

[MJTM 13 (2011–2012)]

BOOK REVIEW

Roger E. Olson. *Against Calvinism*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011. 208 pp. Pbk. ISBN 13: 978-0310324676.

Michael S. Horton. *For Calvinism*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011. 208 pp. Pbk. ISBN 13: 978-0310324652.

In recent years, there has been a revival of Reformed (or Calvinist) doctrine in North America, especially among the new generation of pastors and church leaders. This phenomenon has been described in Collin Hansen's book, *Young, Restless, Reformed* (Crossway, 2008). Zondervan has published these two works—by a proponent and by a critic of Reformed theology—as companion volumes to enable readers to form their own opinions on the merits and weaknesses of Calvinism. The Arminian, Roger Olson, is professor of theology at Truett Seminary at Baylor University; the Calvinist, Michael Horton, is professor of theology at Westminster Seminary California. In the Preface that each writes for the other's volume, it is evident that each one maintains respect for the other as a fellow believer. But each also states that he considers the other's theology as inconsistent, leading to the logical conclusions that the other refuses to acknowledge. For Olson, Calvinist theology makes God the author of sin and evil, and for Horton, Arminian theology denies that salvation is entirely of God's grace. What enables the two to engage in this vigorous written debate is their shared commitment to the authority of Scripture for the respective doctrines that they present. Each one argues that his particular theological understanding is more faithful to Scripture, and that the other's views are inconsistent with biblical teaching.

Let me make two comments by way of introduction to my review of these two works. First, I am a committed Calvinist, and an ordained minister in a denomination that holds to the

Westminster Confession and Catechisms. Second, it seems to me that the format of the two books gives Horton the clear advantage. Because Olson's work focuses on giving arguments why he is not a Calvinist, his presentation consists primarily of critical and negative remarks. While he does give brief expositions of the Arminian alternatives to the Reformed doctrines that he critiques, the bulk of the book is an attack on, and refutation of, the doctrines of Calvinism. In contrast, Horton's book is a positive and irenic presentation of the Calvinist doctrines of salvation. While he has some critique of Arminian theology, his presentation allows him to unfold Calvinist soteriology in a winsome and attractive fashion. Thus, Olson's material has a negative tone, while Horton's exposition has a more positive tenor to it.

Now I will make some comments on the specific content of each book, beginning with Olson's *Against Calvinism*. Olson indicates that his book is prompted by the rise of the new Calvinists who give central prominence to the doctrines indicated by the acronym TULIP: total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of believers. What Olson considers abhorrent about this theology is that it makes God the author of sin and evil. So he presents a lengthy critique of the doctrines of Calvinism, and the Arminian alternative, so as to preserve human responsibility, and refute any notion of divine responsibility, for sin and evil. He claims that there are three basic problems with Calvinist doctrine: it is not a proper interpretation of the whole of Scripture; it contradicts the beliefs of the ancient church and of recent evangelical heritage; and it falls into unintelligible contradictions.

In the next four chapters, which make up the main body of the book, Olson gives his detailed theological critique of the doctrines of TULIP. In addition to his claim that these doctrines are not supported by Scripture, his main criticisms are that they make God to be the author of sin and evil, that they are inconsistent with God's love and justice, and that they undermine the universal offer of the gospel based upon Christ's death on the cross for all humanity. Olson also appeals to a number of "problem" passages for these Reformed doctrines, notably 1 Tim 2:4 (God desires the salvation of all), and 2 Pet 3:9 (God does

not want anyone to perish but everyone to come to repentance).

In response to Calvinist monergism, where God is in control of and responsible for the salvation of individuals from beginning to end, Olson presents the Arminian alternative (synergism). The three main doctrines he presents are: God's divine self-limitation whereby he permits sin, the doctrine of prevenient grace (God's restoration of the freedom of the will of fallen humans so that on their own they can repent and believe the gospel), and the universal atoning death of Christ (based on the governmental theory of the atonement, which makes the salvation of all possible). The key concern for Arminian soteriology is that God establishes the conditions that make salvation possible for every human. The human decision of faith, not divine election, is the ultimate factor for one's salvation.

Notably absent in Olson's work is a detailed discussion of the Reformed doctrine of perseverance. His reason is that this doctrine does not touch on "the central area of disagreement: the character of God" (p. 53). In my view, this is a glaring omission for two reasons. First, he himself admits that "It follows logically from the other points of TULIP" (p. 53). Second, Calvinists have argued that the logic of the Arminian position leads to a denial of assurance of perseverance for Christians.

In his concluding chapter Olson rejects the claims of Reformed theologians that their interpretations of Scripture should be embraced as mysteries. He claims that these views are contradictions, betraying deep problems at the heart of Reformed theology, the greatest of which is to impugn the just and loving character of God. For this reason above all, Calvinist theology should be rejected.

Yet, I think that Olson fails to acknowledge that Arminian theology contains mysteries parallel to those in Reformed theology. Let me give two examples. Olson admits that God sometimes places people in circumstances where they will do what he needs them to do to fulfill his plan (p. 99). The obvious example of this is the actions of Judas, the Jewish leaders, and Pilate resulting in Christ's crucifixion. Thus, Olson holds simultaneously that God's actions never render sinful actions certain and that some events involving sin are God's purpose and will.

Second, Olson also allows that nothing can ever happen that God does not allow (p. 100). God could have prevented the fall into sin, and the subsequent torrent of evils unleashed in the world. So it is also a challenge to Arminian theology to relate God's permission of evil and suffering in the world to his holy and righteous character.

I conclude my remarks on Olson's book with two weaknesses that I find in his critique. First, Olson constantly deals with human decision-making and divine determination as if they were at the same level, such that (using Horton's analogy) they are competing for pieces of one pie. The consequence is that God's sovereignty in salvation leaves no "pieces" for human responsibility. Alternatively, to maintain the freedom of the human will, Arminians contend that God must limit his sovereignty. But theologians—not just Calvinists—have understood God's sovereignty, not as undermining human decisions, but rather as supporting them. This is the distinction many theologians, such as Aquinas and Calvin, make between God as primary (or ultimate) cause of all things, and the creatures as the secondary causes of events. Olson rejects this distinction (pp. 181–83) but fails to acknowledge the numerous biblical references to God's sovereignty as encompassing human decisions (for example, Acts 2:23; 4:27–28). Second, while Olson's critique of Calvinist doctrine is that it undermines the love and justice of God, he never appeals to the holiness of God. This overlooks the biblical judgments of God based upon his holy abhorrence of evil, such as destroying all life in the flood, destruction of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the death of all the firstborn of Egypt. If a holy and loving God enacts these final judgments on sinful and rebellious people, thereby bringing about their eternal condemnation, there is no inconsistency with his passing over the reprobate, leaving them to the consequences of their sinful choices.

In the companion volume, *For Calvinism*, Michael Horton presents Reformed soteriology as worthy of acceptance. He introduces his exposition by urging two things: that Christians should have a theological understanding of their faith and the reasons for it, and that they need to grapple with the teaching of

the whole of Scripture, and not just those verses that support their preferences. Christians must study all of God's revelation in the Bible to find one unified and coherent teaching on salvation.

In chapter 1, "The Essence of Calvinism," Horton clarifies three common misconceptions about Reformed theology: (1) This theology did not originate with Calvin but has a history going back to Augustine. (2) The Reformed tradition was shaped not solely by Calvin but by many sixteenth-century Protestant reformers. (3) Predestination was not the central doctrine in Calvin's theology. Addressing fellow Calvinists, Horton recommends that the model they follow for their self-understanding is to view themselves, in order, as catholic, evangelical, and Reformed.

In the next four chapters Horton gives an exposition of the doctrines of TULIP. (In the course of this, he indicates that he prefers to use the term "particular" to refer to the extent of Christ's atonement, and he also favors the phrase "effectual call" over "irresistible grace.") He expounds the traditional understanding of Reformed soteriology, while both correcting typical misconceptions and defending these doctrines from common Arminian accusations.

The following are some key points he makes. Concerning the human fall into sin, Reformed theology holds simultaneously that God has decreed all things, including the fall, that God is not the author of sin, and that humans do not sin by compulsion. The mystery of God's unconditional election of individuals, and his leaving the reprobate to their fate, still maintains human freedom because his transcendent divine agency guarantees the freedom of the will. Although Christ's particular redemption has various facets to it (as highlighted by other views of the atonement, such as recapitulation, Christus Victor, moral influence, and the governmental theory), the penal substitutionary view of the atonement is central in enabling the other views to be realized. God's effectual calling of the elect is not coercive but the sovereign work of grace that liberates the will through the new birth. This, in turn, leads to the perseverance of believers through the fruit of their good works. Horton claims that all these doctrines reflect "a *consistently monergistic* view of salvation as entirely due to

God's grace from beginning to end" (p. 123).

Horton devotes a chapter to the importance and necessity of good works in the Christian life for sanctification (contending that election does not undermine, but rather is an impetus for, godliness). To respond to the charge that Calvinism is anti-missionary he also presents a chapter on both the history of Reformed missions and on the Reformed theological basis and motivation for missions. Horton concludes with a chapter on the strengths and weaknesses, and the opportunities and threats, for Calvinism today. He acknowledges the weaknesses to which Calvinists have succumbed, but he is optimistic about the missional impact of the Christian faith rooted in sound orthodox Reformed theology.

These two books are a welcome addition to the ongoing discussions and debates on evangelical theology. First, they point to the importance of the place of theology in the faith and practice of evangelicals. Second, they provide helpful material to further a mutual understanding between Arminians and Calvinists of each others' beliefs. If the readers of these two volumes follow the lead of the authors, they cannot help but gain a mutual respect for each other. I highly recommend these two works. And for the readers to gain the most from these books, I conclude by emphasizing that they must read both.

Guenther ("Gene") Haas
Redeemer University College
Ancaster, ON