

Federal Vision for the average Joe

By Luke A. Nieuwsma

A lot of you out there have probably heard concerned Christians talking about The Federal Vision, and you may have heard words and phrases like 'heresy,' 'justification by works,' 'baptismal regeneration,' and 'Doug Wilson theology' bouncing around in the same conversations. And yet you might still not have a clear idea of what 'Federal Vision' really means. So I, an unsharpened layman who has been around Federal Vision theologian-type people for 15 years, am taking a shot at explaining (in terms that we laymen can understand) just what having a federal vision means.

I hope this little essay blesses you and enables you to get a better idea of whether all this 'stuff' is indeed heresy. And hopefully it will whet your appetite to consider if the Federal Vision really is contrary to the Westminster Confession of Faith, and above all, whether it is consistent with Scripture, or contrary to the heart of the gospel.

First, I'll lay out what the Federal Vision *is*. Next, I'll consider what the Federal Vision *is not*. Not all Federal Vision theologians think exactly alike, let me warn you; but for now, I hope you won't mind that I paint with a broad brush. There will always be more details which can be filled in, and it won't be difficult for you to gain a deeper understanding of the issues than what I offer here. And I hope you do.

I. What Federal Vision Theology Is

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- an emphasis on the sacraments, particularly baptism
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I. What the Federal Vision is

An emphasis on Biblical definitions

First of all, you'll want to understand the interpretive assumption that these Federal Vision chaps are basing all of their thoughts off of. The Federal Vision is an attempt to describe doctrine and theology and dirt and wind and everything in terms of biblical categories, not necessarily 'theological' categories. In other words, theologians have come up with ways of saying things and defining things (which is a good thing), but being sons of Adam, these theologians are capable of screwing up, of missing nuances of Scripture and making plain old mistakes just like any other believer.

So keep in mind that the Federal Vision is taught and believed by men who want *sola scriptura* to affect every idea they pull from the Bible. Whatever you end up concluding, these men ultimately appeal not to Frame, Calvin, Huss, or various Dutch theologians of great weight, but to Scripture itself. And this mindset has led these theologians to reconsider and re-define certain ideas.

An emphasis on the external Covenant: a different definition of Christian

When you ask someone whether his friend is a Christian, what do you mean? "Well," you might say, "he believes in Jesus Christ and I think he's going to heaven, so I would say he's a Christian." That seems to be the most common definition of Christian today: has this person repented of his sins, accepted Christ into his heart, and is he going to heaven when he dies?

But there's a couple problems with this definition: one, how do you know who really is going to heaven when they die? and two, what do you do with people who seem to be walking with God, but fall away into sin and die as an apparent unbeliever?

This definition is a *subjective* view of Christian, which means that your Christianity is rooted in your mind, rather than in the external world. Put another way, whether you are a Christian is defined by the state of your heart, which no man can really know; all we can do is guess if you're a Christian by the fruit that we see. And so if you live a good life, raise children, love your wife, and then spin wildly out of control and become an atheist-Bhuddist homosexual, then we say, "Oh, I guess he wasn't a Christian after all."

By the common definition of Christian, you cannot truly know who your Christian brothers and sisters are; that is, in more theological language, you have no way of knowing who is a member of the invisible church. We know that some people out there, just like us, believe in Christ and rest on His salvation for us alone, we just have no idea who they really are.

The Federal Vision theologians use a different definition of Christian. Whoa! Careful, now. They don't use a different definition of salvation; they believe that salvation comes through the death and resurrection of Christ, the incarnate God, and through His blood alone. Federal vision theologians would clearly state that we are saved by grace through faith alone, and that not of ourselves in any way whatsoever – it is the gift of God to be saved from your sins and given eternal life in the last day.

So, salvation is the same; but their definition of 'Christian' is NOT whether you go to

heaven when you die; rather, to a Federal Visionary, a Christian is someone who is a member of an external covenant with the Christian church. Probably most or all Federal Visionaries (as I call them) believe that baptism is what brings you into the New Covenant, just as circumcision brought Israelites into the Old Covenant. So in other words, a Christian is someone who is baptized into Christ, and who is therefore accountable to the church and her ministers.

Now, using this definition, do all “Christians” go to heaven? No. This is because there are faithful Christians and faithless Christians. There are some people who become attached to the Christ-following church and baptized in the name of the Trinity, but who end up leading a morally degenerate lifestyle, and who will be burning in hell along with Hitler and Judas. We would call these people 'Christians,' but unfaithful Christians. This is not to say that the faithful Christian goes to heaven BECAUSE of his faithfulness, or vice versa for the faithless Christian, but that this is the fruit born in their lives.

Nor is this saying that Christians can lose their salvation, or that Christ died in vain. Rather, it is the faithful Christians living a life of obedience who will reach heaven, and both the pagans and the unfaithful Christians who lead lawless lives will end up in hell. And this is not saying that the faithful Christians “earn” their salvation by leading good lives, but that faithful Christians believe and obey through the power of the Spirit alone, and are truly washed through Christ's justifying and cleansing blood. But while a baptized man is on earth, whether he obeys and believes in God and is admitted into heaven, or whether he breaks his vows to obey God's law and becomes a mass-murderer... he is still a Christian. He is still bound to obey the Triune God.

To put this whole discussion in an analogy, the relationship between the church and the Christian is rather like that of marriage. When a man marries a woman, he becomes a husband. If a man has been married three years, and he starts lusting after the neighbor's wife or having an affair with the secretary at the office, is he still a husband? Well, he may not be acting like it, but he still has a ring on his finger, and his wife wears one on her finger. He is an unfaithful husband, but a husband nonetheless. His marriage covenant is objective – it exists outside of his mind. The husband's heart and actions do not erase the commitment he made to his wife at the wedding until they have a formal divorce (analogy borrowed from Douglas Wilson).

In the same way, if you have been brought into the new covenant, then whether or not you are leading an obedient life, you are bound to the terms of the New Covenant. Christ is your lawful Lord and King, and you are accountable to His ministers on earth whether or not you are willing to admit it. And just as only the Holy Spirit gives husbands the ability to be faithful their entire lives to their wives, He alone also gives Christians the moral ability to be faithful to the terms of the New Covenant, to the commands of Christ and His apostles. Faithful Christians who truly believe in Christ will always be faithful Christians, thanks to the power of the Holy Spirit; but Christians who join the church in unbelief are totally incapable of 'climbing' to God through their works.

To have a Federal Vision is to have an *objective* view of Christians; you view the word Christian in terms of the covenant relationship a person has with the church. Once again, there are two kinds of Christians: A) the faithful, who are baptized people who keep God's laws and live a life of obedience ending in eternal life, and B) the unfaithful, who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, but who fall away and crucify again the Son

of God and put Him to shame (Hebrews 6).

And so joining the church with an unrepentant heart is a fearful thing: you taste the Holy Spirit without truly believing in Him (just as King Saul did), and you drink judgment on yourself every time you take the Lord's supper.

And by using this definition, you aren't always asking the question, "Is *John* reeeally a Christian?" You ask the question once, and check the baptismal records. And if John was baptized, then his external relationship makes him obligated to obey the Bible and follow the Church's teachings. Do we know who are the truly faithful Christians? No, only God knows the hearts. But can we know everyone who is formally tied to the church? Yes, and they are covenantally bound as Christians to obey Christ and the Church.

An Emphasis on Strong Church Authority

Something which naturally flows from viewing Christians by their covenant bonds is that you respect the church's authority. In the Old Testament, the prophets and the priests held the people accountable for their obedience to the terms of the covenant; in the New Testament, the elders of the church hold that office, and do so with true authority and honor (Hebrews 13).

While this may not be a major emphasis of the overall Federal Vision, it naturally produces an ecclesiology of a strong church, and of strong membership ties. To the Federal Visionary, being a member of a church is not just being a member of a club that speaks Jesus-speak once a week. Rather, it is being a member of the living body of Christ, and if you do not bear fruit, you may be eventually cut off from the olive tree that you were grafted (Romans 11:17ff).

I've heard Federal Vision pastors preach about church discipline in a different vocabulary than we are used to hearing. When someone is falling into sin, hanging out with the wrong crowd, drinking too much at the bars, and starting to skip church, then the FV friends of the sliding Christian and/or the elders of the church meet with him and grab him by his baptism: "Look – you were baptized in Christ's name, and you were washed from these sins. You've been washed – stop your sin! You were baptized into Christ's flock, so you have no business doing these things!"

If the fellow doesn't turn from his sins after repeated appeals and a final trial, then he is excommunicated. Excommunicated – a nasty word to the liberal ears, because it implies *judgment* and denouncing *sins* and dark and gloomy things like that. But what is the church for except to herd the sheep away from the wolves? Even if the sheep eventually wander into darkness, they still have the brand of the Christian ranch on their skin. And so you grab the stray by his baptism and tell him he belongs somewhere else.

To do this, to exercise discipline in those unpleasant times when it is needed, requires a strong church where the members realize that they are accountable to each other, to the elders, and ultimately to God. A sense of strong church authority organically springs from having a Federal vision of what it means to be Christian.

An emphasis on the sacraments, especially baptism

But this also requires that you have a high view of baptism and the Lord's supper, the 'means of grace.' And here is where things begin to get a little thick.

To a Federal Visionary, baptism and communion have deep meaning. They're not just

physical washing of H₂O and the digestion of bread and fruit sugars. Formal baptism actually does something: it visibly ties you to Christ, it washes you in some way and makes you part of the olive tree, a branch on the vine of Christ. Baptism isn't just a rite; it buries us with Christ (Rom. 6:4). However, it doesn't guarantee that we're saved. Rather it is an objective seal and sign upon a person, reminding them of the name they carry, and calling them to *true faith* and repentance, which are the *only grounds for justification*. If a baptized believer is given true faith, then he will be a faithful branch, and will be pruned; but if he is not given true faith, then his baptism is a sign and seal against him, and he will be fruitless, resulting in being cut off (John 15:1-6, Romans 11:17-22). In this way we see that Baptism is an objective act of God on behalf of the baptized, while being neither Baptismal Regeneration, nor meaningless. Baptism is a powerful sacrament with a lasting effect; it is more than just a personal statement of your dedication to God. It objectively ties you to Christ: “for by one Spirit we were all **baptized** into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit” [1 Corinthians 12:13](#).

And in the same way, the Lord's Supper is more than just a physical meal. It does something to you when you eat of it. When you first read this, you might think that this sounds superstitious and Roman Catholic, but we all believe this to some degree or another. Every Christian knows that if you eat and drink the Supper in an unworthy manner, you're cursing yourself and sending judgment upon yourself. The other side of the coin is that if you eat and drink the Lord's Supper, you're receiving a nourishment which is deeper than physical molecules. Your soul is being fed by the body and blood of Christ in a real and tangible way.

With this heavy emphasis on the power of the sacraments, most Federal Vision theologians would probably hold to paedobaptism, baptizing children into the New Covenant shortly after birth (just as Israelite boys were circumcised into the Old Covenant on the 8th day). Also, most Federal Visionaries would likely believe in paedocommunion, giving little children their own portions of the Supper of our Lord in the covenant hope that when they are old, these children will not depart from the way they should go. And I have seen first-hand how many children raised in this sort of theology walk with our Lord at a young age and obediently serve Him.

Another aspect to the church (Ecclesiology)

Now think about this for a moment; if baptism unites you with the entire body of Christ, his visible church, which consists of everyone else who was baptized in the name of the Triune God, then your baptism ties you together with an enormous body of believers! When you understand the Church to be everyone who is covenantally united through baptism, then your perspective on ecclesiology shifts dramatically.

It's like going from a geocentric model of the skies to a heliocentric model; before, you might have viewed 'Christian' to mean only those people within your denomination, or even your local church. But the Federal Vision has forced many Christians to suddenly realize that they have ties with a massive body of people on earth; the 'church'; doesn't revolve around our denomination or particular doctrinal perspective. Rather, we are all just one branch on a mighty vine which extends past denominational fences to every single person who has been baptized in Christ's name.

This means that Roman Catholics are Christians. Whoa! Wait, wait, wait. I didn't say they

were *faithful* Christians. But they have been baptized in Christ's name and into His body. This means that we have some level of unity with them which we do not have with Joe Pagan down at the Pigsty Night Club. And we have that same tie with the Eastern church, the Orthodox Church. Now, the nominalism in Russia and Spain and Mexico and other countries is famous, but so is American nominal Christianity. To an extent, all of these branches of Christianity are still Christianity, because they all still preach a triune Lord and administer the sacrament of baptism in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

In short, the Federal vision of ecclesiology quickly becomes a global vision of ecclesiology, a corporate ecclesiology. The church today spans the globe, though in many areas it is unhealthy. Yet, Christ's body stretches from continent to continent, and He will purge it of spot and blemish in time.

Another aspect to election

So how does this federal view of the sacraments and membership in Christ relate to the Pauline doctrine of election? Here in particular it has been easy to get confused about what the Federal Vision theologians teach. A rumor has gone around that Federal Vision theologians teach that you can be elect and still go to hell; do they really say this?

As you already know, the doctrine of election means that God chose from before the foundation of the world who would be His children among all the humans who would ever live on earth. God chose everyone who would become a Christian (using the Christian = person who goes to heaven). But if you have the Federal definition of Christian, then you have two kinds of Christians: the believing one, and therefore a covenant-keeper, and the unbelieving, who is incapable of being a covenant-keeper"

So then, there are *two kinds of elect Christians* which must be distinguished if we are going to use the same language as scripture. There are those whom God chose to be faithful covenant members (again, not faithful in themselves, but as a gift of God's grace) from before the foundations of the world, and there are those whom God chose to be faithless covenant-breakers from before the foundation of the world.

In one sense, you can be an elect Christian and go to hell. What is this kind of person elect to? This person has been predestined to nominal Christianity, to hypocrisy, to be an apostate, a vessel of dishonor. In contrast, all of Christ's true sheep are actually those Christians who have been elect to faithfulness and eternal life.

The Federal Vision in no way contradicts the classic, Pauline, Augustinian, Calvinist doctrine of election; it simply carries out the implications of God's decrees and sovereign story-writing to those who break their covenant bonds with the church. So when we refer to those 'elect,' chosen by God to be a part of his church body, this word can mean a mixed bag; some covenant members are elect to be faithful covenant members, and others are elect to damnation, whose damnation would have been less harsh if they had not first joined the body of Christ (2 Peter 2:18-20).

II. What the Federal Vision is not:

Salvation by works:

Having a Federal Vision in no way implies that a man is saved by his works, or justified by his works, or in any way elevated above any other man by his works. Rather, the terms of the New Covenant (obedience to the Bible and the Church) are a thermometer for how a person is doing spiritually. If a man is in sin, you can tell by comparing him to the law of Christ, for even a child is known by his actions, whether they are true and right. And how the man reacts to the ministry of the church also speaks about what is in his heart – faith and humility, or pride and deceit.

If anything, the New Covenant shows how much we must cling to the grace of Christ, for without Christ we can neither obey Christ's commandments in Moses or in the Gospels or in the Epistles. Instead, as Doug Wilson would say, we work out what God works in. We live by grace through faith alone, and only Christ gives us the strength to be faithful to the terms of His covenant; *and everyone who tries to follow that covenant on his own strength falls short and brings judgment on his head.*

Justification by works

In the same way as we are only saved through Christ, we are only justified through Christ. To a Federal Vision theologian, the only thing which makes us right with God and removes our guilt is the dead body of Christ hanging on the cross. The only thing which gives us hope is not our own behavior, for we all fall every day; rather, it is Christ risen above, and His Holy Spirit working in us to produce the good works which God prepared for us beforehand.

Now, whether you are right with your church body *is* determined by your works; druggies and fornicators whose deeds become public will quickly find that their pastor and elders wish to meet with them. But neither Douglas Wilson, nor John Barach, nor Steve Wilkins, nor any other FV theologian would ever claim that the good deeds which can keep us in fellowship with our church have any canceling power on the wages and debt of our sins. *Only Christ's blood alone.*

Baptismal regeneration:

Also, the Federal Vision theologians don't believe that being baptized means being saved. Being baptized means that you are united with Christ's body here on earth and are accountable to His commandments and His church body, but whether or not you are going to be in eternal glory depends on whether God has chosen to change your heart, give you faith, and forgive your sins in Christ.

Baptism makes you a Christian only in the Federal sense of the word: you have been externally united to the visible Church here on earth. A baptized Christian can also be a nominal believer – believer in name, not in the heart. The Federal vision in no way teaches that everyone who is baptized is automatically a faithful Christian. A Christian must be a Christian of the heart and by faith.

Now, on the other hand, Federal vision theologians may say that God does save people through baptism – that God uses baptism as part of the conversion method (just as people at Billy Graham crusades might have come to the front of the revival and prayed a prayer, or thrown a

pinecone in the fire; neither the pinecone nor the prayer actually paid for your sins, but God may have used it to bring you to him). But no, the Federal Vision does not equate baptism with eternal life.

The New Perspective on Paul

Also, despite the PCA's apparent confusion on the matter, the Federal Vision is not the same thing N.T. Wright and other theologians who teach the New Perspective on Paul. Although there has been some communication between the two camps (particularly between N.T. Wright and Dr. Leithart), these are quite distinct theological movements.

The New Perspective on Paul teaches just that: a new perspective, a new view of Paul's teaching which deals in particular with justification by works and his war against the Hebraists of his time (such as those who appear in Galatians). Part of this new perspective is that Paul's reactions to the Judaists were not a response to their attempts to earn their way to heaven through the Mosaic code, but rather that Paul was attacking the Jewish ethnic pride, which tried to turn every convert into a Jew, rather than a servant of God. The New Perspective might say that Luther's classic understanding of *by grace alone* misreads Paul's argument; the Pharisees were not trying to earn their way to God's favor. Rather, they thought they were already there, simply by nature of being descended from Abraham. It was the sin of ethnic pride, not works-righteousness, which the New Perspective folks would say Paul is so vehement against.

While some of the New Perspective gentlemen have similar sympathies to the Federal Visionaries (such as a common understanding of the corporate, world-wide nature of the church), these are really quite different discussions. For anyone to say that FV is NPP, or vice versa, simply means that they don't quite understand either group. *Many, if not most proponents of the Federal Vision, are in disagreement with the New Perspective on Paul.*

Heresy taught by men who have been tried in an ecclesiastical court:

One thing which the Federal Vision is definitely not is heretical teachings which have been condemned in an ecclesiastical court. If we look at how this story has played out, in 2002 a conference was held in Auburn, Louisiana entitled "The Federal Vision." Since then, the label 'Federal vision' has been slapped on the theology which I have tried to describe above, and along with this label, the adjective 'heresy' has been pasted.

Whether or not you agree with some of the Presbyterian-type groups who have rejected the Federal Vision, there has not yet been any sort of trial or debate where a Federal Vision theologian has been publicly summoned as a witness in an ecclesiastical court and required to defend his theology based on Scripture. Douglas Wilson voluntarily had the CREC presbytery to which he answers examine him on the subject, and Steve Wilkins was examined by a branch of the PCA presbytery, but there has been absolutely no denominational or inter-denominational trial which has asked for the Federal Vision theologians to present their case to a general assembly.

The PCA in its General Assembly in June, 2007, heard the decision of their committee that the 'Federal Vision' and New Perspective on Paul theology did not match up with the Westminster Confession of Faith, but that was no trial. No, not even when R. C. Sproul said, "You do not put the accused on the jury" during the open-mic part of the session. Why? The personal, in-court,

recordable testimony of the people who teach this theology wasn't presented to the general assembly in any form. Rather, the decisions and summary work of the Committee alone were presented.

There has yet to be a true, ecclesiastical trial, with 2+ witnesses on both sides, of the Federal Vision Theologians. Therefore, there is no way that people can spout off cries of heresy. Without people on both sides testifying in an equal setting, there is no way for a church body to decide that this is heresy. At least 7 denominations have done careful study of the issues and rejected Federal Vision, but there has yet to be a trial with plenty of witnesses from both sides.

In fact, there has been little actual debate period, meaning head-to-head, face-to-face, between Waters and Wilson, or Sproul and Wilkins, or Clark and Barach. I think it's clear that the Federal Vision is in no way heretical, but for the larger body of American believers to really decide this, we need public debate. We need the opponents of the Federal Vision to actually face the Federal Visionaries in open debate, and we need this to happen soon.

In all this, I've tried to give you a picture of the Federal Vision theology. I sat under Doug Wilson's teaching for 15 years, and attended numerous classes at New Saint Andrews college. I have had many a recitation with Peter Leithart, and I have personally interviewed Steve Wilkins and Dr. David Field. I also have an older, and godly, relative whose church has rejected the Federal Vision because they believe it is a doctrine of justification by works.

But I believe I understand the majority of the issues, and hopefully, this little article may have cleared up some of your questions about the Federal Vision. I'm also leaving many implications, details, and narrower discussions out of the picture. So please study this more!

All glory be to God alone, and to His Son, by whose saving blood alone we are healed.

In Christ's name,

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