

## **A Response to Richard Phillips's Comments, Part One**

Jonathan H. Barlow

I write simply to assess the arguments put forward by Phillips that Wilkins's answers to the committee's questions do not satisfactorily resolve the question of Wilkins's fidelity to the system of doctrine contained in the Westminster standards. I will leave aside any sociological, historical theological, exegetical, or other discussions. It is always positive when someone such as Phillips takes the time to present a written explanation of his position, and I can only hope that my response furthers the debate by focusing on the theological substance. We will know that this Federal Vision controversy has borne fruit when we finally are able to discuss the scriptures, but until then, this is a theological controversy in search of a sound method for adjudication. I respond to a version of the paper retrieved on January 5th, 2007 from the archives of the B.B. Warfield discussion list.

Part One of my comments discusses confessional subscription and the ways in which the confession uses the scriptures. I also cover some of the issues related to election and perseverance. Part Two (forthcoming) will examine baptism, apostasy, and the visible / invisible church distinction.

### **Confessional Subscription**

Phillips characterizes subscription to the Westminster Standards, in the PCA, as agreeing that the standards summarize accurately the Bible's doctrinal system. This is the context for Phillips's first claim:

“As TE Wilkins's answers consistently show, he affirms the teaching of the Westminster Standards and then proceeds to argue that the Bible teaches otherwise. But this is not to affirm the Standards.”

In other words, Phillips alleges that Wilkins affirms the truth of the standards, but that Wilkins errs in simultaneously teaching that the bible differs from the standards. In doing so, Wilkins runs afoul of proper subscription – subscription to the notion that the standards agree with the Bible. Phillips worries that Wilkins's exegetical conclusions cause “him to *redefine* the doctrinal terminology that he affirms in the Westminster Standards.” Further, Phillips characterizes this problem as dealing with “the meaning of the terms” in that

“Wilkins teaches *different* definitions of key terminology that appears in the Confession in such a way that his teaching is out of accord with the Confession's summary of biblical truth.”

This is the heart of Phillips's disagreement with Wilkins, yet we must note that the expression of Phillips's position obscures a distinction that, when made clear, renders his position incoherent. Phillips undoubtedly gets the meaning of good-faith subscription right – it is an affirmation that the Westminster Standards are an accurate summary of the

system of doctrine contained in the scriptures. One might quibble with the idea that the standards attain anywhere near a comprehensive summary of the Bible's vast material – the Confession leaves out missiology, for instance. But as far as it goes, Phillips's definition of subscription has heuristic value. But notice that this type of subscription is to the Standard's ability to accurately capture the system of doctrine found in the Bible. Yet Phillips focuses on the issue of the definition of theological terms.

Definitions stipulate a meaning in a context. Linguistically, we say that the meaning of a word derives from its use. Leaving aside onomatopoeias like "ruff" and "meow", words bear a practical and not an intrinsic relationship to their meanings. As children, we learn the difficult skill of intuition about using words. An adult points to a ball and says "red" and we eventually realize that the ball is "red" with respect to its color and not to its shape. We learn that "round" is a shape and not a color. And this is because of our context, previous convention, and the amazing human ability to learn inductively.

When it comes to theology, linguistic care is important. Phillips focuses on a word like "election" as his exhibit A for Wilkins's theological problem. Notice this passage in Phillips's article – it illustrates in only two sentences how Phillips fails to employ an important linguistic principle:

“In response to the citation in the CCP Memorial against TE Wilkins's affirmation of the Confession – a citation in which he states that election is lost by those who profess faith but then fall away – he answers that he taught this only of the Bible's teaching: ‘The Presbytery in making this charge has ignored the context of what I have written and because of this, has completely missed my point. In the article, this statement comes in the context of a discussion of how the word ‘elect’ is used in the Biblical text’ (Answers II.3). His point is that he was merely teaching what the Bible says about election, in contrast to what the Confession says.”

Notice that Wilkins does not say that “this statement comes in the context of a discussion of how the doctrine of election is handled in the Biblical text.” Wilkins merely says that the discussion was in the context of how the word “elect” is used in the Bible. These are different issues entirely. And so Phillips's summary sentence is simply incorrect – it is **not** Wilkins's point that the Confession and the Bible differ in their teaching about election. It is simply Wilkins's point, clearly stated, that his comments relate to the way the Bible uses a word as opposed to how the Confession uses a word. The defect here is not in Wilkins's prose. If any reader of this paper cannot agree that there is a difference between “The Doctrine of Election” and the English word “elect” (or the Greek word translated ‘elect’) then common understanding will remain elusive in this theological discussion.

Here is a way that Wilkins *could* speak that would validate the concerns of the memorial: “The confession teaches that there is a fixed number of people appointed for glory, but the Bible teaches that there is no fixed number.” If Wilkins were to say this, we should all join Phillips in our opposition to this denial of the basics of Calvinism. But this is not

the way that Wilkins speaks. Wilkins merely makes an observation – when the confession uses the word “elect” it wants to mark out those people appointed for glory before the foundation of the world. Wilkins agrees that this is a true doctrine – that there are people appointed for glory from before the foundation of the world. As “the doctrine of Election” this is good and proper. Wilkins also goes on to affirm that the Bible uses the word “elect” to denote all church members. In other words, the word “elect” is used in way X in the Bible, and the word “elect” is used in way Y in the standards. But both the standards and the Bible teach the same doctrine – that there are a fixed number of people appointed for glory. This is what Wilkins means when he talks about the scriptures’ using words in a “broader” way. Wilkins simply takes to heart the linguistic insight that there are levels of discourse – natural use of language often differs from technical use of language. In the standards, “election” is the linguistic sign and “people chosen from before the foundation of the world” is the thing signified. Wilkins affirms the thing signified. That Wilkins makes further observations about how Biblical writers employ a word (a linguistic sign) is irrelevant to the concerns of any church court unless Wilkins draws conclusions that lead him to deny the thing signified by the Confession.

The reason this principle is hard to keep in mind is that in the case of words like “elect” and “justify” theologians confront natural language (the Bible) that looks the same, on the surface, to technical language in theology – the doctrine of justification by faith, or the doctrine of election. Consider an analogy. Suppose that the confession contains the following line:

“The doctrine of the Trinity is that Father Son and Holy Spirit are unconfused persons who are the divinity.”

and that the Bible contains this line:

“Shadrach, Meshach, and Abegnego made up a trinity of dissent in the empire.”

Could a pastor remain true to his confessional subscription and say that the word “trinity” is used in a broader way in scripture than in the confession? Surely all would agree that the pastor could. And yet Phillips’s claim is analogous – that Wilkins can’t really believe that the Confession has a biblical approach to “election” while also teaching that the bible uses the word “elect” in a broader semantic way. Phillips confuses the sign with the thing signified, and he takes no note of the level of discourse in which the sign occurs.

### **The Way the Confessions Use Scripture**

Phillips claims that if Wilkins makes reference to verse X to establish conclusion Y, and the confession makes reference to verse X to establish conclusion Z, then he implicitly denies the confession’s formulation Z. Phillips writes,

“My assertion regarding the Confession’s understanding of the apostles’ use of the term ‘elect’ can be substantiated by consulting its proof texts for

the doctrine of election unto glory ... So what are the proof texts for the Confession's doctrine that the elect are 'predestinated ... unto everlasting glory' (III.5) and 'elect unto glory' (III.6)? They are some of the very passages that TE Wilkins see [sic] as pertaining also to those who will *not* enter into glory ... These proof texts demonstrate that not only is TE Wilkins's definition of election contrary to that of the Scripture, but his teaching of the relevant Bible passages also fundamentally differs"

But this does not follow. Phillips here holds Wilkins responsible for not viewing subscription to the Confession as a subscription to the implicit exegesis inferred from the proof texts appended to the Confession. This is several layers of abstraction away from the issue at hand. In response, we may remind ourselves that a Biblical passage can be used to anchor a doctrine of X while using a linguistic unit "X" in a broader way. Again, Phillips's argument leaves aside any consideration of the levels of discourse at play here:

Level One: Natural, Biblical Language (letters, histories, etc.)

Level Two: Confessional Language (definitional, technical)

The glory of a confession is in its consistent use of terms. The glory of natural language is in the beautiful interplay of words used in particular ways in particular contexts. Learning a language and learning a system of theology are different types of learning. If Phillips believes that James uses the linguistic sign "justified" differently than Paul uses the linguistic sign "justified" and Phillips simultaneously believes that Paul's and James's writings can be used to proof-text a single "doctrine of Justification" then he already agrees with this point and simply needs to apply it to the discussion at hand. Preachers like Wilkins and Phillips must, every Sunday, face a crowd of people and preach to them from the scriptures. In doing this, preachers bring out doctrinal issues which they, if faithful to their vows, explain confessionally. But they also bring out textual issues that have their own context. The preacher, speaking to a congregation, engages in a kind of discourse more similar to the apostolic writer of an epistle than to the committee writing a theological document.

In essence, it comes down to this – the various authors of the scriptures (Paul, Moses, etc.) "use words", they do not "define terms" or "use terms." That kind of discourse belongs to the realm of confession writing or theologizing. A confusion concerning this issue cripples the cogency of Phillips's response and hinders a dialogue that is already hanging by a thread.

## **Perseverance**

Like election, Phillips approaches perseverance with similar questions – does Wilkins affirm the confession on one hand, but undermine it in his further formulations or in his preaching or exegesis? Some of what has gone before in this response applies to Phillips's methods here. But Phillips has more precise questions concerning perseverance. Phillips writes:

“The point is whether or not the non-elect ever possess salvation truly. The confession teaches that they do not; TE Wilkins teaches that they do, but that they subsequently lose it through their failure to persevere.”

Phillips’s accusation raises the question of what he means by “salvation.” If, by “salvation,” Phillips means to describe a once-for-all-time transfer of a person from death to eternal life, then he has built perseverance into his definition of salvation. Given that definition of salvation, then of course Wilkins must agree that the non-elect do not possess such a thing - ever. But in his answers, and in the oral clarification of these written answers (the duo forming the substance of the assessment of his fitness) Wilkins seems really to be asking about the non-elect and their participation in temporary blessings. Again, Phillips alleges that Wilkins affirms the confession only via a redefinition of terms. But Wilkins’s point is simply that when the confession uses the word “save” and its cognates, it uses such words to refer to full, eschatological salvation. And in that sense, of course apostates never have such salvation. I think Phillips misreads Wilkins to be using causal language – that the non-elect lack salvation “because” they do not persevere. Rather, Wilkins seems to be talking about the definition of salvation – that the non-elect can’t be said to ever have salvation in the Westminsterian sense because they do not have one of the key elements of salvation – perseverance. But in another sense, they are part of “the way” for a while very often and Wilkins affirms that there is a qualitative and not simply a quantitative (duration) difference in the faith and experience of the non-elect who are in the church for a time.

*Part Two of this response (forthcoming) will examine Phillips’s criticisms of Wilkins’s answers with regards to baptism, apostasy, and the visible / invisible church distinction.*