

Chapter 11

Greg Bahnsen is Not in the Federal Vision Camp

This may seem to be an odd chapter in this book. Why a chapter dealing with Greg Bahnsen? He died in 1995 long before this controversy arose in the Reformed community. My main reason for including this as a chapter is to vindicate the name of Greg Bahnsen for various reasons. First, his son, David Bahnsen, has publicly stated that his father, if still alive, would be sympathetic to the Federal Vision. Second, the institution that he was associated with in California has been captured by the Federal Vision camp; therefore, when people think of this institution and Bahnsen's name, they will think that Bahnsen held the same theological views. And third, some critics of the Federal Vision think that a presuppositional apologetic approach lends one to be given to Federal Vision theology.

Unfortunately, in August 2003, the Southern California Center for Christian Studies sponsored a summer conference and invited Norman Shepherd to be one of its speakers. In the lectures that Shepherd gave, from which I have quoted significant portions in chapter 4, he openly denied the active obedience of Christ in the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer. This was a major further development in the view of the Federal Vision. To deny the imputation of Christ's righteousness is a heretical position. This is the study center that Bahnsen started many years ago. This institution was a tremendous champion for the Reformed Faith during Bahnsen's lifetime. For me to see this institution under the flag of the Federal Vision is quite disheartening. David Bahnsen enthusiastically introduced Norman Shepherd at this conference. It was at Bahnsen's institution that this heresy of the Federal Vision was further propagated.

I am desirous of defending Greg Bahnsen's good name. I personally benefited from Bahnsen's teaching over the past 30 years. When I was a student at

Reformed Theological Seminary during the mid to late 1970's, I took apologetics and ethics under Greg Bahnsen. In subsequent years, I benefited greatly from his brilliant scholarship. He was truly one of the greatest theological minds of the 20th Century. In his later years just prior to his death, I had the privilege to be a personal friend of Greg Bahnsen. Even those who did not agree with him in several of his teachings (e.g. theonomy), still recognized that there were few men who could match his intellect and his ability to bring to bear the Scripture on virtually any issue. For his son to champion the cause of the Federal Vision is discouraging to me, for Bahnsen's institution to be in the Federal Vision camp is distressing, and for Covenant Media Foundation (the organization handling the distribution of Bahnsen's audio tapes) to be in the Federal Vision camp is equally disheartening. It is most discouraging because I **know** that Greg Bahnsen would not have been sympathetic in any way with the theology of the Federal Vision. If he were alive today, he probably would have written a book similar to mine, exposing the heresies of the Federal Vision. Why do I say that I know this to be the case? Before I answer that question, let me quote his son David Bahnsen. In 2003 David Bahnsen wrote an article titled "*Greg Bahnsen and the Auburn Avenue Controversy*." In this article, David Bahnsen writes:

To begin, I suppose of the truly difficult things in writing this article, is that in one very real sense, the answer to how my late father "would have felt" about the current controversy should be, "Who cares?" He was a mere man, albeit a bright one, and he did not have any divine intercessions when he was alive, and if he were here today he would have none. Nonetheless, I have received over 250 emails in the last year regarding people's opinion on what my father would feel, should feel, did feel, etc. There is a sense in which I can relate to the people that have wondered about such a thing, because I do know that I hold him in such high regard (not **just** as a father, but also as a thinker), that whenever I do feel confused on some theological, ethical, philosophical, or political issue I often find myself wondering "WWDD" (i.e. what would dad do?)... I especially get tempted to think this way when it comes to matters of division amongst people whom I deeply respect. There is a naïve and tender part of me that just wishes to myself, "Dad, come down here and straighten this thing out."¹

¹ David Bahnsen, *Greg Bahnsen and the Auburn Avenue Controversy*, February 2003. Found at www.cmfnow.com/AAPC/Bahnsen.html.

In the 1990's I had the privilege to meet Greg Bahnsen's sons. I had met several of them briefly when they were very young children when Greg Bahnsen had his short tenure at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi. I have had the opportunity to meet David Bahnsen when I was living in Atlanta, Georgia. I felt for David and his other siblings when their father died in 1995 at the relatively young age of 46. I sensed with many other Reformed friends that the world had lost a great champion for the Christian Faith. I too greatly miss Greg Bahnsen's physical presence with us. He was truly a unique, gifted man. David, if I could speak directly to you, I would say to you, "You don't need to have your daddy come down from heaven to help us sort out this controversy; your daddy left a legacy behind. He left his books and his audio tapes as a legacy for us to appreciate, just like several other great Reformers of the past like Calvin and Owen." All we need to do is read Greg Bahnsen's books and listen to his audiotapes and we would know what he thought. This is why I am including this chapter in this book. There is no mystery what Greg Bahnsen taught on the issues surrounding the Federal Vision. My primary source will be quotes from his magnum opus, *Theonomy In Christian Ethics*. In his book, Greg Bahnsen, unmistakably sets forth his understanding of the nature of the gospel as it relates to the law of God.

I **cannot agree** with the conclusion that his son David Bahnsen draws when he writes:

I have no pretensions that there are not serious theological matters here that need to be addressed, further clarified, and continually exegeted. However, I feel that were my father alive, he would want that exegesis, that discussion, that clarification, etc. to take place in a context of love, and grace, and benefit of the doubt...I do not deny that the Monroe men are endorsing a paradigm shift. As a matter of fact, I embrace it and am certain my father would as well.²

Before I demonstrate that Greg Bahnsen would not have embraced Federal Vision theology, I want to quote from some others who think that he did endorse it. In April 2003, Randy Booth (who heads Covenant Media Foundation), wrote an article titled "*Caution and Respect in Controversy*." In this article Randy Booth quotes Greg Bahnsen from one of Bahnsen's lectures on Calvin's Institutes. The purpose of Booth quoting from Bahnsen is to demonstrate that Bahnsen agreed with Norman Shepherd on James 2. Booth quotes Bahnsen as saying:

² Bahnsen, *Greg Bahnsen and the Auburn Avenue Controversy*.

I think (this) is rather convoluted ... let me very briefly point out, some people will say James can't mean the word justify in a forensic sense, because then he would contradict Paul. Paul says we are justified by faith, not works. James says we are justified by works. So if they both mean "justify" in the forensic sense, there is a contradiction. Well, I don't think so, because in Galatians 5:6 Paul teaches exactly what James does. Paul says we are justified by faith working by love. We are justified by working, active, living faith. I think that's what James is teaching. They mean exactly the same thing. But nevertheless some people have insisted- and this has been a bone of controversy in my denomination even, because a professor at Westminster Seminary insisted James means this in the forensic sense.

Now ... people who don't like that say, It is to be taken in the demonstrative sense. The problem is, the demonstrative sense of the word justify means "to show someone to be righteous," and that doesn't relieve the contradiction between James and Paul, because Paul in Romans 4 looks at Abraham as an example of how God justifies the ungodly. James is saying, Look at how God justifies someone demonstrated as godly. The contradiction is not relieved. And so what you really get – and this is crucial, this is a crucial point- modern interpreters who don't like what I am suggesting and what Professor Shepherd is suggesting end up saying that to justify in James 2 really means "to demonstrate justification," not to "demonstrate righteousness." That is, they make the word to justify mean "to justify the fact that I'm justified." And the word never means that. That's utterly contrived. It means either "to declare righteous" or "to demonstrate righteous" It does not mean "to justify that one's justified."

... Am I making myself clear? I'm suggesting that the reason Paul and James are not contrary to one another is because the only kind of faith that will justify us is working faith, and the only kind of justification ever presented in the Bible after the Fall is a justification by working faith, a faith that receives its merit from God and proceeds to work as a regenerated, new person.³

³ Randy Booth, "*Caution and Respect In Controversy*," Booth quotes Greg Bahnsen's 1986 audio tape on Calvin's Institutes. <www.cmf.com/AAPC/controversy.html>

Greg Bahnsen attended a class with Roger Wagner that was taught by Norman Shepherd at Westminster Seminary. Because of this, Booth interviewed Wagner to see what he thought Bahnsen would believe about the Federal Vision controversy. Booth quotes Roger Wagner's reply:

I'm absolutely sure if Greg were still with us, he'd be squarely on the "Shepherd side" of this issue (if I may use that shorthand in a "non-partisan" sense), and trying to get Joe M. and others of his opinion to erase the "line in the sand" they've drawn among the confessionally Reformed Reconstructionists.⁴

Those in the Federal Vision camp think that this comment from Greg Bahnsen demonstrates that if alive he would be clearly on the Federal Vision side of the controversy. I do not think this to be the case at all. The Greg Bahnsen quote that Randy Booth is referring to is not how Shepherd views James 2 in his book *The Call of Grace*. Bahnsen does mention in his quote that Shepherd was teaching that the meaning of the word "justified" was still a forensic meaning. Let's assume that is the case. This still does not mean that Bahnsen's quote supports Shepherd's views that reemerged in the late 1990's and to the present. The way that Shepherd now expresses his views on works as they relate to justification is not what Bahnsen stated in the above quote and are not in conformity with what Bahnsen wrote in *Theonomy In Christian Ethics*. Let's examine closely Bahnsen's quote. When Bahnsen states that justification is a justification by working faith, a faith that receives its merit from God and proceeds to work as a regenerated, new person, this is not what Shepherd and the rest of the Federal Vision has said about justification. Shepherd has defined saving faith as "the obedience of faith." In his book *The Call of Grace* Shepherd made the comment about James 2 that "*the faith credited to Abraham as righteousness was a living and active faith.*"⁵ Shepherd also stated, "*In fact, Genesis 15:6 says that Abraham's faith was so significant that it was credited to him as righteousness! If so, then righteousness was a condition to be met, and faith met that condition.*"⁶

Bahnsen speaks about a faith that **proceeds to work as a regenerated, new person**. When he said the word "proceed" Bahnsen separated himself in what Shepherd came to articulate. Bahnsen has said nothing different than what the Westminster Confession of Faith says in chapter 11:2. This section states: "*Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the alone*

⁴ Booth, "Caution and Respect In Controversy."

⁵ Shepherd, *The Call of Grace*, p. 16.

⁶ Shepherd, *The Call of Grace*, p. 15.

instrument of justification, yet is it not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love." The proof texts given for the last phrases in this section are James 2:17, 22, 26 and Galatians 5:6. Bahnsen was saying that saving faith is a living, active faith. Now, when Shepherd says that faith is a living, active faith he means something different because he means that the essence of faith is obedience to God's law. This is a view that Bahnsen utterly rejects in *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*.

Let's consider what Greg Bahnsen said on James 2 in *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*. Bahnsen states:

James 2:23 says, "The scripture was fulfilled saying, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed to him for righteousness." The quotation from the older Testament to which James alludes is Genesis 15:6; yet the activity of Abraham that James has in mind is Abraham's willingness to offer up Isaac (James 2:21), and this does not occur in Genesis until chapter 22. Abraham's activity does not fulfill a prophecy, for the statement in Genesis 15:6 is an assertion, not a prediction. What James tells us, therefore, is that Abraham **confirmed** his imputed righteousness by obedience to God; this is the theme of James 2:14-26.⁷ (Emphasis Bahnsen)

There is a very glaring difference between Bahnsen, Shepherd, and Schlissel. Bahnsen says that Abraham's obedience was not the essence of faith; it was not "the obedience of faith" as the Federal Vision purports. Bahnsen says that Abraham's faith was an **imputed righteousness**. I have demonstrated in this book that Shepherd and the rest of the Federal Vision emphatically denies the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer. Bahnsen says that Abraham's obedience **confirms** his imputed righteousness. He did not say that the essence of Abraham's faith was obedience, which was the cause of his justification. What did Bahnsen say was the meaning of justification in James 2 that Randy Booth quotes from? Bahnsen says that justification means either "to declare righteous" or "to demonstrate righteous." Bahnsen is saying that Abraham's obedience demonstrated the imputed righteousness that he possessed. Bahnsen is clearly within the parameters of the Reformed Faith. Bahnsen is clearly Confessional. Shepherd is not!

⁷ Greg Bahnsen, *Theonomy In Christian Ethics*. (Nutley, N.J: The Craig Press, 1977), p. 69.

In my book, I have set forth the Federal Vision's understanding of Romans 4:5-8 which is a complete distortion of this portion of Scripture. The Federal Vision maintains that Abraham's faith was fundamentally obedience to the covenant demands which is why he was justified. Is this what Bahnsen believes? I don't think so. Bahnsen states:

So important is the law in our salvation that our justification is grounded in Christ's obedience to it (Rom. 5:17-19); we're saved by grace no doubt, but by a grace made possible through the lawful obedience of God's Son. Our **faith in Christ** is counted for righteousness, thereby justifying us freely by God's grace **through Christ's righteousness**, which is declared for the remission of sins (Rom. 4: 5-8; 3:22-25; 5:17-19)...Christ's atoning work, then, does not entail the relaxation of the law's demand for righteousness, but rather accentuates it. Christ, who suffered as the righteous for the unrighteous (I Pet. 3:18), is the believer's righteousness (I Cor. 1:30).⁸ (Emphasis Bahnsen)

This quote is absolutely devastating to the Federal Vision. Every one of the major figures that I have quoted from in the Federal Vision camp would disagree with Bahnsen's quote. Remember, the Federal Vision has denied the active obedience of Christ imputed to the sinner. Bahnsen champions the Reformed doctrine of Christ's active obedience as good as any one has expressed. Would Bahnsen be siding with the Federal Vision if he were alive? Absolutely not!

Bahnsen continues to make very helpful comments about the relationship of the law to the justified man. Bahnsen says:

It is the **condemning** aspect of the law which is nullified by Christ's perfect obedience to that law; the law itself with all its integrity, remains in force while our **guilt** is removed...Furthermore, the Holy Spirit causes the believer in his sanctification to grow in **likeness** and obedience to Christ...Union with Christ, which underlies our salvation, entails the requirement of sharing His righteous character – of **identifying** with His lawful obedience.⁹ (Emphasis Bahnsen)

⁸ Bahnsen, *Theonomy In Christian Ethics*, p. 154.

⁹ Bahnsen, *Theonomy In Christian Ethics*, pp. 154-155.

Just like the Westminster Confession of Faith states, Bahnsen agrees that sanctification flows out of justification as an inevitable reality. He does not blur the distinction between justification and sanctification. Just what role does the Law of God play in our justification according to Bahnsen? We know what the Federal Vision says. Schlissel and Lusk openly stated that the law is the gospel, and the Gospel is Law. Schlissel derided Luther for what he calls Luther's false dichotomy between the Law and the Gospel. We recall that Schlissel stated that good works are not the fruit or evidence of justifying faith but that it is the very essence of faith. This is why Schlissel stated that the Law keeper and the believer are identical. Let's see what Bahnsen has to say about this.

Bahnsen states, "*Using the law as a means of salvation is high handed flattery and disdain for God's grace.*"¹⁰ Bahnsen describes the fundamental problem of the Pharisees. "*The Pharisees attempted to justify **themselves** by means of the law*"...*Justification was not by the law in the Older Testament, and the scribes of the law should have known this fact well.*"¹¹ (Emphasis Bahnsen) Bahnsen discusses people like Abel, Enoch, Noah, and Abraham. The Federal Vision has told us that there were righteous people that God recognized and rewarded with justification. Steve Schlissel and Rich Lusk make a big point of this. The Federal Vision says that men can keep the Mosaic Law, and God expected them to keep it for their justification. The Federal Vision interpreted the story of the young rich ruler as one where the failure of the rich young ruler as an example of one who failed to keep the law as he should. Jesus was encouraging him to keep the Law in order to gain eternal life as if he could really keep it. Bahnsen states:

Abel, Enoch, and Noah were all clear illustrations that man gains favor with God, not by works, but by faith (Gen. 4:4; 5:24; 6:8,9 with Heb. 11:4-7)...Genesis 15:6 clearly teaches that righteousness was **imputed by faith**: "then he believed in God, and it was imputed to him for righteousness."¹² (Emphasis Bahnsen)

According to some, Bahnsen would support the Federal Vision if he were here. This says that he totally disagrees with the Federal Vision. These same historical figures that the Federal Vision point toward as examples of righteous who are justified because of their righteous works, Bahnsen uses to demonstrate that they were justified by faith and not by works. Bahnsen says, "The law does **not**

¹⁰ Bahnsen, *Theonomy In Christian Ethics*, p. 90.

¹¹ Bahnsen, *Theonomy In Christian Ethics*, p. 125.

¹² Bahnsen, *Theonomy In Christian Ethics*, p. 126.

save a man, but it **does** show him **why** he needs to be saved and **how** he is to walk after he is saved.”¹³ (Emphasis Bahnsen)

We know from Federal Vision theology that the Mosaic Law never demanded perfection. We learned from Rich Lusk that Moses even said that the Law was easy to keep. We learned that God, on Judgment Day, will judge with “soft justice” being concerned not that we score a 100% on an ethics test but that we are loyal. What would Bahnsen say to this? He says:

As the sinner compares his life to the demands of the law he finds himself sold under sin and lost. The magnitude of his sinfulness is glaring because “it stands written that accursed is everyone who continues not in **all** the things having been written in the book of the law to do them” (Gal. 3:10 and “whoever keeps all the law, but stumbles in **one point** has become guilty of all” (James 2:10). The law, then, works wrath against the sinner (Rom. 4:15). Hence it should be plain that “no man is justified by the law in the sight of God (Gal. 3:11; cf. 2:16). To use the law as a means of justification is an unlawful use of the law (cf. I Tim. 1:8).¹⁴ (Emphasis Bahnsen)

Bahnsen says that the sinner is overwhelmed by his inability to keep the law because the law **demand perfect obedience**. No, the Federal Vision cannot claim Bahnsen on this one either. Bahnsen continues:

Christ’s perfect obedience to the law of God secures our release for the necessity of personally keeping the law as a condition of justification. “And may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith” (Phil. 3:9, NASV). Our righteousness before God must be that which is **imputed** to us, the righteousness of Christ who was sinless before the law ... Christ justifies us from all the things which the **Mosaic law was not able** to justify us (Acts 13:38f; cf. Rom. 3:28; 10:4; Acts 2:38; 10:43).¹⁵ (Emphasis Bahnsen)

¹³ Bahnsen, *Theonomy In Christian Ethics*, p. 127.

¹⁴ Bahnsen, *Theonomy In Christian Ethics*, p. 128

¹⁵ Bahnsen, *Theonomy In Christian Ethics*, pp. 128- 129.

Again, Bahnsen expresses his belief in the active obedience of Christ; he is not supposed to believe this because the Federal Vision denies it, and Bahnsen is supposed to be in their camp. Moreover, Bahnsen is supposed to believe that the Mosaic Law is easy to keep. Why does Bahnsen say that the Mosaic Law was not able to justify us? It is because the Bible teaches that the law cannot justify us. Bahnsen continues:

Justification must be **by the law** according to the **Pharisaical** converts (v.5); this squares with what we know about the doctrine of the Pharisees.¹⁶ (Emphasis Bahnsen)

This statement by Bahnsen would indicate that my chapter 7, “Modern Day Judaizers,” would be appropriate for the Federal Vision proponents. Remember, the Law is the Gospel, and the Gospel is the Law according to the Federal Vision. Bahnsen discusses Paul’s attitude about the Law and the Holy Spirit’s role in Law obedience:

The law had executed Paul because he was unable to keep it; the letter killed him (cf. 2 Cor. 3:6) ... Now the law can no longer manipulate him, for he is a dead servant; nothing more can be exacted of him. It did not supply the power to obey... Only the Holy Spirit of God can bring power to obey to the sinner, and that Holy Spirit was received not by law-works but by faith (3:2). The law is simply not a quickening power; it is without power because of sin (Rom. 8:3), and therefore unable to impart life and righteousness (Gal. 3:21). Thus anyone who seeks justification before God out of obedience to the law lies under the law’s curse. Paul directs this comment against the self-righteous legalism of the Judaziers and Jewish rabbis. They should have known that nobody shall be justified by the law, for the Older Testament clearly said that the righteous shall live by **faith...** If those individuals who want to be under the law as a way of salvation would truly **listen to the law**, then they would not submit to the Judaizers and their slave principle ... Galatians 5:4 make it unmistakably clear that Paul has been dealing in this epistle with the way of **justification**; if one takes the law as his salvation, then he has precluded grace.¹⁷ (Emphasis Bahnsen)

¹⁶ Bahnsen, *Theonomy In Christian Ethics*, p. 130.

¹⁷ Bahnsen, *Theonomy In Christian Ethics*, pp. 132- 133.

This sounds like Bahnsen would agree with my assessment of the Federal Vision as a heresy since he viewed the Judaizers as heretics. And what was a Judaizer? Someone who believed the Law could be kept for our justification, which is identical to what the Federal Vision teaches. Bahnsen is drawing a distinction between Law and faith, which Schlissel says was Luther's broken lever. The moment that Bahnsen drew a contrast between Law and faith, he has distanced himself from the Federal Vision's meaning of faith as "the obedience of faith." Bahnsen further distances himself from Federal Vision theology when he says:

Scripture uniformly views the law as a standard of righteousness after which we should pattern our sanctification and Christian life, but **justification** is never by our obedience to the law (after the fall of Adam and Eve). The Pharisees and Judaizers both missed this important truth and thereby unlawfully abused the law of God. It is necessary for us to **distinguish** between **two types** of forensic religion: that of Judaistic legalism and that of the Scriptures. In the former **self-righteousness** is generated. In the latter Christ perfectly obeys the law's demands and qualifies as an atoning substitute for those who have violated the law, and then in gratitude to God for His grace Christians pattern their lives after the laws as the expression of God's holy will. Before the law the sinner is guilty and powerless to obey its demands, but in the gospel he is forgiven and empowered (cf. Rom. 3:19-26; 8:1). When Paul says that we are not under the law but under the Spirit, he has in mind that we are no longer obligated to the law in regard to the accomplishment of righteousness or doing of God's commandments; instead, we are dependent upon the Spirit who renders us capable of doing what God demands (cf. Gal. 5:18 with Rom. 8:4). A proper understanding of the law's abiding **validity** must be accompanied with a recognition of the law's **inabilities**.¹⁸ (Emphasis Bahnsen)

According to the Federal Vision the Mosaic Law can be kept. Again, Lusk says it is not that hard to keep (See last paragraph on page 296). Bahnsen said that justification is **never** by obedience to the law. Shepherd, in his thesis 23, said that obedience to the commandments is necessary for continuing in the state of justification (See last quote on page 45). Bahnsen's quote should shed much

¹⁸ Bahnsen, *Theonomy In Christian Ethics*, pp. 135- 136.

light on Randy Booth's assertion that Bahnsen would have been a supporter of the Federal Vision if he were alive today. This is nonsense! Bahnsen has clearly stated that obedience to the law has **nothing** to do with justification but everything to do with sanctification. He made it very clear that we have a choice between two types of forensic justification: we can choose the self-righteousness of the Judaizers, or we can choose the imputation of Christ's perfect obedience. The Federal Vision believes in the first according to Bahnsen – the self-righteousness of the Judaizers. If it isn't clear enough yet, Bahnsen in speaking about Paul's statements in Romans 7 says this:

He refutes his antinomian opponents who would make him as a minister of the new covenant a despiser for grace. But since the law came from God, Paul appropriately states that it came in glory. Nevertheless, the law is not to be exalted at the expense of the gospel. The gospel far **excels** in glory because it has renewing **power**. Although Moses' glory faded, the glory of the good news in the face of Jesus Christ does not (2 Cor. 4:6).¹⁹ (Emphasis Bahnsen)

Schlissel called Luther's view as false, but Bahnsen has just affirmed Luther's dichotomy of Law and Gospel in terms of justification; thereby, he is implicated by inference in Schlissel's condemnation. Greg Bahnsen's son, David said that his father thought very highly of Steve Schlissel's ministry in New York City. Does this mean that Bahnsen would have agreed with Schlissel on this controversy? Absolutely not! There is no question that Bahnsen would have called Schlissel and all of the Federal Vision proponents to repentance for having betrayed the Gospel. Bahnsen stated:

Consequently we glory in the gospel of Christ and His Spirit as accomplishing what the law could not; that is, we magnify the gospel as the **power of God unto salvation** unto all who believe, for therein is revealed the **righteousness of God unto our justification (Rom. 1:16f)**.²⁰ (Emphasis Bahnsen)

I have proved that Bahnsen believed in the active obedience of Christ in that Christ's righteousness is imputed to us as our righteousness. This contradicts the Federal Vision. As I pointed out in earlier chapters, the Federal Vision is very deceptive in this regard because they will say that they believe in an active

¹⁹ Bahnsen, *Theonomy In Christian Ethics*, p. 136.

²⁰ Bahnsen, *Theonomy In Christian Ethics*, p. 137.

obedience too. They believe that Jesus actively kept the Law for Himself in order to qualify as the Redeemer. The Federal Vision does not believe in an active obedience of Jesus in **our stead**. Rich Lusk said that Dr. Morton Smith was entirely wrong when Dr. Smith said – “*It is Christ’s active fulfillment of the law that becomes the ground of our acceptance with God. It is this righteousness that is imputed to us*” (See last paragraph on page 145). Lusk said that Smith’s view was problematic, and went on to say that Jesus’ thirty-three years of Law keeping being imputed to us was unnecessary. Lusk said that there is no notion of this in the Bible (See second and third paragraphs on page 146).

Greg Bahnsen has something quite explicit to say about the Federal Vision’s concept of no need of Christ’s righteousness being imputed to us. Bahnsen states:

We have no reason to hope that God, who immutably righteous, will lower His ethical norms in order to accommodate our unrighteousness. However, God does credit the perfect obedience of Christ to our account, thereby being just and the justifier of His people (cf. Rom. 3:26). Herein the law takes on a two-fold significance for Christians; **first**, obedience to the law by the Messiah plays an integral part in the accomplishment of salvation, and **second** followers of Christ thus have set before them the example and goal of lawful living by their Lord.²¹ (Emphasis Bahnsen)

Bahnsen has just refuted Rich Lusk’s views that God doesn’t require a 100% on an ethics test, and that God’s final judgment will be a “soft judgment.” He continues:

God could only forgive sins in a manner which is consistent with His holiness; in salvation righteousness and peace must kiss each other (Ps. 85:9f). Consequently, salvation with justification is impossible, and justification without righteousness is inconceivable. There must be perfect righteousness in the reign of God’s grace for our salvation. Therefore, Scripture centers on the **obedience** of Christ- both active and passive – because it is the necessary requirement for the full justification of sinners.²² (Emphasis Bahnsen)

²¹ Bahnsen, *Theonomy In Christian Ethics*, p. 149.

²² Bahnsen, *Theonomy In Christian Ethics*, p. 152.

The extent of Christ's righteous obedience is seen in the fact that He both actively obeyed the prescriptive as well as passively obeying the penal requirements of the law, the former in order to qualify as a substitute, the latter in order to atone for sin. Having obeyed the law in its moral requirements in order that His perfect righteousness might be imputed to us. He came under the law's curse and condemnation so that our transgressions could be forgiven.²³

Therefore, although **our own** obedience to the law cannot be used as a way of justification, we are saved by the **imputed** obedience of the Messiah (I Cor. 1:30; Phil. 3:9), an obedience to **both** the prescriptive and penal requirements of God's law. With its customary accuracy the Westminster Confession states: The Lord Jesus, by His perfect obedience, and sacrifice of Himself, which He through the eternal Spirit, once offered up unto God, hath fully satisfied the justice of His father; and purchased, not only reconciliation, but an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven, for all those whom the Father hath given unto Him" (Chapter 8, section 5).²⁴ (Emphasis Bahnsen)

So important is the law in our salvation that our justification is grounded in Christ's obedience to it (Rom. 5:17-19); we are saved by grace no doubt, but by a grace made possible through the lawful obedience of God's Son. Our **faith in Christ** is counted for righteousness, thereby justifying us freely by God's grace **through Christ's righteousness**, which is declared for the remission of our sins (Rom. 4:5-8; 3:22-25; 5:17-19).²⁵ (Emphasis Bahnsen)

Metaphorically speaking, Bahnsen just put the "blow torch" to the Federal Vision's denial of Christ's active obedience. Bahnsen has clearly expressed the historic Reformed view, which is not the view of the Federal Vision. Bahnsen probably would have led the charge in the condemnation of the Federal Vision if he were still alive. Bahnsen moves on to discuss the role of obedience in the Christian life as a means of sanctification, not justification. Bahnsen states:

²³ Bahnsen, *Theonomy In Christian Ethics*, p. 152.

²⁴ Bahnsen, *Theonomy In Christian Ethics*, p. 153.

²⁵ Bahnsen, *Theonomy In Christian Ethics*, p. 154.

Furthermore, the Holy Spirit causes the believer in his sanctification to grow in **likeness** and obedience to Christ, “to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:13; cf. v. 15; Gal. 4:19) ... Union with Christ, which underlies our salvation, entails the requirement of sharing His righteous character – of **identifying** with His lawful obedience... **Those who have been saved by Christ’s obedience must strive to imitate the same obedient spirit.** “Hereby we know that we are in him: he that saith that he abideth in him ought himself also to walk even as he walked.²⁶ (Emphasis Bahnsen)

There is much in this quote that refutes Federal Vision theology. First, Bahnsen distinguishes justification from sanctification. Our obedience in keeping the commandments is the fruit or evidence of our justification. Notice that Bahnsen says that the believer must strive to imitate Christ’s obedience. Union with Christ entails being found righteous in Christ and then obeying Him by the power of the Holy Spirit. Our obedience flows out of Christ’s obedience. Bahnsen is in total agreement with the Westminster Confession’s statement that obedience on our part is the accompanying grace that flows out of our justification (WCF 11:2). Bahnsen makes it crystal clear when he says:

The removal of man’s guilt and his securing of a right standing in the sight of God comes, not by his own personal works of the law, but only through the imputation of Christ’s righteousness (His perfect obedience, both active and passive, to every demand of God’s law). The sinner’s legal condition is changed by God’s judicial act, grounded in the “alien” righteousness of Christ, so that God’s people are entitled to the eternal enjoyments of God presence.²⁷

To summarize what has been said to this point, we can say that salvation is not exhaustively circumscribed by God’s pardon of, and imputation of Christ’s righteousness to, the sinner, salvation continues beyond the **point** of justification into the **process** of sanctification, a process which begins with a **definitive break** with the bondage of sinful depravity and matures by **progressively preparing** the Christian to enjoy the internal purifying of his moral condition ... It is the

²⁶ Bahnsen, *Theonomy In Christian Ethics*, p. 155.

²⁷ Bahnsen, *Theonomy In Christian Ethics*, p. 157.

perfect obedience of God's Son that is imputed to the Christian in justification, and sanctification can be understood as a progressive growth toward the **personal realization** of that level of righteousness which has been imputed to the believer.²⁸ (Emphasis Bahnsen)

I have demonstrated in earlier chapters that the Federal Vision believes in a process justification. It argues for an **initial** justification and a **final** justification. Rich Lusk said that justification is a dynamic fluid concept. Bahnsen utterly refutes this false theology. Bahnsen affirms the historic Reformed position as set forth in the Westminster Confession when he emphasizes that justification is a **point** reality while sanctification is a **process**. He would have been appalled with the Federal Vision's blurring of this distinction. Bahnsen continued to emphasize over and over that our justification is rooted in the imputation of Christ's righteousness to us. He understood that we can't be saved without this imputation. The Federal Vision, namely Norman Shepherd, insists that it is only the passive obedience of Christ that saves us. Bahnsen continues to differentiate between justification and sanctification:

This inescapable requirement of holiness or sanctification is **not** contradictory to salvation by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8, 9); we are not saved **by** obedience, but **unto** obedience.²⁹ (Emphasis Bahnsen)

David Bahnsen and others in the Federal Vision believed that Greg Bahnsen would have enthusiastically endorsed Steve Schlissel's views of the Law. This is categorically incorrect. Greg Bahnsen just stated that we are not saved **by** obedience, but **unto** obedience. Steve Schlissel has said:

Obedience is not merely a test or evidence of saving faith; it is inseparably bound up in its character. There is no disobedient yet saving faith. It is not faith plus obedience, but the obedience of faith.³⁰

Bahnsen would also take great exception to Schlissel's comments that the law and the gospel are identical. Bahnsen was careful to relate the two but make a fine distinction:

²⁸ Bahnsen, *Theonomy In Christian Ethics*, pp. 160- 161.

²⁹ Bahnsen, , *Theonomy In Christian Ethics* p. 162.

³⁰ Steve Schlissel "Living the Reformed Faith in the Real World: True Confessions," <www. messiahnyc.org>

In Biblical perspective, grace and promise are not antithetical to law and demand. The law and the gospel both aim at the same thing; what the law was unable to bestow upon us, the gospel has the power to grant. Hence, Paul can say, “Is the law contrary to the promises of God? May it never be! (Gal. 3:21).³¹

It is Schlissel who believes that the law can be kept. He insists that this is the real lesson of the story of the young rich ruler. This is why Schlissel says that we are asking the wrong question if we ask, “What must I do to be saved?” Rather Schlissel insists that we must rather ask, “What does the Lord require of me?” He then says that the Law tells us what we must do to be saved – obey it. If Bahnsen were alive with us today, he would surely say that Schlissel is a modern day Judaizer.

Before I close this chapter on Bahnsen’s views, I want to quote from a sermon that Bahnsen gave on Romans 3:21-30. Regarding the necessity for righteousness outside of us, Bahnsen said:

All mankind comes under the judgment of God. And so if your righteousness is that which is geared to the law, you are lost. But now another kind of righteousness has been manifested. What a glorious mercy. “But now apart from the law of God has manifested a righteousness’ being witnessed by the law and the prophets.”³²

And what is this righteousness that God has shown apart from the law, apart from our efforts, apart from our obedience? He tells us in the next verse. “Even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ unto all them that believe. . . This is God’s provision of the righteousness that He requires. We said as we began this morning, God will not change His mind. **God demands perfect righteousness.** He won’t violate His own justice. And so how can He possibly justify sinners?³³ (Emphasis mine)

³¹ Bahnsen, *Theonomy In Christian Ethics*, p. 183.

³² Bahnsen, A sermon preached titled *Paul’s View of the Law: Justified by Faith – Romans 3:21-30*. Transcribed by Wayne Rogers for *The Counsel of Chalcedon*. (April 2005), p. 3.

³³ Bahnsen’s sermon on Romans 3:21-30.

Here is another source from Bahnsen that indicates that God's standard is a perfect standard. So much for Bahnsen agreeing with the Federal Vision on its view of the Law. To answer his own question, Bahnsen continues:

Here is God's own provision of a righteousness that He requires, a righteousness apart from the law, apart from all of our effort – all of our effort – a righteousness that has nothing to do with any merit in you or in me, a righteousness that does not come because you have even in a small way lived up to what God wants... "But now apart from the law, a righteousness of God has been made manifest even the righteousness of God has been made manifest even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ unto all them that believe being justified freely by his grace." How utterly gracious on the part of God to save sinners. Vs 26 tells us, however, God accomplished that; this is the amazing thing. God accomplished giving this gift to sinners without violating His justice. He didn't send forth a righteousness which is contrary to the law.

What God did was to supply His own Son. He provided a substitute. And He said "Instead of doing it on your own, trust My Son who did it for you. You didn't have to live up to the law. You cannot live up to the law. By the law you will be cursed. Instead of trying then to keep the law and gain my favor, then completely give up your own effort, and turn rather and trust simply in the accomplishment of My Son."³⁴

Again, Bahnsen destroys forever the idea that the Law can be kept by us. The Federal Vision insists that it can be kept for our justification; it insists that Moses' Law was not that hard. Bahnsen recognizes the trouble with our sinful thinking when he says that we have a tendency to think that there must be something for us to do. Bahnsen states, "*You know sometimes we find that hard to do. Its kind of strange, there is this kind of works righteousness that's really got its tangles around our heart.*"³⁵ Yes, I totally sympathize with Bahnsen's statement. It's too bad that the Federal Vision doesn't realize this fact. It wants to resurrect that old works salvation mentality, which is what every other religion in the world does. The great demarcation between Christianity and other world religions is that Christianity is God reaching down to us rather than our

³⁴ Bahnsen's sermon on Romans 3:21-30.

³⁵ Bahnsen's sermon on Romans 3:21-30.

feeble attempts to please Him with our sin tainted efforts. The Federal Vision utterly destroys this demarcation and reduces Christianity to the level of all other pagan religions. Bahnsen makes a statement in his sermon that every Federal Vision teacher and sympathizer better heed:

But, you see, if you approach going to church, if you approach a daily time of reading the word and prayer, if you approach witnessing, or works of mercy, or any obedience that you offer to God, and you should offer as much as you can give, but if you approach any of that in the attitude that somehow this will show that I am worthy rather than simply saying “My only hope is in Jesus Christ,” **then you will be lost.**³⁶ (Emphasis mine)

I cannot get more serious in echoing what Bahnsen has just exhorted. In another chapter I mentioned that any of the Federal Vision preachers that really believe in their heart that obedience to the law is what maintains our justification are in serious trouble. Any person in their congregations who really believes this lie is in serious trouble. I mentioned that I don’t want to be in Rich Lusk’s shoes on Judgment Day who claims that God will render “soft justice.” I don’t want to be in Steve Schlissel’s shoes either on Judgment Day who says that we have asked the wrong question, “What must I do to be saved?” but believed Schlissel’s alternative – “What does the Lord require of me?” This is why Paul in Galatians 1:6-9 says that those who preach another gospel of works stand under the anathema of God. I know that if any Federal Vision teacher or sympathizer reads this, he may scoff saying, “Why that judgmental Otis ought to be ashamed for calling us heretics; he is totally wrong.” Are you willing to bet your soul on it? I say with all seriousness; I plead with all who have come to embrace this false theology, please repent before its too late. Do not let your pride get in the way. If you don’t, then on that great and terrible day, you will hear the horrendous words of Jesus – “Depart from Me; I never knew you.”

Greg Bahnsen died in 1995 before the Federal Vision theology was unloaded publicly upon the Reformed world in January 2002. This does not mean that there were no instances prior to 2002. Shepherd’s book was published in 2000, and Steve Schlissel mentions that he was met with resistance in Canada in late 2001. It was at the 2002 Auburn Avenue Pastors’ Conference that major emphasis was given to this theology. Prior to Bahnsen’s death in 1995 there were occasions where there were defections from Protestantism back to

³⁶ Bahnsen’s sermon on Romans 3:21-30.

Roman Catholicism. Bahnsen warned us back then of Romanizing tendencies floating around in Protestantism. He says:

This is important now and it's important for two reasons: first, in the most general use, the issues in the Protestant Reformation have not been fully resolved even yet and we have in our day and age, and I need to tell you this to warn you to protect your own souls, we have in our day and age people who at one time knew the grace of God, at least knew how to teach it, had been taught it, who knew that justification is by grace through faith in Christ, who have nevertheless left the Presbyterian church and gone back into Roman Catholicism ... How can any explanation be given to that kind of thing? Of course, I do pray with all my might that God will take away their confusion and restore the truth in the lives of these men who have done this, if that truth was ever there, genuinely there, in their hearts. But if there is self-conscious affirmation of the teaching of the Roman Catholic church, these men cannot be saved and neither can you and that's why I have to set this out very plainly for you this morning.³⁷

I can only imagine what Bahnsen would think today. I have demonstrated in chapter 10 that the Federal Vision is a hybridization of Roman Catholicism. I mentioned in an earlier chapter that I know of at least three persons who have gone back into Roman Catholicism due to Federal Vision influence. The casualties will be even greater if we don't stop this movement in its tracks. Bahnsen talked about the errors of Rome:

Justification is not causing someone to have sanctifying grace in his heart. The Roman Catholic church is simply wrong about this. For God to justify the sinner is for God to act as a judge and to declare the sinner righteous. God will also make the sinner righteous. You say, "Well then what difference does it make, Dr. Bahnsen; you admit what the Roman Catholics do, that those who are going to be saved need to lead new lives." Absolutely, But that isn't what the Roman Catholic church teaches. It teaches that those who lead new lives will be saved. Don't think that I am just drawing a very minor point in English grammar when I put it to you that way

³⁷ Bahnsen's sermon on Romans 3:21-30.

because on that point rests your salvation. It is a matter of eternal consequences that you get this right. God does make saved people to be holy but He does not save them by making them holy.³⁸

This is what so many of us in the Reformed world have been trying to tell those in the Federal Vision. If you simply relegated good works as necessary evidence of a justified life then there would be no controversy. However, because the Federal Vision links obedience to God's Law to faith itself and to the act of justification, even calling justification a process, we have a controversy on our hands. Those in the Federal Vision have been somewhat dismayed by many sectors of the Reformed world who have reacted so strongly to their teaching. One Federal Vision proponent referred to my denomination, the RPCUS, as "those who came out swinging," after hearing the tapes at the 2002 AAPC. What did he expect? Did he think that we would not see their teaching as a direct challenge to the gospel? Obviously not.

In commenting about Romans 3:21, Bahnsen has said:

And the reason why He maintains His justice in declaring you righteous though you yourself are not, is because in Christ your record has changed. You mustn't think that in Christ God has simply ignored your record. He has changed your record. Amazingly God now looks upon you as Jesus. He looks upon you as righteous. That's the point of verse 21, now apart from the law a righteousness of God has been manifested. God has set forth a different righteousness, not your own. Luther called it an "alien righteousness," and he had that right. It's alien because it doesn't belong to me; I have not earned it. It's not mine by right. It's the righteousness of Jesus Christ. But here's the point, in Christ it's not alien to me, it is now mine; not my accomplishment. Oh, it's a big theological word but I think maybe you would appreciate it, it's by "imputation." God has now imputed to you the righteousness of Jesus Christ by faith so that in your record, as He opens the folder up, and read what is there, He sees the righteousness of Christ now constituted as your own.³⁹

³⁸ Bahnsen's sermon on Romans 3:21-30.

³⁹ Bahnsen's sermon on Romans 3:21-30.

One thing is for sure. Steve Schlissel would not be happy that Bahnsen agrees with Martin Luther on the view of “alien righteousness.” As noted previously, Schlissel believes Luther was wrong. Rich Lusk would not rejoice either that Bahnsen says that the imputed righteousness of Jesus is credited to our account, which makes us righteous. After all, Lusk said that “*final justification is to the (faithful) doers of the law (Rom. 2:1ff) and that by those good works which make faith complete (James 2:14ff). Justification will not be fully realized until the resurrection.*”⁴⁰

Bahnsen rejects the fundamental notion of the Federal Vision that justifying faith be defined as “the obedience of faith.” He states:

He calls on us to have faith in Christ but he doesn’t make faith the basis of our justification. Now this may call for some quick explanation because you have probably heard the expression, which is true and precious to Protestants, that “We are justified by faith.” But you have to understand we are not justified on the basis of faith. We are justified by faith, or if you will, through faith, but not on the basis of faith . . . The basis of God’s justifying work is the redemption that is brought to me in Jesus Christ.⁴¹

This statement of Bahnsen utterly refutes those who think that Bahnsen is teaching what Norman Shepherd has taught. Shepherd said:

In fact, Genesis 15:6 says that Abraham’s faith was so significant that it was credited to him as righteousness! If so, then righteousness was a condition to be met, and faith met that condition.⁴²

As I conclude this chapter, it should be evident from Greg Bahnsen’s writings that he is not even in the same ballpark as the Federal Vision men. I want to address David Bahnsen: “David, please forsake the Federal Vision camp. Your father left you the means for you to have discernment; he left you his great book *Theonomy In Christian Ethics* and other valuable tools. You don’t need to wish that your daddy would come down to you and speak to you; your daddy has said, “Son, I have shown you the way.”

⁴⁰ Lusk, *Future Justification To The Doers of the Law*,” p. 8.

⁴¹ Bahnsen’s sermon on Romans 3:21-30.

⁴² Norman Shepherd, *The Call of Grace*, p. 15.