

## **A Didactic Review on Current Systematic Theology Issues**

**D. Douglas Gebbie**

*Occasionally in the Haddington House Journal we include a didactic review. The following is such a review, which may serve as a discussion article for graduate class seminars. The reviewer, Rev. D. D. Gebbie, helps guide us perceptively through two books relating to current theological discussions which bisect around justification, federal theology and Paul. He points us to other literature which needs to be considered in this theological discussion.*

*Editor*

***The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology: A Comparative Analysis.* Guy Prentiss Waters. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006, 397 pp., paper, ISBN: 1-59638-033-0**

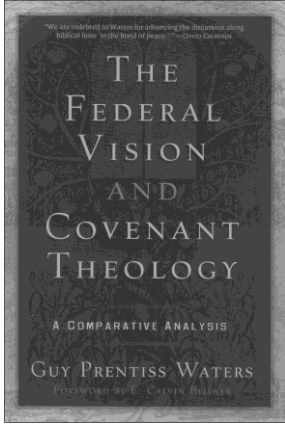
***By Faith Alone: Answering the Challenges to the Doctrine of Justification.* Eds. Gary L. W. Johnson & Guy P. Waters. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2007, 219 pp., paper. ISBN: 1-58134-840-1**

Along with an overlap in subject matter, these books have in common the work of Guy Prentiss Waters, who was assistant professor of biblical studies at Belhaven College, Jackson, Mississippi, and is now on the faculty of Reformed Theological Seminary in the same city. He is the author of the first, co-editor of and a contributor to the second, and also the writer of *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul: A Review and Response*.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Guy Prentiss Walters, *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul: A Review and Response* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004).

In *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology*, Waters sets out the Federal Vision (FV) positions using the proponents' own works and then critiques them in the light of the Westminster Standards. Following an introduction to the FV, the subjects covered are: covenant and biblical history; covenant and justification; covenant and election; covenant and assurance, perseverance and apostasy; and covenant and the sacraments. The book is brought to a conclusion by a chapter on the sources of the FV.



The task of defining the FV is not easy. While there is a core group of men who are the proponents of the FV, firstly, they are not all agreed on all issues; and, secondly, their views are subject to almost continuous development as they interact with one another and their critics, using websites and blogs rather than the printed page to propagate their views. Waters has gone to a great deal of effort to bring together and to present accurately and fairly those views. He allows the various FV

proponents to speak for themselves, noting where they speak in unison and where they differ. Doing so, however, takes up much of this book, leaving little room for the comparison mentioned in the title. Yet, at the same time, it also leaves little room for complaint from those whose views are being critiqued. The great strength of this book is its summary of FV views on the subjects treated.

The covenant theology which is used in the comparative analysis is that of the Westminster Standards. The views of the FV proponents are compared to the Standards and are found to be at variance with the doctrines taught in them. Unfortunately, there is little exposition or development of the Westminster doctrines, either as particular wordings relate to FV views or as the Westminster system of doctrine stands in opposition to FV views. Waters shows that the FV is contrary to the Standards, but he does not present a Westminster alternative. The effort and space given to a detailed presentation of the FV is not reciprocated when it comes to presenting the covenant theology to which their views are to be compared.

To be fair, Waters says in his preface that it was not his intention to give an exhaustive restatement of the Standard's doctrine on each point in question. However, given that, as he points out, the FV exalts the external and minimizes the internal, it would have been especially helpful to see a discussion of the Westminster doctrine of regeneration.

Waters criticizes the proponents of the FV for defining regeneration in a variety of ways (which they do), but does not give a clear definition of the word himself; nor does he explicitly set regeneration in its Westminster context of effectual calling. This is unfortunate as on almost every point of difference between the FV and the Westminster Standards, the subject of effectual calling is not only relevant but crucial. For example:

- 1) *Effectual Calling*: All those whom God hath predestinated unto life, and those only, He is pleased in His appointed and accepted time effectually to call, by His Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death, in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God, taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them a heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and, by His almighty power determining them to that which is good, and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ: yet so, as they come most freely, being made willing by His grace. (WCF 10:1)
- 2) *Election and Assurance*: The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care, that men attending the will of God revealed in His Word, and yielding obedience thereunto, may, from the certainty of their effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election. (WCF 3:8)
- 3) *Covenant of Grace*: Man by his fall having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein He freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in Him, that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto life His Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe. (WCF 7:3)
- 4) *Union with Christ*: The union which the elect have with Christ is the work of God's grace, whereby they are spiritually and mystically, yet really and inseparably, joined to Christ as their head and husband; which is done in their effectual calling. (LC 66)
- 5) *Justification*: Those whom God effectually calleth, He also freely justifieth; not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous, not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone; nor by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them,

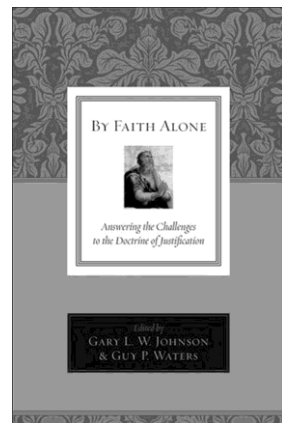
as their righteousness, but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them, they receiving and resting on Him and His righteousness by faith; which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God. (WCF 11:1)

- 6) *Apostasy*: They, whom God hath accepted in His Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally, nor finally, fall away from the state of grace: but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved. (WCF 17:1) All the elect, and they only, are effectually called; although others may be, and often are, outwardly called by the ministry of the Word, and have some common operations of the Spirit; who, for their wilful neglect and contempt of the grace offered to them, being justly left in their unbelief, do never truly come to Jesus Christ. (LC 68)

*The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology: A Comparative Analysis* makes an excellent supplement to the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) Study Committee Report on Federal Vision.<sup>2</sup> It is, perhaps, because of the context in the PCA that Waters does not drive home his conclusions with the force that his arguments warrant; for to do so would have turned the book into a series of charges against those Federal Visionaries whose ordination vows bound them to the Westminster Standards. However, at some point, when this debate has become less personalized, it would be helpful to have a more exhaustive restatement of the Westminster doctrines.

*By Faith Alone: Answering the Challenges to the Doctrine of Justification* is a collection of essays by Cornelis P. Venema, T. David Gordon, Richard D. Philips, C. FitzSimons Allison, David VanDrunen, R. Fowler White, E. Calvin Beisner, John Bolt, and the editors: Gary L. W. Johnson and Guy P. Waters. There is a foreword and an afterword by David F. Wells and R. Albert Mohler, Jr., respectively.

Waters' and Venema's overviews of the "New Perspective" and Federal Vision movements are very accessible and helpful. An interesting comment by Venema is that Saunders is not adequately familiar with the old perspectives. The Reformation concern



<sup>2</sup> <http://www.pcahistory.org/pca/07-fvreport.pdf>.

was not faith or works, but faith alone or faith plus works. While Saunder's findings show that Second Temple Judaism was not a religion of works alone, the "covenantal nomism" which he describes supports the view that Paul's opponents taught a doctrine of faith plus works.

Other essays treat more specific points regarding the Doctrine of Justification. Philips and FitzSimons write on the subject of imputation. The former deals with imputed righteousness as it relates to Arminianism and the New Perspective. The latter, being an Anglican, covers imputation in the context of the emergence of Anglican Protestantism in the sixteenth century, the Council of Trent, and the ecumenical amnesia which seems to forget the points of difference between them. VanDrunen writes on the Active Obedience of Christ. On a related note, Bolt looks at the arguments against the doctrine of the Covenant of Works and responds to them.

In every collection of this kind, there are unevennesses. Attention might be drawn to the ninth essay of the collection which asks, "What is an evangelical?" Johnson points out the vagueness of the term today when Keith Fournier (a Roman Catholic) and Robert L. Millet (a Mormon) are considered by some to be evangelicals. This is an interesting article, and it may make a valid point; however, it seems a little out of place in this collection. Rather than focusing on some aspect of Justification by Faith Alone, it deals with wider gospel issues. It fits better with the concerns of those who are heading up The Gospel Coalition<sup>3</sup> than with those whose attention is taken up primarily with the New Perspective and Federal Vision. (This might also be said of Wells' excellent, but again not quite germane, foreword).

The essays by Gordon and the collaborative effort by White and Beisner focus on biblical theology. Gordon states:

I am staggered by the lack of discussion of John Murray's biblical theology. Many families have a dark secret that they prefer not to talk about: the uncle who gets drunk every Thanksgiving and makes passes at the womenfolk, the eccentric nephew who can't hold a job, etc. Such family secrets are well known but rarely discussed. The Reformed version of this is John Murray's biblical theology. ... And the Auburnites, whose entire paradigm comes from Murray, appear hesitant to state the matter publicly, with the exception of Pastor Trouwburst....

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org>.

But why don't we consider it fair to talk about this? Why do we all know that Murray desired to recast the historic covenant theology, but we never publicly acknowledge that he did so? Further, since it is so patently obvious (to me, anyway) that the real distinctive of Auburn theology is not some alleged difference between biblical theology and systematic theology, but the distinction between historic covenant theology and Murray's recasting thereof, why didn't the essays address this matter?<sup>4</sup>

One possible answer to Gordon's questions is that it is not the content of Murray's recasting of classical covenant theology which is important. Indeed, it would seem that the content of Murray's 1953 monograph was eclipsed by the appearance of George E. Mendenhall's *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* in 1955 and the work done by Meredith Kline in his *Treaty of the Great King: The Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy: Study and Commentary* and *By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism*.<sup>5</sup> To the contrary, the important thing is that he applied Vosian biblical theology to the subject; and whether or not today's biblical theologians agree with Murray's conclusions, they are following in his footsteps. Rather than being the debauched uncle, Murray is the founder of the family firm. Not all the sons are in agreement with the way in which the old fellow ran the business, but they cannot criticize too loudly without undermining the market for their own product. So, when White and Beisner say that their contribution to this collection provides "a fresh exposition of God's covenantal dealings with man [which] conserves the classic features of historic covenant theology"<sup>6</sup> and use biblical theology to do it, they do not stand outside of the two streams of covenant redefinition which they identify: one coming from those who promote the New Perspectives on Paul and the Mosaic Law and the other stream coming from "those who support the effort initiated by the late John Murray to

---

<sup>4</sup> *By Faith Alone*, 118 and 121.

<sup>5</sup> George E. Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Pittsburgh: Biblical Colloquium, 1955); Meredith G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King: The Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy: Study and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963); *By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968).

<sup>6</sup> *By Faith Alone*, 148.

recast (reconstruct) classic covenant theology”.<sup>7</sup> They are in a branch of the stream flowing from Murray’s initiative.

For Gordon’s assertion that the real distinctive of the Auburn theology is “the distinction between historic covenant theology and Murray’s recasting thereof” to be given due consideration, some discussion of historical theology, of the doctrine of covenant in the reformed theological tradition, might have been expected. But there is no such discussion. There is no mention of the Antinomian and Neonomian controversies. There is no discussion of the development of covenant theology in the writings of Robert Rollock, David Dickson, Samuel Rutherford, Patrick Gillespie, and Thomas Boston in Scotland, of John Ball and Richard Baxter in England, and of Francis Turretin and Herman Witsius on the Continent. More specifically, there is no mention of works of John Owen,<sup>8</sup> John Brown of Wamphray,<sup>9</sup> Robert Traill,<sup>10</sup> and Herman Witsius<sup>11</sup> in which the very issues of the condition of the covenant of grace, the instrument of justification, and imputation are discussed at length in their responses to the Neonomianism of Richard Baxter. An examination of their writings would clearly demonstrate the truth of White’s and Beisner’s observation that “redefinition of God’s covenants inevitably brings reformulation of the doctrine of justification”;<sup>12</sup> but there is no such examination. Nor is

---

<sup>7</sup> *By Faith Alone*, 148.

<sup>8</sup> John Owen, *The Doctrine of Justification By Faith*, in *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 5 (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1967).

<sup>9</sup> John Brown of Wamphray, *The Life of Justification Opened. Or, A Treatise grounded in Gal. 2:11. Wherein the Orthodox Doctrine of Justification by Faith, & Imputation of Christ’s Righteousness, is clearly expounded, solidly confirmed, & learnedly vindicated from the various Objections of its Adversaries. Whereunto are subjoined some arguments against Universal Redemption* (1695).

<sup>10</sup> Robert Traill, *Vindication of the Protestant Doctrine concerning Justification, and of its Preachers and Professors, from the unjust charge of Antinomianism*, in *Select Practical Writings of Robert Traill* (Edinburgh: Free Church of Scotland, 1845).

<sup>11</sup> Herman Witsius, *Conciliatory, or Irenical Animadversions: on the Controversies Agitated in Britain under the unhappy names of Antinomians and Neonomians* (Glasgow: Printed by W. Lang for M. Ogle, 1807).

<sup>12</sup> *By Faith Alone*, 148. The application of biblical theology to the disputed questions of classic or historic covenant theology has of itself brought redefinition. For example, when biblical theologians imposed the form of Hittite Suzerain-Vassal treaties upon the divine covenants and defined stipulation as covenant faithfulness, given the connection between the

there anything to give any credence to the contention that the real distinctive of the Auburn theology is “an alleged difference between biblical theology and systematic theology”. The discussions here imply that the real distinctive of the Auburn theology is a dispute between different schools of biblical theology all of which are redefining historic covenant theology.

More soberingly, not only is this a dispute between differing schools of biblical theology, as two appeal cases before the 2003 General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church illustrate; the subjects at issue are the moral law, the condition of the covenant of grace, and the instrument of justification. In short, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, covenant theology is no further forward from where it was in the last decade of the seventeenth century.

Whoever coined the subtitle of this book set the mark rather high. Given the finished product, that was somewhat unfortunate. On the whole, *By Faith Alone* contains some useful contributions to the current debate. But it is flawed by having another agenda within its stated agenda.

Of the two books reviewed here, *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology* is more strongly recommended. Although, that being said, Waters’ and Venema’s essays in *By Faith Alone* are very helpful for bringing inquirers “up to speed” on the key issues of the New Perspective and the Federal Vision.

*David Douglas Gebbie is a regular reviewer for this Journal. Rev. Gebbie is a native of Scotland and was educated at Glasgow College of Technology and the Free Church of Scotland College, Edinburgh. Before his induction to the Presbyterian Reformed Church (PRC) in Chesley, Ontario, he served Free Church of Scotland charges in Raasay and Achiltibuie and pastored the PRC’s congregation in Portland, Oregon.*

---

condition of the covenant of grace and the instrument of justification, it was only a matter of time before someone replaced faith alone with faithfulness.