

## SHOULD WE ADJUST OUR EYESIGHT?

### *The New Perspectives on Paul and the Federal Vision*

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Dear.....

#### **New teachings**

When I visited you in Poland last year, you asked me what I could tell you about a new teaching known as the "New Perspective on Paul" (NP). You had also shared with me that a new teaching was being accepted in some Reformed churches in Poland, known as the "Federal Vision" (FV). After reading a little on these issues, it became clear to me that there was a connection between the two. It also became clear to me that what the proponents of these "new teachings" were saying was not that clear! As one minister commented, "the Federal Vision reminds me of a wall that someone has blasted with a sawed off shot gun – [bullet] holes all over the place with no apparent pattern or lines of connection" (Alan Camarigg). I decided it might be useful if I tried to briefly write down what I understood these "new teachings" to be saying.

The purpose of the following words therefore, I trust, is to present a very short and basic understanding of what has been termed the "New Perspectives on Paul," and the "Federal Vision" teaching (also known as "The Auburn Avenue Theology"). These are teachings, which I have discovered challenge the Christian's "traditional" Reformed view of the doctrine of sin, justification, the atonement, and what it means to belong to the "church." In other words, the proponents of the New Perspectives and the Federal Vision are challenging Christians to adjust their "theological" eyesight and look afresh at what the Bible says (in particular at what the apostle Paul says in his letters). *A new perspective and vision are being called for.*

#### **The New Perspectives on Paul**

The New Perspectives' main proponents are E. P. Sanders, James D. G. Dunn and N.T. Wright, whose teachings challenge the Reformed understanding of the apostle Paul's teaching on justification and the works of the law. Putting together their varied views they appear to teach that God chooses by His grace those who are to be in His covenant. In the O.T. it was the Jewish nation He chose. They demonstrated that they were in God's covenant by keeping the law. This law keeping was thus their "badge" of membership. And this is what justification means according to NP – *God sees the badge and acknowledges that you are in the covenant community.*

However, now that Christ has come He has opened up the way for the Gentiles. His death and resurrection was a picture of the exile and restoration of the Jews, but it also was a

demonstration of His power, that He is Lord of all. Faith in Him as Lord is now the "new" badge of being in the covenant, whether you are a Jew or a Gentile.

What NP is therefore teaching is that "*justification*" is God's acknowledgement ***you are already in***, rather than the Reformed understanding that it is God's declaration that you are not guilty, that you are righteous in Christ. Faith is just a badge of membership, rather than an "instrument" by which we enter into union with Christ and are saved. Note also that our faith is in Christ as Lord, not as Saviour. Sin and God's wrath is downplayed and so there is no place here for the atonement of our sin; in fact we appear to be able to enter into God's covenant literally for free. The whole point of Christ's death is extremely unclear and obscure in NP teaching. What does seem clear is that there is no apparent place for penal substitution – Christ being punished in our place. Nor is there room for the imputation of Christ's righteousness.

If "faith" is simply a badge of your membership, how do you actually get in? NP appears to teach it is by baptism. And once you are in the covenant community you have to keep in by your good works until the final judgement. Then there will be a future justification when God judges you by your good works. *It can be put like this: you enter into the covenant community here on earth by baptism, (with faith being simply a badge of that membership) and you stay in and then eventually enter into heaven by a good life.*

In being brief I have sacrificed a lot of detail, but I trust I have presented a faithful representation of the New Perspectives on Paul. In summary NP appears to teach:

*Grace (God chooses you) → baptism (you enter) → faith → good works → heaven*

Christ's obedience in His life appears irrelevant and His death and resurrection simply a demonstration of His power. We are justified by a combination of God's grace and our works.

### **The Federal Vision teaching**

What then are we to make of the Federal Vision teaching? After considering FV, I began to think I was experiencing déjà vu. Though NP and FV have emerged from very different "stables," one would be forgiven into thinking they were long lost twins separated at birth, such are their similarities. NP was born in the academic corridors of British liberal theology, whereas FV emerged from the Reformed wing of American Evangelicalism. Yet, as we shall see, there is not much to differentiate them.

It appears that FV proponents, such as Norman Shepherd, Peter J. Leithart, Steve M. Schissel, Steve Wilkins and Douglas Wilson appear to have reacted to problems in the churches such as antinomianism, an overemphasis on individualism, a neglect of covenant theology and minimising of the role of the sacraments. In doing so, however, it appears they have swung too far the other way.

FV emphasizes the "objectivity" of the covenant in such a way that if you are outwardly baptised, you are as good as in the covenant with your sins washed away. As Alan Camarigg puts it, "In a word [it] is about the covenant! It is about the covenant as it relates to our children." It is about "their earnest desire to enjoy a greater measure of assurance." It is therefore felt wrong to evangelise 'covenant' children, and there is no

emphasis on the need for repentance and faith. Instead, once you are in the covenant community, the stress is on the need to be faithful. I think you can begin to see the similarity with NP.

*So you enter into the "historical church" (here on earth) by baptism, and you enter into the "eschatological church" (in heaven) by good works. Power is being placed not in Christ's life and death but in sacraments and works.*

FV appears to also teach the O.T. saints were justified by covenant faithfulness and not simply trusting in the promises of God that Messiah would come. I understand that there also appears to be a downplaying of the role of Christ's work and the imputation of His righteousness to the believer. In summary FV appears to teach:

*God's gracious choice → baptism (you enter) → faithfulness in good works → heaven*

### **Where might it all end?**

It is startling to see the similarities between the 'New Perspectives' on Paul and the "Federal Vision" teaching. NP teaches that *believers are those that are in the covenant of God because they have been chosen by God's grace, they enter by baptism, they demonstrate that they are in the covenant by faith and they keep in it by doing good works.* I believe that description can be repeated in respect of FV. *In a nutshell, NP and FV are semi-Pelagianist but in new clothes!* This is the teaching that Roman Catholicism promotes and that the Reformers opposed – that *justification is by God's grace and our works.*

Interpretations of Scripture also seem interchangeable between the proponents of NP and FV. N.T. Wright has said, "Justification, at the last, will be on the basis of performance..." Norman Shepherd has stated that "the personal godliness of the believer is also necessary for his justification in the judgement of the last day." *Both NP and FV therefore teach that one's justification can be lost!*

You joked that it would not be a surprise if it was Rome that had planted its agents to spread such dangerous error. Or, were you serious? In any case, one cannot help but think of Rome when one examines NP and FV. As Maurice Roberts comments in respect of NP, "There are serious ecumenical implications attached to these new views." Ron Gleason in commenting on Cornelis P. Venema's critique of NP and how Venema pinpoints this semi-Pelagianism, states, "This is a key observation because Roman Catholic theology is thoroughly semi-Pelagian as is much of modern evangelicalism...there are elements of semi-Pelagianism in Sanders', Dunn's, and Wright's works as well as in a number of those who are proponents of what is called the Federal Vision. Venema has hit on a key distinction here that must not be overlooked."

Joseph Pipa, in his response to a paper presented by Steve Wilkins, said: "If I have understood Wilkins in his paper, the Federal Vision is a deviant, unbiblical view of salvation..." Anthony R. Dallison comments, "the so-called "Federal Vision" is no vision at all in the end, but a "Federal Fog", and that of a most serious nature indeed."

Should we be adjusting our eyesight, then, for these "new perspectives" and seek together this "federal vision"? I think enough has been said to make us fix our eyes even

more firmly on that one place where our justification and salvation is found, and that is in Christ our righteousness. There alone do we find safety and assurance. Upon the work of Christ alone do we as believers find our acceptance and standing before God. As to those who have been enamoured with "new perspectives and visions" let us have that same desire as the apostle Paul had for Israel: *"Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God ... is that they might be saved ... For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God"* (Romans 10:1,3).

*Yours in Christ Jesus*  
*Peter Slomski*

**P.S.** Here are some resources that may be of help. (I believe you have some of the articles.)

### **Resources used**

- Alan Camarigg, "Thoughts on the 'The Federal Vision'" *The Trumpet* (July/August 2005). Available at [http://www.banneroftruth.org/pages/articles/article\\_detail.php?845](http://www.banneroftruth.org/pages/articles/article_detail.php?845)

Anthony R. Dallison, "Debating the Federal Vision".  
Available at [http://www.banneroftruth.org/pages/articles/article\\_detail.php?601](http://www.banneroftruth.org/pages/articles/article_detail.php?601)

Ron Gleason, "Getting the Gospel Right" *Reformation 21*. Available at [http://www.banneroftruth.org/pages/articles/article\\_detail.php?1242](http://www.banneroftruth.org/pages/articles/article_detail.php?1242)

Ian Hamilton, "How a Believer's Good Works Are Acceptable to God" *Banner of Truth* (April 2007).

Maurice Roberts, "The New Perspective On Paul And Other Errors" *Free Church Witness* (March 2006).  
Available at [http://www.banneroftruth.org/pages/articles/article\\_detail.php?1027](http://www.banneroftruth.org/pages/articles/article_detail.php?1027)

Cornelis P. Venema, "Justification and a Final Judgment according to Works" *Banner of Truth* (April 2007).

Cornelis P. Venema, *Getting the Gospel Right – Assessing the Reformation and New Perspectives on Paul* (Banner of Truth, 2006).

### **Books that have been recommended**

- E. Calvin Beisner; Ed, *The Auburn Theology – Pros and Cons: Debating the Federal Vision* (Knox Theological Seminary, 2004) - 331 pages.
- Philip H. Eveson, *The Great Exchange – Justification by faith alone in the light of recent thought* (Day One, 1996) - 232 pages.

- Fred A. Malone, *The Baptism of Disciples Alone – A Covenantal Argument for Credobaptism Versus Paedobaptism* (Founders Press, 2007) -319 pages.
- Cornelis P. Venema, *Getting the Gospel Right – Assessing the Reformation and New Perspectives on Paul* (Banner of Truth, 2006) -112 pages.
- Cornelis P. Venema, *The Gospel of Free Acceptance in Christ – An Assessment of the Reformation and New Perspectives of Paul* (Banner of Truth, 2006) - 352 pages.
- Guy Prentiss Waters, *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology – A Comparative Analysis* (P & R Publishing, 2006) – 398 pages.