



Federal Vision & Covenant Progression... Selected

Now in this last lesson, I want to talk about Federal Vision theology¹ and Covenant Progression. And I also want to suggest some recommended reading. It is a lot to cover but if you will bear with me I think we can get through everything and perhaps even have some time for questions or comments.

Now the term “Federal Vision” is applied to a controversy in our own denomination that has been raging for about 7 or eight years and now at last seems to be beginning to wane. Now the assessment that it is beginning to wane may be more a reflection of my own personal hope and desire than reality. What was it Mark Twain said when he read in the paper that he had died, “Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated?”

You will also hear it sometimes referred to as “Auburn Avenue Theology” and when it is it is a reference to Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church in Monroe, Louisiana.² Auburn Avenue holds a theological conference every year and one of

their conferences, one held in 2002 I think, really lit the powder that exploded into a full-blown controversy.

The movement originally began at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia. It was started by a professor of systematic theology named Norman Shepherd. Specifically, it began in 1974, when Shepherd redefined faith in the act of justification to be “faith and works”.³ Now when Shepherd redefined “faith” in the act of justification to be “faith and works” things really hit the fan. He denied, of course, teaching that justification required faith and works and he affirmed holding to the orthodox position that justification is through faith alone. Still, students produced tape recordings of his classes that seemed to indicate something else. They seemed to indicate that he was actually teaching the instruments (notice I did not say the instrumental cause) of justification to be faith and works. Later, under pressure, Shepherd changed the buzz-word “works” to the word “faithfulness”. That did not help very much.

Eventually, Shepherd was dismissed from Westminster Seminary Philadelphia in 1981. He also had charges brought against him in the OPC for heresy. Shepherd survived the first round of charges but later left the OPC when charges were again brought against him for teaching doctrine contrary to the Westminster Standards.⁴ Shepherd left the OPC before his ecclesiastical trial and joined the CRC until his retirement in 1998.

During that time much of the controversy went underground. When Shepherd retired in 1998, he began preaching, teaching and writing on justification and the covenant and the controversy began to resurface.

All this was happening at just about the same time the New Perspective on Paul was peaking. Now I want to be clear, the NPP and Federal Vision Theology are two different things. The first was created outside of Reformed Circles and more or less seeped in the PCA and OPC because of the academic influence of men like James Dunn and N.T. Wright. The second, Federal Vision Theology, was very much created inside the Reformed Church and was promoted by men like Norman Shepherd and Doug Wilson and the speakers at the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church conferences.

Now the two views do overlap in that they both concern the doctrine of justification and you will find that sometimes a person holding Federal Vision views also holds to the New Perspective on Paul. But in reality and in substance they are different. The New Perspective focuses on the meaning of justification in Paul's writings and specifically on the fact that 2nd Temple Judaism (Judaism in the time of Paul) did not hold to works righteousness. It argues that Judaism has always held to salvation through grace and that understanding first century Judaism to have held to works righteousness only occurs because people read Martin Luther's conflict with medieval Catholicism back into the writings of Paul. The New Perspective maintains the view that what Paul taught was a sort of covenantal nomism. That is, he taught that people get into the covenant through grace but stay in the covenant through faithfulness of works.

Now I made the point last week that that was, in fact, the view of medieval Catholicism and that it was the very thing that Luther fought against. But I also made the point that it just happened to be the very thing Paul fought against...that is if you let Paul's words have their original meaning.⁵

Federal Vision theology also concerns the doctrine of justification but in a less radical way than the New Perspective. Federal Vision theology principally focuses on the objectivity of the covenant. Now what that means, at least superficially, is that the covenant really and truly has substance. It means baptism really has significance. It means involvement in a covenant community really has significance. It is not simply some sort of subjective experience. It is a real, objective act in history and time and space and it means something.

I have to tell you I agree with that part of its assessment. Still, as one of favorite theologians Inigo Montoya once said to the arch-heretic Vinzinni, I would have to say about the objective nature of the covenant espoused by Federal vision folk that, "You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means."

Anyway, Federal Vision theology really got rolling after the 2002 Auburn Avenue Conference in Monroe, Louisiana. A number of the speakers, some trying to clarify their understanding of covenantal objectivity and some just trying to be provocative, produced a number of seminars and sessions whose recordings had a deep impact on the PCA and the OPC.

Over the next few years the controversy deepened as a number of PCA and OPC pastors embraced Federal Vision language. I once, for example, had to participate in an investigation of a certain local PCA pastor that baptism produced a "living, vital union with the Savior." Now that language if it means anything means that baptism saves...it means that baptism regenerates. Fortunately, the pastor, a dear friend of mine and a person who had attended the Auburn Avenue Conference, was quick to admit that his language had not been

precise enough and that he had not meant to imply that baptism regenerated anybody. What he had meant to say is that the benefits of baptism actually are objective benefits and that we should encourage our people to baptize their children. The committee was able to encourage the brother to be careful about his remarks and to adopt language in keeping with the Confession and catechisms which he was willing to do.

Now I don't think any of that was a bad thing. I think it was a good thing and I am grateful that he was willing to listen to the instruction he was given. I have had the opportunity to preach in his pulpit several times in the past and hope to do so again.

Still, I am glad that the men of our presbytery were willing to affirm the historic teaching of our confession as accurately reflecting the Bible. I am glad they were moderate in their language. I am also glad they were men enough to confront the problem of imprecision because I think imprecision is the principle danger of the Federal Vision viewpoint.

I think a failure to stand up for the historic confessional views of our faith would almost certainly lead to a denominational meltdown. Still, I have been encouraged by the boldness of many of the men in prominent positions in our denomination. They want to hold to the historic Reformed faith and they hold that any misunderstanding regarding the doctrine of justification would be catastrophic. These issues come up every year at General Assembly and I glad our pastor and other such men go and are involved and vocal.

Now to the content of what Federal Vision theology teaches and this is somewhat difficult because not all views are the same. So forgive me if some of what I say has a tendency to generalize.

Federal Vision theology holds that when a person is baptized they receive all the benefits of Christ...that is they receive election, union with Christ, justification and adoption.⁶ That is, they hold to baptismal regeneration.

Generally speaking, Federal vision advocates also deny the historic three covenant view of covenant theology. That is, it rejects the view that there was a covenant of redemption prior to creation and it rejects the idea that there was a covenant of works at the beginning of creation. It also rejects the idea that there was a covenant of grace after the fall. Instead, it understands that there was only one covenant. That covenant was a conditional covenant of grace before the fall and a conditional covenant of grace after the fall.

Listen to Scott Clark:

This *apparently* gracious version of covenant theology is very much a child of the spirit of the age. In the 20th century, there had been serious criticism of historic Reformed theology as being “legalistic” (for teaching a pre-fall covenant of works and for teaching that Jesus’ obedience is the legal ground of our justification). It allowed them to market their views not only as gracious –which was attractive to those just discovering the doctrines of grace, who are fleeing fundamentalist legalism — but as new and improved.

Of course neither the FV nor the new comers attracted to it recognized or admitted that, having taken away the covenant of works from Adam and Christ, it is now up to us to cooperate with grace and thereby to fulfill “our part” of the covenant. This has the effect of placing the Christian in a covenant of works! So much for a “gracious” covenant theology.⁷

Now the long and the short of this particular view is that Federal Vision gets rid of the righteousness of Christ imputed to believers as the result of the active obedience of Christ. You see, and I hope I have made this clear along the way, the Reformed Church has always held the view that the Covenant of Grace was actually a covenant of works in which Christ earned our salvation. We believe it is a covenant of grace for us because he actively obeyed in our place. He actively obeyed the law of God...fully and completely and his active obedience is imputed to us so that we are viewed as righteous for what he has done. Of course, our sin was imputed to him. He bore that in his passive obedience on the cross. He bore our sin which removed the penalty due our sin. But had he not obeyed the law perfectly there would have been no basis for the imputation of his righteousness to us.⁸

Federal Vision theology denies the reality of Christ's imputed righteousness on the basis of his active obedience and tells us that we are to cooperate with God's grace by living lives of faithfulness.

Now I have to tell you I am not comforted by that at all. Not should you be. It is wrong and, I think, diabolical to argue in such a manner. Of course, we are to strive to live obediently on the basis of what Christ has done for us but that is a matter of sanctification not justification.

Either Christ obtained our justification or he did not. Either Westminster was right and Luther was right and Calvin was right and Paul was right or they were not. How repugnant it is to me to hear those that think that real wisdom can only be obtained in this modern day.

And the outworking of this rejection of the imputation of Christ's imputed righteousness winds up producing something very much like the New Perspective. It winds up concluding that entrance into the people of God occurs at baptism. Now I agree with that if you limit the statement to the visible people of God but many of these Federal vision folk believe that baptism is not just the sign but the seal of righteousness at the moment it is administered. That is they believe in baptismal regeneration. They believe that the sign accomplishes what it symbolizes and that a child is fully regenerated when they are baptized. As a result, they want very much to practice paedocommunion. They want little children to receive all the benefits of the covenant until they reject the covenant as covenant breakers, But the historic reformed faith has always argued that baptism is a sign of righteousness when it is administered...it is a sign to all. It is a sign when administered but that when a person comes to faith and believes in the Lord Jesus Christ that same sign becomes a seal to them and they ought to be committed to Lord's Table.

You see in the Federal Vision scheme...baptism replaces the gospel. Obedience replaces grace. Our active obedience replaces Christ's active obedience. Thanks goodness our denomination has had the courage to reject the idea and to make its rejection plain. My prayer is that it will hold the line.

Now I will be having Dave post an article by Michael Horton on the website entitled *Déjà vu All Over Again?* on Federal Vision theology if you want to read more. I think you might find it helpful. Also if you want to really know more and would like to read a book you will find *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology* by Guy Prentiss Waters very helpful.

Now if you will allow me, I would like to change gears and talk for a moment or two about the concept of covenantal progression, I've hinted at it along the way but have not addressed it in any sort of detail. I won't be going into much detail even now.

Covenantal progression concerns how we approach the salvation of our covenantal children. Should we look at them presumptively as believers or should treat them as we would any other unbeliever and exercise something more like revivalistic approach toward their evangelism.

The reason the issue comes up is because historically southern Presbyterianism tended, I think, to be much more revivalistic in its approach to its covenantal children. If you read James Henley Thornwell...particularly his letters to his children...I think you will be surprised by the way he talks to his children about their spiritual life. I had Gage read Thornwell extensively for me in preparation for this series and as we talked about the way Thornwell treated his children it helped me to recall the startling difference between those who approached the salvation of their children from a revivalistic perspective and those that approached the salvation of their children from what I would call a covenantal progression model.

Now I don't want to be misunderstood here. I am not knocking Thornwell. He was prolific writer and a very godly man. But he certainly had a strong desire to see his children make a visible profession of faith based upon a dramatic conversion...and that does sometimes happen. But the historic view of reformation theology is that the typical model of salvation for our covenantal children ought to be much less dramatic. In other words, our children ought not

generally undergo some sort of dramatic conversion simply because their positive response to the gospel ought to follow the Holy Spirit's regenerating work through the means of our Christian nurture of our children.

Let me say it another way. We ought to raise our children in such a way that their conversion and their reception of the gospel seems fairly natural. That doesn't mean we presume upon God. But it does mean that we tend to think that God will save our children simply because he was gracious enough to save us.

Of course, that does not mean that we sit back and do nothing and that God will honor our lack of Christian nurture by saving our children. No...it doesn't mean that at all. What Christian nurture means is that we commit to live like Christians at home. We commit to teaching our children the Scriptures. We pray for our children. We explain the content of the gospel. We demonstrate our affection for the Lord Jesus based on what he has done for us as we demonstrate our desire to worship the great Triune God of the Bible. It means we live out our Christian faith before our children and with our children and then are not terribly surprised when God regenerates their hearts and they come to Christ.

Now I intended to say that this view of Christian nurture was made famous by Horace Bushnell in his debate with the revivalists of his day. But that would be inaccurate, I think. Besides Bushnell had other theological issues that tend to taint the terrific nature of his book on Christian nurture. Actually, this particular view of Christian nurture was made famous by Moses in Deuteronomy 6 where he says:

^{ESV} **Deuteronomy 6:4...**"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. ⁶ And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. ⁷ You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. ⁸ You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ⁹ You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

There is no end to the instruction that can be gained from the study of this crucial passage. But rather than do an exposition of the text, it might be more appropriate just to list a few of Moses' more important points, especially with regard to the issue of catechesis.

(1) The words of instruction are not to just be committed to memory. They are to be taken to heart (vs. 6) which means, at very least, that they are to impact ethical behavior.

(2) The words of instruction are not just to be taught; they are to be taught diligently (vs.7). That means that not only the content of the instruction but the very means of instruction is to be constantly scrutinized and improved.

(3) The words of instruction are to permeate all of life's activities. They are to be a part of home-life, travel, and even work. They are to so saturate the life of believers that they are the last thing on a person's mind when they go to bed and the first thing on a person's mind when they rise up in the morning (vs. 7).

(4) Moses associates the words of instruction with both the hands and the head which can be taken metaphorically to speak of their place both in the actions and thoughts of believers (vs. 8).

(5) In the same way the words of instruction are to be written on the doorposts of the house and the front gates of fences. Metaphorically, Moses' command implies that such instruction should be a constant testimony to those both inside and outside of the believing household (vs. 9).

Now that having been said I think genuine Christian nurture only occurs when we commit ourselves to demonstrate our affection for the Lord to our children by actually living that affection out. I mean the question becomes one that is fairly significant. Do we teach our children as much, for example, about the Lord as we do about baseball?

Now there is no way on earth my dad would have allowed me to learn baseball at school. He did not rely on others to teach me how to hold a glove or to throw or catch. He did not rely on others to teach me how to lay down a bunt or hit the cutoff man. He taught me himself because he loved the game. The idea of Christian nurture demands that we be responsible for the nurture and admonition of children and that we not rely on their Sunday school teachers or young ministers or anyone else to teach them the truth. We use those things to help them learn...we rejoice that those things are available to help but we commit ourselves to show them our faith at home.

I bring all that up because of one little book that I would like to ask you to read. It is called the *Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant* by Lewis Schenck. It purports to address the issue of infant baptism and it does but it does even more by addressing the issue of Christian nurture of covenantal children.

All right that's it. Let me talk about a few books and we'll pray and be done.

¹ Much of my thought is adapted from R. Scott Clark's website. I think he offers a real measure of clarity regarding the issues involved and I have relied upon him heavily.

² Guy Prentiss Waters, *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology*, (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishers, 2006), 3.

³ R. Scott Clark, "For Those Just Tuning In," at Heidelbergblog.wordpress.com.
<http://heidelbergblog.wordpress.com/2007/12/27/for-those-just-tuning-in-what-is-the-federal-vision/>

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Obviously I disagree with N.T. Wright's assessment of what Paul really said.

⁶ R. Scott Clark, "For Those Just Tuning In," at Heidelbergblog.wordpress.com.
<http://heidelbergblog.wordpress.com/2007/12/27/for-those-just-tuning-in-what-is-the-federal-vision/>

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Mark W. Karlberg, "Reformed Interpretation of the Mosaic Covenant" in *Covenant Theology in reformed Perspective* (Eugene Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2000), 25.