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## REDEMPTIVE-HISTORICAL THEMES IN THE *WESTMINISTER LARGER CATECHISM*

### INTRODUCTION AND “FULL DISCLOSURE”

The perceptive e-mail from a supporter of my seminary read, “I think that the next systematic theology professor must be able to convincingly wed biblical and systematic theology because of the emotionally charged nature of those currently wishing to pit one against the other.”<sup>1</sup> Understanding what is termed either biblical theology, or as I prefer, redemptive-historical theology (R-H<sup>2</sup>), is important.<sup>3</sup> For confessional Presbyterians this is especially important because, as the e-mail indicates, some are pitting R-H against the traditional-Reformed systematic theology (ST) of the Westminster Standards.

In the 20th century, most conservative Reformed groups have consciously included

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<sup>1</sup>This e-mail was sent to the president of Reformed Theological Seminary, Ric Cannada, in the summer of 2003.

<sup>2</sup>I will use “R-H” for “redemptive-historical,” “redemptive-history,” and “redemptive-historical theology.”

<sup>3</sup>In Geerhardus Vos’ important book *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments*, he complained in the preface that “the term ‘Biblical Theology’ is really unsatisfactory,” but he consented to it due to its past usage by others. Vos noted that if it were possible, “a more suitable name would be ‘History of Special Revelation’” (*Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948], p. v). Herman Ridderbos primarily used “redemptive-historical” and not “biblical theology.” This went a long way toward popularizing this term in Reformed circles (see e.g., *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* [trans. John Richard De Witt; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975], p. 39).

various R-H themes as part of their overall emphases.<sup>4</sup> For this article, an R-H theme may be either a R-H methodological emphasis (e.g., time-line is important) or a R-H theological emphasis (e.g., creation's relationship to redemption).<sup>5</sup> Some of those who draw a sharp contrast between R-H and traditional-Reformed ST tend to talk about R-H as if it is something completely new.<sup>6</sup> However, due to Reformed theology's long emphasis on the OT and its emphasis on covenant theology (both in the sense of the Covenant of Grace and Covenant of Works [i.e., federal theology], and in the sense of the unfolding specific covenants [e.g., Abrahamic, Mosaic]), what are now called R-H themes have always been to varying degrees part of traditional-Reformed ST.<sup>7</sup>

In this article I will present a broad-brush description of the biblical themes associated with R-H and a very brief snapshot of the varying degrees to which these themes are emphasized

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<sup>4</sup>Many in evangelical scholarship who are not as explicitly Reformed also have a renewed interest in R-H. For example, see *Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect* (ed. Scott J. Hafemann; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002).

<sup>5</sup>Of course, methodological and theological emphases are interrelated.

<sup>6</sup>Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., a strong supporter of R-H, notes that "it would be quite misleading, as is often done by its more enthusiastic advocates, to create the impression that biblical theology [R-H] brings something totally new into the life of the church" ("Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," *WTJ* 38 [1975-76]: p. 292). More recently, but with similar conclusions, Gaffin notes that "the predominant concern of biblical theology . . . has been the once-for-all accomplishment of salvation; for the Standards, the predominating concern is its ongoing application. Both, biblical theology and the Standards, share both concerns, accomplishment and application, but with different emphases" ("Biblical Theology and the Westminster Standards," *WTJ* 65 [2003]: p. 175).

<sup>7</sup>For an interesting creedal example, the *Scotch Confession of Faith* (1560) Article 4 explicitly connects Gen 3:15 to Adam, Noah, Abraham, David, and Christ. It should also be noted that the Church throughout her entire history has always incorporated aspects of Covenant theology, see J. Ligon Duncan, III, "The Covenant Idea in Ante-Nicene Theology" (Ph.D. diss.,

in Reformed circles. Then, for the majority of the article, I will compare two R-H themes to the *WLC* and show the strong correlation between the themes and the *WLC*. My polemic is to emphasize that many of the modern R-H themes *are* in the Westminster Standards. Hence, there should not be a sharp contrast between R-H and ST.

In interests of “full-disclosure,” let me briefly state my views. My complaint is that many in Reformed circles (1) *over-emphasize* R-H themes and (2) tend not to note that many R-H themes are in traditional-Reformed ST. On the other hand, I believe that R-H themes are very important, and I am a big promoter of them. In my NT and hermeneutical courses, despite my slight reservations, many of the main textbooks are R-H “classics.”<sup>8</sup>

### **R-H THEMES IN MODERN REFORMED CIRCLES**

R-H themes have as their core the acknowledgment that God’s redemptive actions and Scripture have been progressively revealed through the time-line of biblical history.<sup>9</sup> Given this core starting point, there is variety within modern, conservative-Reformed circles as to their methodological and theological emphases under the umbrella term of R-H. I explain R-H themes using three broad overlapping foci. For convenience, the foci are more oriented toward

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University of Edinburgh, 1995).

<sup>8</sup>Herman Ridderbos’ *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* is the main textbook in my Paul course. The students also read in my courses Herman Ridderbos, *When the Time Had Fully Come* (Jordan Station: Paideia, 1982); George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (ed. Donald A. Hagner; rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); and Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

<sup>9</sup>Edmund P. Clowney states, “The development of biblical theology is redemptive-historical. The divisions of biblical theology are the historical periods of redemption, marked by creation, the fall, the flood, the call of Abraham, the exodus, and the coming of Christ” (*Preaching and Biblical Theology* [Nutley: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1975], p. 16).

methodology. I see all three of the foci as biblically important.

(1) A focus on the important R-H events of history, that is, consider what *God* has done through the time-line of biblical history. For some, these include the minimum of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation.<sup>10</sup> Others add covenants, exodus, Davidic kingdom, exilic, post-exilic, Christ's states of humiliation and exaltation, etc.<sup>11</sup> In NT theology, there is usually a special emphasis on the now/not-yet aspects and our union with Christ in his life/death/resurrection/ascension/second-coming. This focus might be termed *historia salutis*.<sup>12</sup>

(2) A focus on any subject coming directly from the biblical text, small or large, viewed through the time-line of biblical history. For example, what does "land"/"rest" mean before the fall, after the fall, in Moses, for the Davidic kingdom, in exile, in Christ's death/resurrection, now, and in the new heavens and earth. Seeing a subject and its possible modifications through time allows us to make appropriate implications about

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<sup>10</sup>For example, Gordon J. Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

<sup>11</sup>Willem VanGemeren sees "twelve periods of redemptive history" (*The Progress of Redemption: The Story of Salvation from Creation to the New Jerusalem* [Grand Rapids: Academie/Zondervan: 1988], p. 33).

<sup>12</sup>*Historia salutis* (history of salvation) is usually given the connotation of *God's* major actions in the history of salvation. This is opposed to *ordo salutis* (plan of salvation), which relates *God's* forethought and order of *God* applying salvation to an individual. The point is usually made in R-H circles that *historia salutis* has logical/causal priority over *ordo salutis* (for example, Ridderbos, *When the Time Had Fully Come*, pp. 47-48). However, I am not sure that all are using the same definition of *ordo salutis*.

that subject's meaning for today.<sup>13</sup> The Scriptures often use explicit time-line considerations for exegetical conclusions (e.g., Heb 4:8-10, 7:11-12, 28).

(3) A focus on noting that every section of the Bible has a redemptive message for God's people centered on Christ; usually this focus especially affects preaching.<sup>14</sup> Typology of Christ in the OT is an important topic (Luke 24:44). Many times this focus only has concern for Christ's redemptive work.<sup>15</sup> I would rather slightly adjust this focus to: What does every text explicitly and implicitly say about the Triune God—his character (person) and actions (work)—with an emphasis on Christ?

In addition to the variety of foci above, another difficult factor involved in trying to discuss R-H is that there is disagreement within Reformed circles as to the extent to which R-H themes are the *main* themes in the Bible. If I may use my own terms and again paint broadly, I might suggest four positions on a continuum: (1) R-H only, (2) R-H primary, (3) R-H important, and (4) R-H unimportant (ST only).

I define the "R-H only" camp as those who see R-H significantly trumping traditional

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<sup>13</sup>John Murray does this in *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957). He looks at a variety of ethical topics (e.g., marriage) and evaluates them through the time-line of R-H.

<sup>14</sup>For example, Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology*; Sidney Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts* (Toronto: Wedge, 1970); and Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

<sup>15</sup>Christ's work of creation is noted in Heb 1:2, 10-12, which quotes Ps 102:25-27. His person is also included in the discussion, compare Heb 1:12 and 13:8.

ST<sup>16</sup> and/or see it as the only way to preach.<sup>17</sup> This usually comes in a package of anti-exemplary exegesis.<sup>18</sup> It is noted that not all in the “R-H only” preaching camp are interested in significantly trumping ST.

The “R-H primary” camp sees R-H as the primary or most important consideration for the correct understanding of Scripture.<sup>19</sup> Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. says, “in a word, the concept of theology is redemptive-historically conditioned. The essence of theology is interpretation of the history of redemption.”<sup>20</sup>

In the “R-H important” camp I include those, like me, who see R-H themes as important, but not necessarily the primary or only themes in the Bible and not the only method of preaching.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>For example, I put into this camp those who are favorable to N. T. Wright’s views of justification and the “new perspective.” See Wright’s *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 18-20, 113-33.

<sup>17</sup>For an excellent example of “R-H only” preaching, see Sidney Greidanus’ *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method*.

<sup>18</sup>Exemplary exegesis notes a biblical character’s actions and traits that are intended to be used as either good or bad examples for readers.

<sup>19</sup>In this category for example, I place two evangelical giants of 20th century NT scholarship: Herman Ridderbos (*Paul: An Outline of His Theology and The Coming of the Kingdom* [trans. H. de Jongste; ed. Raymond O. Zorn; Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962]) and George Eldon Ladd (*A Theology of the New Testament*). Tremper Longman, III, even while touting the literary aspects of Scripture, concludes that the R-H function of Scripture is most “dominate” (*Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* [FCI 3; Grand Rapids: Academie/Zondervan, 1987], pp. 68-69).

<sup>20</sup>*Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul’s Soteriology* (2nd ed.; Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), p. 24.

<sup>21</sup>Reasons for not seeing R-H as primary differ. John M. Frame, who agrees to the importance of R-H, does not see it as primary as per his perspectival system, along with other

Finally, the “R-H unimportant (ST only)” camp does not exist in *principle* due to traditional-Reformed ST always having a level of R-H interest. However in *practice*, many use no other biblical categories except for the main ones used in traditional ST and rarely discuss any topic with time-line sensitivity.<sup>22</sup>

Yes, there are disagreements among the above, but I do not want to overplay this. All would say something to the effect that the person and work of the Triune God with emphasis on Christ is the “center” of the Bible. The differences in method between the “R-H primary” and “R-H important” are in practice only in degree. Gaffin might say that R-H is the primary control on a given biblical text, but there are many secondary controls.<sup>23</sup> With a slightly different nuance, I assert that R-H is one of several important controls on a text, but other equally important controls are Trinity, covenants, literary context, ST categories, analogy of Scripture, etc.

In preaching, the differences between the “R-H only” group and the others do present

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reasons (*The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* [Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987], pp. 207-12 and *The Doctrine of God* [Phillipsburg: P & R, 2002], pp. 7-9). Gerhard F. Hassel, who dislikes ST and emphasizes R-H, in the end concludes that no “center can be sufficiently broad” (*New Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978], p. 163). Others, like me, see Covenant theology (which has many R-H aspects!) as the best organizing principle of Scripture. Still others might find other “centers” to the Bible (e.g., justification by faith).

<sup>22</sup>Some would accuse L. Berkhof of this, although I would not. See his *Systematic Theology* (4th rev.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941).

<sup>23</sup>“Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” 294. This article is a good starting point for these types of discussions. Also in this article is a brief summary of the relevant views of Gabler, Kuyper, Vos, Warfield, and Murray.

some tensions.<sup>24</sup> If Christ is the center of Scripture, does that make him equally the “center” of every sermon? Is exemplary exegesis always wrong?<sup>25</sup> What about preaching the third use of the law? Is it proper to use texts of Scripture from different R-H periods and then combine them in a topical sermon?<sup>26</sup> Can grace be assumed in a text simply because the text is part of the Bible, or does grace need to be shown from the specific text? How does a worship service with a confession of sin and assurance of pardon and/or the Lord’s supper affect the sermon? But again, most, but not all, of these tensions are reduced if we agree that the Triune God with emphasis on Christ should be part of every sermon/worship-service. Given this, the tensions then relate only to how explicit and to what extent that part is. For example, related to the third use of the law, Chapell states, “‘Be’ messages are not wrong in themselves; they are wrong messages by themselves.”<sup>27</sup> The argument here revolves around what constitutes “by themselves” in a third-use-of-the-law sermon. I sense that in practice Chapell wants a more explicit and extended

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<sup>24</sup>Hendrik Krabbendam notes tensions and complains that R-H preaching is too restrictive. It totally rejects exemplary exegesis and downplays application. Also, it is too Christocentric to the detriment of a full trinitarian message. See his “Hermeneutics and Preaching,” in *The Preacher and Preaching: Reviving the Art in the Twentieth Century* (Phillipsburg: P & R, 1986), pp. 212-45, esp. 233-35.

<sup>25</sup>For a justification of a limited use of exemplary exegesis, see Robert J. Cara, “The Ambiguous Characterization of Barnabas in Acts 15:36-41” (Ph.D. diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 2001), pp. 154-64 and Richard L. Pratt, *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Students’ Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* (Brentwood: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1990), p. 91. Clowney does see a use for exemplary or “ethical instruction” (*Preaching and Biblical Theology*, pp. 78-79).

<sup>26</sup>I would argue it is in principle proper because the Bible itself does this with other portions of Scripture (e.g., Rom 3:9-20). Of course, I am assuming that the Bible’s hermeneutic is in principle normative for us.

<sup>27</sup>Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, p. 285.

discussion of Christ than I feel is required. However, we probably are not that far apart in principle.

Concerning those in the “R-H only” camp who stress that R-H significantly trumps ST, yes, there are important differences. Once many of the traditional ST categories and conclusions are discounted, the differences are more substantial and could lead to the denial of key Christian doctrines. Of course, those in the “R-H only” camp would simply reply that certain ST doctrines (if not the whole idea of ST) are wrong, and that many other ST doctrines need to be significantly improved by reformulation into R-H categories.<sup>28</sup>

### **R-H THEMES IN THE *WLC***

Of the many R-H themes presented above, for convenience I will evaluate the *WLC* in respect to (1) time-line aspects, which relate more to method and (2) modern views of union with Christ, which relate more to theology.

Why use only the *WLC* instead of the complete Westminster Standards? The *WLC* is the most neglected part of the Westminster Standards.<sup>29</sup> Also, the *WLC* has a large union with Christ

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<sup>28</sup>For example, John Goldingay compares biblical narratives and ST. He complains about ST’s use of a Greek-thought framework for the Trinity, and “for all its truth and fruitfulness, the doctrine of the Trinity seriously skews our theological reading of Scripture.” ST does not do justice to much of the biblical material because “it presupposes a quest for unity.” Greek-thinking ST does not match biblical narratives concerning providence. In biblical narratives, “God is committed to the achievement of certain long-term aims, and sometimes acts in history, but does not decide how most events work out in history. If sovereignty means that what happens is what God wants to happen, God is not sovereign.” See John Goldingay, “Biblical Narrative and Systematic Theology,” in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (eds. Joel B. Green and Max Turner; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 123-42, esp. pp. 128-31, 140.

<sup>29</sup>W. Robert Godfrey agrees, “At least in the United States the Larger Catechism is seldom mentioned, much less studied, as a living part of the Presbyterian heritage” (“An

section (*WLC* 65-90) that needs more highlighting.

For my purposes, the following is a truncated outline of the *WLC*. Especially note the union with Christ section.

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Introduction to the Westminster Larger Catechism,” in Johannes G. Vos, *The Westminster Larger Catechism: A Commentary* [ed. G. I. Williamson; Phillipsburg: P & R, 2002], p. ix). The literature specifically on the *WLC* is limited. Two major works are the just cited Vos work and Thomas Ridgeley, *Commentary on the Larger Catechism* (2 vols.; Edmonton: Still Waters Revival, n.d. [1731-33]). Also see Morton H. Smith, “Theology of the Larger Catechism,” in *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century: Essays in Remembrance of the 350th Anniversary of the Westminster Assembly* (ed. J. Ligon Duncan; 3 vols.; Ross-shire: Mentor/Christian Focus, 2003-), pp. 1:101-22.

- \* Belief (6-90)
  - \* Trinity: person and work (6-19)
  - \* Covenant of Works/Life (20-30)
  - \* Covenant of Grace (31-35)
  - \* Christ the Mediator of the Covenant of Grace (36-56)
    - \* Person (36-42)
    - \* Work (43-56)
      - \* Prophet, Priest, and King (43-45)
      - \* Humiliation and Exaltation (46-56)
  - \* Application of Christ's Benefits to the Church (57-64)
  - \* Union with Christ (65-90)
    - \* Communion with Christ "in grace" (66-81)
      - (Effectual Calling, Justification, Adoption, and Sanctification)
    - \* Communion with Christ "in glory" (82-90)
      - ("This life," Intermediate State, and Resurrection)
- \* Duty (91-196)
  - \* Law (92-152)
  - \* Means of Grace (153-196)
    - \* Word (155-160)
    - \* Sacraments (161-177)
    - \* Prayer (178-196)

## **TIME-LINE ASPECTS IN *WLC***

Obviously, the Westminster divines are aware that Scripture presents many subjects with time-line aspects. But how much of this is included the *WLC*? The following is a review of topics from the *WLC* that are discussed, at least minimally, with time-line aspects. Following the review, I will summarize and then discuss some of the possible weaknesses of the *WLC* in this regard.

"The scriptures make known . . . his decrees, and the execution of his decrees" (*WLC* 6). The decrees include "his works of creation and providence" (*WLC* 14, also 15, 18). Time-line aspects are shown by distinguishing the decrees and the execution of them, and distinguishing between creation and on-going providence.

The federal system (the Covenant of Works/life and the Covenant of Grace [*WLC* 20-22,

30-32]) of the Westminster Standards is well-known. Both of these covenants have time-line aspects. Although the Covenant of Works was with Adam,<sup>30</sup> the requirement of “perpetual obedience” and the punishments due its violation continue throughout R-H. Mankind is now “liable to all punishments in this world and that which is to come” (*WLC* 20, 27, 38, 93). Also the “flesh” and “sin” aspects from Adam’s fall continue in both believers and unbelievers through R-H (*WLC* 26, 27, 78, 191, 193). Finally, the Covenant of Works is related to the “moral law,” which also extends through R-H (*WLC* 92-94).

Although there is only one Covenant of Grace, it was “administered” in a different “manner” in the OT than it is in the NT epoch (*WLC* 33-35). In the NT, “grace and salvation are held forth in more fulness, evidence, and efficacy, to all nations” (*WLC* 35). This shows both time-line aspects and, more specifically, a progressive fulfillment through R-H.

In relationship to the Covenant of Grace, Christ is called the “second Adam” (*WLC* 31). The relationship between the first and second Adams shows time-line awareness.

Christ’s person is described partially in time-line ways. Christ “in the fullness of time became man, and so was and continues to be God and man . . . for ever” (*WLC* 36, also 47).

The mediator, Jesus, is described using OT categories: Christ, Prophet, Priest, and King. He is “Christ . . . to execute the offices of prophet, priest, and king of his church” (*WLC* 42, also 43-45). Although not explicitly stated but implied with the use of the footnotes, these OT

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<sup>30</sup>Bavinck argues that because the Covenant of Works was conditional for Adam, this implies that at creation Adam did not possess the highest state of blessing. Hence, even the Covenant of Works itself had a progressive aspect that will not be fully realized until the new heavens and earth. He contrasts this Reformed R-H aspect of the Covenant of Works against Roman Catholic and Lutheran views. See Herman Bavinck, *In the Beginning: Foundations of Creation Theology* (ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), pp. 206-12.

categories for Jesus give many typological hints for preaching Jesus from OT texts.<sup>31</sup> These categories also imply a progressive fulfillment from the OT to Christ.<sup>32</sup>

The emphasis on the states of Christ in his “humiliation” and “exaltation” shows a time-line movement in Christ’s work. The *WLC* covers Christ’s “conception and birth, life, death, and after his death, . . . resurrection, ascension, sitting at the right hand of the Father, and his coming again to judge the world” (*WLC* 46, 51). As all agree, defining Christ in terms of his humiliation and then his exaltation is one biblical way, among several biblical ways, to summarize Christ’s work (e.g., Ps 118:22, Luke 24:46, Acts 5:30-31, Phil 2:6-11, 1 Pet 1:11). The Nicene Creed and the Apostles’ Creed do this, along with traditional-Reformed ST and modern R-H emphases. Unfortunately, the people in the pews do not generally pick-up on this.

The full-orbed salvation of believers is shown in time-line terms (*ordo salutis*). This occurs many times in the section on humiliation and exaltation (*WLC* 46-56). For example, Christ’s exalted resurrection is related to believers’ “justification, quickening in grace, support against enemies, and to assure them of their resurrection from the dead on the last day” (*WLC* 52). The whole union with Christ section (*WLC* 65-90) also revolves around the time-line of believers. It is split between our union now (“in grace”) and our union in the life to come (“in glory”) (*WLC* 65). More on this later in the union with Christ section of this article.

Upon death, believers are “capable of further communion with Christ in glory” (*WLC* 85). This shows the progressive nature of salvation. In the discussions of the second coming, it is

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<sup>31</sup>For additional typological hints, see *WCF* 8.6, 27.5.

<sup>32</sup>Ridgeley, writing in 1721-23, makes the obvious typological and progressive fulfillment connections. See Ridgeley, *Commentary on the Larger Catechism*, 1:490-98.

made especially clear that there is a progressive advancement of believers' salvation. Believers will be "at last perfected at the resurrection and day of judgment" (*WLC* 82) and "fully and for ever freed from all sin and misery, filled with inconceivable joys, made perfectly holy and happy both in body and soul" (*WLC* 90).

*WLC* 79 well shows an example of God's actions through R-H related to the salvation of believers. True believers cannot fall from grace because of the "unchangeable love of God, and his decree and covenant . . . , their inseparable union with Christ, his continual intercession for them, and the Spirit and seed of God abiding in them."

The preface to the ten commandments section notes "that he is a God in covenant, as with Israel of old, so with all his people; who, as he brought them out of their bondage in Egypt, so he delivereth us from our spiritual thralldom" (*WLC* 101). Note the time-line aspects in the typology connecting "bondage in Egypt" to "our spiritual thralldom."

The large ten commandments section (*WLC* 102-48) has modern meanings, that is, "duties required" and "sins forbidden" for today. This indicates some level of time-line sensitivity, if not simply to explicitly show that many OT moral laws have a one-to-one relationship to the NT epoch. Also, some of the discussions include slight adjustments from the OT to NT (e.g., Saturday to Sunday in the fourth commandment [*WLC* 116]).<sup>33</sup>

Concerning the Sabbath, a brief time-line is included, "remembrance of the two great benefits of creation and redemption, which contain a short abridgment of religion" (*WLC* 121). Creation/Redemption is a biblical and current R-H emphasis.

*WLC* 191 speaks of "thy kingdom come." This kingdom has time-line aspects, for

example, “the fulness of the Gentiles brought in” and “Christ would rule in our hearts here, and hasten the time of his second coming, and our reigning with him for ever.”<sup>34</sup>

### **Summary and Possible Weaknesses of Time-Line Aspects of *WLC***

As seen from the above review, the *WLC* exhibits many time-line aspects. As is well-known, traditional-Reformed ST’s *ordo salutis* has always incorporated time-line aspects that are progressive, and the *WLC* confirms this. However, the *WLC* confirms this by discussing the *ordo salutis* as part of the humiliation and exaltation section and also as part of the union with Christ section. This shows a strong correlation between *historia salutis* and *ordo salutis* that most in the modern Reformed circles can whole-heartedly support.

Both the Covenant of Works and Covenant of Grace exhibit time-line aspects. They are not only “static” covenants; both have implications throughout R-H. The Covenant of Grace is portrayed as progressively developing from the OT to the new heavens and new earth.

The person and especially the work of Christ are shown in time-line terms. The humiliation and exaltation scheme has a separate discussion of Christ’s conception and birth,

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<sup>33</sup>Discontinuity of OT laws into the NT is explicitly discussed in *WCF* 19.3-4, 20.1.

<sup>34</sup>A common complaint in some Reformed circles is that the Westminster Standards have a truncated view of the Kingdom of God as compared to the view presented by, for example, Geerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church* (Phillipsburg, Presbyterian and Reformed, n.d. [1903]). It is usually noted that in *WCF* 25.2 the kingdom is equivalent to the church. True, in *WCF* 25.2 the kingdom is equated as far as membership is concerned to the church. Vos also agrees to this (*The Teaching of Jesus concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church*, pp. 86-87). But Vos would go on to argue that “it does not necessarily follow that the visible church is the only outward expression of the invisible kingdom” (*The Teaching of Jesus concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church*, p. 87). *WLC* 191 states, “that he [Christ] would be pleased so to exercise the kingdom of his power in all the world, as best may conduce to these ends.” Although not clear and does not say as much as I would like, I believe that this implies that kingdom work is broader than the visible-

life, death, after his death, resurrection, ascension, sitting at the right hand of God, and coming again to judge. Highlighting these *historia salutis* redemptive-actions matches many modern R-H emphases.

Given that the *WLC* did not intend to say everything, are there weaknesses in the *WLC* pertaining to R-H time-line aspects? In my view there are no explicit R-H errors in the *WLC*; however, it would have been helpful if the *WLC* (1) included more on the specifics of the unfolding OT covenants/periods within the Covenant of Grace (e.g., Abrahamic covenant, Davidic covenant), (2) included more on the typology of Christ in the OT (although Christ as prophet, priest, and king gives many hints) and (3) made the *progressive* nature of God's redemptive actions and his Scriptures more explicit.

## **UNION WITH CHRIST**

The terminology of “union with Christ” is used in both historic-Reformed ST and modern R-H emphases. How well does union with Christ in the *WLC* match to the modern R-H emphasis on it?

Due to Calvin's emphasis and application of union with Christ,<sup>35</sup> this terminology has always been part of historic Reformed ST. However, it has been used in slightly different ways. For example, in the *ordo salutis*, does union with Christ begin with (1) Christ's agreement in eternity past to represent us or (2) our existential union with him as part of our effectual

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church work.

<sup>35</sup>For example, Calvin connects union with Christ to the sacraments (*Institutes*, 4.15.6, 4.17.2-3).

calling?<sup>36</sup> However, much of modern Reformed ST now agrees with Murray that union with Christ is the “central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation” and stretches from eternity past to our glorification.<sup>37</sup>

### **Union with Christ in Pauline Theology**

What concepts are associated with the term “union with Christ” in Reformed circles by those who emphasize R-H? Generally, it matches modern Pauline scholarly usage, which unfortunately is not uniform.

Union with Christ is connected by both modern Pauline critical and conservative scholars to Paul’s use of the “in Christ” formula.<sup>38</sup> Also related to this is Paul’s use of both “Christ for us”

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<sup>36</sup>For example, Ames and Witsius connect union with Christ directly to our effectual call (William Aims, *The Marrow of Theology* [trans. and ed. John D. Eusden; Durham: Labyrinth, 1983 {1629}], p. 157; Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man* [2 vols.; Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1990 {1693}], pp. 1:344-45). L. Berkhof seems to incorporate both (*Systematic Theology*, pp. 418, 449-50). Charles Hodge, connects our union to Christ to eternity past, with Christ’s work, and our consummation of it by faith. He has a good, but brief, discussion connecting our union with Christ’s work to our justification (*Systematic Theology* [3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982 {1871-73}], pp. 3:104, 3:121. For some insightful discussions, see William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (ed. Alan W. Gomes; 3d ed.; Phillipsburg: P & R, 2003 [1888-94]), pp. 789-90 and Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (trans. George Musgrave Giger; ed. James T. Dennison, Jr.; 3 vols.; Phillipsburg: P & R, 1992-97 [1679-85]), pp. 2:179-83.

<sup>37</sup>John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), pp. 161, also 162-73. Sinclair B. Ferguson says, “Every element in the classical *ordo salutis* is thus a further perspective on the one reality of the believer’s union with Christ” (*The Holy Spirit* [Contours of Christian Theology; Downers Grove; InterVarsity, 1996], p. 106). Douglas F. Kelly, my teacher and now colleague, notes in class that “union with Christ is from eternity to eternity” and is the “motor that makes [soteriology] run.” Robert L. Reymond acknowledges Murray’s view, but insists on the more traditional connecting of union with Christ with effectual calling (*A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998], p. 736).

<sup>38</sup>As to categorizing the “in Christ” statements with different overlapping conclusions,

(e.g., Rom 5:6, 8, 1 Cor 15:3, 2 Cor 5:21) and “we with Christ” (e.g., Rom 6:8, 2 Cor 5:14-15, Col 2:20, 3:1) ideas.<sup>39</sup> (The distinction between “Christ for us” and “we with Christ” has been in traditional-Reformed ST; the 1563 *Heidelberg Catechism* used it [42-43].<sup>40</sup> ) Finally for many, these are additionally related to the Adam/Christ parallels (“in Adam/“in Christ”; “old man”/“new man”; both Adam and Christ as “image of God”).<sup>41</sup>

In scholarly Pauline-studies circles, there is disagreement on exactly what these formulas mean and how they are related. At a minimum, there is agreement that our union with Christ includes our connection to him at his death/resurrection and a related union with Christ when we first believe. Many scholars also see an election aspect to our union with Christ stretching back to the “foundation of the world” (Eph 1:4). There is also disagreement both at the terminology and concept level as to how to characterize the union itself. Is it federal, forensic, existential, R-

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see M. A. Seifrid, “In Christ,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (eds. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), pp. 433-36; Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1981), pp. 644-56; and I. Howard Marshall, “The Theology of Philippians,” in Karl P. Donfried and I. Howard Marshall, *The Theology of the Shorter Pauline Letters* (NTT; Cambridge: CUP, 1993), pp. 138-44.

<sup>39</sup>For a critical perspective, see James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of the Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 396-412. For a conservative perspective, see Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, pp. 57-64, 168-89 and Ridderbos, *When the Time Had Fully Come*, pp. 53-57.

<sup>40</sup>The *Heidelberg Catechism* connects “Christ for us” to justification and “we with Christ” to sanctification. Although Paul often ties “we with Christ” to sanctification (e.g., 2 Cor 5:14-15), this does not exhaust Paul’s meaning as the connection of “we with Christ” to both the Adam/Christ parallel and “in Christ” would indicate (cf. Rom 5:19, 1 Cor 1:30, 15:22).

<sup>41</sup>Thomas R. Schreiner has an extended discussion of Paul’s “Adam christology” and how it can be seen in relationship to other Pauline doctrines, including “in Christ.” He presents it as one of the main categories to understand Christ (*Paul: Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001], pp. 151-68).

H, mystical, spiritual, vital, “a Gnostic conception of the cosmic Anthropos,”<sup>42</sup> etc.?

In order to get a starting point to compare against the *WLC*, allow me to give a very brief overview of my view of the “in Christ” formula in Paul. My view is reasonably common within conservative Pauline scholarship.

Union with Christ (“in Christ”) may be defined as *our representation by and our connection with Christ, and all the implications that flow from this*. Union with Christ is multifaceted and covers the whole scope of R-H. It has three key points in R-H. We are (1) united to Christ in eternity past (e.g., Ephesians 1, 1 Thess 5:9-10, Rom 8:28-29), (2) united to Christ with him in his work of humiliation and exaltation (e.g., Rom 3:24, Romans 6, 2 Cor 5:19, Col 2:20, 3:1, 1 Thess 4:14), and (3) united to Christ existentially, which starts when we first believe and continues into the new heavens and earth (e.g., Rom 8:1, Gal 2:20, Eph 6:1, Phil 4:4, Col 2:20, Col 3:1, 1 Cor 15:58).<sup>43</sup> This is not the place to expand upon the difficult subject of exactly how all three of these points relate to each other.

This union with Christ has federal, forensic, spiritual, and existential aspects, along with a now/not-yet structure,<sup>44</sup> which, I would argue, all match to a full-orbed covenant theology.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (trans. Kendrick Grobel; 2 vols.; New York: Charles Scribner’s, 1951-55), p. 2:177.

<sup>43</sup>Gaffin’s three terms of “predestinarian,” “redemptive-historical,” and “experiential” match to my “eternity past,” “with his work,” and “existential,” respectively (*Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul’s Soteriology*, pp. 50, 57). John L. Girardeau, speaking specifically of justification, prefers the term “representative” to refer to our justification in 30 AD, and “conscious” to refer to our justification when we first believe (*The Federal Theology: Its Import and its Regulative Influence* [ed. J. Ligon Duncan, III; Greenville: Reformed Academic, 1994 {1881}], p. 22).

<sup>44</sup>The now/not-yet structure includes having some of the apparent future-age

## Union with Christ in the *WLC*

*WLC* 65-90 is an amazingly biblical discussion of many aspects of our union with Christ. Similar to older ST, the terms “union with Christ” (*WLC* 79) and “union and communion” (*WLC* 65) relate to our “existential” union with Christ, which begins at believers’ effectual calling. This union is defined as a “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” (*WLC* 66).

As can be seen from my above truncated outline, the *WLC* maps out this existential union in two phases: “in grace” (this life, 65, 69-81) and “in glory” (heaven, 65, 82-90).

The “communion in grace” relates to believers’ “partaking of the virtue of his mediation, in their justification, adoption, sanctification, and whatever else, in this life, manifests their union with him” (*WLC* 69).<sup>46</sup> This communion-in-grace section is typical of traditional ST *ordo salutis* answers, and several R-H emphases do appear.

Concerning the adoption section, a future aspect is included. Those adopted are “fellow-

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eschatological benefits brought back into the “now” age. Hence, the two R-H ages overlap. The classic for now/not-yet in Paul is Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Phillipsburg: Puritan and Reformed, 1986 [1930]), esp. pp. 1-41. Compare Luke 18:30, Rom 8:9, Gal 1:4, 5:17, and Eph 1:21. My minor complaint with standard now/not-yet discussions, including Vos’, is that there should be some aspects of eschatological “now” extending from Adam to Christ, albeit reduced aspects compared to the NT epoch. Does not Romans 4 imply that David’s faith, which is related to “promise,” “heir,” “grace,” and “righteousness,” had some aspect of eschatological blessing?

<sup>45</sup>For example, the covenantal “I am your God, and you are my people” (e.g., Gen 17:7-8, Exod 6:7, Rev 21:3) shows the existential aspect. Showing non/not-yet aspects, covenants have benefits when they are made, but also look toward future benefits (e.g., “In you [Abraham], all the families of the earth *will* be blessed” [Gen 12:3]).

<sup>46</sup>This answer assumes that one is already effectually called (*WLC* 66-68).

heirs with Christ in glory” (*WLC* 74).<sup>47</sup> Ridgeley, summarizing the adoption answer, states, “Hence, all the blessings which we have either in hand or in hope, the blessings of both worlds, the blessings which are conferred upon us from our conversion to our glorification, are the privileges which God bestows on those who are his adopted children.”<sup>48</sup> This shows a now/not-yet structure to adoption.<sup>49</sup>

Sanctification is “through the powerful operation of his Spirit applying the death and resurrection of Christ unto them” (*WLC* 75). Here is a clear connection between (1) our union with Christ in his work and (2) our existential union with Christ. Also see *WLC* 52 and 79 in this regard.

In sanctification, Christians are being “renewed in their whole man after the image of God” (*WLC* 75). This matches the biblical and current R-H emphasis of connecting creation language to redemption language.

The flesh versus Spirit struggle is included in the *WLC*. “The imperfection of sanctification in believers ariseth from the remnants of sin abiding in every part of them, and the perpetual lustings of the flesh against the spirit” (*WLC* 78). This shows at least partial awareness of a now/not-yet structure.

*WLC* 82-90 relates to our “communion in glory” which ostensibly begins “immediately after death.” The term “glory” refers to heaven (the heaven now and the future new heavens).

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<sup>47</sup>The footnote cites Rom 8:17: “heirs . . . that we may be glorified with him (*syndoxazomai*).” Rom 8:23 even more clearly asserts a future aspect of adoption.

<sup>48</sup>*Commentary on the Larger Catechism*, p. 2:136.

<sup>49</sup>The adoption chapter in the *WCF* (12) only implies a future aspect of adoption.

However, *WLC* 82-83 includes a discussion of how our “communion in glory” relates to “this life”! Christians “have communicated to them in this life the first-fruits of glory with Christ, as they are members of him their head, and so in him are interested in that glory which he is fully possessed of.” The *WLC* has an overlap of the “communion in grace” and the “communion in glory.” This is a clear example of a now/not-yet eschatology, and another connection between our union with Christ in his work and our existential union with Christ.

The *WLC* well notes the biblical and current R-H emphasis that the body in addition to the soul is to be redeemed. Part of the union with Christ in glory during the intermediate state is the “waiting for the full redemption of their bodies, which even in death continue united to Christ” (*WLC* 86). First Thessalonians 4:14 is footnoted for the connection between Christ and believers during the intermediate state that looks forward to believers’ bodily resurrection.

*WLC* 87 is more explicit concerning bodily resurrection. “The bodies of the just, by the Spirit of Christ, and by virtue of his resurrection as their head, shall be raised in power, spiritual, incorruptible, and made like to his glorious body.” Again, note the connection between our union with Christ in his work and our existential union with Christ.

The sacraments section (*WLC* 161-77) also includes union with Christ language. Baptism is a “a sign and seal of ingrafting into himself [Christ]” (*WLC* 165). Our baptism is improved on “by drawing strength from the death and resurrection of Christ, into whom we are baptized, for the mortifying of sin, and the quickening of grace” (*WLC* 167). In the Lord’s Supper, we have our “union and communion with him confirmed (*WLC* 168); and “do therein feed upon the body and blood of Christ . . . while by faith [we] receive and apply unto [our]selves Christ crucified, and all the benefits of his death” (*WLC* 170).

What about our union with Christ in eternity past? It is implicitly included in the “communion of grace” section by the starting point of effectual calling, which has a predestination aspect (*WLC* 67). This then connects back to the decrees of God (*WLC* 12-14). God’s decrees include “in Christ [God] hath chosen some men to eternal life” (*WLC* 13). Our union with Christ in eternity past is explicit in that the “covenant of grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed” (*WLC* 31). Possibly related is *WLC* 174 where the Lord’s Supper is considered a “renewing of their [believers’] covenant with God.” Jeremiah 50:5 is footnoted, which refers to an “everlasting covenant.” (*WCF* 11.4 has a three-fold discussion of justification, which connects God’s decree of justification, to Christ’s rising for our justification, to our actual justification.)

Although a topic for another article, the *WLC* does make corporate implications (believers’ connection to other believers) from our union with Christ. See *WLC* 64, 168, and 174.

Finally, it should be noted that while *WLC* 65-90 ostensibly emphasizes what I would call existential union with Christ, one should not assume that the existential aspect alone is the sum total of the Westminster divines’ doctrine of the union with Christ. Given extensive 16th and early 17th-century Reformed discussion of that locus, stretching back to Calvin, Peter Martyr, and Beza, it is likely that the divines would have acknowledged all the dimensions of union with Christ recognized by modern Reformed theologians.

### **Summary and Possible Weaknesses of Union with Christ in *WLC***

The *WLC* has a large union with Christ section (65-90). Specifically, the term “union with Christ” refers to our union that begins at our effectual calling. How does this compare to current Pauline studies that include our union with Christ in eternity past, our union with him in

his work, and our existential union? Given that there is a terminology difference, the *WLC* does match well to union with Christ in Pauline studies. The *WLC* shows that our three-fold union with Christ is (1) connected back to eternity, (2) connected to Christ's life/death/resurrection/ascension/return, and (3) results in an existential union and benefits for us in this life and the life to come. (For purposes of this paper, I did not pursue the discussions concerning the nature of the union [e.g., Does the union have forensic aspects?] and the inter-relationship of the three-fold union.)

Matching to biblical and current R-H emphases, the *WLC* includes many implicit and explicit now/not-yet statements. Examples include the adoption and resurrection discussions, along with the overlapping communion in grace with communion in glory.

Again, given that the *WLC* did not intend to say everything, a possible weakness in the *WLC* is that there is no explicit explanation of the overlapping R-H ages. The kernel, however, of the overlapping ages is included. Original and actual sin run throughout R-H (see *WLC* 25, 26, 78, 194). Our union with Christ in his work is connected to our union with Christ in grace and in glory (e.g., *WLC* 87, also see *WCF* 13.2-3). Our benefits in this life are termed the "first fruits of glory with Christ" (*WLC* 83). The overlap of the communion in grace and communion in glory, and the Covenant of Works and Covenant of Grace also contribute.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

(1) There are many modern R-H themes in the *WLC*. Specifically, this article has highlighted time-line aspects and the three-fold union with Christ. One may argue, although I would not, that certain aspects of the *WLC*'s presentation of R-H are wrong or many doctrines need to be significantly altered by reformulation along R-H lines. However, to imply that the

Westminster Standards' ST does not include many R-H aspects is simply wrong.

(2) The "union with Christ" section (*WLC* 65-90) is biblical and needs to be more well known.

(3) In my opinion, there are no R-H errors in the *WLC*, although I do think there are some possible weaknesses due to partial omissions. It would have been helpful if the *WLC* (a) included more on the specifics of the unfolding OT covenants/periods within the Covenant of Grace (e.g., Abrahamic covenant, Davidic covenant), (b) included more on the typology of Christ in the OT, (c) made the *progressive* nature of God's redemptive actions and his Scriptures more explicit, and (d) gave a more explicit explanation of the overlapping R-H ages.