

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

Pages 1-2 for discussion 8-1-10

Introduction

A recent study by William Evans of Erskine College, Due West, S.C. gives a helpful overview 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 in relation to 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 in the form 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]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. [Q: is this the teaching of Jn 3.16?]

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