

PART ONE ~ A HISTORICAL SURVEY OF NEW ENGLAND'S HALFWAY COVENANT

- I. BETWEEN 1643-1647, THE ENGLISH PURITANS AT THE WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY COMPOSED AND ADOPTED THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH, ALONG WITH THE LARGER AND SHORTER CATECHISMS, WHICH (AMONG OTHER THINGS) OUTLINED A THEOLOGY OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP AND COMMUNION PARTICIPATION.
  - **WLC 62** "The visible church is a society made up of all such as in all ages and places of the world do profess the true religion, and of their children."
  - **WLC 165** "Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament... whereby the parties baptized are solemnly admitted into the visible church, and enter into an open and professed engagement to be wholly and only the Lord's."
  - **WLC 173** "Such as are found to be ignorant or scandalous, notwithstanding their profession of the faith, and desire to come to the Lord's supper, may and ought to be kept from that sacrament, by the power which Christ hath left in his church, until they receive instruction, and manifest their reformation."
  - **WCF 26.2** "Saints by profession are bound to maintain a holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God... Which... is to be extended unto all those who, in every place, call upon the name of the Lord Jesus."
  - **WCF 14.2** "By this faith, a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God himself speaking therein... But the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace.
  - **WCF 18.4** "True believers may have the assurance of their salvation divers ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted... yet are they never utterly destitute of that seed of God, and life of faith, that love of Christ and the brethren, that sincerity of heart, and conscience of duty, out of which, by the operation of the Spirit, this assurance may, in due time, be revived; and by the which, in the meantime, they are supported from utter despair." [Jn. 21:15-19]
- II. IN 1648, THE NEW ENGLAND PURITANS, LED BY JOHN COTTON AND RICHARD MATTER, ADOPTED THE CAMBRIDGE PLATFORM,<sup>1</sup> AFFIRMING THE DOCTRINAL CONTENT OF THE WCF (minus *Am. Rev.* ~ Ch. 25, 30, 31), ALONG WITH A FORM OF CONGREGATIONALIST CHURCH GOVERNMENT AND DISCIPLINE WHICH PROVED HIGHLY INFLUENTIAL AMONG LATER CONGREGATIONALISTS, SUCH AS JOHN OWEN & THE SIGNERS OF THE SAVOY DECLARATION (1658).
  - **CP 2.6** "A Congregational church is by the institution of Christ a part of the militant visible church, consisting of a company of saints by calling, united into one body by a holy covenant for the public worship of God and the mutual edification one of another in the fellowship of the Lord Jesus."
  - **CP 3.1** "By saints, we understand, Such as not only have attained the knowledge of the principles of religion and are free from gross and open scandals, but also, together with the profession of their faith and repentance, walk in blameless obedience to the Word, so as that in charitable discretion they may be accounted saints by calling (1 Cor. 1:2; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:2); though perhaps some or more of them be unsound and hypocrites inwardly: because the members of such particular churches are commonly by the Holy Ghost called saints and faithful brethren in Christ; and sundry churches have been reprov'd for receiving and suffering such persons to continue in fellowship among them, as have been offensive and scandalous: the name of God also by this means is blasphemed and the holy things of God defiled and profaned, the hearts of the godly grieved, and the wicked themselves hardened and helped forward to damnation; the example of such does endanger the sanctity of others. A little leaven leavens the whole lump. **3.2** The children of such, who are also holy."
  - **CP 4.3** "This form [of a Visible Church] is the visible covenant, agreement or consent whereby they give up themselves unto the Lord to the observing of the ordinances of Christ together in the same society which is usually called the church covenant...**4.5** This form then being mutual covenant, it follows it is not faith in the heart... because that is invisible."
  - **CP 12.1** "The doors of the churches of Christ upon earth do not by God's appointment stand so wide open that all sorts of people good or bad may freely enter therein at their pleasure; but such as are admitted thereto as members ought to be examined and tried first whether they are fit and meet to be received into church society or not. The eunuch of Ethiopia, before his admission, was examined by Philip whether he did believe on Jesus Christ with all his heart."
  - **CP 12.2** "The things which are requisite to be found in all church members are repentance from sin and faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38-42; 8:37). And therefore these are the things whereof men are to be examined at their admission into the church & which then they must profess and hold forth in such sort as may satisfy rational charity that the things are there indeed."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> James Dennison, *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation*, Vol. 4: 1600-1693 (pp. 369ff.)

<sup>2</sup> E. Morgan, *Visible Saints* (Kindle): "Outside the church in New England stood not only the mixed multitude of wicked Englishmen and heathen natives, but also the visibly good, who understood and believed the doctrines of Christianity and lived accordingly but who lacked the final experience of grace. The New England churches made no differentiation among these seemingly different men. Indeed the New England ministers devoted a good deal of time to showing that there was no difference in the eyes of God between the vilest sinner & the 'civil' man, who obeyed God's commands outwardly but did not love God in his heart. The only distinction among men in the eyes of God was between those who had saving faith & those who lacked it. Therefore the civil & the uncivil alike were kept outside God's church."

- **CP 12.3** “The weakest measure of faith is to be accepted in those that desire to be admitted into the church: because weak Christians, if sincere, have the substance of that faith, repentance, and holiness which is required in church members (Rom. 14:1): and such have most need of the ordinances for their confirmation and growth in grace. The Lord Jesus would not quench the smoking flax nor break the bruised reed, but gather the tender lambs in His arms and carry them gently in His bosom (Matt. 12:20; Isa. 40:11). Such charity and tenderness is to be used, as the weakest Christian, if sincere, may not be excluded nor be discouraged. Severity of examination is to be avoided.”<sup>3</sup>
- **CP 12.7** “The like trial is to be required from such of the church as were born in the same or received their membership and were baptized in their infancy, or minority, by virtue of the covenant of their parents, when being grown up unto years of discretion, they shall desire to be made partakers of the Lord’s Supper (Matt. 7:6; 1 Cor. 11:27). Unto which, because holy things must no be given to the unworthy, therefore it is requisite that these as well as others should come to their trial and examination and manifest their faith and repentance by an open profession thereof before they are received to the Lord’s Supper, and otherwise not to be admitted there unto. Yet these church members that were so born or received in their childhood before they are capable of being made partakers of full communion have many privileges which others (not church members) have not. They are in covenant with God; have the seal thereof upon them, viz., baptism; and so if not regenerated, yet are in a more hopeful way of attaining regenerating grace and all the spiritual blessings both of the covenant and seal; they are also under church watch and consequently subject to the reprehensions, admonitions, and censures thereof for their healing and amendment, as need shall require.”<sup>4</sup>

**III. SIX YEARS LATER (1654-55), QUESTIONS AROSE AS TO WHETHER THE CHILDREN OF BAPTIZED, NON-PROFESSING, NON-COMMUNING MEMBERS MAY RECEIVE BAPTISM, EVENTUALLY RESULTING IN THE BOSTON SYNOD (1662), WHICH AGREED TO PERMIT THE PRACTICE, LATER NICKNAMED BY ITS OPPONENTS, *THE HALFWAY COVENANT*.**

- A. **CH. HODGE:** “Many were recognized as entitled to present their children for baptism, who were not prepared for admission to the Lord’s Supper. The controversy on this subject began in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1654, 1655. Several councils were called, which failed to produce unanimity.<sup>5</sup> The question was referred to a Synod of divines to meet in Boston. The Synod met and sat two or three weeks. ‘As to the case of such baptized persons as, without being prepared to come to the Lord’s Supper, were of blameless character, and would own for themselves their baptismal obligations, it decided that they ought to be allowed to present their children for baptism. This assuming of baptismal obligations was called by opponents, *taking the Half-way Covenant*.’” [ST: 3.567]
- B. **CH. HODGE:** “The Synod decided in favor of the following [seven] propositions: —
1. They that, according to Scripture, are members of the visible Church, are the subjects of baptism.
  2. The members of the visible Church, according to Scripture, are confederate visible believers, in particular churches, and their infant seed, i.e. children in minority, whose next parents, one or both, are in covenant.
  3. The infant seed of confederate visible believers, are members of the same Church with their parents, and when grown up are personally under the watch, discipline, and government of that church.
  4. These adult persons are not, therefore, to be admitted to full communion, merely because they are, and continue members, without such further qualifications as the Word of God requireth thereunto.
  5. Church-members who were admitted in minority, understanding the doctrine of faith, and publicly professing their assent thereto, not scandalous in life, and solemnly owning the covenant [of baptism] before the Church, wherein they give up themselves and their children to the Lord, and subject themselves to the government of Christ in the Church, their children are to be baptized. *Propositions 6-7 omitted*. [ST: 3.567]

**IV. PERHAPS AS EARLY AS 1677, THE REV. SOLOMON STODDARD, MINISTER AT NORTHAMPTON, CHANGED EVERYTHING.**

- A. In the years leading up to Stoddard’s ordination at Northampton (1672), both he and his wife entertained doubts regarding his salvation, till one day, while administering communion, he experienced what he believed to be his conversion.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Wm. Perkins’ 10 Steps of Conversion (Common Elements of a Personal Testimony): (1) Hears the Word, often with affliction (2) Law reveals good/evil (3) Convicted of personal sin (4) Fears God’s wrath (5) Seriously considers gospel (6) Begins to trust Christ (7) Overcomes doubt/despair/unbelief (8) Rests on promises (9) Evangelical sorrow for sin (10) Seeks to obey God. [Works: 8.141]

<sup>4</sup> Edmund Morgan, Visible Saints (Kindle): “The Puritans... [demanded] that when the child of a saint grew up he must demonstrate to the church that he was indeed saved. Until he did so, by the same kind of examination that adults seeking membership were subjected to, he should not be admitted to the Lord’s Supper. So said John Cotton, Richard Mather, and the synod of divines who between 1646 and 1648 drafted the exposition of Puritan beliefs and practices which is usually referred to as the Cambridge Platform.”

<sup>5</sup> Britannica: “In 1657 a ministerial convention suggested that such children should be accepted for baptism and church membership, and in 1662 a synod of the churches accepted the practice, which in the 19th century came to be called the Half-Way Covenant.”

<sup>6</sup> Iain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987) 79

- B. Between 1677 and 1720, Northampton's communicant membership increased from 76 to nearly 500, following Stoddard's decision to welcome Halfway Covenanters to the Lord's Table, regardless of conversion (Murray, 87-89).
- C. In loosening the standards for communion, Stoddard rejected the position of the Cambridge Platform, which limited communion to those who credibly professed faith and repentance, according to the charitable judgment of the church.<sup>7</sup>
- D. Stoddard openly acknowledged that, if his view were properly implemented, most communicants would be unconverted.<sup>8</sup>
- E. Stoddard taught his parishioners that their profession of faith did not involve a claim to have saving faith, meaning that the church gradually became filled with orthodox, outwardly moral communicants who did not even *profess* to be converted.<sup>9</sup>
- F. Stoddard's position was grounded in his belief that the Lord's Supper is a converting ordinance, by which unregenerate, doctrinally orthodox, outwardly moral churchgoers may be brought from death to life.<sup>10</sup>

V. **STODDARD WAS SUCCEEDED AT NORTHAMPTON BY HIS WELL-KNOWN GRANDSON, THE REV. JONATHAN EDWARDS, WHO INITIALLY TOLERATED STODDARD'S COMMUNION POLICY (1727-1747), BUT EVENTUALLY, UPON IMPLEMENTING A "CAMBRIDGE"-STYLE INTERVIEW PROCESS IN 1748, THE CONGREGATION — FILLED, NO DOUBT, WITH MANY UNCONVERTED HALFWAY COVENANTERS — VOTED HIM OUT OF OFFICE.**

*An Humble Inquiry into the Qualifications for Full Communion in the Visible Church of Christ (1649)*<sup>11</sup>

- A. "The main question I would consider... is this; Whether, according to the rules of Christ, any ought to be admitted to the communion and privileges of members of the visible church of Christ in complete standing, but such as are in profession, and in the eye of the church's Christian judgment, godly or gracious persons?" [Works: 4.292-293]
- B. "The question is not, whether Christ has made converting grace or piety itself the condition or rule of his people's admitting any to the privileges of members in full communion with them... It is the credible profession and visibility of these things, that is the church's rule in this case... in the same manner as some kind of repentance is the qualification in one that has been suspended for being grossly scandalous, in order to his coming to the Lord's supper. [Works: 4.293]
- C. "...by Christian judgment I intend something further than a kind of mere negative charity, implying that we forbear to censure and condemn a man because we do not know but that he may be godly, and therefore forbear to proceed on the foot of such a censure or judgment in our treatment of him: as we would kindly entertain a stranger, not knowing but in so doing we entertain an angel or precious saint of God. But I mean a positive judgment, founded on some positive appearance, or visibly, some outward manifestations that ordinarily render the thing probable. There is a difference between suspending our judgment, or forbearing to condemn, or having some hope that possibly the thing may be so, and so hoping the best; and a positive judgment in favour of a person. For having some hope, only implies that a man is not in utter despair of a thing, though his prevailing opinion may be otherwise, or he may suspend his opinion. Though we cannot know a man believes that Jesus is the Messiah, yet we expect some positive manifestation of visibility of it, to be a ground of our charitable judgment: So I suppose the case is here." [Works: 4.295]
- D. "It is not my design... to affirm that all who are regularly admitted as members of the visible church in complete standing, ought to be believed to be godly or gracious persons when taken collectively, or considered in the gross, by the judgment of

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<sup>7</sup> E. Morgan, *Visible Saints* (Kindle): "But the New England Puritans... felt obliged to deny baptism and communion to the unconverted. In their view both ordinances were seals of the covenant of grace which God extended to his elect. To permit an unbeliever to participate in them would be blasphemous. By this exclusion, however, the church deprived itself of two traditional means of bringing unregenerate men closer to God."

<sup>8</sup> S. Stoddard, *Appeal to the Learned*, p. 16 (cited by J. Edwards, *An Humble Inquiry*, Works: 4.302): "Indeed by the rule that God has given for admissions, if it be carefully attended, more unconverted persons will be admitted than converted."

<sup>9</sup> J. Edwards, *An Humble Inquiry, etc.* (Works: 4.306): "But in such churches, neither their publicly saying that they *avouch God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost to be their God, and that they give themselves up to him, and promise to obey all his commands, nor their coming to the Lord's supper, or to any other ordinances*, are taken for expressions or signs of anything belonging to the essence of Christian piety. But on the contrary, the public doctrine, principle, and custom in such churches establishes a diverse use of these words and signs. People are taught, that they may use them all, and not so much as make any pretence to the least degree of *sanctifying grace*; and this is the established custom. So they are used, and so they are understood... And hence they cease to be of the nature of any pretension to grace. And surely it is an absurdity to say, that men openly and solemnly profess grace, and yet do not so much as pretend to it."

<sup>10</sup> J. Edwards, *An Humble Inquiry, etc.* (Works: 4.303): "Whereas, the doctrine taught [by Stoddard] is, that sanctifying grace is not a necessary qualification, and that there is no need that a person himself, or any other, should imagine he is a person so qualified. The assigned reason is, because it is no qualification requisite in itself; the ordinance of the Lord's supper is as proper for them that are not so qualified, as for those that are; it being according to the design of the institution a converting ordinance, and so an ordinance as much intended for the good of the unconverted, as of the converted; even as it is with the preaching of the gospel."

<sup>11</sup> Unabridged Title: "An Humble Inquiry into the Rules of the Word of God concerning the Qualifications Requisite to a Complete Standing and Full Communion in the Visible Christian Church"

any person or society. This may not be, and yet each person taken singly may visibly be a gracious person to the eye of the judgment of Christians in general. These two are not the same thing, but vastly diverse; and the latter may be, and yet not the former... Hence... [it] by no means implies a pretence of any scheme that shall be effectual to keep all hypocrites out of the church, and for the establishing in that sense a pure church. [Works: 4.296-297]

- E. "When it is said, those who are admitted, etc., ought to be by profession godly or gracious persons; it is not meant, they should merely profess or say that they are converted or are gracious persons, that they know so, or think so; but that they profess the great things wherein Christian piety consists, vis. a supreme respect to God, faith in Christ, etc." [Works: 4.297]
- F. "And as to the ecclesiastical rule now in question, of admission to sacraments on a profession of godliness, when attended with requisite circumstances; although in particular instances it may be an occasion of some tender-hearted Christians abstaining, and some presumptuous sinners being admitted, yet that does not hinder but that a proper visibility of holiness to the eye of reason, or a probability of it in a judgment of rational Christian charity may this way be maintained as the proper qualification of candidates for admission... For it ought to be attended with an honest and sober character, and with evidences of good doctrinal knowledge, and with all proper, careful, and diligent instructions of a prudent pastor. And though the pastor is not to act as a searcher of the heart, or a lord of conscience in this affair, yet that hinders not but that he may and ought to inquire particularly into the experiences of the souls committed to his care and charge, that he may be under the best advantages to instruct and advise them, for their self-examination, to be helpers of their joy, and promoters of their salvation. However, finally, not any pretended extraordinary skill of his in discerning the heart, but the person's own serious profession concerning what he finds in his own soul, after he has been well instructed, must regulate the public conduct with respect to him, where there is no other external visible thing to contradict and over-rule it. And a serious profession of godliness, under these circumstances, carries in it a visibility to the eye of the church's rational and Christian judgment." [Works: 4.421]

#### VI. EDWARDS' POSITION IS ECHOED BY WILLIAM SYMINGTON IN HIS CLASSIC WORK, *MESSIAH THE PRINCE*.

- A. "The Lord Jesus Christ, in virtue of the Mediatorial dominion with which he is invested, prescribes the qualifications of the members of the church. He has a right to say who they are that shall enjoy the privileges of his kingdom. What the qualifications of church members should be, is a point of equal importance and difficulty. With respect to the invisible church, it cannot be questioned that actual regeneration and true faith in Christ are indispensable. Nor can it be doubted, even with respect to the visible church, that the possession of true and vital religion can alone qualify for fully promoting the objects of ecclesiastical communion. But, as this is a thing of which the office-bearers of the church are incompetent to judge, it would seem that the utmost they can require is a credible profession of true religion." [MTP, 101]
  - 1. **INTELLIGENT ORTHODOXY** "Of this [credible profession], intelligence and orthodoxy constitute essential elements... From all this it appears that soundness in the faith is a requisite qualification... The ignorant then, as well as the heterodox, are unfit for the communion of the church." [MTP, 101-102]
  - 2. **SUBMISSION TO CHRIST'S ORDINANCES** "Full submission to the ordinances of Christ is another qualification of the members of the church. The disciples of Christ are required to observe all things whatsoever he has commanded; and such as refuse to follow him in this cannot claim to be regarded as his disciples... It is not uncommon for persons who profess religion to live in the neglect of some one ordinance — family worship, or the Lord's Supper, for example — and yet they would fain be regarded as members of the church. How how can they?... A member of the church must be one who submits to all the laws and institutions of Christ's house, not... only what is agreeable or convenient." [MTP, 102]
  - 3. **APPARENT RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE** "Apparent religious experience is also indispensable. Apparent, we say, because of the reality man is incompetent to judge; appearances are all that is within the sphere of his cognizance. Whoever seeks admission to the fellowship of the Christian church, professes to have experienced something of the power of religion on his heart. And, although the rulers in the church may not be able to determine whether this profession be real, they are entitled to determine whether it be made, and to apply to it certain criteria of judgment. They may not be fit, in any case, to pronounce absolutely on the presence of true religion in the soul, nor, in every case, to decide on its absence; yet the appearances of its being present or absent may be in general so marked as to form a sufficient guide in receiving or refusing persons applying for admission. An individual who knows nothing of the nature of Christian experience, or of the marks by which it is distinguished, is, of course, inadmissible. Nor is it a bare pretension to religious experiences, or every plausible story of feelings and ecstasies, that can form a sufficient ground for admitting to ecclesiastical privileges. Credible evidences of the experimental power of religion are to be required, and nothing but what is rational, sober, consistent, and holy, can ever constitute credible evidence. [MTP, 102-103]
  - 4. **CONSISTENT BEHAVIOR** "To these qualifications must be added consistent behavior. The rule of judging is thus explicitly laid down by the Savior himself: 'By their fruits ye shall know them'... It is not enough that men 'repent and turn to God;' they must also 'do works meet for repentance.' They must be 'zealous for good works'... 'Lord, who shall abide in thy tabernacle? Who shall dwell in thy holy hill? He that walketh uprightly, and worketh righteousness, and speaking the truth in his heart' (Ps. 15:1-2)." [MTP, 103]
- B. "Such are the ingredients of a credible profession of true religion, the elements of a visible Christian character, the possession of which is necessary to qualify for admission to the church. And let it be carefully observed, that all the

qualifications specified are essential. The profession in question does not exist where any one of them is wanting... We deny that the office bearers of religion have either the power or the right to judge men's hearts: but it were strange, indeed, if they were not warranted to require that those who are professing to believe the Gospel shall give some signs that it is exerting its proper influence upon their hearts, and to inquire whether it has taught them to abjure self-righteousness, to renounce the practice of sin, and to live by faith on the Lord Jesus Christ; whether, in short, it has taught them to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, and to live soberly, righteously, and godly in the world." [MTP, 104]

**VII. THE RPCNA, IN ADDITION TO ITS AFFIRMATION OF THE WESTMINSTER STANDARDS, AGREES IN PRINCIPLE WITH THE VIEWS OF EDWARDS AND SYMINGTON IN ITS DIRECTORY FOR CHURCH GOVERNMENT.**

- **DCG 1.4** "Candidates for communicant membership shall be examined by the session in constituted court. The examination shall seek to bring out the degree of the candidate's knowledge of Divine truth, his personal sense of sin and need of salvation and his knowledge of and willing acceptance of the Covenant of Church Membership... No one should be admitted who is ignorance of the plan of salvation, or who gives no credible evidence of having been born again..." [Cf. Chart from Lect. 5]

|                                          | INWARD MARKS OF GRACE                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | VISIBLE FRUITS OF GRACE                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>DEFINITION</b>                        | Biblical characteristics of a true Christian which may be discerned by the individual for the purpose of growing in personal assurance.                                                                                                                                                                      | Biblical characteristics of a true Christian which may be discerned by church overseers for the purpose of identifying a credible profession, pursuant to communicant membership.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>MANNER OF INQUIRY</b>                 | Self-Examination of Heart and Life<br>2 Cor. 13:5                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Ecclesiastical Evaluation of Profession and Life<br>Mt. 7:15-20; Lk. 3:8-14                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>OBJECTIVE STANDARD</b>                | Scripture Alone<br>1 Jn. 5:13                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Scripture Alone<br>Mt. 16:18-19; Acts 2:47; 10:47                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>KIND OF CRITERIA</b>                  | Inward Persuasion<br>Heb. 10:22                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Outward Credibility<br>Mt. 13:28-30                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <b>MAXIMUM DEGREE OF CERTAINTY</b>       | Infallible, Full Assurance<br>Col. 2:2; Heb. 6:11                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Fallible, Charitable Confidence<br>1 Tim. 5:24-25; Heb. 6:9-10                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>RELEVANT STATUS OR CLASSIFICATION</b> | Assurance of Salvation (2 Pet. 1:10)<br>Eligibility for Communion (1 Cor. 11:28f)                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Credible Profession of Faith (Jm. 2:14-19)<br>Eligibility for Communion (Ezk. 44:7-9; 1 Cor. 5:9-13)<br>Eligibility for Restoration (2 Cor. 2:5-11; 7:10-11)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <b>WESTMINSTER STANDARDS</b>             | WCF 18.2 "This certainty is... an infallible assurance of faith founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidences of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God..." | WCF 25.2 "The visible church... consists of all those throughout the whole world that profess the true religion; & of their children.<br><br>WLC 173 "Such as are found to be ignorant or scandalous, notwithstanding their profession of faith, and desire to come to the Lord's supper, may and ought to be kept from that sacrament, by the power which Christ hath left in his church, until they receive instruction, and manifest their reformation." |
| <b>ADD'L SCRIPTURE REFERENCES</b>        | Ps. 139:23-24; Rm. 8:13-17; Gal. 5:19-24                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Ps. 15; Mt. 12:33; Lk. 6:45; Jn. 15:1-2                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |

**PART TWO ~ A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE FEDERAL VISION'S *HALFWAY SCHOLARSHIP***

**I. STEVE WILKINS IS A CREC PASTOR WELL KNOWN FOR HIS INVOLVEMENT IN THE FEDERAL VISION CONTROVERSY.**

- C. Since 1989, Rev. Wilkins has served as pastor of the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church in Monroe, Louisiana (renamed *Church of the Redeemer* in 2018), the congregation which hosted the annual Auburn Avenue Pastor's Conference, where the Federal Vision controversy broke out in January of 2002, and where Rich Lusk initially served as Associate Pastor.
- D. Wilkins has vigorously promoted the FV from its inception, speaking regularly at the AAPC, contributing to the Knox Colloquium (2003), co-editing the book *Federal Vision* (2005), and signing the FV Joint Statement (2007).
- E. In 2005, responding to judicial charges, the Louisiana Presbytery (PCA) exonerated Wilkins and his FV teachings, and was later indicted by the PCA's Standing Judicial Committee (2007) "for failing to find a strong presumption of guilt", after which Wilkins' congregation (AAPC) swiftly left the PCA for the CREC (1/27/08), where it remains to this day.
- F. In 1999, Wilkins admirably represented the southern perspective in a debate with Christian author and historian, Peter Marshall, entitled, *The Great Civil War Debate*, and has authored several books, including *Call of Duty: The Sterling Nobility*

of Robert E. Lee, *All Things for Good: The Steadfast Fidelity of Stonewall Jackson, and Southern Slavery As It Was*, a pamphlet co-authored with Doug Wilson, allegedly containing plagiarism, which Wilson later acknowledged as an honest mistake.

- G. Arguably, Wilkins' most influential contribution to the FV controversy is his lecture at the original AAPC in 2002, entitled, *The Legacy of the Halfway Covenant*, in which he attacks and ridicules the New England Puritans for serving communion only to those who make a credible profession of their faith in Christ; over against the practice of paedocommunion.

**SEVEN COMMON MYTHS ABOUT THE HALFWAY COVENANT, AS PRESENTED IN  
STEVE WILKINS' 2002 AAPC LECTURE, *THE LEGACY OF THE HALFWAY COVENANT*.**

**MYTH #1 — The HC reflected the NE Puritans' desire to limit church (i.e. covenant) membership to the elect only.**

1. "[The Puritans] believed it was their duty to make the visible church conform as closely as possible to the invisible church."
2. "The covenant of grace, to them, existed between God and the elect only: those who have saving faith. The church must be a reflection, then, of the covenant of grace. It should only consist of the elect. And the elect can be identified as the possessors of saving faith. And the church should only, therefore, consist of those who are regenerate and born again."

**MYTH #2 — The NE Puritans' definition of a credible profession of saving faith was unreasonable and unbiblical, especially with respect to baptized covenant children.**

1. "The Puritans came to believe that a mere profession of faith the truth of the gospel and faithfulness of life were not sufficient to secure the purity of the church... So they felt something more was needed than that, and thus they added... the requirement of a necessity to demonstrate... the presence of true saving faith in the applicants for admission to membership."
2. "They distinguished, you see then, between a profession of faith in the doctrines of the gospel... — they call that merely a general or historical faith — ...from saving faith, which was the result of a climactic conversion experience after a season of conviction and going through various stages: of conviction, alienation, doubt, struggle — all sorts of things — and then coming to a semi-assurance."
3. "By the 1630s... there had been two generations of Puritan theologians who had... established a pattern of conversion which was deemed to be the way, generally speaking, [that] men come to faith. This is the way it happens... And so, you had to follow this pattern of experience in order to be assured that you had, actually, saving faith, not some form of spurious faith."
4. "Now, William Perkins, one of the most influential of the Puritan divines had identified already, by the 1630s [d. 1602!...] no less than ten stages by which a man should go through in order to arrive at saving faith."
5. "...it was assumed that [Perkins' ten-step process] is the common experience of covenant children. Now even if this ten step process... is the common experience of adult converts, that still doesn't follow that it would be the common experience of covenant children of adult Christians. Why would it be? Children are growing up in covenant. They grow up believing what you have taught them, and if you teach them the Bible and the gospel, and tell them about the Lord Jesus, they're gonna believe it, and they're gonna love it. That's the way God made them and thanks be to God that he made them that way. And there's nothing incredible or doubtful about them doing that. That's exactly what they should do. It's, in fact, right that they do that. But they won't go through these steps if they're that way. The assumption was [that] they must go through these things, because they are sinners, and sinners, to be converted, must follow the same road. And I'm saying that's not right. But that's what they believed. That's what they assumed."

**MYTH #3 — The NE Puritans encouraged professing Christians to doubt their salvation and raised suspicions concerning anyone who claimed to have full assurance.**

1. "Commonly, [the Puritan practice of self-examination] did not end in full assurance, so that assurance was a rather elusive thing, as you can imagine. It came and went as it pleased, sometimes for no apparent reason. You read some of the period of diaries and they talk about this being a sunny day, they say, because the sun of God's grace is shining upon them, and they have assurance... If a man had doubts of his assurance, that was considered sound assurance. If you had no doubts about your assurance, that was clearly false and [presumptuous]. Therefore, if you didn't go through some of these heart struggles before coming to assurance, you were highly suspect. So saving faith strangely came to be marked by nothing so much as doubt."

**MYTH #4 — The Halfway Covenanters professed to have saving faith in Christ.**

1. "Here you have a whole group of children. And I'm sure it's like any congregation. Some of them went out and decided they wanted to be the *Hell's Angels* of that day, and so they were really in big trouble with the church, and got all kinds of discipline and all the rest. But, you see, the majority of them were not that way. The majority of the children grew up like you would expect them to grow up. They grew up; they didn't renounce the faith; they didn't forsake the church; they were faithful in worship; they lived obedient lives externally; they were not scandalous; but they never had the experience that their parents said must be true for a sinner to become a Christian. They believed what they were told; believed the Bible; they professed faith in Christ and in His atonement; and in His forgiveness; they embraced the orthodox faith as they understood it; they lived obedient lives; they didn't renounce the gospel; they attended worship faithfully; there was no reason to bring rebuke to them in the least. But they didn't have this experience, and so they were never allowed to the table!"

2. “You can’t bring discipline against them: they’re attending church. You can’t bring discipline against them for heresy. They acknowledge everything. They even profess to believe that Christ is their Savior.” [Cf. Above: footnote 2, 7-10]

**MYTH #5 — The HC is equivalent, in principle, to the presbyterian practice of credo-communion.**

1. “[The Halfway Covenanters] weren’t joined, as I’ll say in a minute, to full membership. They were like our children, and most [children] in most churches: they were baptized and seen as halfway members.”
2. “The Puritans were paedobaptists, of course. They viewed their children as subjects of baptism, and believed that baptism admitted them into membership in the church. But it didn’t admit them into full membership. They were PCA Presbyterians, in that sense. They were not allowed to vote. They were not allowed to partake of the Lord’s Supper. That awaited their conversion. Now you see this is exactly the pattern that Presbyterians have adopted. That’s exactly their position. It is the position of a Halfway Covenant, brothers. If you’re gonna accuse somebody of it, accuse yourself. This is the pattern. This is what they believed. You had to have a conversion, and when you did have a conversion, you met with the elders, you made a testimony, and the elders admitted you to the Lord’s Supper as a result of that. And that’s how you got it. You became a full member rather than a half member.”
3. “So you haven’t departed from [the Halfway Covenant]. We haven’t — I’m speaking corporately — we haven’t since. We still follow this practice, all the while denouncing the Halfway Covenant.”

**MYTH #6 — Solomon Stoddard opposed the HC on the same grounds that Federal Visionists oppose credo-communion.**

- “Solomon Stoddard said, ‘This is wrong.’ Solomon Stoddard said, ‘We have no basis for this. You’re wrong. The practice is wrong. Children should be admitted to the table by virtue of their baptism. And as they’re admitted to the table, then the Lord’s Supper will bring them to a more full experience of faith.’ And he called it a converting ordinance. Now you may quarrel with Solomon Stoddard’s solution a bit, but he opposed what was wrong. And he was right to oppose what was wrong. Jonathan Edwards, his grandson, repudiated Solomon Stoddard, his grandfather, and then established us firmly in the way of the Halfway Covenant.”<sup>12</sup>

**MYTH #7 — In opposing Stoddard, Edwards and the “old school” Cambridge-Platform Puritans largely provoked the apostasy, liberalism, and secularization of New England.**

1. “The Puritans wanted to have a pure church and by their theology of conversion, their misunderstanding of the nature of the church and salvation, they ended up undermining the very thing that they sought. They ended up out-Phariseeing the Pharisees. And they’re not the last ones to do it. They’ve produced Pharisaism and hypocrisy: a group of people who mistrusted genuine spiritual experience, who did not eventually believe in the miraculous claims of the gospel. In the hope of making up a church of truly converted people, they produced New England Unitarianism.”
2. “It wasn’t very long before these men, these children, grew up and said, ‘You know, this is all a psychological stupid thing [sic]. Mom and dad and grand-daddy, you don’t know what you’re talking about. We didn’t go through the experience. All right, if we’re not Christians, fine! Have it! It’s ridiculous!’ And they rejected it all. And, in a way, what else could they have done? In a sense, you see. You can’t endorse their rejecting the gospel, but what would you have done in such a situation? This opened the door to transcendentalism, to existentialism, which provoked revivalism. And then you had things not getting better, but getting worse. The Calvinists in the First Great Awakening give us then this standard and establish it as the basis upon which we can distinguish true converts from false. They make things, in a sense, worse.”
3. “Edmund Morgan has written probably the best analysis of this whole phenomenon in his book, *Visible Saints*.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Hodge (ST 3.569): “[The Halfway Covenant] gained the ascendancy, which it retained until President Edwards published his ‘Essay,’ to which we have referred, which gradually changed the opinions and practices of the Congregational churches throughout the land, and to a great extent those of Presbyterians also.” Morgan (Visible Saints: Kindle): “But the new movement for purity gained sudden respectability in 1748 when Jonathan Edwards, the grandson of Solomon Stoddard and Stoddard’s successor in the influential pulpit at Northampton, announced that he could no longer admit candidates to full communion without proof of saving grace. The next year, in a treatise defending his view, he denounced not only Stoddardeanism but also the granting of baptism to any but visible saints and their children. In other words, he repudiated even the halfway covenant and called for a return to the system established in the 1630’s.”

<sup>13</sup> Morgan (Visible Saints, Kindle): “If a man could not qualify as a visible saint, he was wholly outside any church. He could not be baptized. He could not have his children baptized. He could not take communion. In England both these ordinances were available to everyone and were widely believed to be means of conversion through which God acted on the individual just as He did through preaching of the Gospel. But the New England Puritans did not share this belief and therefore felt obliged to deny baptism and communion to the unconverted. In their view both ordinances were seals of the covenant of grace which God extended to his elect. To permit an unbeliever to participate in them would be blasphemous. By this exclusion, however, the church deprived itself of two traditional means of bringing unregenerate men closer to God. Church discipline, which might also have served this purpose, was similarly confined to those who least needed it. It was used only for recovering or expelling backsliding members... But how would the mass of men who had come to New England unqualified for membership ever become qualified? How would civil men be encouraged to persevere in their outward obedience in the hope of eventual faith?”