

29. Covenant and election

John Barach, “Covenant and Election,” pp. 15-44 in *The Federal Vision*, ed. S. Wilkins and D. Garner (Monroe: Athanasius Press, 2004)

Introduction

In recent weeks we’ve looked at the outworking of God’s plan of salvation in history (O. Palmer Robertson on Covenant Theology in *The Christ of the Covenants*) and the origin of God’s plan of salvation in eternity (John Calvin on the doctrine of election). We now bring these two topics together with an article by American theologian and Pastor John Barach entitled “Covenant and Election.”

This article helps us to think through the practical and pastoral relevance of the doctrine of election. In particular, it highlights some problems which (according to Barach) can arise from a common Reformed misunderstanding of the doctrine of election, and proposes what he regards as a more biblical alternative which avoids these problems.

It’s important to realise here that Barach is discussing an issue about which there is disagreement *within* the Reformed tradition. This is helpfully reflected in the gracious and measured tone of Barach’s article – a tone which of course should characterise all such discussions. At the same time, the pastoral issues at stake are potentially quite significant, and Barach’s article therefore rightly poses some challenging questions, which if we are wise we will want to engage with in a clear-headed and robust way.

Questions for reflection

- i. What is “assurance of salvation”?
- ii. Can assurance of salvation be experienced? If so, how?
- iii. Does the doctrine of election have anything to do with assurance?
- iv. Should a professing believer ever be excluded from the Lord’s Table? Why or why not?

Study questions

1. How, according to Barach, should we approach the subject of election (pp. 15-17)? What particular mistakes must we take care to avoid (pp. 15-17)?

For reflection: Do you notice here any echoes of Calvin’s approach to the doctrine of election (see Institutes, III.xxi. 1-4)?

2. What does Barach believe about the doctrine of predestination? (pp. 17-18)

3. “There are [Reformed] churches where perhaps twenty out of seven hundred partake of the Lord’s Supper” (p. 19). What flawed logic leads to this practice (p. 19)? What response does Barach make briefly on p. 19?

For reflection: How do you think you would feel if you, as a believer, were refused admission to the Lord’s Table (either at your church or elsewhere)?

Barach now summarises two views on the relationship between election and the covenant: (1) The Arminian view; and (2) What he calls “one Reformed view” which is “more popular in our circles.”

Let’s look at the Arminian view first.

4. How does Barach summarise the Arminian position on election (pp. 19-20)?

*5. Read the following extract from Francis Turretin’s description of the Arminian doctrine of election:

“[The Arminians] attribute a certain causality to faith, so that God is moved by its foresight to choose this rather than that one ... Moreover, they make a twofold decree of election: the first general, of saving believers; the second special, of saving individuals by name whom God foresaw would believe” (Turretin, *Institutes*, IV.xi.7; 1:356-357).

Does Barach agree with Turretin about the Arminian doctrine of election? If not, how do they differ?

Now let’s look at what Barach calls “one Reformed view” which is “more popular in our circles.”

6. What is the other view of election and the covenant which is “more popular in our circles” (p. 20)?

7. “This view presents a number of pastoral problems” (p. 20). What are these problems (pp. 20-21)? What happens “if we hold this view consistently” (p. 21)?

For reflection: Do you agree with Barach that this view of election and the covenant will tend to produce the problems he describes?

Having outlined this second view of the relationship between covenant and election, Barach now proceeds to critique it, and to propose an alternative view.

8. What point does Barach seek to make from Hebrews 10 and John 15?

For reflection: Do you agree with this exegesis of Hebrews 10 and John 15?

9. What alternative view about “the relationship between covenant and election” does Barach propose (p. 23)? Who else (according to Barach) also held this view? (Barach also discusses the historical pedigree of this view on pp. 39-41.)

According to Barach, some who hold this view distinguish sharply between covenant and election (bottom of p. 23). However, he argues, “This isn’t the way Scripture speaks” (p. 24).

10. How, according to Barach, does Scripture use the language of God’s “chosen ones” and “elect ones” (pp. 24-26)? What texts does Barach mention in this context?

11. “The Old Testament election involved the whole body and it involved history. But that was the Old Testament. Election revealed in the New Testament is a different kind of election” (p. 27). How does Barach reply (pp. 27-31)?

For reflection: What do you think of Barach’s response? Do the following New Testament texts add anything to this discussion?

- 1 Corinthians 10
- Jude 5
- Romans 9-11, especially Romans 11:17-21

12. “We need to hold three things together as we think about the relationship between covenant and election” (p. 31). What are these three things (pp. 31-32)?

*13. What will happen “If we try to do our theologizing and our pastoring and our speaking to God’s people from the perspective of God’s eternal predestination” (p. 32) rather than from the perspective of the covenant (pp. 32-33)?

14. Barach discusses several possible descriptions of someone who is a member of God’s covenant people for a time but then falls away (p. 36)? What are these different descriptions? What are their strengths and weaknesses?

15. “If apostasy is a real danger, can we ever have assurance?” (p. 39). If so, how?

For reflection: Has Barach’s article changed the way you think about assurance of salvation? If so, how?