

# **The Conservative Reformed Subculture in the United States And Our Place within the Reformed Community**

## Introduction

A recent study by William Evans of Erskine College, Due West, S.C. gives a helpful survey of contemporary debates within the reformed community (“Deja Vu all over again? The contemporary reformed soteriological controversy in historical perspective,” *WTJ*, spring 2010, 135-151). The title indicates the author’s point, namely, that current discussions are nothing new in reformed history and in many ways they recycle discussions of a hundred years ago. He describes three pockets of reformed thought around 1900 that emerged from the American colonies. For our purposes, we can identify them by three reformed thinkers and their views as they appeared in 1900 (*with some oversimplification*) The Hodge school of thought gave priority to justification. The Edwards school of thought gave priority to sanctification. The Nevin school of thought gave priority to union with Christ.

## **1A. Three divisions of reformed thought in 2010**

Evans notes that today on justification, sanctification, and union there are “those who have tended to emphasize or prioritize each” (138, in line with generalization and over simplification, Evans says that his work is descriptive not analytical, and citation is illustrative not exhaustive, 138). He covers three groups of trajectories followed by observations, 147-151. This should help us get a handle on the topic of our interest, the Federal Vision.

The Biblical-Theological Trajectory-Vos, Murray, Gaffin, et al, 138-141

The Revisionist Wing-Norman Shepherd and the Federal Vision, 141-145

The Repristinationist [counterattack or defensive]Wing-Westminster California, 145-147

## **1B. The Biblical-Theological Trajectory-Vos, Murray, Gaffin, et al, 138-141**

Evans includes himself in this group (and many others including the author of a book on Luke from Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing-Philip Ryken; cf. what each volume in this series seeks to provide: “exposition that gives careful attention to the biblical text, is doctrinally Reformed, focuses on Christ though the lens of redemptive history, and applies the Bible to our contemporary setting”).

Vos may be thought of as the father of conservative biblical theology; he taught Murray at old Princeton and Murray taught Gaffin (and Shepherd) at Westminster Seminary (east, in Philadelphia). Hallmarks:

1) Deep respect for the confessional tradition, especially from Calvin through the Westminster formulators.

2) Strong affirmation of the sovereignty of God in salvation

3) Belief in double imputation-of sin to Christ and of His righteousness to His people

4) Commitment to a forensic view of justification

But this trajectory is not a “mere repristination of the past” (139; not merely defensive).

5) Thus, there is search “to recover overarching biblical themes” by Biblical Theology

Vos led the way in this in his emphasis on the organic unfolding of redemptive history (139). Murray emphasized union with Christ as something that underlies every step of the

application of redemption (140; Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 1955, 161). Gaffin called for a recasting of theology in terms of the eschatological character of the NT [i.e., the now and not yet structure of NT teaching] (*WTJ*, 1976).

## **2B. The Revisionist Wing-Norman Shepherd and the Federal Vision, 141-145**

This wing of contemporary reformed thought involves “a significant recasting of the tradition” (141; Evans acknowledges that that is somewhat present in the Biblical Theology position; apparently, this 2nd trajectory flies higher and sails farther).

They have good motives: opposition to cheap grace by the preaching of salvation apart from real transformation of life; the close connection of faith and obedience; and an emphasis on the objective versus the subjective in conversion and church life.

1C. Shepherd has set the agenda for this group since leaving WTS in 1981.

1) He places great stress on the covenant with Abraham among the covenants

Covenant is “a divinely established relationship of union and communion between God and His people in the bonds of mutual love and faithfulness” (142).

The covenants are conditional: they entail both promise and obligation. They are gracious but cannot be enjoyed without faith and obedience.

He rejects the bi-covenantal structure of classic Reformed theology (covenant of works with Adam and covenant of grace since the fall). Thus, the pre-fall covenant with Adam is gracious, as the Law is ultimately gracious (he opposes a strong Law...Gospel distinction that he takes to be Lutheran and not reformed historically).

2) He expands the idea that faith includes works

Faith that saves is living, active, and obedient; obedience is simply faithfulness (142).

3) He rejects a “works/merit principle”; merit is opposed to grace.

There is no merit potential for Adam and none for Christ.

Thus, he rejects the imputation of Christ’s active obedience to the believer (142-43).

4) He emphasizes the objectivity of covenant administration, especially baptism

If we are excessively subjective (looking within for evidence of grace), we have problems of assurance. If objective, we will look at our baptism (143). He elevates the place of baptism.

5) Shepherd thinks that much of reformed evangelism fails to apply the gospel directly

It is wrong to approach evangelism from the point of view of election. Instead, we need to approach evangelism from the point of view of the covenant. Thus, we *must* say to people: “Christ died for you.” That approach, per Shepherd, is the teaching of Jn 3.16 as not an elaboration on election but as covenant truth.

Question: is this the teaching of Jn 3.16? It seems much closer to the text to simply state that the personal “you” can be and ought to be used in speaking to unbelievers by saying, “if you believe you will be saved and this promise that whosoever believes has everlasting life was secured for fallen sinners because God gave His Son to the cross not to condemn the world but to save it. So, in the end, there will be a saved world in glory.

On Shepherd’s way of evangelizing see His Way of Righteousness (81-82).

2C. The FV is a fleshing out of Shepherd’s work (143).

Federal Vision (FV) refers to the covenant (*federal* theology is covenant theology) with a distinct perspective (*vision*) that leads to a recasting of aspects of the reformed tradition.

Within this perspective are the following: a strongly stated view of the efficacy of baptism. Picture a pendulum among FV thinkers from mainstream reformed to quite suspect forms, such as the view of Lusk. On baptismal efficacy, Lusk expresses concern that 19th

century revivalism in America put covenant children (infant baptized covenant children) on the margins of the church because of its emphasis on individual “narratable conversion experience” (“Paedobaptism and Baptismal Efficacy: Historic Trends and Current Controversies” in *The Federal Vision*, 76). The very practice of paedobaptism declined within paedobaptist communities (71-75). The 19th century Enlightenment, emphasizing human autonomy (cf. Kant), generated influential presuppositions that rendered infant baptism “preposterous” since children must “be allowed to grow and make their own decisions to join the Church” (81). Religion became private, individualistic, and baptistic. Lusk criticizes the way Warfield connected a direct and personal relationship with God to Calvinism. Lusk thinks that the “reformed” view of a covenant of works expresses the influence of Enlightenment autonomy (82) and tends toward a depreciation of the sacraments in their ordinariness as means of grace, so they become mere teaching aids (82). Therefore, paedobaptism fell into decline within Presbyterianism and the idea that the children of believers are “covenant children” was obscured (83-88). According to Lusk (per Nevin), “...the real issue underlying the loss of infant baptism was the loss of baptismal efficacy” (88).

However, consider how the *WCF* states efficacy in strong terms in 28.6: **The efficacy of Baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered; yet, notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited, and conferred, by the Holy Spirit... according to the counsel of God's own will, in His appointed time.** This efficacy is parallel with the Spirit’s work with the preached word. Problematically, Lusk confuses the analogy with preaching and he does so by appeal to Calvin and Augustine (104). For example, he says that Christ himself is offered and given to the one baptized (103). Christ is offered to all in preaching, but is He given to all? Lusk therefore uses confusing language: covenant children are not born as Christians in the full sense, they are made Christians at the font (88, citing Nevin), new life begins at baptism but “only the elect received new life in an indestructible sense” (92), saving grace is truly conferred by baptism but it does not guarantee eschatological salvation (95, citing Gerhart), baptismal regeneration is taught in the *WCF* with qualifiers and most Presbyterians focus on the qualifiers rather than the central thrust that God works “efficaciously through the water of baptism to regenerate and justify believers” (96), and “a sacrament, by definition, includes the bestowal of the thing signified” (100). Losing this center, “We have drifted far from our Reformed heritage” (96). My assessment is that Lusk confuses (conflates) the efficacy of baptism with the instrumentality, objectivity, and validity of baptism. Much clarification is needed to get the good.

Many FV folk practice paedocommunion (participation in communion as early as practicality allows). They emphasize the conditionality of the covenant (but legalism is avoided by the denial of merit); justification does not involve the imputation of the active obedience of Christ to His people, and yet some in the FV camp argue for a transformatory dimension to justification.

### **3B. The Repristinist [defensive/counterattack]Wing-Westminster California, 145-47**

Good motive: to guard the doctrine of justification by grace through faith.

- 1) They maintain a Law/Gospel distinction (with emphasis on the “third use” of the Law)
- 2) They defend the bi-covenantal framework of *WCF*

They defend the *pactum salutis* and they are suspect of the Vosian BT view.

- 3) On the *ordo salutis* (order of salvation), they give priority to justification in the application of redemption. Thus, definitive justification *produces* sanctification. [though they oppose the idea that justification produces sanctification, their statement have a transformatory ring regarding justification].

4) They seek to defend the reformed tradition of the past with no substantial role for historical development according to Evans. Hence, they are classified as the “defending the status quo” wing of reformed theology today.

## 2A. Observations by Evans

Wrestling with these issues in the reformed tradition is not new; largely, it is “‘deja vu’ all over again.” The controversy raises a number of important questions. [Note: it is good to wrestle with these things for perspective]

1) What is the normative center of the reformed tradition?

Some say the Westminster Standards, but from what angle (of three) do we read them? And we should recall that they themselves are transitional documents wrestling their way to formulation. [In a personal conversation Shepherd (7-17-10) stated that things are backwards: those who preserve the WCF are the revisionists since the standards revise Calvin and the early reformers; he sees himself as repristinationalistic]

2) How do we do reformed systematic theology with biblical theology?

Key Q: what is the relationship of the covenants (a Biblical Theology/history of redemption category) to the covenant of redemption (a Systematic Theology/topical category)?

What is the role of a confession, of prescription to a confession, and the place of Scripture relative to confessional prescription? [a) We need to emphasize the subordination of confessions, as reformed thinkers do. b) But we can lose that subordination in practice when the requirement of subscription is comprehensive; practical dead orthodoxy may result. c) Without a confession, we do not do our duty as churches and we fail to profit from the Spirit’s work in church history. d) So, we need a confession that is living and pliable yet firm and stable. So, we need much wisdom born of patient study!]

3) Are there really three schools of thought given the similarities (with big or not so big differences)? [Can we state it differently to emphasize the unity: there is unity with challenging diversity?]

4) What is the role of the covenant theme in reformed theology?

It is important to recognize that debates over definitions and applications of the covenant theme have a long history. Some argue that the word covenant has begun to lose definition (150). Covenant language does seem overused if you think of NT usage [There is little of it in the Gospels; Hebrews uses the term in particular ways that seem different from covenant talk; the idea of implicit can be overdone]

Debate is not necessarily a bad thing. It should humble us and drive us prayerfully to Scripture and to one another with open-minded humility. Evans: “careful discussion of theological method is required. A key challenge is the integration of biblical-theological insights into the dogmatic tradition” (150). [This is back to the relation of BT to ST; cf. Warfield graph turned upside down: from a dot at the bottom (exegesis), sides of a triangle rise to BT that serves ST. Put the triangle on its side to move from the text to PT, preaching. Note that each exposition of a text works through BT to PT but not to yield multitopical or multitextual preaching. Here are some examples: 1) discipleship: from BT work then to now in Lk 6 and from ST we get the definition of being a learner for following; these perspectives affect the exposition and properly so. 2) miracles at sunset; BT: anticipation of end of history & resurrection without the word and miracles as gospel; ST: miracles show us our Lord’s deity or His power to forgive sin.]

### 3A. Application to our history

Perhaps, in challenge to the “three” schools analysis (as partly true but oversimplified), the diet of Westminster Reformed Church (WRC) has drawn nourishment from all three groups. I studied under both Gaffin and Shepherd and acknowledge a great debt to both of them for my approach to the reformed faith. If Evans is correct in the apparent claim that the third school emphasizes the *pactum salutis*, then in that regard I definitely draw from all three wells (I studied under Kline, Frame and Strimple before they moved west).

Moreover, I *defend* the historic doctrines of grace and the eternal covenant of redemption along the lines sketched by the 3rd wing. For example, consider the answer I give to the following question. Does *union* with Christ have both pre-temporal and temporal aspects? Yes, per the *pactum salutis*, God’s people are united to Christ as His covenant children before the foundation of the world, *and* by God’s call to faith they are called in time from alienation into fellowship-union with God. Therefore, covenant children *become* the children of God.

#### 1B. The clear differences do not necessarily lead to radical differences

Does Shepherd hold to the imputation of the active obedience of Christ in a *fundamental* sense? In *The Way of Righteousness* (Kerygma Press, 2009) he says, “The ground of justification is the suffering and death of our Lord. This is the one act of righteousness imputed to us for our justification” (p. 36; underling mine). Thus, there is a sense in which the differences on “merit,” on Law/Gospel, and on bi/mono covenantalism have an important and vital unity like different limbs arising from the same tree trunk. In personal conversation with Shepherd a few weeks ago (7-17-10) he stated that since being my instructor at WTS, he has moved away from belief in the imputation of the active obedience of Christ to believers. His book (*Way*) notably omits reference to the imputation of the righteousness of God to believers in their justification. We differed on the gift of righteousness in Rom 5.17 (note two ways to take gift of righteousness that are difficult to state: source of the cross and forgiveness, God’s righteousness versus God’s righteousness because of the cross; another way to say it: gift “from” righteousness and gift that “is” righteousness).

Do not all three “schools” believe the old doctrine of the *pactum salutis* and not just the third wing? Vos, for example, related the covenants of redemptive history (BT) to the underlying covenant of redemption (ST) in his sermon on “Seeking and saving the Lost” (*Grace and Glory*) where he says that the salvation of Zacchaeus as “a son of Abraham” (Lk 19.9) traces back “to the covenantal promise made ages before to the patriarch, and ultimately to the sovereign election of which this promise was the outcome” (64).

All three “schools” stress the inseparability of faith and works (of justification apart from works *and for* works). But how to state this reality to reflect Scripture better and better is a challenging task. This is where the differences emerge and we should therefore not overstate them and go around calling others heretics. After all, note the language of James: **You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone** (2.24; Scripture nowhere *explicitly* speaks of justification by faith alone; it says, **one is justified by faith apart from works of the law**, Rom 3.28).

#### 2B. Lesson

We cannot merely defend the past; nor may we forget it. We can respectfully differ with the past and with one another with the challenge before us to preserve the unity of salvation in Christ. These historical realities show that reformed theology is not something frozen from the past but that it is a living faith that requires earnest and prayerful discipleship of both pastors and

flocks in the present. Debate is not necessarily a bad thing: we often need to refresh pages under scrutiny to see them more clearly and perhaps more correctly.

### 3B. What then is the normative center of reformed theology?

Perhaps, we need to talk about reformed centers (the core has partitions that interrelate)

1) Calvin: some might say that it is Calvin's theology. If so, we must avoid a static conception of his own work. Calvin revised his *Institutes* many times, the last edition comes from his later years. Just as the Westminster formulators worked their way to some consensus views and compromises. They made revisions of Calvin as on the fourth commandment, but their revisions miss the central emphasis on rest as the core principle of the Lord's Day. This core is an emphasis of Vos and Gaffin in their efforts to empathize with, but improve upon, Calvin.

2) Solas: at the least, from Calvin to the present, we have to emphasize the solas beginning with Scripture alone. Without the priesthood of every believer, Scripture is not the "alone" authority. The Christian conscience that is bound to God speaking through Christ by the Spirit is free from the commandments of men while enslaved to God who requires the privilege of earnest discipleship under the risen Christ as his prophet, priest, and king.

Another sola is grace alone and thus the doctrines of grace as articulated by Dort (1618). We need historical definition here just as we need historical definition of the trinity per Nicea (325). Surely, a hearty view of grace alone is at the core of reformed theology.

How could one claim to be reformed without "faith alone" in justification that is both "apart from works" and a faith that works? To be sure, getting all parties on the same page on this doctrine regarding particulars is a huge up hill battle. This is why we must exercise a great deal of charity toward those we perceive to be close to the edge of error; this is especially so when we think they have gone over the edge. For example, we can react in one of two ways to Shepherd's denial of the active obedience of Christ: a) call him a heretic, learn nothing good from him, block others from his views by poisoning the well against him, and only do negative critique with no constructive criticism, b) emphasize the fact that he strongly stresses the gracious forgiving grace that we receive by the work of Christ; by Christ's work alone you are not guilty, emphasize the point that Shepherd teaches the imputation to the believer of the one act of obedience of Christ (so his denial of imputation of our Lord's active obedience is not total), and try to find ways to improve in matters of clarity of terms and texts (cf. how both come together in Rom 5.18-19: **Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. 19 For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous;** note: one act of righteousness, v. 18, of righteous obedience, v. 19, leads to justification, v. 18, and being made righteous, v. 19). Surely we can say that this is a mouthful of good news, even if the life of obedience of Christ is marginalized for the moment. Then, we might seek to find balance by exploration of Rom 5.10: that tells us that He came to save us by His *life*.

Which solas are missing so far? Consider how they reinforce not man-centeredness but God-centeredness.

Being reformed is a mindset; as such it approaches the Christian life, preaching and learning with roots dug deep in the sovereignty of God. This not lawless because our sovereign commands x, y, z. Neither is it legalistic and judgmental (we pray for forgiveness as we practice it). The effort to apply sovereign grace to education, sanctification, and counseling yields an approach to these areas that is non-manipulative, patient, and principled. Application is by reasonable instruction and heart felt persuasion. In other words, the means of grace are

emphasized (taken up, put to work) while educators, pastors, and the Christian family of brothers and sisters wait prayerfully for the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit in spiritual renewal.

#### **4B. Do we have a reformed view of covenant theology and the sacraments?**

This is probably where reformed thinkers will be most critical of us. Does our approach here still have a reformed core and trajectory?

##### **1C. Baptism**

If we base our answer on the tradition since Calvin in a strong confessional (restitutionist) way, then no we do not have a reformed view of covenant theology because we do not define covenant standing or covenant children by birth to believing parentage, and therefore we do not practice infant baptism. The following conclusion that we draw from Scripture is fingernails on a chalk board to many reformed thinkers: we identify the children of the covenant not by birth to believing parentage, but by entry into the covenant community by repentance-baptism by the confession of sin and faith. This conclusion has a biblical theology orientation because of John's baptism in the history of redemption. Here, I am revisionist and it is per biblical-theological application to the topic of baptism and the question of covenant children. How accurately we do this is something for others to judge. Granted, the judgment of others will be controlled by their presuppositional sunglasses; it is difficult for all of us to see that with which we see. But if a person wearing bifocal glasses tilts his head as he looks out, he will notice the lenses and see what controls his seeing. We must engage, ask for dialogue with open-minded humility, rethink our own view regularly and fully, and then act on what we understand waiting on the Lord to reveal more to us of what we need (cf. Phil 3.15-16).

As you know, the biblical-theological (history of salvation) notion we emphasize attempts to clarify the language of the covenant. We begin with the fact that the covenant people of Abraham are under judgment and thus are "not my people" and they are one with the nations as not the covenant children of God. However, *God keeps covenant with Abraham and his seed, even in their judgment. Therefore, they remain His covenant people but under judgment.* Now, marvelously, the gospel goes to all people: the covenant promises belong to all people, *so, all people are covenant breakers.* All are God's people under judgment and *called to repentance to become the new Israel.* Entry into the new Israel is by means of repentance-baptism to which Israelites, their children, and all nations are called. We have covered these sentiments in our NT survey, in sermons on Romans, in sermons on Matthew and Luke on John the Baptist, and in sermons on Matthew on the parables of the kingdom. For one detail, recall that at the end of the age law breakers (tares) will be gathered out of his kingdom (Mat 13.41). Wheat and tares include all people; all people are in God's kingdom; hence, they are in His covenant, the gospel belongs to them all in its free offer. Still, they are not the people of God and God calls out a new Israel from those that are not His Israelite (covenant) people to form the new Israel, the new covenant people. Thus, baptism is the entry way into new covenant membership in the visible church. [cf. in the book of Revelation, the woman, Israel, is protected in the wilderness for the church age]

Q: then, can we claim solidarity with reformed theology and does it matter?

*Yes, we claim solidarity with reformed theology* because a) our acceptance of the validity of infant baptisms reflects reformed thinking, especially on the objectivity of the sacraments as gospel signs. We think this is the most important point when we prioritize various matters of baptism (mode, meaning, subject, etc). b) We also dig deep into covenant theology rooting every historical covenant in the *pactum salutis*. We claim to hold to a strong view of covenant theology without the entailment of infant baptism, which many reformed folk see as some kind of

oxymoron. However, the reformed folk of the CREC show more understanding to our view than most Presbyterians, even if they do not embrace our view. Both a) & b) matter.

c) We follow Calvin's root to its fruit on how Scripture counts sonship (Calvin, Rom 9.26, 372f).

Calvin's comments on the "not my people" language harmonize in principle with our emphasis on Israel's covenant standing under judgment for they are "put on a level with the Gentiles"; then, "having equalized the Jews and the Gentiles, he would gather a Church for himself from aliens, so that they who were not a people would begin to be so" (372).

How do we relate eternal election to childship to recognition of it in the Church? To this point he says, "Though they indeed, whom God in his eternal counsel has destined as sons to himself, are perpetually his sons, yet Scripture in many parts counts none to be God's children but those, the election of whom has been proved by their calling: and hence he teaches us not to judge, much less to decide, respecting God's election, except as far as it manifests itself by its own evidences" (373; i.e. there must be a transition from wrath to grace in history).

Connecting eternal election to the counting of childship to God in history, Calvin's orbit of thought includes the visible church and human judgment. What we do with this, contrary to Calvin, is conclude that we are to identify covenant children, not by birth (as is typical in reformed theology), but by how "it manifests itself by its own evidences," which we take to be repentance, and in turn, the seeing the evidences of repentance leads to the administration of repentance-baptism (on credible confession of faith).

Granted, in his comments on Romans 9.26, Calvin is connecting eternal sonship (per the *pactum salutis*) to counting someone to be a child of God in the judgment of the church. He is not addressing the notion of covenant standing within history (per the covenant with Abraham). Thus, he draws on the covenant with Abraham and his seed to arrive at the conclusion of covenant standing and identification (counting as children of God) by birth to covenant parentage. Our assessment is that these are contradictory or at least stand in tension with each other: counting as children of God by birth and counting as children of God by evidences that manifest calling (and calling results in faith and repentance as two sides of the same coin). Note that on Romans 9.26, Calvin says that *we* are "not to judge" and "decide" regarding "God's election" (that makes people "perpetually his sons") or "count [them]...to be God's children" "*except as far as it manifests itself by its own evidences*" (italics mine).

Therefore, we think it is true to Calvin and in harmony with reformed theology to resolve contradictions or confusing lines of thought in Calvin. Many within the reformed communities have done this. Recall Gaffin's critique of Calvin on the Sabbath (Gaffin per Vos also evaluates the Westminster Confession as missing the main point of the fourth commandment). Many differences have emerged regarding Calvin's "real presence" teaching about communion. Effort is made in at least two ways (Nevin versus Hodge) to follow Calvin's root to a different fruit. Doing so surely does not make one non-reformed. Still, some, like Mathison think that if you do not have weekly communion you are not reformed (we have evaluated his view and found it wanting) or like Kelly Clark think that if you do not have a Sunday evening service, your church is not reformed.

Accordingly, we think that the connection between being perpetually covenant children and being identified as such per the evidences of repentance is clearly biblical and, contrary to Calvin, that it leads away from infant baptism because it leads away from identifying covenant children by natural birth. This being true, it still leaves the door open (somewhat anyway) to work from the Abrahamic covenant to covenant identification by birth. Addressing that point, we



follow Calvin regarding the fact that the Jews are put on a level with the Gentiles (Rom 9.26) so that the church is gathered from aliens (of both Jews and Gentiles). However, we think he fails to go far enough because he does not see the historical-redemptive implication that now the covenant promises belong to all people and he does not see the further implications that this has regarding the arguments for infant baptism. For example, he claims that we must baptize infants since otherwise we exclude our children from the new covenant, and it becomes a matter of lesser grace than the old. However, the implication of the covenant people remaining such, but under judgment and blended with the nations as not my people, is that all people are covenant people but under judgment. Thus, all people are “not my people,” the covenant belongs to all, all are covenant breakers, and some are to be identified as covenant keepers *if they show the evidences* of God’s effectual calling, which are repentance and faith, and in turn, the *obedience* of baptism.

To say this central point again: we take the identification of covenant children by birth per the promise to Abraham and his seed to be a historical-redemptive mistake because the promise to Abraham and his offspring refers to his descendants to the end of time in a unique way that does not apply to Christians and their children. Now in the new covenant, God is fulfilling His unique promise to Abraham and his children’s children by keeping His word to them even though they are under judgment. He does so by calling Gentiles (not my people) to be His people and through provoking Israel to jealousy He does so by calling a remnant of Israelites (not my people under judgment) to be His people.

Finally, to not miss the point we are making here, we need to return to the discussion of where we stand relative to the reformed subculture in the United States. Bottom line: we are claiming that we stand within that tradition even though we do not embrace infant baptism because we believe (with Calvin as a rough and ready marker of being reformed) that we move from the root of what he teaches to what we understand to be a more consistent fruit regarding a) the identification of covenant sons and daughters by the life evidences, and b) the identification of Jews and Gentiles as the people who are not God’s people (they are all His people, His covenant people under judgment as covenant breakers) and from whom He is calling out a new people in fulfillment of the promises to Abraham and his descendants in all their generations.

## **2C. Communion**

If we were strong traditionalists then we would have communion *after* the morning sermon (per the Westminster directory of worship). So, we do not advance a “reformed” view of communion that accords with the Westminster Standards because we partake of communion *during* the morning worship: the partaking of the sermon and the partaking of the elements are a unit. At the table, we partake of the elements in the context of a sermon that focuses on Christ in a distinct way (a sermon that involves preaching communion remembrances of Christ in a way that is more directly focussed on Christ than how we focus on Him in every “regular” sermon).

### **1D. We hold a reformed view versus Luther and Rome**

However, we do hold to a reformed view of communion over against Luther and Rome (see the sermons on communion from Mat 26). But we also question the Nevin (Mathison) approach to the “real presence” doctrine of Calvin. We think we are more in line with the best of Calvin here versus his confusing language. We align ourselves more with Hodge than Nevin on this point. Surely, that does not make us “non-reformed.” Since most reformed Paedobaptists do not practice Paedocommunion, then we align with the majority of reformed folk on this practice. So, we claim to be more reformed than not regarding communion.

2D. What about the practice of preaching communion remembrances (PCR) every time we have communion?

1E. Many in reformed history had special communion preaching on the day of communion, either in the morning worship sermon or after it in a less lengthy but substantial preaching of communion remembrances, in association, at least with partaking of the elements.

We can see ourselves as part of the unity without unanimity that exists within the history of reformed theology because the core emphasis is on the word and sacrament, even if it is applied in a variety of ways.

2E. T Gordon (Johnny books) argues from the bond of word and sacrament to weekly frequency, but does this do justice to the regulative principle: what does God tell us to do in this regard? Does He command weekly communion? We argue that Gordon's aim is reformed in principle as a logical and biblical extension of this sacrament because communion is the word of God in symbol (an objective gospel sign) that Jesus told us to observe in remembrance of Him. However, if weekly communion is not clearly (not even implicitly) commanded by God for worship, then openness on how often it is observed is the best and reformed way to go.

Moreover, it seems to us that it is fully reformed to say that Jesus calls us to remember Him in a distinct way in observing communion (cf. remember and remember me) and that that involves the Spirit's reminders that covenant heads of the households of faith (pastors of local churches) are to preach. We assert that emphasizing the Spirit's reminders hardly makes us Zwinglian with a bare memorial. PCR is God-centered versus man-centered. The latter involves subjectivism and mysticism in the sacrament, which tend toward being bare memorials in their neglect of the Spirit's reminders through the preached word. PCR combines notions from the second wing (objectivity in the sacraments) with notions from the first wing (BT: pastoral explanations of the Christian and fulfillment Passover) and the third wing (in our defense of the primacy of preaching in the tradition of Calvin regarding exposition book by book).

## **5B. Final assessments**

Perhaps with oversimplification ourselves, we may be inclined to say that there are not three different schools of reformed thought, but healthy discussions of major issues and their implications within the reformed tradition from Calvin to the present. There has been and continues to be unity without uniformity within the tradition that emphasizes the gospel (of the sixty-six books alone) of the sovereign grace of God in the salvation of needy sinners (per the eternal covenant of redemption that underlies all of history) by faith (without works but for works defined by the Law). Regarding the nettlesome theme of the sacraments, we should emphasize the trunk of the tree from which different limbs and branches extend; we must aim for root to fruit consistency.

### **1C. Central reformed beliefs (essential tree trunks)**

What are the trunk truths that are central and give a strong basis for unity? Let me state some in a brief and provisional list. Is there something else to add?

1. Sola scriptura (with open-minded humility as always relevant in all stages of our lives)
2. Salvation by Christ alone
3. Justification by faith alone
4. The pactum salutis

5. The doctrines of grace (the five points of Calvinism; the fifth includes “for law-works”)
6. The identification of covenant children in relation to Abraham’s children
7. The objective nature of the sacraments
8. The regulative principle for church worship: hence, simplicity of worship
9. Expository preaching, book by book, paragraph by paragraph thoughtfully

In *Are Five Points Enough? The Ten Points of Calvinism* (REF, 1980, 197 pp.), Coppes has this list of ten central and defining calvinistic beliefs:

1. Scripture - God’s clear and coherent speech
2. Sovereignty of God - Predestination & Providence
3. Covenantal structure of Scripture
4. Plan of salvation - sovereignly accomplished and applied
5. Worldview perspective - focused in worship and submission
6. Holiness
7. Church government - covenantal
8. Sacraments - covenant of Abraham & Christ; so, infant baptism
9. Evangelism - depravity, repentance, holiness, church life
10. Worship

We get a “better” outline by combining topics that overlap. His ten become the following three points:

1. Scripture
  - Clear, 1
  - Covenantal, 3
2. Sovereignty of God
  - Providence & Predestination, 2
  - Worldview perspective, 5
  - Plan of Salvation, 4
  - Holiness, 6 (perseverance)
  - Evangelism, 9
3. Church: Covenant Community
  - Government, 7
  - Sacraments, 8
  - Worship, 10

What is in his list but missing from our ad hoc list?

We could combine some things on our list too (overlap within a list is for emphasis).

Missing in our list is explicit reference to the sovereignty of God, predestination, and providence. However, the five points express sovereignty in the plan of salvation. Our emphasis on the *pactum salutis* involves us in predestination, providence, and in turn a worldview.

Therefore, the overlap of lists is high (we are more “reformed” than not). We overlap on the objective nature of the sacraments (not mere memorialism). Coppes includes infant baptism as necessary: only then do you have enough to be reformed, but he makes no comment on Paedocommunion and no comment on preaching communion remembrances (PCR) versus regular preaching. Most importantly: he gives nothing substantive on expository preaching whereas, this is a major point for us!

For discussion, consider this question: what is the difference between PCR and regular expository preaching (Christ is central in both)? Hint: characterize the sermon outline in each. Thus, in a regular sermon, the subject of the text is the central focus that prompts the title and the goal of the outline is to show how the text develops that central focus. Of course, ultimately, it all relates to Christ. In a communion sermon, the central focus that prompts the title is Christ and the goal of the outline is to draw remembrances of Christ from the text in each point of the outline.

## **2C. Diverse reformed beliefs (variations in limbs and branches)**

Then what are the limbs that branch out, and about which we need to give mutual respect with mutual study? For now, we can discuss the following five subjects.

### **1D. The relation of works to justification with different emphases**

#### 1) The declarative nature of justification

It applies at the beginning of the Christian life, but also *in the gospel repeatedly and on the Day of Judgment*. How works factor into the picture and how we treat specific texts may differ in significant ways, but with OMH we can all benefit by dialogue, even over old ground.

#### 2) The active obedience of Christ (giving the best turn in charity to Shepherd's views)

a) He is concerned with what Scripture teaches explicitly (but he seems to lose sight of "necessary consequence" or what Scripture teaches implicitly).

b) Yes, he does hold to the imputation of the obedience of Christ in the narrow sense of Romans 5.18-19 in His one act of obedience (but we think more is implicit).

### **2D. The identification of covenant children (at least two ways; our preference)**

#### 1) Not by birth per the Abrahamic covenant: his offspring has HR uniqueness

Under judgement the children of Abraham are still loved, Rom 11.28

Children enter the new Israel by baptism, not per heritage, Lk 3.7-8

#### 2) General sense and specific sense

General sense: all in the household are "within" the covenant community as an unbelieving spouse is sanctified by the believing spouse (1 Cor 7.14); likewise, your children are holy.

Specific sense: by display of the evidences of calling; and by baptism on that basis, children *enter* the new covenant community thus to be identified and counted children of God.

### **3D. Objective nature of the sacraments leads us to two limbs**

#### a) Baptist theology that grants validity to infant baptism

Fundamentally, the point here is to stress God's voice in the gospel sign over man's subjective voice. We relativize the gospel sign when we make the validity of baptism dependent on the genuineness of the candidate's confession. Thus, God spoke in the baptism of an unbeliever (on the basis of a sincere confession that turns out to be untrue) and to avoid relativizing His word in the sign, we ought to grant validity to the baptism and not call for re-baptism. Similarly, God gives His objective word in the baptism of an infant; it is a baptism and need not be repeated, even if we think that the baptism is improper or unnecessary.

#### b) PCR (without paedocommunion and without weekly observance)

In summary, this means that the *goal is to hear the Spirit's reminders of Christ*; to concentrate on these reminders in a distinct way in every communion observance. The texts for preaching may come from any part of Scripture, but the point is to remember Christ in a distinct way. The text selection is not restricted to those that discuss the institution of the sacrament nor to those that unfold His death per se. After all, in showing His death till He comes, we show the

death of the risen, ascended, and exalted Lord who saves us by the entire work on earth that He came to do.

#### **4D. Regulative principle for public worship**

God tells us what to do, it is not that we do what we judge to be permissible.

Basis is the second commandment: God is jealous regarding how we worship Him.

Hence, the principle or rule is that we only do what He prescribes.

There is healthy debate over what God prescribes on the singing of Psalms and the use of instruments. There is room for variety; we conclude that singing hymns is prescribed along with Psalms and that stringed accompaniment is prescribed with nothing else.

Most importantly, preaching is primary. What does this tell us about the other elements, especially singing? They have a secondary place in worship; they are subordinate to the preached word. How does the primacy of preaching humble us? In listening to preaching we bow in submission to God speaking through His ordained but frail instruments.

#### **5D. Expository preaching**

There may be some creative variety, but central is following the argument or line of thought of a book paragraph by paragraph to find (to figure out) the main ideas treated and how they are treated in specific nuances.

Expository preaching calls us all to careful and prayerful work for both preacher and hearer. What are ways to answer the question: who is the audience in public worship? We may think of God as audience to our praises or we may emphasize the fact that we are the audience listening to God speak. How does this involve us *always* in application? This involves us always in application in that a major principle in our walk with God is submission, the submission of our life and all we hope to be to Him.

Again: what is the difference between preaching communion remembrances (PCR) and regular expository preaching? Both 1) exposit Scripture 2) by outlining from the text. The difference is that the focus on Christ in a distinct way governs every point of the outline. We have recent examples of each type of sermon from Luke 6.20-26 (9-5-2010 and 9-12-2010). The title of the regular sermon was “The Cause of the Blessed Person’s Blessings” and the title of the communion sermon was “Remembering the Lord of Beatitude and Woe.” The outline of the regular sermon was: 1A. The marks of a Christian are not the cause (of his blessings) and 2A. The grace of God is the cause of the blessed person’s blessings. For communion, the outline was 1A. Remember Jesus who speaks as our King, 2A. Remember Jesus who speaks as our Teacher, and 3A. Remember Jesus who speaks as our Savior. A goal in both was to derive the outline from the text for exposition and the teaching of Jesus is the basis for both, but, we might say, what Jesus *teaches* is the subject in the regular sermon while *Jesus* is the subject in the communion sermon (speaking as our king, teacher, and savior).

### **Conclusion**

In this context of the root to fruit analogy, Shepherd and the FV not only have a legitimate, but a vital role to fulfill.

Moreover, it should not surprise us to discover that the CREC, that contains many FV thinkers, has elements of all three wings of thought in various mixtures among its member churches (notably including Reformed Baptists). In many ways, we find ourselves aligned with the creative and recasting impulse of the federal visionist arm of the CREC, albeit in a carefully selective way (the key things are cited above). However, we are not close enough to the FV for them to include us with them nor for us to include them with us.

Finally, the open-mindedness of the FV position (as expressed by Wilkins in the introduction to the book, *The Federal Vision*) and the mutuality emphasis of the CREC regarding pastors as brothers in Christ are very appealing emphases. These are good things even if they apply them in ways that trouble many traditionalists of the reformed community. The dialogue that occurs between the “three trends” within reformed thinkers and among Christians generally is healthy in principle and ought to be engaged wholeheartedly since disciples indeed are continually in the process of transcending remnant blindness by the sovereign grace of God.