

Steve Wilkins' Re-examination Reveals Unorthodoxy

Introduction

I have one overriding purpose in this analysis. It is my love for the Word of God and duty as a minister of our Lord Jesus Christ to do what Jude 3 tells us – *“Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you **contend earnestly** for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.”* One of the primary responsibilities of elders is set forth in Titus 1:9-11 – *“holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching that he may be able both **to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.** For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision who **must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach, for the sake of sordid gain.**”* It was for this very reason that a year ago I wrote my book, *“Danger In the Camp: An Analysis and Refutation of the Heresies of the Federal Vision.”*

The theology of the Federal Vision is a serious threat to the spiritual health of our churches. It must be exposed with its teachers. Men's souls are at stake. Getting it wrong as to how men are justified before God is no minor point in theology. The worse thing that a person can hear from the Lord Jesus on Judgment Day is – “Depart from me; I never knew you, you who are lawless.”

It is not my goal to be contentious, but I am obligated to exhort in sound doctrine and refute those who teach things that are upsetting families. There are many people in the pews of Reformed churches who are confused. I seek to bring clarity to the truth of God's Word. As one goes through this analysis, it should be evident that I am passionate about what I believe.

A Brief Historical Setting

Steve Wilkins and Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church (PCA) dropped a theological bomb upon the Reformed world when they hosted the 2002 Auburn Avenue Pastors' Conference in January of 2002. The speakers at that conference included Steve Wilkins, Steve Schlissel, Doug Wilson, and John Barach . They presented views regarding the covenant that were a challenge to the historic Reformed faith and views that were downright heretical. The true gospel was challenged.

The first Reformed denomination to openly challenge the views of that conference was the Reformed Presbyterian Church In the United States (RPCUS) in June 2002. This is the denomination of which I am a member. The RPCUS sent letters to each of these men's authoritative bodies requesting these bodies to discipline them for unorthodox teaching. Since 2002, several denominations and various presbyteries have also agreed that this teaching commonly known now as the “Federal Vision” is out of accord with the Reformed Confessional documents, namely the Three Forms of Unity (Belgic

Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dordt), and the Westminster Standards (Westminster Confession and Larger and Shorter Catechisms).

In July of 2005 Louisiana Presbytery of the PCA examined Steve Wilkins regarding his views that disturbed many in the PCA. Wilkins not only had expressed his views at the 2002 AAPC but also at the 2003 AAPC, and at the 2003 Knox Seminary Colloquium. Wilkins' views were examined very loosely, and the presbytery exonerated him. However, those very familiar with Wilkins' views were very disappointed in the inadequacy of the examination.

In February 2005 Mississippi Valley Presbytery (PCA) had already condemned the theology of the Federal Vision as out of accord with the Westminster Standards. Since then several presbyteries of the PCA sent overtures to the 2006 PCA General Assembly regarding the views of the Federal Vision. Recently, Central Carolina Presbytery (PCA) asked Louisiana Presbytery to defend their examination of Steve Wilkins in 2005 to the Standing Judicial Committee (SJC). The SJC then directed Louisiana Presbytery to respond to several charges that Central Carolina Presbytery leveled against Steve Wilkins' theology.

On December 9, 2006 Louisiana Presbytery re-examined Steve Wilkins particularly addressing the charges brought against him by Central Carolina Presbytery. The Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church has made available to the public the written responses of Steve Wilkins to these charges.

It is this written response that I want to analyze and demonstrate that Rev. Steve Wilkins has manipulated his views to make readers think that his views really are compatible with the Westminster Standards. He must try to make them compatible; otherwise, he can be disciplined for failing to uphold these Standards that he vowed to uphold at his ordination into the PCA to uphold.

I will demonstrate that Steve Wilkins is still out of accord with the historic Reformed Faith, that his views are blatantly contradictory to it, that Wilkins misquotes some of the Reformers, namely John Calvin in a vain attempt to reconcile his views to historic Reformed Christianity.

The written response provided by the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church is seriously flawed in a glaring way by absence of two major issues under debate with Federal Vision theology. Nothing substantially was said about Wilkins' views about justification by faith alone and the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers. These are two critical issues which are at the heart of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

If this written response is indeed the totality of the re-examination, then this exam was totally inadequate. In this written response, Steve Wilkins has expressed a certain amount of gratitude to the writings of various Federal Vision proponents. One of these is Rich Lusk. Wilkins has never gone on record to refute anything that Rich Lusk has written. In my book *"Danger In the Camp: An Analysis and Refutation of the Heresies of the Federal Vision"* I have demonstrated with lengthy quotes from Rich Lusk that he

openly denies the historic understanding of justification by faith alone and the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers. At the 2002 AAPC, Steve Wilkins publicly endorsed Norman Shepherd's book "*Call of Grace*." In my book, I also demonstrate how Shepherd has denied the two cardinal doctrines mentioned earlier. Steve Wilkins has advocated what all these men have espoused in their definition of saving faith. Wilkins has defined faith as "the obedience of faith." Nothing in the exam addressed this definition. Although Wilkins has expressed views such as "**final salvation**," of "**initial covenantal grace**," and of the **reprobate as having "a justification"** on p.13 of the written response. More will be said on this when I give a more detailed analysis of his responses. Though the Presbytery did not directly question him on justification, Wilkins has stated enough to squarely put him into the camp of the unorthodox.

The real need for the Reformed world is for there to be a heresy trial of Steve Wilkins in the PCA. Wilkins, just like several of the other men in the Federal Vision camp, are deceptive as to how they try to manipulate words. Only in an immediate cross examination of his comments can his heretical views be more readily seen. Of course, I believe that Wilkins has said enough in his writings and lectures to convict him of heresy.

The basis of my analysis will be his actual responses in the re-examination and excerpts from his other sources, particularly his lectures and comments in the 2003 Colloquium.

I am terribly grieved that Steve Wilkins has attempted to justify his views as being compatible with the Westminster Standards. The only thing is that he must desire respectability in the PCA as opposed to leaving voluntarily. What is odd in this written response is that it is much different than what one hears from many corners of the Federal Vision camp. I frequently hear people complaining that we should go only to the Bible and not the Confessional documents to argue the case. Such complaints may be common among non credal denominations, but it is wholly out of line with those within credal denominations to speak like this. The Creeds have never been exalted above the Scriptures by Confessional churches; they have always been recognized as secondary sources, but sources nonetheless that accurately convey biblical truth. Those who want to not bring the Confessional Standards into the picture are those who usually know that their views are already out of accord. It is an attempt to foster upon the church views that are contrary to the historic understanding.

But since Wilkins pleads innocence to violating the Westminster Standards, I will use the Standards to prove the case against him.

Wilkins and the Covenant of Works

When asked if there was any area of the Westminster Confession that he disagreed with, Wilkins made this comment about the doctrine of the covenant of works. He states:

I quibbled with the terminology of the so-called "covenant of works" (WCF 7.1) — I do not believe this to be the best way to refer to the pre-fall covenant between God and Adam since it is open to such wide misunderstanding regarding the whole

matter of works and merit. I do not disagree, however, with the description of the “covenant of works.”

Wilkins simply states that he is in agreement, but the evidence of the views of the Federal Vision are quite explicit in their denial of the covenant of works as expressed by the Westminster Standards. Two of the most outspoken critics of the covenant of works have been Rich Lusk and James Jordan. In the preface to Wilkins’ written response, he says he is indebted to the writings of Lusk and Jordan. **Never** has Wilkins contradicted anything said by Lusk and Jordan.

I believe Wilkins to be deceptive in his comment, using terminology that he has misgivings of this usage because of the “whole matter of works and merit.” The whole Federal Vision wants to avoid **any** reference to “merit” in an attempt to come across as champions of grace, but this is simply equivocation on their part. By merit the Federal Vision wants to use it as something “human produced.” Norman Shepherd has no problem criticizing “merit,” but he then turns around and says the following:

“Do the promises actually describe the reward merited by good works? Not at all! Fulfilling the obligations of the Abrahamic covenant is never represented as meritorious achievement... The obedience that leads to the fulfillment of promise is totally different. It is the expression of faith and trust in the Lord, not the expression of confidence in human effort” (Shepherd, *Call of Grace*, pp. 20-21).

Note that Shepherd is not opposed to effort in our justification, just the wrong kind of effort – only the kind of confidence in human effort. **But this is still works salvation!** The Judaizers were not advocating a works stemming from some nebulous human effort but a works mentality of keeping the ceremonial and moral law for their justification.

Shepherd has expressed explicitly that obedience to the Law is a condition to receive the promises of the Abrahamic covenant when the apostle Paul has emphatically declared that the promises of this covenant are not fulfilled by such works but by faith. Faith and works are contrasted, not viewed as something identical (Romans 4).

Wilkins agrees with Shepherd. He recommended Shepherd’s book. As Shepherd is playing word games, so is Wilkins. There is no way Wilkins agrees with the covenant of works as expressed by the Westminster Standards. He is pulling the same game with this works/merit.

Norman Shepherd emphatically rejects the notion of the covenant of works view as being the works/merit principle (*Call of Grace*, p.25). Shepherd also denies what Charles Hodge taught on the covenant of works, stating that this notion of a covenant of works viewed maintaining eternal life as a reward for perfect obedience. Shepherd, in rejecting this covenant states: *“Whether it is called a covenant of life or a covenant of works, the idea is the same. Life is promised on the condition of works. The new covenant, by way of contrast, promises life on the sole condition of faith. Eternal life is the gift of grace”* (Shepherd, pp.25-26).

Wilkins will betray this feigned allegiance to “the covenant of works” when he discusses Christ as the second Adam and what it means to be in union with Him. Wilkins **NEVER** speaks in his re-examination or in any of his other works of Christ’s active obedience being imputed to us as our righteousness. So, I am sorry, but I believe Wilkins to be deceptive at this point. **He does not subscribe to WCF 7:1-2. All the evidence is against him.** Not once, not once has Wilkins contradicted Shepherd, Lusk, or Jordan on their denial of the covenant of works. You see, in a heresy trial, the prosecutor could point blank ask Wilkins if he rejects what these men have said. I can assure the reader he wouldn’t.

John Fesko has written an excellent article on the covenant of works whereby he exposes the weaknesses of Lusk and Jordan’s denial of the covenant of works. Fesko cites a very important quote:

“Wilhelmus á Brakel, a 17th Century Dutch reformed theologian, writes concerning the covenant of works: Acquaintance with this covenant is of the greatest importance, for whoever errs here or denies the existence of the covenant of works, will not understand the covenant of grace, and will readily err concerning the mediatorship of the Lord Jesus. Such a person will very readily deny that Christ by His active obedience has merited a right to eternal life for the elect.”

If Wilkins subscribes to the covenant of works as presented in the WCF, why then doesn’t he argue for Christ’s active obedience in terms of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to believers? Why doesn’t he say that the covenant of works in the Garden was presented as a way demanding perfect obedience? Why doesn’t he say in agreement with WCF 19:1-2 that this covenant of works as a law continued in the Mosaic covenant as a perfect rule of righteousness quoting Romans 5; Galatians 3:10 as proofs?

The reason Wilkins doesn’t do this is because he doesn’t believe it! It is best that he says nothing but “Oh, I agree with it, sort of” (my paraphrase). He is conspicuously silent; otherwise, he is in trouble if his real views are known. **None** of the Federal Vision proponents have accepted the notion of the covenant of works as presented in the Westminster Standards. This is why there needs to be a heresy trial so that the precise nature of his views can be brought out. As it stands now, he makes a very short statement that he is uncomfortable with calling this covenant with Adam as a covenant of works, which is a clever way of saying I don’t agree with it without explicitly saying he disagrees. And when Wilkins says that he does not disagree with the description of the covenant of works, he has said nothing that has content. He has cleverly avoided the question. There is no one to follow up on his vague answers, forcing him to be precise.

Wilkins challenges the proof texts of the Westminster Standards

One of the most damaging statements Wilkins makes is with reference to the following question:

Do you believe any of your public teaching or writing since the beginning of the “Auburn Avenue Theology” controversy either contradicts or is inconsistent with the Standards? (Besides your registered exceptions)

Wilkins responds as follows:

No I do not. My concerns I have not been with the Confession’s statements or definitions but rather with how we read the texts of Scripture which appear to contradict some of the statements and positions set forth in the Confession and Catechisms. I do not believe the scriptural texts do contradict the standards in fact but they are simply using terminology in a broader way than it is defined by our Confessional standards. This means that we must consider carefully the meaning of these terms in the particular contexts in which they are used. That has been my concern in regard to the so-called “Federal Vision” issues (page 3 of reexamination).

I have highlighted the sentence that reveals a generic disagreement with the Westminster Standards. Wilkins has challenged how the Westminster divines substantiated their statements. Challenging the proof texts is a blatant challenge of the biblical basis of the Confession. Doug Wilson, a fellow Federal Vision proponent, has openly stated that his church accepts the Westminster Standards **without their proof texts**. It is obvious why they deny them because the proof texts refute Federal Vision theology. Without proof texts, one can make the Confession say **anything** you want. This will become quite apparent when Wilkins believes in an “election” not taught in the Confession. For example, Steve Schlissel has openly challenged the Westminster Standards on using Romans 3 to defend the universal doctrine of original sin. In not accepting the proof text, Schlissel has openly denied the Reformed doctrine of total depravity. For a discussion on this see pages 307-314 in my book “*Danger In the Camp.*”

Wilkins’ comment is a comprehensive challenge to the Westminster Standards. This denial by Wilkins, in my opinion, is self condemning. This is most glaring in his views on the use of “elect” or “election.” The Westminster Standards are very precise in using the term “elect” to refer to only the invisible church in terms of receiving God’s saving graces such as “regeneration,” “justification,” “forgiveness of sins,” and “adoption.” The Confession’s proof texts bind us to a certain view of election. In all boils down to biblical exegesis, and the Federal Vision is deplorable when it comes to rendering sound biblical exegesis of key texts. One of the most tragic examples of a faulty exegesis is Wilkins’ interpretation of the parable on forgiveness in Matthew 18:21-35. More will be said on this later, but he must twist it to fit into his horrendous view that one can be genuinely forgiven of sins but then later become a reprobate and lose that forgiveness.

On pages 3-4 of his re-examination, Wilkins fundamentally gives an accurate view of how the Westminster Confession confines the idea of the “elect” to only those who are the recipients of God’s saving graces. At this point, a person thinks, “Oh, well, Wilkins is Confessional after all.” Wilkins sets his reader up to begin to interject his alien views, making one think that this is what the Confession really states. Here is where the subtle twisting begins. On page 4, Wilkins states:

In the end, however, this gives us very little to go on, and the proof-texts themselves are not confessionally binding or authoritative. When the confession says that these non-elect people “never truly come unto Christ,” it means that they do not receive Christ with a faith that perseveres unto **final salvation**. The confession does not address the question of whether they are able come unto Christ in some other sense and **participate in some sense in the blessings of redemption that ultimately fall short of the fullness of salvation**.

Further, when the confession says that these non-elect people “cannot be saved,” one must recognize that the Standards use the word “save” and its cognates almost exclusively to refer to the **fullness of salvation** inherited when Christ returns. In this sense, apostates are not saved because they fail to persevere and fall short of receiving **the fullness of redemption** as it is described in WCF 10-18.

I have highlighted these comments in yellow and red due to the importance of showing how unbiblical and non-Confessional Wilkins really is. First, when Wilkins states that the proof texts are not confessionally binding and authoritative, he is trying to argue in the line of thinking of Jeff Meyers and James B. Jordan. These Federal Vision proponents vainly attempt to say that the proof texts are not important. Yes, the Westminster delegates debated the issues and originally presented the Confession to Parliament for approval without proof texts, but then under the demand of the House of Commons added the proof texts. Whether or not the delegates originally included them is **not the point**. When asked to provide them, they did so, and the proof texts provided is the thinking of the Assembly as to the biblical basis for their theological statements. Below is a brief excerpt from an article that I derived off of the internet entitled, “A Brief Historical Survey of the Westminster Assembly and Standards.” I cannot ascertain who posted it.

A Brief Historical Survey of the Westminster Assembly and Standards

The scriptural proofs for the Confession have an interesting story behind it. During the Assembly’s proceedings, the Assembly settled upon various articles of the Confession through the process of discussion and debate. One of the rules in these proceedings was that speakers should make their statements good from Scripture. No doubt, many many quotations from the Scriptures were brought out in their meetings. Nevertheless, the Assembly voted to adopt the precise wording of the Confession without incorporating the numerous biblical references raised during the discussion of each article.

When the document was completed in December 1646, it was simply the text of the Confession alone that was presented to Parliament. The House of Commons was not satisfied and they gave orders to the Assembly requiring them to add scriptural proofs to

it. This action was probably a stall tactic, because the House of Commons were Erastians and they opposed the Confession's teaching on Church government and the relationship between the Church and the state. But while the motives of the Parliament were suspect, their action greatly enhanced the usefulness of the Confession. Robert Baillie, one of the six Scottish commissioners, wrote, "This innovation of our opposites (the Erastians) may well cost the Assembly some time... but it will be for the advantage and strength of the work."

In replying the Parliament, the Assembly agreed to add the scriptural texts, but also gave a brief explanation why they had not done so in the first place. Firstly, the *39 Articles* of the Church of England (the revision of those articles had been the Assembly's first task) did not have proof texts. Secondly, the confession was already a rather large document and to add the Scriptures would make it a very large volume. Thirdly and in their words, "There was seldom any debate about the truth or falsehood of any article or clause, but rather the manner of expression or the fitness to have it put into the Confession. Whereupon when there were any texts debated in the Assembly, they were never put to vote."

A careful study of the proof texts would no doubt help in understanding and discovering how the Divines developed a particular doctrine from various passages of Scripture and how one verse is linked to others under the same doctrine.

Wilkins in Agreement With Jordan

The following comments are made by James B. Jordan in an article that he posted on the internet on September 26, 2006 entitled, *Misusing the Westminster Confession*. I have highlighted all his comments in yellow so that no one will confuse his comments with mine. Jordan has his agenda as does all of the Federal Vision, and he will go to great ends to reinterpret the Confessional documents to advance an aberrant view of the Confession. Here are some of Jordan's comments:

Similarly, it is arguable at least that Ephesians 1 speaks not of election and predestination unto the end of life, unto everlasting life with God, but speaks rather of God's electing people into a new *beginning*, into His Church and making promises to them, even though some may fall away. But theologians can reason from this "upward" to the idea that God also elects some people to persevere in faithfulness to the end. And because of the controversies of their times, the writers of the Standards devoted their attention to this second aspect of the notion of Divine election.

Now, the writers did not attach "prooftexts" to the original Standards that they wrote, and when asked to provide them by the English Parliament, did not want to do so. The writers knew that they were writing theology, not providing a guide for reading the Bible. They were required to add "prooftexts" by Parliament, but we must understand that many of

these are not actual proof texts but foundations from which a given statement in the Standards is derived.

Yet today, many use the Standards as a guide for reading the Bible, and that was not its intention. They look at the proof texts and say, “This is what the writers are saying that this verse means in its context.” But the writers may have only meant, “This verse supplies support for the conclusion we have put down in the Standards.”

The Standards are an application of the whole Bible to certain central and important issues. They are not, and were not intended to be, a statement of how particular verses and passages must be read, understood, and preached. To use them that way is to abuse them.

Tenth, and finally, the Standards are abused when men affirm only those sections of them that support their prejudices, and ignore the parts that do not. The Standards are actually quite broad and catholic, but they are sometimes not treated as such.

I am not intending to give a critique of Jordan’s views here, but the one thing I want to stress is that Jordan is wanting to avoid emphasis upon textual biblical exegesis regarding what he says about the proof texts, “*They are not, and were not intended to be, a statement of how particular verses and passages must be read, understood, and preached. To use them that way is to abuse them.*” Here is another radical place where the Federal Vision wants to adopt a totally unbiblical approach to understanding Scripture. In several Federal Vision writings, the emphasis is stressing the unfolding of the Bible as a story, not upon some “systematic” organization of Bible doctrines. We must adamantly reject this approach by the Federal Vision. **Theological truth is perceived as we in the power of the Holy Spirit faithfully discern biblical texts and see their interrelationship. It always begins with textual exegesis!**

We must not be seduced by the wiles of the Federal Vision in trying to adopt some document as the Westminster Confession from the point of view that it can be broadly interpreted beyond the way that the Westminster Assembly meant it. Steve Wilkins at least admits that the Westminster delegates did interpret their statements in a particular way that is expressed in the proof texts. Wilkins is pleading for broad liberty in interpreting the statements differently, but in pleading this, he is at odds with the Confession. **In trying to get us to adopt his new views in interpreting the Confession, he has broken his ordination vows. Wilkins is blatantly in disagreement with the Confessional documents although he says otherwise.**

I want to bring up the previous highlighted area in order to address several issues. Wilkins states:

In the end, however, this gives us very little to go on, and the proof-texts themselves are not confessionally binding or authoritative. When the confession says that these non-elect people “never truly come unto Christ,” it means that they do not receive Christ with a faith that perseveres unto **final salvation**. The confession does not address the question of

whether they are able come unto Christ in some other sense and **participate in some sense in the blessings of redemption that ultimately fall short of the fullness of salvation.**

Further, when the confession says that these non-elect people “cannot be saved,” one must recognize that the Standards use the word “save” and its cognates almost exclusively to refer to the **fullness of salvation** inherited when Christ returns. In this sense, apostates are not saved because they fail to persevere and fall short of receiving **the fullness of redemption** as it is described in WCF 10-18.

I have also highlighted in red some very problematic areas. Notice that Wilkins speaks of “final salvation,” “fullness of salvation,” “fullness of redemption.” He refers to a type of redemption that actually does not make it to a fullness of salvation. This terminology **is not language of the Confessional Standards; it is not the language of the Bible!** Later I will deal with Wilkins’ unbiblical views and outright denial of the Reformed doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. Wilkins is totally unorthodox in his use of these terms, and **Wilkins is deceptive when he introduces ideas like “final salvation.”** For one the Confession does not ever refer to the non-elect of having any kind of salvation! No where in the Confession does the Bible ever refer to the reprobate as having any kind of redemption. **This is a blatant assault on the atoning work of Christ.** Now, Wilkins and the rest of the Federal Vision want to view Hebrews 6:4-6 and Hebrews 10:24-31 as indicators that men can legitimately be saved and then lost. The Federal Vision has openly embraced an Arminian view. For Wilkins to state that a person can be redeemed by the blood of Christ, have Jesus pay the ransom price, and then fail to be fully saved is outlandish. Wilkins argues for a partial or temporary redemption. Nowhere, and I mean nowhere do the Westminster Standards ever adopt anything close to this, but Wilkins insists that he is Confessional. All one has to do is go through the Confessional Standards and see them referring to “final salvation,” “partial redemption,” “fullness of redemption.”

I will give a few examples how Wilkins still twists the Confession. In chapter 10 “Of Effectual Calling” section 4 reads:

*Others, not elected, although they may be called by the ministry of the Word, and may have some common operations of the Spirit, yet **they never truly come unto Christ, and therefore cannot be saved:** much less can men, not professing the Christian religion, be saved in any other way whatsoever, be they never so diligent to frame their lives according to the light of nature, and the law of that religion they do profess. And to assert and maintain that they may, is very pernicious, and to be detested.*

Where is Wilkins’s idea of the reprobate failing to get “**final** salvation”? The Confession **never** uses the word “final.” It only says “saved.” See how deceptive Wilkins is?

Let’s look at chapter 12 “Of Adoption.” Here is what the Confession says:

All those that are justified, God vouchsafeth, in and for His only Son Jesus Christ, to make partakers of the grace of adoption: by which they are taken into the number, and enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God, have His name put upon them,

receive the spirit of adoption, have access to the throne of grace with boldness, are enabled to cry, Abba, Father, are pitied, protected, provided for, and chastened by Him as by a Father; yet never cast off, but sealed to the day of redemption, and inherit the promises, as heirs of everlasting salvation.

Where is Wilkins' idea of "fullness of redemption"? Wilkins quotes accurately the phrase out of chapter 12 but then in his interpretation he throws in his extraneous words. There is no such thing as temporary adoption. If we are adopted, then we are sealed to the day of redemption. It means it cannot be lost!

Let's look at chapter 8 of the WCF "Of Christ the Mediator." Section 5 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.

Notice that Christ's redemptive work is only for the elect and not for the reprobate. Is there any mention of a partial redemption? Jesus purchases an everlasting inheritance. He did not purchase some temporary kind of redemption. **I trust that it is obvious how Wilkins perverts the Confession by inserting words into it that are not there.**

Also see question 59 of the Larger Catechism which asks: Who are made partakers of redemption through Christ?

The answer is:

Redemption is certainly applied, and effectually communicated, to all those for whom Christ hath purchased it; who are in time by the Holy Ghost enabled to believe in Christ according to the gospel.

Only the effectually called (the elect) are redeemed! There is no mention of non-elect people ever being redeemed. Wilkins is clearly mistaken. He is not confessional in the least bit, though claiming he is.

Wilkins' Distortion of Chapter 25 "Of The Church"

What is odd is that Wilkins who has argued that the proof texts are questionable in the Confession but now appeals to the proof texts in chapter 25. **Wilkins will make a tremendous error, and it is no minor point.** Here are some of his comments from page 4 of his re-examination. Wilkins states:

The other major text in the WCF that is relevant to the non-elect is WCF 25.2. Here we find the assertion that *all* members of the visible church are members of the

kingdom of Christ and the house and family of God (at least *in some sense*). Since the visible church contains some who are non-elect, the WCF thus implies that some adults and their children are citizens of the kingdom and members of God's family, and yet still do not inherit the fullness of redemption and eternal life. Given the fact that earlier chapters of the Confession restrict these blessings to the elect alone, we are given some sense that the writers are sensitive to the claims made for the members of the visible church in the Scriptures.

Again, the proof texts used in WCF 25.2 help us to see some of the things that were in the minds of the members of the Assembly. **They refer to Colossians 1:13 to prove that the visible Church is "the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ."** But this text illustrates the very concerns that I have raised in my teaching and writing. In the verse preceding (1:12) he includes them among the number of those who have been qualified "to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light." Further, he goes on in the verses that follow to describe what has happened to the members of the Church in Colossae. They have not only been "delivered from the power of darkness" and "conveyed into the kingdom of the Son of His love" but also, in Christ, they **"have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins."** (1:13-14). In Col. 3:12 Paul calls the members of the church in Colossae, "the elect of God" and does not qualify this appellation at all, and calls upon them to forgive one another as Christ has forgiven them (3:13).

Does Paul mean that each and every member of this congregation is "elect" in the Westminster Confession sense? I don't think so but that leaves the question of how exactly he does understand them to be "elect of God, holy and beloved." And further, how exactly do they partake of "the inheritance of the saints"? And, though I am quite certain that only the elect will finally be redeemed through the blood of Jesus and only the elect will receive the forgiveness of sins (and I'm sure Paul would agree) how can Paul state that this reality was true of the members of the church in Colossae? These are the sorts of questions I'm seeking to address and to do so in a way that does no harm in the least to God's absolute, sovereign, predestination.

Wilkins is correct in saying that 25:2 refers to all members of the visible church as being in "the kingdom of Christ" in some sense. But, Wilkins will commit a serious blunder, but I do not think it is an oversight, but a deliberate attempt to insert alien doctrines into the Confession. I have highlighted in red the sentence *"They refer to Colossians 1:13 to prove that the visible Church is "the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ."* Wilkins also quotes Colossians 3:12-13 as proof texts for this section on the visible church. **Anyone can do their own research and will see that Colossians 1 is listed as a proof text under the INVISIBLE CHURCH NOT THE VISIBLE CHURCH.** Moreover, Colossians 3:12-13 is **not even** listed as a proof text under the visible church. In fact, only Colossians 1:18 is mentioned in 25:1 under the invisible church, not even Colossians 1:12-13. This is absolutely crucial because the Westminster Confession categorically states that the invisible church consists of **only the elect**. Wilkins will systematically argue for the fact that the non-elect in some sense have been delivered out of darkness and transferred into Christ's kingdom, having redemption and forgiveness of sins. The

Confession does not speak of all those in the visible church experiencing this. **Wilkins has twisted the Confession to say something it NEVER says.**

Question 61 of the Larger Catechism is very clear: It asks this question – Are all they saved who hear the gospel, and live in the church?

The answer is:

All that hear the gospel, and live in the visible church, are not saved; but they only who are true members of the church invisible.

Wilkins also assigns Colossians 3:12-13 to the section on the visible church **which is not true. It is not a proof text.** Wilkins has not changed from what he wrote in the Knox Theological Colloquium in 2003. If one looks closely at his written responses to his re-examination, he has simply copied from that paper. It is clear that Wilkins really does believe that the non-elect can experience all of the things that the elect experience but only in a temporary fashion. In so doing, Wilkins has placed himself out of accord with **all the Reformed Confessional Documents.**

Notice how Wilkins derides the Confession by saying that the apostle Paul is not in agreement with the Westminster Confession when Wilkins states: **Does Paul mean that each and every member of this congregation is “elect” in the Westminster Confession sense? I don’t think so but that leaves the question of how exactly he does understand them to be “elect of God, holy and beloved.”**

Why does Wilkins continue to say he is in full agreement with the Confession when he makes comments like this? Pitting Paul against the Confession? As I have said, the Confession does not list Colossians 3:12-13 in the section on the visible church. Paul is referencing the invisible church in Colossians 3. The elect of God as the Confession states are only the effectually called, who are the only ones who are redeemed. The Westminster Confession agrees with inspired Paul in the use of Colossians 3, not with Steve Wilkins.

Wilkins is finally correct by noting that Ephesians 2:19 is a proof text for the visible church, and he raises the question how can this be true unless it applies to the non-elect in some way.

The following comments of mine are in bold because I don’t want the reader to miss the point.

One of the fundamental problems of the Federal Vision is that it simply cannot understand the following fact. The invisible church (the elect) are in the visible church (professing believers with their children). When the apostle wants to address spiritual truths that apply to only the elect of God, how else is he going to do it without addressing them in the context of the visible church? Paul does not know who the elect are. When he gives warnings, he gives them addressed to the visible

church. The possibility of falling away is not true of the elect, but only of the false professors. But again, Paul does not know who the non-elect are; therefore, he addresses the visible church, which includes the invisible church. If only the Federal Vision would understand this fact, they would not have gone so far astray. The denial of the Reformed distinction of the visible and invisible church is a fatal flaw of the Federal Vision.

The reason that Paul refers to the elect in his opening comments in several of his epistles is because he understands that the covenant of grace was made only with the elect. Paul's concern is for the elect of God, but the reality is that these elect are intermixed with tares (non-elect) in the visible church.

Wilkins and the Federal Vision Fails To Distinguish between Corporate and Personal Election

In their stress upon the idea of the “objectivity of the covenant,” the Federal Vision does not understand that there are two kinds of election conveyed in the Scripture. One is a corporate election and the other is a personal election. The corporate election is that of a whole nation. It is the visible church of the OT. The latter election is that which refers to the children of God as heirs of eternal life. It is this kind of election that is at the heart of the Bible's view of predestination.

The corporate election is seen in God's choosing of the nation of Israel out of all the nations of the earth. This election is seen in Deut. 4:37; 7:6-8; 10:15. In Isaiah 5, God refers to the nation of Israel as His vineyard which had both good and bad fruit in it. God bemoans the wicked of his vineyard (Isa. 5:7). In this verse, God refers to the house of Israel as His vineyard. The wicked of God's vineyard are referred to as “**false** sons in Isaiah 30:9 which says, “*For this is a rebellious people, false sons, Sons who refuse to listen to the instruction of the Lord.*” The Lord Jesus referred to Israel as a vineyard in Matthew 21:33-46. The wicked vine growers not only persecute the owner's slaves and eventually kill the son of the owner. Jesus says that “the kingdom of God” will be taken away from them and given to a nation producing good fruit. In verse 45, the chief priests and Pharisees understood that the wicked people in Jesus' parable was a reference to them and tried to seize Jesus. Now how did these wicked people ever possess the “kingdom of God”? They did so only in an outward, external covenantal sense. Jesus never alludes to them as ever having any portion of His saving grace. None whatsoever!

The problem with many Jews is that they thought that external election was all that mattered. They thought that being physical sons of Abraham is all that mattered. We are told that the Pharisees and Sadducees were trying to come to John the Baptist to get

baptized in Matthew 3:7. But John the Baptist called them a brood of Vipers who needed to truly repent by showing fruit of repentance. He did not baptize them. In verses 8-12 he warned them that their trusting in a physical lineage of Abraham would not save them. Those bearing bad fruit will be cut down and burned in the fire. In verse 12 he referred to them as the chaff of the threshing floor that will be burned with unquenchable fire.

So, Wilkins and company want to see these Pharisees and Sadducees as possessing in some sense a kind of salvation, redemption, and forgiveness of sins simply because they had “the kingdom of God” in some sense. How foolish they were and Wilkins and company.

The following information is taken from a section in chapter 6 of my book “*Danger In the Camp*” titled “The Federal Vision’s Concept of the Church.”

Romans 9:6-8 And The Church Visible And Invisible

Regarding the nature of the church, the Federal Vision goes astray. Their denial of the distinction of the visible and the invisible opens up Pandora’s box to all sorts of serious errors. Romans 9: 6-8 clearly demonstrates that the textual exegesis demands a distinction in this passage. It reads:

But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; neither are they all children because they are Abraham’s descendants, but: “Through Isaac Your Descendants Will Be Named.” That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants.

Rich Lusk has written that there are some persons who for a time enjoy real blessings purchased for them by Christ and applied to them by the Holy Spirit but who later apostatize and are lost. He says that these apostates once really were “reconciled to God, adopted, granted new life, etc. But in the end, they fail to persevere, and because they fall away, they go to Hell” (see footnote 151). Lusk has just admitted that there are some people who have had Christ’s atoning work applied to them but who end up lost. It is hard to imagine that Lusk has the audacity to even quote John Murray as one who is in support of this view! This is a gross dishonor to John Murray. I have shown in many other places in this book that one cannot trust at all Rich Lusk’s quotations. He quotes the Reformed creeds and Reformed theologians, but he totally twists what they say. Does he not think that somebody will actually look up his quotes? Lusk references Romans 9:4 where the text states that physical or national Israel is said to be the adopted sons of God, and Lusk misreads the application totally. He thinks that this adoption is referring to the possession of spiritual blessings. It is not; it is clearly referring to the fact that physical Israel (the blood descendants of Abraham) was adopted in the sense that they were the custodians of the covenants of God, that they had the Mosaic Law, and the temple of

God. However, the context clearly states that this did not help physical Israel to have all these things because they were not the inheritors of the promises.

What did John Murray teach about Romans 9? We must consult his commentary to see. Regarding 9:4 and the use of adoption here, Murray states:

This adoption of Israel is to be distinguished from that spoken of as the apex of New Testament privileges (8:15; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:5; cf. John 1:12; I John 3:1). This is apparent from Galatians 4:5, for here the adoption is contrasted with the tutelary discipline of the Mosaic economy.¹

Romans 9:5 states, “Whose are the Fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever, amen.” Regarding this verse, Murray states:

“Of whom is Christ as concerning the flesh,” At this point there is a change in the relationship. After “Israelites” all the privileges mentioned are stated as belonging to the Jewish people. Even “the fathers” are represented thus. But when Paul reaches the climax he does not say that Christ belonged to them but that Christ came from the Jewish stock.²

John Murray is not saying in any shape, form, or fashion that physical Israel, the covenant people of God, were adopted in a saving sense. Being the recipients of special privileges does not make one the recipient of spiritual blessings as Murray will discuss in the following verses. In his comments on Romans 9:6-8 he will make the following points:

In the other expression, “they are not all Israel,” obviously the denotation is much more limited and the thought is that there is an “Israel” within ethnic Israel. This kind of distinction appears earlier in this epistle in connection with the term Jew and circumcision (2:28-29). If the terms of the present passage were applied to the earlier the formula would be, “they are not all Jews who are of the Jews” and “they are not all circumcised who are of the circumcision.” The Israel distinguished from the Israel of natural descent is the **true Israel**. They are indeed “of Israel” but not coextensive with the latter...He distinguished between those who were disciples and those **truly** disciples (cf. John 8:30-32) ... If we use Paul’s own language, this Israel is Israel “according to the Spirit” (Gal. 4:29) ...”³ (Emphasis Murray)

The purpose of this distinction is to show that the covenantal promise of God did not have respect to Israel after the flesh but to this **true** Israel, and that, therefore, the unbelief and rejection of ethnic Israel as a whole in no

¹ John Murray, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament, Epistle to the Romans*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1959). Section on chapter 9, p.5.

² Murray, p. 6.

³ Murray, p. 9.

way interfered with the fulfillment of God's covenantal purpose and promise. 4 (Emphasis Murray)

Regarding Romans 9:7, Murray continues:

He is still speaking of those "of Israel" and now draws the distinction in terms of that between "Abraham's seed" and "children." In this instance "Abraham's seed" denotes the natural posterity and "children" is equivalent to the **true** Israel, and that sense the **true** children as inheritors of the promise. Later on these children are called the "children of God" (v.8) and this fixes their identity even though in verse 7 are contemplated simply as the **true** children of Abraham. 5 (Emphasis Murray)

Regarding Romans 9:8 Murray states:

"The children of the flesh" has the same import and extent as "Abraham's seed" in verse 7. "The children of God" has the same reference as "children" in verse 7 ... The "children of the promise" are the same as the children of God and this designation is placed in contrast with "the children of the flesh." The latter are those born after the flesh but the children of the promise are those who derive their origin from the promise of God ...6

It is evident from the quotes of John Murray that he is anything but in agreement with the Federal Vision as Lusk thinks. Lusk has totally misunderstood everything Murray has said. Murray has championed a distinction that the Reformed Faith has championed for centuries. This is an example of the imposition of an unbiblical notion into the text, forcing it say nothing the Scripture intended. The very thing that Lusk, Schlissel and others complain about, they are guilty of themselves. Romans 9:4-8 is about as clear a passage together with Romans 2: 28- 29 as one will find to demonstrate this distinction between the outward and external covenant or the visible and invisible church respectively.

Wilkins has thoroughly misunderstood the entire nature of the visible and invisible church and deceives his readers into thinking he complies with the Westminster Standards when he doesn't. This becomes very conspicuous when it comes to Wilkins' view of election that I will now look at.

Let's begin with this incredible statement in response to Central Carolina's accusation against him. The following question is asked of Wilkins:

⁴ Murray.

⁵ Murray, p. 10.

⁶ Murray, p. 11.

1. Laying aside for a moment the argument that Scripture uses the word “elect” in different ways, can you provide an example(s) in your public teaching or writing where you affirm the Confession’s definition of election?

Wilkins responds by saying:

I’m not quite sure how to answer this question. The fact is that I have never taught contrary to the Confession in regard to its view of election.

I will demonstrate that the above comment is blatantly false.

On page 6 of his written response in his re-examination, Wilkins states the following:

“It has been the common practice in Reformed circles to use the term “elect” to refer only to those who are predestined to eternal salvation. Since God has ordained all things “whatsoever comes to pass” (Eph. 1:11), He has certainly predestined the number of all who will be saved at the last day. This number is fixed and settled, not one of these will be lost. The Lord will accomplish all His holy will.”

I then follow this affirmation of the traditional view with a discussion of how the word “elect” functions in various passages of the Bible.

Also in our “Response to the Charges of Heterodoxy” I wrote this:

“We affirm the teaching on ‘election’ in the Westminster Standards (WCF III.6). In our ‘Summary Statement’ we unanimously adopted this statement:

‘From before the foundation of the world, God has sovereignly chosen a multitude no man can number for salvation. The basis of His election was solely His grace and mercy and nothing in the creature. The number of the elect can neither increase nor diminish. All who were chosen by God from the beginning will be surely saved eternally. Not one will be lost.’

This continues to be our view. **We do believe, however, that the terms ‘elect,’ ‘chosen,’ etc., are often used in the Scriptures to refer to those who are members of the visible church (e.g., Col 3:12; 2 Th 2:13; 1 Pe 1:1-2) and not restricted to those who were chosen to eternal salvation. To affirm this, however, does not require a denial of the teaching of the Confession. It is simply acknowledging the fact that our theological usage of these terms is often more narrow than the biblical usage.”**

Notice that Wilkins says that the term “elect” is not restricted to those chosen for eternal

salvation, but to say this does not deny the Confession? I find this statement incredible. The Westminster Confession has specifically stated over and over that the elect refer only to the invisible church, which are the only ones redeemed, justified, adopted, and glorified. **Wilkins blatantly contradicts the Confession and then immediately turns around and says that it is not contradictory. This is the deception that I and others find so upsetting. Never does the Westminster Standards use Col.3:12; 2 Thess.2:13; and I Peter 1:1-2 to refer to members of the visible church.**

Wilkins has stated in his re-examination the following on page 3:

The discussions regarding the application of redemption in the Westminster Standards beginning with the sections on effectual calling and continuing through the rest of the “ordo salutis” only properly apply to the elect as defined in WCF 3.5: “Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to his eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of his will, hath chosen, in Christ, unto everlasting glory, out of his mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith, or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving him thereunto; and all to the praise of his glorious grace.” **Here, the “elect” are defined to be only those who are predestined to eternal life.** This sets the parameters of the discussion concerning the application of redemption.

Okay, Wilkins has stated the position of the Confession above but note what he has noted later in the same response:

We do believe, however, that the terms ‘elect,’ ‘chosen,’ etc., are often used in the Scriptures to refer to those who are members of the visible church (e.g., Col 3:12; 2 Th 2:13; 1 Pe 1:1-2) and not restricted to those who were chosen to eternal salvation.

I thought Wilkins said he has never taught anything contrary to the Confession? The two paragraphs contradict each other.

To compound the contradiction, I will quote from the WCF in chapter 3 “Of God’s Eternal Decree” section 6 and note the proof texts:

*As God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so hath He, by the eternal and most free purpose of His will, fore-ordained all the means thereunto.^m Wherefore they **who are elected**, being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ,ⁿ are **effectually called** unto faith in Christ by His Spirit working in due season, are **justified, adopted, sanctified,^o and kept by His power through faith, unto salvation.^p Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only.^q***

(m) I Pet. 1:2; Eph. 1:4, 5; Eph. 2:10; II Thess. 2:13.

I trust that one can see that Wilkins has again referred to passages that he says pertain to

the visible church when one can see that the Confession applies them only to the invisible church.

Louisiana Presbytery asked Wilkins again this question on page 7 of his re-examination:

2. Do you at all deny the definition of election as given in the Standards?

Absolutely not, never have, and God willing, never will. I firmly believe in the absolute sovereignty of God over all things, including the salvation of man.

Well, I have just demonstrated that Wilkins has denied the Standards' view of election. And it continues to be bad as one goes through his comments. Consider the following from his responses:

3. Briefly explain why your statement: "The elect are those who are faithful in Christ Jesus. If they later reject their savior, they are no longer elect" (*Federal Vision*, p. 58) is NOT contradictory to or inconsistent with WCF III-6).

The Presbytery in making this charge has ignored the context of what I have written and because of this, has completely missed my point. In the article, this statement comes in the context of a discussion of how the word "elect" is used in the Biblical text. God calls Israel His "elect or chosen" people (p. 56). Paul calls the members of the church in the New Covenant "elect and chosen" as well. On page 58, I discuss Paul's statements in Romans 8 and II Thessalonians 2:13-14 where he calls the members of the church in Thessalonica "chosen from the beginning for salvation." I then ask the question, "How could Paul say this?" (p. 57). In light of the decree of predestination and the reality that not everyone in the church is chosen in the Westminster sense of the word, how can he call the members of the church in Thessalonica "chosen before the foundation of the world"? If I didn't believe WCF chapter 3 to be true, I would have no problems at this point. My question arises in light of the fact that I am convinced that WCF chapter 3 is correct!

Again, Wilkins' fundamental problem is that he believes that Paul's comments about the elect in his epistle addressed in the context of the visible church be it in Colossae, Ephesus, etc. **must** apply to **all** members of the visible church. **But this is his Achilles heel. Wilkins continues to play word games with us. He categorically denies that he contradicts the Confession but the two paragraphs I noted earlier shows that he does deny the Confession.**

Wilkins equivocates tremendously when he says that he is not anti-Confessional but then makes the statement in his book- "The elect are those who are faithful in Christ Jesus. If they later reject their savior, they are no longer elect" (*Federal Vision*, p. 58)

Here is what the Westminster Confession states in its chapter 17 "Of The Perseverance of

the Saints in section 1:

*They, whom God hath accepted in His Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally, nor finally, fall away from the state of grace: **but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.***

Wilkins has admitted that the WCF uses effectually calling and election as applying only to those who will be saved. It is incredible that Wilkins then says he is confessional by saying the elect can become un-elect and that the elect can later reject their savior. Wilkins has re-defined the "election" of the WCF that applies to personal election to incorporate the limited times that election is used to refer to national Israel. Somehow Wilkins believes that he can insert this "corporate election" into any biblical text anytime he feels like it and say, "See, I am confessional!" This is the height of theological incompetence, and I believe it to be outright dishonest. Wilkins knows by his own admission that the WCF views election differently than him.

Wilkins wants to know how can it be that Paul can call the members of the church in Thessalonica to be "chosen before the foundation of the world if not all the members in the church are chosen in the Westminster sense. Well, Steve, the Confession answered you in chapter 3 when they took those proof texts that you think are restricted to the visible church and applied them to the invisible church. As I said earlier, Paul speaks spiritual truths that are applicable only to the elect, but he has to say these things in the context of the visible church of which the elect are part of. Moreover, he has no idea who may not be the elect. Wilkins thinks that his question is somehow insurmountable when there is a simple explanation. It is simple if we let the Scripture speak for itself and not impose upon it our own theological biases. The Federal Vision has been very critical of the discipline of systematic theology stating that it does not deal with textual exegesis. They continue to say that if we allow the Bible to be read in "a covenantal context" then it means something different than how much of the Reformed world has understood it in the past 500 years. **It is the Federal Vision that has imposed an alien system of thought upon biblical texts, not historic Reformed Christianity.**

Wilkins makes a very damaging remark in the Knox Seminary Colloquium when he says:

As Steve Schlissel has noted, this entire discussion revolves around a "way of seeing." It involves looking at the Scriptures from a covenant perspective and reading them straightforwardly from that perspective... But I (and the other men on the "Federal Vision" side) are suggesting that the Scriptures speak of the work of salvation in a much more concrete way — not contradictory to these truths as they are set forth in the Westminster Confession and Catechisms but seeing these truths as overtones of the teaching of the Scripture. **The Scriptures seem to use the terms "covenant," "elect," and "regeneration," in a different way than the Westminster Confession uses them.** (Emphasis mine) (Steve Wilkins, *Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation*, quoted in *Debating The Federal*

Vision, the Knox Theological Seminary Colloquium on the Federal Vision, August 11-13, 2003, p. 268.)

Again, I mention what Louisiana Presbytery said to Wilkins: **Do you at all deny the definition of election as given in the Standards?** His answer was: **Absolutely not, never have, and God willing, never will.**

Wilkins and the Decree of Election

In his re-examination, Wilkins stated the following:

I am convinced that WCF chapter 3 is correct!

Thus, the questions I'm addressing do not in any way deny what the Confession says in chapter 3. In no way should this discussion be interpreted to mean that I deny what I just affirmed (and still believe) on p. 56. In the passage cited I am focusing the discussion upon how the term is used in the text of God's Word where over and over again, entire congregations are addressed as "elect" or "chosen" or with some equivalent term (e.g., Col 3:12; 2 Th 2:13; 1 Pe 1:1-2). I go on to suggest that we must understand Paul's language covenantally rather than decretively. To make this distinction in no way requires that I reject one in order to embrace the other.

It seems clear to me that Peter in particular views the "elect" in the same sense that the term was used of Israel under the Old Covenant since he applies the same descriptive terminology used for Israel to the Church (1 Pe 2:9). Paul and Peter do not appear to use the terms "elect" and "chosen" to apply *exclusively* to those who were chosen to eternal salvation (i.e., in the Westminster Confession sense). They had no knowledge of God's decrees and only could judge by what was revealed. What was revealed was that Jesus was the Elect One and all who are united to Him as elect *in Him*. (1 Pe 2:4-6).

It seems (at least to me) to be plain that Paul and other Biblical writers have no hesitation in identifying those who are members of the Church as "elect." This apparently was based upon the fact that the Church is, as our Confession states, "the household, family, and kingdom of God" (WCF 25.2) and is the body of Christ Jesus, God's chosen/elect Son. Thus, those who are members of the body of the Elect One are viewed as "elect" themselves. The writers of the New Testament, in numerous places, appear to use the word to refer to those who are united to the visible body of God's people and persevere therein by grace through faith.

The line I have highlighted in red indicates the serious theological error Wilkins makes and puts him squarely in contradiction to the Westminster Confession. The Confession views election as **an unchangeable eternal decree. It does not speak of all the members of the covenant community as being elect.**

It is this denial of election in a “decretive” way that leads to his denial of the perseverance of the saints. By the way, Wilkins uses the same terminology that Norman Shepherd uses. Shepherd in his book *Call of Grace* says, “*In the process, we will have to compare and contrast what may be called “election-evangelism,” or “regeneration-evangelism, with what may be called “covenant-evangelism.”*” (Shepherd, p.70).

Wilkins is simply falling into the theology of Shepherd. Shepherd states the following:

*The words **inward** and **outward** are often used in Reformed theology to resolve problems that arise because biblical texts are approached from the perspective of election. Indeed, the seeming indispensability of this formula indicates that the covenant is commonly viewed from the perspective of election, rather than election from the perspective of covenant. The distinction is necessary to account for the fact that the covenant community appears to include both elect and non-elect. The non-elect are then said to be only outwardly in the covenant. The elect are inwardly in the covenant. Covenant is virtually dissolved into the idea of election.*

*The terms **outwardly** and **inwardly** are biblical terms, but when Paul uses them in Romans 2:28-29, he is not referring to the **elect** and the **reprobate**. The terms describe the difference between covenantally loyal Jews and disobedient transgressors of the law. The categories derive their meaning from the covenant, not from the decree.*

to the doctrine of the covenant, rather than to the The application of this principle to evangelism means that a Reformed methodology must be oriented doctrine of election (Shepherd, pp. 90-91).

Wilkins’ comment that election should not be viewed decretively but covenantally is an explicit denial of the Westminster Confession.

Let’s examine more closely the following paragraph from Wilkins’ re-examination:

It seems (at least to me) to be plain that Paul and other Biblical writers have no hesitation in identifying those who are members of the Church as “elect.” This apparently was based upon the fact that the Church is, as our Confession states, “the household, family, and kingdom of God” (WCF 25.2) and is the body of Christ Jesus, God’s chosen/elect Son. Thus, those who are members of the body of the Elect One are viewed as “elect” themselves. The writers of the New Testament, in numerous places, appear to use the word to refer to those who are united to the visible body of God’s people and persevere therein by grace through faith.

In WCF 25:2 there is no direct mention of “the body of Christ Jesus” but there is the proof text I Cor.12:12-13 attached to this section. Now Wilkins wants to bring all that is true of the church being referred to as the body of Christ into the meaning of the visible church, and he has no warrant to make this kind of broad generalization. Wilkins does

not understand how the Confession is using this term and even why I Cor.12:12 is mentioned. The really significant point is to whom the WCF assigns the elect. They are assigned to the “invisible church.” The proof texts given for WCF 25:1 are as follows:

The catholic or universal Church which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all.^a

(a) Eph. 1:10, 22, 23; Eph. 5:23, 27, 32; Col. 1:18.

If we examine these proof texts we will see Ephesians 1:22-23 refers to Christ as the head of the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all. In Ephesians 5:23 we see Christ as the head of the church, He Himself being the savior of the body. In this section, the relationship of Christ with His church is put in the context of a marriage. Here, Christ as the bridegroom sanctifies His bride the church; He cleanses her so well that there is no longer any blemish; He gives Himself for her, meaning he died for her. The invisible church, the elect, are thoroughly united with Christ so that there is no chance of them not making it to glory.

Wilkins has no right to insert into the section on the visible church this imagery of the body of Christ as pertaining to **all** members of the visible church being called saints or elect. The WCF does not do that because the Scripture does not do it.

We need to note what WCF 25:3 says:

*Unto this catholic visible Church Christ **hath given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world: and doth by His own presence and Spirit, according to His promise, make them effectual thereunto.***

The Confession makes clear that purpose of the visible church is for the gathering and perfecting of the saints. We understand that the invisible church is included in the visible church but not mutually exclusive to it. Section 3 tells us that the ministry of the visible church is to use the outward means (sacraments and word) as a way of ministering to those effectually called, which is the invisible church, the elect.

Chapter 26 “Of Communion of Saints” is very important in helping us understand the nature of the invisible church. Notice closely what WCF 26:1 says:

All saints, that are united to Jesus Christ their Head by His Spirit and by faith, have fellowship with Him in His grace, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory: and, being united to one another in love, they have communion in each other's gifts and graces and are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man.

It is significant that the term “saints” is used to refer to those united to Jesus as their Head

by His Spirit and by faith. The only members of the visible church who are saints are those who are members of the invisible church. Of course, Steve Wilkins and the rest of the Federal Vision will say, “Hold on. Paul addresses his epistle to the Ephesians as “to the saints who are in Ephesus. Ephesus was the visible church; therefore, the saints are all those in the visible church.” The fatal error of the Federal Vision is its failure to understand the **simple fact** that the invisible church, the saints, the elect happen to be in the visible church. Paul is addressing his letter to the invisible church, who are the elect, who are the saints. Seeing that the members of the visible church don’t have tags on them specifying them as the elect from the false professor, Paul can only address the elect or saints via the visible church. Failure to understand this simple distinction leads Wilkins and the rest into heresy. It forces them to assign saving graces in some sense to all members of the visible church. It forces them into the unbiblical notion of baptismal regeneration and to a denial of the perseverance of the saints.

Wilkins brings a strange terminology in that he refers to Christ as the Elect One of God the Father to the visible church and that **all** the members of the visible church are then elect in Jesus. Wilkins stated: “**Thus, those who are members of the body of the Elect One are viewed as “elect” themselves.**” Wilkins interprets I Peter 2:4-6 as the biblical basis for this view. In this passage, Christ is pictured as that “chosen” or precious stone in Zion. Yes, Zion in the Old Testament was a term for His covenant people. However, I Peter 2:7-10 states: “*This precious value, then, is for you who believe. But for those who disbelieve, the stone which the builders rejected thus became the very corner stone, and, A stone of stumbling and a rock of offense; for they stumble because they are disobedient to the work, and to this doom they were also appointed. **But** you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light, for you once were not a people but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*”

Wilkins’ makes a terrible exegetical error by assuming that Peter here is addressing all the members of the visible church as having these graces applied to them. Christ is indeed the precious stone in the midst of the external covenant people of God; however, Peter makes it very clear that the chosen stone “**is for you who believe.**” This is not a reference to mere professors but to those who believe to the saving of their souls. Peter discusses the unbelievers who stumble over the chosen stone and then Peter uses the crucial word – **BUT YOU**. Peter is clearly indicating that those whom he now addresses are not everyone indiscriminately. They are an elect people who have been called out of darkness.

Louisiana Presbytery asked Wilkins if he denies the distinction between the visible and invisible church, and he said, “Absolutely not.” The problem is that he already denied how the Westminster Standards defines the two. His comments that the Bible defines the elect differently than how the Westminster Standards restrict the term “elect” is a denial of this distinction. To say that all the members of the visible church have some kind of redemption and forgiveness of sins and that these can prove to be unelect **is a denial of the distinction between the visible and invisible church.**

The following comment is most damaging by Wilkins that he makes on page 9 of his written response. He states:

The “invisible Church” is not a parallel entity that exists above or beyond the visible church but rather is the “whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof;”—in other words, **the invisible Church does not yet exist though it is surely foreordained by God and will surely and certainly exist at the last day (but then of course, it will exist as a very visible body).** It is only “invisible” in that we can’t see all the members of it now.

Christ has only one Bride and she is a Bride that is in the process of being perfected (sanctified and cleansed) for Him through time (Eph. 5:25-27) until that day when she shall be “spotless and without blemish.” Thus, the Church which throughout history had blemishes and imperfections, will finally be glorified and perfectly holy at the last day.

It seems better to speak of the “invisible” church simply as the “eschatological church” — i.e., the church in its perfection as it will exist at the last day. My accusers are simply disagreeing with my argument rather than proving that I deny the WCF definition of the church. Indeed, it seems to me that they are often the ones who deny the distinction between the “visible” and “invisible” Church in that they attribute those things the apostles say to be true of the visible Church exclusively to the invisible Church. The visible Church is denigrated as being nothing more than a pale and imperfect reflection of the “true” church (which is, in their minds, the “invisible” church, the abode of the elect).

This is not how the Westminster Standards reflect the biblical teaching. There is a very good reason why Wilkins and others prefer the term “eschatological church.” It reflects his so called view of covenant elect rather than a decretive election. What it really shows is an emphatic denial of unconditional election. The Federal Vision advocates a completely Arminian view of election. It advocates a conditional view of election contingent upon what members of the visible church do throughout their life. For Wilkins to say that the elect can become non-elect and lose what they one had is a blatant statement that supports conditional election. Comments that I have highlighted in red in the above paragraphs shows that he views the elect as something unknown because we do not yet know until a person dies as to whether he has persevered to the end. This is why the Federal Vision likes the term “eschatological church” because only then after history is over do we now find out who made it. For Wilkins to state that the “*invisible Church does not yet exist though it is surely foreordained by God and will surely and certainly exist at the last day*” is wrong. The Bible teaches and the WCF states it accurately that all those who have truly believed in Jesus Christ possess now forgiveness of sins, have been redeemed and justified in space and time. The elect of God who have been effectually called (regenerated) and justified will **surely be glorified**. Romans 8:28-39 is one of the most explicit passages that contradicts Wilkins’ views. **I may not be glorified yet, but I and everyone else who have truly believed in Jesus Christ are right now guaranteed of our glorification because of God’s unconditional decree of election determined from the foundation of the world.** The invisible church does truly exist now despite Wilkins’ denials.

For the Federal Vision to purport this idea of an “eschatological church” which comprises all the elect is nothing but a modern jibberish of Arminianism, plain and simple. This is no different than the classical Arminian definition of the elect. It says that all the elect have been foreseen by God as to what they will do with Jesus; therefore, since God foresees this, He elects them on the basis of **what they do**. The Federal Vision advocates a covenantal view of election, not a decretive view. In a covenantal view of election it is possible for someone to be “initially justified or saved” but not eternally or finally saved because they may abandon Christ. They may lose it all; therefore, we must wait until human history runs its course and see who made it. Note this! It is not God’s decretive election that makes people persevere but man’s own power. This is what Wilkins and the Federal Vision believes. Rich Lusk, whom Wilkins states that he is indebted to, best expresses this blasphemous view. Rich Lusk has made this horrendous statement:

Thus, initial justification is by faith alone; subsequent justification includes obedience...The fluidity of these symbols suggests a certain fluidity in our doctrine of justification. The white robes stand first and foremost for Christ’s free gift to his people... But his forensic justification cannot be separated from the good works that make the saints worthy of their new apparel...those who will be vindicated in the end are those who have been faithfully obedient. There is no hint of merit theology in these passages, but there is no escaping the close nexus formed between priestly investiture, justification, and obedience. (Rich Lusk, Future Justification To the Doers of the Law).

Wilkins has never refuted this blasphemous theology of his former assistant pastor. It is because he too believes it. Everytime I read this, I just shake my head that this man claims to be Reformed. This is one of the most insulting views to our Savior that I have ever read. Notice here that those who will be vindicated in the end are those who have been faithfully obedient. Jesus only took them part of the way; they must finish what Jesus began. This fully explains why the Federal Vision argues for an “eschatological church” because we need to wait to see who is covenantally obedient to the end!

This is how Wilkins can say, “Oh, I don’t contradict the Confession because I believe only the invisible church will partake of the blessings of eternal salvation. But all of this is determined **conditionally**. Hence, Wilkins is NOT Confessional after all. Look closely at this quote from his written response:

Ultimately, it is unquestionably true that *only* the “invisible Church” will partake of the blessings of eternal salvation. In history, however, the Church consists of those who are elect **unto final salvation** and those who are not. There are those who are members of the Church but **who are not ordained to persevere in faith**, yet they are, like unfaithful Israelites, still members of the Church, though in the sense that they harbor unbelief, they can be said to be not “of” the Church. But in saying this, we are merely acknowledging that the Church in history is a mixed body.

I hope that it is becoming clear that there is a reason that Wilkins and the Federal Vision does not simply use the word “salvation,” but that they must add the adjective “final.”

We must wait to see who chooses to make it. It is not God's decree from eternity that determines the outcome but our own free will.

Wilkins is in direct contradiction to WCF 3:2 which states:

Although God knows whatsoever may or can come to pass upon all supposed conditions, yet hath He not decreed anything because He foresaw it as future, or as that which would come to pass upon such conditions.

WCF 3:5 makes this important statement:

*Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to His eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of His will, hath chosen, in Christ, unto everlasting glory, out of His mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith or good works, **or perseverance in either of them**, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving Him thereunto: and all to the praise of His glorious grace.*

Wilkins is saying that "perseverance" in space and time is a condition that determines whether we have "final" salvation. The WCF does not express reprobation the way Wilkins does it. WCF 3: 4 states:

By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others fore-ordained to everlasting death.

This foreordination to everlasting death is not the same as Wilkins' "who are not ordained to persevere in faith" Wilkins believes that one can have saving faith but lose the blessings by apostatizing. It is not God's fault that men apostatize. Romans 9:22 states, "*What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, **endured with much patience** vessels of wrath prepared for destruction.*"

Wilkins Distorts John Calvin

One of the things that the Federal Vision is notorious for is misquoting important documents. I demonstrate this in several places in my book "*Danger In the Camp.*" Wilkins is desperate to try to find some Reformer that supposedly supports his erroneous views that people can possess certain saving graces but then apostatize and lose it all. Wilkins clearly denies the historic doctrine of the perseverance of the saints.

Wilkins amazingly has the audacity to quote Calvin but terribly distorts the great Reformer. Here is what Wilkins says:

In his *Institutes* Calvin states that in some sense, the reprobate may be said to have received "the gift of redemption" (3.2.11): "Yet, the reprobate [within the church]

are justly said to believe that God is merciful toward them, for they receive the gift of reconciliation.”

In spite of these statements, I believe Calvin was a thorough-going Calvinist even though Central Carolina Presbytery apparently believes that Calvin's views are not compatible with the Westminster Confession of Faith.

The Federal Vision complains often that people take them out of context, but the following quotes from Calvin demonstrates that it is Wilkins who terribly misuses Calvin's statements. Wilkins is quoting From Calvin's Institutes at Book 3 chapter 2 and section 11. Allow me to quote the **entire section 11** to demonstrate just how bad Wilkins distorts Calvin. Here is what Calvin actually said:

11. "FAITH" EVEN AMONG THE REPROBATE?

I know that to attribute faith to the reprobate seems hard to some, when Paul declares it the result of election [cf. 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5]. Yet this difficulty is easily solved. For though only those predestined to salvation receive the light of faith and truly feel the power of the gospel, yet experience shows that **the reprobate are sometimes affected by almost the same feeling as the elect**, so that even **in their own judgment** they do not in any way differ from the elect [cf. Acts 13:48]. Therefore it is not at all absurd that the apostle should attribute to them a taste of the heavenly gifts [Hebrews 6:4-6] — and Christ, faith for a time [Luke 8:13]; not because they firmly grasp the force of spiritual grace and the sure light of faith, but because the Lord, to render them more convicted and inexcusable, steals into their minds to the extent that his goodness **may be tasted without the Spirit of adoption.**

Suppose someone objects that then nothing more remains to believers to assure themselves of their adoption. I reply: **although there is a great likeness and affinity between God's elect and those who are given a transitory faith, yet only in the elect does that confidence flourish which Paul extols, that they loudly proclaim Abba, Father** [Galatians 4:6; cf. Romans 8:15]. Therefore, as **God regenerates only the elect** with incorruptible seed forever [1 Peter 1:23] so that the seed of life sown in their hearts **may never perish**, thus he firmly seals the gift of his adoption in them that it may be steady and sure.

But this does not at all hinder that lower working of the Spirit from taking its course even in the reprobate. In the meantime, believers are taught to examine themselves carefully and humbly, lest the confidence of the flesh creep in and replace assurance of faith. Besides this, **the reprobate never receive anything but a confused awareness of grace, so that they grasp a shadow rather than the firm body of it. For the Spirit, strictly speaking, seals forgiveness of sins in the elect alone**, so that they apply it by special faith to their own use. **Yet the reprobate are justly said to believe that God is merciful toward them, for they receive the gift of reconciliation, although confusedly and**

not distinctly enough. Not that they are partakers of the same faith or regeneration with the children of God, but because they seem, under a cloak of hypocrisy, to have a beginning of faith in common with the latter. And I do not deny that God illumines their minds enough for them to recognize his grace; but he so distinguishes that awareness from the exclusive testimony he gives to his elect that they do not attain the full effect and fruition thereof. He does not show himself merciful to them, to the extent of truly snatching them from death and receiving them into his keeping, but only manifests to them his mercy for the time being. Only his elect does he account worthy of receiving the living root of faith so that they may endure to the end [Matthew 24:13]. Thus is that objection answered: if God truly shows his grace, this fact is forever established. For nothing prevents God from illumining some with a momentary awareness of his grace, which afterward vanishes.

No, Wilkins is entirely wrong. It should be evident how he corrupts the Reformer to say what the Reformer does not say. Wilkins wants us to believe that Calvin believed that the reprobate are truly redeemed and reconciled for a time but then become reprobate.

Calvin clearly acknowledges the difference between the elect and the reprobate just like the Westminster Standards maintains. Calvin clearly states that the word sown in the elect can never perish. Calvin states explicitly that God regenerates **only the elect**. Calvin states that **the Spirit seals forgiveness of sins in the elect alone**. Calvin says that the reprobate receive the gift of reconciliation **although confusedly and not distinctly enough**. Calvin explicitly says that the reprobate DO NOT receive the same faith as the children of God. This means that they are not really children of God. Calvin says that it is under a cloak of hypocrisy that the reprobate look like the real children of God. Calvin states that only the elect having a living root of faith that endures to the end.

So, Steve Wilkins has completely abused Calvin to make Calvin appear to support his views. Did Wilkins not think that anyone would not look up what Calvin actually said? Norman Shepherd is masterful at misquoting Reformers as well. It was Shepherd who made the incredible statement that Calvin did not support the idea of the active obedience of Christ. I prove this to be entirely false in my book *“Danger In the Camp.”*

Wilkins Believes Paul Is Not In Agreement with the Westminster Standards

The following question is asked by the Presbytery of Wilkins:

Explain how your published views on the benefits that members of the “visible” church enjoy are NOT inconsistent with WLC # 69 (“The communion in grace which the members of the invisible church have with Christ, is their partaking of the virtue of his mediation, in their justification, adoption, sanctification, and whatever else, in this life, manifests their union with him.”)

Wilkins responds with the following:

Note that I refer to “the clear implication of these passages” which is a reference to the sixteen passages to which I have just referred on the previous page. The passages cited attribute these very things to those who are warned against the danger of falling away and being eternally condemned. In other words, this is not something I am teaching. Rather, it is what *Paul himself* was teaching. The problem of the Presbytery is with Paul not with me.

The Larger Catechism is speaking about “members of the invisible church” who are by definition, the elect. I have no quarrel with that at all and nothing I have written contradicts that in the least. My questions have arisen because the apostles appear to attribute these same things to all the members of the visible church without distinction. For example, Paul says of the Corinthians (whom he sternly warns against apostasy, I Cor. 10:1-11) that they are sanctified (I Cor. 1:2); have been given the grace of God (1:4); and have been enriched in all things (1:5); they share in Christ’s righteousness, wisdom, sanctification and redemption (1:30-31); they have received the Spirit (2:14-16) and the Spirit dwells in them (3:16-17); all things belong to them (3:21-23); they have been born through the gospel preached to them (4:15); they have been washed and justified by the Spirit (6:9-11); they enjoy communion in the body and blood of Christ (10:15-17); they have been baptized into one body by the Spirit (12:13) and are individually members of Christ’s body (12:27).

My question in light of what WLC affirms (and which I also affirm) is this, “How can Paul say that these things are true of the members of the church in Corinth and in what sense are they true?” **Whatever our answer to this question, it seems clear then that Paul is not using these terms in the same way that the Westminster Confession defines them.** My accusers may disagree with my interpretation of these passages, but clearly these statements by Paul are not based upon a denial of God’s sovereignty in salvation or a denial of the doctrine of unconditional election or the perseverance of the saints as the WCF defines these teachings (which I affirm most happily). **My contention is that our understanding of salvation from a systematic (Westminsterian) theology standpoint has difficulty accommodating these passages. I am suggesting that the understanding of covenant which I propose gives us a better way to deal with these statements in Scripture.** My views do not require any departure from the teaching of the Confession at all. They simply require us to recognize that Paul is not thinking of these matters from precisely the same perspective as the writers of the Confession though he would very likely be willing to affirm the statements of the Confession wholeheartedly.

It is quite apparent that Wilkins is not only pitting the apostle Paul against the Westminster Standards, but he is pitting himself at variance with the Standards, claiming to be a better interpreter of Paul than the Standards. **And then amazingly, Wilkins says my views do not require a departure from the Confession’s teaching.**

Wilkins Reveals His Hand On Justification

The following question was asked Wilkins:

How would you distinguish between the benefits enjoyed by a (decretively) elect member of the visible Church and a reprobate member of the visible church who has not yet manifested his apostasy?

He responds by saying:

This is not an easy question to answer but it does seem to me that the benefits enjoyed by the “decretively elect” do differ from those received by the non-elect. First, they differ *qualitatively*. Thus, for example, though the non-elect are brought within the family of the justified and in that sense may be referred to as one of the justified, the elect person’s justification in time is not only a declaration of his present acquittal from the guilt of sin but also an anticipation of his final vindication at the last judgment. **The non-elect church member’s “justification” is not.** His “justification” is not the judgment he will receive from God at the last day. Second, **the blessings conferred differ in their duration.** The elect person perseveres and remains in a state of grace until the end of his life. **The non-elect believer eventually forsakes the faith and falls away from the state of grace.** There may also be other experiential differences between the elect and the non-elect, but these differences may not be discernible (to the individuals themselves or to others) until the non-elect person displays his unbelief in some very explicit and concrete ways.

Wilkins is in complete disagreement with the Westminster Standards on the nature of “justification.” First, he attributes a justification to the non-elect that is totally refuted by the Standards, and he espouses a type of fluidity in justification that Rich Lusk and Norman Shepherd teach. Wilkins states that the difference is one of “duration.” The Federal Vision is notorious for promoting two kinds of justification – initial and final justification. The reprobate only exhibit initial justification but not final justification. Wilkins has just adopted a justification completely alien to God’s Word and one that the Westminster Standards utterly rejects. Wilkins is outside the pale of Christian orthodoxy with his false views of justification.

Note that the WCF 11:5 states:

God doth continue to forgive the sins of those that are justified: and although they can never fall from the state of justification; yet they may, by their sins, fall under God's fatherly displeasure, and not have the light of His countenance restored unto them, until they humble themselves, confess their sins, beg pardon, and renew their faith and repentance.

The Bible speaks of a “forensic” one time justification whereby our sins are once and for all pardoned and the righteousness of Christ imputed to us. There is no such thing as “duration” in justification. Justification is **an act of God**, not a work of God. Herein lies one of the differences between justification and sanctification.

Wilkins’ Faulty Idea That the Reprobate Are Initially Justified

Wilkins seeks to apply his faulty view of justification in giving the illustrations of King Saul and Judas Iscariot. Wilkins will argue that both initially were justified and later apostatized. This acknowledgment only bears out the seriousness of Wilkins’ departure from evangelical Christianity. On page 13 of his written response Wilkins states:

Saul and David were indistinguishable from one another to all outward appearances in the early phases of their careers; **Judas looked like the other disciples for a time**). It is only as history goes forward, as God’s plan unfolds, that we come to know who will persevere and who won’t. In the meanwhile, we are to view and treat all faithful members of the covenant community in the way we see them treated throughout the New Testament epistles — i.e., all covenant members are viewed and treated as elect, but also warned of the dangers of apostasy.

The language of the Bible forces us to acknowledge a great deal of mystery here. For example, the same terminology that describes the Spirit coming upon Saul in 1 Sam. 10:6 is used when the Spirit comes upon David (1 Sam. 16:13), Gideon (Jdg. 6:34), Jephthah (Jdg. 11:29), and Samson (Jdg. 14:6, 9; 15:14). But in four of these five cases (David, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson), the man in question was clearly regenerated and saved by the Spirit’s work (cf. Heb. 11:32). **This means that at the outset of Saul’s career, the biblical narrative itself draws no distinction between his initial experience of the Spirit and the experience of those who would obtain final salvation. Saul appears to receive the same initial covenantal grace that David, Gideon, and other saved men received**, even though God did not enable him to persevere in that grace.

If Wilkins had merely said that Judas and King Saul looked like the real thing but were **never really in the covenant** in terms of saving grace in any form, then there would not be an argument. But this is not what Wilkins is saying. Notice the red highlighted area where he says that the Bible draws “**draws no distinction between his initial experience of the Spirit and the experience of those who would obtain final salvation.**” Wilkins is stating that they all started out the same! He claims that Saul **received the same initial covenantal grace** that David and others received. The only difference is that the others proved to be faithful.

No matter how we try to explain it away, Wilkins believes that one can lose a justification! He is squarely in the Arminian camp. He believes in an initial salvation and a final salvation, something that the Bible and the Westminster Standards know nothing of.

Since Wilkins vainly has attempted to rally Calvin to his side, allow me to quote Calvin regarding the nature of election as it relates to the reprobate, particularly Judas Iscariot. In his Institutes of the Christian Religion Book 3, chapter 24, and sections 8 and 9 here are some excerpts. The bold areas are intended to show how Calvin refutes Wilkins' views:

Nothing will be ambiguous if we hold fast to what ought to be clear from the foregoing: bthat there are two kinds of call. There is the general call, by which God invites all equally to himself through the outward preaching of the word—even those to whom he holds it out as a savor of death [cf. 2 Corinthians 2:16], and as the occasion for severer condemnation. **The other kind of call is special, which he deigns for the most part to give to the believers alone, while by the inward illumination of his Spirit he causes the preached Word to dwell in their hearts. Yet sometimes he also causes those whom he illumines only for a time to partake of it; then he justly forsakes them on account of their ungratefulness and strikes them with even greater blindness.**

Now since the Lord saw the gospel published far and wide, held in contempt by many, justly valued by few, he describes God to us in the person of a king, who, in giving a solemn feast, sends his heralds round about to invite a great crowd but can obtain acceptance from very few, for each one claims that something prevents him from coming; hence, since they refuse, he is compelled to call in off the crossroads all met there [Matthew 22:2-9]. **Up to this point everyone sees that the parable is to be understood of the outward call.** He afterward adds that God acts like a good host, who circulates from table to table, affably greeting his guests. But if he finds one not dressed in a wedding garment, he will not allow him, unfitly dressed, to dishonor the festivity of the banquet with his unclean attire [Matthew 22:11-13]. **This phrase ought, I admit, to be understood as applying to those who enter the church on profession of faith but not clothed with Christ's sanctification.** God will not forever bear such dishonors, even cancers, of his church but as their baseness deserves, will cast them out. Few, therefore, were chosen from the great number of those called [cf Matthew 20:16]; however, **we do not say that this is the call by which believers ought to reckon their election. For this call is common also to the wicked, but the other bears with it the Spirit of regeneration [cf. Titus 3:5], the guarantee and seal of the inheritance to come [Ephesians 1:13-14], with which our hearts are sealed [2 Corinthians 1:22] unto the day of the Lord. To sum up, when the hypocrites, not unlike true worshipers of God, boast of piety, Christ declares that they will be cast out of the place, which they wrongly occupy [Matthew 22:13], just as in the psalm it is said: "O Lord, who shall dwell in thy tabernacle?" [Psalm 14:1, Vg.; 15:1, EV]. "The innocent of hands and pure of heart" Psalm 24:4, cf. Comm.; cf. Psalm 15:2 ff.]. And elsewhere: "This is the generation of those who seek God, of those who seek the face of the God of Jacob." [Psalm 24:6; 23:6, Vg.] **And thus the Spirit urges believers to****

patience so as not to be vexed at the mingling of the Ishmaelites with the church, since the latter will eventually be unmasked and cast out in disgrace.

THE EXAMPLE OF JUDAS IS NO COUNTEREVIDENCE

The same reason applies to the exception raised just above, where **Christ says that “no one perished but the son of perdition” [John 17:12]**; This is indeed an inexact expression but not at all obscure; **for he was counted among Christ’s sheep not because he truly was one but because he occupied the place of one.** The Lord’s assertion in another passage that he was chosen by him with the apostles is made only with reference to the ministry. “I have chosen twelve,” he said, “and one of them is a devil.” John 6:70 p.] That is, he had chosen him for the apostolic office. **But when he speaks of election unto salvation, he banishes him far from the number of the elect:** “I am not speaking of you all; I know whom I have chosen” John 13:18]. **If anyone confuses the word “election” in the two passages, he will miserably entangle himself; if he notes their difference, nothing is plainer.**

Consequently, when Gregory teaches that we are aware only of our call but unsure of our election, he is badly and dangerously in error. From this notion he exhorts all men to fear and trembling, making use of this reason: that even though we may know what we are today, we know not what we shall be. But in this passage he sufficiently declares how he tripped on this stone. For, inasmuch as he made election depend upon the merits of works, he supplied ample reason for men’s minds to become dejected; he could not strengthen them, for he did not transfer them from themselves to a trust in God’s goodness.

From this believers have some taste of what we set out at the beginning: predestination, rightly understood, brings no shaking of faith but rather its best confirmation. Yet I do not deny that the Spirit sometimes accommodates the utterance to the measure of our understanding—for instance, when he says: “They shall not be in the secret of my people, or be enrolled in the register of my servants” Ezekiel 13:9 p.]. It is as if God were beginning to write in the book of life those whom he reckons among the number of His people, although we know, as Christ bears witness [Luke 10:20], that the names of the children of God have been written in the book of life from the beginning [Philippians 4:3]. But these words simply express the casting away of those **who seemed** the chief among the elect, as the psalm had it: “Let them be blotted out of the book of life; let them not be enrolled among the righteous” [Psalm 69:28; cf Revelation 3:5].

Let’s make these observations about this section in Calvin’s Institutes. It is devastating to the argument of Wilkins and the Federal Vision. First, Calvin speaks of two calls of the Spirit, an outward and inward. The inward one is the only one that the elect experience. So much for Wilkins’ belief that the reprobate experience this inward call. Second, in the parable of the marriage feast, Calvin demonstrates how these two calls

manifest themselves. One group receives only the outward call but is not properly attired. The other receive the inner call and who are properly attired. Note that those receiving the outward call are as he put it “*those who enter the church on profession of faith but **not clothed with Christ’s sanctification.***” Notice that Calvin states that these visible church members who only have the outward call are NOT clothed with Christ’s sanctification. And note that only those receiving the inner call of the spirit have the spirit of regeneration according to Titus 3:5 which is devastating to Wilkins who insists that all church members have been regenerated via baptism. Third, Calvin calls the reprobate who fall away as hypocrites unlike as he says the true worshippers of God. Fourth, Calvin refers to these hypocrites as Ishmaelites in distinction with the “believers.”

Concerning Judas Iscariot, Calvin says that he was never a sheep in any spiritual sense whatsoever. Wilkins thinks that he had an initial sharing of the Spirit along with King Saul. Regarding Saul, Wilkins states that initially Saul had the Spirit just like David until he apostatized. Calvin with the Scripture and the Westminster Standards state that the non-elect never experience the Spirit’s work in the same way as do the elect. The non-elect are not justified or sanctified temporarily.

On page 15 of his response, Wilkins states:

Similarly, His attitude toward sinners changes through time. An elect man is an object of God’s wrath during the week before his conversion, and the object of God’s mercy during the time after. I submit that the same is true of the reprobate who receives the word of God with joy for a time: He is an object of favor while he responds in faith, and then becomes an object of disfavor. I take Saul as a concrete example of this reality.

Wilkins stands in stark contradiction to the Westminster Standards, which again he claims absolutely that he is in agreement with. Wilkins states that the reprobate are the objects of God’s mercy as long as they believe just like the elect are objects of God’s mercy after conversion.

Here is what WCF 3:5 states:

*Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to His eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of His will, hath chosen, in Christ, unto everlasting glory, **out of His mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving Him thereunto: and all to the praise of His glorious grace.***

WCF 3:7 states:

The rest of mankind** God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of His own will, whereby He extendeth or **withholdeth mercy**, as He pleaseth, for the glory of His sovereign power over His creatures, to pass by; **and to ordain them to dishonour and wrath, for their sin, to the praise of His glorious justice.

One of the proof texts given for section 7 is the classic passage in Romans 9. Esau and Pharaoh are examples of being hated and **not loved and without mercy**. God says in verse 18 that He has mercy on whom He desires and hardens whom He desires. Paul states that God endured with much patience those prepared for destruction, and in verse 23 He says that God did this to the reprobate in order to make known the riches of His glory upon **vessels of mercy** which He prepared beforehand for glory. And in v.24, Paul says “*even us , whom He also called...*” Then in verses 24-32 Paul states how God differentiates between the truly called from the physical seed that are reprobate who stumble over Christ.

My Analysis of Wilkins and Lusk On the Perseverance of the Saints

Steve Wilkins stated at the outset that he was indebted to Rich Lusk. I am going to simply copy a section of my book “*Danger In the Camp*” in response to Lusk but in so doing I am responding to Wilkins. One will notice that the quote that I give of Rich Lusk is identical to the quote that Wilkins gives in his re-examination because Wilkins is simply quoting Lusk.

Rich Lusk Denies The Perseverance of the Saints

Rich Lusk falls into the same pit, as do his comrades in the Federal Vision. He says that God addresses covenant members consistently as God’s eternally elect, even though some of these may apostatize and prove themselves to not be elected to eternal salvation (See footnote 146 in chapter 6). We must consider the inherent contradiction of his statement, which seems to completely escape him. Lusk says that God addresses covenant members as His **eternally elect**. But he then says that some of these persons will apostatize and prove to **not be eternally elect**. This is what I mean by the delusion that has blinded the men of the Federal Vision. How can an eternally elect person not be eternally elect? Eternal means forever! He refutes himself. Moreover, the idea of an “eternal election” implies an unconditional election since who can undo what God foreordains? When Lusk states that the apostates prove themselves not to be elected, this means that their “eternal” election is conditional after all – it is contingent upon man’s faithfulness. Just like so many other biblical words, the Federal Vision redefines “eternal” to be “not eternal,” or maybe “almost eternal,” or maybe “for a limited time.” Lusk also says that election in Ephesians 1 applies to all members of the church and that this election is from the foundation of the world; however, not all of these elect members will achieve final salvation, as he puts it (See footnote 149 in chapter 6). Here again the idea of elect before the foundation of the world means only elect for a time. It is amazing how many false doctrines that one is forced to hold in order to believe in the Federal Vision’s objective covenant. All of the precious doctrines associated with the salvation of men are robbed of their majesty and efficacy. Regeneration is only for a limited time. Pardon of sin is only for a limited time. God’s mercy and grace can be thwarted by man’s actions. God’s faithfulness is not good enough to see all of the elect to

glorification in heaven. All of God's actions are contingent upon man's faithfulness. Eternality does not mean forever. There are people in Hell for whom Jesus died and redeemed. If they were redeemed then how did they end up in Hell? Redemption means deliverance. They are supposedly redeemed but then not totally redeemed. It is all a tragedy of immense proportions. This is why the Federal Vision is a heresy that stands under the curse of God.

Lusk uses king Saul as an example of his view of apostasy:

Saul and David look alike in the early phases of their careers; Judas looked like the other disciples for a time. No appeal to the decree can be allowed to soften or undercut this covenantal perspective on our salvation. It is only as history is lived, as God's plan unfolds, that we come to know who will persevere and who won't... This means that at the outset of Saul's career, the biblical narrative itself draws no distinction between his initial experience of the Spirit and the experience of those who would enter into final salvation. Saul's apostasy was not due to any lack in God's grace given to him, but was his own fault... Saul received the same initial covenantal grace that David, Gideon, and other saved men received, though God withheld from him continuance in that grace. At the same time, his failure to persevere was due to his own rebellion. Herein lies the great mystery of God's sovereignty and human responsibility (cf. WCF 3.1, 8).⁷

He says that Saul **initially** had an experience with the Spirit but that experience would not give him **final** salvation. Lusk states that the Bible draws no distinction of the initial workings of the Spirit and of those who make it to final salvation. Lusk says that Saul's apostasy was his own fault and not God's. He says that Saul initially had the same initial grace that David, Gideon, and other saved men. Notice that Lusk uses the word "saved." This means that Lusk views Saul as one who was saved but who would later apostatize and fall out of a saved condition. Lusk says that God withheld from Saul continuance in that grace. It is baffling to see Lusk quoting the Westminster Confession's chapter on God's eternal decree. This chapter utterly refutes his position. Lusk references 3:8 where I suppose that he is referring to the fact that despite God's decree being eternal and unchangeable, God's decree does no violence to man's will and that God is not responsible for the sinful actions of men. Lusk has argued that Saul was a saved man initially just like David and others; however, Saul, of his own free will, apostatized and lost his initial salvation. This contradicts the fact that God's decree is eternal and unchangeable. To lose a previous salvation is a change! Lusk also quotes 3:8 of the Confession where it refers to the doctrine of predestination as a mystery. Lusk states that the mystery is between divine sovereignty and human responsibility pertaining to how one could be initially saved but then lost because God withheld continuance of grace. This is not what 3:8 teaches. This section refers to the fact that men can be assured of their eternal election flowing from the "**certainty of their effectual vocation.**" The concept that God withholds continuing grace from those whom He elects is an impossibility. The Federal Vision completely rejects Philippians 1:6 – "*For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the*

⁷ Ibid.

day of Christ Jesus.” There is no contingency here. There is no withholding a continuance of grace. Why will God complete what he has started? It is because God is faithful. Lusk is stating that for some unknown reason (mystery) God stops his act of electing grace and allows the person to apostatize and go to Hell. What an insult to God. Is there any comfort in this doctrine of the Federal Vision? None whatsoever. While Lusk maintains that it is the fault of the apostate who apostatizes, he turns around and blames God for the fact that God withheld continuance of grace to keep this person saved. The Federal Vision does not understand nor appreciate I Thessalonians 5:23, 24 – *“Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and joy be preserved complete without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.”* The comfort for the Christian is in God’s faithfulness. If God elects you, God will provide sustaining grace all your life. Assurance of salvation flows out of the promise of God’s unconditional election. The Federal Vision gives no real comfort; it hangs over our heads this threat of eternal damnation to everyone who does not continue in obedience, as if this obedience ultimately depended upon us. Yes, as Hebrews 12: 14 states, no one will see God without holiness of life. There must be a sanctified life, but God always provides what He promises. This is why the Westminster Confession states in 11:2 (chapter on justification) that justifying faith is **always accompanied with all other saving graces**. Since Lusk says that God is the one who withheld continuing grace from Saul, who is to say that God will not withhold continuing grace from any of us? How do I know that any kind of backsliding isn’t the beginning of the end of my salvation? The Westminster Confession in its chapter on assurance of grace and salvation clearly teaches that we who truly believe in Jesus, who love Him in sincerity, and who endeavor to walk in Him, can be **certainly assured** that we are in the state of grace. And what is the basis of this confident assurance? Our determined wills? No. The Confession says that this certainty is grounded upon the divine truth of the **promise of salvation and the inward evidence of those graces unto which the promises are made, and the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God**. The Confession uses Ephesians 1: 13, 14 as a proof text that states that all who believe in Jesus as a result of their election are **sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise**. This sealing of the Holy Spirit is viewed by Scripture as a pledge of our inheritance. What the Federal Vision tells us is that God reneges on His election by withholding His sustaining grace. This is a mystery as to why God does this, says Lusk.

Lusk likens our covenant relationship with God as a marriage (See footnotes 162 – 164 in chapter 6). In his analogy, Lusk states that our water baptism is like the wedding ceremony, and as long as we remain faithful, Christ will keep us under His protection. Yet, if we become unfaithful (adulterous), then Christ will divorce us. Lusk then asks, “What constitutes unfaithfulness leading to Christ’s divorcing of us?” Lusk’s answer to his own question is quite odd. He says that God does not demand perfection from us, only loyalty. Lusk states that God is concerned with our direction, not perfection. He says that sustained faithfulness is what counts, however numerous our failings may be. Does this mean that if we cheat on Jesus only once that is okay? How about twice? Lusk’s analogy is not that good. He wants us to understand that there is a real wedding with Christ. We are His bride, and the relationship is true union with Him. The problem

with Lusk's analogy is that it breaks down seriously because he makes the wedding applicable to the visible church in its entirety. Lusk says that all baptized persons are married to Christ and in full union with Him. Jesus is married to His bride, the church, according to Ephesians 5: 22- 33. But this marriage is to His elect, the invisible church! Christ promises to have a **spotless bride**. Christ sanctifies His bride and presents her to Himself **as holy and blameless**. There is no divorcing of His bride! Ephesians 5: 25- 27 states:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her; that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless.

Notice that Christ preserves, guarantees the faithfulness of His bride! It never puts the onus of responsibility on the bride, the church, to maintain the relationship. Lusk's illustration totally breaks down and insults the Lord Jesus Christ. What this means is that when those who are in the visible church apostatize, it simply demonstrates that they were **never** married to Christ. If they had been married to Him, they would not have apostatized just as Ephesians 5 states. As I John 2: 19 states, those that go out from the body of believers as apostates only showed that they were never really part of the body in terms of a spiritual reality. The Federal Vision simply cannot accept this because of its obsession to maintain its objective covenant. Once a person buys into the Federal Vision's covenant concept, then he begins a downward spiral of immense proportions. One precious doctrine after another must be denied, such as the Reformed doctrine of the perseverance of the saints.

Lusk, just like other proponents of the Federal Vision, want to avoid using the phrase "lose one's salvation." This would be too openly Arminian. To solve his dilemma, Lusk asks the question, "What do you mean by salvation?" (See footnote 165 in chapter 6). He says that biblical writers view salvation as an eschatological concept, meaning that no one is saved until the last day. I wonder whom these biblical writers are that he never mentions? They don't exist because this is nowhere taught in Scripture. Not once is the term "eschatological salvation" ever used. His attempts to explain this are one huge convoluted mess. He says that salvation can be understood as a past reality, meaning that it is in eternity past when God chose us or when Christ died for us on the cross, or when the Spirit converted us. I am using Lusk's verbatim statements from his quote. Lusk continues to say that no elect person can lose his salvation, and he quotes John 10: 27, 28. However, he says that the biblical language is much more complicated. By complicated Lusk means that "*in one sense all those in the covenant are saved. They have been delivered out of the world and brought into the glorious new creation of Christ. But not all will persevere.*"⁸ Lusk then quotes Jude 5 as support for the fact that people can be saved but then lost. If we look at Jude 5 we read – "*Now I desire to remind you, though you know all things once for all, that the Lord, after saving a people of the land of Egypt, subsequently destroyed those who did not believe.*" The word does not carry the

⁸ Rich Lusk, *Covenant & Election FAQ's (Version 6.4)*. Quoted in *Theologia*, 2002. One can find this article on the internet at [www.Theologia.org/Soteriology/Covenant & Election FAQs](http://www.Theologia.org/Soteriology/Covenant%20&%20Election%20FAQs)

connotation of “saving” in a soteriological sense. It simply means “deliverance” in this context. It is obvious that there is no soteriological meaning for this word here because the verse clearly states that those whom God destroyed after “saving” **did not believe**. We must remember that the terms “adoption” and “children of God” can simply have an external meaning as John Murray has pointed out as in Romans 9. As we can see, Lusk totally misunderstands because he is looking through his tinted lens of this erroneous objective covenant.

Lusk says that the Reformed community cannot hide behind the doctrine of election, or the “invisible church” and say these warnings are for other people, but not for us (See footnote 167 in chapter 6). Lusk is in outright defiance of the very Standards that he swore to uphold. Chapter 18 of the Westminster Confession again affirms that everyone effectually called and sanctified cannot totally fall away from the Faith (18:1). The perseverance is rooted in God’s immutable decree and unchangeable love. Westminster Larger Catechism # 68 affirms that only the elect are effectually called while others only receive “common operations of the Spirit” but who never truly come to Christ. Like Barach and Wilkins he makes absolutely no sense when he says that “*no elect person can be lost and no non-elect person can attain salvation*” (See footnote 168 in chapter 6). He then turns around and says that non-elect persons are truly brought to Christ and united to Him. He says, “*In some sense, they were really joined to the elect people, really sanctified by Christ’s blood, really recipients of new life by the Holy Spirit. But God withholds from them the gift of perseverance and all is lost. They break the gracious new covenant they entered into at baptism*” (See footnote 169 in chapter 6). It is hard to see how Lusk can immediately state: “*The covenant really is gospel – good news- through and through. Yet only those who continue to persevere in loyalty to the covenant and the Lord of the covenant inherit final salvation...those who fall away lose the temporary covenantal blessings they had enjoyed. Ultimately, this is because God decreed that these covenant breakers would not share in the eschatological salvation of Christ*” (See footnote 170 in chapter 6). It is not good news to those whom God supposedly decides to deny sustaining grace.

Relevant Passages That Refute The Federal Vision’s Denial of the Perseverance of the Saints

I do not intend to list many of the passages that support the Reformed doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, but a few will suffice.

Romans 8: 28-39

The text reads:

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren; and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified. What then

shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, 'For Thy sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.' But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This passage commonly has been called "the ordo salutis," a Latin phrase meaning "the order of salvation." This is one of the most glorious passages in all of God's Word. It sets forth for us the plan of salvation from start to finish. It is one of the most comforting and awe inspiring passages for the Christian. However, it is not for those of the Federal Vision, for they deny this passage, and in so doing they rob God of His glorious mercy and grace, and they leave the professing Christian in the realm of his own feeble efforts.

In verse 28 we see that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God and are called according to His purpose. One might ask, "What purpose is that?" The answer is found in the succeeding verses. The word "for" is a transitional word linking verse 28 with all that follows. The Greek word is "oti," which can be translated as "because." Verse 29 begins with those whom God has "foreknown." A word study on this word, and its usage in this context refers to a love that God has shown to a certain group of persons from all eternity. Paul is now going to link together several great biblical concepts in an unbreakable chain. Those whom God has foreknown, these He also predestines, meaning that He foreordains them. To what does God predestine those whom He foreknew? It is to the goal of becoming conformed to the image of His Son. This is very important for us to understand in our analysis of the Federal Vision. Predestination is to holiness of life in all whom God has predestined. Verse 30 indicates that those whom God predestines, these He also calls. This is effectual calling. The only ones who are called by God are those whom He foreknew and predestined to reach holiness of life. Those who are called are those whom God has loved from all eternity according to God's sovereign choice. Verse 30 continues to add that all those whom God called, these He also justified. The people who are justified are those who have been loved from all eternity and called. To be justified means that one is declared innocent, not for anything done in themselves but for the righteousness of Christ imputed to them. To be justified means to be pardoned of sins once and for all. Then, we are told that all whom God justified, He glorified. Glorification is pictured in the Bible as that state when we are made perfect both in body and soul. This occurs at the Second coming of Jesus, which is at the last Day, when Jesus raises up all those whom God justified. Now this is the unbroken sequence of the plan of salvation. Does anyone see any election according to our faithful obedience? Does anyone see reference to an initial election or justification in some but who do not make it to glorification because God decided to withhold His

sovereign, sustaining grace? Election, which is foreknowledge combined with predestination, always culminates in glorification in those whom God foreloves and predestines. In verse 31 we need to ask, “Who is the “us”?” Moving on to verse 32, we see that God did not spare His own Son for “us.” The Son of God was delivered up for “us all.” God freely gave “us” all things in the Son. In verse 33, we are told who the “us” are. It is the “elect.” Verse 33 and 34 emphasize that God justifies the elect! No charge can be brought against the elect, and who can condemn these elect? Verse 34 affirms that Jesus died for the elect and that He intercedes for the elect. This is no minor point! Jesus intercedes for all the elect. If a person has Jesus continually interceding for them, how can any such person ever fail to be glorified? Paul then asks the glorious question, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” In verses 35 – 39, he gives this litany of things that cannot separate us from Christ’s love for us. The “love of Christ” in verse 35 is not our love for Christ but Christ’s love for us! The conclusion to verses 35- 39 is that **absolutely nothing can separate the elect of God from God’s love for them in Jesus Christ.**

The ordo salutis is God’s unconditional love for an undeserving people. It begins in eternity past and will continue into eternity future. There are no conditions pending to some initially elect who must persevere or else. God promised that all whom He foreknew and predestined **will be conformed to Christ’s image, not maybe.** If someone apostatizes, it is simply because they were **never foreknown, never predestined, never called, never justified, never glorified.** As Jesus said in Matthew 7:23, there will be those whom Jesus **never knew.** These are people who were members of the visible church! Jesus knows savingly only those in the invisible church.

The Federal Vision’s gospel is no gospel. It can save no man. Trusting in such a theology will be disastrous for the souls of such persons.

Hebrews 6: 4-9

The passage states:

For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame. For ground that drinks the rain which often falls upon it and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God; but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed and it ends up being burned. But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this way.

This is one of the classic passages that Arminianism has used to attempt to prove that one can lose his salvation. It is interesting this is also one of the passages that the Federal Vision uses to agree with the Arminians that one can lose his salvation. Doug Wilson

said that it is such passages that Calvinists have been dishonest with, and remember, Wilson said that Arminians would eat the Calvinist's lunch with passages like this.

Wilson makes a fatal assumption because of his commitment to a false view of the covenant. Like all the men of the Federal Vision, he believes that entrance into the covenant via baptism is accompanied by God's saving graces at that moment. When we are in covenant we are in Christ in all respects. As Rich Lusk and John Barach say, the whole package of salvation is present at baptism. Hence, it is assumed that all the characteristics mentioned in this passage must be indicative of someone who is saved initially. The assumption is that the warnings are directed toward genuine Christians to keep them alert, lest they should lose it all.

The pivotal verse in the entire passage is verse 9. Verse 9 begins with the conjunction "but," which is a transitional word. In verses 4 through 8, the writer has been setting forth a list of traits of certain persons. Now, in verse 9 the writer says that he thinks of better things concerning them – things that **accompany salvation**. This means that all the traits listed in verses 4-8 are things that may look like salvation or that may be closely associated with salvation but fall short of true saving faith.

Simon Kistemaker makes some helpful comments on this passage. He states:

Throughout the epistle the writer has admonished his readers to accept the Word of God in faith and not to fall into the sin of unbelief that results in eternal judgment (2:1; 3:12-14; 4:1, 6, 11; 10:25, 27, 31; 12:16-17, 25, 29). In 6:4-6 he does not address the recipients of his letter, but instead he states a truth that emerges from an earlier reference to the Israelites perishing in the desert because of their unbelief. The truth also applies to the Hebrews, even though the author omits the personal reference in 6:4-6.⁹

Regarding this passage, John Calvin, has made these comments:

But here arises a new question, how can it be that he who has once made such a progress should afterwards fall away? For God, it may be said, calls none effectually but the elect, and Paul testifies that they are really his sons who are led by his Spirit, (Romans 8:14;) and he teaches us, that it is a sure pledge of adoption when Christ makes us partakers of his Spirit. The elect are also beyond the danger of finally falling away; for the Father who gave them to be preserved by Christ his Son is greater than all, and Christ promises to watch over them all so that none may perish. To all this I answer, That God indeed favors none but the elect alone with the Spirit of regeneration, and that by this they are distinguished from there probate; for they are renewed after his image and receive the earnest of the Spirit in hope of the future inheritance, and by the same Spirit the Gospel is sealed in their hearts. But I cannot admit that all this is any reason why he should not grant the reprobate also some taste of his grace, why he should not irradiate their minds with some sparks of his light, why he should not give them some perception of

⁹ Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary, Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1984), pp. 157, 158.

*his goodness, and in some sort engrave his word on their hearts. Otherwise, where would be the temporal faith mentioned by Mark 4:17? There is therefore some knowledge even in the reprobate, which afterwards vanishes away, either because it did not strike roots sufficiently deep, or because it withers, being choked.*¹⁰

Calvin is very clear to state that only the elect are effectually called and that those led of the Holy Spirit are truly His sons. Calvin is the one who uses the word “truly” to describe God’s sons. The Federal Vision vehemently objects to this kind of verbiage because it views all in the covenant as sons in a saving sense. Calvin emphatically states that the elect are beyond the danger of finally falling away because God the Father who gave the elect His Son is greater than all and that Christ promises (John 17:12) that He will care for them all, so that none perishes. There is no discussion of an initial elect as opposed to a final elect as the Federal Vision insists. There is no contingency based upon man’s efforts. Calvin states that God bestows His Spirit of regeneration only on the elect and that they are distinguished from the reprobate. This is a key point in demonstrating the spiritual bankruptcy of the Federal Vision. Calvin recognizes an antithesis between the elect and the reprobate. The Federal Vision states that the reprobate is initially elect because of their baptism into the covenant community. This is why the Federal Vision must create a “final elect” or a “final salvation.” Calvin states that only the elect have the Spirit of God sealed to their hearts as the earnest of their inheritance. This completely refutes the Federal Vision’s comments that all baptized persons are regenerated and have the Holy Spirit, of whom some will later apostatize. The point of Calvin is clear. **It is impossible for any elect to apostatize.**

There are several things that characterize the persons of Hebrews 6: 4-6. They have once been enlightened; they have tasted the heavenly gift; they have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit; and they have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come. If these things are not references to genuine Christians, then how are they to be explained? What does it mean to be enlightened? The Scripture does maintain that illumination does not always mean a saving enlightenment to the truth. In John 1: 5 we read: “*And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.*” This is a reference about the eternal Word who has come into the world, whom John tells us that it is Jesus Christ. In John 1:9 we read: “*There was the true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man.*” What is meant by the phrase, “enlightens every man?” Of all the various interpretations that could attempt to explain this, William Hendrikson gives his analysis:

He illumines every man who hears the Gospel; i.e., he imparts a degree of understanding concerning spiritual matters (not necessarily resulting in salvation) to all those whose ears and minds are reached by the message of salvation. The majority, however, do not respond favorably. Many who have the light prefer the darkness. Some, however, due

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries, Hebrews*, Translated by W. B. Johnston (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1963), p. 76.

*entirely to the sovereign, saving grace of God, receive the word with the proper attitude of heart and mind, and obtain everlasting life.*¹¹

There are those in the world who have been enlightened to the gospel message but who have never truly come to the light. Jesus said on several occasions that He is the true light and that men must come unto Him if they are to be saved. We know from the Scripture in doing word studies that words often can change their meanings according to the context. The word “flesh” can mean material body in one context and then mean “sinful living” in another context. The word “world” can mean everyone without exception in one context but then refer only to believers in another context, and even refer to a sinful system of thought in another context.

How can certain men taste the heavenly gift and been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, taste the goodness of the word of God, and taste of the powers of the coming age and not be genuinely saved? Let’s suppose we have someone who has professed Christ, who has been baptized, who has taken part actively in the local church, and who has participated in the Lord’s Supper (eaten and drank the gift of God pictured in the sacrament). Is this person automatically a Christian? The Federal Vision would emphatically say yes, but the Bible has false professors. Why should we assume that the word “partake in” must mean saving union? Is it possible to be associated with the Holy Spirit and not be saved? Of course it is. Let’s consider some notable figures in the New Testament. First, we have Judas Iscariot who was Jesus’ disciple for three years. Was he in close association with the Holy Spirit? He sure was when he was in the presence of Jesus in whom the Spirit of God abode. He saw the miracles of Jesus. He heard the word of God consistently as Jesus preached and taught. Did this do Judas any good? Absolutely not. John 6: 70, 71 states that Jesus knew all along from the outset when He chose His disciples that Judas Iscariot was a devil and would betray Him, but He permitted him to be with the true believers. Jesus did this because in fulfillment of prophecy, the Messiah must be betrayed for 30 pieces of silver, and the betrayer would throw it into a potter’s field (Zechariah 11: 12, 13). We then have Simon Magus, the magician in Samaria, who saw the great signs and wonders performed by Philip and the apostles. He saw those who believed and who were baptized speak in tongues. Simon Magus was in very close association with the Holy Spirit, and he saw the powers of the coming age. Simon was said to have believed and was baptized (Acts 8: 13). Does everyone who believes a true participant in God’s saving work? No. We are told in Acts 8: 18-24 that when Simon Magus wanted to buy from Peter the gift of the laying on of hands to do miracles that Peter had some very strong words to say to him. Peter says that Simon has no portion in this matter and that he is in the bondage of sin. This is said to one who “believed and was baptized.” Not everyone who professes Christ is necessarily a true disciple. In chapter 6, I dealt in some detail with those “believers” in John 8 whom Jesus declared to be the children of the Devil. We are told in John 6: 1, 2 that there was a multitude that followed Jesus because of “*seeing the signs which He was performing on those who were sick.*”

¹¹ William Hendrikson, *New Testament Commentary on John*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1953), p. 77.

How can men be closely associated with the word of God, see miraculous things and not be genuinely saved? Matthew 7:21-23 is the vivid proof. In that passage we see men who profess Christ, who prophesy in Jesus' name, who cast out demons in Jesus' name, and who performed many miracles in Jesus' name. To these persons, Jesus says, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness." The key words are – **"I never knew you."**

To answer Doug Wilson who stated that Arminians would eat the Calvinist's lunch on such passages and that Calvinists have been dishonest with them, "My lunch was not eaten, and neither have the lunches of Calvinists for centuries been eaten." It is Doug Wilson and his fellow Federal Vision proponents who have no lunch to offer.

Further Comments On Wilkins' View of Perseverance From "*Danger In the Camp*"

Steve Wilkins And His Church Session Deny The Perseverance of the Saints

Wilkins makes an incredible statement about who constitutes the elect of God. He states:

*The elect are those who are faithful in Christ Jesus. If they later reject the Savior, they are no longer elect—they are cut off from the Elect One and thus, lose their elect standing. But their falling away doesn't negate the reality of their standing prior to their apostasy. They were really and truly the elect of God because of their relationship with Christ.*¹²

This statement is totally out of accord with the Reformed Standards. There is no unconditional election in this statement. It openly states that man can undo what God had previously done. Wilkins says that one can be cut off from election. I don't understand the value of the statement that apostasy doesn't change prior election. What good was a prior election, if it doesn't guarantee us anything? The concept of "election" is rendered meaningless. Election means that God sets His love upon a people that guarantees their salvation from start to finish. Romans 9 is the classic passage that demonstrates the unconditional nature of God's election.

In commenting on the spiritual status of the Corinthian church in I Corinthians 10, Wilkins states that the entire church, all individual members by their baptism, have been joined to Christ in a saving way. Wilkins states that Paul says to them that Christ died for their sins. Wilkins indicates that Paul knew this, not because he was privy to God's secret decrees, but because of their objective union with Christ in the covenant. However, each must be faithful to persevere in faith; otherwise, the blessings could sink into everlasting fire (See footnotes 31 and 32 in chapter 6). The Reformed Faith does demand that men must persevere in faith, and there is no question that those "elect" and those for whom Christ died will unquestionably persevere. Wilkins clearly denies this.

¹² Steve Wilkins, *Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation*, Quoted in *Debating The Federal Vision*, the Knox Theological Seminary Colloquium on the Federal Vision, August 11-13, 2003, p. 261.

Wilkins continues to state that if church members fail to persevere they lose all the blessings they once were given. He states that all this is according to God's decree that God has ordained from the foundation of the world (See footnote 34 in chapter 60). What does Wilkins mean here about God's decree? He has just denied the Reformed understanding of God's decrees. The Westminster Confession affirms the unconditionality of God's decrees. It states that God's decree is unchangeable!¹³ The chapter on God's eternal decree also affirms that God foreordains whatsoever comes to pass neither on the basis of any supposed conditions, nor because of what He foresaw as future that could come to pass upon such conditions.¹⁴ Wilkins argues for the condition of human faithfulness as the basis of continuing in the initial state of blessings. When Wilkins states that this condition is what God has foreordained from all eternity, he has just refuted the Confession of Faith. He has adopted a classic Arminian interpretation, which states that God plans according to what He knows men will do in space and time. What has the apostate given up according to Wilkins? He has "*forfeited life, forgiveness, and salvation...had real communion with Christ, had the Spirit's work within them, had been sanctified by the blood of Christ, had been made members of the heavenly city, had been sprinkled by the blood of Jesus, had been cleansed from former sins, had been bought by the Lord, had escaped the pollutions of the world, and had the adoption* (See footnote 35 in chapter 6). Wilkins says that the apostate fails to persevere in all of these blessings and has his name removed from the book of life (See footnote 36 in chapter 6). This is pure, unadulterated Arminianism. Wilkins stresses that this falling away is not a hypothetical impossibility but a very real possibility for those in covenant with God and members of His Church. Wilkins says that the apostates enjoy for a season all of these blessings but eventually fall short of the grace of God (See footnote 37 in chapter 6). He wants us to be sure that we understand what he is affirming. Wilkins states:

The apostate, thus, forsakes the grace of God that was given to him by virtue of his union with Christ. It is not accurate to say that they only "appeared" to have these things but did not actually have them—if that were so, there would be nothing to "forsake" and apostasy is bled of its horror and severity. That which makes apostasy so horrendous is that these blessings actually belonged to the apostates—though they only had them temporarily they had them no less truly. The apostate doesn't forfeit "apparent blessings" that were never his in reality, but real blessings that were his in covenant with God.¹⁵

Wilkins quotes John 15: 1-8 as support of his Arminian view of apostasy. He says that that the branches are in true saving union with Christ and that when they are cut off and burned for being fruitless, this means that they are eternally lost. Wilkins wants us to realize that there is genuine loss of salvation. He states:

Often this passage is interpreted along these lines: There are two kinds of branches. Some branches are not really in Christ "in a saving way," but only in an external sense—whatever fruit they bear is not genuine and they will eventually be destroyed. Other branches are truly joined to Christ inwardly and savingly, and they bear more and more

¹³ *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, "Of God's Eternal Decree," 3:1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* Chapter 3:2

¹⁵ Wilkins, p. 264.

fruit as they are pruned and cultivated by the Father." As Norman Shepherd has noted, "If this distinction is in the text, it is difficult to see what the point of the warning is. The outward ("external") branches cannot profit from it, because they cannot in any case bear genuine fruit. They are not related to Christ inwardly and draw no life from him. The inward branches do not need the warning, because they are vitalized by Christ and therefore cannot help but bear good fruit. Cultivation by the Father, with its attendant blessing, is guaranteed."¹⁶

Wilkins' denial of the unconditional nature of God's decree is explicit, for he says:

Covenant, therefore, is a gracious relationship, not a potentially gracious relationship. To be in covenant is to have the treasures of God's mercy and grace and the love which He has for His own Son given to you. But the covenant is not unconditional. It requires persevering faithfulness.¹⁷

Here it is in glaring clarity. Wilkins denies the unconditional nature of God's decrees, making God's decree contingent upon man's faithfulness, and then he clearly states that God's mercy and grace can be nullified if the person is unfaithful. So much for the faithfulness of God that preserves us to the end. It is all gone in Federal Vision theology.

The position statement by the session of Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church of which Steve Wilkins is the pastor is one of the most convoluted statements that one can ever read (See footnote 58 in chapter 6). If someone did not study thoroughly all that the Federal Vision teaches, then one might have a tendency to think that Auburn Avenue has not denied the Reformed doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. After all, the statement states that it would be improper to speak of anyone "losing their salvation." But if one reads the statement carefully, one will notice that the statement says that "none of the elect unto **final** salvation can lose that salvation." This is not Reformed terminology. There is no such thing as initial or final salvation; either one is saved thoroughly at the start or he is not saved at all. The statement wants to preserve the appearance of some kind of predestination when it says that God has ordained all to eternal life that He has determined, but this final salvation is contingent upon man himself. The position statement clearly refers to the phrases "glorious new creation in Christ," "have been delivered out of the world," "been cleansed from their former sins" and "have known the way of righteousness" as things that indicate "salvation." The statement continues to acknowledge that not all persevere in that "salvation." The problem is that the Federal Vision maintains **two kinds of salvation**. What the Federal Vision attributes to initial salvation, the Bible attributes to the only salvation that God provides, which cannot be lost. Does it make any sense to say that a person can have his former sins forgiven, but there remains a possibility for this person to be lost in the future? This would mean that there are sins that can be committed after this initial forgiveness and salvation that would forfeit all that one previously had. This is why the position statement was careful to say - "been cleansed from their **former** sins." In Federal Vision theology there is a death of Jesus initially for the forgiveness of sins, but

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 264, 265.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 265, 266.

then the efficacy of Jesus' death will not guarantee final forgiveness simply because the person may apostatize from the Faith. This is an outright challenge to the nature of Christ's atoning work.

The session of Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church actually seeks to quote the Westminster Confession chapter 18: 1, 2 as a proof text for its statements. This is amazing, for there is no similarity between Westminster and the Federal Vision. The session speaks of those who persevere to the end can have assurance but others have false hopes. The fact that the Federal Vision believes that all the saving graces are present at baptism changes everything. The Confession says that those who have the false hopes are the "unregenerate." The assurance of salvation is reserved for those who "truly believe in the Lord" as the Confession states in 18:1. WCF 18:2 states that this assurance is a **certainty** which is based on "the divine truth of the promises of salvation." The Confession does not say "initial salvation" or "final salvation." This distinction is pure fabrication in the minds of the Federal Vision. WCF 18:2 continues to add that this certainty of the promise of salvation is due to the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit that we are children of God. The Federal Vision believes that all persons baptized are "the children of God."

Wilkins' Distorted Views of Forgiveness

Wilkins maintains that all members of the visible church have experienced initially justification, sanctification, redemption, and forgiveness of sins. It is all based on his faulty reasoning that since Paul addresses several of his epistles to "saints" or "the elect" that this means that all are in this category.

Wilkins is asked this question as part of his re-examination. – Do you believe that those who ultimately fall away ever truly possessed forgiveness of sins?

His response is:

If you mean by "truly possessed" that they had forgiveness in the same sense that those who are elect unto salvation have, then the answer is, "no." The Bible speaks of members of the visible church, as those who are counted among the redeemed, washed, and sanctified and promises forgiveness for all who abide in Christ and persevere in faith. **Thus, though we know that the elect are forgiven and shall surely be acquitted at the last day, the promise of forgiveness given to us is always conditional upon our continuing in the faith (which of course, is only possible by the grace of God and not the result of our own native strength, will power, or discipline).** Thus, Jesus makes plain that those who refuse to forgive others will not be forgiven by the Father (Matt. 6:14-15). This seems clearly to be the teaching of the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matt. 18:21-35; see also Mark 11:25-26; Luke 6:27).

Note that the servant is **actually forgiven his debt** but he refuses to *forgive* the debt of

his debtor. What made the servant's sin so grievous is the fact that he really had been forgiven. If the parable was simply about the need for us to forgive others, then the first part of the story is unnecessary. Jesus could simply have told a story about a servant who didn't forgive his debtor and was punished by his master. But He doesn't because that isn't the point (or at least, the entire point).

The point is that *those who are forgiven must forgive*. And that point depends upon the servant having genuinely been forgiven at the start of the story. That's what drives the story and that's what makes the ending of the parable so startling. This once-forgiven servant loses the forgiveness he had been granted because he didn't forgive his own debtor. **This seems to set forth a sort of "temporary forgiveness" (for lack of a better term) that is, in spite of its impermanence, real.** If the servant wasn't genuinely forgiven, the story loses its impact. He was given a real promise that he would not be held accountable for his debt. The point is that God has made such a promise to us in Christ, and therefore we must forgive our debtors or Jesus' Father will treat us the way the master treated the unforgiving once-forgiven servant.

Forgiveness is only found "in Christ." Apart from Him, there can be no forgiveness, no salvation. **Those who are faithful members of Christ's church, trusting in His work in their behalf are forgiven and must continue to believe in order to maintain this status.** This is a difficult concept to express (and I don't believe it is addressed in our Confession or catechisms) but it seems to me to be clearly taught in the Scriptures.

However we might state this, we would have to maintain that the "forgiveness" received by such a person is not identical to that received by the elect. To repeat what I've said earlier: *First, differs in its duration.* The elect person perseveres and remains in a state of grace until the end of his life. The non-elect eventually forsakes his faith and falls away from the state of grace. *And second, it differs qualitatively.* The elect person's forgiveness in time is an anticipation of his final vindication at the last judgment. The non-elect's "forgiveness" is not. Although the non-elect person has standing for a time in the church which is "realm" of the forgiven, his **justification** is not the judgment he will receive from God at the last day.

These responses by Wilkins reveal the depth of just how far he has departed from Christian orthodoxy. The highlighted areas above reveal an unorthodox view of justification, for it blatantly attacks the once for all sufficiency of Christ's atoning work. His positions advocates a thoroughly conditional view of Christ's atoning work. The highlighted in red areas are strikingly unorthodox. Let's begin with the first very damaging comment he makes. The question of Presbytery is whether one ever really possessed forgiveness of sins if he falls away from the faith. Wilkins says, **"Thus, though we know that the elect are forgiven and shall surely be acquitted at the last day, the promise of forgiveness given to us is always conditional upon our continuing in the faith (which of course, is only possible by the grace of God and not the result of our own native strength, will power, or discipline).** This statement clearly advocates a conditional view of forgiveness. Forgiveness on the last day is contingent upon us persevering in the faith. Think about this very carefully. Wilkins

says that our forgiveness on judgment day is totally dependent upon something **we do**. The Reformed Faith has always taught that the elect cannot fall away permanently because they are secure in Christ's atoning work on their behalf. If Christ redeems us, forgiveness is **once and for all** given. To be truly forgiven at one point is to be truly forgiven forever. The apostate that falls away **never** had forgiveness. But Wilkins insists that he really and truly did have it. What caused his forgiveness to become unforgiveness? Man! Wilkins and the Federal Vision have a MAN CENTERED, MAN GLORIFYING THEOLOGY. The sustaining power of Christ's forgiveness can be undone says Wilkins. For Wilkins to claim that our continuing in the faith is only by God's strength and not ours is pure double talk. Wilkins wants to minimize the blow of his comments. In reality, Wilkins says that in this life the elect is actually undetermined because this "elect" person in the visible church just might prove to be non-elect by falling away. There is no unconditional election but pure, unadulterated man-centered conditional election contingent upon **man's perseverance**.

The elect of God will most assuredly persevere to the end **because** they have been forgiven once and for all. It is the work of Christ that guarantees our salvation on the day of judgment; **it is not our perseverance that gives value to Christ's initial forgiveness**.

Wilkins tries desperately to prove this horrible doctrine from the parable of the unforgiving debtor in Matthew 18:21-35. Notice that Wilkins says that the debtor is as Wilkins puts it "actually forgiven his debt." But because he refuses to forgive his debtor he loses his former forgiveness. Let me say this at the outset. Wilkins does not know how to interpret parables at all. **This parable does not teach the nature of forgiveness of sins as it pertains to Christ's substitutionary work as a propitiatory sacrifice.** That is not the point of the parable. Wilkins seems to forget one of the primary principles of Biblical interpretation – the Bible is not self-contradictory. To adopt Wilkins' view of the parable blatantly contradicts the rest of Scripture's teaching about the nature of Christ's redeeming work.

Notice where Wilkins' interpretation takes him by necessity. It leads to this statement that he makes – **"This seems to set forth a sort of "temporary forgiveness" (for lack of a better term) that is, in spite of its impermanence, real.** Just let this sink in for a moment. The forgiveness that a person has is only "temporary forgiveness." It must be only temporary because we must wait to see if the person continues to be faithful. If he continues, then he will be rewarded permanent forgiveness on Judgment Day. So, where in the Bible does it teach that Jesus' forgiveness is only an initial or temporary forgiveness? Nowhere!

Note this statement by Wilkins: *"Those who are faithful members of Christ's church, trusting in His work in their behalf are forgiven and must continue to believe in order to maintain this status."* This clearly advocates the view that our maintaining forgiveness is absolutely tied to our continued faith. While in one sense it is true that the believer must persevere in order to be saved, it is not true that there is **any doubt** to the outcome. One who has true faith; one who is the elect **is redeemed and forgiven and cannot apostatize**. Steve Wilkins believes it is possible to be an elect but become a non-

elect if one fails to persevere. The difference is between unconditional and conditional election. The Federal Vision believes in a conditional election based upon “persevering faith.” **When Wilkins insists that one maintain his forgiven status, he has exalted our human will above the very power of God! What he is clearly implying is that MAN can undo the redemptive work of Christ initially done on his behalf.**

It is amazing at the equivocation that Wilkins attempts in the last yellow highlighted area. He wants the reader to think that he really is Reformed and Confessional by saying that the elect cannot be lost. But, Wilkins introduces a contingency and possibility in space and time that affects eternity – a person must remain faithful or lose what he genuinely had. In other words **man** determines whether he is elect in eternity or not. This is not, I repeat, it is not the biblical position recognized by the Westminster Standards.

Wilkins gets himself into a theological nightmare when he states: “*Although the non-elect person has standing for a time in the church which is “realm” of the forgiven, his justification is not the judgment he will receive from God at the last day.*” Notice very carefully that Wilkins states that the non-elect does have a justification but not necessarily the one that he will have on Judgment Day. In other words, this is only an initial justification that is lost, for the non-elect person will apostatize and not receive final justification. He doesn’t get final justification because he failed to persevere. It should be obvious that Wilkins has just made justification a process and that which is contingent upon human obedience. **Wilkins has just denied the Faith once and for all delivered to the saints. He has abandoned justification by faith alone in Christ’s work for us for a justification based on human works – our obedience. After all, Wilkins has argued for faith to be defined as “the obedience of faith.”**

On page 19 of his response Wilkins states:

But the Biblical language becomes more complicated when speaking of the members of the visible Church. There is a sense in which we can say that all those in covenant are “saved.” They have been covenantally delivered out of the world and brought into the glorious new creation embodied in the resurrected Christ even though not all of them will persevere. Thus Jude (5) can speak of the Israelites as having been “saved,” and then destroyed, because they did not persevere.

This is where Wilkins’ acceptance of election not in a decretive way (as the Bible defines it and as the Westminster Standards) but in a covenantal way gets him into real trouble. **From the Federal Vision point of view, covenantal election is conditional election contingent upon faithful obedience.** In defining election this way, Wilkins can pretend to subscribe to the Westminster Standards by saying, “Oh, God has decreed only the elect to be saved and they cannot be lost.” Where Wilkins is sly is when he states that this final election is determined by human faithfulness. So, he argues exactly the same way Arminians argue for a conditional election.

The moment that Wilkins stated that we must persevere in order to **maintain** our justification and forgiveness, he explicitly denied WCF 3:5 where it states that God has

predestined the elect to everlasting life without foresight of perseverance. And in WCF 3:7 only the effectually called (elect) are redeemed, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved. Those effectually called cannot lose **any** kind of justification since there is only one kind, not two as Wilkins and the Federal Vision believe. Perhaps Wilkins needs to read again what WCF 11:5 states on justification:

God doth continue to forgive the sins of those that are justified: and although they can never fall from the state of justification; yet they may, by their sins, fall under God's fatherly displeasure, and not have the light of His countenance restored unto them, until they humble themselves, confess their sins, beg pardon, and renew their faith and repentance.

Wilkins can say all that he wants about agreeing with the Confession but where in the world does he think it teaches two kinds of justification and that one can have temporary justification? Not from the Bible.

In WCF 17:2 we read:

*This perseverance of the saints depends **not upon their own free will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father; upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ; the abiding of the Spirit, and of the seed of God within them; and the nature of the covenant of grace from all which ariseth also the certainty and infallibility thereof.***

As one can see there is no final salvation based upon faithful obedience of man's will, but only the immutable decree of election. Moreover, the perseverance is also based upon the value and merit of Christ's intercession. This means one cannot temporarily have forgiveness in Jesus and later lose it.

Wilkins needs to look closely at WCF 18:1 when it says:

*Although **hypocrites and other unregenerate men may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes, and carnal presumptions of being in the favour of God, and estate of salvation; which hope of theirs shall perish: yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love Him in sincerity, endeavouring to walk in all good conscience before Him, may, in this life, be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, which hope shall never make them ashamed.***

Wilkins is entirely wrong to think those who apostatized were once in God's favor. Regenerate do not become unregenerate; the justified do not become the unjustified; the elect do not become non-elect, the forgiven do not become the unforgiven. Apostates were **always un-regenerate; they were always hypocrites.**

On page 20 of his response, Wilkins again reveals his outright heretical doctrine of justification when he says:

“Salvation” is not a “thing” we possess that can be lost and found, like our car keys. Rather, it is a matter of being rightly related to God. But relationships are not static, timeless entities. They are fluid and dynamic. Some marriages start well; the couple is full of love. But then things go sour. Our salvation covenant with the Lord is like a marriage. If we persevere in loyalty to Christ, we will live with him happily ever after. If we break the marriage covenant, he will divorce us.

In the above comment, Wilkins has absolutely denied the forensic nature of justification and has denied the fact that it is an act of God. He makes justification a work of God thereby confusing justification with sanctification. And, he has defined our justification as a fluid, dynamic relationship. The analogy he gives of the marriage contract is tragic. He makes the salvation of men contingent upon continued faithfulness. We remain married to Christ as long as we choose to remain married. What an insult to the Lord Jesus Christ. Ephesians 5:23-27 definitively states that Christ sanctifies and preserves His bride, the church. Christ does not divorce His church and there is no place in the Bible where the “elect” bride divorces Christ. Wilkins articulates classical Arminianism, which states that Christ may not abandon us, but we can abandon Christ.

Wilkins advocates views of justification identical with Norman Shepherd and Rich Lusk. Not only is Wilkins outright Arminian, but he is a Judaizer in the truest sense. Making justification dependent upon man’s obedience is the damning sin of the Judaizers that God anathematizes in Galatians 1:6-9.

William Hendriksons’ Interpretation of Matthew 18:21-35

The Reformed commentator William Hendrikson has made these conclusions about the parable:

In reading this touching story one immediately senses that is indeed a parable. The lesson “those who refuse to show mercy will receive everlasting punishment.”

Positively stated the one and only main lesson of the parable is this: Prompted by gratitude the forgiven sinner must always yearn to forgive whoever has trespassed against him, and must do all in his power to bring about complete reconciliation.

Matthew Henry’s Interpretation of Matthew 18:21-35

Matthew Henry has some very insightful comments that are diametrically opposed to Steve Wilkins’ bizarre interpretation. Henry states:

The danger of not forgiving; *So shall your heavenly Father do.* (1.) **This is not intended to teach us that God reverses his pardons to any, but that he denies them to those that are unqualified for them, according to the tenour of the gospel;** though having seemed to be humbled, like Ahab, they thought themselves, and others thought them, in a pardoned state, and they made bold with the comfort of it. Intimations enough we have in

scripture of the forfeiture of pardons, for caution to the presumptuous; and yet we have security enough of the continuance of them, for comfort to those that are sincere, but timorous; that the one may fear, and the other may hope. **Those that do not forgive their brother's trespasses, did never truly repent of their own, nor ever truly believe the gospel; and therefore that which is taken away is only what they seemed to have, Luke viii. 18.** (2.) This is intended to teach us, that *they shall have judgment without mercy, that have showed no mercy, Jam. ii. 13.* It is indispensably necessary to pardon and peace, that we not only *do justly*, but *love mercy*. It is an essential part of that religion which is *pure and undefiled before God and the Father*, of that *wisdom from above*, which is *gentle, and easy to be entreated*. Look how *they* will answer it another day, who, though they bear the Christian name, persist in the most rigorous and unmerciful treatment of their brethren, as if the strictest laws of Christ might be dispensed with for the gratifying of their unbridled passions; and so they curse themselves every time they say the Lord's prayer.

My Perspective on Matthew 18:21-35

Matthew Henry's interpretation captures the heart of the parable. It is really plain and simple – the person who refuses to forgive is not forgiven. The details of the parable are not trying to indicate someone can really be forgiven and then by their own unwillingness forfeit genuine forgiveness. As Henry states, the unforgiving slave **never truly repented, nor truly believed the gospel, and therefore that which is taken away is only what they seemed to have**. As I said earlier, the details of the parable are not intended to teach the fine details of forgiveness through redemption in Christ. The parable simply teaches that one is not really pardoned who refuses to pardon others. The genuine Christian has a forgiving heart. Note that in v.32 the king refers to the unmerciful slave as “wicked.” Hence, wicked men deserve no pardon, and wicked men are tormented forever. Genuine Christians do not become “wicked.” Wilkins wants us to believe that the slave is forgiven but then falls away and becomes wicked and loses his original forgiveness. He applies this to the doctrine of the atonement, which is an incredible theological error. Wilkins wants us to learn from this parable that one can be redeemed initially, justified initially, but if we then apostatize by deciding not to forgive people of their sins, then we will forfeit the original forgiveness and justification. This interpretation is absolutely, categorically wrong, for it teaches heresy.

Wilkins' theological presupposition demands that he teach this because his theological presupposition is that all church members have this temporary or initial forgiveness. But I will remind Wilkins that one can make logical inferences from faulty presuppositions and end up with an unsound argument. In this case, the unsound argument has tremendous soul ramifications such as being a heretic!

The following material is taken from S. Morris Engel's book, “*With Good Reason: An Introduction to Informal Fallacies.*” This is absolutely vital to understand what Engel says: “*It is possible in logic to start with true premises but reach a false conclusion (because we reason badly with those premises) or to reason correctly or*

validly without reaching a true conclusion (because our premises are false). Soundness results when the premises of an argument are true and its conclusion validly derived from them. Otherwise, the argument is unsound.

In order to accept the conclusion of an argument as true, therefore, we must be sure of two things. We need to know, first, that the premises are true, not false. Premises after all, are the foundation of an argument; if they are unreliable or shaky, the argument built on them will be no better. Second, we need to know that the inference from the premises is valid, not invalid. One may begin with true premises but make improper use of them, reasoning incorrectly and thus reaching an unwarranted conclusion.

We may have our facts wrong (one or more of our premises is false), but we may make proper use of them (reason validly with them). In this case, our argument will be valid but unsound.

Example: All movie Stars live in Hollywood.

Robert Redford is a movie star

Therefore Robert Redford lives in Hollywood.

Here the first statement is clearly false, yet the reasoning is valid and the conclusion follows the premises... In order to reach a conclusion that we can depend upon to be true, it is not enough to reason validly, we must do so from true premises (Engel, pages 7-9).

The Federal Vision has made this fatal mistake. It's argument is like this:

Premise: All members of the visible church are elect and are saints initially

Premise: All the elect are initially forgiven

Premise: Continued forgiveness is contingent on persevering in faith

Harry fails to persevere in faith

Therefore, Harry is not elect and loses his initial forgiveness

Based on the premises, the Federal Vision proponent comes to a valid argument based on his premises; however, his argument is unsound because his premises are false. How do we derive correct premises? By doing sound biblical exegesis and being sure that our views are not self-contradictory to other biblical texts.

Steve Wilkins Does Indeed Believe In Baptismal Regeneration

Criticisms for some time have been leveled against Steve Wilkins, charging that he is guilty of teaching baptismal regeneration. In my book "*Danger In the Camp*" I have accused Wilkins of teaching this, and after reading the responses to his re-examination, I am still convinced that he is teaching baptismal regeneration, and I will demonstrate this from Wilkins' writings and lectures. I concur with Central Carolina Presbytery's charges against Wilkins.

The Central Carolina Memorial asserts that your public teaching on the efficacy of baptism is “strikingly different” from the Standards. It charges that while the Confession describes baptism as a *sign and seal* of Christ’s blessings – including regeneration (*WCF XXVI. 1*) – the Standards do not equate all baptized persons with the elect, nor do they equate baptism with regeneration.

Hence, in his re-examination, Louisiana Presbytery asks Wilkins the following question:

1. Do you believe that every baptized person possesses “all the eternal blessings of salvation?”

His answer was:

No. I do believe that baptism delivers over to us all the promises of God in Christ Jesus.

He goes on to say:

I affirm precisely what the Westminster Confession teaches in regard to baptism.

I do not believe that Wilkins is honest with us in these answers in light of his writings and lectures and that he is playing theological games with us by using similar terms but redefining them. This I will show to be the case.

What do we mean by “baptismal regeneration?” This is the belief that we are regenerated or born again at our water baptism. It means that all of God’s saving graces are present at our water baptism. Baptismal Regeneration teaches that at the ceremony of baptism one is in union with Christ in its truest sense, that at that moment there is a transition from death unto life, that one is justified, that one has forgiveness of sins, and that one is a new creation in Christ.

The view that a person is regenerated at water baptism carries some tremendous theological errors. Baptismal regeneration insists that saving faith is always present at water baptism; it makes salvation automatic for all who receive the sign and seal of baptism. It also impacts the biblical doctrine of apostasy. If one is a Christian in the fullest sense, a true seed of Abraham, then to apostatize and renounce Christ means that one loses his salvation.

Wilkins insists that he is not guilty of “baptismal regeneration” in a certain sense. Let’s see what Wilkins exactly has said and how it stacks up against the Westminster Standards.

In His lecture “The Half-Way Covenant,” Wilkins is critical of Southern Presbyterian theologians, Robert Louis Dabney and James Henley Thornwell. But, Wilkins is critical of New England Puritans. Here is what Wilkins states:

They completely ignored the significance of baptism and consequently misunderstood the nature of salvation. Baptism was drained of all of its scriptural significance. And the biblical teaching of salvation coming to us by our union with Christ was lost in its true sense. Infant baptism to the New England Puritans and to most of their heirs in modern Protestantism and Presbyterianism is nothing more and was nothing more than a wet dedication service. That's all it was. **It did nothing for the child.** It did nothing more than bring the child into what they called an ecclesiastical covenant which was merely symbolic and actually accomplished nothing. This was also the view, as you know, and the dominant view in the southern Presbyterian Church in the nineteenth century, which was argued for by our heroes, and I mean that, I love those men, Thornwell and Dabney but they were arguing for this position and basically made baptism nothing more than a dedication.¹⁸

The Christian Renewal magazine interviewed the Monroe Four regarding the controversial issues taught at the 2002 Auburn Avenue Pastors' Conference. Gerry Wise asked various questions of the four speakers, and here are some of the questions and answers dealing with the covenant and the nature of the church.

Question: Steve Wilkins, in your address you say that the Puritans and Presbyterians believe that baptism brings a child merely into ecclesiastical covenant. What else does it do?

Steve Wilkins: Modern Presbyterian theology has made a distinction between external membership and real membership in the covenant. Obviously, by baptism we become members of the church, but to be a member of the church is to be a member of the body of Christ and biblically speaking, that means that **the baptized are united to Christ.**¹⁹

Question: Can we be in the church but not united to Christ?

Steve Wilkins: That's a distinction the Bible doesn't make. I see what they're trying to preserve, but the distinction is not biblical. **The visible, historic church is the body of Christ and thus, to be joined to it by baptism is to be united to Christ.** By baptism God offers and gives Christ to us. But this good gift must be received by faith or our baptismal union with Christ will bring judgment not salvation. None of this undermines the sovereignty of God since faith is a gift from God and how we respond to His gifts is ultimately determined by His comprehensive decree.²⁰

¹⁸ Wilkins, p. 167.

¹⁹ Steve Wilkins, *Christian Renewal Magazine* 2003, The Monroe Four Speak Out

²⁰ Wilkins.

Wilkins clearly sees that water baptism is the objective reality that demonstrates that we are truly in Christ, experiencing all the blessings of God. He states:

The Bible teaches us that baptism unites us to Christ and by his, and to his body by the power of the Spirit. By one Spirit we were all baptized into one body whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves of free, we've all been made to drink of one Spirit.²¹

Paul says that at baptism you are clothed with Christ Jesus. For as many of you as are baptized into Christ, have put on Christ. Union with Christ is a real, vital blessed union. The clothes make the man. With our union with Christ, we have all spiritual blessings. Union with Christ is union with the church, his body. We are members of his body, of his flesh and of his bones, Paul says, and then he says and don't you know that from marriage because the two, the Bible says, become one in marriage. And that is exactly the picture, marriage is a picture of the greater covenant that the church has with its divine bridegroom. The Church cannot be divorced from Christ and the blessings of the covenant and it is for this reason that our confession states that outside the church there is ordinarily no possibility of salvation. Now that's not a Roman Catholic confession I quoted that is the Westminster Confession and they are right, you see.²²

My Comments

Let me make some comments about Wilkins' views thus far. One, he thinks that the Puritans and some of the notable Southern Presbyterians taught that baptism itself did nothing for the child. By this statement, Wilkins is explicitly teaching that something does happen special at the moment of water baptism. Why else would he criticize them for teaching that baptism is merely a wet dedication service? Second, by water baptism a person is united to Christ by the Spirit. What does Wilkins mean by "united with Christ?" He states it is union with Christ in a real, vital, blessed union in which we have as he states, "**all spiritual blessings.**" Wilkins states that union with Christ is union with the church, His body. It is clear from these comments that Wilkins is equating union with the visible church with those things that are true of the invisible church.

Remember, Wilkins was asked this question in his re-examination:

Do you believe that every baptized person possesses "all the eternal blessings of salvation?"

He said: **No. I do believe that baptism delivers over to us all the promises of God in Christ Jesus**

Do you see how convoluted Wilkins can be? How he uses confuses people with his statements. He has clearly stated that true union with Christ means possessing all

²¹ Steve Wilkins, *The Legacy of the Half-way Covenant*, Tape 11, 2002 Auburn Avenue Pastors' Conference. The RPCUS transcription of the 2002 AAPC, p. 167.

²² Wilkins.

spiritual blessings. The presbytery phrases it as “all the eternal blessings of salvation.” Wilkins then says no, but then immediately says baptism delivers over to us all the promises. If this isn’t one jumbled mess of double talk, I don’t know what is.

In his re-examination immediately following the statement above that baptism **delivers** to us all the promises of God in Christ, Wilkins immediately writes: “By baptism, one enters into covenantal union with Christ and is **offered** all his benefits (Gal. 3:27; Rom. 6:1ff; 2 Cor. 1:20).”

So which is it? Does God **deliver** or **offer** all his benefits? See what I mean? It is immediately confusing. Wilkins says that baptism is union with Christ with “**all spiritual blessings**” but then he says that all baptized persons do **not have all the eternal blessings of salvation**.

Either Wilkins is absolutely confused in his thinking, or he is deliberately seeking to be muddled in his answers in order to be deceptive and misleading – to make people think he is Confessional when he knows that he is not. Either way, Wilkins is undeserving to be a minister of the Gospel. It is the primary responsibility of all ministers to strive for clarity so not to confuse God’s professing people. The Federal Vision is drenched in confusion. Why is it that so many ministers of the Reformed Faith are upset with Wilkins and others? Why is it that Presbyteries and entire denominations are bringing charges against him? Is the majority of the Reformed world stupid?

In the comment above where Wilkins states that baptism is covenantal union with Christ where the baptized person is **offered** all His benefits. The proof texts Wilkins uses to substantiate this are Gal. 3:27; Rom.6:1ff; 2 Cor. 1:20. This is a fatal mistake for him to quote these passages because they do not simply picture union with Christ as **offered benefits**. NO! all three of these passages convey biblical truths that are **ABSOLUTELY CONVEYED** in these passages, not merely offered. Galatians 3:26 states – “*For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.*” And then Galatians 3:27 states – “*for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.*” Galatians 3:29 states “*And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.*” The context is crystal clear that Paul is referring to only true believers, only the elect, only the invisible church. The same is true in Romans 6:1ff. Paul is clearly referring to all those who are members of the invisible church, true believers. In Romans 6:3, Paul says that all of us who are baptized into Christ have been baptized into His death. In 6:4 all those buried then with Christ in baptism will be raised to newness of life. In 6:5-6, Paul says, “*for if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this that our old self was crucified with Him, that our body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin.*” **There is no offering of benefits that can be rejected! It is certain that our union with Christ brings newness of life and freedom from sin’s bondage.** Wilkins is categorically wrong! And in 2 Cor. 1:20 we read – “*for as many as may be the promises of God, in Him they are yes; wherefore also by Him is our Amen to the glory of God through us.*” This passage is a glorious affirmation of the certainty that all of God’s promises belong to those in true union with

Christ. Note what 2 Cor.1:21-22 states – “*Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and anointed us is God, who also sealed us and gave us the Spirit in our hearts as a pledge.*” Paul is saying to the saints that he is addressing that he is in union with them in God’s promises, for he and they were sealed with the Spirit with regard to these glorious promises. Wilkins insults the living God by daring to think that union with Christ in baptism is only an offering of promises, not a guarantee of those promises.

Moreover, if Wilkins tries to maneuver out of this theological dilemma by saying which he has that water baptism is indeed a conferring of all of Christ’s benefits, then he is trapped here as well. This means he affirms baptismal regeneration. The baptism that is referred to in Galatians and Romans is a baptism that is a sign and seal to those who truly have been regenerated and believed in Jesus.

The problem with Wilkins and the Federal Vision is that they make “union with Christ” something that is objective in water baptism that applies to all in the visible church. How do the Westminster Standards present the idea of “united with Christ or communion with Him?” WCF 26:1 states:

All saints that are united to Jesus Christ their head by his Spirit, and by faith, have fellowship with him in his graces, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory. And being united to one another in love, they have communion in each other’s gifts and graces...

Note, the Confession uses the term “saints” which is equated with the elect or the invisible church. Simply put, “saints” in the Bible and in the Confession are those who have been ordained to eternal life and believed in Jesus. Only these are “united to Christ.”

There should be no confusion where the Westminster Standards stand:

The Westminster Larger Catechism # 64 states:

What is the invisible church?

Answer: The invisible church is the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one under Christ the head

The Westminster Larger Catechism #65 states:

What special benefits do the members of the invisible church enjoy by Christ?

*Answer: The members of the invisible church by Christ enjoy **union and communion with him in grace and glory.***

The Westminster Larger Catechism # 66 states:

What is that union which the elect have with Christ?

*Answer: The union which **the elect** have with Christ is the work of God's grace, whereby they are **spiritually and mystically, yet really and inseparably, joined to Christ as their head and husband; which is done in their effectual calling.***

The Westminster Larger Catechism question # 79 states:

May not true believers, by reason of their imperfections, and the many temptations and sins they are overtaken with, fall away from the state of grace?

*Answer: **True believers**, by reason of the unchangeable love of God, and his decree and covenant to give them perseverance, **their inseparable union with Christ**, his continual intercession for them, **and the Spirit and seed of God abiding in them**, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation.*

It is clear from this catechism that only true believers are in inseparable union with Christ; hence, it cannot be said that baptized members into the visible church are de facto in union with Christ in this way as Wilkins teaches.

Moreover, Westminster Larger Catechism question # 83 states:

What is the communion in glory with Christ which the members of the invisible church enjoy in this life?

*Answer: The **members of the invisible church** have communicated to them in this life the firstfruits of glory with Christ, as they **are members of him their head**, and so in him are interested in that glory which he is fully possessed of; and, as an earnest thereof, enjoy the sense of God's love, peace of conscience, joy in the Holy Ghost, and hope of glory; as, on the contrary, sense of God's revenging wrath, horror of conscience, and a fearful expectation of judgment, are to the wicked the beginning of their torments which they shall endure after death.*

To be a member of Him their head, that is, to be in union with Christ belongs to those of the invisible church.

Wilkins has made it clear that baptism into the visible church is in union with Christ, for let me just re-quote Wilkins from above - **The visible, historic church is the body of Christ and thus, to be joined to it by baptism is to be united to Christ.**

Now, it is very important where we see Wilkins stumbling badly and where he gets into real trouble. WCF 28:1 does state:

Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible Church; but also, to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God through Jesus Christ, to walk in the newness of life. Which sacrament is, by Christ's own appointment, to be continued in His Church until the end of the world.

It is important that we quote WCF 28:6:

*The efficacy of Baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered; yet notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is **not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred, by the Holy Ghost, to such** (whether of age or infants) **as that grace belongeth unto**, according to the counsel of God's own will, in His appointed time.*

Water baptism is only of spiritual value to those to whom belongs the grace of the Holy Spirit by faith. Abraham's circumcision came **AFTER** he was justified by **faith**, not before. The sign and seal of baptism is of value only where the graces are actually there! Water baptism into the visible church is not necessarily inseparable union with Christ when it is administered.

I want to show how Wilkins can "talk out of both sides of his mouth" and in his mind it makes total sense. Again, here are the two contradictory statements of Wilkins. They are contradictory from the Bible and the Westminster Standards but not in Wilkins' twist. The statements are: Wilkins says that baptism is union with Christ with "**all spiritual blessings**" but then he says that all baptized persons do **not have all the eternal blessings of salvation**. Wilkins with the Federal Vision believe in two kinds of election, two kinds of justification, two kinds of forgiveness, and two kinds of salvation. The first is temporary, and the second is final. If one has noticed Wilkins' comments in this entire article, he refers to an elect becoming a non-elect, one having temporary forgiveness but not necessarily permanent last Day forgiveness, a justification initially but not necessarily last Day justification. Now notice carefully the difference in the above comments about baptism. Wilkins says baptism is union with Christ with all spiritual blessings, and he then says all baptized persons do not have **eternal** blessings. Their key word is "eternal." The reason one can have all blessings now but not eternal blessings is because there are two types! Wilkins can confidently say our water baptism gives it to us now, but we don't know if they will apostatize and lose the initial blessings and not get "eternal" blessings because one must persevere in **this life** in order to qualify for "eternal" blessings. This is how the Federal Vision speaks out of both sides of their mouth because in their thinking there are two sides! Temporary and permanent. All baptized persons have not completed life's journey, meaning we don't know if they may apostatize along the way so how can we say all baptized persons have "eternal blessings?" We can't say Wilkins.

I trust that I have exposed the ugliness of the Federal Vision's warped view of the covenant and God's electing decrees for what they really are – conditional upon man's actions. **Man determines** as to whether his initial forgiveness, initial justification, initial salvation become a final forgiveness, justification, and salvation.

Wilkins can refer to baptism as being truly objective possessing all the blessings of Christ because they are really and truly there initially. The key to understanding the theology of the Federal Vision is to understand this dual usage of terms that the Bible and the Westminster Standards understand to be only one.

All those of the historic Reformed heritage get somewhat confused over this because rightly so, they understand election to be unconditional, not conditional; they understand justification to be a **one time act**, not a process whereby there is doubt until death.

Many may think Wilkins and others are not really unorthodox because they hear the speaking from only one side of his mouth, but now that we know there are two sides that he speaks from, then things become clear. Oh, one can really be justified but then lose it because what matters is what we do with Christ in this life. God's decrees of election do not govern man's destination because covenant election affirms that we must do something to remain elect. All of a sudden, the orthodox person realizes that Wilkins and company changed the whole playing field. They **added** theological concepts to the equation. Historic Reformed Christianity, in their thinking, was wrong to think there is only one kind of justification. There is really two kinds if look at election, forgiveness, and justification through the "lens of the Scripture" and not through the "old lens." This is why Wilkins speaks of a "new way" of looking at the covenant. The new way has two kinds of everything!!!

Is it any wonder that Wilkins has come to this new way of seeing things? Not really, once one understands who has influenced him, and whom he invited to be one of the keynote speakers at his 2005 AAPC. It was none other than the infamous N.T. Wright. Wright has said this in his radical book on Romans: We are justified by faith in the present, but justification "*occurs in the present as an **anticipation of that future verdict, which is according to works** (emphasis Wright)*" (N.T. Wright, *The Letter to the Romans in the New Interpreter's Bible*). N.T. Wright has also said: "*Justification, at the last, will be on the basis of performance, not possession*" (Wright, Romans, p.440). This is the same perspective that not only Wilkins advocates, but it is the same view of Norman Shepherd, Steve Schlissel, Doug Wilson, Rich Lusk, etc. They have all fallen prey to The New Perspective on Paul Theology.

This dual concept explains how Wilkins can say this in his re-examination:

As Westminster Shorter Catechism #94 states, baptism signifies and seals "our ingrafting into Christ, and partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace." Baptism in itself does not, however, guarantee final salvation. What is offered in baptism may not be received because of unbelief.

Note that Wilkins speaks from this dual concept. Baptism signifies and seals our ingrafting with Christ, but baptism does not guarantee **final salvation**. And why is what baptism offers not received in reality? Unbelief. The problem is that Wilkins believes one can be truly in union with Christ but then fall away due to unbelief.

Wilkins really hurts himself badly with what he wrote in the Knox Seminary Colloquium on pages 259-262. Here are the lengthy quotes. **I have highlighted in yellow and red key phrases. My comments are totally in red:**

In the first Adam we lost everything. Man now stands in need of a "second Adam" in whom all things can be restored. Of course, the Fall cannot be reversed by simply pretending it didn't happen and starting over. The "second Adam" inherits the circumstances of the Fall and must remedy them if mankind is to be restored to communion with God as His image-bearers. This demands that man first be freed from the dominion of sin and reconciled to God.²³

In order to restore man sin must first be dealt with. The curse of the covenant that hangs over mankind and all creation must be removed if man is to be reconciled to God and restored to His favor. Thus, the job of the second Adam is to undertake redemption by making atonement for sin and through death and resurrection to restore all things. This task was undertaken by the Second Person of the Godhead.²⁴

All the blessings and benefits of salvation therefore are found "in Christ." In the first Adam there is only death. In the second Adam there is life and peace. **By virtue of union with the Second Adam we have wholeness and restoration—new birth, regeneration, new life.** And by virtue of our union with Him who is the true image of God (Colossians 1:15), we are restored to full image-bearing (Romans 8:29). A new humanity is re-created in the Second Adam.²⁵

To be reconciled to God is to be restored back into covenant communion with Him. Christ is the only Mediator of the covenant—the one Mediator between God and man (1 Corinthians 2:4). Our covenant relationship with God is in and through Him. In Him we are granted all the promises of God and everything necessary for life and godliness (2 Corinthians 1:19-20).²⁶

The Bible teaches us that **baptism unites us to Christ and His body** by the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13). Baptism is an act of God (through His ministers) which signifies and seals our initiation into the Triune communion (we are "baptized into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit"). **At baptism** we are clothed with Christ, united to Him

²³ Wilkins, p. 259.

²⁴ Wilkins.

²⁵ Wilkins.

²⁶ Wilkins.

and to His Church which is His body (Ephesians 3:26-28). The church, therefore, is not to be divorced from Christ and the blessings of covenant. "We are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones," Paul says (Ephesians 5:30). It is for this reason that the Westminster Confession states that outside the church there is no ordinary possibility of salvation (WCF 25.2). This is true simply because there is no salvation outside of Christ.²⁷

All that man must have is found in Him. **He is the elect One of God**, the chosen servant to accomplish for His people what they could not accomplish on their own. He is the well-beloved of the Father in whom we find acceptance in God's sight. He is the faithful and righteous One, in whose righteousness we are able to stand in God's presence. **He was baptized and lived His life faithfully according to that baptism**, keeping covenant as the second Adam, doing all that the first Adam failed to do, walking by faith in obedience in the power of the Spirit. Moreover, He did what the first Adam could not have done, taking our curse upon Himself, dying in our place, paying the penalty for our sins.²⁸

He is the justified One. At His resurrection He was vindicated by the Father, publicly declared to be the righteous One. We might say that by His resurrection He was the first One to be born again, born from above by the power of the Spirit as He died to sin and was raised in newness of life. In being delivered from death, He not only purchased salvation and secured it for His people, but we may also say that in one sense, He as our substitute, was the first to receive salvation in all its fullness. He receives it in the middle of history and thus becomes the surety that we too shall be made recipients of this salvation at the end of history.²⁹

By virtue of our union with Him, we are made recipients of all that is His. This is how we receive the grace of God. We often think of grace exclusively as the "unmerited favor" of God toward sinners. But the term refers to "favor, pleasure, or goodwill." Grace is not a thing or a substance, but the favor of God. Christ, in this sense was the object of God's grace—not that He had any sin which had to be forgiven, but in that He was the peculiar object of God's favor and good pleasure. He is the One who is "well-pleasing" to God and, thus, all God's favor or grace is found only in Him. We receive the grace of God "in Him." We are accepted in the Beloved (Ephesians 1:5-6). To be saved by grace then requires that we be united to Christ (Ephesians 2:5-6). **Thus, Christians are called to persevere** in the grace of God (Acts 13:43)—i.e., **never forsake the Lord Jesus in Whom alone we may find grace and favor.**³⁰

²⁷ Wilkins.

²⁸ Wilkins, pp. 259-260.

²⁹ Wilkins, p. 260.

³⁰ Wilkins.

Salvation is relational. It is found only in covenant union with Christ.

As we abide in Him, all that is true of Him is true of us. It has been the common practice in Reformed circles to use the term "elect" to refer only to those who are predestined to eternal salvation. Since God has ordained all things "whatsoever comes to pass" (Ephesians 1:11), He has certainly predestined the number of all who will be saved at the last day. This number is fixed and settled, not one of these will be lost. The Lord will accomplish all His holy will. But the term "elect" (or "chosen") as it is used in the Scriptures most often refers to those in covenant union with Christ who is the elect One.³¹

In the Old Testament, Israel is called God's elect or chosen people (Deuteronomy 7:6; Psalm. 135:4; Isaiah 45:4). Consequently, Paul and the other apostles refer to the members of the Church, the "new Israel," as the "elect" as well (Colossians 3:12; 1 Peter 1:1-2; 2:9; 5:13; 2 John 1, 13).³²

Election was not something hidden or unknown to the apostles or the prophets but something that could be rightly attributed to all who were in covenant. Paul even addresses the Ephesians in startling language (Ephesians 1:3-5) saying that they were chosen in Christ "before the foundation of the world." We have to remind ourselves that he was not giving a theological lecture but stating what was **objectively true of all those in the church in Ephesus. Being united to the Elect One, all who are baptized may be truthfully addressed as the "elect of God."** Thus, if you were to ask Paul, "Do you know who the elect are?" he might have replied, "Of course! The elect are all who are in Christ!"³³

This is not to say that election is only "general" or "corporate" and not individual as Arminians like to say. It is both. No Israelite had the right to say, "God chose the nation, the class as a whole, but he didn't choose me." God chose each Israelite to belong to the nation. They couldn't take His promise to Israel as if it referred only to the nation as a whole but not to the particular individuals who made up the nation. **Each Israelite was grafted by God into the body of His people as an act of His sovereign, electing love. Obviously, the promises were given to Israel as a whole, but that meant that every individual Israelite could say, "This belongs to me."**³⁴

We see similar language in 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14 ("But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth, to which He called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ."). How could Paul say

³¹ Wilkins.

³² Wilkins.

³³ Wilkins.

³⁴ Wilkins.

this? If someone insists that Paul was given special insight into whom God had chosen, then we must respond with John Barach, "we suddenly discover that we cannot learn from the apostle Paul, who told us to imitate him, how to talk to our churches."³⁵

The elect are those who are faithful in Christ Jesus. If they later reject the Savior, they are no longer elect—they are cut off from the Elect One and thus, lose their elect standing. But their falling away doesn't negate the reality of their standing prior to their apostasy. They were really and truly the elect of God because of their relationship with Christ.³⁶

Being "in Christ" is the key to understanding covenant ... In fact, covenant is a real relationship, consisting of real communion with the triune God through union with Christ. The covenant is not some thing that exists apart from Christ or in addition to Him (another means of grace)—rather, the covenant is union with Christ. **Thus, being in covenant gives all the blessings of being united to Christ.** There is no salvation apart from covenant simply because there is no salvation apart from union with Christ. And without union with Christ there is no covenant at all. Because being in covenant with God means being in Christ, **those who are in covenant have all spiritual blessings in the heavenly places. Union with Christ means that all that is true of Christ is true of us.** This seems clear by how the apostles address the churches.³⁷

Wilkins discusses what it means to be "born again" through the gospel. He links it to being "in Christ." He links all of this to water baptism. He refers to Paul's addresses in I Corinthians:

Through Paul's ministry, **they have been "born" through the gospel** (4:15 "in Christ Jesus I have begotten you [gennao] through the gospel."). **Christ has been sacrificed for them (5:7). They have been washed (or baptized) which has brought about sanctification and justification in the name of Christ, by the Spirit of God (6:9-11).**³⁸

Regarding this last paragraph, Wilkins makes a comment in a footnote saying:

Peter also speaks this way in his first epistle (1:22, 23-25). He uses the word "anagennao," which means "give new birth or life to." Peter speaks in the second person plural throughout without any qualifiers. **All of the members of the Church have been "born again" by means of the word preached to them. Again, what is striking is that both Paul and Peter say this to the visible Church (even though they could not see the**

³⁵ Wilkins, p. 261.

³⁶ Wilkins.

³⁷ Wilkins, pp. 261-262.

³⁸ Wilkins, p. 262.

hearts of their hearers). **Some commentators read I Corinthians 6:11 in this way: “But you received a justifying and sanctifying washing in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” The grammar of the text may suggest the Spirit instrumentally confers justification and sanctification through the washing.**³⁹

They will, therefore, be raised up just as God raised up the Lord Jesus (6:14). The Holy Spirit is in the body and, therefore, they must remember that they are not their own; they have been bought with a price (6:19-20). The Corinthians are the "children" of the Fathers of Israel who were also "redeemed" out of Egypt, baptized in the Red Sea, and granted fellowship with God and communion with Christ—yet, God was not well-pleased with them; thus, they must not imitate them (10:1-5). These things were written to teach us not to do what Israel did in breaking covenant: lusting after evil things, becoming idolaters, committing sexual immorality, tempting Christ, murmuring against God (10:6-11). **They have communion with the body and blood of Christ and are thus one body with Him (10:15-17). They have all been baptized into one body by the Spirit (whether Jews or Greeks) (12:13). He emphasizes that they are body of Christ and individually members of it (12:27). Paul emphasizes that Christ died for "our" sins (including those of his hearers; 15:3).**⁴⁰

Paul declares these things to be true of the members of the Church in Corinth in spite of the fact that he knew of their sins. **He was not able to speak like this because he had some special insight into the secret decrees of God. He was speaking about what was true of these objectively by virtue of their union with Christ in covenant.** All this was true of each of the members, but, like Israel, **they were required to persevere in faith.** If they departed from Christ, they would perish like Israel of old. All their privileges and blessings would become like so many anchors to sink them into the lake of fire. **This is his point in chapter 10.** Note, however, Paul's method: he declares what is objectively true of them by virtue of their covenant union with Christ and then calls upon them to be faithful because of this union. "How can you who are members of Christ do these things?" (1 Corinthians 6:15-17).⁴¹

The apostles **did not** view the covenant as a place of **potential blessing** or a place of fantastic opportunity—**they viewed it as salvation**, because it means fellowship and communion with the triune God. It is union with Christ in His obedient life, sacrificial, substitutionary death, triumphant resurrection, and glorious ascension and session at the right hand of the Father.⁴²

³⁹ Wilkins.

⁴⁰ Wilkins, p. 263.

⁴¹ Wilkins.

⁴² Wilkins.

All in covenant are given all that is true of Christ. If they persevere in faith to the end, they enjoy these mercies eternally. If they fall away in unbelief, they lose these blessings and receive a greater condemnation than Sodom and Gomorrah. Covenant can be broken by unbelief and rebellion, but until it is, those in covenant with God belong to Him and are His. If they do not persevere, they lose the blessings that were given to them (and all of this works out according to God's eternal decree which He ordained before the foundation of the world).⁴³

Steve Wilkins will advance the same view of apostasy as all the other proponents of the Federal Vision. As we will see, Wilkins believes that all these magnificent promises associated with the Christian life can all be lost if we do not persevere in the faith. This is not a hypothetical apostasy, for there are some who do apostatize and lose everything. His comments are as follows:

Thus, when one breaks covenant, it can be truly said that he has turned away from grace and forfeited life, forgiveness, and salvation. For this reason the Scripture describe apostates as those who: "possessed the Kingdom" (Matthew 21:42-45); received God's gifts (Matthew 25:14ff, the parable of the talents); received the word with joy (Matthew 13:20) and believe for a while (Luke 8:13); bore fruit (though not to maturity, Luke 8:14); had union with Christ as branches in a vine (John 15); had real communion with Christ (1 Corinthians 10:4-5); had the Spirit's work within them (being "enlightened, tasted of the heavenly gift, made partakers of the Holy Spirit, tasted the Word and the powers of the world to come," Hebrews 6:4ff); received the knowledge of the truth (Hebrews 10:26-26); — had been sanctified by the blood of Christ (Hebrews 10:29); had been made members of the heavenly city, sprinkled by the blood of Jesus (Hebrews 12:22ff); had been cleansed from former sins (2 Peter 1:9); were bought by the Lord (2 Peter 2:1); escaped the pollutions of the world (2 Peter 2:20); knew the way of righteousness (2 Peter 2:21); and had "the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises" (Romans 9:4).⁴⁴

The apostate fails to persevere in the grace of God and, thus, has his name removed from the book of life (Revelation 3:5): "He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels."). The book of life is the book of the covenant (see also Exodus 32:31-33; Revelation 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27). Those who "take away from the words of the book" will in turn be "taken away" from the Book of Life (Revelation 22:19).⁴⁵

⁴³ Wilkins.

⁴⁴ Wilkins, pp. 263-264.

⁴⁵ Wilkins.

This is not a hypothetical impossibility but a very real possibility for those who are in covenant with Christ and members of His Church. We must not view these and similar warnings as mere devices which are placed in the Scriptures in order to frighten the elect into heaven. **The clear implication of these passages is that those who ultimately prove to be reprobate may be in covenant with God. They may enjoy for a season the blessings of the covenant, including the forgiveness of sins, adoption, possession of the kingdom, sanctification, etc., and yet apostatize and fall short of the grace of God.**⁴⁶

The apostate, thus, forsakes the grace of God that was given to him by virtue of his union with Christ. It is not accurate to say that they only "appeared" to have these things but did not actually have them—if that were so, there would be nothing to "forsake" and apostasy is bled of its horror and severity. That which makes apostasy so horrendous is that these blessings actually belonged to the apostates—though they only had them temporarily they had them no less truly. **The apostate doesn't forfeit "apparent blessings" that were never his in reality, but real blessings that were his in covenant with God.**⁴⁷

This seems to be the point of John 15:1-8. Jesus here declares that He is the vine and His hearers are branches united to Him. He then exhorts them to continue abiding in Him so that they might bear fruit. If they refuse to abide in Him, they will be fruitless and incur the wrath of the Divine husbandman and, finally, will be cast into the fire. Here then we have those who are joined to Christ in a vital union (i.e. a union that could and should be fruitful) and yet who end up cursed and condemned.⁴⁸

Often this passage is interpreted along these lines: There are two kinds of branches. Some branches are not really in Christ "in a saving way," but only in an external sense—whatever fruit they bear is not genuine and they will eventually be destroyed. Other branches are truly joined to Christ inwardly and savingly, and they bear more and more fruit as they are pruned and cultivated by the Father." As Norman Shepherd has noted, "If this distinction is in the text, it is difficult to see what the point of the warning is. The outward ("external") branches cannot profit from it, because they cannot in any case bear genuine fruit. They are not related to Christ inwardly and draw no life from him. The inward branches do not need the warning, because they are vitalized by Christ and therefore cannot help but bear good fruit. Cultivation by the Father, with its attendant blessing, is guaranteed."⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Wilkins.

⁴⁷ Wilkins.

⁴⁸ Wilkins, pp. 264-265.

⁴⁹ Wilkins.

The Calvinist embraces this implausible interpretation because he (understandably) does not want to deny election, effectual calling, or the perseverance of the saints. The exegetical problems one must embrace with this position, however, are nearly insurmountable. If the branches are not truly joined to the vine, how can they be held accountable for their lack of fruit? **The distinction of "external" and "internal" union seems to be invented and is not in the text.** All the branches are truly and vitally joined to the vine. All can and should be fruitful. The pressure to preserve the Scriptural teaching of God's sovereignty in salvation ought not be allowed to push us to deny these obvious points. But in order to resist this pressure the text must be interpreted as it is intended to be interpreted—i.e., covenantally.⁵⁰

The picture of the vine and branches was a common way in which God referred to His covenant people Israel in the Old Testament (Psalm 80:8-16; Isaiah 5:1-7; Jeremiah 2:21). The Jews were used to thinking of themselves as the vineyard of Jehovah. "The vine" was a figure of God's chosen people. Here in John 15 Jesus says that "He is the real vine." He identifies Himself with His people. He is their covenant head. He is their life. He is not only their Creator but their Redeemer. They are His body, united to Him by God's gracious inclusion of them in covenant.⁵¹

Covenant, therefore, is a gracious relationship, not a potentially gracious relationship. To be in covenant is to have the treasures of God's mercy and grace and the love which He has for His own Son given to you. But the covenant is not unconditional. It requires persevering faithfulness.⁵²

Wilkins also promotes the works salvation paradigm that all the other Federal Vision adherents promote. With Shepherd and Schlissel particularly, Wilkins repudiates the biblical and Reformed doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ. It is evident that we must learn to be faithful like Jesus was in order to be saved. Here are his comments:

The covenant is dependent upon persevering faith. This is illustrated most clearly by Jesus acting as the Second Adam. Jesus came into the world with the same responsibility as Adam (He was to live as a man as He has always lived as the Second Person of the Trinity—i.e., denying Himself and seeking to glorify His Father). He was to walk by faith, entrusting Himself to the Father, believing His Word, and obeying. As with the first Adam, Satan tempted Him to doubt God's trustworthiness, seeking to get Jesus to satisfy His own desires and grasp at glory apart from the will of His Father. But Jesus continued to trust and remained faithful throughout His life, learning "obedience by the things which He suffered" (Hebrews 5:7-9). Even in death, He continued to entrust Himself

⁵⁰ Wilkins.

⁵¹ Wilkins.

⁵² Wilkins, pp. 265-266.

to His Father (Luke 23:46). Through His sufferings He became mature, growing in wisdom, showing forth the image of the Godhead. And because He was faithful, He became the author of eternal salvation.⁵³

His whole earthly life is the very embodiment of trust in God (Heb. 2:13–"And again: 'I will put My trust in Him.' And again: 'Here am I and the children whom God has given Me.'"). It is marked from start to finish by total dependence on the Father and complete attunement to his will (10:7,10). His faith expresses itself, necessarily, in prayer (5:7; John 17; Mk. 1:35, etc.), and is completely victorious as, surmounting all temptations and afflictions, he is made perfect through suffering (Heb. 2:10; 4:15), thus becoming "the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him" (5:8f.). **In looking to Jesus, then, we are looking to him who is the supreme exponent of faith, the one who, beyond all others, not only set out on the course of faith but also pursued it without wavering to the end. He, accordingly, is uniquely qualified to be the supplier and sustainer of the faith of His followers.**⁵⁴

Covenant life is always founded upon persevering faith in the faithful One. If we are to abide in union with Him, we, by the grace and power of the Spirit, must be faithful. Thus the elect are marked by abiding in the Word of Christ (John 8:31-32). Those who turn away and refuse to "hold fast to the word" break covenant with Christ and are referred to by Paul as having "believed in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:1-2). **The blessings purchased by Christ are enjoyed only by those who "continue in the faith" (Colossians 1:21-23).**⁵⁵

We must embrace this straightforward covenantal framework and allow it to direct our understanding of God's work of salvation as it unfolds in time. We cannot judge men based upon the secret decrees of God or the hidden operations of the Spirit. The secret things belong to God (Deuteronomy 29:29). We are to be concerned with those things that are revealed. The questions of when a man is "regenerated," or given "saving faith," or "truly converted," are ultimately questions we cannot answer and, therefore, they cannot be the basis upon which we define the Church or identify God's people.⁵⁶

What we do know is whether or not a man is in covenant with God. If he is not in covenant, he must repent of his sins and believe in Christ Jesus, be joined to the people of God by baptism, and persevere in faithfulness all his days (by the power of the Holy Spirit who works in him "to will and do" for God's good pleasure). **If he has been baptized, he is in covenant with God and is obligated to walk in faithfulness, loving the**

⁵³ Wilkins, p. 266.

⁵⁴ Wilkins, p. 267.

⁵⁵ Wilkins.

⁵⁶ Wilkins.

Lord with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength. If he is unfaithful, he is to be called to repentance. If he refuses to repent, he is to be cut off from the body of Christ and delivered over to Satan with the prayer that he be taught not to blaspheme.⁵⁷

Steve Wilkins “reveals his hand” when he makes the following comments about the meanings of “covenant,” “election,” and “regeneration.” Wilkins knows that the Federal Vision’s theology on these points is out of accord with the Westminster Standards, but he and the others of the Federal Vision movement think they are wiser than the Westminster delegates. Wilkins states:

As Steve Schlissel has noted, this entire discussion revolves around a "way of seeing." It involves looking at the Scriptures from a covenant perspective and reading them straightforwardly from that perspective. **The Westminster Confession of Faith deals with the work of salvation from the perspective of seeing what God does for those whom He has predestined to persevere in faith to the end. From this perspective we are able to speak about an infallible "effectual calling" (God giving faith and repentance) and His justifying, adopting, sanctifying and glorifying all those whom He has predestined unto life so that none of them fall away.**⁵⁸

But I (and the other men on the "Federal Vision" side) are suggesting that the Scriptures speak of the work of salvation in a much more concrete way — not contradictory to these truths as they are set forth in the Westminster Confession and Catechisms but seeing these truths as overtones of the teaching of the Scripture.⁵⁹

The Scriptures seem to use the terms "covenant," "elect," and "regeneration," in a different way than the Westminster Confession uses them. Thus, in the Scriptures, the Covenant is a structured relationship of love with the Triune God in which man participates in Christ Jesus. The elect are all those who are **presently "in Christ"** (as members of His body, the Church). **Regeneration** is the act of the Spirit of God whereby one is transferred from being united to the old Adam to union with the new (or second) Adam.⁶⁰

Biblically, to be in covenant is to be embraced within the circle of the eternal communion of the Trinity. We can only be accepted and welcomed into this divine fellowship by being united to Christ. Christ is the elect One, chosen and beloved by the Father, and to be united to Him is to be

⁵⁷ Wilkins, pp. 267-268.

⁵⁸ Wilkins, p. 268.

⁵⁹ Wilkins

⁶⁰ Wilkins, pp. 268,269

among the number of the elect. Thus, Christ, the whole Christ, Head and Body, constitutes the elect.⁶¹

In Christ we are made recipients of the grace (favor) of God (we are renewed in covenant fellowship with Him). **Thus, the Scriptures view salvation relationally. It is a matter of being in union with Christ. All who are in Christ are called upon to persevere in the grace of God** (Acts 13:43; 11:23; 14:22) and endure in faith to the end (Matthew 10:22; 24:13; Mark 13:13), knowing that the blessings of life come only to those who "overcome" (Revelation 2:7,11,17,26; 3:5,12,21; 21:7).⁶²

Further Comments About Wilkins On Baptism

In his written response of his re-examination, Wilkins quotes a David Wright as saying –“ *What then about the efficacy of baptism according to the Westminster Confession? Its central affirmation seems clear: ‘the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost’ (28:6).*

That is not what WCF 28:6 exactly says. He leaves out the important phrase following Holy Ghost which is –“*to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto.*” This is a vital phrase because without it, it makes it look like all of this grace happens at the water baptism. This section of the Confession deliberately makes the point in the first part of section 6 to state –“*The efficacy of baptism is not tied to teat moment of time wherein it is administered...*”

Wilkins has a view of the meaning of “signs” that conveys a completely different meaning to the effect of baptism than what the Bible and the Westminster Standards convey. Here is what Wilkins stated in his re-examination:

Biblically, a “sign” is not a picture but a powerful act of God which results in deliverance for God’s people (note the “signs” that God did in Egypt for example). Thus, baptism is a “sign” in that by this means the Holy Spirit transfers the baptized from union with the old Adam into Christ Jesus (the Confession’s scriptural proofs cite Gal. 3:27; Rom. 6:5 at this point), transferring him into Christ, the “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17). Thus, it is a sign and seal of regeneration (the proofs cite John 3:5; Titus 3:5 to prove this point). By the Spirit we are “given up unto God” — i.e., bound to walk in “newness of life” (repenting of our sins, trusting and obeying the Savior all our days).

⁶¹ Wilkins, p. 269.

⁶² Wilkins.

If the visible Church is the body of Christ (as the confession and the Bible teach), and if baptism unites one to the visible Church (as the confession and the Bible teach), then we may say that we are united to the body of Christ by baptism (as the confession and the Bible teach).

And again, to be united to the body of Christ is to have all spiritual blessings and benefits of Christ *delivered over to you by promise*. This does not mean, however, that the one baptized is saved automatically by his baptism apart from his personal faith in the Savior. Salvation is always and only by grace through faith.

Wilkins shows that he does not understand the nature of “signs.” He calls them not a picture or not a symbol or representation of something else, he calls baptism “**a powerful act of God that results in deliverance.**” This is attributing the spiritual reality to the baptism when it is applied. Wilkins goes on to declare that baptism as this act **transfers one from the old man to the new man in Christ**. His proof texts give it away that it is union with God in the deepest sense. Hence, he says the act transforms a man into the “new creation”. And Wilkins states that it is the act of “regeneration.” He uses John 3:5 and Titus 3:5 as the proof texts of this spiritual experience. Earlier Wilkins had stated about the Corinthians - **they have been "born" through the gospel** (4:15 "in Christ Jesus I have begotten you [gennao] through the gospel."). **Christ has been sacrificed for them (5:7). They have been washed (or baptized) which has brought about sanctification and justification in the name of Christ, by the Spirit of God (6:9-11).**

Wilkins states it about as clear as you can get in advocating “baptismal regeneration.” He calls baptism the regeneration! We are born again in that act! Jesus redeemed us in that act of baptism! We have been justified in that act! We are the new creation in Christ in that act! And when Wilkins says that it is this powerful act that unites us with the **visible church**, then this means all baptized into the visible church have all of these saving graces right then and there, at least initially unless we apostatize and forfeit all these blessings. Wilkins declared – **“The grammar of the text may suggest the Spirit instrumentally confers justification and sanctification through the washing.”**

If this isn’t baptismal regeneration I am at complete loss.

John Murray on Baptism:

To demonstrate that Wilkins’ view is out of accord with Scripture and the teaching of the Reformed Faith, allow me to quote John Murray and John Calvin. In his book *Christian Baptism*, Murray states:

The meaning of this washing with water is that it signifies and seals a spiritual fact or relationship, namely, union with Christ and membership in his body the church. What efficacy attaches to this observable action? It is apparent that as a sign or seal it should not be identified with that which is signified and sealed. That which signifies is not the thing signified and that which seals is not the thing sealed. The sign or seal

*presupposes the existence of that which is signified or sealed. Hence baptism is the sign and seal of a spiritual reality which is conceived of as existing. **Where the reality is absent the sign or seal has no efficacy.***

*Equally pertinent is the observation that the sign or seal does not bring into existence that which is signified or sealed. It does not effect union with Christ. In other words, baptism **does not convey the grace which it signifies** (Murray, p.86).*

In a footnote on the previous paragraph, Murray states – “*This is directed against the notion of baptismal regeneration. It hardly seems necessary to set forth any extended refutation of this sacerdotalist conception.*”

Murray continues:

*The notion that it is the instrument of bestowing the grace or of constituting the fact signified is contrary to the nature of the rite as a sign and seal...It is a testimony which God has been pleased to give to us so that we may the better understand the high privilege of union with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. This is the purpose of baptism as a sign. And what is its purpose as seal? As seal it authenticates, confirms, guarantees the reality and security of this covenant grace. It is not indeed indispensable to the grace sealed; the grace exists prior to the seal and the seal **does not produce the grace sealed.** (Murray, p. 87).*

Murray then discusses the practical efficacy of baptism:

It is germane to the question of the efficacy of baptism to ask: what comfort may we derive from baptism, both as respects our own baptism and the baptism of the infant seed of believers? What needs to be stressed in this connection is that we may never divorce the faith of God’s covenant grace from the discharge of those obligations which inhere in the covenant relation. Covenant privilege always entails covenant responsibility. And this is just saying that the comfort and confidence of God’s covenant mercy may never be severed from covenant keeping. It is an abuse that turns the grace of God into lasciviousness to divorce faith from piety and obedience. Faith severed from obedience is presumption, just as formal obedience severed from faith is self-righteousness.

Hence, the sign and seal of baptism can be no pledge or guarantee to us of that which baptism signifies except as we are mindful of God’s covenant, embrace its promises, discharge its obligations, and lay hold in faith upon the covenant faithfulness of God.

***The Scripture does not extend to parents who have received baptism for their children, nor to the church of God, an assurance or guarantee that the children concerned are without condition the partakers of the grace signified and sealed by baptism...The degree of faith and assurance that God’s promise to them will be fulfilled is proportionate to the extent to which the fear of God, the keeping of His covenant, and the doing of His commandments rule in the heart and life.**(Murray, pp. 90-92).*

It is evident from the quotes from Murray, which explains well the position of the

Westminster Standards, differs greatly with Wilkins' views.

John Calvin On Baptism:

What does John Calvin say about baptism as a sign and seal? In his commentary on Romans 4:11 Calvin states this about the rite of circumcision:

*In order to anticipate an objection, he shows that circumcision was not unprofitable and superfluous, though it could not justify... And yet he intimates at the same time, by stating what its object was, that it was **not the cause of righteousness, it indeed tended to confirm the righteousness of faith, and that already obtained in uncircumcision.***

Calvin makes these comments in His Institutes:

*For this **analogy or similitude** is the surest rule of the sacraments: that we should see spiritual things in physical, as if set before our very eyes. For the Lord was pleased to **represent them by such figures** — **not because such graces are bound and enclosed in the sacrament so as to be conferred upon us by its power**, but only because the Lord by this token attests his will toward us, namely, that he is pleased to lavish all these things upon us. And he does not feed our eyes with a mere appearance only, but leads us to the present reality and effectively performs what it symbolizes.*

*Let us take as proof of this, Cornelius the centurion, who, having already received forgiveness of sins and the visible graces of the Holy Spirit, was nevertheless baptized [<441048> Acts 10:48]. **He did not seek an ampler forgiveness of sins through baptism, but a surer exercise of faith** — indeed, increase of assurance from a pledge. Perhaps someone will object: **why, then, did Ananias tell Paul to wash away his sins through baptism [Acts 22:16; cf. ch. 9:17-18] if sins are not washed away by the power of baptism itself?** I reply: we are said to receive, obtain, and acquire what, according as our faith is aware, is shown forth to us by the Lord, whether when he first testifies to it, or when he confirms more fully and more surely what has been attested, **Ananias meant only this: “To be assured, Paul, that your sins are forgiven, be baptized. For the Lord promises forgiveness of sins in baptism; receive it, and be secure.”***

Yet it is not my intention to weaken the force of baptism by not joining reality and truth to the sign, in so far as God works through outward means, but from this sacrament, as from all others, we obtain only as much as we receive in faith. If we lack faith, this will be evidence of our ungratefulness, which renders us chargeable before God, because we have not believed the promise given there. (Calvin, Institutes Book 4, chapter 15, sections 14 and 15)

Calvin discusses the relationship of baptism to regeneration and keep in mind that Wilkins has stated that baptism is an act of God that brings regeneration and he uses John 3:5 and Titus 3:5 to prove it. This is **not** the view of Calvin. For Calvin states:

Moreover, they bring forward the words of Christ recounted in the third chapter of John, by which they think that a present regeneration is required in baptism: “Unless a man be born again of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God” [John 3:5]. See (they say) how by the Lord’s lips baptism is called regeneration.

First, they are deceived in thinking that because they hear the word “water,” baptism is mentioned in this passage. For after having explained the corruption of nature to Nicodemus and taught him that men must be reborn, because Nicodemus was dreaming of physical rebirth, Christ indicates here the way in which God regenerates us, namely, through water and the Spirit. It is as if he said: through the Spirit, who in cleansing and watering faithful souls performs the function of water. I therefore simply understand “water and Spirit” as “Spirit, who is water.”

Therefore, just as to baptize by the Holy Spirit and by fire is to confer the Holy Spirit, who in regeneration has the function and nature of fire, so to be reborn of water and the Spirit is but to receive that power of the Spirit, which does in the soul what water does in the body. (Calvin, Institutes, Book 4, chapter 16, section 25).

*Baptism brings three things to our faith which we must deal with individually. The first thing that the Lord sets out for us is that baptism should be a token and **proof of our cleansing**; or (the better to explain what I mean) it is like a sealed document to confirm to us that all our sins are so abolished, remitted, and effaced that they can never come to his sight, be recalled, or charged against us. For he wills that all who believe be baptized for the remission of sins [Matthew 28:19; Acts 2:38].*

*In this sense we are to understand what Paul has written: that the church has been sanctified” by Christ, the bridegroom, and “cleansed with the washing of water in the Word of life” [Ephesians 5:26 p.]. And another passage: “He saved us...in virtue of his own mercy, through the washing of regeneration and of renewal in the Holy Spirit” [Titus 3:5]. And by Peter: “Baptism...saves us” [1 Peter 3:21 p.]. **For Paul did not mean to signify that our cleansing and salvation are accomplished by water, or that water contains in itself the power to cleanse, regenerate, and renew; nor that here is the cause of salvation, but only that in this sacrament are received the knowledge and certainty of such gifts. This the words themselves explain clearly enough. For Paul joins together the Word of life and the baptism of water, as if he had said: “Through the gospel a message of our cleansing and sanctification is brought to us; through such baptism the message is sealed.” And Peter immediately adds that this baptism is not a removal of filth from the flesh but a good conscience before God [1 Peter 3:21], which is from faith, indeed, baptism promises us no other purification than through the sprinkling of Christ’s blood, which is represented by means of water from the resemblance to cleansing and washing. (Calvin, Institutes, Book 4, chapter 15, sections 1- 2).***

Calvin is not making a direct correlation of baptism with regeneration as is Wilkins. In fact, Calvin goes on to emphasize the distinction between the sign and the matter of the sacrament. Calvin states:

*thence that distinction (if it be duly understood), often noted by the same Augustine, between a sacrament and the matter of the sacrament. For the distinction signifies not only that the figure and the truth are contained in the sacrament, but that **they are not so linked that they cannot be separated; and that even in the union itself the matter must always be distinguished from the sign, that we may not transfer to the one what belongs to the other.***

He speaks of their separation when he writes, “In the elect alone the sacraments effect what they represent.” Again, when he writes thus of the Jews: “Although the sacraments were common to all, grace was not common — which is the power of the sacraments. So also the laver of regeneration Titus 3:5] is now common to all; but grace itself, by which the members of Christ are regenerated with their Head, is not common to all.”

*“We also receive visible food this day, but **the sacrament is one thing, the power of the sacrament another.** Why is it that many receive from the altar and die, and die in receiving? For the Lord’s morsel was poison to Judas, not because he received evil, but because an evil man evilly received a good thing.” (Calvin, Institutes, Book 4, chapter 14, section 15).*

*I say that Christ is the matter or (if you prefer) the substance of all the sacraments; for in him they have all their firmness, and they do not promise anything apart from him. The less tolerable, then, is **the error of Peter Lombard, who learnedly makes them the causes of righteousness and salvation, of which they are but parts.** Accordingly, bidding farewell to all causes which man’s ingenuity fashions for itself, we ought to hold to this single cause. Therefore, the sacraments have effectiveness among us in proportion as we are helped by their ministry sometimes to foster, confirm, and increase the true knowledge of Christ in ourselves; at other times, to possess him more fully and enjoy his riches. **But that happens when we receive in true faith what is offered there.***

*But, as Augustine has shown in the above passages that the sacrament is a worthless thing if it be separated from its truth, so in another place he reminds us that in the very joining of these we also must have a distinction, lest we cling too tightly to the outward sign. He says, “As to follow the letter and receive the signs for the things themselves are marks of servile weakness, so unprofitably to interpret the signs is a mark of badly straying error.” He points out two vices which are here to be avoided. The first vice is for us to receive the signs as though they had been given in vain, and by destroying or weakening their secret meanings through our antagonism, to cause them to be wholly fruitless to us. **The second vice is by not lifting our minds beyond the visible sign, to transfer to it the credit for those benefits which are conferred upon us by Christ alone. And they are conferred through the Holy Spirit, who makes us partakers in Christ;***

conferred, indeed, with the help of outward signs, if they allure us to Christ; but when they are twisted in another direction, their whole worth is shamefully destroyed. (Calvin, Institutes, Book 4, chapter 14, section 16).

Moreover, we must beware lest we be led into a similar error through what was written a little too extravagantly by the ancients to enhance the dignity of the sacraments. That is, to think that a hidden power is joined and fastened to the sacraments by which they of themselves confer the graces of the Holy Spirit upon us, as wine is given in a cup; while the only function divinely imparted to them is to attest and ratify for us God's good will toward us. And they are of no further benefit unless the Holy Spirit accompanies them... For the sacraments (as we have suggested above) are for us the same thing from God, as messengers of glad tidings or guarantees of the ratification of covenants are from men. They do not bestow any grace of themselves, but announce and tell us, and (as they are guarantees and tokens) ratify among us, those things given us by divine bounty. The Holy Spirit (whom the sacraments do not bring indiscriminately to all men but whom the Lord exclusively bestows on his own people) is he who brings the graces of God with him, gives a place for the sacraments among us, and makes them bear fruit.

In the meantime, that false doctrine is removed by which the cause of justification and the power of the Holy Spirit are enclosed in elements, just as in vessels or vehicles, and that chief force which has been overlooked by some is clearly set forth. (Calvin, Institutes, Book 4, chapter 14, section 17)

It is evident that Calvin is at great odds with Wilkins, whom he tries to enlist on his side. Calvin emphatically states that we must distinguish between the sign and substance. Calvin indicates that it is wrong to speak of the sacrament having power as such to confer the graces of the Holy Spirit to us. But this is exactly what Wilkins said - **Biblically, a "sign" is not a picture but a powerful act of God which results in deliverance for God's people (note the "signs" that God did in Egypt for example). Thus, baptism is a "sign" in that by this means the Holy Spirit transfers the baptized from union with the old Adam into Christ Jesus (the Confession's scriptural proofs cite Gal. 3:27; Rom. 6:5 at this point), transferring him into Christ, the "new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17). Thus, it is a sign and seal of regeneration (the proofs cite John 3:5; Titus 3:5 to prove this point). By the Spirit we are "given up unto God" — i.e., bound to walk in "newness of life" (repenting of our sins, trusting and obeying the Savior all our days).**

According to Wilkins, this powerful act of baptism is when it is applied to all in the **visible church**, not just to the invisible church.

My Concluding Comments On Wilkins' Views On Baptism

Wilkins maintained in his re-examination that he was in full agreement with the Westminster Standards on baptism and that he did not believe in a baptismal regeneration. I have shown this to be blatantly false. What is incredible is that Wilkins in the quotes above admits that his views and those of others in the Federal Vision uses the terms “elect,” “covenant,” and “regeneration” differently than the Westminster Standards. Can it be more blunt! He emphatically states that he is a better interpreter of the Scriptures than the Westminster Standards, but then he isn't really different, he says. This is pure double talk and misleading comments.

Wilkins emphatically identifies union with Christ in all of its redemptive blessings as being present at one's water baptism. At least all of them are there initially or temporarily until one proves himself by persevering in faithfulness. In fact, Wilkins says that salvation itself is following the example of Jesus as the Second Adam who justified Himself by being faithful to all that God commanded. In saying this, Wilkins has publicly shown himself to be a heretic, and should be immediately defrocked from the PCA. His views of a present justification and a final justification with the final justification being contingent upon our faithfulness is an outright espousing of a different gospel. Wilkins stands under the anathema of God according to Galatians 1:6-9.

Wilkins clearly teaches baptismal regeneration. He said explicitly that we are “born again” through our union with Christ and that it is instrumentally conferred by the Spirit through washing, which he calls baptism into the visible church.

Concluding Remarks To The Entire Re-Examination

Steve Wilkins stands guilty as charged by Central Carolina Presbytery's charges. Wilkins has sought to cloud the minds of those reading his responses with double talk that is confusing to most Presbyterians who have been raised in the Reformed heritage. The Westminster Standards clearly do not teach a two fold kind of election, forgiveness, and justification. There is no present and future salvation contingent upon our obedience. Wilkins puts himself squarely into the camp of N.T. Wright and the New Perspective on Paul Theology. Wilkins' views are thoroughly Arminian, and his views are an outright challenge to the Bible's presentation of the Gospel. For the sake of the purity of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, the PCA must banish Steve Wilkins from their number. He must be identified with all those of church history who have sought to undermine the blessed gospel of Christ. Unless he and all those who embrace his theology repent of their views, they will all hear a terrifying word from Jesus on that Last Day – “I never knew you, depart from me you lawless ones.”

