

On the second day of June 2007, here comes the session of Christ Community Church of Johnson City, Tennessee to overture Westminster Presbytery as follows:

**Whereas** we are a denomination that believes in the authority of the Bible as the only infallible rule of faith and practice;

**Whereas** we are a confessional Presbyterian denomination and believe that the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and *Catechisms*, while certainly subordinate to the word of God, are a faithful summary of the system of doctrine contained in the Bible;

**Whereas** Westminster Presbytery is currently examining the doctrines of Covenant and Election, Justification, Union with Christ, and the Sacraments;

**Therefore be it resolved** that Westminster Presbytery adopt the attached series of overviews, affirmations and denials, and suggested questions for examination originally written by our brothers in Missouri Presbytery in order to clarify our understanding of these doctrines.

This overture was approved and adopted by the session on June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2007 and I hereby attest to this fact as Moderator.

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1 **I. The Nature of the Covenant and Election**

2 Overview

3  
4 Our understanding of “covenant” is shaped both by Scripture and the Westminster  
5 Confession, especially WCF 7 and 19:1, 6, as well as WLC 20, 22, 30-36, 57, 79, 97,  
6 162, 166. We appreciate and affirm the richness of interpretation regarding the biblical  
7 language of “covenant.” In particular, we recognize that doing justice to the number of  
8 contexts in which “covenant” appears as well as offering a single biblical understanding  
9 of the word is challenging. Biblical studies from a past generation that compare biblical  
10 covenants to ancient Near Eastern suzerainty treaties, for example, have helpfully  
11 clarified some aspects of how biblical covenants function. And yet, we fear that those  
12 who read “covenant” solely through these lenses might unwittingly shift the real biblical  
13 thrust of the covenant idea.

14  
15 In a similar manner, it is clear that there is a great deal of confusion concerning to what  
16 the Westminster Standards might commit us when it comes to understanding “covenant.”  
17 Confessionally speaking, the word "covenant" is used in a number of combinations:

- 18
- 19 ● God relates to humankind "by way of covenant" (WCF 7.1).
  - 20 ● God is also presented as "a God in covenant, as with Israel of old, so with all His  
21 people" (WLC 101).
  - 22 ● The "first covenant" was a "covenant of works" (WCF 7.2) but is also called a  
23 "covenant of life" (WLC 20).
  - 24 ● The Lord made a second covenant "commonly called the covenant of grace"  
25 (WCF 7.3).
  - 26 ● The sacraments are said to represent, seal, and apply Christ and "the benefits of  
27 the new covenant" to believers (WSC 92).
  - 28 ● Baptism is not to be administered to those outside the visible church and "so  
29 strangers from the covenant of promise" (WLC 166).
  - 30 ● During the Lord's Supper, individuals are to be engaged in the "renewing of their  
31 covenant with God" (WLC 174).
- 32

33 As a result, we affirm as well the variety of interpretation of the Westminster Standards  
34 when it comes to the nature of the covenant. On the issue of the “covenant of works,” for  
35 example, we believe that those who read the Standards as emphasizing an adamic  
36 meritocracy and those who read them as emphasizing the gracious foundation of all God's  
37 covenant dealings with humanity can both claim confessional integrity and historical  
38 precedent in the Westminster tradition. Neither of these views does violence to the  
39 Standards given their lack of precision regarding Adam's covenant relationship to God.  
40 This variety of interpretation of both Scripture and the Standards make offering any  
41 definition of “covenant” hazardous. And yet, we would affirm that a definition includes  
42 understanding the word “covenant” to mean biblically: a covenant is a committed  
43 relationship typified by mutual loyalty and obligation.

1 Another contested word in these discussions is the word “election.” In particular, the  
2 theological question has been the relationship that “covenant” and “election” bear to one  
3 another. In some readings, understandings of “covenant” have forced “election” to be  
4 redefined in order to fit biblical and/or theological propositions. Our usage follows that of  
5 the Westminster Confession where "election" refers to those God has chosen in Christ  
6 and are predestined unto eternal life (WCF 3.5).

7  
8 Affirmations and Denials

9  
10 1. We affirm that by an act of gracious condescension, God bound Himself to His  
11 creation, and through His covenant representative bound Himself to His creation by way  
12 of covenant.

13 2. We affirm that a covenant, generally speaking, is a committed relationship typified by  
14 mutual loyalty and obligation (stipulations and sanctions). We further affirm that when  
15 we are speaking of God's covenant with His people, God is always the initiator of the  
16 covenant, sovereignly calling the relationship into being, freely committing Himself to  
17 His covenant partner, and calling each member of the covenant to respond with faith and  
18 love.

19 3. We affirm that while God takes the initiative in all His covenant dealings with human  
20 beings, He also grants grace for the required human responses of faith and obedience, to  
21 those whom He has chosen to save.

22 4. We affirm that Adam mediated the first covenant in the original integrity of the  
23 creation order. We further affirm that having created Adam in and for covenant blessing,  
24 God called Adam to loyalty and fruitfulness: so long as Adam walked with God in love  
25 and obedience, God promised to bless him, his posterity, and the entire earthly creation,  
26 but should Adam fail to obey God's word, he would bring frustration into the creation,  
27 and would subject himself and his posterity to the enslaving power of sin and the reign of  
28 death. We deny that God's creational intention was for Adam to mature, eat from the Tree  
29 of Knowledge of Good and Evil, die, and be raised from the dead; and further deny that  
30 Adam's sin was only seizing the fruit of the Tree prematurely; and thus deny that death  
31 coming upon Adam and his posterity was part of God's creation purposes instead of a  
32 threatened response to human disobedience.

33 5. We affirm that when Adam disobeyed God's word and brought himself, his posterity,  
34 and the earth over which he had exercised dominion, under the curse of the covenant,  
35 God was merciful and initiated a second covenant for the purpose of bringing His  
36 redemptive grace to the chosen sons and daughters of Adam, delivering them and the  
37 world from the reign of sin and death, and calling them into covenant friendship, loyalty,  
38 and service with Himself. We deny that those who are true participants in this second  
39 covenant by means of justifying faith, who are called and who have received the  
40 promised inheritance, can break this covenant (Heb. 9:15).

41 6. We affirm that Jesus Christ, the eternal Son, is the mediator of the covenant of God's  
42 gracious redemption. Those whom the Father gives to the Son through His electing love  
43 in the covenant of grace will know the blessings of life and fruitful service into all  
44 eternity. Believing that God has elected in Christ to salvation all those who will be saved  
45 and that God has also foreordained all the means thereunto, we deny that the elect can  
46 lose their election (WCF 3.5-6). And because God's decree to save is immutable, Christ's

1 merit and intercession is efficacious, and the Spirit continues to abide upon all those  
2 whom God has effectually called, we further deny that perseverance ultimately depends  
3 upon human effort or striving (WCF 17.2).

4  
5 7. We affirm that the covenant of grace was administered differently under the “old  
6 covenant” (the law) than it is under the “new covenant” (the gospel; cf. WCF 7:6). We  
7 affirm that, in promising and foreshadowing Christ, the Mosaic Law (including all aspects  
8 of that economy) was an efficacious revelation of the covenant of grace for its time. We  
9 additionally affirm that as an expansion of God's covenant promises and provisions  
10 within the Abrahamic covenant, the law instructed and built up the people of God in their  
11 hope of the Messiah and their mission in the world. We finally affirm that with the  
12 coming of Christ and the institution of the new covenant, the preparatory function of the  
13 old covenant was rendered obsolete. 8. We affirm that all those baptized into the  
14 covenant community receive certain covenant blessings, whether elect or not, and that  
15 these blessings include the regular preaching of God's Word; the watchful care, pastoral  
16 oversight, instruction and government of the Church; the nurture of believing parents;  
17 and the regular call to place their faith in Christ (WLC 63; WLC 166; BCO 56-1).  
18 Believing that one is inseparably united to Christ by his/her faith alone, we deny that the  
19 ritual act of baptism apart from faith unites us to Christ. Further, since God alone sees  
20 what is invisible to us, we deny that the whole visible church is united to Christ by virtue  
21 of the ritual act of baptism (WLC 61). Suggested Questions for Examinations

- 22  
23 1. From Scripture and the Westminster Standards, how do you speak about Adam's  
24 covenantal relationship with God? What are the significance and implications of this  
25 relationship?  
26 2. From Scripture and the Westminster Standards, does God's covenantal relationship  
27 with Adam include all people? Explain what implications might result from your answer.  
28 3. From Scripture and the Westminster Standards, how would you compare and contrast  
29 Adam and Christ as covenant mediators?  
30 4. From Scripture and the Westminster Standards, how would you describe the  
31 relationship between God's electing decree and his covenant with human beings?  
32 5. From Scripture and the Westminster Standards, what is “new” about the New  
33 Covenant?  
34  
35

## 36 **II. Justification**

### 37 Overview

38  
39 The Westminster Standards define and describe the doctrine of justification in WCF 11,  
40 WLC 70-73, 77 and WSC 33. The affirmations and denials below intend to affirm this  
41 doctrine of justification, including the definition of justification as an “act of God's free  
42 grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight only  
43 for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.” This definition  
44 summarizes what Scripture clearly teaches about justification in such passages as Acts  
45 13:38-39; Romans 3:21-5:21; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21; Galatians 3:1-29; and Philipians  
46 3:3-11.

1 This doctrine has been one of the hallmarks of the Reformation and of the reformed  
2 tradition; and it is a key to any right system of faith. At the same time, we recognize that  
3 the Greek (and Hebrew) terminology which can be translated “justify” has a semantic  
4 range in the Old and New Testaments broader than the specific idea of God's pardoning  
5 sinners by the imputation of Christ's righteousness. Words from the biblical dikaio- group  
6 can be used in human interactions describing both judicial and non-judicial actions and  
7 declarations; and they can even have a negative connotation, expressing attempts at self-  
8 vindication. However, when employed in discussing God's work in saving his elect  
9 forever via the imputation of Christ's righteousness, this terminology takes on a more  
10 specific theological meaning. One can thus distinguish the doctrine of justification from  
11 the broader usage of dikaio-terminology. A failure to recognize this fact can result in a  
12 variety of fallacious exegetical and theological conclusions that create a disjunction  
13 between the biblical doctrine of justification and the classic Reformed doctrine.  
14 Furthermore, the doctrine of justification cannot be reduced to a mere listing of the places  
15 where the word “justify” is used in Scripture. Rather, it is a rich and coherent message  
16 from God as to how sinful human beings may be assured of his love and grace.

17  
18 Also we would remark pastorally to our brothers that presbyteries have the right to expect  
19 pastors and teachers, when they are speaking of the doctrine of justification, to assume  
20 the definitions of the Westminster Standards. There justification refers principally to  
21 God's work in saving elect individuals. Therefore, if pastors and teachers define  
22 justification differently, they should not be surprised when confusion and disagreements  
23 arise; and in fact, pastors and teachers should work to prevent such needless contention.

24  
25 Scripture not only affirms the imputation of Adam's sin to all humankind, but also affirms  
26 the imputation of Christ's righteousness to his people, wherein his righteousness is  
27 credited forensically to their account (Romans 5:12-21; 2 Corinthians 5:21). Although in  
28 previous periods it was incumbent to distinguish such imputation from an infusion of  
29 righteousness, today's exegetical discussions have also made it necessary to reaffirm  
30 imputation as the basis for God's just declaration of righteousness. God's declaration of  
31 righteousness, even a corporate declaration, cannot rightly occur without a basis in God's  
32 reckoning of Christ's righteousness to the account of individual sinners (Philippians 3:9).

### 33 34 Affirmations and Denials

35  
36 1. We affirm that the biblical word group for “to justify” (the dikaio-word group) has a  
37 broader range of usage than the term justification as employed in the Westminster  
38 Standards; we deny that this fact calls for a redefinition of the classic Reformed doctrine  
39 of justification.

40 2. We affirm that there is an element of vindication in the biblical vocabulary for “to  
41 justify”; we deny that God's ongoing acts of vindicating his people in history are to be  
42 confused with their justification by faith.

43 3. We affirm that the sphere of covenant blessings, including spiritual privileges, is wider  
44 than that of salvific blessings; we deny that all who partake of covenant blessings  
45 necessarily partake of salvation.

46

1 4. We affirm that salvation embraces more than justification and includes union with  
2 Christ, regeneration, effectual calling, sanctification, adoption, perseverance, and  
3 glorification; we deny that any one of these other aspects of salvation detracts from the  
4 importance of justification.

5 5. We affirm that God planned the justification of his elect before creation and that it was  
6 therefore certain to occur; we deny that those who will be justified are justified before the  
7 Holy Spirit does, in due time, actually apply Christ to them (WCF 11.4).

8 6. We affirm that faith in Christ alone is the only instrumental means of justification; we  
9 deny that this faith ever remains alone, but affirm that it issues forth in good deeds.

10 7. We affirm that in justification, God the Father imputes the righteousness of Christ to  
11 believing sinners, a righteousness that is premised upon Christ's lifelong obedience and  
12 his obedience unto death; we deny that anyone is justified by God apart from this  
13 imputation.

14 8. We affirm that God justifies sinners by imputing Christ's righteousness to them rather  
15 than counting their sins against them; we deny that justification is grounded in any  
16 infusion of grace or that faith itself, as an act of obedience, is imputed as the ground of  
17 justification.

18 9. We affirm that there is an eschatological dimension to justification, namely that on the  
19 last day God will declare the elect righteous before men and angels; we deny that  
20 justification is only eschatological and not also an accomplished present reality.

21 10. We affirm that justification is a definitive, forensic act by which God acquits sinners  
22 by his grace and declares them righteous; although believers enjoy their justification as  
23 an ongoing state, we deny that justification is a process.

24 11. We affirm an individual sense to justification, that God declares righteous any person  
25 who trusts Christ as Lord and Savior; we deny that this individual sense implies  
26 autonomy from the covenant community.

27 12. We affirm a corporate sense to justification, that God, out of his covenant  
28 faithfulness, justifies individuals from every race and people and incorporates them into  
29 one body in which they have privileges and responsibilities; we deny that God justifies  
30 the community apart from the imputation of Christ's righteousness to individual believing  
31 sinners.

### 32 33 Suggested Questions for Examinations 34

35 1. Does the fact that the biblical word group for “to justify” has a broader range of usage  
36 than the term justification in the Westminster Standards minimize the importance of the  
37 classic Reformed doctrine of justification? Explain.

38 2. How do God's acts of vindicating his people in history, recorded in Scripture, influence  
39 your understanding of the doctrine of justification by faith?

40 3. What benefits do the non-elect receive from belonging to the covenant community, the  
41 visible church (WLC 62)?

42 4. When are persons justified? Explain from Scripture.

43 5. Distinguish between the basis (or ground) and the means of justification? What is the  
44 relation between good deeds and justification? Explain your answers from Scripture.

45 6. Define imputation; argue your position from Scripture. What part does imputation play  
46 in justification?

- 1 7. Distinguish between the doctrines of the infusion of righteousness and the imputation  
2 of righteousness in definitions of justification. Evaluate biblically.
- 3 8. Is there an eschatological dimension to justification? Explain. If so, how does that  
4 impact the justification believers enjoy now?
- 5 9. Is justification both an act and a process? Explain your answer from Scripture.
- 6 10. Distinguish individual and corporate aspects of justification. Articulate your answer  
7 from Scripture.

### 10 **III. Union with Christ**

#### 11 Overview

12  
13 The Westminster Standards (e.g., WLC 66) employ the phrase "union with Christ" to  
14 signify Christ's relationship with the elect. In theological discourse this definition  
15 militates against referring indiscriminately to all members of visible churches as "people  
16 in union with Christ." Although there is a sense in which non-elect church members may  
17 be in fellowship with God's people and thus, in a derivative way, in fellowship with  
18 Christ and His Spirit, it creates significant confusion to describe this "fellowship" without  
19 qualification as "union with Christ," since this language has a long history of meaning  
20 "the union which the elect have with Christ" (WLC 66). While this understanding of  
21 union with Christ is essential to a scripture-based theological definition of the term, it is  
22 not essential that this specific notion be deemed present in every biblical passage that  
23 uses "in Christ" or similar terminology. Further, in harmony with the Westminster  
24 Standards we commend the wisdom of maintaining the time-honored reformed  
25 distinction between the visible and invisible church (cf. WLC 61, 63, 82 and 83).

#### 26 27 Affirmations and Denials

28  
29 1. We affirm that in the Westminster Standards, the union with Christ that the elect enjoy  
30 involves a vital biblical way of speaking about God applying salvation. We deny that the  
31 various aspects of salvation's application (e.g., adoption, glorification, justification,  
32 perseverance, regeneration, faith, and sanctification) can be so subsumed under the  
33 category of union with Christ that no distinctions among them may be made.

34  
35 2. We affirm that all members of the visible church are in covenant relationship to Jesus  
36 Christ and thereby participate in the privileges and responsibilities of that relationship;  
37 we deny that it is prudent to use the terminology of "union with Christ" to describe the  
38 relationship of all those in the covenant community (elect and non-elect alike) without  
39 carefully clarifying the difference between the specific sense the terms have come to have  
40 in our theological tradition, and the other senses they may have in the Bible.

41 3. We affirm that God before creation planned to unite to his Son those whom he chose,  
42 and that this union ordinarily begins when they trust Christ as offered in the gospel; we  
43 deny that persons are united to Christ before the Holy Spirit does, in due time, actually  
44 apply Christ to them.

45 4. We affirm that it is the secret work of God to unite His elect savingly to Christ in His  
46 accepted time; we further affirm that God may, if He wills, effect this saving union in a

1 covenant child before parents or pastors are able to recognize its presence by way of a  
2 profession of faith. We deny that these affirmations relieve parents and pastors of the  
3 responsibility to seek a profession of faith from covenant children; we further deny that  
4 the Presbytery ought to impose upon its churches a uniform practice for receiving these  
5 professions of faith beyond what is required in the Book of Church Order (e.g., BCO 57-  
6 2).

7 5. We affirm that the Father seals all true believers with the Holy Spirit in union with  
8 Christ for the day of redemption; we deny that any so united to Christ can fall away from  
9 grace and finally be lost.

10 6. We affirm the confessional distinction between the church visible and invisible: that  
11 not all who are outwardly called by the ministry of the Word and live in the visible  
12 church will be saved, and that we distinguish the operations of the Spirit common to all in  
13 the visible church from those that effectually bring the elect to salvation; we deny that the  
14 confessional distinction between the visible and invisible church may be set aside in an  
15 attempt to clear it from misunderstandings and abuses.

16 7. We affirm that God promises in Christian baptism to unite to the Trinity by faith in the  
17 power of God those who are being baptized; we deny that all those baptized are  
18 inseparably united to Christ. We affirm that God's promise in baptism is only rightly  
19 received and realized by faith. We deny that baptized persons who persist in unbelief may  
20 be assured of their final salvation.

21 8. We affirm that some passages in Scripture genuinely warn of God's wrath to the  
22 covenant community, some of whom may never come to saving faith; we deny that true  
23 believers, chosen by the Father, redeemed by the Son, and given the Spirit as guarantee of  
24 their inheritance, can commit final and total apostasy.

#### 25 26 Suggested Questions for Examinations

27  
28 1. How does your understanding of the biblical doctrine of union with Christ affect your  
29 evaluation of the Westminster Standards' doctrine of justification?

30 2. Do you hold that all those in the covenant community are in union with Christ?  
31 Explain from Scripture.

32 3. Can non-elect persons be united to Christ? When are persons actually united to Christ?  
33 Explain your answers from Scripture.

34 4. Can persons united to Christ fall away from grace and finally be lost? Can any who are  
35 sealed with the Holy Spirit fall away from grace and finally be lost? Explain your  
36 answers from Scripture.

37 5. Explain why the core idea in the confessional distinction between the visible and  
38 invisible church is biblical and useful. In what directions can this distinction be misused?

39 6. Are all baptized persons united to Christ when they are baptized? Explain your answer  
40 from Scripture.

41 7. Can persons who trust Christ with genuine faith commit final and total apostasy?  
42 Explain from Scripture.

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