

## A Joint Federal Vision Profession

### Greetings in the Lord.

Many of us who have signed this statement are also confessionally bound to the Three Forms of Unity or to the Westminster Confession of Faith. The following brief statement therefore should be understood as being in harmony with those other confessional commitments, a supplement to them, and not an example of generating another system of doctrine. In any place where statements here would constitute an exception to whatever confessional standards we are under, they are exceptions that have been noted and approved by our respective presbyteries or classes. We have sought to maintain an eagerness to submit our teaching to our respective presbyteries for their evaluation, and see this statement as consistent with that desire.

In addition, in the books, articles, and websites that are part of the broader Federal Vision discussion, there are many issues being discussed and distinctive positions held that are not addressed below. We have limited ourselves here to those issues that have been a significant part of recent controversy, or which, in our view, have silently contributed to it.

This statement represents the views of those who drafted it, contributed to it, and signed it. It should not be taken as a confessional statement by any ecclesiastical assembly or body, particularly the CREC. There are things stated here which do not represent the views of the CREC as a whole, or of certain CREC ministers in particular. The CREC is not an FV denomination, but is rather a confederation which welcomes convictions like these as being "within the Reformed pale." This statement therefore represents the views of the CREC men who signed it, and it represents what CREC men who could not sign it believe to be within the realm of acceptable differences. It should further be noted that not all the signatures are from the CREC.

On the other side, there are many people who should be considered as full and friendly participants in the Federal Vision "conversation" who cannot sign this statement (even though they might *want* to) because of one or two issues—paedocommunion, say, or postmillennialism. This statement is not drawing the borders of our fellowship, and it certainly does not represent any club from which we are trying to exclude people. We offer this statement in good faith, and we pray that it will do some good in promoting unity in the broader Church. At the same time, we recognize that some of our differences with our brothers in Christ are "sub-systematic" and may not be obvious on the surface, on the level of systematic theology—what one writer described as looking like the "same theology, different religion."

We have no desire to present a "moving target," but we do want to be teachable, willing to stand corrected, or to refine our formulations as critics point out ambiguities, confusions, or errors. We therefore ask others to accept that the following represents our honest convictions at this stage of the conversation. This statement is therefore not an attempt at evasion or trickery, but simply represents a desire to be as clear as we can be, given our circumstances.

### **Our Triune God**

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

*We deny* that a mere formal adherence to the doctrine of the Trinity is sufficient to keep the very common polytheistic and unitarian temptations of unbelieving thought at bay.

### **As the Waters Cover the Sea**

*We affirm* that God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but rather so that the world through Him would be saved. Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world—He is the Savior of the world. All the nations shall stream to Him, and His resting place shall be glorious. *We affirm* that prior to the second coming of our Lord Jesus, the earth will be as full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

*We deny* that eschatological views are to be a test of fellowship between orthodox believers, but at the same time we hold that an orientation of faith with regard to the gospel's triumph in history is extremely important. *We deny* that it is wise to imitate Abraham in his exercise of faith while declining to believe the *content* of what he believed—that through him all the nations of the world would be blessed, and that his descendants would be like the stars in number.

### **The Next Christendom**

*We affirm* that Jesus Christ is the King of kings, and the Lord of lords. We believe that the Church cannot be a faithful witness to His authority without calling all nations to submit themselves to Him through baptism, accepting their responsibility to obediently learn all that He has commanded us. *We affirm* therefore that the Christian faith is a public faith, encompassing every realm of human endeavor. The fulfillment of the Great Commission therefore requires the establishment of a global Christendom.

*We deny* that neutrality is possible in any realm, and this includes the realm of "secular" politics. We believe that the lordship of Jesus Christ has authoritative ramifications for every aspect of human existence, and that growth up into a godly maturity requires us to discover what those ramifications are in order to implement them. Jesus Christ has established a new way of being human, and it is our responsibility to grow up into it.

### **Scripture Cannot Be Broken**

*We affirm* that the Bible in its entirety, from Genesis to Revelation, is the infallible Word of God, and is our only ultimate rule for faith and practice. Scripture alone is the infallible and ultimate standard for Christians. *We affirm* further that Scripture is to be our guide in learning how to interpret Scripture, and this means we must imitate the apostolic handling of the Old Testament, paying close attention to language, syntax, context, narrative flow, literary styles, and typology—all of it integrated in Jesus Christ Himself.

*We deny* that the Bible can be rightly understood by any hermeneutical grid not derived from the Scriptures themselves.

### **The Proclamation of the Word**

*We affirm* that God's Spirit has chosen the best ways to express the revelation of God and reality, and that the divine rhetoric found in Holy Scripture is designed to strike the richest of all chords in the hearers of the Word of God. For this reason, we believe that it is pastorally best to use biblical language and phrasing in the preaching and teaching of the Bible in the Church.

*We deny* that it is necessarily unprofitable to "translate" biblical language into more "philosophical" or "scholastic" languages in order to deal with certain problems and issues that arise in the history of the Church. At the same time, we do deny that such translations are superior to or equal to the rhetoric employed by the Spirit in the text, and we believe that the employment of such hyper-specialized terminology in the regular teaching and preaching of the Church has the unfortunate effect of confusing the saints and of estranging them from contact with the biblical use of the same language. For this reason we reject the tendency to privilege the confessional and/or scholastic use of words and phrases over the way the same words and phrases are used in the Bible itself.

### **Creeds and Confessions**

*We affirm* that all who subscribe to creeds and confessions should do so with a clean conscience and honest interpretation, in accordance with the plain meaning of words and the original intent of the authors, as can best be determined.

*We deny* that confessional commitments in any way require us to avoid using the categories and terms of Scripture, even when the confessional use of such words is necessarily more narrow and circumscribed. *We deny* that creedal or systematic understandings of scriptural truth can ever be given a place of parity with Scripture, or primacy over Scripture. In line with this, we continue to honor and hold to the creeds of the ancient Church and the confessions of the Reformational Church.

### **The Divine Decrees**

*We affirm* that the triune God is exhaustively sovereign over all things, working out all things according to the counsel of His will. Because this necessarily includes our redemption in Christ, God alone receives all the glory for our salvation. Before all worlds, God the Father chose a great host of those who would be saved, and the number of those so chosen cannot be increased or diminished. In due time, Jesus of Nazareth died on the cross, and in that sacrifice He secured the salvation of all those chosen for salvation by the Father. And at some time in the earthly life of each person so chosen, the Holy Spirit brings that person to life, and enables him to persevere in holiness to the end. Those covenant members who are not elect in the decretal sense enjoy the common operations of the Spirit in varying degrees, but not in the same way that those who are elect do.

*We deny* that the unchangeable nature of these decrees prevents us from using the same language in covenantal ways as we describe our salvation from within that covenant. We further deny this covenantal usage is "pretend" language, even where the language and terminology sometimes overlap with the language of the decrees. The

secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children, that we may keep the words of this law. We affirm the reality of the decrees, but deny that the decrees "trump" the covenant. We do not set them against each other, but expect them to harmonize perfectly as God works out all things in accordance with His will.

### **The Church**

*We affirm* that membership in the one true Christian Church is visible and objective, and is the possession of everyone who has been baptized in the triune name and who has not been excommunicated by a lawful disciplinary action of the Church. We affirm one holy, catholic, and apostolic church, the house and family of God, outside of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation. In establishing the Church, God has fulfilled His promise to Abraham and established the Regeneration of all things. God has established this Regeneration through Christ—in Him we have the renewal of life in the fulness of life in the new age of the kingdom of God.

*We deny* that membership in the Christian Church in history is an infallible indicator or guarantee of final salvation. Those who are faithless to their baptismal obligations incur a stricter judgment because of it.

### **The Visible and Invisible Church**

*We affirm* that there is only one true Church, and that this Church can legitimately be considered under various descriptions, including the aspects of visible and invisible. We further affirm that the visible Church is the true Church of Christ, and not an "approximate" Church.

*We deny* that such a distinction excludes other helpful distinctions, such as the historical church and eschatological church. The historical Church generally corresponds to the visible Church—all those who profess the true religion, together with their children—and the eschatological Church should be understood as the full number of God's chosen as they will be seen on the day of resurrection.

### **Reformed Catholicity**

*We affirm* that justification is through faith in Jesus Christ, and not through works of the law, whether those works were revealed to us by God, or manufactured by man. Because we are justified through faith in Jesus alone, we believe that we have an obligation to be in fellowship with everyone that God has received into fellowship with Himself.

*We deny* that correct formulations of the doctrine of *sola fide* can be substituted for genuine faith in Jesus, or that such correct formulations can be taken as infallible indicators of a true faith in Jesus.

### **The Covenant of Life**

*We affirm* that Adam was in a covenant of life with the triune God in the Garden of Eden, in which arrangement Adam was required to obey God completely, from the heart. We hold further that all such obedience, had it occurred, would have been rendered from a heart of faith alone, in a spirit of loving trust. Adam was created to progress from

immature glory to mature glory, but that glorification too would have been a gift of grace, received by faith alone.

*We deny* that continuance in this covenant in the Garden was in any way a payment for work rendered. Adam could forfeit or demerit the gift of glorification by disobedience, but the gift or continued possession of that gift was not offered by God to Adam conditioned upon Adam's moral exertions or achievements. In line with this, we affirm that until the expulsion from the Garden, Adam was free to eat from the tree of life. *We deny* that Adam had to earn or merit righteousness, life, glorification, or anything else.

### **The Sacrament of Baptism**

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

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

### **The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper**

*We affirm* that by faithful use of the humble but glorious elements of bread and wine (remaining such), we are being grown up into a perfect unity with our Head, the Lord Jesus. Unless there has been lawful disciplinary action by the Church, *we affirm* that any baptized person, children included, should be welcome at the Table.

*We deny* that the Supper is merely symbolic, but we also deny that any metaphysical changes are wrought in the bread or wine. We believe in the real presence of Christ with His people in the Supper, but *we deny* the local presence of Christ in the elements.

### **Union with Christ and Imputation**

*We affirm* Christ is all in all for us, and that His perfect sinless life, His suffering on the cross, and His glorious resurrection are all credited to us. Christ is the new Adam, obeying God where the first Adam did not obey God. And Christ as the new Israel was baptized as the old Israel was, was tempted for 40 days as Israel was for 40 years, and as the greater Joshua He conquered the land of Canaan in the course of His ministry. This means that through Jesus, on our behalf, Israel has finally obeyed God and has been accepted by Him. *We affirm* not only that Christ is our full obedience, but also that through our union with Him we partake of the benefits of His death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and enthronement at the right hand of God the Father.

*We deny* that faithfulness to the gospel message requires any particular doctrinal formulation of the "imputation of the active obedience of Christ." What matters is that we confess that our salvation is all of Christ, and not from us.

### **Law and Gospel**

*We affirm* that those in rebellion against God are condemned both by His law, which they disobey, and His gospel, which they also disobey. When they have been brought to the point of repentance by the Holy Spirit, we affirm that the gracious nature of *all* God's words becomes evident to them. At the same time, *we affirm* that it is appropriate to speak of law and gospel as having a redemptive and historical thrust, with the time of the law being the old covenant era and the time of the gospel being the time when we enter our maturity as God's people. We further affirm that those who are first coming to faith in Christ frequently experience the law as an adversary and the gospel as deliverance from that adversary, meaning that traditional evangelistic applications of law and gospel are certainly scriptural and appropriate.

*We deny* that law and gospel should be considered as hermeneutics, or treated as such. We believe that any passage, whether indicative or imperative, can be heard by the faithful as good news, and that any passage, whether containing gospel promises or not, will be heard by the rebellious as intolerable demand. The fundamental division is not in the text, but rather in the human heart.

### **Justification by Faith Alone**

*We affirm* we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone. Faith alone is the hand which is given to us by God so that we may receive the offered grace of God. Justification is God's forensic declaration that we are counted as righteous, with our sins forgiven, for the sake of Jesus Christ alone.

*We deny* that the faith which is the sole instrument of justification can be understood as anything other than the only kind of faith which God gives, which is to say, a living, active, and personally loyal faith. Justifying faith encompasses the elements of assent, knowledge, and living trust in accordance with the age and maturity of the believer. *We deny* that faith is ever alone, even at the moment of the effectual call.

### **Assurance of Salvation**

*We affirm* that those who have been justified by God's grace through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are saved to the uttermost and will spend eternity with Christ and his saints in glory forever. *We affirm* also that though salvation is granted through the instrument of faith alone, those who have been justified will live progressively more and more sanctified lives until they go to be with God. Those believers for whom this is true look to Christ for their assurance—in the Word, in the sacraments, in their fellow believers, and in their own participation in that life by faith. *We deny* that anyone who claims to have faith but who lives in open rebellion against God and against his Christ has any reason to believe that he will be saved on the last day.

## **Apostasy**

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

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

## **Some Points of Intramural Disagreement**

The "Federal Vision" is not a monolithic movement. It has been variously described as a conversation, a broad school of thought, a series of similar questions, and so on. As the statements above would indicate, there *are* a number of common themes held by those who signed this statement.

But there are also important areas of disagreement or ongoing discussion among those who are identified as "Federal Vision" advocates. Some of these areas would include, but not be limited to, whether or not the imputation of the active obedience of Christ (as traditionally understood) is to be affirmed in its classic form. Some of us affirm this and some do not. Another difference is whether or not personal regeneration represents a change of nature in the person so regenerated. Some of us say *yes* while others question whether we actually have such an "essence" that can *be* changed. All of us would affirm that we should have a high view of covenant renewal liturgy, but this does not necessarily mean that we all agree on how "high" the liturgy should actually be. Some of us are comfortable using the language of justification to describe the "deliverdict" of the last day, while others would prefer to describe it in other ways. That said, we are all agreed that no one is justified at any time because they personally have earned or merited anything. Some of us robustly affirm Christ's unique merit in His person and work as the answer to our demerit. Others think there are better words to describe the value and worthiness of Christ's sacrifice without recourse to the term "merit" because it is not biblical language, and its use both in the history of the church and currently shows that it can cause confusion.

Any doctrine mentioned in the previous sections can be fairly represented as part of the Federal Vision. Issues in this last section cannot be fairly represented as the view of the whole. Our prayer is that this statement will help to bring clarity to a subject that been confused because of the noise of controversy. "*Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace . . .*" (Eph. 4:3).

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