

The Federal Vision

A New Perspective—an Old Heresy

By Rev. T. Aicken

So, what is all the stir about the Federal Vision? Well, from one perspective, namely the extent of its influence, it is not making great waves at all. It has created some ripples in some denominations, but otherwise, it has made hardly a splash in the pond of Reformed and Presbyterian churches, now numbering hundreds of denominations worldwide.

From another perspective, though—not the extent of its influence, but its serious departure from the Bible, from historic Christianity, and from all that confessional churches have stood for since the Protestant Reformation—yes, the Federal Vision is making waves, and pretty big ones at that. It may be a tempest in a teapot, yet, for those of us in that teapot, it is a tsunami that is bearing down on us and threatening to pull us under. Are we ready for it? Are we securely anchored in the Word of God? Do we even recognize what we are up against, or what others (who said they were Reformed) have lost?

The Federal Vision combines Klaas Schilder's view of the covenant (not the historic view, by any means), Norman Shepherd's view of justification (for which he was dismissed from Westminster Seminary in 1982), plus several speculative notions of the Anglican Bishop of Durham N.T. Wright and other innovators of what has come to be known as the "New Perspective on Paul (NPP)."

Broadly speaking, the Federal Vision is neolegalism (a system advocating works-righteousness over free grace), which is a trend in churches as old as the Galatian heresy of New Testament times. Specifically, this new version of that old trend denies, or at least ignores, the unconditional covenant God made with Christ as the Second Adam, and in Him with all the elect as His seed. It focuses exclusively, rather, on the administration of that covenant, i.e. on the covenant handed down to Abraham, consisting of conditional promises only and ordinances administered by the visible Church.

What are the practical effects of such a truncated covenant? Regrettably, it leaves us with a warped and twisted view of covenant blessing. I shall give three examples of that.

First, the clear emphasis of the Federal Vision is on covenant—not on Christ. The Federal Vision teaches that we are saved by the covenant, whereas the Reformed faith (in line with the Bible) teaches that we are saved by Christ. The Federal Vision teaches that the covenant itself conveys a relationship of peace and favour with God; the Reformed faith (again, in line with the Bible) teaches that Christ is the only Mediator, the only Redeemer of God's elect, and that the covenant offers salvation only by faith in Him. Richard D. Phillips observes, "The most stunning feature of the Federal Vision writings is the way Jesus Christ, in His person and work, recedes into the background. I am astonished that in the great mass of Federal Vision material dealing with God's covenant and salvation, our Savior is almost completely ignored" (The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros and Cons: Debating the Federal Vision, p. 84).

God the Father has given all things into the hand of His Son (John 3:35). The Holy Spirit, in turn, testifies of the Son (John 15:26). Are we now to believe that the covenant is more important than the person and work of the Son of God? Paul said, "For to me, to live is Christ..." (Phil. 1:21). He did not say, "to live is the covenant." Surely, the covenant is nothing, and can do nothing, apart from Christ Himself coming into the world and sealing to His people all the benefits of God's covenant through the shedding of His own precious blood. This is the whole point of Rev. 5.

Second, another distortion characterizing the Federal Vision's covenant and of the blessing it is said to yield

is its emphasis on a grace that is external to the recipient, and hence the importance it attaches to water baptism. An exaggerated view of ritual and ceremony is directly contrary to the Bible's demand for an internal work of grace, for Spirit baptism, and it is contrary to the priority the Bible gives to the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit.

We find the need for an internal work of grace (and how useless signs and symbols are without that) to be a strong, unbreakable cord woven throughout the Scriptures. Consider, for instance, Isa. 29:13, Jer. 4:4, Rom. 2:28,29, and Rom. 10:8-10. There is an external element to the covenant, to be sure. The water sprinkled in the sacrament of baptism is real water, something tangible. The external is meant to serve the internal, however, to be a sign and seal of rich blessings we can appropriate only by faith.

This does not mean, of course, that we can afford to ignore the external, or that we can justify our neglecting it. But, at the same time, we need to understand that water baptism does not include Spirit baptism, nor is it adequate to replace it. What does water baptism say to the unregenerate? It says, "You need to be cleansed. More than the sign, you need what it signifies. You need Christ, and you dare not die without Him!" On the other hand, to those who are converted, and are led by the Holy Spirit, this same sacramental water says, "You are complete in Christ. Nothing in all the created order can separate you from God's love to you in Him!"

Third, one more perverse effect of the Federal Vision's covenant has to do with its view of the Church. The Federal Vision makes no distinction—or says that this is the wrong distinction for us to consider—between the invisible Church (i.e. the elect) and the visible Church (i.e. those who profess faith in Christ plus their children).

Indeed, this new paradigm, as it is called, does not distinguish even between professing members and baptized members in the visible Church. All are lumped together, as it were, of one and the same status, since salvation is deemed to be conferred on all through the sacrament of baptism. Douglas Wilson, for instance, defines a Christian as "anyone who has been baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit by an authorized representative of the Christian church" ("Reformed is Not Enough, p. 19).

If you think that this sounds similar to the teaching of Rome, you are right. By confusing the sign (baptism) with the thing signified (salvation), the Federal Vision leads us full circle, back to Rome.

Some would insist in all this that they do not deny the doctrine of justification by faith alone, but say that faith and salvation are both conferred through the sacrament of baptism. What this does, of course, is to make everyone in the church a believer, whether or not he really is a believer, and it also gets rid of the need for conversion since everybody is a Christian from the moment the water of baptism is sprinkled upon him.

Is this what the Scriptures teach? (See John 3:3; Matt. 18:3) Is this what we confess? (Consider the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 3, 23, and 27.) Is it not contrary to our experience? Is it not proved to be wrong and absurd by even common sense and reason?

But let us examine this claim more closely. Those of the Federal Vision who tell us that they do not deny justification by faith alone are indeed quick to deny it when they go on, as they do, to define faith as faithfulness, i.e. faith and works together. This is not the historic Protestant view of justification by faith alone, but merely a clever attempt to make it sound so to the unsuspecting. As a matter of fact, these same people insist that we are saved, not by faith in Christ, but by faithfulness to the covenant. This is a further corruption of the doctrine.

Now we need to be very clear about this. We are saved, not because we are faithful to God's covenant, but because Christ Himself was faithful to it. Our salvation rests, then, not on our faithfulness, but on His. Jesus Christ met with the demands of the covenant of works (fulfilling all righteousness); He also met the demands of

the covenant of grace (taking upon Himself the penalty for our unrighteousness), and offered these blessings to us when we did not, and could not, meet what was required of us on account of our own disobedience and sin. Through faith, on the other hand, we lay hold of these benefits of Christ. His righteousness is imputed to us, our unrighteousness is imputed to Him, and, dressed now in the unblemished righteousness and perfect obedience of Jesus Christ, we are declared to be righteous before God for Jesus' sake.

The teaching of justification by faith alone allows no room for our own faithfulness to crowd in, as if we could ever contribute anything to gain a right standing with God ourselves. Are we not called to be zealous for good works? Of course we are, but they are the fruit of faith; they are not in any sense an instrument to lay hold of Christ.

Let us now take this one step further. If we are not saved by faith in Christ, but by faithfulness to the covenant, and if we are kept in good standing with God by having to continue in that faithfulness, then we have to produce a never-ending supply of good works or we will lose our justification. This is one of the distinguishing features of this new paradigm: one may gain and ultimately lose his salvation, his right relationship with God.

The Federal Vision, remember, teaches baptismal regeneration. It teaches that salvation is conferred on all, not through faith, but through the sacrament of baptism. Yet, while this baptismal regeneration renders conversion unnecessary in their view, still, every Christian has to preserve his favourable standing before God through good works, through his own best efforts, for he has no enduring hope of heaven apart from that.

Do you see, then, how the Federal Vision's covenant, which is intended to save everybody under its fountain of sacramental water, does not actually guarantee anything or secure any future blessing for anybody? The one thing it is purported to do—to take away all anxious fears and doubts—it therefore cannot do because it allows for no perseverance of the saints. In fact, it is a theological system based on built-in fears and doubts.

This is not a minor controversy among Christians, something that will require only grace and tact to overcome. It is the old Galatian heresy, which is no Gospel at all (Gal 1:6-7). "Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law," asks Paul, "or by the hearing of faith?...Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?" (Gal. 3:2-3).

How is it that most churches in mainline denominations have become apostate over time? Many people would surely say, in response to that question, that they went wrong when they no longer believed the Bible to be the Word of God. In other words, it is really a question of authority. When the leaders could no longer accept, consciously and with conviction, that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament were inspired of God and thus the only infallible rule of faith and practice, those churches began right then, like a runaway train, careening off the rails.

I submit that it happened before then. Indeed, long before the pastors and teachers were even conscious of their having overturned the Bible and rejecting its authority, they had abandoned preaching Christ and Him crucified. They had turned to liturgies instead, to a grossly exaggerated view of the value of religious symbols and ceremonies, and they had rejected the doctrine of justification by faith alone, supposing that men are not so bad that they cannot contribute something of worth to secure for themselves favour with God.

Can we not see, therefore, where this Federal Vision trail is leading us? Shall we be any different from so many who came before us if we, too, should go the wrong way? "If the foundations are destroyed, What can the righteous do?" (Ps. 11:3). And what legacy will it leave our children and grandchildren?