

The Federal Vision: Reformation or Alteration? Part I

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In January of 2002, the Auburn Avenue Pastor's Conference¹ brought together four men² to speak on the topic of the covenant and its nature. Steve Wilkins, the pastor of Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church, (AAPC) writes that "there was nothing novel or particularly creative about the lectures given (most if not all of the points made by the speakers had been made by numerous theologians at one time or another in the past), but the conference became the catalyst to provoke a great deal of discussion on the covenant and its practical outworkings."³ The discussion, as Wilkins puts it, is more like a firestorm, and seven years later—after books, articles, ecclesiastical pronouncements, calls of "heresy," and many broken relationships—it seems that everyone involved has taken sides and chosen their books to recommend defending their particular position.

What is the Federal Vision (FV)? Defining the FV is no easy task. Even the original four speakers at AAPC differ on fundamental issues. For instance, Steve Schlissel differs with the other three speakers on the issue of paedocommunion. In fact, since most FV advocates hold to paedocommunion (Schlissel an exception), some have narrowed the whole debate to whether infants can receive the Lord's Supper at an early age; while others say the debate has to do with the weekly celebration of communion. Some think this debate is about those who no longer care about our confessional heritage, while others think this is about the church always reforming (*Semper Reformanda*). While narrowing the debate can be helpful, FV theology is concerned with a broader set of issues. Douglas Wilson seems to have best summarized what the FV wishes to emphasize:

The whole federal vision controversy boils down to this -- the Latin word *foedus* means covenant. The original meaning of the word *federal* means covenantal. The federal vision constitutes an attempt to get Reformed Christians to see life (that's the vision part) more covenantally.⁴

The FV wants to have a more federal (covenantal) vision (understanding, perspective) about life. But once we understand the mission of the FV all sorts of questions begin to be raised. What is a covenant? Who is in this covenant? Does a covenant imply community? If so, does it exclude individualism? What must I do to stay in this covenant? Do I have to do meritorious works to remain in this covenant? Can I live as I want and still remain in this covenant? Will God ever throw me out of this covenant if I apostatize? Is apostasy real? Is there grace in this covenant? Are there works? Is there grace in works or works in grace? What about children of Christian parents? What is their status in the covenant? Should I evangelize my children so they can enter the covenant? Should I treat them like children of the covenant? Do children of the covenant come to the Lord's Supper after their baptisms or should they wait until they can make a mature profession of faith? What benefits do we have in the covenant? All these questions and a host of other questions pertain to this topic.

¹ This is why some critics have referred to this as the Auburn Avenue Theology, in light of where the conference was held. Also referred to as *Federal Vision Theology*.

² Steve Schlissel, Steve Wilkins, Douglas Wilson and John Barach; also known as the "Monroe Four" since the Conference was held in Monroe, LA.

³ Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner, eds. *The Federal Vision* (Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2004) 12.

⁴ Douglas Wilson, BLOG AND MABLOG.

As anyone can see, this topic is not so much about a theoretical, abstract theological inquiry, but it is all encompassing. It affects our day to day. It is a question of worldview; a worldview that deeply affects our understanding of ecclesiology (study of the Church).

Definitions

In any theological discourse it is important to define terms. Interestingly, this debate is all about the definition of theological terms. Naturally the charge against the FV is that they have re-defined traditional Reformed terms and poured their own meaning into it. What are these debatable terms? Justification, election, covenant, faith, merit and apostasy are a few of the terms in dispute.

In Opposition & In Favor

Who are the players in this debate? Of course, there are too many to mention. But the categories boil down to two groups: Strict Subscriptionists (SS) and Honest Subscriptionists (HS).⁵ Strict Subscriptionists refer to those who subscribe strictly to the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF).⁶ They believe that the WCF is the best summary of the Bible and that it needs no revision or addition. The WCF, though not at the same level of authority with the Bible, it is the lens through which we read our Bibles.⁷ On the other hand, Honest Subscriptionists believe that the WCF is the best summary of the Bible, but that it is in no way the ultimate and final summary of the Bible.⁸ HS will honor the WCF, but at the same they are committed to the idea that the Church matures, and as it matures it will produce better summaries of Sacred Scriptures. Further, HS are honest about their exceptions with the WCF. These exceptions do not compromise the central doctrines of the faith⁹ and central doctrines of the Reformation.¹⁰

Covenant and Election¹¹

The relationship between covenant and election is one most churches would rather stay away from. Traditional evangelical Baptist churches, which are largely Dispensational in orientation, avoid the idea of covenant due to its complexity and its association with the Reformed Tradition. On the same note, these same churches avoid discussing election because it is too controversial or because it makes God capricious; “the cosmic rapist,” as a well known Arminian writes. On the other hand, Reformed Churches tend to be highly intellectual; an “army of note-takers,” as Jeff Meyers observes in his book *The Lord’s Service*. The traditional Reformed pulpit throws out words like *covenant* and *election* as a natural part of their Biblical exposition. However, when making applications to daily lives, these expositors fail to speak of the practicality or applicability of God’s covenant or God’s election.

⁵ Douglas Wilson offers this alternative to “strict subscriptionism”. The “Honest Subscriptionist” says that he agrees with the WCF with the “following exceptions.” In other words, he is honest about his exceptions.

⁶ Lane Keister, Ligon Duncan, John Otis, Joseph Pipa, Morton Smith and many others.

⁷ Some call this group the “Truly Reformed” or the TR’s.

⁸ James B. Jordan, Steve Wilkins, Douglas Wilson, Peter Leithart, Rich Lusk and many others.

⁹ Central doctrines of the faith include the apostolic doctrines of the great creeds (Apostle’s and Nicene’s)

¹⁰ Central Reformed doctrines include: Sola Scriptura, Sola Fide, Sola Gratia, Solus Christus, and Soli Deo Gloria.

¹¹ I will be drawing heavily from *The Federal Vision* eds. Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner. In this section I will be mainly summarizing John Barach’s study on covenant and election and adding some other salient observations.

Enters the Federal Vision

Federal Vision advocates follow the intellectual integrity of the Reformed Tradition,¹² but they are equally interested in how theology applies to our daily lives. They try to answer the question “*How does the covenant and election in Christ change my family, church, and culture?*”

One of the unique presuppositions of almost all FV advocates is their vision of a bright future for the church in this world. Whereas most critics of FV foresee periods of darkness in the church’s future, FV advocates subscribe to a Postmillennial eschatology.¹³ This may be a concrete reason why there is such an emphasis on the application of the word instead of merely the intellectualization of the word.¹⁴

FV advocates believe that to speak of election without speaking of the life of the elect renders the theological idea useless. For instance, in Deuteronomy 29:29 the Bible says that “the secret things belong to Yahweh our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.” Hence, to spend time speculating about the decrees of God (whether he created first and then elected or whether he elected first and then created; the famous *infra vs. supralapsarian* debate) is enjoyable in seminary, but not very beneficial to the Church at large. But the things that are revealed unto us in God’s Word, these are indeed essential and beneficial for our discussion.¹⁵

Election

As mentioned above, election is an indispensable part of the Scriptures. It is found in the Old Creation (Older Testament) and in the New Creation (New Testament).¹⁶ All Calvinists believe that in election, “God initiates, not because He sees anything in us, but out of sheer grace.”¹⁷ The Bible never speaks of election in morbid terms. It deals with it as a source of comfort and hope and joy. Election is not a frightening mystery. Election is not taught so that you can doubt whether you are in or out; it is not taught so you can become God’s policeman arresting people and telling them that they are not truly saved. Election is assurance and comfort.¹⁸

In some churches, election is taught in a manner that brings doubt to the congregants. In fact, in some Reformed congregations, parishioners refuse to eat at the Lord’s Table because they are in doubt about their salvation (these are men and women who have been Church members most, if not all of their lives). This is not just a modern phenomenon. In the Revivalist days of the 18th and 19th century, men

¹² As an example, consider Peter Leithart. Peter is one of the few scholars today in the Reformed tradition that is capable of interacting with the latest philosophical theory, while analyzing Shakespeare’s poetry.

¹³ Some opponents of the FV have picked up on this distinctive and have also chosen to attack FV’s eschatology.

¹⁴ No doubt Amillennialists and Premillennialists are faithful in living out the faith, but my point is that Postmillennialism provides a more thorough framework for Biblical application (consider the theonomic movement or James B. Jordan’s *The Law and the Covenants*, where he makes direct application for our modern day from Exodus 21-23).

¹⁵ It is possible to treat Deuteronomy 29:29 as a proof text for the FV, though “proof texting” is not something cherished in the FV. FV theology is largely a contextual theology; building its case from the totality of Holy Writ.

¹⁶ These are helpful and more accurate categories to describe the old and new testaments.

¹⁷ John Barach, *Federal Vision*, 17.

¹⁸ Thoughts drawn from John Barach in Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner, eds. *The Federal Vision* (Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2004)

and women spent days of agony wondering if they had the right experience to enter into God's covenant.¹⁹

The central question FV advocates answer is: "Who is that 'you' who is elect? Or who is that 'you' who receives the comfort of election?" This is where we find the first major distinction between modern Reformed thinkers and FV thinkers.²⁰ FV opponents assert that the "elect" are only those who have been predestined to eternal life. They assert that only those predestined to eternal life are part of the covenant. Others in the church may be in the sphere of the covenant, but not truly *in* the covenant. In other words, God's promises are only for those who are eternally predestined to eternal life.²¹

In this position, we do not really know who the elect are since elect is being defined only as those who will be in heaven when they die. We can assume that someone is elect, but we cannot be truly sure. In this view, the minister cannot call his people "The people of God" because there may be some that are not people of God. One begins to see the implications of this thinking when applied to a host of issues. For example, what about our children? They have been baptized²² and brought into the Church, but have they been predestined? If they have not made a profession of faith, how can I assume they are Christians? Can I teach my child to sing "Jesus Loves Me, This I know?" since there is no certainty whether that child has been predestined to eternal life with Christ? Can I teach my child to pray "Our Father who art in heaven...? Or should I wait until the child makes a profession of faith before we can assume the Father in heaven is truly her Father? As John Barach observes: "As pastors become consistent with this view they are inclined to preach in the third person, and stay away from the words *I* and *we* and *you* when it comes to election."²³ These pastors cannot say the promises are for "you" because it may not be after all. If this is the Biblical view of covenant and election, then it becomes unknowable and uncomfortable.

The FV agrees thoroughly with the WCF's emphasis on eternal predestination, but it also sees a covenantal dimension to this election. Auburn Avenue advocates treat covenant and election as those things that God has revealed unto us and our children.²⁴ In Genesis 17 God makes a covenant with Abraham and He does not tell Abraham to treat his children as "maybe" or "possibly" elect, rather to include them into the covenant. Even though it is possible that those children later on may break the covenant and apostatize, they remain in the covenant as long as they are faithful to the commands of the covenant.²⁵ But can people fall away from the covenant? Is not the covenant permanent and unconditional? FV advocates affirm that the covenant is conditional and that one who abandons the Church and decides to live a life of sin and apostasy is truly cut off from the covenant. In fact, the book of Hebrews makes this very case in chapter 10:29: "How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?" Notice that the writer of Hebrews does not say that they have been brought into the sphere of the covenant, but they have actually borne fruit

¹⁹ These were Puritan and Calvinistic parishioners.

²⁰ You can find these types of distinctions in Calvin (Institutes 3.24.8) and other Reformed writers, but the fact that the WCF does not make these distinctions is what really frustrates FV opponents. As an FV opponent once said to an FV advocate: "I don't want to hear what Calvin taught, I want to hear the Confession."

²¹ Modern Presbyterians hold to this view, but that is only a small part of the larger Reformed tradition.

²² I am assuming infant baptism, rather than taking the time to make a case for it. See "A Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism", edited by Gregg Strawbridge.

²³ Barach, Federal Vision, 21.

²⁴ FV sees a BOTH/AND instead of an EITHER/OR approach to election.

²⁵ Faithfulness does not mean perfection, but a commitment to live as God would have us live. See Malachi 6:8.

since they have been “sanctified.”²⁶ The conclusion is that these people were truly in the covenant, but they fell away from the covenant. Hence, the New Covenant can be truly broken, just as the Old Covenant.²⁷

Conclusion

One aspect of this controversy centers on the definition of election and covenant. FV opponents declare that God uses “election” only in the decretal, eternal sense. FV advocates see the word “election” applying not only to those predestined to eternal life with Christ, but also to those who are in the Church of Christ living faithfully to the covenant.

²⁶ I am defining “sanctification” as John Murray would. Murray defines this as process of transformation and conformation to into the image of Christ. Murray speaks also of “definitive sanctification,” which is a once-for-all definitive act (John Murray, Published in *Calvin Theological Journal*, vol. 2, no. 1, April 1967).

²⁷ We can also see this clearly, as John Barach observes, in John 15. Jesus says that those who were in the vine were in Christ, but because they did not bear fruit they fell away. Hence, people fall away from the vine.