

Meribah:
A Review of Guy Prentiss Waters's book
The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology: A Comparative Analysis
by Bill Smith

The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology is the latest critical offering of the so-called Federal Vision (FV), a subject that has been debated in American Presbyterian and Reformed circles over the past several years. While some will hail this as the death knell for FV sympathizers, it will only appeal to those who are already pre-disposed to Waters's conclusions. Those who are able to recognize poor argumentation will find no lack of it in this book. Waters is unable to argue with those he critiques from their point of view. Even if these men are wrong in their conclusions, Waters does not prove it because he is playing on a different field, using his own categories to critique men who are speaking from some nuanced presuppositions. He does not do well at internally critiquing their views. He only asserts that their views must be inconsistent at points because they do not fit into his categories. Because of this he has not fulfilled the first requirement of a good debate: state your opponents position to his satisfaction. The men he critiques would not agree that he has accurately stated their fundamental positions at many points (even though there are times that he does). Certainly he uses extensive quotes. But as he himself states in his book concerning Rich Lusk's quoting of Calvin, even extensive quotes can be taken out of context (cf. pp. 210 ff.). (Incidentally, Lusk had a couple of Calvinian scholars examine his work and affirm that he had captured the thought of Calvin.) So, extensive quotations do not good research make. Capturing the overall thought—the system of thought—is what is needed. I submit that Waters has not done that. Waters's method of argumentation employs “wiggle words,” exegetical assertion (of the Westminster Standards and Scripture), overstatement leading to false conclusions, guilt by association, false dilemmas, and direct misrepresentations (that can be proven from the very quotes he uses).

Keeping this critique short will be a formidable task. There are so many problems with Waters's arguments that a full-length book could be written. I will not attempt to defend specifically each of the positions of the men critiqued in the book. They must speak for themselves. But I must say that Waters would have been well-served had he taken up the invitations of a couple of the men he critiqued to converse about their views and learn to state adequately their views to their satisfaction. It can be argued that all of these views are public and can be critiqued as such. But most of the men he critiques are within his own denomination and invited him to converse. Misrepresentation out of innocent ignorance is a problem, but it does not rise to the level of a sin. Misrepresentation out of willful ignorance resulting from refusing to meet with your brothers in order to represent them accurately is wicked. The aim in this book, therefore, is not understanding and reconciliation but discord and further division of the church. This is quite distressful. Even if Waters's conclusions about these men being not in conformity with the Westminster Standards is true (which I do not concede), there are people outside of our confessional boundaries who are in God's favor. Those who lie about others and destroy God's church through pedantic squabbings and party spirits God finds abominable... no matter how right their view of justification might be.

Before moving on, I need to add that two of the men critiqued by Waters—Wilkins and Leithart—have both been investigated by their presbyteries and acquitted. Mark Horne appeared before his presbytery for a transfer exam and passed. Then, after his transfer, Horne was

investigated again and found to be in line with the Westminster Standards. These men are in good standing in Waters's own denomination ... even after thorough examinations by fellow ministers. Could it be that Waters has not rightly and/or thoroughly examined them as he ought?

Presuppositions

One of Waters's basic presuppositions is revealed in his Preface when he says, "It is my desire that British Puritanism, from which these Standards emerged, and American Presbyterianism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in which these Standards came to marvelous expression, will commend themselves more and more to study by the modern church" (xv). There is, of course, no problem in this statement. It is Waters's opinion. But to insinuate or lead the reader to believe that British Puritanism and American Presbyterianism are monolithic in their assessments of these issues and find their expression in Waters's own assessment is a bit naive and/or arrogant. To say that "This and no other" is *the* view of these respective movements in the Christian faith and that there is no room for others is problematic. Just as there were various opinions at the Westminster Assembly, so there have been various ways to formulate particular issues throughout the past several hundred years. By the way, is this the American Presbyterianism of the North or the South? Is this the American Presbyterianism that produced Finney and Sunday or Hodge, Murray, Dabney, and Thornwell? Where exactly do the Standards find "marvelous expression" in American Presbyterianism? If they find "marvelous expression" (in Waters's opinion) in Dabney, for instance, does that mean that anyone who disagrees with Dabney is *anathema* concerning the Westminster Standards? Similar questions could be asked about the British Puritans.

Another area in which Waters has some presuppositional problems is in the discussion of ontology (a subject which appears again and again throughout his book). Waters sees all kinds of problems with people like Ralph Smith "reshaping" the doctrine of the Trinity (p. 10). Ontology, in his view cannot mean what they say it means because ontology does not mean that. He engages in classic question begging. From this he concludes, "The ontological skepticism of both men [Smith and Leithart] effectively results in our being able to affirm little about the essence of God, except *that* it exists." (p. 24) How is their view "ontological skepticism?" It is and can only be such if one enters the debate with the preconceived notion that "ontology" must be defined in a particular way. Though Waters never commits to a definition of ontology, he says that Leithart appears (a word that we will see occurs frequently in this book) to dismiss Aristotle's ontology too quickly (pp. 182, 183). Maybe Leithart does. Maybe that is a fault that needs to be pointed out. But what is wrong with formulating ontology in terms of the Trinity (which, in my understanding would encompass but would not be exclusive to the more common understanding of "being")? Is not man created *imago dei*? Is God not Trinity? Can ontology be understood as more than "substantive" in some form or another? Why can it not include relationships? Is God not *fundamentally* Trinity? Or is there a "God substance" that lies behind the Trinity? Waters does not engage the debate at that level. He only asserts that this thinking through ontology in terms of man being created in the image of a Triune God with all of the implications of that is problematic.

Waters criticizes Leithart for using contemporary philosophical categories to describe ontology (p. 183). He then says, "This raises the question of whether Leithart's argument is at all historically plausible. Would the biblical writers be sharing these modern conclusions from the

philosophy of language? To raise this question is to suggest that Leithart's reflections, whatever merit they may possess in themselves, are anachronistic." I must ask, "Would the biblical writers affirm Aristotelian categories of ontology?" The same argument that Waters levels against Leithart can be leveled against any development in theological concepts or language. Is Nicea or Chalcedon anachronistic? Are the Reformed Scholastics and the Standards anachronistic? In some sense the answer is "Yes." The question is, "Do these categories rightly represent what is being said in the Scripture?" Can modern language rightly express Scriptural truth at all? (Remember, English is anachronistic in relation to the biblical languages.) Waters does not deal with the argument. He begs the question in terms of ontology.

Docetic tendencies

Appearances can be deceiving. I purposely named this section "docetic tendencies" because of the historical referent to the Christological heresy in which people believed that Jesus only "appeared" to be human. I am, in no way, accusing Waters of this heresy. But I do want to emphasize that his words—like the use of "docetic"—can leave the wrong impressions. The word "docetism" derives from the Greek word *dokeo* which can have as bland a meaning as "to appear" or "to seem." Waters's affinity for "appearances" throughout this book leave the wrong impressions, leaving the reader with conclusions that may or may not be correct. These statements use "wiggle words." The author can quite purposefully lead the reader to his conclusion but *technically* he can say, "Well, I did not conclude that." Even if it is not purposely devious, it is bad argumentation because it is quite possible to leave false impressions. E.g., "It *appears* that this theology is coming *really close* to Roman Catholicism." This statement never says that the theology is in agreement with Roman Catholic theology, but it leaves that impression. What is worse, though, is that Waters uses all of these "appearance" statements to build his case for his critique. While it is perfectly fine to state one's own ambivalence concerning what someone else has said, a solid, condemning conclusion should not be drawn in light of that ambivalence. At the least alternative conclusions should be given as to what the statements in question might mean. This, I am afraid, does not happen.

These types of arguments are too numerous to list them all. They start early and recur often. For instance, on p. 13 Waters is critiquing the fact that FV proponents use the analogy of marriage to explain the covenant. He concludes (inconclusively), "Given the *diminished concern* with a covenant as a legal or forensic entity, and the *enhanced concern* for a covenant as a vital relationship?..." (emphasis added). Later he adds, "Much of the biblical language in describing covenants, furthermore, is patently legal or forensic, and speaks of covenants in terms of an agreement. FV proponents do not necessarily deny this, but they practically neglect these data in their discussions of covenant. Their discussion, then, is selective and produces an unbalanced picture of a covenant." Diminished concern? Enhanced? "They do not deny but?..." Should someone be keeping a theological scorecard to make sure that the percentages all balance out *to Waters's liking?! Who is the judge of what is emphasized and not emphasized enough?* Besides marriage has legal/forensic dimensions. It may be that it is a fuller picture that is being emphasized. Why should the courtroom have priority in metaphors when the Bible begins and ends with marriage?

On p. 56 Waters says, "It *appears*, then, that Leithart has called into question the historic Reformed doctrine of the imputation of Adam's sin to his posterity." (emphasis added) The fact

is that Leithart affirmed the substance of the doctrine in the quote that precedes this statement: “Abel was still born in sin, since he was born under the curse and born to parents who were alienated from God.” (Ibid.) Does it matter at all that he affirms the substance of the doctrine? Must he say it just like Waters? Because someone says something in a slightly different way does not mean that he denies the substance. (How do you say that word ... *shibboleth* or is it *sibboleth*?)

On the same page Waters makes it look as if Leithart denies the fact that the righteousness we have as believers is in Christ alone with the statement, “Leithart also forthrightly rejects the Reformed doctrine of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the believer.” What Leithart is dealing with in this quote has been a debatable issue in the Reformed world since, at least, the 17th century (see Roland Ward’s book *God & Adam*; Wantirna, Australia: New Melbourne Press, 2003). Leithart is questioning the biblical validity of understanding the imputation of the “active obedience” of Christ (a statement that never occurs in our Standards). In the quote that Waters uses, Leithart affirms, “... the Father was pleased, and judged Jesus to be the Righteous One, declaring that verdict by raising His Son from the dead; in raising Jesus, the Father was saying, ‘I judge My Son to be the one who has obeyed perfectly even unto death; by union with Christ, that verdict is also passed on us. In this construction, there is no ‘independent’ imputation of the active obedience of Christ, nor even of the passive obedience for that matter; we are regarded as righteous, and Christ’s righteousness is reckoned as ours, because of our union with Him in His resurrection. What is imputed is the verdict, not the actions of Jesus, and this is possible and just because Christ is our covenant head acting on our behalf.” (pp. 56-57) Is Leithart rejecting “the doctrine” of Christ being our righteousness, or is he rejecting the way some people want to formulate it? Waters leaves the wrong impression.

On p. 79, when evaluating Lusk, Waters concludes, “It *raises the question* whether the believer’s covenantal faithfulness becomes the *ground* of his acceptance at the judgment of the last day, that is, whether the believer’s covenantal faithfulness has effectively displaced Christ’s active obedience in Lusk’s scheme of justification.” (emphasis added). Yet on the previous page (p. 78) he quotes Lusk as affirming that Christ’s righteousness is our only righteousness (i.e., the “ground” of our righteousness). Lusk does not like the “active obedience” formulation, but affirms that Christ’s righteousness is the ground of our acceptance before God. Waters is again leaving the wrong impression.

Waters continues to use this method of argumentation on p. 93 when critiquing Lusk and drawing a conclusion that Lusk’s doctrine of final justification “clearly impl[ies] a process” (i.e., of justification). Good works “*appear* to be the necessary supplement to the basis of the believer’s present justification.” This is reiterated on p. 95. No matter that Lusk has affirmed that Christ is our righteousness and not our works. It might be possible that Lusk believes in the perseverance of the saints. It might be that the only people who will be acquitted on the day of judgment (LC 90; SC 38; legal/forensic, final justification terminology) are the people who have persevered in faith, which means that they have been *faithful*. Does Waters *not* believe that a person must continue in faith in order to be saved on the last day? I believe he would affirm the necessity for persevering faith. Does that mean he is adding to the work of Christ? Not in the least.

This type of argumentation is standard for Waters. On p. 65 Waters accuses FV proponents of

“de-emphasizing” the individual in salvation for corporate concerns. Wilson’s doctrine is “weighted toward” this (p. 147). Lusk “appears to believe” that. (p. 163) Leithart does not deny the moral dimension of sin but it is “marginalized.” (p. 178) Leithart “appears to believe” that his view of sacramental signs transcends traditional categories and “virtually” concedes that sacramental doctrines as traditionally formulated are illegitimate. (p. 184) Neither has Leithart “sufficiently distanced” himself from the Arminian doctrine concerning saving grace. (p. 193) It “appears” that Lusk has given “functional or practical priority” of the sacraments over the Word. (p. 215) Garver “appears” to affirm a “form” of baptismal regeneration. (p. 243, emphasis added) There are times when Garver “appears” to be clear. (p. 244) Lusk formulates justification in terms that “suggest justification to be a process.” (p. 262) FV proponents “appear” to interpret Scripture in a “prooftexting” manner. (p. 265) Appeal to mystery “*presses us toward* dialecticism and away from classical formulations of inerrancy.” (p. 272) “Wilson’s doctrine is not necessarily erroneous, but it is imprecise.” (p. 275) FV proponents have “overemphasized” the continuity between the NT and the OT. (p. 284) All of these instances (and more!) could be spelled out and defended. My point here is that Waters uses these wiggle words to say, “They are *close* to this or that. They don’t *deny* the doctrine, but it *appears* that they might be.” Maybe it is a judgment of charity, but he *appears* to draw conclusions in his critiques without proper substance. What we have here are muddy waters.

Exegetical Assertion

Waters is guilty also of asserting his conclusion over matters in question (again, begging the question). It is perfectly fine for Waters to understand the Scriptures or the Standards in a particular way, but part of the debate is the question of interpretation of certain Scripture passages and Confessional language. Like the previous problem, this one occurs early and often. On p. 19 Waters says, “Second, the doctrine of covenantal objectivity also fails to account for biblical teaching that speaks of the covenantally unfaithful as those who were never truly members of the covenant of grace in the first place. We may consider two representative passages, 1 John 2:19-20 and Matthew 7:22-23.” From here Waters goes on to give us his exegesis, but he does not interact with any exegesis from his opponents. But consider: could it be possible because of the wider contexts of these passages that they are dealing with false prophets and not with covenant members in general? “To know the Lord” could be referring to being a prophet, a spokesman for God. Of course, you would need to examine the OT usage to discover this, and that might be a “flat hermeneutic.” (More on that in a moment.) Even the immediate context gives you these clues. But Waters’s interpretation cannot be challenged here because that would make his conclusion faulty. The argument should be engaged at the level of exegesis of these passages. There is not a Reformed confessional standard for the way particular passages must be exegeted.

Waters does the same kind of exegetical question begging when it comes to “works/works of the Law” in Galatians. On p. 47 it is assumed that faith v. works means “faith v. meritorious works.” That is by no means a settled issue. In fact, Waters’s interpretation of “works” here does not make sense of the entire passage. Using his hermeneutic, when the reader comes to Paul’s question, “Is the law then against the promises of God (i.e., the promises realized by faith)?” Waters would have to answer, “Most certainly! Meritorious works are not compatible with the promise of God received by faith.” But Paul says, “Certainly not.” So, Waters’s exegesis is, by no means, as solid as it appears.

This happens again on p. 79 where Waters asserts, “Given that the law *does* require perfect obedience, it is difficult to conceive, however, how such modest obedience would satisfy this requirement.” Waters is criticizing Lusk for believing that the Law of Moses did not require sinless perfection from those who lived under its administration. Lusk dared raised the *biblical* argument that there were people who were said to be righteous, walking in all of the commandments and ordinances of the Lord (e.g., Lk 1.6, Zechariah and Elizabeth) but were not sinlessly perfect. How could the Bible affirm such a thing if the Law demanded sinless perfection and that were the *only* definition of “righteous?” Maybe, just maybe, God’s provision of sacrifice for sin *within the Law* counted as Law-keeping. Waters may disagree with this assessment, but let’s hear his treatment of this passage. Isn’t that what is at issue: how can we be most faithful to the text of Scripture?

Waters also asserts that Barach’s understanding the term election derived from the OT (you know that “Scripture interpreting Scripture” maxim) is “not clear;” i.e., that it “must shape the way that individual election is understood.” (p. 119) Why is it not clear? Waters does not offer exegetical argument or where he derives his understanding of the term “election.” He only asserts that Barach’s use of the term (remember, derived from the OT) is “not clear.”

One of the bigger problems that Waters has with all of these proponents is their use of the “baptismal passages” to refer to water baptism. He asserts again, “It is not true that these promises were individually true by virtue of congregants’ water baptism or covenantal membership. It is doubtful, for instance, whether such passages as Romans 6:1-3 and Galatians 3:27 have primary reference to the physical application of water baptism.” (p. 137) Later he will say the same thing about 1 Corinthians 12:13. (p. 195) These passages, in Waters’s view, by no means certainly refer to the physical act of water baptism. It is interesting that earlier in his book, when asserting that the Standards teach that the Mosaic covenant republishes the covenant works, he says, “This latter rejection, however, is itself a repudiation of the exegesis that underlies key paragraphs of the Standards’ exposition of the covenant of works at WCF 7.2, 19.1; LC 20 (citing both Gal. 3:12 and Rom. 10:5).” (p. 58) Waters knows that the prooftexts are not binding for subscription. But why are they so telling about “underlying exegesis” here but not in WCF 28.1 where 1 Cor. 12:13 is used with reference to water baptism, entrance into the visible church? Do the divines of Westminster disagree with Waters’s exegesis of this passage? It at least stands as a possibility. Not only this, but there is no dealing with the text, only the assertion that it is “doubtful” that these texts deal with water baptism. A couple of questions do need to be asked here: If this is dealing with a “dry baptism” (i.e., unseen heart regeneration) how would Paul or anyone else know who has been baptized? If you don’t know who is *really* baptized, how do these passages apply to the believers in the church? That is, one can never really be sure, one can only give a “judgment of charity.” Quite frankly, it is doubtful that these passages refer to a “dry baptism.” One good assertion calls for another.

Waters also asserts that his view of John 15 and the parable of the vine is *the* way to look at this parable. (pp. 153-54) In agreement with Cal Beisner, Waters believes it dangerous to interpret details of the parable. But is it possible that Jesus himself gave us this hermeneutic when he interpreted the parable of the soils with every detail meaning something specific in Matthew 13? But Waters concludes, “There is no hint in this parable that the broken branches ever existed in any vital, living relationship with Christ.” (p. 154) Question: What exactly is a relationship between a vine and a branch, especially one that is cut out of the vine as the text indicates? Is the

branch not *really* a branch? If that is the case then Jesus is confused (a possibility that I would not entertain). The meaning of the passage is determined, not by exegesis, but by assertion. Don't tell the reader what the passage *doesn't* mean. Tell the reader what it means. Assertion is not exegesis.

An interesting turn is taken as Waters evaluates Leithart. Waters rightly says that Scripture interprets Scripture. (p. 192) But then when Leithart applies the experience of Saul to NT discussions, he "is mistaken." (p. 193) So does "Scripture interpreting Scripture" mean "Scripture only interprets Scripture the way *I* think it ought?" Or, could Leithart's interpretation be valid? "Leithart has not disproven that Saul possessed the Spirit only officially and externally." (Ibid.) Is Leithart under necessity to prove a negative?

In discussing the use of the term "sign" in relation to the sacraments, Waters says, "Given that the Bible is not a philosophical textbook, we would not expect the *sign* to be used in any other way than according to its commonsense meaning." (p. 228) What is "commonsense?" Is it the sense that is common among Waters and his theological compatriots? Or should we look at the biblical use of *'oth* and *semeion* to get the common sense of Scripture? Well, if we did that we would find that God performed "signs" in Egypt. We would also find that John's Gospel is built (in one way of structuring) around seven "signs" of Christ. We would discover that these are, in some sense, transformative acts. I agree that the Bible is not a philosophical textbook. So, we should use *the text* to interpret the text, not "commonsense" (which is terribly and radically corrupted by sin).

This exegesis by assertion argumentation is used again on pp. 230-31. Lusk's treatment of issues in Romans 9 are dismissed out of hand. "Exegetically and theologically (cf. Rom 9:4-5), neither option is likely or even plausible." (p. 230) The same is also true about Lusk's interpretation of the Westminster Standards. Lusk's interpretation is "doubtful." (p. 231) Why? Because Waters says so?

Again, the argument has not been engaged at the level of the real issues. Waters lobbs assertion grenades, but they will only cause surface damage, never getting to the deeper bunker below. Exegesis by assertion only wins those who are already on your side and the naive.

Overstatement

Early on, when criticizing the "overemphasis" of the marriage analogy, Waters says, "This, however, does not prove that the marriage metaphor *exhausts* all that is entailed in membership within the covenant of grace." (p. 13, emphasis added) Whoever said it did? Because the analogy to marriage is a prominent example, does that mean that someone has asserted that it *exhausts* the meaning of the covenant? There is nothing substantive to back up this assertion. The Bible is rich with metaphors concerning the covenant. Marriage, as stated earlier, is a prominent biblical theme. The whole story of Scripture begins with marriage. God describes his relationship with Israel as marriage (and dedicates at least two entire books to it). The Bible ends with the bride coming down out of heaven adorned for her husband. Why would someone not use the marriage metaphor frequently? Is the law court emphasized that much in Scripture? Does God emphasize the marriage metaphor too much through Hosea or through Canticles? Does Paul emphasize it too much in Ephesians 5 to the exclusion of all of the other metaphors he could have used? No,

the marriage analogy does not *exhaust* all the dimensions of the covenant, but it certainly is *emphasized greatly* in Scripture.

In trying to prove his point against Leithart's hermeneutic about a *prima facie* reading of the baptism passages, in which he implies that Leithart is being overly simplistic (though he has shown elsewhere that Leithart does see various uses of the term "baptism"), Waters tries to show where this hermeneutic leads. "What prevents us from affirming transubstantiation? Except for Leithart's philosophical scruples regarding being, it would not be at all implausible to see him gravitate toward this doctrine." (p. 192) Where did this come from? This is akin to someone asserting that Waters, because he does not reject Aristotelean ontological categories, is prone to adopting transubstantiation. You know, he is friendly toward Aristotle, and transubstantiation *is* rooted in Aristotelean categories.

Covenant Confusion?

Waters takes an interesting turn when he critiques Smith's view of the covenantal structure of Trinitarian relationships and that covenant being the covenant into which God entered with man in creation (25ff.). Waters concludes, "In other words, the biblical narrative tells us that there is a temporal gap (of some unspecified time) between the creation of man and the first covenant between God and man. This certainly seems to be the understanding of the Confession (WCF 7.1). It is not true, then, that God *has* only and, therefore, *can* only relate to man by way of covenant" (26, emphasis original). This is followed up later with the brash statement, "Smith's conclusions on this score are furthermore not required since the Scripture and the Westminster Confession of Faith do not teach that man was created in covenant" (37-38). This is nothing more than bald assertion. This does not take into account the fact that it may be true that the processes of creation are shown by their actions that they are covenantal. The act of creating one whole, dividing it, and having the two come back into proper relationship with one another in unity and diversity *might be* covenantal. For instance, God takes the dust of the ground, separates from the earth, breathes into the created man the breath of life, and putting this dust of the ground into a new form and relationship with the things around it just could be a covenantal act. The same is true for marriage. Therefore, to speak of the "temporal gap" between creation and the institution of the covenant of works betrays, once again, some presuppositions that are unchallengeable for Waters. He assumes that his paradigm is correct and never deals with the fundamental paradigm of men like Smith and Leithart. This is again problematic if one's intention is to give an honest critique.

False Dilemmas

Another of Waters's problems is his creation of false dilemmas. He does this with the church v. salvation, sin as relational v. sin as moral, visible/invisible church v. historical/eschatological church, internal witness of assurance v. external witness of assurance in the sacraments, and the sacraments v. the Word. Whereas most of these should be formulated as "both/and," Waters unnecessarily puts them as "either/or."

Church v. salvation

Leithart is first accused of “consciously meld[ing] ecclesiology and soteriology.” (p. 63) There are other allusions to this type of thinking, but here it is stated explicitly. Either it is the church *or* it is salvation. If Waters is consistent with this view, he will need to take an exception to the Confession at 25.2 which says that outside of the visible church there is no ordinary possibility of salvation. Is the Confession “consciously melding ecclesiology and soteriology?” If the visible church is the “kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God,” and if the visible church is the body of Christ (as the “Preliminary Principles” of the PCA BCO say in §3), then soteriology *is* melded to ecclesiology. They do not exist in some type of sterile separation from one another.

sin as relational v. sin as moral

Waters is fond of pointing out this supposed dilemma. Following up on Leithart’s conscious melding of ecclesiology and soteriology, Waters states, “Second, Leithart understands sin and redemption primarily (but my no means exclusively) in terms of fragmented relationship (whether human or divine) and restored relationship, or reconciliation.” (p. 63) This is escalated a bit when he says later, “Notable in this explanation is Leithart’s conception of sin in fundamentally social and nonmoral categories. The moral dimension of sin is not denied. It is, however, marginalized.” (p. 178) He does essentially the same thing on p. 184. Waters uses the “he does not deny but ...” argument here. But he conceives of sin in an interesting way, like it can be parsed out between relational and moral dimensions. If someone murders another human, is that relational or moral? If someone hates another, is that relational or moral? If someone misrepresents another person, is that relational or moral? Don’t all of these involve sins of the heart (moral?)? Don’t they all involve relationships? Are the Ten Words dealing with relational or moral issues? Waters is creating a division where there need not be one.

visible/invisible church v. historical/eschatological

On pp. 120ff. Waters criticizes Wilson for his formulations of the historical/eschatological church. He assumes that Wilson is saying that the two are “interchangeable.” (p. 123). What Wilson emphasizes in the quote given by Waters on p. 122 is that the eternally elect are revealed on the last day (i.e., the eschatological church). The eternally elect are what many would call “the invisible church.” But that invisible—unseen in its totality by us and known only to God—will be made quite visible on that day. This is another perspective on the same thing, not a dilemma that needs to be resolved.

internal witness v. external sacraments

A catechism:

Teacher: My child, are you a Christian in fact as well as in name?

Child: Yes, my father.

Teacher: How is this known to you?

Child: Because I am baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Now the question: Who wrote this catechism? Was it Leithart? Surely it was Lusk, right? Maybe it was a conspiracy of all of the FV proponents developing this “new” system of thought and indoctrinating all of these poor Reformed and Presbyterian children. Actually (as many reading this will already know) this is from Calvin’s 1538-9 Strasbourg Catechism. Was Calvin a sacerdotalist? Did Calvin not believe in or flatly deny justification by faith alone? Was Calvin an Arminian (I know, anachronistic, but bear with me)? No, Calvin was no sacerdotalist, he did believe in justification by faith alone, and he affirmed in the strongest terms God’s complete sovereignty in the salvation of individuals. But one would think by reading Waters that looking to one’s baptism for assurance of one’s standing with God was totally foreign to our Reformed tradition.

The response to this might be, “Calvin balanced these statements with subjective assurances as well.” Granted. So, do all FV proponents believe, as Waters states of Wilkins, that the sacrament of baptism is “the primary if not the sole ground of the believer’s assurance?” (p. 139) Having attended both of the AAPC Pastors’ Conferences where all of this started, I personally heard these men emphasize the need for faithfulness joined with the sacraments in order for a person to have assurance. They certainly did emphasize the sacraments because, in their long-time pastoral experience, they had seen them under-emphasized. Again, emphasizing one thing does not mean that you are denying something else. In the criticism of Wilkins beginning on p. 139, Wilkins is criticizing the fact that children and others are being pointed to a particular revivalistic conversion experience, an experience which in and of itself could be quite faulty. Anyone who has pastored a church for any length of time knows this to be the case and strives diligently to guard against it. Wilkins, in the quote recorded by Waters, is in the *shameful* place of pointing people away from themselves and to Christ alone. As Waters quotes Wilkins saying, “Our assurance cannot be based on what we see within ourselves but Christ himself ... Our salvation is based upon His faithful work and faithfulness *not* upon our own works or experiences no matter how genuine they might be.” (p. 139) I am quite sure that Wilkins would plead guilty to the crime of pointing people away from their own experience as the *ground* of their salvation and thus their assurance. Does Waters have a problem with that? Certainly there are accompanying evidences which aid assurance. Wilkins does not deny this (nor does anyone else to my knowledge). They are not the *ground* or *basis* of assurance. That can only be found, like the totality of salvation itself, *solo Christo*. Again Waters has created tension where there is none. If he had spoken with Wilkins (one of the men that invited him to do so on no less than twice), he might have heard the balance.

sacraments v. the Word

In the “Conclusions” found at end of chapter 7, Waters summarizes, “We are offered a doctrine of baptism that effectively denigrates the preaching of the Word, particularly as an ordinance by which men are brought from death to life. At points, baptism appears to be a necessary attendant of or a necessary means of individual soteriological regeneration.” (p. 257) This is only one succinct example of something that is peppered throughout the book. He must be referring to statements like that which he recorded as written by Lusk, “Indeed there is a kind of equal ultimacy between these means [Word and sacraments]. Christ designed Word and Sacrament to work together, not to stand alone, in the application of redemption. However we construct our *ordo salutis*, each means of grace must be given its full due. We need truth and life, instruction and renewal, and so both preaching and the sacraments are essential to a biblically shaped

Christian life.” (p. 213) Why Lusk is practically making the preaching of the Word completely unnecessary! Is that what he said? Not at all. Yet Waters leaves a person with the conclusion that the preaching of the Word is denigrated and becomes a distant second to the sacraments. He creates the impression of a false either/or when these FV proponents all affirm a both/and. Our Standards *do teach* that the sacraments are among God’s ordinary means of salvation (LC 63, 154, SC 88) with the Word and prayer. These various means work together to accomplish the salvation of individuals.

No room for nuance

Theological debates, depending on the setting, are many times highly nuanced arguments. Some of those nuances need to be understood by those debating. For instance, when two orthodox Christians come together to debate church government, it is understood that both are taking the Bible as their authority and believe in the one true God revealed in Christ Jesus. Those things are assumed. So, no matter how the debate goes those particular givens nuance the debate in some form or fashion. Now, within the debate each debater must listen to the nuances of the other’s particular arguments. If one fails to do this, he will believe that the other is saying something totally different from what he is actually saying. Nuance and qualification are extremely important.

Waters does not want to recognize adequately the qualifications and nuances offered by these men. For instance, he says of Lusk concerning his purported view on covenant and justification, “We may be grateful for Lusk’s recent affirmations, but our appreciation must be tempered by his prior and contrary formulations that he has not retracted.” (p. 92) Similarly concerning Garver Waters notes, “In fairness we should note that Garver’s revised edition of ‘A Brief Catechesis on Covenant and Baptism’ introduces a number of qualifications to and revisions of (recorded in the footnotes) many of the preceding statements [i.e., Waters quoting Garver]. When viewed against their original statements, many of these qualifications and revisions, however, do not sufficiently clarify the statements in question in such a way as to ensure certainty regarding their confessional orthodoxy.” (p. 244) Maybe both of these men cannot understand internal inconsistencies in their arguments. How Lusk earned a Masters in Philosophy from the University of Texas and why LaSalle University continues to let Garver maintain his position as a Philosophy professor is a puzzle. They obviously don’t understand the law of non-contradiction or how to nuance an argument. This is not to say that these two men cannot err in their assessments, but they do know a little something about how to maintain a logical argument. Waters does not allow nuance and qualification to these men and assumes that they cannot see what are obvious contradictions to him. Could it be that Waters himself is not understanding the argument? Or could it be that no matter how much these men qualify their arguments Waters is not willing to concede that they are actually within the bounds of Reformed and Presbyterian—yea, even Confessional—orthodoxy?

Out of context

On pp. 210ff. Waters criticizes Lusk again concerning his use of Calvin to prove that what he (Lusk) believes is perfectly in line with our Reformed heritage. Waters concludes (1) “... we are frequently given little or no context for the quotation.” (2) “... [W]e may grant that at times the statement, on a *prima facie* reading, supports Lusk’s point ... Lusk, however, fails to demonstrate satisfactorily that his overall sacramental theology finds a genuine parallel in that of any

sixteenth- or seventeenth-century writer in question ... In relation to this above point, Lusk's proof-texting of Calvin and other sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Protestants, his collating individual statements from several different works or several portions of a single work, raises the question of whether vital qualifying and balancing statements or arguments have been neglected." (p. 211). Interestingly, with these condemning arguments leveled against Lusk, Waters gives *no context* for what he himself is saying. He says, "To engage each of these quotes *seriatim* would distract us from our primary concern: to offer an exposition and a biblical, theological, and confessional critique of the distinguishing doctrines of the FV." (Ibid.) In other words, "You can't trust Lusk to quote things in context, but you can rely on me." Waters entire book could come under the same criticism he is leveling against Lusk here. As mentioned earlier, Waters has not satisfied his opponents with an explanation of their views. Who then should be accused of "de-contextualizing?"

Contrary to the position taken by Waters against Lusk here, he is quick defend Warfield from being "de-contextualized." On p. 198f. Waters argues that Wilson has "misread Warfield's statement." (p. 199) Why is Warfield graciously interpreted without suspicion, but these FV proponents, no matter how many qualifications they make, are regarded with high suspicion and accused of denying what they affirm?

Direct misrepresentation

In critiquing Barach on his teaching concerning covenant, assurance, perseverance, and apostasy, Waters comments, "To understand assurance in a subjective sense, Barach appears to suggest, is to compromise biblical grace, in that we 'contribute to God's election' or election is grounded on human works." (p. 136) First, Waters comments are muddled within the context. He is affirming that Barach is saying that we do not contribute to God's election of us. But one of the consistent criticisms of all of these men is that they *do believe* that our works contribute to our "election" and/or salvation. Second, Waters misrepresents what he has just quoted. Barach is simply saying what the text *is not* affirming. Right or wrong in his interpretation, Barach says, "What does he [Peter in 2 Peter 1:10] mean? The context here is not dealing with personal assurance. He is also not saying that we can somehow contribute to God's election or that God's election is based on something in ourselves or something we have done." (Ibid.) Barach then goes on to conclude what the passage is saying. Waters has not even read Barach correctly at this point.

Then there is Lusk again. In examining Lusk's views on the sacrament of baptism, Waters draws the net by concluding, "First, there is an inherent tension in his view. Lusk's *real* doctrine must insist on an absolute necessity of baptism." (p. 229 emphasis original) But earlier he quoted Lusk as qualifying his statements concerning the sacraments with that famous Reformed qualification "ordinarily." (p. 223) Waters is trying to show where Lusk's arguments are contradictory. If it weren't for the qualifications, we might even believe him. But Waters misrepresents the argument by not taking into account that Lusk insists on the *relative necessity* of the sacraments not their *absolute necessity* (a distinction made by Augustine). This is all handled with that little word Lusk used in a quote recorded by Waters: "ordinarily."

One more misrepresentation. On p. 291 Waters says that we are offered a doctrine by FV proponents that would "admit infants to the Lord's Supper." He does recognize that many, but not all, of these men have publicly taken exception to our Standards regarding the issue of

paedocommunion. That is no secret. Their presbyteries have examined them and approved them notwithstanding this exception. Our denomination—the PCA—has done a study on this issue and there is a strong minority in the PCA who hold this exception. One thing that Waters does not understand is the position of paedocommunion itself. No one has fought for “infants” coming to the Lord’s Table. That is simply and flatly wrong. Of course, Waters offers no proof of this either. He simply asserts it because it follows from his logic based in his presuppositions, not in the arguments of anyone he is critiquing.

Flat hermeneutic

In his concluding chapter, Waters wants his readers to understand what the source or the sources are for all of these teachings. One source, he claims, is a “flat hermeneutic—an approach to biblical interpretation that so stresses continuity between the Testaments that the teaching of Scripture becomes distorted.” (p. 291) He says earlier in his introductory comments to this section, “These proponents, however, have overemphasized this continuity. The result has been a flat hermeneutic, one that strains the New Testament through the Old Testament.” (p. 284) Of course the equally damning yet inconclusive and purely subjective charge could be made that Waters has “under-emphasized” the continuity. Historically, this is the basic debate that exists between Baptists and Reformed. How much do we emphasize the unity of the Bible? I do believe that Waters holds to infant baptism. Is that too much continuity between the Testaments? How does he arrive at the conclusion that infants ought to be baptized? Does he strain the NT through the OT to accomplish this? Where in the NT do we see it explicitly stated that children are to be baptized? In fact, I recall arguing as a Baptist minister the same way Waters argues against the continuity of these men. Indeed, Waters says earlier in his book, “J. A. Alexander has rightly observed [in comment on Acts 22:16], ‘calling on His name’ is ‘an indispensable prerequisite of baptism.’” (p. 193) Baptists accuse Reformed people all the time about having too flat of a hermeneutic, and they use passages just like this to prove that we shouldn’t hold to infant baptism.

While Waters criticizes this “flat hermeneutic,” he says in several places that Scripture must interpret Scripture (cf. e.g., p. 192). Does he mean that Scripture ought to interpret Scripture the way *he* interprets the Scripture? Is every other interpretation either “too flat” or (I assume the converse would be) to “hilly?” Again, is it too flat of a hermeneutic to include infants among the covenant community? Many would say it is. Waters is acting as if he is the ultimate arbiter between what is legitimate exegesis and what is illegitimate exegesis and how that relates to confessional conformity.

To what section of Scripture was Paul referring that was primarily in use at the time when he said, “All Scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work?” Paul must have in view primarily the OT. Just how are we to understand the Hebrew Bible as profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness? Waters criticizes, for instance, the use of the Temple model applied in Christian worship. (pp. 286-87) Is this not part of the Scripture that is profitable for doctrine? We may disagree on how it is applied, but does it “distort” the Scriptures to say that Christian worship in Christ is the fulfillment of that Temple worship, therefore the Temple worship gives us the pattern for worship? How do we account for all the sacrificial language in the NT

pertaining to Christians; especially since animal sacrifice has ended? Where do we learn what this means? Could it be that Paul assumed too flat of a hermeneutic when he did not explain all the sacrificial language but assume that Christians would read the entire Bible? Incidentally, if we are given no “pattern” for worship in the NT (which I assume would mean that we were relatively free to pick), what would be wrong with choosing the pattern of the Temple worship? Would it not be just as valid as anything else since Scripture itself would be regulating worship?

It is quite possible that this “flat hermeneutic” came from the Scriptures themselves. Take, for instance, 1 Cor 10 and Heb 3-4. Paul and the author of Hebrews use the example of the children of Israel in the wilderness having received God’s blessings (e.g., deliverance from Egypt, water from the Rock, manna from heaven, hearing the gospel, etc.). These people who received all of these blessings fell in the wilderness, destroyed by God because they did not believe/obey the word that was preached to them (cf. Heb 3.18-19; note here the two different yet almost interchangeable words used: *apeithō* and *apistia*). Is the conclusion drawn from these two passages, “Thank the Lord we are not in that OC any more and need to worry about things as such.” Not at all. The exhortation which follows both is essentially, “Let this be an example to you so that you don’t do the same thing.” Now are the NT writers employing a “flat hermeneutic?” Don’t they know that there is “less continuity” than this and apostasy is not possible in the NC? Maybe we ought to learn how to interpret the Scriptures from those who were inspired to do so.

The same would be the case for Waters’s criticism of the understanding of election in the NT. He criticizes these men by saying, “We earlier criticized this doctrine of covenant election. We mention it here to illustrate *how* the doctrine of election has been constructed: Old Testament teaching about God’s choice of Israel is normative and determinative for New Testament teaching about God’s election of the believer.” (p. 285) Would this not be Scripture interpreting Scripture? The question at this point should be directed to Waters, “From where do you derive your understanding of election?” These men have *biblical* evidence that the terms “election” or “elect” most certainly refer to people who apostatized (e.g., national Israel). They have wrestled with how to understand the Scriptural use of the term. Does Waters’s understanding come from the Scriptures or from a preconceived notion of what election *should* mean and understand the NT without reference to the OT? Does your systematic theology derive from the text, or is it a complete system that comes from outside the text and tries to fit theological square pegs in contextual and lexical round holes? How much should Scripture interpret Scripture? Is Waters’s the only valid hermeneutic? Is there no space for the slightest dissent from what he understands as Scripture interpreting Scripture, especially in the glaring light of *biblical* evidence?

Not so incidentally, Waters does not prove that there is anyone in this group who doesn’t believe there were radical changes between the OC and the NC. He simply leaves the reader with the conclusion that these men might very well be sacrificing goats in their worship services! Why not? They are stuck in the OC. His assertion that their hermeneutic is too flat is overly subjective and lacks substantial proof.

Conclusion

As I mentioned at the beginning, this critique could have been book length. Waters will win many, I am sure, by his innuendo, extensive quotes, and seemingly damning critiques and

appearances. But the fact is, that while he may win a battle here and there, he loses the war. He has not justly critiqued these men. He has sought to defame good ministers of the gospel with charges they constantly deny. He has assumed the position that he understands their arguments better than they do by not recognizing their qualifications and nuances. As I said at the beginning of this review, even if these men are guilty of being outside the pale of the confessional Standards, they may still be in God's favor. Those who defame, slander, and libel brothers in Christ—especially after having denied the invitation to discuss these matters—will stand before the judgment seat of Christ one day to give account for these matters.