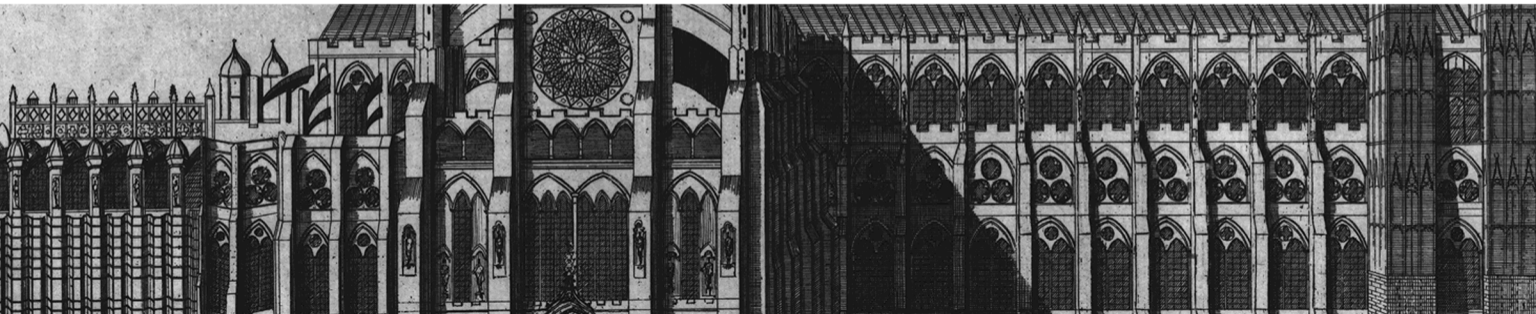




CONFESSIONAL
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PRESSES

THE CONFESSIONAL PRESBYTERIAN

A Journal for Discussion of Presbyterian Doctrine & Practice



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Baptism and the Benefits of Christ: The Double Mode of Communion in the Covenant of Grace

By R. Scott Clark, D.Phil.

INTRODUCTION

As part of his polemic against the Judaizers of his day, the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans made a remarkable and vital distinction:¹

For one is not a Jew who is a Jew outwardly (φανερόν) but he is a Jew who is one inwardly (κρυπτόν) ... (Romans 2:28–29).

The Apostle did not create this distinction but rather carried on a polemic as old as Moses' exhortation to the Israelites to "circumcise the foreskin" of their hearts (Deut 10:16), and the clear distinction made in Jeremiah 9:25–26 between those who are circumcised only "in the foreskin" and those who are circumcised "in the heart."²

In Reformed theology, these passages and others like them have been understood to make a distinction between those who are members of the covenant of grace outwardly and those who are members outwardly, but who have also taken possession of the benefits of Christ by faith. This distinction appears in one way or another in virtually every major and minor systematic theology or survey of the faith from Calvin to the end of the high orthodox period as illustrated by Caspar Olevianus (1536–1587) and Herman Witsius (1636–1708).

Olevianus' covenant theology was premised on his conviction that there are those in the church with whom God has made a covenant of grace, in the narrower sense, and those in the visible church with whom he has not. That is why he titled his major work on covenant theology: *On the Substance of the Covenant of Grace Between God and the Elect*.³ For Olevian, the covenant of grace, construed narrowly or properly, is made only with the elect. Considered broadly, however, the covenant of grace can be said to include "hypocrites" and

"reprobates." They participate in "external worship," but do not enter into fellowship with Christ. Only the elect believe and only they receive Christ's benefits, i.e., the substance of the covenant.⁴ Christ is present and offered to the congregation, but Christ and his benefits are received through faith alone.⁵ One finds this very same distinction also in the theology of Olevianus' colleague Zacharias Ursinus (1534–1583).⁶

These two Heidelberg theologians articulated a fundamental conviction of the Reformed Churches, that there is a distinction to be made between the church

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1. The Biblical translations in this essay are my own unless otherwise indicated. All quotations from the Greek New Testament are taken from Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2001).

2. This distinction should not be confused with the so-called "Half-Way Covenant" of Colonial American Puritanism. In the Half-Way Covenant, one had to testify to a certain conversion experience. Paul's distinction is not premised on religious experience but faith in Christ which, in turn, is the fruit of election.

3. Caspar Olevianus, *De Substantia Foederis Gratuiti Inter Deum Et Electos* (Geneva: 1585) 3.418.

4. *De substantia*, 2.53, 56. See also *ibid.*, 2.103.

5. See also R. Scott Clark, *Caspar Olevian and the Substance of the Covenant: The Double Benefit of Christ*, ed. David F. Wright, *Rutherford House Studies in Historical Theology* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 2005) 191–201.

6. *An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism: Sources, History,*

considered as the communion of the saints, in all times and places, and the church considered as a visible institution. Unlike so many individualist American evangelicals, Reformed theology does not teach that it is possible to be a member of the communion of the saints and yet ignore the visible church. The *Belgic Confession* (Art. 28) virtually quotes St. Cyprian when it declares that, “outside of [the visible church], there is no salvation.”⁷ At the same time the confession (Art. 29) is clear that in the visible church there are always “hypocrites, who are mixed in the Church with the good, yet are not of the Church, though externally in it . . .” (Schaff, *Creeeds*, 3.419). The notion that it is possible to be “in” but not “of” the church is obviously drawn from 1 John 2:19.

Herman Witsius’ use of this distinction at the end of the 17th century reflects its fixed position in Reformed orthodoxy:

... the participation (*communio*) of the covenant of grace is two fold. The one includes merely symbolical

and Theology, *Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought*, ed. Lyle D. Bierma (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005) 185–86.

7. Phillip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983) 3.418.

8. Modified from the translation in Herman Witsius, *Sacred Disquisitions on the Apostles’ Creed*, ed. Donald Fraser, 2 vols. (Edinburgh and Glasgow: A. Fullarton & Co. and Khull, Blackie & Co., 1823) 2.354–355. Herman Witsius, *Hermani Witsii Exercitationes Sacrae in Symbolum Quod Apostolorum Dicitur Et in Orationem Dominicam*, 3rd ed. (Amsterdam: 1697) 453–454. See also, Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, trans. William Crookshank, 2 vols. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing; repr., 1990) 1.353.

9. In his essay expressing doubts about the visible/invisible distinction, Doug Wilson cites John Murray. The latter did raise questions about the utility of the adjective “invisible.” His point, however, was that what has been called the invisible church is only found in the visible church. He did not reject the distinction to the same effect or for the same purpose as Klaas Schilder, Norman Shepherd, and the Federal Vision Theologians. There is not a hint in Murray that baptism confers a temporary, conditional election and union with Christ that can be retained or lost by obedience or disobedience. See John Murray, “The Church: Its Definition in Terms of ‘Visible’ and ‘Invisible’ Invalid,” in *Collected Writings* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976–1982) 1.231–236. See also Douglas Wilson, “The Church Visible or Invisible,” in *The Federal Vision*, ed. Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner (Monroe, La.: Athanasius Press, 2004) 265–269. Hereafter *The Federal Vision*.

10. The designation “Federal Vision” is one the proponents have applied to themselves in books and conferences.

11. This is the approach of Jeffrey D. Niell, “The New Covenant, Membership, Apostasy, and Language,” in Andrew P. Sandlin, ed., *The Backbone of the Bible: Covenant in Contemporary Perspective* (Nacogdoches, Tex.: Covenant Media Press, 2004) 138–145.

12. For the purposes of this essay these elements of the *ordo salutis* shall be described as the “the benefits of Christ.”

and common benefits (*beneficia*), which have no certain connection with salvation, and to which infants are admitted by their relation to parents that are within the covenant; and adults, by the profession of faith and repentance, even though insincere.... The other participation of the covenant of grace, is the partaking of its internal, spiritual, and the saving goods (*bonorum*), as the forgiveness of sins, the writing of the law in the heart, etc. accordingly the apostle makes a distinction between the Jew outwardly and the Jew inwardly,—between circumcision in the flesh and the letter, and circumcision in the heart and Spirit; which, by analogy may be transferred to Christianity.⁸

Thus, in our confessional and classic covenant theology, we have accounted for the co-existence in the visible church of believers and hypocrites by speaking of those who are in the church “externally” only, by baptism, and those who are also in the church “internally” through faith which apprehends Christ and his benefits. Both sets of people are in the covenant of grace but they sustain different relations to it.⁹

THE STATE OF THE CONTROVERSY

Appreciating this distinction is essential to understanding the controversy in which our churches are presently involved regarding baptism and the benefits of Christ. If one denies this distinction then one’s understanding of baptism and its relations to the benefits will be altered radically. A group of writers, some of whom are ministers in confessional Reformed and Presbyterian churches, known collectively as the “Federal Vision” are, however, either denying or calling into question the distinction between the church visible and church invisible and with that they are proposing that there is no distinction between those who in the covenant of grace externally and internally.¹⁰

Though they are not very clear about this, the Federal Vision writers suggest that there is both an eternal, unconditional election and an historical, conditional, temporary and therefore uncertain election, which relates to the administration of the covenant of grace. This latter election is said to be “real” such that to fall away from it is “real apostasy.”¹¹ They propose that the biblical and truly Reformed view of baptism, the church, and the benefits of Christ is that by virtue of their baptism, every baptized person is brought into union with Christ and into temporary possession, at least, of the benefits of election and union with Christ, namely, justification, adoption, saving faith, and sanctification.¹²

THESIS

In contrast to the claims of the Federal Vision, I argue that Scripture teaches that there is a distinction to be made between those who have the substance of the covenant of grace, i.e., union with Christ, justification, and sanctification, and those who are in the covenant of grace but who participate only in its external administration. Further, I argue that baptism initiates the baptized person into the authorized, official sphere of God's saving work and recognizes one's membership in the covenant of grace. This initiation does not confer Christ's benefits *ex opere operato*. Rather, the promise of baptism is that whoever believes has what the sign signifies and seals.

CURRENT LITERATURE

Some of the views addressed in this essay can be traced to the teaching of Klaas Schilder (1890–1952), the founder of the Liberated Reformed Churches (*Gereformeerde Kerken Vrijgemaakt*) in the Netherlands in the 1940's.¹³ Schilder and his followers rejected the traditional internal/external distinction as expressed by Olevianus and Witsius. They argued that the covenant of grace is, "*Alles of niets*"—all or nothing. They argued that everyone in the covenant of grace sustains the same relations to Christ "head for head."¹⁴

As we shall see, rejecting the internal/external distinction has far reaching consequences and it set the stage for the Federal Vision doctrine of baptismal benefits. Schilder's rejection or redefinition of other elements of classical Reformed theology such as the covenant of redemption and the covenant of works also contributed to what has become the Federal Vision covenant theology.¹⁵

Since the mid 1970's Norman Shepherd has elaborated on Schilder's position.¹⁶ He argues that the "heart of covenant privilege is union and communion with God." With that privilege, however, comes responsibility. We are to be covenant keepers and pattern our covenant-keeping after Christ, "the covenant keeper par excellence (Shepherd, "Evangelism," 55).

According to Shepherd (and Schilder, and John Barach as will be noted), the decree of election must be viewed only through the lens of the covenant of grace (60). E.g., Ephesians, he says, was not written from the point of view of election, but from the point of view of "covenant." Thus Paul called everyone in the Ephesian congregation, "elect" (63–64). Some in the Ephesian congregation may fall away. If so, then they were not

elect. Implied in this argument is the existence of a type of election that is historical and conditional and not identical to eternal, unconditional election. Shepherd and his followers refer to this historical, conditional election as "covenantal election."

Explaining Jesus' discourse on the vine and the branches in John 15, he argues that the faithful and disobedient branches do not refer to two modes of visible communion in the church. He recognizes that the terms "inward" and "outward" are biblical terms (Rom 2:28–29), but they do not refer to elect and reprobate in the visible church or even to believers and unbelievers, but to "covenantally loyal Jews and disobedient transgressors."¹⁷

These conclusions lead him to a third thesis. It is not regeneration but baptism that is the transition from death to life.¹⁸ He explicitly denies that this view entails baptismal regeneration, and he is formally correct, for it actually entails much more.

One finds this system expressed even more clearly in two recent essays by John Barach in collections of essays advocating or discussing the Federal Vision theology. In

13 For an introduction to Schilder's life and work see J. Geertsma, ed., *Always Obedient: Essays on the Teachings of Dr. Klaas Schilder* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 1995).

14. See John Barach, "Covenant and Election," in *The Auburn Avenue Theology Pros & Cons: Debating the Federal Vision*, ed. E. Calvin Beisner (Fort Lauderdale, Fla.: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004) 151.

15. As a matter of rhetoric, when proponents of the Federal Vision theology speak of "Dutch Reformed theology," this seems to be code for Klaas Schilder's idiosyncratic system of covenant theology. They are not referring to the orthodox Dutch Reformed theologians of the 16th and 17th centuries. For more on this see R. Scott Clark, ed., *The Foolishness of the Gospel: Covenant and Justification* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, forthcoming).

16. Norman Shepherd, "The Covenant Context for Evangelism," in *The New Testament Student and Theology*, ed. John H. Skilton (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1976) 1, 23, 13.

17. Shepherd, "Evangelism," 65. In this reading, Shepherd anticipated some of the conclusions of the New Perspective.

18. Shepherd, "Evangelism," 66. In response to Sinclair Ferguson's critical review (see footnote 40 below) Shepherd conceded that it is improper to say that baptism is the "point of transition" from death to life. He revised his language to say, "Baptism marks the point of transition from death to life." It is notable that even after revising his language, he did not relate his view of baptism to the definition of faith "receiving and resting" as the sole instrument of justification. For those who believe, baptism may be said retrospectively, to have marked a transition. That is in the nature of sacramental language, but Shepherd made no such distinction in 1977 and continues to neglect it. See Norman Shepherd, "More on Covenant Evangelism," *The Banner of Truth* (November 1977) 25; idem, *The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illumines Salvation and Evangelism* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2000) 100–101.

one essay,¹⁹ he affirms an unconditional, eternal predestination, but he reacts to that view of election which denies assurance to all but the few who have had a sort of second blessing. His response to that abuse of the doctrine of election is to so objectify the covenant of grace and baptism with the result that baptism confers election and union with Christ.²⁰

Because all baptized persons are in the covenant of grace in the same way, Barach concludes that all baptized persons are, in an historical, temporary sense, elect.²¹ He says, “Each Israelite was grafted into God’s people as an act of God’s electing love” (“Covenant and Election,” 26). This, he says, is the clear teaching of 1 Corinthians 1 and 1 Peter 2. He says repeatedly that the good news to the visible congregation is that they are all, “as members of the Church” individually elect (27). “Christ is the Elect One ... and in Him we have been chosen” (28).

What does this mean for baptism? Those, he says, who make the internal/external distinction have reduced baptism to a mere sprinkling. Every baptized person is “in Christ” (20–22). This, he claims, was Calvin’s view, and the view of the confessions (23).

The whole church is in Christ. They have been baptized into Christ. They have clothed themselves with Christ (Gal. 3:27). Paul wants them to know that all of these blessings he is praising God for are theirs in Christ.

19. John Barach, “Covenant and Election,” in *The Federal Vision*; idem, “Covenant and Election,” in *The Auburn Avenue Theology*.

20. Barach, “Covenant and Election,” in *The Federal Vision*, 19. Barach’s use of an aberrant view creates a straw man which he then uses as a ground to propose radical revisions to Reformed theology. This discussion would be advanced if Barach would interact with the views of widely received, influential, and magisterial Reformed theologians from the Reformed tradition such as those discussed in this essay.

21. Barach, “Covenant and Election,” in *The Federal Vision*, 25. He argues from Deuteronomy 6, that all the Israelites were historically elect.

22. Barach, “Covenant and Election,” in *The Federal Vision*, 33. One also finds these same views in essays by Rich Lusk and Steve Wilkins. See Rich Lusk, “Paedobaptism and Baptismal Efficacy: Historic Trends and Current Controversies,” in *The Federal Vision*, 71–97. See also Rich Lusk, *Faith, Baptism, and Justification* (January 2, 2006 [cited]); available from http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/faith_baptism_and_justification.htm. Rich Lusk, “New Life and Apostasy: Hebrews 6:4–8 as Test Case,” in *The Federal Vision*, 271–290. Steve Wilkins says, “Those who ultimately prove to be reprobate may be in covenant with God. They may enjoy for a season the blessings of the covenant, including the forgiveness of sins, adoption, possession of the kingdom, sanctification, etc., and yet apostatize and fall short of the grace of God.” Steve Wilkins, “Covenant, Baptism and Salvation,” in *The Federal Vision*, 62.

There is nothing missing in Christ Jesus. Everything you need is found in Him and *you* are in Him. That’s the good news Paul wants the Ephesians to know (29).

The ground for his conclusion is that the Apostles called their congregations “elect.” Like Shepherd, Barach rejects the traditional Reformed notion of a “judgment of charity,” preferring to think of every baptized person as elect (30–31).

He says that he wants to speak to the congregation unequivocally, as the apostles did. The promises of baptism are real, which means that by baptism, every baptized person is elect, united to Christ and has the benefits of Christ. Just as the baptized are covenantally but genuinely elect, apostasy is just as real.

His distinction, however, between the historical, temporary benefits of Christ and eternal election is not absolute. In baptism, he says, the promise is that “God chose you to be in His covenant, to have that bond with him in Christ. That choice, worked in history when you were baptized, is grounded in God’s eternal predestination” (36). In baptism one is not only “engrafted into the church” but also “joined to Christ, the Elect One.” Those baptized who turn out to be reprobates, were “joined covenantally to Christ, the chief Cornerstone” (37). God began to work in them to will and to do, but he did not continue to work in them so they did not persevere. So, in the end, apostasy is not falling from temporary benefits, but falling from actual, eternal election.

Barach does not attempt to square these two positions but rather says that the relations between the facts of election, the baptismal, covenantal union with Christ, and apostasy are mysterious.²² As this brief survey suggests, there are areas of tension if not incoherence in the Federal Vision doctrine of baptismal benefits, and it is far from clear that their doctrine of baptismal benefits is congruent with or faithful to the confessions they subscribe.

METHOD

In the balance of this article, I will survey briefly the way the church has approached the relations between the substance of the covenant of grace and its administration. Second, I will pay close attention to four Biblical texts that are central to this discussion. Third, from those texts I will draw some theological conclusions. Fourth, I will respond to some of the claims by the Federal Vision theology regarding baptism and, fifth, I will make some observations about the practical implications of this doctrine.

HISTORICAL THEOLOGY

Augustine (350–434): Sacrament and Efficacy

In his debate with the Donatist schismatics (ca. 400), Augustine remarked that “the reason why the blessed Cyprian and other eminent Christians ... decided that Christ’s baptism could not exist among heretics or schismatics was that they failed to distinguish between the sacrament and efficacy or working out of a sacrament” (*De baptismo*, 6.1).²³

He tended to speak of baptism as the laver of regeneration, which became the traditional language of the church, and he did suggest that baptism regenerates the baptized. He also taught that it is the Holy Spirit who gives us new life and that may happen apart from baptism and that it is by faith that we have the remission of sins. “[B]aptism,” he said, “is one thing” and “the conversion of the heart is another.”²⁴ Nevertheless, there were unresolved tensions in Augustine’s theology of baptism. The medieval church resolved those tensions by capitalizing and enlarging on his idea of baptismal regeneration.

The Medieval Views: Ex Opere Operato

According to Peter Lombard (c.1100–1160) baptism initiates the process of eventual, progressive justification by graciously renewing the baptized person.²⁵ For the Lombard, we are as justified as we are sanctified and we are as sanctified as we cooperate with grace.

According to Thomas Aquinas (c.1224)–1274) at baptism all sins are washed away. He appealed to Ezekiel 36:25, “I will pour upon you clean water, and you shall be cleansed from all your filthiness.”²⁶ He also argued from Romans 6:3, that:

Hence it is clear that by Baptism man dies unto the oldness of sin, and begins to live unto the newness of grace. But every sin belongs to the primitive oldness. Consequently every sin is taken away by Baptism (3a, 69.1).

In the next article he continued: “by Baptism a man is incorporated in the Passion and death of Christ, according to Rm. 6:8 ...” (3a, 69.2).

The mainline of medieval theology taught that in the act of baptism, the baptized person is forgiven all sins, dies to sin, is regenerated, and is united to Christ and thus begins the journey to justification. Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas would agree with the Federal Vision, that the Spirit works necessarily through baptism

to unite the baptized person to Christ because baptism necessarily confers what it signifies and these benefits are retained by grace and cooperation with grace. This was the doctrine of baptismal benefits promulgated in Session 7 of the Council of Trent (1547) and remains the magisterial doctrine of the Roman church.

Luther: Baptism as Gospel

For Luther, baptism is the gospel made visible and the Christian life is a baptized life.²⁷ Both the *Small Catechism* (1529) and the *Augsburg Confession* (1530) teach that baptism “gives” the “forgiveness of sins.”²⁸ Paul Althaus says that Luther’s “doctrine of baptism is basically nothing else than his doctrine of justification in concrete form” (Althaus, 356).

For our purposes here, however, it is important to realize that, for Luther, the Spirit is so embedded in the sacrament that it must accomplish in the baptized what it signifies. This view created significant tensions in Lutheran theology between Luther’s doctrine of predestination, the basic commitment to justification *sola fide* and the recognition that baptized people apostatize. To resolve this tension, confessional Lutheranism concluded that though election is unconditional, it and what is given in baptism can be lost if we resist grace.²⁹

Calvin: Baptism as Covenant Sign and Seal

John Calvin (1509–1559) was unambiguous about the

23. Henry Bettenson, ed., *The Later Christian Fathers. A Selection from the Writings of the Fathers from St. Cyril of Jerusalem to St. Leo the Great* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970) 241.

24. *De Baptismo*, 4.31, 32; Sermon 71.19 in Bettenson, *The Later Christian Fathers*, 142–143.

25. Peter Lombard, *Magistri Petri Lombardi Parisiensis Episcopi Sententiae in IV Libris Distingtae*, 3rd edn, 2 vols, *Spicilegium Bonaventurianum* (Rome: Collegii S. Bonaventurae Ad Claras Aquas, 1971–1981) 4 ds. 2–3, d. 4 cs. 5–7, d. 5 (esp. c. 3). I am grateful to Brannan Ellis for pointing me to these references.

26. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, ed. Thomas Gilby, 60 vols. (London and New York: Blackfriars, 1963) 3a, 69.1.

27. Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 355–374.

28. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000) 43, 183–184, 319–120, 359–60, 438.

29. E.g., Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 579–580. There is some irony here since some of the language of the Federal Vision writers regarding baptism sounds remarkably like that of our Lutheran cousins—while they accuse Reformed confessionalists of a “Lutheran” dichotomy between law and gospel in justification. See P. Andrew Sandlin, “Lutheranized Calvinism: Gospel or Law, or Gospel and Law,” *Reformation & Revival* 11 (2002) 123–35.

benefits of baptism. In the first edition (1536) of his *Institutio* he explicitly rejected the doctrine of baptismal regeneration and he was consistent on this point until his death.³⁰ In places where he might have taught baptismal regeneration, e.g., in his lectures on John 3:5, he explicitly rejected it.³¹ Baptismal regeneration does not appear in the *Genevan Confession* or in the *Genevan Catechism* (1545).³² Calvin taught throughout his ministry that the sacraments are signs and seals which the Spirit uses to confer comfort and assurance, not election, union with Christ, or regeneration. He defined baptism this way:

Baptism is the sign of the initiation by which we are received into the society of the church, in order that, engrafted in Christ, we may be reckoned among God's children.³³

Notice that he begins with the language of signification and relations to the "*societas Christi*." For Calvin, baptism is most closely connected to our being "inserted into Christ" (*Christo insiti*), but neither baptism nor the Spirit working through baptism are said to create this union. In the first instance, Calvin considered the external effect of baptism. It has been given (*datus est*) that we might be "counted" (*censeamur*) among God's people. It serves our faith but also acts as a confession before men (*OS*, 5.285.14–16).

Fundamentally, baptism is to strengthen our faith, not replace it. It is more than a mere token (*tessera*) or mark (*nota*) of our Christian profession. It is also a "*symbolum*" and "*documentum*" and a "diplomatic seal" to those who believe, that what baptism promises is actually true of them (*OS*, 5.285.20–21).

30. G. Baum, E. Cunitz, and E. Reuss, eds., *Ioannis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, 59 vols., *Corpus Reformatorum* (Brunsvigae: C. A. Schwetschke et Filium, 1863–1897) 29.110–118. Hereafter designated as CO.

31. Helmut Feld, ed., *In Evangelium Secundum Johannem Commentarius*, 2 vols., *Ioannis Calvini Opera Omnia Series II: Ioannis Calvini Opera Exegetica* (Geneva: Droz, 1997) 1.87–89.

32. CO, 12.91, 105; H. A. Niemeyer, *Collectio Confessionum in Ecclesiis Reformatis Publicatarum* (Leipzig: Julius Klinkhardt, 1840) 163–164.

33. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., *Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) 4.15.1. See also Ioannis Calvini, *Opera Selecta*, ed. P. Barth and G. Niesel, 5 vols. (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1962) 5.285.12–13. Hereafter designated as OS.

34. T. H. L. Parker, ed., *Commentarius in Epistolam Pauli Ad Romanos*, *Ioannis Calvini Opera Omnia, Series II: Ioannis Calvini Opera Exegetica* (Geneva: Droz, 1999) 119.24–25, 28–29. "Nam suo more Paulus, quia ad fideles est sermo, substantiam et effectum externo signo coniungit."

Calvin addressed the very point at issue here, i.e., whether baptism unites the baptized person to Christ, and with that union, justification etc. He wrote:

Lastly, our faith receives from baptism the advantage of its sure testimony to us that we are not only engrafted into the death and life of Christ, but so united to Christ himself that we become sharers in all his blessings. For he dedicated and sanctified baptism in his own body in order that he might have it in common with us as the firmest bond of the union and fellowship which he has deigned to form with us (*Institutes* 4.15.5; *OS*, 5.288.21–22).

Notice that, for Calvin, baptism is not said to effect union with Christ, but to serve as a testimony of our union. Baptism says that the believer *is* united to Christ, not that it effected that union. "It shows (*ostendit*) our mortification in Christ and our new life in him." Calvin goes on to say that "through baptism Christ has made (*fecerit*) us sharers (*participes*) in his death, that we may be engrafted in it" (*OS*, 5.288.29–30).

The question is not whether we have been baptized into Christ's death, or whether "through baptism Christ makes us sharers in his death," but what Calvin meant by that language. He elaborated by appealing to organic metaphors (twigs and roots). Those baptized persons with "right faith" (*fide vere*) ought to experience the efficacy of union with Christ's death and resurrection (*OS*, 2.88.31–32). Baptized persons ought to believe and thus receive what baptism signifies and seals to believers.

Calvin's doctrine of baptism must be interpreted in the light of his doctrine of justification *sola gratia, sola fide*, about which he was unambiguous. It must also be interpreted in the context of his use of the internal/external distinction. Thus, for Calvin, faith and baptism have quite distinct functions. Faith receives righteousness and union with Christ, whereas baptism signifies and seals that union. This seems clear from his lecture on Romans 6:4 where he recognized that Paul was speaking of those who believe, and in with that assumption "joins the substance and the effect with the external sign." Nevertheless, what the Lord offers in the visible symbol "is ratified" (*ratum est*) by faith. Whenever the dominical institution and faith are united, the sacrament is not "*nuda inanique*."³⁴

In contrast to Calvin's view, the Federal Vision does not locate their doctrine of baptism in an unambiguous doctrine of justification, and Calvin distinguished more clearly between the "*res*" and the "*res significata*" than the Federal Vision writers do, because he con-

sidered baptism in the light of his distinction between those who have the substance of the covenant of grace and those who only participate in the covenant of grace externally.

Calvin understood that, in this life, though we do not know who are elect, we must recognize that there are two classes of people in the congregation. For this very reason, rather than speaking of an historic, conditional, temporary set of benefits conferred by baptism, Calvin used the doctrine of election to explain why the visible church has two kinds of people within it. “Therefore the secret election and inner vocation of God is to be considered.”³⁵ In the visible church there are always “many hypocrites mixed in, who have nothing of Christ except the title and appearance.”³⁶ Calvin quite intentionally and clearly distinguished between the “*signum*” of the sacrament and its “*veritas*.” He did so because one receives from baptism only as much as one receives in faith (OS, 5.296.9–11). Thus, he counseled the very “judgment of charity,” which the Federal Vision rejects as condescending and superfluous (*Institutes*, 4.1.9).

Confessions

After Calvin’s death, the Reformed Churches continued to make and elaborate on the same distinctions Calvin used. In Q. 20 the *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563) asks, “Are all men, then, saved by Christ as they have perished in Adam?” The answer is, “No, only those who by true faith are ingrafted (*einverleibt*) into Him and receive all His benefits” (Schaff, *Creeds*, 3.313). Does baptism “ingraft” the baptized into Christ? Not according to the next question which defines true faith as:

“a certain knowledge and hearty trust ... which the Holy Spirit works in me by the Gospel, that not only to others, but to me also, forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness, and salvation are freely given by God, merely of grace, only for the sake of Christ’s merits (3.313).

Note well that the Heidelberg says that it is the Holy Spirit who works faith in the elect through the preached gospel, not the sacrament of baptism. Question 65 clarifies how we are united to Christ:

Since, then, we are made partakers of Christ and all his benefits by faith only, where does this faith come from?

The Holy Spirit works faith in our hearts by the preaching of the Holy Gospel, and confirms it by the use of the holy sacraments (3.328).

This doctrine of Spirit-wrought faith as the sole instrument of justification and union with Christ would seem to be impossible to reconcile with the Federal Vision doctrine of the baptismal benefits. According to Question 66, the function of the sacraments is not the creation of union with Christ, but the confirmation of union received through faith.

The sacraments are visible, holy signs and seals appointed by God for this end, that by their use He may the more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the Gospel, namely, that of free grace He grants us the forgiveness of sins and everlasting life for the sake of the one sacrifice of Christ accomplished on the cross (3.328).

The Westminster Standards teach precisely the same doctrine as the Heidelberger on baptism and union. *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1647) 27.2 says:

There is in every sacrament a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified: whence it comes to pass, that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other.³⁷

We confess a “sacramental union” precisely to avoid conflating the sacrament with the thing signified. In sacramental speech, the sacrament can stand for the thing signified, as in Gen 17, where God calls circumcision “my covenant,” but the Confession understands such speech as “sacramental” language not a literal identity. Thus WCF 28.1 calls baptism a

sacrament of the New Testament, ordained ... not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible Church; but also, to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life.

35. OS, 5.3.14–15. “Ita et arcana electio Dei et interior vocatio spectanda est.”

36. OS, 5.12.19–20. “In hac autem plurimi sunt permixti hypocritae, qui nihil Christi habent praeter titulum et speciem.”

37. S. W. Carruthers, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: Being an Account of the Preparation and Printing of Its Seven Leading Editions, to Which Is Appended a Critical Text of the Confession* (Manchester: R. Aikman & Son, 1937) 145.

The *Westminster Confession* does not say that baptism effects our ingrafting into Christ, regeneration, remission of sins etc., but rather teaches that the sacrament is a sign and seal of the reality received through faith “receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness” (11.2, Carruthers, 113).

The confessional theology of baptism must be read in the context of the confessional internal/external distinction and in the context of the confessional distinction between the visible and invisible church. These distinctions are affirmed either explicitly or implicitly in all our confessional documents. For example, in *Belgic Confession*, Art. 29, we confess that there is a “company of hypocrites (*compagnie des hypocrites*), who are mixed in the Church with the good, yet are not of the Church, though externally in it (*soient présents quant au corps*) ...” (3.419).

Heidelberg Catechism questions 54 and 55 make a distinction between the Holy Catholic church, which it treats as the church invisibly considered, and the “communion of saints” which it treats as the church visible. It also speaks explicitly (Q. 81, *Creeds*, 3.336) about the presence of baptized members whom it calls hypocrites (*Heuchler*).

The *Westminster Confession* (25.1, 2) affirms explicitly and unequivocally the existence of the “catholic or universal Church which is invisible, consists of the whole

number of the elect ...” (Carruthers, 139). The answer to *Westminster Larger Catechism* Q.31 implies a distinction between those who are in the invisible church and those who are only in the visible church, when it says that the “Covenant of Grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the Elect as his seed.”³⁸

The church is also considered as the “visible church,” which is “also catholic or universal” and “consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion ... out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.” Read in their context, the Reformed confessional language concerning baptismal efficacy takes on a quite different tone and sense from that found in the *Federal Vision* writers.

Reformed Orthodoxy

One of the reasons the *Federal Vision* writers feel the liberty to reject or revise accepted Reformed terms, distinctions, and categories, is because they seem unaware of the Reformed tradition before the 20th century and unaware of modern scholarship that has reversed decades of prejudice against Reformed orthodoxy or scholasticism.³⁹ Recent scholarship, however, has shown that the older assumption of discontinuity between Calvin and the orthodox is untenable.⁴⁰

The Reformed orthodox made frequent use of the internal/external distinction found in Calvin and in the confessions. Olevianus explained that we are called “Christians ... because we believe in Christ and are baptized into his name. This faith in Christ is the anointing that we have received from Christ and that remains ours for ever.”

He knew nothing of a temporary or conditional or historical election or union with Christ and certainly knew nothing of a union with Christ wrought through baptism. For Caspar Olevianus, we are justified “through faith” and baptism is the “testimony” that, as believers, we are members of Christ.⁴¹ According to Olevianus, “... the Holy Spirit is that bond of the union by which Christ abides in us and we in him.” It is only by the work of the Spirit “who incorporates us into Christ ... that we can share in Christ and all his benefits...”⁴²

In the early 17th century, a few years before the Synod of Dort, Johannes Wollebius (1586–1629) wrote that “The purpose of baptism, besides others that it has in common with the holy supper, is the confirmation both of one’s reception, or ingrafting into the family of God, and his regeneration.”⁴³

William Ames, who was an important influence on

38. Assembly of Divines, *The Humble Advice of the Assembly of Divines, Now by the Authority of Parliament Sitting at Westminster Concerning a Larger Catechisme* (London: 1648) 9. This language would seem to be irreconcilable with the *Federal Vision* doctrine of baptismal benefits. If the covenant of grace, considered narrowly, is only with the elect then those who are not included in that covenant cannot be in union with Christ.

39. For an introduction to this scholarship see Carl R. Trueman and R. Scott Clark, eds., *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999). See also Richard A. Muller, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Willem J. Van Asselt and Eef Dekker, eds., *Reformation and Scholasticism, Text and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001); Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, Ca. 1520 to Ca. 1725*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003).

40. In a review published in *The Banner of Truth* (July–August [1977] 61), Sinclair Ferguson criticized Norman Shepherd for making just this historical error.

41. Caspar Olevianus, *A Firm Foundation. An Aid to Interpreting the Heidelberg Catechism*, ed. Richard A. Muller, trans. Lyle D. Bierma, *Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995) 45.

42. Olevianus, *Firm Foundation*, 92.

43. Johannes Wollebius, *Christianae Theologiae Compendium*, ed. E. Bizer (Neukirchen: Kreis Moers, 1935) 1.23.13.

the Synod of Dort, a bridge between British Puritanism and Dutch Reformed orthodoxy, and a seminal Reformed theologian in the Netherlands, said that “the special application of God’s favor and grace which arises from true faith is very much confirmed and furthered by the sacraments.” The “sacramental signs do not include the spiritual thing to which they refer in any physically inherent or adherent sense for then the signs and the things signified would be the same.”⁴⁴ He continued, “Those who partake of the signs do not necessarily partake of the spiritual thing itself...”⁴⁵

Archbishop Usher, who was a significant influence leading up to the Westminster Assembly, never spoke of union with Christ relative to baptism. Rather he called union with Christ the fruit of justification and faith alone is the instrument of justification. The Holy Spirit working through the preached Word is the agent of union, not baptism.⁴⁶

There was a consistent pattern in Reformed orthodoxy. When Reformed theology thought of “union with Christ,” it thought of the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit, who regenerates, who gives faith, and who, through faith, unites the believer to Christ. Baptism is a sign and seal of this union, but it neither creates it nor does God necessarily create this union through baptism.

EXEGETICAL THEOLOGY

Genesis 17

In the history of salvation God’s covenant with Abraham was the paradigm for his saving work and word. It was to this covenant that the apostle Peter appealed in his sermon on Pentecost (Acts 2:39) and by which Stephen defended himself before the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:2–8, 17). The apostle Paul appealed to this covenant in his synagogue sermon in Antioch (Acts 13:32), in his defense before Agrippa (Acts 26:6), in his epistle to the Romans, and in his argument with the Judaizers (Rom. 4; Gal. 3:13–29, 4:22–31). In the history of covenant theology the Reformed have always regarded this passage as foundational for our understanding of the covenant of grace.

In Genesis 17, Yahweh comes to Abram and enters into a covenant with him requiring that (v. 10) every male shall be circumcised. Verses 12 and 13 add that every male in the household must be circumcised. This is Yahweh’s “covenant in your flesh.”

It is clear that, as part of the administration of the covenant made with Abraham, both infant and adult

males other than Abraham were to be circumcised, including slaves. The Federal Vision writers assume correctly a close connection between baptism and circumcision as roughly equivalent sacraments. Like baptism, circumcision was a sign of initiation and every male in Abraham’s house was eligible because, for purposes of covenant administration, they were regarded as subsidiaries of the covenant head. They were recipients of the promises of the covenant of grace just as the infants were and so were included in the initiation rite.

If, however, their view, that baptism confers the benefits of Christ to every recipient, is correct, then we should conclude that every member of Abraham’s household also received Christ’s benefits by virtue of circumcision. Yet nothing in the narrative suggests that this was the case. Indeed, in v. 23, the first person, other than Abraham, mentioned as being initiated into the Abrahamic covenant was Hagar’s son Ishmael (Gen. 16:5) whom Paul uses (in Gal. 4) as the prototypical reprobate in contrast to Isaac.

Romans 4:9–11

In Romans 4:9–11 Paul explains the meaning of Abraham’s covenant initiation. Abraham’s “faith was reckoned” to him “as righteousness...” “He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.” Paul did not interpret Abraham’s circumcision as having conferred all Christ’s benefits to be retained by “faithfulness.” For Paul, Abraham’s circumcision served as the sort of guarantee described above.

Paul’s interpretation of Abraham’s circumcision, and its corollary, the inward/outward distinction served as the basis for the distinction made by Olevianus and the rest of the Reformed tradition between the *substance* of the divine promise, “I will be your God and a God to

44. William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, trans. John Dykstra Eusden (Durham, N.C.: Labyrinth, 1983) 197.

45. Ames, 198. Ames’ doctrine of baptismal benefits was identical to that of the “conforming spiritual brotherhood” including William Perkins, Richard Sibbes, and John Preston. See E. Brooks Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed: The Development of Puritan Sacramental Theology in Old and New England 1570–1720* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974) 38–51. Holifield also describes the 17th century controversy surrounding the “sacramentalism,” of Samuel Ward and Cornelius Burgess, which in certain respects, seems to have been resuscitated by the Federal Vision. See Holifield, 78–87. The mainline of British confessional Calvinism rejected their doctrines of baptismal benefits.

46. James Usher, *A Bodie of Divinitie or the Summe and Substance of Christian Religion* (London: 1653) 190–191.

your children” and the *administration* of that promise through circumcision and baptism.

Shepherd’s claim that the adverbs φανερω̄ and κρυπτω̄ refer to “covenantally loyal Jews and disobedient transgressors” assumes a false definition of faith in the act of justification.⁴⁷ Abraham the believer is the prototypical “inward” Jew. His circumcision signified and sealed what God the Spirit had already accomplished in him through the divine promise. Paul does not say that Abraham was justified because he was faithful (πιστός), but because he believed (ἐπίστευσεν) the promise.⁴⁸ The contrast here is not between “covenantally loyal” and disloyal Jews, but between belief and unbelief, behind which lies eternal election. In this passage, circumcision and baptism serve as external signs and seals of promise of the covenant made with Abraham. It does not confer Christ’s benefits, but it does promise and confirm them to those who believe.

Romans 6:1–5

The Federal Vision advocates appeal to Romans 6 as perhaps the chief proof of their doctrine that baptism unites us to Christ. There are some modern scholars who have read this passage in a way that might seem to support their view, or in ways that might lead to this understanding;⁴⁹ but, as we saw, that was not Calvin’s interpretation nor has it been the historic Reformed understanding of the passage.⁵⁰

There are compelling reasons that arise from a close consideration of the passage itself, which pushed the Reformed away from the view that the act of baptism unites the baptized to Christ, the first of which is the context of the passage. The issue in Romans 6 was the motive for and necessity of sanctity. The question before Paul was this: Is it the case that, having been justified *sola gratia, sola fide*, we may sin with impunity? Paul picks up the theme of 5:20. Given the “hyper-abundance” of grace, does it follow that we should sin so that

47. “Evangelism,” 65. Shepherd does not defend this interpretation or cite any of his exegetical influences. This line of interpretation, however, seems to have anticipated the reading of Paul offered by the New Perspective on Paul.

48. Paul does not use πιστός in Romans.

49. Herman N. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John Richard de Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 59, 408–411.

50. E.g., see Olevianus, *De substantia*, 2.65, where he interprets Romans 6:3–6 as a “testimonium divinum adoptionis nostrae seu unionis cum Christo Dei Filio”... (*De substantia*, 2.65). See Caspar Olevianus, *In Epistolam D. Pauli Apostoli Ad Romanos Notae, Ex Concionibus G. Oleviani Excerptae*, ed. Theodore Beza (Geneva: 1579) 237–241.

there might be even more grace? Paul’s answer was unequivocal: “It ought never to be.” We cannot “live in sin,” because “we died to sin” (v. 2). So, read in context, Paul’s interest is not to argue that baptism confers Christ’s benefits, but rather to appeal to it as an illustration of the union (and concomitant benefits) that already exists by faith. We who believe, who are united to Christ by the work of the Spirit, who were baptized, “were baptized into his death...” We were not only baptized into his death and burial, by baptism we are also identified with his resurrection and thus ought to live as those who have been united to Christ’s resurrection.

Several observations are in order. First, as closely as Paul relates the sign to the thing signified in this passage, he nowhere says that baptism unites the baptized to Christ. The function of Paul’s appeal to baptism is not to teach that baptism does anything per se. Rather, he appeals to baptism as an illustration, or a sign of what was already true of them. He uses sacramental language, using the *signum* for the *res significata*. On their hermeneutic, the Federal Vision interpretation does not go far enough. If baptism per se confers union with Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection, then these must be permanent and not provisional. For Paul, death, burial, and resurrection are not soteric events to be repeated either historically or in the life of the believer.

There is no question whether believers are united to Christ. There is no question whether those united to Christ have died with him. There is no question whether there are moral consequences of union with Christ. What is also clear is that Paul nowhere says either that baptism accomplishes or that the Spirit effects union with Christ through baptism.

Colossians 2:11–13

Here the apostle Paul speaks of our union with Christ and he connects it to both baptism and circumcision. This passage is primarily about our union with Christ. Circumcision and baptism serve as correlate illustrations of our union with Christ by faith.

In verse eleven Paul says “in him” (ἐν ᾧ) or “into whom also you were circumcised.” The point here is the nature and consequence of our union with Christ. That is what it means to say “in whom.” Paul was warning the Colossian congregation about the danger of any attempt to present one’s self before God on the basis of our obedience. This much is evident from Paul’s warning in v. 8 regarding “philosophy and empty deception” (φιλοσοφίας καὶ κενῆς ἀγαπῆς).

Paul’s answer to moralism is the incarnation of God

the Son, whose righteousness is the ground of our standing before God, thus raising the question of the nature of our relation to Christ. The answer, in v. 10, is that “you have been filled in him” (ἐστὲ ἐν αὐτῷ πληρωμένοι). This is legal, relational (not realistic) language. In verse eleven he gives us an analogy that explains how we are filled with Christ. The “internal/external” distinction is also at work here. Again, “into whom” (ἐν ᾧ) you were circumcised (περιετμήθητε), not physically, but “with a hand-less circumcision” (περιτομῆ ἀχειροποιήτω). Whatever is in view, it is not the act of ritual initiation into the covenant of grace. This “hand-less” circumcision is further explained as that instrument “in the putting off of the body of the flesh” which, in Pauline theology, refers to the consequences of Spirit-wrought union with Christ. This circumcision is located, not in any sacrament administered to us, but in the act of Christ’s crucifixion, “in the circumcision of Christ.”

This argument makes perfect sense, given Paul’s “inward/outward” distinction. Without this distinction, Paul’s argument becomes incoherent. For Paul, both circumcision and baptism are a ritual death. They both point to Christ’s literal, physical death. We are said to have been crucified, buried, and raised with Christ only by virtue of our union with Christ, which for Paul, is realized by faith. This is made unmistakably clear in the last part of vs. 12 and in vs. 13 in the instrumental phrase “through faith” (διὰ τῆς πίστεως). Nowhere in this passage does the apostle Paul make either baptism or circumcision the subject of the verb “to unite” or baptism/circumcision the instrument of that union. For Paul, the Holy Spirit unites the elect to Christ through faith.

Romans 9

It is a given for the Federal Vision writers that covenant and election are, at best, only parallel categories. The Apostle Paul was not so reluctant to connect covenant and election and neither were our confessional theologians.⁵¹ Indeed, this passage would seem to be the antithesis to the Federal Vision’s doctrine of conditional, provisional, baptismal benefits.

First, in 9:6, Paul connects this discourse directly with 2:28–29 when he makes the very same distinction by saying that “not all those who are of Israel (πάντες οἱ ἐξ Ἰσραὴλ οὗτοι) are Israel.” Paul’s point is that in the administration of the covenant of grace, not all those who were visibly members of the covenant of grace, who were outwardly related to Abraham, were actually mem-

bers of the covenant of grace inwardly. They were outwardly Israel, but not spiritually Israel by election.

Paul’s proof of this distinction is that some believed and others did not. He is unequivocal that faith is the fruit of election and that faith is the sole instrument for taking possession of Christ’s benefits. Faith’s sole instrumental function is evident in the grammar of 9:30 where the Gentiles are said to have “appropriated” (κατέλαβεν) righteousness “through faith” (ἐκ πίστεως) not by observing the law (ἐξ ἔργων).⁵² He reinforces this point in 9:33 where he says that it is the one “believing” (πιστεύων) in Christ who shall not be put to shame.⁵³

In contrast to the Federal Vision theology, Paul’s doctrine of unconditional election is situated in and closely related to his doctrine of the administration of the covenant of grace. Throughout this passage, Paul uses election to explain the history of redemption and that to illustrate the nature of divine election. Thus, in v. 11, Paul is at pains to make clear that the divine election is unconditioned by anything except the divine will and nature. God’s purpose (πρόθεσις) regarding election (ἐκλογὴν) was not contingent upon anything foreseen in Jacob or Esau. Paul knows nothing of any sort of historically conditioned or contingent election. He views redemptive history as populated by two classes of people, those who are unconditionally elect and those who are reprobated. Verse 13 is categorical in its declaration that God hated (ἐμίσησα) Esau before the latter had opportunity to cooperate with the grace received in his circumcision. In that case, it would seem impossible to say that Esau (or anyone in his class) was ever united to Christ. Only in this case does the anticipated objection (vv.14, 19), “is there injustice with God?” and “Why does [God] blame us?” make sense. If the Federal Vision doctrine of baptismal union with Christ is true, then the apparent injustice is mitigated considerably, since in their theology, the reprobate are those who do not cooperate with the grace given in covenant initiation. Paul, however, offers no such qualification. He is so committed to unconditional, eternal election, that

51. Olevianus discussed these verses at considerable length in his commentary on Romans. He used the doctrine of election not as an abstract *à priori* but as an explanation of the *historia salutis*. He began his argument by considering the covenant promise made to Abraham. See Olevianus, *Ad Romanos*, 418–446.

52. For the same reason he says in Philippians 3:3 and 3:9 that it is those who have righteousness “through faith” (διὰ πίστεως), who are “worshiping God by the Spirit,” who are “boasting in Christ,” who are “the circumcision.”

53. This same doctrine and approach is found in Galatians 3:6–26.

in verses 15–18 he heightens the apparent injustice by appealing to the unconditioned divine will. Both Esau and Jacob were circumcised. Both were members of the covenant of grace, but only one was elect, only one had true faith, and only one was united to Christ. The difference between Jacob and Esau was not cooperation with grace, but eternal, unconditioned, divine election which manifests itself in true faith.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

As a representative of Reformed orthodoxy, Wollebius' account of the sacraments is particularly helpful in this discussion. He distinguished clearly between, on the one hand, the "internal and heavenly matter" i.e., "the thing signified (*res significata*) namely Christ with all his benefits" and on other hand, the "external form of the sacrament" which "consists of the legitimate administration and participation, according to the command of God" (Wollebius, *Compendium*, 1.22.12, 13). The relation between them is analogical (1.22.14).

The union between the sign and the thing signified, he wrote, is "not natural," and it is "not local" but relational (σχετική; or perhaps "accidental") insofar as the sign represents the thing signified, and by the sign exhibited the thing signified is given to the believer by Christ in the sign exhibited by the minister" (Wollebius, *Compendium*, 1.22.15). As Calvin had argued before him, Wollebius contended that, by distinguishing the sign and the thing signified, signs are not emptied of meaning or importance. They convey information (*significantia*), they exhibit/present grace, they are an application of grace, and they seal grace (1.22.16). The sign of the sacrament conveys the most important information, the gospel of Christ. Second, in the sacramental action, grace is exhibited. Third, to those who believe, the sacrament conveys the thing signified, that is the benefits of Christ, by the fourth the thing promised is sealed or confirmed (1.22.16).

In short, confessional Reformed theology thinks of the sacramental "sign" of baptism as something "rich,"

54. "Effecta sacramentorum non sunt iustificatio aut sanctificatio tanquam ex opere operato, sed utriusque beneficii confirmatio et obsignatio. Res manifestata est exemplo Abrahami, qui prius quam circumciscus esset iustificatus erat. Rom. 4.11. Falso igitur Pontificii asserunt sacramenta insita quasi vi ex opere operato remissionem peccatorum et similia beneficia conferre" (Wollebius, *Compendium*, 1.22.21). The very same arguments that Wollebius made contra the Pontificii could also be made against the Federal Vision doctrine that baptism confers the *beneficia Christi ex opere*.

55. "Quod verbo ordinarie fides excitetur, sacramentis confirmetur" (Wollebius, *Compendium*, 1.22.24).

not something empty or impoverished. At the same time, we have avoided confusing the sacrament with the thing signified. As Wollebius said:

The effects of the sacraments are not justification and sanctification *ex opere operato*, but the confirmation and sealing of both benefits. This was obvious from the example of Abraham who was justified before he was circumcised. The papists therefore teach falsely, that the sacraments confer remission of sin and similar benefits *ex opere operato*, by an inherent power.⁵⁴

Hence, he said, "Normally faith is aroused by the Word, confirmed by sacraments."⁵⁵

Initiation and Identification

Another aspect of signification is identification. It is particularly clear from Romans 6, Colossians 2, and 1 Corinthians 10:1–5 that, for Paul, covenant initiation is a ritual, public, identification with Christ. To be identified with him, is not, however, the same thing as being united with him. All the Israelites were "baptized" (into Moses), i.e., were identified with Christ and ate "the same Spiritual food" as we do. Nevertheless Paul goes on to say in v.5, "with most of them God was not pleased..."

For the phrase "baptized into Moses," substitute "united to Christ" and one can see how intense is the problem raised by the Federal Vision doctrine of baptismal benefits. The very point of Paul's argument in these verses is that it is possible to partake of the sacraments, to be ritually, externally identified with Christ and still fall under judgment. It is true faith that actually unites us to Christ, not the sacraments.

Ministerial Recognition

Covenant initiation is a ministerial not magisterial act. When a minister pronounces the declaration of pardon or commination, those words do not create justification or judgment; rather they recognize an existing state of affairs. In Scripture, covenant initiation never creates union with Christ, but rather recognizes that the candidate for baptism is properly the recipient of the sign and seal. Thus, the covenant child is properly the recipient of initiation because he or she is already a member of the covenant of grace and ritually sanctified (1 Cor. 7:14). The mature convert (e. g., Abraham) is baptized in recognition of his faith (Rom. 4:11). Thus, Wollebius said, "the minister's function is to