

My Response to the Committee's Questions

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When the Letter of Concern addressed to Missouri Presbytery was made known to me—the same day it was made public online (March 29, 2010)—I wrote a brief response (see Appendix A, p. 95). At the April meeting of Missouri Presbytery I petitioned the presbytery to investigate these allegations as well as the way they were brought to my attention and made public. A committee of the presbytery was formed, and they have asked me to answer the questions contained in the following pages.

Many of these issues deal with questions that have engaged Reformed scholars in academic debates and research programs for decades, even centuries. I have attempted to answer the following questions as adequately as possible, while recognizing that truly comprehensive answers to these important questions would require a great deal of research and many more pages.

I answer these questions as a parish pastor. I am not a professional theologian or academic scholar, though for a time I was engaged with academic theological concerns. That was during my graduate work at Concordia Theological Seminary (1995-2005). In the context of academic debate, theological propositions are proposed in a scholastic community so that others can analyze and critique those ideas in a spirit of friendly disputation. I was engaged in that kind of lively but convivial *disputatio* in graduate seminar classes for 9 years. During that same time period, I extended that practice in my interaction with other ministers and friends in conferences, lectures, and on public and private internet discussion lists. Now that I look back on that period, I see that I was pretty naïve about the manner in which many people would receive the exploratory kinds of theological propositions I offered for debate and discussion. I never intended for many of those oftentimes-provocative theses to be taken as formal, public confessions of faith on my part.

There have, no doubt, been times in the past when my rhetoric has gotten away from me and I have overstated points in debate, or I have been overly provocative in arguing for certain

theological positions. I hope that this document will clarify any mistakes and put to rest any misunderstandings that my past indiscretions may have precipitated.

Answering these questions felt very familiar. I spent most of 2006 interacting with fellow members of the Missouri Presbytery Federal Vision study committee. We discussed and debated many of these issues at length. The consensus document that we drafted (which I signed) deals with most of these issues. I still agree with the affirmations and denials contained in that document, as I hope my answers to these questions will make clear.

Why then did I sign the Joint Federal Vision Profession (JFVP) in 2007? I did not see this as a deliberately provocative act. I signed this document to join with many of my friends who were being falsely accused of gross theological error. That statement was an attempt to clear the air of misunderstandings and caricatures. I believe a fair reading of both the JFVP and my answers in this document will reveal nothing that contradicts or overturns Reformed theology as taught in the Westminster Standards.

I. Covenant

Many of these questions call for similar answers. I would ask the committee to read through the entire section first before passing judgment on earlier answers. As I read over my responses, I see that earlier issues are often illumined by some of my later answers. I didn't want to repeat myself too much. The answers are already long.

1. Can you/do you affirm the following statement from the Report of Ad Interim Study Committee on Federal Vision, New Perspective, and Auburn Avenue Theology (M35GA)? “The Westminster Standards set forth a bi-covenantal structure of federal theology, with a covenant of works before the Fall and a covenant of grace after the Fall providing the outline to the biblical story of creation, fall and redemption.”

a. Yes. I agree with this statement, as long as the two covenants are explained carefully. If this question is intended to determine whether I am “monocovenantal” or not, then I wish to be clear that I do not believe that the prelapsarian covenant is the same as the postlapsarian covenants (all of which have a *special gracious character* given man's guilt after the fall). God's covenantal relations with man change after the fall. What I mean by that will be explained in my answers to later questions in this section.

b. But simply stating that there is a bi-covenantal structure of Federal Theology does not answer the question of *which interpretation* of bi-covenant theology is being advanced. I affirm what our Missouri Presbytery Federal Vision Study Committee wrote in 2005:

We affirm as well the variety of interpretation of the Westminster Standards when it comes to the nature of the covenant. On the issue of the “covenant of works,” for example, we believe that those who read the Standards as emphasizing an Adamic meritocracy and those who read them as emphasizing the gracious foundation of all God's covenant dealings with humanity can both claim confessional integrity and historical precedent in the Westminster tradition. Neither of these views does violence to the Standards given their lack of precision regarding Adam's covenant relationship to God. This variety of interpretation of both Scripture and the Standards make offering any definition of “covenant” hazardous (Report of the Missouri Presbytery *ad hoc* Committee on Federal Vision Theology, page 3).

This “lack of precision regarding Adam's covenant relationship to God” in the Westminster Standards will be important to remember as I begin to respond to the questions in this section.

2. In your opinion, are there problems with the so-called ‘bi-covenantal’ construction of the Westminster Standards that Scripture (and/or other reformed confessions) avoids?

a. The problems I have expressed are not so much with the Westminster Standards, but with the way they have been interpreted by some. There is a strand of Federal theology in the Reformed tradition that privileges a covenantal arrangement between God and Adam based on merit and makes it foundational for the entire sweep of God's covenants with humanity. So much so that even Jesus had to merit or earn God's favor; that his righteousness was merited during his pre-cross life in order to pass it on to his people. I reject the foundational importance of "merit" in some traditional interpretations of the bi-covenantal Federal Theology. My problems are not with Westminster so much as they are with *that particular interpretation of Westminster*.

b. I learned to subject some of the 17th-century covenantal categories to biblical criticism in seminary and in my reading of contemporary Reformed biblical theologians like John Murray. I have submitted my reservations to three separate presbyteries, starting in 1987, about the interpretation of the Westminster Standards that believes Adam's relationship with his Creator was based on merit. It's only been in the last 5 years, with the advent of Federal Vision controversy, that I have been criticized for teaching the gracious foundation for all of God's dealings with humanity. My seminary professors freely taught that grace was the foundation of the Adamic covenant in the 80's. Reformed theologians, including Westminster divines, have been divided over the role of merit in both the pre- and postlapsarian covenantal administrations. The Westminster Standards do not speak of "merit" except in regard to Christ's work for us. I don't see how my objections to a merit-based bi-covenantal construction of the Westminster standards logically implies that my theological convictions strike at the vitals of our system of theology.

c. Although I don't agree with all of O. Palmer Robertson's covenantal formulations, I believe I am only carrying forward what I learned from him in classes at Covenant Seminary in the mid-1980s. I'll provide one example from his book *The Christ of the Covenants* (P&R, 1980). After describing how the language of "covenant of works" and "covenant of grace" has much value, he nevertheless goes on to offer this critique:

However, the terminology traditionally associated with this scheme has significant limitations. No criticism may be offered with respect to the general structure of this distinction. Two basic epochs

of God's dealing with man must be recognized: pre-fall and post-fall. All the dealings of God with man since the fall must be seen as possessing a basic unity.

Yet the nomenclature chosen to designate these two epochs suffers from a lack of preciseness. To speak of a covenant of "works" in contrast with a covenant of "grace" appears to suggest that grace was not operative in the covenant of works. As a matter of fact, the totality of God's relationship with man is a matter of grace. Although "grace" may not have been operative in the sense of a merciful relationship despite sin, the creational bond between God and man indeed was gracious.

The terminology further suggests that works have no place in the covenant of grace. But from the biblical perspective, works play a most essential role in the covenant of grace. Christ works for the salvation of his people. His accomplishment of righteousness for sinful men represents an essential aspect of redemption. Still further, those redeemed in Christ certainly must work. They are "created in Christ Jesus unto good works" (Eph. 2:10). Scripture consistently indicates that the final judgment of man shall be according to works. While salvation is by faith, judgment is by works.

Furthermore, the covenant of "works" terminology has tended to concentrate attention on one single element of the creational bond between God and man. The non-eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil has been viewed as the one "work" which man as created had to perform. Rather than seeing the broader implications of man's responsibility to his Creator, attention has been directed more exclusively toward Adam's probation-test.

Because of these limitations in the terminology "covenant of works" and "covenant of grace," different designations for these two great covenantal epochs are desirable. . . . (*Christ of the Covenants*, p. 56-7).

I agree with Robertson's critique and suggestions in the paragraphs I quoted above. Notice that he says that the totality of God's relationship with man is a matter of grace. My teaching that the Adamic covenant has a gracious foundation agrees with this.

d. In addition to Robertson's classroom instruction and book, we also used John Murray's works in systematic theology class. In his essay "The Adamic Administration" Murray criticizes the language of "covenant of works":

This administration has often been denoted "The covenant of Works." There are two observations. (1) The term is not felicitous, for the reason that the elements of grace entering into the administration are not properly provided for by the term "works." (2) It is not designated a covenant in Scripture. . . . (*Collected Writings of John Murray*, Vol. 2, p. 49).

Note that Murray refers to the problem of failing to see the grace of God operative in the Adamic administration. I disagree with Murray's reluctance to call the pre-fall relations between God and Adam "covenantal." Even so, my point is that criticism of 17th-century

covenantal language and categories has become common in orthodox Reformed circles in recent years.

John Murray's essay on *The Covenant of Grace* (Tyndale, 1953) contains this challenge:

Theology must always be undergoing reformation. The human understanding is imperfect. However architectonic may be the systematic constructions of any one generation or group of generations, there always remains the need for correction and reconstruction so that the structure may be brought into close approximation to the Scripture and the reproduction be a more faithful transcript or reflection of the heavenly exemplar.

This is at the beginning of Murray's little booklet offering his own suggestions for the correction and reconstruction of the covenants in Reformed theology.

e. John Murray's challenge to *semper reformanda* was taken up by Wilson Benton in his essay "Federal Theology: Review for Revision" in *Through Christ's Word: A Festschrift for Dr. Philip E. Hughes*, edited by W. Robert Godfrey and Jessee L. Boyd III (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1985, pp. 180-204). I read this article during my seminary training. At the beginning of his essay, Benton laments the fact that since the 17th century the structure of Federal theology "has resisted all attempts of renovation."

Federal theology, notwithstanding the finesse of its analytical method, the splendor of its articulated scheme, and the comprehensiveness of its organizing design, needs recasting. . . . a more biblically formulated concept of the fundamental covenant motif can be contrived if (and that's a big if) the system itself can be exposed to critical evaluation. This work is an effort to emancipate the system from that unrestrained and unwarranted loyalty which has repressed judicious examination (p. 180).

Wilson Benton goes on to critique federalism in terms of the "legalistic understanding of divine human relations," that is, definitions of the covenants that are dominated by economic/contractual categories (p. 181ff.), the connection between natural law theories, the connection between 16th- and 17th-century politics and the covenant of works (p. 190ff.), and the deleterious influence of philosophical Ramism on the development of Federal theology (pp. 195ff.). The last subsection of his essay is called "The Intrinsic Faults of Federal Theology" (pp. 200-204).

Whatever one may think of Wilson Benton's methodology or conclusions, in the 1980's men were not afraid to subject the details of the bi-polar Federal theology to criticism in the light of historical theology as well as the new insights of the emerging discipline of biblical theology. And this critique often zeroed in on the problems of a legalistic, merit-based understanding of God's original covenantal relations with Adam.

3. Do you believe the Westminster Standards teach or require the belief in a meritorious prelapsarian covenant of works?

a. No. Unless by "meritorious" one means that there were "conditions" required of Adam in the prelapsarian covenant. Yes, there were requirements and conditions. But I don't believe that the presence of covenantal "conditions" necessarily signals a "meritorious" contract. I agree with Robert Letham's judgment:

"The Westminster documents clearly affirm grace was present before the fall" (*The Westminster Assembly: Reading its Theology in Historical Context* [Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 2009], pp. 232).

Letham also quotes John Leith's appraisal of the Westminster Assembly's portrayal of the pre-fall, Adamic covenant:

"This was not simply a covenant of merit, for the covenant itself was a gracious act of God, the great disparity between God and man prohibiting any possibility of man's works by their own merit earning salvation" (*The Westminster Assembly: Reading its Theology in Historical Context* [Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 2009], pp. 231).

b. I affirm what our MO Presbytery Federal Vision Study Committee wrote in 2005 (which was later adopted by the entire presbytery) about the lack of precision in the Westminster Standards and the diversity of interpretation of the content of Federal theology by those who subscribe to those standards:

We affirm as well the variety of interpretations of the Westminster Standards when it comes to the nature of the covenant. On the issue of the "covenant of works," for example, we believe that those who read the Standards as emphasizing an Adamic meritocracy and those who read them as emphasizing the gracious foundation of all God's covenant dealings with humanity can both claim confessional integrity and historical precedent in the Westminster tradition. Neither of these views does violence to the Standards given their lack of precision regarding Adam's covenant relationship to God.

c. Questions about the meritorious nature of the covenant with Adam have been debated in Reformed circles for some time. I have set before three presbyteries on four separate occasions (Missouri [1987, licensure], Evangel [1988, ordination], South Texas [1991, transfer], and Missouri [1994, transfer]) the following statement for their evaluation.

WCF 7:2-3 (and 19.1). I think that the language of “covenant of works” is at best misleading. The Westminster Standards are not always consistent in using the same language to refer to man’s pre-lapsarian relationship with the Lord (*WCF* 4.2, 19.1, *WLC* 20). What I am concerned about is that the language of “works” not lead to the erroneous conclusion that Adam and Eve did not enjoy life and communion with God before the fall as the gift of God’s goodness. Even *WCF* 4.2 speaks of pre-lapsarian man being “happy in their communion with God.” Communion with God was not something to be *earned* by Adam and Eve. They possessed “spiritual life.” It is misleading to say that Adam and Eve would have been *rewarded* with life because of their obedience. Genesis 1-2 seems to indicate that they had access to the tree of life, that they should have eaten from it, thereby acknowledging their utter dependence upon God for life and happiness. As a judicial consequence of their sin Adam and Eve *lost* the life that they possessed. They did not pass from a neutral state into an estate of death. The life Adam and Eve possessed, they lost. What I am trying to guard against is the idea that Adam and Eve would have *merited* God’s favor through good works. They were created in an estate of favor with their covenant God. I am not denying that pre-lapsarian man’s life was in some sense an “unconfirmed” life. The righteousness they possessed was capable of being lost. It was lost. What I am denying is that Adam’s life—his status and favor before his heavenly Father—was somehow merited or earned by him.

This statement of my convictions has been received and approved by all three presbyteries as convictions that do “not strike at the vitals of the system of doctrine.”

4. Do you currently acknowledge any specific reservations regarding the Covenant of Works as presented in *WCF* 7? If so, explain how these reservations differ in any way from your previously published remarks or to the expressed exceptions that you submitted to one or more of the presbyteries of which you have been a member (Evangel, South Texas, and Missouri), and which were determined by those courts to “not strike at the vitals of the system of doctrine.”

a. The exceptions I registered regarding *WCF* 7 and the covenant of works are still an accurate summary of my difficulties with the language of the Westminster Standards. In addition to the paragraph on the language of *WCF* 7.2-3 and 19.1 that I quoted in the previous question, the following reservation has also been accepted by all three presbyteries:

The language of *WCF* 7.1 implies that the covenant is something added to the Creator-creature relationship. The implication is that God, *after* he created man, realizing that there was a great distance between himself and his creation, needed to do something *additional* to bridge the gap. I don’t think this is the best way to put it. This implies that the covenant bridges some metaphysical gap, as if man’s problem is his “createdness,” as if createdness itself necessitates a *relational*

distance between God and man. In contrast to this dangerous possibility (not sufficiently guarded against in the Confession), the Scriptures indicate that God enters into covenant with man by virtue of his role as Creator. Adam is constituted by creation in covenant with God. Genesis chapter 1 uses the language of covenant making to express God's creative work (speaking, evaluating, separating, etc.). Genesis 2 is even more explicit. The covenantal name of Yahweh is used when the author of Genesis describes the creation of man. Man was a covenantal creature, under God's covenantal Lordship, responsible to Yahweh's covenantal laws and sanctions, from the very moment that he was formed from the dust of the earth. Furthermore, all men, by virtue of their creation, "know God" and live inescapably in relationship to him (Rom. 1:18ff.). Maybe I'm reading too much into the language of *WCF 7:1*; nevertheless, it cannot hurt to clarify my position.

b. Since the last time I registered that exception (1994) I have continued to reflect on the phrase "voluntary condescension" in *WCF 7:1*. That reflection now leads me to believe that this phrase may be a more philosophical way of speaking of God's gracious will toward humanity. Others have also interpreted this phrase as a summary of God's grace toward humanity. *If that is the case, then I have no objection to the WCF 7.1*, only that the language is a bit out of date and overly philosophical. Today, however, "condescension" connotes arrogance and even sneering. Many words have changed meaning since the 17th century and I suspect that this word did not have that kind of baggage when the Confession was composed. I will explain this a bit more in my response to question #12.

I don't have any further problems or exceptions to the Standards regarding the covenant or the covenant of works other than what I have expressed in these statements.

5. How do you presently understand/characterize the relationship between the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace? Was the Covenant of Works gracious in character? Was the Covenant of Works in any way meritorious? Please explain.

a. All the questions subsumed under #5 and #6 appear to me to be asking for the same information, so my answer to this question bleeds over into my answer to the questions asked in #6. Even so, answering these questions adequately seems to require two or three dissertations. I will try to summarize my views in outline form in my replies to each of the questions.

Yes, the covenant of works was gracious in character. I have already addressed this in previous questions.

No, the covenant of works was not meritorious. I also addressed this briefly in my answers to questions #2-4.

b. I must say something about the way this controversy has been framed by many who have opposed men who do not affirm a meritorious covenant of works. There are those who are mandating an idiosyncratic theology of merit that is not found in the Westminster Standards and is contrary to many mainstream Reformed theologians. This particular reading of the Standards is then proclaimed to be the authoritative interpretation of the Confession and Catechisms of our church. I believe some wisdom and caution is called for here.

c. For one thing, the Westminster standards use the term "merit" sparingly, and *never* with reference to Adam's obedience, but rather when speaking of the work of Christ for his people. That fact is significant. There is no Confessional requirement to use the word "merit" to describe Adam's inheritance of life under the first covenant. So those who oppose anyone who fails to use the word "merit" to describe Adam's appropriation of God's promise are either using an extra-confessional standard to judge others or they are interpreting the Standards in a way that is not required by our ordination vows.

d. As our Missouri Presbytery Committee report affirmed, if someone wants to adopt the position that Adam's work was meritorious, that's certainly within the bounds of Reformed tradition. There are many Reformed theologians who argue for this interpretation of the covenant of works. But such an interpretation is not, and never has been a touchstone of orthodoxy. Many orthodox Reformed ministers and theologians have disagreed with this way of putting things and have not been judged as outside the pale of Reformed orthodoxy. I have referenced three above in my response to question #2 (O. Palmer Robertson, John Murray, and Wilson Benton). I could list many more. Furthermore, if a PCA minister thinks that the use of the term "merit" is problematic for various reasons, but confesses that Christ's infinite "worthiness" covers our unworthiness—should the use of a different preferred term be enough to constitute a rejection of the system of doctrine of the Westminster Standards? I believe that Jesus merited our salvation in the sense that his perfect life, suffering, and sacrificial death on the cross as the Incarnate Son was infinitely worthy to secure our redemption. What I want to avoid is the idea that Jesus racked up a sufficient number of credits or points to satisfy God's

justice and then passes these credits to us. I do not find anything like that in the Westminster Standards or the Scriptures.

e. In denying that our good works can merit salvation, the Westminster Confession plainly lays down criteria for merit that are as out of reach for a sinless creature as they are for a sinful one (WCF 16.5). In other words, if we cannot merit eternal life not just because of our sin but also “because of the infinite distance between us and God,” then neither could Adam before the fall. Furthermore, from Zacharias Ursinus to Francis Turretin there is a long line of Reformed authorities who categorically deny that sinless Adam could merit anything from God. And according to Rowland Ward's treatment of this subject virtually all 17th-century divines would have refrained from using "merit" to describe Adam's duties under the covenant of works (see Roland Ward, *Adam, Reformed Theology And The Creation Covenant* [New Melbourne Press, 2003]).

f. All of which is to say that the authors of the letter against me have no authority to bind PCA ministers to an extra-confessional understanding of the Adamic covenant.

6. What major differences exist between the ways in which God dealt with Adam pre-Fall and post-Fall? In what ways are these covenants distinct? What are the points of continuity between the pre-Fall and post-Fall covenants? Do these points of continuity require a denial of what the Westminster Standards affirm about the differences between these covenants? If a denial is not required, why not?

a. The major differences between the pre-fall and post-fall dealings with Adam have to do with the heightened grace shown to Adam after he incurred guilt by his disobedience and therefore deserved the just punishment of eternal death. The covenant of grace was a redemptive covenant. All the covenants after the fall, from Noah to Jesus, are all grounded in God's unconditional grace and mercy in the face of humanity's deserving of the just punishment of eternal death.

b. Upon his creation Adam was graciously gifted with communion with God. The WCF says that Adam and Eve were “happy in their communion with God” (WCF 4. 2). They possessed “original righteousness” (WCF 6.2; WLC Q. 20;) from which estate they fell when they broke covenant with God and followed the lead of the Devil (WSC Q. 13, 18, 19; WLC Q. 27). Adam was not called to work his way up to communion with God. Adam did not need to

achieve righteousness. Communion with God and righteousness were God's gifts to Adam at creation. Adam was called to continue in these, to be faithful and obedient to his gracious Heavenly Father.

c. I believe John Calvin's summary is helpful here because he affirms that Adam was dependent on the grace of God:

In order for us to come to a sure knowledge of ourselves, we must first grasp that Adam, parent of us all, was created in the image and likeness of God. That is, he was endowed with wisdom, righteousness, holiness, and was so clinging by *these gifts of grace* to God that he could have lived forever in Him, if he had stood fast in the uprightness God had given him. But when Adam slipped into sin, this image and likeness of God was cancelled and effaced, that is, *he lost all the benefits of divine grace*, by which he could have been led back into the way of life (*Institutes of The Christian Religion*, 1536 Edition [*Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. 19, pp. 15-6, emphasis added]).

d. Before the fall, Adam was called to *trust* God his heavenly Father for his future. He was graciously created as a "son of God," the "image" of his heavenly Father (Gen. 1:26; Luke 3:38). That "image" language connotes "sonship" is clear from the immediate context (Gen. 5:3). Furthermore, God the Son is the eternal Image of his Father (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15). So before the fall, God related to Adam as a Father to his created son. He gave him life (Gen. 2:7). He blessed and loved him (Gen. 1:26-28). And he graced him with the whole world to rule and enjoy (Gen. 1:26). He even graciously gave him a wife to help him fulfill his vocation (Gen. 2:18-25). These are all gracious gifts from his heavenly Father.

e. Adam as God's son was called to mature in his faith and obedience over time. This would involve learning through service and obedience. Adam failed to obey and to serve God and even his wife in Genesis 3. And the record of the people of God throughout the Old Testament testifies to their failure to serve and obey God. Jesus, however, was faithful in this. As "a son he learned obedience through what he suffered, and being made mature (*teleios*), he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (Heb. 5:8-9). What God intended for Adam, what Adam failed to reach, God graciously accomplished in his Son Jesus Christ, the new Adam. Jesus' covenantal faithfulness and maturity fulfills what Adam was called to do. This is another point of continuity between the pre-and post-fall covenants.

f. The original covenantal mandate to Adam (to possess and rule over the entire creation) remains one of the points of continuity between the pre- and post-fall covenants. Jesus Christ, the new Adam, now rules over all creation, as the New Testament everywhere proclaims. He is Lord. And his people rule with him as well.

g. After the fall, God continued to deal with Adam as a Father, but now his heavenly Father had to deal justly with his rebellious son. Adam lost communion with God, his original righteousness, his happiness, and his ability not to sin. But God in his mercy did not abandon his created son. God's covenant with Adam after the fall was gracious in a heightened sense. Now God's grace was a gift of love in the face of demerit. Adam deserved the punishment of death. The covenant of grace with Adam after the fall promised him life through a Redeemer, the seed of the woman who would one day crush the serpent's head.

h. Another point of continuity between the two covenantal arrangements has to do with the ultimate goal of the covenant—to know and enjoy God himself or as chapter 7 of the Westminster Confession puts it: man was promised “the fruition of him [the Creator] as their blessedness and reward” (WCF 7:1).

i. I don't expect everyone to agree with all the particulars of the way I have described the differences between God's covenant with Adam before the fall and the covenant of grace inaugurated after the fall. But I believe my way of describing the continuities and discontinuities does not constitute a break with accepted interpretations of bi-covenantal Federal Theology. As I said in a previous answer, I learned much of this at Covenant Seminary in the mid-1980s.

7. Concerning the Covenant of Grace, can you/do you affirm the following: “Though it is common in Reformed theology to use the term covenant of grace both broadly and narrowly... nevertheless, the Confession never speaks as if all those who are in the covenant of grace broadly considered (the visible church) are recipients of the substance or saving benefits of the covenant of grace narrowly considered (the invisible church).” (Report of Ad Interim Study Committee on Federal Vision, New Perspective, and Auburn Avenue Theology [M35GA])?

a. This is a statement about how the Confession uses the term “covenant of grace.” Do I affirm this interpretation of the Confession's use of “covenant of grace”? Yes. Given the

stipulated definition of the covenant of grace, I believe that only those who have saving faith are recipients of the substance or saving benefits of the covenant of grace.

b. The “narrowly considered” qualification reminds us that many people, although not elect, do nevertheless receive some benefits from God’s gracious covenants with his people. But as the Confessions states in WCF 14.2 “the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace.” Those that do not accept, receive, and rest upon Christ alone do not receive the substance or saving benefits of the covenant of grace. They may receive certain benefits temporarily, but the saving benefits (in the fullest sense of that phrase) are reserved for the elect who are gifted with true, saving faith.

8. In light of the above, in your opinion what benefits of the Covenant of Grace accrue to all who are baptized? What differences do you acknowledge between those who are truly elect in Christ (i.e., “those of mankind that are predestinated unto life” [WCF 3.5]) as opposed to those who are baptized but non-elect (i.e., not so predestinated)?

a. The answer to the second question here is pretty straightforward: those who are elect in Christ receive everything promised in the Gospel. (The question uses the adverb “truly” before the phrase “elect in Christ.” But I don’t know what the difference between “elect in Christ” and “truly elect in Christ” might be.)

b. As for the first question, whatever benefits accrue to the non-elect, they are something less than eternal salvation. The baptized non-elect may for a time experience the benefits that come from membership in the covenant community, including but not limited to the grace of hearing the Word of God preached and taught, the godly example of Christian living displayed for them in the church, the presence of the Spirit working through the service of the members of the body of Christ toward one another (1 Cor. 12), and more. Of course, what *is promised* to all who are baptized is nothing less than “Christ and the benefits of the new covenant” (WSC Q. 92). But in order for the recipients of baptism, whether infants or adults, to *receive* the promised salvation, they must believe in Christ. The “sacraments become effectual means of salvation not from any virtue in them, or in him that doth administer them; but only by the blessing of Christ, and the working of his Spirit in them that by faith receive them” (WSC Q. 91).

9. As someone who subscribes to the Westminster Standards and has promised submission to his brothers in the Lord, explain what you mean by the statement, “The whole bi-polar covenant of works/grace schema has got to go. And if that goes, the whole 'system' must be reworked (The Wrightsaid Group, November or December, 2003).” In particular, does the “reworking” that you suggested in 2003 entail denying any teachings in the Westminster Standards? Please explain why or why not.

a. I wrote this statement on an internet discussion list more than 7 years ago (in 2003). It was a quick response to a long series of conversations on that particular internet discussion list. It was not a carefully composed, stand alone, public confession of faith on my part. I can see how my comment “the whole ‘system’ must be reworked” might be taken as a reference to “the system of doctrine taught in the Westminster Standards.” That was not what I intended. I was referring to the systematic implications of construing the covenant of creation as a legalistic, meritorious arrangement and how such a construction has implications for how the rest of the Scriptures are read (e.g., the Mosaic Covenant, the work of Christ, etc.). I meant something along the lines of the critiques of Federalism by John Murray, O. Palmer Robertson, and Wilson Benton that I have quoted in an earlier answer.

b. Just so the committee can see the full context of my remarks, I went back and found that statement of mine in the Wrightsaid list archives. I’m appending it to the end of this question.

c. There are no doubt many statements I’ve made in haste on many different discussion lists that might be isolated and brought forward as “evidence” against me. I am not always careful about how I compose responses in the heat of an argument. *I confess my sin of overstatement in this case and hope to guard against this problem in the future.*

d. What I mean by that statement is summarized in my registered “exceptions” to the Standards that I have provided above in answers to questions #1-8.

e. Since isolated statements of mine have been brought out as evidence of my guilt, I believe a fuller account of what transpired between Jeff Hutchinson and me on the Wrightsaid list in 2003 will be helpful to the committee. Here is the full context of my statement made on December 5, 2003, on the Wrightsaid list.

Jeff Hutchinson wrote:

We who confess the Westminster Standards are to consider any departure from those Standards as "unorthodox" by definition, until such time as the church amends the Standards consistent with the proposed modification, or have I misunderstood the nature of being a confessional church?

I responded:

Mostly. But I certainly don't consider "any" departure from the Standards as unorthodox. The Westminster standards are 17th-century documents composed by committees. They were never designed to function as a once-for-all formulation of the faith. We must confess our faith afresh to our own generation. The Westminster Standards don't do that very well anymore. Every new members class I teach reminds me of this.

We must stop living in the past.

But how can the church amend or correct her standards unless guys have the freedom to discuss possible corrections? If every time a PCA minister begins to wonder about the appropriateness of confessional language and categories, he is denounced as "unorthodox," then the church will be immune to continuing reformation.

I do think the latest scholarly work in biblical theology demands that we go back and redo a great deal of the Westminster standards. They were written when people still thought of the covenant as a contract and believed that "merit" had some role to play in our covenantal relations with God. The whole bi-polar covenant of works/grace schema has got to go. And if that goes, the whole "system" must be reworked.

I should also note that Jeff Hutchinson, with whom I was interacting, responded to my explanation above and seemed to be satisfied with it. He actually agreed with most of what I had written. He responded with notes on each of the paragraphs I had written. He quoted me, then responded below my statements:

Jeff Meyers: Mostly. But I certainly don't consider "any" departure from the Standards as unorthodox.

Jeff Hutchison: I should have defined my terms, sorry. We consider the Standards to be "orthodox," i.e. correct doctrine. So, any departure from them, however mild and however allowable (and I can live with all sorts of exceptions being taken), is, by definition, a departure of some sort from correct doctrine, until the church courts rule otherwise. Even a mild departure is still a departure. I was not meaning to use the word "unorthodox" in this context as a synonym for "apostasy" or "heresy" (i.e the sort of departure from orthodoxy that leads to hell not heaven), but simply as a descriptive term.

Jeff Meyers: The W. standards are 17th century documents composed by committees. They were never designed to function as a once-for-all formulation of the faith. We must confess our faith afresh to our own generation.

Jeff Hutchison: I agree completely. My insides get knotted up when I hear folks seeming to imply the inerrancy of our Standards. But thankfully I don't think there is anyone in our denomination that believes the Standards are beyond amending. Folks may seem to imply that at times--and maybe some folks even say it at times, but that is just outright stupid--but no one (in my experience) actually believes that.

Jeff Meyers: **The Westminster Standards don't do that very well anymore. Every new members class I teach reminds me of this.**

Jeff Hutchinson: I know what you mean, but my experience (there I go again with my all-powerful "personal experience"!) has actually been quite the opposite. With another group of folks--and maybe even with my next new members class--I might have the same experience that you have had. But I haven't so far. After getting past the vouchsafeths and the thees and thous, folks in the churches I've been in have come to greatly appreciate the Standards, and think they are cool.

Jeff Meyers: **We must stop living in the past.**

Jeff Hutchinson: Agreed. "THIS is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad IN IT" (Psalm 118:24); THIS is the time and place that God has appointed for us to live in (Acts 17:26). But obedience to the Word (following "the pattern of the sound words" that we have heard from those who have gone before us--1 Tim. 1:13) is never out of style. Okay, it is ALWAYS out of style, but that is actually part of the point. I don't think anyone at our church, or anyone who knows our church, thinks we are living in the past by being a confessional church. I might be wrong. But it is so far around the globe in the direction of old and square that most folks here think we are young and fresh and hip. Especially the 20-somethings.

Jeff Meyers: **But how can the church amend or correct her standards unless guys have the freedom to discuss possible corrections? If every time a PCA minister begins to wonder about the appropriateness of confessional language and categories, he is denounced as "unorthodox," then the church will be immune to continuing reformation.**

Jeff Hutchinson: Again, I agree completely. But I am assuming that you don't mean that ordained officers should be allowed to go beyond merely wondering and discussing--which folks should certainly be encouraged to do without fear of being denounced as capital "U" "Unorthodox" (but again, until the courts of the church amend the Standards at that point my point is that we must acknowledge that we would be, by definition, at least discussing lower case "u" matters of "unorthodoxy")--into actually teaching as true, non-confessional positions that they have neither made known to their presbyteries nor received at least implicit permission to teach. Did that awkwardly phrased sentence make sense? I hope so because I don't know how to fix it!

Jeff Meyers: **I do think the latest scholarly work in biblical theology demands that we go back and redo a great deal of the Westminster standards.**

Jeff Hutchinson: I am sympathetic in principle, that is for sure. But as for the actual matters that need redoing, I would of course have to evaluate them according to Scripture on a case-by-case basis. For instance:

Jeff Meyers: They were written when people still thought of the covenant as a contract and believed that "merit" had some role to play in our covenantal relations with God. The whole bi-polar covenant of works/grace schema has got to go. And if that goes, the whole "system" must be reworked.

Jeff Hutchinson: I'm not with you on this. But I encourage good folks to follow their conscience and attempt to reform our tradition where we need it. Folks who are straight forward about it, and follow their ordination vows by seeking the Lord's help as they pursue these things in the courts of the church, would have my great respect and support, even if I were unconvinced that they were correct.

That was the end of my interaction with Jeff Hutchinson on this topic. I didn't think anything about it again until I saw one of my statements lifted and used as evidence against me in the letter of concern sent to our presbytery.

10. You seem to indicate merit has no role in our covenantal relations with God when you write, "They were written when people still thought of the covenant as a contract and believed that 'merit' had some role to play in our covenantal relations with God." In light of WCF 7.2, WSC 12, WLC 20, which teach that life was offered to man upon "condition of personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience" (WLC 20), comment on your understanding of the relationship between a "condition of personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience" and merit or payment.

a. What does WCF 7.2 mean when it says that "life was promised to Adam"? This statement is ambiguous. Clearly, Adam and Eve were gifted with life at the beginning (Gen. 2:7) and this "life" Adam possessed was not just physical life, but included "original righteousness" as well as "true holiness" (WCF 4.2). Furthermore, Adam and Eve were "happy in their communion with God" and did not need to *merit* God's favor or approval through their works (WCF 4.2). I do not believe that life was held out as a promise to Adam and Eve, rather the maintenance of the life they were gratuitously given by God was promised if they kept the covenant God made with them. They were not created neutral or "dead" with the need to achieve life through meritorious works. Rather, when they sinned, breaking covenant with God, "they fell from their original righteousness, and communion with God, and so became dead in sin" (WCF 6.2). The continuance of that "covenant of life" God made with Adam was contingent on Adam's "personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience" (WLC Q. 20).

- b. If the second part of this question is suggesting that covenant “conditions” always imply merit, then I must strongly disagree. The presence of a condition does not imply that the fulfillment of that condition *merits* the promise made upon such a condition.
- c. Please note that the Westminster Standards use the same language of “condition/s” of the covenant with Adam as they do to describe the “conditions” required in the covenant of grace. *If requiring Adam to meet conditions logically implies meriting the benefits promised, then requiring people after the fall to meet the condition of faith must also mean that our faith merits salvation.* I reject both horns of this dilemma.

The Confession uses the language of “condition” to describe what was required of Adam in the first covenant:

“the first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, *upon condition of perfect and personal obedience*” (7.2, emphasis mine).

The Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 20 also uses “condition” language but adds “perpetual” to the list:

What was the providence of God toward man in the estate in which he was created?

A. The providence of God toward man in the estate in which he was created, was the placing him in paradise, appointing him to dress it, giving him liberty to eat of the fruit of the earth; putting the creatures under his dominion, and ordaining marriage for his help; affording him communion with himself; instituting the Sabbath; entering into a covenant of life with him, *upon condition of personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience*, of which the tree of life was a pledge; and forbidding to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, upon the pain of death.

When later describing the covenant of grace, the Larger Catechism uses the same language of “condition” to describe how post-fall sinners are to receive the benefits of the “second covenant”:

How is the grace of God manifested in the second covenant?

A. The grace of God is manifested in the second covenant, in that he freely provideth and offereth to sinners a mediator, and life and salvation by him; *and requiring faith as the condition to interest them in him*, promiseth and giveth his Holy Spirit to all his elect, to work in them that faith, with all other saving graces; and to enable them unto all holy obedience, as the evidence of the truth of their faith and thankfulness to God, and as the way which he hath appointed them to salvation. (WLC Q. 32).

d. Both covenantal arrangements—before and after the fall—have requirements and conditions for man. A covenantal requirement or condition does not imply that meeting the condition will “merit” the benefits of the covenant. If that is the case, then we merit God’s grace in the new covenant when we meet the condition of faith that God requires of us. I reject the notion that conditions signal a meritorious covenant. The Westminster divines clearly did not think that was the case.

e. Just to be sure I am not misunderstood, I deny that meeting the “conditions” of the covenant means that we merit or earn God’s grace or favor. I believe that God graciously grants what he requires. Not only is salvation a gift of God’s grace, but the faith to receive that salvation is also God’s gracious gift given freely to the elect.

11. Do you believe Adam’s prelapsarian obedience was meritorious? If so, in what way? If not, why not?

a. No. Please see my reply to previous questions where I answered this question.

b. To reiterate what I have answered in earlier questions, but in a different way: the Westminster standards do not speak of God’s pre-fall covenant with Adam in terms of meritorious achievement, but of perseverance in the "knowledge, righteousness, and holiness" (WLC Q. 17) in which Adam was created and with which God had gifted him with the ability to retain. Merit, arguably, only functions in the Standards in terms of Christ's relationship to his people by virtue of the infinite worth of his obedience as a divine Person. The Westminster Standards use “merit” in a positive sense only once and that is with respect to Jesus’ work for us (WCF 17.2). In WCF 16.5 we are warned that “we cannot by our best works merit pardon of sin.” Then in the Larger Catechism “merit” is used three times: once again to refer to Jesus’ intercession for us (WLC Q. 55), once in Q. 174 instructing Christians that a worthy reception of the Lord’s Supper involves “trusting in his [Christ’s] merits,” and once in dealing with the fourth petition of the Lord’s prayer we are told that we cannot “merit” the “outward blessings of this life” (WLC Q. 193). The term is not found in the Shorter Catechism.

c. There is no suggestion in our Confession or Catechisms that Adam's work would have been meritorious. I do not see how one can insist that one must affirm a meritorious pre-fall Adamic covenant to be faithful to the Westminster Standards.

d. Again, I affirm this statement from our presbytery's Federal Vision study committee:

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

12. Was Adam's prelapsarian obedience something God accepted through grace? If so, how does this obedience fulfill the condition required by God's covenant?

a. I believe I have answered this question in my response to question #10. I will also note here that that the Standards nowhere *exclude* grace from God's prelapsarian covenant with Adam (and in fact seem to strongly suggest it). I lean towards interpreting the language of "voluntary condescension on God's part" in WCF 7.1 to be another way of describing God's gracious inauguration of his covenants with man. This is Robert Letham's way of understanding this phrase in his recent book *The Westminster Assembly: Reading its Theology in Historical Context* (Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 2009), pp. 231-2.

I'm not sure where this comes from, but I like this paraphrase of WCF 7.1:

The distinction between God and creatures is so profound, that although human beings owe their obedience to God as their Creator, yet humanity could never have any eschatological enjoyment of God as their ultimate blessedness and reward, unless God himself graciously offers and grants it to them. God has been pleased to express his promise of eschatological fulfillment in terms of his "covenant."

Interpreting the language of "voluntary condescension" as God's gracious arrangement with man is not new to me or to anyone associated with the current controversy. Robert Shaw's *An Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Christian Focus Publications, 1992) explains that man "could not have laid his Creator under any obligation to him, or been

entitled to any recompense. But God graciously condescended to deal with man by way of covenant. . .” (p. 84).

I believe that this interpretation of “voluntary condescension” in WCF 7.1 is reflected in the Missouri Presbytery Committee’s FV Report. The first affirmation in the section “The Nature of the Covenant and Election” is:

We affirm that by an act of gracious condescension, God bound Himself to His creation, and through His covenant representative bound Himself to His creation by way of covenant (p. 4).

b. One can find explicit descriptions of the covenant of works in terms of divine grace in many Reformed theologians from the 16th to the 21st centuries. I will list a few of them: Zacharias Ursinus, William Bucanus, Francis Junius, Anthony Burgess, Patrick Gillespie, Thomas Blake, John Owen, Samuel Rutherford, William Bridge, Thomas Boston, John Brown of Haddington, Thomas Ridgeley, J. H. Thornwell, Robert L. Dabney, and Herman Bavinck. Many other Reformed theologians, while not employing the explicit language of “grace” nonetheless speak of the covenant of works as “voluntary condescension,” God’s “free gift,” unmerited divine “favor,” and so on.

13. In what particular sense do you maintain that prelapsarian Adam lived by faith? What are the specific continuities and discontinuities between prelapsarian faith and postlapsarian faith? In your opinion, does affirming a prelapsarian faith entail denying any affirmations that the Westminster Standards make about faith? If not, why not?

a. Adam was called to trust God’s Word. Faith means “trust.” He had to believe his heavenly Father’s word to him. God tells Adam who he is and why he was created, gives him a mandate, and makes warnings to him about what will happen if he disobeys. Adam had to live by faith and obey God. I don’t see how this can be problematic.

b. In some profound sense it was easier for Adam to live by faith before the fall than it is for us. Adam had personal, even audible and visible, communion with God in Eden and the Garden. God seems to have spoken to Adam directly. Adam seems to have watched while God made the Garden of Eden, learning from it what he was called to do with the rest of the world (glorify and beautify the world by working to “gardenize it.” The eschatological end of history is a vision of a garden city that fills the earth). Adam had no temptations from within

to fight or struggle against. More could be said here about our first parents' privileged position, but surely Adam and Eve had to live by faith and trust God their Father before the fall. It was precisely their failure to believe God's Word and their failure to trust their gracious Creator that led to his disobedience and sin. Adam and Eve sinned by eating the forbidden fruit, which means they had to simultaneously commit the sin of reckoning God as untrustworthy. The Serpent told them that God was lying to them and they decided the Serpent was more trustworthy than God their Father. Adam ultimately failed to live by faith.

c. Our faith after the fall is not simply in the goodness of God our Father as it was for Adam, but in the goodness, mercy, and grace of God our Father on display in the birth, suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus for us. Unlike Adam, we are called to trust God for his unconditional grace in Christ. For example, before the fall Adam did not need to trust God for the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness. We do.

d. So even though the content and object of our faith is different given the changed situation after the fall, nevertheless, the apostle Paul is able to use the Edenic pre-fall situation to explain the current relation between Christ and his Bride, the church. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 11:1-4,

I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me! For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough.

Notice how Paul is warning Christians about being deceived by Satan *like Eve was*. This is basically a call to *keep faith* and not be led astray by the Devil. Trust your Husband, place your faith in Jesus and don't be duped by Satan. Trust the Lord and not the Tempter.

Therefore even though it is true that Adam and Eve were required to be obedient under the pre-fall covenant and that there was no provision for forgiveness, it is also the case that the basic issue for them was faith, just as it is for us. How else could Paul use this analogy if there were no basic similarity?

Or do we think this admonition means something like this?

I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me! For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I engaged you to one husband, to be perfectly, personally, and perpetually obedient. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, you will disobey and fail to earn by your good works the favor of Jesus that you need to maintain a good relationship to Christ. For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough.

Obviously, that doesn't work. The reason Paul can use Eve in his argument is because she failed in her faith; she was disloyal and unbelieving toward God when she *believed* the Devil's accusations against God.

e. To sum up, I believe that Adam was called to trust God, to believe God the Father's word and promise. His faith was exercised under different circumstance and did not require, as it does for us, faith in a Redeemer from sin. But he was called to faith in his Creator nonetheless.

14. In A Joint Federal Vision Profession, of which you were a signatory, there is the affirmation "that the triune God is the archetype of all covenantal relations" (Joint Federal Vision Profession [JFVP], p. 2). What are the biblical grounds for this affirmation? Do you see this statement as contrary to the Westminster Standards, which state the covenant expresses God's voluntarily condescension to man so that man can have God as His blessedness (WCF 7.1)? Why or why not?

a. The entire statement from the JFVP is as follows:

We affirm that the triune God is the archetype of all covenantal relations. All faithful theology and life is conducted in union with and imitation of the way God eternally is, and so we seek to understand all that the Bible teaches—on covenant, on law, on gospel, on predestination, on sacraments, on the Church—in the light of an explicit Trinitarian understanding.

b. I'll answer the last question first. No, I don't believe that statement is contrary to the Westminster Standards. I don't see how affirming that the origins of God's covenantal relations with man find their source in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit's relation to one another would undermine the system of doctrine taught in the Westminster Standards. I am not trying to contradict the Westminster Standards, only supplement them. They are very sparse when it comes to Trinitarian theology. A great deal of biblical and theological work has

been done recently that needs to be incorporated into our systematic theological work. I have spent a good deal of my graduate theological work at Concordia Seminary (1995-2006, S.T.M. and Ph.D ABD) researching and writing on Trinitarian theology. That work informs all my theologizing about the covenant today.

c. I have already explained my difficulty with the “voluntary condescension” language of chapter 7 in my response to question #4 above. I’ve also suggested that the phrase might be understood as another way of describing God’s grace toward humanity.

d. My main concern in grounding God’s personal relations with us in his eternal personal relations as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is to avoid the specter of an unknown God behind his assumed relations with his creatures. In other words, does the way God deals with us *reveal* his true character and nature? Or has he *adopted* some *ad hoc* way of relating to us that is not grounded in his eternal life and being? Everything I’ve written or said in lectures on this topic has been designed to help Christians see that God’s relations with us are truly expressive of his eternal inner character and life. That there is no other hidden God behind his “assumed” covenantal relations.

e. In his introduction to Witsius’s work on the covenants, J. I Packer grounds God’s covenantal dealings with man in the Trinitarian relations between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit:

*“ . . . the reality of God is not properly understood till it is viewed within a covenantal frame. Who is God? God is the triune Creator, who purposes to have a covenant people whom in love he will exalt for his glory. (“Glory” there means both God’s demonstration of his praiseworthiness and the actual praising that results.) Why does God so purpose? –why, that is, does he desire covenantal fellowship with rational beings? The most we can say (for the question is not one to which God has given us a direct answer) is that the nature of such fellowship observably corresponds to the relationships of mutual honor and love between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit within the unity of the divine being, so that the divine purpose appears to be, so to speak, an enlarging of this circle of eternal love and joy. In highlighting the thought that covenantal communion is the inner life of God, covenant theology makes the truth of the Trinity more meaningful than it can otherwise be” (Introduction to *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man: Comprehending A Complete Body of Divinity*, Herman Witsius [Presbyterian & Reformed, 1990]).*

f. That the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit engage in some form of pre-temporal covenantal arrangement has been a majority opinion among Reformed theologians for 400 years.

Theologians have not always agreed on how to formulate that pre-temporal covenantal bond between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but the list of Reformed pastors and theologians endorsing such a covenantal relationship is impressive: Casper Olevianus (1536-1587), Richard Sibbes (1577-1635), David Dickson (1583-1662), Samuel Rutherford (1600-1161), Thomas Brooks (1608-1680), John Owen (1616-1683), Thomas Manton (1620-1677), Francis Turretin (1623-1687), John Flavel (1628-1691), Herman Witsius (1636-1708), Thomas Boston (1673-1732), John Gill (1671-1771), Charles Hodge (1797-1878), William Shedd (1820-1894), Robert Lewis Dabney (1820-1898), A. A. Hodge (1823-1886), Lewis Berkhof (1873-1957), and more.

g. The last theologian cited, Lewis Berkhof, believes that the persons of the Trinity in “their internal relations assume the form of a covenant life” (Systematic Theology, p. 266). He goes on to say this:

“In fact, it is exactly in the trinitarian life that we find the archetype of the historical covenants, a covenant in the proper and fullest sense of the word, the parties being on equal footing, a true *suntheke*” (p. 266).

The first part of Berkhof’s formulation is almost the same as my own that is quoted in this question.

h. Abraham Kuyper was one of the first to suggest that the traditional *pactum salutis* does not go far enough. The *pactum salutis* or “covenant of redemption” is said to come about in response to the fall, an agreement or covenant between the members of the Godhead for the purpose of bringing salvation to men. Kuyper goes one step further and says that the origin and ground of all of God’s covenantal dealings with man are to be traced to the relations between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

If the idea of the covenant with regard to man and among men can only occur in ectypal form, and if its archetypal original is found in the divine economy, then it cannot have its deepest ground in the *pactum salutis* that has its motive in the fall of man. For in that case it would not belong to the divine economy as such, but would be introduced in it rather incidentally and change the essential relation of the three Persons in the divine essence. . . . The danger can only be escaped when the divine economy of the three Persons is presented *natura sua* as a covenant relation. . . . We then confess that in the one personality of the divine essence there consists a three-personal distinction, which has in the covenantal relation its unity and an inseparable tie. God himself is, according to this conception, not only of every covenant, but of the covenant idea

as such the living and eternal foundation; and the essential unity has in the covenantal relation its conscious expression” (Cited in Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* [Reformed Free Publishing Co., 1966], p. 295).

i. As for the biblical grounds for my statement, all I can do is summarize a few lines of arguments from my lectures, papers, and articles I have written on this subject. I’ve already provided the committee with links to these works. They will fill out the biblical and theological arguments for my position on this topic.

j. Here is one sample line of argument I have used in the past in public lectures. Perhaps this will help. It is an argument based on the fact that in the Gospels we have opened for us, if you will, a window on the intra-trinitarian relations between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. What is revealed there is a revelation of the inner life and love relations between the three Persons.

When the disciples and apostles pondered everything Jesus had said and done, especially what he had said to his Father and done on the cross in obedience to his Father, they were confronted with a riddle. The riddle of all riddles. How would they understand the meaning of his intimate conversations with the Father? What would they make of his obedience to the Father? Was he merely a human image of God, an example for us to follow? Or is there more going on in the life of Jesus?

Were his words and actions in relation to the Father merely human actions? Or was he truly the eternal God talking, acting, obeying, serving, suffering, and dying in the flesh?

When they call him "Lord," what kind of lord was he? When they refer to his "obedience" and "service" what kind of obedience was this? The obedience of a man? Surely, at least! But was it also the obedience of God? Can we talk meaningfully about God's obedience or is "obedience" a category reserved for creatures in their relations with one another and with their Creator?

How one answers these questions is enormously significant. If obedience is, strictly speaking, a human or creaturely duty, then it is easy to conceive of our obedience as a function of who's got more power. Since God has all the power, we must submit and obey. If a king or an employer has more power, then we must obey. We obey our parents because they are bigger than we are. But is that the only way to understand obedience— as a way of relating to one more powerful and dangerous than oneself?

To put this in the context of the current discussion about the nature of the covenant, the question is: is covenant obedience restricted to the creature's response to his almighty Creator? If the answer is yes, then it would be blasphemous and dangerous to push this dimension of the covenant back into the Godhead. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are "equal

in power and glory" as our Westminster Shorter Catechism nicely puts it. The eternal Son does not obey the Father because he is more divine or even more powerful than he is. That would be the worst kind of subordinationism, ontological and economic.

Sovereign human lords make treaties with vassals and those subservient vassals must obey without question or suffer severe repercussions. If we make God the great Suzerain Lord and human creatures his vassals, then obedience has a context and meaning.

But can such a relation make sense of Jesus' obedience to the Father?

If we accept these lord/vassal categories, then Jesus' obedience to his Father must simply be the obedience of his human nature, of the creature to the Creator. But is this a full explanation of his submissive relation to his Father? Christologically, this is suspect because Jesus is not a human person at all. Rather, he is a *divine Person* who has assumed our *human nature*. He existed as the eternal Son before the incarnation. He continued to be the divine Son after his assumption of our human nature. So it is as the eternal Son that he assumed our human nature and lives his divine life as the Person of the Son in union with his assumed human nature.

Given this truth, can we be content with assigning his obedience to his assumed created nature? This appears to divide the natures in a way that seems too Nestorian. (I recognize that these two paragraphs assume an awful lot and might need to be fleshed out a bit. Even so, the Christological premise is sound.)

But if it is the Person of the eternal Son who obeys the Father, then we have obedience, as it were, expressed in the relations of Father and Son. And if the incarnation of the Son reveals the true nature of God, as John tells us in chapter one of his Gospel, then the true God is obedient. God does not only require obedience, God obeys. God the Son obeys God the Father.

According to the New Testament it is not simply the human nature of Jesus that has this obedient orientation, but it is Christ Jesus who lives as *morphe theou*, who in accordance with his divine mode of life becomes obedient unto death, pouring himself out for us (Phil. 2). That's my take, anyway, on Philippians 2. It is God the Son living as a man that humbles himself and is obedient unto death.

Continuing the argument, then, it is the Person of God the Son who is an obedient Servant — Servant of his Father on our behalf. There is nothing accidental or alien about this way of living and relating to the Father. This is not simply a foil for his divine glory, as if divine glory is really primarily about power. His "lordship" has nothing to do with the way fallen human political tyrants perceive glory — pushing people around and manipulating others.

In his incarnation and death on the cross, the eternal Son does not become something that he is not. What I mean by this is that the Son does not incarnate as a man so that he might *become* submissive and obedient. He does not need to become a man to be obedient and submissive to his Father.

In other words, the Son does not assume a role that does not express who he is. And who he is, he is in relation to his Father. Obedience and service characterizes, at some crucial level the eternal, inter-trinitarian personal relations. The Son becomes a man because he is submissive to the Father. He, the Son, gave himself up (Gal. 2:20, Eph. 5:2). He, the eternal Son, humbled himself (Phil. 2:7). He, the divine Son, emptied himself, pouring out his life to the Father for us (Phil. 2:8; Isa. 53:13).

Now think about the requirement of submission and obedience given to humanity in covenant relation to God. I think everyone would agree that God's covenant with the human creature involves man's obedience. If obedience is a necessary dimension of covenantal relations, then the Son's relations with the Father are covenantal.

More than that, is it too much of a stretch to conclude that God's expectation of obedience from man is not something utterly foreign to God himself? That God's own covenantal life includes obedience—at least the obedience of the Son to the Father, but also the obedience of the Spirit to Father and Son, and possibly even the willing submission of Father to the will of the Son and Spirit.

To state this in a way that some might find shocking, God does not ask his creatures to do something that he himself is not willing to do. You see, we have to clean up our thinking a bit. Obedience, especially an obedience that willingly serves and puts oneself at another's disposal in order to see the other glorified, is a divine mode of life. Maybe this is the deep meaning behind John's theological statements, "God is love" (1 John 4:8), and that "love is obedience to the command of the other" (2 John 6).

Father, Son, and Spirit love one another so much that they are obedient servants one to the other. And this eternal covenantal submission and service is the ground of the human creature's covenantal obedience to God. To be godly means to be obedient, and imaging God means obedient, self-sacrificial service to God and to other human creatures.

So you see, the submission/obedience/service of the covenant is not external to God, but expressive of his true life as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And this is not myth, but history. God's story.

This is part of the solution to the riddle of Christ's conversations with and obedience to the Father. What is recorded in the New Testament Scriptures—what the Son said to his Father and to us, as well as what the Son did in obedience to his Father in time and space is nothing else than the history of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit's covenantal relations with each other *pro nobis*. Reading the Gospels is like gazing into the window of God's eternal being. We don't have access to everything, of course. But we do have enough to know that God is more than a solitary Sovereign Person (like the false god Allah). What is recorded in the Gospel stories is nothing less than a slice of the life of God.

I believe that if our conception of the covenant degenerates into purely external, extrinsic acts of God, acts that are only loosely related to the real life of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, if they only assumed these roles in order to get something accomplished, then we know and worship an unknown god behind the purely economic, covenantal relations

expressed in his external dealings with us. I believe what we have revealed in the Gospel stories is God himself.

(Note: Of course, if this line of reasoning is faithful to the Scriptures, then it has massive implications for the question of God's initial covenantal relations with Adam. The demand for obedience could never be a meritorious covenant since that would be alien to God's eternal covenantal relations. But this has to be developed with more care, which is what the next question addresses).

As I said above, this is just one line of argument that leads to the conclusion that God's intra-personal life as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is the origin and ground of his relations with created persons. I don't expect everyone to accept my reasoning. But this kind of theologizing is not outside of the tradition of Reformed theology. And it does not threaten the rich covenantal theology we have inherited. I am not the only one to argue this way, as I have pointed out above.

k. Here's another line of argument I've used on lectures, one that combines what I've already said in critique of a meritorious Adamic covenant with reflection on the obedience of Jesus in the light of the intra-trinitarian relations of love between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

To speak of Adam or Jesus "earning" or "meriting" God's favor is confusing at best. Obeying the law as a condition of "covenantal blessings" is one thing. Obeying the law as way to gain "God's favor" is something entirely different. Let's think about this a bit.

Adam in his pre-lapsarian state enjoyed the favor of God. He did not have to *work* for it. He did not have to *merit* God's love. He was in loving and happy communion with God, as our Standards explicitly teach (WCF 4.2, 19.1, WLC 20). Moreover, there is nothing in the text of Genesis 1-3 or anywhere else in the Bible to suggest that God's favor and acceptance was suspended until such time that Adam met certain conditions. Adam was created in a living, healthy covenantal relationship with God. God was Adam's Father. This Father-son relationship did not depend on Adam's meriting it or fulfilling certain conditions. The idea that he had to earn the love and favor of God seems to me incredible.

But all this is not to say that Adam did not have eschatological blessings yet to receive from his Father, the Lord. Neither am I denying that what Adam hoped for in the future depended upon his fulfilling certain conditions. Fine. He was created good but not mature. And we don't even need to spell out exactly what Adam would have received from God had he been faithful to the covenant. I have my own convictions, but they need not mess up the argument here. There was clearly something more for Adam, some glorification of his estate in the future. But my point here is that this "more" was not God's favor and love. He had that. And saying that Adam's reception of the "more" depended on his faithfulness, on his perseverance in his communion with God is much different than

saying that by fulfilling the law Adam would have earned the favor of God or merited some blessing.

Now, in the case of Jesus we need to make the same distinctions. This line of reasoning also helps us understand Jesus' obedience as the new and last Adam. Jesus did not obey his Father and ultimately give his life sacrificially so as to merit God's favor for us. He did not live and obey the law perfectly in order to merit God's love and favor for his people. No. Whatever Jesus did, he most certainly did not, by his meritorious work, cause the love of God to come into existence, for him or for us.

Rather, God so loved the world that he sent his only Son (John 3:16). Indeed, since Jesus himself is God, his incarnation was an act of love for us. He became a man and lived a human life obediently as the Son for us. What culminated on the cross was God the Son's decision to suffer the consequences of the curse himself for us. The Son assumed our flesh to do just that.

I'm not trying to provide a comprehensive theology of the incarnation or the atonement. There's more to it than this, of course. But the notion that Adam and Jesus were set to merit God's favor or even to cause God's love and favor to come into existence because they met certain meritorious conditions is intolerable.

We can say more about this. To me, ascribing "merit" to Jesus work becomes even more problematic if you are talking about the Person of God the Son. Did God the Son merit/earn the favor of God the Father? That can't be. Not if his incarnate life expressed the love of God for us.

Remember, one of the factors that often gets left out of these equations is that our salvation was not simply about the man Jesus doing something so that God the Father would be gracious or free to bless us. God the Son is sometimes forgotten in our theologizing about his earthly work. Did he merit salvation for us *from himself*? Did he obey himself in order for himself to be gracious to us? That's doesn't make any sense.

As I just said above, it was the love and favor of the Father and the Son that led to the cross. Neither the obedience of Jesus to the law before the cross, nor his sacrificial obedience unto death on the cross earned or achieved God's favor and love. Rather, the obedience of Jesus and his self-denying death on the cross are expressions of God's love for us.

Merit talk simply does not work when we consider God the Son's relation to the Father. Think about it. I believe that theologizing with Trinitarian eyes about the obedient life of Jesus that climaxes in the atonement may prove to be quite productive. If we don't do this, then we risk lapsing into a Unitarian or Deistic theology of the atonement.

Once again, please don't read these two sample arguments as the final word, but as explorations based on my commitment to an explicitly trinitarian theology. I grant that there are other ways of theologizing about the covenant and covenantal obedience. Ways that have

their roots in traditional ways of interpreting the bi-polar covenantal Reformed theology. Even so, I don't believe that grounding God's *ad extra* relations with humanity in the *ad intra* personal relations between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is contrary to anything in the Westminster Standards. If you want to read more about my way of arguing for this, please see my 2001 essay "Some Prima Facie Arguments for the Trinity as the Image of Renewed Sociality in the Church" available here:

files.me.com/jeffmeyers/7rpa0s

15. Given man's limited knowledge of intra-Trinitarian relations, in what ways can one overreach in utilizing these relations as the "archetype of covenantal relations" (particularly in view are our covenantal relations with God)? What would you say are some of the primary areas in which theologians should be cautious?

a. The only knowledge we have of the intra-trinitarian relations between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are those revealed in the Scriptures. I don't advocate prying beyond that. But I do believe that the Scriptures, especially the account of the incarnate Son's interaction with the Father and Spirit in the Gospels, has more to offer in this area than we have previously thought.

b. I have been working on a book dealing with these matters. Actually, it is a book on the doctrine of the Trinity. I pretty much finished it about 5 years ago. But I have put off trying to publish it in order to insure that I am not overreaching in my theologizing about the Triune God. I continue to submit my views to colleagues in an effort to insure that I am not speculating beyond what is appropriate for one who is committed to the infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible. A great many problems in Trinitarian theology, even traditional Trinitarian theology, are the result of ontological speculation about the inner life and being of the Trinity. I am very anxious to avoid errors like that. Augustine, himself a master of trinitarian speculation, wrote something in Book 1 of his *On the Trinity* that has frightened me for many years. I have tried my best to submit to his advice.

Accordingly, dear reader, whenever you are as certain about something as I am go forward with me; whenever you stick equally fast seek with me; whenever you notice that you have gone wrong come back to me; or that I have, call me back to you. In this way let us set out along Charity Street together, making for him of whom it is said, Seek his face always (Psalm 105:4). This covenant, both prudent and pious, I would wish to enter into in the sight of the Lord our God with all who read what I write, and with respect to all my writings, especially such as these where we are seeking the unity of the three, of Father and Son and Holy Spirit. For nowhere is a mistake more dangerous, or the search more laborious, or discovery more advantageous (*De Trin.* 1.1.5 [*The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. John E. Rotelle, vol. I/5 (New City Press, 1991), p. 68]).

I have tried to be cautious about my Trinitarian formulations. I'm sure I have not always been as careful as I ought. Even so, I remain convinced that the personal relations between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the ground of all divine-human as well as human-human social relations.

Follow-up Questions from the Committee on Covenant relationships within the Trinity

Here is question we originally put to you:

In A Joint Federal Vision Profession, of which you were a signatory, there is the affirmation “that the triune God is the archetype of all covenantal relations” (Joint Federal Vision Profession [JFVP], p. 2). What are the biblical grounds for this affirmation? Do you see this statement as contrary to the Westminster Standards, which state the covenant expresses God’s voluntarily condescension to man so that man can have God as His blessedness (WCF 7.1)? Why or why not?

We make this observation: Unlike with other words, you fail to note that the term “covenant” is nowhere used in Scripture or in our Standards in reference to the intra-Trinitarian relationships. Yet you consider it an important point in regard to other areas of theology whether a term is used in the Standards or in the Scriptures. So, for instance, you point out that neither the term “merit” nor “covenant” is used in the Westminster Standards in connection with Adam in his prelapsarian relationship with God.

In light of that observation; here are a few questions to help us understand why and how you contend for the idea that “that the triune God is the archetype of all covenantal relations.”

1. Do you acknowledge the truth of the claim that the word “covenant” is never explicitly used in either Scripture or the Standards in reference to the intra-Trinitarian relationships among the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit?

Yes. I do not make my affirmation of God's intra-trinitarian covenantal relations a matter of orthodoxy. My thoughts on this topic are set out as a theological research project. Part of my argument is based on the analogy of Scripture. Just as we describe the relationship between God and Adam as covenantal, even though the word is not used in the text of Genesis 2, so we might also consider God the Father's relationship with the eternal Son as covenantal.

2. Do you derive your confidence that the term "covenantal" is an appropriate term to use because you are stressing the "familial" (or relational) dimension of the concept of covenant rather than any "contractual" dimension?

Yes.

3. Would you accept the hermeneutical proposition that you feel justified in applying the term "covenantal" to the intra-Trinitarian relationships because you believe it follows by good consequence from Scriptural statements, but also that you have refrained from requiring that terminology of others because you do not believe it flows from Scripture by a necessary consequence? If you do not accept this proposition, explain why not.

Well, what I am proposing is that speaking of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit's shared life as covenantal is grounded in scriptural statements. I have offered my arguments for this position at some length in lectures and essays. I summarized a few lines of argument in my answers to the committee's questions. The argument as a whole cannot be reduced to a few sentences. All I am asking for is that others interact with my biblical theological arguments in fruitful dialog and debate. As I said in my answers to the committee, I am just a midget standing on the shoulders of men like Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, and others who have argued from Scripture that God's intra-trinitarian relations might fruitfully be described in covenantal language. Take a look, for example, at Herman Hoeskema's extended argument for the value of using covenantal categories to describe the Trinity's inner relations (*Reformed Dogmatics* [Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing, 1966], pp. 285-336). There may be nothing in the Westminster standards regarding this matter, but my theologizing on this issue is not something foreign to the Reformed tradition. I am not, however, claiming that my theological formulations on this topic are necessary for everyone to confess and teach. I am humbly submitting this thesis for evaluation and critique to the community of men who have an interest in both covenant and Trinitarian theology.

Here is another question regarding your answers to our query about what you believe concerning the intra-Trinitarian relationships as being “covenantal.” In your answer to question #14 above you write:

*“More than that, is it too much of a stretch to conclude that God’s expectation of obedience from man is not something utterly foreign to God himself? That God’s own covenantal life includes obedience—at least the obedience of the Son to the Father, but also the obedience of the Spirit to Father and Son, **and possibly even the willing submission of Father to the will of the Son and Spirit.**” [emphasis not in the original]*

You seem to be moving into speculation with the last clause, as you qualify it by saying “possibly...the willing submission of the Father.” But later (p. 29, lines 9-12) you seem clearly to affirm the idea that the Father “obeys” the Son and the Spirit when you say,

Father, Son, and Spirit love one another so much that they are obedient servants one to the other. And this eternal covenantal submission and service is the ground of the human creature’s covenantal obedience to God. To be godly means to be obedient, and imaging God means obedient, self-sacrificial service to God and to other human creatures.

We can see how the Scripture-attested submission of the Son to the Father lends itself to seeing intra-Trinitarian relationships as “covenantal,” at least if one is emphasizing the familial rather than the contractual aspect of the category “covenant.” But the possibility of the Father submitting his will to the will of the Son and the Spirit seems to be in a different category.

The resulting questions are these:

4. Do you affirm the doctrine that the Father obeys the Son and Spirit, as you seem to above, and have you taught that? Or do you only regard it as a possibility, as a speculative extension? Do you find any explicit Scriptural support for such a statement?

Pure speculation. I copied that section from a lecture I gave 8 years ago as an example of my overall argument. As often happens in lecturing and preaching, reviewing that comment now 8 years later, I would not say that. I’m sorry that such an off-hand comment has sidetracked everything. Honestly, I didn’t even notice that comment when I copied it into my answers. “When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent (Prov. 10:17). My original response to the committee’s questions contained 40,000 words! I have no doubt that there are other places where I have erred.

5. Presumably, you see the idea of the Father submitting his will to the will of the Son and Spirit as an inference from the idea of mutual love among the persons in the

Godhead—are we correct?

That is the only way such a statement could be acceptable. But as it stands it is too provocative and does not reflect my own theological convictions at present.

6. Do you accept the assertion that our understanding of the intra-Trinitarian relationships should be built up by collocating all the specific Scriptural statements about those relationships and trying then to develop a coherent picture from them, and not by absolutizing Jesus' general statement, "For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise" (John 5:19), or other such general statements, and then drawing the inference that there must be a complete interchangeability in the way the Father, the Son, and the Spirit relate to each other? To put a finer point on this, Would you agree that Jesus' statement in John 14:28, "The Father is greater than I," does not give us grounds to teach that the Father must be saying about the Son, "The Son is greater than I?"

I agree.

7. This may all seem rarefied and abstruse, but it goes to the concern some have about your emphasis on the covenantal relationships within the Trinity—and the familial dimensions of them—as being the ground of all God's covenantal relationships with human beings. We regard your answers to all the questions we have put to you to be, essentially, a credo, "This I believe." So we are trying to ascertain what, precisely, you believe here, and what you regard as speculation. And if you acknowledge that some of the answers to the question, "How do the intra-Trinitarian relationships function?" will certainly be speculative, then further questions follow:

Is there a proper place for speculation in the teaching ministry of the gospel, and if not, Why not? If so, a) What is a simple way of expressing the value of speculation? And b) How does one guard against the danger of speculation sliding over into affirmation in the minds of God's people as they sit under our teaching/preaching ministries?

I suppose it all depends on what one means by "speculation." That word has insurmountable negative connotations. Even so, I have in the past considered certain theological propositions speculative, only to realize later that I did not have sufficient biblical knowledge to recognize biblical connections that I had at first failed to see. For example, I believed when I was younger that the biblical doctrine of election was "speculative." Lutherans still accuse Reformed theologians of being overly "speculative" in our formulations of election and predestination. Then there are those that accuse recent Trinitarian formulations of being "speculative" for using "social" language to describe the intra-trinitarian "family" being of God. I've been told that any suggestion of an eschatology for Adam is speculative because

there is nothing in the text of Genesis 1-3 about Adam's future. And I think many conservative preachers often speculate in their sermons when they make all kinds of psychological applications from narrative texts.

There are risks involved in all theologizing. I'm with John Frame on the nature of doing theology. All theologizing is about the application of the Word of God to our questions and concerns. When we do this there is always some risk of overextending our "applications" and "formulations" so that some may think we are speculating. Furthermore, all theology is contextual, and so what might be very concrete and applicable to one generation or culture might be thought to be speculative by another. We read Augustine's *De Trinitate* and can hardly read 5 pages into it before we are scratching our heads and wondering how Augustine could be so cocksure about his speculations.

I have a bookshelf full of books on the Trinity—almost 150 books—most of them written in the past 60 years. There's a great deal of "speculation" in many of these books, especially those that were written at the headwaters of the renaissance in Trinitarian studies in the mid-20th century. Later work would correct earlier "speculation." But that speculation was productive for the progress in trinitarian theology. We all do theology in community. We are inspired as well as corrected by others as we write, review, criticize, and dialog with others interested in our field of inquiry. I don't believe it's healthy for the church to squelch all conjecture and "speculation" that arises from biblical reflection and study.

In my preaching and teaching in the church I tend to be pretty concrete and try to stick with the text of Scripture as much as I can. Occasionally, however, I will offer suggestive theological propositions for debate among friends or in more academic environments. I don't see any problem with this as long as the context is appropriate. This has been happening for centuries. It's one of the ways we move forward and gain new insights in the meaning and application of the Word of God.

II. The Imputation of Christ's Merit

I will preface my answers in this section with this statement: I affirm without reservation everything taught about the doctrine of justification in the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Larger Catechism, and the Shorter Catechisms. I have never had any reservations about the Reformed doctrine of justification by faith alone, including the imputation of the righteousness of Christ to believers.

Once again, please read through all the questions in this section before passing judgment on any particular formulation in my answers. Later answers will illumine earlier replies, I believe. Also, a fuller expression of my views on imputation can be found in my answers to the questions in section V on "Justification."

1. On September 29, 2007 on the *De Regno Christi* web site, you repeatedly denied the "imputation of the active obedience of Christ" (IAOC). By this denial are you implying that a genuine believer is accounted and accepted as righteous in the sight of God (WCF 11.1) without regard for the perfect obedience of Christ?

a. No. Absolutely not. I affirm the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers. I have always affirmed this Reformation truth. Apart from the judicial imputation of Christ's work to us there is no hope of salvation for sinful humans. We are justified by God's "imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ" (WCF XI.1) to us when we believe the Gospel.

b. I believe and confess that the righteousness of the risen, glorified Christ is imputed to us by faith. I confess and teach that Jesus was perfectly obedient and submissive to his Father during his earthly life and ministry. This faithfulness on his part qualified him to be the sinless Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. His flawless "active obedience" was absolutely necessary in order for him to fulfill all righteousness and to qualify him "to offer himself without blemish to God" (Heb. 9:14).

c. So why don't I like the phrase "the imputation of the active obedience of Christ" (IAOC)? The phrase "active obedience of Christ" does not occur in the Westminster Standards. There's a simple reason for that. There was a group of Westminster divines that held to a particular theory about what "the righteousness of Christ" imputed to us implied. They wanted the Standards to include "active" to make it clear that the merits that Jesus accrued during his life

were legally transferred to believers. Other Westminster divines disagreed with that theory. There was a big debate. That debate is well known and documented. The resulting compromise was written in such a way that the various views would not be excluded in the formulations. It is important to remember that the Westminster Standards are “compromise” documents that allow for all sides in these intramural Reformed debates to subscribe to the final formulations.

d. What I deny is a particular theological interpretation regarding what is imputed to us. Specifically, I am not comfortable with how the mechanics of imputation are described in some quarters. I do not believe Jesus *merited* the Father’s favor or earned “righteousness points” during his earthly life, merit points that are then credited to believers. I put it crassly like this in order to highlight what I see as the problem with this entire way of conceiving of God’s covenantal relationship with Adam and then with Jesus. We’re back to the same issues that I discussed in the previous set of questions on the covenant. Many who insist on the imputation of “the active obedience” of Christ are bringing this entire covenantal “meritocracy” into the theological mix. I do not find that position to be persuasive, as I’ve already made clear. That’s why I reject the phrase “the imputation of the active obedience of Christ.”

e. Just to be clear, I do not deny Jesus’ perfect obedience during his earthly ministry. I affirm that he was faithful and just, that he obeyed the law perfectly. I do not deny the importance of Jesus’ pre-cross obedience. The reason I do not affirm the phrase “the imputation of the active obedience of Christ” is because of the systematic baggage that goes with that phrase in our tradition. What I deny is that the accumulation of the merits earned by Jesus’ moral acts during his life is somehow imputed to my account. And I reject the IAOC formulation because I find no evidence for it whatsoever in the Bible or in the Westminster Standards to which I have subscribed. I believe that judging men’s Reformed orthodoxy by means of extra-confessional formulations is dangerous and unhealthy. This is especially the case when the accusers are using language that the Westminster divines deliberately decided not to include in the Confession and Catechisms.

2. What role, if any, does Christ's perfect obedience to the law of God play in establishing a genuine believer as righteous in God's sight?

a. There is a peculiar accusation I have encountered on the internet. The charge is made that those who object to the imputation of the active obedience of Christ (again, because it is connected with the idea that Adam and Jesus both had to fulfill a meritorious covenant of works in order to earn or achieve righteousness) must therefore hold to the following:

1) Believers are forgiven and justified (by the imputation of the passive obedience of Christ),

2) And that puts believers in some sort of neutral state with regard to positive righteousness,

3) Therefore we have to add our own righteousness/obedience to make up for what we didn't get via the imputation of the active obedience of Christ.

I don't believe anything like that. I believe we are justified by faith and reckoned to be righteous in God's sight because of the work of Christ for us. The righteousness of Christ does not need to be supplemented by our acts of righteousness in order for us to earn or achieve salvation at the last day.

b. I affirm this statement from the *Report of the Missouri Presbytery ad hoc Committee on Federal Vision Theology* with no reservations:

Scripture not only affirms the imputation of Adam's sin to all humankind, but also affirms the imputation of Christ's righteousness to his people, wherein his righteousness is credited forensically to their account (Romans 5:12-21; 2 Corinthians 5:21). Although in previous periods it was incumbent to distinguish such imputation from an infusion of righteousness, today's exegetical discussions have also made it necessary to reaffirm imputation as the basis for God's just declaration of righteousness. God's declaration of righteousness, even a corporate declaration, cannot rightly occur without a basis in God's reckoning of Christ's righteousness to the account of individual sinners (p. 6).

c. I also wholeheartedly agree with these two affirmations from the Missouri Presbytery Report (p. 7):

7. We affirm that in justification, God the Father imputes the righteousness of Christ to believing sinners, a righteousness that is premised upon Christ's lifelong obedience and his obedience unto death; we deny that anyone is justified by God apart from this imputation.

8. We affirm that God justifies sinners by imputing Christ's righteousness to them rather than counting their sins against them; we deny that justification is grounded in any infusion of grace or that faith itself, as an act of obedience, is imputed as the ground of justification.

3. Does the covenant of grace preclude the condition of perfect obedience to God's law in order for mankind to enjoy a covenant relationship with God?

I'm not sure I understand the intent of this question. Is this question asking if Jesus had to obey the law perfectly in order to become the source of eternal salvation and ensure that his people would have a fruitful covenantal relationship with God? If so, I believe that is the case. I've said as much in my answers to earlier questions. But this is different from saying that a meritorious "covenant of works" is still in force after the fall and that it must be fulfilled by Jesus before he (and we in him) can be accepted by God.

4. What benefits, if any, does a genuine believer receive from Christ's perfect obedience to God's law (i.e. the active obedience of Christ)?

a. The phrase "active obedience of Christ" refers to something very specific in the debates about Covenantal theology. It does not simply refer to Christ's perfect obedience to God's law. I affirm that Jesus had to obey the law perfectly in order to be qualified as our Savior. I believe Jesus' obedience was necessary to qualify him to be the perfect sacrificial victim on the cross. What I deny is that Jesus earned God the Father's favor by meritorious good works before the cross and then that these moral brownie points are somehow legally transferred to us. I find nothing in the Bible or the Westminster standards about such a scheme.

b. The genuine believer benefits from the perfect obedience of Christ in that without it Jesus would not have been the sinless, spotless Lamb of God. His sacrifice would not have been acceptable. His perfect obedience qualified him to be the Savior of the world. Without his perfect submission and obedience to the law he could never have offered himself without spot to God on the cross (Heb. 9:14; 1 Pet. 1:19). If he had not been obedient during his earthly life he would not be the risen, glorified righteous Federal Head of his people. In union with the risen, glorified, righteous Jesus we are reckoned to be righteous in God's sight. United to Christ, I do not have a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith (Phil. 3:9).

5. What is your understanding of the phrase “obedience of Christ” as it is presented in the Westminster Standards (e.g., WCF 11.3). What aspects of Christ’s character or life is included in this obedience?

a. The paragraph referred to in the question (WCF 11.3) says

Christ, by his obedience and death, did fully discharge the debt of all those that are thus justified, and did make a proper, real, and full satisfaction to his Father's justice in their behalf.^f Yet, inasmuch as he was given by the Father for them; and his obedience and satisfaction accepted in their stead^h; and both, freely, not for anything in them; their justification is only of free grace; that both the exact justice and rich grace of God might be glorified in the justification of sinners.

I affirm what is taught in this paragraph. The biblical proof texts appended to the “obedience and satisfaction” phrases (footnotes. f and h) help explain what is meant by “obedience and death.” I have copied them below. Every biblical reference listed by the Westminster Divines has to do with Jesus’ obedient, submissive death.

f. Mark 10:45, For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many. Rom. 5:8–10, 18–19, But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life. . . Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life. For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous. Gal. 3:13, Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree. 1 Tim. 2:5–6, For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time. Heb. 1:3, “. . . who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high. Heb. 10:10, 14, By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. . . .For by one offering he hath perfected forever them that are sanctified. Dan. 9:24, 26, Seventy weeks are determined upon thy people and upon thy holy city, to finish the transgression, and to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up the vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most Holy. . . . And after threescore and two weeks shall Messiah be cut off, but not for himself: and the people of the prince that shall come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary; and the end thereof shall be with a flood, and unto the end of the war desolations are determined. See Isa. 52:13–53:12.

h. 2 Cor. 5:21, For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him. Eph. 5:2, . . . and walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savour. Phil. 2:6–9, . . . who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and

being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name. Isa. 53:10–11, Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities.

The biblical proofs listed for “obedience and death” all have to do with Jesus’ sacrificial death for us. He was obedient in every thing before the cross, and that obedience both qualified and enabled him to perform the crowning act of obedient submission to his Father—his self-giving death on the cross for us.

Both Jesus’ obedience and his death were necessary for our salvation, for our justification. I affirm this. But I don’t believe that one should read into this phrase the entire works/merit scheme that is found in some versions of Reformed theology. Every one of the passages cited in the prooftexts has to do with the death of Jesus, his life of obedience having qualified him to make atonement for his people. I believe and confess that Jesus was perfectly righteous in his earthly life (all aspects of his life) and that his flawless obedience culminated in his self-giving death on the cross for his people. Every biblical reference to the doctrine of justification (and not just the use of the word “justify” or “justification”) in the New Testament, grounds justification in the sacrificial, propitiatory death and resurrection of Jesus. The only text that refers to Jesus’ obedience is Rom. 5:18-19.

Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.

And that text turns out also to be a reference to Jesus’ death. Paul grounds justification in Jesus’ “one act of righteousness” (18), meaning his sacrificial death. That one act of righteousness is the “obedience” by which the many will be made righteous. All the other references in the footnotes to this paragraph of the Confession are about Jesus’ being qualified to offer himself on the cross as “sinless,” “without blemish,” “holy,” “righteous,” human sacrifice for sin. We are justified because of the death and resurrection of Jesus for us:

But God commends his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, *being now justified by his blood*, we shall be saved from wrath through him. For

if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life (Rom. 5:8-10).

b. There is no reference in the New Testament that says something like this: “we are justified by Jesus’ obedient life” or “we are justified by the merits of his earthly life” or simply “we are justified by his righteous works.” All the references to justification in the NT ground our forgiveness and righteousness in Jesus’ death and resurrection. I confess and believe that his perfect life of obedience *qualified* him to be that propitiatory sacrifice. But there is nothing in the New Testament to suggest that we are justified by his pre-cross meritorious works being imputed to us. Rather, *the righteousness that he possesses now as the resurrected, glorified Christ* is imputed to us and received by faith alone.

c. Jesus obeyed the law perfectly, fulfilling the law without sin. He subjected Himself to the judgment of the Father because of our sin; obeying "passively" he died on the cross. With this the Father was well pleased, and judged Jesus to be the Righteous One, declaring that verdict by raising His Son from the dead.

Jesus “. . . was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom. 4:25).

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us (Rom. 8:31-34).

d. In raising Jesus, the Father was saying, "I judge My Son to be the one who has obeyed perfectly even unto death." Now by union with Christ, through faith, that verdict is also passed on us. If this is an accurate summary of the New Testament, then there is no "independent" imputation of the active obedience of Christ. Rather, we are legally judged to be righteous, that is, Christ's righteousness is imputed to be ours, because of our union with Him by faith in His resurrection. Imputation is the judicial verdict of “not guilty and righteous,” but it is not the pre-cross moral acts of Jesus or the moral merits he earned during his life that are imputed to us. Rather, the righteousness that he possesses *now* as the resurrected, glorified Christ is imputed to us and received by faith alone. Jesus “was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.” (Rom. 4:25).

e. Let me close this section of questions with a further note about the controversy surrounding the phrase “the imputation of the active obedience of Christ.” Certain men in our churches are attempting to revise all the way back to the Westminster Assembly and make affirming the imputation of the "active obedience of Christ" mandatory for PCA ministers. I find this perspective troubling because a few years ago I made a special point of listening to church historian Chad Van Dixhoorn lecture on precisely this issue.

Van Dixhoorn is the director of the Westminster Assembly Project. He has access to a great deal of information about the assembly. His lecture was an attempt to summarize the amazingly complex debate over the doctrine of justification in the assembly, especially over the notion of the imputation of the active obedience of Christ.

When asked which theological controversies led to spicy debate, Van Dixhoorn says without hesitation that the doctrine of justification "brings the assembly to its highest temperature in debate." During this controversy, divines even called each other names and John Lightfoot says this controversy about justification was "our hot debate." He goes on to say that the record of the speeches made by the individual divines on this subject ought to help us appreciate "the messiness of confessional formulation." As they debated the doctrine of justification, different parties formed and alliances shifted with the discussion of various formulations. In his new book on the Westminster Assembly Robert Letham has a lengthy account of the debates on the subject of imputation (*The Westminster Assembly* [Presbyterian & Reformed, 2009], pp. 250-264). This is worth reading even if the terms of the debate have changed somewhat since Merdith Kline's proposals regarding the Adamic covenant of works.

The divines debated the biblical and theological merits of “the imputation of the active obedience of Christ.” That simple fact is not often appreciated or even acknowledged in the current debates. Not every divine agreed with this doctrine. Was Jesus' obedience to the law imputed to the believer? Did he merit something in his obedience that then gets transferred in justification? Reformed theologians and pastors of the day did not all answer these questions the same way. There was diversity on this in the assembly. There was no unified Reformed tradition on this matter.

Not only is it quite clear from Van Dixhoorn's work that the Westminster divines were divided on this subject and debated it fiercely, it is also crystal clear that the divines decided not to include the idea in the Confession of Faith or Catechism. *The phrase "the active obedience of Christ" was not only available to them, it was the signature way of describing what some divines believed was imputed to believers in justification. It was not, however, included in the final document.*

In other words, Van Dixhoorn makes it clear that the Westminster divines intentionally framed and approved a confession that did not include the imputation of the active obedience of Christ as a part of the doctrine of justification.

This is a remarkably honest assessment, given the fact that Van Dixhoorn confesses in the interview that he himself holds to the doctrine of the imputation of the active obedience of Christ. The Westminster documents do not, but he does. He says that the divines produced, at best, an ambiguous document on this question, but that he himself is not ambiguous about it.

I have no trouble with Van Dixhoorn's personal convictions about the IAOC. For him to accept and teach the IAOC is within the bounds of Reformed orthodoxy. I have no issue with our church's acceptance of ministers who hold to this particular view. I believe that diversity on this opinion is perfectly acceptable, especially since it was acceptable to the Westminster Assembly. I would be helpful, however, if certain parties within the Reformed theological world would acknowledge the fact that denying the imputation of the active obedience of Christ is not tantamount to denying the Reformation doctrine of justification by Christ through faith alone. Furthermore, I wish that they would stop charging those that deny the imputation of the active obedience of Christ with rejecting the truth that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to believers in justification. One can reject the former and still believe the latter, as I do.

In sum, Van Dixhoorn was perfectly clear that the Assembly debated this issue and that the consensus was a compromise to write the confession in such a way that allowed ministers who did not believe in the imputation of the active obedience of Christ to subscribe. How then can it be made a litmus test today when it is not stated nor even implied in the Westminster

Documents? Consider what the Scottish theologian William Cunningham has to say about the debate:

It [the distinction between active and passive obedience] is to be traced rather to the *more minute and subtle speculations*, to which the doctrine of justification was afterwards subjected; and though the distinction is quite in accordance with the analogy of faith, and may be of use in aiding the formation of distinct and definitive conceptions,—it is not of any great practical importance and need not be much pressed or insisted on, if men heartily and intelligently ascribe their forgiveness and acceptance wholly to what Christ has done and suffered in their room and stead. There is no ground in anything Calvin has written for asserting, that he would have denied or rejected this distinction, if it had been presented to him. But it was perhaps more in accordance with the cautious and reverential spirit in which he usually conducted his investigations into divine things, to abstain from any minute and definite statements (*The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967], 404; emphasis mine).

f. Van Dixhoorn's closing exhortation to theological humility is instructive. He exhorts us to remember that "there were a tremendous diversity of views" on this and other issues at the Westminster Assembly as well as in the wider world of 17th-century Reformed theology.

Where is the appreciation for that diversity in modern Reformed circles, especially on the internet? If someone believes that the imputation of the active obedience of Christ is the best way to express the Reformed doctrine of justification, that's fine with me. I may disagree, but I don't believe that such a theological construct is wicked or heretical or even particularly dangerous.

But what I don't understand is why those of us who do question that the doctrine of the imputation of the active obedience of Christ is required by the Bible or by our confessional tradition are so viciously attacked as if we were preaching and teaching "another Gospel." To identify the true Gospel with such an esoteric theological construct is counterproductive. It appears like the Westminster divines had similar thoughts when they deliberated, drafted, and approved language that would include both sides of the debate.

Will Barker, former professor of Church history at both Covenant and Westminster seminaries, says that the Confession was written specifically to *include*, not exclude, men who could not affirm that the active obedience of Christ is imputed to us.

One of the interesting debates in the summer of 1643 pertained to the question of the imputation of Christ's active obedience, as well as his passive obedience, to the believer in justification. Daniel Featley, echoing Archbishop James Ussher, argued for the imputation of Christ's active obedience. Ranged against him were such figures as William Twisse, Thomas Gataker and Richard Vines, who contended that it was Christ's passive obedience alone that was imputed to the believer for justification. Such formidable theologians succeeded in getting the term *whole* obedience removed from the phrase "imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them" in Chapter XI of the Westminster Confession, but the imputation of Christ's active obedience was thus included; and in the Savoy Declaration, under John Owen's influence, it would be sharpened into "Christ's active obedience unto the whole law, and passive obedience in his death for their whole and sole righteousness." The Westminster divines, in such controversies, sought to be clear and faithful to Scriptural language, yet to allow for shades of difference within a generic Calvinism.

Robert Letham makes this same point in his new book on the Westminster Assembly:

During these debates, Thomas Gataker argued that these differences should not lead to the imposition of one position on everyone, so as to prevent some men from exercising their ministry. . . . Norris hits the nail on the head when he remarks, "It was a point on which difference was tolerated. It shows that the Calvinism of the Assembly, so long regarded as inflexibly rigid, and pilloried for being so, was capable of divergent opinions within it, and of tolerating and discussing these opinions without much of the acrimony that accompanied continental theological debates." . . . The compromise on justification was carried over into both the Confession and the Larger Catechism. . . . There is no mention of the active obedience of Christ anywhere in the Assembly documents (*The Westminster Assembly: Reading its Theology in Historical Context* (Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 2009), pp. 113-4).

To affirm the imputation of the active obedience of Christ may be traditional in some circles, and PCA ministers are free to believe it, but to judge Presbyterian ministers who do not assent to this language and the theological theory behind it, goes beyond what has been traditionally required of those who subscribe to the Westminster Standards. This odd form of subscription is too restrictive.

h. I will say again in closing that I believe and confess the *forensic* character of justification, and the fact that Christ's righteousness is reckoned to us by faith. I have no reservations or exceptions with the doctrine of justification as taught in the Westminster Confession and Catechisms.

Furthermore, as I've said above, I affirm this statement from the *Report of the Missouri Presbytery ad hoc Committee on Federal Vision Theology*:

Scripture not only affirms the imputation of Adam's sin to all humankind, but also affirms the imputation of Christ's righteousness to his people, wherein his righteousness is credited

forensically to their account (Romans 5:12-21; 2 Corinthians 5:21). Although in previous periods it was incumbent to distinguish such imputation from an infusion of righteousness, today's exegetical discussions have also made it necessary to reaffirm imputation as the basis for God's just declaration of righteousness. God's declaration of righteousness, even a corporate declaration, cannot rightly occur without a basis in God's reckoning of Christ's righteousness to the account of individual sinners (p. 6).

I also agree with these two affirmations from the Missouri Presbytery Report (p. 7):

7. We affirm that in justification, God the Father imputes the righteousness of Christ to believing sinners, a righteousness that is premised upon Christ's lifelong obedience and his obedience unto death; we deny that anyone is justified by God apart from this imputation.

8. We affirm that God justifies sinners by imputing Christ's righteousness to them rather than counting their sins against them; we deny that justification is grounded in any infusion of grace or that faith itself, as an act of obedience, is imputed as the ground of justification.

Follow-up Questions from the Committee on Merit

We'd like to clarify a little further your assessment of the wider category of "merit." At times you seem to reject only the interpretation of merit in the Standards that implies that the one meriting something virtually can hold God hostage for it, or use it as leverage with God. At other times you seem to reject even the Standards' view or use of merit, as when you said in 2003 (this quotation is part of your answer to Question 9 in the section on Covenant):

...the Westminster standards...were written when people still thought of the covenant as a contract and believed that 'merit' has some role to play in our covenantal relations with God."

Granted that here you are talking about merit in relationship to Adam rather than to Christ, but it still seems that you are arguing here that the Westminster divines were working with a view of "covenant" that we can no longer accept and that they erroneously believed that merit was a proper category to use in describing our relationship with God--whether we are talking about Adam or about Christ.

We can sharpen the question this way: You say in your answer to the first question in this section on "The Imputation of Christ's Merit":

I do not believe Jesus merited [your emphasis] the Father's favor or earned "righteousness points" during his earthly life, merit points that are then credited to believers.

This is a statement about the doctrine of the imputation of the righteousness of Christ; and yet it seems to be a window onto how you view the concept of merit when applied to

Christ and his redemptive work.

So the questions distilled down are these:

1. What understanding of "merit" do you ascribe to the Westminster Standards and the divines who wrote and assented to them?

This is a question for historians and one that I am not comfortable answering with a lot of certainty. As I said in my original answers, I have relied on specific studies of 17th-century covenant theology in formulating my own ideas about the problems with Reformed scholastic thought on the nature of the covenant(s). Let me say again that the problems I have expressed are not so much with the Westminster Standards, but with the way they have been interpreted by particular authors. There is a strand of Federal theology in the Reformed tradition that privileges a legal covenantal arrangement between God and Adam based on merit and then makes it foundational for the entire sweep of God's covenants with humanity. So much so that even Jesus had to merit or earn God's favor; that his righteousness was merited during his pre-cross life in order to pass it on to his people. I reject the foundational importance of "merit" in some traditional interpretations of the bi-covenantal Federal Theology. My problems are not with Westminster so much as they are with *that particular interpretation of Westminster*.

In those interpretations of Westminster, "merit" often has to do with Adam and Christ's need to earn or secure God's favor through works of legal righteousness. My problem is with theological constructs that seem to reduce God's most essential relationship with humanity to our performance based on works or works of the law. I reject the notion that the most fundamental aspect of God's relations with Adam was "the works principle" or the expectation that Adam would "earn" or "merit" God's approbation and blessing through obedience to the law. This would transform the original filial, Father-son relationship between God and Adam, his "image" (= sonship, Gen. 5:1-3), into a legalistic and contractual arrangement.

I do, however, vigorously affirm that Christ's infinite "worthiness" covers our unworthiness. I believe that Jesus merited our salvation in the sense that his perfect life, suffering, and

sacrificial death on the cross as the Incarnate Son was infinitely worthy to secure our redemption. What I want to avoid is the idea that Jesus racked up a sufficient number of credits or points during his pre-cross life to satisfy God's justice so that he might then pass these credits to us. I do not find anything like that in the Westminster Standards or the Scriptures.

Again, I affirm this statement from our presbytery's Federal Vision study committee:

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

2. Do you believe the Westminster divines err when they use the word “merit” to describe the work of Jesus Christ, the Second Adam?

No, I tried to make that clear in my original answers. But my answers were so long and involved that I understand how it could be missed. Westminster uses the word merit only 5 times (WCF 16:5; 17:2; WLC Q. 55, Q. 174, Q. 193). I understand these references to refer to the infinite value or worth of Jesus saving work for us, especially his sacrificial death, which has procured out salvation. I am comfortable with using “merit” in this manner.

Let me rephrase my objections to some forms of “merit theology.” I reject the notion that God's fundamental relationship with Adam can be reduced to a legal, contractual one. I reject the notion that Adam's most fundamental response to God can be described as "the works principle." I reject the idea that God is most fundamentally a lawgiver who demands man earn the right to his favor and acceptance. I reject making that legal, meritorious relationship the basis for everything fundamental about the relations between God and man, including Jesus' pre-cross effort to fulfill the "covenant of works" and rack up enough legal points to satisfy

God's demands and then transfer these points to us.

3. Or are you only critical of the view that you allege distorts the teaching of the divines?

That is my position. I have tried to make it clear that I have an issue with a particular reading of the theology of the Standards, not with the system of doctrine taught in Westminster.

4. Do you believe that when the Standards use the term “merit” in reference to Jesus’ obedience, the Standards are teaching the idea that he was accruing moral “points” with God?

No, I don’t read Westminster that way.

5. The concept of “accruing points” is a metaphor, and you appear to be construing it in a negative way. Yet you yourself seem to use the concept of merit positively when you use the phrase in your answer to Q. 5 above: “The divines debated the biblical and theological merits of ...” Here the “merits of” a thing seems to mean the ‘value’ of it, or the ‘worth’ of it. Do you believe there is a positive way to use the concept of “merit”?

Yes, but the word “merit” is freighted with all sorts of negative connotations because of its suspicious use in past theological systems (Thomism, nominalism, etc.) and therefore must be used with care and careful qualifications.

6. You don’t seem to like the idea of Christ “earning” something in his redemptive work; but are you content to say that Christ “won” something through his obedience? And if so, What do you regard as the difference between “earning” something and “winning” it?

The Scriptures speak of Jesus’ work in a variety of ways, using a number of metaphors to explain what he accomplished for us. That Jesus went to war and defeated Satan for us is pretty standard stuff. I affirm this. He “won” our deliverance through a decisive victory over sin, death, and the devil in his work on the cross, his resurrection, and his ascension to the throne of David. And I really don’t have a problem with the idea of him “earning” our salvation. What I have a problem with is the notion that *in his pre-cross life* he “earned” or “merited” his Father’s favor and approbation as some sort of fulfillment of a lingering “covenant of works” that needed to be satisfied before humanity could be loved and accepted by God. My problem is with formulations that suggest Jesus “merited” righteousness in his

pre-cross life and that this “merited achievement is then somehow separately transferred to us in distinction from his crucifixion and resurrection.

7. Do you have trouble with the concept of Christ—or believers, for that matter—being “rewarded” by God for obedience? What do you regard as the difference between “earning” something through obedience, and being given something as a “reward” for obedience?

No, I don’t have trouble with believers being rewarded for obedience as long as we have an Augustinian understanding of this—that God crowns his gifts of grace in us on the last day, but not as rewards we have “earned” or “merited.” Fathers “reward” their sons and daughters for obedience, but children do not, strictly speaking, merit their Father’s love and acceptance. God the Father loved Adam and gifted him with life and righteousness before the fall. We could say that Adam would have been rewarded with further gifts from his Father (however we might conceive of these gifts—confirmed righteousness, elevated authority and rule, etc.) had he continued to obey. God the Father loved his Son even before he began to obey the law perfectly. Moreover, God the Father loves us because we are united with his Son by faith. It is pretty clear from Scripture that there will be “rewards” for faithfulness and obedience for believers at the Last Day (1 Cor. 3:14; 9:17; Col. 3:24; Heb. 10:35; 11:6; 2 John 8), but these will not be given as “debts owed to us” by God, but additional gifts from our loving heavenly Father.

**Follow-up Questions from the Committee on
the Imputation of the Active Obedience of Christ**

In a question we already put to you (Q. 4 above), “What benefits, if any, does a genuine believer receive from Christ’s perfect obedience to God’s law (i.e. the active obedience of Christ)?” the first paragraph of your answer said:

The phrase “active obedience of Christ” refers to something very specific in the debates about Covenantal theology. It does not simply refer to Christ’s perfect obedience to God’s law. I affirm that Jesus had to obey the law perfectly in order to be qualified as our Savior. I believe Jesus’ obedience was necessary to qualify him to be the perfect sacrificial victim on the cross. What I deny is that Jesus earned God the Father’s favor by meritorious good works before the cross and then that these moral brownie points are somehow legally transferred to us. I find nothing in the Bible or the Westminster standards about such a scheme.

A fair way to interpret this paragraph would be to say that everything after the first sentence is your explication of what the “active obedience of Christ” means in historical theology. But then when one reads the rest of the paragraph, everything said about this doctrine, namely, that Jesus’ obedience to the moral law of God is “legally transferred to our account,” so to speak, seems completely negative.

1. Are we to understand you to be saying you believe that all who hold to this doctrine, i.e., to the imputation of the active obedience of Christ to believers, are teaching that Jesus was racking up “moral brownie points,” or is this your representation of a distortion of that doctrine?

This is the way I have heard it preached and taught by some. I am not imputing these distortions to the Westminster divines, just to some popular ways of explaining the significance of Jesus pre-cross obedience. I am not trying to belittle or make fun of those who hold to a meritorious covenant of works. By using the language of “moral brownie points” I am trying to point out the weakness inherent in talking about Jesus fulfilling some lingering “meritorious covenant of works” in his pre-cross obedience.

What I reject is the notion that *the most fundamental bond between God and man*, either before or after the fall, can be adequately described in legal categories using words and phrases like “works,” “merit,” “obedience,” “covenant of works,” etc. I do not deny that there is a legal dimension to God’s relations with man, before and after the fall. I do not deny that Adam and Jesus needed to obey God. What I do deny is that God is most essentially a lawgiver and man most fundamentally one who must obey the law in order to please God. That’s what we get if we make a meritorious covenant of works the foundation of all of God’s relations with Adam and us through Christ. I reject the idea that before the cross Jesus went about performing a finite set of positive demands of the law that he had to “check off” in order to satisfy the legal demands of the covenant of works. I reject the idea that these supposed “merits” accrued by Jesus in his earthly ministry are somehow transferred to us. I do not deny that the righteousness of the crucified, resurrected, glorified Christ is imputed to us. I believe his righteous standing is ours by God’s judicial act of justifying us who believe the Gospel.

2. In other words, Do you believe it is possible to hold to the doctrine of the active imputation of Christ’s obedience, as some of the Westminster divines did, as John Murray did, with theological integrity, or do you necessarily construe the doctrine as teaching that Jesus had to rack up “brownie points” with God?

Here's how John Murray expressed the doctrine:

This obedience [of Christ] has frequently been designated the active and passive obedience. This formula when properly interpreted serves the good purpose of setting forth the two distinct aspects of Christ's work of obedience. But it is necessary at the outset to relieve the formula of some of the misapprehensions and misapplications to which it is subject....Neither are we to suppose that we can allocate certain phases or acts of our Lord's life on earth to the active obedience and certain other phases and acts to the passive obedience. The distinction between the active and passive obedience is not a distinction of periods. It is our Lord's whole work of obedience in every phase and period that is described as active and passive, and we must avoid the mistake of thinking that the active obedience applies to the obedience of his life and the passive to the obedience of his final suffering and death.

*The real use and purpose of the formula is to emphasize the two distinct aspects of our Lord's vicarious obedience. The truth expressed rest upon the recognition that the law of God has both penal sanctions and positive demands. It demands not only the full discharge of its precepts but also the infliction of penalty for all infractions and shortcomings. It is this twofold demand of the law of God which is taken into account when we speak of the active and passive obedience of Christ. Christ as the vicar of his people came under the curse and condemnation due to sin and he also fulfilled the law of God in all its positive requirements. In other words, he took care of the guilt of sin and perfectly fulfilled the demands of righteousness. He perfectly met both the penal and the perceptive requirements of God's law. The passive obedience refers to the former and the active obedience to the latter. Christ's obedience was vicarious in the bearing of the full judgment of God upon sin, and it was vicarious in the full discharge of the demands of righteousness. His obedience becomes the ground of the remission of sin and of actual justification. (John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, pp. 20-22)*

Do you agree with Murray's exposition of the doctrine? If not, how would you criticize it?

Yes. I agree with this formulation. I have no problem with Murray's explanation here. Of course, he does not address many of my concerns, but this simple statement avoids the use of "merit" and steers clear of problems associated with a legalistic understanding of Jesus' pre-cross works of obedience that are isolated out and then imputed to us.

III. Baptism

After finishing my answers to these questions on Baptism I have a nagging suspicion that I have left out something important. In answering these questions, I feel as if I have been wrestling with some of the deepest mysteries of our faith, especially regarding the status of our baptized children. These questions have perplexed the best Reformed theologians for centuries, and there have been many different answers given. In contrast to these giants of our theological tradition, I am a simple pastor trying to explain the Word of God accurately to my people with pastoral sensitivity. I confess that I do not have a great deal of confidence in my ability to unravel all of the theological and philosophical complexities in questions that involve predestination, the sacraments, the covenant, and church membership. This is the best I can do right now. Once again, I ask the committee to read through the entire section before passing judgment.

1. The 2007 JFVP states, “God formally unites a person to Christ and to His covenant people through baptism into the triune Name” (p. 5). Explain what is included in this formal union. How does this statement differ from the denial in the 2006 Report of the Missouri Presbytery *ad hoc* Committee on Federal Theology: “we deny that all those baptized are inseparably united to Christ” (p. 9, lines 35-39).

a. The statement from the JFVP quoted in this question has a larger context. The entire affirmation and denial should be read to understand what is meant by the sentence that speaks of God “formally” uniting a person to Christ:

We affirm that God formally unites a person to Christ and to His covenant people through baptism into the triune Name, and that this baptism obligates such a one to lifelong covenant loyalty to the triune God, each baptized person repenting of his sins and trusting in Christ alone for his salvation. Baptism formally engrafts a person into the Church, which means that baptism is into the Regeneration, that time when the Son of Man sits upon His glorious throne (Matt. 19:28).

We deny that baptism automatically guarantees that the baptized will share in the eschatological Church.

We deny the common misunderstanding of baptismal regeneration—i.e. that an "effectual call" or rebirth is automatically wrought in the one baptized. Baptism apart from a growing and living faith is not saving, but rather damning. But *we deny* that trusting God's promise through baptism elevates baptism to a human work. God gives baptism as assurance of His grace to us personally, as our names are spoken when we are baptized.

I had a part in composing this affirmation and denial. I didn't contribute much else to the document, but I wanted to get this part right. I believe these affirmations and denials express biblical truths and are consistent with Reformed theology.

Before I begin to offer an explanation for this language, it should be noted that many Reformed confessional documents have included the affirmation that the baptized are united (or engrafted) into Christ. This is not something odd or strange. The Westminster Confession itself is quite clear that baptism is a sign and seal of our engrafting into Christ. In fact, the very first paragraph in the chapter on Baptism (WCF 28.1) emphasizes that baptism *not only* unites a person to the visible church, but baptism *also* is to be to the person baptized a sign and seal of his union with Christ.

Baptism is a sacrament of the new testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, *not only* for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible church; but also, *to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his engrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life.* Which sacrament is, by Christ's own appointment, to be continued in his church until the end of the world (emphasis mine).

What this means, at the very least, is that the one who is baptized is encouraged to *believe* the promises made to him or her in baptism, promises that include “engrafting into Christ.”

Reformed theology has a legacy of affirming that baptism unites us to the body of Christ (the church) and therefore to Christ the Head. The *Scots Confession* (1560) was written by John Knox and used in the Scottish church until Westminster replaced it in the mid-17th century. Article 21, “Of the Sacraments” teaches this about baptism:

. . . we utterly damn the vanity of they who teach that the sacraments are nothing more than naked and bare symbols. No, rather we are firmly persuaded that by Baptism we are engrafted into Christ Jesus, to be made partakers of his righteousness, through which our sins are covered, and because of which pardon and grace are accomplished (Art. 21).

Knox's confession probably says much more than we are willing to say about baptism. But this way of putting it is part of our Reformed tradition.

The *French Confession of Faith* (1559), composed by John Calvin & De Chandieu, says something similar:

. . . baptism, is given as a testimony of our adoption; *for by it we are grafted into the body of Christ*, so as to be washed and cleansed by his blood, and then renewed in purity of life by his Holy Spirit. We hold also that although we are baptized only once, yet the profit to us that it signifies reaches over our whole lives and to our death, so that we have a lasting witness that Jesus Christ will always be our justification and sanctification (Art. 35, emphasis mine).

This Reformed confession clearly teaches *by baptism we are grafted into the body of Christ*. Being grafted into the body of Christ is in some important sense to be “united to Christ.”

Confessing that baptism formally engrafts the one baptized into Christ is, therefore, not unusual in the Reformed confessional tradition. Given how willing our Reformed forbearers were to talk about baptism and union with Christ in such a nearly unqualified way, it ought not to be considered unusual now to confess a formal union between Christ and baptized Christians. The difficulty, of course, is explaining just how that can be. I don’t pretend to be able to unravel the knots that seem to form whenever questions about the relations between faith, baptism, and union with Christ are all mentioned in the same sentence. What follows is my feeble attempt to make some sense of this language.

b. The question I have been asked is: What is included in this formal union? Using the word “formal” I believe is another way of saying “covenantal.” A person baptized into the Christian faith is formally, publically, officially united to the body of Christ, the church. Notice that the parallel sentence in the JFVP affirmation says, “Baptism formally engrafts a person into the church.” Being united to the church, the body of Christ, means being united in *some sense* to the Head of the Body, Christ himself. At the very least, I believe we have to say that every baptized member of the church is in covenant with Christ. Being in covenant does not mean that they are guaranteed eternal salvation. One can fail to be faithful to the covenant—that is, one can fail to *trust* in Jesus and thereby become a covenant breaker. Even so, the church of Jesus is the community of people covenanted to Christ and to one another.

Consider what Paul says about the church in 1 Cor. 12:12-27. When Paul begins his argument in 1 Cor. 12:12-13 we might expect him to say this:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many are one body, *so it is with the church*.

But that is *not* what he says. He makes a very strong connection between Christ and the members of the church:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many are one body, *so it is with Christ* (1 Cor. 12:12).

The body belongs to Christ. He is the Head of the Body. And those who are baptized into the body are united to Christ, the head, and made to drink of one Spirit:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many are one body, *so it is with Christ*. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

The baptized, according to Paul, become members of the community that is indwelt by the Spirit of Christ. It is crucial to see here that Paul is not talking about the invisible church of the elect. He can't be. He goes on to address the problem of the members of the body of Christ not serving one another and caring for one another (12:14-26). The weaker members are indispensable, and so on. The point is that there should be "no division in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another" (1 Cor. 12:25). This must refer to the visible, tangible, physical body of believers in Corinth. We don't know who the members of the invisible church are. We don't know who's truly regenerate or not. We're not supposed to know. If this passage was about the elect who have been secretly engrafted into the Church by the Spirit, then we would not know who's in and out and thus whom to serve as members of Christ's body. If Paul is talking about some internal, invisible "baptism" of the Spirit exclusively, then we could never know who the weaker members of the body might be. We would have to pick and choose within the community of the church, deciding whom we believe has been baptized by the Spirit and serve them, but not others. That just doesn't work.

On the other hand, I do know the individual, flesh and blood, baptized, members of the covenant community of my local church, and I am called to care for every member of the body, every baptized member of the local body of Christ. Therefore, according to Paul, baptized members of the church are all in some significant sense united to Christ and united to one another as well. "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Cor. 12:27). I cannot comprehend or explain how all this fits together. Nevertheless, I can say that

there is a mystical, real union between Christ and his body, the church, and also between the individual members of his body. Furthermore, this mystical union of all baptized, professing believers means that we must be careful to treat each other as members of the same body, all connected to the Head Jesus Christ.

c. 1 Corinthians 12 is not the only place in the Bible that connects baptism and union with Christ. Paul does so with a different purpose in mind in Romans 6:3-5.

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

Here Paul grounds his exhortation to faith and the promise of new life in the Christian's baptism. John Calvin's comments on this passage are telling:

“Let us know, that the Apostle does not simply exhort us to imitate Christ, as though he had said that the death of Christ is a pattern which all Christians are to follow; for no doubt he ascends higher, as he announces a doctrine, with which he connects, as it is evident, an exhortation; and his doctrine is this – that the death of Christ is efficacious to destroy and demolish the depravity of our flesh, and his resurrection, to effect the renovation of a better nature, *and that by baptism we are admitted into a participation of this grace*. This foundation being laid, Christians may very suitably be exhorted to strive to respond to their calling. Farther, *it is not to the point to say, that this power is not apparent in all the baptized*; for Paul, according to his usual manner, where he speaks of the faithful, connects the reality and the effect with the outward sign; for we know that whatever the Lord offers by the visible symbol is confirmed and ratified by their faith. In short, *he teaches what is the real character of baptism when rightly received*. So he testifies to the Galatians, that all who have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ. (Galatians 3:27) Thus indeed must we speak, as long as the institution of the Lord and the faith of the godly unite together; for we never have naked and empty symbols, except when our ingratitude and wickedness hinder the working of divine beneficence. (Commentary on Romans 6:3-4).

Notice a few things about Calvin's comments on Romans 6:

- 1) by baptism we participate in the “grace” of the power of death and Christ's resurrection;
- 2) we are all called to respond to the grace given to us in baptism;
- 3) we are to believe that God accomplishes what he promises in baptism. When we do, baptism is not an empty and naked symbol.

In the New Testament Paul designates the *visible* church as Christ's body and bride (Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4-5). The visible, institutional community with its diversity of gifts, its officers and rites, is the body of Christ. Those who are baptized members are *in some significant sense* united to Christ the Head because they are members of his body.

As I said above, I do not know how to connect all the theological dots here. I cannot answer all the questions that arise when we reflect on passages like 1 Cor. 12 and Romans 6 from the perspective of God's election. Even so, I am afraid that in the interests of the demands of our "system" we have often effectively neutralized passages like this and failed to hear the Spirit's wisdom. Just to be clear, I am not denying the Calvinistic system—not at all. I just don't believe it is right for us to use the doctrines of election and predestination to squelch passages that we cannot make fit into our system. I say that because as a Minister of the Word I have a pastoral concern to be true to the Bible above all else.

2. In the section on "Union with Christ and Imputation," the JFVP states: "We affirm not only that Christ is our full obedience, but also that through our union with Him we partake of the benefits of His death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and enthronement at the right hand of God the Father" (p. 5). Is this the union God establishes whenever a person (elect or non-elect, infant or adult) receives the sacrament of baptism? Explain your answer.

a. This particular affirmation from the JFVP speaks of the union that those who have saving faith enjoy. Is this the union that God establishes through baptism with every person (elect or non-elect)? If we ask the question like that, then the answer is clear: No. God does not establish that kind of union with the non-elect. He does so only with the elect. Because this question includes non-elect and elect persons, we cannot say that the union established in baptism is always a saving one. But does this mean we have to be agnostic about everyone who is baptized? In my mind and ministry, this is a very significant pastoral question.

Suppose parents in my congregation asked me about the status of their recently baptized child. "Pastor, has my child been united to Christ by baptism so that he partakes of the benefits of the death, resurrection, ascension and enthronement of Jesus?" How would I answer that question? I would remind the parents that baptism is given to them as a sign and seal of God's promises to their child. I would tell them that this covenant child must be raised to *believe*, to

trust in Jesus and his promises. I would encourage them to remind their child of his baptism and the grace and mercy bestowed on him when he was made a member of the body of Christ. I would also instruct and encourage the parents to nourish the child-like faith of their little one, so that he would mature in his faith as he grows, and that in the end his faith will be shown to be true and saving faith.

I would hope and pray that those who are baptized have such faith, even infants and children. Nevertheless, as a Pastor *I don't know the answer to this mystery*. I treat baptism, *all things considered*, as the mark of a person's Christian faith. In baptism, a person is named and claimed by the Triune God. He or she bears the name Christian and *is called to a life of faith*. Not everyone is faithful to the call of God in baptism. But I hope and pray that they will be.

The Westminster Standards say that the grace promised in baptism is *not only offered* but that God "confers" that grace by the Holy Spirit, according to his sovereign will:

The efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered; yet, notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is *not only offered, but really exhibited, and conferred*, by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God's own will, in his appointed time (WCF 28.6, emphasis mine).

b. In answer to the question "Is this [saving] union with Christ the union God establishes whenever a person is baptized?" I would say, yes, sometimes. Even more, I would also *hope* that this is the way God *ordinarily* unites our covenant children to Christ. And I would have this hope because of everything God has said about baptism in his Word.

This is precisely the Reformed way of describing *how* God promises to act through baptism. The baptismal rite is *normally* a means of saving grace to those who are baptized, but not always. God is sovereign. He is free to work against or outside of his appointed means. If God so chooses to *normally* grant this saving union with Christ to our children through baptism, I believe that he also gifts them at the same time with the faith they need to trust Jesus, a faith appropriate to their age and capacity. In other words, I don't pit baptism and faith against one another. If God uses a child's baptism to unite him to Christ in a saving way,

then he also grants that child faith. I don't know that this is always the case. Again, God is sovereign. But I trust his promises for our children until I see evidence otherwise.

For me as a Pastor, *not* to believe that God *ordinarily* delivers by means of baptism what he promises in that sacrament, would be a species of unbelief. This is John Calvin's contribution to the discussion. If you received a box from a friend that was nicely wrapped with "happy birthday" wrapping paper, tied with a bow, and fastened with a birthday card with your name on it, would you expect to find a gift inside? Yes, and if you didn't, you would have been deceived. In Calvin's *Catechism of the Church of Geneva* (1545) he puts it like this:

M[aster]. But do you attribute nothing more to the water than to be a mere symbol of ablution?

C[hild]. I think it to be such a symbol that reality is attached to it. For God does not disappoint us when he promises us his gifts. Hence both pardon of sins and newness of life are certainly offered to us and received by us in Baptism." (*The Catechism of the Church of Geneva*, in J. K. S. Read, ed. and trans., *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, vol. 22 of *Library of Christian Classic* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954], p. 131).

Calvin uses this illustration to explain the strong connection between the promises attached to the sacraments and our reception of them. We must *believe* what God himself says about the sacraments. We must believe that he delivers what he signifies and seals therein. If it were not normally so, then God would be deceiving us. The sacraments, he says, are not "naked signs." They are not just pictures of something that happens independently of their administration.

The nineteenth-century Reformed Princetonian theologian A. A. Hodge comments on the Westminster Confession Faith saying:

The efficacy of the sacraments depends – (1) upon their divine appointment as means and channels of grace. They were not devised by man as suitable in themselves to produce a moral impression. But they were appointed by God and we are commanded to use them as means of grace; and *hence God virtually promises to meet every soul who uses them rightly in the sacrament*" (A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith*, p. 333).

This is the essence of what I am saying: we should *believe* that God ordinarily does what he promises in baptism! Even if he doesn't always choose to do it, we must believe that he normally *does* and that when he doesn't he will have good and just reason for that too.

That is why our Westminster Standards say that the names and effects of the reality of salvation are attributed to the sacraments (WCF 27.2), listing as proof texts Gen. 18:10, where circumcision *is called* the covenant, Matt. 26:27-28, where Jesus calls the wine itself the blood of the new covenant, and Titus 3:5, where Paul calls baptism “the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit.”

This is nothing else but an explanation of the “sealing” aspect of the sacrament. If the sacrament of baptism *seals* to us all the promises of God (forgiveness, new life, union with Christ, adoption, etc., see WLC Q. 165), then we ought to *believe* that God has given us these things because we have been baptized. In other words, *by faith we count baptism to confirm all these realities for us!* Applying this to our children, we would say that the parents and the church are *believing* all that God has promised in baptism for any particular child. If baptism “signifies, seals, and applies” all these gracious benefits, then we should trust that God ordinarily delivers what he promises. This is why the Puritan divine John Owen, for example, called baptized infants “professing believers” and afforded them the same status as adult professors in the church. We teach our little baptized, covenant children to sing “Jesus loves me, this I know” when they begin to speak and sing. Do we not, then, treat them as believers?

Again, A. A. Hodge makes this explicit in his commentary on the Westminster Confession of Faith:

The sacraments were designed to “apply” —i.e., actually to convey —to believers the benefits of the new covenant. If they are “seals” of the covenant, they must of course, as a legal form of investiture, actually convey the grace represented to those to whom it belongs. Thus a deed conveys an estate, or the key handed over in the presence of witnesses the possession of a house from the owner to the renter. Our Confession is explicit and emphatic on this subject. The old English word “exhibit,” there used, does not mean to SHOW FORTH; but, in the sense of the Latin EXHIBERE, from which it is derived, TO ADMINISTER, TO APPLY (Hodge, *Confession of Faith*, 331).

c. This word “normally” or “ordinarily” is also the very thing that separates us from Lutherans and Roman Catholics. By placing this adverbial qualifier in our statements about

baptism's efficacy we identify ourselves as Reformed and not Lutheran. No one who held to "baptismal regeneration" (especially Lutherans) would ever qualify such a statement with the word "ordinarily" or "normally." Even if we affirm that the sacraments are important "outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption" (WSC Q. 88), we do not go as far as those who are fully sacerdotal.

Roman Catholics and Lutherans teach that the sacrament always or automatically regenerates every infant who is baptized without exception. But, of course, those so regenerated can lose this, according to them. Furthermore, they teach that *only* those who are baptized are regenerate. Hence, both traditions practice "emergency baptism." On both counts we disagree. There are those who are baptized that will *not* be savingly regenerated at the font or anytime subsequent to this. And there are those who *will* be savingly regenerated by the Holy Spirit apart from water baptism, whether before or after its administration. So, for example, the man who trusts in Christ in response to a neighbor's testimony, schedules a baptism at the local church, but dies before he can be brought to the font—that man will go to heaven!

Many Lutherans would deny this because they believe in baptismal regeneration. Roman Catholics might allow for some people to go to heaven in cases like this since a period of punishment in purgatory will help this man atone for this deficiency. But my point is that we don't have to lapse into Lutheranism or Catholicism when we affirm that God "ordinarily" accomplishes what he promises in Baptism or in the Lord's Supper.

d. Too often we formulate our sacramental theology according to the exceptions and qualifications. So, rather than take the normal language associated with baptism in the NT and build our theology around these statements, we rather latch on to all the possible exemptions to the normal manner of God's working through Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the ministry of the church. This often leads to very dangerous results. It leads directly to the doctrine of the irrelevance of the sacraments in the life of the Church. After all, they are not *really* necessary, are they? What about the thief on the cross? What about this and what about that?

e. I regularly tell my congregation at infant and adult baptisms that I don't know the answers to questions about the relationship between baptism and regeneration and all the attendant

issues. But what I do know and what they should know is that *God's promises to our children in baptism are to be believed*. We are to believe that everything God has said about baptism is true for our children. And our children are to be taught to *believe* that everything God promises them in baptism is theirs. They are to believe God. Trust him. Have faith. The only other stance would be to doubt that what God says about baptism applies to our children.

3. The 2006 Missouri Presbytery report affirms the following benefits for the recipients of baptism: “the regular preaching of God’s Word; the watchful care, pastoral oversight, instruction and government of the Church; the nurture of believing parents; and the regular call to place their faith in Christ” (p. 5, lines 11-18). In light of the 2007 JFVP statements, do you believe the Missouri statement is incomplete? If so, what would you add?

a. The complete statement in the Missouri Presbytery report contains an important qualification:

We affirm that all those baptized into the covenant community receive certain covenant blessings, *whether elect or not*, and that these blessings include the regular preaching of God’s Word; the watchful care, pastoral oversight, instruction and government of the Church; the nurture of believing parents; and the regular call to place their faith in Christ (WLC 63; WLC 166; BCO 56-1).

That qualifying statement makes it clear that our presbytery’s report is referring to the bare minimum of what the baptized receive as a result of being baptized into the church. This list is a summary catalog of “covenant blessings” received through baptism regardless of one’s elect status. I am comfortable with this statement as long as it is not meant to be a complete list of what privileges and grace the baptized received as members of the church, the body of Christ. For example, this summary statement makes no mention of the “common operations of the Spirit” that even non-elect baptized members of the church enjoy. In listing the benefits of life in the covenant, Berkhof says this of baptized members:

They are in the covenant also as far as the common covenant blessings are concerned. Though they do not experience the regenerating influence of the Holy Spirit, yet they are subject to certain special operations and influences of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit strives with them in a special manner, convicts them of sin, enlightens them in a measure, and enriches them with the blessings of common grace, Gen. 6:3; Matt. 13:18-22; Heb. 6:4-6 (*Systematic Theology*, p. 289).

The Westminster Confession says something similar in the chapter on effectual calling:

Others, not elected, although they may be called by the ministry of the Word, and may have some common operations of the Spirit, yet they never truly come unto Christ, and therefore cannot be saved (WCF 10.4).

The catechisms that are cited in the affirmation above list many more benefits than just the seven that are listed. And there are other catechism answers that fill out the benefits of baptism. For example, WLC Q. 167 asks how baptism is to be improved by us. The answer given lists all sorts of benefits that are given by God through baptism that we must be faithful “to improve.”

The needful but much neglected duty of improving our baptism, is to be performed by us all our life long, especially in the time of temptation, and when we are present at the administration of it to others; by serious and thankful consideration of the nature of it, and of the ends for which Christ instituted it, *the privileges and benefits conferred and sealed thereby*, and our solemn vow made therein; by being humbled for our sinful defilement, our falling short of, and walking contrary to, *the grace of baptism*, and our engagements; by growing up to *assurance of pardon of sin, and of all other blessings sealed to us in that sacrament*; by drawing strength from the death and resurrection of Christ, *into whom we are baptized*, for the mortifying of sin, and quickening of grace; and by endeavoring to live by faith, to have our conversation in holiness and righteousness, *as those that have therein given up their names to Christ*; and to walk in brotherly love, *as being baptized by the same Spirit into one body* (emphasis mine).

These benefits listed are not merely sociological and external. As I have tried to explain in previous answers in this section, there is something mystical and profound that happens when someone is baptized into the body of Christ. I cannot fully explain how this all ties in with God’s predestination and election. But I will not deny one or another of these truths in order to achieve some rational solution to the mystery. I am determined *to believe* what I nevertheless cannot fathom or understand perfectly.

b. While Baptism does not guarantee an eternally saving relationship with Christ because membership in the church does not automatically guarantee salvation, even so *baptism certainly does make one a covenanted member of the visible church*. Baptism is “the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible church” (WCF 28.1). The PCA Book of Church Order outlines “some words of instruction” that might be given before a baptism. This includes the following:

That children by Baptism, are solemnly received into the bosom of the visible church, distinguished from the world, and them that are without, and united with believers; and that all

who are baptized in the name of Christ, do renounce, and by their Baptism are bound to fight against the devil, the world, and the flesh (*BCO* §56-4).

This means that the one who is baptized has a right to be treated in accordance with everything it means to be part of the visible church of Jesus Christ. “The visible church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation” (WCF 25.2).

However we categorize the benefits received in baptism, we should not forget that baptized members of the church belong to “the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God.”

4. In particular, do you believe the following benefits are given to all recipients of baptism (elect or non-elect, infant or adult), never to be lost or forfeited?

a. Forgiveness of their sins?

b. Justification in God’s sight (i.e., justification as defined by WSC 33: “an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.”)?

c. Resurrection glory with Christ, as explained in the WSC: “at the resurrection, believers, being raised up in glory, shall be openly acknowledged and acquitted in the day of judgment, and made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God to all eternity” (WSC 38)?

My answer to all three questions is an emphatic *no*.

The decretal status of the one being baptized is not one of the things that baptism signifies, and whether or not the baptized individual is truly justified and saved is dependent upon the presence or absence of *saving faith* somewhere in the course of his life.

The phrase “saving faith” here reminds us that not all who receive baptism are eternally saved. No Reformed theologian, to my knowledge, has taught that baptism guarantees salvation apart from faith, and I certainly do not. Many who are baptized receive blessings and

gifts from God, but fail to respond with faith, or they respond with a shallow faith, and will end up damned. Only the elect respond with genuine and lasting faith, and only they ultimately receive the blessing of eternal communion with the Triune God.

I agree with the MO Presbytery denial: “we deny that all those baptized are inseparably united to Christ.” Only the elect, those that have saving faith, are inseparably united to Christ.

5. The 2007 JFVP (p. 7 under “Apostasy”) states, “All who are baptized into the triune Name are united with Christ in His covenantal life.” Do you continue to affirm this statement? If so, please define what is included in this “covenantal life”?

The entire JFVP statement on “Apostasy” should be considered:

We affirm that apostasy is a terrifying reality for many baptized Christians. All who are baptized into the triune Name are united with Christ in His covenantal life, and so those who fall from that position of grace are indeed falling from grace. The branches that are cut away from Christ are genuinely cut away from someone, cut out of a living covenant body. The connection that an apostate had to Christ was not *merely* external.

We deny that any person who is chosen by God for final salvation before the foundation of the world can fall away and be finally lost. The decretally elect cannot apostatize.

Perhaps the phrase “covenantal life” is awkward, but I take it to mean life in Christ’s church, his body. I believe that baptized members of the church, even if they turn out to be reprobate, are blessed with life in the body of Christ together with all the attendant knowledge, fellowship, and privileges that come to those in that community. Ultimately, the non-elect reprobate reject it all and will be judged more severely because they will have spurned these special privileges.

My statements above *do not* intend to teach that there is *no difference* between the elect and non-elect who are in covenant with Christ. The point is that the difference is not a difference having to do with whether they are in covenant or not. Whatever the differences between elect and non-elect in the church—and every Reformed theologian acknowledges that there are many—the *baptized are in covenant*. Our own *Book of Church Order* says that the presiding minister at a baptism is “to admonish all that are present to look back to their Baptism, to repent of their sins against their covenant with God” (BCO §56-4). Denying that all baptized

Christians are in covenant with God is not only unbiblical, it also contradicts the PCA Constitution.

Louis Berkhof, wrestles with the question of the status of the non-elect who are in covenant with God. He notes that there are a diversity of ways of formulating the problem (*Systematic Theology*, pp. 284-89). He summarizes Kuyper and Bavinck's positions. Kuyper said they are in covenant but "not essential participants of the covenant." Bavinck distinguished between those who were *in foedere* (in the covenant) but not *de foedere* (of the covenant). Berkhof's summary of his position regarding covenant children is worth quoting in full:

a. They are in covenant as far as their responsibility is concerned. Because they stand in the legal covenant relationship to God, they are duty bound to repent and believe. If they do not turn to God and accept Christ by faith, when they come to years of discretion, they will be judged as breakers of the covenant. The special relationship in which they are placed to God, therefore, means added responsibility.

b. They are in covenant in the sense that they may lay claim to the promises which God gave when he established his covenant with believers and their seed. Paul even says of his wicked kinsmen, "whose is the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises," Rom. 9:4. As a rule God gathers the number of his elect out of those who stand in this covenant relationship.

c. They are in covenant in the sense that they are subject to the ministrations of the covenant. They are constantly admonished and exhorted to live according to the requirements of the covenant. The church treats them as covenant children, offers them the seals of the covenant, and exhorts them to a proper use of these. They are the guests who are first called to the supper, the children of the kingdom, to whom the Word must be preached first of all, Matt. 18:12; Luke 14:16-24; Acts 13:46.

d. They are in the covenant also as far as the common covenant blessings are concerned. Though they do not experience the regenerating influence of the Holy Spirit, yet they are subject to certain special operations and influences of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit strives with them in a special manner, convicts them of sin, enlightens them in a measure, and enriches them with the blessings of common grace, Gen. 6:3; Matt. 13:18-22; Heb. 6:4-6.

It should be noted that while the covenant is an eternal and inviolable covenant, which God never nullifies, it is possible for those who are in covenant to break it. If one who stands in the legal covenant relationship does not enter upon the covenant life, he is nevertheless regarded as a member of the covenant. His failure to meet the requirements of the covenant involves guilt and constitutes him a covenant breaker, Jer. 31:32; Ezek. 44:7. This explains how there may be, not merely a temporary, but a final breaking of the covenant, though there is no falling away of the saints (*Systematic Theology*, p. 289).

Berkhof's summary of the benefits of covenant membership is helpful. I would summarize the answer to the question this way: The rite of Baptism officially, formally, covenantally

unites a person to the visible church. Because the visible church is the body of Christ, God by the Spirit uses baptism to unite the baptized to the Head of the body, Christ. In this way the baptized, by sharing in the body of the resurrected and glorified Son, receive covenantal benefits of various sorts. But this union is *no guarantee of eternal salvation*, since some who are baptized into the church, the body of Christ, will fall away because they never possessed true faith. Baptism is a gift of grace that bestows other gifts, but it is efficacious unto to salvation only for those who have saving faith.

6. Do you believe that a baptized infant who grows up to reject faith in Christ may still be ultimately condemned to hell?

Yes. More than that, I believe that one who is baptized will receive a greater judgment because he has spurned the gifts received and rejected promises that were offered to him by God in baptism.

Let me be clear. Baptism in itself does not guarantee anyone's salvation. What is promised and offered in baptism may not be received because of unbelief.

I agree with the following affirmation and denial in the Missouri Presbytery FV Study Committee Report:

We affirm that God promises in Christian baptism to unite to the Trinity by faith in the power of God those who are being baptized; we deny that all those baptized are inseparably united to Christ. We affirm that God's promise in baptism is only rightly received and realized by faith. We deny that baptized persons who persist in unbelief may be assured of their final salvation (p. 9).

7. Explain the union, if any, that a non-elect baptized person has with Christ. How does this union differ from the union the elect have with Christ (WLC 65, 66, 69)?

a. I don't pretend to know how to explain all of this. I've already already tried in previous answers in this section to connect this with the baptized person's membership in the church, the body of Christ. I have also defined this union as the formal covenant God makes with those who are baptized. They have a covenantal union with Christ. Ultimately, for the non-elect this covenantal union does not result in their salvation because they refuse to accept the covenantal promises of God made to them in baptism, choosing instead to rebel against his offers of grace and mercy in Christ.

b. If the Bible says that those who turn out to be reprobate covenant members have had *some* kind of connection with Christ (as John 15, Romans 11, 1 Cor. 12, Gal. 5, etc. seem to require), it nevertheless does not stop and explain the differences. Jesus, speaking of his Father's work as a vine dresser, simply but powerfully warns, "Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes. . . . If anyone does not remain in me, he is thrown away like a branch that withers" (John 15:2, 6). But Jesus does not stop and give a theological discourse on exactly how a non-elect branch could be united with him and how it is that one united to him might nevertheless be cast into the fire and burned.

Paul uses the analogy of root and branches in Romans 11:17-24 to exhort Gentile Christians not to be arrogant about their standing while they see many of the Jews being rejected. He says that "some of the branches were broken off" from the "nourishing root of the olive tree" (17-18). He is talking about unbelieving Jews. The gentile Christians should not be haughty about their being grafted in. They are to "remember that the root supports you." Then he warns the grafted-in Gentile Christians of the possibility of their being cut off. Remember, that the unbelieving Jews

. . . were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. Note then the kindness and severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you too will be cut off.

Paul solemnly exhorts the Galatian Christians, "If you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen from grace" (Gal. 5:4). But Paul does not stop and explain exactly *how* someone can be "severed from Christ." He does not feel the need to bring election into the equation. This is a pastoral exhortation. They are in danger of losing their standing, falling from grace, and being cut off from Christ. If one frets too much over theological subtleties, one can easily miss the point of Paul's warning.

c. There are mysteries here that we cannot hope to penetrate. As a pastor I have tried to be faithful to the richness of God's Word. For me that means not shaving off the hard edges to

make difficulties disappear with simplistic answers. If election ends up trumping all the warning passages in the Bible, then the doctrine of election is being misused. If the biblical warnings are taken out of context and absolutized then we are liable to deny God's electing grace and land squarely in the Arminian theological camp. Even so, Jesus and Paul do not stop to make philosophical explanations about how what they are saying fits with a decretal system of theology. I'm not denying election. And I am not trying to erect a parallel soteriological system. I am simply trying to be faithful to the complexities of the Word of God and as a pastor faithfully warn people as God warns them in Scripture as well as assure them with language God uses in his Word.

It is said that before the third Punic war, the Roman senator Cicero would append at the end of every speech he delivered before the Roman Senate this statement: "And I also believe that Carthage ought to be destroyed." Like Cicero I feel the need to repeat myself often in these answers so that there are no questions about what I believe. I believe God predestines all things. I believe only the elect have true saving faith, are united to Christ inseparably, and will by God's grace persevere to the end. Even so, there is some sort of temporal, covenantal, formal union with Christ that the reprobate enjoys and then falls from, loses, and ultimately spurns. They will be judged more severely for sinning against knowledge and privilege.

IV. Perseverance

Because some of the questions in this section are similar, almost identical to ones asked in the previous section on Baptism I will try not to duplicate answers. But that will mean referencing where to find fuller statements in my earlier responses. Also, I believe many answers to the first four questions in this section will suffice as explanations for my brief responses to some of the later questions (5-7).

1. The 2007 JFVP includes the following passage on Apostasy (p. 7):

“We affirm that apostasy is a terrifying reality for many baptized Christians. All who are baptized into the triune Name are united with Christ in His covenantal life, and so those who fall from that position of grace are indeed falling from grace. The branches that are cut away from Christ are genuinely cut away from someone, cut out of a living covenant body. The connection that an apostate had to Christ was not merely external.”

a. Do you continue to affirm this statement? If so, please explain how all who are baptized (elect and non-elect) are “united with Christ in His covenantal life.” Also, please explain the clause “those who fall from that position of grace are indeed falling from grace.” Are there any aspects of this statement with which you disagree? Please explain.

Yes, I continue to affirm this statement. I also agree with the denial that immediately follows this affirmation in the JFVP statement. The two paragraphs are meant to be read together.

“*We deny* that any person who is chosen by God for final salvation before the foundation of the world can fall away and be finally lost. The decretally elect cannot apostatize” (JFVP, p. 7).

The affirmation regarding apostasy is not meant to suggest that any who are regenerate, justified, savingly united to Christ by genuine faith and the work of the Holy Spirit can or will fall away from those saving benefits. What is being affirmed is that one who is baptized, who bears the name Christian, who is united with Christ’s body and therefore covenantally with Christ the Head, and who receives by God’s grace real benefits as a member of the covenant community, may be unfaithful to his calling, spurn God’s promises, and thereby become an apostate. The proof for this is found in many places in the Scriptures. But I’ll get to that shortly.

Just to be clear, I do *not* believe this JFVP statement affirming the reality of apostasy teaches or implies that *true believers* can lose their salvation, or that the elect can fail to persevere in

faith to the end of their lives by the irresistible grace of God. I do *not* believe that God predestines some to saving faith and that those so predestined can lose that faith. If a Christian possesses God-given faith, evangelical faith, the kind of faith that God grants to those whom he has determined to save, then that Christian cannot fall away and make shipwreck of his faith. Reprobate covenant members don't have that kind of faith. They don't have saving faith. They don't partake of saving benefits in union with Christ. One cannot lose saving faith. That is the work of the Holy Spirit in our effectual calling. Christians that have that kind of faith, saving faith, have it because they are elect. They will persevere to the end. I wholeheartedly subscribe to and believe every word of the Westminster Confession of Faith chapter 17, "Of the Perseverance of the Saints."

b. Please explain how all who are baptized (elect and non-elect) are "united with Christ in His covenantal life."

I have already answered questions about baptism and union with Christ in the previous section on Baptism, specifically Q. 5. To sum that up, I believe that the baptized are united to Christ *in the sense that* they are formally or officially covenanted with Christ as members of his body. But not all who are in covenant with Christ and joined to his body, the church, are elect unto eternal salvation. There are those that have this kind of union with Christ who nevertheless are not faithful to Christ's call to faith and discipleship.

However we attempt to describe this covenantal union with Christ, the Bible speaks of people being "grafted in" but also "cut off" and "pruned" from the vine (Gen. 17:14, John 15:1-11, Rom. 11:17-24, 1 Cor. 10:1-11, etc.). I take this language as a vivid description of entering and exiting the covenant community of God's people.

Jesus, speaking of his Father's work as a vine dresser, simply but powerfully warns, "Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes. . . . If anyone does not remain in me, he is thrown away like a branch that withers" (John 15:2, 6). Notice how Jesus says that the branches that are "taken away" and "thrown away" are branches that are "in me." He says that the problem is that they don't "remain in me." Five or six times in this warning Jesus warns those "in me" about what will happen if they fail to abide "in him" and do not produce fruit. However you want to define

this “union” that these branches have with Jesus, there is some real connection here. That’s all I am comfortable saying. I do not believe that this passage teaches that the elect and non-elect enjoy the same union with Jesus. I don’t believe John 15 is designed to teach that. Even so, Jesus does not stop and give a theological discourse on exactly how a non-elect branch could be united with him and how it is that one united to him might nevertheless be cast into the fire and burned. The point is to warn his disciples of the danger, not to give precise theological categories for understanding the phenomenon of desertion or falling away.

Paul uses the analogy of root and branches in Romans 11:17-24 to exhort Gentile Christians not to be arrogant about their standing while they see many of the Jews being rejected. He says that “some of the branches were broken off” from the “nourishing root of the olive tree” (17-18). He is talking about unbelieving Jews. The gentile Christians should not be haughty about their being grafted in. They are to “remember that the root supports you.” Then he warns the grafted-in Gentile Christians of the possibility of their being cut off. Remember, that the unbelieving Jews

were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. Note then the kindness and severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God’s kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you too will be cut off (Rom. 11:17-23).

Here in Romans 11, Paul warns Gentile Christians by using language similar to Jesus’ warning in John 15. Being “broken off” or “cut off” from the root of the olive tree is a genuine possibility for proud, faithless members of the covenant community (whether Jews or newly engrafted Gentile Christians). Again, let me be clear that I believe this is a very powerful way of speaking of covenant membership. Being a circumcised member of Israel or a baptized member of the Christian Church, means that you are united to the community in which God dwells as the gracious source of life and salvation. But being covenanted does not guarantee that you are elect unto salvation. That’s part of Paul’s point in Romans 9-11. You can be a member of the elect people of God (Israel or the Church), but that doesn’t mean you are elect unto eternal life. Paul is explaining how it is that many of his contemporaries—covenant members of the chosen people of God—were nonetheless being “cut off” by God. The

answer is: unbelief and pride. And Gentile members of the new covenant community are warned against the same species of unbelief.

Another clarification in the form of a denial may help: I deny that the benefits enjoyed by non-elect apostates up until the time that they apostasize are identical to the benefits received by elect members of the covenant who possess true faith and who will persevere until the end. The elect and non-elect do not enjoy the same benefits in the church. The non-elect do not lose the saving benefits of union with Christ when they apostatize. They never possessed them. There are profound differences between the elect and non-elect in covenant with Christ, although these differences may not be discernable to us until we observe how they end their lives. I do not teach that the baptized members of the church, both elect and non-elect, are united to Christ in the same way, even during the time when the non-elect ones are still united to the visible body of Christ. I have never taught anything like this. Of course, we are often unable to differentiate the elect and non-elect in this life. We leave that to God's righteous judgment at the Last Day. "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever" (Deut. 29:29). So we do not often observe the differences between the elect and non-elect. The wheat and tares grow together (Matt. 13:29, 30). But the differences between elect and non-elect covenant members are real and have to do with the elect's effectual calling by the Spirit, their regeneration, justification, and progress in sanctification. None of which will be found, if we could inspect those realities, in the lives of the non-elect covenant members.

Those predestined to eternal life, gifted by God with saving faith, and savingly united to Christ by the Holy Spirit, can never lose their status as justified, regenerate, sanctified Christians. Those not predestined to eternal life, not gifted by God with saving faith, and not savingly united to Christ by the Holy Spirit, may partake of many gracious gifts as covenanted members of the body of Christ, but they are not regenerated, justified, and sanctified unto eternal life.

I agree with these affirmations and denials in the section on "Union with Christ" in the Missouri Presbytery FV Report:

1. We affirm that all members of the visible church are in covenant relationship to Jesus Christ and thereby participate in the privileges and responsibilities of that relationship; we deny that it is prudent to use the terminology of "union with Christ" to describe the relationship of all those in the covenant community (elect and non-elect alike) without carefully clarifying the difference between the specific sense the terms have come to have in our theological tradition, and the other senses they may have in the Bible (p. 9).

I have tried to carefully clarify the differences between the various ways that our Reformed tradition and Scripture uses these terms and imagery.

c. Please explain the clause “those who fall from that position of grace are indeed falling from grace.”

That statement is meant to call attention to the fact that covenanted (baptized) Christians who nevertheless are not ultimately faithful *really receive benefits and graces for which they eventually show contempt and scorn*. I read this statement as an emphatic restatement of what Paul says in Galatians 5:4, “. . . you have fallen from grace.” The Bible uses “falling away” language to refer to those who spurn the kindness and gifts of God and are unfaithful to God’s gracious covenant with them. That’s real grace, even if it’s not saving grace. Consider the following thoughts on a few key passages in the New Testament.

- 1) Apostates do not merely “fall away” from external benefits, but from God himself. “Take heed, brethren, lest there shall be in any one of you an evil heart of unbelief, in falling away from the living God” (Heb. 3:12).
- 2) Hebrews 6 is difficult to interpret and I don’t claim to understand it fully, but at the very least, the author of Hebrews warns against falling away from genuine benefits, including some form of “enlightenment,” some “tasting of the heavenly gift,” some kind of “sharing in the Holy Spirit,” and some “taste of the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the age to come.”

For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, *if they then fall away*, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt (Heb. 6:4-6).

- 3) The example of the Israelites in the wilderness is used by Paul in 1 Corinthians 10 to warn the visible church of the danger of apostasy. He says that there were those in Israel at the time of the Exodus who were “baptized into Moses” (10:2), who “ate the same Spiritual food” (10: 4, the implication is clear: the same Holy-Spirit-given food as Christians eat), who all “drank from the Spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock

was Christ” (10:4). His warning then is powerful: “Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness” (10:5). He goes on to apply this lesson from covenant history to us, members of the new covenant community, the church. “Now these things took place as examples for us. . . they were written down for our instruction, upon whom has come the end of the ages. Therefore, let anyone who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall” (10:6-12). Whatever these rebellious Israelites fell from, it was significant and stands as a warning to Christians.

4) Paul speaks frightening warnings to the Galatian Christians who are on the verge of apostasy. He warns them that if they accept circumcision “you are severed from Christ. . . you have fallen away from grace” (Gal. 5:4). I do not believe that he is referring to the elect losing their vital union with Christ, their salvation; but he nevertheless uses the language of being “severed from Christ” and “falling from grace” to indicate that they will lose genuine gifts. I don’t know how to systematize this perfectly with so many other statements in the New Testament. Nevertheless, I must acknowledge some sort of “union with Christ” that falls short of a saving union and is lost by some. The way I reconcile this is that this “union with Christ” is a *covenantal union* they enjoy by virtue of being members of his body, the church. The “graces” they receive, and yet fall from, are gracious gifts of God and benefits they enjoy as members of the community of saints.

5) Peter says that apostates have forgotten that they had been “cleansed from their former sins” (2 Pet. 1:9) and were “bought” by the Lord (2 Pet. 2:1) and had “escaped the pollutions of the world” (2 Pet. 2:20).

6) Jesus says that those who fail to persevere will have their names *removed* from the book of life (Rev. 3:5; 22:19). I take that to be equivalent to losing membership in the covenant community. These are baptized, communing members of the body of Christ, his church. I don’t understand this passage to be teaching that someone can lose their status as the elect of God. Neither do I believe this passage or others teach that the non-elect lose their salvation (i.e., saving benefits of union with Christ). They cannot lose what they do not have.

7) The author of Hebrews warns new covenant Christians of the danger of apostasy in Hebrews 10:28-29: “Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?” Once again, I am quite sure that I cannot explain how all of this fits with our Reformed *ordo salutis*, but the author of Hebrews clearly says that if one defects he is at the very least sinning against great privileges and benefits, including having been “sanctified” by the “blood of the covenant,” which I take to refer to baptism. Therefore, the baptized Christian who defects, sins against the covenant God made with him in Christ, profaning the washing away of sins by the blood of Jesus that baptism was meant to signify and seal to him. I may be wrong in that interpretation, but I do not believe the author of Hebrews is saying that one can lose his “eternal salvation” or “justification.”

There are more passages to consider, but these are enough to establish the warrant for the kind of language I am willing to affirm about what reprobates enjoy but then forfeit in their apostasy. *The reprobate apostate does not lose eternal salvation, regeneration, justification, and a vital union with Christ by saving faith*; rather, he loses many gracious gifts as well as a covenanted connection with Christ and his people in the church. I believe what I have written here is consistent with both the JFVP and the Westminster Standards.

Let me emphasize again that those who are elect in Christ can never fall away. But those who are not elect often partake of gracious benefits and gifts from God, including a covenantal union with Christ, all of which gracious gifts they eventually reject. They fall from grace—not the same grace that the elect receive, but grace nonetheless.

I agree with this affirmation and denial from the Missouri Presbytery FV Report:

We affirm that the Father seals all true believers with the Holy Spirit in union with Christ for the day of redemption; we deny that any so united to Christ can fall away from grace and finally be lost (p. 9).

These warnings about apostasy in the Scriptures are to be taken seriously. Genuine believers hear these and they tremble, which is evidence that they have *saving* faith:

By this faith, a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God himself speaking therein; and acteth differently upon that which each particular passage thereof containeth; yielding obedience to the commands, *trembling at the threatenings*, and embracing the promises of God for this life, and that which is to come. But the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace (WCF 14.2)

2. Are non-elect, but baptized, members of the church in a “position of grace” or in a “state of grace”? How would you define that state in comparison (and in contrast) with the state of elect, baptized members of the church?

a. I understand “state of grace” to be equivalent to “eternal salvation,” that which only the elect enjoy. True believers who are in a “state of grace” cannot fall from that because that grace is “irresistible grace.” This is plainly taught in our Westminster Standards and I embrace this teaching.

When God converts a sinner, and translates him into the state of grace, he freeth him from his natural bondage under sin; and, by his grace alone, enables him freely to will and to do that which is spiritually good; yet so, as that by reason of his remaining corruption, he doth not perfectly, nor only, will that which is good, but doth also will that which is evil (WCF 9.4).

They, whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved (WCF 17.1).

Although hypocrites and other unregenerate men may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of being in the favor of God, and estate of salvation (which hope of theirs shall perish): yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before him, may, in this life, be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, which hope shall never make them ashamed (WCF 18.1).

b. I don't believe the phrase "position of grace" as it is used in the JFVP has such a definitive use in our tradition. I suspect the language was chosen to describe what apostates enjoy because it communicates the fact that those baptized members of the body of Christ do enjoy some measure of grace and gracious gifts of God in the covenant community. I believe I have described, as best as I can, what "grace" this is that the non-elect enjoy in previous answers to questions in this section and the last section on Baptism.

3. Please clarify your understanding of WCF 17 and WLC 79, especially vis-à-vis the passage above from the 2007 JFVP (i.e., the passage on Apostasy in question IV.1).

I believe I have answered this question in my response to the two previous questions. The Larger Catechism Q. 79:

Q. May not true believers, by reason of their imperfections, and the many temptations and sins they are overtaken with, fall away from the state of grace?

A. True believers, by reason of the unchangeable love of God, and his decree and covenant to give them perseverance, their inseparable union with Christ, his continual intercession for them, and the Spirit and seed of God abiding in them, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation.

I affirm this answer, and I see nothing in my previous explanations that would raise questions about my commitment to these truths.

I agree with this statement from the Missouri Presbytery FV Study Committee Report:

7. We affirm that some passages in Scripture genuinely warn of God's wrath to the covenant community, some of whom may never come to saving faith; we deny that true believers, chosen by the Father, redeemed by the Son, and given the Spirit as guarantee of their inheritance, can commit final and total apostasy (p. 9).

4. Given that WLC 79 employs the terminology “union with Christ” and “fall away from the state of grace” to refer to “true believers” (i.e., “the elect” as referred to in WCF 3.6), for whom it is impossible to “fall from grace,” do you affirm that terminological confusion could result (either intentionally or accidentally) by endorsing the 2007 JFVP statement on apostasy (quoted above in IV.1)?

a. There is always a danger of “terminological confusion” when we attempt to systematize biblical truths and assign technical meanings to biblical terms and phrases. This danger was recognized in our Missouri Presbytery FV committee report:

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

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

The Missouri Presbytery study committee sought to be consistent in the way it used terms in the document it produced, privileging the Westminster definitions. I believe that was perfectly appropriate for our committee in producing that document. Nevertheless, I do not believe that we as pastors and elders are restricted to these definitions when we preach and teach the Bible. The Westminster standards, for example, use “union with Christ” to refer to Jesus’ specific relationship with the elect. But while this understanding of union with Christ is essential to our tradition’s theological definition of the term as it is employed in the Standards, surely we will not insist that Westminster’s definition of union with Christ is to be poured into every

biblical passage that uses that same or similar terms and images. Drawing attention to the different biblical uses of the “union with Christ” images does not amount to a betrayal of the teaching of the Standards.

Furthermore, I do not believe that doing theology faithfully is primarily about defining terms. Unfortunately, this seems to be what we have inherited from our 17th-century scholastic Reformed tradition. We have catechisms that are mostly about defining terms. What is justification? What is sanctification? What is the meaning of this and that? It is important, of course, when one speaks and writes to insure that hearers and readers understand how one uses words. I’m not denying that. We need to be careful, however, that we don’t suspect others of heterodoxy simply because they don’t use the terms we do or define words the way we do in our tradition. We also need to be very careful that we don’t privilege our theological tradition’s definition of terms over the Bible’s own use of these same words. I often wonder if our way of doing theology by defining terms does not lead to confusion when people read their Bibles and are then confused about what they read because they are reading into biblical words all the theological content we have loaded into these words in our tradition.

I have also, in previous answers, tried my best to define carefully the terms I am using. The fact is that “grace” does not always mean the same thing in the Bible that it means in discussions of, say, the *ordo salutis* in Reformed Theology. Even so, the Bible ought not to be forced into the straightjacket of systematic theology, especially when doing so might blunt the force of biblical texts.

b. I learned to be careful about language and its use in theology by reading John Frame and Vern Poythress in seminary. Poythress warns about the confusion that results when we go to the Bible and force our loaded definitions on biblical words. Here is his second maxim of symphonic theology: “No term in the Bible is equal to a technical term of systematic theology.” He explains:

If we want to develop technical terms in theology, such as ‘Trinity’ or ‘saving faith,’ we cannot make those terms perfectly match individual Hebrew or Greek vocabulary items. The reason is that we cannot make a word with a precise meaning exactly match a word with a broad, flexible meaning, or one with several shades of meaning in different contexts. If we really succeeded in making some English word “exactly match” a Hebrew or Greek word, the word in English would

be just as vague and flexible as the one in Greek or Hebrew; it would not have any of the advantages of technical precision or fixity of meaning. The more precise we make the technical term, the greater the distance it must have from an exact match to any one word of Hebrew or Greek (*Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), p. 75).

In other words, reading our systematic theological meaning into every occurrence of the phrase "grace" or words that describe "union with Christ" in the Bible will most likely cause us to misunderstand the passage.

c. The answer, I believe, to what the Catechism means by "state of grace" is something different than what Paul means when he writes, "you have fallen from grace" (Gal. 5:4). Similarly, the JFVP statement on apostasy means something different by "position of grace" than the Westminster divines meant by "state of grace" in WLC 79. People use language in different ways—it's all about *context*. I suspect that if the author of that section of the JFVP statement knew about the possibility of a conflict with Westminster, another phrase might have been chosen instead. So yes, there is a possibility of confusion because the same terms are used.

Remember, the JFVP was offered up quickly as a means of answering public accusations against the signers. Not every phrase and sentence was carefully vetted. It does not have the same authority or usefulness to me as the Westminster Standards do. Let me be clear, the JFVP is not some sort of confessional document that I place before or even beside the Westminster Standards. It is not an alternate confession of faith. It is an *ad hoc* document designed to clarify the convictions of the signers in the face of numerous inaccurate accusations and erroneous caricatures of their theological commitments.

5. The following paragraphs are taken from the 2006 Missouri Presbytery report: Under section I. "The Nature of the Covenant and Election" (p. 4, lines 28-45).

5. We affirm that when Adam disobeyed God's word and brought himself, his posterity, and the earth over which he had exercised dominion, under the curse of the covenant, God was merciful and initiated a second covenant for the purpose of bringing His redemptive grace to the chosen sons and daughters of Adam, delivering them and the world from the reign of sin and death, and calling them into covenant friendship, loyalty, and service with Himself. We deny that those who

are true participants in this second covenant by means of justifying faith, who are called and who have received the promised inheritance, can break this covenant (Heb. 9:15).

6. We affirm that Jesus Christ, the eternal Son, is the mediator of the covenant of God's gracious redemption. Those whom the Father gives to the Son through His electing love in the covenant of grace will know the blessings of life and fruitful service into all eternity. Believing that God has elected in Christ to salvation all those who will be saved and that God has also foreordained all the means thereunto, we deny that the elect can lose their election (WCF 3.5-6). And because God's decree to save is immutable, Christ's merit and intercession is efficacious, and the Spirit continues to abide upon all those whom God has effectually called, we further deny that perseverance ultimately depends upon human effort or striving (WCF 17.2).

Under section III. "Union with Christ" (p. 9, lines 24-26, and 41-44)

5. We affirm that the Father seals all true believers with the Holy Spirit in union with Christ for the day of redemption; we deny that any so united to Christ can fall away from grace and finally be lost.

8. We affirm that some passages in Scripture genuinely warn of God's wrath to the covenant community, some of whom may never come to saving faith; we deny that true believers, chosen by the Father, redeemed by the Son, and given the Spirit as guarantee of their inheritance, can commit final and total apostasy.

Do you continue to affirm these statements (broadly and in regard to the particulars)? Please indicate and explain any area(s) of disagreement.

Yes, I continue to affirm these statements. I believe I've established that in my answers to questions 1-4 above.

6. The following paragraphs are from the "Declarations" of the Report of the Ad Interim Study Committee on Federal Vision, New Perspective, and Auburn Avenue Theology of the PCA (M35GA):

Do you affirm these statements accurately summarize the Westminster Standards on these points? Please note and explain any disagreement you have with these statements.

Let me first offer a clarification. These statements below are not meant to "accurately summarize the Westminster Standards." Instead they are meant to identify views that are outside of the bounds of our confessional and catechetical standards. They summarize errant views and then claim that these views are contrary to the Westminster Standards.

Yes, I affirm these statements. I believe the views summarized here set forth erroneous views of Reformed theology and are indeed contrary to the Westminster Standards.

Declaration #2. The view that an individual is “elect” by virtue of his membership in the visible church; and that this “election” includes justification, adoption and sanctification; but that this individual could lose his “election” if he forsakes the visible church, is contrary to the Westminster Standards.

The words “elect” and “election” are set off by quotation marks in this declaration. I assume, then, that the “election” spoken of here refers to God’s election of individuals to eternal salvation. If that is the case, then, yes, I agree with this statement. Neither the Bible nor the Westminster Standards teach such an outrageous thing as an individual being “elect” by virtue of his membership in the visible church.

The *decretal* election of individuals is the primary focus of the Westminster Standards when treating election. But the GA FV Report also acknowledges another type of election found in our Standards: “The Confession is, of course, fully aware of the national, ethnic, external, covenant election of Israel (LC 101), as a church under age (WCF 19.3-4, 1.8, and 7.5)” (p. 4). In addition to *decretal* election, the Confession teaches there are also these other kinds of election, including *covenantal* election unto the visible body of God’s people. Having acknowledged the realities of both decretal election and covenantal election, the Report repeatedly implies the men under investigation were speaking of the former when in fact they are speaking of the latter. Because of this confusion, the FV report’s conclusions often miss the mark.

Consider the following sentence from the Report: “For example, to affirm the decretal view of election, and then to say that the Bible teaches that the elect may fall from their election, is to set the Bible over against the Standards” (*Report of the Ad Interim Study Committee on Federal Vision, New Perspective, and Auburn Avenue Theology of the PCA* [M35GA]). The conclusion is only warranted if the same type of election, *decretal* election, is meant throughout the sentence. It is not true if the second mention of election is a reference to covenantal election, and *this is the only kind of election that men may fall from*.

There is an outrageous charge related to this that comes up on the internet quite regularly. It is the idea that one becomes elect by means of baptism. I do not believe nor have I ever taught that something is “required for one to be elect.” I do not believe or have ever taught

that something is "required for one to be elect," as the GA Study Committee Report believes some have taught (*Report*, p. 9). By its very nature, election is God's choice, his unconditional choice. That is true whether we are talking about the covenantal election of Israel or the decretal election of the invisible church. Israelites were Israelites only by God's sovereign choice. Those who are members of the body of Christ are "elect" in the same sense Israelites were; they are elect not because they have met the "requirement" of being baptized but because God has chosen to include them among His people. Not only that, but not all Israel is Israel. And not every member of the church is elect unto salvation in Christ.

These kinds of distinctions need to be carefully maintained if we are going to deal faithfully with the biblical teaching about Israel and the Church.

Some people enjoy various benefits of the new covenant and then lose those benefits because they are found to be without saving faith. This is not a threat to the Reformed doctrine of election and reprobation, since God ordains both the end point (election or reprobation) and the whole story arc along the way. Some reprobates come near to God for a time and then drift or turn away. It should be noted that the doctrine of reprobation in Romans 9 is given by Paul to explain apostasy, an exposition of God's election applied to the question of why his elect, chosen people have turned from their Messiah.

Declaration #7. The view that one can be "united to Christ" and not receive all the benefits of Christ's mediation, including perseverance, in that effectual union is contrary to the Westminster Standards.

Again, this declaration uses the phrase "united to Christ" in quotation marks. In my responses to earlier questions in the last section on baptism and in questions 1-4 of this section, I believe I have answered this already. I believe this statement summarizes a view that is unreformed, unbiblical, and not consistent with the Westminster Standards. If we take "union with Christ" as Westminster defines it and not as a reference to the fact that baptized Christians are "united with him" in the sense that they are in covenant with him as members of his body, of which he is the Head, then this view is wrong.

Declaration #8. The view that some can receive saving benefits of Christ's mediation, such as regeneration and justification, and yet not persevere in those benefits is contrary to the Westminster Standards.

I agree with this statement. Only those who are eternally elect to salvation receive regeneration and justification, and they all persevere to the end.

7. Is your understanding of Christian doctrine at variance from any of the three "Declarations" quoted above in question IV. 6? If so, please note the variance and explain your view(s). Please include how your views are in accord with the Westminster Standards.

No, I don't believe my views are out of accord with any of these three declarations or the Westminster Standards. I hope my answers to the questions above have explained why I believe they are not.

V. Justification

All of the questions about justification in this section might be answered quickly with reference to my response to the very last question (#8). To my knowledge, nothing I have written or said in lectures should cause anyone to question my commitment to the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone. Some have tried to *draw logical conclusions* about my understanding of justification based on other statements I have made about related theological issues (such as my rejection of a meritorious Adamic covenant).

I will answer these questions simply and honestly, mostly with reference to the Westminster Standards, with which I have no reservations or exceptions regarding its teaching on justification.

After finishing my answers to these questions I realized that the big elephant in the room here is N. T. Wright's views on justification. Let me summarize my interaction with NTW's ideas briefly. I have not kept up with the debate about his doctrine of justification for the past two or three years. About 12 years ago I read his *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Eerdmans, 1997), but I never embraced his core argument in that book. I think his work on many New Testament texts is interesting and insightful, but his overall teaching on justification I remember having serious flaws. When I was doing my graduate work at Concordia Seminary in the late 1990's and the early 2000's my Lutheran professors would often lead discussions with us about Wright's proposals. I learned a great deal in those seminar classes, but most of all they helped me remain grounded in the Reformation doctrine of justification that the Reformed and Lutheran traditions share. I still read Wright's little "For Everyone" commentary series when I preach through a book. I've benefited a great deal from his larger commentary on Romans, although not agreeing with him on many points. I am suspicious of Wright for many reasons (his weak doctrine of Scripture, women's ordination, biblical socialism, etc.) and I have never embraced his doctrine of justification as a replacement for the Reformation doctrine. My commitment to the classic Reformation doctrine of justification has not changed. I believe Wright's understanding of justification, especially his exegetical insights into specific New Testament texts, will likely extend and enrich the traditional

doctrine. Even so, a great deal of evaluation and theological debate has to happen in the coming years before confessional churches like ours accept his proposals.

There is a strange irony in this controversy about my views on justification. If the signatories of the Letter of Concern would have taken the time to correspond with me on this topic, they would have discovered that I am indebted far more to Luther for my convictions about justification than to most contemporary Reformed theologians, whether Presbyterian or Anglican (N.T. Wright). My story begins with my baptism into Christian faith in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. My believing mother was fastidious about my discipleship in the faith at Resurrection Lutheran church in South St. Louis. This included weekly worship, Sunday school, and youth group. I attended Lutheran grade school (Salem in South St. Louis) and one year of high school at Lutheran High South. I was catechized and confirmed in the Lutheran church as a teenager. I had a child-like faith growing up that was challenged and tested to the breaking point in my later high school years and my first two years at the University of Missouri. Thankfully, the Lord was gracious and faithful to his promises to me and brought me to my knees in 1977, to confess my sin and embrace his grace and mercy in Christ in a more mature way. From 1977 to 1980, the Lord led me to Reformed convictions so that I eventually joined First Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Augusta, GA, in 1981. Skipping ahead 13 years, when I was called to pastor Providence Presbyterian Church in St. Louis in 1994, I began graduate theological studies at Concordia Theological Seminary, completing my Master of Theology (S.T.M.) in 1998. I also completed all my language requirements and course work for my Ph.D. in the early 2000's. For various reasons, mostly pastoral, I decided not to complete my work on my dissertation. Nevertheless, for ten years I researched and studied Luther in earnest with the result that my respect for Luther and his doctrine of justification did not weaken but rather was confirmed and strengthened. Of course, I do not embrace everything Lutheranism teaches about justification (in the Book of Concord), but I find little to disagree with in Luther's doctrine of justification. In conclusion, I hope this little bit of biographical background helps the reader understand why I am so very disappointed that my views on this foundational biblical doctrine are so terribly misrepresented by my accusers.

1. Does the fact that the biblical word group for “to justify” has a broader range of usage than the term justification in the Westminster Standards (WCF 11, WLC 70, WSC 33) minimize the importance of the classic Reformed doctrine of justification? Explain.

a. I agree with the first affirmation under “Justification” from our Missouri Presbytery FV Study Committee Report:

1. We affirm that the biblical word group for “to justify” (the *dikaio*-word group) has a broader range of usage than the term justification as employed in the Westminster Standards; we deny that this fact calls for a redefinition of the classic Reformed doctrine of justification.

b. I’ve not thought about this question carefully enough to give any kind of definitive answer. I’ve done a little reading here and there, but I haven’t formulated my own ideas on this topic. I can’t remember ever writing or lecturing about this problem.

c. There is always a danger of reading back into the Bible our systematic theological definitions. In addition, there is the challenge of making sure we use biblical terms faithfully in our preaching and teaching. As for the challenge of determining the semantic range of the “justify” word group in the Bible and incorporating that information into our doctrine of justification, I have no definite answers. I’ve not studied this issue carefully, so I am reluctant to make declarations. I will simply note that this problem is not new to current debates. Maybe this example will help. John Murray and other Reformed commentators have noted that the apostle Paul does speak of being “justified from sin” in Roman 6:7, and in that context he is talking about being delivered from the power of sin. Murray seems to do a pretty good job of trying to tie this in with the classic Reformed doctrine of justification:

“Justified from sin” will have to bear the forensic meaning in view of the forensic import of the word “justify.” But since the context deals with deliverance from the power of sin the thought is, no doubt, that of being “quit” of sin. The decisive breach with the reigning power of sin is viewed after the analogy of the kind of dismissal which a judge gives when an arraigned person is justified. Sin has no further claim upon the person who is thus vindicated. This judicial aspect from which deliverance from the power of sin is to be viewed needs to be appreciated. It shows that the forensic is present not only in justification but also in that which lies at the basis of sanctification. A judgment is executed upon the power of sin in the death of Christ (cf. John 12:31) and deliverance from this power on the part of the believer arises from the efficacy of this judgment (Murray, *Romans*, p. 222).

I find Murray's discussion helpful. And there are studies to suggest that both the Hebrew word group *qdx* and the Greek *dikaio/w* can indeed express deliverance in some contexts. Sometimes "justification" language is used in circumstances that are not strictly judicial or forensic, like military situations, for instance, or a conflict with enemies that does not literally take place in a court. Just last week I was teaching Acts 13 and noticed that the ESV translates *dikaio/w* as "freed" in Acts 13:38, 39, and this in the context of forgiveness of sins and salvation. Even so, the classic Reformed doctrine of justification is a true and accurate expression of biblical teaching with regard to our judicial standing in God's sight. We should never minimize the truth that when we place our faith in Jesus we are declared righteous by God because of the work of Jesus for us. Deliverance from sin or from our enemies is surely connected with God's judgment in our favor in justification, but the challenge is to carefully distinguish the two acts without separating them.

d. I agree with this statement from the Missouri Presbytery FV Study Committee Report:

. . . we recognize that the Greek (and Hebrew) terminology which can be translated "justify" has a semantic range in the Old and New Testaments broader than the specific idea of God's pardoning sinners by the imputation of Christ's righteousness. Words from the biblical *dikaio-* group can be used in human interactions describing both judicial and non-judicial actions and declarations; and they can even have a negative connotation, expressing attempts at self-vindication. However, when employed in discussing God's work in saving his elect forever via the imputation of Christ's righteousness, this terminology takes on a more specific theological meaning. One can thus distinguish the *doctrine* of justification from the broader usage of *dikaio-* terminology. A failure to recognize this fact can result in a variety of fallacious exegetical and theological conclusions that create a disjunction between the biblical doctrine of justification and the classic Reformed doctrine. Furthermore, the doctrine of justification cannot be reduced to a mere listing of the places where the word "justify" is used in Scripture. Rather, it is a rich and coherent message from God as to how sinful human beings may be assured of his love and grace (p. 6).

2. Explain how God's acts of vindicating his people in history, recorded in Scripture, influence your understanding of the doctrine of justification by faith?

I have not come to any definitive conclusions about this subject. I certainly have not written or lectured about it, as far as I can remember. If I have written anything, it was 6 or more years ago in informal discussion groups. I know Peter Leithart has an essay on this topic ("Judge Me, O God: Biblical Perspectives on Justification"), but I have not read this article carefully. There is nothing about historical vindication that shows up in the Joint FV

Profession either. God's historical vindication of his people has not influenced my understanding of the doctrine of justification by faith. My understanding of the classic doctrine of justification has not changed since the assumption of my ordination vows.

I agree with the second affirmation under "Justification" from our Missouri Presbytery FV Study Committee Report:

2. We affirm that there is an element of vindication in the biblical vocabulary for "to justify"; we deny that God's ongoing acts of vindicating his people in history are to be confused with their justification by faith.

3. When are persons justified? Explain from Scripture and compare with the Westminster Standards.

a. We are justified by faith. "Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification" (WCF 11.2). Since faith is the sole instrument of justification, one is justified when one believes, when one trusts God for his promises in the Gospel. When a person believes the Gospel and trusts Jesus he or she is justified. That happens in time and involves a real transition from wrath to grace in that person's history. I agree with paragraph 4 in chapter 11 of the Westminster Confession of faith:

God did, from all eternity, decree to justify all the elect, and Christ did, in the fullness of time, die for their sins, and rise again for their justification: nevertheless, they are not justified, until the Holy Spirit doth, in due time, actually apply Christ unto them.

b. Of course, we don't always know when we or others first believed. Covenant children may never remember a time that they didn't trust in Jesus, so the moment of their conversion may never be known by them or others. Indeed, some covenant children—maybe many or even most—have a child-like faith from their mother's womb. The Psalms and other Scriptures seem to encourage us all to think this way (Psalm 8:2; 22:9-10; 51:5; 139:13-16; Matt. 21:16; Luke 1:44.) But even if one cannot date the time and place where he first trusted in Jesus, justification happens at that moment. I do not believe in "eternal justification." I also reject the idea popular in some Lutheran circles that Jesus justified everyone at his death and resurrection, and now that universal justification must be accepted by faith.

c. I agree with the fifth affirmation under “Justification” from our Missouri Presbytery FV Study Committee Report:

5. We affirm that God planned the justification of his elect before creation and that it was therefore certain to occur; we deny that those who will be justified are justified before the Holy Spirit does, in due time, actually apply Christ to them (WCF 11.4).

a. Is justification both an act and a process? Explain your answer from Scripture and compare with the Westminster Standards.

Justification is “an act of God’s free grace” (WLC Q.70, WSC Q. 33). Justification does not proceed by degrees; it is not a gradual process. Justification is instantaneous and therefore complete as soon as the sinner believes in Christ (Rom. 4:7; Luke 18:24; Rom. 5:1). I’ve never believed or taught otherwise. Justification is a judicial pronouncement from God. I agree with Berkhof’s summary: Justification “is unique in the application of the work of redemption in that it is a judicial act of God, a declaration respecting the sinner, and not an act or a process of renewal, such as regeneration, conversion, and sanctification” (*Systematic Theology*, p. 513). Scripture makes it clear that the justification of a sinner that responds to the Gospel by faith is God’s act of declaring them forgiven and righteous in his sight (Rom. 3:24, 25; Rom. 4:6-8; Gal. 2:16; Phil. 3:9). Justification is not repeated over and over for the Christian (Rom. 5:21; Heb. 10:14; Psalm 103:12; Isa. 44:22). A justified Christian is exempt from condemnation (Rom. 8:1, 32-34).

I agree with the tenth affirmation under “Justification” from our Missouri Presbytery FV Study Committee Report:

10. We affirm that justification is a definitive, forensic act by which God acquits sinners by his grace and declares them righteous; although believers enjoy their justification as an ongoing state, we deny that justification is a process.

Luther said it colorfully: “Justification does not come in pieces, but in a heap.”

b. Is justification permanent or can it be lost?

Justification cannot be lost. It is permanent. The scriptural arguments for this are the same as that for the perseverance of all those with saving faith (Luke 22:32; John 10:28; Rom.

8:28-39; Heb. 10:14). Christians are continually forgiven by God of their sins, but the elect cannot lose their justification, as the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 11, par. 5 teaches:

God doth continue to forgive the sins of those that are justified; and, although they can never fall from the state of justification, yet they may, by their sins, fall under God's fatherly displeasure, and not have the light of his countenance restored unto them, until they humble themselves, confess their sins, beg pardon, and renew their faith and repentance.

c. Is justification effected by divine action alone, by divine and human action together, or by human action?

Justification is an act of God. Justification is “an act of God’s free grace” (WSC Q. 33) and not some cooperative effort between God and man. How could human action “effect” justification when the act of justification is *God’s* pardoning all our sins and accepting and accounting our persons as righteous in his sight (WLC Q. 70)? We, of course, exercise faith in God as the Gospel is proclaimed, but “it is God who justifies” (Rom. 8:33). We don’t justify ourselves in God’s sight, nor do we contribute to our own justification by a long process of becoming more righteous. God declares us not guilty and righteous in his sight because of the work of Christ for us. This is all through God’s unconditional grace. We do not participate in our justification; we only receive his grace by faith.

d. Is justification by grace or favor?

I’m not sure I understand the difference. It all depends on how you define these terms; and one cannot define them without a context. I’d say that we are “justified by his grace as a gift” (Rom. 3:24). But, of course, God’s grace can be defined as “divine *favor* freely given” or something like that. If there is a big difference between these terms, I’m not sure I understand what it is. At least one place in the Westminster Larger catechism these terms “grace” and “favor” seem to refer to the same divine posture towards us. In the Larger Catechism Q. 194 we learn that in the fifth petition of the Lord’s prayer we are “to we pray for ourselves and others, that God of his free grace would, through the obedience and satisfaction of Christ, apprehended and applied by faith, acquit us both from the guilt and punishment of sin, accept us in his Beloved; *continue his favor and grace to us*, pardon our daily failings, and fill us with peace and joy. . .”

How would you interpret Paul's use of the Greek word *charis*: 1) grace or 'favor' as in a shown kindness or 2) a loan with commensurate obligation?

I do not believe Paul has a technical definition of this word that he always intends whenever he uses this word. I look in Bauer's Greek lexicon and see that there are dozens of different entries under *charis*. To what Scripture passage does this question refer? Is there something I have written that prompts this question? If so, I don't know what it might be.

I will assume you are talking about Paul's use of *charis* in passages that have to do with justification. I'll take the most obvious one. Paul says we "are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:24). "Grace" here is God's mercy and favor revealed to us in Christ's redemptive work for us. I've never even thought about God's "grace" being "a loan with a commensurate obligation." The idea that the grace of God would be "a loan" is offensive to me. Such a notion has all sorts of negative connotations. Will God call the loan due at some future date? Is it a loan with interest? What happens if I don't pay the loan back? Do I have to pay the entire amount back to him or just a portion? Exactly how much is that? I'm not sure where the idea that *charis* is a loan comes from. Maybe there's some extra-biblical use of the word in different contexts that I don't know about. Or maybe the word might connote "a loan" in contexts other than God's justification of believing sinners in some Scripture passages. That's possible. But I don't know how to answer this question other than to say that when I talk about *God's grace in salvation* I mean "God's unconditional kindness expressed in his gratuitous gift of justification to those who deserve his just wrath and anger."

e. Is justification through faith or faithfulness?

We are justified by God grace alone because of Christ's life, death, and resurrection; and this justification is ours *through faith alone*. We might say that the ground of justification is the faithfulness of Jesus. But the instrument of justification, the way we receive God's judicial verdict of not guilty and righteous in his sight, is through faith alone not faithfulness. As Paul says: "we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ" (Gal. 2:16). Of course, those who exercise faith in Jesus and are justified will be

faithful to the end. They will have faith-filled lives. But their faithfulness is not the *material* or *instrumental cause* of their justification, but the fruit of their salvation.

Faith itself is *not* something we offer to God to become good enough to be worthy of his friendship, but rather a means by which we are united to Christ so that his sacrifice applies to us.

My answer to the next question expands on this a bit.

How would you interpret Paul's use of the Greek word *pistis*: 1) belief or faith or 2) faithfulness?

a. Once again, I can't answer this question without a specific context. *Pistis* is not a technical term for Paul. Its meaning can be discovered only when one sees how Paul uses the word in context. I suppose the question is getting at whether I believe in justification by faith or justification by faithfulness? Do I believe that God justifies those whom he finds to be good and faithful members of the covenant? No. Do I believe that God declares righteous those whom he finds to be righteous? No.

b. If, however, you mean by "faithful" something like "faith-filled," then I suppose that would be acceptable. God justifies those who have faith. I was asked by someone recently what I meant when I said that Christians are those who are faithful until death. Was I teaching justification by faithfulness? No. All I meant by that is justified Christians live a life of faith. "The just shall live by faith" (Hab. 2:4; Rom. 1:17). A justified Christian believes, trusts, place his faith in Jesus throughout his entire life, even unto death. I don't believe that God justifies those whom he finds worthy or acceptable because they have been so faithful to his covenant that they are, in fact, righteous.

c. The Letter of Concern claims that I "reject justification by faith alone" (p. 1) and then "documents" that claim with 3 statements at the end of the letter:

6. TE Meyers teaches that justification is by works by including faithfulness in faith and thus denies the *sola fide* of the Reformation contrary to the Westminster Standards.

a. TE Meyers teaches, "*We deny* that the faith which is the sole instrument of justification can be understood as anything other than the only kind of faith which God gives, which is to say, a living, active, and personally loyal faith" (JFVP, 6). The problem is that he includes loyalty or

faithfulness in the instrument of justification. In the Confession, faith is one thing and faithfulness is another. The Confession teaches that good works and other virtues are things that accompany faith but are not part of faith itself (WLC 73). It teaches that faith is the only instrument by which a sinner receives and applies the righteousness of Christ (Ibid., cf. 11.2).

b. What TE Meyers means is elucidated by what he says under the sacraments, “Baptism obligates such a one to lifelong covenant loyalty to the triune God” (p. 5). Yet TE Meyers says that loyalty is part of the faith that justifies us. This is a salvation wrought by obedience and justification by works contrary to the Standards, the Bible, and the entire Protestant Reformation.

The documentation provided by the Letter of Concern does not support the claim that I teach justification by works. I do not include “loyalty or faithfulness as an instrument of justification,” as the Letter asserts. That is not what the portion of the JFVP that they quote says. The statement from the JFVP only talks about *what kind of faith* is true faith, that is, saving faith. To say that the kind of faith that justifies is a “living, active, and personally loyal faith” is simply to define genuine faith over against false or superficial belief. The Scriptures often warn against superficial, historical, or merely intellectual faith (Matt. 7:26; 13:12; Acts 26:27, 28; James 2:19). To say that saving faith is “living” is just to repeat what James says in chapter 2 of his epistle. Chapter 16 of the Westminster Confession uses the same kind of language when it speaks of “the fruits and evidences of a true and *lively* faith” (16.2). Furthermore, to say that faith is “active” is another way of describing what our Confession teaches about saving faith in 14.2:

By this faith, a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God himself speaking therein; and acteth differently upon that which each particular passage thereof containeth; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life, and that which is to come. But the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace.

Notice that this paragraph is describing the nature of saving faith. We are told that “this faith” *does* two things: 1) it believes, and 2) it acts. Indeed, the last sentence says that “the principle *acts* of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone. . .” Therefore, when the JFVP describes saving faith as “active faith” this is perfectly consistent with our Westminster Confession of Faith.

To describe saving faith as “personally loyal faith,” as the JFVP does, simply draws out the “volitional element” (*fiducia*) in classic Reformed definitions of saving faith. Saving faith has three marks in most Reformed theological treatments: 1) knowledge (*notitia*), assent (*assensus*), and trust (*fiducia*). Berkhof describes the third dimension of saving faith this way:

This is the crowning element of faith. Faith is not merely a matter of the intellect, nor of the intellect and the emotions combined; it is a matter of the will, determining the directions of the soul, an act of the soul going out towards its object and appropriating this. . . This third element consists in a *personal trust* in Christ as Savior and Lord, including a surrender of the soul as guilty and defiled to Christ, and a reception and appropriation of Christ as the source of pardon and spiritual life (*Systematic Theology*, p. 505).

That the JFVP should choose to describe the fiduciary aspect of faith with the words “personal loyalty” does not imply that one is justified by his meritorious work of “personal loyalty.” No more than one might accuse Berkhof of believing in “justification by a surrender of the soul” or “justification by a volitional act of the soul.” These are all just ways of describing the richness of saving faith.

Faith itself is not something you offer to God to become good enough to be worthy of his friendship, but rather a means by which you are united to Christ so that his sacrifice and righteousness is reckoned to you by God’s gracious declaration.

4. Distinguish between the basis (or ground) and the means of justification? What is the relation between good deeds and justification? Explain your answers from Scripture and compare with the Westminster Standards.

The basis or ground of justification is not to be found in man or his good works. We do not earn or merit God’s verdict of justification. We have no inherent righteousness and we cannot work up enough in the end to merit God’s final verdict of “righteous.” Rather, the Bible and our Westminster standards teach that we are justified by the free grace of God (Rom. 3:24) and not by the works of the law or by good works (Rom. 3:28; Gal. 2:16; 3:11; Phil. 3:8).

God, in his grace, provided the ground of our justification in the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. He was the sole faithful human, true to Adam’s as well as Israel’s calling as no one else had ever been. He lived a sinless life and thus qualified himself to be our blameless sacrificial substitute (Heb. 9:14; 1 Peter 1:19). His one selfless act of obedience (Rom. 5:18)

is the ground of justification for all those who believe in him. Having died and risen for our justification (Rom. 4:25) he is the righteous one whose righteousness is imputed to the sinner in justification (Rom. 3:24; 5:9; 8:1; 10:4; 1 Cor. 1:30; 6:11; 2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:9).

I believe the answer to question 73 in the Larger Catechism sums up my views on the question of the part good works play in our justification:

Q. 73. How doth faith justify a sinner in the sight of God?

A. Faith justifies a sinner in the sight of God, not because of those other graces which do always accompany it, or of good works that are the fruits of it, nor as if the grace of faith, or any act thereof, were imputed to him for his justification; but only as it is an instrument by which he receiveth and applieth Christ and his righteousness.

I agree with the eighth affirmation under “Justification” from our Missouri Presbytery FV Study Committee Report:

8. We affirm that God justifies sinners by imputing Christ’s righteousness to them rather than counting their sins against them; we deny that justification is grounded in any infusion of grace or that faith itself, as an act of obedience, is imputed as the ground of justification.

The righteousness granted to the sinner is not his own produced by himself but an “alien righteousness,” as Luther so powerfully put it. It comes from outside of us (*extra nos*). It is the righteousness of Christ imputed to the sinner. We are completely passive in this transaction and cannot do anything that will contribute to our justification.

What is the relationship of justification to sanctification?

Justification and sanctification are to be carefully distinguished, but not entirely separated. Thinking about this from the perspective of the biblical imagery behind these terms, justification has to do with the law and God’s court, but sanctification is the language of the sanctuary. The lawcourt is where God delivers his just verdict. Believers are pronounced righteous because of the death of Jesus and the righteousness of their representative Head Jesus. That is an act, a judicial pronouncement by God.

WSC Q. 33. What is justification?

A. Justification is *an act of God's free grace*, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.

Sanctification, however, is about the sanctuary, God's presence. The sanctuary is where one draws near to a holy (*sanctus*) God. Our legal standing before God is established when we are justified because of Christ by faith. That then gives us the legal right to enter God's holy presence and begin to be transformed by his grace and made fit for the experience of fellowship with him. Sanctification is a process that continues throughout our entire lives.

WLC Q. 75. What is sanctification?

A. Sanctification is *a work of God's grace*, whereby they whom God hath, before the foundation of the world, chosen to be holy, are in time, through the powerful operation of his Spirit applying the death and resurrection of Christ unto them, renewed in their whole man after the image of God; having the seeds of repentance unto life, and all other saving graces, put into their hearts, and those graces so stirred up, increased, and strengthened, as that they more and more die unto sin, and rise unto newness of life.

What is the relation between good deeds and justification?

We are not justified by our good deeds. The Westminster Confession makes this clear: "These good works, done in obedience to God's commandments, are the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith." The proof texts cite James 2:18 and 22 to back up this claim. Good works are evidence of a living and true faith.

No matter how much progress we make in obedience and holiness, our works can never secure our justification, either now or at the Last Day. The Confession makes this powerfully clear:

We cannot by our best works merit pardon of sin, or eternal life at the hand of God, by reason of the great disproportion that is between them and the glory to come; and the infinite distance that is between us and God, whom, by them, we can neither profit, nor satisfy for the debt of our former sins, but when we have done all we can, we have done but our duty, and are unprofitable servants: and because, as they are good, they proceed from his Spirit; and as they are wrought by us, they are defiled, and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection, that they cannot endure the severity of God's judgment (WCF 16.5).

The change that follows justification in the life of the believer along with whatever good works he is enabled to do as a Christian—these are the fruit of faith and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and properly belong to the doctrine of sanctification, not justification (Rom. 5:1-5; Gal. 5:6; Eph. 2:10; James 2:20). The justified sinner is *simul justis et peccator*—at the same

time righteous (in God's sight because of Christ) and a sinner. That *simul* status endures until the Christian's death.

5. Define "imputation," arguing your position from Scripture. What part does imputation play in justification?

I have answered questions about imputation throughout this document. I will only say a few words here. Imputation is God's forensic act of accounting us "debt free" because of Christ's death and also "righteous" because the risen, glorified Lord is our representative Head.

Justification is the conferring of a forensic status or righteousness in God's sight. We are given legal right standing with Him. I agree with the eighth affirmation under "Justification" from our Missouri Presbytery FV Study Committee Report:

8. We affirm that in justification, God the Father imputes the righteousness of Christ to believing sinners, a righteousness that is premised upon Christ's lifelong obedience and his obedience unto death; we deny that anyone is justified by God apart from this imputation.

The only ground of our justification is the righteousness of Jesus, his obedient life, sacrificial death for us, and his righteousness as the resurrected, glorified Christ. Our liability for our sins is imputed to Christ. He undergoes the punishment for us. He willingly undergoes the just punishment for sin as our substitute. Then his righteous status as the obedient, vindicated, resurrected Christ is imputed to us. As Luther says, we are justified by "an alien righteousness," not our own. All of this is "credited to our account" or "reckoned to be ours" or "imputed to us" when we believe the Gospel. This is clearly taught in Rom. 3:24; 5:9, 19; 8:1; 10:4; Gal. 3:13; 1 Cor. 1:20; 6:11; 2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:9).

Distinguish between the following doctrines as they are used in definitions of justification: 1) the infusion of righteousness and 2) the imputation of righteousness. Evaluate biblically.

I do not believe that we have a right standing before God because of infused righteousness, or our works, or our progress in sanctification. We have a right standing before God because we have been graciously united to Christ by faith, and because the Father regards us, reckons us as righteous (imputation) in His Son.

The Roman Catholic view has grace infused in man. But grace is not a substance that is transferred from God to us. Rather grace is God's personal posture toward us in Christ. When God justifies us he does not analyze our person and work to determine if we are just. Nor does he infuse us with enough grace and righteousness so that we pass muster when he finally judges us on the Last Day. Rather, God justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5). Justification is a judicial declaration that we are righteous because our debt has been paid by Jesus' death (Rom. 4:5-8; 5:18, 19; Gal. 2:17) and because Jesus is the righteous person who stands in our stead. In this way Jesus' suffering the penalty for our sins, as well as his status as the Righteous One, is imputed to us and received by faith alone.

I agree with the eighth affirmation under "Justification" from our Missouri Presbytery FV Study Committee Report:

8. We affirm that God justifies sinners by imputing Christ's righteousness to them rather than counting their sins against them; we deny that justification is grounded in any infusion of grace or that faith itself, as an act of obedience, is imputed as the ground of justification.

6. Is there an eschatological dimension to justification? Explain your view from Scripture and compare with the Westminster Standards. If you affirm there is an eschatological dimension to justification, how does that reality impact the justification believers enjoy now?

I agree with the ninth affirmation under "Justification" from our Missouri Presbytery FV Study Committee Report:

9. We affirm that there is an eschatological dimension to justification, namely that on the last day God will declare the elect righteous before men and angels; we deny that justification is only eschatological and not also an accomplished present reality.

The eschatological dimension of our justification is largely about our public vindication at the Last Day, as the Missouri Presbytery committee notes. I have heard and read other ways of conceiving of this that strike me as fundamentally wrong. I reject the idea that we will be justified by works at the last day so that our justification by faith now is simply a promise of what we will one day earn or merit ourselves through our own righteousness. Although it is true that our present justification is a down payment on our eschatological vindication, I do not understand that to mean that we will finally merit or earn God's verdict of righteous at the

Last Day. Rather, at the Last Day what was hidden will be revealed. Our faith will be publicly vindicated. God's people will be "openly acknowledged and acquitted" (WSC Q. 38, WLC Q. 90). Our works done in faith will be judged, accepted by grace, and rewarded:

Notwithstanding, the persons of believers being accepted through Christ, their good works also are accepted in him; not as though they were in this life wholly unblamable and unprovable in God's sight; but that he, 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 addition to this, all charges against us by the enemies of God will be dealt with. And God's enemies will be judged and humiliated, their accusations against his people will be overturned and they will be condemned. In that way God's people will be "justified" at the end of history (WLC Q. 89). Question 90 in the Larger Catechism makes this all explicit:

Q. 90. What shall be done to the righteous at the day of judgment?

A. At the day of judgment, the righteous, being caught up to Christ in the clouds, shall be set on his right hand, and there openly acknowledged and acquitted, shall join with him in the judging of reprobate angels and men, and shall be received into heaven, where they shall be fully and forever freed from all sin and misery; filled with inconceivable joys, made perfectly holy and happy both in body and soul, in the company of innumerable saints and holy angels, but especially in the immediate vision and fruition of God the Father, of our Lord Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, to all eternity. And this is the perfect and full communion which the members of the invisible church shall enjoy with Christ in glory, at the resurrection and day of judgment.

7. Distinguish between the individual and corporate aspects of justification. Explain your answer from Scripture and compare with the Westminster Standards.

a. The Westminster Standards speak to both issues, but they do not, to my knowledge, tie these corporate, sociological concerns to the biblical doctrine of justification. They are concerned more with the justification of individuals. The entire chapter on justification in the WCF is concerned with how individuals are justified. I cannot find anything in Westminster's treatment of the doctrine of justification, either in the Confession or the Catechisms that deals with the corporate dimensions of God's justification of sinners.

b. I have already cited Scripture to ground my support for the Reformed doctrine of individual justification. As for the corporate dimension of justification, I understand that to be largely related to the Jew/Gentile problem in the New Testament. After all, Paul's extended treatment of justification in his letter to the Romans is all about defending "the righteousness of God,"

with a good deal of his concern being the Jew/Gentile controversy. Even his discussion of individual justification in chapters 3 through 5 has to do with the place of circumcision and the works of the law in God's justification of Abraham, David, and also the Gentiles. God is just and the justifier of both Jew and Gentile who trust in Jesus and are incorporated into the new community of the Church. Those who have been graciously added to the Church ought to recognize that everything that divided humanity before the fall (even the divine bi-polar differentiation between Israel and the Nations) has been overcome in the work of Jesus. God intends to make things right. He is in the process of making things right through this new community of justified believers. The unity that ought to characterize the Christian community is the model for and hope of the entire world. That unity of Jew and Gentile at the Lord's Table is so important for Paul that his greatest exposition of the meaning of justification is occasioned by what might be called bad Table manners in Galatia (Gal. 2:11-14).

c. I agree with the 11th and the 12th affirmation in the Missouri Presbytery FV Report:

11. We affirm an individual sense to justification, that God declares righteous any person who trusts Christ as Lord and Savior; we deny that this individual sense implies autonomy from the covenant community.

12. We affirm a corporate sense to justification, that God, out of his covenant faithfulness, justifies individuals from every race and people and incorporates them into one body in which they have privileges and responsibilities; we deny that God justifies the community apart from the imputation of Christ's righteousness to individual believing sinners (p. 7).

8. What, if anything, would you add or subtract from the Westminster Standard's elaboration of the doctrine of justification?

Right now I would not add or subtract anything from the Westminster Standards' dogmatic exposition of the doctrine of justification. I have not done the research necessary, nor do I have competence in this area to suggest changes to our confessional doctrine of justification. What is more important, however, is that I have never taken exception to or expressed any reservations whatsoever with the Westminster Standards on the doctrine of justification, especially the Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter XI, "Of Justification." I believe that the substance of what is taught there is accurate and true to both the Bible and our Reformation tradition. I have on many occasions, however, urged that the form and language

of the Westminster Standards are dated and ought to be revised, but I have no specific recommendations for revision in the area of justification at this time.

Follow-up Questions from Committee

While we understand that N.T.Wright's views are not the subject of our investigation, still, his reinterpretation of the classic Reformation teaching on justification has been near the storm center of the debates in recent years about the teaching of men identified with Federal Vision, and it would help us if you would clarify a couple of the passages in your answers where you discuss N.T. Wright.

In your introduction to our set of questions on justification (the third paragraph) you wrote:

"I believe [N.T.] Wright's understanding of justification, especially his exegetical insights into specific New Testament texts, will likely extend and enrich the traditional doctrine. Even so, a great deal of evaluation and theological debate has to happen in the coming years before confessional churches like ours accept his proposals."

If one takes out the middle clause, it reads like this:

"I believe [N.T.] Wright's understanding of justification...will likely extend and enrich the traditional doctrine. Even so, a great deal of evaluation and theological debate has to happen in the coming years before confessional churches like ours accept his proposals."

Read like this, the statement can easily be taken as a fairly positive of assessment of Wright's teaching on justification and as expressing hope that our church will eventually embrace it. Yet a few paragraphs above this statement in your answers you say,

"I think his [Wright's] work on many New Testament texts is interesting and insightful, but his overall teaching on justification I remember having serious flaws." Then later, "...I have never embraced his doctrine of justification as a replacement for the Reformation doctrine. My commitment to the classic doctrine of justification has not changed."

Here are our questions: In statement #1, when you say, "Wright's understanding of justification, especially his exegetical insights into specific New Testament texts, will likely extend and enrich the traditional doctrine," are you saying that the traditional Reformation understanding of justification will be "extended and enriched" by BOTH a) Wright's overall teaching on justification AND b) his exegetical insights in to specific New Testament texts? Or did you mean to put the emphasis on the "exegetical insights into specific New Testament texts"?

I can see how that complex sentence could be misunderstood. I was primarily thinking about N.T. Wright's insights into specific New Testament texts. I don't believe his doctrine of justification ought to replace the Reformation doctrine. I believe I've made that pretty clear. What I am open to, however, is an *enrichment* of the biblical understanding of "justification," especially the "social" implications. Remember, Paul links justification with healing the divide between Jew and Gentile. In Galatians, for example, the question of justification arises because of bad behavior at the Lord's Table (Gal. 2:12). In Romans the unification of humanity is also a large concern of Paul's and is not unrelated to his discussion of justification. It is N.T. Wright's treatment of the social dimension of various biblical passages that holds some promise for future studies, I believe. But let me make it clear again that by saying this I do not believe that 1) justification is fundamentally about ecclesiology and not soteriology. Nor do I believe 2) that justification can be faithfully formulated without imputation of Christ's righteousness.

Appendix A – My Initial Brief Response to the Letter of Concern

My Response to Recent Accusations

Jeffrey J. Meyers

March 30, 2010

The clerk of my presbytery received a letter this week making serious accusations against me. I had no knowledge of this letter until yesterday (March 29, 2010) when I received a call from the moderator of Missouri Presbytery informing me that the clerk had just received it. After I got off the phone with the moderator, friends informed me that the letter had been published on the internet that same day. The accusations are very serious, but not true. If any of the men who signed this letter to my Presbytery had taken the time to contact me personally, I could have assured them that these reports were false and, if necessary, clarified my own theological commitments.

To defend my good name and ministry, I offer the following response as an accurate summary of my personal convictions relating to these recent accusations. A process is at work now in our presbytery that I intend to respect. Therefore, I do not desire to engage in public discussions of these matters in an informal way on the internet. If I have ever seemed to question the fundamental truths I am accused of denying, this process will afford me the opportunity to clarify my intentions and amend any infelicitous or unclear statements I may have made in the past. I do, however, wish to provide an initial, public, defense of the orthodoxy of my personal convictions for the comfort of my friends and interested parties who may hear of these grave allegations and be concerned.

I will address these accusations in the order of their importance rather than the order in which they are found in the letter.

“He rejects justification by faith alone.”

This charge is false. I wholeheartedly affirm justification by faith alone. Throughout my ministry I have taught and preached the biblical and Reformation doctrine of justification by Christ alone through faith alone. I believe that “justification is an act of God’s free grace wherein he pardons all our sin and accepts us as righteous in his sight only for the righteousness of Christ, imputed to us, and received by faith alone” (Westminster Shorter Catechism Q. 33). I have never taken exception to or expressed any reservations whatsoever with the Westminster Standards on the doctrine of justification, especially the Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter XI, “Of Justification.”

Just to be crystal clear, I deny that fallen humans can merit salvation through works. Salvation is a free gift of God graciously granted to sinful humans in spite of their demerit, only because of the sinless life, death, resurrection, and glorification of Christ. I repudiate all forms of salvation by works.

“He rejects the idea that Christ’s merits are imputed to us.”

This accusation is false. I affirm the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers. I have always affirmed this Reformation truth. Apart from the judicial imputation of Christ's work to us there is no hope of salvation for sinful humans. We are justified by God's "imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ" (WCF XI.1) to us when we believe the Gospel.

"He denies that all who are saved will ultimately end up in heaven."

This, too, is false. I deny that any who have saving faith will not attain heaven and the resurrection of the righteous at the Last Day. All those who are truly saved in this life, the elect, will persevere to the end and enjoy the blessedness of heaven and the eternal state. I wholeheartedly affirm the Reformed doctrine of "the perseverance of the saints" as it is formulated in the Westminster Confession, Chapter XVII: "They whom God has accepted in his Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved."

"He affirms that baptism effects a saving, covenantal union with Christ."

He affirms that this saving union occurs with all the baptized."

These two accusations seem to be virtually the same. I deny them both. I do indeed joyfully affirm that baptism *formalizes* a child's or an adult believer's covenantal relationship with God. Even before baptism, even in the womb, the children of believers have a covenantal union with Christ as a gracious gift of God. This is why we call them "covenant children," even before they are born, even before they are baptized. At baptism this covenantal union is formally and publicly celebrated and made official through the application of water in the Name of the Triune God. But baptism does not automatically guarantee their salvation.

Although baptism confers many covenantal benefits, I deny that baptism "effects a saving" union with Christ for everyone baptized. The baptized must believe the Gospel and respond to the grace given and offered to them in baptism. I deny that all baptized persons are saved. Sadly, there will be many in hell who, although baptized, refused to believe the Gospel.

I do not believe that the sacraments are effectual unto salvation apart from "the blessing of Christ, and the working of his Spirit in them that by faith receive them" (Westminster Shorter Catechism Q. 91).

"He denies the bi-covenantal structure of the Standards."

This is a curious accusation, and I'm not entirely sure what it means. The statements that come after the letter assert that my views are "radically monocovenantal." These terms "bi-covenantal" and "mono-covenantal" are not found in our Westminster Standards, nor are they part of our traditional Reformed systematic theological vocabulary. I suppose that my accusers object to my reservations about the pre-fall Adamic covenant being characterized as a "covenant of works." But questions about exactly how to characterize the Adamic covenant have long been a matter of intramural debate among Reformed pastors and theologians. I have had this "exception" to the language of the Westminster Standards registered in every

presbytery I've been a member of since 1987. All three presbyteries that I have belonged to since then have determined that my disagreement with our standards on this point did "not strike at the vitals of the system of doctrine" found in the Westminster Standards. Full disclosure: here is text of the exception I have registered and have had approved by three different PCA presbyteries:

WCF 7:2-3 (and 19.1). I think that the language of "covenant of works" is at best misleading. The Westminster Standards are not always consistent in using the same language to refer to man's pre-lapsarian relationship with the Lord (*WCF 4.2, 19.1, WLC 20*). What I am concerned about is that the languages of "works" not lead to the erroneous conclusion that Adam and Eve did not enjoy life and communion with God before the fall as the gift of God's goodness. Even *WCF 4.2* speaks of pre-lapsarian man being "happy in their communion with God." Communion with God was not something to be *earned* by Adam and Eve. They possessed "spiritual life." It is misleading to say that Adam and Eve would have been *rewarded* with life because of their obedience. Genesis 1-2 seems to indicate that they had access to the tree of life, that they should have eaten from it, thereby acknowledging their utter dependence upon God for life and happiness. As a judicial consequence of their sin Adam and Eve *lost* the life that they possessed. They did not pass from a neutral state into an estate of death. The life Adam and Eve possessed, they lost. What I am trying to guard against is the idea that Adam and Eve would have *merited* God's favor through good works. They were created in an estate of favor with their covenant God. I am not denying that pre-lapsarian man's life was in some sense an "unconfirmed" life. The righteousness they possessed was capable of being lost. It was lost. What I am denying is that Adam's life—his acceptance and favor before his heavenly Father—was somehow merited or earned by him.

In the interest of clarity let me state emphatically that I deny that God's pre-fall covenant with Adam was the same as God's post-fall gracious covenantal arrangement with sinful man in Christ. I have never taught they were the same. They are two distinct covenants.

Conclusion

I pray that this brief response to the false accusations against me will be received in the spirit I offer it. I have been preaching, teaching, and writing for many years. Consequently, there are many thousands of my words available on audio files, essays, articles, and internet blog posts and comments. When I have had the opportunity to read or hear sermons and lectures I delivered years ago, I often cringe at errors I have made in expounding and applying biblical texts. The Lord continues to sanctify and mature me. The past five years of ministry have been especially transformative as the Lord has graciously changed me and re-directed my ministry in many ways. I've said many things in the past that I would love to take back and correct. Perhaps I will have an opportunity to do that publicly during this process.

I have always ministered with the conviction that I have been ordained as a minister of the Gospel and of the Word of God. I believe that being "Reformed" is short for being "reformed according to the Word." My absolute commitment to the infallibility, authority, and sufficiency of the Bible alone has sometimes led me to evaluate human creeds and confessions with an eye to improving them; this includes even our Reformed confessional tradition. I

believe Jesus taught us to have a healthy dose of suspicion for tradition, especially when it is venerated in ways that practically supplant the authority of the Word of God. I only ask that my critics interpret such critical comments, when they find them, in the context of 25 years of preaching, teaching, and counseling from a decidedly Reformed theological perspective. My pastoral ministry has predominantly been constructive and not centered on criticism of our tradition. My occasional frustration with traditional ways of formulating things in Reformed systematic and confessional theology should not be misinterpreted as evidence of disrespect for our tradition's faithful exposition of the Word of God.

Finally, I pray that my presbytery will choose a wise course in answering these "reports" so as to defend the peace and purity of the Church of Christ.