

## Book Review

# Chosen in Christ: Revisiting the Contours of Predestination

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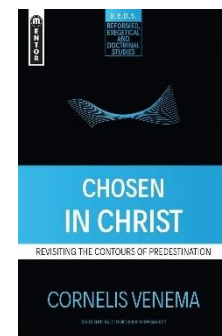
This saying is perhaps trustworthy, “Of writing many books on the election, there is no end.” So why another book on this topic? What’s the payoff(s)? One apparent reason is the contentious nature of the idea of election itself, and so no one has written conclusively on this particular issue, as witnessed throughout the history of Christianity. As a contribution to the Reformed, Exegetical, and Doctrinal Studies (REDS) Series, Cornelis Venema believes not only that it is a timely work to commemorate the four-hundredth anniversary of the Synod of Dordrecht and the genesis of the Canons of Dordt, but there are also at least two other motivations for an additional reflection on the topic. First, the doctrine of election is so pervasively taught throughout Scripture, explicitly or implicitly, that it is impossible not to come across the topic as one reads both the Old and New Testament carefully. Second, the doctrine of election is essential in understanding the triune God’s initiative and role in the whole biblical drama of redemption. Venema rightly notes the two practical implications following this second point, that such doctrine would impress upon believers a life of humility as well as a life of thanksgiving and total commitment to glorify God.

However, despite the centrality of election in the Bible, Venema lists the two difficulties pertaining to the election, which typically led many to question its truthfulness. First, the idea that God elects some and not others brings to the fore the complex issues surrounding assurance of salvation, including how one can be sure whether or not he or she is already saved and how many people are actually saved. Second, the idea that God sovereignly elects believers to salvation seems at odds with human freedom and responsibility to respond to the gospel by exercising their faith. At the heart of the issue, as indicated by both difficulties, is the coherence of the divine attributes of God himself entailed by the doctrine of election. Furthermore, Venema observes that today’s postmodern culture, combined with some leftovers of modern belief in autonomous selves, makes it even harder for many to accept this doctrine. Thus, for Venema, a restatement

### Book Title

Chosen in Christ: Revisiting the Contours of Predestination

### Front Cover



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and clarification of this central biblical doctrine would prove profitable and contextual in this day and age.

At the outset, Venema restricts the scope of his book to the study of election instead of predestination (despite the subtitle), where predestination is defined as comprising both election and reprobation—that is, double predestination. Venema then states that election “is a form of monergism” in opposition to “synergism” (p. 20). Hence, in the first part of the book, Venema starts by selections of exegetical works on the election in both the Old and New Testament (ch. 1–2), especially the Pauline epistles (ch. 3). Venema frames his discussion of the Old Testament teachings on election around five themes: (1) divine counsel and providence; (2) the election of Israel as God’s chosen people; (3) the election of specific individuals among Israel for salvation and service; (4) the election of a ‘remnant’ within Israel; and (5) the election of the Messianic King and Servant (pp. 26–50). As I see it, Venema wisely spends more time expounding the third theme: whether the election concerns the corporate or individual Israel and whether they are chosen for salvation or service. In that case, Venema convincingly shows that it is more coherent to hold an individual rather than corporate Israel, at least through the evidence of God’s election of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as well as the fact that not all Israel become recipient of God’s promise of blessings. This latter point is explained further under the fourth theme, more specifically by the distinction between the historical election of the people in Israel and the eternal or saving election of those who are to become recipients of the covenant blessings (see the excursus on election and covenant on pp. 46–48).

Moreover, Venema argues that those who want to affirm the view of election as strictly for service are postulating a false dichotomy, needlessly reductionistic, and inconsistent with the New Testament teaching on the election (pp. 41–44). Venema then continues

with his exposition of election in the Synoptics and Acts, John’s Gospel, General Epistles, and Revelation, and demonstrates how the OT provides the basis for election in the NT and how it develops—especially how Paul interprets and sets forth the doctrine of election in Romans 8:28–30; Romans 9–11; Ephesians 1:3–14; including some other evidence in his writings. All these selections of OT and NT passages, Venema argues, support a monergistic and unconditional doctrine of election.

The second part of Venema’s book is the historical-theological retrieval of Augustine (ch. 4), whose doctrine of election sets the foundations not just for theologians in the medieval era but continues through to the Reformation era (ch. 5). Venema observes that Augustine’s doctrine of election was born out of the context of his replies to the Pelagians and Semi-Pelagians, whose works challenge the traditional doctrine of original sin and grace. Hence, Venema analyzes roughly three writings of Augustine on each of his views, firstly on original sin and human freedom and then on the election. Venema concludes with debates on whether Augustine holds to a single or double predestinarian view and provides some clarifications to contend for a single-predestinarian view. Though sympathetic to Augustine, Venema mentions two common criticisms for his view on election in the following terms: (1) Augustine’s teaching that the number of elect is relatively few due to his mistaken view of the sacraments, particularly baptism; and (2) Augustine’s teaching that the gift of assurance or perseverance is not given during this lifetime, even after baptism, which removes the confidence of believers in their salvation. As Venema then moves to his examination on Reformation theology, he traces the influences of Augustine in many ways in Luther, Melancthon, and the Lutheran traditions, showing that they ascribe to the “moderate Augustinian monergism” (p. 186). Venema also shows some relative dependence on Augustine among the Reformed theologians,

especially Calvin, Bullinger, Zwingli, and Vermigli, though not without some modifications and variations among each thinker.

Additionally, Venema cites some articles from the mid-sixteenth century Reformed confessions (the Gallican Confession, the Scots Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and the Belgic Confession) and claims that they are “undoubtedly, the most important sources for ascertaining the Reformed doctrine of predestination” (p. 202). In conclusion to his investigation on the election in this section, Venema provides a summary of some of the continuities and discontinuities among the early Reformed orthodoxy (e.g. Beza, Perkins), and the place and functions of predestination among the Reformed theologians. Finally, Venema ends this second part of the book with the discussion of Arminius’ rejection of the Augustinian and/or the Reformation understanding of election within the sixteen-century controversies leading up to the Synod of Dordrecht, with a brief summary of the Reformed response in the Canons of Dordt (ch. 6). After fairly summarizing Arminius’ teaching on the election (i.e. conditional election, synergism, and middle knowledge), Venema launches three criticisms to the Arminius’ view, namely that (1) his interpretation of Romans 9 is mistaken; that (2) his distinction of God’s antecedent and consequent will regarding the fate of the salvation and non-salvation of sinners “posits a remarkable contradiction” (p. 236); and that (3) his use of middle knowledge is problematic, for it generates an “ontological absurdity” (citing Richard Muller) when he claims that God can foreknow the free and indeterminate decisions of human beings (p. 240–241).

The third part is the evaluation of what Venema refers to as the revisionist doctrines of election, namely Karl Barth’s or the “neo-Reformed” view (ch. 7) and the free will/open theist or the “neo-Arminianism” (ch. 8). While both revisionist formulations attempt to provide some corrections to either the

Augustinian/Calvinist or the Arminian view, both of them end up being too radical and indefensible. Venema identifies at least three problems in Barth’s view: first, the lack of scriptural basis and ambivalence in the relation between God’s intratrinitarian being and act; second, the incoherence of his affirmation and denial of universalism; and third, the failure to account for the election of individual persons in his interpretation of Romans 9–11 (pp. 272–296). As with the open theist view, Venema’s critique is even more blunt: “open theism has no true doctrine of election” (pp. 327–328). This is because open theist’s views of divine self-limitation in terms of his omniscience and providence strictly as conservation—without concurrence and governance—are at odds with Christian orthodoxy. Also, as Venema indicates, the notion of libertarian freedom in open theism is “the most important unexamined assumption” (p. 314) which, upon closer scrutiny, is incompatible with Scripture’s account of divine sovereignty and human freedom, theological anthropology, original sin, and heavenly freedom (pp. 310–334).

In the final section, Venema answers the common theological questions related to the election and its practical implications, such as the simplicity of the gospel, the justice of God, the number of the elect, the urgency of evangelism, the Gospel call, human free will and responsibility, and the assurance of salvation. Venema ends with an appropriate reflection on how we, as God’s elect, should always live in thanksgiving and doxology.

There is much to commend in Venema’s book as a whole. Indeed, Venema has written a rich yet clear and accessible book on the Reformed doctrine of election, which I believe would be helpful for both pastors and academics (including his recommendation of sources for further studies). I also find Venema’s command of both the primary and secondary sources pertaining to historical figures and matters is fine and charitable

when he is critical, especially on Arminius and Barth. However, by way of some improvements for his book, I would have liked for Venema to consider including more in-depth discussions on both the medieval figures like Thomas Aquinas and his influence on the Reformed traditions on predestination, including two additional (Reformed) figures, namely Jonathan Edwards and Herman Bavinck—where studies on both “giants” not only are gaining traction in the last decades or so, but indeed could serve as correctives or minimally as further options among the Protestant views on the topic at hand. Also, in my judgment, it would do well for Venema to have engaged more literatures from the analytic (philosophical) theologians, both from the more Augustinian or Calvinistic or Reformed (e.g., Daniel Johnson and David Alexander, Paul Helm, James Anderson, Greg Welty, Guillaume Bignon, Oliver Crisp, Jesse Couenhoven) and the non-Reformed camps (e.g., Peter van Inwagen, Robert Kane, Katherin Rogers, Kevin Timpe). Engagements with the medievals, Edwards, Bavinck, and the aforementioned analytic theologians would enhance the uniqueness and creativity of the book as to not repeating some of what previous works on the election have covered, as well as strengthen Venema’s overall argument—to mention one example, as he criticizes libertarian freedom, where I think it is appropriate

only to the “leeway” type but not the “sourcehood” type of libertarian freedom. Finally, perhaps one major weakness in Venema’s book is that he has not engaged Molina or Molinism adequately, either in the primary sources and some of the latest scholarships, which he was aware of (p. 305, n. 19). Venema should not have equated Arminius’ and Molina’s use of middle knowledge, which is not quite the same, especially on Molina’s anticipated rejection of Arminius’ conception of middle knowledge in his *Concordia*, as well as MacGregor’s rejection of Muller’s interpretation of Molina).<sup>1</sup> Venema also did not cite one important source on Arminius, namely Roger Olson’s *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), which provides a rather different gloss of Arminius in contrast to Muller. To be fair, it could have been the case that Venema had read those sources and remained unconvinced, and so decided to report what Arminius actually wrote on middle knowledge (which is basically equal to Molina) and follow Muller’s reading of Arminius. But in any case, I would still recommend Venema to at least include some discussions on these particular matters to avoid the charge of misrepresenting the Molinists’ doctrine of election. Apart from these omissions, Venema’s work certainly repays a careful study by scholars and pastors alike.

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<sup>1</sup>See e.g. Kirk MacGregor, *Luis De Molina: The Life and Theology of the Founder of Middle Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2015), 18–24.