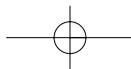
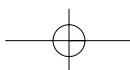
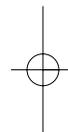
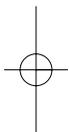


THE  
FEDERAL  
VISION  
AND  
COVENANT  
THEOLOGY





THE  
FEDERAL  
VISION  
AND  
COVENANT  
THEOLOGY

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

GUY PRENTISS WATERS

FOREWORD BY E. CALVIN BEISNER



P U B L I S H I N G  
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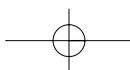
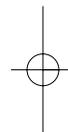
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## Foreword

In the last five years or so, first the North American and now increasingly the British and European Reformed communities have been bewildered by a theologically loose-knit but sociologically tightly woven movement of fairly recent origin but with deep historical roots. Even determining a name by which to designate it is a challenge. One might call it

- Auburn Avenue Theology, after Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church in Monroe, Louisiana, which has hosted conferences at which the movement's ideas have been most consistently promoted;
- the Federal Vision (its proponents' preferred name), playing on the movement's emphasis on reworking traditional Reformed covenant theology and giving prominence to vision (story) over propositional system;
- Shepherdism, in recognition of the seminal role of former Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia) systematic theology professor Norman Shepherd in articulating and promoting several of its key doctrines, especially subsuming the covenant of works into the covenant of grace and, in the process, critically redefining the latter;
- monocovenantalism, which repudiates the historic Reformed distinction between a covenant of works and a covenant of

grace, insisting instead that there has been but one, gracious covenant between God and man from creation onward, both before and after the fall;<sup>1</sup>

- or neonomism or neolegalism, labels applied by some of its sternest critics, who believe that its peculiar understandings of covenant theology imply a synergistic soteriology in which works join faith as both instrument and ground of justification, and thus threaten or jettison the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

All of these names fit it to varying degrees, and all have inadequacies. Whatever is the case, the growing and constantly metamorphosing movement has Reformed heads swirling.

After nearly three years of reading and listening widely and carefully to the Federal Vision's proponents,<sup>2</sup> including voluminous correspondence with many of them, I am convinced that what the Federal Vision offers is not a renewal or improvement of the historic Reformed faith but a wholesale replacement of it with a curious hybrid affecting soteriology, sacramentology, and ecclesiology, closely similar to and heavily influenced by the New Perspective on Paul associated with James D. G. Dunn, E. P. Sanders, and N. T. Wright.

In soteriology, by redefining the traditional terms of the Reformed *ordo salutis* and viewing them all "through the lense of the covenant" rather than "through the lense of the decree," the Federal Visionists offer a hybrid of three components. The first is a modified Amyraldianism. Original Amyraldianism posited a hypothetically universal atonement; the Federal Visionists hold that the atonement is hypothetically for all in the historical-objective covenant but effective only to the "elect," who equal those "justified" by faith who don't apostatize and wind up condemned by works. The second is a modified Arminianism. Original Arminianism affirmed that Christ died as substitute to pay the penalty for the sins of all people. The Federal Visionists will affirm that Christ died to pay the penalty for the sins of all in "the covenant," including some who wind up in hell. One's "election" ultimately depends on whether he is "faithful" to "the covenant," and one can be "justified" and wind up in hell through apostasy. The third is a modified Roman infusionism. We are "justified" at first by

grace through faith but at last by the merit (despite how much some proponents of that view hate the word *merit*) of the works produced in and through us by God.<sup>3</sup>

In sacramentology, Federal Visionists offer a modified sacerdotal sacramentalism that borders on affirming the Roman Catholic doctrine of *ex opere operato*.<sup>4</sup> The sacraments are objectively effective means of *converting*, not only of sanctifying, grace<sup>5</sup> because they are administered by properly ordained people in the community of the faithful. Thus, one of the most prominent of the Federal Visionists, Steve Wilkins, has said, “If [someone] has been baptized, he is in covenant with God”; “covenant *is* union with Christ. Thus, being in covenant gives all the blessings of being united to Christ. . . . Because being in covenant with God means being in Christ, those who are in covenant have all spiritual blessings in the heavenly places.”<sup>6</sup> It follows necessarily from these two statements that if someone has been baptized, he has all spiritual blessings in the heavenly places—which certainly seems to include salvation in the sense of being destined for heaven rather than hell. Yet, paradoxically, the sacraments’ efficacy can be frustrated by the recipients’ unfaithfulness.

In ecclesiology the Federal Visionists are more nearly Roman Catholic than Reformed. I could not help thinking immediately of the Federal Vision when I read this passage in a recent book on developments in Catholic-Protestant relations: For Roman Catholicism,

Christ and his church are one! This basic confession explains why Catholics can offer salvation through baptism into the church. It is why the pope (as the vicar of Christ) can speak without error in matters of faith and morals. It is why . . . only priests in connection with a bishop, in connection with the pope, can offer valid sacraments. It is why Protestants may not share a Catholic Eucharist. . . . It is why a church marriage is unbreakable. It is why . . . “No one can have God as Father who does not have the Church as Mother.” It is why Mary is called the mother of the church. . . . This is why the church is self-correcting. . . . It is why the word of the church is higher than individual conscience and reason. It is why sin against God is also sin against the church. . . . It is why Catholics view the Protestant Reformation as such a drastic mistake—a splintering of the church is an attack on Christ himself.<sup>7</sup>

This is not to say that the Federal Visionists embrace all those Roman Catholic doctrines. They don't. But just as Rome's ecclesiology underpins its errors in soteriology and sacramentology, so also the Federal Visionists' ecclesiology, by taking the metaphor of Christ and the church as Head and body literally rather than metaphorically, nearly equates Christ and the church and so is the foundation of both their soteriology and their sacramentology. To be in the church *is* salvation. To receive the sacraments *is* to be in the church. Therefore to receive the sacraments *is* salvation. But after that neat syllogism there comes a great retreat. Suddenly *salvation* doesn't mean one is going to heaven; it means he's been delivered out of the sin-ruled world into the Christ-ruled church, and perhaps, if he remains faithful to the end, it will mean he goes to heaven instead of hell. But it isn't clear just what it means to the Federal Visionists to remain faithful. One thing is crystal clear: it doesn't just mean one believes the gospel, or, in the words of the Westminster Confession, that he rests "upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace," for *faithfulness* means something more than faith. It means measuring up to some standard of what earlier generations, especially in the Wesleyan tradition, called "evangelical obedience"—which is not the perfection demanded by the moral law but some approximation of it accepted in its place.

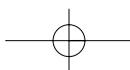
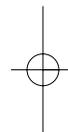
Three years ago, after hosting a colloquium that brought proponents and critics of this theology together for discussion, I wrote with restraint in my conclusion to the book containing the papers they had prepared for the colloquium, singling out individual flaws in the Federal Vision. At the time I still hoped much of the controversy could be explained by mutual misunderstanding and ambiguity. If I were to rewrite that conclusion now, it would be much more comprehensively and seriously critical.

Guy Waters's painstaking historical and theological analysis in this book makes up, to a large extent, for my over-restraint in that conclusion. Courteous, scholarly, gracious, yet patiently driving to the point time after time, Waters offers here a helpful contribution to ongoing discussion. While he deftly resists the temptation to smooth over significant differences among the movement's main proponents, he demonstrates an overall unity to the Federal Vision that makes it a

distinct alternative to the theology of the historic Reformed confessions: the Belgic Confession, the Second Helvetic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Canons of Dort, and the Westminster Confession and Catechisms—indeed, even the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England. He also goes far toward showing the historical roots of the Federal Visionists' thinking, roots that he traced more thoroughly in his earlier book, *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul*, which really should be read alongside this book, giving readers the opportunity to see the close affinity between the Federal Vision and the New Perspective on Paul.

The eventual outcome of the Federal Vision controversy cannot yet be predicted. What can be predicted is that this book will be an important contribution to the debate.

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## Preface

**T**he Federal Vision (FV) presents to the Reformed church at the dawn of the twenty-first century possibly her greatest challenge and opportunity.

The challenges posed by the FV are legion. Some of them pertain to coming to terms with what the FV is and what it is not. Is the FV an unwelcome label unfairly imposed on a loosely associated group of men, or does it represent a concerted theological vision and project? Does the FV represent the quintessence and acme of centuries of Reformed thought, or is it an aberration from the system of doctrine contained in the Westminster Standards? Has the FV purged classically Reformed theology of supposed “baptistic” and dispensationalist sympathies, or has it reshaped it after the image of Anglo-Catholicism? Is the FV covenant theology come into its own, or is it fundamentally a betrayal of covenant theology?

Some of these challenges are pointedly theological and practical. They invite us to consider and reconsider many crucial questions pertaining to Christian faith and practice. What is a covenant? What do we mean when we say that God is triune? How may biblical covenants be said to relate to the decree, or to one another? May we speak of a “covenant of works”? What does it mean to say that a sinner is justified, or that a Christian is “elect”? How may a Christian be assured

of grace and salvation? What is the nature and import of baptism? What difference does it make to my Christian experience that I or my child has received the sacrament of baptism?

Other challenges transcend these particular questions. They strike at the core of the way in which we think about the Bible and the way we think about the world around us. FV proponents pose such questions as the following: Does the contemporary Reformed church emphasize the individual at the expense of the corporate people of God, the ingathered church? Has she yielded to a scholasticism that lays the mystery of God upon the altar of human rationalism? Does she at present lack the theological apparatus to engage the wider world, as some conceive that engagement?

With these challenges, however, comes an opportunity. Not every question that the FV raises is profitable or worthy of wide consideration. The FV, however, is responding to certain legitimate and perennial questions that surface in Christian experience. It is heartening that FV proponents attempt to provide theologically reasoned answers to those questions. It is disappointing that FV proponents have arrived at the particular answers that they are presently propounding.

This state of affairs invites the Reformed church to appreciate afresh her rich confessional heritage. The Reformed denomination in which I am privileged to serve, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), receives the Westminster Standards as its confession of faith. These documents are, to be sure, theologically penetrating statements of biblical doctrine. They are equally penetrating guides to the Christian life. They offer to the church consistently biblical answers to the pastoral questions to which proponents of the FV have plied themselves.

The goal of this project is to show that the FV, when measured against the Scripture and against the Westminster Standards, not only falls short of the “whole counsel of God,” but, at any number of points, counters biblical teaching. It is not my intention to offer an exhaustive restatement of the Standards’ doctrine on each point in question. It is my hope, however, that readers will take two things from this work. First, they will see that the FV fails not only to rise to the measure of its own professed aims and intentions but also to withstand the light of biblical and confessional scrutiny. Second, they will have awakened in them an interest in studying more deeply our confessional

standards as theologically and practically relevant statements for the twenty-first-century church. It is my desire that British Puritanism, from which these Standards emerged, and American Presbyterianism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in which these Standards came to marvelous expression, will commend themselves more and more to study by the modern church.

In the preparation of this work, I have become increasingly and keenly conscious of my debts to numerous individuals. I am appreciative of particularly fruitful conversations with Drs. J. Ligon Duncan III, W. Duncan Rankin, and Alan Carter. Dr. E. Calvin Beisner, Dr. Scott Clark, Mr. Charlie Dykes, Rev. Chris A. Hutchinson, Rev. James T. O'Brien, Rev. Richard D. Phillips, and Dr. W. Jason Wallace have thoughtfully and critically read earlier drafts of this work. I am indebted to the many good comments, suggestions, and corrections that these men have offered and trust that this work is the stronger for them. I assume, of course, full responsibility for the content of these pages. I am grateful for the labors of the FV's critics at the 2003 Knox Colloquium. Their work has helped to crystallize for me many of the important issues in this debate. I am similarly indebted to the criticisms in Cornelis Venema's published review of Norman Shepherd's *The Call of Grace*. Mrs. Cindy Mercer, Mrs. Susan Smith, and Mr. Jeremy Smith kindly supplied editorial comment, and Miss Abigail Shanks helped prepare the bibliography in its present form. Mr. Stephen Tindal, Mr. Jonathan Sherrod, and Mr. Jeremy Smith provided invaluable research assistance. The faculty and administration of Belhaven College have been steadfast in their encouragement and support, and for this I am grateful. I also wish to thank Thom Notaro and the staff at P&R for their work in preparing this project for publication.

A particular word of appreciation must go to my wife, Sarah, and to my daughters, Phoebe and Lydia. Their continued patience and encouragement in the course of this project has been a balm to me in my labors. My daughters are, through my wife, descended from men and women who sat under and, I trust, profited from the ministries of Solomon Stoddard and Jonathan Edwards. It is my fervent hope that the biblical doctrine preached from that pulpit in

Northampton will, by the blessing of the Holy Spirit, thrive in the Reformed churches of my own and my young daughters' generations.

The origins of this book are traceable to two sources. First, the Ad-Hoc Study Committee of the Mississippi Valley Presbytery (PCA), chaired by Dr. Duncan, appointed me in the spring of 2004 to study and to prepare material, for the benefit of committee, pertaining to the Federal Vision. Second, the session of the First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi, invited me to deliver, in the fall of 2004, the third series of the John Hunter Lectures. These lectures, graciously sponsored and underwritten by the First Presbyterian Church, became the foundation of this present work.

It is, then, in recognition of their steadfast and unreserved dedication to the cause of God and truth that this work is warmly and gratefully dedicated to the ministers, session, staff, and congregation of the First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi; and to the ministers and elders of the Mississippi Valley Presbytery (PCA).

## CHAPTER 1

# An Introduction to the Federal Vision

In this book, we are expounding and analyzing a theological system and movement that, in many respects, strikes very close to home: the Federal Vision (FV), or the Auburn Avenue Theology. There are at least three reasons why the FV has rapidly gained the attention of many within Reformed churches. First, recognized proponents of the FV are cross-denominational (within the Presbyterian Church in America [PCA], the United Reformed Churches [URC], the Confederation of Reformed Evangelical Churches [CREC], as well as independent churches). They are distributed geographically across the United States and Canada, and have effectively used new technologies to disseminate and promote their views into the homes and offices of many ministers, elders, and nonofficers. Specifically, they have used the Internet to create communities that transcend geographical and denominational boundaries and limitations, that are resistant to the oversight and accountability that published discourse and ecclesiastical discourse would otherwise afford, and that permit more democratized and coarsened theological dialogue than conventional print media have generally allowed.

A second reason explaining recent interest in the FV is that the FV has purportedly developed its system from covenant theology. Covenant theology, of course, is near and dear to the Reformed faith.

Any theological system that claims its origin and genius from covenant theology understandably gains the ear of many Reformed men and women.

Third, the FV, as its name indicates, offers a vision that is comprehensive and sweeping. It articulates an epistemology, a Trinitarian theology, a doctrine of redemption and its application, and a conception of the church, culture, and Christian living in this world. Many FV proponents not only promote this vision as stemming from their understanding of covenant theology but also charge the Reformed world with having failed to live up to what covenant theology entails for belief and practice. Consequently, ministers, elders, and laypersons are being pressed anew with the question, what does it mean to be Reformed?—a question that few Reformed church officers can now afford to ignore.

In the remainder of this chapter, we will address six matters: (1) the terminological options that have been proposed to label this system; (2) the sources we have consulted in preparing this material; (3) a brief historical account of the rise and progress of the FV; (4) a brief biographical introduction to the major proponents of the FV; (5) the FV's definition of the term *covenant*; and (6) the FV's attempt to reformulate the doctrine of the Trinity in view of *covenant*.

## Terminology

Leaving aside such pejorative labels as the “Monroe Four,” not fewer than three terms have circulated in connection with the theology that we are about to study.

(1) “The New Perspective on Paul,” as a label, was applied by the Reformed Presbyterian Church in the United States (RPCUS) to the views expressed by participants of the 2002 Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church (AAPC) Pastors' Conference (AAPCPC).<sup>1</sup> Others have spoken of the FV's “inclusion of doctrinal innovations such as the New Perspective on Paul.”<sup>2</sup>

While there is, to be sure, some overlap between the concerns of the NPP and the concerns of the FV, it is not accurate to describe them as a single movement.<sup>3</sup> They properly represent different theological traditions and different constituencies, and have separate aims and

objectives. Although the label “New Perspective on Paul” appears to have gained some currency within the church, it seems wisest to reserve this to describe the academic movement formally launched by E. P. Sanders and sustained by James D. G. Dunn and N. T. Wright.<sup>4</sup>

(2) A second label that has gained some attention and use is “Auburn [Avenue] Theology.”<sup>5</sup> This name, of course, derives from a significant nerve center of this movement, the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church, Monroe, Louisiana, the congregation that has occasioned the controversy surrounding these doctrines. This church has sponsored the conferences at which the doctrines of the FV have been advanced and defended.<sup>6</sup> It has also drafted a statement that defends FV doctrines of election, covenant, and baptism;<sup>7</sup> has supplied two ministers (Steve Wilkins, Rich Lusk) who have prolifically written in support of these views; and has sponsored a press that has promoted the doctrines of the FV.<sup>8</sup>

This label is, in many respects, an improvement upon “NPP”; it is nevertheless deficient. It risks misstating certain FV proponents’ views. While, for example, Wilkins and Lusk are proponents of paedocommunion, Steve Schlissel is currently not.<sup>9</sup> Wilkins and Lusk, furthermore, articulate a distinctive view of baptism that is not paralleled in Schlissel’s writings on the subject.<sup>10</sup> The term “Auburn [Avenue] Theology” can also suggest that the FV originated from the AAPC. Unquestionably the proximate origins of the FV lie partially in the AAPC. As we shall argue below, however, the ultimate origins of the FV likely lie elsewhere.

(3) One of the reasons a third label, “The Federal Vision,” is preferable to the others is that it has been adopted both by Wilkins<sup>11</sup> and Wilson<sup>12</sup> and by critics of its doctrines.<sup>13</sup> It appears then to have been met with broad-based acceptance and to be as unencumbered with pejorative overtones as such a label can be. Another reason why this label is appropriate is that it addresses the root concern of the system for which it stands: federal theology, or covenant theology. It also fairly represents this system as broadly casting a theological, ecclesiastical, and social “vision” from the standpoint of its understanding of covenant theology.

At this stage, we might address an understandable objection against the use of any labels whatsoever to describe the theological

views in question. Some proponents of the FV have strenuously objected that there is no such thing as a “federal vision”—whether in the sense of a movement or a theological system.<sup>14</sup> We may certainly recognize that there are genuine limitations and conceivable liabilities inherent to the label “FV.” At the same time, we shall be arguing that the men who have identified themselves or have come to be identified with this movement have much in common that distinguishes them theologically from many others within the contemporary Reformed and Presbyterian world.

In view of this state of affairs, we have before us both a task and a caution. Our task is to define what, theologically, unites and distinguishes these men. We are interested in examining and analyzing the theological system that emerges from a concentrated study of the theological writings of these men. Our caution is to avoid defining the FV in such a way as to impute one FV proponent’s views to another FV proponent who does not share those views, or to assume that one FV proponent’s rhetorical expression of a doctrine would necessarily and in all respects be approved by all other FV proponents.

At the same time, we can be *too* cautious. If a FV proponent articulates a distinctive and otherwise unparalleled view, we must ask what, theologically speaking, has made that view possible. In some instances, we will see that what makes such distinctive views possible are other and prior distinguishing views held in common among FV proponents. It is here that we will see some of the clearest indications that the FV is a theological system.

## Sources

What materials have I consulted in this study of the FV? Part of the difficulty in addressing this issue is the fact that FV proponents have made effective use of the Internet. They operate well-maintained Web sites and post articles, sermons, and essays with frequency. Many make use of private presses (Canon, Athanasius), which enable swift and prodigious dissemination of book-length material. Both of these considerations mean that quantities of information are being added on a regular basis.

In view of this unceasing influx of information, one might be tempted to say that to draw theological conclusions at this stage is premature. In view of the nature and amount of the existing literature, however, the newest literature that continues to be posted on the Web or that is being privately published in one important sense adds little to our understanding of the basic positions of the FV that had not hitherto been known. Even responses to criticisms frequently restate the positions rather than offering substantial refinements or modifications of previously articulated positions.

Given this state of affairs, let us outline the sources that I have consulted for this project. In general, I have accessed and quoted from sources that were intended for public consumption. Paramount have been the AAPCPC Lectures, from both the 2002 and the 2003 conferences. I have made use of transcriptions of the original addresses.<sup>15</sup> Given the impromptu nature of the conference format, I have not made recourse to the question and answer sessions of either conference. I have also made use of the Knox Colloquium, *The Auburn Avenue Theology*, and the recently published collection of essays, *The Federal Vision*. For other writers, I have consulted the pages of *Credenda/Agenda* and *Biblical Horizons*, the writings of Canon Press (Moscow, Idaho), and the Web sites maintained by individual authors or congregations.<sup>16</sup> These Web sites were accessed between May and August 2004.

Generally, when titles appear in a stand-alone fashion—that is, without facts of publication in the bibliography and in the first citations of sources in each chapter's notes—they are unpublished articles that appeared on the Internet.<sup>17</sup> Owing to the unedited nature of some of these sources, quotations from FV spokesmen are sometimes, understandably, roughly stated. I have noted a few typographical errors with the word *sic*, but have not wanted to call attention to all such occurrences.

The literature in this work is current through July 1, 2005. At times, FV proponents have revised their literature. Where appropriate, revisions that have come to my attention at a later stage in the composition and preparation of this book have been entered in the footnotes for readers' benefit.

## The Rise and Progress of the Federal Vision

While we shall reserve more extended consideration of the theological origins and ultimate causes of the FV to the final chapter, we may now trace the development of the FV in the recent past. In that chapter, I will argue that the FV is peculiar to the theological concerns and conclusions of that form of reconstructionism frequently termed “theonomy.”

While one can trace rumblings of the concerns for sacramental objectivity that would be incorporated into the FV as early as the 1980s,<sup>18</sup> and the mid 1990s,<sup>19</sup> the FV may properly be said to have taken its beginning in late 2001. In October 2001, Steve Schlissel delivered a controversial address at Redeemer College (Ancaster, Ontario), “More than Before: The Necessity of Covenant Consciousness.” This address elicited critical replies by David Linden, a URC elder in Alberta, and Cornelis Venema, theological professor at Mid America Reformed Seminary (MARS).

In this address, Schlissel argued for a couple of things that would characterize his subsequent addresses and that would be paralleled in other FV pieces. First, Schlissel charged the Reformed tradition with succumbing to dispensationalism, to “fundamentalistic” and “baptistic” theologies. The Reformed, he argued, had unwittingly followed Luther’s bifurcation of the Old Testament and the New Testament. In so doing, the Reformed had neglected the genius of their key biblical insight: covenant. Schlissel asked, then, “What’s new about the New Testament? Grace? NO. Faith? NO. Christ? NO. The new thing about the New Testament is Gentiles are incorporated into Israel. THAT IS IT.”<sup>20</sup> The NT, for instance, was not consumed with the question of “salvation by faith as opposed to works,” but “salvation that included Gentiles as Gentiles.”<sup>21</sup>

Second, Schlissel also argued that the Reformed had succumbed to a hermeneutical problem. We have not read the Bible in the manner in which it was intended to be read. “One difficulty, then, is the Greek versus the Hebrew way of thinking.”<sup>22</sup> What does Schlissel mean by the “Greek” and the “Hebrew” epistemologies? By the former, Schlissel has in mind an interest in or concentration upon propositional truth. He approvingly summarizes another writer’s analysis of “the Word of God for Western Christians.”

The Word of God seems to interest modern Christians only to the extent that it reveals certain truths, propositions, inaccessible to human reason. We open the Bible to find out certain articulations. These truths themselves are conceived as certain doctrinal statements, and the Word of God finally is reduced to a collection of formulas. They are detached from it, moreover, so they can be reorganized into a more logically satisfactory sequence.

Schlissel then amplifies this concern.

Whether we realize it or not, the result is that the Word of God appears as a sort of nondescript hodgepodge from which the professional theologian extracts, like a mineral out of its matrix, small but precious bits of knowledge, which it is his job to clarify and systematize.

We've gone so deeply into the systematization that we become system worshippers.<sup>23</sup>

By the latter, Schlissel appears to have in mind a certain understanding of what a covenant is,<sup>24</sup> one that is “organic” and is “not abstract,” but “active and dynamic.” What is the value of such an understanding? For one thing, we will be able to “live in the cusp of the tension of the covenant,” namely, how it is that God “is able to fulfill His promises generationally while denying them to unbelief in any given generation.”<sup>25</sup> Schlissel chides Reformed preaching for “telling [congregants] that they are bound for hell because of all sorts of various inconsistencies in their internal organs—gross willful ignorance, secret reserves in closing with Christ.” To do so is evidence of our “Pharisaism,” that is, our “perfect propositions, and our internal observations, and our morbid introspectionism.”<sup>26</sup>

What then does covenantal Christianity look like? In place of “Luther’s question, ‘How can I be saved?’” the question we embrace is “What does God require?”<sup>27</sup> In other words, rather than attempting to resolve the above-mentioned “tension” of subjecting one’s affections to scrutiny, believers and their children should get about the business of obeying what God commands.<sup>28</sup> In fact, such obedience *is* the gospel of God: “That’s what God requires: to love Him with all

your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself. That is the gospel that Gentiles have been incorporated into through Jesus Christ.”<sup>29</sup>

It was shortly after Schlissel’s address that the 2002 AAPCPC Lectures were delivered to the public. The response of the RPCUS in June 2002 has already been noted. This response elicited several replies and counter-replies from Douglas Wilson, Steve Schlissel, and their respective congregations, and the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church in the summer and fall of 2002.<sup>30</sup> Douglas Wilson in particular responded with a volley of statements and responses to the RPCUS charges,<sup>31</sup> culminating in his fall 2002 book, “*Reformed*” Is Not Enough.<sup>32</sup>

In January 2003, the AAPC sponsored another pastors’ conference in which many of the 2002 speakers were invited to speak, along with responses from critics of the theology promoted by the previous year’s conference. The fact that two of these critics were a long-standing professor of theology (Morton Smith) and the president of a Reformed Seminary (Joseph A. Pipa) helped to launch the AAPC controversy to a broader scale of attention within the Reformed community.

In August 2003, Knox Seminary hosted a colloquium in which several proponents of the FV and their critics presented papers and responses. An edited version of these papers, as has been mentioned, was published in the spring of 2004. At present, sessions and presbyteries of many Reformed denominations have formally or informally begun discussions and deliberations concerning the FV theology. At stake is the acceptability of the FV theology within denominations that subscribe to the Three Forms of Unity or the Westminster Standards. The debate, at present, shows no signs of abatement.

### Introducing the Major Proponents of the FV

We will now take the opportunity to present the *dramatis personae*—the individuals whose theological output we shall study and critique. Each of these individuals has identified himself or has been identified, in some way, with the FV.

(1) *Douglas Wilson* is pastor of Christ Church, Moscow, Idaho (Confederation of Reformed Evangelical Churches [CREC]). Wil-

son began his ministry as an independent pastor of broadly evangelical convictions, but without formal theological training. He has recently described himself as an adherent of “postmillennial, Calvinistic, Presbyterian, Van Tillian, theonomic, and reformed thought.”<sup>33</sup> His influence has come, over the last decade, through his magazine, *Credenda/Agenda*, and his press, Canon Press, which has published not fewer than two dozen of his books, as well as those of Peter Leithart, Ralph Smith, Steve Wilkins, and Mark Horne. He has also founded New St. Andrews, an alternative undergraduate institution, at which Peter Leithart serves as senior fellow of theology and literature. Wilson has played an important role in establishing the classical Christian school in North America. His impressive rhetorical abilities and his distinctive satire and humor have also helped to attract a substantial following within the Reformed community.

(2) *Peter Leithart* is a senior theological instructor at New St. Andrews, Moscow, Idaho, and a longtime associate of James Jordan’s.<sup>34</sup> Leithart is one of the most intellectually precocious and broadly read of FV proponents, having completed doctoral studies under John Milbank at Cambridge.<sup>35</sup> He has also undertaken studies that have acquainted FV audiences with the sacramental theology both of Eastern Orthodoxy and of post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism. Unlike Wilson, whose ministerial credentials are in the CREC, Leithart holds his ministerial credentials in the PCA. Leithart, however, is currently serving a CREC congregation in Moscow, Idaho.

(3) *James Jordan* does not hold ecclesiastical office but has formal theological training. Jordan’s influence has come largely through well over two decades of newsletters and self-published books and symposia, through which he has promoted both theonomic Christianity and his ingenious biblical-theological readings of Scripture. In many respects, he bears a large share of the responsibility for generating the critical mass within the theonomic movement that has resulted in the FV, a movement with which he has identified himself.<sup>36</sup>

(4) *Steve Schlissel* is pastor of Messiah’s Congregation, New York City, a congregation formerly affiliated with the Christian Reformed Church, but now independent. He was an invited speaker at both the 2002 and 2003 AAPCPC and has become known for his rhetorical flamboyancy.

(5) *John Barach* is presently pastor of a URC church in Alberta. Barach has been heavily influenced by the theology of Norman Shepherd and the concerns of the Liberated churches.

(6) *Ralph Smith* is a minister in the CREC who serves overseas in Japan. An aficionado of Jordan's covenant theology,<sup>37</sup> Smith is perhaps best known for his attempts to reshape the doctrine of the Trinity in view of FV concerns.<sup>38</sup>

(7) *Steve Wilkins* is a longtime PCA minister who serves as senior pastor of the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church, Monroe, Louisiana.

(8) *Rich Lusk* is a former PCA minister who once served as the assistant pastor of the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church. He is pastor of the Trinity Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama.

(9) *Joel Garver* is a PCA officer in the Philadelphia area. Garver serves as assistant professor of philosophy at LaSalle University and is well regarded by FV proponents as an able defender of their views. His theological influence has come largely through his essays posted on his Web site.

(10) *Mark Horne* is serving as assistant pastor, Providence Presbyterian Church, in St. Louis. Horne's well-maintained Web site has served to collate and promote essays and articles that are sympathetic to the FV.

### The Federal Vision and Covenant: A Definition

We may begin our exposition and critique of the FV by asking a very basic question: What, to FV proponents, is a covenant? On this issue of definition, we find a broad-based consensus—both negatively (what a covenant is *not*) and positively (what a covenant *is*).<sup>39</sup>

Most proponents are agreed that a covenant is essentially a relationship,<sup>40</sup> as seen in a representative sampling of their descriptions:

It is most important that we ourselves understand what covenant is and I am going to tell you in the most simple words what covenant is. Covenant is relationship. That is what covenant is. Relationship.

Now, when we speak of covenant, specially, we speak of it as a defined relationship.<sup>41</sup> (Steve Schlissel)

Covenant isn't a thing. Covenant isn't a thing that you can analyze—covenant is a relationship. It is a personal, ordered and formally binding relationship. It's personal; it's not just a legal relationship. Sometimes people present the covenant as if it were something somewhat cold and impersonal, like a business contract.<sup>42</sup> (John Barach)

Covenant as it relates to man, simply and perhaps too simplistically stated, is the relationship of love and communion with the living, Triune God.<sup>43</sup> (Steve Wilkins)

A covenant is a relationship between persons. That relationship has conditions, stipulations, and promises. Put another way, there is no such thing as a personless or abstract covenant. Put yet another way, a covenant does not consist of a list of names, but is rather a relation between persons (whose names can certainly be formed into a list).<sup>44</sup> (Douglas Wilson)

The covenant is a personal-structural bond which joins the three persons of God in a community of life, and in which man was created to participate.<sup>45</sup> (James Jordan)

Attendant to these definitions, as may be seen especially from Barach's quotation above, is a resistance to defining a covenant in legal or administrative terms or in terms of an agreement. Even Ralph Smith's recognition that "agreement" may still be considered part of one's definition of a covenant must be seen against the background of his argument that "relationships also involve making agreements which express the relationship."<sup>46</sup> When we come to our study of the covenant of works in the next chapter, we will find this priority assigned to relationship expressed in explicit terms by a number of writers.

How do FV proponents defend their claim that a covenant is essentially a relationship? Many do so by pointing to biblical metaphors, most notably that of marriage.

But when the Bible talks about covenant, it talks about it in terms of a marriage, for instance. You may choose to view your marriage as a legal contract—your wife wouldn't appreciate that—hopefully your marriage is more than just a legal contract.<sup>47</sup> (John Barach)

To define the covenant biblically, we also must take into account the fact that of all the covenants that appear in the Bible, no type of covenant is used to describe the relationship of God with His people with greater frequency or deeper emotion than the marriage covenant.<sup>48</sup> (Ralph Smith)

A covenant does not consist of a list of names, but is a relation between persons (whose names can certainly be formed into a list). But these names are not the covenant any more than the two names on an invitation constitute a marriage. They may accurately describe the parties to the marriage, but they are not the marriage itself.<sup>49</sup> (Douglas Wilson)

Before we proceed to show how FV proponents draw their doctrine of covenantal objectivity from the above consideration, let us summarize and make some critical observations. FV proponents (quoted above) are not simply saying that a covenant entails a relationship. Few Reformed individuals would deny this point. *FV proponents are saying, however, that a covenant is itself essentially a relationship.* Frequently, this claim is asserted, not argued. The problem with this claim is twofold. First, proponents are not entirely clear about what they mean by the term *relationship*. Wilkins is clear that relationship entails vital union and communion between God and the soul.

In fact, covenant is a real relationship, consisting of real communion with the triune God through union with Christ. The covenant . . . is union with Christ. Thus being in covenant gives all the blessings of being united to Christ. There is no salvation apart from covenant simply because there is no salvation apart from union with Christ. And without union with Christ there is no covenant at all.<sup>50</sup>

While other definitions are at best less clear, frequent use of the marriage metaphor from Scripture to illustrate FV definitions of covenant suggests that Wilkins's definition is not unique to him. To say, however, that relationship (as Wilkins defines it) lies at the essence of covenant jeopardizes the integrity of the legal or formal relationships within the covenant of grace that Reformed theologians have under-

stood the Scripture to teach.<sup>51</sup> Few FV proponents will categorically deny that the covenant of grace has legal or forensic dimensions. The emphasis, however, decidedly lies in the personal-vital dimensions. This is made possible by equivocal uses of the term *relationship*. In so doing, FV proponents practically deny multiple senses of membership (legal/vital) within the covenant of grace, resolving them into a single undifferentiated way of the covenant member relating to God. Note again Wilkins:

According to the Bible the privileges of covenant membership go far beyond opportunity, mere opportunity, or privilege. According to the Scriptures to be in covenant with God is to really and truly be swept up into the glorious communion and fellowship of the Triune God, and be part of His family. Being in covenant involves then a concrete, substantial reality, and thus the Apostles could declare the blessings of salvation that are true of everyone who is a member of Christ, and declare them to be true without qualification, even though they didn't know the decrees.<sup>52</sup>

This raises two further questions, which we will probe in subsequent chapters: (1) Given that FV proponents universally understand children of believers to be members of the covenant of grace, what does this membership entail? (2) Given the diminished concern with a covenant as a legal or forensic entity, and the enhanced concern for a covenant as a vital relationship, what implications does this have for the doctrine of justification?

A second problem with FV claims that a covenant is essentially a relationship is that proponents offer dubious biblical support for their doctrine. Much of the evidence they cite does prove that Scripture *can* speak of covenant in terms of a marital relationship, and that in its personal and vital dimensions. This, however, does not prove that the marriage metaphor exhausts all that is entailed in membership within the covenant of grace. In other words, just because *some* persons in covenant relate to God in that way does not necessarily prove that *all* persons in covenant relate to God in similar terms.

Much of the biblical language in describing covenants, furthermore, is patently legal or forensic, and speaks of covenants in terms of an agreement.<sup>53</sup> FV proponents do not necessarily deny this, but

they practically neglect these data in their discussions of covenant. Their discussion, then, is selective and produces an unbalanced picture of a covenant. FV proponents illegitimately privilege the marriage metaphor at the expense of the total witness of the biblical data.

### Covenantal Objectivity

Understanding covenant to be a relationship and the biblical metaphor of marriage to describe the essence of covenant, many proponents articulate what has come to be known as the doctrine of covenantal objectivity. Before we proceed, it will be important to emphasize that no FV proponents presently deny that some within the covenant community prove in the end not to have been genuine believers, or that covenant faithfulness includes more than external obedience to the commands of God.<sup>54</sup> What is under question is how any member of the covenant of grace at any given time may regard himself and his standing before God; and how members of the covenant of grace are to be addressed by and regarded in the public teaching of the church.

Proponents sometimes contend that a covenant is an objective relationship independent of the covenant member's subjective considerations of the strength or nature of his membership.

And a covenant is also objective, like your marriage. It's there whether the members of the covenant feel it's there, or they believe it's there, whether they even believe in the covenant or not. If you were to stop believing that you were married, you would still be married. If you stopped feeling married, you would still be married. Your marriage exists.<sup>55</sup> (John Barach)

Such an understanding of a covenant is not infrequently framed polemically against the subjectivism thought to leaven much of Reformed Christianity.

And here is the basis of visible covenant faithfulness—here is our central duty. Morbid introspection is a counterproductive fight with a tarbaby. Are you a Christian? Look by faith to Christ—in the Scriptures, in the preached Word, and in the sacraments.<sup>56</sup> (Douglas Wilson)

Objective assurance is found in real faith responding to an objective gospel. Objective assurance is never found through trying to peer into the secret counsels of God, or into the murky resources of one's own heart. The gospel is preached, the water was applied, the Table is now set. Do you believe? The question is a simple one.<sup>57</sup> (Douglas Wilson)

We might note parenthetically that Wilson's question ("Do you believe?") is one that Wilkins argues cannot be competently answered by the believer within the realm of assurance. This state of affairs underscores an important inconsistency between two FV proponents.

The chief consequence of covenantal objectivity is that a premium is placed on that which is visible, external, and tangible.<sup>58</sup> Distinctions within the covenant of grace based on subjective considerations are either muted or rejected.

As in the old covenant, so in the new covenant. There is an objective covenant made of believers and their children. Every baptized person is in covenant with God and is in union, then, with Christ and with the triune God. The Bible doesn't know about a distinction between being internally in the covenant, really in the covenant, and being only externally in the covenant, just being in the sphere of the covenant. The Bible speaks about the reality, the efficacy of baptism. Every baptized person is truly a member of God's covenant.<sup>59</sup> (John Barach)

Negatively, this means, to the session of the AAPC, that many Reformed Christians have been mistaken in their efforts to discern the difference between a true and a spurious work of grace.

It would appear that we must be willing to speak of the undifferentiated grace of God (or the generic, unspecified grace of God). In their reading of Heb. 6:4–5, some theologians try to draw subtle distinctions to make highly refined psychological differences between blessings that do not secure eternal salvation and true regeneration, which does. . . . Thus, the solution to Heb. 6 is not developing two psychologies of conversion, one for the "truly regenerate" and one for the future apostate, and then introspecting to see which kind of grace one has received. This is a task beyond our competence.

The solution is to turn from ourselves and to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith (Heb. 12:1ff).<sup>60</sup>

Rich Lusk, a former pastor of the church whose session adopted the statement above, explicates this position in an essay on Hebrews 6:4–8. Lusk rejects the conventional Reformed view that “there is some qualitative difference between what the truly regenerate experience and what future apostates experience, *and* that this distinction is in view in Hebrews 6:4–6.”<sup>61</sup> “The difference between the truly regenerate person and the person who will fail to persevere is not clear on the front end; rather, it only becomes clear as the one continues on in the faith and the other apostatizes.”<sup>62</sup> Genuine covenantal membership, therefore, is not to be measured inwardly and subjectively, but outwardly and objectively.

Positively, this means that one may speak in very strong terms about what is true of the member of the covenant of grace. Citing Paul’s address to the Ephesians in Ephesians 1, Steve Wilkins argues that the reason that Paul can say that his audience has been blessed “with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,” “chosen in Christ Jesus before the foundation of the world,” “rede[emed] through his blood,” and the like, is because of their relationship to the covenant.

[Paul is] speaking to a particular, living group of people—real people, who were sinners, that he didn’t know the decrees of God about, but what he knows is what the covenant means. That’s what he knows. He didn’t know the decrees, he didn’t know their hearts, he didn’t know the genuineness of their conversion, or the genuineness of their faith. He didn’t know any of that. What does he know? How could he talk like this? Because he knows what the covenant means. The covenant is communion—living communion—with the triune God. It’s a living relationship with the living God.<sup>63</sup>

In other words, the reason that the apostle addresses believers in the manner he does is derived from the nature of covenantal membership.

Barach confirms such a view, rejecting the traditional view that the apostle addresses believers in such terms according to a “judgment of charity”—that the apostles speak of believers according to their profession.

When we look around the congregation and we see other people in the congregation, we do not give them a “judgment of charity” that says “Well, I don’t know; maybe he’s a Christian; maybe he isn’t. So I’ll be charitable and I’ll regard him as a Christian and I’ll treat him as a Christian. I’ve got my doubts.” Instead we go by God’s promise. He has said that this person is in Christ and therefore believing God’s promise, we treat that person as who he really is—someone who is in Christ.<sup>64</sup>

Such a view extends even to the covenantal membership of duly baptized children, as Wilkins makes plain.

Traditionally, the Reformed have said, we have to view our children as presumptively elect or presumptively regenerate. And therefore, Christian, if we are willing to take the Scriptures at face value, there is no presumption necessary. Just take the Bible. And this is true, of course, because by the baptism, by baptism the Spirit joins us to Christ since he is the elect one and the Church is the elect people, we are joined to his body. We are therefore elect. Since he is the justified one, we are justified in him. Since he is the beloved one, we are beloved in him. . . . Children are joined to Christ by their baptisms and must be viewed and treated in the light of this reality. They are to be nurtured in the faith.<sup>65</sup>

In this rejection of the conventional Reformed explanation of the doctrine of the “judgment of charity,” and in the absence of a distinction between the membership of children of the covenant of grace and of adult believers, we find that what characterizes FV conceptions of covenant is that *membership in the covenant of grace is to be understood in an undifferentiated sense*. In other words, we are not to define membership within the covenant community by drawing distinctions along the lines of the doctrines of regeneration and conversion.

To do so, FV proponents often aver, is to violate the spirit and letter of Deuteronomy 29:29.

We can never, in this life, know with absolute certainty who are elect unto final salvation. For this reason, we have to make judgments and declarations in terms of what has been revealed, namely, the covenant (Dt. 29:29).<sup>66</sup> (AAPC Summary Statement)

We are to take the baptisms of others at face value. We also take the teaching of Scripture at face value, and the behavior and the words of these covenant members at face value. If there is conflict between what baptism means and what the baptized are openly doing and saying, then we are at liberty to point to the inconsistency and say that it constitutes covenantal faithlessness. But we need to be extremely wary of pronouncing on the secret things (Deut 29:29). We have cited this verse a number of times in this book—it would be a good verse to memorize.<sup>67</sup> (Douglas Wilson)

We therefore do not publicly distinguish among covenant members along the conventional lines of a profession of saving faith. Within the covenant of grace, the working admissible public distinction is between “covenant keepers” and “covenant breakers.”<sup>68</sup> Perseverance, FV proponents generally argue, is that which distinguishes the covenant keeper from the covenant breaker. We shall examine this doctrine in more depth in a subsequent chapter. We may observe that Wilson’s statement (above) closely resembles the doctrine of the judgment of charity.<sup>69</sup> This appears to place him in conflict with Barach’s rejection of this doctrine. This difference represents a significant hermeneutical inconsistency among certain FV proponents.

In many respects the doctrine of covenantal objectivity will resurface in our consideration of the FV’s understandings of perseverance and apostasy, and of the sacraments. Given the importance of the doctrine to the FV, we may make a few preliminary critical comments. First, it seems that the doctrine of the judgment of charity has been too hastily discarded by FV proponents. The question at hand, of course, is how the apostles can speak of believers as “elect,” “sanctified,” “heirs of glory,” and in terms of similar expressions, mindful that some in the audience may prove in the end to be unregenerate. All are agreed that the apostles had no infallible knowledge of the state of the hearts of their audience.

One important passage in this regard, and one that has been untreated in the FV literature I have studied, is 1 Peter 5:12: “Through Silvanus, our faithful brother (for so I regard him), I have written to you briefly, exhorting and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it!” What does this passage tell us? We gain a window into the mode of the way that the apostles speak of fellow believers.

The affirmation that Silvanus is a “faithful brother” is the way, Peter tells us, that he “regard[s] him.” In other words, Peter receives Silvanus according to his profession and according to the life that accompanies, corroborates, and adorns that profession.

Second, the doctrine of covenantal objectivity also fails to account for biblical teaching that speaks of the covenantally unfaithful as those who were never truly members of the covenant of grace in the first place.<sup>70</sup> We may consider two representative passages, 1 John 2:19–20 and Matthew 7:22–23. In 1 John 2:19–20 (“They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us, but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us. But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you all know.”), we may notice what John says: “they were not really of us”—not “they failed to persevere.” In this statement is a distinction drawn within the covenant community: “those who are really of us” and those who are not. The apostasy of the latter, John says, proves that they were never really believers at the outset.<sup>71</sup> This conclusion is confirmed by the reassurance given to believers in verse 20: they are said to have an “anointing from the Holy One.” Those who departed, we may fairly infer, did not possess this anointing.<sup>72</sup> The difference, then, between apostates and believers does not consist merely of the fact that the latter persevere and the former do not. The difference, John says in both verse 19 and verse 20, is *qualitative* in nature and is inherent from the beginning.<sup>73</sup>

In Matthew 7:22–23 (“Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; Depart from Me, You who practice lawlessness.’”), Jesus says of individuals who, notwithstanding their religious activity and usefulness to the kingdom, are proven to have been false, “I never knew you.” Jesus does *not* say, “Once I really knew you, but now I don’t.”<sup>74</sup> Although they were members of the covenant community and recognized as such, Jesus’ verdict is that he never knew them. They were not his, and they never were.<sup>75</sup> This proves that we are not at liberty to understand membership in the covenant of grace in an undifferentiated way.

## Covenant and the Trinity

FV proponents frequently defend their definition of a covenant as essentially a relationship by appealing to the doctrine of the Trinity. Both these appeals and the grounds for their doctrine of a covenantal Trinity merit consideration. Wilkins, for example, argues that the “covenant into which we are brought is this very same covenant that has always existed within the Godhead from eternity.”<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, “Covenant is a gracious relationship with the Triune God, in which we are made partakers of His love and participants in the communion and fellowship that has existed from all eternity in the Godhead.”<sup>77</sup>

Two individuals who have extensively developed a covenantal doctrine of the Trinity are Peter Leithart and Ralph Smith.

### Peter Leithart

Leithart has recently synthesized his views on the Trinity and their implication for theology in his contribution to the Knox colloquium.<sup>78</sup> While he does not explicitly reflect on whether the intratrinitarian relations are themselves covenantal, his discussion is not immaterial to consideration of that question. Leithart raises Karl Rahner’s charge that the West, following Augustine, has adopted a doctrine of the Trinity that is essentially Unitarian, “begin[ning] with the one God, the one divine essence as a whole, and only *afterwards* does it see God as three in persons.”<sup>79</sup> Leithart, believing that he is following a trajectory set forth by Jonathan Edwards, argues that a “complete Trinitarian re-casting of theology” is necessary.<sup>80</sup>

One place where Leithart argues that this is especially needed is the doctrine of the Trinity. Leithart argues that Van Til’s doctrine of the Trinity as “absolute Person” needs to be reclaimed by the Reformed tradition.<sup>81</sup> Such an understanding will ground the “thoroughly personal character of all reality.”<sup>82</sup> But such a concept of divine and created personality requires, Van Til maintains, the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>83</sup>

What does this mean for the vision propounded by the FV? Leithart explains that only such a doctrine of “Trinitarian personalism” rescues the church from “reification” and “abstraction.”<sup>84</sup>

Basic concepts and categories and terms in theology repeatedly have fallen prey to these mental twists. Some terms in theology gravitate

toward reification and abstraction in a way that appears to be almost inevitable. What do we mean by talk about the “nature of God,” for example? Does the phrase “nature of God” mean anything other than “God”? What is added by adding “nature”? If the phrase refers to God’s attributes, well and good, though I prefer the more personalist connotations of “attributes.” But the phrase can hint that there is some reality that we can call “nature of God” that is different from the Sovereign Person we call “God,” and that hint is dangerous and heretical if pressed.<sup>85</sup>

Leithart is going to develop this argument in ways that are extremely important to our consideration of FV views of the sacraments (specifically) and of anthropology and the application of redemption (broadly). For the present, we may observe both a concern and a conclusion that Leithart has drawn.

Leithart’s *concern* is that the West has viewed reality in a depersonalized way. We have separated attributes and form from being. This concern Leithart has correctly adopted from Van Til who (mistakenly in my judgment) understood this false conception of reality to be an epistemological consequence of the fall. Such a concern prompts Leithart to ask whether the doctrine of the Trinity has not fallen prey to such a conception of reality. He *concludes* that it has when certain individuals speak of the “nature of God” abstracted from “the Sovereign Person we call ‘God.’” Leithart, then, appears to evidence discomfort with traditional formulations of the nature of God’s being because of their potential abuse in this direction. Emphasis will be placed on Trinitarian formulations that stress the personhood of God and the mutual interactions within the Godhead.<sup>86</sup> There is therefore a skepticism toward the *nature* of being and a preference in expressing the *relations* or *activities* of that being.

### Ralph Smith

Smith offers one of the most thoroughgoing and developed articulations of the Trinity hitherto set forth by FV proponents. In so doing, he attempts to relate the Trinity in expressly covenantal terms. In his 2002 *Paradox and Truth*, Smith engages Cornelius Plantinga’s “social view of the Trinity.”<sup>87</sup> Smith, while admiring the social emphases of Plantinga’s doctrine, nevertheless concludes that Plantinga

“at least invites tritheism,” if one is to define tritheism as the denial of any “real *identity* of [God’s] nature with the persons, singly or severally.”<sup>88</sup> Smith rightly concludes that “three persons who merely share the same nature or essence are not ontologically one.”<sup>89</sup> In this sense, Plantinga’s social doctrine of the Trinity falls short.

In this same work, however, Smith is attracted to Van Til’s understanding of “God, that is, the whole Godhead [as] one person.”<sup>90</sup> After defending Van Til’s doctrine of “one person, three persons” from the charge of contradiction<sup>91</sup> by appealing to the incomprehensibility of God and the necessity of apparent contradiction posed by the incomprehensibility of God,<sup>92</sup> Smith argues that what is absent from Van Til’s doctrine is an understanding of the “persons of the Trinity [as] eternally united in a covenantal bond of love,” a deficiency that Abraham Kuyper supplies.<sup>93</sup> When posing the question why such an understanding is important, Smith answers, “A covenantal relationship among the persons of the Trinity introduces the possibility of a worldview in which the doctrine of God is the fountain from which all other truths flow.”<sup>94</sup> Such an understanding of the Trinity is important, then, because it enables a worldview with global implications. It helps us to see that the “whole world [is] a covenantal system.”<sup>95</sup>

Such a view of the Trinity is important, Smith argues, for another reason.

Without the doctrine of the covenant among the persons of the Trinity, the tendency to abstraction dominates thought about God, and there is no basis for a real link between God as He is in Himself and God as He relates to man. Also the doctrine of man, both as individual and as related to society, suffers from a neglect of the doctrine of the Trinitarian covenant, for to rightly understand man, we must view him as a covenant personality.<sup>96</sup>

Similarly to Leithart, then, Smith argues that the problem of theological abstraction must be resolved by, and the proper conception of human nature must be grounded in a right understanding of the Trinity.

What does a covenantal doctrine of the Trinity entail? The Reformed tradition, Smith claims, has maintained that “the attributes of God are qualities of His essence,” which “the persons of the Trinity share.”<sup>97</sup> But this means that “intratrinitarian love is ruled out by

definition.”<sup>98</sup> At the very least Reformed theology requires an overhaul of the traditional language of “essence” and “substance.”

Traditional Reformed theology . . . appears to presuppose something close to the very notion Van Til objects to: the idea that the essence of God is an impersonal substratum. As a matter of fact, traditional Reformed theology has been significantly influenced by the Aristotelian and medieval idea of “substance” in formulating the doctrine of the Trinity. Needless to say, this influence is not limited to Reformed theology; it is the mainstream church tradition. But it is not the only approach. As far back as Athanasius, the notion of God’s essence was defined apart from Aristotelian notions of substance.<sup>99</sup>

We need rather to conceive of such attributes as love, righteousness, and faithfulness as “point[ing] to God as covenantal in His essential nature.”<sup>100</sup>

Smith concludes:

If the words used in the Bible to describe God’s attributes are covenantal terms and if we take God’s revelation of Himself in the economy as a true revelation of who He is, then we may infer from this covenantal language that there is a covenantal relationship among the persons of the Trinity and that it is ultimately in that everlasting covenantal relationship that words like love, covenantal loyalty or faithfulness, and righteousness have their meaning.<sup>101</sup>

In other words, “faithfulness” is “the total commitment of each of the persons of the Trinity to the covenant relationship among them”; “righteousness means that each of the persons of the Trinity is wholly dedicated to preserving the properties of the others. They never transgress the boundaries of their personhood but rather act to protect them by blessing and glorifying one another. They uphold the law-covenant of their triune being, the essence of which is love.”<sup>102</sup>

Before proceeding further, we can make two preliminary comments by way of criticism of Smith’s trinitarianism. First, Smith appears to regard the intratrinitarian relationships to be themselves covenantal. He argues this because certain biblical words (*love, righteousness, faithfulness*) are used in the context of the biblical redemptive covenants to

disclose God's character. But it is not at all clear why such words must be grounded in a *covenantally* divine character in order for God to use them in revealing himself in redemptive history. Since Smith argues this in more detail in a separate treatment, we will defer consideration of this point until our assessment of that discussion.

Second, while Smith has raised valid concerns about Plantinga's tritheism and desires to guard the unity of the Godhead, his own formulations do not sufficiently safeguard God's oneness.<sup>103</sup> This concern applies equally to Leithart. The ontological skepticism of both men effectively results in our being able to affirm little about the essence of God, except *that* it exists. What can be affirmed are the relations that the persons of the Godhead sustain to one another. When the unity of God *is* spoken of, Smith prefers to speak of it in terms of eternal union in the covenantal bonds of love. Again, his preferred means of giving expression to the divine unity is relational but not ontological. The thrust of this doctrine is to emphasize the plurality of God in such a way as to attenuate the divine unity.

Let us take up Smith's efforts to relate the biblical covenants to his covenantal trinitarianism. Smith concluded *Paradox and Truth* by observing that "the covenant in God is the ground for the existence of the covenant in creation."<sup>104</sup> In his 2003 *Eternal Covenant* Smith attempts to relate the doctrine of the Trinity (so conceived) to the biblical covenants.<sup>105</sup>

Smith explains his concerns at the outset of his *Eternal Covenant*. First, he is concerned that the "covenant of works" in Reformed theology has illegitimately "constitute[d] the paradigmatic covenant" for covenant theology.<sup>106</sup> As we shall see in the next chapter, Smith argues that the covenant of works, classically conceived, must be discarded. Second, Smith is concerned that the covenant of redemption has been wrongly constructed after the pattern of the covenant of works—as too closely "oriented to redemption" and as tied to the concept of merit.<sup>107</sup> Third, Smith proposes that we place the covenant of redemption at the center of covenant theology, indeed, as "not only the key notion of systematic [and] biblical theology, but also the essential link between these two disciplines" *and* "the very center of the whole Christian worldview."<sup>108</sup> But Smith argues that we need to reconceive the covenant of redemption in terms of a distinctive

“covenantal relationship among the persons of the Trinity.”<sup>109</sup> It cannot be, he argues, “a mere agreement entered into in order to respond to the situation of sin.”<sup>110</sup> Properly speaking, then, it is not a covenant of *redemption*.

How does Smith argue this last point? What biblical evidence does he perceive to require this conclusion? We will summarize and respond to three major arguments that he advances. First, Smith, following Van Til,<sup>111</sup> argues that God’s act of creation is itself covenantal. Smith concedes that “the word *covenant* is not specifically used in the creation account,” but observes that the chapter nonetheless provides us with all the necessary elements of a covenant.<sup>112</sup> Four arguments are worth rehearsing. (1) We have “creation by command,” which “determines His lordship over that which He has commanded.”<sup>113</sup> (2) We have “covenantal progression,” namely, “command, evaluation, and blessing.”<sup>114</sup> (3) God institutes a covenant at Genesis 9:1f. “that unambiguously replicates the relationship between God and Adam”; therefore, creation itself is covenantal.<sup>115</sup> (4) in biblical history, “there is no other means of interpersonal relationship between God and man except through a covenant.”<sup>116</sup> Therefore the “weight of presumption falls on the side of those who see God’s covenantal work in history as an expression of the fact that He is a covenantal God in eternity, that covenant in history manifests the covenantal nature of the triune God himself.”<sup>117</sup>

In response to (1) and (2), we may observe that while Smith has drawn plausible consequences from the biblical narrative of creation, he has not drawn, in the words of the Westminster Confession of Faith, good *and necessary* consequences from the biblical narrative of creation (WCF 1.6). In other words, the text of Genesis does not require that the act of creation itself is covenantal. The elements that Smith has isolated (command; the pattern of command-evaluation-blessing) do not prove the existence of a covenant in Genesis 1.

In response to (3), the repetition of the creation command of “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” at Genesis 9 need not prove that creation is itself covenantal. It need only prove that it is of the nature of the Noahic covenant to uphold and preserve the created order. In response to (4), Smith overlooks the fact that what has been traditionally termed the “covenant of works” is not instituted until

Genesis 2. In other words, the biblical narrative tells us that there is a temporal gap (of some unspecified time) between the creation of man and the first covenant between God and man. This certainly seems to be the understanding of the Confession (WCF 7.1). It is not true, then, that God *has* only and, therefore, *can* only relate to man by way of covenant.

In summary, Smith has not established his case either that creation is covenantal or that God himself is thereby covenantal.

A second line of argument that Smith offers to prove that the covenant of redemption is grounded in a covenantal Trinity is that “when we have the elements of a covenant, we have the covenant.”<sup>118</sup> This argument in and of itself is not objectionable. It is the way Reformed theologians have traditionally and successfully proven both the covenant of redemption and the covenant of works as biblical doctrines.

Smith, however, applies the argument in a manner that few if any Reformed theologians have done. He contends that “when the Bible speaks of a relationship in which there is a hierarchy, responsibility, commands, and stipulations, and a promised blessing, the Bible calls that relationship a covenant.”<sup>119</sup> On the basis of this observation, and in view of several passages from the gospel of John, Smith concludes that the eternal intratrinitarian relationships are themselves covenantal.<sup>120</sup>

It is unclear that these passages actually prove Smith’s point. To be sure, they most certainly prove the covenant of redemption. Unproven, however, is the assertion that the covenant of redemption must itself be identified with eternal, intratrinitarian relationships. Smith has not disproven the possibility that the former may be analogous to but not identical with the latter.<sup>121</sup> The likelihood that they are not to be identified in the manner in which Smith has proposed is seen from the covenant of redemption’s concern with the redemption of the people of God. Such a relatively narrow concern militates against its simple equation with the eternal and ontological intratrinitarian relationships.

Smith’s third and final argument that the covenant of redemption is grounded in a covenantal Trinity is that John 17 “assert(s) a basic parallel between the covenant that God has with His people and the relationship between the Father and the Son. The obvious impli-

cation of this language is that there is a covenant among the persons of the Trinity that serves as analogue and ground for the covenantal relationship that God has with His people.”<sup>122</sup> It is not simply that John 17 *may* require such conclusions, Smith argues; it is that it *must* require such conclusions.<sup>123</sup>

To what passages does Smith point in John 17 as necessitating this conclusion? Jesus prays for believers’ unity “in covenantal faith and obedience (21a).”<sup>124</sup> Such “covenantal unity of believers has its ground in His dwelling in them and its pattern in the mutual indwelling of the persons of the Trinity (21b, 23a).”<sup>125</sup> The “purpose” of this pattern is “the extension of covenant blessing to all the world (21c).”<sup>126</sup> It is through the Spirit that “we share the covenant life of God” (v. 22).<sup>127</sup> Finally, “Jesus implies that His indwelling the Church brings about increased covenantal unity over time” (v. 23).<sup>128</sup>

How are these passages said to prove Smith’s point?

The mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son is the pattern for the unity of believers, which can only mean a covenantal unity, for ontological unity among believers in the same way that there may be ontological unity among the persons of the Trinity is unthinkable, and a mere unity of love or fellowship does not do justice to the fact that indwelling is a common covenantal theme, nor to the fact that when the notions of love and fellowship are infused with their most profound biblical meaning, these are words of covenantal relationship.<sup>129</sup>

Smith’s argument, however, breaks down at a couple of key points. First, while the bond of unity constituted among the people of God results from what God has done in and for them in the covenant of grace, Jesus in John 17 does not isolate that bond as covenantal. Smith points to such concepts as unity, faith, and obedience that, in the context of the argument of John 17, are only remotely covenantal. In other words, they are only covenantal *here* in the sense that they are the result or byproduct of the covenant of grace, a concept that itself is a couple of steps removed from the explicit argument of John 17. The proposed Johannine connection between human-unity-as-covenantal and divine-unity-as-covenantal is therefore an exceedingly tenuous one.

Second, it is true that “indwelling is a common covenantal theme” both in the old covenant and in the new covenant.<sup>130</sup> Having entered into a covenant with his people, God’s dwelling with his people (a promise of the covenant of grace), is therefore covenantal. Similarly, “love and fellowship” (which God pledges as part of the covenant of grace), when exercised toward sinners, are therefore covenantal. It is that *context* of the indwelling, the love, and the fellowship, that renders them covenantal. But it is not at all clear that this particular context necessarily conveys when those same terms are affirmed of the eternal intratrinitarian relations among the persons of the Godhead.

Third, the divine unity and the human unity in view in John 17 are, by Smith’s own admission, not in all points identical. The former, after all, is ontological, while the latter is not. But we may also reason in reverse: the nonontological unity of believers *does not and cannot* necessitate the nonontological eternal unity of the persons among the Godhead. Consequently, even were we to grant Smith’s point that the unity among believers in John 17 is explicitly covenantal (it is not), that does not necessarily pave the way for understanding the ontological Trinitarian unity as covenantal.

In summary, Smith’s argument regarding the eternal, intratrinitarian relations among the persons of the Godhead rests neither upon explicit biblical testimony nor upon the good and necessary consequences of explicit biblical testimony. We may grant with Berkhof that “the archetype of all covenant life is found in the Trinitarian being of God, and what is seen among men is but a faint copy (ectype) of this.”<sup>131</sup> Smith, however, speculatively appears to understand this relationship in terms of identity, not analogy.

Given that Smith’s speculations attend his radical reconception of the doctrine of the Trinity; and given that this reconception is employed within the FV to reconceive, as we shall see, in a similarly radical way anthropology and soteriology, we cannot dismiss this as a harmless speculation.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have considered FV proponents’ definition of a covenant and their (reworked) doctrine of the Trinity, which is a

consequence of that definition. In our next chapter, we will continue our study of FV proponents' understanding of a covenant. Specifically, we will turn our attention to the way in which FV proponents conceive the number, nature, and division of the biblical covenants, as well as the outworking of these covenants in biblical history.