

The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros and Cons: Debating the Federal Vision, ed. by E. Calvin Beisner. Fort Lauderdale, Florida: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004. Pp. 331.
Reviewed by John A. Battle.

Concerned about the developing controversy surrounding the Federal Vision in conservative Reformed churches, E. Calvin Beisner and other members of the faculty of Knox Theological Seminary organized a three-day colloquium retreat in Fort Lauderdale. This meeting was held in August 2003, and was paid for by an anonymous Christian businessman desiring to see the controversy clarified and possibly settled. Invited participants to the colloquium included seven men who support the Federal Vision (John Barach, Peter J. Leithart, Rich Lusk, Steve M. Schlissel, Tom Trouwborst, Steve Wilkins, and Doug Wilson) and seven men who criticize it (Christopher A. Hutchinson, George W. Knight III, Richard D. Phillips, Joseph A. Pipa, Jr., Carl D. Robbins, Morton H. Smith, and R. Fowler White). Professor Beisner moderated the meeting. For this meeting each participant was to prepare a position paper, to be discussed by the whole group. Each participant was also assigned to reply to one of the other papers. This book is the collection of these papers.

Twenty-two chapters of the book are divided into four parts: (1) Overviews (giving the broad outline of the Federal Vision [FV] and the major concerns against it), (2) Paradigms and Perspectives (discussing the overall hermeneutic employed by the FV, particularly its view of scriptural interpretation, and the linking of the doctrine of the Trinity to our understanding of covenant relations), (3) The Federal Vision and the Doctrine of Salvation (the longest section, dealing with the FV views of covenant, salvation, the covenant of works, regeneration, and apostasy), and (4) The Federal Vision and the Sacraments (dealing with the FV view of baptism and the Lord's Supper). Dr. Beisner provides a final chapter, summarizing the controversy.

While it is impossible in this brief review to interact with all the subjects discussed, I believe it is important to point out the sympathy of the FV men for postmodernism.¹ This tendency is shown strongly in the first Part of the book. The FV writers prefer the idea of "drama" or "story" to propositional revelation. Schlissel objects to our "forcing saving faith into the mold of mere assent rather than . . . as a holistic, living response to the Word and will of God." He objects to "seeing Scripture as a repository of truth claims and propositions rather than as a story" (p. 22). "Reason," he says, "requires a proposition as its object whereas Faith requires a history and/or a Person as its object." He mistakenly says that, "When God called Abram, it was not by a proposition, but by a promise" (p. 24). Of course, a promise *is* a proposition. This leads Schlissel to identify faith as the same as obedience: "To submit to God's Word is what it means to believe. *To believe is to obey*" (p. 26, emphasis his).

Leithart's chapter on interpretation likewise reveals a different approach to the Bible than that taken traditionally by Reformed writers. He speaks disparagingly of "treating realities of God as mere propositions," maintaining that "abstraction, especially Enlightenment abstraction, is the great bogey-man of the Auburn Avenue speakers." He says that Reformed theology has compromised in many respects with the Enlightenment and that we must "continue the process of purgation" (p. 65). This is done by emphasizing the personal side of God and of the Bible. In

¹ Cf. the *WRS Journal* 6:2 (August 1999); the entire issue is devoted to the criticism of postmodernism in evangelical theology.

his view the members of the Trinity are in covenant relation to each other, and by creating man God has created him in relation to himself. Since man is both spiritual and material, his body and outward actions are not to be separated from his “inner man.” This is seen to have profound implications for our views on church membership and the sacraments. It is not surprising that Leithart approvingly quotes the Roman Catholic Karl Rahner’s famous thesis, “The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity” (p. 59), and considers the only modern evangelical writer who appreciates his approach to be the postmodernist Stanley Grenz (p. 66).

This postmodern approach to Scripture is echoed later in the book by Rich Lusk. Lusk denies the theological covenant of works, and says, “The Bible came to be treated as a collection of propositions rather than an unfolding drama. No where (sic) is this seen more clearly than in the creation of the covenant of works doctrine” (p. 119). Supposedly, in his view, if you understand the Bible as being made up of true propositions, you will support a covenant of works; but if you take it as a “drama,” you won’t. Personally, I’d much rather take the sentences of the Bible as expressing true propositions, than try to have to derive my theology from some “drama” or series of events. Biblical narratives are composed of “propositions” too. Without propositions “drama” carries no revelatory power.

There are many areas of doctrine held by the FV that are exposed and explored in the course of these chapters. It is apparent that some of the FV emphases tend to correct some abuses in Reformed churches. Often we see de-emphasis on the visible church and the importance and value of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Often Reformed people have not appreciated the privileges of the Abrahamic and new covenants, and their application to our children. Tom Trouwborst rightly criticizes the horrific sentiment of Thornwell, “But, until they [our baptized covenant children] come to Him, . . . they are to be dealt with as the Church deals with all the enemies of God” (p. 198). In that sense, the FV controversy can help Reformed churches educate and rear our children as they are, children belonging to the Lord and beloved by him. However, the price is too high when they make baptism convey the same blessings to all, the elect and the non-elect.

Clearer definitions are needed. The Abrahamic and new covenants deal with the visible church and the invisible church in different respects. They are derived from the overarching covenant of redemption (covenant of grace), in which Jesus is designated as the Savior of the elect, not of the reprobate. We need to distinguish sharply the visible and the invisible church. While there is great overlap, they are by no means identical.

The overall tone of this book (with a few exceptions, as the interchange between Phillips and Schlissel, ch. 7-8) is irenic and constructive. Written early in these controversies, it seems hopeful that the writers can come to some clarification and agreement. However, the two positions staked out are not reconciled that easily. As this controversy has continued after the colloquium was held, these men have more and more interacted with each other. It appears that the FV men have hardened in their position against the traditional position of the Reformed churches. In personal correspondence the book’s editor expressed this to me:

Thank you for your comment about *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros & Cons*. I would mention that if I were to rewrite the conclusion in light of the continued correspondence with the Federal Visionists, it would be considerably more negative, on more points, than the conclusion there was. Many things became better clarified in succeeding months through literally thousands of e-mails back and forth among the fifteen participants in our colloquium. But at least the book helped get some things out on the table, and now it is up to the teachers in the churches to carry through the controversy and earnestly contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints.²

This book provides an excellent introduction to the Federal Vision controversy, as it expresses the main features of the conflict in the proponents' own words. Even though more has subsequently been written on both sides, I recommend this book highly as an excellent introduction and resource.

² E. Calvin Beisner, email letter to John Battle, Nov. 29, 2005.