

# What is the Federal Vision?

The Federal Vision is a theological position put forth by a group of men who believe that current Reformed churches for the most part have gotten off track and have lost the true vision of the Reformers. They claim that the churches of the Reformation lost sight of the Reformers' vision as the churches reacted to Western culture throughout its history. As a result, they believe that the church is wandering blindly, growing stagnant, and in need of a clear vision for guidance. As they rebuild this vision, they sift through some of the older theologians who they perceive have been insulated from the corrupting influence of Western culture, but for the most part claim to drive their theological piles into the bedrock of the Reformation.

As the name "Federal Vision" suggests, the vision is a covenant vision. The words "covenant" and "federal" are used to describe a relationship between parties. As Christians, these terms refer to the relationship between God and man. God describes the relationship he establishes with his people in terms of the most profound relationship that exists in our earthly life: a marriage. The men of the federal vision believe that the marriage has grown cold and dreary because the church has not been doing its part. The church needs to get active. The whole world is our home. The church is acting like a timid bride hiding in the closet. She needs to get out, engage whole heartedly in her calling, and make this world what God intends it to be. Thus, the federal vision is being developed to present a clear picture of what we must be doing as Christians to bring the church forward in its development.

The ideas of these federal vision men had been fermenting for years until January, 2002 when Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Monroe, Louisiana, hosted its annual pastors' conference. Four men who had been very busy working with the vision—writing books that applied and tested their thinking in a wide range of church life issues including practical family life and education—were asked to speak. The pastors Douglas Wilson, John Barach, Steve Wilkins, and Steve Schlissel spoke on "The Federal Vision: An Examination of Reformed Covenantalism." The Covenant Media Foundation had the following description for recordings of the conference that could be purchased: "The focus of this year's conference was to build on the Reformed confessional and historic emphasis on the Covenant—reclaiming some forgotten aspects and advancing further implications of the covenant. These lectures raise important questions and offer substantial insights for the continued theological development and understanding of the covenantal structure of God's relationship to his people." <http://www.cmfnow.com>

We as Protestant Reformed people are also very interested in the doctrine of the covenant. It is a truth of God's word that we find to be central to our understanding

and enjoyment of our salvation. It is a doctrine in defense of which we have struggled, suffering wounds and earthly hardship. We have been blessed with the fruits of men in our midst who have unveiled further truths of the covenant and currently work to apply the covenant of God to our schools and families. God has given us the beautiful vision of walking with God as covenant friend-servants as the citizens of his kingdom. We have enjoyed spiritual growth under the lively preaching of God's word. As we plumb the depths of the gospel, we have ever increasing reason to live a life of thankful obedience to our God. We have been enabled to establish schools where we can train our children in the hope of the promise that God gathers his church in the line of continued generations. We dig into the resources of the earth God has given to us, praise him for the wonders he has created in the earth, and subdue it for our use in raising our children and spreading the gospel to the ends of the world. With the vision before us of this life perfected in glory, we fight against every attack on covenant life in the home and church.

Is this the vision of the men of the "Federal Vision?"

The "Covenant Vision" that we as Protestant Reformed people have along with many other saints today, and along with saints throughout history, is quite different from the "Federal Vision." While we rejoice to send forth God's word to the ends of the world to gather his church from every nation, the federal vision men see not simply people from every nation, but rather a general turning of the nations themselves to Christ to establish a global Christendom. A core group of the federal vision men state in a document called "A Joint Federal Vision Statement"<sup>1</sup> the following: "We affirm that prior to the second coming of our Lord Jesus, the earth will be as full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." And again, under the title "The Next Christendom" they state: "We affirm that Jesus Christ is the King of kings, and the Lord of lords. We believe that the Church cannot be a faithful witness to his authority without calling all nations to submit themselves to him through baptism, accepting their responsibility to obediently learn all that he has commanded us. We affirm therefore that the Christian faith is a public faith, encompassing every realm of human endeavor. The fulfillment of the Great Commission therefore requires the establishment of a global Christendom."

Our vision of earthly life includes a clear antithesis between righteousness and wickedness. We see ourselves as pilgrims in the world of sin, having no part in the ungodly developments. Even so, we are called to subdue the creation for the sake of the kingdom of God. The men of the federal vision state, "We deny that neutrality is possible in any realm, and this includes the realm of "secular" politics. We believe that the lordship of Jesus Christ has authoritative ramifications for every aspect of human existence, and that growth up into a godly maturity requires us to discover what those ramifications are in order to implement them. Jesus Christ has established

a new way of being human, and it is our responsibility to grow up into it.” It would appear that the men of the federal vision are not content with the lordship of Jesus Christ as stated in [Proverbs 21:1](#). “The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will.” They are saying that we need to do more to discover a new way that involves the leaders of the world actively and willingly participating in the kingdom of God.

Our covenant vision is carefully framed by the creeds of the church in the past. We see the creeds as the work of our fathers to clearly define errors and state our understanding of God’s word as God has led the church through history. We see God ruling sovereignly in all history so that he guides the church in her development of the great doctrines of salvation. The federal vision sees the creeds as crutches that were useful for the time, and having the potential to be useful, but to be set aside in favor of pure biblical language. They write, “We deny that it necessarily unprofitable to “translate” biblical language into more “philosophical” or “scholastic” languages in order to deal with certain problems and issues that arise in the history of the Church. At the same time, we do deny that such translations are superior to or equal to the rhetoric employed by the Spirit in the text, and we believe that the employment of such hyper-specialized terminology in the regular teaching and preaching of the Church has the unfortunate effect of confusing the saints and of estranging them from contact with the biblical use of the same language. For this reason we reject the tendency to privilege the confessional and/or scholastic use of words and phrases over the way the same words and phrases are used in the Bible itself.” In other words, they recognize that there is a certain value in carefully defining words like “sanctification,” “trinity,” “predestination,” etc. in creeds and confessions, but it is better to stick with words as they are used in the Bible, especially in the teaching and preaching to avoid bringing confusion to ordinary saints. Now this may sound good and pious, but it is inevitable that these federal vision men will develop their own “scholastic” and “philosophical” language as a basis for their teaching. The terms that have been developed by the church have been given to us by means of the great struggles through which God has led the church. Confusion among the saints results when this history and catechism instruction is neglected.

At the heart of the federal vision is a particular view of the covenant and our children. God gives us salvation, and he gives us our children. For both we are willing to fight to the bitter end. A vision looks to the future, and it is our children who are the future. One’s view of children and how they are included in the covenant is necessarily going to be central to any covenant vision. One of the signers of the document quoted above, Rev. Leithart, writes in his blog, “The Federal Vision has been about a lot of things, but one of the central pastoral issues has to do with the status of our children, what we say to them, and how we say it. From one perspective, the Federal Vision is an effort

to articulate a consistent paedobaptist theology. Doug Wilson said awhile ago that this is all about children; I agree. The pastoral import of the Federal Vision is that we can say to our children, without any mental reservation, ‘God is your God. Trust him, and he will remain your God.’” June 15, 2007

<http://www.leithart.com/archives/003076.php> Certainly as parents we deeply desire to be able to say all our children without any mental reservation “God is your God.” But we can’t let our desires dictate what God says in his word. In an attempt to explain the dilemma that some children show themselves to be unbelievers, the federal vision men have put their trust in the notion of the conditional covenant that we battled against in our own church history.

Much has been said about the federal vision by men in many different denominations, and more needs to be said about this federal vision. While support is growing for this vision, many have rightly condemned it as heresy. Writers in the *Standard Bearer* have also been working hard to expose real, and spiritually dangerous details that develop out of this vision. As with every false doctrine that arises in history, God uses it to sharpen and bring into clearer focus beautiful truths of his word. May we seek prayerfully to sharpen our understanding of the covenant vision we hold dear.

### **Endnote**

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.federal-vision.com/> Statement sketching the general “federal vision” perspective on Reformed Theology, signed by John Barach (minister, CREC), Randy Booth (minister, CREC), Tim Gallant (minister, CREC), Mark Horne (minister, PCA), Jim Jordan (minister ARC, Director of Biblical Horizons, member CREC), Peter Leithart (minister, PCA), Rich Lusk (minister, CREC), Jeff Meyers (minister, PCA), Ralph Smith (minister, CREC), Steve Wilkins (minister, PCA), Douglas Wilson (minister, CREC).