

CanRC Answers to URC Questions

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Classis Southwest of the United Reformed Churches of North America formulated a list of questions about positions and views within the Canadian Reformed Churches. Dr. Jason Van Vliet and Dr. Gerhard H. Visscher were asked by the Canadian Reformed Committee for Church Unity to answer those questions. On January 19, 2010, in Escondido, California, Drs. Van Vliet and Visscher appeared before Classis Southwest and presented an abbreviated version of what follows.

It is a pleasure to be here in your midst this afternoon, brothers, to experience the rich bond of fellowship, and to attempt to answer the questions which you have formulated. Just a couple of comments before we begin. First, it should be apparent to all that we really cannot speak for all the Canadian Reformed Churches and their ministers. We can only offer to you some thoughts about the approach which is generally taken in the Canadian Reformed Churches on these matters. Because the CanRC is a small federation, we probably can paint for you a fairly accurate picture. We certainly can give you an impression of what is taught presently at the Canadian Reformed federational seminary. Secondly, we do not profess to have read all the books and material written by the adherents of the so-called "Federal Vision." Certainly, we have read enough to be informed and to understand their views, and to assess what degree of similarity there may or may not be with ourselves. Your questions and our answers then follow.

1. How is the so-called "Federal Vision" theology regarded in the CanRC? Are there ministers/professors in the CanRC who support this teaching?

Federal vision is not a raging controversy in CanRC like it is in some other federations; this is due in part to the fact that some FV emphases are ones to which Canadian Reformed people are also sympathetic. In the face of the individualism that is rampant in evangelicalism, it's good to be emphasizing the corporate and collective aspects of Christianity; in the face of the tendency to see sacraments as mere rituals, it's good to remind each other that sacraments are a means of grace which the Holy Spirit uses for an effective purpose. So there's a certain amount of familiarity and sympathy towards some of the sounds of the Federal Vision. More than a few of our ministers may, for instance, be using Douglas Wilson's book, *Reforming Marriage*, as recommended reading in premarriage classes.

At the same time, that does not mean that FV material is accepted uncritically. Perhaps it's fair to say that there is neither complete acceptance nor complete rejection of FV material. The exact degree to which one sympathizes varies with the topic. In a presentation which I (GHV) made on the Federal Vision, I argued that just as it is best to decide about a federation of churches on the basis of its official documents rather than on positions of individuals within it, it is best to do the same with something like "Federal Vision." As it really is made of a number of loosely connected

individuals, the best one can do is note what is written in the document "Joint Federal Vision Statement" (on www.federal-vision.com). The document provides us both with points that we can appreciate as well as points that we should be concerned about. Paedocommunion is an example of the latter. There are also some statements about baptism which are problematic ("God formally unites a person to Christ through baptism"). Some statements about faith also lack sufficient clarity. At the same time, it should be acknowledged that there are a considerable number of qualifiers in the document which alleviate much of the concern raised, and, frankly, leave one wondering what exactly the point of issue is (e.g., imputation of the active obedience of Christ). But we will say more about these points later.

Suffice it to say FV theology is not predominant in the CanRCs. That can be illustrated by the fact that when Synod Schererville's Nine Points (as well as Mid-America's "Doctrinal Testimony") first appeared, Canadian Reformed people did not read them against the background of FV, but against the background of the Liberation of 1944. Had they read them in the context of the FV discussion, they would have understood much more; without that background, however, we understood these documents to be in opposition to a way of thinking that had become dear to us because of our more recent history.

2. How is the so-called "New Perspective on Paul" viewed in the CanRC? Is there support in the CanRC?

I believe that there is very little awareness in the CanRCs about what "the New Perspective" debate is all about. Does that concern me? It could, especially since I have spent a good portion of my life reflecting on it and writing about it (G. H. Visscher, *Romans 4 and the New Perspective on Paul*, Peter Lang, 2009). In actuality though, I think it is largely an academic debate. Those in the pew have a hard time understanding how it can be that (according to NPP) that there was no legalism on the part of the opponents of Paul or the Lord Jesus; the conclusion of my work is that there was. As Dr. Stephen Westerholm has suggested, both the Roman Catholicism that Luther thundered against and the Pharisaism which Paul broke away from had a considerable measure of semi-Pelagian thinking. Since the argument really goes full circle, why bother the pew about it? Since these are academic questions which future exegetes need to be aware of, we do ensure that seminarians know about these issues and are suitably equipped to deal with these views in their reading and interpretation of Scripture.

To suggest, however, that NPP thinking is prevalent in the CanRCs is simply erroneous.

3. How do the ministers in the CanRC regard Westminster Seminary California's application of the Reformed confessions to the problems raised by the Federal Vision and the New Perspective on Paul?

<http://www.wscal.org/resources/Justification.htm>

We do not believe that the CanRC brothers would have a problem with the "Testimony on Justification" found on that website. From our own perspective we would not need to add the references from Westminster Standards, but we do not have any problem with them either.

4. There are many ministers in the URCNA who hold to the three-covenant view (covenant of redemption, covenant of works, and covenant of grace). The Liberated tradition *does not appear* to hold the three-covenant view of covenant theology. How can these two be reconciled?

Let's start with a simple observation from Scripture. Every time the word "covenant" is used in Scripture, it refers to the covenant of grace (either old or new dispensation). There is one possible exception: Hosea 6:7 may refer to a pre-fall covenant, which is sometimes called the covenant of works. Next, if we turn to the Three Forms of Unity (hereafter: TFU), we find that they say comparatively little about covenant. Most references to the covenant in our confessions are in connection with sacraments (e.g., BC 34; LD 27; CoD 1.17), and they all refer to the covenant of grace. So, speaking plainly, the TFU *explicitly* advances a one covenant view (covenant of grace). The Westminster Standards explicitly speak of a covenant of works (pre-fall) and the covenant of grace, but they do not speak *explicitly* about a covenant of redemption (*pactum salutis*) in eternity. So, in short, neither the TFU nor the Westminster Standards explicitly advance a three covenant view.

Since we are confessional churches, we should find common ground in our confessions. Moreover, since both the URCNA and CanRC only subscribe to the TFU, we must hold each other accountable to preach the covenant of grace in all its fullness. Individual ministers or members may have their opinions about the validity of a two- or three-covenant view. Generally speaking, they should be free to hold those views, so long as their teachings do not contradict the TFU in any way. For the rest, though, we cannot insist that all ministers hold to a particular kind of two- or three-covenant view, because that would go beyond our subscription to the TFU.

5. What is the dominant covenant theology of the CanRC?

The dominant covenant theology in the CanRC is expressed in the Form for Baptism. This may sound a bit simplistic, but in reality the covenant theology in the Form is what the members of the federation know well and hold dear. Of course, because of our history, the teachings of Dr. K. Schilder have had, and still do have, an influence. At the same time, the majority of our members don't read Dutch anymore; also the newer generation of ministers cannot read (much) Dutch. Having said that, concerning the covenant, there are a few points we regularly emphasize:

- covenant and election are related, but must *not be equated*;
- *both* the promises and the obligations of the covenant should be laid upon the hearts of all God's people;
- Baptism is a sign pointing to God's covenant promises. It does not point to something which may, or may not, be within the person being baptized, e.g., a presupposed seed of regeneration.

6. Are there CanRC ministers, who like many in the UCRNA, who hold to the Reformed doctrine of the *pactum salutis* (covenant of redemption)?

We do firmly adhere to a divine *decree* concerning our salvation before the creation of the world. Concerning that eternal decree we certainly confess:

- that it involves Father, Son and Holy Spirit (CoD 1.7);
- that Christ was appointed to be the Mediator and the Surety of the elect (CoD 1.7 & 2:2);
- that the Father decreed to give the elect to Christ and to work in the elect through his Word and Spirit (CoD 1.7).

God's eternal decree is the foundation of our salvation (Eph. 1!). Whether or not that decree is described as an intratrinitarian covenant is another matter. As mentioned previously (#4 above), our confessions do not require us to speak of the eternal decree *as a covenant*. There will, therefore, be difference of opinion on that matter. Such differences of opinion should be permissible within the bounds of subscription to the TFU. Also in the context of the present debates regarding Federal Vision, it is noteworthy that the report of the URCNA study committee on Federal Vision (to be submitted to Synod London 2010) and the "Testimony on Justification" from Westminster California Seminary both defend justification *sola gratia* and *sola fides* without mentioning the covenant of redemption (*pactum salutis*). This indicates that it is possible to maintain an orthodox, Reformed understanding of the gospel without necessarily speaking of the covenant of redemption.

7. Are there CanRC ministers, who like many in the UCRNA, who hold to the Reformed doctrine of the covenant of works? How is this understood?

In the history of Reformed theology, various terms have been used to describe the relationship between God and man before the fall into sin. For instance, K. Schilder was willing to use the phrase "covenant of works," although he often added "so-called" before it because he did not want people to think that Adam would have merited eternal life from God. S.G. De Graaf preferred to use the term "covenant of favour," and more recently Rev. Cl. Stam has suggested "covenant of love" (see *Covenant of Love*, pp 48-54). The Westminster Standards speak both of "covenant of works" and "covenant of life." Thus, there has been much variety in terminology. Whatever term might be used, concerning the pre-fall relationship we maintain:

- God created man in true righteousness and holiness, so that he both could, and should, obey the Lord his God (Q&A 6 & 9; BC 14);
- God's command to Adam in the garden was "the commandment of life" (BC 14). In other words, *if* Adam had obeyed the command he and his descendants would have continued to live eternally in blessedness with the Lord (Q&A 6). But, *since* Adam disobeyed, he and all his descendants have become "liable to physical and spiritual death" (BC 14).

Within the CanRC, we are cautious about saying that Adam's pre-fall obedience would have *merited* him *eternal life*. Eternal life is a gift from God, not a paycheck earned by Adam. We do not want to leave the impression in any way that God is beholden to man. At the same time, even if we are not inclined to speak of Adam meriting eternal life (pre-fall), this does *not* mean that we are hesitant to say that Christ merited salvation & eternal life for us. That is, indeed, confessional language (BC 22).

8. How do the ministers of the CanRC regard the covenant theology of K. Schilder?

First of all, let's highlight a few main points of Schilder's teaching on the covenant:

- Schilder's main burden is to keep the covenant *real*. In one speech he gave around the time of the Liberation he said, "Now we must first agree on one thing: we must believe in the *reality* of the covenant" (*Main Points of the Doctrine of the Covenant*, p 1). He emphasized this because there were people who viewed the children of the covenant through the lens of presuppositions concerning their baptism. Rather than working from assumptions and presuppositions, Schilder taught that those who are baptized are *really* in the covenant. They *really* receive the promises of salvation, and they *really* receive the obligation to respond, out of thankfulness, with a new obedience. (*MPDC*, pp 10-11)
- Schilder also points out that everyone is baptized with the same Form. We do not have a Form A for elect and Form B for non-elect (*MPDC*, p 11)
- At the same time, those who are properly and legally in the covenant also have to appropriate the promises by faith. After all, it is by true faith that we are grafted into Christ (LD 7)
- Schilder speaks of conditions within the covenant, but he also takes pains to ensure that no one misunderstands this. He says: if you mean by condition "something whereby we bind God," or "something for which God has to wait before He can go on," or "something which we have to fulfill in order to *merit* something," then "we say unconditionally: 'unconditional is the password.'" But he continues: "Do you mean by *condition* something which God has *joined to something else*, to make clear to us that the *one* cannot come *without the other* and that we cannot be *sure* of the one, unless we are at the same time *assured* of the other? Then we say unconditionally: 'conditional is the password'" (*Extra-Scriptural Binding - A new Danger*, Inheritance Publications, 1996, p. 78).

Bearing the above in mind, CanRC are not inclined to speak of an inward/outward covenant or an inward/outward aspect of the covenant. Using that terminology leaves us with the impression that some children of the baptism are really in the covenant and really baptized, while others are not. We fear this leads us back to the teaching of baptism on the basis of presupposed regeneration. That is history we do not want to repeat. At the same time, this does not mean that we teach that every member of the covenant is *de facto* elect. Not at all! Genuine profession of faith is a very real and important part of life in the covenant.

9. How do the ministers of the CanRC regard the covenant theology of Norman Shepherd?

In a sense, this is a difficult question to answer because there are so many – widely divergent – views on what exactly Shepherd's covenant theology is. There are some aspects of Shepherd's teaching with which we can agree. For instance, his desire to emphasize the objectivity – or reality – of the covenant is commendable. Likewise, we can agree with his concern that the sacraments do not become merely empty ceremonies.

At the same time, we would not endorse everything that Shepherd has written. For example, in *Backbone of the Bible: Covenant in Contemporary Perspective*, Shepherd writes that “we need to abandon the works/merit paradigm” (p. 119). As mentioned above, speaking of the merits of Christ is confessional language which we would want to maintain, not abandon. Furthermore, in his writings, Shepherd frequently uses of the phrase “living, active, repentant and *obedient* faith.” “Living faith” is used in the CoD 1.4, but “obedient faith” is not used in the TFU. Whatever Shepherd himself may mean by that phrase, it has the potential to be confusing. Someone might easily conclude that works are somehow part of the instrument of justification, namely, faith. It would be better to stick to the common terminology of the confessions and refer to “*true* faith” (e.g., LD 7, 23, 24; BC 22)

10. How exactly do ministers in the CanRC relate the confessional doctrine of justification *sola gratia, sola fide* to their covenant theology?

The covenant promise of salvation which comes to us, *sola gratia*, at baptism should be related to the second part of the Catechism, that is, our deliverance. Our covenant obedience (or the “new obedience” in Form for Baptism) should be related to the third part of the Catechism, that is, our thankfulness. So long as we keep that distinction in mind, we should be able to stay on the straight and narrow, doctrinally speaking. LD 24 is abundantly clear: our good works do not have any part in our deliverance. LD 32 is also abundantly clear: our good works *must* be there, but as part of our thankfulness. In all of this it must be remembered that justification and sanctification are *both* works of Christ, (see LD 32), and therefore there is *no* room for boasting that our good works contribute, even an iota, to our salvation. It's all of Christ! The fact that good works must necessarily come forth from Christians is not due to the nature of their faith in the first place, but it is due to the fact that by that faith they are grafted into Jesus Christ (LD 24). True Christian living is not dependent on our works, nor the quality of our faith, but on being rooted in the Christ who wondrously renews (LD 32-52) those whom he so graciously redeemed (LD 8-31).

11. How will CanRC ministers relate to those URCNA ministers and churches who not only hold to and preach the distinction between those internally/externally in the covenant but for whom it is of the essence of Reformed covenant theology since these two views would seem to be mutually exclusive? Could a congregation have a minister one year who preached the distinction and the next year who preached that all baptized members are in the covenant of grace in precisely the same way, without distinction?

It may be best to answer this question after the next question..

12. Some followers of the so-called “Federal Vision” reject the above internal/external distinction, and are preaching that every baptized person is “united to Christ,” as K. Schilder said, “head for head.” Is this view held or taught in the CanRC? If so, to what degree?

First of all, we believe it is erroneous to maintain that K. Schilder saw every baptized person as, head for head, "united to Christ" and therefore regenerate. Certainly he saw all covenant children as "sanctified in Christ", as the Baptism Form which is used both in the CanRCs and in the URCs says. Covenant children are "set apart" and distinguished from the children of unbelievers. The "head for head" language, however, applies to their position in the covenant. Here we (and, we believe, Schilder) would maintain that all children of believers, head for head, are truly in the covenant. They all receive the same promises. If they later err in unbelief, that is not because God did not really offer them life and salvation.

In the FV statement, it is maintained however that "baptism unites a person to Christ" and that is often maintained in a "head for head" manner. One writer, for instance, after maintaining that he fully adheres to the doctrines of the Canons of Dort, goes on to speak about how Paul addresses his congregations and suggests that Paul sees each member of the church as "head for head" "elect" (Eph.1:4). Later he suggests that one can fall away from this election. That is unfortunately confusing and problematic. We would prefer to think that Paul speaks covenantally and corporately. Paul addresses those who are faithful in Christ (Eph.1:1) and refers to his readers as "chosen in Christ"(1:4). As he speaks to the body, he goes on in Eph 6:1-4 to address also the children in a covenantal and corporate way urging them to obey and honor their parents. One does not need to redefine the classical definitions of election to understand things that way. I believe that what I wrote back in 2007 (G. H. Visscher, "How Should the Pulpit Address the Pew? Some Lessons fom Paul" Clarion, 42, no 55 (2006). (Cf. Lux Mundi 26 March 2007. See [here](#).) reflects the approach followed in the CanRCs - an approach which is faithful to both Scripture and confession.

On this point, it is also good to note that the position of men like K. Schilder is not the same as the present positions of some of the FV leaders. We need to remember too that in the 1940s Schilder was opposing baptism on the basis of presumptive regeneration. If he so opposed the presumption of a regeneration in children, is it not clear that he would be even more opposed to the suggestion that the reality was already present with newborn children? "Promise" was a big word in Schilder's approach. To suggest that Schilder replaced Kuyper's "presumptive regeneration" with a construction in which all are head for head regenerate and united to Christ is simply wrong. All are in the covenant, head for head; all receive the same promises; but not all respond in with faith and obedience.

While the exact formulations may vary, Canadian Reformed ministers generally see it and preach it in that way. Regarding the previous question, it is theoretically possible that some ministers preach an internal/external distinction within the covenant, and that that this would be tolerated within the Canadian Reformed federation. But that is rare and when it happens, it is not because the Can Ref seminary has taught them in that way.

13. To what degree did Schilder reject “common grace” and how is this doctrine understood by ministers in the CanRC?

The exact reason for this question is really not very clear to us. While the topic is considerably more complex and much more could be said, for K. Schilder, the concern was that what was

generally referred to as "common grace" is really a matter of God "postponing his judgement" for a time. It was unclear to him, how exactly this constituted grace. It is largely a matter of terms. There is no doubt that as long as history waits for the final display of grace and the final execution of judgement, the sun and the rain will fall on the just and the unjust alike.

14. How widely, if at all, is the free or well-meant offer of the gospel accepted and practiced in the CanRC?

Again, the exact concern of this question is vague to us. If it simply means, "Do you still agree to Canons of Dort 2.5?", the answer is simple, "Of course we do!" As a matter of fact, we would maintain that the well-meant offer of the gospel comes out even stronger with the approach of Schilder than with an approach which argues for an internal/external distinction in the covenant. How well-meant is the gospel offer for someone who is said to be in the covenant only externally? Since we maintain a real covenant, God's promises and offer of grace are real to all in the covenant. Even stronger than 2.5 is Canons of Dort, III/IV, 8: "*as many as are called by the gospel are earnestly called...He...earnestly promises rest of soul and eternal life to all who come to Him and believe.*"

15. Some of the proponents of the Federal Vision along with Norman Shepherd, have recently and publicly rejected the imputation of the active obedience of Christ. Is the active obedience of Christ believed and preached by ministers in the CanRC? How influential has the rejection of the active obedience of Christ been in the CanRC?

Here we would like to refer to our colleague, Dr. N.H. Gootjes who has written a clear defence of the imputation of Christ's active obedience (*Koinonia* 19.2). He argues that, even if the actual term, "active obedience," is not used, the teaching is nonetheless there in BC 22 where we confess, "He imputes to us all His merits *and as many holy as He has done for us and in our place.*"

At the same time, we should also remember that Christ's active and passive obedience are so closely tied to one another that at times it is difficult -- and perhaps also unnecessary -- to distinguish between the two. For example, in Heb 10:9 our Saviour says "Here I am, I have come to do your will." This sounds very much like what we would call "active obedience" in dogmatics. However, immediately thereafter, in Heb 10:10 the Holy Spirit continues, "And *by that will*, we have been made holy *through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.*" And that sounds very much like what we would call "passive obedience" in dogmatics.

16. Are the CanRC brethren having the same discussion regarding paedocommunion? Are there congregations in the CanRC that practice or teach paedocommunion?

Paedocommunion is not an issue in the Canadian Reformed federation. To our knowledge it is neither practiced nor promoted by anyone in the federation.

In conclusion, then, where do we stand? Perhaps it's appropriate to quote from one of our leaders at this point.

At the end of an extensive article very relevant to the present discussions (*American Secession Theologians on Covenant and Baptism*, Inheritance Publications, 1996), the late Dr. J. Faber wrote some words which highlight how still today we wish to bind ourselves only to Scripture and confession, and promote the development of theology precisely by resisting the temptation to bind each other to the specific dogmatic constructions of any theologian. We should value God's covenant and baptism very highly, he said, but "at the same time we should remember that Christ is not gathering a church of theologians or church historians, but of *believers*." "God's catholic church is being gathered, not in the unity of a perfect theology - however eagerly we should endeavour to obtain it - but in the unity of true faith, faith in the triune God of the covenant, the God of our baptism" (p.54).

It is in this spirit that we offer to you our answers to your questions.

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