

Neither Calvinists nor Arminians but Baptists

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Neither Calvinists nor Arminians but Baptists

Are You Calvinists or Arminians?

There is a question that many professional theologians, pastors and students, as well as theologically-minded Christians in the local churches, are being asked these days: Are you Calvinists or Arminians? More specifically, in our case, are the authors who have contributed to *Whosoever Will: A Biblical-Theological Critique of Five-Point Calvinism* to be identified with Calvinists or Arminians? Because that book is specifically intended to address the type of Calvinism that measures theology according to the five heads of doctrine promulgated in the canons of the Synod of Dort, the idea may arise that the authors themselves are, therefore, Arminian. This idea has been clearly promoted by Roger E. Olson, an articulate advocate of Arminianism, author of a significant text on Arminian theology, a self-proclaimed “classical Arminian,” and a recent reviewer of *Whosoever Will*. In an academic book review at www.BaptistTheology.org and on his personal blog, Dr. Olson identified the authors as both “anti-Calvinist” and “Arminians.”

Although we might variously appreciate Professor Olson’s claims that the book “contains 11 mostly excellent chapters by Southern Baptist leaders and scholars absolutely demolishing key Calvinist doctrines,” and that it “stands as *the* scholarly argument against Calvinism by evangelical authors,” we would unanimously, though respectfully, disagree with his characterization of us as “Arminian.” As he notes, the editors do not claim to be Arminians. Here, the relevant words from the book’s introduction seem appropriate to repeat: “none of the authors in this project is Arminian or a defender of Arminianism. None of the authors is a five-point Arminian, a Pelagian, a semi-Pelagian, or a strong Calvinist. . . . Instead, our contributors try to keep the two more extreme positions in balance, learning from both, counting themselves as being in the mainstream of the Baptist theological tradition” (*Whosoever Will*, 5).

If you were to read more broadly in their works or hear each of them speak in both private and public settings, the contributors themselves occupy a spectrum of views on the controverted points of Calvinism. Some of the authors in *Whosoever Will* would occupy a position closer to five-point Calvinism while others would occupy a position closer to Arminianism, but none would identify himself with either extreme. Yet other contributors would adamantly maintain that the common practice of measuring theology according to a flawed instrument created by a gaggle of baby baptizing, state church theologians in the seventeenth century is by degrees anachronistic and unhelpful. The purpose of each author in contributing to the book was to provide a critique of some aspect of Dortian Calvinism from a majoritarian Baptist perspective rather than to promote a particular version of Calvinism or Arminianism.

So, why did these theologians address Calvinism? Note these factors: First, a major task for any theologian is to reflect critically upon the proclamation of the church. Second, many of our churches have recently been proclaiming Calvinism with the encouragement of sectors of the Southern Baptist academy. Taken together, these factors require responsible theologians to

address an issue that is of growing concern among many of our churches. We are servants of the churches, and when we are constantly bombarded with well-meant queries regarding biblical interpretation in our classrooms, churches and homes, we are compelled to deliver a reasonable response. We addressed Calvinism because we were asked to help our people think through the important subjects that Calvinism raises. For this, we have no regret but a sense of duty.

Logically, because the authors are providing a critique of Calvinism from a biblical-theological perspective, it might be assumed that they are the ideological opposite: Arminians. However, had the authors provided a critique of Arminianism from a biblical-theological perspective (a critique we have not attempted nor perceived the need to address at this time), they would doubtless be identified by some as Calvinists. Indeed, we understand yet another forthcoming book has referred to us as “moderate Calvinists.” While some of the contributors might be comfortable with that designation, yet others would disagree with the characterization of being “moderate” with regard to any theological position, including Calvinism. The same discomfort with regard to certain labels applies to the description of the authors as “anti-Calvinist.” Again, a citation from the book would be helpful: “The contributors are not ‘anti-Calvinist’ and therefore are interested in dialogue, not diatribe. We have no desire to sweep the SBC clean of Calvinism” (9).

So, Then, Who Are We?

So, then, the authors claim they are neither Calvinist nor Arminian, nor anti-Calvinist. Because the authors have been clear as to what they are not and what their agenda is not, we would ask our readers to honor our claims. However, since these claims have apparently left a sense of conceptual vacuum for many readers, we would like to remind our readers of who we are and of what our agenda consists. Rather than allowing others to define us according to a construction not of our own making, we would prefer to fill the ideological space created by certain reactions to the book with our own meaning.

(Please note three qualifications: First, the book itself was not intended to provide a full statement of the way forward but to provide a critique. Please respect the stated purpose of the book alongside the narrow purposes stated for each essay to stand, and please judge them on those self-identified bases. Second, as the writers of this particular response, please note that the undersigned are not the totality of the eleven. We believe the other contributors to *Whosoever Will* would not disagree with much, if any, of our assessment. Third, in this essay we are not attempting to provide a complete systematic statement of our theology but merely an outline of the focus we believe should provide the way forward for all Baptists, especially Southern Baptists.)

Are we Calvinists? No. Are we Arminians? No. So, then, who are we? We are Baptists. We are majoritarian Baptists in the Sandy Creek tradition, who formulate theology according to the authoritative, inerrant, and sufficient Word of God so that we might better proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to all human beings. We are neither Calvinists nor Arminians; we are Baptists! Please give us a moment of your time to unpack the meaning of this important position. We believe that almost anywhere you stand on the ideological spectrum of Calvinism and Arminianism, or even if you refuse to take a stand on the spectrum itself, you could and should join us in affirming, as some of our leaders have said before: “The primary focus of Christians should be to carry out the Great Commission under the lordship of Jesus Christ according to the

guidelines found in the inerrant Word of God” (8). In summary, we are neither Calvinists nor Arminians, but Baptists!

Neither Calvinists

Let us address the negative side of this position statement, “We are neither Calvinists nor Arminians.” The book itself outlines many reasons why we are not Calvinists, but three of those bear repeating in light of our own priorities. First, we do not believe that Dortian Calvinism properly represents the gospel of Jesus Christ in its simplicity and profundity according to the Bible. We are uncomfortable with Dortian Calvinism because we believe its rigid structure is imposed upon Scripture and that it does not allow Scripture to form theology. As philosopher Steve Lemke queried about the Calvinist belief in irresistible grace, “Is Scripture being shaped to make it agree with one’s theological system, or is one’s theological system being shaped according to Scripture?” (127). Malcolm Yarnell was similarly concerned that an exemplary Reformed theologian’s methodological approaches to Scripture “reflect a thoroughgoing rationalism that is prior to and formative for his treatment of Scripture” (*The Formation of Christian Doctrine*, 50).

Second, we are not Calvinists because we do not believe certain Calvinist doctrines can be found in a gospel-ruled, canonical reading of Scripture. This is why the authors of *Whosoever Will* repeatedly refer to the plain sense of scriptural passages according to the grammatical and historical context. From the detailed expository approach to John 3:16 by Jerry Vines (*Whosoever Will*, ch. 1), to the commonsense contextual reading of Ephesians 2:1ff by Paige Patterson (ch. 2), to the canonical approach to defining biblical language utilized by both David Allen (78–83) and Steve Lemke (117–29), the authors repeatedly demonstrate a necessary return to Scripture. Scripture is sufficient for the substance and structure of our preaching, and though we seek to address those living in contemporary cultural contexts, we call our listeners to begin with hearing the Bible in its own context and end with contemporary personal submission to that Word. As a result, most of us are convinced, against Dortian Calvinism, that Scripture does not teach that man is totally unable to respond to the call of God to believe, or that grace does violence to the human will, or that Jesus Christ’s death failed to propitiate for the sins of “the whole world” (1 John 2:2).

Third, we are not Calvinists because we are genuinely concerned about the impact of Dortian Calvinism upon evangelism. As David Allen asserted, “Christians must evangelize *because God wills all men to be saved* and has made atonement *for all men*, thus removing the legal barriers that necessitate their condemnation” (97). How could God offer salvation to all people with integrity if Jesus did not die for all (2 Corinthians 5:20)? Since the Calvinist doctrine of limited or particular atonement “provides an insufficient motive for evangelism by undercutting the well-meant gospel offer” by God to all men, as well as by us to all men, Southern Baptists should reject five-point Calvinism (107). We decry the efforts of Calvinist professors of limited atonement who argue the evangelistic altar call is unbiblical or that it somehow represents an attempt by those who deliver altar calls to “manipulate the sovereignty of God” (101). We are motivated to offer the gospel to all, and to invite all to respond, even in a public fashion, because Christ died for all.

Moreover, as the evangelistic preacher Jerry Vines argued, the crisis behind our understanding of Christ’s offer of “whosoever will” comes down to the type of God we are worshipping: “It is the design of the sovereign God to make the salvation of all people possible

and to secure the salvation of all who believe. What kind of God would not make salvation possible for all?" (25). We do not ask such questions in order to score rhetorical points against our Calvinist Baptist brethren, but because we believe that the God revealed in Scripture is a God who loves all men, desires their salvation, and has made salvation possible for all by Christ's death for all.

We say such things because we perceive grace when we hear the gospel verbally and enthusiastically offered to all men freely through personal repentance toward God and faith in Christ. With the first Baptist pastor in England, we believe that Christ died for all men. This is a "comfortable doctrine," because "every poor soul may know that there is salvation for him by Christ and that Christ hath shed His blood for him, that believing in Him he may be saved, and that God wants not the death of him, but that he should repent and live" (Thomas Helwys, *A Short and Plain Proof by the Word*, 1611). This is our passion: that every sinner, without qualification, may hear the gospel of Jesus Christ, believe in Him and be saved! With regard to this God, who loves all people, we can agree with Roger Olson, who claims that Arminians "are in love with God's goodness and unwilling to sacrifice that on the altar of divine determinism."

Nor Arminians

And, yet, neither are we happy to receive the name of "Arminian." Although we respect Professor Olson's scholarship and passion for God's love, we disagree with his assessment of where we are. Our understanding from the five Arminian articles of 1610 is that classical Arminians are unsure as to whether Christians may lose their salvation. As the Remonstrants' fifth article states, they did not reach a conclusion regarding the perseverance of the saints "*cum plerophoria animi nostri*", with full assurance in their minds (Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, III, 549). On the other hand, unlike classical Arminians, we are absolutely sure that Scripture teaches that a born-again Christian will be saved. This is why our Baptist Faith and Message affirms, without equivocation, "All true believers endure to the end. Those whom God has accepted in Christ, and sanctified by His Spirit, will never fall away from the state of grace, but shall persevere to the end" (art. V, "God's Purpose of Grace"). Some have referred to Southern Baptists as moderate Calvinists, because our confession clearly affirms this one point addressed by the heads under contention between Calvinists and Arminians. In our churches, this belief is more popularly identified as "once saved, always saved." On this point, confessional Southern Baptists may never be said to be Arminian, and we are indeed confessional Southern Baptists.

We could also raise other concerns about Arminianism. Among those would be concerns about the tendency of some Arminians to fall into the trap of Open Theism, a doctrine with which we are in adamant disagreement. In response, we would point out that, according to the Baptist Faith and Message, "God is all powerful and all knowing; and His perfect knowledge extends to all things, past, present, and future, including the future decisions of His free creatures" (art. II, "God"). The specter of Open Theism arises when we begin to speculate with regard to the doctrine of human free will and proceed to oppose human free will stridently against divine sovereignty. Ken Keathley (*Salvation and Sovereignty: A Molinist Approach*) and Jeremy Evans (*Whosoever Will*, ch. 10) have provided some crisp theological reasons for where we might be headed with regard to these issues.

As mission-minded and evangelistic Baptists, we are uncomfortable with moving too far beyond scriptural revelation into speculative theological models. Jerry Vines referred to "simple

biblicism” in his sermon and this describes where we have additional difficulties. Arminians and Calvinists too often seem to be involved in a harsh intramural discussion that begins with a few scriptural texts and then transitions too quickly toward theological speculation. This propensity to move beyond the biblical text is where we see the problems of both Hyper-Calvinism and Open Theism arising. Over against these efforts, we prefer to set aside distracting theological speculation and focus on teaching the gospel clearly and compellingly to our students and churches, both modeling and encouraging the development of personal and professional lives that keep gospel proclamation at the center of our and their efforts.

Moreover, please note that we see many things to appreciate in Calvinism, important things that keep us in fellowship with our Calvinist Baptist brethren. As Paige Patterson pointed out several years ago, there are six reasons why non-Calvinist Baptists fellowship with Calvinist Baptists. We reproduce those here for your benefit, with the caveat that even more things that keep Calvinist and non-Calvinist Baptists together could be listed:

Calvinists, Patterson said: “usually lead very pious lives”; believe theology is important; generally are “very clear about the dangers involved in the charismatic movement”; “understand the purpose of everything is to glorify God”; “never question the inerrancy of Scripture or the substitutionary atonement of Christ”; and “are crystal clear about the fact that salvation is by grace alone” (Baptist Press, 13 June 2006).

Therefore, our claims that we are neither fully Calvinists nor fully Arminians are deeply held and do not arise because of political reasons but issue forth from genuine theological convictions that have ecclesiological ramifications.

But Baptists!

At this point, we would like to affirm more clearly who we are from a positive perspective. Please note that as we make these affirmations we are not saying that Calvinist Baptists and Arminian Baptists are not truly seeking to be Baptists. We certainly believe that Baptists can be Calvinists and they can be Arminians, but we prefer not to allow ourselves to be defined by either of those great positions, because we see something even greater, something that deserves more attention and requires a higher allegiance. Likewise, theologians open to Molinism, such as Bruce Little and Ken Keathley, do their work with a firm commitment to evangelical Baptist convictions. What we are saying is that our own passion for God’s Word, for Christ and for His Great Commission necessarily places every desire for settling the long-running and seemingly intractable Calvinist-Arminian debate to the side. We recognize this is a debate that will continue to be held and should be held in certain restricted venues. However, the debate itself is trumped by our need to glorify the Lord Jesus Christ, to proclaim Scripture, and to obey His Great Commission. Moreover, we believe our position is the mainstream Southern Baptist position, as Richard Land said in his chapter, “the Separate Baptist Sandy Creek Tradition has been the melody for Southern Baptists, with Charleston and other traditions providing harmony” (50). Here are our thoughts about these interwoven, mutually reinforcing and majoritarian priorities:

1. The Lordship of Jesus Christ

We believe that Jesus Christ is Lord. Salvation consists of this fundamental and profound affirmation in heart and mouth. To believe and say that Jesus is Lord is to affirm that God in Christ took upon Himself human nature. True faith is impossible apart from the work of the Spirit of God with the Word of God. Born of a virgin, the Word became flesh. Jesus Christ taught us and worked great miracles, and then he died on the cross to atone for the sins of all humanity. He then arose from the dead on the third day, ascended to the right hand of the Father, and will one day return to judge the living and the dead. As our Lord, He saves us now through faith in Him. As our Lord, He has the right to command us and we have the responsibility to obey Him entirely and according to His order. As our Lord, He preserves us as we carry the cross He has given us through this world. As our Lord, he reigns over us even through death itself and brings us victoriously into eternal life with Him. We come to God the Father through God the Son in God the Holy Spirit. Jesus is Lord!

2. Biblical Proclamation

We believe that the Holy Spirit inspired the Bible, including every word in the entire canon of the Old and New Testaments. As a result of divine inspiration, the Bible is the Word of God and is without error and sufficient for every aspect of the Christian life, from regeneration to proclamation. The Word of God is living and active and will accomplish that for which the Lord sent it. As a preacher proclaims the Word of God, the Spirit opens the ears of the hearer to listen and perceive the Word. The preacher of the Word has been chosen as a necessary instrument by God to proclaim His Word and that Word may not be separated from Scripture; therefore, the Christian minister's powerful task is to proclaim the Bible in its depth and its fullness. As a result of these truths, we believe that expository preaching of the Bible is the means God has revealed to bring about the salvation of new believers and the growth and comfort of all Christians.

3. The Great Commission

We believe that the Great Commission is the commandment of Jesus Christ. As the Lord's final and all-encompassing command to His disciples, the Great Commission must be heard and obeyed with utmost seriousness. The Great Commission is primarily focused upon the making of disciples and is inclusive also of going to the nations, baptizing new believers and teaching them all that Christ commanded. The Christian's entire life and the church's entire effort must be submitted to obeying this commission. This entails the effort to evangelize everyone in our hearing through bringing our voice to everyone, everywhere, at all times. This entails following the order of His commission through baptizing people only after he or she has truly become a disciple of Jesus Christ. This entails baptizing a person in the name of the one God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This entails teaching all of Christ's commands, which means teaching all of Scripture. The Great Commission will not be completed until all nations have been reached and all people have been confronted with the call to follow Jesus, until He comes again. Baptists view the conundrum of divine sovereignty and human responsibility through the lens of the Great Commission. As we wrestle to apprehend the Bible's simultaneous affirmation of both truths, whether we lean toward Calvinism or Arminianism or neither, we do so in such a way as to always promote the great work of evangelism and missions.

With these three positive Baptist affirmations in mind, we ask that people identify us neither as Calvinists nor as Arminians, but as Baptists. We know this may not provide a certain intellectual satisfaction for solving theological conundrums, but we really think there is a greater

question than, “How do you reconcile divine sovereignty with human freedom?” This greater question needs to be answered because it is more important than any other. There is no greater question for the Christian to answer at this point in God’s plan for His creation, and it has to do with His redemption of creation. That question is, “How are we, His chosen instruments, going to obey our Lord and proclaim the good news of His Word—the gospel of His death for the sins of the world and His resurrection for our sakes—to everyone, everywhere and at all times, until He comes again?” This question defines us. This is why we want to be known simply as “Baptists.”

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