

A REPLY TO "THE OPC JUSTIFICATION REPORT" ON PERFECT OBEDIENCE AND THE LAW

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In 1549, Calvin wrote the ministers of Zurich in the midst of theological controversy over his views,

I may at least on good grounds wish to obtain this of you, viz., that you will not allow yourself to become entangled in baseless suspicions. For I observe that, owing to this cause, you are perplexed in regard to many points which present difficulty, simply because you put upon the majority of my statements a different construction from what you have any ground for doing. A preconceived opinion regarding me leads you to imagine and attribute to me what never occurred to my mind.

Calvin was reminding these pastors to exercise a "hermeneutic of love" rather than a "hermeneutic of suspicion." He was calling on these ministers to consider his writings in the best possible light, with fairness and without bias. Calvin was complaining that these men had misunderstood him because they let their preconceptions get in the way of his words. He pleaded with them to read his work on its own terms.

I guess it would be an understatement to say that [a] Calvin's call for charitable interpretation of one another's theological work is as apropos as ever in the Reformed world, and [b] I know from sad experience exactly how Calvin must have felt! Indeed, I want to write to the OPC Study Committee, "You are perplexed in regard to many points which present difficulty, simply because you put upon the majority of my statements a different construction from what you have any ground for doing."

One of the most outrageous claims made by the recent OPC "Study Report on Justification" concerns their (mis)understanding of my view of the keep-ability of the law and its implications. This is just one illustration of the many simple factual errors the Report contains. Perhaps by pointing out this one, readers of

¹ This essay belongs to a series of papers responding to the OPC's Study Committee, which has produced a "Report" on current controversies in Presbyterian circles related to justification. My responses to the Report are most concerned with its criticisms of my work and the so-called "Federal Vision" (FV), though I will also touch on issues related to the "New Perspective on Paul" (NPP). If the Committee's Report is modified, obviously I will be happy to my revise my critical responses as well.

the Report will be sensitized to others, and not simply accept the Report on its own authority. Mistakes like this one should call into question the overall trustworthiness of the Report. While greatly respecting the scholarship of the men producing the Report, I do not think it would be an unfair assessment to suggest that the Report is a sloppy piece of work. It puts a strained, overly narrow interpretation on the Reformed tradition and frequently reads the “FV” materials in the worst possible light rather than dealing with them on their own terms.

The Report, describing my view, says (lines 2385ff, 2570ff; see also lines 210-250, 276-416),

Not only do some FV proponents deny that God made a covenant of works with Adam, regarding such a covenant as legal, servile, etc., in opposition to whatever arrangement prevailed in the pre-lapsarian state that was supposedly more reflective of sonship, but some FV supporters deny that the rule of life (the law) given to Adam required perfect obedience. Lusk writes: “the law did not require perfect obedience. It was designed for sinners, not unfallen creatures.”

But the law was designed for man as an unfallen creature, not as a sinner, and it required full obedience (WCF 19.1-2). Lusk cannot escape the weight of this by alleging that he has reference to fallen yet regenerate man and the way that God accepts the less than perfect obedience of his adopted children (cf. WCF 16.2-6). More on this, below, when we examine justification...

Given this schema, one might think, then, that since God is perfect, covenantal faithfulness entails perfection. In other words, it has been commonly assumed that the law, as the standard revealing God’s perfect character, demands perfection and it is such perfection that is foundational to righteousness. Not so, asserts Rich Lusk, who sees the law not as the eternal righteous standard of God but as a purely post-lapsarian phenomenon: “the law did not require perfect obedience. It was designed for sinners, not unfallen creatures. Thus the basic requirement of the law was covenant loyalty and trust, not sinless perfection.” (It is worth re-visiting aspects of Lusk’s position, already examined above under the rubric of anthropology, in this context.) One wonders if this means that had Adam maintained covenant loyalty and trust, though not sinless perfection (whatever that means and however it might have been done), he would not have fallen.

According to the WCF, “God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works, by which He bound him and all his posterity to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience” (19.1). Clearly, this is an attestation, contra Lusk, that the law did require sinless perfection. If one demurs that the law that Lusk has in view is that given at Sinai and not that law that God gave to Adam in Eden, the WCF, at 19.2, links the law that God gave to Adam in paradise with the “perfect rule of righteousness” that was “delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in ten commandments, and written in two tables.” The law is an integral whole—that given in Eden being of a piece with that delivered at Sinai—and the WCF is very clear that it demanded perfection of Adam and has always demanded such of his progeny. It is this perfection, our Confession is quite clear, that is constitutive of

righteousness in God and man.

In other words, the Report suggests that I do not think God required perfect obedience before the fall (lines 2577-2578) and that I believe there was no law in force before Moses (lines 2573-2574). The Report chides me for driving a wedge between Adam and Moses and compromising the very nature of “righteousness.”

I see this argument as basically a *reduction ad absurdum*. Obviously, any view that says Adam did not have to obey perfectly is false, just on the face of it. Christians have universally agreed that any sin on Adam’s part would have (and obviously did) constitute a “fall.” If my position entails the claim that Adam was not required to render perfect and perpetual obedience, my position is obviously false.

However, the Report’s argument is littered with half truths, falsehoods, terminological confusion, unwarranted assumptions, and logical errors. It is my goal here to bring some of these things out, showing that the authors of the Report have interpreted my work recklessly and irresponsibly. Their misinterpretation is all the more egregious given that they have had two years to do their work and never once contacted me (or other primary subjects of the Report, as best as I’ve been able to tell). This is not a matter of the Report failing to uncover subtleties in my work; it is a matter of Report’s claims contradicting what I plainly and explicitly wrote.

First, let’s examine what I have actually said about the requirement of sinless perfection. The statement of mine the Report quotes above affirming the keepability of the law has a very specific context – a context which the Report conveniently omits. The Report is quoting from my colloquium essay, “Reworking the Covenant of Works: A Response to ‘The Biblical Plan of Salvation,’” found in *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros and Cons*, edited by E. C. Beisner. The quotation above comes from my discussion of the Mosaic law, on page 128. It is the third point in a ten point argument for the graciousness of the Mosaic covenantal administration. How many of these points does the Report interact with? Zero. They simply pluck a statement out of its wider theological framework in the essay and attribute to it a totally foreign meaning. They take a claim about what it meant to be a law-keeper under the Mosaic administration, and project it back onto the Adamic situation without warrant. In context, I am dealing with the law as an administration of the covenant of grace (WCF 7.5) and a typological foreshadowing of the good things to come, given by God to his redeemed people for a specified period of time in history (cf. Gal. 3:15-4:7; Heb. 8-10). My point is to show that the law is indeed gracious, as the Confession teaches, though it cannot be identified with the Abrahamic or New covenants,

strictly speaking. I was explaining how the Bible can speak of believers as having kept the law, despite that fact that they are imperfect.

Had the authors of the Report wanted to actually know what I believe about the Adamic administration and God's original requirement of perfect obedience in the Garden, they would have been well advised to look at the part of the essay that deals with Adam. Why they passed over this section is one of those bewildering features of the Report that makes it rather frustrating and unhelpful. On page 121, I wrote, in point blank contradiction to the claims of the Report,

This statement [by Meredith Kline] is unarguable from one angle: any sin, even the smallest, made Adam worthy of eternal death (WSC 84). God certainly did require perfect and perpetual obedience of Adam.

The Report wonders out loud if, on my view, Adam could have sinned without falling. Well, here is answer to their question. There was no need for them to wonder at all. They only needed to read what I wrote. I am in full agreement with Meredith Kline and the whole Christian church down through the ages on this point. God required perfect obedience from Adam, threatening death if he sinned (Gen. 2:15-17). The Report says, "Necessarily, then, God's original requirement was nothing less than perfect obedience" (lines 321-322). I say, "Amen!" This is a point of common ground; I am unclear why the authors of the Report felt the need to fabricate a disagreement on this matter, unless they were simply not reading carefully.²

This is not an isolated admission on my part. The fact that the original creation covenant, or the covenant of life, required perfect obedience is something I have repeatedly affirmed. It never even crossed my mind that someone could accuse me of calling this fundamental truth into question. It is axiomatic.

In my internet essay, "Living by His Faithfulness" (http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/living_by_faith.htm), I wrote:

Paul says in Gal. 2:16 that we are justified by Christ's faith. That is to say, Jesus lived the perfect life of covenant fidelity that the original covenant with Adam required. That perfect faithfulness is regarded as our own by virtue of our faith in Christ.

Again, this is a clear statement: God required perfect obedience from Adam. He fell. Jesus has now fulfilled that requirement, and even transcended it in his

² Obviously, there is a difference between reading carefully and reading charitably. However, Christians are obligated to do both. In this case, the authors of the Report have done neither. I would have hoped that even if they could not exercise charity, they could have at least exercised care, for the sake of the accuracy of their own work.

death and resurrection. Jesus is the new Adam, who brings to fulfillment the original covenant. Thus, the argument of the Report (lines 220-221, 292-3) is not applicable:

Where the law's requirement for perfect obedience is questioned, the traditional doctrine of justification is necessarily also thrown into dispute...If one denies that God required perfect obedience from Adam as the basis for his attaining eternal life, then there is no reason why Christ must provide perfect obedience as the basis for our attainment of eternal life.

No one has denied that God required perfect obedience from Adam and everyone affirms that Jesus rendered that perfect obedience. The Report's claims are a grand exercise in missing the point. What has *not* been proven is that the *Mosaic* covenant required perfect obedience *as a condition for being regarded as a covenant keeper*. That was the point at issue in the section of my colloquium essay under review.

In another essay, "Rome Won't Have Me"

(http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/rome_wont_have_me.htm), I discuss the law/gospel antithesis:

The problem here is partly terminological, partly theological, partly exegetical. On the one hand, the terms "law" and "gospel" can be used in different ways. In some theological contexts, "law" and "gospel" refer to different ages within God's program of redemptive history. On this scheme, the tension (or contrast) between law and gospel is eschatological; law and gospel are placed on a continuum as successive eras within history (Gal. 3:21). In other theological contexts, "law" means bare command (a "covenant of works") and "gospel" means God's free work of salvation in Christ. Law = imperatives; gospel = indicatives (for those in Christ). On this view, law and gospel are set side by side and represent two antithetical modes of salvation....

But of course, we concede in theory that if "law" means "bare command" rather than the "Mosaic covenant" as such (which is part of the covenant of grace, per WCF 7.5, 6; 19.3, 7), then there is an absolute law/gospel antithesis. If the law is taken out of the context of the covenant (e.g., Ex. 20:1-2), it becomes a moralistic program of self-salvation.

That should be sufficient to settle the matter and show that the Report has erred in its critique.

It should be noted that my colloquium essay was not an attack on the "covenant of works" per se. Indeed, the original main title of the paper was "Reworking the Covenant of Works." (I am not sure why Calvin Beisner used only the subtitle in the print edition.) I attack some versions of "merit theology," which are often tied into particular ways of formulating the covenant of works, but the

Westminster Standards and the Reformed tradition more generally have never required belief in a meritorious covenant with Adam.³

The Report is correct to acknowledge that so-called “Federal Vision” theologians emphasize the filial nature of the original covenant with Adam. This is, in part, where the challenge to “merit theology” comes in. Adam was already a son (Lk. 3:38); he did not have to work up to sonship or earn sonship. But this is not the same as denying that the covenant had (and always has) a legal aspect. After all, familial bonds (parents and children, husbands and wives) certainly include a legal element, even though they do not (or at least should not) work on a merit basis. The Report confuses a covenant that includes a legal dimension, with a purely legal relationship (a contract). It rightly holds the filial and the forensic together, but wrongly assumes that the legal and the meritorious must go together. The Report’s claim that the “FV” plays off the filial against the legal is simply wrong. No one associated with the “FV” denies the covenant bond includes law, sanctions, succession, forensic declarations, and other legal elements. Further, no one denies that justification presupposes a law court setting. But merit is not necessary to any of these concepts, and that has been burden of the “FV.”⁴

³ See the historical survey, *God and Adam: Reformed Theology and the Creation Covenant*, by Rowland Ward, for definitive proof of this claim.

⁴ Even in critiquing “merit theology,” the “FV” theologians have been carefully nuanced. No one has claimed that all versions of merit theology are problematic, or that all version of the traditional “covenant of works” are erroneous. But some of them are. Also, those versions of “merit” that are not problematic would probably be described with more clarity using another term. The discussion in lines 461-467 bears out the problem. Everything said in this section is entirely true, and no “FV” theologian would disagree. But is it not pastorally confusing to teach that Adam’s reward would have been *both* a gracious gift *and* a merited payment? In common parlance, “merit” is antithetical to grace and is associated with earning, not freely receiving.

Many of the Report’s attempts to respond to the “FV” view of the covenant of works miss this point about merit and confuse the issues involved. Many of the Report’s criticisms are half-baked and incomplete (e.g., footnotes 39 and 43, which miss in the mark in attempting to criticize my use of Thomas Aquinas and Herman Bavinck). With regard to “merit” and the “covenant of works,” the Report seems more concerned with preserving cherished terminology rather than dealing with substantive theological issues. It makes me wonder if the authors of the Report have taken time to consider the actual concerns of the “FV.”

The discussion of merit in lines 418-525 says many things anyone on the “FV” side would agree with. The Report acknowledges that strict merit is problematic, and (following Turretin) that all notions of merit have to be qualified by the Creator/creature relationship and the gracious, promissory character of God’s covenant (lines 435ff). But since the Report does not hold to a strict grace/merit antithesis (lines 454ff), the “FV” proponents might ask why the term merit is so important to preserve, especially given that Calvin himself expressed a strong dislike of it. The Report stops short of giving a definition of merit, which is unfortunate. However, overall, there is very little that any “FV” theologians would find troublesome in the way the Report lays out the

Second, turning from Adam to Moses, let us return to my colloquium essay and the Report's assessment of my view of the law. The Report suggests that I err in that I do not connect the law of Moses with the law God gave to Adam. The Report insists that the law of Moses is a republication of the Adamic covenant of works. The Report argues for a complete identification of the law of Adam with the law of Moses (lines 2585-2586). The Report does not allow for alternative meanings of "law" or "righteousness;" both of these terms must include sinless perfection in any and all contexts (lines 2587-2588).

Actually, as I begin my discussion of the law, I acknowledge several points of contact between Israel and Adam (page 127). Israel's situation under the Mosaic covenant was a typological recapitulation of the original Edenic covenant (cf. Rom. 5:13-14). In other words, the Report, following the Confession, is not wrong to connect the Adamic and Mosaic covenantal orders. Israel is a new corporate Adam, called to live in a new garden situation, under special probationary tests (many of which involve food).

And yet there are some significant discontinuities as well between Adam and Moses. It is not sufficient to simply identify the Mosaic law with the original "rule of righteousness" God gave to Adam, even though the two have significant overlap in content (cf. WCF 19.2). While the Report desires to limit the meaning of "law" to the two tablets of stone given on Sinai, the Report seems to ignore the fact that the "law" in other theological and exegetical contexts includes the *whole* Mosaic covenant, including the civil and ceremonial precepts (WCF 19.3, 4). The Report's failure to discuss these wider definitions of "law" results in sheer confusion.⁵

There is no doubt that the original Adamic covenant and the requirement of perfect obedience stand in the backdrop of the Mosaic law. But it is also

issue of merit and the covenant of works. This agreement should give us pause since it indicates confusion on the part of the authors of the Report.

Further, the Report says that if we are going to use terms such as "faith" and "grace" in relation to the original Adamic covenant, we must be very precise in distinguishing the meaning these terms take on in a post-lapsarian situation (lines 461-479). This is exactly what "FV" writers have done. No one suggests that faith and grace mean exactly the same thing before and after the fall. These terms are used analogically, not univocally. Again, "FV" folks would see common ground whereas the Report is driving a wedge between its views and the "FV."

⁵ The Report takes a rather static approach to redemptive history. "Law" is the same in every age. But is this so? Take the concept of "holiness." How does holiness relate to the law? While God's people are called to holiness in every epoch (cf. Lev. 11:44, noting the context; 1 Pt. 1:16, again, noting the context), surely the shape of that holiness changes profoundly.

indisputable that the Mosaic law, unlike the original Adamic covenant, addresses itself to fallen-but-redeemed humanity and makes provisions accordingly (Ex. 20:1f). This true even of what was written by the finger of God on the two tablets of stone (Ex. 20:1f; cf. also Dt. 5:15). Thus, the law does not reflect *merely* the perfect holiness and justice of God; it also reflects his love and mercy (contra the Report, e.g., lines 250ff). The book of Exodus bears this out beautifully, as God continually bears with his wayward people, within the framework of the law (e.g., Ex. 33-34). The Report ignores the wider narrative and covenantal context in which the law was delivered on Sinai. The Report fails to explain why a law that demands perfect obedience would also include provisos for imperfect obedience and forgiveness in the form of sacrificial offerings. It fails to explain why the law itself includes promises and references to redemption. It fails to deal with the way in which the covenant given at Sinai was a seamless whole. It fails to deal with the Psalmist's view of the law (e.g., Ps. 19, 119).

That being said, I do not deny that echoes of God's original requirement ring through the Mosaic law. The law is a multi-layered revelation of God's character and purposes. We can consider the law as a *bare command*, or as a *covenantal administration*. The law, considered in the abstract, or as a "natural law," demands perfection. But in its concrete historical form, as delivered by Moses in the context of the exodus, the law includes redemptive grace and provides a way for God to accept the imperfect works of his people as they proceed from faith in the divine promises. Thus, both WCF 19.1 and 16.1ff must both be affirmed. The law both requires and does not require perfection, depending on one's perspective. Yet greater weight, exegetically if not theologically, must be given to law's role within the economy of grace. When Paul deals with the law, more often than not (perhaps even always), he is interacting with the "Torah," the covenantal form God established with Israel at a particular point in history. As I have written in response to Michael Horton:

Perhaps I should give a word of clarification here concerning my colloquium paper's claim that the law of Moses did not require perfection (page 128; see also 144-146). Obviously, in one sense, the law does demand perfection (and in doing so it reveals our imperfection; Rom. 3:20). The law says, "Be holy, as I am holy" (Lev. 19:2). God cannot wink at sin. The law is *always* a perfect rule of righteousness (WCF 19). But my point was primarily pastoral. Perfect obedience is not required of us in order to be regarded as law keepers or covenant keepers (e.g., Lk. 1:6), nor to receive the blessings of the covenant that pertain to this life and the life to come (e.g., Eph. 6:3). The Torah itself made provision for sin and foreshadowed the gospel of Christ (Heb. 10:1). Furthermore, God really is pleased with the imperfect obedience of his believing children. This does not mean God is offering us salvation at a bargain price (a "relaxed law"); rather, *on the basis of Christ's death, resurrection, and intercession*, our works really can be regarded as "good" and "holy" in God's sight (WCF 16.5-6). If (with Horton) we only emphasize that the law calls us to absolute holiness, without the corresponding truth that the covenant includes a merciful and fatherly evaluation of our works (cf. Jas. 2:12-13), then we have set up people for discouragement and despair. When Paul said, "We make it our aim to

be well pleasing" to God (2 Cor. 5:9), he wasn't suggesting we aim at a target we can never hit. Our faithful, though imperfect, works really do please God and God wants us to know that. Turning the gracious Mosaic covenant into a covenant of works takes away that source of encouragement and assurance. To say our works are genuinely good, of course, does not mean they carry merit or procure salvation (WCF 16.5), but it does mean we should come to know what it means to hear the Father say, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" Not enough Christians in Reformed churches are allowed to hear that declaration about themselves; all they hear is that everything they do never quite measures up....

I was disappointed that Horton felt no need to respond to my ten arguments against a strict law/gospel dichotomy, found on pages 127-130. Obviously, everyone party to this debate believes in a strict law/gospel antithesis *if the law is construed as a covenant of works* (see my colloquium essay, pages 127-8, first point). If the law is taken as a *nuda lex*, a bare command divorced from the broader covenantal and narrational context in which it's found, then, yes, the law and the gospel are antithetical. Or, to put it another way, attempts at self-salvation (whether they use the law of God or some other moral system) are absolutely antithetical to the gospel.

But that's the nub of the matter: Did God present Israel with a Pelagian program of salvation at Sinai? Did he give them a law, devoid of grace, as a way of achieving redemption by their own merits? Or, did he enter into a special, temporary phase of the covenant of grace with Israel? One need read no further than Exodus 20:1-2 to see the answer. Any divine law that begins with the words "I have redeemed you" simply cannot be taken as a covenant of works in any form or fashion. I have contended for my view with numerous detailed arguments; Horton provided no answering counter-arguments against my position.⁶

⁶ See "Blurring the Federal Vision" (http://www.auburnavenue.org/articles/Blurring_the_Federal_Vision.htm). This essay dealt with this theme at length, showing that both sides of the truth have to be held in tension. God always demands perfect holiness because he is holy, yet through the covenant of grace, he is pleased with less than perfect obedience and even rewards it. In the paper, I note that Calvin believed that God's inflexible holiness was not incompatible with his gracious acceptance of the faithful-but-flawed works of his people. Here is a further excerpt, focused on Calvin.:

Because Horton seems suspicious of my teaching on good works, we should take this up at further length. We must remember with Calvin that because God

examines our works according to his tenderness, not his supreme right, he therefore accepts them as if they were perfectly pure; and for this reason, although unmerited, they are rewarded with infinite benefits, both of the present life and also of the life to come. For I do not accept the distinction made by learned and otherwise godly men that good works deserve the graces that are conferred upon us in this life, while everlasting salvation is the reward of faith alone. On the other hand, so to attribute to the merit of works the fact that we are showered with grace upon grace as to take it away from grace is contrary to the teaching of Scripture . . . Whatever, therefore, is now given to the godly as an aid to salvation, even blessedness itself, is purely God's beneficence. Yet both in this blessedness and

So the law, considered apart from its context (or as it may have been twisted by apostate, legalistic Jews) can be viewed as a “covenant of works” after a fashion. But this is not the God-intended purpose of the law (that is, the Torah).

Unfortunately the Report has drastically truncated any sense in which the Mosaic covenant functions within the economy of the covenant of grace, which is equally significant and equally confessional. While not all of the Report’s authors are followers of Meredith Kline, the Report unquestioningly privileges Kline’s version of covenant theology over others (at least on this point).

When Israel publicly pledged to uphold the law, they were not promising perfect, sinless obedience. (Surely, Moses would have known better than to ask them to do such.) Rather, they were promising to live as God’s faithful, redeemed people in the world, a holy and righteousness nation, among all the nations of the earth. They were promising to walk in the ways of the law (that is striving to obey, and offering appropriate sacrifices when they failed) as a response to God’s gracious, salvific initiative. Their vows were like wedding vows – they were committing themselves to serve the Lord in terms of the covenant grace, forsaking other gods and clinging to YHWH alone. Within that covenantal relationship, not all sins rise to the level of covenant breaking (that is, excommunication). Or, to take another analogy, Israel’s vows were like church membership vows. In many Presbyterian churches, members make a promise to “endeavor to live as becomes the followers of Christ” (*PCA Book of Church Order*, 57-5). This is not a pledge to live in sinless perfection (though if the language was pressed, it could technically be interpreted that way – how could sin ever be consistent with following Christ?). Rather, it is a promise to strive for obedience, and to confess and repent when we fall short. In other words, it is a promise to keep covenant with the Lord by faith.

in those godly persons, *he takes works into account*. For in order to testify to the greatness of his love towards us, he makes not only us but the gift he has given us *worthy of such honor . . .*

Finally, while they [the sophists] repeatedly inculcate good works, they in the meantime so instruct consciences as to discourage all their confidence that *God remains kindly disposed and favorable to their works*. But we, on the other hand, without reference to merit, still remarkably cheer and comfort the hearts of believers by our teaching, when we tell them they please God in their works and are without doubt acceptable to him . . .

[T]he promises of the gospel . . . not only make us acceptable to God but also render our works pleasing to him . . .

This is not even the entire relevant section. The paper includes much more from Calvin on this topic, and shows how Calvin’s position relates to my own views. More will be said about God’s acceptance of the works of his people later in this paper.

The Report says that all of humanity is under the law of God by nature. I do not necessarily disagree with every aspect of the “natural law” view of the law set forth in the Report.⁷ All of humanity is bound to obey God, and those absolute and comprehensive requirements were largely republished to Israel in the Mosaic covenant. But that still does not mean that Paul has in view this universal ethical system when he speaks of the “law.” Rather, given the way Paul’s “law” language actually works, it seems much more likely that he has in view the covenant that was specifically given to and for Israel from the time of the exodus until the coming of the Christ (cf. “...in the time of the law...” in WCF 7.5).⁸ Paul’s theology of the law is primarily reflective of Israel’s special role in the

⁷ Of course, as a biblical theologian, I would argue that this “natural law” cannot be simplistically equated with the Mosaic law, which includes a good deal that was not found in the original creation covenant. The law as given to Israel was specially suited for their circumstances as God’s typologically redeemed but still immature people (cf. Gal. 3-4). However much it might overlap with the moral content of natural revelation, it is still uniquely addressed to God’s chosen people, at that moment in history, as the preface to the law (properly speaking, part of the first commandment) shows.

Further, as a Vantillian, I think “natural law” has to be carefully formulated. Some theories of natural law confuse the objective fact of natural revelation with humanity’s subjective ability to grasp and properly interpret this revelation. The Report rightly says that man was created “in law,” that is, with a built in moral compass. This innate moral knowledge was supplemented and governed by further verbal revelation (Gen. 2:15-17). After the fall, “natural law” is hardly a helpful, authoritative moral guide since conscience has been corrupted by sin. Even the redeemed need the guidance of the objective, written Word, through which the Spirit can reform and reshape our moral sensibilities in the community of the church.

In some sense, the law of Moses predated Moses himself. Even in the interim period between Adam’s fall and Moses’ law, we know that God put humanity under various moral obligations (e.g., Gen. 17:1), some of which even went beyond what we would think of as “moral law” strictly speaking (e.g., the Levirate institution is clearly in force in Gen. 38). God must have revealed commands and ordinances in some provisional form even before the giving of the law as a whole at Sinai, and forming Israel into a holy nation.

The Report does not carefully consider what Paul has in view when he discusses the law. It is not natural law, per se, but the Mosaic covenant that is the focus of Paul’s concerns. It is more consistent with Paul’s terminology to use “law” to refer specifically to “Torah,” that is, to the whole covenantal order set up especially for Israel through the ministry of Moses. The Torah certainly overlaps with the moral obligations imposed upon all humanity from creation onwards, but that law functions differently in some important ways in the context of the Mosaic administration. It is not “bare law,” but law situated within an unfolding drama of redemption. The Report seems oblivious to this incredibly important exegetical point.

⁸ WCF 7.5 is important because it shows the divines were willing to use “law” language to refer to more than a perfect and perpetual rule of righteousness. Otherwise, it would be non-sense to speak of the “time of the law.” But this terminological flexibility and richness, on which the Report’s whole care against this aspect of the “FV” rests, is sadly missing from the Report. In its zeal to apply one aspect of the Confession’s theology of the law, the Report (inadvertently, no doubt) shaves off another part of the Confession’s teaching.

economy of redemption. His reasons for saying that Christians are no longer under the law are essentially eschatological: Paul is indicating that the new age has arrived in Christ, so the covenant blessings can no longer be bottled up in Israel, but must flow out to all the nations. We no longer live “in the time of the law,” but in the time of Christ, that is, the promised new age and new creation.

The burden of this section of my colloquium essay (pages 128-131) is to demonstrate ways in which the Mosaic covenant is properly understood as a temporary administration of the covenant of grace (WCF 7.5). To say it again, “law” in Paul often refers not to an eternal standard of ethics, demanding moral perfection, but more specifically the total covenantal system God gave to Israel through Moses, distinguishing her from the nations. Reformed commentators have always recognized this, however inconsistently. Again, I made ten arguments to that effect, demonstrating the graciousness and typological character of the Mosaic order. The Report does not engage any of these arguments.⁹

Further, my essay is mainly building off of Galatians 3:15-4:7, which is Paul’s fullest and most comprehensive discussion of the role of the Mosaic law in redemptive history. This discussion is found primarily on pages 132-135 of the essay.¹⁰ The Report does not interact with this text or my exegesis at all. The result is that the Report completely overlooks that fact that Paul understood the law, not primarily as an “eternal rule of righteousness,” but as a “tutor to bring us [that is, Israel] to Christ” (Gal. 3:24). The Report makes it impossible to explain why the law was appropriate to the people of God in their childhood, before Christ came (Gal. 3:23). The Report makes it impossible to explain why the law is counted by Paul as part of the *stoicheia*, “the elements of the world” (Gal. 4:3, 9). The Report makes non-sense of Paul’s temporal language about the law in Gal. 3:15ff (“the law, which was 430 years later....was added...til the Seed should come...But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed...But after faith has come we are no longer under a tutor...[T]he heir...is under guardians and stewards [including the law] until the time appointed by the father...But when the fullness of time

⁹ However, this means that I *agree* with the Report, over against some New Perspective theologians, that the expression “works of the law” in Paul refers to the total way of life called for by the Mosaic revelation (cf. lines 1610ff in the Report).

¹⁰ While the Report does not provide any exegesis of Gal. 3:15ff, it does interact some with Gal. 3:10-14 and 5:1-6 (lines 324ff). Much of what it says here is good and true. However, the Report is still exegetically deficient in that it leaves out the redemptive-historical dimensions of these passages. Also, by failing to integrate 3:10-14 with the verses that come before and especially after, the Report leaves a number of questions unanswered. For a more complete treatment of this section of Galatians in the context of the whole letter, see Derrick Olliff, “When the Fullness of Time Had Come: Paul’s Gospel to the Galatians,” available at http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/derrick_olliff/pauls_letter_to_the_galatians.htm.

had come,...God sent forth his Son...to redeem those who were under the law..."). The Report makes it impossible to give anything but a superficial exegesis of Paul's "no longer under the law" language (Rom. 6:14), since obviously Paul does not mean that we are no longer under moral obligation towards God.¹¹ Rather, Paul has in view the Mosaic covenant – the law as it functioned in the hand of Moses – which is no longer in force in the new age. The law now functions in the hand of Christ (1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2).

There are other problems. If the law given through Moses was an eternal rule of righteousness, why did it include typological provision for the forgiveness of sin in the form of animal sacrifices? If Adam's obedience in the Garden was meritorious, does that mean Israel's obedience was meritorious as well? How hard does the Report intend to push this link between Adam and Moses?

Why does Paul speak of those who are "of the law" (Rom. 4:14; Gal. 3:10) or who have the law "by nature" (Rom. 2:14), contrasting them with the Gentiles who do not have the law and are not under its provisions (Rom. 2:25-29)? Why does Paul so closely link the law to circumcision, even making circumcision the preeminent "work of the law" (Gal. 5:3)? In light of Galatians 5:3, is it fair to say that the uncircumcised are *not* debtors to the law? Does this not indicate that the "law" in Paul often refers to something other than an eternal rule applicable to all of humanity? Further, on the Report's understanding of "law," how is the law of Moses to be distinguished from the law of Christ (1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2)? Why is there a distinction to be made at all if the former is already defined as God's unchangeable, eternal rule of righteousness?¹²

¹¹ Oddly, the Report departs from its own strict identification of the Mosaic law with God's eternal rule of righteousness in footnote 33. But the Report fails to integrate its discussion of the law there into its overall theology of the law. The kinds of issues raised in this footnote (e.g., the law as part of the *stoicheia* from which we are freed when we are adopted) are the kinds of questions the Report should have focused on in order to get traction in its critique of the "FV." In general, the Report's discussion of the law is divorced completely from the eschatological perspective of the NT. The Report, in the main, is only willing to view the law as a timeless system of ethics, not as a typological covenant of grace foreshadowing the new covenant. The exegetical sections of the Report were carefully chosen to avoid dealing with these questions (e.g., Gal. 3:10-14, but not 3:15ff, or Hebrews 8-10). The result is a skewed and incomplete presentation of Paul's theology of the law. Further, the Report ends up missing the core issues the so-called "FV" is bringing to the table for discussion.

¹² The Report cannot escape these questions by simply appealing to law categories (WCF 19). Those categories have their place. But the Report states emphatically that the law (without qualification) is to be identified with God's eternal rule of righteousness (lines 2585-2586). The Report only knows one definition of the law: a perfect and absolute moral standard. Those on the "FV" side of this controversy admit that "law" has more than one legitimate meaning, depending on the context. It can refer to the moral law, the eternal rule of righteousness applicable to all of humanity. But it can also refer to the specific form of the covenant of grace that God put into effect through Moses; that is to say, it can be used to describe the shape and form of God's relationship to his people in that era of history.

If the law given was so stringent, why did Moses tell them it was not too hard to keep (Dt. 30:11ff)? Why didn't the nation as a whole, and every individual within the nation, fall under the curse of the law (exile, and ultimately death), the *very moment* they received the law – since no doubt they were sinning in some way shape or form at the very instant? This points out an important difference between the law as administered in the Adamic covenant and the law as it functioned in the hand of Moses. Adam was driven out of the garden and into exile the very day he sinned. One infraction, and he was dead on the spot (spiritually speaking). But God was gracious and longsuffering towards Israel in the land of promise, bearing with their sin and forgiving them for many generations, until finally their covenant breaking reached the point where the hammer of exile had to fall (Dt. 28:15ff; 31:14ff). Adam was exiled immediately when he sinned; Israel was not. Thus the “law” worked differently in these two epochs of history. Even if the content of the moral commands is identical, the function of the law is not the same.

We could go on and on with biblical questions of this sort.¹³ It should be evident that the paradigm of the Report has no way of answering these types of questions. The point should be clear by now: The simplistic theology of law found in the Report does not even begin to do justice to the complex theology of the law found in the Confession (which views the law as an administration of the covenant of grace, even as it continues to call for perfect obedience), much less the Scriptures (which situate the law within the unfolding story of redemption in a way that is completely at odds with the Report). The Report fails to deal with

¹³ Again, this is an issue I have already addressed extensively elsewhere. In my reply to Michael Horton, “Blurring the Federal Vision” (http://www.auburnavenue.org/articles/Blurring_the_Federal_Vision.htm), I wrote:

Obviously, everyone party to this debate believes in a strict law /gospel antithesis *if the law is construed as a covenant of works* (see my colloquium essay, pages 127-8, first point). If the law is taken as a *nuda lex*, a bare command divorced from the broader covenantal and narrational context in which it's found, then, yes, the law and the gospel are antithetical. Or, to put it another way, attempts at self-salvation (whether they use the law of God or some other moral system) are absolutely antithetical to the gospel.

But that's the nub of the matter: Did God present Israel with a Pelagian program of salvation at Sinai? Did he give them a law, devoid of grace, as a way of achieving redemption by their own merits? Or, did he enter into a special, temporary phase of the covenant of grace with Israel? One need read no further than Exodus 20:1-2 to see the answer. Any divine law that begins with the words “I have redeemed you” simply cannot be taken as a covenant of works in any form or fashion.

the only real question about the law the so-called “FV” even raises – namely the function of the law in light of the *historia salutis* and Pauline eschatology.¹⁴

After quoting me to the effect that the law is keep-able (in some sense) by the redeemed, the Report says that cannot be the case because the law is (by inflexible definition) an absolute rule of righteousness, requiring sinless perfection. And then it says that “Lusk cannot escape the weight of this by alleging that he has reference to fallen yet regenerate man and the way that God accepts the less than perfect obedience of his adopted children.” But why does the Report say this? My argument makes it very clear that I am talking about the law of Moses in particular (not biblical ethics in general) as it was given to a redeemed nation (cf. Ex. 20:1f). The stipulation of the Report – that I cannot be referring to the good deeds done by believers, accepted by God through Christ – is purely arbitrary and prejudicial. If Christ is the mediator of the covenant of grace (WCF 6.3, 7.1), and the Mosaic covenant was a temporary administration of the covenant of grace (WCF 7.5), then in an ultimate sense, Christ was the mediator of the Mosaic covenant. The good-but-imperfect works done by believers under the Mosaic law were accepted by God through Christ (WCF 16.6). WCF 16.1 defines good works as those things “God hath commanded in his holy word...These good works [are] done in obedience to God’s commandments.” In other words, for believers, our good-but-imperfect works really and truly fulfill the law of the God. They are really are good (WCF 16.3), and God accepts them, their imperfections notwithstanding, “in his Son” (WCF 16.6). Appeal to WCF 16.6 is not some kind of escape I need to run to in order to justify my point about the keep-ability of the law. Rather, it *just is* the point.¹⁵

Further, why is the Report so anxious to deny WCF 16.6 any place in the discussion of good works and law-keeping? Why is the Report utterly silent on the question of how 16.6 relates to 19.1-2? It appears that the authors of the Report want to downplay the themes of WCF 16. But why is this? Why shouldn’t the Report embrace the *whole* of the Confession, rather than just selected portions? Why does the Report refuse to admit any distinction between the law as a “perfect rule of righteousness” in its ethical content, and the law as an administration of the covenant of grace in which imperfect good works can be accepted by God through Christ? Is the Report suggesting that all the works

¹⁴ One of the best contemporary writers on this whole issue of the law and its relationship to the gospel is Mark Horne. For a taste of Horne’s fine work, see his recent post, critiquing the hard law/gospel antithesis from an exegetical perspective:

<http://markhorne.blogspot.com/2006/06/trust-obey-and-receive-blessings-of.html>.

¹⁵ I addressed this point comprehensively in “Blurring the Federal Vision,” http://www.auburnavenue.org/articles/Blurring_the_Federal_Vision.htm. Readers will be especially interested in the Calvin quotations collected there.

done by believers under the Mosaic order were rejected because they were not perfect?¹⁶

In the context of unfolding the covenant of grace, the Confession emphatically agrees with my position, over against the Report. As believers, we obey God's *commandments* (WCF 16.2). This is essentially a confessional claim that the law (at least from one vantage point) is keep-able. More importantly, this echoes the Bible's own language. The Bible speaks of the redeemed as doing "good works" (Eph. 2:8-10; Tit. 2:14), living in "righteousness" and "blamelessness" (Lk. 1:6; 1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:6), "doing" the law (Rom. 2:13-15), fulfilling the law (Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14), attaining holiness (Rom. 6:21-22; Heb. 12:14), etc. These are *real descriptions* of how God views our obedience in this life, not *hypothetical* calls to

¹⁶ In My "Blurring the Federal Vision" essay, http://www.auburnavenue.org/articles/Blurring_the_Federal_Vision.htm, I take up at more length some of the problems that crop up in a hard law/gospel antithesis approach:

That federal theology (not be confused with the "Federal Vision," of course) did indeed lead to the pulling apart of justification and sanctification is clearly established in William Borden Evans' magisterial (though unfortunately not yet published) dissertation, "Imputation and Impartation: The Problem of Union with Christ in Nineteenth Century American Reformed Theology."

Evans notes ways in which federal theology vitiated Calvin's doctrine of union with Christ, ultimately even leading to such distortions as dispensationalism (with its strong law/gospel antithesis and antinomian "carnal Christian" theory):

"[C]ertain factors, when combined with the federal bifurcation, caused justification and sanctification to become further abstracted from one another . . . [T]he disjunction of justification and sanctification [is] implicit in the federal bifurcation of union with Christ . . . It is not at all surprising, therefore, that dispensational writers used the conceptual structure and some of the terminology of federal theology to describe union with Christ – the federal bifurcation of a federal and a spiritual union fit well with the dispensational separation of law and grace . . . In this sense, the recent squabbles between conservative [bi-covenantal, federalist] 'Reformed' and 'Dispensational' thinkers have been a family dispute [e.g., a dispute among those who share basic presuppositions about law and grace]" (417, 420, 423-4, 426).

By sharply separating law and gospel into air tight compartments, earlier bi-covenantal federalists prepared the way for dispensationalism. Dispensationalism took certain features of the federal scheme and extended them. Evans further explains:

As noted earlier, the soteriological dualism of the federal theology, with its *ordo salutis* and bifurcation of *unio Christi* into legal and spiritual unions, was unable to meaningfully relate the forensic and transformatory aspects of salvation. For this reason, the tradition tended to oscillate back and forth between the two poles of legalism and antinomianism" (199).

sinless perfection. We know this, because we have concrete cases of saints who are said to be morally righteous (Noah, Job, Zacharias and Elizabeth, etc.).

This is not to say that there is no longer an overarching demand for perfect obedience. We still have a perfect rule of righteousness in God's Word. I take this as a given, and it was not a point I felt any need to emphasize in my essay. As creatures of God, all men are duty bound to live for the glory of God, giving him thanks and obedience in all things. Even the smallest sin, considered in itself, is due God's eternal wrath and curse. We ought to confess all sin and strive for that perfect obedience God calls us to offer him. But the argument I was making in the my colloquium essay was concerned with another issue altogether, namely, the way in which the Mosaic covenant functions as a covenant of grace, and the way in which our good-but-imperfect obedience to the law can be made acceptable to God in terms of the covenant of grace. There is more than ample biblical and Reformed support for speaking of the keep-ability of the law as I did in my essay, contrary to the impression created by the Report. The Report fails because it is comparing apples (the law as a rule of righteousness, or covenant of works) to oranges (the Mosaic law as a covenant of grace). By emphasizing the latter (which is the primary way Scripture and our tradition would have understand the law, I think), I was not denying a place for the former as an important theological construction.¹⁷

Third, the Report badly confuses the language and categories of Scripture with the language and categories of the Confession. In fact, the Report even narrows down the meaning of terms in the Confession itself. This is especially so in the Report's discussion of the requirements of the law and the meaning of the term "righteousness." To explore the issues here, we will have to retrace some of the same steps we covered in the preceding section.

¹⁷ Note again this quotation from "Rome Won't Have Me":

The problem here is partly terminological, partly theological, partly exegetical. On the one hand, the terms "law" and "gospel" can be used in different ways. In some theological contexts, "law" and "gospel" refer to different ages within God's program of redemptive history. On this scheme, the tension (or contrast) between law and gospel is eschatological; law and gospel are placed on a continuum as successive eras within history (Gal. 3:21). In other theological contexts, "law" means bare command (a "covenant of works") and "gospel" means God's free work of salvation in Christ. Law = imperatives; gospel = indicatives (for those in Christ). On this view, law and gospel are set side by side and represent two antithetical modes of salvation....

But of course, we concede in theory that if "law" means "bare command" rather than the "Mosaic covenant" as such (which is part of the covenant of grace, per WCF 7.5, 6; 19.3, 7), then there is an absolute law/gospel antithesis. If the law is taken out of the context of the covenant (e.g., Ex. 20:1-2), it becomes a moralistic program of self-salvation.

As we have just discussed at length, the Report (in contradiction to WCF 7.5) allows for one and only one meaning of the word “law.” In the eyes of the Report’s authors “law” is always a reference to an eternal standard of righteousness that requires absolute sinless perfection. It is the moral law in the abstract; that is, commands considered apart from a gracious, covenantal context. The Report “links the law that God gave to Adam in paradise with the ‘perfect rule of righteousness’ that was ‘delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in ten commandments, and written in two tables.’ The law is an integral whole—that given in Eden being of a piece with that delivered at Sinai” (lines 2583-2586). Further, according to the Report, the perfection of the law is described in terms of “righteousness” (e.g., lines 2445ff, 2587-2588). “Righteousness” is that perfect obedience that satisfies God’s justice, and nothing else. “It is this perfection, our Confession is quite clear, that is constitutive of righteousness in God and man” (lines 2587-2588).

What happens when we begin to flesh out this meaning of the terms “law” and “righteousness” in the way the Report defines them? We are led into all kinds of absurdities if we try to use these definitions exegetically:

- If the law given to Adam is identical to the law given through Moses, if (as the Report says in lines 325-326) “God’s requirement...did not waver,” then the Report is suggesting that Adam was supposed to build a tabernacle, and practice circumcision, sin offerings, the Levirate, and the Passover. These are all included in the “works of the law,” after all. To play the Report’s own game,¹⁸ the authors of the Report cannot escape by appeal to law categories (WCF 19) because the Report has already made an unqualified identification of the law given in creation with the law given at Sinai. In addition, Paul says the law is all or nothing. To be under the law is to be under the *whole* law (cf. Gal. 5:3). No picking and choosing!
- Since righteousness means “sinless perfection” or “complete conformity to the law,” Abraham must have been rather naïve. Why was he asking God to spare 50 *sinless* people in Sodom (Gen. 18:24)?! Wasn’t this great patriarch familiar with the truths of original sin and human depravity? Of course, maybe he wasn’t so naïve since apparently lot of people have attained sinless perfection in this life – including a few of the citizens of Sodom (Gen. 19; 2 Pt. 2:7),¹⁹ Noah (Gen. 6:9), Job (1:1, 8, 22), etc.

¹⁸ Remember, the Report’s suggestion that on my view, perhaps God did not require perfect obedience from Adam derived from projecting what I said about the Mosaic covenant back onto the Adamic situation. These question seem absurd, but they do follow the logic of the Report to its end.

¹⁹ The Report misses an important point with regard to the story of Sodom’s destruction. The Report says (lines 259-261), “God, remarkably, allows Abraham to engage in such dialogue with him, and his answer indicates that he accepts the premises upon which Abraham reasons (Gen

- Luke must have been a Wesleyan holiness teacher since he believed that people could attain sinless perfection in this life. He calls Zacharias and Elizabeth “righteous” and “blameless,” and says they “walked in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord” (Lk. 1:6). The amazing thing is that Zacharias and Elizabeth must have done this all their days. Even one sin, at any point in their lives, would have rendered them unrighteous. According to the terminological standards of the Report, Luke would have been wrong to call them “righteous” if they sinned even once, because the law is a perfect rule.
- If the law is an eternal rule of righteousness, why does the writer of Hebrews say that the law can be and has been changed (7:12)? Apparently, the inspired author was not fortunate enough to have the light of the OPC Report! He thought the “law” was a temporary covenant for Israel, not a permanent moral code.
- If “righteousness” only and always means sinless perfection, how could Tamar have been regarded as “*more* righteous” than Judah (Gen 38:26)? After all, perfection does not admit of degrees.
- The view of the Report that the law given to Adam and Moses is identical leads to some rather crazy chronological conclusions. Paul says the law was delivered 430 years *after* Abraham (Gal. 3:17). Does this mean the

18:25-26). A fundamental principle is asserted: God does not confuse the wicked and the righteous in his judgment and always does what is just.” This is exactly right. But, then, who are the just? Lot and his family (excepting his wife) are spared. God has not confused the righteous with the wicked when judgment falls. The righteous -- the morally upright – are rescued.

The Report tries to use the story of Sodom to drive a wedge between the concepts of “righteousness” and “covenant.” Lines 1587 to 1593 read,

For example, when Abraham negotiates with God to spare Sodom he tries to convince God to spare the city on the pretense that there might be fifty righteous men within its confines. Abraham contrasts the righteous with the wicked (Gen 18:24-25). Yet, at this point in redemptive history the only ones in covenant with God are Abraham and his household (Gen 15), so the righteous supposedly dwelling in Sodom could not be members of the covenant as Wright contends. Just as in the flood judgment, righteous Noah was spared while the wicked were swept away in judgment (Gen 6:9, 12-13). Righteousness, therefore, cannot mean covenant membership.

I do not find the argument persuasive, even though I agree with one aspect of the conclusion. To be sure, the Report is correct to assert that “righteousness” cannot simply be glossed as “covenant membership.” It includes moral and forensic dimensions, referring to both behavior and status. But the Report should not assume that the residents of Sodom had no covenantal relationship with God. They were not under the provisions of the Abrahamic covenant, of course, but they can be regarded as falling under the provisions of the earlier Noahic covenant (Gen. 9). If man was created “in covenant,” as the Report suggests, and further, if the Noahic covenant included all of humanity after the flood, the link between “righteousness” and “covenant” is not broken as easily as the Report suggests.

authors of the Report believe that Adam lived 430 years *after* Abraham? That would seem to be an implication. Moreover, Paul says the law has expired since “faith came” in the life and ministry of Christ (Gal. 3:15ff). How can a timeless code of ethics be *added* at a certain point in history and *rescinded* at another? The Report’s definition of the law just doesn’t work.

Frankly, I am a bit embarrassed to offer these *reductio* arguments. I know that the authors of the Report would probably not accept any of these conclusions, and would bring nuance into their positions in order to avoid them.²⁰ But this is *exactly* the wooden hermeneutic the Report applies to my writings (and others they lump into the “FV” group). The Report presses my positions to absurdity, but only by taking terms and arguments out of context; if two were to play at that game, the position of the Report could be reduced to equal absurdity.

That being said, I think even if the authors of the Report are allowed to bring nuance in, they have painted themselves into a corner. Their critique is overzealous; they have overreached. They have left themselves no way to deal honestly and exegetically with a text like Luke 1:6 apart from serious backtracking. Not only does this mean that the rigid terminological strictures of the Report do not fit with Scripture; it also means that the Report completely fails to deal with the actual questions raised by the “FV” theologians. The “FV” is very interested in questions like, “What does Luke mean when he calls Zacharias and Elizabeth righteous and blameless? In what sense did they walk in *all* the commands and ordinances of the Lord? How does this statement fit with the wider teaching of Scripture, the sinfulness of man, the nature of the law and the covenant, and the categories given to us by the Confession and the Reformed tradition?” It is just these sorts of questions that “FV” theologians are seeking to answer, however imperfectly. But they are not addressed in the Report.

Fourth, because the Report glosses over what the so-called “FV” theologians have actually written about the law, it saddles us with the charge of “mono-covenantalism” – that is, reducing all the covenants of Scripture down to one (lines 2086-2094; 2351-2359). But this is a patently false charge and has been repeatedly refuted in the literature. Ralph Smith has devoted a great deal of

²⁰ On the other hand, perhaps I am being too generous. Perhaps the authors of the Report would swallow these *reductios*. After all, they have left themselves very little wiggle room. By defining terms as they have, with no flexibility whatsoever, it is hard to see how the Report’s position can deal with the Bible apart from a major overhaul. *Their whole case against me (and others) rests on their stipulated definitions. Take those definitions away, and the anti-“FV” case begins to unravel.*

My hunch is that if/when the authors of the Report get around to answering the sorts of exegetical questions “FV” folks are asking, they would begin to sound a lot like the “FV” theologians they are critiquing. But since the Report refuses to answer the questions the “Fv” raises, I cannot say for sure.

attention to this question and has already provided more than sufficient answer to the Report's claims. His essays can be found at <http://berith.org/>. Smith has done a fine job showing the exegetical and theological warrant for describing the Trinitarian life of God in covenantal terms. The original form of the covenant ("structured relationship") is found in God himself. Covenants within the created order are patterned after the archetypal inter-Trinitarian relationships, just as all fatherhood and sonship in creation are analogues of the original Fatherhood and Sonship that exist eternally within the Godhead. This position has been espoused by Abraham Kuyper, Cornelius Van Til, Rowland Ward, Peter Wallace, and others.

But more can be said here. Theologians associated with the "FV" cannot be considered monocovenantal in any legitimate way. Consider the evidence. Much of the theologizing in "FV" circles has emerged from the work of James Jordan. His seminal volume on the Bible, *Through New Eyes*, makes a clear distinction between the various covenantal orders in Scripture. "FV" folks are also appreciative (though not uncritically) of the work of Bishop N. T. Wright. But Wright is certainly not a monocovenantalist. He treats the Bible as *one story* – a single unified narrative -- but does *not* collapse the covenants into one another. Like Jordan, he is sensitive to typological structures and organic development that takes place within redemptive history.

Moreover, several theologians associated with the "FV" have explicitly repudiated the monocovenantal charge. Three examples should more than suffice.

I have clearly distanced myself from anything that could be called monocovenantalism. In my colloquium essay, in the volume edited by Beisner, I pointed out many of the continuities and constants that exist in the various covenantal "chapters" of the biblical story. But I also pointed out important discontinuities, e.g., the meaning of faith (page 125). I also developed a detailed argument out of Galatians 3-4 that clearly differentiated the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants. In my essay, "Rome Won't Have Me," I explicitly addressed the monocovenantal charge (http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/rome_wont_have_me.htm). The whole section, "Law/Gospel and 'Monocovenantalism: Elementary Mistakes,'" should be consulted. (It would have made for a more constructive document had the authors of the Report considered this piece.)

Tim Gallant has also addressed this issue in his essay "Monocovenantalism? Multiple covenants, no Adamic merit" (<http://www.biblicalstudiescenter.org/covenant/monocovenantalism.htm>).

Gallant's entire essay deserves careful study, but we can only cite his conclusion here:

It becomes clear from the above that denying a meritorious covenant of works most certainly does not collapse all of God's work together into one undifferentiated covenant, and that the term "monocovenantalism" is singularly inappropriate. While there is undoubtedly a relational typology which holds throughout history since creation, the continuity is scarcely absolute. In His governance of history, God shapes covenant life in different ways suitable to the historical period. This differentiation is in fact strong enough that Paul considered the gospel to be at stake when the Judaizers attempted to force Gentiles to come under the preceding covenant. Yet even so, God never contracted with man to "earn his way." Life with God is along the pathway of holiness, always, but it is always lived by faith alone.

We also see why it is not in the least problematic to employ the language of "grace" to refer to the pre-fall covenant. To be sure, the grace shown to Adam was not redemptive; the resolution of guilt and corruption was no part of its aim. Yet grace simply means favour, and even if we define this as "unmerited favour," such grace was what characterized the life of the original covenant. God not only created man out of nothing and in His own image, into a fellowship of life with Himself, He added to these gifts wonderful other provisions, including a task in the Garden, a wife, and much more. Furthermore, the eschatological blessing set before Adam was intended to be a gift of grace. It was not placed before him as the wage due to the merit which he would accrue; it was the blessing which God Himself would provide Adam as his free inheritance, in His own good and wise time.

In summary, then: the Adamic covenant was not meritorious, but Adam could be disinherited through demerit. That demerit thus necessitated redemption through Christ's merit. In between is a long history, during which man is never called upon to merit anything, but rather to live by faith. In Christ will be found both righteousness and glorification; and thus in Yahweh alone was man to glory and be justified (Isaiah 45.25; Jer 23.6; 1 Cor 1.30-31).

Another "FV" associate, Joel Garver has written a very helpful series of blog posts that outlines continuities and discontinuities between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace in Reformed theology:

Part 1:

<http://www.lasalle.edu/~garver/web2printer4.php?img=0&lnk=0&page=http://sacra doctrina.blogspot.com/2004/05/covenant-of-works-part-one-ive-not.html>

Part 2:

<http://www.lasalle.edu/~garver/web2printer4.php?img=0&lnk=0&page=http://sacra doctrina.blogspot.com/2004/05/covenant-of-works-part-two-in-my-prior.html>

Part 3:

<http://www.lasalle.edu/~garver/web2printer4.php?img=0&lnk=0&page=ht>

[tp://sacra doctrina.blogspot.com/2004/05/covenant-of-works-part-three-in-my.html](http://sacra doctrina.blogspot.com/2004/05/covenant-of-works-part-three-in-my.html)

I think those grouped into the so-called “FV” would endorse Garver’s analysis of the covenants. Garver points out various ways in which Reformed divines have understood the original covenant to have elements of grace. He also shows how pre-fall grace should be distinguished from the graciousness of God’s covenant after the fall. Garver argues that the Reformed tradition at its best has viewed the covenant of works and the covenant of grace as analogically related, with both similarities and dissimilarities:

[I]t is sometimes the case in current discussions that we find a "bi-covenantal" scheme opposed to a "mono-covenantal" one. I suppose, in certain contexts, such language can be helpful. But it seems to me that the way in which it is often deployed is not particularly helpful, but supposes a relationship between the covenant of works and covenant of grace that is purely contrastive and equivocal, rather than following the more traditional path of delineating those respects in which the two covenants agree and those respects in which they differ (see, e.g., the discussion of Turretin, *Institutes* 12.4).

Such a way of delineating the relationship between the two covenants does not suppose that we must find a contrast at every point, but allows for various points of contact and continuity, thus establishing the relationship between the two covenants as *analogical*: involving similarities, even in a context of substantive differences, differences that establish a distinction between covenants not only in degree and accidental features, but in kind and substance.

Even the most ardent of "bi-covenantalists," however, usually (and rightly) see the covenant of grace as functioning within the wider context of the covenant of works, insofar as the covenant of grace involves Christ bringing the covenant of works to its intended fulfillment on our behalf, obeying where Adam rebelled. Thus, even on such a view, the connections between the two covenantal administrations are intrinsic and internal, even if the covenant of grace involves an intensification and elevation of grace in the context of sin and demerit by means of Christ's fulfilling of the covenant of works outside of us and for us.

Moreover, since both covenants reveal the one and the same God in his relationship to those creatures who bear his image, establishing the means by which they might be brought to their eschatological end, we would also expect a certain analogy or homology between these covenants, even if in application and outworking there are differences as to the character and nature of the two covenants.

Thus, I would suggest, a simplistic opposition of “bi-covenantalism” against “mono-covenantalism” is inadequate and potentially misleading for the purposes of describing various approaches to covenant theology. Both positions, taken to an extreme, become problematic.

Garver’s work also points out the wide variety of views on “merit” that have been offered in the Reformed church. The summary of Turretin on “merit” is helpful:

Turretin maintains that Adam's entire ability to obey God and thereby receive what was promised was a matter of grace and that Adam possessed sufficient grace to obey. Moreover, he says that "merit" in the proper sense only refers to "strict merit" and that is entirely excluded in all relations between God and his creatures. Turretin and others will sometimes speak in terms of "strict justice," but in saying this they are referring the fact that the covenant of works does not, in itself, make any room for pardon and mercy if violated.

If Turretin allows that covenant merit is only a broad and improper use of the term, then surely it is a use of the term we can live without and still formulate theology appropriately, as many Reformed theologians have done.

Merit is not a category that is essential to Reformed theology. As Turretin says, it is only used properly when used improperly. I do not desire to quibble over words, and as I have already said here and elsewhere, there are versions of merit theology I could happily live with because the concept of merit is softened and qualified. But I also think the term is open to misunderstandings and as Calvin said, I tend to wish it had never been injected to Christian theological discourse. In my experience, merit is routinely understood by non-specialists in a "hard" or "strict" way, and is associated with servile relationships of earning and demanding reward.²¹

The attention to detail in Garver's blog series is useful for both sides in the present "FV" controversy because it shows that there may in fact be more common ground than has been admitted to this point. Garver's posts are helpful from a historical vantage point, because they show that the views of the theologians associated with the "FV" are not new to the Reformed tradition, even if they have not always been in the majority. Garver's even-handed way of dealing with the evidence is commendable.

Fifth, while the Report takes "FV" and "New Perspective" theologians to task for defining "righteousness" as "covenant faithfulness," the Report does not do justice to those it critiques, or to the Reformed tradition as a whole. Peter Leithart has already responded to this charge on his blog (<http://www.leithart.com/archives/002002.php>; see points 4 and 5 in particular for Leithart's discussion of "covenantal" views of "righteousness") and there is no reason to repeat those arguments here since I would affirm all that Peter says. To sum up, we do not believe that righteousness is a relational category *rather than* a moral, ethical, or legal category. Rather, it ties all those things together. We

²¹ As already noted, at least in some places, the Report uses a heavily qualified notion of merit that would probably be acceptable to anyone associated with the "FV" (Report, pages 1611-1615). I certainly have no problem with it, aside from the potential terminological confusion that results from using "merit" in this improper way. For more on merit, see Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, volume 1, page 578 and volume 2, pages 712-715.

hold to a considerably “thicker” view of righteousness than the Report (contra line 2603). This has been clear all along.

However, I want to add an historical footnote to Peter’s discussion. The covenantal-relational understanding of righteousness/justice is not a recent invention. It is not a fabrication of “FV” or “NPP” scholars. Rather, theologians have noted the Bible’s relational view of justice for centuries, simply as a result of doing exegesis.

Two examples will have to suffice. My essay, “Grace and Justice in Unexpected Places” is an exegetical/theological discussion of this point (http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/grace_and_justice_in_unexpected_places.htm), and includes the following discussion of John Calvin’s view:

To ask God to “repay” obedience [e.g., Ruth 2:12] is to ask him to graciously reward it, as he’s promised. To say that his rewarding of our works is “just” is to say it is in accord with the covenant provisions. And so on. This is just Calvin’s conclusion, after surveying passages like those we have looked at in this essay: “To confirm us in this expectation [of a reward for our services, e.g., Heb. 6:10], the apostle declares that God is not unjust but that he will keep his pledge once given. This justice, then, refers more to the truth of the divine promise than to the equity of rendering what is due . . .” (*Institutes* 3.18.7). God’s justice is simply his pledge-keeping, or his promise-fulfilling. Long before the “New Perspective on Paul,” Calvin had already taken note of this fact.

“Justice refers more to the truth of the divine promise than to the equity of rendering what is due.” In other words, Calvin understood “justice” (at least in some contexts) as “covenant faithfulness.” This is all the so-called “FV” is doing. No one insists that “righteousness” language must always be glossed as “covenant faithfulness” (or “covenant membership,” for that matter). But the Report errs in ruling this out as a legitimate meaning in certain theological contexts (see especially lines 1409ff, 1565ff).

Herman Witsius makes the same point in brief compass in volume 1 of his *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man* (page 420-421). Witsius is examining the biblical doctrine of final justification. In part, his discussion reads,

Whence it appears, that they do not speak right, who affirm, that in the last justification mere justice will take place without any mixture of grace. It is said, indeed, Heb. 6:10, “God is not unrighteous to forget your work...” But that the reward of our works is of mere justice, without any mixture of grace, is language which sounds harsh in reformed ears, and is diametrically repugnant to our [Heidelberg] catechism, question 63. [Using various biblical texts, it has been] proved at large, that in the Hebrew, Syriac, and Arabic languages, justice and truth denote one and the same notion, and are generally put one for the other. Thus, “justice,” or “righteousness,” when affirmed of God, in many places,

in many places denotes “truth.” But also “truth” is translated by the Septuagint as “justice” or “righteousness,” Gen. 24:49, Isa. 38:19....

Witsius’ discussion is absolutely essential to the present controversy over the use of “righteousness” language. It would have been very helpful if the authors of the Report had familiarized themselves with the content and method of Witsius on this question. Witsius acknowledges that the biblical use of terms like “justice” and “righteousness” may sound strange (even repugnant!) to our Reformed ears, and may even appear to contradict the catechism. (Witsius is using the Heidelberg Catechism, but the same point applies with the Westminster Standards.) Witsius is happy to admit that the biblical usage of terms is broader than the confessional, and does not feel any need to confine the usage of terms in the Scriptures within the strict definitions found in the confessional standards. Instead, he simply exegetes the text, incorporates the results into his dogmatics, and does not let the terminological tension with the Standards bother him. After all, as his whole procedure shows, the Catechism is true in its own way, even though it must be held in submission to Scripture. The Catechism can never be used to muzzle the meaning of Scripture or determine what biblical terms mean *a priori*. Witsius understands the richness of the Bible’s theological vocabulary.²²

There are other examples that could be given to show that a covenantal-relational understanding of righteousness is at home in the Reformed tradition. People associated with the “FV” may have sometimes overstated the “covenant fidelity” aspect of righteousness, but no one (as far as I know) has ever denied that righteousness has both moral and covenantal components. The evidence from Calvin and Witsius is sufficient to demonstrate that the Report has illegitimately narrowed the scope of our tradition; on this point, the “FV” is definitely more faithful to our Reformed legacy as a whole.²³

Finally, by way of summation on this topic (and equally relevant to several others), I should note that probably my biggest problem with the Report is that it makes simplistic appeals to the Confession to answer sophisticated exegetical arguments. There is a mismatch in terms of the arguments and the critiques given in response. This has been a pattern in the “FV” controversy from the beginning: detailed biblical arguments are answered with confessional slogans. But this is

²² Another helpful resource on the biblical meaning of “righteousness” is Joel Garver’s essay, “‘ZDQ’ in Isaiah,” available at <http://www.joelgarver.com/writ/bibl/zdq.htm>. This essay demonstrates the same point. Unlike the Report, the biblical usage of terms has a built-in flexibility, and the precise shade of meaning in view in any given context only becomes clear as we do the hard work of exegesis.

²³ Interestingly, the Report actually acknowledges this covenantal definition of justice for a brief moment in its discussion of merit in the work of Turretin (lines 440-453). But then it does not allow those insights to play out anywhere else in the document.

just comparing apples to oranges, as we have seen. The Report does not deal with the bi-lingual, dual-layer nature of theology, and thus fails to deal with any issues of substance. These two languages, of course, are [a] the language of the Scriptures themselves, and [b] the language of Reformed systematic and confessional theology.²⁴ The Report proceeds on the assumption that the meanings of terms on level [b] can be read into the exegesis of the Scriptures, on level [a]. But, as this paper has demonstrated with regard to “law” and “righteousness” (and as I have demonstrated elsewhere with regard to “imputation”) that simply does not work. The Report’s critique proceeds by a simple, but flawed methodology: it takes the stipulated definitions of level [b] and reads them into the “FV’s” discussions, taking place on level [a]. In this way, the Report can easily (but only superficially) show that the “FV” contradicts Reformed theology in a myriad of ways.²⁵

The “FV” does not *deny* the confession’s meaning or its stipulated vocabulary, but wants to dig back into the inspired words of Scripture, reading the texts on their own terms. The critics of the “FV” sidestep the interesting exegetical questions the “FV” raises and seek to settle the matter with a simplistic appeal to the Confession. But as shown above, this continually yields unsatisfactory results. The theological constructs of the Confession are fine as far as they go, but they do not settle all the exegetical issues.

The Report virtually assumes that the Confession exhausts the meaning of Scripture on the topics it addresses; practically speaking, it makes it almost impossible for the Bible to teach anything not already taught in the Confession, using identical terms. But this is patently false. The Westminster divines did not intend for the Confession to be used in this way. They believed they were giving an accurate summary of the overall theological teaching of Scripture, and they succeeded in that. But it would be foolish to pretend that the Confession teaches us everything the Bible has to say on topics like justification, righteousness, and the Mosaic law. There is plenty of room for developing our understanding of

²⁴ And within these two layers, there may even be many sub-layers, or additional strata (e.g., Calvin’s theological vocabulary is not the same as later Reformed scholasticism; Paul’s theological lexicon is not identical to John’s).

²⁵ A more sophisticated account of theological “levels of discourse,” related to the present justification controversy, can be found here: http://64.233.161.104/search?q=cache:vswFfai4OIkJ:www.christianity.com/CC/CDA/Content_Blocks/CC_Printer_Friendly_Version_Utility/1,,PTID23682%257CCHID125467%257CCIID1532882%257CCPATHL3BhcnRuZXIvOXJ0aWNsZV9EaXNwbGF5X1BhZ2UvMCwsUFRJRDIzNjgyfENISUQxMjU0Njd8O0IJRDE1MzI4ODIsMDAuaHRtbA%3D%3D,00.html+jonathan+barlow+discourse&hl=en&gl=us&ct=clnk&cd=1&client=firefox-a. Jonathan Barlow wrote this paper several years, before the controversy became white hot. It is unfortunate that his insights into the problems of theological language have not been incorporated into our discussions and critiques of one another.

these themes in way that supplements and enriches, rather than subverts, the teaching of the Confession. This is what the "FV" has been all about. The Report has failed to prove otherwise.

The Report makes a big deal out of the high and demanding requirements of biblical law. Surely part of the "righteousness" the law calls for is dealing honestly, fairly, and charitably with the words of other men – especially when they are brothers in Christ, and the topics under discussion are complex matters of theology that affect the peace and purity of the wider church. I do not hesitate to say that the Report, as it presently stands, falls far short of biblical standards in its interpretation and critique of the "FV."