Those familiar with the conservative Reformed subculture in the United States have likely noticed considerable recent debate on matters soteriological (i.e., issues having to do with the doctrine of salvation). Issues long thought settled have emerged with new vigor, new questions have emerged, and long-forgotten or even suppressed aspects of the Reformed tradition have been brought to light. For example, the doctrine of justification by faith, thought by many to be the material principle of the Reformation and a hallmark of Reformed Christianity, is now under intense discussion in a variety of circles. Related to this are, to use John Murray’s influential terminology, issues of redemption accomplished (i.e., the work of Christ) and redemption applied (i.e., the nature of the believer’s union with Christ and the means of grace).

In this article we will look briefly at the prehistory of these matters, where we will discover that there is less novelty in the current discussions than some might initially think. We will then attempt a rough taxonomy of the parties in the debate. Finally, we will offer some observations about the nature and implications of these debates.

I. Prologue

Reformed soteriology, particularly in America, has been anything but monolithic. At the risk of oversimplifying a complex process of historical development, let us begin with Calvin, who set a formal agenda for most subsequent Reformed thinking by highlighting the Pauline theme of union with Christ. Here we recall his famous statement at the beginning of Institutes 3.1.1 that the benefits of salvation remain unavailable to us as long as “Christ remains outside of us.” Note also Calvin’s insistence that it is through union and participation with the “substance” of Christ’s incarnate humanity that both the power of his

1 John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion (ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 3.1.1: “How do we receive those benefits which the Father bestowed on his only begotten Son—not for Christ’s own private use, but that he might enrich poor and needy men? First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us.”

135
deity and the forensic benefits of salvation (e.g., justification) are conveyed to the Christian. But Calvin’s view of union with Christ and soteriology in general involved a matrix of realistic, personal, and forensic categories which was never fully developed and explained. Categories such as “substance” and “participation” are ontological, while “imputation” and synthetic justification are forensic, and the Reformer never fully explained how the forensic dimension is related to Christ’s person such that to receive the latter is to receive the former.

Some initial headway on this problem was made by some of Calvin’s successors who began to explore the notion of Christ’s resurrection as a forensic act—a divine declaration of the righteousness of the God–Man, which applies first to Christ himself, and then to those united with him. But this promising approach was soon overwhelmed by the rise of the federal theology with its notions of an extrinsic federal or legal solidarity. The tendency in mature federal theology from the late seventeenth century onward is to speak of at least two forms of union with Christ—an extrinsic legal union whereby the Christian appropriates the forensic benefits of salvation by faith, and a vital or spiritual union whereby the Christian experiences the transforming power of God. Accompanying this was the imposition of an ordo salutis framework on the elements of soteriology, such that the forensic benefits of salvation (justification and adoption) logically and temporally preceded the transformatory benefits (sanctification and glorification). The effect of these moves was to safeguard the forensic from works righteousness, but at the expense of making the forensic rather abstract. That is, the doctrine of justification was abstracted from the ongoing life of faith and obedience. Compounding the problem of abstraction, the unity of salvation (the link binding the forensic and the transformatory together) was no longer to be found in Christology (as in Calvin), but in the eternal decrees of God.

This impulse was most fully developed in the American context by the Old Princeton theologians Charles and A. A. Hodge, who insisted that justification precedes sanctification in time as well as in logical priority, who redefined the human demerit addressed by justification as liability to punishment, and who strongly insisted that justification entails only an extrinsic, legal relationship with Christ. Clearly the primary concerns here are personal peace with God. Only as salvation is seen as entirely the work of God, with no admixture of

---


3 See Evans, Imputation and Impartation, 43-83. It is worth noting that the Westminster Standards were written prior to the point when the language of an extrinsic “legal union” emerges in Reformed thought. Today, however, notions of covenantal/federal/legal solidarity and participation are often pitted against one another. See, e.g., Michael S. Horton, “Participation and Covenant,” in Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition: Creation, Covenant, and Participation (ed., James K. A. Smith and James H. Olthuis; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 107-32.
human accomplishment or subjectivity, can we be confident that God will accept us.\textsuperscript{4}

But this federal theology paradigm provoked reactions in other directions. The New England Calvinist trajectory from the Edwardseans to Nathaniel William Taylor was convinced that federal theology was implicitly antinomian (because \textit{ordo salutis} conceptions of a punctiliar, once-for-all forensic decree of justification upon the exercise of faith were thought to undercut the need for ongoing obedience and holiness of life). Thus they jettisoned all notions of imputation (in both hamartiology and soteriology) and merit, and they spoke only of a “moral union” of shared sentiment between Christ and the individual believer.\textsuperscript{5} Here the primary concern was genuine transformation of life, and antinomianism was seen as the great threat.

Another reaction is evident in the so-called Mercersburg Theology of John W. Nevin. Responding both to the forensic abstraction of federal theology and the individualistic legalism of New England Calvinism, Nevin sought to go back to Calvin by emphasizing the believer’s union with Christ, which issues in both justification and sanctification, and the way that this union with Christ is inaugurated and strengthened by the objective means of grace in the corporate life of the church.\textsuperscript{6}

Despite these substantial and often contentious debates, it was the tradition of late federal Calvinism that was in large measure bequeathed to the twentieth-century conservative Reformed communities in this country. Nevin, as a member of the largely ethnic German Reformed Church, was marginalized, and New England Calvinism, with its revivalist and moralist concerns, increasingly distanced itself from the theological center of the Reformed tradition. While other influences were at work, the most powerful engine of dissemination was Old Princeton Seminary, where Charles Hodge himself trained over three thousand students. Hodge’s successors, A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield, continued in the same soteriological path. In the Southern Presbyterian context R. L. Dabney was a firm advocate of the Princeton soteriology, and Louis Berkhof propagated Hodge’s soteriology in the Dutch-American Christian Reformed Church and beyond through school texts such as his \textit{Systematic Theology}.\textsuperscript{7} Thus, the soteriological sensibilities of the conservative Reformed communities in America have been in large measure shaped by this late federal textbook tradition of Hodge, Dabney, and Berkhof.

\textsuperscript{4} See Evans, \textit{Imputation and Impartation}, 187-237.
\textsuperscript{6} See Evans, \textit{Imputation and Impartation}, 141-83. Despite his intent to return to Calvin, Nevin departs from Calvin’s forensic concerns by recasting soteriological imputation as mediate, i.e., as grounded in the believer’s participation in a new and renovated moral state.
II. A Taxonomy of Debate

The identification of three parties in this discussion requires some defense. I have no desire to be Hegelian, and I do not view this as a dialectical process of thesis—antithesis—synthesis. There is, however, a logic to this schema that seems to be hardwired into the Reformed tradition itself. We are dealing, not with the dialectical, but with the structural. For Reformed Christians historically, soteriology has been structured in terms of three key elements—union with Christ, the forensic dimension of justification, and the transformatory aspect of sanctification—and there have been those who have tended to emphasize or prioritize each. Later federal theology privileged justification, New England Calvinism stressed sanctification, and Mercersburg prioritized union with Christ. As we shall see, similar things are going on today. The emphasis here is on description rather than analysis, and citation will be illustrative rather than exhaustive.

1. The Biblical-Theological Trajectory—Vos, Murray, Gaffin, et al.

The beginnings of this trajectory go back to the turn of the twentieth century and the work of Geerhardus Vos at Princeton Seminary, whose work has proven to be seminal. One of Vos's students at Princeton was John Murray, a Scot who later was a founding member of the Westminster Seminary faculty, and whose work in systematic theology evinces the biblical-theological influence of Vos. One of Murray's students was Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., who taught New Testament at Westminster for many years before assuming a post in Systematics. It is Gaffin who, more than any other, has preserved and developed the legacy of Vos. Another in this group is Gaffin's former colleague at Westminster, Sinclair B. Ferguson. Finally, a variety of Gaffin's students—Lane Tipton, Mark Garcia, Philip Ryken, the present author, and others—have explored the biblical, systematic, historical-theological, and pastoral implications of a biblical-theological approach to soteriology. The web of institutional connection with Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia should be noted.

One hallmark of this trajectory is a deep respect for the confessional tradition of Reformed theology. For example, traditional conceptions of divine sovereignty in salvation are affirmed, as is the double imputation of the sin of the believer to Christ and the righteousness of Christ to the believer, and a firmly forensic conception of justification. To be sure, there is some selectivity involved—the tendency is to go behind later Reformed scholasticism to the period from Calvin through the Westminster divines, though some post-Westminster figures such as John Owen and Thomas Boston are also emphasized. Book-length studies of these issues include my own work, which examines the theme of union with Christ from Calvin to the late twentieth century with a

focus on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American Reformed debates, and that of Mark Garcia, who has written the most extensive and detailed study of Calvin's view of union and its relationship to the benefits of salvation.

But this respect for confessional tradition is no mere repristination of the past. There is, first of all, a desire to recover overarching biblical themes. Vos called for a biblical-theological method that was sensitive to the organic unfolding of redemptive history as it is revealed in Scripture. And so, in his *The Pauline Eschatology*, Vos explored the eschatological framework of understanding evident in Paul as heportrays Christ as the Second Adam whose work inaugurates the messianic age of the Spirit, and whose resurrection constitutes his justification on behalf of those united with him.

We also find here a dissatisfaction with certain concepts and schemas that have been taken for granted more recently by the federal theology tradition together with a sense that they have obscured rather than illuminated certain key scriptural themes. The relationship between biblical theology and systematic theology was addressed by Gaffin in an influential 1976 article where he sought to clarify the relationship between the two and to build on the work of Vos and John Murray. Gaffin contended that the biblical-theological recognition of the pervasively eschatological character of the NT was "an insight of a magnitude that requires recasting not only eschatology but also the other loci as traditionally conceived, especially Christology, soteriology, both accomplished and applied, and ecclesiology." Particular attention has been focused on the *ordo salutis* construction that has informed much conservative Reformed soteriology since the early seventeenth century. Gaffin and others have argued that

---


The antecedents of Vos's biblical theology have yet to be fully explored. Vos was well versed in continental theological scholarship, and he was doubtless aware of those German mediating theologians who followed Schleiermacher in emphasizing the role of Christ as "second Adam." Also, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century saw a rise of scholarly interest in eschatology—a response to the flat moralism of classical German liberalism—in the work of NT scholars such as Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer. Furthermore, Albrecht Ritschl in his *A Critical History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation* (trans. John S. Black; Edinburgh: Edmonston & Douglas, 1872), 267-74, had pointed to earlier Reformed usage of the idea of a "resurrection justification" of Christ. While classical Reformed influences are emphasized by the Westminster Seminary successors of Vos, it is plausible to suggest that Vos was also seeking to appropriate some of these other emphases while placing them in a context that affirmed the full authority of Scripture and the overarching redemptive-historical unity of scriptural revelation.

the *ordo salutis*, with its logical and temporal schematizing of the various elements of salvation, obscures the unity of salvation in Jesus Christ and the centrality of the believer's spiritual union with Christ.\(^\text{12}\)

Another characteristic of this trajectory is a strong emphasis on the theme of the believer's union with Christ. Two aspects of this view of union with Christ stand out. First, there is the priority of union. John Murray wrote,

> Nothing is more central or basic than union and communion with Christ. . . . It is not simply a step in the application of redemption; when viewed, according to the teaching of Scripture, in its broader aspects it underlies every step of the application of redemption. Union with Christ is really the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation not only in its application but also in its once-for-all accomplishment in the finished work of Christ. Indeed the whole process of salvation has its origin in one phase of union with Christ and salvation has in view the realization of other phases of union with Christ.\(^\text{13}\)

Thus, union with Christ is understood as an umbrella category that is foundational to all aspects of salvation. Philip G. Ryken writes, “Union with Christ is not simply one step in salvation; it is the whole stairway on which every step is taken.”\(^\text{14}\) Particular attention here is focused on the relationship between union and justification, with the imputation of Christ's righteousness viewed as in some sense consequent to spiritual union with Christ. Thus Ryken adds, “Union with Christ is logically prior to justification by imputation . . . [and] is the matrix in which imputation occurs. It is on the basis of our spiritual and covenantal union with Christ that our sins are imputed to him and his righteousness is imputed to us.”\(^\text{15}\) Along the same lines, R. B. Gaffin writes, “The participatory or relational involves an inalienable legal, forensic aspect, and the forensic does not function apart from but always within the participatory.”\(^\text{16}\) At the same time, this imputation also entails a synthetic declaration of the righteousness of the ungodly by means of their being joined with Christ by faith.\(^\text{17}\) The mode of imputation envisioned here corresponds to neither what has been classically termed mediate (i.e., through participation in a moral quality) nor immediate (i.e., based on a purely extrinsic and legal relationship) imputation. Rather, it is forensic imputation through personal spiritual union with Christ. In this, the proponents of


\(^{15}\) Ibid., 8.

\(^{16}\) Gaffin, *By Faith, 41.

\(^{17}\) Gaffin, *Resurrection and Redemption*, 132, writes, “This does not at all mean that Paul qualifies the synthetic character of the justification of the ungodly. The justifying aspect of being raised with Christ does not rest on the believer's subjective enlivening and transformation (also involved, to be sure, in the experience of being joined with Christ), but on the resurrection-approved righteousness of Christ which is his (and is thus reckoned his) by virtue of the vital union established.”
this trajectory stand with those nineteenth-century Presbyterian opponents of Charles Hodge such as W. G. T. Shedd, Samuel J. Baird, and John B. Adger.\textsuperscript{18}

Second, in contrast to the late federal bifurcation of union into two distinct unions (a federal or legal union which justifies and a spiritual union which sanctifies), the singularity of union is asserted. Though there are different "aspects" and "benefits" of this union, there is but one union with Christ by faith and the power of the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{19} This enables one, so it is argued, to affirm the unity of salvation in Christ and to avoid the charge that forensic justification is a "legal fiction."\textsuperscript{20} This recognition of the singularity of union with Christ also enables one to relate justification and sanctification indirectly through a third element rather than trying to relate them directly, which would almost inevitably result in either legalism or antinomianism.\textsuperscript{21}

What are the primary concerns of this trajectory? Clearly there is a desire to articulate a balanced soteriology that will fall prey to neither legalism nor antinomianism and that will do justice to the dynamic of the Christian life. According to this trajectory, Scripture teaches both forensic and synthetic justification, and it indicates that one's eternal destiny hinges in some sense on the ongoing life of faith and obedience. Proponents believe that an emphasis on the priority and singularity of union better preserves and integrates these biblical emphases. Finally, there is a concern to affirm the unity of salvation in Christ. This involves both the desire to avoid unnecessary abstraction of justification from the life of faith, and also a refusal to "cut loose" any of the benefits of salvation (such as perseverance).

2. The Revisionist Wing—Norman Shepherd and the Federal Vision

We begin with Norman Shepherd, who taught systematic theology at Westminster Seminary, Philadelphia, from 1963 to 1981, and various figures associated more or less closely with the so-called Federal Vision (FV) movement (Steve Wilkins, John Barach, Rich Lusk, Mark Horne, James Jordan, Peter Leithart, Douglas Wilson, Andrew Sandlin, and so forth). Here we see a revisionist impulse entailing a significant recasting of the tradition. The motives evident here are several. There are deep concerns about "cheap grace," that is, antinomian preaching of salvation apart from real transformation of life. Thus the necessity of obedience and the close connection of faith and obedience are stressed. There is also a deep ecclesial impulse here. The American revivalist tradition with its subjectivity and concern for isolated conversion experiences at the expense of


\textsuperscript{19} Gaffin, \textit{By Faith}, 37-38. The process by which Calvin's singular spiritual union with Christ was bifurcated into a legal justifying union on the one hand and a spiritual sanctifying union on the other is explored in Evans, \textit{Imputation and Importation}, 57-83.

\textsuperscript{20} See Murray, \textit{Redemption Accomplished and Applied}, 165; and Ryken, "Justification and Union," 8.

\textsuperscript{21} See Evans, \textit{Imputation and Impartation}, 260.
the ongoing life of faith and obedience is viewed with deep suspicion, and so we see a turn toward the objective in religion, toward the churchly and sacramental. Also evident here is a profound pastoral concern for the raising of children within the bosom of the church in the context of a hostile broader culture. Along these lines there is a concern for assurance of salvation, as pensive Christians are directed not to their subjective experience of grace, but to their baptisms.

Norman Shepherd must be regarded as a seminal figure here, for his thought has set an agenda for much of this group. His work is characterized, first of all, by an insistent focus on the theme of covenant, which he defines as “a divinely established relationship of union and communion between God and his people in the bonds of mutual love and faithfulness.” He contends that the key scriptural covenants—the Abrahamic, the Mosaic, and the New—are conditional in that they entail both “promise and obligation.” The covenant promises are freely given, but the blessings of the covenant cannot be enjoyed apart from faith and obedience. In addition, the bi-covenantal structure of classic Reformed federal theology involving a programmatic distinction between a covenant of grace and a covenant of works is rejected in favor of a single covenant of grace in its various iterations. Here we also see a rejection of the Law/Gospel distinction (which Shepherd views as “Lutheran”) in favor of a mono-covenantal framework which attempts to integrate rather than separate obligation and promise.

Second, there is an expansive view of faith as including works of evangelical obedience. Shepherd never tires of declaring that the faith that saves is living, active, and obedient: “Faith produces repentance, and repentance is evident in the lifestyle of the believer. Thus, the obligations of the new covenant include not only faith and repentance, but also obedience.” Shepherd adds that this “is not the obedience of merit, but the obedience of faith. Obedience is simply faithfulness to the Lord; it is the righteousness of faith.”

Third, there is a rejection of what Shepherd calls a “works/merit principle” in favor of a “faith/grace principle,” and a repudiation of the notion of merit. Merit stands opposed to grace for merit implies that God rewards good works as a matter of just deserts. Not surprisingly, Shepherd on this basis rejects the traditional notion of a “covenant of works,” in which the first parents might have “earned” eternal happiness by obedience, and also the imputation of Christ’s

23 Shepherd, Call of Grace, 12.
24 See ibid., 11-57.
25 Ibid., 47.
26 Ibid., 39.
27 Ibid., 37.
active obedience to the believer. Only when the very notion of merit is rejected, he argues, can Protestants properly respond to Rome and also do justice to passages in Scripture that speak of salvation as conditional upon obedience.

Fourth, there is a focus upon the objectivity of covenant administration over against the subjectivity of personal experience. Problems of assurance result, he contends, when we look within for evidence of God's grace. Regeneration is difficult to quantify, and even more difficult to fathom is the mystery of God's eternal election. And so Shepherd directs believers away from subjective personal experience to baptism.

But instead of looking at covenant from the perspective of regeneration, we ought to look at regeneration from the perspective of covenant. When that happens, baptism, the sign and seal of the covenant, marks the point of conversion. Baptism is the moment when we see the transition from death to life and a person is saved.

Finally, there is a corresponding de-emphasis on election and divine sovereignty. In its foregrounding of the "five points of Calvinism," Shepherd argues that the Reformed tradition has attempted, as it were, to play God, to approach soteriology from the standpoint of infinite deity rather than finite humanity. This has led to abstraction in gospel proclamation as preachers fail to apply the saving promises of God directly to people. In place of such "election-evangelism," he calls for "covenant-evangelism." Reformed evangelistic methodology must be consciously oriented to the doctrine of the covenant, rather than to the doctrine of election.

From a covenant standpoint, he argues, preachers must proclaim that Christ died "for you." Also, pastors must treat as "elect" those who are baptized members of the church, knowing that at some point in the future they may prove not to be elect by forsaking the covenant.

The Federal Vision (FV) movement may be treated more briefly, since it is in large measure a fleshing out of Shepherd's earlier work. In addition to Shepherd, we must also note the importance of the theonomic or Christian Reconstructionist movement, which seems to have provided a sizeable social network.

29 See Shepherd, "Justification by Works in Reformed Theology", "The Imputation of Active Obedience"
30 Shepherd, Call of Grace, 61-62
31 See ibid, 69
32 Ibid, 94
33 Ibid, 70
34 Ibid, 79
35 Ibid, 85
36 See ibid, 86-88
and base for the FV movement.\textsuperscript{38} The volume of material generated is massive; here we will focus more on those points where development is evident.

As with Shepherd we see here an ongoing critique of the Law/Gospel distinction, and a corresponding distinction being drawn between the Lutheran and Reformed traditions.\textsuperscript{39} Rather, they prefer to speak of an essentially gracious covenantal arrangement involving both obligation and gracious promises. Along with this there is a heavy emphasis on covenant conditionality and suspicion of the notion of a covenant of works as traditionally defined. The threat of legalism is avoided, they maintain, because the fulfillment of these covenant obligations is not meritorious.\textsuperscript{40}

Development is also evident in the FV understanding of the sacraments. With regard to baptism, the trend here has been toward exceedingly high conceptions of baptismal efficacy. The parameters of the covenant community are defined by baptism, which both admits a person to the church and conveys saving grace (regeneration and union with Christ). For example, Rich Lusk contends that all covenant children who receive the sacrament of baptism are “really joined to the elect people, really sanctified by Christ’s blood, and really recipients of new life given by the Holy Spirit.”\textsuperscript{41} With regard to the Lord’s Supper, the emphasis is, once again, on sacramental objectivity. Because baptized children are understood to have already received initial saving grace, the practice of paedocommunion is often encouraged in FV circles.\textsuperscript{42}

Because the enjoyment of the benefits of the covenant is conditional on perseverance in faith and obedience and because of a robust doctrine of baptismal grace, considerable attention has been paid to the dynamics of perseverance and

\textsuperscript{38} The connection between Theonomy and FV is complex. For example, Waters, \textit{Federal Vision and Covenant Theology}, 6, 9, 296-99, emphasizes conceptual and personnel continuities between Theonomy and FV, and he views the FV movement as closely connected with “a project of cultural transformation.” Alternatively, this writer senses that, rather than FV being a means to societal transformation, it is a replacement. Having despaired of broader social transformation, some former theonomists have now turned to the revitalization of local church and family life by implementing FV ideas. In contrast to Waters, Minich, “Within the Bounds of Orthodoxy?,” 19, 21, highlights discontinuities between the two movements and emphasizes the pastoral concerns motivating FV. For a dispassionate account of the rise of Christian Reconstructionism, see Molly Worthen, “The Chalcedon Problem: Rousas John Rushdoony and the Origins of Christian Reconstructionism,” \textit{CH} 77 (2008): 399-437.

\textsuperscript{39} See, e.g., P. Andrew Sandlin, “Covenant in Redemptive History: ‘Gospel and Law’ or ‘Trust and Obey,’” in \textit{Backbone of the Bible}, 63-84.


\textsuperscript{42} Advocates include Steve Wilkins, Rich Lusk, Peter Leithart, and others. Because of the close connection in the Reformed tradition between baptismal efficacy and faith, Lusk has argued for a doctrine of infant faith. See his \textit{Pseudofaith: A Primer on the Mystery of Infant Salvation and a Handbook for Covenant Parents} (Monroe, La.: Athanasius Press, 2005).
apostasy. For example, Rich Lusk has argued at length that the warnings against apostasy in the NT are real rather than hypothetical, and that it is possible for those who are genuinely united with Christ in baptism to fall from grace. In order to account for this while still maintaining a role for divine sovereignty, Lusk posits a separate grace of perseverance given only to the elect. Here, rather clearly the unity of salvation in Christ has been compromised in that union with Christ does not necessarily entail the grace of perseverance.

Finally, the doctrine of justification undergoes considerable development in FV hands. Two areas stand out. First, the notion of imputation appears to be in process of eclipse. There is little talk of the imputation of Adam’s sin to his posterity, probably because such a notion is vestigial in the absence of the concept of merit. Likewise, soteriological imputation is challenged in that some of the FV figures, along with Shepherd, deny the imputation of the active obedience of Christ to the believer. Second, Leithart has also argued that justification is more than merely forensic, and that it has a transformatory dimension. All this suggests a certain shaking of the foundations of traditional Reformed theology, and we are left with the nagging suspicion that some have “wandered off the reservation.”

3. The Repristinationist Wing—Westminster California

Such revisionism has sparked a strong reaction from those who wish to defend classical Reformed orthodoxy. Much of this effort has emerged from faculty members at Westminster Seminary in California (Michael Horton, Scott Clark, David VanDrunen), though others are also involved (e.g., Mark Karlberg, Thomas Wenger). The overriding motive here is clear and laudable—safeguarding the Reformation doctrine of justification by grace through faith.

Here, first of all, we find a vigorous defense of the Law/Gospel hermeneutic. If salvation is to be truly gracious, then law and gospel must be distinguished. In contrast to the Revisionists, who view the Law/Gospel distinction as genetically Lutheran rather than Reformed, these figures stress the essential continuity of

Lutherans and Reformed on this matter, although the attitude toward law is more positive than one finds among some Lutherans. For example, there is consistent affirmation of the "third use" of the law (i.e., the law of God as a guide for the life of the Christian).  

Second, in keeping with this, there is vigorous defense of the conceptual apparatus of later federal orthodoxy, especially the bi-covenantal framework involving a Covenant of Works and a Covenant of Grace. The covenant of works as an instantiation of the law principle is viewed as an essential guarantor of the Law/Gospel distinction. Then, in order to underscore the gracious uniqueness of the New Covenant, the Mosaic Covenant is seen in part as a "republication" of the Covenant of Works. There is also defense of a pre-temporal intratrinitarian Covenant of Redemption or pactum salutis between the Father and the Son, which is viewed as providing a foundation for the Covenant of Grace in theology proper. Not surprisingly, we find considerable suspicion directed toward the Vosian Biblical Theology trajectory, particularly where it conflicts with this federal theology edifice, and the argument is made that the federal theology is firmly rooted in Scripture.

Third, we find here an insistent defense of the classic federal ordo salutis construction in which justification is assigned a clear priority in the application of redemption so that Law and Gospel, works and grace, may be kept separate and distinct. In this sense, the charge of "Lutheranizing" has some substance in that there is a tendency to try to extract a doctrine of sanctification from gratitude for one's justification. As Scott Clark succinctly puts it, "According to Reformed theology, definitive justification produces sanctification." In keeping with this, union with Christ is bifurcated into a "legal" or justifying union and a "vital" or sanctifying union. Here once again we see great suspicion of the Biblical Theology trajectory, with its criticism of the classic sequential ordo salutis and affirmation of a single spiritual union with Christ.


52 R. Scott Clark, "Do This and Live: Christ's Active Obedience as the Ground of Justification," in Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry, 262: "There is no question whether we need both a legal and a vital union with Christ, but these must be distinguished. By virtue of legal union with Christ our federal head and substitute, his obedience is credited to believers. This union is distinct (not separate) from that union which increases." See also Clark, "The Benefits of Christ," 107-34.
Finally, the historical method evident in this wing needs to be noted. As the continuity of later federal orthodoxy with the earlier Reformed tradition is asserted, a certain "flattening" of the tradition often ensues. The notion of historical development seems to play no substantive role here. For example, much weight is placed on the earlier "Calvin against the Calvinists" debate that pitted confessional Calvinists against Barthians, and the impression is given that there were no significant differences between Calvin and later federal orthodoxy. The magisterial work of Richard Müller on the question of a deductive "central dogma" is often cited against claims that "union with Christ" functions as a central theme in Calvin.53 And, as we would expect, the soteriological continuity of the Lutheran and Reformed traditions is also asserted. All this is quite evident in the recent *JETS* articles of Thomas Wenger,54 but the standards of evaluation are often Procrustean—there is much in Calvin and early Reformed thought that simply does not fit the mold.

III. Observations

First of all, this survey leaves this author with a sense of Yogi Berraesque "déjà vu all over again." The contours of nineteenth-century American Reformed debates are to a significant extent repeated. The eclipse of imputation, the repudiation of merit, and the foregrounding of sanctification by the Revisionist wing are reminiscent of New England Calvinism (though the sacramentalism and ecclesial concerns of Shepherd and the FV are markedly different from New England Calvinism). Likewise, the Repristinationist wing, with its vigorous Law/Gospel hermeneutic, full-orbed federal theology, and defense of the *ordo salutis*, reminds us of Charles Hodge and the Princeton school. Finally, the Biblical Theology trajectory recalls in some ways the realistic mediating theologies of Mercersburg, Shedd, Baird, and so on. That we have, in a sense, been here before does not, however, detract from the seriousness of these debates. These are not academic tempests in teapots. Churches have been torn by these debates, and extensive denominational reports have been written.55


55 A number of extensive reports have been generated. Two may be mentioned here. See Orthodox Presbyterian Church, "Report on Justification Presented to the Seventy-third General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church" (2007), http://www.opc.org/GA/Justification
Second, this controversy raises important questions about the historiography of the Reformed tradition. Issues of continuity and discontinuity, of fidelity and infidelity to the tradition are persistently raised. Another way to phrase this is to raise the question of what is the "normative center" of the tradition for conservative Reformed people. Most conservative American Presbyterians view that normative center as the Westminster Standards, but should the Westminster Standards be read in light of later thought or earlier thought? The former approach is simply good contextual historical method, while the latter runs the risk of treating late federal orthodoxy as a sort of dehistoricized "Platonic ideal." The descriptive task becomes more complex when we recognize that the Westminster standards themselves are transitional documents, reflecting both the earlier Calvinian biblical/sacramental theology and the emerging federal conceptuality with its more extrinsic cast.

Second, this controversy poses important questions as to how conservative Reformed systematic theology ought to be done. A major point of contention in these discussions has been the relationship of biblical-theological categories (e.g., union with Christ, resurrection justification, etc.) to dogmatic-theological categories (e.g., *ordo salutis*, covenant of works, covenant of redemption, immediate imputation, etc.). Also important here is the role of the confessional tradition and the rising "confessionalism" that is evident in some quarters. Are Reformed churches defined primarily, as some today seem to argue, by adherence to confessional documents? If so, is the role of Scripture, practically speaking, simply to provide prooftexts for the confessional tradition?

Third, this controversy also signals the decisive emergence of recognizable schools of thought. There have been some intriguing recent attempts to schematize the divisions that are increasingly evident in conservative Reformed circles. For example, Andrew Sandlin has suggested a threefold typology of "Truly Reformed" (those "fervently committed to the scholastic, Reformed orthodoxy of the 16th and 17th centuries"), "Barely Reformed" (those "more committed to a broad evangelicalism than the confessional form of the Reformed faith"), and "Catholic Reformed" (a group committed to the principle of theological development and a robust ecclesiology, and with a deep regard for the comprehensive Christian tradition). This "broad-brush" treatment is useful, but it focuses more on matters of style and ethos than on the theological specifics of this controversy. In an essay dealing with some of the tensions addressed in this article, Tim J. R. Trumper suggests a two-fold typology of "Orthodox Calvinists" ("traditional later Calvinists seeking to be faithful to the form and content of the WCF") and "Constructive Calvinists" (those who are "usually the product of later Calvinism and in sympathy with it, yet wish to see the moderate scholastic form of Westminster Calvinism recast in the..."
biblical-theological approach to theology of Scripture and, in the Reformed tradition, of Calvin most notably”). This too is helpful, but it is too limited in scope to encompass all the parties in the current debate. Lastly, this writer recently suggested a typology of “ecclesials” and “theocentrics,” which is a useful distinction for some contexts but once again it does not do justice to the scope of discussion here in that all three groups seek in their own fashion to have a robust ecclesiology. The schema we are suggesting here—a Biblical Theology trajectory, a Revisionist wing, and a Repristinationist wing—is more attuned to the contours of this theological debate and better rooted in the historical background of these issues.

Of course, some would question this threefold typology by arguing that there are not three groups but two—a “classic Reformed orthodox” position and a revisionist tendency that looks to John Murray. In essence, some wish to collapse the Biblical Theology wing and the Revisionist wing into a single group with more and less radical representatives. Two arguments could be advanced for this. There is the genetic argument—that both Norman Shepherd and Richard Gaffin were students of John Murray. Here we may recall T. D. Gordon’s inelegant characterization of Murray as the drunk uncle at the Reformed party, whose denial of the covenant of works has led, in Gordon’s estimation, to all these problems. There is also the argument from personal relationship—Gaffin and Shepherd remain friends, and Gaffin was a supporter of Shepherd during the “Shepherd Controversy” at Westminster Seminary. But such arguments fail to reckon with the principled opposition to Federal Vision innovations that has emerged from the Biblical Theology wing. It is simply not the case that Biblical-Theology trajectory types and Revisionists are cut from the same cloth, with the first just being a bit more timid. To be sure, there are some similarities here, but the differences, as noted above, are profound. Conversely, there are similarities between the Revisionist and Repristinationist wings—both tend to reify covenant and present it as the central theological category, while the Biblical-Theological trajectory recognizes the importance of covenant but balances it with other biblical themes.

Finally, this controversy raises questions as to the role of the covenant theme in Reformed systematic theology. Both the Revisionist and Repristinationist

60 See, e.g., Richard B. Gaffin’s contention in “Union with Christ,” 286, that the FV eclipse of imputation is “more disturbing to a biblically sound doctrine of justification than the view that ignores or obscures union in maintaining imputation” because it obscures the “ground or basis” of justification. The FV view of baptismal efficacy has been critiqued in William B. Evans, “Really Exhibited and Conferred”; and “Calvin, Baptism, and Latent Efficacy Again: A Reply to Rich Lusk,” Presbyterion: Covenant Seminary Review 32 (2006): 38-45.
wings of the Reformed movement place extraordinary emphasis on covenant as the programmatic theme in theology (while the Biblical Theology trajectory has been somewhat more reticent on this point). But the history of the tradition shows that Reformed theologians have been arguing over issues of covenant definition, as well as the dialectic of covenant conditionality and unconditionality, for almost four hundred years, and these debates are not abating. There are also signs of fatigue within the conservative Reformed community over these problems. Fifteen or so years ago, John Stek warned of what he termed "covenant overload," arguing that the covenant theme in Scripture emerges as an accommodation to the ancient Near Eastern cultural context, and that it was never intended as a timeless and all-encompassing organizing principle of theology. Rather, he contends that covenant is a "secondary biblical theme" that functions within relationships already constituted.\(^\text{61}\) Richard Phillips has critiqued the expansion of the covenant concept in FV circles, suggesting that "the word has begun to lose definition and become little more than a vague nimbus."\(^\text{62}\) In the same collection of essays, Andrew T. B. McGowan has argued that the deeper issues at stake are solidarity in sin and in salvation, and that "covenant" may not be the most useful concept to use. In its place he tentatively proposes a "Headship Theology."\(^\text{63}\) This writer has also noticed a trend in some circles of bypassing these perennial disagreements over the nature and implications of the covenant theme, and instead using the term "covenant" as a sort of shorthand for a redemptive-historical approach to Scripture.\(^\text{64}\)

A further question emerges: do these debates evince the vigor or the decline of the Reformed tradition? This is a difficult question. Vigor—perhaps too much vigor in some instances—is certainly present. But these debates are also occurring at the same time that the conservative Reformed theological tradition is no longer central to the intellectual life of American Evangelicalism, and as the conservative Reformed churches associated with the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) make up only about a half million people. The prospect of further splintering of this group does not bode well for it. The battle lines are already drawn and the positions are hardening. One participant in these discussions has spoken of a "Reformed civil war." Military terms like "under fire" and "under attack" are now common in the polemical literature.

Substantive discussions need to take place. For example, careful discussion of theological method is required. A key challenge here is the integration of biblical-theological insights into the dogmatic tradition. There is also need for careful reflection on the role and place of the covenant theme in Reformed

---


theology. Larger questions of identity and the parameters of the Reformed tradition are also posed. In this writer's opinion, efforts simply to recapitulate seventeenth-century Reformed Orthodoxy are doomed to failure, however useful the scholastics may be on specific matters, and any definition of conservative Reformed identity that implicitly or explicitly excludes Calvin is probably not sustainable. The challenge is formulating a soteriology that preserves the forensic and synthetic character of justification, while not abstracting the doctrine of justification from the ongoing life of faith and while preserving the unity of salvation in Christ. The next decade should prove to be of great importance for this community.