

1 **Report of the Federal Vision Study Committee**
2 **Presbytery of the Pacific Northwest**
3 **April 22, 2005**
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6 **Background**

7 In response to an overture in October 2004, Presbytery erected a study committee
8 assigned to determine at what points, if any, Federal Vision theology is out of accord
9 with our Confession and Catechisms. In addition, the committee was assigned the
10 responsibility of considering a letter from the RPCGA calling for an investigation of the
11 views of TE Peter Leithart, a member of this Presbytery. The committee was charged to
12 deliver a report to the April 2005 meeting of Presbytery.

13
14 **Methodology of the Committee**

15 Originally, this committee determined to prepare a two-part report for Presbytery. Part
16 one, which would have represented the majority of the committee's efforts, would have
17 contained an assessment of Federal Vision theology and part two would have included a
18 summary of our interactions with TE Leithart. The focus of the committee changed,
19 however, when TE Leithart received a letter from several PCA men outside our
20 Presbytery urging him to resign his membership in this denomination or face judicial
21 action. The committee then decided that the interests of Presbytery would best be served
22 by focusing all immediate attention on the views of TE Leithart. We have anticipated
23 Presbytery's need to address the substance of this letter sent to TE Leithart. Therefore,
24 this report concerns only the views of TE Leithart and does not offer a general
25 assessment of Federal Vision theology. Presbytery will determine if this committee is to
26 continue working to produce such an assessment for a later meeting.
27

28 **Contents of the Report**

29 In addition to this document, four papers are attached:

- 30 1. TE Leithart's *Summary of Views*. This paper was submitted at the committee's
31 request.
32
33 2. The committee's *Response to TE Leithart's Summary of Views (with TE*
34 *Leithart's replies)*. In this document, the committee sought clarification and
35 elaboration of statements made in the *Summary*. TE Leithart's replies are
36 included.
37
38 3. *Additional Questions for TE Leithart (with TE Leithart's replies)*. This
39 document sought further clarification and elaboration on matters previously
40 discussed, and introduced new questions based on accusations set forth by critics
41 of Federal Vision theology.
42
43 4. *Final Questions for TE Leithart (with TE Leithart's replies)*.
44

45 **Conclusion**

46 The committee reports that we received full cooperation from TE Leithart. The
47 documents that follow focus on four primary areas: 1) miscellaneous questions regarding
48 the role of the Confession and Catechisms; 2) sacramental theology, 3) ecclesiology; 4)
49 justification.

50

51 In regard to the first matter, as the attached documents illustrate, TE Leithart, on the
52 whole, affirms the teaching of the Confession and Catechisms where there is a direct
53 correspondence of issues between his thinking and topics covered in our Standards. The
54 committee notes, however, that there are aspects of TE Leithart's thinking that simply are
55 not addressed fully in the Confession and Catechisms. Some would argue that TE
56 Leithart's thinking represents an interpretation or refinement of the teaching in our
57 Confession and Catechisms; others would argue that TE Leithart's thinking is a departure
58 from the system of doctrine found in the Standards. A departure would be evident, of
59 course, if we had in our possession denials of statements found in our Confession and
60 Catechisms. What we have, however, *in terms of the attached documents*, are
61 affirmations and elaborations. The question is whether the elaborations represent views
62 contrary to the teaching of our Standards.

63

64 Concerning TE Leithart's sacramental theology, the committee was specifically
65 interested in TE Leithart's understanding of sacramental efficacy. We direct your
66 attention, in particular, to lines 95-119 and 144-195 of *Response to TE Leithart's*
67 *Summary of Views*, and lines 36-56 of *Additional Questions for TE Leithart*. Certain
68 expressions used by TE Leithart may raise initial questions, but when taken in context
69 and with accompanying qualifiers, these expressions appear less alarming, though still
70 open to further exploration.

71

72 We believe that one issue, which came up in the discussion regarding the efficacy of the
73 sacraments, is sufficiently clear as to require the attention of Presbytery without further
74 investigation. In answer to a question about 27-4 of the Confession, concerning the
75 administration of sacraments by a lawfully ordained minister (see lines 58-92 of
76 *Additional Questions*), TE Leithart's response indicates a possible exception to the
77 Confession. (See Recommendation 3 at the end of this report.)

78

79 In the matter of TE Leithart's views on ecclesiology, the committee believes that TE
80 Leithart's responses (see lines 209-360 of *Response to TE Leithart's Summary of Views*)
81 suggest that additional analysis would be beneficial (for example, in the matter of
82 invisible/visible vs. historical/eschatological as terms describing the nature of the
83 Church). The committee, nevertheless, has no substantial objection to the answers
84 provided by TE Leithart in this category of doctrine.

85

86 Finally, the committee questioned TE Leithart on the topic of justification. In regard to
87 lines 429-449 of *Response to TE Leithart's Summary of Views*, lines 134-164 of
88 *Additional Questions*, and lines 96-115 of *Final Questions*, requesting additional
89 clarification of TE Leithart's understanding of union with Christ seems reasonable. We
90 note TE Leithart's words:

91 ... this personalist framework also introduces *a great deal of nuance and*
92 *complexity*. Sinners participate in Christ *in all manner of ways*, which are as
93 various as personal relations among human beings. So, *while it is true that*
94 *everyone in the body of Christ is identified and joined to Christ, it is not true that*
95 *everyone who is joined to Christ in the same way*. (lines 153-158 of *Additional*
96 *Questions*) [emphasis added]
97

98 I distinguish, as the scholastics say: *God's declaration that we are justified is*
99 *based on the work of Christ in the past as a matter of "redemption*
100 *accomplished."* *In the "application" of redemption, the ground is our union with*
101 *Christ*. We are justified because we are in the Risen Christ, but His justification is
102 ours because He has been justified in His resurrection (which assumes His prior
103 obedience). (lines 100-105 of *Final Questions*) [emphasis added]
104

105 Moreover, statements found in *Final Questions* suggest that additional inquiry is
106 warranted to clarify TE Leithart's understanding of the imputation of Christ's
107 righteousness.
108

109 The committee does not believe that we are expected to make a comprehensive
110 pronouncement regarding the theological views of TE Leithart. Rather, we have been
111 asked to investigate TE Leithart's views. To the extent we have done this we conclude
112 that while we do not agree with everything TE Leithart says, our analysis does not
113 provide grounds upon which to judge TE Leithart's views as falling outside the
114 boundaries defined by the Standards. In fact, we find some of his thinking useful in
115 emphasizing important biblical considerations too often underemphasized or forgotten in
116 typical Reformed reflection.
117

118 **Recommendations**

119

120 1. That Presbytery receive this report as a preliminary investigation of the views of TE
121 Peter Leithart.
122

123 *Reasoning:* It is only too obvious that the committee's interaction with TE
124 Leithart has been hindered by the short amount of time we have had to devote to
125 this task. Given the many questions and theological nuances touched upon in our
126 report, we do not believe this report, in its present form, is a fully sufficient
127 analysis.
128

129 2. That Presbytery continue the study committee with instructions to:

130 A. Pursue investigation of those areas identified in this report as warranting
131 further study (see lines 64-70 and 86-107, in particular, above);
132

133 B. Broaden the scope of the investigation beyond the attached documents to
134 include additional material produced by TE Leithart.
135

136 C. The Committee pursue the investigation of the Federal Vision Theology and
137 report to a later meeting of Presbytery.

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139

140 *Reasoning:* As indicated in the report and in Recommendation 1 above, the
141 committee believes that the most helpful investigation of TE Leithart's views will
142 take into account his various publications in addition to the relatively limited
143 information provided in the attached documents.

144

145 3. That Presbytery consider whether TE Leithart does, in fact, need to register an
146 exception in regard to *WCF* 27-4.

147

148 *Reasoning:* See lines 72-77 above.

149

150 4. That Presbytery forward this report, if received, to the RPCGA as a response to their
151 communication requesting an investigation of the views of TE Peter Leithart.

152

153 *Reasoning:* Although we are not bound to supply a response to the RPCGA, we
154 believe that no harm would be done by forwarding a copy of this report to the
155 RPCGA and would, in fact, be an act of brotherly courtesy.

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157

158 Respectfully Submitted,

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160 TE Jim Bordwine (chairman)

161 TE Rob Rayburn

162 TE David Scott

163 TE Shawn Doud

164 RE Steve Meerdink

165 RE Brian Curnutt

166 RE Mike Pfefferle

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Summary of Views
Provided by Peter Leithart for the Federal Vision Study Committee
Presbytery of the Pacific Northwest
February 2005

6 As a preliminary, let me say a word about how the Confession functions in my
7 theological work. I accept the Calvinistic covenant theology of the Confession and affirm
8 most of its specific statements. I do not believe that the Confession is, or was intended to
9 be, the final word on any point of theology. It does not say everything. On many points,
10 moreover, the Confessional language is not my preferred language for theology,
11 preaching, or teaching. For example, I am more inclined to call sacraments “rites” than
12 “signs and seals”; though I affirm imputation, I usually emphasize that imputation is
13 rooted in the more basic reality of union with Christ (cf. WLC #69); and I use
14 soteriological language with the same flexibility that Scripture does (e.g., Psalm 106:8;
15 107:13, 19; Isaiah 45:17, 22; 63:9).

16
17 There are, in my judgment, four main areas in which the conformity of my views to the
18 WCF might be challenged: sacramental theology and especially the issue of baptismal
19 efficacy; ecclesiology (especially the visible/invisible church distinction); election and
20 apostasy; and justification. Let me attempt to clarify my own views, and how I see them
21 in relation to the Confession.

22
23 **1. Sacramental theology and baptismal efficacy.**

24 *Sacraments in general:* I have been critical of the use of “sign” language regarding
25 sacraments. I do believe that sacraments are signs, but they are not signs in the way a
26 Stop Sign is a sign. The sacraments are not merely given to us to teach us something or to
27 remind us of something. Sacraments are “performative” signs, both in the sense that they
28 include actions and in the sense that through them the Spirit works to give Himself to His
29 people. For these reasons, I prefer to say that the “outward element” of baptism is
30 washing with water, rather than simply “water” (WCF 28:2).

31
32 I have been critical of defining sacraments as “means of grace.” For similar reasons,
33 describing sacraments as “outward signs [of] inward and spiritual grace” (WLC #163)
34 captures only a limited scope of the sacraments’ significance, though I do not reject this
35 language. My problem is with the notion of grace often implicit in such definitions. Grace
36 is pictured as a substance or fluid channeled through the sacraments. With the Reformers,
37 I believe that grace is God’s favor to His people, expressed the gift of the Spirit but also
38 in gifts of all sorts, outward and physical as well as inward and spiritual. Sacraments are,
39 precisely in their outwardness and visibility, among the gifts that God gives His people.
40 Being visibly “distinguished from those who are without” the church by the sacraments
41 (WLC #162) is one of God’s gifts.

42
43 I have been critical of the notion of “sacramental union.” My main concern here is that
44 this concept can be employed to rob all sacramental passages in Scripture of their
45 sacramental force. Romans 6, thus, is not about water baptism but the “thing” to which
46 water baptism points. I find that a deeply problematic way to proceed in developing a

47 biblical theology of sacraments. From certain perspectives, further, the distinction
48 between sign and thing signified dissolves: Baptism is not a picture of someone
49 becoming a disciple, but the event of someone becoming a disciple (Matthew 28:18-20);
50 the sign of eating and drinking together *is* the fellowship of believers with one another
51 with and in Christ.

52

53 Other than these points, I do not disagree with WCF 27; WLC 161-164; WSC 91-93.

54

55 *Baptismal Efficacy*: My basic view has been that baptism, in the Confessional
56 terminology, is “the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible church.”
57 Everything else I have written about baptismal efficacy is just an unpacking of this
58 statement. Of course, that raises the issue of the nature and meaning of “visible church,”
59 on which more below.

60

61 Other than the quibble that the “outward element” is “washing with water” (28.1; cf.
62 WSC #94), I have no disagreement with WCF 28; WLC #165-167; WSC #94-95.

63

64 **2. Ecclesiology.**

65 *Visible/Invisible Church*: My views on the visible/invisible church distinction were
66 formed in seminary by reading John Murray’s brief article “The Church: Its Definition in
67 Terms of ‘Visible’ and ‘Invisible’ Invalid” (*Collected Works*, vol. 1, pp. 231-237). I agree
68 with Murray that the NT normally uses “church” to refer to a visible and historical
69 reality, either to a local community of believers who worship together Sunday by Sunday,
70 or to all believers throughout the world along with their children. This visible and
71 historical community has invisible dimensions, and it includes within it some who will
72 fall away before Christ’s return and others who will be exposed as hypocrites at the
73 judgment, but this visible and historical “mixed body” is what the NT describes as “the
74 church.” The Confession (25.1-2) does not apply body and spouse language to the visible
75 church (though it does not prohibit such language, and cf. BOCO, Preface, Part 1). I
76 believe that “body” and “spouse” applies primarily to the visible church.

77

78 The “visible/invisible” distinction sometimes appears to imply that there are two
79 overlapping churches. I do not believe that this is what the Confession has in mind with
80 the distinction. But I think it more biblical to insist that there is one church that exists in
81 various conditions throughout history. During the current phase of history, the church is a
82 mixed community, including both elect and reprobate. After the judgment, it will be
83 purged of all tares and will be identical to the community of the elect. Throughout this
84 history, it is a single community. Rather than use the visible/invisible distinction, I prefer
85 to describe the one church as existing in both “historical” and “eschatological” states.

86

87 In several published writings, I have argued that soteriology and ecclesiology are two
88 sides of the same coin. My reasoning is: Salvation has been achieved already in Christ,
89 though it is not yet consummated. Salvation involves the restoration of man, and since
90 man is created as a social/relational being, salvation necessarily involves the restoration
91 of human society. The church is the redeemed society, the social form of the “already” of
92 the salvation of the human race. I agree that there is no “ordinary possibility of salvation”

93 outside the visible church (WCF 25.2), but I also believe that it's theologically accurate
94 to say that the church is the site where salvation has been achieved (imperfectly), where
95 sinners commune with the Father through Christ in the Spirit.

96
97 *Ecclesiology and Baptismal Efficacy*: If baptism admits the baptized into the visible
98 church, and if the visible church is the body of Christ and the “already” of salvation, then
99 baptism admits the baptized into a share of that salvation, just as all Israel shared in the
100 redemption from Egypt. This does not mean that everyone who is baptized is saved
101 eternally; most of those redeemed (Exodus 15:13; Deuteronomy 7:18) from Egypt fell in
102 the wilderness (1 Corinthians 10:5). Nor does it mean that everyone who is baptized has
103 the same share in the benefits of Christ's work, or the same degree and sort of
104 communion with God in the Spirit. But if the church truly is the body of Christ, and the
105 members are members joined to the Head, there can be no “merely social” membership in
106 the church.

107 108 **3. Election and apostasy.**

109 *Election*: I have no disagreements with WCF 3. As I understand WCF 17.1, those who
110 are “accepted in his Beloved” are the elect. I agree that God has decreed who will finally
111 be saved, and that there will be neither addition to nor subtraction from that. Yet, the life-
112 history of a reprobate might include membership in the church, temporary faith,
113 participation in the life of the saved community, communion with the Spirit, all of which,
114 however, falls short of a persevering and eternally saving relationship with God in Christ.

115
116 *Apostasy*: The elect cannot fall away. But apostasy from a state of blessing is a real
117 possibility, and involves a real loss. A baptized person who turns from Christ is not just
118 an unbeliever; he is a disinherited son, a rebellious subject of Christ's kingdom, a branch
119 cut off the tree. He has fallen from grace (Galatians 5:4), and made shipwreck of his faith
120 (1 Timothy 1:19).

121 122 **4. Justification.**

123 I have published two main papers on justification. In the first, I examine passages in
124 Scripture where “justification” language is used to describe not merely a verdict (“not
125 guilty”) but describes an act of deliverance (to “justify” is to judge one's enemies and
126 liberate or vindicate the oppressed). I do not believe this is in conflict with the
127 Confession's teaching on justification; I am identifying another Scriptural usage of the
128 language, and suggesting that this additional Scriptural nuance needs to find a place in
129 our theology of justification. In the second, I examine some historical formulations of
130 justification, and argue that these formulations are sometimes infected with an unbiblical
131 dualism between legal status and real identity. This is not in conflict with the Confession,
132 in that the Confession states that in justification God “accepts their persons as righteous”
133 (11.1). The justified are not merely “legally” righteous; because we simply are what God
134 declares us to be, we *are* the righteous.

135
136 Strictly, I believe that what is reckoned to us is not Christ's obedience per se (cf. WCF
137 11.1), but the verdict God passed on Christ's obedience in His resurrection (Romans
138 4:25).

139

140 There is a relation between my work on justification and my work on baptism in one
141 important sense: If, as I argue, baptism grafts the baptized into the body of Christ, and He
142 is the Risen Righteous One, then the baptized share in some fashion in that righteous
143 standing. I cannot offer a Confessional defense of this view, but there is precedent for
144 such a view within Reformed theology, evidence for which I could provide on request.
145 There is also a corporate/historical dimension to justification: Israel as a nation was
146 “vindicated” by the restoration from exile (Isaiah 54:17; Jeremiah 51:10) and by
147 deliverance from judgment (Joel 2:23). In an analogous way, one may speak of the
148 church as being “vindicated” and of the members of the church as sharing in that
149 “vindication.”

**Response to Peter Leithart's *Summary of Views*
(with Leithart's Replies)
Prepared by the Federal Vision Study Committee
Presbytery of the Pacific Northwest
March 2005**

The Role of the Confession

1. It is accepted that the Confession has limitations. It is a summary and a summary of a particular type. It is not a biblical-theological document so much as a systematic-theological document (in the traditional sense of the term). It is certainly not a document of spiritual or liturgical theology, still less a homiletical document. Nuances, finer points, and ambiguities are not its interest. It does not attend with any care to the way in which its technical theological terms may be used in different ways in Holy Scripture. Further, as a historical document, it features a concern for the issues of its time. In respect to the sacraments, it speaks directly to issues that roiled the 16th and 17th century church. That is accepted and understood. Understanding the Standards as you do, having taken a vow of loyalty to them as you have, expressing your sense of their limitations as you have, do you have any objection to the church continuing to use such a document to ensure conformity to Scripture's teaching?

Leithart: No. Creeds and Confessions are crucial to the health of the church, and the WCF is among the best we have.

2. Would you prefer that the *Presbyterian Church in America* undertake the revision of the Standards or would you prefer their replacement by some new document?

Leithart: I believe that a new Confession would be very edifying for the church. Revisions would, in all likelihood, make the Confession more cumbersome rather than clearer. And we have all kinds of issues that didn't face the original assembly, as well as different ways of formulating theology.

3. In terms of your own convictions, is there any point at which you believe you are out of accord with the Confession or Catechisms? To put it another way: Reflecting upon the discussions surrounding Federal Vision theology over the past couple of years, do you believe it necessary to notify your Presbytery of any exceptions to the Confession or Catechisms?

Leithart: I have considered this a number of times on a number of issues. At this point, I don't believe that I do have such exceptions. But I am inclined to allow others to determine that for me, since I will naturally gravitate to interpretations of the Confession that make room for my views.

Sacramental Efficacy

1. Insofar as the Catechism defines baptism as “the washing with water in the name of the Father...” [Q. 94], the very wording you prefer, is there a genuine objection to identifying water as “the outward *element* to be used in this sacrament” (as opposed to oil or milk, or as opposed to bread and water) or are you simply meaning to say that you wish the Catechism’s more dynamic definition, with its emphasis on the ritual act, had been included in the Confession’s statement?

Leithart: Yes to the last option: The Catechism definition is preferable.

2. You object to what you regard as a minimalist understanding of the “sign” language used in Reformed circles to describe sacramental efficacy, as if the sacraments were primarily to be understood as simply information in another form, a reminder of truth, nothing more than a visible form of the Word. You admit that the Bible does use the term in respect to the sacraments and you accept that the sacraments are signs. You note that the Standards do not specifically define what they mean by “sign” in this context. The Bible, and the Confession following it, also use the terminology of *seal*. “Seal” suggests a more dynamic concept of efficacy. Sealing is a process, an action, and it produces a result; it creates what was not present before. It is, obviously, not simply information as seals, in and of themselves, convey no information. Do you have any quibble with our Standards’ use of “seal” alongside “sign” in its discussion of the role, the function, and the efficacy of the sacraments?

Leithart: I do have a quibble, but it is only a quibble. The “seal” language is used in Scripture of circumcision, and by analogy baptism. It makes most sense to me in that context, and less sense for the Supper. I like the patristic description of the baptismal seal; the church fathers compared baptism to the tattoo on a soldier, the brand on an animal, or the mark on a slave. All these indicate ownership, and place demands on the one sealed. That is most directly analogous to baptism, though our commitment to be the Lord’s is also renewed in the Supper, so it can be used of the Supper by extension.

Leithart: If sealing is defined as “a process . . . [that] creates what was not present before, then it is true that the sacraments “seal.”

3. In your view, how do the sacraments serve as seals?

Leithart: I hope the previous answer suffices.

4. You say that baptism is the “solemn admission...” You worry about a particular understanding of the phrase “means of grace” abroad in some Reformed circles. But you also argue that in the sacraments “the Spirit works to give Himself to his people.” Is there any sense in which you would deny that the sacraments are “outward and ordinary means

whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption?”

Leithart: No. My objective is to the impersonalism that is sometimes implied by “means of grace.” I agree that we receive Christ’s benefits through the sacraments because we are communing with Christ in the sacraments. The sacraments are communicative actions of Christ through the Spirit, conveying Christ Himself and His benefits.

5. Following upon the question above, would you say that in every observance of a sacrament, the Spirit “works to give Himself to his people”? Do you believe it is possible, for example, for a baptism to be administered in which the Spirit does not “work”? (*cf.* WSC 91: “How do the sacraments become effectual means of salvation? The sacraments *become* effectual means of salvation, not from any virtue in them or in him who administers them, but only by the blessing of Christ and the working of His Spirit *in those who receive them by faith.*” [emphasis added] The answer seems to suggest that a sacrament may be non-effectual.).

Leithart: In one sense, sacraments never fail to work. A baptized person is always different after he’s been baptized. I don’t mean to be flippant, but the chief difference is that he’s been baptized; he wears the mark of Christ, and is called to serve Him. And this is not merely an “external” or “sociological” fact, but a theological fact. In the sense that a baptized person is admitted to the community where the Spirit dwells, to that extent (at least) the Spirit is active at every baptism: “By one Spirit we have all been baptized into one body” (1 Cor 12). That baptism may turn out to be a witness against the person, if he does not respond to the call. But a baptized person is a different person, just as a man is a different man after his wedding. The Supper likewise never returns void, though its effect may be discipline and judgment rather than grace. But someone who has sat at the Lord’s table is different, precisely because he has sat at the Lord’s table.

Leithart: To WSC 91: I agree that the sacraments are efficacious by the blessing of Christ and the work of the Spirit, and that the sacraments are means of salvation to *believers*.

6. You express reservations about the way in which the notion of the union between “the sign and the thing signified” tends, in some thinking, to eviscerate the place, the role, and the importance of the sacrament itself. But taking the term [*unio sacramentalis*] in its more positive sense (e.g. that Christ and his benefits are really conveyed in the sacrament without his body being physically present in the bread and wine – the original and Confessional burden of the term – i.e. the thing [*res sacramenti*] is not contained in the sign), do you deny, in fact, that there is such a “spiritual relation, or sacramental union”?

Leithart: I deny that the bread and wine are physically or substantially body and blood, and agree that Christ and His benefits are communicated through the sacrament. If that is what the sacramental union is intended to deny, I have no problem with it.

Leithart: For the sake of completeness, however, I do not believe that the “sign” should be limited to the element. The sacrament is the whole action of the minister and church in the Supper (a “wide-angle” view of the sacrament). Further, I find compelling the medieval formulations that include the church as the *res sacramenti*. When we put these two points together, the *res* and *signum* are not two things that have to be unified; they are two aspects of one event. The *res* (church) is the company of people that participates in the *signum* (the meal). Or, to put it another way, the Eucharistic celebration is not a “sign” of the church’s fellowship with Christ; it is an act of fellowship.

7. Do you agree that while baptism does admit the party baptized into the visible church (or historical church if you prefer), the divine gifts and saving graces “represented, sealed, and applied” by the sacrament, and especially those most beautifully and powerfully portrayed in the sacrament – the washing of regeneration and the cleansing from sin – are not conferred *ex opere operato*? If there is a sense in which you wish to maintain baptism’s efficacy as a rite *per se*, how would you explain the frequent and emphatic emphasis in the Bible on its ineffectiveness when saving grace and true faith are absent (e.g. Isa 1; Jer. 9; 1 Cor. 10; Rom. 2)?

Leithart: I believe the answer to #5 applies here. In one sense, the sacraments do work *ex opere operato*; a validly baptized person is always validly baptized, and that is a gracious gift of God. But the sacraments do not automatically guarantee final salvation to anyone.

8. Coming from a different angle on the matter raised in the previous question—the Confession says that the sacraments may be dispensed only by “a minister of the Word lawfully ordained.” (27:4) Assuming we could find a case where we all agree that a man performing baptisms was not “lawfully ordained,” would you consider the baptisms he administered valid? If so, on what basis? And, if so, what would be the relationship of the baptized individual to the Church and to Christ?

Leithart: If the baptism was Trinitarian baptism, I would say that the baptism is valid. My reasoning would be Augustinian: Ultimately, the sacraments are Christ’s, and He is the chief actor. The moral or official status of the baptizer does not determine baptism’s validity. The person so baptized is marked as belonging to Christ, and is a member of Christ’s church. (Of course, lots of other factors would enter into this judgment; I’m offering an opinion on the basis of the information contained in the question.)

9. In your article *Why Sacraments Are not Means of Grace (Credenda/Agenda, 15:1)*, you conclude by saying:

So I suggest the following refinement of the confessional language: instead of saying that sacraments are means by which Christ’s benefits are communicated to us, we should simply say that the sacraments are among the benefits that Christ has graciously given to us. Sacraments are not means of grace, but themselves graces, gifts of a gracious God.

Based on this paragraph, would it be correct to conclude that you believe the sacraments must be efficacious because they are expressions of God's grace, not simply symbols representing God's grace in some potential manner?

Leithart: In that article I define grace as God's attitude of favor, which is expressed in gracious gifts. The sacraments are among the gifts that the gracious God gives. And He gives these gifts to many who will not receive them rightly, just as He sends rain and sun to many who do not give thanks for them.

Leithart: This does not mean that the sacraments are "efficacious" in the sense that the question seems to use the word. The sacraments are always efficacious in that God always gives a good thing, the good thing being the sacrament itself, admission to the church, identification with the Triune God. They are not always efficacious in the sense that they have an ultimately saving effect. Only those who receive with true faith receive them rightly, and for those only are the sacraments effectual means of salvation.

10. When you write "I prefer to say that the "outward element" of baptism is washing with water, rather than simply "water" (WCF 28:2)," that *seems* to put an emphasis on the administration of the sacrament, rather than the sacrament itself. How, therefore, are the words of institution (or the actions of the minister) related to your understanding of the nature and efficacy of sacraments?

Leithart: I'm not sure what is meant by "the sacrament itself" in the question. As I understand it, the "sacrament itself" consists of the action, including verbal formulae, as well as the element itself. I don't think a sacrament exists unless there are actions performed. Water is not baptism; a minister washing a person with water is baptism. Perhaps I've misunderstood the force of the question.

Ecclesiology

1. In your preference for the distinction historical/eschatological over visible/invisible, which we take, following Murray, to be a protest against the diminishment of the place and importance of the church in the world as taught in the New Testament and in much of Christian theology (a diminishment due largely to the influence of modern individualism and evangelical revivalism/voluntarism), do you deny any of the classical theological implications of the latter distinction: 1) that in this age and until the consummation, the church in the world is, spiritually considered, a *corpus mixtum*, containing at once saints and hypocrites; 2) that it is impossible for human judgment infallibly to determine who among the church's members is and who is not a genuine believer, or who is already in possession of eternal life; and 3) contrary to the protest against this distinction made by Roman Catholics at the time of the Reformation, it does not tell against the Reformed doctrines of justification by faith, etc. that they were not for so long the teaching of the church?

Leithart: I affirm that the church is a mixed body, and that we cannot know infallibly who is eternally elect. If I understand point #3, I also agree with it. I understand it to be saying that the truth of a Reformation doctrine is not dependent on its having been taught throughout the history of the church.

2. The Larger Catechism, question 69, asks: “What is the communion in grace which the members of the invisible church have with Christ?” The answer given is: “The communion in grace which the members of the invisible church have with Christ, is their partaking of the virtue of his mediation, in their justification, adoption, sanctification, and whatever else, in this life, manifests their union with him.” Given your preference for historical/eschatological in place of visible/invisible and your understanding of the nature of the Church in this age, would you be comfortable substituting the word “historical” for “invisible” in the question and answer? Or, as an alternative, would you rather simply strike the word “invisible”?

Leithart: Perhaps there’s a mistake here; in the scheme I suggested, the invisible church corresponds to the eschatological church. Putting to the side my reservations about visible/invisible terminology, I have no objection #69 as stated.

Leithart: But I’ll assume there is no mistake. I would prefer to strike invisible entirely, and leave the point ambiguous. If “historical” were substituted for invisible, I’d agree with the statement, but a full account of the question would have to reckon with various meanings of “union with Christ.” Not everyone in the historical church is united to Christ in the same sense. (I’m in part influenced by Aquinas at this point.)

3. We take your point that *in some sense* the “Christian hypocrite” is a member of the body of Christ. On the other hand, obviously the Bible makes a point of saying many times and in emphatic ways that “a man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical.” Do you accept that just as there is a sense in which the professing but unbelieving man is a member of the body of Christ, there is also a sense in which he is plainly *not* a member of that same body?

Leithart: Yes. Judas was an apostle; Judas was no apostle. The merely external Jew is a Jew; yet he is not a Jew.

4. Given the large place this emphasis on the reality of false profession is given in the preaching of the prophets, of Jesus, and of the Apostle Paul and the deadly peril of false presumption, what, in your mind, is the importance or the benefit the Bible attaches to emphasizing the church membership of the multitudes of church members who are damned? It is one thing to admit that there are hypocrites in the body of Christ and we are incapable of rooting them out and are prohibited from attempting to do so and to admit that there may be important benefits to the elect from the presence of the reprobate in the church (1 Cor. 11:19). It is another thing *to stress* the church membership of reprobate professors.

In your view, in Holy Scripture to what point is that assertion made?

Leithart: As with many of these issues, the main motivation for me has been to make sense of the biblical text and to learn to speak as the Bible does. Paul addresses the Corinthians (and many other churches) as “saints,” in spite of all their very obvious problems. Without denying that there is an emphasis on rooting out false professions, there is also a strong emphasis (in my reading of the NT) on treating the whole church as the body and bride of Christ, as the company of saints, as believers.

5. Do you accept the responsibility of pastors to warn their congregations against a false profession, to remind them of the great numbers who have been falsely at ease in Zion, and do you accept the responsibility of the elders of the church to require for admission to the church and continuance in her membership a *credible profession of faith in Christ*?

Leithart: Yes, but I believe that this can be and has been misused to raise unnecessary doubts in sincere believers.

6. With respect to apostasy, do you believe that it is appropriate to make distinctions between different classes of members of the visible church and do you make such distinctions? For example, would you consider a baptized person who was born and raised in an unbelieving church, who never claimed evangelical convictions or experience, who never had any other understanding of the Christian faith than that taught in his relativist, pluralist, and humanistic church, an apostate in the sense discussed in Hebrews 6 or 1 John 2? Is there some importance or benefit, in your view, in lumping a baptized Roman Catholic or Episcopalian who attends church twice a year and upon whose heart and life the Christian faith bears virtually no imprint with a protestant evangelical, seemingly converted through a campus ministry while a college student, who lives as an active Christian for some years, but then returns to the world as a dog to its vomit? Has the former “fallen from grace” in the same way as the latter? Are two such people members of the church in the same way?

Leithart: Yes, I do think that there are important differences. One underlying agenda in all of these things is to think through these issues as thoroughly as possible in a personal context. That is, we’re always talking about a sinner’s personal relationship with the Personal Triune God. Personal relationships have infinite range of nuance and diversity. We can make generalizations, but the individual nuances particular stories are important.

7. Are there any points at which you differ with chapter 18 of the Confession (regarding Assurance of Grace and Salvation)?

Leithart: I do not have any differences with this chapter. I could expand on my views on assurance if you like, but I don’t differ with the chapter – other than in phrasing and perhaps the emphases.

8. You write that the “life history of a reprobate might include ... temporary faith [and] communion with the Spirit ...” Would you please elaborate on these ideas? Specifically, distinguish between the “temporary faith” of the reprobate and the persevering faith of the one who ends up in heaven. And, in your view, how would one who proved to be a reprobate have had communion with the Spirit during that time prior to the revelation of his true disposition?

Leithart: A few dimensions to my answer to the first question: First, God has decreed the eternal destiny of elect and reprobate. That cannot help but color God’s attitude toward someone who is ultimately reprobate. He is obviously conscious that any blessing He gives or favor He shows is blessing and favor to a reprobate.

Leithart: Second, while God decrees before the foundation of the world all that comes to pass, He also is active in the outworking of those decrees, and in that activity He is interactive with His creation. We pray, and He answers, and that is not pretense; He really does answer prayers (albeit He had planned from eternity for the prayer and the answer). Similarly, His attitude toward sinners changes through time. An elect man is an object of God’s wrath during the week before his conversion, and the object of God’s mercy during the time after. I submit that the same is true of the reprobate who receives the word of God with joy for a time: He is an object of favor while he responds in faith, and then becomes an object of disfavor. I take Saul as a concrete example of this reality. Again, this is qualified and complexified by point #1.

Leithart: Third, I am favorable toward a teleological view of human nature. If you slice into the life of an elect man at a point of backsliding, and also slice into the life of the reprobate at a point when he is rejoicing in the gospel, it will appear that the reprobate’s faith is strong, more living, more true, than that of the elect. Analyzed in that kind of punctiliar fashion, the two are well-nigh indistinguishable. But nature is determined by ends. We are what we are destined to become (which is what we are decreed to become). Thus, the quality of temporary faith, even the nature of temporary faith, is different from the nature of true and living and persevering faith. I’ve used the analogy of marriage to explain this: A marriage that ends in divorce differs from a happy marriage in its *conclusion*; but the conclusion of the marriages reveals that there was something fundamentally and permanently different in the two marriages. The differences are never *merely* differences at the end, because the end reveals the shape of the whole story-line.

Leithart: How have they had communion with the Spirit? I am thinking of Hebrews 6 primarily there: they “have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit” (v. 4). That might manifest itself in acts of ministry that are empowered by the Spirit. It may manifest itself in acts of piety, devotion to and joy in worship, eagerness to hear the word of God. I believe that this all falls under what the WCF calls “common operations of the Spirit,” taking “common” here as operations common to the elect and reprobate.

Justification

1. You say that you believe in imputation but that what is imputed to us in justification is not strictly Christ's obedience but God's verdict on that obedience. In what sense do you understand Paul's remark that he wishes not *to have* his own righteousness, that comes from the law, but to be found in Christ, *having* the righteousness that comes from faith? In a similar way, in what sense are we "made righteous" (Rom. 5:19; 2 Cor. 5:21)? Is it faithful to the Scripture's teaching to say that when a sinner believes in Jesus "God grants and credits to him the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if he had never sinned nor been a sinner, as if he had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for him"?

Leithart: I believe that there are various ways to express imputation. First, when I say that God's verdict regarding Christ is ours, that is not implying (as the question seems to suggest) that God's verdict is passed on our performance. It's not; it's passed on Christ's performance on our behalf. Second, Christ is our righteousness. We have righteousness because we are in Him, or, alternatively, because He is in us. The Father reckons us righteous because the Righteous One, like a generous husband (as Luther puts it), shares His righteousness with us. Third, when I said that the verdict is reckoned to us, I had in mind particularly Romans 4:25: "He was raised for our justification," interpreted (as Gaffin does) in the light of 1 Timothy 3:16: "vindicated in the Spirit." The Father vindicates/justifies Jesus Himself by raising Him from the dead, and we stand as righteous before the Father because we are in the Risen Son. Jesus' obedience is essential to that verdict, and in imputing the verdict, the imputation of Christ's obedience is implicit. But it seems cleaner to say that the Father's verdict on Jesus is His verdict with regard to us.

Leithart: The quotation at the end of the question appears to imply that Christ's obedience (active or passive) is directly imputed to us. I'd say that it's imputed to us implicitly in the imputation of the Father's verdict regarding the Son.

2. If the baptized, *qua* baptized, share "in some sense" in the righteous standing conveyed by Christ, is it not also the case, manifestly and emphatically, that, without true and living faith, it is also true that they *do not* share that standing and do not share it in the way that matters most (e.g. Hosea 1:6; Rom. 9:8; 1 Cor. 10:5; Heb. 4; Gal. 4:24-31)? If you answer that question in the affirmative, given that fact, what is the spiritual importance, the benefit to be derived from the demonstration of the first point? As scholastic theologians would put the question: what is the *use* of the doctrine? It is all very well to acknowledge that *in some sense* baptized people, whether believers or not, are members of the church and *in some sense* may be said to share in the benefits of that membership. But given the large tracts of biblical teaching devoted to ferreting out false profession and warning of its consequences, is the church membership of hypocrites a biblical *doctrine* or a biblical concession?

Leithart: To the first question: I emphatically agree that those without true faith do *not*

share in the benefits of Christ is the most important way.

Leithart: The impetus behind my thinking on this has been to make sense of the biblical text. I want to be able to say, without any hesitation or reservation of conscience, “Baptism now saves you,” as Peter does, or, with Paul, “all of you who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ” and to make sense of how Paul can refer the Romans to their baptism to show them that they have died with Christ and have thereby been “justified from sin” (Romans 6:7). So, for myself, the main answer is theological; I want to understand how the NT speaks of baptism and want to use sacramental language in the way that the Bible does, while avoiding the obvious errors that have plagued the church historically. There is a similar impetus behind my thinking about apostasy; I’ve wanted to take passages like Hebrews 6 seriously.

Leithart: At the same time, I think that the recognition of a range of responses to God’s gifts is pastorally useful. Ultimately, there are only the saved and the damned. But that is not the situation now, the situation we face in our churches. Some receive the word with joy; for some the word is choked out by persecutions; for some the word is immediately snatched away. This gives a finely calibrated set of categories to deal with the particular people and particular lives in our churches.

3. In the opening paragraph of your *Summary*, you state: “... though I affirm imputation, I usually emphasize that imputation is rooted in the more basic reality of union with Christ.” You then reference WLC 69:

What is the communion in grace which the members of the invisible church have with Christ? The communion in grace which the members of the invisible church have with Christ, is their partaking of the virtue of his mediation, in their justification, adoption, sanctification, and whatever else in this life manifests their union with him.

Are you suggesting that this question/answer in the Larger Catechism is teaching that the things mentioned—justification, adoption, and sanctification—*constitute* our union with Christ or that these things are *grounded in* our union with Christ (meaning that our union is a separate aspect, not the sum)? If the latter, then is it fair to say that you believe justification is related to our union with Christ as effect from cause?

Leithart: I am inclined to refuse to answer the first question. On the one hand, it seems that union with Christ is the ground of all the benefits that we have from Christ; we share in benefits because we are in personal communion with the Benefactor; as Calvin says, Christ and His benefits are not separable. On the other hand, justification, adoption, etc., can rightly be seen as aspects or dimensions of our union with Him. Instead of “cause,” I would say that union with Christ is the “ground” of our justification.

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47 into the visible church, and, given my view that the visible church is the body of
48 Christ, baptism grafts the baptized into Christ as a member of the body (1
49 Corinthians 12:12-13). To that extent, baptism functions identically with everyone
50 who is baptized. On the other hand, some who receive the gift of membership in
51 Christ's body never believe and some believe only for a time. Only those who are
52 ordained to life will exercise genuine faith, which means (at least) persevering
53 faith. Baptism's effect is not tied to the moment of administration, and it's in the
54 sequel that baptism functions differently for believer and unbeliever. Ultimately, a
55 baptized unbeliever will receive greater condemnation for renouncing a gift
56 offered and bestowed.

57
58 **Does previous correspondence with our committee reveal a possible exception to the**
59 **Standards?** If you will recall, you were asked: "Reflecting upon the discussions
60 surrounding Federal Vision theology over the past couple of years, do you believe it
61 necessary to notify your Presbytery of any exceptions to the Confession or Catechisms?"
62 (see lines 33-37 in *Leithart's Reply to the Committee's Response*) You replied: "I have
63 considered this a number of times on a number of issues. At this point, I don't believe
64 that I do have such exceptions. But I am inclined to allow others to determine that for me,
65 since I will naturally gravitate to interpretations of the Confession that make room for my
66 views." (lines 39-42) Later, however, in reference to *WCF 27:4*, which says that
67 sacraments may be dispensed only by "a minister of the Word lawfully ordained," you
68 were asked about the validity of a baptism performed by one not lawfully ordained. (lines
69 153-158) You said: "If the baptism was Trinitarian baptism, I would say that the baptism
70 is valid. My reasoning would be Augustinian: Ultimately, the sacraments are Christ's,
71 and He is the chief actor. The moral or official status of the baptizer does not determine
72 baptism's validity. The person so baptized is marked as belonging to Christ, and is a
73 member of Christ's church. (Of course, lots of other factors would enter into this
74 judgment; I'm offering an opinion on the basis of the information contained in the
75 question.)" (lines 160-165) My concern here is not so much the question of what
76 constitutes a "lawful" ordination, but how your answer (quoted immediately above) bears
77 on your view of the efficacy of the sacraments. It seems that your response raises the
78 possibility of taking an exception to the Confession at 27:4, which in turn, reflects upon
79 the broader issue, as noted, of the efficacy of the sacraments. The Confession includes the
80 participation of a lawfully ordained minister as one aspect of a properly administered
81 sacrament—the implication being that where there is no lawfully ordained minister, the
82 sacrament is irregular at best. Yet your understanding of the sacraments does not require
83 the participation of a lawfully ordained minister and that is due, I assume, to your
84 particular understanding of efficacy.

85
86 **Leithart:** Perhaps I should take an exception to 27.4. Without the resources to
87 investigate this now, I wonder if the statement is intended as absolutely or not. If I
88 may introduce a scholastic distinction, I believe that it is useful to make a
89 distinction between licit and valid. Something can be valid – truly baptism, for
90 instance – even if it is irregular (illicit). That may touch on the question of
91 efficacy, but it seems to my mind to be more concerned with the distinct but
92 related question of sacramental validity.

93

94 **To what degree does my perseverance serve as an assurance of salvation?** This
95 question is prompted by an emphasis in Federal Vision writings on the objectivity of the
96 covenant. Rightly or wrongly, opponents have said that Federal Vision advocates are
97 teaching that a baptized person should look to his/her life as a primary means of
98 assurance, which, opponents say, leads to a misplaced emphasis on good works as
99 somehow *contributing* to the individual's standing as opposed to serving as *evidence* of
100 an individual's standing. I realize that my question and summary of the view of Federal
101 Vision critics may not be as precise as it could be, but perhaps you can see the concern
102 I'm expressing.

103

104 **Leithart:** Everything I've taught or written on this has been an effort to STOP
105 people from looking to their own lives as "a primary means of assurance." With
106 the Reformers (as I understand them), looking to baptism and the Supper for
107 assurance was precisely looking AWAY from oneself to the promise of God.
108 Baptism is an enacted promise; it promises that God will be my God and will save
109 me to the uttermost, and I know that this promise has been offered to me because
110 I've been baptized; I am simply called to trust the promise. Dittos, mutatis
111 mutandis, for the Supper. At the same time, it appears to me that looking to one's
112 own life for assurance has a settled place in the Reformed tradition (the Puritan
113 syllogism and all that). If anything, I've been expecting to be criticized for
114 MINIMIZING the role looking to one's life rather than over-emphasizing it.

115

116 **Leithart:** Do good works contribute to the standing? Good works are a sine qua
117 non of final right standing with God, as the NT makes clear (e.g., 1 Corinthians 8-
118 11). The WCF makes clear that we will be judged according to our works, and I
119 agree with Richard Gaffin that this is judgment is a judgment of life or death,
120 heaven or hell. Are our works the ground or basis for God's judgment? No,
121 because we all fall short in many ways. Though it is a judgment according to
122 works, God's final judgment will be a gracious judgment.

123

124 **Do you accept the traditional designation of "covenant of works" to describe**
125 **Adam's relationship with the Creator prior to the fall?** As you know, Jim Jordan's
126 views have come under scrutiny by some Federal Vision opponents. Since you often refer
127 to Jim's work in your own, I'm wondering if you share his thinking on this matter.

128

129 **Leithart:** I prefer the "covenant of life" terminology of the Larger Catechism. I
130 don't think that Adam was created in a neutral state, and had to work to earn
131 God's favor. He was created in a state of favor with God, and was called to trust
132 God for life and to live in obedience to Him.

133

134 **In your system of thought, what is "union with Christ" and how does it relate to**
135 **justification?** I confess that the matter of union with Christ in your theology continues to
136 leave me with questions. I'm asking for some elaboration, if you will, on what you said in
137 the context of lines 222-240 of *Response to TE Leithart's Summary of Views (with TE*
138 *Leithart's Replies)*. My understanding is that you hold that all who are members (by

139 baptism) of the Church as She now exists in this world at this present time partake of
140 what is described in *LC 69*.

141
142 **Leithart:** Perhaps two points will help to clarify: First, union with Christ is in my
143 view all bound up with union with His body. The church simply IS the body of
144 Christ; or, as Augustine said, Christ is the totus Christus, the head and body. From
145 my reading of Calvin, this is very much his view as well. The blessings that God
146 offers in Christ are realized in His body, His people, through the Spirit.

147
148 **Leithart:** Second, I have attempted to think through soteriological and
149 sacramental issues in a consistently personalist framework. Thus, union with
150 Christ is not a “thing,” but describes a particular kind of personal relationship
151 with the incarnate Son. Likewise, justification, sanctification, adoption, and so on,
152 cannot be separated from participation in Christ Himself. As Calvin said, the
153 benefits are enjoyed only by union with the Benefactor. But this personalist
154 framework also introduces a great deal of nuance and complexity. Sinners
155 participate in Christ in all manner of ways, which are as various as personal
156 relations among human beings. So, while it is true that everyone in the body of
157 Christ is identified and joined to Christ, it is not true that everyone who is joined
158 to Christ in the same way.

159
160 **Leithart:** I’ve often appealed to an analogy of marriage: All those who are
161 lawfully married are “equally” married; but not all marriage relationships are the
162 same. Do a husband and wife who fight daily enjoy the same blessings of
163 marriage as a husband and wife who love, cherish, and respect one another? Of
164 course not. Yet they are both equally married.

165
166 **In what manner are good works related to justification?** Opponents, as you know,
167 charge that Federal Vision theology is teaching something other than what we find in our
168 Confession—not something that could be described as an elaboration, but something that
169 should be described as an alternative.

170
171 **Leithart:** I agree with the confession: Justification is by faith alone, but the faith
172 that justifies is never alone in the person justified. To put it into the context of
173 union with Christ: I am not united to Christ by anything I do, but through faith
174 and by the work of the Spirit. Because I am united to Christ and have received the
175 Spirit, the requirement of the law is fulfilled in me. But even that obedience to the
176 law is an effect of faith; faith is not something for the beginning only but works
177 from beginning to end (Gal 3). Whatever good works I performed come through
178 the power of the Spirit, and I am able to perform those good works in utter
179 reliance on the Spirit.

180
181 **Leithart:** If you are asking a wider question about the New Perspective, that is a
182 somewhat different matter. The thesis that Paul does (at least in some contexts)
183 argue within a particularly Jewish set of concerns, where the question is not “good
184 works” in general but specifically adherence to the unique demands of Torah. I

185 don't believe that this exegetical question threatens the Confessional
186 understanding of faith and works.

187

188 **Are you comfortable with the ontological vs. economic Trinity formulation?** I ask
189 this question because opponents of Federal Vision theology have said that at least some
190 proponents reject this formulation when it comes to describing relationships within the
191 Trinity.

192

193 **Leithart:** I'm not comfortable if the "vs." is meant literally; that is, I do not see
194 the ontological and economic Trinity in opposition to one another. If you are
195 simply asking if I agree with the distinction, Yes I do. God is Triune in Himself
196 (ontological) and we know that because the Trinity has manifested Himself as
197 Trinity in the economy of redemption.

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Final Questions for TE Leithart
(with TE Leithart's replies)
Prepared by the Federal Vision Study Committee
Presbytery of the Pacific Northwest
April 2005

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In your *Summary of Views* paper, lines 122-134, you say that formulations of justification are “sometimes infected with an unbiblical dualism between legal status and real identity.” You go on to say: “The justified are not merely ‘legally’ righteous; because we simply are what God declares us to be, we *are* the righteous.” [emphasis in the original]

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Granting the possibility of the unbiblical dualism, do you agree that one must be careful about using this kind of language because it might strike too close to “infusion” terminology?

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Leithart: Yes, but I don't want to let fear of being mistaken for a Roman Catholic prevent me from following out what Scripture teaches. The way to prevent moving into a Catholic direction is to emphasize that our justification is a fruit of our union with Jesus Christ. One of the deep problems with the late medieval Roman Catholic doctrine of justification is that it treated grace in abstraction from Christ, the benefits could be had without personal union with the benefactor. Luther can use some strikingly “infusionist” language to describe how we receive the righteousness of justification, but what's “infused” is ALWAYS the living Jesus, through His Spirit. That way, our righteousness is both alien, and yet, in another sense, within. I see this as being very close to Calvin, who says that the righteousness of justification is inseparable from the gift of new life precisely because both are from Christ and Christ is not divided.

Committee: Is this substantially different from the RC view of infusion, different enough, that is, to represent a distinctly Reformed understanding? Does not the Roman Church maintain that what is infused is “the living Jesus”? And, does this answer reflect the Standards' view of imputation?

Leithart: I do think it's substantially different from the RC view, at least as it was formulated in the high and late middle ages. Aquinas does not say that infused grace makes us righteous, but rather that it provides the needed assistance so that we can believe and repent, and start making our way toward God. Once we have made some progress in that direction, our sins are forgiven. That whole process is what Aquinas means by “justification” (this is based on McGrath's description of Aquinas, in *Iustitia Dei*). That's not at all what I'm saying. As soon as a sinner trusts in Jesus, He is joined to Christ and Christ is in Him, the Christ who has been made righteousness, wisdom, and sanctification. There is no “process” and no “cooperative grace” or “cooperation.” God “counts us” as righteous because we are in the righteous one.

45 **Leithart:** Nor does the description I gave assume the semi-Pelagian position of
46 the late medieval scholastics – Biel’s idea that “God will not deny grace to those
47 who do their best with what they have.”
48

49 **Leithart:** Finally, I don’t think that the classic Roman Catholic view does teach
50 that the righteousness of justification is Christ’s own righteousness. They say it’s
51 the product of cooperative grace and the will of the sinner.
52

53 **Leithart:** As I understand it, the description I gave is one that Luther often
54 employs (in Freedom of a Christian, for instance). If you can believe the recent
55 Finnish scholarship on Luther, this is Luther’s MAIN idea of justification.
56

57 **Could you give us assurance that you (A) affirm the importance of the forensic**
58 **nature of justification; and (B) affirm that your teaching emphasizing familial**
59 **themes, or vindication, or real identity, in no way is meant to detract from the**
60 **forensic?**
61

62 **Leithart:** I don’t know how I could do that better than by my “Judge me” paper.
63 It was all about justification as a forensic reality. Justification is vindication
64 precisely because it is a forensic, judicial act of God, and justification affects my
65 identity, again, precisely because it is a forensic, judicial act of God. I’m
66 convinced that justification is forensic, and my burden has been to attempt to
67 grasp what “forensic” and “judicial” mean in their biblical contexts.
68

69 **Granting that righteousness must never be de-personalized, i.e. abstracted from**
70 **union with Christ, or reified into a “thing” like a certificate, could you explain your**
71 **understanding of Paul’s language of “having” righteousness and not wanting to**
72 **“have” his own righteousness (Phil. 3)?**
73

74 **Leithart:** Paul has Christ by faith. In that sense he “has” righteousness, because
75 Christ is the righteousness of God. The beauty of this is that we can speak of our
76 “having” righteousness while also saying that it’s never entirely “ours” - it’s
77 always an alien righteousness because the righteousness is another person.
78

79 **Committee:** Does this answer give us reason to question you regarding your
80 views on the imputation of Christ’s *active* obedience? Is that second sentence
81 compatible with the idea of the righteousness of Christ being imputed to us? Our
82 understanding is that we have imputed to us the righteousness Christ earned as
83 our Substitute.
84

85 **Leithart:** I do think that we are saying things differently, though I don’t think
86 we’re saying things that are in conflict. I can’t quite tell where the difference lies,
87 though. Here’s my view: Union with Christ is central, as I’ve said. Jesus obeyed
88 the law perfectly, and was obedient to death. Therefore, the Father declares Him
89 righteous by raising Him from the dead (Rom 4:25). I am in Christ by faith
90 (which is a gift of the Spirit); Christ is the Righteous One, and He is

91 “righteousness” (1 Cor 1:30). God counts the righteous status of Jesus as MY
92 righteous status, and thus implicitly reckons me as one who has obeyed the law
93 perfectly, because I am united to Christ, who obeyed the law perfectly.
94

95

96 **In *Response to TE Leithart’s Views*, lines 448-449, you say that union with Christ is**
97 **the “ground” of justification. Is this a departure from the traditional Reformed**
98 **expression that the work of Christ is the ground of justification?**
99

100 **Leithart:** No. I distinguish, as the scholastics say: God’s declaration that we are
101 justified is based on the work of Christ in the past as a matter of “redemption
102 accomplished.” In the “application” of redemption, the ground is our union with
103 Christ. We are justified because we are in the Risen Christ, but His justification is
104 ours because He has been justified in His resurrection (which assumes His prior
105 obedience).
106

107 **Committee:** Is our justification grounded in the finished work of Christ, which is
108 imputed to us? Or are you saying that we “share” a justification with Christ?
109

110 **Leithart:** I don’t think that Christ’s work is imputed in distinction from a sharing
111 in Christ Himself. No separation of the benefit from the Benefactor. To repeat:
112 God accounts me, considers me, reckons me as righteous because I am united to
113 the Risen Christ who is justified by the resurrection. That, again, implies that God
114 counts Christ’s work as mine, but the focus is on the Father declaring the verdict
115 over me that He declared over His Son.