

# THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled. *2 Corinthians* 10:3-6

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## Peter Leithart and the PCA's Failure to Deal with the Federal Vision

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*Editor's note: the following is taken from the forthcoming book Can the Presbyterian Church in America Be Saved? by Sean Gerety, which will be available later this year. The life span of denominations that stay true to Biblical Christianity is growing shorter and shorter in this present day. Despite strong statements against the Federal Vision in the PCA's report by the Ad Interim Study Committee on Federal Vision, New Perspective, and Auburn Avenue Theologies, the PCA has still not effectively dealt with the problem of the Federal Vision within its own ranks. In the same report Federal Visionists are referred to as "brothers." Since the report's near unanimous adoption by the PCA's general assembly in 2007, two presbyteries have approved the teaching of FV men, the latest being Peter Leithart by the Pacific Northwest Presbytery. No Federal Visionist has been convicted of teaching heresy by any court of the PCA.*

On Friday, October 3, 2008 the Pacific Northwest Presbytery (PNW) exonerated Federal Visionist and PCA pastor, Peter Leithart, stating that his teaching, specifically in the areas where he took issue with all nine declarations found in the PCA's committee report, "is in complete conformity with the *Westminster Confession of Faith*." Once again a major court in the PCA has affirmed the Federal Vision as an acceptable scheme of salvation that can be taught with impunity within the PCA. The PNW issued both a majority<sup>1</sup> and minority<sup>2</sup> report in light of their examination of Leithart. Thankfully, the minority report offered some hope that there are still a couple of Christians left in the PNW who understand the Gospel, even if they're not the majority.

Here is a brief rundown of Leithart's rejection of the nine declarations and the PNW's majority ruling in each case:

### 1. Regarding Bi-covenantal Structure

Leithart rejects the idea of a Covenant of Works in contrast with the Covenant of Grace and contends that "the differences between Adamic and post-lapsarian covenants are not at a 'soteriological' level...but at the level of covenant administration."<sup>3</sup>

According to the *Westminster Confession* 8:2 the Covenant of Works promised life "to Adam, and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience." Whereas, the Covenant of Grace offers to sinners "life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved; and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto life his Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe." You'll notice that in both cases, and in opposition to Leithart, both the "Adamic and post-lapsarian covenants" differ greatly and precisely at the "soteriological level." One promises life to Adam and his posterity on the basis of Adam's perfect and personal obedience, whereas the other promises life as the result of belief in the perfect and personal obedience of Jesus Christ alone.

Elsewhere the Minority Report makes clear Leithart's rejection of the Confessional bi-covenantal structure where he writes:

Yes, we do have the same obligation that Adam (and Abraham, and Moses, and David, and Jesus) had, namely, the obedience of faith. And, yes, covenant faithfulness is the way to salvation, for the "doers of the law will be justified" at the final judgment. But this is all done in union with Christ, so that "our" covenant faithfulness is dependent on the work of the Spirit of Christ in us, and our covenant faithfulness is about faith, trusting the Spirit to will and to do according to His good pleasure.

First, the phrase "the obedience of faith" does not mean what Leithart seems to think. It does not mean "covenant faithfulness," nor does it mean that "the 'doers of the law will be justified' at the final judgment." In spite of Leithart's clear misapplication of *Romans* 2:13 teaching a form of works righteousness and his rejection of the bi-covenantal structure taught in the *Confession* (along with an unambiguous rejection of the doctrine of justification which is by faith alone and not "covenant faithfulness"), the PNW committee ruled that it "does not find his views out of accord with the *WCF*."

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.exile-pc.org/docs/leithart\\_majority\\_report.doc](http://www.exile-pc.org/docs/leithart_majority_report.doc).

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.exile-pc.org/docs/leithart\\_minority\\_report.doc](http://www.exile-pc.org/docs/leithart_minority_report.doc).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.leithart.com/archives/003074.php> - all citations from

Leithart except otherwise noted are taken from this open letter.

## 2. Election by Baptism

Leithart affirms that all baptized persons are elect in Christ and that election has both a “general and special” sense. Leithart believes “Baptism expresses God’s eternal sovereign choice of an individual to be a member of the people of God; and those who are members of the church stand righteous before God, are holy, and are sons,” but “there are some who are made sons by baptism who fall away.” Of course, nowhere does the *Confession* teach that all members of the church “stand righteous before God, are holy, and are sons.” And, in case anyone could be blind enough to miss it, Leithart adds, “That does express my view of baptism.”

To this departure from the Confessional standards the PNW committee asserts that it “does not judge Dr. Leithart’s views to be out of accord with the *WCF*.”

## 3. Imputation of Obedience

Leithart is at best agnostic on the question of imputation, claiming that he is “unsettled.” Yet, how can any Christian teacher and minister be “unsettled” on the question of the imputation of Christ’s obedience? This alone should be enough to disqualify him from any Christian pulpit, Reformed, Presbyterian, or otherwise. Leithart writes:

I affirm that Christ’s obedience was necessary for our salvation, and affirm too that Christ’s history of obedience becomes the life story of those who are in Christ. I’m not sure “imputation” is the best way to express this. It’s not clear to me that the Westminster Standards require belief in the imputation of Christ’s active obedience.

Notice, Leithart affirms Christ’s obedience was necessary for our salvation, but in what sense? After all, Romanists believe that Christ’s obedience was necessary for salvation. Since Leithart argues that the idea of Christ’s obedience as something that is reckoned or imputed to believers “might not be the best way to express” the role Christ’s obedience plays in our salvation, what’s left? Could it be that Christ’s obedience provides an example for us to emulate so that we might exercise our “covenant faithfulness” in order to receive final justification, something which Leithart tells us only the “doers of the law” can achieve? It would seem so. As cited in the minority report, Leithart again appeals to union:

By union with Christ, that verdict [which Christ received at his resurrection] is also passed on us. In this construction, there is no “independent” imputation of the active obedience of Christ, nor even of the passive obedience for that matter; we are regarded as righteous, and Christ’s righteousness is reckoned as ours, because of our union with Him in His resurrection. What is imputed is the verdict, not the actions of Jesus, and this is possible and just because Christ is our covenant head acting on our behalf.

Dr. Leithart is not “unsettled” at all and completely rejects the Biblical doctrine of imputation, even as it applies to the

passive obedience of Christ. What is imputed is not Christ’s alien righteousness at all, either passive or active, but rather a verdict - “*and not the actions of Jesus.*” There is no longer any need for the traditional Reformed belief in “double imputation” where our sins are imputed to Christ and His righteousness is imputed to us. There is no longer any “great exchange” in Leithart’s Federal Vision. All of these ideas are subsumed as redundancies in his un-Christian and all encompassing theory of “union.”

On the basis of this anti-Christian nonsense the incompetent and criminal shepherds currently occupying the PNW concluded, “The Committee does not find Dr. Leithart’s admission that ‘imputation’ may not be the best way to express the idea that we are made righteous before God on the ground of the righteousness of Christ evidence that he denies the doctrine of the *WCF*.”

Of course, if the above statements by Leithart are not an explicit denial of the doctrine of the *WCF*, it is hard to imagine what is?

## 4. Merit

Leithart denies the very idea of merit and states that he does not believe “that Adam or any human being could merit anything before God.” Adam could not merit eternal bliss by his obedience to the demands God imposed on him in the Covenant of Works and Jesus Christ could not merit anything for those given to Him by the Father by his obedient, sinless life and cross work.

Leithart adds, “Yet, because the eternal Son is the equal of the Father, He and His work have an inherent worth that no creature has before God. If this is what ‘merit’ expresses, I do not disagree.” Well, that is not what merit means according to the Standards. *Westminster Larger Catechism* 155 states that it is “in the merit of [Christ’s] obedience and sacrifice on earth” [and for the blind members of the PNW that means on the basis of Christ’s active and passive obedience] that Christ makes intercession “continually” for us before the Father, even giving us “access with boldness to the throne of grace, and acceptance of their persons and services.” *Westminster Confession of Faith* 17:2 states that the very perseverance of the saints is based “upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ; the abiding of the Spirit, and of the seed of God within them....” Not so says Dr. Leithart.

Yet, in spite of Leithart’s rejection of the role merit plays in the Biblical scheme of salvation, the PNW committee “does not judge Dr. Leithart’s views to be out of accord with the *WCF*.”

## 5. Union with Christ

Leithart writes, “I do believe that all of Christ’s benefits are ‘subsumed’ under the heading of union with Christ. This renders imputation ‘redundant’....”

Yet, and as the Minority report rightly notes, the fifth declaration of the Federal Vision Report states: “The view that ‘union with Christ’ renders imputation redundant because it subsumes all of Christ’s benefits (including justification) under this doctrinal heading is contrary to the Westminster Standards.”

Clearly A is not A in the befuddled minds of those who wrote and voted in favor of the PNW majority report. Could this be the Vantilian misology and love of paradox once again rearing its ugly head in the PCA? It would seem so. Interestingly, one man who was present during the proceedings of the PNW commented:

John Frame's theology has had a very detrimental impact on the PCA, and his denigration of the confessions, false positing of [Systematic Theology] against [Biblical Theology], and "multi-perspectival approach" were all specifically and repeatedly invoked (Frame's name even being brought up several times) against sane, confessional theological debate. It was astounding how many times the "Bible vs. the confessions" was bandied about, and how many times the threat of becoming a "dead and rigid confessional church" was seen as the end of the argument.<sup>4</sup>

Not surprisingly and against all reason, the men on the PNW concluded that the above view of union that renders imputation "redundant" is not "out of accord with the WCF."

On a side note, this provides another great example why anti-Federal Vision forces should have immediately called for a recorded vote after the voice vote carried on the floor of the General Assembly approving the non-binding FV/NPP report (doesn't anyone read *Roberts Rules* anymore). My guess is that there are some PNW members who voted in favor of committee report on the FV/NPP who also voted for the majority report exonerating Leithart. After all, is anything unbelievable when even the law of contradiction has been abandoned?

## 6. Baptism and Covenantal Union

Leithart's doctrines of baptism and covenantal union have already been covered. He holds that those who are baptized and thereby accounted members in the church "stand righteous before God, are holy, and are sons..." This righteous and holy standing before God in the case of many baptized members is fleeting since, according to Leithart, "there are some who are made sons by baptism who fall away." This is what happens when you replace imputation (which Leithart calls "redundant") with the anti-Christian doctrine of union.

Leithart argued that he doesn't see any of this as presenting "a 'parallel' soteriological system to the decretal system." Of course he doesn't. Not surprising, the PNW committee agreed and stated that they again do not find his views "out of accord with the WCF."

## 7. Union with Christ and Benefits

As should be obvious by now, Leithart believes "that some are united to Christ yet do not persevere (*John 15*)," unequivocally rejecting perseverance as one of the benefits of being united to Christ. So, while doing the typical Federal Vision jig around the parable of the vine and branches,

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.puritanboard.com/f77/peter-leithart-pacific-northwest-presbytery-38206/#post475274>.

Leithart appeals to the same tired analogy of marriage and divorce, nicely following the lead of his employer, Doug Wilson:

During the time they are branches in the vine, they do receive benefits from Christ through the Spirit and may enjoy real, personal, and deep communion with Jesus for a time. Yet, their relationship with Christ is not identical to the relationship of the elect. Put it this way: Some are united to Christ as members of the bride but are headed for divorce; others are united and headed for consummation. Marriages that end in divorce are not the same as marriages that end happily.

Aside from missing the obvious that God hates divorce (*Malachi 2:16*), Leithart, guilty of the anti-Christian Federal Vision, believes that some Christians, who are made holy and righteous sons of God through the waters of baptism and their subsequent union with Christ, go to Hell. Evidently the PNW missed this in their examination of Leithart. However, Leithart and the men of the PNW, who affirmed that "In the committee's judgment there are no statements in evidence to indicate that Dr. Leithart denies the WCF's doctrine," are leading the way.

## 8. Temporary Benefits

Even Leithart imagines his readers by now understand where he stands and on this point only refers to answers previously given. In his letter to his Presbytery informing them of his disagreements with the committee report he simply states: "I have already described my views on this above...I am convinced that some are united to Christ but do not persevere..."<sup>5</sup> Not surprisingly and not to beat a dead horse, even one that deserves a beating, "The committee does not judge Dr. Leithart's views to be out of accord with the WCF."

## 9. Justification by Works

If questions of baptism, union, merit, and the covenant seemed at all esoteric, justification by works should be more than enough to open the eyes of even the most spiritually blind presbyter. Leithart writes:

We are righteous before God by faith because we are united to Christ the Righteous [no, we are righteous before God because of Christ's righteousness imputed to us - SG]. James says that we are "justified by works." I don't know precisely how to take James, but I believe we must, in faithfulness to Scripture, affirm that we are justified by works in whatever sense that James means it.

First, any Protestant pastor who does not already know "how to take James" when he said we are "justified by works" has no business in any Christian pulpit, much less teaching impressionable young minds, even those poor souls subjected to such nonsense at Wilson's Federal Vision New

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.leithart.com/archives/003074.php>.

St. Andrews school. But, in fairness, Leithart is just being coy – he knows full well how he “takes James.” As already cited above, Leithart clearly and unambiguously affirms justification by faith and works:

Yes, we do have the same obligation that Adam (and Abraham, and Moses, and David, and Jesus) had, namely, the obedience of faith. And, yes, covenant faithfulness is the way to salvation, for the “doers of the law will be justified” at the final judgment. But this is all done in union with Christ, so that “our” covenant faithfulness is dependent on the work of the Spirit of Christ in us, and our covenant faithfulness is about faith, trusting the Spirit to will and to do according to His good pleasure.

Read that paragraph again. Notice that Leithart, following men like Norman Shepherd and his errant understanding of *Romans* 2:13, teaches that it is our own doing of the law, our own “covenant faithfulness,” that is required in order to be saved. If in order to be justified at the final judgment requires being a “doer of the law,” then doing the law is the necessary ground for justification. After all, what good is a theory of justification that doesn’t extend to the final judgment? That’s why in the Christian system the requirement of covenant faithfulness was fulfilled by Christ alone completely apart from and outside of us. Jesus alone is the only “doer of the law,” and it is his perfect keeping of the law that is imputed to us by faith alone. That’s how sinners are justified by God right now and at the final judgment. *Romans* 2:13 is not a prescription for the kind of works righteousness Leithart advocates. Rather, Paul is teaching us in *Romans* 2 concerning our own inability to be “doers of the law” in order to be justified. As Dr. Robbins observed:

The Bible is unequivocal. None but the doers of the Law is accepted by God. That is an eternal principle. God will not turn from it. He has never changed his mind. A life of perfect obedience—that is to say, a life of righteousness—is the only possible basis of acceptance with the holy and righteous God.

God demands a life of perfect obedience to his Law. No lame, imperfect, halfway, partial obedience will satisfy his holiness: “the doers of the Law shall be justified.” James says that if we offend in only one point, we are lawbreakers. This fundamental basis of Biblical Christianity has been overlooked in the twentieth century.... When Paul contrasts the way of faith and the way of works in *Romans* and *Galatians*, he is not contrasting faith and works as such, but faith and our weak, puny, defective works. We must not get the idea that faith is against the Law. In *Romans* 3:31 Paul argues that the way of faith is not against the Law. Faith establishes the Law. Faith is not the negation of the Law of God. Faith honors the Law. Faith acknowledges that it is only on the basis of answer Number 1 – a life of

complete obedience to the Law – that God will ever accept a man.

*The righteousness of God is that which God himself provides.* When Luther discovered this, the Reformation was born. That is the good news. That is the Gospel. The righteousness of Jesus Christ is both the demand of God and God’s provision for his people. If you want to see what God demands of you and me, look at the perfect life of Jesus Christ. He was truly man as man was meant to be. Jesus is the righteousness of God in that he is the provision of God. When he was born into this world, it was a birth such as had not been since Adam fell. He came to Earth to live a life that no one had lived since Adam fell. If you look at the whole stream of human history from the Fall to the end of the world, you will see only thirty-three years that God accepts. Jesus came to give the perfect sacrifice, the substitutionary ransom for the failure of men and women to live righteously before God. He rose from the tomb and ascended to the right hand of God, so that right now he is in God’s presence as a perfect Man on behalf of all those who trust him.... Jesus came and lived a life of perfect obedience to the Law of God. His life matched the holiness of God at every point. What the holiness of God demanded, Jesus provided.<sup>6</sup>

Notice, it is not on the basis of our own “covenant faithfulness,” our own doing of the law that justifies us either now or in the final judgment. It is the covenant faithfulness of Jesus Christ alone that justifies us today, yesterday, and forever. Yet, here we have Peter Leithart, a minister and teacher in the PCA, asserting that it is our own “covenant faithfulness” that “is the way to salvation, for the ‘doers of the law will be justified’ at the final judgment.” Of course Leithart adds the caveat that this work of “covenant faithfulness” is not something we do ourselves, but “is all done in union with Christ, so that ‘our’ covenant faithfulness is dependent on the work of the Spirit of Christ in us....” Salvation by faith and works could not be taught more clearly. This man should be defrocked and should have been years ago. Then, should he fail to completely repent of his sinful and pernicious doctrines, he should be excommunicated and cut off like the dead branch he is.

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<sup>6</sup> John Robbins, “How Can a Just God Forgive a Sinful Man?” *The Trinity Review*, April 1996; *Against the Churches*, 321.