

# *An Explanation of the New Perspective on Paul for Friends of Covenant Theological Seminary*

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*First, my disclaimers: I am not a New Perspective on Paul expert. A seminary president sometimes has the role of getting up to speed on an issue that has suddenly become hot in the Church, and he should make no pretense about knowing as much as the real scholars. I have needed to ask our godly faculty to help me understand these issues so that I can advise friends of Covenant Theological Seminary as to what is going on as best as I can. I do not intend for this to be a definitive research paper where every statement is documented and qualified for scholarly dissection. I also intend only to discuss the concerns that are most significant for the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), knowing that the New Perspective's own interests are much broader. For the sake of fairness I have consulted various persons on both sides of these issues and asked them to review this document. Still, please consider this a coffee-shop explanation for Christian friends who have asked my opinion of the recent hubbub that seems to be troubling some churches and presbyteries in the PCA. No doubt my thoughts are too simplistic to satisfy any real expert, but hopefully they are expressed with sufficient clarity and charity to help some dear folk know a bit of what this New Perspective is about.*

## What Is the New Perspective on Paul?

The New Perspective on Paul is a general term referring to multiple strains of thought that have been building in England and North America for about 30 years but have caught the attention of most PCA leaders within the last five years. In broadest terms the New Perspective emphasizes the corporate nature of our salvation in distinction from the typical way many North Americans think about their salvation primarily as “a personal relationship with Jesus.” The best forms of the New Perspective do not deny the personal aspects of our salvation but contend that a focus on individual blessings is more a product of Western culture than a reflection of the Apostle Paul's design for the New Testament church. What we need to remember is that the Bible never divorces our corporate identity from our personal faith – we who believe are members of the body of Christ. Still, without personal faith and repentance we cannot truly unite with Christ no matter how much we participate in the Church's corporate heritage or practices.

## What Are the Key Names and Groups Associated with this New Perspective?

In scholarly circles the New Perspective was originally most associated with such names as Krister Stendahl, E. P. Sanders, and James Dunn. These are not traditional Evangelicals, though they may identify themselves with some Evangelical concerns. The New Perspective has made its most important inroads into Evangelical

thought through the writings of N. T. Wright. Wright is a brilliant and engaging Anglican who has written masterfully about subjects such as the resurrection and the historicity of the Gospels. But Wright has additional concerns that are stirring the Evangelical community. He argues that the early Reformers (especially Martin Luther), though they may have advanced correct theology, wrongly read Paul in the light of their conflict with Roman Catholicism rather than in the context of the Apostle's own setting and concerns. Wright says that Paul's central concern was *not* how we obtain personal salvation by faith versus good moral works. Rather, Wright thinks Paul was mostly concerned about how New Testament Christians identified themselves with the corporate, covenant community that was no longer exclusively Jewish. Wright says Paul is not so much arguing against gaining salvation by moral merit, but against the claim that in order to be a Christian one had to adopt the practices of Jewish exclusivity and identity in addition to faith in Christ.

Often mentioned in the same breath as the New Perspective are some persons identified with what they prefer to call the Federal Vision or Auburn Avenue Theology. Persons with PCA ties who are identified with these views include Doug Wilson, James Jordan, Steve Wilkins (who pastors the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church [PCA] in Louisiana) and Rich Lusk. Although not all of these men are presently in the PCA, they are intelligent and prolific writers whose works are read by persons who are zealous about Reformed theology (and who often think the PCA is not Reformed enough). While appreciating aspects of the New Perspective on Paul, these PCA-related writers strongly insist that their main concerns differ from the New Perspective.

The Federal Vision and Auburn Avenue advocates (who think of themselves as returning to a more consistently Reformed theology) do not want to link their views to the New Perspective because of its apparent questioning of basic Reformed theology. Conversely, New Perspective leaders may little regard Federal Vision or Auburn Avenue Theology because of its tendency to narrow its concerns to Church sacrament issues or related Church doctrine. New Perspective leaders tend to think of themselves as being about the "Big Story" of the role of the covenant in redeeming creation. They tend to view Federal Vision and Auburn Avenue as being caught up in a "little story" of renegotiating Presbyterianism. Despite these differences and objections, however, the two groups (New Perspective and Federal Vision/Auburn Avenue) continue in common perception to be of the same cloth. Reasons for this include the observation in PCA presbyteries that Federal Vision and Auburn Avenue Theology proponents are often those most conversant with and defensive of New Perspective ideas. The Federal Vision advocates have mined New Perspective writings for ideas supportive of their interests, and consequently the two groups have simultaneously emerged in PCA consciousness. These realities will probably continue to cause the two groups to be considered together – despite the legitimate objections of their respective leaders. What may be less apparent to both groups' leaders, however, is the common cultural soil from which they emerge even as they point to their different root systems.

### From Where Did this New Perspective Come?

Biblical scholars tend only to look within their ranks over the last 30 years for the origins of the New Perspective and related movements, but the origins are much older. The philosophical currents behind the New Perspective on Paul began to flow early in the 20th century. At that time, the modern confidence in scientific objectivity was quickly eroding. New communication theories, the discovery of the subconscious, and rapid shifts in scientific theory were destroying claims that we could replace the "myths of religion" with "objective" scientific explanations of our world. We discovered that science was subject to its own subjectivity – we see only what we are prepared to see and discover only what our present technology allows.

As a consequence, Western philosophy plunged into a radical relativism that concluded that the only truth we can know is what we individually perceive.

The secular answer to this relativism that isolates everyone in his or her own personal truth was the claim that we could understand each other if we shared similar experiences. But, of course, the more we compared our lives, the more we discovered that our experiences – even if we are in the same communities, churches, or families – are radically different. The need for a common framework to understand others' experiences led to the conclusion that the way for us to have common understanding of our world is through shared stories. These stories are the shared experiences that allow us to understand our world with a common perspective. Thus, it was claimed that each culture frames its own meta-narratives that form the basis for interpreting individual experiences and that allow us to live in community.

As these ideas worked their way into religious studies, much damage was done to orthodox faith. Modernist theologians in the early 20th century claimed that Scripture was myth that could be replaced by scientific understanding. But, when science lost its claim of objectivity, purveyors of "Neo-orthodoxy" claimed that the Bible could be understood existentially (i.e., individually) by the unique work of the Spirit in each person apart from the historical truth claims of the Bible.

When this individualistic view of faith was eventually seen only to be feeding the interests and appetites of self, contemporary theologians turned to teaching that faith must be formed in community. According to this line of thought, by its shared narratives each community forms the faith that creates its religion that, in turn, informs its worldview. Of course, this would mean that the Bible is not divine truth provided by heaven, but is simply a cultural product that provides narratives by which individuals can operate in community. In other words, Christianity supposedly is no different from every society that creates its own "truth" with its own stories – there is no transcendent truth, all religions are human projections.

Evangelical theologians have not followed all of these philosophical trends but have been influenced by them. In particular, Evangelicals have understood that faith, even Biblical faith, cannot and should not be understood only individualistically. We understand God's inspired and transcendent truth both because of His Spirit in us and because we are part of the body of Christ. The stories of the Bible are descriptions of experiences that enable Christians across all ages to understand the unchanging propositions of Scripture. And, God placed us in the church community not merely to satisfy our needs, but because the community – as each member does his or her part – helps us understand and apply the truth of Scripture. Neither faith nor true religion is formed by the community, but our expression of faith and understanding of religion are not possible apart from the Biblical community that includes the saints who have gone before us, as well as the saints that are around us.

What does all of this have to do with the New Perspective on Paul? The New Perspective follows the trajectory of the community emphases that have so dominated the trends of contemporary philosophy. The New Perspective does not accept all the "faith-is-formed-in-community" philosophies, but alarm over the dissolution of church communities (and/or the impotence of the modern church) due to the assaults of secular culture has sensitized New Perspective folk to the corporate components of faith. New Perspective advocates look around and see those who call themselves Evangelical (and Reformed) little distinguished from secular culture on matters as diverse as promiscuity, abortion, divorce, stewardship, business ethics, care for the poor, racism, etc. At the same time, New Perspective folk look in Scripture and see Paul calling us to live as a covenant community that is distinct from the culture, united to Christ, united to each other, and

transforming the world. Reacting to what they perceive as individualistic, autonomous, and “Baptistic/Revivalistic” (i.e., overly focused on producing personal professions of faith) influences on the Church, New Perspective advocates believe they are calling the Church back to being the faith community that the Bible requires both by its doctrinal teaching and by the narratives that reveal its larger redemptive story. Federal Vision and Auburn Avenue proponents – on a different but parallel path – also view themselves as calling the Reformed church back to a more consistent expression of its doctrine that will also create a community more faithful to its covenantal distinctions.

## What Are Some Things the New Perspective Teaches?

Recognize again that there are many strains of the New Perspective. It is impossible to say what is taught uniformly by all those who are identified with this movement. Nevertheless, here are some of the major thoughts that are getting attention:

1) When Paul describes the Jews’ misuse of the law, he is not attacking the Jews for believing in a legalistic works righteousness such as was advocated by late medieval Roman Catholicism. The Roman Catholicism to which Luther reacted taught that persons gained merit by moral virtue and religious observance made possible by grace infused through the sacraments of the Church. The New Perspective folk (particularly those associated with N.T. Wright) claim that the Jews at the time of Jesus did not believe in this kind of legalism, but rather advocated the necessity of identifying with the covenant community by staying within its boundary markers that were defined by Jewish standards (e.g., circumcision, Sabbath observance, cleanliness laws). One was not gaining merit by these standards but rather was defining one’s community identification and status.

Paul, according to Wright’s view, was not arguing against the necessity of community identification, but rather was arguing that the standards for this identification had changed for the inclusion of the Gentiles in the people of God. The new boundary markers for Jews and Gentiles in the covenant community are faith in Jesus Christ (marked by baptism in the New Testament church), separation from the secular society, and participation in the Lord’s Supper. [Note: As we will observe, the New Perspective seems to create unnecessary dichotomies. Unquestionably, Paul at times challenges Jewish legalism based on ceremonial customs, but at other times he also challenges the assumption that one can be righteous before God on the basis of moral behavior. Yet, in either case, it is still true that one cannot be justified by keeping the law (of ceremony or of virtue) and, thus, Luther’s understanding of Paul’s principle that salvation is by grace through faith remains valid.]

2) When Paul uses the term “faith” as the basis of our salvation, he is not using the term merely to refer to our trusting acknowledgment of the work of Christ in our behalf, but rather as a commitment to coming under the rule of Christ in the ordering of one’s life. Thus, faith is really “faithfulness” (a semantic possibility in Greek) to one’s identification with the community that honors Christ. The Gospel is not so much about gaining one’s personal salvation as it is about bowing to the declaration that Christ’s kingdom has come and identifying with the community that recognizes that “Jesus is Lord.” New Perspective advocates (particularly those desiring Evangelical regard) strenuously insist that they believe that those who submit to Christ’s lordship are those called into a saving relationship with God by His grace alone. Still, the movement’s strong insistence on faith as community identification has caused much confusion (and misstatement) even within New Perspective ranks and, consequently, much suspicion from those zealous to protect the Reformation distinction of salvation by faith alone.

Suspensions have been further revised by the New Perspective’s questioning of historic ways in which the Reformers describe our justification. The Reformers described the grace of our salvation as involving

Christ's righteousness being imputed (attributed) to us, and our sin being imputed to Him. Wright says this is an extra-Biblical notion. He says that God as a righteous judge pardons our sin, but that the removal of our sin (rather than the imputation of Christ's righteousness) is the Biblical basis of our justification before God. To most Reformed ears, this is a needless narrowing of the historic doctrine of justification that involves the pardoning of sin and the provision of Christ's righteousness. This narrowing undermines both the fullness of Christ's provision and the assurance of His resources for our spiritual destitution. New Perspective advocates want to heighten the Pauline emphasis on union with Christ, but since this union necessarily connotes that we are one with the Holy One, there should be no debate that His righteousness is ours by His grace.

3) The New Testament sacraments are about *more than remembering* what Christ did in our behalf. [Note: some are anxious to protest that the sacramental issues being discussed in the PCA are not derivative of the New Perspective, but because the sacraments are identity markers of our covenant community the New Perspective inevitably becomes part of the present discussion.] By the sacraments believers identify with the covenant community that God has elected for salvation and glory. Thus, the sacraments not only establish one's identification with the community, they are also the means by which God conveys aspects of His grace to individuals. The sacraments establish the boundaries of the saved community and, as a consequence, identify those within the boundaries as possessors of God's pledge of salvation. The sacraments are not magical, and few of the New Perspective advocates (or related groups) are willing to say that the sacraments actually cause the grace they signify apart from faith. Still, these groups perceive grace as so integrally related to identification with the covenant community that its boundary signs (sacraments) are being treated with an importance unparalleled in recent generations of Reformed believers.

In part, this heightened focus on sacraments as a means of including us in a worship community results from this generation's own longing for church and family solidarity in an increasingly broken society. Sadly, however, expressions of this heightened importance have been made with such zeal or relational clumsiness (perhaps because of our church's own relational struggles) that advocates have been perceived by unprepared ears as advocating a virtually Roman Catholic view of the sacraments. In the PCA, where polarities and distrust are yet a product of our painful withdrawal from mainline Presbyterianism, the consequence of this insensitivity (and occasional error) has been heightened suspicion rather than solidarity.

4) The baptism of children has become a particular point of tension because the sacramental emphasis discussed above also means greater significance is being attributed to this rite than has been the case in typical expressions of American Presbyterianism. By their baptism children are identified with the Christian community. They, too, come within the boundary markers of the covenant community by the administration of the sacrament. Thus, some who are advocates of the New Perspective – particularly from the Federal Vision and Auburn Avenue groups – say that baptism “makes a child a Christian.” By this the kind of wording New Perspective advocates do not typically (there are exceptions) mean that the child is automatically made regenerate by the baptism, but rather that the baptism gives the child identification with the covenant community. What this means precisely is hotly debated and variously expressed. For instance, some have argued that baptism is so conclusive a sacrament that it is improper for a person who was baptized as a child to speak of a later conversion by saying something like, “I became a Christian in college.” The argument is made that the person became a Christian (i.e., was identified with the covenant community) in his infant baptism, and simply confirmed his Christian status as a young adult.



So much confusion is being created by this terminology that New Perspective advocates are finding themselves pressed very hard to define the spiritual status of the baptized child, the benefits that are actually conferred by the baptism, the relation of the baptism to the parents' profession of faith, the nature of the child's (and/or the parents') profession, and even the nature of regeneration. This has led some ministers to make statements before presbyteries that sound almost indistinguishable from the Roman Catholic view of baptismal regeneration.

## What Are Some Good Emphases of the New Perspective?

There is no question that many of those who advocate the New Perspective are seeking to bring Biblical correction to what they believe are misunderstandings in present expressions of Evangelical and Reformed belief. Their goal is to steer the Church toward greater fidelity in Biblical doctrine and practice. Some of the concerns of the New Perspective are valid, and we are aided by considering the seriousness of these concerns:

- 1) **We are not saved alone.** The New Perspective rightly critiques much of the North American expression of Christianity that makes faith merely a personal fire insurance policy that requires no obligation to others, little concern for the world, and little obedience to God beyond what satisfies our own pleasures. The New Perspective reminds us that we are saved as part of a community with concomitant loves, obligations, and identifications.
- 2) **Saving faith is not alone.** The New Perspective reminds us that we are part of a great story in which God is calling a covenant community to Himself in order to glorify Himself and transform this world for His glory. Our calling inherently and necessarily includes works of obedience. We have no assurance of the validity of our faith where there is no fruit to our faith.
- 3) **The sacraments are not signs alone.** The New Perspective (especially as articulated in Federal Vision and Auburn Avenue Theology) elevates our concern for the sacraments and reminds us that they are not merely sentimental ceremonies (or simply memorials) but means by which God is communicating aspects of His grace and obligating Himself to bless His people.
- 4) **The Bible is not propositions alone.** The New Perspective values the Bible's use of narrative as a means of unifying and teaching the covenant community. Despite the desires we sometimes have, the Bible is not simply a systematic theology textbook. Attempts to force all the Bible into easy doctrinal categories have sometimes created an unhealthy rationalism that does not adequately express the human experiences, divine interventions, and salvation story by which God communicates His covenant love throughout redemptive history. The New Perspective's emphasis on the drama of redemption in Scripture can help theologians and pastors better describe what the Bible teaches on its own terms, especially in ministry to a postmodern generation that (for philosophical reasons expressed above) is powerfully moved by narrative.

## What Are Troubling Aspects of the New Perspective?

Concerns about the New Perspective need to be divided into at least two categories: theological and pastoral. The first category will probably require sorting out over several years. My sense is that we are on a journey similar to our experiences with the Charismatic and Theonomy movements decades ago. The Charismatic movement was concerned that the Church was not rightly applying the New Testament gifts of the Spirit; the Theonomy movement was concerned that the Church was not rightly applying the Old

Testament law; the New Perspective is concerned that the Church has not rightly applied the corporate nature of the covenant. All of these movements have had some legitimate concerns, but all err in subtly moving the emphasis of the Gospel from a Christ-centered provision of grace to proper expressions of human performance. [Note: My friends who are advocates of New Perspective and Federal Vision, have strongly objected to this last statement. They believe their approach strongly supports a Christ-centered perspective for God's Church family. So, I hope that I am wrong and will need to be forgiven. Still, I feel the responsibility to express my honest concern, resulting from the way these issues have been advocated in the contexts the seminary must serve. The zeal to prove others wrong, and even ridiculous, for not seeing these new perspectives has created significant pain. Almost always the pain is the result of persons being belittled for "not getting it." Thus, the fruit has not been a new focus on the beauty of God's grace, but the reoccurrence of old divisions driven by supposed superior knowledge or practice.]

The advocates of the Charismatic and Theonomic movements were also intelligent, zealous in conviction, concerned that the rest of the Church was not Biblical enough, claimed that their positions were historic, and rarely stated a position that was clearly unorthodox. But, over the course of time (and through the sad experiences of numerous churches), those movements were shown by their fruit to be divisive, and they largely faded from view. My prayer is that we will be able more quickly to reach consensus about what are legitimate concerns of, and about, this New Perspective for the peace, purity, and progress of the Church.

What are some legitimate concerns *about* the New Perspective on Paul?

1) **An unnecessary and dangerous ambiguity regarding the nature of justification.** "Justification is an act of God's free grace wherein He pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in His sight only for the righteousness of Christ imputed [i.e., attributed] to us and received by faith alone" (cf. WSC #32). The New Perspective claims that Paul's chief concern was to make sure that the Jews shifted the boundary markers of their covenant identification from the ethnic practices of Israel to the identity practices of the New Testament Church. This perspective inappropriately de-emphasizes Paul's concern that Jews (and others) were seeking to establish their righteousness before God based on their personal moral sufficiency. By moving Paul's major concern to community identification, the New Perspective de-emphasizes the role of grace for personal justification and the sufficiency of Christ's work as the sole basis (or ground) of righteous standing before God.

In particular, Wright's argument that justification is not so much about how someone is personally saved, but rather who should be recognized as a member of the covenant community can move the focus of our theology from properly emphasizing the personal faith and repentance from which all true Christian assurance and faithfulness flows. Of course, we must grant that there is every necessity of recognizing Christ as Lord, and living out the imperatives of our faith commitments in order to have the assurance of our salvation and express love for our Savior. Still, this necessity is an insufficient reason to question the historic understanding of justification.

*In justification our sins are imputed to Christ and His righteousness is imputed to us* (1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 2:20). Wright has questioned whether it is Biblical to say that Christ's righteousness is imputed to us since that is a judicial (forensic) declaration that he does not explicitly see in the Biblical text. Yet, even if Wright wants to hold the terminology of imputation in question, the reality of our union with Christ by virtue of His grace alone (which Wright does not question) should be reason enough to emphasize with the Reformers that Christ's work – not ours – is the ultimate basis of our present and eternal standing before God.

In an oft-quoted statement Wright says that at the final judgment we will be judged on the basis of performance not possession (of Israel's status). Were this shocking statement all that Wright said, then he would be easy to dismiss as obviously unorthodox. However, elsewhere he indicates that this performance means being "a doer of the law," and then he says that for Paul being such a "doer" means putting one's faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord. In this way Wright avoids outright denials of Reformation theology, but introduces unanswered questions (particularly since he seems willing to define faith as faithfulness) that are inappropriate for one as theologically skilled and influential as he. This new confusion about the interplay of faith and works in justification may cause you to hear New Perspective advocates compared to Norman Shepherd, a professor dismissed from Westminster Seminary more than twenty years ago for teachings that caused similar confusion. Shepherd's work is now being re-quoted by some New Perspective advocates (especially some who relate to the Federal Vision and Auburn Avenue groups).

It is very important to say that I know of no PCA minister who has denied the imputation of Christ's righteousness. Most of the concern that is being expressed in PCA circles is over some pastors' loyalty to Wright because he is so often accused of being fuzzy on the subject of justification. There is also a secondary controversy as to whether both Christ's active righteousness (i.e., His obedience to the law) and passive righteousness (i.e., His suffering our punishment) are imputed to us, but this is an older issue that even divided the Westminster divines and is unlikely to be finally resolved in our generation. I believe that both Christ's active and passive righteousness are imputed to us, but even where brothers differ over this *there should be no question that in our union with Christ His holiness becomes ours by grace alone and through faith alone*. Whatever, or whoever, does not make clear that we are justified before God by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone ... is wrong.

2) **An unnecessary and dangerous lack of clarity regarding what the sacraments accomplish.** As a consequence of concerns raised primarily by the Federal Vision and Auburn Avenue groups, a controversy is boiling in the PCA around the subject of baptism (but it seems likely to move with equal emphasis to the Lord's Supper in the near future). Here's the question: To what degree do the sacraments actually convey the grace they signify? The issue has become most apparent in discussions about infant baptism. As I indicated earlier, the claim that the New Testament sacraments function as boundary markers for the covenant community is taken by some New Perspective advocates to mean that baptism makes a covenant child a Christian. There is a sense in which this is true. Baptism does mark the child as covenantally connected to the Christian community. Our PCA standards even refer to baptized children as infant members (or non-communicating members) of the church. Additionally, the Westminster Assembly's *Directory for Publick [sic] Worship* also lists among the grounds for infant baptism, "That children, by baptism, are solemnly received into the bosom of the visible church, distinguished from the world, and ... they are Christians, and federally holy before baptism, and therefore are they baptized." *We have never meant by these important distinctions, however, that baptism regenerates a child.* [Warning to readers: Since this is now the hottest aspect of the Federal Vision controversy in PCA circles, I am devoting several paragraphs to this subject. Please move on to the next section if this does not scratch where you are itching.]

The infant's holy status is recognized in baptism, but that status results from God graciously providing the child's relation to the covenant community through believing parents. God can certainly regenerate whomever and whenever He wishes, but in terms of what the church can assess, the parents' faith is the basis of a child being recognized as "holy before baptism" (cf. 1 Cor. 7:14). The water ceremony does



not cause the child to have saving faith, and the sacrament does not guarantee that he will truly believe in Christ as his Savior. Thus, in North American culture, we have not usually talked without qualification about baptism making the child a Christian lest we wrongly communicate to our people that the rite is accomplishing what the Spirit does by faith alone (i.e., we have been careful to distinguish our practice from the Lutheran and Roman Catholic views of baptismal regeneration).

We must confess that most ministers in the PCA have framed their baptismal explanations to distinguish our practice from Catholic or Lutheran practice for listeners coming from a largely Baptist culture. In contrast, the early Reformers framed their explanations to make sense in a largely Roman Catholic culture. For this reason, some statements of the Reformers do sound more “Catholic” than we are accustomed to hearing. All parties would do well to recognize the realities and reasons for these differences of expression, while recognizing that unnecessary controversy will ensue if we do not make it clear for our church and culture that neither the Scriptures nor our Standards teach that the rite of baptism actually and of itself regenerates the spirit of a believer or child.

Now, again, I know of no PCA minister who advocates an explicitly Lutheran or Roman Catholic view of baptismal regeneration, but some associated with the Federal Vision are so anxious to communicate that in baptism God actually transfers His covenantal grace to a child that they are pressing the terminological limits of our traditional baptismal vows. Certainly there is much misunderstanding and mere sentiment involved in many of our churches regarding infant baptism. However, when infant children are declared “Christians” at their baptisms *without explanation* that their blessing is grounded on their parents’ profession of faith and not based on any guarantee of what is (or will be) the eternal status of the children, then further misunderstanding is created in a culture not steeped in Presbyterian distinctives.

Recognition of historic differences among Presbyterians can also help us deal more charitably with one another. The Northern Presbyterian tradition tends to emphasize the solidarity of the family in God’s redemptive plan – treating covenant children as members of the body of Christ (having been made disciples in their baptisms). The Southern tradition prior to the 20th century tended to emphasize the need to save our children from an unregenerate state (even referring to the children of believers as “little vipers”). These are significant differences in emphasis, but we have united in the PCA with everyone refusing to presume a guarantee of the regeneration of the children of believers, or to teach that baptism causes regeneration. Recognition of this unity can help us talk respectfully to and about one another in our present discussions.

So much of our confusion regarding baptism results from our inability to relate to the earliest Christians. They were the converts to a new religion in a culture of paganism or Judaism. For the first Christians, baptism (particularly an adult baptism) was a true crossing of boundaries – an undeniable declaration of a new life and an abdication of a former one, often at the cost of one’s family, status, and security. To be baptized was not participation in a sentimental ritual that everyone in the culture had undergone, but rather was identification with Christ in an entirely new community and way of life. Thus, when a person was baptized it was important to recognize that the Lord was present in the sacrament and lovingly embracing the individual through the corporate prayers of those gathered, through identification with the previous saints of the covenant community, through the convert’s own expression of faith, and through God’s own pledge of faithfulness to all whose faith was genuinely being expressed in the baptism. Thus, baptism not only signifies the grace of salvation; the sacrament itself

bleses the believer with the grace of God's signified and actual embrace. The Westminster divines said, "... by 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" (WCF XXVIII.6, emphasis mine).

Since the sacrament is both a recognition and a means of the grace being signified (as the person publicly passes from one realm to another in the embrace of God provided by the sacrament), Calvin spoke of the believer being lifted to mystical union with Christ in the sacraments. Yet, the vital distinction of Presbyterians who acknowledge that a sacrament recognizes and even ceremonially confers God's blessing is that the sacrament symbolizes and conveys the grace that *already "belongeth unto" the believer by faith.*" The sacrament does not create the grace, cause salvation, or guarantee faith. Baptism (and the Lord's Supper) reinforce, further bless, and publicly declare the covenantal relationship of the individual (or parent), but faith – not any element of the sacrament – is the God-given instrument of the individual's ultimate blessing and status with God. This is why *before* the statement about baptism conferring grace, the Westminster divines state, "... grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto it [baptism], as that no person can be regenerated, or saved, without it; or that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated" (WCF XXVIII.5).

Much misunderstanding of the efficacy of baptism could be corrected with pastorally prudent explanations (i.e., baptism provides real blessing and identification with the covenant community yet does not regenerate), but because the Federal Vision advocates often see themselves as needing to correct the Church, there is frequent use of arresting and incautious phrasing that seems designed to create reaction or, at least, movement in the denomination. An early (now retracted) Auburn Avenue statement even indicated that at his baptism a child receives all the benefits of union with Christ except for the gift of perseverance and final salvation. Such a statement could only have been made if one had redefined a traditional understanding of union with Christ, all its benefits (e.g., calling, regeneration, adoption, justification, and sanctification), and perseverance.

Redefinition of a number of these historic doctrines is being attempted by some New Perspective advocates (including those related to Federal Vision and Auburn Avenue). The redefinition is sometimes an attempt to conform historical doctrinal distinctions to Biblical wording that we have trouble reconciling with the traditional wording of Reformed theology. For instance, Auburn Avenue folk make the helpful (but not new) observation that the Bible does not always use the word "elect" to refer only to individuals whom God has chosen for eternal salvation. Sometimes Israel is called an "elect" nation even though not all of ethnic Israel is true spiritual Israel (Rom. 9:6). However, to move beyond this observation and say – as some New Perspective folk have – that not all the elect will persevere in faith (or that some of them can lose their salvation) creates a doctrinal crisis. Such a crisis would be easily and pastorally avoided by indicating that the word "elect" can be used in a technical way to refer to redeemed individuals (who always persevere because God will not lose one of His own) and in a general way to refer to an ethnic nation through which God is revealing His redemptive plan. The Bible has the right to use words in a technical (doctrinal) sense and in a general (common) sense, and we should be able to distinguish these without requiring a Confessional overhaul.

3) **An unnecessary and dangerous eagerness to critique historic understanding rather than enrich it.** So much of what the New Perspective advocates want to say would enrich our understanding if there were not such a willingness to discredit or dismiss previous teaching of Reformed doctrine. For example,

there are wonderful benefits to reminding every Christian that he or she has corporate as well as individual responsibilities. But it is destructive to teach, or imply, that our salvation is more corporate than personal. Pastoral approaches that would say “not only, but also” rather than “not this (what our Confession teaches) but that (what we have now discovered)” are much better suited to build up the Church. We do not have to create questions about the nature of justification to remind those who are justified that true faith has real fruit. We do not have to make our sacraments sound nearly indistinguishable from those of Roman Catholics or Lutherans to teach the church of the real benefits of church ordinances. We should not have to redefine “regeneration” in order to expand our understanding of the sacraments.

I expect that the preceding paragraph would frustrate advocates of the New Perspective who believe that the Church has not properly understood what Paul (or our Confession) really teaches. They may feel that without the stimulus of arresting language the Church will not listen. However, such an approach mistakes the needs of the Church and the requirements of Gospel progress. Now that the New Perspective is being closely scrutinized, its advocates in the PCA are toning down statements (once made with frequent sarcasm and stridency) about the supposed errors of Church Fathers, the blindness of ministry peers, and the revolutionary nature of this new theology. New Perspective advocates are now more likely to claim that they are saying nothing that is not already in our standards and within the pale of historic Reformed teaching. This is a much more helpful approach and ought to make it possible to speak much more pastorally and gently about the perspectives that are being advanced.

Both those who appreciate and those who question the contributions of the New Perspective should recognize the legitimacy of concern that over-emphasizing the corporate aspects of salvation can make the necessity and blessings of personal salvation seem insignificant or secondary. We must all acknowledge that salvation includes corporate dimensions, and the Church may effectively present or betray the Gospel based on her attention or neglect of these corporate responsibilities. However, personal trust in God's grace must precede proper love for God, His people, and His creation. Church history in Europe and North America should remind us that when churches change the *focus* of their ministry and mission from living and sharing the personal dimensions of the Gospel to reforming external society or refining our own corporate identity, then dead orthodoxy (or worse) soon follows. Paul reminds us to be active in the sharing of our faith so that we can understand every good thing possessed in Christ (Phil. 1:6). Without an understanding that discipleship begins and progresses with personal commitment to Jesus Christ in response to His unconditional grace for individual sin, there will be no Gospel for another generation.

### Who Finds the New Perspective Appealing?

The polar ends of the PCA political spectrum have found the New Perspective appealing for differing reasons. Those who tend to desire the Church to engage more in social action for the renewal of society find the New Perspective's emphasis on the corporate nature of faith appealing because it keeps Christians from making their faith “all about me.” The individualistic, North American tendency to make “a personal relationship with Jesus” the ultimate purpose of faith looks both shallow and selfish in the light of the New Perspective's insights about the corporate responsibility of each person in the covenant community, and the covenant community's responsibility for world renewal. Those who understand the New Testament to be teaching Christians to take responsibility for transforming society according to the principles of Jesus also love the New Perspective's emphasis on the “Big Story” of Christ's Lordship over all the world – and our participation in the culmination of that story.

The emphasis on community, accompanied by additional concerns for observance of “boundary markers” and “faithfulness,” is also appealing to those we stereotypically place at the other end of our political spectrum: societal separatists and/or doctrinal precisionists. These are persons in our church who tend to want the covenant community to have clearer distinctions from secular society and more accountability for right behavior. It should not be surprising that some of the same groups and personalities that once were drawn to Theonomy and Reconstruction over frustrations with the modern church’s worldly compromises have now gravitated toward the Federal Vision and Auburn Avenue versions of the New Perspective. Its emphasis on superior doctrine, corrected sacraments, faith-validating performance, and well-defined covenant communities provides much appeal for those seeking more refined expressions of faith. But, we should also not be surprised that those in the PCA who have historically been most concerned about deviation from our Standards (especially as defined by Southern antebellum theologians), have expressed the most strident concerns about this new perspective though they were once closely aligned with some of its advocates in attitude and doctrinal interest.

### How Should Covenant Seminary Respond to the New Perspective?

The responsibility of Covenant Seminary in all such controversies is not to embrace a view simply because it is historic or to reject a view simply because it is new. Our unchanging task is to ask, “What does the Bible say?” Then we must speak with clarity, charity, and courage.

Clarity requires that we declare as best we can what God has said in His Word. We must honor our forefathers’ understanding of the Word, and we must consider having our views enriched if we have not understood all that the Lord has said in His Word. Charity demands that we not judge others’ arguments prematurely or seek to defeat them by unfair caricature. Courage demands that we love the Bride of Christ enough to defend her from doctrinal harm. Last year our faculty presented the distinctions and problems of the New Perspective on Paul in a seminar\* from which audio recordings are available on the seminary Web site. Also on the Web site is a statement regarding the New Perspective\* presented at the PCA General Assembly two years ago. Covenant Seminary professors have also spent countless hours working with a study committee of Missouri Presbytery to declare what ministers must believe regarding justification, the sacraments, and a number of other key issues. The presbytery plans for this study to be available for the Church at large next fall. Please pray that the Lord would grant clarity, charity, and courage to these men so that their work will benefit the whole Church and glorify the Gospel of our Lord.

Please pray also that this controversy does not distract us from the Gospel of grace. In my opinion, we are not likely soon to get to the bottom of the controversy with definitive statements that will easily identify all errors. PCA leaders on all sides of the issue are extremely articulate, Biblically intentioned, and highly unlikely to state anything that (without being caricatured) can readily be identified as outside Biblical orthodoxy. The consequence is that pastors, professors, and students can become preoccupied with debate – making faith an expression of cerebral competition and intellectual arrogance rather than heart engagement and spiritual dependence. If our ministries only become battlegrounds for sacramental correctness rather than instruments for promoting the Gospel of grace, then we and the Church will have lost much. We all must pray earnestly for the work of the Spirit in our hearts to help us determine whether our efforts are turning the Church toward ever-greater introspection and isolation, or whether we are preparing the Church for Gospel-true priorities and progress. Each must examine his own heart to ask if what he is doing and teaching is creating greater love for Jesus that liberates the soul to serve Him, or is binding God’s people to standards of ecclesiastical correctness rooted in our own doctrinal insecurities and preferences.

We need the Lord's wisdom to know what needs to be defended, what needs to be denounced, and what needs to be ignored because it only appeals to our appetite for argument. We must not allow a controversy largely outside our denomination to become the cause that defines us. The goal of Covenant Seminary is to prepare leaders for the local church who understand and model the Gospel of grace. Ask the Father to give us such great love of His Gospel and such clear judgment from His Spirit that He will enable us to keep the main thing the main thing. For those in whom the Spirit dwells, the message of Christ's grace for sinners such as we will provide the most powerful motivation possible for loving God, His law, His people, and His world.

Blessings,  
Bryan Chapell  
May 2005

\*Additional resources addressing the New Perspective on Paul are available through the Covenant Seminary Website by logging on to [www.covenantseminary.edu](http://www.covenantseminary.edu), choosing *Online Resources*, and typing New Perspective in the search box.

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*Rooted in Grace for a Lifetime of Ministry*

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