

Ecclesiology: the Achilles Heel of the Federal Vision

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The Federal Vision theologians have been claiming to offer a better explanation of covenant membership and its relation to the church than that provided by the usual Reformed theology.¹ The Federal Vision ideas about the covenant are claimed to be both more biblical and more pastorally effective.

In order to make the case for the Federal Vision theology its partisans claim to identify some problems with the usual theology. We find such claims as this: “Can we teach our children to call God “Father” or to sing “Jesus loves me” if we don’t know if He has predestined them for eternal salvation? ... Held consistently,” the usual view “prevents the covenant from functioning in our thinking and practice. The covenant becomes as invisible and unknowable as God’s eternal predestination. We lose the ability to speak the language of Scripture, to apply it directly to the flesh-and-blood people who sit in our pews, and to give them the comfort God intended them to have.”²

The Federal Vision view is that “God does not make His covenant exclusively with those who have been predestined to eternal salvation. Rather, He establishes His covenant with all who have been baptized, with professing believers and their children. The whole church, head for head, is in covenant with God.”³ This covenant membership carries with it a special relationship. “God selected you out of the whole world to belong to Him, to enter His covenant. Covenant membership is not just a bare legal relationship. The covenant is not just a means to an end, the goal of salvation. The covenant in history is the early form of that final goal. It is a bond of love with the triune God of Scripture. God chose you to have that bond with Him in Christ.”⁴ “And so the historic Reformed baptismal form links baptism with election. When we are baptized into the name of the Spirit, He promises to present us ‘without spot among the assembly of the elect in life eternal.’ If the Spirit promises that you will be among the elect in life eternal, you can bank on it and trust that you are among the elect *now*.”⁵

So far so good. Those baptized into the church are elect, are united with Christ and are the object of covenant love. And they don’t need to be in doubt about their status. It is an objective fact that they were

1 There is probably no substitute for “usual” that is acceptable to all sides to describe the view that the Federal Visionaries seek to supplant. Some are contemptuous of what they call “scholastic” or “rationalist” theology, without offering clear parameters to these terms, nor using them in the sense that historians do. Others are cavalier, or worse, about the Westminster Confession or about those “who worship at the idol of the Westminster Confession”, yet others claim to stay within the parameters of the Confession’s language, and yet others claim rather to be the true representatives of the Confession’s original intent. Still others play one confession off against another claiming that only the Belgic and not the Westminster is the Reformed theology.

2 John Barach, “Covenant and Election”, *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros and Cons: Debating the Federal Vision*, lines 23, 24, 31-34.

3 Barach, lines 61-64.

4 Barach, lines 159-162.

5 Barach, lines 209-212.

baptized and that God promised them eternal life. This is the doctrine of the “objective covenant” and the nature of the assurance that it provides.

But, if my assurance is based on my baptism, how do I know that I am baptized? Is every claim to baptize a true baptism, and is every claim to be a church, a true church? The last time I visited the Luther Seminary bookstore—some years ago—there were some Lutheran pastorettes shopping for liturgies to the earth or to Gaia for the next earth day service. Are babies wet down by them in the name of the Trinity united with Christ and promised eternal life?

Recently one of Andrew Sandlin’s readers asked him a variation of this question. [Sandlin is not strictly speaking in the Federal Vision, but on this point he stands with them.]

I have heard you often talk of Roman Catholics as fellow Christians. I know that this is an issue right now in regards to the AAPC conferences in their view of the : “objective covenant” and that certain teachers (like Douglas Wilson) say that Roman Catholics, from an objective covenantal standpoint should be considered brothers and sisters in Christ if they have partaken of Trinitarian baptism.⁶

Sandlin responded with a very broad definition of the Church and its covenant boundaries.

“Christianity” and “Christian” can be defined in diverse ways. That's the nub of the dispute. For instance, every church that stands within the profession of ancient catholic orthodoxy (East and West) is creedally Christian, and every member of that church is to be deemed Christian. This definition (which does not touch on what Calvinists term “the application of redemption”, e.g., justification by faith) accounts for the objective historicalness of Christianity.

At the next level, we think of all those who offer a credible profession of faith and have submitted to baptism. They are enrolled among the visible covenant of the people of God, irrespective of the authenticity of their profession. Analogous to the (circumcised) members of OT Israel, these (baptized) Christians may not in fact be converted and regenerate. This definition of Christianity accounts for the most prominent, visible exhibition of the body of Christ (the church).

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Rome is mistaken on justification (just as many Protestants are) but still stands within the first and second definitions above. Whether its members stand in the final definition above, only God—and they individually—know. To put it another way, justification by faith alone is Biblical, but it does not define Christianity in its objective, historical sense. It never has.⁷

It is a plain fact that Rome does not stand within the second definition. Rome does not require a credible

6 P. Andrew Sandlin, *Christianity Thrice Defined: A Letter on Rome, Covenant and Justification*, Monday, May 10, 2004 <http://www.christianculture.com/>

7 Sandlin, *Christianity Thrice Defined*.

profession from her members. Adolf Hitler and Martin Heidegger were Roman Catholics to their dying day and hordes of mafiosi were and are members of the Roman Church. Fact is, credible profession is a Reformed idea that marked off Reformed churches not only from Rome, but from the Lutherans and Episcopalians. For the Reformers the true church bore three marks: true doctrine proclaimed, sacraments rightly administered, and discipline rightly administered (credible profession was required). It was the Reformed discipline that especially aroused political opposition and attempts to repress Reformed establishment. For if the established church excommunicates the ungodly, then the rich and powerful in governments and royal courts must give up their libertine ways or be ostracized from society (in which the church is established). For this reason Puritanism had to be suppressed, leading to exile and the colonization of what became several American states. That neither Rome nor the church of England stands within Sandlin's second definition of the church is one of the facts of history that bore tremendous consequences.

But what Sandlin is saying here is not merely a travesty of history, it is a repudiation of the Reformed doctrine of the church. For clearly Sandlin's bottom line is not his claim that Rome (and Eastern Orthodoxy) should be regarded as true churches because of their discipline (requiring credible profession), but rather to reject the Reformed criteria of the three marks of the church.

So who is elect, united with Christ, and given assurance of salvation? One Federal Vision voice provides an answer that is extremely broad. It is so broad that it claims for Rome what Rome does not even claim for herself. For Rome has always denounced the doctrine of assurance of salvation as mere presumption. (See Horatius Bonar's "Assurance of Salvation", for example, for a discussion of the contrasting Roman and Reformed views —http://www.contra-mundum.org/essays/bonar/hb_assurance.pdf.)

But this is not the only Federal Vision view of the boundaries of the covenant. Some Federal Vision people are close to the Canadian Reformed Churches, who have their own ideas of what the covenant boundaries are. In fact, the Canadian Reformed have been living for sixty years with a theology of the covenant like the one that the Federal Vision is putting forward. [There have been some recent reports that the Canadian Reformed Church is now backing away from its peculiarities and moving toward more Reformed theology.]

For an explanation of the Canadian Reformed point of view, I am drawing from material written by Rev. K. A. Kok to show why the Canadian Reformed with their covenant idea should not be involved with Presbyterians, and why his church had to leave the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.⁸

First he rejects credible profession. It is not that a test of credible profession—a consistent life and profession—should not be applied, but that it is not enough. It is not adequate to define covenant membership.

One should keep in mind that from the very beginning the Presbyterian churches never envisioned the people subscribing to the standards. Indeed, when certain of the delegates to the Westminster Assembly suggested that all the members of the church should hold to the standards, the House of Commons intervened and ordered that only "competent knowledge" be the rule for church membership. Although the Scottish Church did have a different practice for a while, this notion

8 K. A. Kok, Presbyterian or Reformed?, <http://www.spindleworks.com/library/kok/presorref.htm>

of 'competent knowledge,' or, as it is called in the OPC, 'credible profession,' is the rule. The profession required of members is less than that required of office bearers and is a profession which is not to be judged by the standards of the church.⁹

...

There are, of course, manifold problems with the position of the OPC. A distinction is made between saving faith and the confession of the church. As a result, one is left saying either that the ministers and elders are the only ones who truly make up the church, for they alone hold to the whole confession, or one says that the ministers and elders believe for the people; that is, the people are bound to the confession by implicit faith. If saving faith is different from the confession of the church, then why is there a confession? If the confession goes beyond what is necessary to be saved, is it not a human tradition and something which represents a binding above Scripture?

Where Sandlin wants to make baptism into membership in a church holding the ecumenical creeds to be sufficient for membership in the covenant, with its attendant election and union with Christ, for Kok it must be a church holding the whole Reformed confessional system, of the Three Forms of Unity, and requiring members to hold this entire doctrine without reservation. He is very emphatic about this, citing what he considers solid authorities. For example:

The examples could be multiplied, but it is clear that confessing the truth with the Church is a vital part of being united to the Church, which is the very body of Christ. Abraham Kuyper was clearly correct, when he wrote:

Ye see, therefore, that the holy apostles, who wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and to whose word and meaning all people should be subservient, affirm the exact opposite of that of those ultra-spiritualistic people who assert that the common confession of a church is a comparatively unimportant matter. Whereas the latter maintain that the mind's confession affects the heart hardly at all, the holy apostles affirm in the name of the LORD that "with the mouth confession is made unto salvation", that you must be of one mind with the believers, and that you must speak the same thing with them. And they boldly add that he who, in this confession, departs from the true conception of the Son of God, is of the antichrist (The Implications of Public Confession, pp. 34f.)

Clearly, then, the biblical teaching is that the believer is to confess with the Church and may not be allowed to confess other than what the Church confesses.¹⁰

Those who do not have this conception of the church began to practice an openness that Kok deplors.

It is not surprising, then, that the OPC allows into membership those who will not

⁹ Kok, Presbyterian or Reformed?

¹⁰ K. A. Kok, The Controversy at Blue Bell OPC, <http://www.spindleworks.com/library/kok/blue2.htm>

baptize their children, that members are not required to hold to the confessions of the church, that minister and elders are required to hold only to the system of doctrine contained in the confessions, and that the OPC allows to the Lord's Supper Table all "earnest Christians" even if their confession is incompatible with the confession of the OPC. As Charles Hodge makes clear, the "one faith" or Ephesians 4:5 cannot be predicated of any external society calling itself the church of God, but, is only realized in heaven. It should not surprise us to read Dr. Richard Gaffin arguing that there is essential unity between Reformed believers and other believers. Indeed, Reformed theology expresses the "deepest intentions" of the non-Reformed. The only difference is a matter of consistency. It is not surprising, also, that this attitude parallels the attitude of the synodical churches in the 1920's and 30's. Since the church is to be empirically determined, you should expect to find—just as you do find—that Charles Hodge argues that the "evidences of piety" are all that are required for admission to the Lord's Table, and that the OPC follows Hodge in this regard. All of this flows from the defective and non-biblical teachings in the Westminster Standards concerning the covenant and the church.

The Canadian Reformed idea of the covenant, however, requires a different sort of practice.

All of the above helps us understand the situation which led to Blue Bell's separation from the OPC. Under the influence of Dr. J. Payton, the then-pastor of Blue Bell, who had been a student of Prof. N. Shepherd, the church at Blue Bell had begun to practice a form of confessional membership. New members of the church had to express a "knowledge of and commitment to" the Reformed faith. Blue Bell also began to 'fence' the Lord's, Supper Table, admitting to the Table only those who were members in good standing in churches with which the OPC had fraternal relations. And as well, the session began the practice of catechism sermons from the Heidelberg Catechism in the second service.

Objections to all of these practices were voiced in the Presbytery of Philadelphia when the records of the church at Blue Bell were examined and the session was ordered to make a defense of these practices before Presbytery. Before that defense took place, however, Dr. Payton followed the example of Prof. Shepherd and took a call into the Christian Reformed Church.¹¹

Rev. Kok tells us more specifically who he excludes from communion:

It was in May of 1984 that I went before the Presbytery of Philadelphia to be examined to be declared eligible for call. Objections to my view of the covenant were voiced by Rev. A. Kuschke and objections to my view of the church were voiced by nearly everyone else. I was asked if I would give Billy Graham the Lord's Supper and I said that since Graham was an Arminian, a

11 Kok, Presbyterian or Reformed?

Baptist, and a Dispensationalist, I did not think that I could.¹²

Only those churches confessing the equivalent of the Three Forms of Unity are true churches. Even Presbyterianism is not enough:

The method of celebrating the Lord's Supper which is certainly allowed within the OPC and which this General Assembly seems to commend is out of accord with Scripture and the Three Forms of Unity. The covenant responsibility of the church to delight God and abide by His truth requires saying "no" as well as saying "yes". And a church which cannot say "no" soon loses its ability to say "yes". A church which distinguishes between the faith it confesses and the faith necessary for salvation has already set out upon the path from true to false church, because it has denied Christ's presence and teaching in its midst.

We see that those who hold to the idea of the covenant taught by the Federal Vision cannot agree on the what is the true church. They cannot agree on the boundaries of the covenant. They cannot agree on who is in the covenant. Therefore they cannot agree who is elect and united with Christ.

One of the Federal Visionaries, John Barach, is in the United Reformed Church, which is on a path to union with the Canadian Reformed Church. [Barach as since left the URC and the URC no longer has union plans with the CRC.] Does he agree with the covenantal principles of his future ecclesiastical home? Does he agree that Andrew Sandlin is outside the covenant and outside of Christ?

The justification of the doctrine of the covenant was that it was supposed to provide assurance of salvation. But how can it if one's knowledge of covenant membership depends on a theory of ecclesiology, and if this ecclesiology is so arbitrary that even within the small circle of those holding to the Federal Vision's doctrine of the covenant extremely opposite theories emerge? You don't know you are in the covenant if you don't know that you are in the church, and the theories offered of what is a true church are not only violently opposed to each other, they are both barking mad.

Fifteen years ago there was an analogy to this situation. It occurred in the area of political theory. Gary North published a book outlining a Christian state, in which everyone holding political office would also have to be in the church.¹³ His idea was that everyone should be under dual authority, civil and ecclesiastical. But what constitutes competent ecclesiastical authority? In a review we pointed out the problem.

North needs to provide more than an argument for *some* religious test; he must show that the sufficient justification for having the religious test also justifies its specific content. He needs to substantiate the need for a trinitarian oath; that was certainly not required in the Old Covenant, which serves as a model for North. Moreover in some places North proposes the Bible as the basic legal document, so

¹² Kok, Presbyterian or Reformed?

¹³ *Political Polytheism: The Myth of Pluralism*, by Gary North (Tyler Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989)

why not an oath upholding the authority of the Bible? Some trinitarians follow sources of authority, such as natural law, which they hold to be coordinate to the Bible, both in ecclesiastical and civil matters. (The United States poses a unique problem in this regard, for it contains numerous sects which affirm the Bible, but deny the Trinity, and many denominations which are trinitarian, but deny biblical infallibility.) Madison argued that the content of religious oaths was problematic; given the importance of such oaths in North's system, he needs to further legitimize his form of civil oath.

We should notice right away a certain parallel between the concept of a *trinitarian* oath and a basic plank of Reformed theology. Reformed churches accept the baptism performed by other churches if it is done in the name of the Trinity. The Reformed hold that baptism is a non-repeatable sign and seal of the covenant and that the doctrine of the Trinity is the standard of the validity of the administration of that sign and seal. Thus in a sense the doctrine of the Trinity forms the ecumenical standard for Reformed theology. It is not really a ecumenical standard in another sense because profession of the doctrine of the Trinity falls far short of what is necessary to secure adult church membership in any Reformed church. In fact, some Presbyterian churches excommunicate their members for merely attending a Roman mass. Can North appeal to Reformed sacramentalism to justify using doctrine of the Trinity as the test for entry to the civil covenant? Not in the minds of the members of the non-sacramental churches. For them profession of the Trinity is an arbitrary standard in the sense that there are lesser (e.g. profession of a Creator Deity) and greater (e.g. the Nicene creed) standards with equal *prima facie* claim to be the threshold of admission to the civil covenant.¹⁴

North, who insists on what he calls “Biblical blueprints” had no blueprint for his ecclesiology nor for his politics, and had to resort to arbitrary choices. While incensed by the review—he published a reply calling the reviewers liars—North never plugged the hole in his theory (nor did he retract or correct the numerous factual errors in his book).¹⁵

The Federal Visionaries—some of them are former Christian Reconstructionists, and even former associates of Gary North—should have learned from North's failure. But they did not, and now they have run their ship aground on the same shoals.

The reason is not hard to see. There is no Biblical blueprint for ecclesiology that is a standard equal to the burden that the Federal Vision and its doctrine of the covenant places on ecclesiology. If there is no invisible church, and the visible church—the “church with an address”—is *the* church, then there has to be a precise standard that defines it, and there have to be precise rules for taking people in and putting them out.

14 Roger Schultz and T.E. Wilder, “Godzilla Meets the Pluralists”, *Contra Mundum: A Reformed Cultural Review*, No. 1, Fall 1991, p.54.

15 Gary North, *What Ever Happened to Book Reviewing? In Defense of Political Polytheism*, (ICE, Tyler, TX) 1991.

While the Bible does give guidance on the organization and government of the church, and on relations between individual churches, there is no blueprint corresponding to the ecclesiology that the Federal Vision needs. The explanation for this situation is obvious. The true church is the invisible church with whom the Covenant of Grace is made. Identifying, admitting to and excluding from the invisible church is in God's hands, not the prerogative of the elders. *This* ecclesiology does not depend on the precision and rules for the visible church that the Federal Vision ecclesiology cannot do without and must invent for itself.