

This paper is a reply to Dr. Bryan Chapell's response to an ongoing controversy in Reformed circles. I have taken up this task only with great reluctance because I do not wish to even give the *appearance* of crossing swords with great and godly leaders in the Reformed community. I have every reason to consider Dr. Chapell my superior, a true father in the faith. But I also feel a compulsion to undertake this task because of the stature of Dr. Chapell and the fact that his paper is sure to be very influential in how these matters are handled in the PCA and in the Reformed world at large. Thankfully, Dr. Chapell has provided a voice of calm and deliberative reason amidst the cacophony. His "let's talk it over" approach is welcomed, and this is my attempt to take him up on his offer. Of course, I extend the same offer back to Dr. Chapell and to all others who would like to engage in continued discussion over these issues.

I admire the way Chapell has taken a gracious, winsome, informed, and de-politicized look the theological controversy in our midst. No doubt Chapell is pulled in many different directions, given his position and influence. He has my respect and sympathy. I can only imagine how difficult his situation is when dealing with denominational controversy. But Chapell's work reveals true "grace under fire," for he refuses to cave into either "side," simply telling this or that group what they'd like to hear. He also refuses to give way to acrimonious rhetoric, instead seeking to speak thoughtfully and charitably to everyone involved. Lord willing, his helpful paper will create an environment in which fruitful, trusting discussion can take place amongst Reformed brethren. My reply to Chapell is a humble effort to carry on that discussion and keep the conversation going.

The controversy is sometimes referred to as the "New Perspective on Paul" (NPP) or the "Federal Vision" (FV) or "The Auburn Avenue Theology" (AAT). I'll give my own assessment of how it should be regarded below. For the sake of the reader, I have pasted in the full text of Chapell's paper. My responses will be in text boxes. I have tried to limit my responses to those areas that are most important to the discussion, or where I think Chapell's work needs most correction. Hopefully, this piece will contribute to better understanding and more fruitful conversation in the future.

The controversy in Reformed circles has been rather ugly at times . . . well, ok, it's actually been ugly *most* of the time, unfortunately. In that regard, Chapell's attempt to speak with clarity, charity, humility, and integrity is greatly appreciated by many. His style and tone are commendable. Again, I have nothing but the highest respect for Dr. Chapell, the institution and denomination he represents, and his Covenant Theological Seminary colleagues. While I will take issue with some aspects of his paper below, I hope to do so in a spirit of brotherly love, seeking to be one piece of iron sharpening another. While I will have to register some disagreements with his point of view, *I whole-heartedly agree with his conclusion in the last three paragraphs*. That agreement should color the way all my other comments are interpreted. In the nature of the case, negative comments will outnumber positive, but I found a *great deal* in Chapell's paper to appreciate. *Please keep that fact in mind*.

Occasionally, I'll speak in the plural, of what "we" believe. This isn't quite fair to others who have been lumped in with me. In reality, I'm only speaking for myself, though I hope others who have been associated with the theological views Chapell seeks to analyze will see their own concerns reflected in my reply.

This leads to a further caveat: In this paper I have spoken (by necessity) as though there were two basic “sides” in this controversy. I dislike that language for at least two reasons:

[1] Even when Christians disagree, they should not think in terms of sides or parties. The “us-versus-them” mentality is simply inappropriate (cf. 1 Cor. 1:10ff; Phil 2:1ff). We are all brothers and sisters in the Lord striving to embrace and live by God’s truth. For a vast array of reasons, we find things to disagree about. But, especially in the Reformed community, we must never allow those differences to outweigh the glorious and precious things we have in common. If it is truly possible to esteem others better than ourselves while debating their theology, we should find a way to do so.

[2] The “two sides” approach is way too simplistic. Contrary to what some have claimed, the “FV” is not some monolithic movement, nor is there an official checklist of FV beliefs. The FV is an amorphous blob, probably defined more by those who oppose it (and have therefore *forced* definition onto it) than by proponents themselves. Those lumped into the “FV” group do tend to share a basic set of concerns, but more than that, as friends and brothers, they share in an ongoing conversation together. Thus, it would be virtually impossible to articulate what makes someone “FV,” whether theologically or sociologically with any precision. But the same is true on the other side. Those who oppose the FV, even adamantly, often disagree amongst themselves. There is diversity all over place, making it very, very difficult to sort the issues out in a neat and tidy way. Of necessity, my paper has had to oversimplify reality for the sake of communication and convenience. The reader should keep this in mind. The FV and its opponents represent a variety of subcultures within the Reformed world. This is not a binary discussion.

I did not write this response out of frustration but out of a desire to further the peace and purity of Christ’s church. There is no “boiling cauldron” underneath my response, ready to erupt at a moment’s notice. I have generally made it a policy to not respond to critics of my work (or the FV generally) unless the situation necessitated it. I’m much more concerned with setting forth my positive vision for the church. But Dr. Chapell has opened the door to conversation, and as an FV person he singles out in his report, I feel it is not out of line for me to contribute an FV response to Chapell’s assessment of the situation. I am not the most intelligent, persuasive, or articulate defender of FV-type views. But, Lord willing, this response will give interested people a chance to look at the present ordeal through the eyes of a FV proponent. The view might not be what the critics were expecting to see, but I trust it an accurate representation.

My hope is to offer a reply to Chapell that moves us all further down the road towards mutual *agreement*, or at least mutual *understanding*. Some matters continue to need clarification and that has been my aim here. I want to share Chapell’s conversational humility with regard to these issues, and thus I invite response and critique of my thoughts offered here. I’m quite sure I have not spoken the last word. But I pray it will be a word on the way to where we need to go.

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

by

**Dr. Bryan Chapell,**

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First, my disclaimers: I am not a New Perspective on Paul expert. A seminary president sometimes has the role of getting up to speed on an issue that has suddenly become hot in the Church, and he should make no pretense about knowing as much as the real scholars. I have needed to ask our godly faculty to help me understand these issues so that I can advise friends of Covenant Theological Seminary as to what is going on as best as I can. I do not intend for this to be a definitive research paper where every statement is documented and qualified for scholarly dissection. I also intend only to discuss the concerns that are most significant for the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), knowing that the New Perspective's own interests are much broader. For the sake of fairness I have consulted various persons on both sides of these issues and asked them to review this document.

Chapell's humility is displayed in his willingness to seek godly counsel in how to deal with these issues. I appreciate his desire to look at the controversy as it impinges directly on his denomination, with a view to discussing rather than dissecting. Of course, Chapell himself is a "real scholar" every bit as much as his fellow faculty members, so his evaluation should be carefully considered by everyone who has an interest in the present controversy. This is no off-the-cuff, shoot-from-the-hip response (which makes it rather unique among FV analyses).

I can vouch for Chapell's desire to consult both "sides" of the controversy in crafting his report. This desire to interact first hand with proponents and detractors is admirable and shows the total absence of pretension or arrogance on his part. It might have been helpful at a few junctures if Chapell had included quotations and documentation from those he is interacting with so we would know precisely who or what he has in view (though admittedly, most folks know where to find the debated materials by now!).

Hopefully, others will follow Chapell's dialogical model in the future. The controversy can only move towards resolution as those who disagree actually talk things over. Chapell has been very gracious in leaving the door open for further discussion.

Still, please consider this a coffee-shop explanation

Great! Let me grab another cup of coffee so we can continue the conversation . . .

for Christian friends who have asked my opinion of the recent hubbub that seems to be troubling some churches and presbyteries in the PCA. No doubt my thoughts are too simplistic to satisfy any real expert, but hopefully they are expressed with sufficient clarity and charity to help some dear folk know a bit of what this New Perspective is about.

Allow me to interrupt here. My major concern is found at just this point. This is my *meta-criticism* of Chapell's paper, and probably my single most important complaint. How the issues are framed is of paramount importance in this controversy.

Why has Chapell identified this group with the "New Perspective on Paul"? I do not think this is a helpful or accurate way to frame things. Though I am named below as a proponent of the theology Chapell is seeking to evaluate, I do not regard myself as "New Perspective" theologian (especially if that is juxtaposed to being a "Reformed" theologian).

I am certainly *influenced* by men who would be regarded as "New Perspective" scholars (particularly N. T. Wright), and I admit to seeking to incorporate their best exegetical insights into my biblical and pastoral theology whenever I can (just as I seek to incorporate the best insights I can glean from other strands of Christian scholarship). But the current fracas is not going to be properly understood so long as it is couched in terms of the NPP.

Rather, the men Chapell has identified are better understood as a loosely allied "Reformed catholic" group. We are spearheading a Reformed catholic project – a project which is probably more about retrieval of past Reformed concerns than it is about anything related to the NPP. Reformed catholic distinctives may overlap with NPP distinctives, to be sure. We have a concern for the visible unity of the church, not just institutionally (in matters of doctrine, worship, polity, and structure) but organically (in how we actually treat one another and cooperate within the kingdom of Christ to accomplish ministry and mission). We have an interest in reading Scripture as a "big story" about God's plan to redeem an international community of believers to himself (the Bible's "meta-narrative"). And so on. But NPP is not necessarily tied to Reformed theology, or even to orthodox Christianity (as seen in the work of liberal E. P. Sanders). Those involved in the so-called FV are not overly enamored with the NPP, nor are we simply trying to put a Reformed spin on a non-Reformed theological program so we can stay within confessional boundaries.

How are we justified in viewing ourselves as "Reformed catholics"? Three reasons:

[1] The NPP is not big enough a category to cover all that's going on in the current discussion. It's way too specialized and narrow of a movement, and way too academic. Most of the controversy at the moment revolves around issues that are not really germane to the NPP in any unique sense (e.g., sacramental efficacy; paedocommunion vis-à-vis American revivalism; covenant/election; covenant of works; finer points of Trinitarian theology; etc.). Chapell tries to squeeze way too much under the NPP heading. At times,

he acknowledges that the FV/AAT must be distinguished from the NPP, but his way of titling and organizing his paper basically perpetuate the myth that they should be identified. No one currently involved in the Reformed FV/AAT discussion is a Pauline scholar, doing work in the academic circles in which the NPP is discussed and debated. As I acknowledged above, at most we've sought to take certain features from the NPP and incorporate them into our own version of historic Reformed theology. Perhaps those features of the NPP are not as compatible with traditional Reformed biblical theology as we think. But if so, it will take sustained argument to make that case, not mere assertions. In terms of overall influence, the people labeled FV or AAT are far, far, far more influenced by Calvin and the Westminster divines than any other sources, ancient or contemporary.

[2] Reformed catholicity has been a major theme in our writings all along. Indeed, I'm still quite surprised that this label has not picked up any momentum in the discussions as they've unfolded. It would seem to cover more, and exclude less, than just about any other name that's been suggested. It seems to be an adequate umbrella to cover the whole array of issues on the table for debate. The year *before* Auburn Avenue hosted Wright at its pastor's conference, it hosted a conference on the topic of "Reformed Catholicity," featuring John Armstrong, John Frame, Doug Wilson, Steve Wilkins, and myself as speakers. Now, *no one* paid much attention to that conference, which in itself tells you something about our twisted priorities in the Reformed world. (Apparently we're far more interested in feeding controversy than in theological and practical ways to build ecclesial unity!) But *before* AAPC gave the NPP a public platform (as well as one of its foremost Reformed critics – a "catholic" move in itself!), it used the label "Reformed catholic" to describe its overarching program. I think "Reformed catholic" gets more to the heart of what we're doing, and it's a comprehensive enough label to cover the whole package. Any insights we glean from the NPP (or, more specifically, Wright, since he's about the only NPP scholar we talk much about) are fitted into a Reformed framework we already possess -- not the other way around. Chapell gives the impression we're trying to graft Reformed theology into a basic NPP structure, when, in reality, our Reformed convictions are much more basic. The NPP only provides some exegetical particulars, not the overall structure.

[3] While it is true I published a Reformed appreciation of Wright on the doctrine of justification in the Spring 2002 issue of *Reformation and Revival Journal* ("N. T. Wright and Reformed Theology: Friend or Foe?"), I also published an even more extensive defense and outworking of the Reformed catholic program in the Winter 2004 issue of the same journal ("An Immodest Proposal for Pursuing Peace and Purity in the Body of Christ: A Plea for Reformed Catholicity"). Moreover, those who have listened to sermons and Sunday School lectures from me and others over the last several years will note Reformed catholic emphases repeatedly brought to the fore (e.g., my two part sermon series on "Reformed Catholicity" from 1-12-03 and 1-19-03 at Auburn Avenue). I have never even spoken of the NPP in a sermon (though I plead guilty to often consulting Wright's commentaries for exegetical help in sermon prep).

Why does this matter? In my opinion, painting the current controversy with a NPP brush casts a shadow of unnecessary and unhelpful suspicion over us. Our work does far more to *retrieve* lost insights from earlier generations of Reformed theologians than to propagate something altogether *new* and revolutionary. We're seeking to recover and enrich the Reformed tradition, not overthrow it. The NPP label makes it look like we are NPP proponents who are seeking to hold onto to Reformed theology whenever it's convenient. In reality, the opposite is going on: we're thoroughly Reformed, but unafraid of appropriating NPP insights when and where we think they are consistent with the best of our Reformed heritage. Chapell – inadvertently no doubt – has made it almost impossible for us to get a fair hearing in the Reformed community because of the guilt created by association with the NPP. In short, we're not "about" the NPP; we're "about" classical Calvinism. Perhaps we misunderstand our own Reformed history, but whoever wants to prove that will have to deal with a lot of evidence we've been setting forth for the last several years (e.g., my "Baptismal Efficacy and the Reformed Tradition: Past, Present, and Future," available at [http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/cat\\_sacraments.htm](http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/cat_sacraments.htm), much of which consists in nothing more than quotations from early Reformers). I'm certainly open to the possibility that my understanding of early Reformed sacramental theology is wrong, so this is a discussion worth having.

### **What Is the New Perspective on Paul?**

The New Perspective on Paul is a general term referring to multiple strains of thought that have been building in England and North America for about 30 years but have caught the attention of most PCA leaders within the last five years. In broadest terms the New Perspective emphasizes the corporate nature of our salvation in distinction from the typical way many North Americans think about their salvation primarily as "a personal relationship with Jesus." The best forms of the New Perspective do not deny the personal aspects of our salvation but contend that a focus on individual blessings is more a product of Western culture than a reflection of the Apostle Paul's design for the New Testament church.

So far, so good. But it is hardly unique to the NPP to say that American culture is highly individualistic, especially as compared to ancient cultures, including ancient Hebrew culture and the culture of the early church. Many Reformed theologians emphasized the problems with American evangelicalism's individualistic bent long before the year 2000 (5 years ago) – when this supposed NPP movement began making deep inroads into the PCA. Surely Chapell would agree that American evangelicalism has fostered too low a view of the institutional church and the corporate nature of salvation.

For an example of our communal concerns, see my essay, "God Is Not Enough," available at <http://trinity-pres.net/essays/God-is-not-enough.php>.

What we need to remember is that the Bible never divorces our corporate identity from our personal faith -- we who believe are members of the body of Christ. Still, without

personal faith and repentance we cannot truly unite with Christ no matter how much we participate in the Church's corporate heritage or practices.

This is absolutely correct, and well said. I know of no one associated with the FV/AAT who would say anything different. Indeed, we're Trinitarian: the one and the many (the corporate and the individual) are equally ultimate. Thus, there is no ordinary possibility of salvation outside of the church (WCF 25.2), nor is there any salvation whatsoever apart from a response of personal faith towards Jesus Christ. Salvation is both individual and corporate.

My guess is that we all agree on this individual/corporate dynamic. The whole question is: who has the most biblical understanding of the relationship between the individual and the corporate?

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

In scholarly circles the New Perspective was originally most associated with such names as Krister Stendahl, E. P. Sanders, and James Dunn. These are not traditional Evangelicals, though they may identify themselves with some Evangelical concerns. The New Perspective has made its most important inroads into Evangelical thought through the writings of N. T. Wright. Wright is a brilliant and engaging Anglican who has written masterfully about subjects such as the resurrection and the historicity of the Gospels. But Wright has additional concerns that are stirring the Evangelical community. He argues that the early Reformers (especially Martin Luther), though they may have advanced correct theology, wrongly read Paul in the light of their conflict with Roman Catholicism rather than in the context of the Apostle's own setting and concerns.

Wright is brilliant, as a theologian and communicator. But his concerns here are not to discredit the Reformers, whom he often praises (especially Calvin). Rather his concerns are exegetical. He affirms that if Paul had been confronted with the problems of medieval Romanism, he would have given the same answers the Reformers gave. But he also argues that it is overly simplistic to *completely identify* 16<sup>th</sup> century questions with 1<sup>st</sup> century questions. The discussion over Wright must take place at the exegetical level or it simply skirts the real issues.

Note that we disagree with Wright on many points and are not afraid to say so (e.g., the ordination of women to the priesthood). We are not "Wright groupies."

Wright says that Paul's central concern was *not* how we obtain personal salvation by faith versus good moral works. Rather, Wright thinks Paul was mostly concerned about how New Testament Christians identified themselves with the corporate, covenant community that was no longer exclusively Jewish. Wright says Paul is not so much arguing against gaining salvation by moral merit, but against the claim that in order to be a Christian one had to adopt the practices of Jewish exclusivity and identity in addition to faith in Christ.

This doesn't quite strike me as true to the point. Wright does believe individual salvation is a concern. But that concern is contextualized by a broader concern, namely the Jew-Gentile relationship in the new messianic age. The Jew-Gentile relationship is not peripheral to the gospel, but internal to it, given that denial of free Gentile inclusion in the church, by faith alone and apart from submission to Torah, constituted a denial of the gospel (cf. Gal. 2:11ff). This is a rather prominent issue in Paul's letters.

I think Wright would be unhappy to see salvation and ecclesiology played off against each other as Chapell does here (e.g., personal salvation vs. corporate identity).

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

Thank you, Dr. Chapell, for the kind words.

This assessment of where we're coming from is basically correct. I think all of us (whether we're in the PCA or not) have a great deal of appreciation for the PCA and the way God has used the denomination to spread the Reformed faith in a winsome, attractive manner to people. We appreciate the PCA's missional emphasis and the denomination's emerging concern to minister to the poor not only in word but also in deed. These are reflective of my own concerns (see, e.g., my paper "Aiming at Shalom," available here:

[http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich\\_lusk/aiming\\_at\\_shalom.htm](http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/aiming_at_shalom.htm)).

However, I think it is a bit simplistic to say we don't think the PCA is Reformed enough. In other ways, we might simultaneously argue that the PCA is over-Reformed (e.g., overly sectarian and cut off from the wider body of Christendom) and in need of more catholicity in spirit and practice. Any denomination faces the constant danger of only defining itself in terms of itself.

At any rate, the FV/AAT is not really an organized movement (as was, say, the PPLN) and never had any kind of set agenda to reform the PCA (or any other denomination). It's just an informal, apolitical, "grass roots" group of friends who share a common cluster of theological concerns. Yes, there are books, conferences, and websites, but there has never been any formalized attempt to "push" these views on the church at large. There have never been resolutions sent up to General Assembly or any other procedural action. Most importantly, these views have never been set forth as new tests of orthodoxy. No one in the FV/AAT group has ever even hinted that he would desire to bring charges against another church officer who disagreed. No one associated with the FV/AAT group has

called non-FV pastors and teachers heretics. The fiercest critics of the FV/AAT have made it publicly known they wish to drive FV/AAT men out of the PCA, but that attitude of intolerance is *a one way street*. FV/AAT men have no litigious bone to pick with the other side. They are only looking for a responsible, thoughtful discussion (such as Chapell provides here).

The Federal Vision and Auburn Avenue advocates (who think of themselves as returning to a more consistently Reformed theology) do not want to link their views to the New Perspective because of its apparent questioning of basic Reformed theology.

Which takes us back to my meta-concern: Chapell would have better served his audience if he took our desire here seriously and used some other label for the group of men and concerns that he wants to analyze. We are Reformed Catholics, not NPP scholars.

Conversely, New Perspective leaders may little regard Federal Vision or Auburn Avenue Theology because of its tendency to narrow its concerns to Church sacrament issues or related Church doctrine. New Perspective leaders tend to think of themselves as being about the "Big Story" of the role of the covenant in redeeming creation. They tend to view Federal Vision and Auburn Avenue as being caught up in a "little story" of renegotiating Presbyterianism.

Why is this relevant? I don't think any of us are all that concerned with what NPP scholars think about us. We're not in those circles, we have very little personal interaction with them (except for perhaps Wright), and many NPP men have no regard for the church or orthodox Christianity anyway. Many NPP scholars in academia probably have little regard for Covenant Seminary – but who cares?

At any rate, it seems that Chapell may be confusing widely different concerns here. How is a desire to grapple with the "big story" of the Bible comparable with "renegotiating Presbyterianism"? Shouldn't Presbyterians also desire to come to terms with the "big story" of Scripture as well – even if we would strongly disagree with the way many NPP scholars would frame it?

Despite these differences and objections, however, the two groups (New Perspective and Federal Vision/Auburn Avenue) continue in common perception to be of the same cloth.

But this is a *misperception* (unfortunately perpetuated by Chapell's paper). Again, common concerns and the borrowing of material do not make us "NPP" groupies of some sort. We're *Reformed* theologians; the NPP is not a Reformed movement in any way, shape, or form. Borrowing insights from NPP scholars does not make one NPP anymore than borrowing from C. S. Lewis makes one Anglican, or borrowing from G. K. Chesterton makes one Romish, or borrowing from Louis Berkhof makes one Dutch Reformed. I am confident Chapell would recognize valid insights can be found across denominational lines, and that we can incorporate those insights into our own frameworks without giving up our own Reformed identity.

Reasons for this include the observation in PCA presbyteries that Federal Vision and Auburn Avenue Theology proponents are often those most conversant with and defensive of New Perspective ideas. The Federal Vision advocates have mined New Perspective writings for ideas supportive of their interests, and consequently the two groups have simultaneously emerged in PCA consciousness. These realities will probably continue to cause the two groups to be considered together -- despite the legitimate objections of their respective leaders. What may be less apparent to both groups' leaders, however, is the common cultural soil from which they emerge even as they point to their different root systems.

Everything here sounds good until he mentions "common cultural soil." How can we share soil, but have "different root systems"? Isn't it rather difficult for different roots to be in identical soil? I think this betrays a serious confusion about where both the NPP and the FV/AAT have come from. The first is a post-Holocaust reassessment of 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism. The second is an attempt to recover classical Calvinism in a Reformed, biblical theological framework. Wright may be a bridge, since he has one foot in the NPP camp and another foot in the Reformed tradition, but affection for Wright hardly makes one NPP. I know Baptists, Methodists, Roman Catholics, Anabaptists, etc. who like a lot of what Wright has to say. Does that mean all these people have lost their denominational identities and have suddenly been swept up into the NPP net? I think not. To say otherwise is probably overreaching.

### **From Where Did this New Perspective Come?**

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

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

Much of this is true, no doubt, but again, I sense a bit of confusion here. It is true that communities and cultures share common stories through which they understand the world. For postmodernists, this entails a radical relativism and a denial of any transcendent, trans-cultural metanarrative that includes and explains the whole of human existence. But we're not postmodern relativists.

We reject the relativism that comes with postmodernism, at least in its popular and more extreme academic forms. We would say that Scripture does in fact give us the world's one true meta-narrative, true in all times and places, and for all peoples. It is simply the story of creation-fall-Israel-Jesus-church-consummation. I'm confident that Chapell, as a covenant theologian, would not object to reading the Scriptures as a unified "story" and that he would agree that this story is absolutely true. I'm not sure Chapell has identified anything problematic with the FV/AAT group here. Surely people knew how to think in terms of stories before the rise of postmodernism (even if they were less self-conscious about it).

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

Right. The Neo-Orthodox view of the Bible is reprehensible.

When this individualistic view of faith was eventually seen only to be feeding the interests and appetites of self, contemporary theologians turned to teaching that faith must be formed in community.

Right. But note this emphasis on community was only counterfeiting the teaching of the Bible and the Reformers, who also emphasized that the true faith is learned in community (e.g., Acts 2:42ff; Calvin's *Institutes* book 4, which describes the church as the "mother" of believers and says we must be nurtured by her all our lives). There is really no such thing as a self-taught, self-made Christian. Otherwise, why do we have pastors or seminaries (cf. Eph. 4:11ff)? I'm confident that Chapell is not intending to endorse evangelicalism's traditional *over*-emphasis on the individual over the church because I've heard him articulate concerns about that aspect of evangelicalism and counter it with a high ecclesiology. So I wonder: what's the point? Does Chapell reject the view that faith is ordinarily formed and nurtured from within the community of faith? Does he want to give credence to the idea of a self-made, self-taught "Lone Ranger" Christian?

According to this line of thought, by its shared narratives each community forms the faith that creates its religion that, in turn, informs its worldview. Of course, this would mean that the Bible is not divine truth provided by heaven, but is simply a cultural product that provides narratives by which individuals can operate in community. In other words,

Christianity supposedly is no different from every society that creates its own "truth" with its own stories -- there is no transcendent truth, all religions are human projections.

But, of course, this is not our view of the Bible. We are not relativists. We believe in the absolute authority of Scripture. We believe in plenary verbal inspiration. We believe WCF 1. This story Chapell is telling may be germane to the NPP, because many NPP scholars have woefully inadequate views of the Bible, but it has *nothing* to do with the FV/AAT.

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

I think this is exactly right. My only caveat: I do not think evangelicals have broken free from individualism quite as fully as Chapell seems to imply. But that's a judgment call, and he would certainly know better than I would.

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

This is probably giving way too much credit to the NPP. I doubt NPP academics are as conservative as Chapell suggests here and I doubt their concerns are this wholesome across the board. They are probably concerned with racism and the poor, but I doubt the other concerns matter much to the typical NPP NT theologian.

Reacting to what they perceive as individualistic, autonomous, and "Baptistic/Revivalistic" (i.e., overly focused on producing personal professions of faith) influences on the Church,

Presbyterians have been divided over responses to revivalism since the eighteenth century. Our history is riddled with splits over these things (e.g., Old/New Side and Old/New School splits). Insofar as the FV/AAT opposes the influences of revivalism, it is in line with historic Reformed thought.

Now, to be sure revivalistic impulses were incorporated into the Reformed tradition, and thus have become part of our common Reformed heritage. Many would contend that the PCA basically belongs to the New Side/New School pro-revivalist end of the spectrum, and a very good case can be made for that as the overall tenor and drift of the denomination.

But critiquing revivalism as such is hardly anything new. We might disagree with the way pro-revivalist Reformed theologians frame their understanding of covenant children, but this was an ongoing debate long, long before the rise of the NPP/FV/AAT. There is no reason why it should not be considered an intramural Reformed discussion (albeit, a very important one to each new rising generation of covenant children).

New Perspective advocates believe they are calling the Church back to being the faith community that the Bible requires both by its doctrinal teaching and by the narratives that reveal its larger redemptive story. Federal Vision and Auburn Avenue proponents -- on a different but parallel path -- also view themselves as calling the Reformed church back to a more consistent expression of its doctrine that will also create a community more faithful to its covenantal distinctions.

"Different but parallel"? OK. But I wonder how much could this apply more generally to Covenant Seminary, or to the PCA. Shouldn't we *all* be calling the church to a more consistent communal expression of its faith? Is Chapell denying the need to call the contemporary church to reform? I would think not. Isn't it good to be "counter-cultural" when living in a secular host culture? Isn't a lot of this common ground we all share? We all want lively, faithful churches that make the gospel attractive and winsome. We all desire to be missional and incarnational. We all desire to be communities permeated by the mercy, love, and grace of Jesus Christ. We all want to foster a strong sense of Christian identity and vocation in the world. It seems there's a lot we could build on together here.

### **What Are Some Things the New Perspective Teaches?**

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

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

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

There's a lot to deal with here. I'll try to keep it brief.

Note that Chapell says that in Wright's view, 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews did not believe in "this kind of [sixteenth century Romish] legalism" – which leaves open the possibility they believed in *another kind* of legalism. After all, insistence that someone identify with the covenant community in a particular way can easily become a form of legalism as well (e.g., fundamentalists who require certain lifestyle practices, such as no rock music or no makeup in order to be a part of the community).

The charge that the NPP reduces "works of the law" to ceremonial boundary markers is a highly debatable claim. Even if it turns out to be true, I do not know of any FV/AAT theologian who would make that exegetical move. We do not follow the NPP at this point. For my own part, I certainly see "works of the law" as a broader category, referring ultimately to *everything* that Torah required.

This is what I wrote about in my 2002 *RRJ* essay on Wright's doctrine of justification (note especially the parts I've underlined):

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Again, the New Perspective teaches the basic problem with Judaism in Paul's day, after the coming of Christ, was not that it was "self-righteous" or "legalistic," but that it had an unrealized eschatology (that is, it clung to the old Torah-based ways of expressing fidelity to God which are now obsolete since the promised Messiah has come, opening covenant membership to the Gentiles). In other words, Paul's critique of Israel is not, on the surface, what the Reformers took it to be – prideful, legalistic attempts at achieving self-salvation through meritorious "works of the law." Paul, therefore, was not battling a form of proto-Pelagianism. Rather his opponents' problem was that they wanted to turn back the clock of redemptive history; they were attempting to live "B.C." in an "A.D." world. However, what many New Perspective theologians fail to realize is that to continue to insist on circumcision, dietary laws, etc. as a means of relating to God after he has said these things are no longer pleasing to him and after they have filled their temporary redemptive-historical purpose is prideful and legalistic, considered from another angle. It is a form of self-salvation, since it demands the covenant blessing on one's own terms, rather than submitting to God's. So the old criticisms of Judaism are still there, but in nuanced form. Many New Perspective theologians have been too quick to draw an antithesis between their view of Paul's argument and the Reformers'. Perhaps this is because they have failed to understand the basic nature of sin. Stott quips, "As I have read and pondered [Sanders'] books I have kept asking myself whether perhaps he knows more about Palestinian Judaism than he does about the human heart" (*Romans*, 29). See also Dan G. MacCartney, "No Grace Without Weakness," *Westminster Theological Journal* Vol. 61, No. 1 (1-13). Nationalistic pride and exclusivism, as seen in first century Judaism, are just variant forms of the same basic self-righteous, legalistic stance that fallen human nature always assumes.

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Jewish nationalism and medieval merit mongering were just two aspects of the same deadly disease. (Douglas Wilson's *Credenda* article on the NPP made this same point.)

Also, Chapell's way of framing the "boundary markers" issue appears quite superficial. It leaves out the eschatological dimension of the gospel that we are so careful to include (as biblical theologians), and partakes of the very church/salvation dichotomy we want to reject (in line with WCF 25.2). Divinely established sacramental "boundary markers" are not *merely* sociological.

Further, as I have argued elsewhere, many in the PCA have already, though perhaps unwittingly, affirmed the NPP's "social" view of the gospel. The race and gospel relationship was a big deal in Paul's day, and it is in ours as well (albeit, usually with different racial lines being drawn by sin and in need of erasure by Christ's blood). I think we actually put ourselves at risk of repeating our mistakes of the past if we do not embrace the "social" dimension of Paul's gospel. To emphasize this corporate, race-reconciling view of the gospel does not at all undermine or minimize the gospel's message as a remedy for sin. It's just to say that the gospel brings about reconciliation on the horizontal (Jew/Gentile) level, as well as in the vertical dimension (God/man). Indeed, Paul often seems to use these as analogies of one another. The removal of enmity in one direction symbolizes and embodies its erasure in another direction. See my essay, "The PCA and the NPP" available at [http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich\\_lusk/the\\_pca\\_and\\_the\\_new\\_perspective\\_on\\_paul.htm](http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/the_pca_and_the_new_perspective_on_paul.htm).

Had Chapell (and others) interacted more with the two essays I've mentioned in this section, he might have had a better sense of what we're about, what our appropriation of the NPP really entails, and why we think the gospel's corporate side matters so much. These are certainly matters for further discussion. I don't claim to have it all figured out and I admit that many NPP theologians are cryptic at best and very troubling at worst on many of these points.

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

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

Yes, faith is inseparable from faithfulness. But this is no different from saying that faith is inseparable from obedience/repentance/good works, or that justification is inseparable from sanctification. These points are taught clearly in our Westminster Confession (e.g., 14.2; 15.3; etc.). Nothing new or radical here.

Yes, our union with Christ "connotes that we are one with the Holy One" and so there should be "no debate that His righteousness is ours by His grace." Wright himself would affirm all this, even if (for the sake of exegetical purity, in his mind), he unfolds the way in which Christ is our righteousness in terms of union rather than

imputation. But this is just a matter of formulating the same glorious gospel truth in differing ways. Focusing on union with Christ can hardly minimize the adequacy of God's provision for our needs as sinners. We all agree that Christ and Christ alone is our righteousness. Whether we receive that righteousness by means of a *legal transfer* or a *legal union* should really make no fundamental difference.

Consider an illustration I have used elsewhere: Suppose a woman in infinite debt is married by a man with infinite resources. He can either transfer his funds ("righteousness") into her bank account to cover the debt (a.k.a., "imputation"), or he can make his own account a joint ("union") account so that her debt is covered and she has a full line of credit. The net result is the same either way. But I would argue (on exegetical grounds that I will not detail here) that the second picture is closer to Paul's own view. It situates the legal "imputation" (or "reckoning") of righteousness within a covenantal (relational) context of union with Christ.

Some have balked at FV/AAT formulations of justification because they focus less on the imputation of Christ's active obedience to the law, and more on the resurrection status we share by virtue of our union with him. Again, this is simply two of ways of netting the same result. *Why is it better to have Christ's active obedience imputed than to share in his legal status as the resurrected/vindicated one?* How is the former any more adequate than the latter? How is it a better gospel? What does the latter lack that the former includes?

I have been asking this question of FV/AAT critics for quite some time, but no answer has been forthcoming. In fact, a case could be made that the resurrection status includes implicitly the imputation of the active obedience anyway. I have argued this point in my essay, "Rome Won't Have Me," available at [http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich\\_lusk/rome\\_wont\\_have\\_me.htm](http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/rome_wont_have_me.htm).

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

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

Chapell probably won't be surprised if I attempt to claim the confessional high ground here. The WSC teaches that the sacraments are "effectual means of salvation." Those who deny that the sacraments "confer" and "apply" the grace they signify are out of accord with the WCF and WSC (28.6; 91-92). Frankly, in comparing FV writers to those who oppose the FV, I see FV proponents using the Reformers and quoting from the Reformers far, far more often than the other side.

Based on what Chapell says here and below, I must conclude he is not entirely clear about what Rome teaches on the sacraments and/or what we teach. We have been *extremely* careful to avoid a Romish view of the sacraments. It is very easy to distinguish our view of efficacy from theirs. Rome says the sacrament is efficacious provided mortal sin does not block the flow of the substance of grace. Instead, we view grace as the personal favor and presence of God, and insist that sacramental efficacy is conditioned by a response of faith, not merely the absence of mortal sin. Further, whereas Rome's baptism must be followed up by the sacrament of penance, we view baptism as promise of forgiveness to believers that covers post-baptismal sin as well. Baptism's efficacy is not tied to the time of administration (as for Rome); instead it extends through the whole of life.

Why has this been so controversial? I realize that some misunderstanding is inevitable because so many evangelicals think *any* ascription of efficacy to the sacraments *must* be Romish. But this is a problem we must work to correct, no matter how difficult. Evangelical theology and practice is simply deficient at this point, if judged by the Reformers and the Westminster Standards. The reason a retrieval of a Calvinian/Westminsterian view of the sacraments is so difficult (and so necessary) is because we have drifted so far from our heritage on this point. (Note Chapell's reference to "recent generations of Reformed believers." He seems to acknowledge *some* shift has taken place.)

But Chapell's worst fears are not really applicable here. Let me make this clear: *No one engaged in the contemporary debate believes the sacraments are efficacious unto salvation apart from faith. NO ONE!* This poor straw man has been pummeled to death repeatedly. I'm quite confident that no one holds or has held the baptismal position Chapell is arguing against. I may be misunderstanding Chapell, but I don't think his criticisms pertain to any FV theologian I'm acquainted with.

Again, to spell things out: The sacraments offer Christ to faith because God has appointed them to this end and uses them in this fashion. No magic here -- just Christ and the Spirit working in accordance with the promises of the Word (WSC 91). Faith receives what God offers in the means of grace. There is much mystery involved, but this need not be as complicated as it's been made out to be.

The sacraments also mark out the church, but this is exactly what WCF 27.1 teaches ("to put a visible difference . . ."). I'm not sure why anyone would want to cast a shadow of suspicion on the "boundary marker" function of the sacraments since it is one that has been acknowledged throughout the Reformed tradition. The sacraments are almost always included in Reformed lists of the "marks" of the church. In this regard, the sacraments are important in cultivating a sense of Christian identity and assurance.

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

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

I'm not sure what "confusion" Chapell is referring to, nor is this an issue that has just cropped up in the last few years. I think our views on covenant children are quite clear. Covenant children are members of the visible church in the same way as any other professor of the faith, as far as we are concerned. They are "Christians" in the only sense that fallible, finite creatures can say that anyone is a Christian. We don't know God's decree nor can we peer into people's hearts. Our judgments about who is

a Christian are always subject to revision. We simply *trust* (not presume!) what God's word says about covenant children as a class: God is their God (Gen. 17) and they are members of Christ's kingdom (Mt. 19). That view may be wrong, but it isn't intrinsically confusing. And it may be confusing to anti-FV people who are accustomed to a different terminology, but I have not heard of it causing confusion in any FV congregation.

Debates over the status of baptized children in American Reformed theology run all the way back to mid-seventeenth century New England Congregationalism, when the church first attempted to base membership on subjective experience or conversion event rather than objective covenant markers, including profession (or covenant promise in the case of children), outward obedience, and baptism. It was no longer enough to profess *faith*; one had to profess a *conversion experience*. It should be noted that this movement in the New England churches was a decisive move away from older varieties of Calvinism, and eventually led to the Halfway Covenant, an American innovation we are still grappling with in our churches.

Calvin believed our children grow up in the covenant, already possessing the first sparks of faith and repentance even in the womb. While Calvin was not a paedocommunionist, as many FV proponents are, he was not a revivalist either. He did not expect covenant children to undergo a dramatic conversion experience. Rather, he believed that in a very organic fashion, they would grow up into a mature profession of the faith they'd been exercising all along.

Lewis Schenck's book on covenant succession (recently reprinted by P & R) as well Rob Rayburn's fine paper on covenant succession (available here: <http://www.faithtacoma.org/covenant.htm>) are cogent arguments for the traditional Calvinistic view and I will not reiterate them here.

[Important caveat: The FV view does have a different nuance than that set forth by Schenck and Rayburn, though the practical difference is almost nil. Schenck and Rayburn emphasize that elect covenant children are typically regenerate from the womb. They are baptized because they are presumed regenerate and because the substance of the covenant already belongs to them. Baptism is not so much a transition, but a ratification, confirming an already existing Spiritual status. The FV writers have tended to emphasize that baptism itself is a decisive point of transition, and have suggested that the Bible's robust baptismal language must be accepted at face value. Personally, I've concluded that those who emphasize a relationship with God from the womb need to find a way to do justice to the Bible's strong language about baptism (e.g., Rom. 6:1ff), and those who emphasize baptism as a point of transition still need to do justice to what the Bible says about covenant children even in the womb (e.g., Ps. 22:9-10). See my short paper on the complexities in Calvin's view: [http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich\\_lusk/calvin\\_and\\_the\\_efficacy\\_of\\_infant\\_baptism.htm](http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/calvin_and_the_efficacy_of_infant_baptism.htm). One solution is see "regeneration" (in Calvin's sense of the term, as "new life in the covenant," rather than in the Dordtian/Westminsterian sense of a

“permanently changed heart”) as a process, begun in the womb by the Spirit and then completed in some definitive sense at baptism. Of course, this makes the “new birth” analogous to “natural birth” (or the “old birth”) which is a process as well (as my wife can certainly attest!). I don't see how either the “Rayburn position” or the “baptismal transition” position can be held in a “hard” sense. There has to be some nuancing to deal with the biblical data. Of course, both of these positions agree that very young covenant children belong to God and have a faith-based relationship with him, and therefore they are opposed to the revivalistic and Southern Presbyterian views of covenant children as “outside the pale” or “covenant vipers in diapers,” until conversion at a later age.]

I'm happy for this intramural Reformed debate to continue. There have been, and will continue to be, a wide variety of positions on the status and nature of covenant children within Presbyterian circles. But can justify acting as if those who believe covenant children can and should grow up Christian (never knowing a day when they did not trust God) hold to an odd or previously unknown view. Chapell has men on his own seminary faculty who would argue this way (cf. C. John Collins, “Psalm 139:14: ‘Fearfully and Wonderfully Made’?” *Presbyterian: Covenant Seminary Review*, 25/2 (Fall 1999), 115-120). The idea that covenant children need to reach an “age of accountability” (or whatever it may be called) and then have a conversion experience is simply not the *classic* Reformed view. It *might* be right, but if so, then Luther, Calvin, Bucer, etc. were all wrong on this point. Let's be honest about who's really in agreement with our Reformed fathers on this point.

The comment above about a covenant child getting converted in college is so lacking in any context, it's impossible to analyze one way or the other. But surely such an event should not be *normative*. Children who have grown up in godly homes and faithful churches *should not need to wait* until they are 18 years old to come to know the Lord in a saving way. That may be what happens in the cases of *some* covenant children, but biblically speaking, it would be anomaly (cf. Ps. 22; 71; Mt. 18:1-14; 1 Tim. 3:14ff; etc.).

The claim that we sound indistinguishable from Roman Catholics on baptism is utterly false. We have carefully distinguished our view of baptismal efficacy from Rome's on numerous occasions. The sheer length of our papers is good *prima facie* evidence that we are making nuances and qualifications.

We should at least *consider* another cause of the confusion over the FV: Perhaps qualifications and explanations have been offered by FV/AAT men, but simply not heard by the critics! For an example of this, see, e.g., my paper, “Do I Believe in Baptismal Regeneration?”, particularly Appendix 2, available at <http://www.auburnavenue.org/Articles/DO%20I%20BELIEVE%20IN%20BAPTISMAL%20REGENERATION.htm>. My position on a number of issues continues to develop, but my basic stance on baptismal efficacy has not changed one whit since my first published essay, “Baptismal Efficacy and the Reformed Tradition: Past, Present, and Future.” The problem is *not* that we have been moving targets. The

problem is that the actual position has rarely been engaged. In my opinion (if I may dare to offer it), the transmission signal is reasonably clear; the problem is with receivers tuned only to revivalistic frequencies.

I hope my comments here are not too harsh. I do not intend to be harsh. Much of what I'm saying here is not directed so much against Chapell as against other FV critics. It is very difficult to engage in self-defense without coming across in a rather brash way. My desire is to be humble and charitable. But I also feel the need to speak with some firmness to these issues because I think Chapell's paper, despite its warm tone, could very possibly perpetuate another cycle of misunderstandings. It lacks the precision needed to clarify the issues.

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

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

I appreciate that Chapell sees the validity in some FV/AAT concerns. I would reiterate: the FV/AAT is driven not *simply* by a desire to fix what's wrong with evangelicalism or bring reform to the PCA. Those might be admirable goals in themselves. But they're also quite unrealistic. Most of the men involved in the FV/AAT are men of small influence. We harbor no delusions about what we can accomplish. (Frankly, I'm shocked that we've received as much attention as we have.) At most, we're looking to prompt a conversation about these things, so that God might eventually raise up men with more influence, stature, and clout (not to mention more knowledge and ability) to give these points a wider hearing. We're probably not nearly as ambitious as Chapell would lead an outsider to think.

Also, our driving motivation is not really borne out of a reaction to evangelicalism's problems, but [1] a desire to be faithful to the Scriptures in all areas of church faith and practice; and [2] a desire to recover classic Reformed views in areas where those views have been clouded out of sight by later theological trends.

1. **We are not saved alone.** The New Perspective rightly critiques much of the North American expression of Christianity that makes faith merely a personal fire insurance policy that requires no obligation to others, little concern for the world, and little obedience to God beyond what satisfies our own pleasures. The New Perspective reminds us that we are saved as part of a community with concomitant loves, obligations, and identifications.
2. **Saving faith is not alone.** The New Perspective reminds us that we are part of a great story in which God is calling a covenant community to Himself in order to glorify Himself and transform this world for His glory. Our calling inherently and

necessarily includes works of obedience. We have no assurance of the validity of our faith where there is no fruit to our faith.

3. **The sacraments are not signs alone.** The New Perspective (especially as articulated in Federal Vision and Auburn Avenue Theology) elevates our concern for the sacraments and reminds us that they are not merely sentimental ceremonies (or simply memorials) but means by which God is communicating aspects of His grace and obligating Himself to bless His people.
4. **The Bible is not propositions alone.** The New Perspective values the Bible's use of narrative as a means of unifying and teaching the covenant community. Despite the desires we sometimes have, the Bible is not simply a systematic theology textbook. Attempts to force all the Bible into easy doctrinal categories have sometimes created an unhealthy rationalism that does not adequately express the human experiences, divine interventions, and salvation story by which God communicates His covenant love throughout redemptive history. The New Perspective's emphasis on the drama of redemption in Scripture can help theologians and pastors better describe what the Bible teaches on its own terms, especially in ministry to a postmodern generation that (for philosophical reasons expressed above) is powerfully moved by narrative.

All of this looks fine. Bravo! As the news reporters like to say, "Fair and balanced." This is the finest summary of FV concerns I have seen outside the FV materials themselves.

### **What Are Troubling Aspects of the New Perspective?**

Concerns about the New Perspective need to be divided into at least two categories: theological and pastoral. The first category will probably require sorting out over several years. My sense is that we are on a journey similar to our experiences with the Charismatic and Theonomy movements decades ago. The Charismatic movement was concerned that the Church was not rightly applying the New Testament gifts of the Spirit; the Theonomy movement was concerned that the Church was not rightly applying the Old Testament law; the New Perspective is concerned that the Church has not rightly applied the corporate nature of the covenant. All of these movements have had some legitimate concerns, but all err in subtly moving the emphasis of the Gospel from a Christ-centered provision of grace to proper expressions of human performance.

Human performance? This is a serious charge. But nothing I have seen in FV literature makes salvation dependent on human performance. We are all 100% divine monergists. We're Augustinian, Calvinian, Dordtian predestinarians. We seek to read the Bible in a Christocentric way, structure our liturgies so that Christ is all in all, and embody in our communities a deep and sincere Christ-centeredness. This is our goal, albeit an often unrealized one. If this doesn't come through, we certainly need to backtrack and start over because it means we have totally failed in what we set out to do.

One reminder: we see the sacraments not as human performances, but as divine acts. Perhaps this will help soften the charge. The combination of divine monergism and

efficacious sacraments has a long and venerable history in the church, tracing back before the Reformation to Aquinas, Augustine, and the Synod of Orange, to name a few very explicit examples. It is not an unreasonable synthesis. It cannot be dismissed out of hand.

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

I appreciate that Chapell was willing to include in his report the thoughts of those he is analyzing.

Out of more than mere curiosity: Where have FV proponents belittled and ridiculed others for not "getting it"? Since I am mentioned by name above, I suppose I must consider the possibility that Chapell has me in view. I certainly hope I have not done what he describes, and if I have then I repent. (But it would help if I knew whose forgiveness to seek.)

In general, I think I am fairly conversant with the literature of the controversy and I think it is unfair for Chapell to *characterize* FV proponents in this way. These are serious charges because if true, the FV is a self-contradiction – we would be claiming to be Reformed catholics, while acting like Reformed sectarians. I truly hope Chapell isn't right about us. I'm sure there have been isolated incidents of unduly strong rhetoric, but has this really been widespread in the publicly accessible works of FV writers and speakers?

Also, from what I have seen in print and on the internet, it would seem apropos for Chapell to remind FV critics that they should beware of belittling and ridiculing FV proponents as well.

The advocates of the Charismatic and Theonomic movements were also intelligent, zealous in conviction, concerned that the rest of the Church was not Biblical enough, claimed that their positions were historic, and rarely stated a position that was clearly unorthodox. But, over the course of time (and through the sad experiences of numerous churches), those movements were shown by their fruit to be divisive,

Quick note before I deal with this point more fully below: We're not seeking to be divisive in any way whatsoever. FV folks are far more ecumenical, diverse, tolerant, ecclesiocentric, and traditional than Theonomy ever dreamed of being.

and they largely faded from view. My prayer is that we will be able more quickly to reach consensus about what are legitimate concerns of, and about, this New Perspective for the peace, purity, and progress of the Church.

I can understand why Chapell would want to link the FV/AAT with these earlier movements and subcultures. I'm still not quite sure how to process the connections because I did not live through those earlier sagas in the Reformed world. The Theonomic controversy was essentially over by the time I became Reformed (early 90s) and I never encountered the Charismatic movement in Reformed circles. I cannot think of any personal acquaintance at the moment who holds to the Rushdoony/Bahnsen Theonomic position. I am neither a Theonomist nor a Pentecostal in my own views. My views of the OT law and the cessation of gifts are probably most similar to the views of Vern Poythress.

My hunch is that both the Theonomy and Charismatic movements were quite different than what's going on in the so-called FV. For one thing, there really is no FV "movement." There's no revealed or hidden agenda to impose our views on the church. We wish there were a FV *conversation* instead of a FV *controversy*. Moreover, much of this is about *ad fontes* – back to the sources (though in this case the sources are the writings of the Reformers themselves). In that sense, the FV probably has more in common with the Reformation itself, than Theonomy or Pentecostalism. We don't see ourselves as offering some new fangled approach, we're not claiming we have gifts that others don't, and we're not seeking to enforce our positions in church courts. We simply want to bring together the best in Reformed biblical theology with a classical Calvinian view of the church and sacraments. Again, we're just seeking to be good "Reformed catholics," nothing more or less.

I suppose time will tell if Chapell's links here are accurate. For now, I remain dubious. I'm sure the more rabid detractors of the FV will use these rather embarrassing associations drawn by Chapell to pile on further guilt-by-association arguments. Chapell certainly gives FV critics the rhetorical edge here.

A couple pieces of counter-evidence will suffice in reply. FV views of baptism are found in the PCA outside circles touched by Theonomy or Pentecostalism. Indeed, they are found outside those circles that have been explicitly labeled "FV." A prime example is Craig Higgins, pastor of Trinity Presbyterian in Rye, NY. Higgins' superb thesis paper is available here: <http://www.trinitychurch.cc/>. The bibliography will look *very* familiar to those who have immersed themselves in FV writings. Higgins' theology of baptism is essentially identical to what FV men have been setting forth. Even more interesting is the survey Higgins took of pastors in his presbytery. 91% confirmed that the sacraments not only *represent* what Christ has done for us, but also *convey* to us what God has done in Christ so that through the sacraments we come to dwell in him and he in us more fully. A whopping 77% affirmed a strong Calvinian, instrumental view of baptismal efficacy, confessing that the sacraments are signs through which Christ gives what is signified.

Now perhaps all this means is that the FV probe/witch-hunt should expand to include NY Metro Presbytery. I'm not sure. At the very least it serves to undermine the quirky sociological connections Chapell (along with others) is seeking to draw and shows that "FV" style theologizing about the sacraments is perhaps more pervasive in the PCA than Chapell is aware. I realize that it is impossible for any one person to keep his finger on the pulse beat of a denomination, and Chapell cannot be expected to know everything going on in the PCA. But my hunch is that Chapell's analogies and links to the FV are neither accurate nor helpful, whether considered from theological or sociological viewpoints.

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

1. **An unnecessary and dangerous ambiguity regarding the nature of justification.** "Justification is an act of God's free grace wherein He pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in His sight only for the righteousness of Christ imputed [i.e., attributed] to us and received by faith alone" (cf. WSC #32). The New Perspective claims that Paul's chief concern was to make sure that the Jews shifted the boundary markers of their covenant identification from the ethnic practices of Israel to the identity practices of the New Testament Church. This perspective inappropriately de-emphasizes Paul's concern that Jews (and others) were seeking to establish their righteousness before God based on their personal moral sufficiency. By moving Paul's major concern to community identification, the New Perspective de-emphasizes the role of grace for personal justification and the sufficiency of Christ's work as the sole basis (or ground) of righteous standing before God. In particular, Wright's argument that justification is not so much about how someone is personally saved, but rather who should be recognized as a member of the covenant community can move the focus of our theology from properly emphasizing the personal faith and repentance from which all true, Christian assurance and faithfulness flows. Of course, we must grant that there is every necessity of recognizing Christ as Lord, and living out the imperatives of our faith commitments in order to have the assurance of our salvation and express love for our Savior. Still, this necessity is an insufficient reason to question the historic understanding of justification.

If this description is the NPP, then I reject it absolutely and completely. I do not believe this is an accurate statement of Paul's objective and I believe it is a superficial distortion of the gospel.

I believe Jesus' substitutionary death propitiated God's wrath and reconciled us to the Father. I believe that justification is soteriological and forensic, not merely ecclesiological. Indeed, I reject a split between the soteric and the ecclesial. I think these things are probably true of all FV people, no matter what Wright says about them. I know of *no one* in our circles who has tried to de-soteriologize justification in the way Chapell describes.

Some have criticized Peter Leithart for making justification transformatory rather than forensic in his essay “Judge Me O God” ([http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/peter\\_leithart/judge\\_me\\_o\\_god\\_biblical\\_perspectives\\_on\\_justification.htm](http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/peter_leithart/judge_me_o_god_biblical_perspectives_on_justification.htm)). But a careful study of Peter’s work shows that he still believes in a forensic justification. He has allowed the Bible to reshape and expand what we should mean by “forensic” but he has not done away with the forensic or turned justification into a process.

Some may think the FV emphasis on faithful and obedient perseverance undermines the gospel. But we see this perseverance as a gift included in the gospel, not as something extrinsic to the gospel that we must contribute in our own will and strength. Moreover, while we certainly want to oppose all forms of legalism, which make salvation ultimately dependent on human effort and morality in some way, we also want to guard against antinomianism.

I sometimes think that FV critics think there’s only *one way* to get the gospel wrong – legalism. And so they direct everything towards smashing that enemy of true religion. But antinomianism is just as insidious and must also be dealt with in terms of the grace of the gospel and the cross of Christ (Tit. 2:11ff).

Case in point: One very hostile FV critic told me that antinomianism is *not* a problem in the Reformed community. We only go wrong in a legalistic direction, he said. But I was tempted to reply: “No, antinomianism is a problem as well. All you have to do is look at how you treat theological opponents to see the depth of our lawlessness!” We don’t *see* our lawlessness because we’ve so minimized the demands of God’s word and his pattern for living, and we’ve so totalized the objective, external declaration of justification. But if our gospel does not deal with both these distortions – legalism and lawlessness -- it is truncated and inadequate. As the FV seeks to hammer antinomianism, those who are *only* anti-legalists and are not sensitive to the problems of lawlessness are bound to feel that we’re moving a dangerous direction. But our hope is to attain a biblical balance in which these errors are equally and decisively refuted.

To say it again: the gospel deals with the problem of sin in all its dimensions and ramifications. It deals with not only the *penalty* of sin, due to us because of our guilt, but also the *power* and *presence* of sin in our lives. Anything else is a half-gospel. The gospel includes not only “redemption accomplished” but also “redemption applied.” It includes what Christ did for on the cross, out side of me, as well as what Spirit does to me, inside of me.

Question for discussion: Why do some people think that talking about how God deals with the power and presence of sin in our lives automatically tends towards legalism? Have we lost the sense in which sanctification is a human work empowered and driven by grace alone?

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

Right about Wright. "Even if . . ." all that Chapell says is accurate about Wright, *we* would still affirm and stand behind *solus Christus* and *sola gratia* 100%. Our ultimate standing in God's law court, now and forever, is *grounded* solely in Christ's death and resurrection on our behalf. Whatever role works play in salvation or the final judgment (as evidence or otherwise) must be contextualized by that. Jesus settled the salvation of God's elect at the cross. Period. We've never said anything different.

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

The Wright/Shepherd connection is an interesting one, especially since Wright and Shepherd have done their work independently of one another. They are both grappling exegetically with texts like Romans 2:1-16 and seeking to understand justification in light of the New Testament's already/not yet eschatological dynamic. Obviously, Paul's claim that at the last day the doers of the law will be justified is difficult to understand. Personally, I think a non-hypothetical reading is vastly superior, on exegetical grounds. In other words, Paul really is saying that fulfillment of the Torah (including faith directed towards Jesus alone as the one to whom the Torah pointed) is the criteria of judgment at the last day. Even if Romans 2 is questionable exegetically, there are other texts that are far more difficult to evade on this point (e.g., Matthew 25:31-45).

Rather than going further into exegetical details, I will simply point the reader to Joel Garver's helpful paper, "The Doers of the Law," available at <http://www.joelgarver.com/writ/bibl/doers.htm>.

The Reformers did not intend to do away with a future dimension of justification in which works are evaluated as signs of faith (WSC 38). Of course, they also saw that future justification as ultimately *one* with our initial justification by faith alone. Initial justification is the verdict of the future pulled into the present. The final judgment is simply the public announcement (according to the public evidence; cf. Mt. 25:31ff) of what God already pronounced over us at the beginning. Further, this does not turn justification into a process. Reformed theologians do not typically think of adoption as a process, but it clearly has an already/not yet structure (cf. Gal. 4:5; Rom. 8:23). Why should justification be any different?

It is very important to say that I know of no PCA minister who has denied the imputation of Christ's righteousness.

Correct. I appreciate the fact that Chapell will openly state this. Perhaps it will help some people calm down.

Most of the concern that is being expressed in PCA circles is over some pastors' loyalty to Wright because he is so often accused of being fuzzy on the subject of justification.

But those same pastors are quick to point out deficiencies in Wright's views. No one is committed to following every last word Wright says. Those same pastors are also quick to point out that Wright's use of the term 'justification' covers somewhat different ground than traditional Reformed usage, but he has other ways of doing what we do with the term 'justification.' We shouldn't lose the theological forest in the semantic trees. Wright has to be interpreted on his own terms.

There is also a secondary controversy as to whether both Christ's active righteousness (i.e., His obedience to the law) and passive righteousness (i.e., His suffering our punishment) are imputed to us, but this is an older issue that even divided the Westminster divines and is unlikely to be finally resolved in our generation. I believe that both Christ's active and passive righteousness are imputed to us, but even where brothers differ over this *there should be no question that in our union with Christ His holiness becomes ours by grace alone and through faith alone*. Whatever, or whoever, does not make clear that we are justified before God by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone ... is wrong.

I'm *very* thankful for Chapell's historical honesty on this point. This reveals his deep commitment to theological integrity, ecclesial unity, and confessional

candor. Yes, the imputation of Christ's active obedience was debated at the Westminster Assembly, and a draft of the standards was deliberately altered to allow the passive obedience-only view. Many FV critics have tried to engage in historical revisionism on this point.

I also appreciate Chapell's openness (with a host of other Reformed theologians) to a union-with-Christ-by-faith-alone formulation of justification. This strikes me as an area in which further discussion could be very profitable.

As far as I know, we all agree that we are "justified before God by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone." This need not be debated.

2. **An unnecessary and dangerous lack of clarity regarding what the sacraments accomplish.** As a consequence of concerns raised primarily by the Federal Vision and Auburn Avenue groups, a controversy is boiling in the PCA around the subject of baptism (but it seems likely to move with equal emphasis to the Lord's Supper in the near future). Here's the question: To what degree do the sacraments actually convey the grace they signify?

John Calvin answers: "And as the instruments of the Holy Spirit are not dead, God truly *performs and effects* by baptism what He *figures*." Or to put it in Chapell's terms, the sacraments *convey* the grace they *signify*. (Here is the sentence in full context: "But as baptism is a solemn recognition by which God introduces his children into the possession of life, a true and effectual sealing of the promise, a pledge of sacred union with Christ, it is justly said to be the entrance and reception into the Church. And as the instruments of the Holy Spirit are not dead, God truly performs and effects by baptism what He figures.")

In his sermons on Deuteronomy, Calvin preached, "And that is the reason why in Baptism we truly receive the forgiveness of sins, we are washed and cleansed with the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are renewed by the operation of his Holy Spirit . . . Therefore baptism has that power and whatsoever is there set forth to the eye is forthwith accomplished in very deed." Was Calvin pastorally foolish to speak this way to his congregation?

In his catechism Calvin defines baptism this way: "What is this baptism? It is the washing of regeneration and cleansing from sin." Is this a proper way to teach baptized children to regard their baptisms?

In replying to Trent, he wrote of the "twofold grace" of baptism, "for therein, remission of sins and regeneration are offered to us. We teach that full remission is made, but that regeneration is only begun, and goes on making progress during the whole of life." Is this a theologically responsible use of the term "regeneration"?

Calvin taught that faith should seek assurance in the sign: “While I so often inculcate that grace is offered by the sacraments, do I not invite them there to seek the seal of their salvation?” Does this feed presumption?

*I do not think any FV writer has made stronger statements about baptism than Calvin himself. Indeed, my guess is that most FV pastors tone down Calvin’s language for congregational consumption. It seems the charges brought against our sacramental theology should really be aimed at our master teacher, Calvin himself.*

The issue has become most apparent in discussions about infant baptism. As I indicated earlier, the claim that the New Testament sacraments function as boundary markers for the covenant community is taken by some New Perspective advocates to mean that baptism *makes* a covenant child a Christian. There is a sense in which this is true.

Right. This is true in some senses, but perhaps not in others.

However, there is precedent for the FV view that covenant children are Christians. In Calvin’s 1538 child’s catechism, the first two questions and answers read this way: “My child, are you a Christian in fact as well as in name? Yes, my father. How is this known to you? Because I am baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

If the FV is teaching covenant parents to receive their baptized children as Christians, and if the FV is training baptized children to regard themselves as Christians because they’ve been baptized, we are following in Calvin’s footsteps. We may be wrong, but at least we’re in good company.

Baptism does mark the child as covenantally connected to the Christian community. Our PCA standards even refer to baptized children as infant members (or non-communing members) of the church. Additionally, the Westminster Assembly’s *Directory for Publick [sic] Worship* also lists among the grounds for infant baptism, “That children, by baptism, are solemnly received into the bosom of the visible church, distinguished from the world, and ... they are Christians, and federally holy before baptism, and therefore are they baptized.”

Right. Very helpful.

*We have never meant by these important distinctions, however, that baptism regenerates a child.*

And no theologian involved in the current discussion does either – at least not in the sense that Chapell means “regeneration.”

We have emphasized with some fervor that baptism is no automatic guarantee of salvation. Baptism must be received by faith in order to be an effectual means of salvation.

[Warning to readers: Since this is now the hottest aspect of the Federal Vision controversy in PCA circles, I am devoting several paragraphs to this subject. Please move on to the next section if this does not scratch where you are itching.]

The infant's holy status is recognized in baptism, but that status results from God graciously providing the child's relation to the covenant community through believing parents. God can certainly regenerate whomever and whenever He wishes, but in terms of what the church can assess, the parents' faith is the basis of a child being recognized as "holy before baptism" (cf. 1 Cor. 7:14). The water ceremony does not cause the child to have saving faith, and the sacrament does not guarantee that he will truly believe in Christ as his Savior.

No one believes a "water ceremony" *causes* a child to have faith. The Spirit works faith. No one believes the sacrament *guarantees* true, persevering faith all by itself. We have quite often distinguished our view from the Lutheran view in which baptism really is said to "create" faith in the child.

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

But those associated with the FV also distinguish their view from the Roman and Lutheran churches. (Admittedly, though, I have argued that Luther and Calvin held to very similar theologies of baptismal efficacy. Calvin signed the Augsburg Confession, and did not critique Luther's view of baptism the way he did Luther's view of the Eucharist. This would be an area worthy of further discussion. Needless to say, Lutherans do not believe baptism *automatically* causes regeneration apart from faith or gives an inalienable *guarantee* of salvation.)

We must confess that most ministers in the PCA have framed their baptismal explanations to distinguish our practice from Catholic or Lutheran practice for listeners coming from a largely Baptist culture. In contrast, the early Reformers framed their explanations to make sense in a largely Roman Catholic culture. For this reason, some statements of the Reformers do sound more "Catholic" than we are accustomed to hearing.

This seems to be an inadequate explanation of the strong language used by the Reformers to describe baptism's efficacy. They were not accommodating themselves to a Roman Catholic culture. *They simply believed the sacraments were efficacious. This is the only plausible explanation of their statements.* If we

think they were wrong, let's not beat around the bush. Let's just admit that they didn't go far enough in their break with Rome or that they mis-exegeted the key texts. But let's not pretend that they actually all held to low views of sacramental efficacy, when in fact their rhetoric indicates the opposite. It's been all too easy for American Presbyterians to remake the early Reformers in their own image.

This is why I respect Robert L. Dabney's treatment of Calvin's view of the Lord's Supper, which he called "a strange opinion, not only incomprehensible, but impossible." Contra Dabney, I think Calvin's view was biblically correct. I find Dabney's view of the Supper essentially Zwinglian (in the common sense of that term) and rationalistic. But I appreciate Dabney's integrity and honesty when treating Calvin's view. Instead of trying to explain away Calvin's view or accommodate it to his own, he simply admits that in his judgment, Calvin was wrong. Many Presbyterian pastors probably need to make this admission with regard to Calvin's view of baptism and the status of covenant children.

All parties would do well to recognize the realities and reasons for these differences of expression, while recognizing that unnecessary controversy will ensue if we do not make it clear for our church and culture that neither the Scriptures nor our Standards teach that the rite of baptism actually and of itself regenerates the spirit of a believer or child.

In my opinion, this is an unhelpful statement – well intentioned, but poorly phrased.

What definition of "regenerates" is Chapell using? After all, Calvin said, baptism is the "washing or regeneration" and that in baptism "we are renewed by the operation of his Holy Spirit" and that regeneration is "begun." Does Chapell want to accuse Calvin of misusing theological terms or using unwise pastoral formulations? Surely Chapell aware of the different ways in which "regeneration" language has functioned in the history of the Reformed church, so why is there no acknowledgement of this diversity in theological terminology, given its importance to the current controversy?

What does "actually and of itself" mean? Is Chapell leaving open the possibility that Christ and the Spirit can work to regenerate through baptism as an *instrument*? No FV teacher says that baptism does anything "of itself." Water does not even exist "of itself," much less serve as an instrument of regeneration. Whatever God does in baptism is not *caused* by water but by Christ and the Spirit (WSC 91).

Frankly, in my evaluation, Chapell's language here lacks the clarity needed to seriously evaluate both the Reformers and the FV. It doesn't really engage the FV position. Chapell needs to deal with whether or not the sacraments are Spirit-wrought *instruments* or *means* of salvation *to believers* in order to really deal with the FV position. Thus far, this is an area where the FV discussion has only beaten

around the bush. We haven't yet gotten to the heart of the matter. Thus, we must continue discussing.

Now, again, I know of no PCA minister who advocates an explicitly Lutheran or Roman Catholic view of baptismal regeneration,

Good. I should hope not. However, there may be some imprecision here. The Roman and Lutheran views are quite different. It would be worth exploring how the Lutheran view is similar to and dissimilar from the Calvinian view of baptismal efficacy. I have explored some of the similarities in this essay: [http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich\\_lusk/calvin\\_on\\_baptism\\_penance\\_a\\_bsolution.htm](http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/calvin_on_baptism_penance_a_bsolution.htm).

but some associated with the Federal Vision are so anxious to communicate that in baptism God actually transfers His covenantal grace to a child that they are pressing the terminological limits of our traditional baptismal vows.

I'm not sure I understand these comments.

First, FV proponents reject Rome's view that grace is a substance, and so grace is not, properly speaking, something that can be "transferred." Grace is the personal presence and favor of God.

Second, whatever we're doing, we're certainly *not* pressing the terminological limits of traditional Reformed theology with regard to baptism. We're well within the circle of Reformed theology in terms of both language and substance. Any one who reads the writings of the Reformers on baptism (numerous key quotations are collated in many of our papers and essays) will see that our rhetoric is entirely Reformed. It seems more accurate to say that the Reformed tradition in America has heavily diluted the traditional Reformed language about baptism. Recovering that language *seems* radical, but that is only because we have moved so far from the faith of our Reformed fathers. I use strong baptismal language out of respect for our Reformed fathers, not because I am rejecting them.

Certainly there is much misunderstanding and mere sentiment involved in many of our churches regarding infant baptism. However, when infant children are declared "Christians" at their baptisms *without explanation*

How does Chapell know that we make this declaration *without explanation*? How many paedobaptisms at pro-FV churches has he attended? From my knowledge (admittedly limited), we give plenty of explanation. Besides, I'm usually accused of writing papers that are too long (because of so much explanation and qualification) rather than too short!

that their blessing is grounded on their parents' profession of faith and not based on any guarantee of what is (or will be) the eternal status of the children, then further misunderstanding is created in a culture not steeped in Presbyterian distinctives.

Again, I would humbly ask that observers of the controversy at least *consider* the possibility that the fault for misunderstanding (at this point) lies at least partially on the other side.

*What if* . . . FV men are making the necessary qualification that baptism does not guarantee eternal salvation apart from a life of faith? Furthermore, *what if* those qualifications simply cannot be heard by many detractors of the FV because they are so Zwinglian/baptistic/evangelical in their view of the sacraments that *any* ascription of efficacy to the sacraments is unsettling, disorienting, and misunderstood? Is this possible?

A follow up: How does Chapell account for the fact that *many* people have read FV materials and have seen that we have plenty of needed qualifications on our strong declarations of baptismal efficacy? Why do some people seem to “get” (hear) the qualifications and not others? Whatever the case, FV proponents are not in the position of Athanasius – “against the world.” Many people find what we’re saying to be pretty intelligible. Our failure to communicate has not been total.

At this point, we would inevitably have to turn to the presuppositions and attitudes of the various readers and listeners. Again, is it at least *possible* that many of the biggest critics of the FV have misheard/misunderstood because they have read our work with a hermeneutic of suspicion rather than hermeneutic of trust and charity? I make no judgment here. I only ask the question.

Recognition of historic differences among Presbyterians can also help us deal more charitably with one another.

Excellent point. Most of these issues, if not all, have been debated for centuries within the Reformed and Presbyterian world. This is no strange trial that has overtaken us. Let us imitate our fathers in the faith and discuss these differences in a spirit of charity and humility, without accusations of heresy and without making snap judgments. Chapell is setting a good example in this respect, even if I have to disagree with some of his interpretations and judgments.

The Northern Presbyterian tradition tends to emphasize the solidarity of the family in God's redemptive plan -- treating covenant children as members of the body of Christ (having been made disciples in their baptisms). The Southern tradition prior to the 20th century tended to emphasize the need to save our children from an unregenerate state (even referring to the children of believers as "little vipers").

Chapell's basic characterizations are essentially correct. And herein we find a big part of the problem. The PCA's FV proponents are advocating a *Northern Presbyterian* view of children (e.g., Hodge's view) in a largely *Southern Presbyterian* denomination (e.g., still largely influenced by Thornwell's highly negative view of covenant children). I realize that much of the PCA does not self-consciously identify itself with the old Southern Presbyterian tradition of Dabney and Thornwell. But it is safe to say that the majority of the most rabid critics are still working with a Southern Presbyterian view of the sacraments and covenant children.

A question for discussion: Why does Chapell say that this was the Southern Presbyterian view up until the 20<sup>th</sup> century? Did some decisive shift take place in Southern Presbyterianism? If my impressions are right, Thornwell's view that covenant children are enemies of Christ until they pass through a conversion experience is still alive and well in the PCA in the South. A good part of my knowledge of this is firsthand and up to date. I wonder if Chapell's experience leads him to believe differently . . .

These are significant differences in emphasis, but we have united in the PCA with everyone refusing to presume a guarantee of the regeneration of the children of believers, or to teach that baptism causes regeneration. Recognition of this unity can help us talk respectfully to and about one another in our present discussions.

If this is the case, I would say the FV does not disrupt the PCA's unity and should not be excluded from the denomination. *No one* is saying that baptism guarantees eternal salvation or that the water of baptism causes regeneration. (Following Calvin, I distinguish *causality* from *instrumentality*. The Spirit *causes* regeneration and sanctification through the *means* of grace, Word and sacrament.)

There is some ambiguity in Chapell's statement. He says the PCA has refused to *presume* a *guarantee* that our children are regenerate. No FV proponent *presumes* any such *guarantee*. This isn't how baptism works in our theology.

But this still leaves us with a set of questions. Do we *ever* really know for sure that another person is regenerate in the sense that Chapell is using that term? After all, we cannot read adult hearts infallibly any more than infant hearts. We don't have cardio-analytic abilities. If we don't presume the regeneration of fellow Christians, do we presume their non-regeneration? Or is there another way of dealing with this matter altogether? Can a better understanding of the nature of the covenant (e.g., Rom. 11) help us here? How does covenant membership relate to regeneration and election?

No FV proponent is claiming that *all* covenant children are regenerated in the special sense that Chapell has in view (a sense that guarantees their perseverance and salvation). But we cannot make this claim about *any* group of persons (e.g.

communicant members of a visible church). We do not have a guarantee about any other person. The infallible assurance of the WCF only applies to oneself.

Another area to explore: Is it possible for Christian parents to *trust in* (rather than *presume upon*) the covenant promises (Gen. 17:7), and in this way legitimately treat and raise their children as fellow believers? If a parent takes Matthew 18:1-14 and 19:14 to heart (not to mention all the blessings the Bible associates with the believing reception of baptism) is the parent warranted in viewing his child as a Christian? What else could it possibly mean to receive our children in Christ's name (Mt. 18:5) and to regard them as members of Christ's kingdom (Mt. 19:14)? Is this what it means to parent by faith, rather than fear?

This raises the issue of infant faith, which I will not delve into here. But perhaps my forthcoming work, *Paedofaith: A Primer on the Mystery of Infant Salvation and a Handbook for Covenant Parents* will help spur that discussion along.

So much of our confusion regarding baptism results from our inability to relate to the earliest Christians. They were the converts to a new religion in a culture of paganism or Judaism. For the first Christians, baptism (particularly an adult baptism) was a true crossing of boundaries -- an undeniable declaration of a new life and an abdication of a former one, often at the cost of one's family, status, and security. To be baptized was not participation in a sentimental ritual that everyone in the culture had undergone, but rather was identification with Christ in an entirely new community and way of life. Thus, when a person was baptized it was important to recognize that the Lord was present in the sacrament and lovingly embracing the individual through the corporate prayers of those gathered, through identification with the previous saints of the covenant community, through the convert's own expression of faith, and through God's own pledge of faithfulness to all whose faith was genuinely being expressed in the baptism. Thus, baptism not only signifies the grace of salvation; the sacrament itself blesses the believer with the grace of God's signified and actual embrace. The Westminster divines said, "... by right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited *and conferred* by the Holy Ghost to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God's own will, in His appointed time" (*WCF XXVIII.6*, emphasis mine).

Interesting thoughts. I would say we have much more to learn about this patristic view of baptism. It would seem to be very helpful pastorally if we could comfort believers with their baptisms in the same way the early Christians did. The FV gives us a way of moving in that direction. This may become increasingly important as Western civilization continues to decay and we find ourselves more and more in a situation, culturally and socially, that parallels the early church in the pagan Roman Empire. The FV gives us a pastoral and theologically responsible way of confronting this new situation.

It also seems it would be good if we could recover and re-appropriate the language of the Westminster divines regarding baptism. Chapell asked earlier how many FV pastors make strong baptismal declarations *without* qualification . . . . But now I wonder how often non-FV pastors, when baptizing a child, say *nothing* that would require qualification . . . . I wonder how often they use the strong language of our Standards, such as referring to baptism as an “effectual means of salvation”? How often do they speak of grace being “conferred” and “applied” in baptism? Quite often, no qualifications are needed in their baptismal ceremonies because *nothing* is ascribed to baptism. In effect they make qualifications of the main point *substitutes* for the main point in the WCF. The talk more about what baptism does not do than what it does. But this is bound to obscure the promises God makes in the administration of baptism.

In short, it seems there might be quite a bit of needed reform (in the sense of restoring what has been lost) in American Presbyterianism. If the FV men aren't the ones to do it, someone else needs to.

Since the sacrament is both a recognition and a means of the grace being signified (as the person publicly passes from one realm to another in the embrace of God provided by the sacrament), Calvin spoke of the believer being lifted to mystical union with Christ in the sacraments. Yet, the vital distinction of Presbyterians who acknowledge that a sacrament recognizes and even ceremonially confers God's blessing is that the sacrament symbolizes and conveys the grace that *already "belongeth unto" the believer by faith.*"

Right. As far as I know, every FV pastor and teacher would limit the salvific efficacy of baptism to believers. We agree with the qualifiers the WCF places upon its strong affirmation of baptismal efficacy.

The sacrament does not create the grace, cause salvation, or guarantee faith.

Exactly. We've never said sacraments do any of these things. This isn't our language or understanding.

My fear is that Chapell feels the need to say things like this sentence because the only version of baptismal efficacy he has been deeply exposed to is the Roman version, in which these things would be claimed. But no FV theologians would say any of these things. Our view of baptismal efficacy (like that of the Reformers) is widely different from Rome's.

The typical evangelical can usually only conceive of two sacramental positions: either baptism does *nothing* (it is an empty sign) or it does *everything* (including giving an automatic guarantee of salvation). But the FV is something different altogether from either one of these positions.

Baptism (and the Lord's Supper) reinforce, further bless, and publicly declare the covenantal relationship of the individual (or parent), but faith -- not any element of the sacrament -- is the God-given instrument of the individual's ultimate blessing and status with God. This is why *before* the statement about baptism conferring grace, the Westminster divines state, "... grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto it [baptism], as that no person can be regenerated, or saved, without it; or that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated" (WCF XXVIII.5).

Right. Baptism is no *automatic* guarantee of salvation to the one baptized, nor is it *absolutely* necessary for salvation. This is what we have always maintained.

Much misunderstanding of the efficacy of baptism could be corrected with pastorally prudent explanations (i.e., baptism provides real blessing and identification with the covenant community yet does not regenerate), but because the Federal Vision advocates often see themselves as needing to correct the Church, there is frequent use of arresting and incautious phrasing that seems designed to create reaction or, at least, movement in the denomination.

Hmmmm . . . I know that in my own work, the most "arresting" statements of baptismal efficacy have been quotations of the Reformers, who (in my opinion) were not being incautious, but thoroughly biblical.

Where have we made strong statements about baptism without qualification? I know of no such place. Of course, it's possible Chapell has something in view that I'm unaware of.

How does Chapell *know* we're trying to create a reaction or a movement? I've never sensed this in my interaction with FV men. Instead, I think many men associated with the FV (Jeff Meyers, Peter Leithart, Joel Garver, etc.) are very cautious and erudite scholars, who would not say something just to get a reaction. Their views are settled, mature, well-grounded in research, and appropriately qualified.

An early (now retracted) Auburn Avenue statement even indicated that at his baptism a child receives all the benefits of union with Christ except for the gift of perseverance and final salvation. Such a statement could only have been made if one had redefined a traditional understanding of union with Christ, all its benefits (e.g., calling, regeneration, adoption, justification, and sanctification), and perseverance.

Yes, this was corrected for the sake of clarity (although it should be noted that even in the original version, the "all" in "all benefits" was already heavily qualified).

Of course, every one I know involved in the FV discussion is willing to retract, correct, amend, or do whatever needs to be done, to their statements to improve biblical fidelity and pastoral communication. This is supposed to be a *conversation* after all.

Redefinition of a number of these historic doctrines is being attempted by some New Perspective advocates (including those related to Federal Vision and Auburn Avenue). The redefinition is sometimes an attempt to conform historical doctrinal distinctions to Biblical wording that we have trouble reconciling with the traditional wording of Reformed theology. For instance, Auburn Avenue folk make the helpful (but not new) observation that the Bible does not always use the word "elect" to refer only to individuals whom God has chosen for eternal salvation. Sometimes Israel is called an "elect" nation even though not all of ethnic Israel is true spiritual Israel (Rom. 9:6). However, to move beyond this observation and say -- as some New Perspective folk have -- that not all the elect will persevere in faith (or that some of them can lose their salvation) creates a doctrinal crisis.

Chapell has admitted the twofold use of the word "election" is embedded in the Reformed tradition. So how can the use of the word in *one* of its twofold senses create a doctrinal crisis? I would guess this is because one of those two senses has been forgotten along the way. It seems to me FV-emphasis on corporate election causes a crisis precisely because the biblical and Reformed themes of corporate election have been obscured.

We affirm the distinction, made by Augustine and Calvin, between special/eternal/decretal election and general/historical/covenantal election (cf. John Barach's work on covenant and election in the *Federal Vision* book). We deny that we can know the former apart from the context of the latter. We affirm election in both senses, distinguishing them without separating them.

For more on election language, see Appendix 1 in my "Do I Believe in Baptismal Regeneration?"

<http://www.auburnavenue.org/Articles/DO%20I%20BELIEVE%20IN%20BAPTISMAL%20REGENERATION.htm>.

Such a crisis would be easily and pastorally avoided by indicating that the word "elect" can be used in a technical way to refer to redeemed individuals (who always persevere because God will not lose one of His own) *and* in a general way to refer to an ethnic nation through which God is revealing His redemptive plan.

I agree with the needed explanation of terms. But I think this has already been done, *ad infinitum*. I know of no crisis over FV terminology in a church that is pro-FV. It seems the terminological crisis only exists in the minds of those who have already determined the FV cannot be orthodox or who refuse to listen to carefully made qualifications and distinctions.

The Bible has the right to use words in a technical (doctrinal) sense and in a general (common) sense, and we should be able to distinguish these without requiring a Confessional overhaul.

Exactly. At the same time, I would add that no one has the right to insist that we *only* use terms in their confessional way. We can also use them in their biblical way if we desire. Confessional subscription does not bind us to a single, univocal theological lexicon.

3. An unnecessary and dangerous eagerness to critique historic understanding rather than enrich it.

Here is where we return to my meta-criticism offered earlier.

I do *not* think we are critiquing the *historic* understanding of these things. We are seeking to *recover* it. And that recovery is an *enrichment* of contemporary Reformed thought precisely because we have drifted from our earlier moorings.

(For an example of what our “enrichment” program looks like, see my final conclusion on pages 286-290 in the book *The Federal Vision*.)

So much of what the New Perspective advocates want to say would enrich our understanding if there were not such a willingness to discredit or dismiss previous teaching of Reformed doctrine.

I am grateful that Chapell believes the FV (or NPP in his terms) has something of value to offer the church. This in itself is gracious and encouraging admission. However, I’m not sure I fully understand the criticism.

I know that many academic NPP scholars discredit the Reformation, but where have FV men done this? I would not want to claim that the Reformers were above critique, but I also hold them in the highest esteem and sit at their feet on a daily basis. I know of no FV proponent seeking to dismiss historic Reformed doctrine. It seems to me, we’re the ones more likely to quote the Reformers on the sacraments and to appropriate their liturgies in our churches.

For example, there are wonderful benefits to reminding every Christian that he or she has corporate as well as individual responsibilities. But it is destructive to teach, or imply, that our salvation is more corporate than personal. Pastoral approaches that would say “not only, but also”

I find this ironic. Here, Chapell is not so much critiquing the NPP, as he is stealing a page out of its book. This is precisely what Wright tends to say: “not only but also” and “if you have x, you get y thrown in too.”

To say that salvation is “more” corporate than personal (or vice versa) would be a denial of the Trinity (in which the one and the many are equally ultimate).

rather than "not this (what our Confession teaches) but that (what we have now discovered)"

I believe firmly in the progress of doctrine, and I do think the church has discovered many new insights into Scripture since the Reformation (e.g., the biblical theology movement, literary analysis, etc.). Of course, nothing new should be adopted uncritically. But if the Reformed tradition is a living tradition (as opposed to a dead tradition), then it must be growing in some sense. It cannot simply stagnant. Surely our Bible professors are to do more than reprimarinate the views of the past. They are to be moving deeper down the same path towards an ever fuller understanding of God’s truth. Some “new” views turn out to be dead ends, and we have to back track, but that is not always the case.

But more to the point, I do not know of any FV proponent who would formulate their “discoveries” in the way Chapell speaks of here (in straight opposition to the confession). I will say that I sometimes think Wright overstates the freshness/newness of his exegetical and theological work. That may cause confusion and concern. But Wright also points out that the work of Reformed biblical theologians like Herman Ridderbos been more influential, his “correctives” of the Reformed understanding of Paul might not have been necessary. In other words, much of what Wright saying is very compatible with various strands of Reformed biblical theology that have already been developed.

are much better suited to build up the Church. We do not have to create questions about the nature of justification to remind those who are justified that true faith has real fruit. We do not have to make our sacraments sound nearly indistinguishable from those of Roman Catholics or Lutherans to teach the church of the real benefits of church ordinances. We should not have to redefine "regeneration" in order to expand our understanding of the sacraments.

My response to these sentences has probably already been covered above. But again: How can a return to the baptismal views of Calvin and Bucer and the Westminster divines be indistinguishable from the views of Roman Catholics and Lutherans? Has knowledge of the views of the Reformers’ really slipped that far? Moreover, how can returning to Calvin’s definition of “regeneration” be considered a “redefinition” *within* the Calvinist tradition?

I expect that the preceding paragraph would frustrate advocates of the New Perspective who believe that the Church has not properly understood what Paul (or our Confession) really teaches. They may feel that without the stimulus of arresting language the Church will not listen.

Again, the pro-FV men I know are careful students of God's Word who would not use supercharged language just to get a rise out of people. Hopefully, we're more mature than that. Perhaps Chapell has a different understanding of what constitutes arresting language. Or perhaps he's familiar with FV sources that have eluded me. Or perhaps he's had to deal with immature and overzealous seminary students who were not ready to engage this kind of discussion in an appropriate tone and manner. In any case, while both sides may have had representatives who have spoken in a way that brings embarrassment and dishonor to their theological convictions, it seems the most arresting language has come from the anti-FV side (e.g., charges of heresy, which have *not* run both ways in this discussion).

Of course, I fully appreciate Chapell's desire for a humble tone to be the keynote of all discussions about these matters.

However, such an approach mistakes the needs of the Church and the requirements of Gospel progress. Now that the New Perspective is being closely scrutinized, its advocates in the PCA are toning down statements (once made with frequent sarcasm and stridency)

Hmmm . . . this is very troublesome. I'm mentioned by name at the beginning of Chapell's document, so perhaps he intends to include me in this. But I certainly never intended to make sarcastic or strident comments about anyone. And I don't think I've toned anything down now that I'm being scrutinized. I think my approach has been consistent. I have not noticed others making a sudden change in rhetorical tactics either.

I don't doubt that some pro-FV people have made incautious or overly heated statements, but I hardly think the group as a whole can be *characterized* that way. Such a move would be the equivalent of making John Robbins the representative spokesman for the anti-FV side. But that's simply not fair. Also, some differences in rhetorical style can be attributed to personality and cultural differences more than sin. We cannot expect or demand everyone speak to important issues in the same way. Not everyone has identical standards for language that is too harsh. While self-control is important, we shouldn't look for a detached, depersonalized approach either. Most importantly, concerns over rhetoric should not be allowed to trump content. Speaking *in love* and speaking *in truth* are equally ultimate responsibilities. Being right is not an excuse to bludgeon people, but being nice does not excuse factual errors and theological incompetence.

Given that I don't know the specifics Chapell has in view here, I can only regard this as an overstated generalization. I'm certainly willing to consider evidence that backs up his claims, of course. He may very well have something in mind I haven't considered.

As far as recently toning down statements, the session of AAPC did slightly change the wording of its position paper on covenant and baptism, but that hardly

fits the bill here. The movement was from less precision to greater precision, not from stridency/sarcasm to politeness.

about the supposed errors of Church Fathers, the blindness of ministry peers, and the revolutionary nature of this new theology.

Blindness? Revolutionary new theology? Now I wonder if we're even talking about the same controversy . . . .

This language will gratify the FV's critics, but is it true?

I share Chapell's desire for Christians to speak to one another in respect, charity, and humility. When that has not happened, repentance is called for. But I think Chapell's characterization of the FV group as rhetorically reckless is not accurate, at least if we make the judgments based on publicly accessible documents and lectures.

New Perspective advocates are now more likely to claim that they are saying nothing that is not already in our standards and within the pale of historic Reformed teaching.

Why the "now"? My first paper on any of these topics was written in 2001 and posted to the web in early 2002 — well before any public controversy broke out. It was "Baptismal Efficacy and the Reformed Tradition" ([http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich\\_lusk/baptismal\\_efficacy\\_the\\_reformed\\_tradition\\_past\\_present\\_future.htm](http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/baptismal_efficacy_the_reformed_tradition_past_present_future.htm)). In it, I argued that a "high" view of baptismal efficacy is both Reformed and confessional (not to mention biblical). I have *not* changed my theological position or rhetorical style since that paper. I have *not* just begun to try to square my views with the standards since I came under scrutiny. My intention *all along* has been to better understand the standards. I think others would give the same testimony. Again, I cannot understand what Chapell is speaking about here, though it's possible he's been exposed to things I have missed.

This is a much more helpful approach and ought to make it possible to speak much more pastorally and gently about the perspectives that are being advanced. Both those who appreciate and those who question the contributions of the New Perspective should recognize the legitimacy of concern that over-emphasizing the corporate aspects of salvation can make the necessity and blessings of personal salvation seem insignificant or secondary. We must all acknowledge that salvation includes corporate dimensions, and the Church may effectively present or betray the Gospel based on her attention or neglect of these corporate responsibilities. However, personal trust in God's grace must precede proper love for God, His people, and His creation.

Church history in Europe and North America should remind us that when churches change the *focus* of their ministry and mission from living and sharing the personal dimensions of the Gospel to reforming external society or refining our own corporate identity, then dead orthodoxy (or worse) soon follows.

Exactly right. Warnings about the dangers of personal and corporate apostasy are appropriate here – but, then, that’s another FV emphasis.

Paul reminds us to be active in the sharing of our faith so that we can understand every good thing possessed in Christ (Phil. 1:6). Without an understanding that discipleship begins and progresses with personal commitment to Jesus Christ in response to His unconditional grace for individual sin, there will be no Gospel for another generation.

### **Who Finds the New Perspective Appealing?**

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

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

This is an interesting sociological analysis. I'm not sure I can comment on it competently one way or the other, though the part of it linking FV to Theonomy doesn't "feel" right. Part of the problem of course is the fuzziness that attends any discussion of the NPP. The NPP is an elusive, amorphous movement, very difficult to define.

If we take Wright as the foremost evangelical NPP scholar, I do not think that Chapell is correct to limit appreciation of Wright to the far ends of the PCA political spectrum. I am certainly aware of some more "centrist" pastors in the PCA who have expressed appreciation for Wright's work (though I won't name names so as to not get anyone in trouble!).

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

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

Yes, this is always what we must do.

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

Please pray also that this controversy does not distract us from the Gospel of grace. In my opinion, we are not likely soon to get to the bottom of the controversy with definitive statements that will easily identify all errors. PCA leaders on all sides of the issue are extremely articulate, Biblically intentioned, and highly unlikely to state anything that (without being caricatured) can readily be identified as outside Biblical orthodoxy. The consequence is that pastors, professors, and students can become preoccupied with debate -- making faith an expression of cerebral competition and intellectual arrogance rather than heart engagement and spiritual dependence.

Thank you for pointing this out, Dr. Chapell. This is always a live danger, and one Reformed Christians must especially guard against. Hopefully, FV concerns are sufficiently well grounded in pastoral theology and practice to minimize these dangers.

If our ministries only become battlegrounds for sacramental correctness rather than instruments for promoting the Gospel of grace, then we and the Church will have lost much.

I agree 100%. At the same time I would add that we need to beware of false dichotomies. If we have lost the sacraments' role as effectual means of salvation to believers, then we have lost one of our chief instruments for promoting the Gospel of grace, and the church has lost much. I think a Calvinian and Reformed sacramental theology is of such pastoral value, that it is worth working to recover even in the face of tremendous obstacles.

Thus, the question is: Why are debates over "sacramental correctness" different than debates over aspects of the gospel? How do we know what's important?

We all must pray earnestly for the work of the Spirit in our hearts to help us determine whether our efforts are turning the Church toward ever-greater introspection and isolation, or whether we are preparing the Church for Gospel-true priorities and progress.

Exactly.

I think a renaissance of Calvinian sacramental theology does much to prepare the church for Gospel-centered priorities and progress.

A proper understanding of the sacraments does much to foster an authentic Christian identity in a secularized culture, which identity in turn gives rise to our missional vocation. The sacraments are objective reminds that we do not belong to ourselves; we are called to live sacrificially for God's glory and the good of humanity.

Further, efficacious sacraments help break us out of our ideological shells by reminding us that Christian truth must be embodied and incarnated. Just as God ministers to us in word and deed (sacrament) so we must minister in word and deed. The FV recovery of traditional Reformed sacramental theology should encourage the church to pursue mercy ministry because it opposes the reduction of the gospel to mere ideas. Proper sacramental theology nourishes incarnational ministry.

The sacraments are also important from the perspective of community. The sacraments are public and corporate, bidding us together into one body. The sacraments are reminders that Christianity cannot be privatized without being distorted. We are to live together as one body because we share a common baptism and a common table. The sacraments "train" us in the life of the kingdom together.

Finally, the sacraments are crucial to a recovery of church unity. They provide a partial basis for ecumenical endeavors because they objectively mark out the church. This is

critical, given the amazing proliferation of denominations and evangelical subcultures in our day. A strong sacramental theology – focused on one baptism and one table – appropriately pressures us to recover the visible unity of the church wherever possible. The restoration of the unity of the church is essential to future ministry and mission in the world. A divided church cannot stand against a secular culture.

Each must examine his own heart to ask if what he is doing and teaching is creating greater love for Jesus that liberates the soul to serve Him, or is binding God's people to standards of ecclesiastical correctness rooted in our own doctrinal insecurities and preferences.

Speaking for myself, I reject all needless squabbles over doctrinal details. I don't want to waste time on worthless battles that distract us from the real work of the church.

This is another feature of FV that distinguishes it from the Theonomy and Charismatic movements: the FV is concerned not with peripheral matters, with the most central aspects of Christian existence, namely Word and sacraments, the church, the covenant, assurance, and so forth.

We need the Lord's wisdom to know what needs to be defended, what needs to be denounced, and what needs to be ignored because it only appeals to our appetite for argument.

Question: If FV concerns are valid, then why aren't these discussions worth having? Why (for example) are the sacraments not worthy of being defended? More specifically, why is the sacramental teaching of the Westminster Shorter Catechism not worthy of being safeguarded?

It seems that the FV is controversial largely because its doctrinal emphases (the corporate nature of salvation, a high ecclesiology, the importance of the sacraments) are precisely the areas in which evangelicalism is at its worst and weakest. We admit to going against the grain in that sense.

The FV raises some uncomfortable questions: Is evangelicalism more Americanized than historically catholic? Is American Presbyterianism out of touch with Calvin's theology at various points? Is it out of step with the sacramental theology of its own standards? Is evangelicalism unable to counter secularism because it is so privatized, individualized, and divided? Are evangelicals worldly because they have lost any deep sense of corporate Christian identity? FV critics may not think these questions are important, but we tend to think are they the need of the hour.

We must not allow a controversy largely outside our denomination to become the cause that defines us. The goal of Covenant Seminary is to prepare leaders for the local church who understand and model the Gospel of grace. Ask the Father to give us such great love of His Gospel and such clear judgment from His Spirit that He will enable us to keep the main thing the main thing. For those in whom the Spirit dwells, the message of Christ's

grace for sinners such as we will provide the most powerful motivation possible for loving God, His law, His people, and His world.

This is an excellent conclusion, and I hope all involved in the current discussion will take these wise and gospel-centered words of counsel to heart. Covenant Seminary has the right goal and is blessed with wise leadership to help them accomplish that goal. Dr. Chapell's wonderful pastoral concern oozes out in his closing statements. If this kind of tone had prevailed all along, both sides would be much further along in the discussion that we need to have.

I open the door to further communication with Dr. Chapell, or others, who desire to carry on the conversation about these things, with a view to glorifying God, edifying the church, and promoting the spread of Christ's truth. Again, Dr. Chapell is to be thanked heartily for entering the dangerous fray of FV discussion with a paper that shows honest attempts to grapple with the issues and a desire to serve the peace and purity of the church. While I've had to disagree with Dr. Chapell's assessment at various points, I have done so reluctantly. He has set a godly and exemplary tone in his work. Perhaps dialogue in the future will bring about even greater clarity and unity so that the church can embrace the gospel of Christ with ever greater faithfulness and serve the world in Christ's name with ever greater effectiveness.

Blessings,

Rich Lusk

Blessings,  
Bryan Chapell  
May 2005