

***The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology: A Comparative Analysis***, by Guy Prentiss Waters (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 2006). Pp. 397. Reviewed by John A. Battle.

Guy Prentiss Waters is a ministerial member of the Presbytery of the Mississippi Valley of the PCA. For many years he has been engaged in the controversy surrounding the New Perspective on Paul (NPP) and the Federal Vision (FV), having completed his doctoral work under Richard B. Hays and E. P. Sanders. In 2005 he contributed to the writing of that presbytery's "Study Report, on the New Perspective(s) on Paul; the theology of Norman Shepherd; and the Federal Vision/Auburn Avenue Theology." The Study Report is critical of the FV and the other related theological developments. In this book-length treatment Waters carefully explains and documents the Federal Vision position in particular. His earlier book, *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul: A Review and Response* (2004), dealt with the issues raised by the NPP in more detail; the present book also discusses these issues in the context of the Federal Vision's (FV) view of justification and the covenant of works.

Waters organizes his book by topics within the FV system of theology. After a historical introduction to the FV movement, he devotes an entire chapter to each aspect of the FV theology: its approach to biblical history, justification, election, assurance, perseverance, apostasy, and the sacraments. He concludes with a chapter discussing the historical and theological background of the FV. Each chapter of the book contains an outline of the particular topic, with the explanation of the FV teaching regarding it. Subsections describe the teaching of the various major proponents of the FV: John Barach, Joel Garver, Mark Horne, James Jordan, Peter Leithart, Rich Lusk, Steve Schlissel, Ralph Smith, Steve Wilkins, and Douglas Wilson. This method enables the reader to get a good grasp on the distinctive ideas of the FV, and the variations that exist among the various FV proponents. Waters provides full documentation in the extensive endnotes.

One major difficulty in discussing this topic is the various ways that the FV proponents define, or fail to define, their terms. Often they use them differently than is done traditionally, or even as they have in other contexts. For example, the "covenant" is often vague and ambiguous. It is defined as a relationship rather than as a binding agreement. They often do not distinguish God's eternal covenant with believers (what they call the eternal secret decree) and his covenant with the visible church. This failure results in confusion in many different areas of theology and church life. The fondness of FV promoters for postmodern philosophy (Peter Leithart is a prime example) encourages this sloppy use of language. Waters does a good job pointing out the inconsistent and ambiguous use of theological terms by FV writers.

An important area of conflict concerns the efficacy of water baptism. The FV shares with traditional Reformed theology strong support for infant baptism, but disagrees with the sacrament's significance and effects. Traditionally Calvinists have baptized the infants of believers because of the Abrahamic covenant, understanding that

their children belong to the Lord and are presumptively regenerate. As Calvin said, we baptize adults on the basis of their profession of faith; we baptize infants on the basis of God's promise. We believe that, when we rear children in the Lord, they will receive the gospel truths we communicate to them because their hearts have already been made receptive by God in regeneration. The spiritual benefits of water baptism are conveyed to the elect at the time of God's choice; but infants already can be and are presumed to be regenerate before they are baptized. This presumption means that we treat our children as believers, not that we infallibly know that they are believers. In this sense, it is similar to the "judgment of charity" by which we consider adult professors of faith to be truly born again and treat them as such unless or until they show themselves to be otherwise. The FV view is quite different. They believe water baptism always actually regenerates in that it brings the child into the relation of the church and Christ, giving spiritual life. There is no "presumption" about it. There is no spiritual difference between the baptized child who remains faithful and the baptized child who later falls away. All are believers and are "in Christ." All are regenerated, justified, forgiven, adopted—they all receive all the spiritual grace found in Christ, except the "gift of perseverance." It is possible to lose regeneration by falling away—a view at least bordering on Arminianism. Their view of baptismal regeneration has much in common with that of the Lutherans and Episcopalians, although they tend to minimize the spiritual aspect of baptism in favor of the visible benefits of relating to the church.

E. Calvin Beisner provides a helpful forward to the book, placing the FV within the broader theological context of current Christianity. An excellent feature of the book is its lengthy annotated bibliography of the works of the leading FV proponents, either in print or on the internet or available on audio tape. There is a briefer annotated listing of works critical of the FV.

This book is highly recommended as a detailed introduction to the Federal Vision theology, and an incisive criticism of the movement. It is written at a level so as to be helpful to the pastor and to the lay person as well; and since its extensive documentation is provided in endnotes, it does not detract from the text itself.