

Response to Presbytery Committee Reports¹
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Let me first express my thanks to the committees for their reports, and to both the Presbytery and committees for the fraternal manner in which this investigation has been conducted. The Pacific Northwest has been a model for how theological disputes and disagreements should be handled.

My response has not followed the order of the committee reports. Instead, I have arranged my response so that I deal with the most controversial issues at the beginning and in the most detail. These are not necessarily the most important issues in and of themselves, but they are the issues on which my views are most likely to raise concerns. Specifically, I deal with questions about baptismal efficacy and temporary benefits first, and then move on to the covenant of works, justification and final justification, and the imputation of Christ's active obedience.

On most of these issues, I have given some biblical arguments in favor of the positions I hold, as well as historical arguments. The biblical arguments, of course, are crucial. The historical arguments, however, are also important, and I need to say a word or two about what I mean to prove with these historical digressions. In a few cases, I discuss the Westminster Assembly itself and its historical content. In those instances, my argument is designed to clarify exactly what the Assembly stated, included, and excluded. In some cases, I believe the Minority Report demands more than the Confession.

More often, I summarize or quote the views of individual theologians who were acknowledged by English Reformed theologians as sound theologians prior to or at the time of the Assembly. My point is to demonstrate that their views were acceptable to the Assembly, even if the Assembly did not formulate its doctrine as these theologians did. At several points, these theologians state Reformed doctrine in a fashion similar to that of the "Federal Vision," and so my argument is that, as a historical matter, these views were not excluded by our Standards. I do not claim that the theologians I cite would agree with everything I have written and taught.

This is a lengthy response, but that could not be helped. The issues are multiple and complex, and there is far more to say about each one than I have said below.

I. Election, Baptismal Efficacy, and Temporary Benefits.

Of the issues dealt with in the GA Report, baptism is the one I have dealt with most extensively in my writing. It is also the area in which my conclusions have been most innovative and controversial. I do not believe that my conclusions are outside the Reformed tradition, but I recognize that I have been pushing various boundaries on this issue. For that reason, I will briefly summarize the aims of my research and writing on this topic, and sketch out my main arguments concerning baptismal efficacy, before turning to the criticisms and objections of the Committee Reports.

¹ I gratefully acknowledge the research assistance of Steven Wedgworth.

A. The intentions and assumptions of my work on baptism.

First and foremost, I have wanted to understand the biblical teaching concerning baptism. Under the inspiration of the Spirit, the biblical writers wrote of baptism's effects and benefits with an ease that does not come naturally to Reformed and evangelical theologians. Would any Reformed theologian say what Peter says in 1 Peter 3? I started out with the aim of formulating an understanding of baptism that would allow me to say, with Peter's offhand confidence, "baptism now saves you" (1 Peter 3:21).

Second, the biblical teaching concerning baptism challenges a number of characteristic modern assumptions about human existence. Modern philosophy has often treated individual human beings as isolated monads of humanity, unaffected by the persons and events outside of us.² Such an assumption makes it virtually impossible to grasp what either the Bible or theologians of the past have said about the efficacy of sacraments: How can a little water applied to my body have any effect on my soul? I address this inner/outer problem more fully in a separate section below.

Third, paedobaptist theology has often operated with implicitly Baptist assumptions. Though we baptize babies, our theology of baptism often implicitly assumes that the subject of baptism is an adult convert.³ For instance, paedobaptists say that faith is necessary for baptism to have its gracious effect, but this leaves us open to the charge that we are inconsistent in baptizing babies, whose faith or lack of it no one can know. The almost inevitable result is that the effect of infant baptism is minimized. I agree that faith is necessary if baptism is going to be a means of grace unto final salvation, but I have tried to think about what this means for a baptized *infant*.⁴ My question has been: What benefit, if any, do those baptized in infancy enjoy before they come to an "age of discretion" and make their own personal profession of faith?

Fourth, sacramental theology must be purged of mechanistic models and metaphors. Aquinas says that sacraments are like tools in the hand of God. That captures an important reality of the sacraments, one which is important to the Reformed position: Sacraments have no more power in themselves than a hammer does; baptism does what work it does because God wields this tool. Yet, this analogy fails to capture the personal communion that is at the heart of Christian faith and practice. In place of mechanistic categories, I have tried to think through issues of sacramental efficacy in personalist categories.⁵

Finally, my dissertation attempted to work through questions of baptismal efficacy using the model of the ordination rite of priests (Exodus 29; Leviticus 8-9). Baptism, I argued, is efficacious in the way that the ordination rite is efficacious. That is still my

² I have explored this in my dissertation, *The Priesthood of the Plebs* (Wipf & Stock), and more directly in "Modernity and the 'Merely Social,'" *Pro Ecclesia*.

³ I have explored this tension in early Christian baptismal liturgies in "Infant Baptism: A Tragi-Comedy," in Gregg Strawbridge, *The Case for Infant Baptism*.

⁴ One option is to stress the reality of infant faith, as Rich Lusk has done in *Paedofaith*. While I believe infants do believe, and agree that our default assumption is that our children are believers, my own work on baptism has not depended on the notion of infant faith.

⁵ In this, I am following some of the implications of John Frame's notion that God is "Absolute Person," and the corresponding notion that reality is pervasively personal.

position. This analogy opens up a way of thinking about baptismal efficacy that avoids two extremes: It avoids the view that baptism has little or no effect, and it avoids the view that baptism invariably and permanently confers grace. Aaron received a set of gifts in his ordination – the gift of ministry in the Lord’s house, the gift of access to Yahweh, the gift of a standing within the community of Israel. But those gifts could be forfeited, as they clearly were in the case of Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10). Like ordination, baptism confers benefits – “graces” in the original sense – and these are truly conferred by baptism. Baptism marks the baptized with God’s favor and grants favors, but baptism does not guarantee that the baptized will remain in God’s favor forever.

My recent book on baptism, *The Baptized Body*, is organized around three propositions with regard to baptism. First, when the New Testament uses the word “baptism,” it normally refers to water baptism. The word group is used metaphorically, but these metaphorical uses have to be shown from the context. Thus, I argue that Paul is talking about water baptism in Romans 6 and 1 Corinthians 10, and that Peter is talking about water baptism in 1 Peter 3. Second, when the New Testament writers use the phrase “body of Christ,” they are referring to the visible church. Further, this visible church has all the characteristics that the New Testament ascribes to the body of Christ. Members of the visible church are members of “Christ” and partakers of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:12). This second claim is the key to my argument about baptismal efficacy. Third, I argue that apostasy happens. Some people enjoy various benefits of the new covenant and then lose those benefits. This is not a threat to the Reformed doctrine of election and reprobation, since God ordains both the end point (election or reprobation) and the whole story arc along the way. Some reprobates come near to God for a time and then drift or turn away. In fact, the doctrine of reprobation in Romans 9 is a doctrine of apostasy, an explanation of why the chosen people has turned from her Messiah.

The conclusion of these affirmations is this theology of baptismal efficacy: Baptism is the rite of entry into the visible church; since the visible church is the body of Christ, baptism engrafts the baptized into Christ and His body, and sharing in the body of the incarnate and glorified Son brings benefits of various sorts; but this engrafting is no guarantee of final salvation, since some who are baptized into Christ and His body fall away. Baptism is a gift of grace that bestows other gifts, but it is effective to salvation only for those who have persevering faith.⁶

B. Confessional and Historical Dimensions.

As I noted above, I acknowledge that my work in baptismal theology has been innovative in certain respects. In making the following historical points, I am *not* claiming that the writers I cite would endorse everything I have written on baptism. My aim is to

⁶ An aside: Some are suspicious of my baptismal views because they think they tend toward Rome. I have always thought they actually tend in the opposite direction, toward Zwingli. There’s no “magic” in my baptismal views; in some senses, my view of baptism is very “immanent.” Baptism’s efficacy is like the efficacy of an ordination, a circumcision, an inauguration to the Presidency. Baptism’s chief effect is to unite the baptized to the visible church, and to give the baptized a position in that community. Where I differ from Zwingli(ans) is in my understanding of what that visible church is. Baptism differs from the entry rite of the Masons because, and insofar as, the church differs from the Lodge. I would be happy to accept the label “non-dualist Zwinglian” (though that might amount to a “non-Zwinglian Zwinglian”).

show that my baptismal views draw on central themes in the Reformed tradition and that my views are within the bounds of the Reformed tradition broadly and the Westminster Standards more specifically. I believe, however, that the Reformed tradition stands in need of some correction at various points.

1. Union with the Visible church.

First, my basic affirmation about baptismal efficacy is the affirmation of the Confession itself: “Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ . . . for the *solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible Church*” (28.1). I also agree with the Confession’s description of the “visible church,” though I believe it has limitations: “The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation” (25.2). When we put these statements together, we conclude that a baptized becomes a subject of the kingdom of Christ, a member of God’s household and family, and is put on the way of salvation. Since a baptized infant becomes a member of God’s household, he is a child of God.⁷ That is saying quite a lot.

But the Confession does not say everything that the New Testament says. The Confessional statements on the church are limited by the Assembly’s failure (refusal?) to apply the biblical language of “body” and “bride” to the visible church. The contrast of WCF 25.1 and 2 is notable. The invisible church is described with language of intimacy. Christ is the “Head” of the invisible church, which is His body and spouse, “the fullness of Him that fills all in all.” The visible church is described in less intimate, and more “institutional” or “political” terms as the “kingdom of Christ” and “God’s family.”⁸ In the New Testament, by contrast, Paul describes the *visible* church as body and bride (Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4-5). The visible, institutional community with its diversity of gifts, its officers and rites, is the body of Christ.

⁷ Does baptism make this membership or simply make public a pre-existing membership? The Reformed tradition has not been unanimous on this point, and even individual theologians have spoken differently at different times. On a strict interpretation of the Confession, however, baptism “admits” the baptized into the visible church, which is “God’s family.” Therefore, baptism *effects* this adoption into the family of God. This does not mean, of course, that God did not regard the baptized with favor before baptism; on the contrary, the baptized would not have been baptized at all without the prior grace of God (the grace of being born into a Christian family, for example). The analogy with adoption is useful: Parents have affection for a prospective adoptee prior to the actual adoption, but the child is not their child until the adoption happens. The adoption decree is what speech-act theorists describe as a performative act. God sets His love on the baptized prior to baptism, but baptism is the performative act, the official adoption of the child into the family of God.

⁸ The Catechisms follow the same usage. Neither catechism, so far as I have found, describes the visible or invisible church as “bride” or “spouse,” and no passage in the catechism states unambiguously that the visible church is the body of Christ. LC #168 states that the Supper testifies to and confirms mutual love of those who are members of the “mystical body,” but this benefit is limited to those who worthily partake and thus seems to be talking about the elect.

The PCA's Book of Church Order is closer to the New Testament usage. In several places, it acknowledges that the visible church is the body of Christ. In a section on the "visible church defined," we read:

This visible unity of the *body of Christ*, though obscured, is not destroyed by its division into different denominations of professing Christians; but all of these which maintain the Word and Sacraments in their fundamental integrity are to be recognized as true branches of the Church of Jesus Christ (2-2).

BOCO 47-7 speaks of the public worship of the body of Christ: "Public worship differs from private worship in that in public worship God is served by His saints unitedly as His covenant people, the Body of Christ." The prayer for the dedication of a church building (Appendix F) includes thanksgiving for membership in the church, apparently the visible church: "Your great goodness in granting to us, through Your particular grace, membership in the Church Universal, the mystical Body of Christ."

So, the crux of my view of baptismal efficacy depends on a position very much within the bounds of our Confessional Standards, that is, that baptism admits the baptized into the visible church, the body of Christ.

2. Temporary or "Common" Benefits.

Second, and more controversially, I am drawing on the Reformed notion of temporary benefits and temporary faith. The Confession alludes to this reality only in passing, speaking of the "common operations of the Spirit" enjoyed by some of the non-elect (WCF 10.4).⁹ The Confession hastens to add that the reprobate who share in these works of the Spirit "never truly come to Christ, and therefore cannot be saved" (10.4). I agree that reprobates cannot be saved. If, however, the phrase "never truly come" implies that *no* reprobate has *ever* had *any* real connection or communion with Christ, I disagree.

Is that what "never truly come to Christ" means? My reading of the history of Reformed theology suggests differently. Reformed views on temporary benefits are more complex than this Confessional statement indicates, and Reformed theologians have regularly debated and discussed the nature and extent of the temporary benefits enjoyed by some of the reprobate. Given that history, I do not believe that the WCF intended to dismiss the notions of temporary faith and temporary benefits.

a. Temporary Faith.

First, Reformed theologians have long recognized the phenomenon of temporary faith, and have frequently distinguished temporary faith not only from saving faith but from mere historical faith. Calvin distinguished the faith and experience of the reprobate from the elect in various ways, but he made it clear that some of the reprobate enjoy what he calls the "inferior operation of the Spirit." The highlighted portions of the quotation below

⁹ The Scripture proofs cited include the parable of the sower in Matthew 13 and Hebrews 6:4-5.

it appears harsh to some, when faith is attributed to the reprobate, since Paul affirms it to be the fruit of election. But this difficulty is easily solved; for, though none are illuminated to faith, or truly feel the efficacy of the gospel, but such as are preordained to salvation, yet experience shows, that **the reprobate are sometimes affected with emotions very similar to those of the elect, so that, in their own opinion, they in no respect differ from the elect.** Wherefore, it is not at all absurd, that a taste of heavenly gifts is ascribed to them by the apostle, and a **temporary faith by Christ:** not that they truly perceive the energy of spiritual grace and clear light of faith, but **because the Lord, to render their guilt more manifest and inexcusable, insinuates himself into their minds, as far as his goodness can be enjoyed without the Spirit of adoption.** If any one object, that there remains, then, no further evidence by which the faithful can certainly judge of their adoption, I reply, that although **there is a great similitude and affinity between the elect of God and those who are endued with a frail and transitory faith,** yet the elect possess that confidence, which Paul celebrates, so as boldly to "cry. Abba, Father." Therefore, as God regenerates for ever the elect alone with incorruptible seed, so that the seed of life planted in their hearts never perishes, so he firmly seals within them the grace of his adoption, that it may be confirmed and ratified to their minds. But this by no means prevents that **inferior operation of the Spirit from exerting itself even in the reprobate.** In the mean time the faithful are taught to examine themselves with solicitude and humility, lest carnal security insinuate itself, instead of the assurance of faith. Besides, the reprobate have only a confused perception of grace, so that they embrace the shadow rather than the substance; because the Spirit properly seals remission of sins in the elect alone, and they apply it by a special faith to their own benefit. Yet **the reprobate are justly said to believe that God is propitious to them, because they receive the gift of reconciliation, though in a confused and too indistinct manner:** not that they are partakers of the same faith or regeneration with the sons of God. but because they appear, under the disguise of hypocrisy (*Institutes* 3.2.11; emphasis added).

The Scottish theologian Robert Rollock (1555-1599) distinguished temporary faith from merely historical faith, arguing that the former

hath the same object with justifying faith, and which is properly so called, namely Jesus Christ with his benefits, offered in the word of the Gospel and in the Sacraments; wherein it differs from historical faith, which hath for the object thereof the universal truth. It hath the same subject with justifying faith; for it hath its seat both in the mind, and also in the will and heart.

Last of all, **it [temporary faith] hath as many parts of nature as the justifying hath. For it is a knowledge of the understanding, conjoined with both the judgments of the mind, and it is the apprehension of the will or heart, whereout followeth also the stirring of the affections, as of joy, delight, &c.**¹⁰

¹⁰ *A Treatise of God's Effectual Calling* pg. 208, 210 in *The Select Works of Robert Rollock* Vol. 1 (Woodrow Society 1849), quoted at <http://wedgewords.wordpress.com/2008/06/26/robert-rollock-on-temporary-faith>, accessed August 5, 2008; emphasis added.

Irish Archbishop Ussher (1581-1656) expressed the same view in his *Body of Divinity*, which was widely read by the Westminster Divines. He too distinguishes historical and temporary faith, describing the latter as “a joyful entertaining of the Promises of the Gospel, with some seeming Confidence.” Temporary faith does not save since it is “but vanishing, uncertain, and not rooted; lasteth but for a time, and then comes to nothing.”¹¹ Turretin likewise acknowledges the reality of temporary faith, and discusses the various ways in which temporary faith differs from saving faith.

I cite these not because I agree with every particular in these accounts. I am already on record contesting certain features of Turretin’s description of temporary faith (in *The Baptized Body*). I cite these simply to establish the fact that Reformed theologians have regularly acknowledged the phenomenon of temporary faith.

b. Temporary Benefits.

Along with a notion of temporary faith, many Reformed theologians have accepted that reprobates may enjoy temporary benefits, probably analogous to the Confession’s “common operation of the Spirit.” At the beginning of the seventeenth century, some in the Protestant church of England held to the Augustinian position that some reprobates could temporarily enjoy *soteriological* benefits. The English delegation to the Synod of Dort (1618) submitted a request that the Synod remove its condemnation of the view that some reprobates may be regenerated and justified for a time. The petition was successful; this view was not condemned by Dort. According to Samuel Ward’s account in *A Theologis Ecclesiae Anglicanae de canonibus formandis aliisque in Synodo Dordacena proposita*, the English delegation’s argument was threefold:

We ourselves think that this doctrine is contrary to Holy Scriptures, but whether it is expedient to condemn it in these our canons needs great deliberation. On the contrary, it would appear

1. That Augustine, Prosper and the other Fathers who propounded the doctrine of absolute predestination and who opposed the Pelagians, seem to have conceded that certain of those who are not predestinated can attain the state of regeneration and justification. Indeed, they use this very argument as an illustration of the deep mystery of predestination; which cannot be unknown to those who have even a modest acquaintance with their writings.

2. That we ought not without grave cause to give offence to the Lutheran churches, who in this matter, it is clear, think differently.

3. That (which is of greater significance) in the Reformed churches themselves, many learned and saintly men who are at one with us in defending absolute predestination, nevertheless think that certain of those who are truly regenerated and justified, are able to fall from that state and to perish and that this happens eventually to all those, whom God has not ordained in the decree of election infallibly to eternal life. Finally we cannot deny that there are some places in

¹¹ *A Body of Divinity: Being the Sum and Substance of the Christian Religion* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Books, 2007), p. 176.

Scripture which apparently support this opinion, and which have persuaded learned and pious men, not without great probability.¹²

Two things are noteworthy about this argument, particularly the third paragraph. First, the English delegation claimed that men within the English Protestant church believed that justification and regeneration might be temporary benefits. At the time, the English church was thoroughly Calvinistic.¹³ Second, the Synod of Dort, high as high Calvinism can get, agreed with the English delegation that this was an allowable position.

Though disagreeing with the Augustinian position described above, the English delegation made it clear that they affirmed the possibility that the reprobate could enjoy certain benefits of the covenant temporarily. With reference to the doctrine of perseverance, they wrote that “There is a certain supernaturall enlightening granted to some of them, who are not elect, by the power whereof they understand those things to be true, which are revealed in the Word of God, and yield and unfained assent unto them.” Expanding this point, they added:

The truth of this position concerning the first part, namely the enlightening of their minds, is plainly collected out of the Scriptures, Heb. 6:4. Where the Apostle maketh mention of such as sinned against the holy Ghost, affirming that they *were enlightened*, and in the 10. Chap. And 26 Vers. hee intimateth that they might wilfully sin *after they had received knowledge of the truth*. The Apostle Peter also, 2 Pet. 2.22 makes mention of some, who, when they knew the way of righteousness, neverthelesse *turned from the holy commandment which was given to them*. *Judas was the sonne of perdition*, Joh. 17.12. yet he was furnished with the knowledge of the Gospell; and thereupon was sent by Christ with the other *Apostles to preach the Gospell to the house of Israel*, Matt. 10.7. And Christ threatneth the like punishments to them that despise the preaching of *Judas*, as of others v. 9. All those were enlightened with a supernaturall knowledge of the Gospell. Which illuminating proceeding from the holy Ghost did beget a true knowledge in the mindes of these men: out of which knowledge they, as occasion required, brought forth actions suitable to the same.¹⁴

The section concludes by saying that “backsliders of this kinde” are punished “not because they fained that faith they never had, but because they forsooke the faith they had: and they sin in a far greater measure, which depart from the grace of faith conferred upon them, then

¹² Quoted in Peter O. G. White, *Predestination, Policy, and Polemic: Conflict and Consensus in the English Church from the Reformation to the Civil War* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 198. Page available at Google Books: <http://books.google.com/books?id=R2YbB1021ZgC&printsec=frontcover&dq=peter+white+predestination&sig=ACfU3U3IrPeletwKmK8im9Dwg0t05xkyUQ#PPA198,M1>, accessed August 5, 2008. The English delegation also fought, unsuccessfully this time, to remove the seventh rejected error under the heading of Perseverance, which denies that temporary and persevering faith differ only in duration.

¹³ Nicholas Tyacke, *Aspects of English Protestantism, 1530-1700* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 164 argues that the Calvinist domination of the English church was established by the 1590s and continued into the first two decades of the seventeenth century, when Arminianism began to take hold in some quarters of the English church.

¹⁴ From “The Collegiate Suffrage of the British Divines,” reprinted in Anthony Milton, ed., *The British Delegation and the Synod of Dort (1618-1619)* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2005), pp. 266-267.

they who never tasted of the glad tidings of the Gospel, as our Saviour teacheth us, John 15.22.”¹⁵

c. Temporary Justification and Regeneration.

The view that justification can be lost is explicitly rejected by WCF 11.5: those justified “can never fall from the state of justification.” The British delegation to Dort said the same. Though reprobates may be “in their minds, will and affections disposed . . . in some sort to justification,” yet “they who are not elect . . . never attain unto the state of adoption and justification.”¹⁶

But again the actual views of seventeenth-century Reformed theologians are more varied. While not holding the view of temporary justification and regeneration described in the English delegation’s appeal, some Reformed theologians taught that baptized infants received a form of justification that was not identical to the justification of adults who exercise conscious faith. This justification might be lost if the baptized child turned from the Lord, but until that time the child remained in a state of justification.

In his letter to Samuel Ward, John Davenant (1542-1641), himself a member of the English delegation to Dort and an ardent foe of Arminius, defended the proposition that “all baptized infants are absolved of the guilt of original sin.” He said it is not absurd to think that baptized infants who are later damned enjoy a “temporary ordination to eternal life through the remission of original sin,” a temporary ordination that is “able to stand without the benefit of election.”

For Davenant, this remission of original sin constitutes the baptized infant’s justification, regeneration, sanctification, and adoption. At the same time, he distinguished between this justification, etc. of infants, which might be lost, and the justification of adult believers who cannot lose these blessings:

To these points I now add further, which is proper to my present intention, that—as the justification, regeneration, adoption, or sanctification of which we have been speaking arises from the forgiveness of original sin, through the blood of Christ applied to infants in baptism; and as that remission of sin remains the same as in adulthood and cannot be lost, although it may not draw along after it those effects which (God so ordains) are limited to that age liable solely to original sin—who does not see that, from the example of infants, it is badly concluded that the justification or sanctification of adults, once secured, may be lost?

Thus, he defended as a second proposition the belief “That the justification, regeneration, adoption, which we admit does belong to baptized infants, is not univocally the same with that justification, regeneration, and adoption, which we say is never lost with regard to the matter of the saints’ perseverance.” He distinguished between “the sacramental regeneration proper to regenerated infants” and “that other regeneration from the seed of the word and the efficacy of the Holy Spirit, which is necessary for the effectual regeneration

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 267.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

of adults.” Davenant goes so far as to describe the infant’s status as “salvation,” though qualified as a salvation suitable to their immature condition: “Justification and regeneration and adoption of baptized infants confer on them a state of salvation according to the condition of infants.”¹⁷

Samuel Ward, also a delegate to Dort and a student of William Perkins, claimed that “most of our divines do make the principal end and effect of all the sacraments to be oblation, and all sacraments to be merely oblationary signs.”¹⁸ As a result, for most English theologians “the ablution of infants from original sin, is only conditional and expectative, of which they have no benefit, till they believe and repent.” Ward himself could not “easily assent hereunto.” He instead defended the Augustinian position that baptized infants were cleansed of original sin.

According to Ward, if baptism is “oblationary” only, then “Infants baptized, dying in infancy, have no benefit by baptism. And all non-elect infants have no benefit at all, so that to both of these they are *nuda et inefficacia signa*.”¹⁹ Interestingly, Ward thinks that denying that non-elect infants are cleansed of original sin turns baptism into a “naked and ineffectual sign.” To put it more strongly, he argues that denying that the reprobate receive benefits from baptism destroys the very character of baptism. He also argues that infant baptism is rendered pointless if nothing happens until the infants get older: “What necessity of baptizing infants, if it produce no effect till years of discretion?”

Richard Baxter did not agree with Ward and Davenant, but he summarized their views without censuring them:

After the writing of that book [Plain Scripture Proof of Infants’ Church Membership and Baptism], I wrote a postscript against the doctrine of Dr. Burgess and Mr. Thomas Bedford, which I supposed to go on the other extreme; and therein I answered part of a treatise of Dr. Samuel Ward’s, which Mr. Bedford published; which proved to be Mr. Thomas Gataker’s, whom I defend, who is Dr. Ward’s censor; but I knew it not till Mr. Gataker after told me. But, after these writings, I was greatly in doubt whether it be not certain that all the infants of true believers are justified and saved, if they die before actual sin. My reason was, because it is the same justifying, saving covenant of grace which their parents and they are in, and as real faith and repentance is that condition on the parents’ part which giveth them their right to actual remission, and adoption: so to be the children of such is all the condition which is required in infants, in order to the same benefits; and without asserting this, the advantage of the Anabaptists is greater than every one doth imagine. But I never thought with Dr. Ward that all baptized children had this benefit, and qualitative sanctification also; nor with Dr. Burgess and Mr. Bedford, that all converted at age, had inherent seminal grace in baptism certainly given them;

¹⁷ All quotations taken from Joel Garver’s translation of Davenant’s letter, found at <http://www.joelgarver.com/writ/hist/davenant.htm>, accessed August 7, 2008. On Davenant, see the discussion in Jonathan D. Moore, *English Hypothetical Universalism: John Preston and the Softening of Reformed Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), esp. pp. 187-198.

¹⁸ “Oblationary” is defined in various dictionaries as “ratifying; confirming by sealing.”

¹⁹ Ward’s letter is available at <http://www.joelgarver.com/writ/hist/ward.htm>, accessed August 7, 2008.

nor with Bishop Davenant, that all justly baptized had relative grace of justification and adoption; but only that all the infants of true believers who have right to the covenant and baptism in *foro coeli*, as well as in *foro ecclesiae*, have also thereby right to the pardon of original sin, and to adoption, and to heaven, which right is by baptism sealed and delivered to them. This I wrote of to Mr. Gataker who returned me a kind and candid answer, but such as did not remove my scruples; and this occasioned him to print Bishop Davenant's Disputations with his answer. The opinion which I most incline to, is the sans which the Synod of Dort expresseth, and that which I conjecture Mr. Davenant meant, or I am sure came next to it.²⁰

The views of Ward and Davenant were not universally accepted by any means, but they were well within the mainstream of Reformed theology. Over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there was a spectrum of views regarding the relation of baptism and soteriological benefits. Joel Garver, for example, notes that there were a variety of views regarding the connection of baptism with this "initial regeneration." It was common for theologians to argue that baptism conferred an initial seed of regeneration, though the details of this belief varied: "A further complication is whether these beginnings of regeneration are enjoyed by all covenant infants (which Calvin sometimes seems to suggest), all baptized covenant infants (a view we find in Thomas Cranmer, John Davenant, Samuel Ward, Thomas Bedford, Louis Le Blanc, and Pierre Jurieu, among others), or only elect covenant infants, whether received at baptism or some other time (though the views of Jerome Zanchius, Junius, Chamier, Cornelius Burgess, and others tie the initial regeneration of elect infants closely to baptism)."²¹

As I have noted, both Davenant and Ward were delegates to Dort, and respected and prominent ministers in the Protestant church of England into the 1630s. Both taught that baptism cleansed from original sin and, for Davenant, conferred a status of justification. At the same time, Davenant made clear that this infant justification was not identical to the justification of adults who have faith.²² It seems highly unlikely that the Westminster Assembly intended to condemn and exclude the views of men like Ward and Davenant.²³ When the WCF rejects the idea that justification can be lost, therefore, it is using "justification" in a sense different from that of Davenant.

My baptismal views depend on a notion of real but temporary benefits for at least some of the reprobate. Though my views are not identical to those of Ward and Davenant,

²⁰ Quoted by John Vant Stephens, *Elect Infants: Or, Infant Salvation in the Westminster Symbols*, pp. 119-121, available at <http://books.google.com/books?id=4eUOAAAIAAJ&printsec=titlepage#PPA121,M1>, accessed August 7, 2008.

²¹ "On Regeneration, Baptism, and the Reformed Tradition," available at <http://www.joelgarver.com/writ/sacr/regeneration.htm>, accessed August 7, 2008.

²² The views of Cornelius Burges (1589-1665), who was a delegate to the Assembly, are of interest, though not directly germane. Burges famously taught the "baptismal regeneration of elect infants," stating that "The principal point ... is that all elect infants do ordinarily receive from Christ the Spirit of regeneration as the first principle of spiritual life. This they receive, or their solemn initiation into Christ, and for their future actual renovation in God's good time—if they live to years of discretion."

²³ From what I can determine, it seems that between Dort and Westminster, English theology shifted as Calvinists responded to the rise of the Arminianism of Laud and others. It appears that the options available to Reformed theologians had narrowed by the time of the Assembly.

I am working within a similar framework. Though an admittedly minority position, this position is recognized as orthodox within the Reformed tradition.

3. Union with Christ.

My argument about baptismal efficacy is that the baptized are united to the visible church, which is the body of the Incarnate Son of God. Therefore, the baptized are united to Christ. This union may be only temporary; branches might be pruned from the vine. But the union is a reality nonetheless. The analogy with the positions of Davenant and Ward, outlined above, should be clear.

The question is: Can union with Christ be a temporary benefit of reprobates? Does the WCF allow for this position?

The Minority Report says No, claiming that union with Christ is a benefit enjoyed specifically by the elect. It is true that the Standards describe a permanent union with Christ as a special benefit of the elect or the invisible church (LC #65-66, 79). I agree that the elect enjoy such a union. The Father chose us in Christ from the foundation of the world, so that the Father never regards the elect except in union with Christ.

It should be noted, however, that LC #65 is more specific than the Minority Report in describing the special benefit of the invisible church as “union and communion with Him *in grace and glory*.” That the italicized phrase is not mere filler is evident from the fact that the Larger Catechism has specific questions concerning the elect’s communion with Christ “in grace” (#69) and “in glory” (#82). This suggests that the specific special benefit is not union with Christ as such, but a union of a particular character, a union “in grace and glory.” That leaves open the possibility that there is a union with Christ that is not a special benefit of the invisible church.

The Standards elsewhere seem to point to this possibility. Among the benefits of the visible church (LC #63) is the “communion of saints,” which is defined by the Confession (26.1) in this way: “All saints, that are *united to Jesus Christ their Head*, by His Spirit, and by faith, have fellowship with Him in His grace, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory: and, being united to one another in love, they have communion in each other’s gifts and graces.” Thus, enjoying the communion of saints in the *visible* church includes being united to Christ the Head as well as to one another.²⁴

Aside from the Westminster Confession, there is evidence from other Reformed confessions that baptism unites the baptized to Christ. According to John Knox’s *Scots Confession* (1560), “we utterly condemn the vanity of those who affirm the sacraments to be nothing else than naked and bare signs. No, we assuredly believe that *by baptism we are engrafted into Christ Jesus*, to be made partakers of his righteousness, by which our sins are

²⁴ The Standards perhaps hint in this direction with the use of the phrase “communion with God” to describe the original state of Adam (WCF 4.2). Adam “fell from” or “lost” this communion (WCF 6.2; SC #19; LC #27). The point is not to equate Adam’s state with that of the elect, but to show that the Standards recognize that “communion with God” can accurately describe a temporary condition. Admittedly, the Standards do not describe Adam’s condition as “union” with Christ.

covered and remitted.” The French Confession states: “We acknowledge only two sacraments, common to the whole church, the former whereof is baptism, given unto us to witness to our adoption, for *by it we are grafted into the body of Christ*, that being washed with his blood we might be renewed by his Spirit unto holiness of life... *[I]n baptism, God gives us really and in fact that which he there sets before us*; and that consequently with these signs is given true possession and enjoyment of that which they present to us.”²⁵

Was the Westminster Assembly repudiating these earlier confessions? That seems highly unlikely.

Whatever we conclude about the Westminster Standards or the Reformed confessional tradition, it is clear that the Bible indicates that some are united to Christ and are later cut off. Even the Minority Report admits as much: “TE Leithart is certainly correct to highlight the covenantal nature of the relationship between the Vine and the branches in John 15, and he is also correct in pointing out that even reprobate members of the visible church experience certain common operations of the Holy Spirit.” Their objection is that this “relationship” should not be described as “union with Christ.” That, it seems to me, is merely a quibble over words.

Does this leave me with a “parallel soteriological system to the decretal system of the Westminster Standards”? No more than the New Testament does, because the New Testament speaks both of people who are “in Christ” and cut off, and of people who are “in Christ” and can never be lost. As I understand the New Testament, this does not imply two parallel “soteriological systems.” There are not two streams of salvation. There is only one. The elect have been in the stream since eternity and are, from their personal incorporation into Christ, in the stream. The reprobate may move in and then out of the same stream.

4. Temporary saving benefits in the PCA Constitution.

The GA Federal Vision Report condemns the notion that some receive saving benefits of Christ and later lose them. As I see it, the Report itself runs contrary to our Standards. That is to say, the notion of temporary benefits is part of our Constitution.

Children of believers, we confess, are covenant children. At PCA baptisms, Acts 2 is often read: “The promise is to you and to your children.” According to the BOCO, the following statement is to be read at baptisms: “For to you is the promise, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call unto him. And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee. Believe on the Lord Jesus, and thou shalt be saved, thou and thy house. (Acts 2:39; Gen. 17:7; Acts 16:31)” (56-5). Based on such Scriptures, we say, quite rightly, that God is a God not only to us but to our children.

²⁵ Quoted by Rich Lusk, “Baptismal Efficacy and the Reformed Tradition: Past, Present, Future,” available at <http://www.hornes.org/theologia/rich-lusk/baptismal-efficacy-the-reformed-tradition-past-present-future>, accessed August 7, 2008.

This implies, if read straightforwardly, that we can say to *every* child in a PCA church, “God has made promises to you. God is your God. You are a covenant child.” Head-for-head, we can say those things to our children, every infant in the PCA. Is being a “covenant child” a saving benefit or not? Is having God as our God a saving benefit or not? Yes of course it is: Having God as my God is *the* saving benefit. Yet, no Presbyterian on earth (including me) believes that everyone who is baptized will end up sharing in the new heavens and new earth. When a baptized child has God as his God, he has a saving benefit that he may someday lose. That is what the BOCO says.

And we can push this further. If God is God to our children, does that not imply that God has forgiven and accepted them? Does it make any sense to say that God is God of our children, and yet also to say that they are children of wrath, piling up sins until they exercise personal faith? Do we say to our children, “God is your God, but He holds all your sins against you”? Do we say, “God is your God, but you are also a child of wrath”?

The PCA constitution does not support this kind of double-speak. BOCO 56-4, alluding to 1 Corinthians 7, says that children of believers are “federally holy before Baptism, and therefore are they baptized” (BOCO 56-4, h). This federal holiness mentioned in 56-4, h doesn't depend on baptism; it is the gift to the children of believers, and according to the BOCO is the basis not the result of baptism. If they are holy, they are accepted, cleansed; if they are holy, they have access. What else does “holy” mean? And is that not a “saving benefit”?

5. Response to criticisms of Majority Report.

Though concluding that my views are within Confessional boundaries, the Majority Report levels some serious and weighty criticisms against my views on baptism. I cannot fully address all their criticisms here but will make only a few brief remarks.

First, I should note that the quotations from *The Baptized Body* listed on page 9 of the Majority Report are simply efforts to paraphrase and summarize several biblical passages on baptism. The first that links baptism to God's judgment of sin and justification arises from Romans 6, where Paul says that those who have been baptized into Christ share in His death and therefore are “justified from sin” (v. 7). The second is drawing from 1 Corinthians 6:11, which I take as a baptismal passage, and the last is from Colossians 2:11-12. As I said above, my aim is to formulate baptismal theology in a way that makes these biblical expressions seem natural.

Second, the third quotation states that the baptized “share in all that he has to give.” On further reflection, I believe that this is overstated, and actually violates one of the principal assumptions of my baptismal theology. Above, I noted that I have attempted to avoid mechanistic models and metaphors for sacramental efficacy, and instead attempted to work out sacramental theology in personalist categories. But the notion that everyone shares *equally* in everything that Christ has to give verges back into a mechanistic conception. Since Christ and His Spirit are persons, and we are persons united in fellowship with them, the contours of that union and relationship vary from person to person. Even among the elect, it is not true to say that we *all* share in *all* Christ has to give; some know Christ more intimately than others. Reprobates who are branches in the vine for only a time certainly

have a different relationship with Christ than the elect. My more careful claim would be that the baptized share in Christ Himself and in His body, in varying ways and degrees.

Third, the Majority Report rests much of its criticism of my position on 1 John 2:19. The Majority Report is correct to chide me for not giving more attention to the passage. Arguably, however, that passage is not directly germane to the question at hand. Verse 18 warns that antichrists have already arisen, and antichrists in John's letters are false teachers opposed to Christ. In a review of Guy Waters's book on the Federal Vision, Jack Collins of Covenant Seminary points to a number of questions that need to be addressed in this passage:

Who are "they" who went out? ("Antichrists; v. 18.) Is this about apostasy in general? (Not obviously.) Who are "we" in this context? (John and his apostolic companions?) What is John's use of "of" (*ek*)? How strongly "qualitative" is the language used here? Since this is vital to Waters' view of church membership, and to his distinction between the "visible" and "invisible" church, he should lay out his case in full.²⁶

If the "going out" in 1 John 2:19 is not apostasy but unauthorized mission, then this passage is not the uniquely explanatory text that the Report suggests.²⁷ Even if the Majority Report's understanding of the passage is correct, it doesn't undermine the thesis of *The Baptized Body*. I could agree that apostate reprobates were never "of us" in the way that the persevering elect are, yet also argue that in various senses they were "of us" – at least in the sense that they publicly professed Christ, joined in worship with the people of God, shared in the church's ministry; perhaps in stronger senses as well. Since God's work is the work of discipling the nations, and reprobates may for a time share in that work, they may for a time be on "God's side of history."

This raises, fourth, the issue of internal/external. According to the Majority Report, I "decry" this distinction because it eviscerates the efficacy of baptism. That is true; I do decry *certain versions* of this distinction, particularly versions that regard the inner man as a being impervious to outside influence or effect. If external events and realities cannot penetrate to the inner man, then we have no grounds for sacramental theology at all, since sacraments are outward bodily acts.

At the same time, I acknowledge that the Bible regularly teaches that human beings have an internal and an external dimension. The tabernacle is, among other things, an architectural human being, and it has an "inner" and "outer" sanctuary. Paul uses an "inner man/outer man" distinction in various places (Romans 7:22; 2 Corinthians 4:16; Ephesians 3:16). So, the issue is not whether this distinction is a biblical one; it is. The question is what the Bible means by this distinction and how it functions. It's very easy for us to read the Biblical inner/outer distinction through our own cultural lenses, where the Cartesian subject/object, mind/body dualism is still instinctive.

²⁶ *Presbyterion* 33:2.

²⁷ Matthew 7 might be taken similarly. Jesus is clearly addressing false prophets in that text, and arguable the "I never knew you" should be restricted by that context. Jesus never knew false prophets as His representatives in mission.

Let me briefly analyze one important use of this sort of distinction, Romans 2:27-29. In the context (I believe) of a discussion of Jews and Gentiles, Paul introduces a distinction between different sorts of circumcision. There is the manifest circumcision in the flesh, and the “secret” (*kruptos*) circumcision of the Spirit. Jews who don’t keep the law are not Jews, and their circumcision is uncircumcision (v. 25). Only those who keep the law by the power of the Spirit are Jews and the true circumcision. Within Israel, then, there are some who are circumcised only in the manifest, fleshly sense, and others who are circumcised also in the secret, Spiritual sense.

For Paul, however, this does not mean that fleshly circumcision is meaningless or useless, or that those who received fleshly circumcision received nothing. As Paul’s argument continues into chapter 3, he asks “What advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision” (v. 1). Clearly, he is speaking of what he has just described as Jews and circumcision according to flesh; the advantage of those who are circumcised by the Spirit is obvious. Given Paul’s distinction between fleshly and Spiritual circumcision, we might expect him to answer his question with “Fleshly circumcision gives no advantage.” That is not what Paul says, however. “Great in every respect” (v. 2). Here, he lists only one of the great advantages of fleshly Israel – “they were entrusted with the oracles of God” (v. 2).

When Paul picks up the argument later in Romans, however, he expands on the advantage of fleshly Israel:

For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen. (9:3-5).

Fleshly Israel – the “visible church” of the Old Testament – received great blessings. They were the son(s) of Yahweh, had the glory of Yahweh dwelling in their midst, received the covenants and promises, had a law that was the envy of the nations, was privileged with the temple service and the great heritage of the patriarchs. Above all, they were the people of Jesus, the Christ, the king of all things. When God blessed forever became flesh, He became Jewish flesh. These are blessings enjoyed by the “manifest” or “external” Jew, and they are considerable.

I don’t think I am imagining things to conclude that Paul’s is not the view of many in the PCA. Do we tell baptized children, “Yours is the adoption; yours the glory and the covenants and promises and commandments; you have a great heritage, and are privileged to have a place in the temple of the living God”? If Reformed theologians and pastors had so robust an understanding of the gifts conferred in baptism, I would not have devoted so much time to the subject of baptismal efficacy.

Fifth, the Majority Report charges that I have not paid enough attention to the pervasive reality of nominalism and unbelief in the church:

We say again, one feature of Dr. Leithart's construction of baptismal efficacy that strikes us as particularly unfortunate and revealing is his failure to reckon with the fact that the spiritual situation of the largest part of the company of baptized unbelievers is not in fact described in the texts that he cites. The truly nominal – who have never “received the word with joy”; have never been “enlightened”; have never “tasted the heavenly gift”; have never “shared in the Holy Spirit”; have never tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age”; and “have [never] known our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” – are not apostates in the biblical sense of the term. The Bible does not describe generations-long unbelief in the church as if in every case the baptized individual had such powerful experiences of the reality of Christ and salvation but eventually turned his back on them. He was never at any time such a man as these texts describe. He was not once one thing and later another.

I have several responses to this. In certain respects, I concede the truth of the criticism. As I've written about baptism, my imagined picture of baptism is, for instance, a baptism in a faithful PCA congregation rather than the baptism of a child whose parents will never return to the church. I also concede that the description of Hebrews 6 don't necessarily apply to everyone who is baptized into the visible church. The “personalist” framework I've described above implies this very thing: Not every reprobate's experience is the same.

Yet, my position does have a way of dealing with the problem of nominalism. I disagree with the Majority Report's claim that some are “baptized and unbaptized.” Baptism is God's act, and it is as real and objective as the water on the baptized. Everyone who is baptized is claimed by Christ as His own. Baptism is not double, but the response to baptism is. Some will respond with faith in the promise delivered in baptism, and with loyal adherence to the Lord who claims them. Others will respond with varying degrees of treachery. Both, though, are baptized, and the traitor's end is all the worse because he rejected the gifts God gave him.

Further, I am not convinced that the description of Hebrews 6 is as rare as the Majority Report suggests. How can we know what God may be doing with an infant baptized by an unbelieving pastor in a shell of an Anglican parish? Baptism belongs to Christ, and I don't presume to know what the Lord of the church, the Lord of baptism, might be doing in any particular instance. I am not convinced of what the Majority Report states as a “fact” namely, “that the spiritual situation of the largest part of the company of baptized unbelievers is not in fact described in the texts that he cites.” Even if I concede the Hebrews 6 describes the rare case, we are still left with 2 Peter 2:20-22: Some “escape from the defilements of the world” and then “are again entangled in them.” On the surface, this appears a more common experience, and yet Peter describes the eventual apostate as one who has knowledge of the Lord and Savior and of the way of righteousness.

Finally, the Majority Report rebukes me for failing to take account of important biblical qualifications: “If Dr. Leithart's central affirmation in *The Baptized Body* is that ‘Without qualification or hedging, the church is the body of Christ,’ [p. ix] he was duty bound to address the class of scriptural texts that clearly qualify and hedge.” The quoted

statement is potentially misleading, so let me clarify. The visible church is the body of Christ, but it is the body of Christ in time and history, the body of Christ in the “already” awaiting the eschatological “not yet.” This could be described as a qualification; the claim that the church is the body of Christ is *eschatologically* qualified. Yet, the church, even in the already, is the body of Christ, the humanity of the glorified Son of God in the Spirit. That it is not yet a perfected body doesn’t mean it’s not the body. The church is analogous to the individual believer at this point: We will one day be perfected in holiness; but even now we are truly saints.

6. Conclusion.

At the center of my work on baptism has been the question of how we regard and treat *our* children. I have not been so directly concerned with thinking about how nominal Christians should treat *their* children. What are *we* allowed to say to our children? May we tell them that their sins are forgiven? May we tell them that God accepts them and counts them righteous? Should we assure them that they are beloved? Can we tell them they belong to Jesus and are united to Him? On the Minority Report’s position, it appears that we are not allowed to say any of these things with assurance. Union with Christ, justification and forgiveness are special benefits of the invisible church, and we have no way of knowing that our children are members of that community. But the promise is to us and to our children. They are covenant children, and God is their God.

II. “Bi-covenantalism” and the Covenant of works.

A. Background comments.

As the Minority Report points out, I believe the terms “mono-covenantal” and “bi-covenantal” have become unthinking slogans in this controversy that need to be examined more carefully. Each phrase captures an aspect of the biblical teaching on covenant, and each misses some important features of that teaching. On the one hand, Scripture sometimes speaks in the singular about God’s covenant. Yahweh often uses the phrase “my covenant,” and the biblical writers speak of “His covenant” (Genesis 6:18; 9:13-15; 17:2-4; Exodus 19:5; etc.). The claim that the covenant is, in a sense, “one covenant” does not simply rest on the grammatical fact that the word “covenant” appears in the singular, but also on the way that the Bible speaks of the covenant as the Lord’s single over-arching plan. This is the covenant whose fulfillment Zechariah celebrates in Luke 1: The Lord fulfills the holy covenant with Abraham (vv. 72-73) by raising up a “horn of salvation in the house of His servant David” (v. 69).

On occasion, however, Paul writes of covenants in the plural (Romans 9:4; Galatians 4:24; Ephesians 2:12). In Romans 9:4, Paul writes of the privileges of Israel, enumerating “covenants” alongside “adoption,” “divine glory,” “receiving the law,” “the temple,” the “promises,” and the “patriarchs” (vv. 4-5). What “covenants” is Paul referring to? There are explicit references in the context to the privileges of the Mosaic, the Solomonic, and the Abrahamic eras. Whatever specific covenants Paul has in mind, it is clear that he thinks

there are at least two.²⁸ So, there are multiple covenants within the history of Israel, a reality the Confession captures by saying there is one covenant of grace in different administrations.

Galatians 4:24 is explicitly bi-covenantal: “the women represent *two covenants*.” In Galatians 4, however, Paul is not speaking of a works/grace bi-covenantalism. Rather, the first covenant (Hagar) is the Sinai covenant, and the other covenant is, implicitly, the new covenant. Hebrews uses the first/second covenant scheme in the same way. The “first covenant” sets up the worship of the tabernacle (9:1), while the “new covenant” is that mediated through Christ (9:15). This is the New Testament’s characteristic framework: Where two covenants are invoked, the covenants do not correspond to “covenant of works” and “covenant of grace,” but to “Mosaic” (or “old”) and “new.”

These comments do not imply that the Adam/Christ, covenant of works/covenant of grace scheme is wrong. The Adam/Christ structure is a fundamental structure of biblical history (Romans 5:12-21). But these Scriptures do show that Bible’s presentation of covenant is more complex and varied than can be captured by either “mono-covenantal” or “bi-covenantal.” Arguing about whether the covenant is mono- or bi- is like arguing about whether God is Three or One. These comments also imply that the Minority Report is wrong to claim that my view is “mono-covenantal.” I refuse to choose.

As the Minority Report mentions, I also find it unfruitful to debate whether the covenant with Adam and the covenant in Christ are “fundamentally similar” or “fundamentally different,” whether they differ in “administration” or “substance.” Those terms are too general and vague to get at what we need to get at. The covenants with Adam and Christ are different in some respects, similar in others.

B. Clarifications on the Covenant of Works.

The Minority Report quotes me as saying that the contrast of the Adamic covenant with the new covenant is not a contrast between “a ‘legal’ versus a ‘gracious’ covenant.” The next sentence begins, “TE Leithart’s insistence that the Adamic covenant was not ‘legal.’” I would have made my point more clearly if I had written that the contrast is not a contrast between “an *exclusively* legal covenant and an *exclusively* gracious one.” I do believe that God gave Adam a law in the garden, as is clear from the quotation that follows in the Minority Report from my post “More from Ward.” The covenant with Adam was thus “legal” in the sense that Adam was obligated to keep God’s commandments.

In that respect, however, the covenant with Adam was the same as every other covenant in Scripture. Abraham was called to blamelessness (Genesis 17:1), and the Lord later commends him for obeying Him and keeping His charge, commandments, statutes, and laws (26:5). We too are called to living faith, a faith that works (James 2:14-26); we are called to fulfill the “law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). There are “legal” aspects to every covenant.

²⁸ I agree with Douglas Moo, who thinks the most likely referent is “the several covenants mentioned throughout the OT (with Noah, Abraham, the people of Israel at Sinai, and David. . .).” In *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 563).

At the same time, there is grace in every covenant as well. Adam's existence was an act of grace, and he was created in a state of integrity that was also a gift – obviously unmerited – from God. He had access to the tree of life, and he was on speaking terms with his Creator. He was created a son in the image of his heavenly Father (Genesis 5:1, 3; Luke 3:38). He was not created in a neutral state with the demand to work his way into fellowship with God. He was created in fellowship with God. Abraham too was called by grace, and after the exodus Yahweh delivered the law to a redeemed Israel. Adam was, further, called to faith. He trusted the Lord to give him food, to provide a helper suitable to him, to raise him up after putting him in deep sleep. His obedience arose from this trust. Yahweh commanded Adam to avoid the tree of life, and Adam was supposed to trust God's wisdom and obey Him. Because we are utterly dependent on our Father, faith is inherent in human life properly lived.

Grace and law from God's side, and a demand for faith and obedience from man, characterize *every* covenant in Scripture. No covenant is exclusively legal or exclusively gracious. No one is ever called to a dis-obedient faith or a faithless obedience.

My use of the term “soteriological” in talking about the Adamic covenant was infelicitous, and my claim that the discontinuity between the covenants of works and grace does not lie “in the manner of communion with God” was also potentially misleading. This leads to another set of clarifications. The way of life demanded of Adam was the way of obedience arising from faith, just as it is for us. But Adam did not need saving from sin and death (though he ought to have called out to Yahweh for rescue – for salvation – from the serpent). Hence, it was confusing for me to introduce the term “soteriological” in this context.

Further, because he was “born” in the garden and sinners are not, the means of access to God has changed, and radically. As he was originally created, Adam had communion with God as “naturally” as he had communion with Eve. Once Adam was expelled from the garden, and the way of return was blocked with angels with flaming swords (Genesis 3:24), his access to God was barred. The only way to return to the intimate fellowship of the garden was through sword and flame.

In the old covenant, entry into communion with God took place through the mediation of animals, who died and rose in smoke on behalf of the worshiper. In the new covenant, Jesus has passed through the sword and fire, dying and rising again not only to restore us to intimate communion with God, but to incorporate us even more intimately than Adam into the fellowship of the Trinity: “that they may be one; even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us. . . . I in them, and Thou in Me” (John 17:21, 23). Adam trusted his Father, but did not have to trust in a mediating Son to bring him into communion with God. Once brought into communion with God, we, like Adam, must trust and obey; but we must be *brought* into communion from a state of alienation. Adam was in fellowship with God without needing forgiveness through the shedding of blood; we do need forgiveness.

C. The “Principle” of the Covenant of Works.

The key claim of the Minority Report, and of the GA Report, is that

the discontinuity [the Confession] highlights between the pre- and postlapsarian covenants is one of *principle*, not simply of *administration*. The former is a conditional covenant whose blessings are secured through personal law-keeping, while the latter's blessings are secured by the law-keeping of Another, and are received by faith, which is itself a gift given by God.

In addition to the rebuttal provided by the Majority Report, I have a few comments on this formulation. First, the Minority Report is more specific than the Confession itself. The Standards never use the term "principle" to describe the difference between the Adamic covenant and the covenant in Christ, and the Confession was written by men who held to a variety of views concerning the conditionality of the new covenant.

Second, the Minority Report's formulation skims over important issues that need to be brought to the surface. It characterizes the prelapsarian covenant as a "conditional" covenant, but avoids this language when speaking of the requirement of faith in the new covenant. What does the Minority Report mean by "condition"? Is faith a "condition" for the enjoyment of blessings? Further, the Minority Report formulation seems to undermine the notion that Adam was a covenant head. What would have happened if Adam had remained faithful? Would all his descendants have secured covenant blessings through "personal law-keeping"? What if Abel had sinned, or Methuselah? Would the law-keeping of Another, of Adam, have had any effect on his descendants?

Finally, the formula of the Minority Report appears to imply that "personal law-keeping" is no longer required in the new covenant. If this is the Minority Report's aim, then it runs contrary to the Confession. WCF 16.2 ends with a paraphrase of Romans 6:22, stating that believers "having their fruit unto holiness, they may have the end eternal life." In the chapter on final judgment, the Confession states that each will "give an account of their thoughts, words, and deeds" and "receive according to what they have done in the body, whether good or evil" (33.1). This clearly indicates that personal righteousness is required for entry into life. Without the fruit of holiness, we don't reach the end of life.²⁹

I agree with the Majority Report that the "life" promised to Adam must have been something more than simple existence or even existence in communion with God. Adam had those gifts from the moment of creation. The promise may have included the state of *non posse peccare*, but given the use of the phrase "knowledge of good and evil" elsewhere in Scripture, I believe that the promised life is primarily a life of royal glory. Adam was created in righteousness and holiness, and promised glorification.

D. Historical perspective.

The central concern of the Minority Report is that my views dangerously mix grace and works by failing to distinguish between the works-principle of the Adamic covenant and the grace-principle of the covenant of grace. In leveling this charge, the Minority Report distorts the history of Reformed theology on the question of grace and works in the Adamic covenant. First, the Minority Report's list of Reformed theologians who root the distinction

²⁹ This is not a reversion to works. See below on final justification.

of law and gospel in the distinction between the covenants of works and grace is misleading. It is widely recognized that Calvin did not have a worked-out covenant of works doctrine, and Murray famously contested the very notion that the Adamic administration was properly called a “covenant.”³⁰

Second, Reformed theologians commonly note that grace was inherent in the covenant of works. Alongside this emphasis, Reformed theologians of the era of the Westminster Confession regularly denied that the Covenant of Works was meritorious. That is, the “conflation” of grace and works as operative principles of the Adamic covenant is pervasive in the Reformed tradition. A few quotations will illustrate.

Anthony Burges, a member of the Westminster Assembly, wrote:

though it were a Covenant of works, it cannot be said to be of merit. Adam, though in innocency, could not merit that happiness which God would bestow upon him. First, because the enjoying of God, in which Adam’s happiness did consist, was such a good as did far exceed the power and ability of man. It’s an infinite good, and all that is done by us is finite. And then in the next place, Because even then Adam was not able to obey any command of God without the help of God. Though some will not call it grace, because they suppose that only cometh by Christ, yet **all they that are orthodox do acknowledge a necessity of God’s enabling Adam to that which was good, else he would have failed.** Now then, if by the help of God Adam was strengthened to do the good he did, he was so far from meriting thereby, that indeed he was the more obliged to God.³¹

For Burges, the promised blessing of the Adamic covenant was secured through Adam’s obedience, but that obedience was possible only because of God’s assistance. Though Burges admits that this assistance was not always described as “grace,” his comment indicates that this usage is well-established in Reformed theology. It appears that Burges is guilty of the same error that the Minority Report attributes to me, namely, that of “conflating what Scripture everywhere sets in antithesis, i.e., the principles of works and grace as means to securing God’s heavenly blessings.” But the WCF clearly did not exclude views such as Burges’s.

Nor was Burges alone in this assessment. In the first edition of the *Institutes*, Calvin called attention to the various “gifts of grace” that Adam initially enjoyed, and then lost:

In order for us to come to a sure knowledge of ourselves, we must first grasp that Adam, parent of us all, was created in the image and likeness of God. That is, he was endowed with wisdom, righteousness, holiness, and was so clinging by *these gifts of grace* to God that he could have lived forever in Him, if he had stood fast in the uprightness God had given him. But when Adam slipped into sin, this image and

³⁰ Roland Ward is correct, though, to say that, despite his terminological objection, Murray’s account of the “Adamic administration” affirmed the basic contours of the covenant of works doctrine.

³¹ Quoted in Roland Ward, *God & Adam: Reformed Theology and the Creation Covenant* (Wantirna, Australia: New Melbourne Press, 2003), p. 119.

likeness of God was cancelled and effaced, that is, he lost *all the benefits of divine grace*, by which he could have been led back into the way of life (1.2).

Calvin made the same claim in the 1559 edition:

At that time, I say, when he had been raised to the highest degree of honour, Scripture attributed nothing else to him than that he was created in the image of God, thereby suggesting that man was blessed, not because his own actions, but by participation in God. What, therefore, remains for man, bare and destitute of all glory, but to acknowledge the God for whose kindness he failed to be grateful when he abounded with *the riches of his grace?* (2.2.1).

Turretin echoes this. Adam's "original righteousness can properly be called 'grace' or a 'gratuitous gift' (and so not due on the part of God, just as the nature itself also, created by him)" (*Institutes* 5.11.16).

Patrick Gillespie, brother to the Westminster Assembly's George Gillespie, wrote that one of the agreements between the covenants of works and grace was "that there was very much of grace and favour in both." In fact, the "moving cause in both was mere Grace," since "even the Covenant of works (howsoever the condition of it was obedience, and the reward of it was to works), even that Covenant was thus far a Covenant of Grace."³²

After a survey of the Reformed teaching on the covenant of works, Joel Garver concludes that "Explicit descriptions of the covenant of works in terms of divine grace are to be found in Reformed divines ranging from the 16th to the 20th centuries and as diverse as Zacharias Ursinus, William Bucanus, Francis Junius, Anthony Burgess, Patrick Gillespie, Thomas Blake, John Owen, Samuel Rutherford, William Bridge, Thomas Boston, John Brown of Haddington, Thomas Ridgeley, J. H. Thornwell, Robert L. Dabney, and Herman Bavinck. Many other Reformed theologians, while not employing the explicit language of 'grace' nonetheless speak of the covenant of works as 'voluntary condescension,' God's 'free gift,' unmerited divine 'favor,' and so on."³³

E. Conclusion.

My views on the covenant of works are well within the bounds of Reformed theology and the Westminster standards.

III. Justification and sanctification.

A. Justification and "deliverdict."

In several articles, I have argued that in some passages of Scripture, the language of "justification" is used to describe an act of deliverance. In summary, my exegetical argument is this: A favorable judgment (justification) from God is not only a bare verdict ("you are

³² Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 120.

³³ <http://www.joelgarver.com/writ/theo/covwor.htm>, accessed on July 30, 2008. I have relied on Garver's survey for a number of the quotations above.

righteous”) but an act of deliverance. It is both a forensic verdict and a deliverance; it is what I call a “deliverdict.” This is based on several lines of argument.

First, the biblical idea of “judgment” includes God’s actions not merely His declarations. When Yahweh condemned Israel, He sent them into exile; when He judged Babylon, Babylon fell. Second, in the Psalms, David’s pleas for favor in God’s course are simultaneously pleas for Yahweh to deliver him. If Yahweh *only* speaks to David in his distress, and doesn’t deliver him from his enemies, then Yahweh hasn’t judged David favorably. Third, in Romans 6:7 Paul uses the word “justify” to mean something like “liberate” (as it is often translated), and he is writing about liberation from sin and death through union with Christ’s death and resurrection. Romans 8:1-4 follow the same logic: There is no condemnation (i.e., there is instead justification) because the law of the Spirit has set us free from the law of sin and death. Hence, I concluded that the Bible, and Paul in particular, sometimes use the language of “justification” to describe what Murray called “definitive sanctification,” the once-for-all deliverance from Sin and Death.

In some ways, this is perfectly consistent with traditional Protestant understandings of justification. When we are justified, our Father not only pronounces a verdict over us, but also releases us from the consequences of our sin. Since being under the dominion of sin is one of the consequences of sin, justification liberates us from this dominion. Our Father does *not* say, “You are righteous before me; but I’m going to leave you in prison.”

Based on my exegetical study, though, I concluded that the Reformed tradition has been “narrow” in its grasp of justification, and that it is “too rigid” in distinguishing justification and sanctification. Paul’s use of these terms and concepts is more flexible than the Reformed Confessional tradition has been. Reformed theologians and exegetes have recognized the discrepancy between Confessional usage and biblical usage. Turretin notes that the Bible uses the language of “justification” in ways that do not conform to the Reformed Confessions, but claims that those biblical uses are “improper” and are therefore not part of the Confessional tradition. In his commentary on Romans, John Murray recognizes that Paul uses “justify” in a context dealing with what systematic theologians would call “sanctification” (Romans 6:7). He concludes that there is a judicial aspect to definitive sanctification.

My complaints against the Reformed tradition at this point are these: If the Confessional formulation of justification is founded on a portion of the relevant biblical material, it is too narrow. All relevant passages of Scripture should be taken into consideration. To put it another way, if the Confessional language is stricter than Paul’s language, then the Confessional language needs to be adjusted accordingly. At least, in our theological formulation, if not in our Confession, we should attempt to incorporate everything that the Bible teaches on the subject of justification, and not rule out “improper” uses ahead of time.

B. Strict and Narrow Sense.

One of the issues in this section is whether the term “justification,” either in Scripture or in Reformed theology, must *always* be taken in the strictly forensic sense.

Witsius sharply dismisses this notion, claiming that “the most eminent Protestant divines” have recognized broader and narrower senses of the term:

VI. What then? Are we thus to state the question, namely, whether the term to justify has *always* in scripture a forensic sense? But the most eminent Protestant divines do not affirm this, and therefore it would be too harsh and inhuman to charge them with prevarication on that account. Beza on Tit. iii. 7. thus comments; “I take the term justification in a large sense, as comprehending whatever we obtain from Christ, as well by imputation, as by the efficacy of the Spirit in our sanctification, that we may be $\alpha\zeta\tau\omicron\iota$, that is, perfect and complete in him. Thus also the term justify is taken, Rom. Viii. 30. Much to the same purpose *Thysius in synops. Purior. Theolog. Leyden. Disput. 23 sect. 3.* Nor yet do we deny, that, on account of their very great and close connection, justification seems sometimes to comprise sanctification also, as a consequent, Rom. viii. 30 Tit. iii. 7, &c. I shall add one testimony more, namely, *Chamierus Panstrat. T. 3. Lib. 10. c. 1. No. 6.* who speaks to this purpose: “We are not such ridiculous judges of words as not to know, nor such impertinent sophisters, as not to allow the terms *justification* and *sanctification*, are put one for the other: yea, we know that they are called saints principally on this account, that in Christ they have remission of sin. And we read in the Revelations [sic], ‘let him that is righteous, be righteous still;’ which can only be understood of the progress of inherent righteousness; and we deny not, that there may be a promiscuous use of the words perhaps in other places.”³⁴

C. Union with Christ and Justification.

Another issue is the relationship between union with Christ and the blessings of justification and sanctification. The Minority Report admits that “union with Christ is often understood by the Reformed tradition to be the rubric under which the various blessings of the covenant of grace come to us,” but then claims that “there is no confessional warrant for using union as an means to collapse these blessings together, or to allow the line distinguishing justification and sanctification to be blurred.” The Minority Report claims that I have blurred these realities, citing my article on justification in *The Federal Vision*.

Several points to begin: I have not argued for what I’ve called a “deliverdict” by appeal to union with Christ, but rather by exegetical study of a number of passages of Scripture. I agree with the Minority Report that union with Christ does not blur justification and sanctification in its emphasis on union with Christ. Second, I was mistaken to suggest that the Reformed tradition has “separated” justification and sanctification. At its heart, Reformed theology unites justification and sanctification as deeply as they can be united, since they are regarded (emphatically in Calvin) as the *duplex gratia* that flows from participation in Christ. I should instead have used the word “distinguished.”

Third, my arguments do not entail the conclusion that there is no distinction to be made between justification and sanctification. In biblical categories, justification is the language of the lawcourt, while sanctification is the language of the sanctuary. Justification is

³⁴ *Economy of the Covenants* Vol 1. Bk. III Chap. VIII.

about our legal standing before God, while sanctification is about our access to God's presence in His house. Finally, I don't believe that we have a right standing before God because of infused righteousness, or our works, or our progress in sanctification. We have a right standing before God because we have been graciously united to Christ, and because the Father regards us as righteous (imputation) in His Son.

D. Conclusion.

Given the opportunity, I would add some phrases and nuances to the Confessional statements about justification, incorporating a broader range of biblical texts. Yet, I agree with what the Confession and Catechisms say about justification as far as they go.

IV. Final Justification.

A. The meaning of "justification."

The Minority Report insists that, Confessionally speaking, final judgment is not properly described as "final justification." In the Standards, "'justification' refers to God's verdict concerning his people, expressed in the *present*, grounded upon Jesus' work imputed to them by faith alone."

Several points may be made in response. First, it is true that not everyone judged at the last day will be judged favorably, so "final judgment" is a broader concept than "final justification." The two are not identical. When the phrase "final justification" is used, it is used of those who are in Christ, who are judged favorably according to their works at the last day. Second, it is not entirely accurate that the Confession reserves the language of justification to the present. The Minority Report itself quotes from Larger Catechism #90, which describes the final judgment of the righteous as an "acquittal."

Third, there is a long history in the Reformed tradition of referring to the final, favorable judgment on the righteous as a "justification." Witsius writes that "in the day of the general judgment, [Christ] himself will peremptorily pronounce the *justifying sentence* upon the elect."³⁵ Finally, and decisively, the Scriptures themselves use the verb "justify" to describe the final judgment. Speaking of the final judgment according to works, Paul writes that "not the hearers of the Law are just before God, but the doers of the law will be justified" (Romans 2:16). However one takes that passage – whether it is a hypothetical or a real judgment – it is clear that Paul is not reserving the language of "justification" to the present right standing of those who are in Christ.

Would Paul be judged out of accord with the Confession as interpreted by the Minority Report?

B. Works and justification.

The second concern of the Minority Report has to do with the role of works in justification. The Minority Report states: "Reformed theology has always distinguished

³⁵ Witsius, p. 404.

between ‘justification’ and ‘salvation,’ with good works being in some sense necessary for the latter, but never for the former.”

As a historical statement, this is simply false. Edward Polhill wrote:

Obedience is necessary, though not to the first entrance into justification, yet to the continuance of it; not indeed as a cause, but as a condition. . . . If a believer, who is instantly justified upon believing, would continue justified, he must sincerely obey God. Though his obedience in measure and degree reach not fully to the precept of the gospel; yet in truth and substance it comes up to the condition of it; else he cannot continue justified; this to me is very evident; we are at first justified by a living faith, such as virtually is obedience; and cannot continue justified by a dead one such as operates not at all. We are at first justified by a faith which accepts Christ as a Saviour and Lord; and cannot continue justified by such a faith as would divide Christ, taking his salvation from guilt, and by disobedience casting off his lordship; could we suppose that which never comes to pass, that a believer should not sincerely obey: How should he continue justified? if he continue justified, he must, as all justified persons have, needs have a right to life eternal; and if he have such a right, how can he be judged according to his works? no good works being found in him after his believing, how can he be adjudged to life? or how to death, if he continue justified? These things evince, that obedience is a condition necessary as to our continuance in a state of justification: nevertheless it is not necessary, that obedience should be perfect as to the evangelical precept; but that it should be such, that the truth of grace which the evangelical condition calls for, may not fail for want of it: “Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city,” (Rev. xxii.14.) The first fundamental right to heaven they have by the faith of Christ only: but sincere obedience is necessary that that right may be continued to them: in this sense we may fairly construe that conclusion of St James, “Ye see, then, how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only,” (Jam. ii.24.) Faith brings a man into a justified estate; but may he rest here? No, his good works must be a proof of his faith, and give a kind of experiment of the life of it.³⁶

Polhill distinguishes between the “forum of the law” and the “form of grace,” arguing that while in the former “Christ and his righteousness is all; neither our faith nor our works can supply the room of his satisfaction to justify against us against the law,” yet in the latter “our obedience answers to the evangelical condition, and is a means to continue our justified estate.”

Polhill cites Davenant, one of the members of the British delegation to Dort:

Good works are necessary to retaining and conserving the state of justification, not as causes, which through themselves effect of merit this conservation; but as media

³⁶ “A View of Some Divine Truths” in *The Works of Edward Polhill* (Soli deo Gloria, [1884] 1998), pp. 92-93.

or condition, without which God does not will to conserve the grace of justification in men.³⁷

John Preston explicitly described a “double justification,” one of the person and the other of the person’s faith:

there is a double justification; there is a justification of the person: so was Abraham justified by faith, as Saint Paul expresseth it, Rom. 4. But then there is a second justification, a justification of the faith that Abraham had, he justified his faith by his workes, he shewed that hee had not a dead faith, a livelesse faith, a faith without workes, but that he had a lively effectuall faith: for hee added workes to his faith, his workes wrought together with his faith. So that if the question be, Whether Abraham was an hyprocrite? His workes justified him that hee was none. If the question be, Whether Abraham was a sinner? His faith justified him, and shewes that he was made righteous through faith. So there is a justification of the person, and a justification of the faith of the person: as when a man is said to justifie such an action, or such a cause, the meaning is not, that he will make that just which was unjust before, but he will make it appear to be just: so Abraham was declared to have a justifying faith, by that power and efficacie it wrought in him, in offering up his son.³⁸

Biblically, again, the case is fairly simple. Does the New Testament ever claim that works are, in *any* sense, necessary for justification. Romans 2:16, again, claims that the “doers of the law are justified.” That is a controversial passage, but it shows that works and justification are legitimately linked. James 2 is even clearer. Again, this is a controversial passage, but whatever the specific sense of James 2, he explicitly states that we are “justified by works and not by faith alone” (v. 24). It is difficult to see how the Minority Report makes allowance for this biblical language. If the Minority Report interprets the Confession in a way that brings suspicion on Paul and James, the Minority Report has drawn the boundaries too tightly.

C. Conclusion.

It is self-evident that the Confession teaches final judgment according to works (33.1). If the Minority Report objects merely to the use of “justification” in this context, it is again quibbling over words and, in fact, ruling out expressions found in Scripture.

V. Imputation of Christ’s Obedience.

A. Historical perspectives.

³⁷ The Latin, quoted by Polhill, is: Bona opera sunt necessaria ad justificationis statum retinendum et conservandum; non ut causae, quae per se efficiant aut mereantur hanc conservationem; sed ut media seu conditiones, sine quibus Deus non vult justificationis gratiam in hominibus conservare.

³⁸ *The Breast-Plate of Faith and Love*. 5th ed. 1630, reprinted by (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1979) p. 176-177

Responding to my claim that the Standards do not require any particular position on the imputation of Christ's active obedience, the Minority Report states that "The Westminster Confession and Catechisms are not as unsettled or unsure about the manner by which the benefits of Christ are communicated to his people." I demur. There was diversity among Protestants, including among Reformed Protestants, about how best to formulate the doctrine of justification, including the role of Christ's obedience. This was evident to theologians of the post-Reformation period, and it is equally evident to contemporary historians of theology.

In his treatise *The Doctrine of Justification* (1677), John Owen states:

as to the way and manner of the declaration of this doctrine **among Protestants themselves, there ever was some variety and difference in expressions**; nor will it otherwise be whilst the abilities and capacities of men, whether in the conceiving of things of this nature, or in the expression of their conceptions, are so various as they are. And it is acknowledged that these differences of late have had by some as much weight laid upon them as the substance of the doctrine generally agreed in.

Specifically, Owen noted that there had been a well-known controversy among Reformed theologians about the imputation of Christ's active obedience:

There has been **a controversy more directly stated among some learned divines of the Reformed churches (for the Lutherans are unanimous on the one side), about the righteousness of Christ that is said to be imputed unto us**. For some would have this to be only his suffering of death, and the satisfaction which he made for sin thereby, and others include therein the obedience of his life also. The occasion, original, and progress of this controversy, the persons by whom it has been managed, with the writings wherein it is so, and the various ways that have been endeavored for its reconciliation, are sufficiently known unto all who have inquired into these things. Neither shall I immix myself herein, in the way of controversy, or in opposition unto others, though I shall freely declare my own judgment in it, so far as the consideration of the righteousness of Christ, under this distinction, is inseparable from the substance of the truth itself which I plead for.³⁹

Owen himself affirms the imputation of Christ's active obedience, but he does not treat its denial as a position that puts one outside the Reformed churches.

Chad van Dixhoorn, one of the leading contemporary authorities on the Westminster Assembly, notes that "though the imputation of Christ's active obedience was a matter of prolonged debate at the Assembly, the minutes record that when 'The Question was put' to include the imputation of Christ's active obedience in their definition of justification, 'three or four only [were] dissenting.'" According to the Assembly minutes and Anthony Burgess, who wrote a treatise on the active obedience of Christ, the dissenters

³⁹ *Doctrine of Justification by Faith*, available at http://www.godrules.net/library/owen/131-295owen_e2.htm, accessed August 11, 2008.

“seem to have been the older theologians such as William Twisse, Thomas Gataker, Richard Vines, and William Reyner.”⁴⁰

In his dissertation, Dixhoorn states, “The Assembly's confessional and catechetical documents certainly appear to reintroduce a level of ambiguity about the obedience of Christ which did not exist on this point in the revised eleventh article. But the introduction of ambiguous language does not, in itself, imply a motive or even intention for the change.” He adds,

Although there are only a couple of plausible interpretations of the Assembly's confessional and catechetical statements on Christ's obedience, there must have been a range of postures toward these statements, and motives for voting the wording they now contain. Those divines who did not hold to the doctrine of the imputation of the active obedience of Christ could be satisfied with the statement if they believed that it was a consensual construction, not *teaching* their position, but not *excluding* it either. Members who held to the doctrine of the imputation of the active obedience of Christ but still wanted a consensual statement of the matter could like wise vote for this formulation, for it allowed their doctrine. Those who held to the imputation of the active obedience of Christ and who thought that the *Confession* allowed only for their position could be happy. However, the divines who held to the doctrine of the imputation of the active obedience of Christ, who thought that the *Confession* and catechisms were consensual but wanted to *exclude* the theology of their opponents, were bound to be dissatisfied and likely voted against the wording of the *Confession* and catechisms; such were the majority who revised the Assembly's *Confession* in the 1650s. Clearly, the majority of the divines could share one intention but with diverging motivations.

And,

Perhaps the strongest evidence in favour of reading the Assembly's *Confession* in a consensual fashion is the fact that when the Independents revised and then reissued the Assembly's *Confession of faith* in 1658 [c.c.-i.e. the Savoy], they inserted the language of the “active and passive obedience” of Christ into their version of the *Confession*. These divines did not think that the Assembly's *Confession of Faith* held out the imputation of the active obedience of Christ as it ought, and they reintroduced

⁴⁰ In a footnote, he briefly summarizes the debate at the Assembly: “In the debates over justification and antinomianism at the Assembly, the majority of the divines argued that the imputation of Christ's active obedience is part of justification. One page of the minutes may suffice as a sample. Dr. Joshua Hoyle wound down his speech by reminding his fellow divines that ‘Adam's disobedience was an active disobedience[,] and soe [was] Christ's obedience.’ George Walker immediately concurred, adding that ‘you cannot separate Christ's active and passive obedience.’; Richard Vines questioned whether the doctrine was equally clear in both Testaments, but Theodore Bathurst rejoined that ‘making righteous is more than mere making Innocent.’ John Ley, the man in charge of the Assembly's committee for examining ministers, concurred.” Van Dixhoorn, “The Making of the Westminster Larger Catechism,” available at http://www.the-highway.com/larger-catechism_Dixhoorn.html, accessed August 11, 2008. The second quotation is from footnote 26.

language as strong as that used by the Assembly in 1643 in their revised text of Article Eleven.⁴¹

William Barker comes to a similar conclusion:

One of the interesting debates in the summer of 1643 pertained to the question of the imputation of Christ's active obedience, as well as his passive obedience, to the believer in justification. Daniel Featley, echoing Archbishop James Ussher, argued for the imputation of Christ's active obedience. Ranged against him were such figures as William Twisse, Thomas Gataker and Richard Vines, who contended that it was Christ's passive obedience alone that was imputed to the believer for justification. Such formidable theologians succeeded in getting the term '*whole* obedience' removed from the phrase 'imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them' in Chapter XI of the Westminster Confession, but the imputation of Christ's active obedience was thus included; and in the Savoy Declaration, under John Owen's influence, it would be sharpened into 'Christ's active obedience unto the whole law, and passive obedience in his death for their whole and sole righteousness'. The Westminster divines, in such controversies, sought to be clear and faithful to Scriptural language, yet to allow for shades of difference within a generic Calvinism.

Barker's point is clear: The Confession was written specifically to *include* not exclude ministers who denied that Christ's active obedience is imputed.

It's worth noting that none of these dissenters was ostracized for denying the imputation of active obedience. Twisse served as Prolocutor of the Assembly. Gataker was on the drafting committee to write the Confession. Reyner continued his ministry in Surrey for some years after the Assembly, before being expelled as a result of the Act of Uniformity. The Assembly formulated its statements to accommodate these dissenters, and clearly was not used to exclude them from ministry.

B. Biblical Perspectives.

The Minority Report offers Romans 5 as a defense of its affirmation of the active obedience of Christ. It claims that the position I articulated – that by union with Christ we share in the verdict that the Father declares regarding Christ – says “significantly less than the Westminster Standards affirm” and “also contradicts Paul’s clear teaching in Romans 5:15-19, where the apostle says that God’s people have received a ‘free gift of righteousness’ that consists of ‘one man’s obedience,’ i.e., Christ’s.”⁴²

The cited passage is quite at odds with the Report's claims, however. In context, it is clear that the “obedience” in view is the “passive obedience” of Jesus at the cross. Verse 9 connects our justification directly with the cross, claiming that we are “justified by His blood.” Verse 10 says that we have been reconciled by His death, and therefore shall be

⁴¹ *Reforming the Reformation: Theological Debate at the Westminster Assembly 1643-1652*, pp. 327-330.

⁴² In a footnote, the Minority Report promises an appendix defending its reading of Romans 5, but I have not seen that appendix.

saved by His life. In context, the “life” in view is the life of the resurrection, the life that follows the reconciling death, not the life that precedes it. More decisively, the Minority Report quotes from verse 19, where Paul claims that we are made righteous by the “obedience of the One,” but ignores the preceding verse. In verse 18 Paul says not only that Sin and Death are undone by One Man, the Last Adam, but says that there are undone by a single act of righteousness: “So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men.” The symmetry that Paul describes is not just a symmetry of “one man/One Man,” but a symmetry of “one transgression/one act of righteousness.” One could argue that verse 18 is a proof text *against* the imputation of active obedience, since it roots justification not in a series of acts of obedience during the life of Jesus but in a single act of righteousness in His death on the cross.

The final challenge from the Minority Report is that is this:

there is a vast difference between a person’s being given the obedience and satisfaction of Christ on the one hand, and “Christ’s history of obedience becom[ing] the life story of those who are in Christ” on the other. In the former, we actually receive our Lord’s righteousness, while in the latter it is unclear whether Jesus’ “history of obedience” is reckoned as our own (though TE Leithart is clear that it is not “independently imputed”), or whether it “becomes our life story” by means of the Spirit’s enabling us to live lives of covenant faithfulness (which TE Leithart calls “doing the law to be justified”).

First things first: I have not been able to find the quotation attributed to me (“doing the law to be justified”). I have searched my blog for that phrase, but have turned up no references. I don’t remember ever writing that, though I can imagine a context where I would say that (say, in an exposition of Romans 2, which states explicitly that the “doers of the law will be justified,” v. 13). I trust the writers of Minority Report can provide a citation.

As to the other claims: I don’t see the “vast difference” that the Minority Report suggests between imputation of active obedience and saying that Christ’s history of obedience becomes the life story of those in Christ. My phrasing is, however, potentially ambiguous, though the force of it should have been clear from the fact that I use that phrase in the context of describing my views on imputation. I do not mean that the obedience of Jesus becomes my life story by my obedience to Jesus. It becomes my life story because I am united to Jesus by grace through faith. His past is my past.

Finally, I have argued that the obedience of Christ is not “independently imputed.” Let me fill out that point a bit more. The point is to emphasize that imputation, God’s regarding us as righteous, is not independent of our union with Christ. Union with Christ entails imputation, entails the Father’s regard of us as righteous. Righteousness is not some detachable substance or quality that can be transferred from Christ to me. It is not as if I’m standing at some distance from Jesus, and God moves Christ’s righteousness from Jesus to me so as to impute that righteousness becomes mine. Righteousness is Christ’s standing in His Father’s sight, and because I am in Him I too have that standing.

C. Conclusion.

In my view, the Minority Report is demanding a stricter standard than the Standards themselves. The Confession cannot be used to exclude someone like myself, who has taken no strong position and is befuddled by the fuss on this issue.

VI. Conclusion.

I do not pretend that I have said the final word on any of these topics, and I look forward to the continuing conversation with and correction from the Presbytery. I have tried to be honest and clear, but where I have been obscure I ask the Presbytery's indulgence and charity.

Respectfully,
Peter J. Leithart