

# THE MVP FINAL REPORT:

## Some Initial Reflections

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**Introduction:** On 1 February 2005, the Mississippi Valley Presbytery (MVP) of the PCA approved a [final report](#) (pdf format) concerning a number of issues of current concern within Reformed circles. As part of that report, the committee prepared a list of seventeen views that the Presbytery judged "to be out of the bounds of acceptable diversity in this presbytery and in the PCA. As such they should not be taught or countenanced as part of the public teaching of the church."

Since this report is the first of its kind within the PCA, it deserves careful attention and scrutiny, as well as further study and consideration of the kinds of issues it raises. Only through a process of conversation and discernment within the church--both within the PCA and within the wider Reformed community--will we be able to make the kinds of judgments that are necessary and, from there, move forward in the work of the Gospel.

Moreover, if this report is to have any official standing in the wider PCA, it will have to be through a process of critical reflection, revision, amendment, and reception.

The question here is, in part, one of theological development within a tradition--some of that development looking back to parts of our heritage and confessional tradition that have been neglected, some of it trying to speak the Reformed faith to a world in which certain historically-conditioned and limited categories are no longer as meaningful, and some of it attempting to grow and develop our tradition in light of fresh insights into aspects of the biblical Gospel.

Theological development always runs dangers as well as presenting new opportunities, and the MVP report is correct to remind us of those dangers and for that we should be thankful. As the church continues to think through the implications of the Gospel and to give new emphasis and shape to aspects of the Reformed faith, we will have to be ever mindful that we do not undermine that rich and valuable heritage, continuing in charity to converse with those who may disagree or have concerns.

But we also must not shrink back from the task to which God has called us as we minister the Gospel to a sinful and broken world. The courage of our theological convictions requires us to confront whatever dangers doctrinal and exegetical developments might pose, and yet to move forward with confidence and charity in our commitment to live and teach whatever we find together in the Scriptures, in consultation with our confessional standards and our Reformed tradition.

In connection with the specific content of the MVP report, I've been thinking through these issues for some time, particularly in the months since the publication of the preliminary MVP committee report, from which this final report emerges. Now that the final version of the report is public, I wish to offer some reflections upon it.

Temperamentally, I am averse to controversy and, several years ago, wouldn't have imagined that some of these matters would lead to the level of dissension and dispute we are currently witnessing within certain sectors of the Reformed world. And I certainly don't want to throw fuel on the flames (from which, sadly, I often get the sense we've seen more smoke than light).

Nevertheless, I have been increasingly pulled into matters, most recently by the MVP preliminary report itself, which included several essays I wrote among its footnotes. Therefore, I feel an increasing obligation to speak to these issues and, at the very least, make my own viewpoints clear. And I hope that the remarks below might go some way towards defusing debate, rather than simply adding another voice to the fracas.

I also want to add that I have not read every possible piece of relevant literature in relation to the issues raised by the report. Still, I have read fairly widely and do think that I am, in general, aware of the sorts of things people are saying within current theological discussion. If, however, I misreport the views of anyone or have overlooked a particular text, then I would be quite open to correction.

Finally, I'll add that the following reflections are very much my own and should not be taken to represent the views and opinions of anyone but me.

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**Analysis:** In what follows I list the seventeen views that the MV Presbytery has judged to be out of bounds, providing some brief commentary on each view and ending with some concluding observations.

*(1) views that assert that "final justification" is a matter of performance not possession, and therefore based in some sense intrinsically rather than being wholly extrinsic*

The use of the phrase "performance not possession" here strikes me as somewhat odd. I assume this is meant as an allusion to Wright's statement that "Justification, at the last, will be on the basis of performance, not possession" (*Romans* 4:40).

In the original context, however, Wright's use of the phrase is intended to express the idea that, in *Romans* 2, "final justification" will not be a matter of having a Jewish identity in virtue of circumcision and Torah ("possession"), but will, instead, involve being a "doer of the law" through faith in Christ ("performance"), whatever one's status might be as a Jew or Gentile.

As Wright understands Paul's use of "doer of the law" in *Romans* 2, those who "do the law" are, in the first instance, those who place their faith in Christ as Savior and Lord, thereby, redefining what "doing the law" really means (following Jesus' statement that "If you believed Moses, you would believe me," *Jn* 5:46). Inasmuch as such faith unites us to Christ and his Spirit, Wright states that for Paul those who trust Christ also go on to live out that faith so that the righteous requirements of Torah begin to be met in them.

Depending how one fills in the relation of faith and of the works of faith to final justification, I have difficulty seeing how any of this is necessarily problematic. After all, on Wright's views, as I understand them, neither faith nor works (as the fruit and evidence of a lively faith) provide the *ground* of justification, which remains exclusively the death and resurrection of Christ. The question then is the respective roles played by faith and the works of faith in relation to final justification.

On this point, however, even if one said that final justification is "on the basis of the works of the faith" or "of a whole life," if by "basis" one intended "*evidentiary* basis" (insofar as works are the fruit and evidence of that faith which receives and rests upon Christ alone for justification), then such a view would seem unproblematic. Unfortunately, while Wright does speak of those works of faith in evidential terms a number of times (e.g., he calls them "effective signs" in his Rutherford House lecture), he is not

always entirely clear on the precise relation between faith, the works of faith, and final justification. One could, then, charge him with at least lack of clarity.

Nevertheless, if we do take "faith in Christ" as the primary sense of Paul's polemical and ironic redefinition of "doing the law"--of which the works of faith are the fruit and evidence--then those who will be justified in the end are those who trust what God has done in Christ (that is, their "performance," in Paul's redefined sense, from which further works flow), rather than resting in their badges of Jewish identity (their "possession").

One might raise an objection here to a reference to faith and/or its fruit and evidence as any kind of "basis" for justification and, I think, rightly so. Such language can be confusing and, if "basis" were taken in any way to denote "ground" (as if our works could in any sense merit pardon of sin or eternal life), such an affirmation would flatly contradict the claim that Christ's righteousness is the exclusive ground of our justification. Evidently then, "basis" must be taken here to refer to what the New Testament terms a judgment "according to works" (Mt 16:27; 2 Cor 5:10; Rev 20:12; 22:12) or what Calvin means when he says that after God "has received us into favor, he receives our works also by a gracious acceptance" (*Commentary* on 2 Cor 5:10; cf. Calvin on John 4:36; *Institutes* 3.14.21).

That it is at least *possible* to deploy Wright's exegetical proposals in these ways should be clear enough even to those who, in the end, would disagree with Wright's exegesis. As a confessional communion, however, the PCA has seldom committed itself to specific exegesis of particular passages, instead permitting exegetical diversity within the theological boundaries set by our confessional standards.

I would also add, that if we were to interpret the MVP report in terms of the *usus loquendi* of the views it seeks to reject, then the report would seem to be suggesting that final justification is a matter of trusting marks of covenant membership ("possession," something "extrinsic") rather than trusting Christ with a living faith ("performance," something "intrinsic").

Nevertheless, we can extend greater hermeneutical charity to the MVP report than it extends to others, and take its intention to be an insistence that the ground of our justification (that is, its "meritorious cause," to use traditional language) is exclusively and wholly the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, rather than anything in us--though, of course, without denying that it is our own faith (which is nonetheless a gift) that is the alone instrument by which we receive and rest upon Christ and that this faith produces works (which, though not themselves instruments of justification, are nonetheless the necessary fruit and evidence of a justifying faith).

If that affirmation is the intent of (1), then one could scarcely disagree and remain Reformed in outlook. Nor do I know of anyone within contemporary Reformed circles who would take issue with what such formulations are seeking to state and safeguard.

*(2) views that assert that new discoveries regarding "Second Temple Judaism" require us to reject or radically modify the Reformers' and our Confession's understanding of the Pauline Gospel*

In the study of Scripture, various exegetical conclusions, emerging from further study and reflection, can often lead us to call into question earlier exegesis. Sometimes this might lead us to call into question previous theological conclusions.

In most cases, however, such theological conclusions are based upon a wide Scriptural basis that doesn't depend upon the exegesis of a single passage or, often enough, even a wide swath of related passages.

We might consider, for instance, the New Testament terminology of "son of God" as that is applied to Jesus. In the midst of the controversy with the Arians, the early church Fathers deployed many of passages that spoke of Jesus as "son of God" in support of the orthodox doctrine of Jesus' full deity in the face of Arian re-readings of those same texts. Subsequently, those texts were often read as straightforward "prooftexts" of Jesus' full deity.

Nevertheless, a careful reading of many of those texts will recognize that the language of "son of God" is picking up on various Old Testament uses of the same terminology, where it is applied to Israel, angels, the Davidic kings, the priests of Israel, the exilic remnant, and so on. Thus, the New Testament, in using that language, is often affirming Jesus' identity as the true Israel, the Messianic king, the faithful remnant, and so on, rather than straightforwardly saying anything about his essential deity.

If, however, we step back from the Scriptures, we can see that humanity was created, in Adam, in the very image of the eternal Son and, therefore, the sonship of Israel, of the Davidic kings, and so forth, always already pointed forward to the Incarnation of the eternal Son of God.

Thus, by recognizing all the Old Testament typological significance of the title of "son of God" we lose nothing of the affirmation of Jesus' deity, nor need we reject or radically modify our understanding of the identity of Jesus. Instead, while we may see the Scriptures from a new and fresh perspective, we nonetheless retain the full affirmation of Jesus' deity, but now with a richer and deeper account of how that functions in Scripture.

This example suggests that we have nothing to fear from what we might learn of "Second Temple Judaism," or whatever other developments might occasion a reconsideration of various biblical texts from a new or fresh perspective. Rather, such a perspective might well prove to deepen our appreciation of the very same Gospel we have known and trusted all along, returning us to the same basic theological conclusions we had always embraced, but now enriched by a fuller and more insightful reading of the biblical text.

And we should be clear here also that considerations of Second Temple Judaism, drawn from extra-biblical texts, need not *determine* our exegesis. Instead, such considerations can become an *occasion* for looking once again at the text of the New Testament itself, with an renewed openness to suspending certain assumptions and prejudgments about just what that text might be saying, in order that we might come to better appreciate the contours of the biblical message itself.

As far as I can see, whatever criticisms some contemporary New Testament scholars might have leveled against the exegesis of the Reformers or the traditions stemming from them, as I read figures such as Dunn and Wright, they have insisted that, in the end, recent scholarship does not cause us to lose anything of Paul's Gospel--or the general contours of traditional Protestant understandings of it. Rather, we stand to gain much in our reading and understanding of its precise shape. Indeed, it is evident that even among those who would situate themselves more critically with regard to these "new perspectives" (Gathercole, Seifrid, etc.), that their own exegesis is profoundly shaped by the kinds of questions such perspectives raise and insights that they offer.

*(3) views that reject or radically modify the Confession's presentation of the Bible's teaching on imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers (including the imputation of Christ's active and passive obedience)*

In this point, as in the prior one, the MVP report speaks in terms of "radically modifying" various views, suggesting that modification that is less than "radical" would, in fact, be permissible.

But this might prove troubling. After all, *who* is to make the determination that a modification qualifies as "radical" or not? By what criteria is such a determination to be made?

The text of the MVP report, of course, does make one suggestion here regarding what kind of modification might be unacceptable, namely one that rejects that both "Christ's active and passive obedience" are imputed to us (presumably in relation to justification, though the report does not say that).

But such a criteria, even if theologically correct, is nevertheless extra-confessional. The criteria that we do already have, and to which our church officers are bound, is the language of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, which reads in part:

Those whom God effectually calleth, he also freely justifieth: not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone...by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them, they receiving and resting on him and his righteousness, by faith... (11.1)

While I have no problem with saying that both Christ's "active" and "passive" obedience are imputed for justification, such an affirmation is not required confessionally-speaking.

Moreover, a study of the history of the *Westminster Confession*, the minutes of the Assembly that produced it, and a comparison with both the *Irish Articles* and the *Savoy Declaration*, will reveal that just such an affirmation of both active and passive obedience was specifically excluded from the *Confession's* teaching on justification in light of the views of those divines who rejected the imputation of active obedience (e.g., Twisse, Vines, Gataker, Lightfoot).

One may disagree with the Assembly's judgment on this matter, as did the French Reformed Synod that censured the views of Piscator. Yet, whatever the insistence on "active obedience" in the wider Reformed tradition, in the words of the MVP report itself, "we do not subscribe to 'the Reformed tradition' generically...we subscribe specifically to the *Confession of Faith*." Therefore, so long as the PCA retains the *Westminster Confession* as our doctrinal standard, we have to either take the document as it stands within historical context or make an official determination regarding how the PCA as whole understands and adopts the *Confession* at this point.

*(4) views which confuse infused and imputed righteousness, or which do not recognize the legitimacy of the important biblical and confessional distinction between faith as "the alone instrument of justification" and yet a faith which is "not alone in the person justified"*

Since this is simply a restatement of standard Reformed teaching, I don't see how anyone within the Reformed tradition or PCA could object to it. As far as I can see, these sorts of distinctions *are* being made.

So, for instance, consider Richard Gaffin's suggestion that

Paul does not view the justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification of the believer as separate, distinct acts but as different facets or aspects of the *one act* of incorporation with the resurrected Christ...the act of being raised with Christ in its constitutive, transforming character is at the same time judicially declarative; that is, the act of being joined to Christ in

conceived of imputatively. (*Resurrection and Redemption* 130-2)

This may not be how the relation between justification, sanctification, and incorporation has always been conceived by all confessional Presbyterians, but that does not entail that it is a confusion of infused and imputed righteousness.

More generally, on the issue of "confusing" infused and imputed righteousness, one might ask what exactly would qualify as a "confusion" so long as the distinction itself is drawn and justification is seen imputatively. Does the report have something particular in mind that would count as a "confusion" that goes beyond either failing to make the distinction at all or ascribing a specific effect to righteousness as infused that is proper to righteousness as imputed?

Apart from such further specifications, I would suggest that on this matter the MVP report itself is liable to cause as much confusion as it seeks to correct.

*(5) views which reject the traditional bi-covenantal theology of the Westminster Confession (that is, views which do not merely take issue with the terminology but reject the essence of the bi-covenantal, covenant of works/covenant of grace framework of God's dealings with humanity)*

I find this statement rather perplexing, since the *Westminster Confession* does not speak in terms of a "bi-covenantal" theology and, in fact, speaks instead--in the singular--of "Of God's *Covenant* with Man" in the title to chapter 7, going on to outline in *WCF* 7.1 those features that are common to all the various administrations of the covenant.

Confessionally speaking, God's covenant with humanity has two administrations (the "covenant of works" and the "covenant of grace"), which are briefly described in *Westminster Confession* 7.2 and 7.3. The primary differences appear to be that the "first covenant" required "perfect and personal obedience" in order for Adam to inherit "life," whereas the "second covenant" requires "faith" in Jesus Christ, by whom "life and salvation" are freely offered.

If the contents of these chapters are taken to capture "the essence" of so-called "bi-covenantal" theology, then that is quite satisfactory and I'm not sure who among current Reformed theologians would disagree, unless perhaps we interpret the *Confession* as saying all that one is permitted to say.

And, while some recent theological reflection on covenant theology (perhaps out of historical shortsightedness or recent neo-Barthian distortions) may misunderstand or misrepresent the teaching of the *Confession* at this point (as some perceive in Norman Shepherd or Meredith Kline), it seems to me that the actual positive theological constructions from most of these theologians do not necessarily blunt the force of what the *Confession* does indeed teach.

Thus, apart from some further specification of what counts as "the essence" of the *Confession's* covenant theology, the statement of the MVP report appears to give us an unusable criteria. After all, by what standard is the affirmation or denial of a particular point of covenant theology to be determined to strike (or not strike) at this unspecified "essence"--particularly if that point does not directly intersect with confessional language and, moreover, given that the MVP report does not seem to think that "taking issue with terminology" in itself strikes at that essence?

*(6) views that undermine the forensic aspect of justification by appeal to the "relational elements" or which suggest that justification is primarily a matter of*

## *ecclesiology and less so soteriology*

Questions of what "undermines" something else are always tricky. And do we want to make theological determinations of error based on what might be perceived to "undermine" some other doctrine, especially when the doctrine purportedly undermined is actually explicitly affirmed?

After all, given what he says in Romans and elsewhere, Paul's Gospel was seen by some of his contemporary critics as undermining the positive role of obedience in the life of the Christian and such purported antinomianism is, indeed, a theological error. But we would not want to thereby reject Paul's Gospel because it might be perceived by some as "undermining" another important truth if, in fact, Paul is affirming that truth as well and even if we might sometimes have difficulty seeing how it all fits together.

Such questions of what "undermines" something else are all the more difficult given that a specific text is always directed to a particular audience. What might sound as if it were "undermining" something else in one context, might well be precisely what needs to be said in another context, if the audience has grown overly-attached to what is being "undermined" or has blown it out of its proper proportions.

Similarly, questions of emphasis and primacy are tricky. If a person affirms a particular doctrine in question, are we then to censure him for not properly giving it primacy or emphasis (assuming he doesn't neglect it altogether)? Since our doctrinal standards don't, in general, provide standards for what is primary or to be emphasized, how are we to make these determinations?

If, for instance, a congregation has a firm grasp on the doctrine of justification in its soteriological dimensions, but, due to divisions and dissensions, has obscured the ecclesiological dimensions of that doctrine, then is a minister of the Gospel in error if he were to preach a sermon that emphasizes what justification means for the life of the church as a justified community of believers? According to some New Testament scholars, this is precisely the sort of thing we see Paul saying to the Galatian Christians who, having already received the Gospel by faith, need to be reminded of its ecclesiological and sociological dimensions.

Moreover, doesn't speaking in abstract terms (apart from specific contexts) of whether justification is "primarily" soteriological or "primarily" ecclesiological assume that the soteriological and ecclesiological dimensions of justification are external to one another?

The God of Scripture is a Trinity of Persons who desire to form a people with whom they might enter into covenant. Salvation, then, involves not only the justification of individuals before the divine court, but also the assembling of a justified humanity before the divine court, who, in their reconciliation with God are also reconciled to one another, thereby manifesting publicly God's forensic verdict. Soteriology is irreducibly ecclesiological and sociological and to suggest otherwise would appear symptomatic of an insufficiently biblical anthropology.

Thus, unless we find ourselves facing outright denials of the forensic character of justification or of the soteriological dimensions of justification, then I'm not sure if we are in a position to make determinations about what counts as "primary" emphasis or improper "undermining." Do matters of emphasis rise to the level of confessional boundaries?

*(7) views that categorically reject "merit" in relation to the atoning work of Christ*

The notion of "merit" is not univocal and might apply to the atoning work of Christ in several ways. While various figures within the wider Reformed community might deny that Christ "merited" salvation vis-a-vis fulfilling a meritorious covenant of works, that does not necessarily deny "merit" in other senses of the term.

After all, while Christ's obedience to the Father resulted in his resurrection and exaltation, one might maintain that these rewards have the nature of gratuitous gifts, premised upon God's freely offered gracious promise to Christ, God's fidelity to his own character and promises, the disproportion between the obedience rendered and the reward given, and Christ's own trust in his Father's promise. Thus Christ would have "merited" nothing with regard to his own reward.

Nevertheless, such a proposal could still allow that Christ's saving work was meritorious in at least two senses. First of all, as the work of a divine Person, having received its reward, the work of Christ is of infinite intrinsic value, a value which has often been described in terms of its "merit." Second, following from this first point, the work of Christ would remain "meritorious" with regard to the saving effects it confers upon the elect, obtaining salvation for all whom he had purposed to grant it.

As far as I can see, not even the formulations of Norman Shepherd, which generally reject "merit" with regard to the administration of the covenants, would necessarily exclude "merit" categorically in these other senses.

*(8) views which deny or undercut the biblical and theological legitimacy of the distinctions between true/nominal believers, the invisible/visible church, and the outward/inward aspects of the covenant of grace*

Here again we have the difficulty that the MVP report not only rules out views that "deny" certain distinctions, but also ones that "undercut" those distinctions. But how are we to determine whether a particular way of making or contextualizing a distinction "undercuts" that distinction or not? What appears to one individual, relative to a particular context, as a matter drawing the distinction properly may appear to another individual, perhaps relative to another context, as blurring or undermining that same distinction.

While I certainly think that all the distinctions listed here may be rightly deployed and, in some contexts, are important ones to make, I'm not familiar with anyone within the Reformed community who has outright denied any of these distinctions, even if there may be disagreement regarding how best to formulate and explicate them.

*(9) views that relate water baptism to regeneration in such a way as to suggest that water baptism (rather than that which it signifies) unites us to Christ*

I'm not entirely clear on what is being said here. Perhaps it is a matter of sacramental causality, as if the water itself somehow contains grace.

But no one within the Reformed community, as far as I am aware, thinks that the application of water in the Triune name simply, in itself, unites anyone to Christ. Rather, baptism unites us to Christ insofar as it offers Christ to us in the promise of the Gospel and is accompanied by the power of the Spirit who applies Christ to us.

Reformed doctrine, furthermore, not only distinguishes between the sign and the thing signified, but also

asserts a sacramental union between them, so that Christ may be truly said to be offered to us in his sacraments and received there by faith.

According to the *Westminster Confession of Faith* "sacraments" are not simply "holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace," but also, in some manner, include the reality signified and sealed. This is because sacraments, most basically, are not just signs and seals, but actions by which the covenant of grace is signed and sealed.

This is explicit in both the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, which define a sacrament as a "holy *ordinance* instituted by Christ in his church" (*WLC* 162; cf. *WSC* 92). Similarly, the Confession speaks of sacraments "rightly used" and being "administered" and "dispensed" (*WCF* 27.3, 4). Thus the basic definition of a sacrament is that of an "ordinance" or sacred action, of which one aspect is the sign and seal.

The other aspect of a sacrament is the thing signified. When the *Larger Catechism* asks "What are the two parts of a sacrament" the answer given is: "The parts of a sacrament are two; the one an outward and sensible sign, used according to Christ's own appointment; the other an inward and spiritual grace thereby signified" (*WLC* 163). Likewise, the *Confession* states that "there is, in every sacrament, a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified" (*WCF* 27.2). The sign and thing signified thus are together "in the sacrament" and constitute the sacrament in their union. Thus, "sacrament" encompasses both aspects.

It is this dual aspect of a sacrament that allows our Standards to speak of sacraments as "effectual means of salvation" (*WLC* 161) by which grace--that is, Christ and benefits of the covenant--are not only "signified," "sealed," and "represented," but also "exhibited," "applied," and "conferred." (see *WCF* 27.1, 3, 5; *WLC* 162, 165, 167, etc.; *WSC* 91, 92). Thus is it Christ himself who is present in his sacraments, by the power of the Spirit, to communicate grace.

This understanding is the common understanding of sacraments among Reformed divines. For instance, Franciscus Junius, the highly regarded late 16th century Reformed scholastic, defines baptism in his *Theses Theologiae* as "a sacred action of God washing those that are his own, inwardly, with the washing of the Spirit, and, outwardly, with the washing of water." Here we see, together, the two sides of the single action that comprises baptism. Junius states that the water and the Spirit are united as "relatives." He gives the following analogy:

...as a man in human actions produces, with his soul and his body, both the inward and the outward action in one and the same operation--in which the soul is said to be the form of the body--so also, in a manner of speaking, his inward action is the form and his external action is the material part of the action. Even so, after the same manner, God performs, by his Spirit and by water, both an internal and an external action in one and the same operation, in which the inward washing by the Spirit is the formal part and the external washing with water is the material part of his action.

I don't wish to belabor the point, so I'll allow these quotations to suffice, which are fairly typical across a wide range of Reformed theology from the period leading up to and informing the writing of the Westminster Standards.

*(10) views that suggest that justification in the NT always contemplates faith and the works of faith, or that deny that faith is uniquely receptive in the act of justification*

I am not at all clear just what the first part of this statement means. I suspect the MVP report is trying to reject views of the New Testament that see every mention of "faith" in connection with justification as embracing both faith and the works of faith ("faith" in the sense of "faithfulness" perhaps). If so, such a view is legitimately open to criticism, but I'm not aware of any exegete who takes every instance of "faith" in relation to justification as embracing "faithfulness" in the sense of the works of obedience that flow from faith.

With regard to the second part of this statement, *of course* faith is uniquely receptive in the act of justification. And it is faith *qua* receptive that justifies, not faith *qua* working nor faith *qua* evangelical obedience.

I'm not sure who this is directed against since, as far as I can see, no one among contemporary Reformed theologians would disagree with it. Even Norman Shepherd, in his "The Grace of the Justification," writes, "Faith alone justifies – that is Paul's doctrine. Faith looks neither to itself nor to its own working for justification. Faith lays hold of Jesus Christ and his righteousness and the righteousness of Jesus Christ is imputed to the one who believes. This is the distinctive function of faith in justification, which it shares with no other grace or virtue."

*(11) views that understand a believer's "final justification" to be a justifying verdict that embraces the believer's covenantal obedience [and not a merely public declaration of the justification declared at the outset of the believer's Christian experience]*

I'm not sure what it would mean for a verdict to "embrace" something, particularly since the notion of "embrace" is equivocal at best, open to construal as "grounds," "instrumental means," "consequent condition," "necessary evidence," and so on.

Final justification is, of course, a "public declaration of the justification declared at the outset of the believer's Christian experience." Since justification is a status before the divine court, final justification could not be anything other than the declaration of that same status believers possess upon first believing and in which they afterwards remain.

If by denying that the final verdict "embraces the believer's covenant obedience" the MVP report means to deny that final justification will be grounded upon the inherent righteousness of believers in themselves, then I can only concur and state that, as far as I am aware, everyone within the Reformed tradition agrees that the death and resurrection of Christ remains the exclusive ground of our justification.

If, on the other hand, the MVP report means to deny that "the believer's covenant obedience" has *any* role in final justification whatsoever--even as the fruit and evidence of a lively faith--then I would think the report runs afoul of both Scripture and the Reformed tradition.

The *Westminster Larger Catechism*, after all, explains the day of judgment in terms of believers being "openly acknowledged and acquitted" (Q&A 90), a judgment that the *Confession* describes in terms of all men receiving "according to what they have done in the body, whether good or evil" (33.1). Thus, it appears to me that we are confessionally bound to say that final judgment will be in accordance with those works we have done in the body.

Naturally, it is also the case that we "cannot by our best works merit pardon of sin, or eternal life at the hand of God" since those works, insofar as they proceed from us, remain "mixed with so much weakness

and imperfection, that they cannot endure the severity of God's judgment" (*WCF* 16.5). Nevertheless, those very same works, insofar as they are the works of faith and proceed from God's Spirit, are nonetheless good.

Since, therefore, believers are "accepted through Christ, their good works also are accepted in him" and God, "looking upon them in his Son, is pleased to accept and reward that which is sincere, although accompanied with many weaknesses and imperfections" (*WCF* 16.6). In this sense, then, "good works, done in obedience to God's commandments, are the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith" so that believers "having their fruit unto holiness, they may have the end, eternal life" (*WCF* 16.2).

It is within this context that--if we are to be faithful to Scripture and to our confessional standards--we can and must affirm that good works, as the fruit and evidence of a lively faith, will be the evidence according to which we are openly acknowledged and acquitted on the last day.

Thus Robert L. Dabney correctly writes, "There will be a declaration of the sentence of justification passed when each believer believed, which God will publish to His assembled creatures, for His declarative glory, and for their instruction. See Mal. 3:17, 18. This last declarative justification will be grounded on believers' works, (Matt. 25:), and not on their faith, necessarily" (*Systematic Theology*, Chapter 23, Section 12). As Dabney understands this, works have a role here "because [final justification] will be addressed to the fellow creatures of the saints, who cannot read the heart, and can only know the existence of faith by the fruits."

Whether Dabney is correct in the rationale for the role of works in final justification, he willingly accepts the evident biblical teaching that final justification will, in fact, embrace the believer's covenantal obedience in some respect.

*(12) views that entail multiple instruments in justification (whether the terminology of "instrument" is used or not)*

There seems to be an equivocation on "instrument" here.

On the part of the creature, of course, faith is the sole instrumental cause of justification since only faith looks to Christ in the promises of the Gospel and receives him there.

On the part of God, however, the Reformed tradition has often spoken of other "instruments" of justification and salvation, whether the preaching of the Word or the administration of the sacraments. As the Puritan Thomas Taylor writes regarding baptism, "in its right use, it gives and exhibits Christ and all his merits to the fit receiver. Then God's grace puts itself forth, and after a sort conveys itself, by this *instrument*, into the heart of the worthy receiver."

When we speak of the Word and sacraments, however, as "instruments" we are clearly not saying they are instruments in the same sense as faith in its office as the "instrumental cause" of justification.

Thus there needs to be a distinction between the notion of an instrument as that involves our apprehension of Christ in the Gospel (in the "Godward" direction, which is faith alone) and as that involves God's addressing of us (in the "manward" direction).

But, perhaps, the MVP report is here aimed against those who would make "repentance" and "the works of faith" necessary conditions in relation to justification. But the notion of a "condition" is not the same as that of an "instrument." Thus, the sole instrumentality of faith is not necessarily threatened by

granting other saving graces some conditionality with regard to justification.

"Conditionality" itself, after all, is not a univocal concept, and, depending on context, could refer to conditions that are antecedent, consequent, efficient, and so on. Thus Turretin writes, "Works can be considered in three ways: either with reference to justification or sanctification or glorification. They are related to justification not antecedently, efficiently and meritoriously, but consequently and declaratively" (*Institutes* 17.3.14).

Therefore, insofar as one maintains that, for instance, good works are a consequent and declarative condition for justification (as the fruit and evidence of a living faith), there is nothing in such an affirmation that would endanger the sole *instrumentality* of faith for justification. Faith's conditionality as an instrument is distinct from other kinds of conditionality.

While it is perhaps the case that not all Reformed writers have made such distinctions as carefully as they ought, unless we can reasonably construe those authors as denying the applicability and rightness of such distinctions, I would think it is uncharitable to take them to suggest such a denial.

*(13) views which posit the false antithesis of reading Scripture through the "lens of the covenant" rather than the "lens of the decree"*

As I understand the use of this language in various authors, there is no antithesis between the "lens of the covenant" and the "lens of the decree" and, as I understand it, the denial of just such an antithesis is the point addressed by the use of this language.

While the language of "covenant" and "decree" is perhaps used in several incommensurate ways, some authors appear to use it to express the idea that the God's eternal decree, as that pertains to specific individuals within the historical unfolding of that decree, is only known and revealed through the "lens of the covenant." This is a function of the distinction between the Creator and the creature since, as creatures, we can never know the purposes and counsel of God as God himself knows them, but only as they are revealed to us.

Of course, Scripture teaches us that God is sovereign and unconditionally elects some to salvation, while passing over others. That fundamental truth is not at issue; were it otherwise, the terminology of the "lens of the decree" would not be in play at all.

Rather, the question is how we--each of us as Christians--are assured of our own election and how that should shape pastoral practice. Election is something made known to us through the covenant promise of God, by which Christ is freely offered to sinners, if only they receive him by faith.

Thus the *Westminster Confession* defines the covenant of grace as that covenant "wherein [God] freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved" (7.3). It is in response to that covenant offer, by faith, that one may have assurance of one's election, as the *Confession* says, "men, attending the will of God revealed in his Word, and yielding obedience thereunto, may, from the certainty of their effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election" (5.8).

*(14) views which cannot sustain the difference between the saving and common operations of the Spirit*

Certainly such differences must be sustained in accordance with Scripture, the teachings of the Synod of

Dort, *Westminster Confession* 10.4, and the wider Reformed tradition. As a matter of theological reflection upon election, effectual calling, and so on, there must be a distinction between God's saving work in the elect and the Spirit's work in the church that is common to both the elect and the non-elect, between "temporizers" and "true believers," as was often said in the 17th century.

Nevertheless, might we not disagree with regard to what way of speaking and preaching best sustains and explicates those differences, whether exegetically, theologically, or pastorally, in accordance with the free offer of the Gospel?

While we must never nourish presumption among our church members, allowing them to rest in the common operations of the Spirit apart from a saving faith, such distinctions should also never be deployed in ways that undercut the faith of those tender consciences who sincerely believe the Gospel, but struggle with assurance. Such pastoral concerns, arising against the backdrop of differing past experiences are in large part, I think, what lie behind the various ways in which the distinction is drawn and applied within Reformed churches.

I suspect the target that the MVP report has in mind here is the [AAPC Summary Statement](#), particularly when it states, "The Bible does not explain the distinction between the nature of the work of the Spirit in the reprobate and the nature of His work in the elect, and even uses the same language for both" (point 10). Of course, at this particular juncture, the distinction is not denied, but affirmed, though the Statement suggests that even if the distinction is affirmed in Scripture, it is not explained.

More problematic, perhaps, is the first footnote in the AAPC Statement, which says, in part:

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... The question raised does not concern the nature of the grace received in the past (i.e., real regeneration vs. merely common operations of the Spirit), but whether or not the one who has received this grace will persevere. 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.

Now, I personally would not have worded things in this way and cannot defend every turn of phrase here. Nevertheless, it does not look to me as if the footnote is denying that there is a distinction between the saving work of the Spirit and the Spirit's "common operations." Rather, it is stating that, even if we might, in some contexts, rightly draw such a distinction, that distinction is not operative in Hebrews 6.

It also seems to me that the AAPC Statement at this point is speaking in terms of phenomenology and psychology, rather than the precise nature of the Spirit's differing operations. Thus it aims at epistemological and psychological distinctions regarded synchronically. In those terms, from the standpoint of initial experience, grace is undifferentiated. Considered theologically, ontologically, or diachronically, however, such distinctions may well still be necessary, as its affirmation elsewhere of such a distinction would intimate.

*(15) views of sacramental efficacy that speak of the salvific effects of baptism and the Lord's supper, but fail to maintain adequately the crucial distinction between the sign and the thing signified*

Again, we face the question of what it is to "maintain adequately" a particular distinction. What are the criteria of adequate maintenance? How are we to tell when such a distinction is not adequately maintained?

Certainly a complete denial of such a distinction would be problematic, as I would readily concur.

But the MVP report seems to imply that the view they have in mind is one in which baptism and the Lord's Supper are seen as indiscriminately and efficaciously salvific for any and all who receive would be problematic. One could, nevertheless, hold such a position and still maintain a distinction between sign and thing signified, for instance, by adopting an occasionalist view of sacramental causality.

While I suspect that no one within Reformed circles holds to such a view of sacramental causality in connection with such extraordinarily strong views of efficacy, the logical possibility of such a theological configuration suggests that the MVP report is confusing two matters which are distinct: the extent of sacramental efficacy ("salvific effects") and the nature of sacramental causality ("sign and thing signified").

*(16) views that suggest that water baptism conveys all the benefits of union with Christ, except for the "gift of perseverance" and final salvation*

I would concur. For those who receive the sacrament of baptism rightly, trusting Christ as he is offered to us in the sacrament, water baptism, in its ongoing efficacy, with the Word and by the Spirit, *also* conveys the gifts of perseverance and final salvation along with all other benefits, inasmuch as we are baptized into the resurrection of Christ and therefore anticipate that final salvation in the present.

Whatever benefits baptism may bestow upon those who do not receive the sacrament rightly (that is, with a true and persevering faith), those benefits can be, at the most, only regarded as analogical and not univocal with whatever benefits enjoyed by those who receive the sacrament rightly. Thus the Reformed tradition has sometimes spoken of all the baptized being, for instance, cleansed from sin "conditionally and sacramentally," while only those who truly believe are cleansed "absolutely." Turretin, for instance, makes such a distinction in his *Institutes* 17.1.22, interpreting 2 Peter 1:9 in terms of it when it speaks of the apostate who "was cleansed from his former sins."

Nonetheless, I suspect the target the MVP report has in mind here is, again, the AAPC Summary Statement. But that Statement nowhere says, as far as I can see, that "water baptism conveys all the benefits of union with Christ, except for the 'gift of perseverance' and final salvation."

What it does say is: "By baptism one is joined to Christ's body, united to Him covenantally, and given all the blessings and benefits of His work (Gal. 3:27; Rom. 6:1ff; WSC #94). This does not, however, grant to the baptised final salvation."

When the MVP report speaks of baptism "conveying" benefits, I'm not sure they mean the same thing as what the AAPC Statement means when it speaks of baptism "giving" benefits. Reformed theology has often distinguished between Christ and all his benefits being "offered," "presented," or even "given" in the sacraments and those who receive the sacraments actually "receiving" and "possessing" through faith the benefits and blessings offered therein.

Thus, Calvin insists that "the efficacy of the sacraments does not depend upon the worthiness of men, and that nothing is taken away from the promises of God, or falls to the ground, through the wickedness of men" (*Commentary* on 1 Corinthians 11:27). And so, he says, "Christ's body is *presented* to the wicked no less than to the good" so that unbelief does nothing to "impair to alter anything as to the

nature of the sacrament." In the *Institutes* Calvin similarly says that "the flesh and blood of Christ are no less truly *given* to the unworthy than to God's elect believers" but that unbelievers reject the proffered gift (4.17.33).

The AAPC Statement, however, is perfectly consistent with final salvation being "offered" or "given" but not being "received" in such way that would grant final salvation. Otherwise, the statement would be flatly contradictory since "all blessings and benefits" would have to include "final salvation" since surely that is the chief blessing and benefit of Christ's work.

Regarding Saul the AAPC Statement says, "he did not receive the gift of perseverance." But the language here is that of "receiving," not being "given" or "offered."

Most problematically, the AAPC Statement also says, "In some sense, [the baptized] were really joined to the elect people, really sanctified by Christ's blood, really recipients of new life given by the Holy Spirit. God, however, withholds from them the gift of perseverance, and all is lost." Now this might seem to run in the opposite direction of what the previous statements say.

*Prima facie*, the Statement seems to be saying that the baptized were not merely offered, presented, or given certain blessings and benefits, but were made actual recipients and possessors, yet then God does not offer or give perseverance, but withholds it. On the other hand, one might gloss this statement by saying that the "sense" in which the baptized were "recipients" is that they were truly offered and given these blessings and benefits, but that God "withholds" perseverance, not in terms of its offer, but in terms its reception and, thereby, the efficiency of grace.

On these various points I would readily affirm that the AAPC Statement is poorly written, lacking in clarity, and fails to make distinctions that would be helpful. In this regard, however, as we have seen, we might make a similar appraisal of the MVP report itself (and perhaps even these present reflections). One suspects that both documents were written under considerable pressure and constraints without the necessary time for reflection, discussion, and revision, which would have made for more solid and useful texts.

### *(17) views which undermine the doctrine of the imputation of Adam's sin or which call into question the doctrine of individual regeneration*

While I am aware that James B. Jordan (in an admittedly "tentative exploration") has questioned certain popular versions of "individual regeneration," it is not clear that other persons (particularly within the PCA) follow him in that questioning, nor is it evident that his questioning necessarily excludes understandings of individual regeneration that do not assert, in his words, that "some people receive incorruptible new hearts," that is, hearts that receive a change that is, in itself, inherently "permanent" or indefectible.

Even the Synod of Dort does not define regeneration in quite that sense, if by "incorruptible new hearts" we mean a change in the believer that is, by its very nature, indefectible in itself. Under the "Fifth Head of Doctrine," regarding perseverance, Dort states that "those who have been converted could not remain standing in this grace if left to their own resources" (Article 3). And in Article 8, Dort teaches that "it is not by their own merits or strength but by God's undeserved mercy that [the regenerate] neither forfeit faith and grace totally nor remain in their downfalls to the end and are lost. With respect to themselves this not only easily could happen, but also undoubtedly would happen." This teaching is reaffirmed by *Westminster Confession* 17.2.

In that light, questioning versions of individual regeneration that posit an inherently indefectable ontological change within the believer not only fails to run afoul of classically Reformed doctrine and our *Confession*, but rather may well help us to uphold what our Calvinist forebears intended.

As for the imputation of Adam's sin, I cannot see that any Reformed person has denied that crucial teaching. The MVP report, in its précis on the so-called "Federal Vision" (or "Auburn Avenue Theology"), cites some observations made by Peter Leithart, but it appears to me that a careful reading of Leithart's full comments (or even the excerpts that appear in the footnotes to the report) will demonstrate that Leithart is seeking to confirm and defend the imputation of Adam's sin, not to undermine it.

Once again, then, there are difficulties here regarding what it might mean to "undermine" or "call into question" various views. The MVP report rightly rejects any views that would outright deny the imputation of Adam's sin or individual regeneration, but it is unclear just what kind of teaching would count as "undermining" and "calling into question" those doctrines if they are otherwise affirmed in accordance with our confessional standards. Apart from further clarification, then, I'm not certain how the report can function usefully in defending Reformed orthodoxy.

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**Conclusion:** The analysis and reflections above are, of course, only a preliminary and initial response on the part of one individual. I hope that, in some way, they can contribute to the larger process of biblical discernment, theological development, and confessional application as that is occurring within the PCA and other Reformed denominations.

The MVP report has indeed provided what they intended--"a good and helpful start"--insofar as it has raised a number of important issues and questions. Moreover, I am heartened to see that the MVP report "is not intended to be the final word on the matter." Some of the questions I have raised about the MVP report, if at all on track, would suggest that more time, wider input, and greater care and precision will benefit any future studies and reports so that, as the MVP report says, "things will be clarified and put out of question."

One issue that strikes me in the midst of all these various conversations and disputes is that there is really little or no forum for ongoing theological discussion within the PCA. Other than theological conferences and online discussions, where is there a place within the PCA for pastors, theologians, and exegetes to raise issues, to think out loud, and to engage in ongoing development of our theological tradition?

Certainly the MVP is right to raise concerns and misgivings, but it is startling, I think, how little real interaction and conversation has transpired prior to the issuing of this report. Rather, it seems to me, that matters have moved quickly towards an atmosphere of distrust and suspicion, circumventing any spirit of discussion and charitable interaction among persons who all, in good faith, remain within and are committed to the Reformed tradition, the Gospel of grace, and ministering to Christ's people.

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