

**12 Reasons Why it Would be Unwise
for the PCA General Assembly to Adopt the
Federal Vision Study Committee Report and Its Recommendations**

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My original response to the Federal Vision Study Committee Report (“30 Reasons Why . . .”) is too long to be read in one short sitting. Consult my longer essay for citations and a fuller version of my arguments at www.federal-vision.com.

1. The Study Committee Report (hereafter, SCR) was not included in the Commissioner’s Handbook prior to the Assembly. The report existed only online at the denomination’s magazine, not on its General Assembly page. Some people without internet access will be asked to vote on a long, complex document with less than a day to study the SCR.

2. The SCR asks the Assembly to affirm that its interpretation of the Westminster standards is the correct one on a number of issues. This often runs roughshod over places where the Westminster Assembly wanted to accommodate a range of views. System subscription is the PCA’s standard, and the SCR comes close to introducing extra-confessional binding on matters that the Westminster standards do not address. For example, the committee wants to require every minister to affirm the *imputation* of the active obedience of Christ, a doctrinal formulation that the Westminster Confession of Faith was drafted specifically not to require because some of the prominent members of the assembly did not hold to it. All of the FV men believe that the “active obedience” of Christ (his sinless and righteous life) is necessary for our salvation. Every FV pastor or theologian cited by the SCR confesses justification because of Christ alone through faith alone. They all believe and confess the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to believers. It is a narrow view of the *imputation* of the “active obedience” that is being debated. Adoption of the SCR would erroneously *add* to our standards.

3. The study committee did not contact personally any of the PCA men whose views they condemned in the report. I corresponded with all of the FV men named in the report and asked if the study committee had contacted them in any way – all reported that they were *not* contacted. The de facto result of accepting the report would be making official a particular appraisal of certain PCA Teaching Elders’ teachings without any due process. If adopted, the SCR would seem to require the PCA as a whole to accept the SCR’s appraisal of the FV men as the official interpretation of their views.

4. The committee makeup did not justly represent the diversity of views within the PCA. No TE or RE sympathetic to the FV was appointed to the study committee. All of the ministers on the committee with the exception of Paul Fowler are in print with settled and sometimes harsh criticisms of the FV. There is no minority report, a rarity for committees covering this type of controversy. Furthermore, *Robert’s Rules of Order* requires that a special committee to study an issue “should represent, as far as possible, all points of view in the organization.” This committee’s composition was unjustly narrow.

5. The SCR does not interact with any biblical arguments made by the FV men. Even though the study committee’s mandate was to judge the conformity of the FV to the Westminster standards, the standards themselves call Scripture the supreme judge of all controversies in religion (WCF 1.10). In addition, the committee does not adequately distinguish between saying things, on the basis of Scripture, that *go beyond* the Westminster standards and saying things, on the basis of Scripture, that *violate* the standards. Not everything the Bible teaches is codified in the Westminster standards.

6. The SCR incorrectly alleges that the FV men deny the decretal theology of the Westminster standards, yet they do not. The committee confuses what the FV men say about covenantal election (i.e., membership in the visible church by baptism and solemn vows) with what they say about decretal election. The FV men clearly uphold the idea of a fixed number of the elect whose salvation cannot be lost and who will be preserved to the end by God. But the FV men also go on to discuss another sense of election – election into the covenant community. The WCF also makes a similar distinction (WCF 19.3-4, 1.8, and 7.5) when it talks about the election of Israel. The FV men make this distinction in order to make sense of *biblical* data including the apostolic practice of addressing the members of local churches as “elect.” The FV men are not Arminians who deny God’s eternal election. Rather, they are seeking to be faithful to the biblical way of addressing the saints of the visible church.

7. The SCR asks the General Assembly to affirm that the Westminster standards are “standard expositions of the teachings of Scripture.” But this constitutes a reversal of system subscription. We do not read the Bible through the lens of the WCF. We affirm that the confession generally gets the system of doctrine right, but we preach and teach from the Bible while using the Confession as a kind of fence that sets the boundaries around the meadow of Presbyterian ministry.

8. The SCR erroneously discovers a “theological category of ‘merit’ in the standards” that it uses to wedge an anachronistic approach to the covenant with Adam into the Westminster standards. The SCR makes a particular theology of merit a touchstone when there is no explicit section of the confession that describes this “category of merit” nor is there

a consistent, technical use of the term in the confession. The FV men all believe and confess a covenant of works/life with Adam as well as God's merciful covenant of grace made with man after the fall. To require that PCA ministers subscribe to something much more narrow than this is to introduce a standard of strict subscription not generally practiced in our presbyteries. Related to this, the SCR incorrectly claims that the Westminster standards contain the affirmation that Christ's work "satisfied the covenant of works." The WCF says no such thing, nor do the citations offered in the SCR support the claim. Of course, Jesus had to perfectly obey the Father and did so. And his work does fulfill the calling and duties of Adam. All this is true and no FV man denies it. But that is something much different than saying that the sum total of Jesus' acts of obedience *merited* something in accordance with the original Adamic covenant of works.

9. The SCR incorrectly alleges that the FV men teach that the sacraments effect eternal salvation for all who receive them. No FV man teaches this. They categorically teach and preach that the sacraments are efficacious for eternal salvation only for the elect. Even so, with the Westminster Standards and the PCA BCO, they also hold that the sacraments are efficacious in various ways to all who receive them. For example, when baptized a person is effectually marked as a member of the visible church and disciple of Jesus (whether faithful or not). The SCR canonizes one particular interpretation of baptism's efficacy and thus adoption by the assembly would rule out all but one approach to sacramental efficacy. Calvin and various other Reformed confessions have often explained baptism's efficacy in a different way than the committee, including even the Westminster Directory for Public Worship and the PCA BCO.

10. The SCR narrowly construes the meaning of "union with Christ" limiting union only to those who are eternally elect and effectually called while the Westminster standards and the Scriptures are not so specific. If one reads WLC #167 carefully, one can see that the standards do not make a hard and fast distinction between union with Christ and union with the visible church. The Bible speaks this way, too, identifying all the baptized members of a local church as members of Christ's body (in some sense united to him) and therefore members of one another (Rom. 12; 1 Cor. 12). The Bible also says that temporizers can be "severed from Christ" (John 15; Gal. 5). However difficult these passages may be to explain, the SCR's narrow formulations unduly restrict ministers from using *biblical* language. If we are restricted from addressing the decretally non-elect as covenant members united to the body of Christ, then we can never address anyone in this way since according to the Bible and Westminster the identity of the elect is a matter of God's "secret counsel" (WCF 3.5).

11. The SCR makes sweeping generalizations about the Westminster standards that it does not prove. Further the SCR interprets the rather careful and nuanced formulations of the Westminster standards through the lens of popular theological slogans. For example, the SCR's statement that the WCF carefully distinguishes "conditions" from "requirements" is simply not true, and the SCR links "conditions" with "merit" in order to push further its particular interpretation of the covenant with Adam. Likewise, the SCR writes that the confession premises assurance on election, whereas Westminster views election as something of which one seeks assurance by the right use of ordinary means.

12. The SCR misrepresents the FV men on crucial issues, writing as if

- they deny the Reformation *solas* (they do not), or that
- they deny justification by faith alone (which they do not), or
- they deny the imputation of Christ's righteousness (they do not), or
- they deny that the eternally elect will inevitably persevere (they do not deny this), or
- they deny that the covenant with Adam before the fall differs from the covenant of grace after the fall (all affirm a difference between the two covenants).

Further, the SCR writes as though the FV men believe that there are "requirements" for election, even though none of them believes or teaches any such thing.

- The SCR claims that the FV men deny a qualitative difference between the grace received by the elect and the non-elect in the visible church, but they do not deny this difference.
- The SCR claims incorrectly that FV men teach that perseverance is required for "final election" yet none teaches this.
- The SCR criticizes the FV men for a belief in the "'covenantal' efficacy of baptism" without defining what this means or proving how it differs from what the Westminster standards and the PCA BCO say about baptism.
- The SCR criticizes Leithart's emphasis on justification as both verdict (forensic) and as a kind of definitive sanctification, something John Murray, Sinclair Ferguson and many other theologians have taught.
- The Report fails to demonstrate that TE Leithart's formulation runs afoul of the Westminster standards.

For all of the above, if one compares the claims of the SCR with the writings of the FV men in question, the alleged evidence for their infidelity fails to sustain the exaggerated allegations of unfaithfulness to the Westminster standards either because 1) the SCR take quotes out of context (sometimes making the FV men say the opposite of what they say in context), 2) the SCR equates saying *more* than Westminster with saying something *contrary* to Westminster, or 3) the SCR imposes a narrow interpretation of what is allowable by our standards without proving that its interpretation is correct. It would be unwise for the Assembly to adopt a report that makes false claims about PCA ministers.