

## **I. Introduction - Purpose**

- How does your view of God's Covenant with man affect your day-to-day life?
- How does your view of the Covenant affect your worldview and your view of the institutions of family, church, and state?
- How have different views of the Covenant affected some of the different movements within Reformed Theology?

## **II. What is Covenant Theology?**

### **A. Definitions:**

1. **What do we mean by "Covenant?"**
2. **What do we mean by "Covenant Theology?"**

### **B. Historical comparisons: *suzerain-vassal* treaty**

1. **Some key concepts of a suzerain-vassal treaty**

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

2. **Elements of a suzerain-vassal treaty**

1. **Preamble**
2. **Historical Prologue**
3. **Stipulations**
4. **Witnesses**
5. **Consequences**
6. **Perpetuation**

**C. What Covenants?**

**1. Covenant of Works**

*Who is it between?*

*Requirement:*

*Blessing:*

*Curse:*

**2. Covenant of Grace**

*Who is it between?*

*Requirement:*

*Blessing:*

*Curse:*

**a) Administrations of the Covenant of Grace**

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**D. Distinctions of Covenant Theology**

What sets Covenant Theology apart from other “flavors” of Christianity?

### III. Non-Reformed views

#### A. Atheist

What is an Atheist's basis for morality?

How does he set the boundaries of family vs. state vs. church?

#### B. Papal administration

What is the Roman Catholic view of covenants in Scripture?

How can this view lead to the church having authority over other areas of life?

How does a Roman Catholic set the boundaries of family vs. state vs. church?

#### C. Dispensational

What is the dispensational view of the covenants in Scripture?

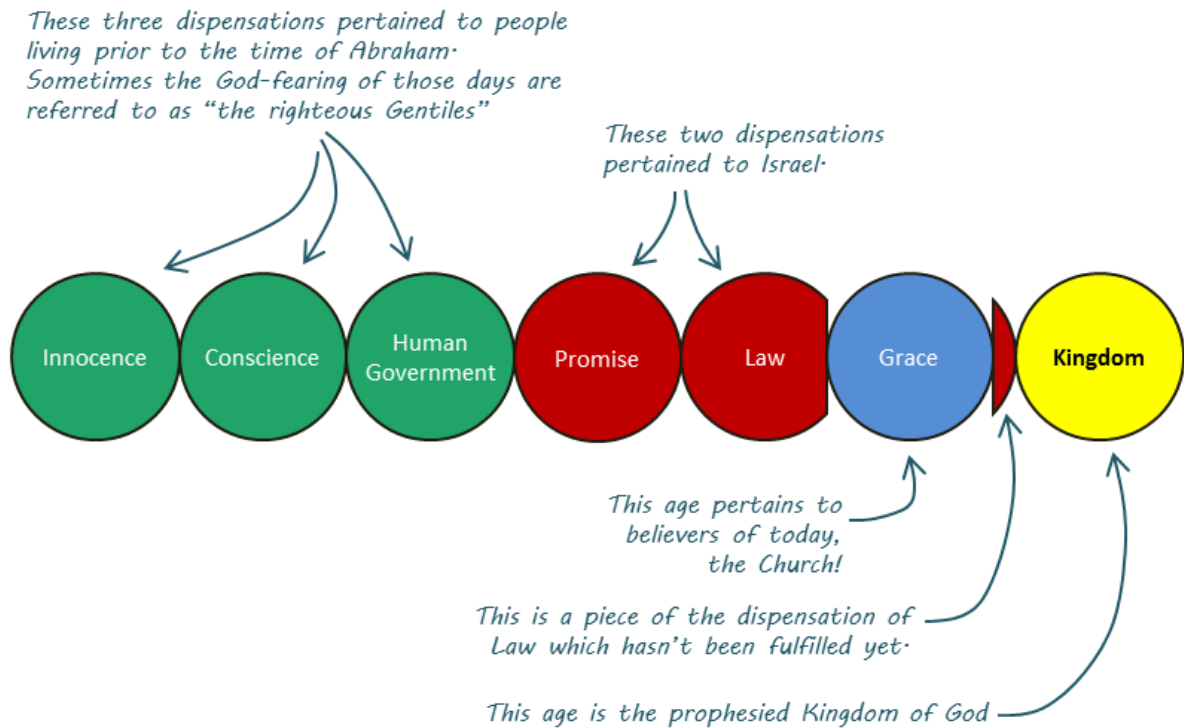


Figure 1 (DispensationalFriends.org)

What is the dispensational view of the Mosaic covenant, compared with the New Testament covenant?

How does a Dispensationalist set the boundaries of family vs. state vs. church?

## **IV. Reformed View**

“I will be your God, and you will be my people.”

One Covenant of Grace with various administrations.

### **A. Natural Law**

What is it?

#### **1. How does scripture speak of natural law?**

Romans 1:18-23, Romans 2:14-15, Genesis 1:26-27

What does it mean to be “In the image of God?”

What are some communicable attributes of God and how do we reflect them?

#### **2. The applicability of natural law**

Who does natural law apply to?

How was the situation of Abraham (and the Patriarchs) similar to that of believers today?

#### **3. The usefulness of natural law**

How is natural law useful to us? (both believers and non-believers)

How do we see natural law shown in creation? What are some examples?

#### **4. The limits of natural law**

Is natural law sufficient? Why?

Does the corruption of natural law mean it's now of no use? Why?

What examples do you see in cultures today where we've drifted further from correct recognition of the natural law? How/why do you think this has happened?

#### **For further reading:**

*A Biblical Case for Natural Law* (David VanDrunen, c. 2012)

## **B. Law in Special Revelation**

### **1. Introduction: Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 19**

#### **CHAPTER 19**

#### **Of the Law of God**

1. God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works, by which he bound him and all his posterity to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience, promised life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it, and endued him with power and ability to keep it.
2. This law, after his fall, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness; and, as such, was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in ten commandments, and written in two tables: the first four commandments containing our duty towards God; and the other six, our duty to man.
3. Beside this law, commonly called moral, God was pleased to give to the people of Israel, as a church under age, ceremonial laws, containing several typical ordinances, partly of worship, prefiguring Christ, his graces, actions, sufferings, and benefits; and partly, holding forth divers instructions of moral duties. All which ceremonial laws are now abrogated, under the new testament.
4. To them also, as a body politic, he gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the State of that people; not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require.
5. The moral law doth forever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof; and that, not only in regard of the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God the Creator, who gave it. Neither doth Christ, in the gospel, any way dissolve, but much strengthen this obligation.
6. Although true believers be not under the law, as a covenant of works, to be thereby justified, or condemned; yet is it of great use to them, as well as to others; in that, as a rule of life informing them of the will of God, and their duty, it directs and binds them to walk accordingly; discovering also the sinful pollutions of their nature, hearts, and lives; so as, examining themselves thereby, they may come to further conviction of, humiliation for, and hatred against sin, together with a clearer sight of the need they have of Christ, and the perfection of his obedience. It is likewise of use to the regenerate, to restrain their corruptions, in that it forbids sin: and the threatenings of it serve to show what even their sins deserve; and what afflictions, in this life, they may expect for them, although freed from the curse thereof threatened in the law. The promises of it, in like manner, show them God's approbation of obedience, and what blessings they may expect upon the performance thereof: although not as due to them by the law as a covenant of works. So as, a man's doing good, and refraining from evil, because the law encourageth to the one, and deterreth from the other, is no evidence of his being under the law; and, not under grace.
7. Neither are the forementioned uses of the law contrary to the grace of the gospel, but do sweetly comply with it; the Spirit of Christ subduing and enabling the will of man to do that freely, and cheerfully, which the will of God, revealed in the law, requireth to be done.

#### **Two tests to determine which laws are still applicable today:**

- 1.
- 2.

## **2. Moral**

James 1:22-25; Romans 3:21-31; Romans 13:8-10

**Definition:**

**Applicability today:**

## **3. Ceremonial**

Hebrews 9:1-10:18

**Definition:**

**Applicability today:**

## **4. Judicial (Theocracy)**

Deut. 25:1-6; 1 Cor. 9:3-12

**Definition:**

**Applicability today:**

## **5. Application Exercise**

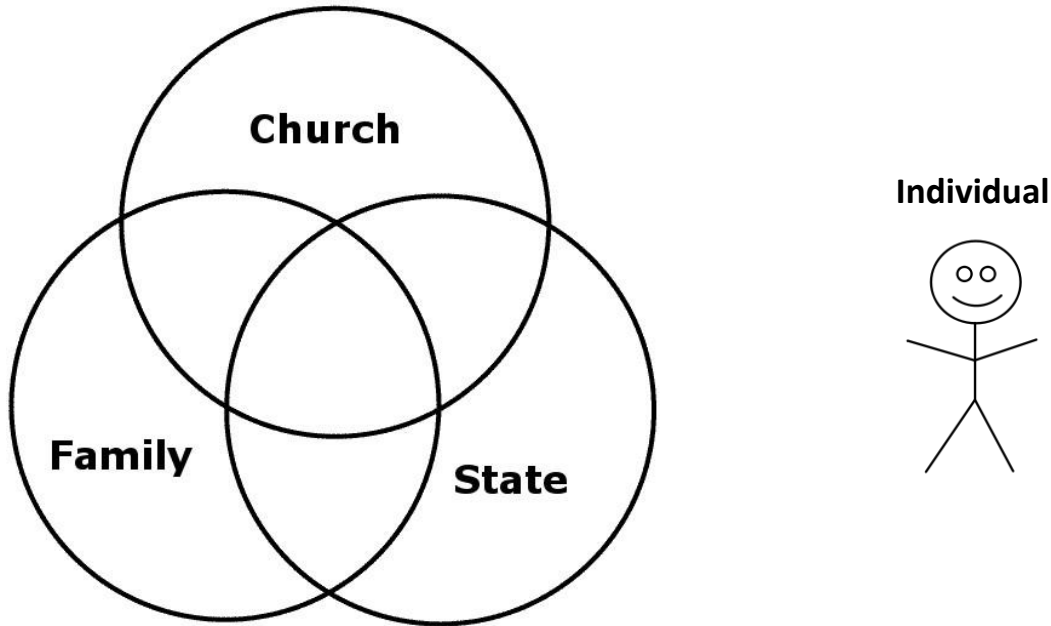
In which categories (Moral, Ceremonial, or Judicial/Civil) should we place each of the laws/commands given in these passages?

1. Gen. 17:9-14
2. Ex. 29:15-26
3. Lev. 23:22
4. Lev. 23:23-25
5. Num. 35:6-28
6. Deut. 22:11-12
7. Ex. 22:2-3
8. Ex. 20
9. Others?

### C. God's law in society today

God's revelation through the Covenant shows us how his laws should be applied in the different areas of life.

Church, state, and family as three different institutions created by God, each with their own areas of responsibility.



We'll examine each institution in more detail and ask these questions:

- *How does our view of the covenant affect our view (or our very definition) of the institution?*
- *How does our view of God's Covenant influence how we determine which of God's laws and commands apply to each institution?*

## 1. Church

1 Cor. 5; Matt. 18:15-17

What kind of authority does the church have?

### **OPC Book of Church Order Chapter III: The Nature and Exercise of Church Power:**

*3. All church power is only ministerial and declarative, for the Holy Scriptures are the only infallible rule of faith and practice. No church judicatory may presume to bind the conscience by making laws on the basis of its own authority; all its decisions should be founded upon the Word of God. "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to his Word; or beside it, if matters of faith, or worship" (Confession of Faith, Chapter XX, Section 2).*

*4. All church power is wholly moral or spiritual. No church officers or judicatories possess any civil jurisdiction; they may not inflict any civil penalties nor may they seek the aid of the civil power in the exercise of their jurisdiction further than may be necessary for civil protection and security.*

*5. Nevertheless, church government is a valid and authentic jurisdiction to which Christians are commanded to submit themselves. Therefore the decisions of church officers when properly rendered and if in accord with the Word of God "are to be received with reverence and submission; not only for their agreement with the Word, but also for the power whereby they are made, as being an ordinance of God appointed thereunto in his Word" (Confession of Faith, Chapter XXXI, Section 2).*

How does our view of the covenant help define our view of the institution of the church? (WCF 25:2-3)

*2. The visible church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.*

*3. Unto this catholic visible church Christ hath given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world: and doth, by his own presence and Spirit, according to his promise, make them effectual thereunto.*

How does our view of the covenant give us a different view of church authority than either the Roman Catholic or the individualistic dispensationalist?

What kinds of Scriptural laws or commands would we generally see as being part of the sphere of the institution of the church?



**2. Family**

Eph. 5:21-6:4

How does our view of the covenant help define our view of the institution of the family?

What are some other views of the family, and how would our view differ?

What kinds of Scriptural laws or commands would we generally see as being part of the sphere of the institution of the family?

**3. State**

Romans 13:1-6

How does our view of the covenant help define our view of the institution of the state?

How is this different from some other views of the state?

What kinds of Scriptural laws or commands would we generally see as being part of the sphere of the institution of the state?

#### **4. Individual**

Matt. 5:27-28

How does our view of the covenant help define our view of the individual?

How does our view of the covenant define our view of the individual in relation to:

- The Church?
- The Family?
- The State?

What kinds of Scriptural laws or commands would we generally see as being applicable primarily just to the individual?

#### **5. Boundaries between the institutions**

How does our view of the covenant help define the boundaries between the different institutions?

##### ***a) Church and Family***

In defining the boundary between these two, we can look at:

- Who the command is directed to (parents, children, church, believers)
- What the command concerns (familial relationships, salvation, corporate covenantal commands)

##### **Discussion of commands, responsibilities, and boundaries in different areas:**

1. Criteria for determining deacons (1 Tim 3:1-13)
2. Husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church (Eph. 5:25)
3. Behavior of children in worship
4. Theological education
5. General education (Eph 6:4, Duet 11:19)
6. Family devotions

***b) Church and State***

In defining the boundary between these two, we can look at:

- Who the command is directed to (rulers, humankind in general, believers specifically)
- What the command concerns (civil relationships, rules regarding commerce, the way of salvation)

**Discussion of commands, responsibilities, and boundaries in different areas:**

1. Execute murderers (Gen. 9:6)
2. Who to ordain as a minister
3. Building a church building
4. Education

***c) Family and State***

In defining the boundary between these two, we can look at:

- Who the command is directed to (rulers, parents, children)
- What the command concerns (familial relationships, moral laws that can and should be externally enforced, relationships with other people)

**Discussion of commands, responsibilities, and boundaries in different areas:**

1. Installing a pool at your home
2. Marriage
3. Behavior of children (see Deut. 21:18-21)
4. Education

## 6. Application Exercise

Categorize these Biblical commands in the different circles/institutions (church, family, state, individual):

1. Rom. 13:6
2. Num. 35:16-25
3. Lev. 23:22
4. 1 Cor. 11:17-34
5. 1 Timothy 5:3-4, 16
6. 1 Timothy 2
7. Ephesians 4:29-32
8. Ex. 20
  1. *No other gods*
  2. *No images*
  3. *Don't use the Lord's name in vain*
  4. *Remember the Sabbath Day*
  5. *Honor your father and mother*
  6. *Don't murder*
  7. *Don't commit adultery*
  8. *Don't steal*
  9. *Don't bear false witness*
  10. *Don't covet*
9. Others?

## V. Theonomy

### A. What is Theonomy?

### B. History and Key Players

1. Rousas John Rushdoony (1916 – 2001)
2. Gary North (1942 - )
3. Greg Bahnsen (1948 – 1995)

### C. Theonomic view of the covenant

Theonomy views the covenant in much the same way as the traditional reformed position, but there are some key differences in how it views Israel and the Mosaic Law.

#### Israel

Draws a clear distinction between Israel the *civil* nation and Israel the *religious* people of God. (*By This Standard*, p. 333)

#### Israel's Law (the Judicial Law)

Divides the law into only 2 primary categories: Ceremonial and Moral, with Moral being divided into 2 subcategories: God's everlasting moral standards and specific applications of it (also called judicial). Thus Theonomy views what we call civil or judicial law as a subcategory of the Moral law, rather than a specific application of it to a particular nation (Israel) in a specific circumstance (being God's chosen people in a theocracy).

### D. Theonomic view of the judicial law and its application to today

Theonomy has a different view of how the Mosaic Law should be applied to society today:

*"...We must recognize the continuing obligation of civil magistrates to obey and enforce the relevant laws of the Old Testament, including the penal sanctions specified by the just Judge of all the earth." (BTS, p.4)*

*"What is proposed here is that all civil governments, whatever their structure, should be encouraged to submit to and apply the standing laws of Old Testament Israel." (BTS p. 323)*

This differs from the traditional reformed position that Israel's situation was unique (as a Theocracy) and its civil laws are God's moral law *applied concretely* to its unique situation.

#### Eschatological view: Postmillennial

**For further reading:**

- *By This Standard* Greg Bahnsen c. 1985
- *Theonomy: What have we learned?* (Ordained Servant 1995.2, John Haverland)

## VI. Federal Vision

### A. Introduction

“Federal” is used in this context to indicate “covenantal.” The word “Federal” derives from the Latin *foedus*, which means “covenant.”

### B. History

#### 1. Initial Exposure and Controversy (2002)

In 2002 at the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church (AAPC) annual Pastor’s Conference, Rev. Steve Wilkins (of AAPC) invited several men to join him in articulating what they had begun to call “the Federal Vision.” Participants included Rev. Steve Schlissel, Rev. Doug Wilson, and Rev. John Barach.

#### 2. Wider controversy and more debate (2003-2005)

Further discussion between proponent and opponents of FV at the 2003 AAPC Pastor’s Conference, including critics of FV: Dr. Joseph Pipa (PCA), Rev. Carl Robbins (PCA), Dr. Morton Smith (PCA), and R.C. Sproul, Jr. (ARP). Retreat in Florida for dialogue drew more attendees (including some OPC ministers). Southern California Center for Christian Study (SCCCS) symposium addresses FV-related questions.

### C. Concerns / Alleged Errors

Note that not all of these apply to a single person, and many who hold to FV deny that they hold these positions; these are concerns that the broader reformed community saw coming out of FV.

- Denial of the covenant of works
- Blurring the law/gospel distinction
- Denial of the imputation of the active obedience of Christ in justification
- Not affirming the definitive nature of justification in this life
- Merging faith and faithfulness as instrumental in justification
- Rejecting the distinction between the visible and invisible church
- A tendency to view the sacraments as efficacious in and of themselves
- Paedocommunion

### D. View of the Covenant

#### 1. One Covenant (no Covenant of Works)

#### 2. Visible vs Invisible church

*But those who fall away will be cut off from the church . . . . And they will look back and discover that they were reprobate on that last day but they will also see that in history, and this is always God’s plan for them, that in history God did graciously, really bring them into his church, that he really made them a part of his chosen people, that he gave them genuine promises that are just as real, just as dependable, just as trustworthy as the promises he gave to people who do persevere to the end. He gave them real promises of salvation; he **united them to Christ** in whom alone is salvation....*

--John Barach (AATPC p.12, emphasis added)

### 3. Confusing salvation/election with the covenant

*The clear implication of these passages is that 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.***

*The apostate, thus, forsakes the grace of God that was given to him by virtue of his union with Christ. It is not accurate to say that they only “appeared” to have these things, but did not actually have them—if that were so, there would be nothing to “forsake” and apostasy is bled of its horror and severity. That which makes apostasy so horrendous is that these blessings actually belonged to the apostates—**though they only had them temporarily they had them no less truly.***

--Steve Wilkins (AATPC p. 264, emphasis added)

### 4. Calling covenant = union with Christ

*...We must maintain that there is a union with Christ that all baptized Christians share, whether those Christians are reprobate or not. – Doug Wilson (AATPC p. 225)*

### 5. Confusing “faith” with “faithfulness,” or getting dangerously close to adding works as a requirement for justification

*But the covenant is not unconditional. It requires persevering faithfulness.*

--Steve Wilkins (AATPC p. 266)

### 6. Summary

*Being afflicted as we are, particularly in this land, with such a low view of the church, the proponents of the FV strike significant chords in being supportive of an ecclesiology that has a high view of the means of grace and of the visible church. The FV promoters eschew a view of the church that would stress the invisible at the expense of the visible and that would exalt the individual and the subjective above the corporate and the objective. They are undoubtedly not wrong when they observe that much of the church is afflicted with a low view of the means of grace (preaching and sacraments, especially), of the obligation to live holy lives, and of the inseparability of justification and sanctification.*

*Much of the critique in which the FV engages, however, seems either to apply more broadly to evangelicalism or to tiny pockets within Reformed churches. While it is true that “easy-believism” has been a problem within American evangelicalism, it has not been the same kind of problem within Reformed communions. It has been rightly observed that if Reformed churches have a tendency to err in a certain way, it is in the direction of nomism, not antinomianism. To be sure, older hyper-Calvinism tended toward an antinomian position, but few would hold to such today. FV proponents seem concerned as well about the kind of morbid introspection that one found among some of the Puritans and other experimental Calvinists and some of their contemporary descendants, who excessively emphasize *ordo salutis* (the order of salvation, the application of Christ’s work to the individual believer) and who require either a narrative of grace or something like it for communicant membership in the church. But few today are guilty of such morbid introspection. Few also, as noted above, follow Gordon Clark in his insistence that faith consists of*



*intellectual assent alone. While the FV proponents do raise concerns that affect the church more widely, some of their weapons seem to be wielded against positions that few hold, and in their making of and attacking straw men, they tend to over argue their case, stressing the objective, e.g., at the expense of the subjective, and thus tending toward a formalism that would not prove beneficial for the life of the church (tending, as Charles Hodge noted in another controversy, to reject rationalism only to embrace ritualism). Rather than heading in that direction, we need a full orb ed ecclesiology that teaches us to hunger for the means of grace, that fully employs them, and that then waits on the Lord in his blessing of them.*

-- OPC Justification report, p. 119

## **E. Eschatological View** Postmillennial

## **F. Denominational Responses**

### **1. OPC's Report on Justification – 2006**

*Rather than taking further space in this summary to explain at any length the difficulties that we believe the FV to have, perhaps it would be better simply to enumerate the ways in which we believe that the FV is misguided. All of these points are developed within the body of our report. The committee believes that the following points that are held by one or more advocates of the FV are out of accord with Scripture and our doctrinal standards:*

1. *Pitting Scripture and Confession against each other.*
2. *Regarding the enterprise of systematic theology as inherently rationalistic.*
3. *A mono-covenantalism that sees one covenant, originating in the intra-Trinitarian fellowship, into which man is invited, thus flattening the concept of covenant and denying the distinction between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace.*
4. *Election as primarily corporate and eclipsed by covenant.*
5. *Seeing covenant as only conditional.*
6. *A denial of the covenant of works and of the fact that Adam was in a relationship with God that was legal as well as filial.*
7. *A denial of a covenant of grace distinct from the covenant of works.*
8. *A denial that the law given in Eden is the same as that more fully published at Mt. Sinai and that it requires perfect obedience.*
9. *Viewing righteousness as relational, not moral.*
10. *A failure to make clear the difference between our faith and Christ's.*
11. *A denial of the imputation of the active obedience of Christ in our justification.*
12. *Defining justification exclusively as the forgiveness of sins.*
13. *The reduction of justification to Gentile inclusion.*
14. *Including works (by use of "faithfulness," "obedience," etc.) in the very definition of faith.*
15. *Failing to affirm an infallible perseverance and the indefectibility of grace.*
16. *Teaching baptismal regeneration.*
17. *Denying the validity of the concept of the invisible church.*
18. *An overly objectified sacramental efficacy that downplays the need for faith and that tends toward an ex opere operato view of the sacraments.*
19. *Teaching paedocommunion.*
20. *Ecclesiology that eclipses and swallows up soteriology.*

### **2. PCA's Report on FV, NPP, AAT – 2007**

PCA study committee's report condemned (or declared contrary to the standards):

- a single-covenant view (denying the covenant of works)
- viewing an individual as elect by virtue of church membership (but that the individual can lose his election if forsaking the individual church)
- denial of both Christ's active and passive obedience and the imputation of his merit to us
- the view that baptism effects a covenantal union with Christ through which each baptized person receives regeneration, justification, and sanctification (vs. sanctification being a process!)

- the view that some can receive the saving benefits of Christ's mediation (such as regeneration and justification) and not persevere.
- The view that justification is based in any way on our works (or anything other than the merit of Christ)

### 3. URC's Report on Federal Vision – 2010

The URC study committee report listed a number of FV areas that it found concerning:

*In our judgment, the following FV themes have implications that are inconsistent with the Scriptural and confessional view of justification:*

- a. The FV insistence upon the close connection, even coincidence, between election and covenant, which leads to the unqualified claim that all members of the covenant community enjoy the gospel blessing of justification in Christ.*
- b. The FV claim that all members of the church are savingly united to Christ, even though some do not persevere in the way of faith and obedience and lose the grace of justification through apostasy.*
- c. The FV emphasis that the obligations of believers in the covenant of grace parallel the obligations of Adam in his fellowship with God before the fall, thereby undermining the sheer graciousness of the believer's justification and salvation in Christ.*
- d. The FV denial of the meritorious character of Christ's work as Mediator, who fulfills all the obligations of the law on behalf of His people and secures their inheritance of eternal life.*

- e. The FV tendency to reduce justification to the forgiveness of sins, which is based upon the imputation of Christ's passive obedience alone.*
- f. The FV emphasis upon a "living" or "obedient" faith in the definition of its role as the instrument for receiving the grace of justification in Christ.*
- g. The FV teaching that the sacrament of baptism effectively incorporates all of its recipients into Christ, and puts them in possession of all the benefits of His saving work, including justification.*
- h. The FV insistence that all covenant children be admitted to the Lord's Supper without having professed the kind of faith that is able to discern the body of Christ, remember His sacrifice upon the cross, and proclaim His death until He comes again.*
- i. The FV attempt to resolve the problem of assurance by an appeal to the "objectivity" of church membership and the sacrament of baptism, while insisting that some believers may lose their salvation because of a non-persevering faith.*

## G. How FV affects practice

### 1. Paedocommunion

### 2. Overemphasis on the family

*The true Church is the Church in history, the gathered throng of all professing households, assembled in covenant around the Word and Christ's sacraments. –Doug Wilson (TFV p.269)*

### 3. Tendency towards legalism

#### **For further reading:**

- *The Auburn Avenue Theology Pros and Cons; Debating the Federal Vision* (2004; The Knox Theological Seminary Colloquium on the Federal Vision; edited by E. Calvin Beisner) [AATPC]
- *Justification: Report of the Committee to Study the Doctrine of Justification* (2007; The Committee on Christian Education of the OPC) [OPC] <http://www.opc.org/GA/justification.html>
- *Report of the Ad Interim Study Committee on Federal Vision, New Perspective, and Auburn Avenue Theology* (2007, PCA) <http://www.pcahistory.org/pca/07-fvreport.pdf>
- *Report of the Synodical Study Committee on the Federal Vision and Justification* (2010, URC) [https://www.urna.org/urna/StudyCommittees/FederalVision/Federal\\_Vision\\_Study\\_Committee\\_Report.pdf](https://www.urna.org/urna/StudyCommittees/FederalVision/Federal_Vision_Study_Committee_Report.pdf)
- *The Federal Vision* (edited by Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner, 2004)
- *Reformed is Not Enough; Recovering the Objectivity of the Covenant* (Douglas Wilson, 2002)fa