

A Response to the OPC Committee on the Doctrine of Justification

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The Orthodox Presbyterian Church's Committee on the Doctrine of Justification recently made available their upcoming report to the 73rd General Assembly. Though the report is only "semi-public," it has been widely distributed on the Internet. One section of that report critiques the doctrine of a Trinitarian covenant held by at least some proponents of the Federal Vision. The report cites two of my own books so I think that it is appropriate for me to express my disagreement on the following seven points in the evaluation. All of my comments are concerned with statements in section IV F that discusses theology proper in the Federal Vision.

First, the report claims, "one's conception of the covenant is crucial for the doctrine of justification." Now I do not mean to be pedantic, but I grew up as a Lutheran and we had the doctrine of justification by faith drummed into us in our 2 years of catechism. However, the word "covenant" was virtually unknown to us. The Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith is not grounded in the doctrine of a Covenant of Works or in any other sort of clear covenantal theology. If Lutherans are the Reformation source for the doctrine of justification, how can we claim that the doctrine of the covenant — especially the Covenant of Works — is crucial for the doctrine of justification without implying that the Lutheran doctrine is grossly defective? Is that really what the OPC wants to say? In my opinion, it is simply not true to claim that the doctrine of justification by faith depends upon a Covenant of Works/Covenant of Grace form of the doctrine of the covenant.

Second, the doctrine of circumincession, which the committee acknowledges to be Biblical, is formulated by Van Til in language that is unmistakably covenantal. I have quoted the relevant passages in Van Til in a number of articles and in my book. Consider the following for example.

It may even be said that *Calvin's covenantal idea is Theism come to its own*. The covenant idea is nothing but the representational principle consistently applied to all reality. The foundation of the representational principle among men is the fact that the Trinity exists in the form of a mutually exhaustive representation of the three Persons that constitute it. The emphasis should be placed upon the idea of *exhaustion*. This is important because it brings out the point of the complete equality as far as ultimacy is concerned of the principle of unity and of diversity. This mutual exhaustion of the persons of the Trinity places one before the choice of interpreting reality in exclusively temporal categories or in eternal categories. The demand of the doctrine of the Trinity, when thus conceived is that reality be interpreted in exclusively eternal categories inasmuch as the source of diversity lies in the Trinity itself and could never be found in a sense world beyond God. Hence the problem of the one and the many, of the universal and the particular, of being and becoming, of

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analytical and synthetic reasoning, of the a priori and the a posteriori must be solved by an exclusive reference to the Trinity.¹

Van Til here points to three important ideas: 1) covenant; 2) representation; 3) mutual exhaustion. In Van Til, the mutual exhaustion of the Persons of the Trinity is his way of speaking of mutual indwelling.

The essence of covenant is representation and the Persons of the Trinity represent one another perfectly because they indwell one another. Representation and mutual indwelling are the quintessential issues of the covenant. What the committee, therefore, calls “standard covenant theology” is in fact a view of the covenant among the Persons of the Trinity that has only been vaguely understood. Kuyper and Van Til brought this issue into the open. The committee still does not understand the significance of what they were saying. If Van Til’s doctrine of perichoresis is Biblical, then there is an intratrinitarian covenant.

Third, the committee speaks of the distinction between the *opera ad intra* and the *opera ad extra*. In their words:

But there is no indication in any of this, as Pipa notes, that Smith or Wilkins distinguishes between the immanent works of God (*opera Dei ad intra*) and the outworking of the decrees (*opera Dei ad extra*) or that it has occurred to them seriously to ask what this does to God’s freedom in regard to covenant: Is God utterly free, even in choosing how to relate to himself (a radical nominalism), or is there no freedom for him, even in his choosing how he relates to his creation (a radical essentialism)

Three important questions are involved here. First, there is the question of the relationship between the *opera ad intra* and the *opera ad extra*. Vern Poythress provides a good answer.

Before we go on, we should include one clarification. In the analogical relation between God and human language, are we considering God as he is in himself, the ontological Trinity, or God as he reveals himself to us, the economic Trinity? We should recognize that much of the Bible focuses on God’s relations to us and the historical outworking of redemption. God’s Trinitarian character stands forth most fully and eloquently in the redemptive events where the Persons of the Trinity have a distinct role (e.g., Matt 3:16–17; Acts 2:33; Rom 8:11; 1:4; John 16:13–15). God reveals himself to us through the “economy” of redemption. We understand the Trinity through the economic relations of the Persons of the Trinity in their functions in creation, redemption, and consummation.

In John 1:1 and elsewhere, the Bible does sometimes focus more directly on aspects of the ontological Trinity, that is, on God as he is in his own existence before creation and independent of creation. But even here we recognize that the language is crafted for the purposes of nourishing our faith, enlarging our understanding, and

¹ *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, p. 96. He goes on to say, “It was upon this foundation of a truly Trinitarian concept that Calvin built his conception of covenant theology.” p. 97.

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promoting our redemption. Hence, the language as a whole is tied in with “functional” or “economic” purposes.

Since God is our standard and his word is our standard, there is nothing more ultimate than this revelation of himself. We believe that God is true. He truly reveals himself, not a substitute. We believe it because God says so. Hence we believe that God is in conformity with what he reveals. The Trinity in economic operations reveals the ontological Trinity. Hence, I have not tried to separate in any strict or exhaustive way between functional (economic) and ontological statements. Such separation on the part of a creature would itself be a repudiation of creaturehood. The analogies we explore deal with God in both respects, ontological and economical.²

Poythress does not attempt to offer a strict separation between the ontological and the economical Trinity because the two are so intimately related. God’s *opera ad extra* reveal who and what God is in His *opera ad intra*. Though in theological discussion we may distinguish them, we must not separate them.

The second question that comes up here is the matter of God’s freedom in *ad intra* relationships. This is one of those paradoxes that are fundamental to the doctrine of the Trinity. Consider: God is love. Is this a Trinitarian truth? If it were not, the statement “God is love” would not mean anything. It is only because God is a Trinity that we can say, “God is love.” God the Father loves the Son and the Spirit and shares with Son His love for the Spirit and so on. The Trinity is a perfect fellowship of love.

Now, is this necessary or is this voluntary? Is love that arises and is sustained by some sort of metaphysical necessity truly love? Is love among the persons of the Trinity a mere metaphysically necessary flow of some sort of irrepressible energy? No. God the Father loves the Son because of who God the Father is and because of who God the Son is. The Father’s love for the Son is a metaphysical necessity only in the sense that the Father must be true to Himself. He must love what is pure, holy, and absolutely good because it is the image of His own perfection.

This love is both necessary, from one perspective, and utterly free from another perspective. Can we unravel all of this? No. It is similar to the doctrine of the generation of the Son from the Father. Among earthly and human relationships, generation implies origin, dependence, and time relationships. In God, generation implies no such things. When we speak, therefore, of the Persons of the Trinity loving one another — which in the Bible is already the language of the covenant — we cannot separate the necessary from the voluntary, just as we cannot wholly define the notion of begetting. The Trinity is the supreme mystery.

The third question here is the matter of God’s relationship to the creation. When God created the world, He created in such a way that He revealed Himself because that is His nature. He is the Father, Son, and Spirit who are fully and joyously in absolute open communication with one another. The world was created to reveal Him and man was created to know and enjoy that revelation.

² Vern Poythress, “Reforming Ontology and Logic in the Light of the Trinity: An Application of Van Til’s Idea of Analogy,” *Westminster Theological Journal*, vol. 57, no. 1, Spring, 1995, pp. 196-97.

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Once again, God is being true to Himself when He reveals Himself. God relates to the world according to who He is. It is necessary because He is a God who is faithful. It is free and voluntary because He wills to reveal Himself as He does. What He freely chooses to do in creating the world and redeeming man from sin shows us who God is. The God in whom Father, Son, and Spirit mutually and fully reveal themselves to one another from eternity is a God who could only reveal Himself in creating the world, otherwise He would not be faithful to His own Triune Self. Nevertheless, His self-revelation is the free gift of His love. As in every aspect of the doctrine of the Trinity, we face a mystery.

Fourth, the committee defines covenant in a prejudicial manner. They say,

In terms of the persons of the Holy Trinity there is no relationship to be entered into (which is what covenant has always signified), the relationship simply is: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are in an eternal relationship with each other and why covenant, without biblical proof, is the proper way of describing this relationship is murky at best.

Now, when Abraham Kuyper spoke of the Persons of the Trinity as having an eternal covenantal relationship, he was not thinking of a covenant as something “to be entered into.” And when Herman Hoeksema defined the covenant as the very life of God, he was not thinking of the covenant as a voluntary or temporal relationship.

If the word “beget” can refer to God the Father and God the Son having an eternal relationship why should the word “covenant” be a problem? The Son is said to be “begotten” by the Father, but we understand that the Father-Son relationship in God is the divine original from which human begetting derives. Human begetting is analogous to the eternal divine act — though for us the whole idea of a begetting that is eternal boggles the mind.

It is the same with the word covenant. Inevitably, the word “covenant” when used of God’s relationship with men or relationships among men, refers to a relationship that is “entered into.” Covenant in God is the original from which the covenants with creation and man derive. Covenants between God and man and among men are analogous to the divine original and help us think about and understand it, but the divine original cannot be reduced to the human analogy here anymore than it can when we speak of the Son as begotten.

Furthermore, when Reformed theologians refer to the Covenant of Redemption, they do not imagine that the Father and the Son “entered into” a relationship that did not previously obtain. If the use of the word covenant must mean a relationship “entered into,” how would we conceive the Covenant of Redemption and the Covenant of Grace as parts of God’s *eternal* plan?

Fifth, the report asserts that the proponents of the Federal Vision are repeatedly demanding Biblical arguments, but that in the matter of the covenant between the Persons of the Trinity, they themselves offer very little or no exegesis. The report says:

Occam’s razor would suggest that, absent Scripture, to adduce covenant to describe the essential inter-trinitarian relationship violates the law of parsimony by needlessly complicating matters: what warrant do we have to denominate the mysterious relationship between the persons of the Trinity as “covenant?”

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I wrote a book to answer this question and I have posted a 70-page document on the Internet to provide further answer to it.³ I offered eight arguments for a covenantal relationship among the Persons of the Trinity.

1. What God does in time reveals who He is in eternity and His most characteristic act in establishing relationships with other persons in time is covenant making.
2. The relations among the Persons defined in the names Father, Son, and Spirit are distinctly covenantal.
3. The names of God used to describe Trinitarian relations are also the names used to describe God's covenant relationships with creatures.
4. Representation is a key covenantal idea and it is found in the relations of the Trinitarian Persons in the representation of the Father by the Son and of the Father and Son by the Spirit.
5. Some of God's attributes are described in language that is distinctly covenantal.
6. The Gospel of John speaks of God's covenantal relationship with us as parallel to the relationship between the Father and the Son.
7. The pre-creation covenant for the salvation of man would involve a change in the relations among the Persons of the Trinity to accommodate the creation, if they were not essentially related in covenant.
8. The dynamic of the Trinitarian ontology is emphatically covenantal.⁴

Merely pulling out Occam's razor here doesn't cut it. I have offered extensive Biblical and theological argumentation and *none of it is new*. In fact, all the verses and all the exegesis that supports the notion of a Covenant of Redemption provide, from Kuyper's perspective, proof of an intratrinitarian covenantal relationship. Of course, Kuyper and Van Til may be wrong. But Occam's razor is not sharp enough to decide this.

In addition, in my essay, I footnoted an essay by Peter Wallace that argues for an intratrinitarian covenant based on the Biblical teaching about Father and Son.⁵ Of course, Peter Wallace may be wrong, but I have not heard anyone suggest that his opinions somehow undermine, or threaten to undermine, confessional Presbyterian faith.

Sixth, the report avers that proponents of the Federal Vision regard the covenant as conditional, taking the covenant in a different direction than Kuyper and Hoeksema. To the best of my knowledge, there is no consensus among the proponents of the "Federal Vision" about whether the covenant should be regarded as conditional or unconditional. Just as the different opinions of John Murray and Meredith Kline were both tolerated as options within the broad

³ <http://www.berith.org/pdf/A-Covenantal-Ontology-of-the-Triune-God.pdf>

⁴ *A Covenantal Ontology of the Triune God*, p. 5. <http://www.berith.org/pdf/A-Covenantal-Ontology-of-the-Triune-God.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.peterwallace.org/essays/inheritance.htm>

spectrum of Reformed theology, so too the different opinions of Herman Hoeksema and Norman Shepherd should be regarded as various views of good Reformed theologians. They cannot both be right, but neither of them deserves the label heretic.

Though some proponents of the Federal Vision view the covenant as “conditional” in the sense that man’s participation in the covenant is “conditioned” upon persevering faith, no one suggests that the intratrinitarian covenant is conditional. Viewing God’s covenant with His people as “conditional” in a certain sense of the word would not require one to view the intratrinitarian covenant as conditional.

I personally am very uncomfortable with the notion of the covenant as “conditional.” I prefer John Murray’s view that the covenant requires “mutuality” since in the nature of the case, God’s covenant with us is a “religious relationship” among persons.⁶ The idea of “conditions” seems as odd to me in the formulation of God’s covenant relationship with man as it does in our notion of the marriage covenant. Do we promise to love and cherish one another, if, and so long as, the other party keeps certain “conditions”? Do we set a contract before the other person, with mutual obligations and conditions? Or, do we promise to give ourselves and all that we are “till death do us part”? The marriage vow is as “unconditional” a promise as we can make to another human, though, as God’s relationship with Israel demonstrates, the marriage relationship can be ruined.

Seventh and last, the report summarizes the Federal Vision view as follows.

There is but one covenant, originally in God, into which Adam as God’s son was invited to live and charged to be covenantally faithful; Adam, however, failed and Christ came to do what Adam did not do, was covenantally faithful, paid for our sin, and, sins having been remitted, has put us back into a place where we are called to be, and given grace to be, covenantally faithful. This is the FV in a nutshell. But it is not the position of classic Federal theology, which in teaching the existence of the covenants of works and grace as established in history, lays a crucial foundation for understanding the biblical doctrine of justification.

I agree that the covenant among the Persons of the Trinity is the paradigmatic covenant. I have offered extensive argumentation for that view, but none of these arguments are answered or even noted. I agree that Adam was created to enjoy fellowship with the Triune God in that covenant of love that the Persons of the Trinity enjoyed from eternity. Adam’s responsibility in

⁶ He writes, “With reference to the second distinctive feature, namely, the necessity of keeping the covenant and the warning against breaking it, we cannot suppress the inference that the necessity of keeping is complementary to the added richness, intimacy, and spirituality of the covenant itself. The spirituality of the Abrahamic covenant in contrast with the Noachic consists in the fact that the Abrahamic is concerned with religious relationship on the highest level, union and communion with God. Where there is religious relationship there is mutuality and where we have religious relationship on the highest conceivable level there mutuality on the highest plane of spirituality must obtain. This is just saying that there must be response on the part of the beneficiary and response on the highest level of religious devotion. The keeping of the covenant, therefore, so far from being incompatible with the nature of the covenant as an administration of grace, divine in its initiation, confirmation, and fulfilment, is a necessity arising from the intimacy and spirituality of the religious relation involved. The more enhanced our conception of the sovereign grace bestowed the more we are required to posit reciprocal faithfulness on the part of the recipient. The demands of appreciation and gratitude increase with the length and breadth and depth and height of the favour bestowed. And such demands take concrete practical form in the obligation to obey the commandments of God.” *The Covenant of Grace*. Murray’s statement here expresses the Federal Vision well.

paradise was to persevere in faith. I agree that Christ came to do what Adam did not do and as the representative head of God's elect was faithful to God, suffered and died for our sins and rose again from the dead so that all who believe in Him are justified by grace through faith. Of course, those who believe must persevere in that faith, but they are saved by grace through faith alone. The proponents of the Federal Vision — to a man — hold to a view of salvation that is unquestionably and emphatically monergistic.

I do deny the Covenant of Works — at least as it is formulated by Meredith Kline. There are some theological explanations of the Covenant of Works that I can agree with, except that the expression “Covenant of Works” seems incongruous when grace holds so central a place. However, I do deny and disagree with the traditional two-covenant scheme insofar as it pictures the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace as two virtually timeless covenants hovering over history.

My view does not imply or entail a denial of justification by faith. It does require a revision of the Westminster Standards. In the doctrine of the covenant, as Meredith Kline shows, the Westminster Standards betray basic misunderstanding.⁷ They need to be revised — though not, in my opinion, entirely along the lines suggested by Meredith Kline. In any case, they are only secondary standards. Like John Murray, Reformed ministers may disagree with various statements in the Westminster Confession and Catechisms and still be good, orthodox, Reformed ministers.

Conclusion

The Orthodox Presbyterian Church's Committee on the Doctrine of Justification refers to me and my views only in passing. I cannot expect them, therefore, to be familiar with the Biblical or theological argumentation that I have presented in my books. But for those who are interested, the arguments are made in the books *Paradox and Truth*, *The Eternal Covenant*, and *Trinity and Reality*,⁸ and internet articles: *The Ontology of the Triune God*,⁹ an article on Dr. Fesko's misunderstanding of my view,¹⁰ articles on the Covenant of Works,¹¹ and an article focused on Biblical exegesis titled, *The Trinitarian Covenant in John 17*.¹²

They do have an obligation to give more thought to the views of Abraham Kuyper and Cornelius Van Til.¹³ The report does not deal with the substantial issues that lie at the heart of the matter. It does not offer serious consideration of Kuyper's view of the intratrinitarian covenant, or of Van Til's views on representation and perichoresis, both of which clearly imply an intratrinitarian covenantal relationship.

⁷ Kline shows that the Westminster Confession is wrong in seeing the covenant as something that God grants to man after creating him. Rather, covenant defines the primordial and essential relationship between God and the creation, especially the relationship between God and His image man.

⁸ All three are available online from the Westminster Theological Seminary bookstore: http://www.wtsbooks.com/category-exec/category_id/218/nm/God_20_28Theology_20Proper_29/show_all/1

⁹ <http://www.berith.org/pdf/A-Covenantal-Ontology-of-the-Triune-God.pdf>

¹⁰ http://www.berith.org/essays/brief_response_to_fesko.html.

¹¹ *Interpreting the Covenant of Works*, http://www.berith.org/essays/cov_works/. *The Covenant of Works: A Litmus Test for Reformed Orthodoxy?* <http://www.berith.org/essays/litmus/>.

¹² <http://www.berith.org/essays/j17/>.

¹³ I have written about Van Til's views of the Trinity also: <http://trinitarianism.com/>