REDEMPTIVE-HISTORICAL THEMES IN THE
WESTMINSTER 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.”¹ Understanding what is termed either biblical theology, or as I prefer, redemptive-historical theology (R-H²), is important.³ 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

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

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

³In 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. 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). 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. 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.

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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4 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).

5 Of course, methodological and theological emphases are interrelated.

6 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).

7 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.”

**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. 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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9Edmund 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. Others add covenants, exodus, Davidic kingdom, exilic, post-exilic, Christ’s states of humiliation and exaltation, etc. 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.

(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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12 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. 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. 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. 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

13 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.


15 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 would see it as the only way to preach. This usually comes in a package of anti-exemplary exegesis. 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. 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.”

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.

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16 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.

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

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

19 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).


21 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.\(^\text{22}\)

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.\(^\text{23}\) 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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\(^{22}\) Some would accuse L. Berkhof of this, although I would not. See his *Systematic Theology* (4th rev.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941).

\(^{23}\) “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.\textsuperscript{24} If Christ is the center of Scripture, does that make him equally the “center” of every sermon? Is exemplary exegesis always wrong?\textsuperscript{25} 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?\textsuperscript{26} 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.”\textsuperscript{27} 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

\textsuperscript{24} 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.


\textsuperscript{26} 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.

\textsuperscript{27} 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.\(^\text{28}\)

**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.\(^\text{29}\) Also, the *WLC* has a large union with Christ

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\(^{28}\) 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.

\(^{29}\) 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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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,
of the Westminster Standards is well-known. Both of these covenants have time-line aspects. Although the Covenant of Works was with Adam, 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

30Bavinck 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.\textsuperscript{31} These categories also imply a progressive fulfillment from the OT to Christ.\textsuperscript{32}

The emphasis on the states of Christ in his “humiliation” and “exaltation” shows a time-line movement in Christ’s work. The \textit{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” (\textit{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 (\textit{ordo salutis}). This occurs many times in the section on humiliation and exaltation (\textit{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” (\textit{WLC} 52). The whole union with Christ section (\textit{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”) (\textit{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” (\textit{WLC} 85). This shows the progressive nature of salvation. In the discussions of the second coming, it is

\textsuperscript{31}For additional typological hints, see \textit{WCF} 8.6, 27.5.

\textsuperscript{32}Ridgeley, writing in 1721-23, makes the obvious typological and progressive fulfillment connections. See Ridgeley, \textit{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 forever 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 thraldom” (WLC 101). Note the time-line aspects in the typology connecting “bondage in Egypt” to “our spiritual thraldom.”

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]).

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.”  

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

34 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, 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 church work.

For example, Calvin connects union with Christ to the sacraments (Institutes, 4.15.6, 4.17.2-3).
calling? 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.

**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.


38 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.\(^{39}\) (The distinction between “Christ for us” and “we with Christ” has been in traditional-Reformed ST; the 1563 *Heidelberg Catechism* used it [42-43].\(^{40}\)) 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”).\(^{41}\)

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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\(^{40}\) 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).

\(^{41}\) 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,” 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). 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, which, I would argue, all match to a full-orbed covenant theology.

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43 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).

44 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). 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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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]).

This answer assumes that one is already effectually called (*WLC* 66-68).
heirs with Christ in glory” (WLC 74). 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.” This shows a now/not-yet structure to adoption.

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).

47 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.


49 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 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.