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For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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Federal Vision^{*}

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The Federal Vision, Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner, editors. Monroe, Louisiana: Athanasius Press, 2004. 299 pages, \$21.95 (paper).

Written by several of the leading proponents of the heresy now solidly entrenched in most of the reputedly conservative Presbyterian and Reformed churches, and spreading, *The Federal Vision* brazenly defends justification by works; universal covenant grace to every child of believing parents, if not to every person sprinkled with water in the name of the triune God; an election unto grace that fails to save; baptismal regeneration; and the falling away of many who were once united to Christ. Among the authors are Steve Wilkins, John Barach, Rich Lusk, Peter J. Leithart, Steve Schlissel, James Jordan, and Douglas Wilson.

Justification by Works

The movement that calls itself the “federal vision” teaches justification by the obedience of the sinner. “The presuppositions undergirding Paul’s statement [in *Romans* 2:13] include the facts that the Law is ‘obeyable,’ that truly responding to the Law (the Word) in faith does justify” (Schlissel, 260). *Romans* 2:13 states that “the doers of the law shall be justified.” Schlissel’s comment on the text, that the “Law is ‘obeyable,’” affirms justification by deeds of obedience to the law.

Schlissel denies that *Romans* 3:28 has any and all human works in view when it speaks of the “deeds of the law”: “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.” Rather, the reference is only to “Jewish” deeds, that is, ceremonial works done with the motive of meriting salvation (260, 261). According to

Schlissel, the apostle merely excludes “Jewish” deeds from justification. Other deeds, deeds performed by the believer in the power of true faith, are included in justification. The Apostle Paul concluded that a man is justified by faith *without* deeds — any deed and all deeds. Steve Schlissel concludes that a man is justified by faith *with* deeds — deeds performed by faith.

Peter Leithart charges the Reformation with distorting the truth of justification: “The Reformation doctrine of justification has illegitimately narrowed and to some extent distorted the biblical doctrine” (209). The distortion is the Reformation’s sharply distinguishing justification and sanctification and its insistence that justification is a verdict (211, 213). Leithart argues that justification in Scripture has “a much wider scope of application than the strictly judicial” (209). In fact, according to Leithart, “justifying is never *merely* declaring a verdict” (213; the emphasis is the author’s). Justification is also the sanctifying work of God within the sinner enabling him to perform good works, which then become part of his righteousness with God, as Rome has been teaching for the past five hundred years.

Resistible Grace

The “federal vision” teaches that the saving grace of God in Christ is universal within the sphere of the covenant, but that this grace can be resisted and lost. Everyone who is baptized, particularly every child of believing parents who is baptized, is savingly united to Christ, although many later fall away and perish:

Non-elect covenant members are actually brought to Christ, united to Him and the Church in baptism, receive various gracious operations of the Holy Spirit, and may even be said to be loved by God for a time.... In some sense, they were really joined to the elect people, really sanctified by Christ’s blood, and really

^{*}“Vision: 1a: something seen in a dream, trance, or ecstasy, specifically a supernatural appearance that conveys a revelation; b: an object of imagination....2a: the act or power of imagination....”

recipients of new life given by the Holy Spirit. The sacraments they received had objective force and efficacy [Lusk, 288].

God truly brings those people into His covenant, into union with Christ. They are "in Him," to use Jesus' words in *John* 15. They share in His blessings (think of *Hebrews* 6). They experience His love, but that covenant relationship is conditional. It calls for repentance and faith and new obedience. God's *choice* was not conditional, but life in the covenant is [Barach, 37; the emphasis is the author's].

The new covenant theology in the Reformed and Presbyterian churches teaches that election fails to save many whom God chooses. It teaches that the *eternal election of Ephesians 1:4 and Colossians 3:12* fails to save many who are the objects of this gracious choice. "And yet not all who are united to the Elect One, Jesus Christ, remain in Him and fulfill the high vocation that election brings with it. It is still to be seen who will persevere and who will fall away from within the elect people" (Lusk, 294).

Baptismal Regeneration

The movement teaches baptismal regeneration. The ceremony of sprinkling with water in the name of the triune God effects the temporary regeneration and salvation of everyone baptized. It effects regeneration by the power of the Spirit, but the ceremony regenerates and saves everyone who is baptized, particularly every infant of godly parents. This regeneration and salvation can be lost. "The threshold into union with Christ, new life in the Spirit, and covenant membership in the family of God is actually crossed when the child is baptized" (Lusk, 109).

The advocates of the "federal vision" teach the falling away of covenant saints from saving covenant grace. They teach the falling away of saints aggressively. The falling away of covenant saints is one of their favorite doctrines:

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 [Wilkins, 62].

Clearly, then, *Hebrews* 6:4-8 teaches the possibility of a real apostasy. Some people do indeed fall away, and it is a *real* fall *from* grace. Apostates actually lose blessings they once possessed. Apostasy is so terribly heinous precisely because it is sin against grace [Lusk, 274; the emphasis is the author's].

Lusk manages to incorporate all of the false doctrines mentioned above in a paragraph that could have been written by James Arminius or Cardinal Bellarmine:

All covenant members are invited to attain to a full and robust confidence that they are God's eternally elect ones. Starting with their baptisms, they have every reason to believe God loves them and desires their eternal salvation. Baptism marks them out as God's elect people, a status they maintain so long as they persevere in faithfulness. By looking to Christ alone, the preeminently Elect One, the One who kept covenant to the end and is the Author and Finisher of the faith of God's people, they may find assurance. But those who take their eyes off Christ, who desert the Church where His presence is found, who forsake the external means of salvation, will make shipwreck of their faith and prove to have received the grace of God in vain [289].

The "federal vision" rejects sovereign grace in the sphere of the covenant. In the sphere of the covenant, particularly among the children of believers, election fails, Christ died for all, grace is resistible, justification is by works, saved saints fall away to perdition, and salvation depends on the will of the sinner.

A Conditional Covenant

The root of the heresy is an erroneous doctrine of the covenant. The doctrine of the covenant being developed by the movement teaches that God graciously makes His covenant with all the children of believers alike. In the sphere of the covenant, regarding all baptized babies without exception, grace is universal. The movement is one of covenantal universalism. But the covenant is conditional. Whether the covenant is continued with a child, whether a child continues in the covenant, whether a child continues to enjoy union with Christ and covenant grace, and whether a child is finally saved by the grace of the covenant depend upon the child's faith and obedience. The movement is full-fledged Arminianism in the realm of the covenant.

In short, the error whence all the denial of sovereign, particular, irresistible grace springs is a covenant doctrine that refuses to permit God's election to control covenant grace and salvation.

[*Hebrews* 6 and similar] passages simply speak of the *undifferentiated* grace of God [Lusk, 275, 276; the emphasis is the author's].

God truly brings those people into His covenant, into union with Christ. They are "in Him," to use Jesus' words in *John* 15. They share in His blessings (think of *Hebrews* 6). They experience His love, but that covenant relationship is conditional. It calls for repentance and faith and new obedience. God's *choice* was not conditional, but life in the covenant is [Barach, 37].

To be in covenant is to have the treasures of God's mercy and grace and the love which He has for His

own Son given to you. But the covenant is not *unconditional*. It requires persevering faithfulness.... The covenant is dependent upon persevering faith [Wilkins, 64, 65; the emphasis is the author's].

Our salvation covenant with the Lord is like a marriage. If we persevere in loyalty to Christ, we will live with Him happily ever after. If we break the marriage covenant, He will divorce us [Lusk, 285, 286].

Contempt for the Creeds

The Reformed creeds mean nothing to these men, all of whom loudly protest that they are Reformed. The Canons of Dordt reject the Arminian heresy that "there is one election unto faith and another unto salvation, so that election can be unto justifying faith without being a decisive election unto salvation." The reason is that this teaching is

a fancy of men's minds, invented regardless of the Scriptures, whereby the doctrine of election is corrupted, and this golden chain of our salvation is broken: "And whom He foreordained, them He also called; and whom He called, them He also justified; and whom He justified, them He also glorified" (*Romans* 8:30) [Canons of Dordt, I, Rejection of Errors/2].

Contradicting the Canons and breaking the "golden chain of our salvation" bother Rich Lusk not at all. With (undocumented) appeal to Augustine, he distinguishes a "predestination unto grace," which is only temporary and does "not lead to final salvation," from "predestination unto perseverance," which does issue in final salvation (275).

With cavalier disregard for the teaching of the Reformed creeds, James B. Jordan denies that Jesus *merited* salvation for His people. "Nowhere [in Scripture] is Jesus' accomplishment spoken of as earning salvation" (192). "What we receive is not Jesus' merits, but His maturity, His glorification" (195).

Absurdity and "Fuzzy-edged Mystery"

James Jordan's presence in the book is significant. Jordan is one of the old-guard Christian Reconstructionists, involved in the fiasco of Tyler, Texas, where an early attempt to bring in Christian Reconstruction's earthly kingdom died aborning. Jordan connects the original movement of Christian Reconstruction with its contemporary manifestation. It should not be overlooked that most of the men of the "federal vision" are zealots on behalf of postmillennial Christian Reconstruction.

James B. Jordan is the wildest hare started by Christian Reconstruction. His speciality is allegorical, fantastical exegesis. In comparison with Jordan, Origen and Harold Camping are pikers. According to Jordan, Adam in Paradise would eventually have eaten the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil with God's approval. Adam would then have died a "good-death." By this "good-death,"

he would have been glorified, maturing into eternal life. This would have enabled Adam to fight the dragon for a while in the unfallen world at large. But Adam would have needed help. Help would have appeared in the form, not of St. George or Frodo, but of the incarnate Son of God. The eternal Son would have become incarnate even if Adam had remained obedient. But the incarnate Son likewise would have passed through the "good-death" of eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, so that He too could "mature." This fantasy is further embellished by Jordan with mind-boggling theories about garments and distinctions among animal, vegetable, and mineral (151-200).

If James Jordan is the exegete of the "federal vision," the movement is not only heretical but also absurd.

The absurd is the unintelligible.

Theological unintelligibility does not trouble Rich Lusk. Bravely drawing the inevitable conclusion from his premise that the Bible is not logical, Lusk is content to "live with fuzzy-edged mystery" (279). "Fuzzy-edged mystery" is "federal vision" language for ignorance. The specific area in which Lusk is content to live in his "fuzzy-edged mystery" is the Biblical doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. Lusk readily admits that his doctrine of an illogical Bible, which is full of contradictions, particularly concerning the perseverance of the saints, derives from his "biblical-theological/redemptive-historical" method of interpreting the Bible, in opposition to what Lusk calls a "systematic/dogmatic" method (280).

In fact, Lusk's "fuzzy-edged mystery" is due to his denial that Holy Scripture as the inspired Word of God is non-contradictory and logical, as non-contradictory and logical as the God whose Word it is. As the written Word of God, Scripture is clear, sharp-edged, and certain revelation, particularly of God's preservation unto glory of every recipient of His grace. Scripture is clear, sharp-edged, and certain *to faith*.

"Luther's Malady"

It falls to Steve Schlissel to make the most despicable attack on the Gospel of grace. Schlissel calls Luther's knowledge of himself as a guilty sinner before a just God, out of which Spirit-worked knowledge came his understanding of the Bible's Gospel of justification by faith alone, "Luther's malady" (255). Luther's sickness! Justification by faith alone, therefore, is a diseased doctrine. Since justification by faith alone is the cornerstone of the entire Reformation Gospel, the entire Reformation Gospel of sovereign grace is sick.

This "malady," the men of the "federal vision" are determined to cure by a massive infusion of works-righteousness into the theology of Presbyterian and Reformed churches and into the spiritual lives of Presbyterian and Reformed people. The device by which works-righteousness is injected into the bloodstream of the

churches and people influenced by the “federal vision” is the doctrine of a conditional covenant.

The heresy of the “federal vision” is deep and broad. It penetrates to the heart of the Gospel, and it extends to all the doctrines of grace. It can be refuted and rooted out only by the doctrine of a covenant of unconditional, particular grace. And this is why the Presbyterian and Reformed churches where the heresy is boldly taught are both unwilling and unable to resist it.

Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul: A Review and Response, by Guy Prentiss Waters. Presbyterian & Reformed, 2004. Paperback, 274 pages, \$16.99. Reviewed by Pastor Edwin C. Urban, OPC.

Many in the conservative Presbyterian denominations are waking up, rubbing their eyes, and beginning to see that their communions are embroiled in a controversy that they never dreamed could have arisen in their Reformed churches. The controversy is over the nature and definition of justification. This debate is shaking the foundations of these denominations and is having a distinctly polarizing effect within them and between them.

It behooves every pastor and elder, the overseers of their flocks, to study and assess the now conflicting views that are being proposed regarding the nature of justification – a primary doctrinal concern of the Protestant Reformation. Much excellent material is being written and published regarding this debate.

One of the best books is *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul* by Guy Prentiss Waters, B.A. in Greek and Latin, University of Pennsylvania; M.Div., Westminster Theological Seminary; and Ph.D., Duke University (concentrations in New Testament, Old Testament, and Ancient Judaism).

At Duke, Dr. Waters studied under Richard B. Hays and E. P. Sanders, two leading expositors of the New Perspectives on Paul. Dr. Waters is a member of the Society of Biblical Literature and the Institute for Biblical Research. He is an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church in America.

D. A. Carson, well known New Testament scholar, has written of Waters' book:

In the last few years there have been several careful evaluations and critiques of the New Perspective. This one excels for its combination of simplicity, fair-dealing, historical awareness, and penetration. For the pastor who is vaguely aware of the debates, but who has little mastery of the confusing details, this book's careful presentation of each scholar's position is a model of accuracy and clarity. Even those who have been pondering the issues for years will see some things in a fresh light. The ability of Waters to combine exegetical, historical, biblical-theological, and systematic reflections, and all in relatively brief compass, enhances the credibility of the argument. Combine these virtues with

pedagogically helpful chapter summaries and an annotated bibliography, and it is easy to see why this book deserves wide circulation.

In reading this book, this reviewer was fascinated by the historical links the author establishes between the early exponents of the "historical-critical" school, F. C. Bauer and Wilhelm Bousset, through Albert Schweitzer, to Rudolph Bultmann and Ernst Kasemann, with the major authors of the New Perspective, E. P. Sanders, James D. G. Dunn and N. T. Wright. Waters has skillfully traced the affinities of the heterodox positions of this two hundred-year-old line of critical descent with the contemporary advocates of the New Perspectives on Paul, and beyond that, with Reformed circles close to home.

In the Preface, projecting the course along which his arguments will run, Waters writes, "I will...attempt to explain why officers and congregants within Reformed and evangelical churches find the New Perspectives on Paul attractive, and why such interest often attends interest in the theology of Norman Shepherd and the theology represented in the September 2002 statement of the session of the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church."

Among the reasons for writing this book, Waters, in the Preface, writes, "I want to illustrate the ways in which the New Perspectives on Paul deviate from the doctrines set forth in the Westminster Standards. I also want to show how Reformed theology surpasses the New Perspectives on Paul in explaining Paul's statements regarding the law, the righteousness of God, justification, and a host of other topics and doctrines."

Waters concludes his book with these remarks:

All expressions of Christianity are on the path to one of two destinations, Rome or Geneva. What the New Perspectives on Paul offer us is decidedly not "Genevan"... It seems that there are elements active in the Reformed churches that wish to lead the church into a sacramental religion, all in the name of being "more Reformed." If we examine their arguments carefully, we see that what they are *really and increasingly* saying is that Luther and Calvin were mistaken, and that Trent was right. May God give us grace that we may not squander the rich theological heritage bequeathed to us by the Reformers, historic British Calvinism, and American Presbyterianism. May we model, in spirit and teaching, that "pattern of teaching" preserved so faithfully by our forefathers.

After reading this book, it has become clearer to this reviewer that those in Reformed circles who have fallen under the influence of Sanders, Dunn, and Wright – whether they are conscious of it or not – are rejecting the federal theology of the Westminster Standards and are promoting, not just a refinement of the doctrine of justification, but a completely new system of doctrine.