

5th. The Federal Vision within the Conservative Reformed subculture in the United States

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3A. Application to our history

Perhaps, in challenge to the “three” schools analysis (as partly true but oversimplified), the diet of 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 Frame before he 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; try 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.