BLURRING THE "FEDERAL VISION": A REPLY TO MICHAEL HORTON

By Rich Lusk

For years I have respected the work of Michael Horton. Though sometimes having to disagree with him, I considered him a valuable gift to the church and a faithful defender of Reformed theology. In particular, I've appreciated his high view of the church, including reverent liturgy, the efficacy of the means of grace, and the importance of the office of the ministry. His desire to recover classical Reformational theology and practice in the modern era is admirable. His trenchant critiques of pop evangelicalism have usually been right on target. While his latest article in *Modern Reformation* ("Déjà vu All Over Again," July/August 2004, pages 23-30) does not change my overall assessment of his scholarship, I found the piece sadly lacking in charity and accuracy. This is not Horton at his best.

Horton criticizes my contribution to the book *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros and Cons*, edited by Calvin Beisner ("A Response to 'The Biblical Plan of Salvation,'" pages 118-148). I believe Horton has misrepresented and misunderstood me. Caricaturing and even slandering advocates of the so-called "Federal Vision" is nothing new, of course. It's become something of an internet hobby for some. Horton had an opportunity to give fair and helpful criticism, but unfortunately he missed it. While his article generally avoided the intense rhetoric of some hotheads with keyboards, there is still very little constructive in his piece. My view of covenant theology may in fact have problems, but I daresay they are not the problems Horton saddles me with. In my essay, I wrote nearly 15,000 words refuting the possibility of merit (that is, of creatures earning anything from their Creator), only to find out from Horton that my *real problem* is that I believe in merit after all, just like the medieval and Tridentine theologians. The irony, of course, is that Horton wants to continue using the medieval and Tridentine categories of condign and congruent merit, whereas I want to make a clean break with them. And yet, somehow Horton would have his readers believe that I'm on the road to Rome and he's safely at home in Geneva.

The truth is that if I really believed what Horton says I believe, I would gladly join him in condemning me! For whatever reason, "Federal Vision" advocates and critics have managed to talk past one another on repeated occasions. Whether this is due to variant theological vocabularies and methodologies, different pastoral concerns and emphases, or deep, irreconcilable theological paradigms still remains to be seen, though I suspect there is more common ground than might appear to an outside observer. I suppose the historical judges in this controversy have yet to be born. My rather modest goals in this reply to Horton are two-fold: [1] To vindicate my biblical and confessional orthodoxy against Horton's misrepresentation; and [2] To demonstrate that traditional Reformed orthodoxy is broader than Horton's narrow interpretation of our common heritage.

Horton views the "Federal Vision" as a reactionary movement. It should be noted that no one set out to start a "movement." What is now known as the "Federal Vision" happened

organically, and congealed largely in response to criticisms. Even now, it hardly constitutes a "movement." Men associated with the "Federal Vision" have all kinds of differences amongst themselves and share no hidden agenda. In some cases, men lumped together as proponents of the "Federal Vision" are closer to their critics than to one another (e.g., my view of baptism is probably closer to Horton's than to Steve Schlissel's, and Schlissel's view of baptism is probably closer to Rick Phillip's, another "Federal Vision" critic, than to mine).

Many of the alliances are clearly more relational/political than theological, which makes one wonder if all the fuss is really worth it. As Horton points out at the conclusion of his article, the "Federal Vision" does seek to reform "an Evangelicalism that ignores the objectivity of Christ's visible church and means of grace, its covenantal ways, and its eschatological, cosmic, and redemptive-historical horizon" (page 30). But, from a "Federal Vision" perspective, these "reforms from within" are driven by exegetical, pastoral, and missional concerns, not by a reactionary spirit. Indeed, every man I know associated with the "Federal Vision" would gladly say that his only reason for taking up these matters is because they are vital to pastoral ministry and practice. But these same men have no desire to be schismatic or form a subculture within the church. With that in mind, let us turn to the substance of Horton's article.

Horton has presented a very one-sided view of the issues. He ignores what I perceive to be a wide area of common ground between us, giving an unsuspecting reader the impression that I am blatantly unorthodox, when really all that is at stake are minor refinements within the Reformed tradition. The problem of misrepresentation is further compounded by the fact that his article has no bibliography and no page references, making it virtually impossible for readers to look at the quotations that Horton has cited from my article in their original context. With such an approach, it's very difficult for those interested to check up on his assessment of my views or hold him accountable for what he says about me. Scholarly interaction among Christian brothers requires above-the-board honesty, and Horton's methodology (unintentionally, no doubt) falls short. One could easily get the impression Horton is more concerned with scoring debate points and pushing an agenda than serving the peace and purity of the wider church by attaining a mutual understanding.

I knew that Horton's piece was sloppily researched when I got to page 25 of his article. There he took me to task for simply following Alister McGrath's understanding of Calvin's theology of merit, rather than consulting the primary source (in this case, Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*). I knew that didn't sound right, so I turned to that section of my colloquium essay, and there it was on pages 144-145: a lengthy quotation from Calvin on the subject of merit, straight from the horse's mouth – indeed I quoted from the precise chapter of the *Institutes* Horton himself referred to. In fact, Horton offered no actual quotation from Calvin on merit, so one could say I consulted the primary source material more directly than he did! It must also be noted I only mentioned McGrath's work in passing in a footnote, whereas the Calvin quotation was in the body of the text. Horton had no excuse for insinuating that I hadn't read Calvin himself on the issue. But readers who only consult his side of the debate will be misled.

To reiterate the point, the fact that Horton overlooked my quotation from a primary source ("If Lusk had gone to the primary sources . . .") casts a shadow of suspicion over the accuracy of the entire article.

Moreover, one would have thought that Horton would have been more careful in dealing with my comments on Calvin's view of merit since I was simply regurgitating the standard scholarly view (found not only in McGrath, but also in, e.g., Anthony Lane's *Justification By Faith in Catholic-Protestant Dialogue*, pages 38-39: Lane begins his discussion by stating, "Calvin disliked the word merit. He realized it was introduced early in church history but considered that it was unwise to use such a non-scriptural term, prone to abuse . . ."). Most of what Horton says about my inadequate theology of merit is just a matter of logomachies. Obviously, merit could be defined in such a way that it would not be so problematic (and Horton notes my use of terms like "deserve" and "worth," which are "merit" terms in his theological vocabulary). But the term "merit" has so much unsavory baggage, I see no reason to continue using it. The Bible makes do without it, so we can as well.

It should also be noted that critics of the "Federal Vision" are not all aligned in their use of merit anyway. It's not as though the "Federal Vision" is bucking a well established, monolithic consensus in the Reformed community. Horton wants to assign both condign and congruent merit to Christ (page 25). Cal Beisner is considerably closer to Calvin in only attributing "covenantal" (or congruent) to Christ (pages 324-25 in *The Auburn Avenue Theology*; private correspondence). But, again, a good deal of the discussion over merit is haggling over what terms to use. I have yet to hear a good argument for the retention of "merit" in our theological vocabulary. It obscures and confuses more than it clarifies. Use of the term certainly cannot be made a test of orthodoxy or even of being Reformed. As I noted in my colloquium essay, the meaning of "merit" is often so watered down and qualified (e.g., the notion of "covenantal merit") that one wonders why the term is so dogmatically defended, apart from a blind traditionalism (page 120).

My reasons for rejecting merit are simple: I do not believe human works can have any causal role in our salvation. Works cannot earn or achieve salvation in any form or fashion. Works cannot serve as the basis or ground of our justification in any way whatsoever. By taking merit out of the picture, the temptation to legalism and self-righteousness is cut off (at least in principle). No merit means no boasting. No merit means everything we get is a gift of unearned, underserved grace. No merit means salvation is a matter pure divine monergism. Period. Scholastic theologians are attracted to merit because it helps create a tidy logical "system" of salvation, but I think it is fully possible to exegete the relevant texts of Scripture without appeal to the extra-biblical category of merit.

Horton unfortunately lets his scholasticism get in the way of exegesis when he deals with my reading of Phil. 2:5-11. On pages 24-5, he says I contradict myself because in one place I say that Christ "deserved" exaltation, by virtue of his perfect obedience, while in another place I attribute it to the Father's grace and promise. But this is precisely the structure of Phil. 2:9: Paul says, "Therefore [on the basis of Christ's obedience unto

death] God has also highly exalted him and *graced* [literal translation] him with a name above every name." Apparently, Paul was not aware of an antithesis between grace and deserts in the case of Christ. If I have contradicted myself, so has the apostle. Calvin himself says, "[I]t is absurd to set Christ's merit against God's mercy . . . Christ's merit depends upon God's grace alone" (2.17.1), contra Horton's appeal to Rom. 11:6. John Ball, a noted Puritan divine, also mixed grace and justice. In his *Treatise on the Covenant of Grace*, he writes,

> The Covenant [with Adam] is of God, and that of his free grace and love: for although in some Covenant the good covenanted be promised in justice, and given in justice for our works: yet it was of grace that God was pleased to bind himself to his creature, and above the desert of the creature: and though the reward be of justice, it is also of favour. For after perfect obedience, performed according to the will of God, it had been no injustice in God, as he made the creature of nothing, so to have brought him unto nothing: it was then of grace that he was pleased to make that promise, and of the same grace his happiness should have been continued."

Sinclair Ferguson, summarizing John Owen's view of the Adamic covenant, gives the same view: "[E]ven if a man were to keep the covenant of works, he would acquire no merit. Eternal life by the covenant of works would not give a man ground for boasting, since that life would be his because of God's promise, not because of his merit" (*John Owen on the Christian Life*, 23). Ferguson goes on to point out that this understanding of grace woven into the original creation covenant actually softens many of the criticisms brought against classic bi-covenantal federalism (by, e.g., T. F. Torrance). I entirely agree.

Horton does not deal with any of my arguments against strict merit made throughout the essay (see especially page 120). He sidesteps the sonship theme I develop and ignores my comments (and huge body of scholarship) on the covenantal meaning of "righteousness" language in the Scriptures. At several critical junctures, he offers assertions, rather than arguments, against my position. He implies that I have ignored the "prominent Servant theme in the Old Testament" (page 24). While I did not develop the "Servant of the Lord" motif in my paper, such a theme does not help in constructing a theology of merit anyway. Servants (or slaves) can merit nothing from their masters since they already owe their masters everything. (Slaves don't get paychecks, after all.) I didn't focus on Christ as servant because it was tangential to the topic at hand.

Horton says that my paper denies that Christ's active obedience is imputed to believers. That's not quite right; actually, in that section of the essay (pages 141-43), I am dealing primarily with the views of *other* theologians (albeit, men I am sympathetic to). The section begins with a reference to Don Garlington and Tom Wright, and throughout I refer to the views of "these theologians." I go on to quote Calvin and Richard Gaffin on the subject of union with Christ, including Gaffin's strong affirmation of imputation. Again, Horton should have read my piece more carefully before launching into such extended criticism. If he had done so, he may have even noticed that we share quite a bit of ground in common.

Horton misleads his readers by failing to note how my essay develops a doctrine of union with Christ, which accomplishes everything the standard doctrine of imputation does (cf. the illustrations on page 142). Surely Horton can see that a shared (or imputed) verdict achieves the same result as imputed obedience (see my article, page 141; God only declares Christ "just" in the resurrection because of his active obedience). Either way, *our justifying righteousness is found exclusively in Christ alone.* The only question is which formulation stays closer to the Pauline texts. To act as though the gospel is at stake on this point is beyond silly, especially when Horton has simply refused to interact with my detailed arguments for viewing Christ's resurrection as the basis of our justification (Rom. 4:25). Critics of my essay (including Morton Smith at the colloquium) have routinely failed to interact with Rom. 4:25 or show how Christ's resurrection is integrated into their doctrine of justification. How can I make our works the basis of justification when I have already given that role to Christ's resurrection?

Horton's critique accuses me of offering a "sweeping indictment of the entire Reformed tradition (including the Puritans who framed the Westminster Standards)." He says I displayed "a remarkable ignorance of the most representative writings of the Reformed/Presbyterian tradition." These comments come in the context of my suggestion that federal theology needs revision in order to better hold together justification and sanctification. If I plead guilty to anything in this section, it's to tightly compressing an argument that I should have unfolded in more fullness. 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).

Horton's article could serve as Exhibit A for Evan's claims. Horton suggests three propositions that comprise "covenant nomism," the supposedly sub-biblical form of soteriology he wants to refute. (I have no desire to use the label "covenant nomism" to describe my position, nor does anyone else Horton critiques. E. P. Sanders used the term to describe the position of Second Temple Judaism, not Paul's theology.) The third proposition includes "Justification (or election) is by grace, but judgment is by works" (page 28, section heading). In other words, Horton *denies* that final judgment is by works. He sees this as a threat to justification by faith alone. Horton cannot hold together present justification by faith alone with a future evaluation of our deeds. He cannot tie together the forensic with the transformational.

But this incompatibility would have surprised the Apostle Paul who taught in one place, "We conclude a man is justified by faith apart from deeds of the law" (Rom. 3:28) and in another place, "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10). For Paul, final judgment according to works is internal to the gospel, not antithetical to it (Rom. 2:16). Likewise, Horton's rejection of future judgment by works runs aground of the Reformed confessional tradition. The Westminster Standards teach that at the last day, the righteous will be openly acquitted (WSC 38, WLC 90; note that "acquitted" is justification language, indicating a future, as yet unrealized, dimension of our justification). The Confession affirms that everyone "shall appear before the tribunal of Christ, to give an account of their thoughts, words, and deeds; and to *receive according to what they have done* in the body, whether good or evil." The Confession goes on to state that it is only the righteous that will enter into eternal life. Actual righteousness, not merely imputed righteousness, is clearly in view, given the prooftexts cited (e.g., Mt. 25:31ff) and the contrast drawn with the destiny of the wicked. Finally, the Confession states that the reason we are taught about this final judgment is to "*deter all men from sin*" and to "*shake off all carnal security*" (WCF 33; emphasis added). Horton's problem, then, is not with covenant nomism; it's with Scripture and the Reformers. He appears to be shaving off parts of the truth that do not easily fit into his reductionistic understanding of justification.

Horton claims the federalist theological construction is "just the system of doctrine found in *all* of the Reformed and Presbyterian symbols" (page 25, emphasis added). But unless this is qualified, it is patently false. Federalism – in the sense that I critiqued it in my colloquium essay – is certainly *not* found in *all* the Reformed confessions. Indeed, it's found in very few. The bi-covenantal doctrine (including the covenant of works) arose very gradually, and did not crystallize until the scholastic period. Any study of the history of covenant theology will bear this out. For example, David Weir's highly respected work *The Origins of Federal Theology in Sixteenth Century Reformation Thought* argues convincingly that "While John Calvin and the earlier Reformers discussed the importance of the postlapsarian covenant of grace, they never taught the

federal theology with its prelapsarian covenant motif . . . The prelapsarian 'covenant of works' motif originated between 1560 and 1590 in the Palatinate" (vii). Weir proves Calvin was not a federal theologian. Calvin did not believe in a meritorious covenant with Adam. We should note that Calvin was the primary author of the Gallic Confession of Faith. Article 9 confesses, "We believe that man was created pure and perfect in the image of God and that by his own guilt he fell *from the grace* which he received . . ." (emphasis added). Nor did Calvin view the Mosaic covenant as a "republished covenant of works." Commenting on Jer. 31, he wrote, "God has never made any other covenant than that which he made formerly with Abraham, and at length confirmed by the hand of Moses."

Bi-covenantal federalism did not enter the Reformed mainstream until after 1590, thanks largely to Robert Rollock and Amandus Polanus. It really came into its own in British Puritanism during the seventeenth century, finally being standardized by the Westminster divines. But even then, it must be granted that the *meritorious* nature of the original Adamic covenant has always been a matter of debate, with a majority of Reformed scholars siding with me over and against Horton, contending that the "covenant of works" was *not* a merit-based covenant. (See footnote 7 on page 120 of my essay.)

One wonders if Horton himself is actually the one ignorant of these facts. Morton Smith, no friend of the "Federal Vision," but a staunch supporter of federalist theology, admits, "The first confessional standards to talk about the covenant of works is actually the Westminster Standards, but the Irish Articles written and published in 1615 have in article 21 the essential doctrine that we would speak of as the covenant of works" (taped lecture, "Federal Theology and the Westminster Standards," 2004 Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary Spring Conference). If the Westminster Standards, a relatively late confessional document in the post-Reformation era, are the *first* to speak of the covenant of works, it can hardly be the case that the covenant of works is *the* distinguishing feature of Reformed theology. If Horton wants to challenge this scholarly consensus regarding the history of covenant theology, summarized on pages 119 and 130 of my colloquium essay, he will have to do more than accuse me of ignorance. He has to back up his claims with solid evidence, something his *Modern Reformation* essay sorely lacks.

Horton says I am no longer "Reformed" because I suggest federal theology needs recasting. But surely he is aware that a wide swath of the Reformed church has been and is calling for revision of just this doctrine. It's not as though I am a lone voice crying in the wilderness. I've already made reference to Evans' dissertation, which offers a deep and insightful critique of classical federalism. But there are others. John Murray certainly called for at least a mild reshaping of federalism in his various writings on covenant theology. It would be hard to find a more highly respected scholar-pastor in the PCA than Wilson Benton (at Kirk of the Hills in St. Louis). In his 1985 essay, "Federal Theology: Review for Revision," published in *Through Christ's Word* (edited by W. Robert Godfrey[!] and Jesse L. Boyd III), Benton chronicled the rise of federalism in the context of British Puritanism, attributing it largely to the influence of Ramist logic, and called for an overhaul of covenant theology quite similar to my colloquium essay. A few

years ago, some leading pastors within the PCA put out a list of "Common Reservations PCA Elders Express Concerning the Westminster Standards." Included in the list was WCF 7.2, concerning the covenant of works. The explanation reads as follows: "Several revered churchmen think the covenant made with Adam, though having duties, was established by God's grace, and is inappropriately distinguished as 'the covenant of works' from the eternal covenant of grace fulfilled by Christ through his work on our behalf." In other words, unless Horton is ready to defrock a good number of faithful Presbyterian pastors, he should recognize that the boundaries of what it means to be "Reformed" are quite larger than his article implies. Otherwise, he appears to be defending his idiosyncratic view as the only possible Reformed alternative. But Reformed orthodoxy has always been a circle, not a pinpoint.

Thus, I think Horton's main thesis in the article fails. Horton has not established the parallels between my views and those of Trent or "covenantal nomism." Horton makes the absurd claim that "While [Norm] Shepherd and company do not embrace the 'merit' aspect of that [Tridentine] system . . . [their view] amounts to the congruent merit advocated by late medieval theology." But this is like saying "Car A is exactly like Car B . . . only Car B doesn't have an engine." Without the engine of merit to drive the system, the entire Tridentine soteriology falls to the ground. Horton simply has not proven his claim that I *really* believe in merit in my heart of hearts, despite my voluminous arguments to the contrary.

It is remarkable that Horton could read my comments on union with Christ (pages 136-143) and still accuse me of turning the gospel into a "relaxed law; in other words covenant nomism" (page 25). Horton himself admits of his own view that

> We have never said that there are no conditions in the covenant – or even in justification. Rather, we have argued that the conditions of salvation as a whole process are many: life-long repentance and faith, sanctification, and glorification. But we have emphasized that these conditions are fulfilled by the gifts that come to us through union with Christ (page 27).

I couldn't agree more! There are *non-meritorious conditions* that must be met for salvation. These conditions are found in Christ alone. Faith, of course, is central. Only faith can unite us to Christ; works cannot do that, though of course, works will flow out of a faith that has laid hold of Christ (note my reference to "faith-wrought good works" on page 146). Thus, faith is the "mother condition" of the covenant because faith carries in itself the seeds of all the other virtues (repentance, love, and obedience; cf. WCF 14.2). If I underemphasized that Christ is received *by faith alone* in the colloquium paper, it's because it never even occurred to me that that topic was on the table for discussion. I assumed it was common ground all along. I am as firmly committed to *sola fide* as ever.

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.

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 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 . . .*

This was precisely my point in the colloquium essay. I was not espousing covenant nomism, but pure Calvinism.

Calvin continues:

> [T]he promises of the gospel . . . not only make us acceptable to God but also *render our works pleasing to him*. And not only does the Lord adjudge them pleasing; he also extends to them the blessings which under the covenant were owed to observance of his law. I therefore admit that what the Lord has promised in his law to the keepers of righteousness and holiness is *paid* to the works of believers, but in this repayment we must always consider the reason that wins favor for these works.
>
> Now we see that there are three reasons. The first is: God, having turned his gaze from his servants' works, which always deserve reproof rather than praise, embraces his servants in Christ, and with faith alone intervening, reconciles them to himself without the help of works. The second is: *of his own fatherly generosity and loving-kindness, and without considering their worth* [used here in the sense of "merit"], *he raises works to this place of honor, so that he attributes some value to them*. The third is: He receives these very works with pardon, not imputing the imperfection with which they are all so corrupted that they would otherwise be reckoned as sins rather than virtues.
>
> And this shows how deluded the Sophists are, who thought they had neatly got around all these absurdities by saying that works of their own intrinsic goodness are of no avail for meriting salvation but by reason of the covenant, because the Lord of his own liberality esteemed them so highly. Meanwhile they did not observe how far those works, which they meant to be meritorious, were from fulfilling the conditions of the promises unless preceded by justification resting on faith alone, and by forgiveness of sins, through which even good works must be cleansed of spots. Of the three causes of liberality, then, which make the works of believers acceptable, they noted only one [the covenant], and suppressed two – and the chief ones at that (*Institutes* 3.15.4, 7; 3.17.3; emphasis added)!

Note that Calvin says our works are repaid with an eternal reward ("everlasting salvation"), even though it is unmerited! Our works have "value" (though not merit), because God judges us with a certain tenderness. As a good pastor, Calvin insists that our good works in Christ can please God, despite the fact they must always be regarded as non-meritorious. This is why he differs from the sophists: they find actual *merit* in works, whereas Calvin only finds their *worth* and *value* derived from God's fatherly evaluation of our deeds, looked upon through the lens of Christ's finished work.

This gives rise to a "twofold acceptance" of believers before God: first of our persons, second of our works. Calvin explains the latter in terms of the former:

> This is the "acceptance" which Peter mentions [Acts 10:34; cf. 1 Pt. 1:17] whereby believers are, after their call, approved of God also in respect of works [cf. 1 Pt. 2:5]. For the Lord cannot fail to love and embrace the good things he works in them through his Spirit. But we must always remember that God "accepts" believers by reason of works only because he is their source and graciously, by way of adding to his liberality, deigns also to show "acceptance" toward the good works he has himself bestowed . . . Whence, also, are these works reckoned good as if they lacked nothing, save that the kindly Father grants pardon for those those blemishes and spots which cleave to them? To sum up, by this passage he means nothing else but that *God's children are pleasing and*

> *lovable to him*, since he sees in them the marks and features of his own countenance. For we have elsewhere taught that regeneration is a renewal of the divine image in us. Since, therefore, wherever God contemplates his own face, he both rightly loves it and holds it in honor, *it is said with good reason that the lives of believers, framed to holiness and righteousness, are pleasing to him* (*Institutes*, 3.17.5).

According to Calvin, this means our works possess a real righteousness, though apart from merit, since they are the product of grace.

> After forgiveness of sins is set forth, *the good works that now follow are appraised otherwise than on their own merit*. For everything imperfect in them is covered by Christ's perfection, every blemish or spot is cleansed away by his purity in order not to be brought in question at the divine judgment. Therefore, after the guilt of all transgressions that hinder man from bringing forth anything pleasing to God has been blotted out, and after the fault of imperfection, which habitually defiles even good works, is buried, *the good works done by believers are accounted righteous*, or what is the same thing, are reckoned righteousness [Rom. 4:22] . . .
>
> Accordingly, we can deservedly say that by faith alone not only we ourselves but our works as are justified (*Institutes* 3.17.8, 10; see also 3.18.5; emphasis added).

Again, this is *not* covenant nomism: We "get in" by grace alone, but also "stay in" by grace alone. Our works only find acceptance with God because our persons are already acceptable to God in Christ. Even passages which speak of believers being "repaid" for their works are only describing the "inheritance" promised to faithful sons (*Institutes* 3.18.2). "Nothing is clearer than that a reward is promised for good works to relieve the weakness of our flesh by some comfort but not to puff up our hearts with vainglory. Whoever, then, deduces merit of works from this, or weighs works and reward together, wanders very far from God's own plan" (*Institutes* 3.18.4).

Thus Horton is badly mistaken when he argues that in saying that God *values* our works (my page 146), I am unwittingly suggesting that they are *meritorious*. Footnoting Calvin as the source of my doctrine, I wrote in the colloquium piece: "Thus, in Christ, our faith-wrought good works have *value* before God, but not *merit*" (page 146). Horton asks, "Just what is this 'value' [that our good works in Christ possess] that is not 'merit'?" (page 25). But the same question could just as easily apply to Calvin! Again, Horton is found to be representing his own idiosyncratic position, not the mainstream of the Reformed tradition.

Horton suggests that I've linked these works to final justification in a meritorious way, when in fact my colloquium essay does no such thing. Again, if Horton familiarized himself with Calvin's *Institutes* 3.15-18, portions of which were just quoted above and referred to in my original paper, he'd understand what I have in mind. I was simply copying Calvin. There, as we've already seen, Calvin makes some of his strongest comments against *merit* as a theological concept, and yet insists that our good works have *value*.

I fully agree with Calvin that "merit" is "an unscriptural and dangerous word" (*Institutes* 3.15.2, editor's section heading). Calvin explains, admitting he wishes the term had never been introduced into theological discourse:

> I must first make these prefatory remarks concerning the term "merit": whoever first applied it to men's works over against God's judgment provided very badly for sincere faith. Of course, I would like to avoid verbal battles, but I wish that Christian writers had always exercised such restraint as not to take it into their heads needlessly to use such terms foreign to Scripture that would produce great offense and very little fruit. Why, I ask, was there need to drag in the term "*merit*" when the *value* of good works could without offense have been meaningfully explained by another term? How much offense this term contains is clear from the great damage it has done to the world. Surely, as it is a most prideful term, it can do nothing but obscure God's favor and imbue men with perverse haughtiness.
>
> I admit that the ancient writers of the church commonly used it, and would that they had not given posterity occasion for error by their misuse of one little word (*Institutes* 3.15.2; emphasis added).

Calvin is expressing my sentiments exactly. He then goes on to explain that the better ancient theologians who used the term qualified it severely (e.g., Augustine, Chrysostom, Bernard), such that it really became unnecessary. But when Calvin turns to the "value of good works" (3.15.3, editor's section title), he says these works, while worthless in themselves (he cites Lk. 17:10), nevertheless are "acceptable" and "praiseworthy" before God. They do not possess merit, "For to the Lord we have given nothing unrequired but have only carried out services owed, for which *no thanks are due*" yet, "Good works are *pleasing to God* and are not unfruitful for their doers. But they receive by way of reward the most ample benefits of God, *not because they so deserve* [e.g., because of merit] *but because God's kindness has of itself set value on them*." In other words, Calvin does precisely what I sought to do in my colloquium essay: while avoiding the problematic category of *congruent merit*, he still insists that our works have *worth* and *value* before God because of his fatherly kindness. Calvin explains further that merit is a category only invoked by those dissatisfied with God's gracious evaluation of their works:

> What unkindness it is that men are not content with the generosity of God which bestows unearned rewards upon works that merit no such thing, and that with profane ambition strive that what comes entirely from God's munificence may seem to be credited to the merit of works!

Calvin goes on to illustrate that this is the "common sense" view of the matter.

In 3.15.5, Calvin says that if these matters had been handled properly in "bygone ages" (that is, if the *value* of our works had not been confused with *merit* – precisely the thing Horton does!), "so many tumults and dissensions would never have arisen." In section 6, he criticizes Rome for having taught the world that men can do good works outside of Christ. He also argues that union with Christ does not give us the opportunity to gain merit by good works. In 3.16.2, he accuses the Romish theologians of "stupidly" reasoning "from reward to merit." In 3.16.3, he notes that "All the apostles are full of exhortations, urgings, and reproofs with which to instruct the man of God in every good work, and that without mention of merit." All in all, I do not see how Calvin's view is

different than the one I briefly set forth in the colloquium essay, though I believe it is widely different from what Horton advocates.

Horton has not taken the time to put forth my views on justification accurately and he has certainly not shown that I've compromised the Reformed doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone on the basis of grace alone. Even when he tries to show that I smuggle meritorious works into the final judgment, he pays insufficient attention to my precise language. I said that the final judgment "includes an evaluation of our works" (quoted on page 28; found on page 146 in the original). But that's not a distinctively Tridentine doctrine. Indeed, as I've already argued, it's thoroughly Westminsterian (WLC 90; WSC 38; WCF 33) and Scriptural (e.g., Mt. 25:31ff; 2 Cor. 5:8ff) to teach that the final judgment is according to works. In fact, as already suggested, one of the glaring weaknesses of Horton's view is that it cannot incorporate eschatological judgment into the total picture. Here Horton is the one whose confessional commitments should be questioned. But for my part, I insist that nothing in my essay validates the parallels Horton seeks to draw between my views (along with Shepherd's views) and the system set forth by Trent. He makes a wild leap in asserting that our view of final justification amounts to congruent merit (page 25-26). That's simply false from any and every angle.

If Horton had wanted to criticize somebody for snuggling up to Trent, he should have looked to men arguing on the *other side* in the *Auburn Avenue Theology* book. For example, in discussing rewards and good works, Smith said "there is a meriting aspect to these works" (page 114). In other words, Smith has openly adopted Trent's congruent merit category. Beisner does the same, but he goes even further. While denying strict merit, he says, "creatures can have covenantal merit – that is, by fulfilling a condition the Creator condescends to establish" (323). Beisner does not qualify this definition of merit, meaning that faith itself could be understood as a "meritorious work" since it certainly fulfills a condition the Creator has condescended to establish.

Horton's article has several other glitches as well. While it's true that Paul's purpose in Rom. 1-3 is to show the whole human race is under condemnation, most top-flight Pauline scholars would not accept Horton's facile equation of "natural revelation" given to the Gentiles with the Torah given to the Jews (though Horton's assertion that the Gentiles are "swept into Israel" in a representative fashion is true enough). Gentiles are those "without the law [Torah]" (Rom. 2:12-14) in Paul's language, contrary to Horton's assertion that Gentiles were under Torah (page 25). Horton's reading of Romans is too simplistic, and he fails to engage the redemptive-historical thrust of the letter.

More generally, Horton tries to patch together a redemptive-historical approach to Pauline theology with a more systematic, scholastic approach, but it is by no means clear how he does this consistently (see page 28). By what hermeneutical criteria do we decide when Paul is moving in systematic categories rather than historical categories? How are these categories integrated into one another? Horton doesn't provide any rationale for his overall approach to Paul. It looks like picking and choosing rather than careful exegesis.

For Horton to suggest that I fail to acknowledge a distinction between indicatives and imperatives because I confuse law and gospel is simply mistaken (page 28). I certainly do see a distinction between indicatives and imperatives, and have emphasized it repeatedly in other writings and teaching. However, I do not think indicatives = gospel and imperatives = law. The law of Moses, after all, begins with an *indicative*: "I have redeemed you" (Ex. 20:2). The preaching of the gospel in the New Testament always carries with it an *imperative* to repent and believe (e.g., Acts 2:38). Unless Horton is going to insist that the gospel requires *no* human response of faith, his point is worthless. The same is true of his assertion that I have made "the hermeneutic of unbelief" into "a guide for our own hermeneutical reflections" (page 28). When I said that the law is sweet to the believing heart and the gospel condemning to the unbeliever (page 131-132), I was exegeting Scripture, not Bultmann (see the numerous biblical texts I cited: Heb. 2:1ff, 2 Cor. 2:16, Acts 2:16ff, etc.). Again, Horton is simply not engaging the argument.

Horton also failed to carefully consider pages 132-35 of my essay. Assuming he read that section on Gal. 3-4, it is hard to understand why he would think I do not distinguish the Mosaic covenant from the Abrahamic covenant (though he does admit that I am open to "exegetical nuance," page 27). My colloquium paper was quite straight forward in showing that the Mosaic Torah must be distinguished from the Abrahamic promise. The Torah entered the scene at a specific point in redemptive history and at a later point it exited from the stage of redemptive history. The Torah was given with a built in expiration date. The goal of the Torah was Christ (Rom. 10:4), and having reached that goal, the Torah was set aside (as a covenant) so that the Abrahamic promises could come to full realization. On pages 133-134, I even said, "The Mosaic covenant . . . *prevented* the full fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise . . . [F]or Paul, . . . his Jewish countrymen and fledging converts [addressed in Galatians] have a choice to make: *Christ or Torah*." So I certainly see tension between Torah and the Abrahamic covenant (though I admit I may not construe that tension and its resolution in precisely the way Horton does).

I was consoled by one aspect of Horton's article: As badly as he caricatured my position, he mangled Tom Wright's even worse. Unfortunately, Horton's short essay tried to do too much, and as a result did nothing well. By trying to take on me, Shepherd, Schlissel, and Wright all in one article, he ended up doing justice to none of us. Nuances were lost, careful distinctions obliterated, evidence badly slanted, and quotations taken out of context. There were unproven historical assertions and misused prooftexts. Unfortunately, at least for now, I'll have to leave these other men to fend for themselves.

The "Déjà Vu All Over Again" piece was most distressing to me because I know that Horton can do better. I do not think our positions are nearly as far apart, or as contradictory, as his rhetoric suggests. Indeed, I see no reason why we shouldn't continue to be allies on all kinds of fronts. Horton has shown a greater degree of catholicity in some of his past work; it was disappointing to see him taking up such a sectarian stance in the *Modern Reformation* article.

Horton's earlier essay, "Law, Gospel, and Covenant: Reassessing Some Emerging Antitheses," published in the *Westminster Theological Journal*, issue 64 (2002), 279-87,

was a model of scholarly charity and grace. While I disagreed with certain features of Horton's article, I appreciated his tone. In that piece Horton argues that the law/gospel antithesis is as Reformed as it is Lutheran. Horton acknowledges that "At present there is considerable debate within conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches over the precise nature of covenant theology." Horton surveyed the parties in the discussion. Some desire to maintain the more classical, scholastic law/gospel formulations, while others desire a more redemptive-historical, narratival approach to covenant theology.

Unlike some of Horton's earlier critics, I fully acknowledge that the older Reformed confessions support a hard law/gospel antithesis, though they also manage to incorporate some redemptive historical concerns (cf. WCF 7, which situates the law of Moses within the unfolding program of the covenant of grace). In my colloquium essay, I was careful not to label the law/gospel antithesis as an exclusively Lutheran hermeneutic. I do believe that Reformed theology has never totalized the law/gospel paradigm the way Lutherans often have (and so I note on page 127 that Smith's more absolute construal of the law/gospel antithesis is quite "Lutheran"). In the colloquium essay, I wanted to carefully guard myself against the charge of historical revisionism.

Of course, it should also be noted by Horton (and those on his side of the discussion) that the law/gospel antithesis cannot simply be read into a bi-covenantal (covenant of works/covenant of grace) paradigm, nor vice versa. Historically, the covenant of works did not emerge for several decades after Luther's (re)discovery of the law/gospel antithesis, and exegetically, a meritorious covenant of works needs to be argued for from the text of Genesis 1-2, not just imported from a Pauline discussion of the Mosaic law. These points are generally overlooked, and the Mosaic and Adamic administrations all too easily collapsed into one another.

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 narratival 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.

At the conclusion of Horton's *WTJ* article, he admits that both sides of the discussion appeal to tradition, but neither side makes tradition absolutely normative. Horton says, "If revisions [to covenant theology] need to be made, so be it, but let them be informed." My colloquium essay was more or less an attempt to do just that, namely, to refine traditional covenant theology in a more Trinitarian, redemptive-historical, eschatological fashion. Horton wrote, "A revisionary perspective of a covenant theology antithetical to the law-gospel distinction may turn out to be more biblical, in which case we would have to dissent from our tradition." Exactly. The dissent is not total because the tradition is not monolithic. The Reformed tradition is a cord with several strands. Thus it is possible for revisions to take place *within* a Reformed confessional tradition. The Westminster Standards themselves represented a revision of an already established Reformed consensus on several matters (e.g., the covenant of works and the Sabbath to name just two). Thus, there is no need to throw down the gauntlet and make the law/gospel antithesis or the meritorious covenant of works the *sine qua non* of Reformed theology. For example, the Three Forms of Unity make use of a law/gospel antithesis, but make do without a meritorious covenant of works. The Westminster Standards have a covenant of works with Adam, but treat the Mosaic law as an aspect of the administration of the covenant of grace. The moral content of the Mosaic law may overlap with the moral requirements placed upon Adam (cf. WCF 19: the law is a perpetual and permanent "perfect rule of righteousness"), but the content of that law is *not* republished at Sinai as a covenant of works; rather, it is republished as part of a gracious covenant given to redeemed sinners (cf. WCF 7). So there is a variety within Reformed covenant theology that must be acknowledged. The gospel is not at stake in any of these discussions; they are debates that have been going on within Reformed circles for quite some time.

My hope is that Horton will reconsider his assessment of my position on the covenant. Perhaps he is open to further discussion and clarification. I also hope he is open to revising his views of the "Federal Vision" as a whole, as well as Tom Wright's theology. In my judgment, Horton has not been fair to those he has criticized. He has not listened carefully or read sympathetically. He is too good a scholar and too gifted a teacher to stand by such rash and uniformed opinions. In my estimation, the things Horton and I hold in common far outweigh our differences, and I would be happy to join with him in combating the *real* evils that abound in the Reformed and Evangelical world today.

Finally, if anyone would like to pursue the matter further, I suggest reading Jim Jordan's essay "Merit Versus Maturity: What Did Jesus Do For Us?" in the book *The Federal Vision*, available from Athanasius Press (http://www.auburnavenue.org/Athanasius%20Press/FV%20book%20intro.htm). His essay covers some of the same ground I sought to cover in colloquium article, but he gives a more in-depth survey of the early chapters of Genesis, with their implications for our understanding of the covenant. It is hard to derive a meritorious covenant of works from a close reading of Gen. 1-2. See also Joel Garver's weblog entries on the covenant of works from May, 2004, available at http://sacradoctrina.blogspot.com/2004_05_01_sacradoctrina_archive.html. Garver says, "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." Garver also includes a helpful list of ways in which the covenant of works and covenant grace are similar and dissimilar. See also my broader response to "Federal Vision" critics in my essay, "Rome Won't Have Me," available at http://hornes.org/theologia/.