion. The participants voted unanimously, at the end of the colloquium, to have the papers
90 published, and they asked me to edit and introduce the book.

91 In the two months leading up to the colloquium, I maintained my hope that most of the
92 controversy could be explained as misunderstanding and that intense, face-to-face discussion of
93 carefully written papers could dispel the misunderstanding, defuse much of the dispute, and restore
94 strained relationships. Much of that hope was rewarded in the two days of discussions. Certainly a
95 spirit of personal respect, charity, and trust prevailed, the men clearly enjoying not only the formal
96 discussion sessions but also their meals, breaks, and three worship services, at which Knox Seminary
97 professor Warren Gage presented his work on the literary and theological unity of the Gospel of John
98 and the Book of Revelation and the theme of the loving Father's provision of a wife for His Son by
99 the transformation of a harlot into a virgin bride. Several participants remarked that his sermons, with

100 their profound insights into Biblical typology, were more than worth the time and trouble of attending
101 even without anything else, and most expressed deep appreciation for his contribution to the meeting.
102 Dr. Gage helped immeasurably by providing for the men a break from their controversy during which
103 they could focus on the glory, grace, and beauty of God, thus being refreshed and strengthened for
104 their work.

105 Yet although much misunderstanding was cleared away and warm relationships were renewed,
106 the colloquium did not result in any consensus that no serious, substantive disagreements really
107 divided the groups. Indeed, that could hardly have been expected, as will become clear from the
108 documents published here. Some logomachies there were—disputes over terminology despite
109 agreement in substance—and some were resolved. But the two groups, or at least individuals in them
110 (for they are by no means monolithic), remain strongly opposed over specific doctrines, and it is
111 likely—and good—that the debate will intensify in the future as the straw men fall by the wayside and
112 the real antitheses become more clear.

113 I have rehearsed this history not only for its historical value but also as background for readers'
114 understanding of my distinct roles in the colloquium and this book before they read on. Indeed, I
115 cannot help fearing that some of the participants might, upon reading my concluding chapter, feel
116 betrayed. (“‘Will you walk into my parlor?’ said the spider to the fly”!³) I can only beg them to
117 believe that, in the months leading up to the colloquium, and to a great extent even during it, I had
118 not come to the assessments expressed there. Indeed, those judgments are contrary to my initial
119 expectations.

120 My expressing my own conclusions in chapter 23 should not be interpreted as compromising my
121 position as moderator. In preparing for and conducting the colloquium, I was obliged, for the most
122 part, to suppress my judgments on the merits of the opposing positions. But just as a moderator at
123 a denomination’s general assembly does not forfeit forever his right to express his own views, so also
124 I did not consider it necessary to do so in my work on the colloquium. Consequently, after we met,
125 during about six weeks of e-mail discussion among participants, I began to express and argue for my
126 own judgments. I shall, with no animosity toward my brothers who disagree, continue that both here
127 and in other contexts. I have been convinced first and foremost by my own study of the documents
128 from both sides and my comparison of them with Scripture and Reformed confessional standards and
129 major theologians’ writings, second by the discussions during the colloquium, third by the
130 participants’ post-colloquium e-mail discussions (the content of which is not public), and finally by
131 reading other relevant materials cited in the bibliography at the end of this book.

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133 **Preview**

134 The chapters in this book, grouped into four parts, present the Federal Vision’s views and reasons
135 for it, together with critical assessments of those views. A very brief preview of the chapters (one that
136 cannot hope to mention all the topics of each) may help readers navigate the material and grasp both
137 the big picture and the details. Readers should keep in mind that half of the chapter pairs have an
138 original paper by a Federal Visionist and a response by a critic, while the other half have an original

³Mary Howitt (1799-1888), “The Spider and the Fly” (1829), in Howitt, *Sketches of Natural History* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1834), 123-128.

139 paper by a critic and a response by a Federal Visionist.

140 Part I contains two overview chapters, one by Douglas Wilson summarizing the Federal Vision
141 (chapter 1) and another by Joey Pipa summarizing the critics' responses—some positive, some
142 negative—to it (chapter 2).

143 Part II contains four perspectival chapters. Proponents of the Federal Vision point out that their
144 ideas stem partly from the application to Scripture and the Reformed standards of a paradigm that
145 differs in significant ways from that of traditional, confessional Reformed theology, but they assure
146 us that the results remain consistent with the confessions. Steve Schlissel ably exhibits the insights
147 of Biblical theology and its focus on redemptive history rather than systematic theology (chapter 3),
148 and Peter Leithart explores how a covenantal understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity can revise
149 our understanding of man and his life in covenant with God (chapter 5). Chris Hutchinson and Fowler
150 White respond to their chapters, affirming some aspects but questioning others (chapters 4 and 6,
151 respectively).

152 Part III contains ten chapters on the soteriology of the Federal Vision. Rick Phillips leads with
153 a chapter arguing against the Federal Vision's heavily covenantal, objective definition of a Christian
154 (chapter 7), to which Steve Schlissel responds (chapter 8). Morton Smith expounds the traditional,
155 Westminsterian doctrine of the covenant of works as an integral part of Reformed soteriology
156 (chapter 9), and Rich Lusk challenges that doctrine on the grounds that it assumes a notion of merit
157 that fails to account for the Creator/creature distinction (chapter 10). John Barach construes how the
158 Federal Vision paradigm might help us understand the relationship between election and covenant
159 and, in the process, relieve some of the doubt many Christians harbor about their salvation (chapter
160 11), and Carl Robbins responds by first placing the current debate in some historical perspective by
161 reference to earlier debates in Dutch Reformed circles and then voicing his own criticisms along the
162 lines of hermeneutical and theological method (chapter 12). Robbins then presents a case for
163 emphasizing the necessity of regeneration and conversion (chapter 13), to which Tom Trouwborst
164 responds with a case emphasizing covenant succession and the incongruity of thinking in terms of
165 conversion for children of the promise raised by faithful parents (chapter 14). In answer to Federal
166 Visionists' challenging traditional Reformed understandings of apostasy, Fowler White says "Yes,
167 but—" in his chapter setting forth an alternative view (chapter 15), which Doug Wilson criticizes as
168 *ad hoc* (chapter 16).

169 Part IV contains six chapters on the Federal Vision's implications for the theology and practice
170 of the sacraments. Doug Wilson argues that the Westminster standards affirm a much more robust
171 view of sacramental efficacy than is commonly embraced in Presbyterian and other Reformed circles
172 (chapter 17), but Rick Phillips argues that Wilson has misconstrued the standards, which are better
173 understood as more clearly tying sacramental efficacy to divine action and the recipient's faith
174 (chapter 18). Steve Wilkins contends that the Federal Vision's understanding of baptism as placing
175 one in covenant with God and union with Christ offers relief from unanswerable questions about
176 sincerity of faith and genuineness of conversion (chapter 19), but Joey Pipa argues that Wilkins's view
177 contradicts Scripture and the Westminster standards (chapter 20). George Knight exegetes the *locus*
178 *classicus* on self-examination before partaking of the Lord's Supper and infers from it that
179 paedocommunion—embraced by some Federal Visionists—is unbiblical (chapter 23), an argument to
180 which Peter Leithart replies by appealing to the broader teaching of Scripture about the family's
181 participation in covenant meals (chapter 22).

182 In the conclusion (chapter 23), I express some of my own responses to the Federal Vision. I admit
183 that I enjoy an unfair advantage. All the other authors either had respondents or were themselves
184 responding to specific authors, who in turn had the opportunity, in addenda, to write some rejoinders.
185 My position as moderator for the colloquium and then editor of the book spared me that rigor (but
186 put on me the agonizing burden of staying out of the fray before and during the colloquium). No
187 doubt other participants, or at least those whom I most strongly take to task, would have been glad
188 to respond to my critiques. But for all such efforts in dialogue, there must come a time to say,
189 "Enough said—for now." The debate will surely continue in other venues. For the present, I invite
190 readers to weigh the arguments pro and con in the twenty-three chapters that follow, perhaps to
191 explore some of the sources listed in the bibliography at the end, and to draw their own conclusions
192 regarding the Federal Vision.