

1 Report of the Missouri Presbytery *ad hoc* Committee on Federal Vision Theology

2
3 **Introduction**

4 At the stated meeting on July 20, 2004, Missouri Presbytery (MOP) formed a study
5 committee to address some theological questions that had arisen out of discussions regarding
6 new trends in theology as well as out of the process of examining candidates for membership in
7 the Presbytery. The motion stated:

8
9 **0407-29 MOVED, SECONDED AND PASSED** to form a study committee to address and establish
10 the parameters of orthodoxy with reference to the following issues: the federalist vision, the
11 new perspective, new thinking on the sacraments, and any other related issues deemed
12 germane by the committee.
13

14 After some months of organizing and planning, the committee met on November 16, 2004,
15 and stated that the goal was to create a document that would be approved by MOP explaining the
16 Presbytery's understanding of these issues in the light of Scripture and the Westminster
17 Standards. The implications of these views would be expressed primarily through a series of
18 affirmations and denials that would help presbyters understand what is theologically acceptable
19 for the purity and progress of the church. The document would also serve as a resource to the
20 Candidates and Credentials Committee as they examine those men seeking membership in MOP.

21 The study committee was divided into 3 subcommittees in order to study a variety of topics
22 including the nature of the covenant, justification, union with Christ, and the sacraments. The
23 report would attempt to examine these topics in the following ways:

- 24 • Provide an overview of the issue; from the perspective of Scripture and the
25 Westminster Standards;
- 26 • Provide a precise definition of terms, particularly those terms used in the affirmations
27 and denials;
- 28 • Provide a list of affirmations and denials that flow out of the teaching of Scripture
29 and the Standards;
- 30 • Provide suggested questions that the Candidates and Credentials Committee could use
31 when examining candidates for transfer, licensure, and/or ordination.
32

33 In broad terms, the issues under study (here referred to as "Federal Vision Theology") touch
34 on the corporate nature of salvation as compared to the individual nature of salvation. Proponents
35 of "Federal Vision (FV) Theology" do not necessarily deny the personal aspects of salvation, but
36 rather point out that some of the emphasis on the individual seen in contemporary evangelicalism
37 is more a product of Western culture than biblical exegesis. Consequently, they seek to bring
38 what they believe is biblical correction to misunderstandings in contemporary expressions of
39 Evangelical and Reformed Faith. They earnestly desire to steer the church, and particularly the
40 Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), toward greater fidelity in biblical belief and practice.
41 Opponents argue that such "reformulations" (or "new perspectives") go too far and will bring
42 division in the church as they appear to inject new meaning into the language of the Westminster
43 Standards. Genuine pastoral concern moves them to resist what they believe is an overemphasis
44 on the corporate nature of salvation. We believe that the emphasis on the corporate nature of
45 salvation is important in view of the truncated understanding found in contemporary
46 evangelicalism. However, any emphasis on the corporate nature should not exclude the
47 individual application of salvation or an individual's vital, intimate relationship with Christ.

1 The members of the study committee recognize that some of the current tension in the PCA
2 is connected to the tension between biblical theology and systematic theology. We affirm that
3 biblical theology done within the church and in its confessional heritage, under the structure of
4 *sola scriptura*, is no threat to systematic theology, but rather is the proper watchman over a
5 systematic understanding of biblical doctrine. We further affirm the priority of exegesis over all
6 theological reflection.

7 Committee members further recognize that we are heirs of a theological tradition that has
8 come to use words in precise ways – words such as "justification," "election," and
9 "regeneration." This precision reflects the need we have in our particular context to define,
10 prescribe, and defend theological constructs. We are far from claiming, however, that biblical
11 passages that use the equivalent Hebrew and Greek words are *necessarily* speaking to the same
12 topics as our theological conventions, or that they are speaking with the same level of precision
13 (since these passages may be addressing other needs in their audience than those for which
14 theological language is best suited). For example, a passage that mentions "the elect people of
15 God" need not be saying that God has appointed each member of that people for everlasting life.
16 For this reason we have labored to define the theological terms we have used. In light of our
17 common commitment to "sincerely receive and adopt the *Confession of Faith* and the
18 *Catechisms* of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures,"
19 we have aimed to let the definitions assumed in the Westminster Standards govern our usage.

20 Two cautions arise from this: First, we recognize that we must not confuse our *doctrine* of,
21 say, election, with the lexical semantics of Hebrew and Greek words. Second, we must be
22 careful when reading the Bible, not to read our theological definitions back into every use of the
23 relevant biblical words.

24 This report is the fruit of extended reflection on and discussion of the issues surrounding the
25 topic of "Federal Vision Theology." Although much work has gone into it, the report is not
26 necessarily the best or final word on the issue but is intended to be an instructional tool and guide
27 for the members of Missouri Presbytery and its committees. The members of this committee
28 hope that presbyters and church members will see the report as an attempt to affirm the truth of
29 Scripture as presented in the Westminster Standards, particularly as it touches on the areas of
30 debate regarding FV Theology. The "Overview" of each section is designed to present the broad
31 concerns of the particular topic. The foundational principles and definitions presented in this
32 overview should shape the reader's understanding of the affirmations and denials that follow.
33 The affirmations and denials are the key part of the report and should be read and interpreted in
34 relation to each other rather than as independent statements. These statements are intended to
35 "set the fences" on the diversity of opinion within the presbytery. If a presbyter finds himself at
36 odds with one of the affirmation/denial statements, he should inform the rest of the body through
37 the Candidates and Credentials Committee. That committee will discuss the issue with the
38 presbyter and determine if further action is appropriate. The section on "Suggested Questions for
39 Examinations" is intended to be a guide for the committee as it explores the views of a presbyter
40 or candidate. The members of the committee are free to use discernment as to which (if any)
41 questions should be asked to determine whether the man's views are in accord with Scripture and
42 the Westminster Standards. This report is not intended to be, nor should it serve as, a subordinate
43 standard; rather, it is a tool to help the Presbytery define acceptable interpretations of the
44 meaning of Scripture (our primary standard) and the Westminster Standards (our subordinate
45 standards). The members of this ad hoc committee earnestly desire that God will use this report
46 to further the peace and purity of Missouri Presbytery and the PCA.

1 I. The Nature of the Covenant and Election

2 3 Overview

4
5 Our understanding of “covenant” is shaped both by Scripture and the Westminster
6 Confession, especially WCF 7 and 19:1, 6, as well as WLC 20, 22, 30-36, 57, 79, 97, 162, 166.
7 We appreciate and affirm the richness of interpretation regarding the biblical language of
8 “covenant.” In particular, we recognize that doing justice to the number of contexts in which
9 “covenant” appears as well as offering a single biblical understanding of the word is challenging.
10 Biblical studies from a past generation that compare biblical covenants to ancient Near Eastern
11 suzerainty treaties, for example, have helpfully clarified some aspects of how biblical covenants
12 function. And yet, we fear that those who read “covenant” solely through these lenses might
13 unwittingly shift the real biblical thrust of the covenant idea.

14 In a similar manner, it is clear that there is a great deal of confusion concerning to what the
15 Westminster Standards might commit us when it comes to understanding “covenant.”
16 Confessionally speaking, the word "covenant" is used in a number of combinations:

- 17 • God relates to humankind "by way of covenant" (WCF 7.1).
- 18 • God is also presented as "a God in covenant, as with Israel of old, so with all His people"
19 (WLC 101).
- 20 • The "first covenant" was a "covenant of works" (WCF 7.2) but is also called a "covenant of
21 life" (WLC 20).
- 22 • The Lord made a second covenant "commonly called the covenant of grace" (WCF 7.3).
- 23 • The sacraments are said to represent, seal, and apply Christ and "the benefits of the new
24 covenant" to believers (WSC 92).
- 25 • Baptism is not to be administered to those outside the visible church and "so strangers from
26 the covenant of promise" (WLC 166).
- 27 • During the Lord's Supper, individuals are to be engaged in the "renewing of their covenant
28 with God" (WLC 174).

29 As a result, we affirm as well the variety of interpretation of the Westminster Standards when
30 it comes to the nature of the covenant. On the issue of the “covenant of works,” for example, we
31 believe that those who read the Standards as emphasizing an adamic meritocracy and those who
32 read them as emphasizing the gracious foundation of all God's covenant dealings with humanity
33 can both claim confessional integrity and historical precedent in the Westminster tradition.
34 Neither of these views does violence to the Standards given their lack of precision regarding
35 Adam's covenant relationship to God. This variety of interpretation of both Scripture and the
36 Standards make offering any definition of “covenant” hazardous. And yet, we would affirm that
37 a definition includes understanding the word “covenant” to mean biblically: *a covenant is a*
38 *committed relationship typified by mutual loyalty and obligation.*

39 Another contested word in these discussions is the word “election.” In particular, the
40 theological question has been the relationship that “covenant” and “election” bear to one another.
41 In some readings, understandings of “covenant” have forced “election” to be redefined in order
42 to fit biblical and/or theological propositions. Our usage follows that of the Westminster
43 Confession where "election" refers to those God has chosen in Christ and are predestined unto
44 eternal life (WCF 3.5).

Affirmations and Denials

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2
3 1. We affirm that by an act of gracious condescension, God bound Himself to His creation, and
4 through His covenant representative bound Himself to His creation by way of covenant.
5
- 6 2. We affirm that a covenant, generally speaking, is a committed relationship typified by mutual
7 loyalty and obligation (stipulations and sanctions). We further affirm that when we are
8 speaking of God's covenant with His people, God is always the initiator of the covenant,
9 sovereignly calling the relationship into being, freely committing Himself to His covenant
10 partner, and calling each member of the covenant to respond with faith and love.
11
- 12 3. We affirm that while God takes the initiative in all His covenant dealings with human beings,
13 He also grants grace for the required human responses of faith and obedience, to those whom
14 He has chosen to save.
15
- 16 4. We affirm that Adam mediated the first covenant in the original integrity of the creation
17 order. We further affirm that having created Adam in and for covenant blessing, God called
18 Adam to loyalty and fruitfulness: so long as Adam walked with God in love and obedience,
19 God promised to bless him, his posterity, and the entire earthly creation, but should Adam
20 fail to obey God's word, he would bring frustration into the creation, and would subject
21 himself and his posterity to the enslaving power of sin and the reign of death. We deny that
22 God's creational intention was for Adam to mature, eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good
23 and Evil, die, and be raised from the dead; and further deny that Adam's sin was only seizing
24 the fruit of the Tree prematurely; and thus deny that death coming upon Adam and his
25 posterity was part of God's creation purposes instead of a threatened response to human
26 disobedience.
27
- 28 5. We affirm that when Adam disobeyed God's word and brought himself, his posterity, and the
29 earth over which he had exercised dominion, under the curse of the covenant, God was
30 merciful and initiated a second covenant for the purpose of bringing His redemptive grace to
31 the chosen sons and daughters of Adam, delivering them and the world from the reign of sin
32 and death, and calling them into covenant friendship, loyalty, and service with Himself. We
33 deny that those who are true participants in this second covenant by means of justifying faith,
34 who are called and who have received the promised inheritance, can break this covenant
35 (Heb. 9:15).
36
- 37 6. We affirm that Jesus Christ, the eternal Son, is the mediator of the covenant of God's
38 gracious redemption. Those whom the Father gives to the Son through His electing love in
39 the covenant of grace will know the blessings of life and fruitful service into all eternity.
40 Believing that God has elected in Christ to salvation all those who will be saved and that God
41 has also foreordained all the means thereunto, we deny that the elect can lose their election
42 (WCF 3.5-6). And because God's decree to save is immutable, Christ's merit and
43 intercession is efficacious, and the Spirit continues to abide upon all those whom God has
44 effectually called, we further deny that perseverance ultimately depends upon human effort
45 or striving (WCF 17.2).
46

- 1 7. We affirm that the covenant of grace was administered differently under the “old covenant”
 2 (the law) than it is under the “new covenant” (the gospel; cf. WCF 7:6). We affirm that, in
 3 promising and foresignifying Christ, the Mosaic Law (including all aspects of that economy)
 4 was an efficacious revelation of the covenant of grace for its time. We additionally affirm
 5 that as an expansion of God's covenant promises and provisions within the Abrahamic
 6 covenant, the law instructed and built up the people of God in their hope of the Messiah and
 7 their mission in the world. We finally affirm that with the coming of Christ and the
 8 institution of the new covenant, the preparatory function of the old covenant was rendered
 9 obsolete.
- 10
- 11 8. We affirm that all those baptized into the covenant community receive certain covenant
 12 blessings, whether elect or not, and that these blessings include the regular preaching of
 13 God’s Word; the watchful care, pastoral oversight, instruction and government of the
 14 Church; the nurture of believing parents; and the regular call to place their faith in Christ
 15 (WLC 63; WLC 166; BCO 56-1). Believing that one is inseparably united to Christ by
 16 his/her faith alone, we deny that the ritual act of baptism apart from faith unites us to Christ.
 17 Further, since God alone sees what is invisible to us, we deny that the whole visible church is
 18 united to Christ by virtue of the ritual act of baptism (WLC 61).

19 Suggested Questions for Examinations

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- 21
- 22 1. From Scripture and the Westminster Standards, how do you speak about Adam’s covenantal
 23 relationship with God? What are the significance and implications of this relationship?
 24
- 25 2. From Scripture and the Westminster Standards, does God’s covenantal relationship with
 26 Adam include all people? Explain what implications might result from your answer.
 27
- 28 3. From Scripture and the Westminster Standards, how would you compare and contrast Adam
 29 and Christ as covenant mediators?
 30
- 31 4. From Scripture and the Westminster Standards, how would you describe the relationship
 32 between God’s electing decree and his covenant with human beings?
 33
- 34 5. From Scripture and the Westminster Standards, what is “new” about the New Covenant?
 35
 36

37 **II. Justification**

38 Overview

39

40

41 The Westminster Standards define and describe the doctrine of justification in WCF 11,
 42 WLC 70-73, 77 and WSC 33. The affirmations and denials below intend to affirm this doctrine
 43 of justification, including the definition of justification as an “act of God’s free grace, wherein he
 44 pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight only for the righteousness of
 45 Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.” This definition summarizes what Scripture

1 clearly teaches about justification in such passages as Acts 13:38-39; Romans 3:21-5:21; 2
2 Corinthians 5:17-21; Galatians 3:1-29; and Philippians 3:3-11.

3 This doctrine has been one of the hallmarks of the Reformation and of the reformed tradition;
4 and it is a key to any right system of faith. At the same time, we recognize that the Greek (and
5 Hebrew) terminology which can be translated “justify” has a semantic range in the Old and New
6 Testaments broader than the specific idea of God’s pardoning sinners by the imputation of
7 Christ’s righteousness. Words from the biblical *dikaio-* group can be used in human interactions
8 describing both judicial and non-judicial actions and declarations; and they can even have a
9 negative connotation, expressing attempts at self-vindication. However, when employed in
10 discussing God’s work in saving his elect forever via the imputation of Christ’s righteousness,
11 this terminology takes on a more specific theological meaning. One can thus distinguish the
12 *doctrine* of justification from the broader usage of *dikaio-* terminology. A failure to recognize
13 this fact can result in a variety of fallacious exegetical and theological conclusions that create a
14 disjunction between the biblical doctrine of justification and the classic Reformed doctrine.
15 Furthermore, the doctrine of justification cannot be reduced to a mere listing of the places where
16 the word “justify” is used in Scripture. Rather, it is a rich and coherent message from God as to
17 how sinful human beings may be assured of his love and grace.

18 Also we would remark pastorally to our brothers that presbyteries have the right to expect
19 pastors and teachers, when they are speaking of the doctrine of justification, to assume the
20 definitions of the Westminster Standards. There justification refers principally to God’s work in
21 saving elect individuals. Therefore, if pastors and teachers define justification differently, they
22 should not be surprised when confusion and disagreements arise; and in fact, pastors and
23 teachers should work to prevent such needless contention.

24 Scripture not only affirms the imputation of Adam’s sin to all humankind, but also affirms
25 the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to his people, wherein his righteousness is credited
26 forensically to their account (Romans 5:12-21; 2 Corinthians 5:21). Although in previous periods
27 it was incumbent to distinguish such imputation from an infusion of righteousness, today’s
28 exegetical discussions have also made it necessary to reaffirm imputation as the basis for God’s
29 just declaration of righteousness. God’s declaration of righteousness, even a corporate
30 declaration, cannot rightly occur without a basis in God’s reckoning of Christ’s righteousness to
31 the account of individual sinners (Philippians 3:9).

32 Affirmations and Denials

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- 34
- 35 1. We affirm that the biblical word group for “to justify” (the *dikaio-*word group) has a broader
36 range of usage than the term justification as employed in the Westminster Standards; we
37 deny that this fact calls for a redefinition of the classic Reformed doctrine of justification.
38
 - 39 2. We affirm that there is an element of vindication in the biblical vocabulary for “to justify”;
40 we deny that God’s ongoing acts of vindicating his people in history are to be confused with
41 their justification by faith.
42
 - 43 3. We affirm that the sphere of covenant blessings, including spiritual privileges, is wider than
44 that of salvific blessings; we deny that all who partake of covenant blessings necessarily
45 partake of salvation.
46

- 1 4. We affirm that salvation embraces more than justification and includes union with Christ,
2 regeneration, effectual calling, sanctification, adoption, perseverance, and glorification; we
3 deny that any one of these other aspects of salvation detracts from the importance of
4 justification.
5
- 6 5. We affirm that God planned the justification of his elect before creation and that it was
7 therefore certain to occur; we deny that those who will be justified are justified before the
8 Holy Spirit does, in due time, actually apply Christ to them (WCF 11.4).
9
- 10 6. We affirm that faith in Christ alone is the only instrumental means of justification; we deny
11 that this faith ever remains alone, but affirm that it issues forth in good deeds.
12
- 13 7. We affirm that in justification, God the Father imputes the righteousness of Christ to
14 believing sinners, a righteousness that is premised upon Christ's lifelong obedience and his
15 obedience unto death; we deny that anyone is justified by God apart from this imputation.
16
- 17 8. We affirm that God justifies sinners by imputing Christ's righteousness to them rather than
18 counting their sins against them; we deny that justification is grounded in any infusion of
19 grace or that faith itself, as an act of obedience, is imputed as the ground of justification.
20
- 21 9. We affirm that there is an eschatological dimension to justification, namely that on the last
22 day God will declare the elect righteous before men and angels; we deny that justification is
23 only eschatological and not also an accomplished present reality.
24
- 25 10. We affirm that justification is a definitive, forensic act by which God acquits sinners by his
26 grace and declares them righteous; although believers enjoy their justification as an ongoing
27 state, we deny that justification is a process.
28
- 29 11. We affirm an individual sense to justification, that God declares righteous any person who
30 trusts Christ as Lord and Savior; we deny that this individual sense implies autonomy from
31 the covenant community.
32
- 33 12. We affirm a corporate sense to justification, that God, out of his covenant faithfulness,
34 justifies individuals from every race and people and incorporates them into one body in
35 which they have privileges and responsibilities; we deny that God justifies the community
36 apart from the imputation of Christ's righteousness to individual believing sinners.
37

38 Suggested Questions for Examinations

- 39
- 40 1. Does the fact that the biblical word group for "to justify" has a broader range of usage than
41 the term justification in the Westminster Standards minimize the importance of the classic
42 Reformed doctrine of justification? Explain.
43
- 44 2. How do God's acts of vindicating his people in history, recorded in Scripture, influence your
45 understanding of the doctrine of justification by faith?
46

- 1 3. What benefits do the non-elect receive from belonging to the covenant community, the
2 visible church (WLC 62)?
3
- 4 4. When are persons justified? Explain from Scripture.
5
- 6 5. Distinguish between the basis (or ground) and the means of justification? What is the relation
7 between good deeds and justification? Explain your answers from Scripture.
8
- 9 6. Define imputation; argue your position from Scripture. What part does imputation play in
10 justification?
11
- 12 7. Distinguish between the doctrines of the infusion of righteousness and the imputation of
13 righteousness in definitions of justification. Evaluate biblically.
14
- 15 8. Is there an eschatological dimension to justification? Explain. If so, how does that impact the
16 justification believers enjoy now?
17
- 18 9. Is justification both an act and a process? Explain your answer from Scripture.
19
- 20 10. Distinguish individual and corporate aspects of justification. Articulate your answer from
21 Scripture.
22

23 **III. Union with Christ**

24 Overview

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26
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28 The Westminster Standards (e.g., WLC 66) employ the phrase "union with Christ" to signify
29 Christ's relationship with the elect. In theological discourse this definition militates against
30 referring indiscriminately to all members of visible churches as "people in union with Christ."
31 Although there is a sense in which non-elect church members may be in fellowship with God's
32 people and thus, in a derivative way, in fellowship with Christ and His Spirit, it creates
33 significant confusion to describe this "fellowship" without qualification as "union with Christ,"
34 since this language has a long history of meaning "the union which the elect have with Christ"
35 (WLC 66). While this understanding of union with Christ is essential to a scripture-based
36 theological definition of the term, it is not essential that this specific notion be deemed present in
37 every biblical passage that uses "in Christ" or similar terminology. Further, in harmony with the
38 Westminster Standards we commend the wisdom of maintaining the time-honored reformed
39 distinction between the visible and invisible church (cf. WLC 61, 63, 82 and 83).
40

41 Affirmations and Denials

- 42
- 43 1. We affirm that in the Westminster Standards, the union with Christ that the elect enjoy
44 involves a vital biblical way of speaking about God applying salvation. We deny that the
45 various aspects of salvation's application (e.g., adoption, glorification, justification,

- 1 perseverance, regeneration, faith, and sanctification) can be so subsumed under the category
2 of union with Christ that no distinctions among them may be made.
3
- 4 2. We affirm that all members of the visible church are in covenant relationship to Jesus Christ
5 and thereby participate in the privileges and responsibilities of that relationship; we deny that
6 it is prudent to use the terminology of "union with Christ" to describe the relationship of all
7 those in the covenant community (elect and non-elect alike) without carefully clarifying the
8 difference between the specific sense the terms have come to have in our theological
9 tradition, and the other senses they may have in the Bible.
10
- 11 3. We affirm that God before creation planned to unite to his Son those whom he chose, and
12 that this union ordinarily begins when they trust Christ as offered in the gospel; we deny that
13 persons are united to Christ before the Holy Spirit does, in due time, actually apply Christ to
14 them.
15
- 16 4. We affirm that it is the secret work of God to unite His elect savingly to Christ in His
17 accepted time; we further affirm that God may, if He wills, effect this saving union in a
18 covenant child before parents or pastors are able to recognize its presence by way of a
19 profession of faith. We deny that these affirmations relieve parents and pastors of the
20 responsibility to seek a profession of faith from covenant children; we further deny that the
21 Presbytery ought to impose upon its churches a uniform practice for receiving these
22 professions of faith beyond what is required in the *Book of Church Order* (e.g., BCO 57-2).
23
- 24 5. We affirm that the Father seals all true believers with the Holy Spirit in union with Christ for
25 the day of redemption; we deny that any so united to Christ can fall away from grace and
26 finally be lost.
27
- 28 6. We affirm the confessional distinction between the church visible and invisible: that not all
29 who are outwardly called by the ministry of the Word and live in the visible church will be
30 saved, and that we distinguish the operations of the Spirit common to all in the visible church
31 from those that effectually bring the elect to salvation; we deny that the confessional
32 distinction between the visible and invisible church may be set aside in an attempt to clear it
33 from misunderstandings and abuses.
34
- 35 7. We affirm that God promises in Christian baptism to unite to the Trinity by faith in the power
36 of God those who are being baptized; we deny that all those baptized are inseparably united
37 to Christ. We affirm that God's promise in baptism is only rightly received and realized by
38 faith. We deny that baptized persons who persist in unbelief may be assured of their final
39 salvation.
40
- 41 8. We affirm that some passages in Scripture genuinely warn of God's wrath to the covenant
42 community, some of whom may never come to saving faith; we deny that true believers,
43 chosen by the Father, redeemed by the Son, and given the Spirit as guarantee of their
44 inheritance, can commit final and total apostasy.
45
46

1 Suggested Questions for Examinations
2

- 3 1. How does your understanding of the biblical doctrine of union with Christ affect your
4 evaluation of the Westminster Standards' doctrine of justification?
5
- 6 2. Do you hold that all those in the covenant community are in union with Christ? Explain from
7 Scripture.
8
- 9 3. Can non-elect persons be united to Christ? When are persons actually united to Christ?
10 Explain your answers from Scripture.
11
- 12 4. Can persons united to Christ fall away from grace and finally be lost? Can any who are
13 sealed with the Holy Spirit fall away from grace and finally be lost? Explain your answers
14 from Scripture.
15
- 16 5. Explain why the core idea in the confessional distinction between the visible and invisible
17 church is biblical and useful. In what directions can this distinction be misused?
18
- 19 6. Are all baptized persons united to Christ when they are baptized? Explain your answer from
20 Scripture.
21
- 22 7. Can persons who trust Christ with genuine faith commit final and total apostasy? Explain
23 from Scripture.
24
25

26 **IV. The Sacraments**
27

28 Overview
29

30 While there is much that lies beneath the surface in the current FV controversy it is our
31 understanding and practice of the sacraments that brings much of the disagreement to light.

32 In baptism, particularly infant baptism (though we should not think exclusively of infant
33 baptism), we confront issues of the role that the ritual plays in the individual's connection to
34 Christ and the church. As this report has already commented on issues of covenant, justification
35 and union with Christ, it seems appropriate now to comment on the issue of regeneration as it
36 relates to the sacraments.

37 Regeneration as a term appears a number of times in our Westminster Standards, but
38 apparently without definition: e.g. *WCF* 10:3; 18:1; 28:1. It seems that regeneration is
39 understood in relation to effectual calling, which happens to the elect alone; and regeneration
40 describes the culmination of that work of effectual calling. Regeneration occurs when the elect
41 sinner is actually turned from death to life. As the culmination of effectual calling, regeneration
42 is "instantaneous," or it "happens in an instant".

43 Thinking systematically, many work from a definition of regeneration similar to the one John
44 Murray offers, "Regeneration is a change wrought by the Spirit in order that the person may
45 savingly respond to the summons, or demand of the call, embodied in the gospel call. God's call

1 is an efficacious summons and therefore carries with it, carries as it were in its bosom, the grace
2 that ensures the requisite response on the part of the subject.”

3 The features of regeneration, understood this way, are its culminative relation to calling, its
4 instantaneous character, and its monergistic origin. This understanding governs the way that
5 those working from the context of the Westminster standards will most likely interpret the term
6 and anyone who wants to use the term otherwise is almost certainly going to be misunderstood.
7 Therefore we will use the term regeneration in this traditional sense.

8 Having stated the above understanding we must acknowledge additional truths. First, there is
9 a wider usage of the term regeneration, or “born again,” in our own tradition, even applying it to
10 the whole of life. Second, we must not imply that our technical confessional usage of
11 regeneration stated above is the required sense in Biblical passages that might use such terms (as
12 *palingenesis*).

13 The Latin expression *ex opere operato* has come, in popular usage, to designate a view that
14 the sacraments justify and confer saving grace by some virtue intrinsic to them – virtually an
15 “automatic” kind of effect. It should be clear from this report that our understanding of the Bible
16 makes no place for such a view. We acknowledge that sophisticated discussions may use the
17 Latin phrase to denote something more defensible, but we doubt whether it is possible to
18 rehabilitate the phrase from its popular sense.

19 Affirmations and Denials

- 20
21
22 1. We affirm that baptism is for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible
23 church, the house and family of God, outside of which there is no ordinary possibility of
24 salvation.
- 25
26 2. We affirm that justification is by grace through faith alone and deny “justification by
27 baptism”.
- 28
29 3. We affirm that the Holy Spirit alone regenerates; we deny that the ritual act of baptism
30 regenerates though it may be the occasion of the Spirit’s regenerative work.
- 31
32 4. We affirm that, since baptism, when rightly used, exhibits Christ and contains a promise of
33 benefit to worthy receivers, and that since by baptism grace is conferred by the Holy Spirit in
34 His appointed time to those to whom the grace belongs, baptism rightly forms one part of the
35 ordinary means by which a believer may find a Spirit-given, infallible assurance through
36 faith in the promises of God. We deny that baptism can provide assurance apart from: faith,
37 good works, inward graces, other ordinary means, and the testimony of the Spirit.
- 38
39 5. We affirm that neither baptism nor a subjective “experience” of conversion are alone
40 sufficient for the assurance of salvation and affirm the necessity of faith and faithful living
41 for a warranted assurance of salvation.
- 42
43 6. We affirm that baptism is properly administered within the context of the church and the
44 fruits of baptism are properly realized within the context of the nurture of the church and the
45 Christian family. We further affirm that baptized covenant children are accountable before
46 God to make faithful use of the appropriate means of grace at every stage of life.

- 1 7. We affirm that before the children of believers are baptized they are federally holy; that is,
 2 they are accepted by God into the visible church for the sake of His promise to be the God of
 3 the children of those who love Him. We further affirm that it is because of this promise that
 4 we baptize such children and we understand that by their baptism, they are renouncing the
 5 devil, the world, and their own sinful flesh (cf. BCO 56-4.g). We deny that we baptize the
 6 children of believers because of any confidence we might have that they possess saving faith,
 7 or that they are professing saving faith out of their own volition.
 8
- 9 8. We affirm that candidates who embrace paedocommunion and take exception to statements
 10 in the Standards that are contrary to paedocommunion must nevertheless agree to submit to
 11 the regulations regarding admission to the Table as outlined in the PCA Book of Church
 12 Order (BCO) (particularly BCO 57 and 58). We deny that embracing paedocommunion is
 13 alone evidence that a candidate or presbyter's convictions are "out of accord with the
 14 fundamentals of the system of doctrine" taught in the Scriptures and summarized in the
 15 Westminster Standards.
 16

17 Suggested Questions for Examinations

- 18
- 19 1. Does the ritual act of baptism change the individual's relationship to God? If not, why? If
 20 so, in what way?
 21
- 22 2. Articulate what you see to be unhealthy views of baptismal efficacy. In your answer
 23 incorporate both poles of the debate.
 24
- 25 3. What do you understand by the "grace ... exhibited" in the sacraments as it is spoken of in
 26 WCF 27.3?
 27
- 28 4. Speak to why the nurture of the church and the Christian family is important for a baptized
 29 person.
 30
- 31 5. What role does the Lord's Supper play in the life of a believer?
 32
- 33 6. In your opinion how often should the Lord's Supper be celebrated? Defend your answer
 34 Biblically, historically, and practically.
 35
- 36 7. What does it mean to fence the Lord's Table? Demonstrate in your own words a proper
 37 fencing of the table? Is there anything that fencing the table does not mean?
 38
- 39 8. What is your view on paedocommunion? Why do you hold that position? If different what
 40 is your attitude toward the PCA's position on this issue?
 41

1 **Conclusion**

2 Through the Apostle Paul, God urges His people to be "eager to maintain the unity of the
 3 Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3 ESV). This command is at the heart of the ordination vow
 4 "to be zealous and faithful in maintaining the truths of the Gospel and the purity and peace and
 5 unity of the Church." In an effort to obey the Word of God and keep this vow, the ad hoc
 6 committee on Federal Vision Theology has performed its work and presented this report.
 7 Balancing a desire to be zealous for the Gospel with seeking the peace and unity of the Church
 8 can sometimes be difficult. The members of this study committee unanimously affirm the
 9 glorious Presbyterian and Reformed heritage that we possess, and we have struggled to remain
 10 true to Scripture and true to the Westminster Standards as we seek the purity of the Church. At
 11 the same time, we affirm one of the foundational principles of American Presbyterianism which
 12 states, "While ... it is necessary to make effective provision that all who are admitted as teachers
 13 be sound in the faith, there are truths and forms with respect to which men of good character and
 14 principles may differ. In all these it is the duty both of private Christians and societies to exercise
 15 mutual forbearance toward each other" (Preface to the BCO, Preliminary Principle 5). We
 16 believe that this report contributes to the doctrinal purity of Missouri Presbytery and the PCA;
 17 we also believe it serves to maintain the peace and unity of the same. The committee is
 18 unanimous in presenting this report; however, that does not mean that every statement is phrased
 19 to the complete satisfaction of individual members. Rather, like the confessional standards that
 20 we wholeheartedly embrace, this report bears the peace-seeking and unified consensus of the
 21 entire committee. In presenting this report, we urge our father and brothers, both in Missouri
 22 Presbytery and the other presbyteries of the PCA, to be careful to seek peace as well as Gospel
 23 faithfulness, purity as well as unity. Followers of Christ, and especially those who lead His
 24 Church, cannot shirk either responsibility. The way we live together and love each other is as
 25 important as the truths we have in common (cf. John 13:34-35). *Soli Deo Gloria.*

26 27 28 Members of the Committee:

29	30 TE William H. Bell, Jr.	TE Robert A. Peterson
31	TE W. Wilson Benton, Jr.	TE Owen L. Tarantino
32	TE C. John Collins	TE Andrew Vander Maas
33	TE Stephen T. Estock - Chairman	RE Charles Waldron
34	TE Sean M. Lucas - Clerk	TE Michael D. Williams
35	TE Ronald G. Lutjens	RE David Yates
36	TE Jeffrey J. Meyers	

37 38 Adjunct Members:

39	TE Bryan S. Chapell (Illiana Presbytery)	TE George W. Robertson (Savannah River Presbytery)
40	TE David Chapman (Chicago Metro Presbytery)	TE Shawn Slate (Blue Ridge Presbytery)