Presbyterion 32/2 (Fall 2006): 73–82

REVIEW ESSAY

WHY I AM NOT AN ARMINIAN

BY ROBERT A. PETERSON AND MICHAEL D. WILLIAMS

WHY I AM NOT A CALVINIST

BY JERRY L. WALLS AND JOSEPH R. DONGELL

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Why I Am Not an Arminian, by **ROBERT A. PETERSON** and **MICHAEL D. WILLIAMS**. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2004. 224 pp. ISBN 0-8308-3248-3

Why I Am Not a Calvinist, by **JERRY L. WALLS** and **JOSEPH R. DONGELL**. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004. 230 pp. ISBN 0-8308-3249-1

InterVarsity Press, well known for its "views" books on often controversial topics, has entered into the lists two new works on the age-old yet perennially fascinating Calvinist-Arminian debate. Unlike some of the other IVP offerings of this class—in which the combatants joust in alternating chapters of theological parry and thrust—the form of this "debate," as it were, consists of two stand-alone volumes written independently and with no direct interaction. What we have here are two hermetically sealed apologetic pieces, the one for Calvinism and the other for Arminianism, ostensibly cast in the form of an argument against each position's congenital opposite. While the confrontationally suggestive titles were most likely borne out of marketing considerations (who can resist a good theological rumble?), these books certainly go beyond mere negation as each pair of authors touts the positive strengths of their respective positions.[1]

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[1] As Peterson and Williams state in their introduction, "To be honest, our true goal is to commend and defend Calvinism. We believe that we are obligated to say this because the answer to the question 'Why am I not an Arminian?' is

Those with pugilistic tastes, lured by the polemically evocative titles, may be disappointed at the generally irenic tone of the disputants, which contrasts noticeably with the rancor that has often attended books on this topic. For the most part, the authors of both books are intentional—if not always entirely successful—about representing the opposing position fairly. They also exert some genuine effort to acknowledge difficulties that attend their own views, and then to address these with reasoned responses. In short, there is much attractive in the tone of both of these volumes.

Beginning with the book by Robert A. Peterson and Michael D. Williams (hereafter P&W), both systematic theologians at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, I was impressed with the significant amount of serious exegesis that one finds throughout the volume. I am reminded of a comment by my friend Professor Beisner of Knox Seminary, who lamented that sometimes modern Calvinists rely too much on the logic of the Reformed system in their defenses of Calvinism and too little on the nuts and bolts of biblical exegesis. P&W have definitely not fallen into that trap. Though they do bring in philosophical, historical, and systematic considerations, P&W build their case primarily on a bevy of scriptural passages that they put forth to support the Calvinist position and negate the Arminian. Their use of the Scriptures is well nuanced and avoids facile proof-texting. They are careful to set the given texts in their proper historical and interpretive framework, and are chaste in what conclusions they draw from a particular text or set of texts. I note this capable approach to the Scriptures in Peterson's other writings as well, such as his fair handling of the biblical text in his earlier *Hell on Trial*. Overall, I regard the biblical character of the work to be its most commendable feature.

I found interesting P&W's attempt to provide a cogent explanation for the so-called "warning passages" in Hebrews (especially Heb. 5:11–6:12 and 10:26–39), which are often brought forth by Arminians against the doctrine of perseverance. I appreciated their frank acknowledgment of the difficulty that these passages pose for the Reformed doctrine of perseverance and the need for Calvinists to face them squarely. P&W grant that the burden of proof "rests with those claiming that the description in Hebrews 6:4-5 does not portray Christians,"[2] and then attempt to meet that burden. They argue their case especially from the "clear contextual indicators" that show saved persons are not in view, of which the agricultural metaphor of the fruitless land (6:7–8) was particularly compelling.

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that we are Calvinists . . . we are not predisposed to be anti-Arminian but rather predisposed to affirm the fundamental tenets of Calvinism" (13).

[2] P&W, 83.

I believe that P&W could have presented a stronger case against the oft-laid charge that the God of Calvinism is "unfair" and "discriminatory." P&W tend to grant at least tacitly certain Arminian premises by adopting the loaded language of "discrimination" in their defense of unconditional election. It is unhelpful when P&W declare that Calvinism "stands for discrimination, and a divine discrimination at that,"[3] granting the modern connotations of that word. Nor does P&W's retort that "the gospel of Jesus Christ is countercultural"[4] set matters right. Here P&W have themselves unwittingly reinforced a charge against Calvinism that is readily dispatched simply by confronting it head on. While P&W do note that human beings are sinners, they fail to state that God did, in fact, give Adam and Eve a "fair shot" at obeying him by endowing them with plenary moral ability to obey him; the ante-lapsum "protoplasts" were, in the words of Augustine, *"posse peccare et posse non peccare"* ("able to sin and able not to sin"). Indeed, God did not create them morally neutral but actually inclined to the good![5] The Arminian complaint would have traction if God had perverted Adam and Eve's wills in some way and had then turned around and held them accountable for this perversity. But since their sin was self-caused, they alone are to blame for it and God is under no obligation to counteract the moral damage that human beings inflicted on themselves in the fall. That he chooses to do so in the case of some may be called "discriminatory" if one likes, but that loaded term connotes unfairness and injustice, a charge that Calvinists ought to repel forcefully. Indeed, the real mystery is why God would choose to save anyone at all, not why he would bypass those whom he created upright but who threw it all away in a decisive act of willful rebellion. Simply stated, I wish P&W would have raised this line of argument and pressed it forcefully rather than tacitly conceding certain suppositions underlying the Arminian point of view.[6]

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[3] P&W, 18.

[4] P&W, 18.

[5] P&W do state several pages later (23–24) that, according to Augustine, "Adam was created good. He was, as Augustine put it: *posse non peccare* ('able not to sin') before the fall. . . . Adam's original integrity consisted in his ability to respond to God obediently from an unencumbered will." And again, they affirm that man fell into sin "through his own self-determination" (97). My point is not that P&W are unaware of this aspect of Augustine's theology or that they fail to state it altogether. Rather, I fault them for their failure to exploit this hugely significant fact against the Arminian cavil of "unfairness."

[6] Of course, the line of argument I am suggesting presumes the Augustinian doctrine of original sin, according to which not only Adam and Eve but also their progeny are implicated both in the corruption and in the guilt of the first human pair's sin. But this is precisely the point at which the debate must be resolved. *If*

Ironically, I found P&W's trenchant criticisms of the scholastics within their own Reformed tradition to be less accurate and justified than I did their polemic against Arminianism. Their treatment of the Reformed orthodox was most unsatisfactory, and seemed to recapitulate outmoded caricatures that have been decisively overturned by the better and more recent scholarship. The problems begin with their faulty definition of scholasticism: "For our purposes, the term *scholasticism* need only mean the elevation of rational conceptualization over historical action and logical relationships over personal relationships for the sake of the creation of a rational theological system."[7] While such a definition may indeed suit the *authors' purposes* in pitting the purportedly speculative scholastics against a supposedly more biblically-grounded Calvin in the discussion that follows, it bears no relationship to the thing itself. Richard Muller's magisterial and foundational work is cited in this connection, though to no good effect. P&W state,

> Even Richard Muller, whose own project has been committed to rehabilitating the flagging reputation of Reformed scholasticism and showing the development-within-continuity between Calvin and his seventeenth-century successors, admits that the product of the turn toward scholasticism in the second generation of the Reformation was a revived interest in "a speculative formulation of the will of God" in which reflection upon the ways of God came to be dominated by the concept of divine will, and divine goodness and justice became correspondingly less important.[8]

Leaving aside the fact that Muller's writings are not works of "rehabilitation" but of historiography *simpliciter*, the quote from Muller is taken from his *Christ and the Decree*, where in context he is addressing (and actually quoting) *Brian Armstrong's* earlier (and flawed) definition that casts scholasticism in certain of these terms—the defects of which Muller then highlights in the sentences that follow. Muller himself, contrary to Armstrong, correctly concludes that scholasticism should *not* be seen as allied to a particular set of metaphysically speculative commitments but rather "ought simply to indicate the formal theology of

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the Augustinian/Calvinist/Lutheran doctrine of original sin is biblical—which entails as one of its central affirmations the plenary ability of ante-lapsum Adam's will—then questions about the "fairness" of unconditional election evaporate.

[7] P&W, 94.

[8] P&W, 94.

the systems and doctrinal compendia developed out of the classroom experience of the academies and universities."[9]

P&W then proceed to set Beza's speculative supralapsarian approach over and against a less speculative and more biblically-centered Calvin, who, in contrast to Beza, "was willing to leave questions unanswered."[10] P&W continue: "As Beza sought to move Reformed theology toward greater scholastic consistency, he also brought all things, including the affairs of men, under the eternal decree of God. Nothing falls outside of the divine will. . . . God predetermines all events and all human destinies by his eternal will, his decree."[11] In working out this "greater emphasis upon philosophical and metaphysical concerns than Calvin entertained,"[12] one casualty was Beza's movement away from "Augustine's asymmetric understanding of predestination, in which God causes belief in the elect but does not cause the unbelief of the unregenerate," replacing it instead with "a doctrine of double predestination."[13] In response, we should first note that supralapsarianism and speculativeness are not coordinate categories; that is, there is no necessary connection between the supralapsarian view of the decrees and a speculative approach to theology, nor can any such necessary connection be documented. Also, God is no more the "cause of unbelief of the unregenerate" for the supralapsarian than he is for the "milder" infralapsarian. We also note that Calvin, every bit as much as Beza, held to the "harsher" view of double predestination as distinguished from various infralapsarian Reformed scholastics. Indeed, one would be hard pressed to set forth a more thoroughgoing predestinarianism than what Calvin offers (e.g., *Institutes* III.11.5). That, coupled with Calvin's rejection of the divine *permissio*—"accepted by virtually all later Reformed theologians, including Beza and Zanchi"[14]—actually puts most of the Reformed scholastics closer to "Augustine's asymmetric understanding" of predestination than it does to Calvin's view. And at all events, one questions the justification for elevating Beza, who is still relatively early in the tradition, to the position of a touchstone or benchmark for Reformed scholasticism. While P&W correctly observe that "a somewhat less strident [sic] form of Calvinist decretal thought arose alongside Beza's supralapsarianism and would become the

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[9] Richard Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1986), 11.

[10] P&W, 94.

[11] P&W, 95.

[12] P&W, 93.

[13] P&W, 95.

[14] Richard Muller, *Dictionary of Greek and Latin Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1985), 222.

dominant confessional position among Reformed churches,"[15] they fail to note that this "less strident form of Calvinist decretal thought" is, in fact, mainstream Reformed scholastic theology in its mature development and not a defection from or softening of it.

The pro-Arminian volume is co-authored by two colleagues at Asbury Seminary: Jerry L. Walls, professor of philosophy of religion and Joseph R. Dongell, professor of biblical studies. As noted earlier, Walls and Dongell (hereafter W&D) write in a generally irenic tone. They also show a wide reading of Calvinist authors, particularly modern ones, both popular and academic. I also note an attempt to be fair to the Calvinist position. For instance, W&D's presentation of irresistible grace states accurately the Reformed claim that "God's grace does not violate our wills but rather changes them so that sinners willingly and gladly respond."[16] Likewise, their description of the Calvinistic view of perseverance of the saints seems fair enough, even taking pains to distinguish "Calminian" Baptists, as it were, from the mainstream Reformed tradition. In brief, at many points in the book I observed a genuine effort to attend to the nuances within the Reformed tradition, and also to distinguish it from views sometimes wrongly seen as allied with it. Taking the book as a whole, I found this attempt at defending Arminianism much more satisfying in engaging the Reformed position than certain broadsides from the Arminian camp, such as Pinnock's much earlier *Grace Unlimited.*[17]

I was also pleased to note W&D's rejection of open theism,[18] which actually is more the historical offspring of Socinianism than it is of Arminianism. I believe they are quite correct in stating that our inability to explain *how* God can have foreknowledge of future contingents ought not to prevent us from affirming *that* he has it—a salutary bit of theological humility that is good for Calvinists and Arminians alike.[19]

Biblically, W&D address many passages commonly advanced by Arminians to argue for God's universal saving intent, in contra-distinction to the particular election of Calvinism. As one would rightly

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[15] P&W, 97.

[16] W&D, 12.

[17] Clark Pinnock, ed., *Grace Unlimited* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany, 1975).

[18] W&D, 61.

[19] I note, interestingly, that W&D regard it as "possible" that God knows the future "not by peering forward but by knowing the future directly as already present" through what they describe as a "*temporal* omnipresence." Though I've not read Walls on this subject, I would opine that this view may be closer to a traditional position than it is to the one held by certain of his modern fellow Arminian philosophers. But I shall leave that for more nimble minds to untangle.

expect, much stress is placed on the "all" texts, such as Romans 11:32 and Titus 2:11. While the presentation here did not seem to advance the debate beyond what one normally finds in works of this class, the arguments were more capably and forcefully presented here than in some other works defending the same position. I did, however, find as special pleading the authors' attempt to get quit of passages such as Proverbs 21:1 by cautioning against "immediately converting reports of God's specific actions into universal principles. . . ."[20] I was also dismayed that W&D failed to address Acts 2:23, which describes the perpetrators of the crucifixion as both *predetermined* and *foreordained* to do so, but yet responsible for their actions. Unless I missed it, this text was not cited even in passing, nor does it occur in the Scripture index at the end of the book. While this text is not necessarily fatal for an Arminian view of providence—as it is for open theism—it does pose difficulties at least for certain approaches to libertarian freedom. It may well be that W&D have some way of dealing with it, but I was disappointed that this text was not addressed at all, given its centrality to any biblical discussion of God's sovereignty and human responsibility. Since W&D do not attempt to skirt other passages ostensibly difficult for Arminians, such as Romans 9, one could reasonably regard this omission as an unintentional oversight.

A number of deep inconsistencies surface in this book as the authors attempt to juggle: 1) an affirmation of the sinner's total inability and bondage in sin apart from grace; 2) the oft-repeated claim that God *must* provide grace if he is to be loving and fair; and 3) the necessity of the power of contrary choice as requisite to moral responsibility, in keeping with their view of libertarian agency. The incoherence of their view is highlighted in one of the least palatable features of the book, namely, several analogies aimed at showing the weakness of the Calvinistic view but which instead show the theologically muddled character of the Arminian.

Consider W&D's justifiable lament, in which, citing Robert Chiles, they correctly bemoan that "contemporary Arminians' underestimation of sin represents a shocking erosion from classical Arminian convictions, especially as taught by John Wesley."[21] Here they purport to make

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[20] W&D, 63. The statement in Proverbs 21 appears axiomatic; indeed, that a king is used as an example may be an argument from the greater to the lesser. If the will of a king—to whom the highest sovereignty is imputed in human terms—is subject to the hand of the Lord, how much more for the average person? Whether this verse might be accounted for on Arminian terms by invoking a middle knowledge approach would have been a debate worth pursuing, but W&D's evasion seems to denude the text of any real force.

[21] W&D, 67.

common cause with the Calvinists, agreeing with them "fervently" "that salvation can only occur if God radically, powerfully and graciously invades the human heart. Given the human condition, this invasion will take place without human invitation and prior to any human interest in God or inclination toward the good. Only as God opens blind eyes, stirs the desire and loosens the grip of sin can saving faith follow."[22] Well and good. But our hopes are dashed when through several different analogies W&D picture the "sinner" as in reality a hapless *victim*. For example, the captive is "imprisoned in the deepest corner of a terrorist camp." He is "bound, blindfolded and drugged" and also "weak and delusional."[23] In yet another scenario, the unconverted are likened to (no doubt insufferably cute) children at a summer camp who contract a fatal disease that can be cured only by a certain medicine. The heartless camp director (the Calvinist God in this analogy) cruelly withholds from some of the children the appetite stimulant that would overcome their aversion to the nasty tasting medicine, causing them to perish and eliciting the "anger and grief" and "perplexity" of the parents defrauded of their poor innocents.[24] We are also treated to "a horribly wounded victim lying helpless in an emergency room. The attending physician flies into action without waiting to obtain the victim's permission."[25] And again, we encounter "an accident victim pinned under a car on a remote road."[26]

Now, let us acknowledge that the point of each analogy as offered by W&D is ostensibly something *other than* the innocence of the sinner. For example, the point of the summer camp analogy is to argue that a claim of love rings hollow from a person who could effect deliverance but chooses not to use all the necessary means at his disposal. Likewise, the terrorist camp analogy is meant, on its face, only to illustrate resistible grace, not the sinner's innocence. Leaving aside for a moment the fact that these analogies are still inept at illustrating their intended points,[27]

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[22] W&D, 68.

[23] W&D, 68.

[24] W&D, 55.

[25] W&D, 78.

[26] W&D, 79n39.

[27] Consider the "terrorist camp" analogy. Elsewhere in the book (e.g., 103ff.), the authors maintain that moral responsibility both assumes and requires moral ability, i.e., the power of contrary choice. Accordingly, prior to the advent of grace these mind-controlled captives in the terrorist camp cannot with any real propriety be called "sinners," since the power of contrary choice is lacking to them (again, based on what W&D themselves have conceded on pp. 67–68). But if there is no power of contrary choice then there is no moral culpability, and if there is no moral culpability then there is no sin, and if there is no sin then there

their cumulative force is to instill in the reader's mind an *obligation* on God's part to save the "sinner"—here cast as some kind of accident victim—and to reinforce the charge that the God of Calvinism is unfair and unrighteous because he is unwilling to save all. No doubt this "victim motif" helps to sell the idea that God *must* do his best to save all if he is to be fair, for what kind of moral monster would refuse to save a group of unhappy campers if he could? But what becomes, then, of W&D's assertions that these individuals are *sinners*, which, if the word means anything at all, entails their moral culpability and an utter lack of any *claim* or *right* to deliverance? And what are we to make of W&D's now rather hollow affirmation that God "*graciously* invades the human heart"? In what sense is God's activity "gracious" in any of these victim-oriented analogies—replete with perplexed and angry parents, raging against the Calvinist God qua summer camp director? For if "grace" means anything at all it must include a lack of obligation to extend it. Stated simply, "fairness" has reference only to what is owed, that is, to "wages due," and not to what is offered *graciously* and to the *undeserving*.

One part of the book that I found quite interesting was W&D's discussion of "Molinist Calvinism."[28] According to the authors, this is a view that they do not think has been "explicitly articulated" by Calvinists but which some Calvinists seem to be implying in some of their treatments of sin. According to this view,

> . . . fallen persons might have a range of freedom with respect to which specific sins they commit and when they commit them. Moreover, they might have something like libertarian freedom in the realm of morally indifferent choices. . . . Given middle knowledge, however, he could know the particular sins each person would commit, and he could decide which of these to permit for his providential purposes.

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can be no condemnation, and if there is no condemnation then no salvation is needed. God might have done better to forego supplying the serum (also mentioned in the analogy) that clears their minds and enables them to choose or reject their liberation, for in administering the serum (grace) God actualizes the conditions under which the prisoner becomes morally culpable for his choice to remain in the terror camp. Indeed, God knows that some prisoners in fact *will* reject deliverance and face an eternal hell worse than their initial captivity! Consider also the "summer camp" analogy. The main point of the analogy—viz., that if God truly *loved* the sinner he would in every instance supply the efficacious medicine needed to remedy his condition—does not follow in the case of God as it does in the case of a camp director. God may well genuinely *love* the sinner, but for reasons connected with his role as a *judge* (and not as camp director) he may have a purpose in leaving the sinner in his chosen state of rebellion rather than using extraordinary means to counteract it.

[28] W&D, 162ff.

> Moreover, given original sin, the Calvinistic view of unconditional election could be maintained. God could choose to save certain persons by making them willing to believe and by leaving all others in their sins. He would thus permit, but not determine, the specific choices of those who continue to persist in sin and unbelief, with no intent to save such persons.[29]

While W&D "think this is a consistent possibility for Calvinists to consider" they regard it as "doubtful" that it is compatible with historic Calvinism, particularly given the association of Molinism with the Arminian position.[30] I believe that W&D are correct in noting a position similar to this in not a few Calvinist treatments of sin, but it does not seem to me to be incompatible with Calvinism's historic commitments, nor in any way a concession to Arminianism or Molinism. The doctrine of a *permissive decree*—which has reference to sin only—is well established in Reformed theology. God is able to extract with certainty particular sins from particular fallen individuals but he does so in such a way that the full matter of the sin derives from the sinner's own causation and not from God's efficient causality.[31] That is to say, the permissive decree may indeed be construed as God placing a particular sinner in a particular set of circumstances in which that sinner will *certainly* sin—indeed, in just the manner that God requires him to sin to accomplish some purpose—and yet the sinner will do so through his or her own self-caused activity, i.e., apart from God tinkering immediately with the sinner's will. The problem with Molinism from the Reformed perspective is that Molinism applies the model symmetrically to the case of the sinner choosing God; the Reformed find the synergistic implications of this model entirely unacceptable.

In sum, I regard both of these volumes to be important contributions to the ongoing Calvinist/Arminian debate. Both are well written and engaging and deserve careful study. I believe they will stimulate thought on this most important issue.

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[29] W&D, 163.

[30] W&D, 163.

[31] For a very fine discussion of the permissive decree from a thoroughly Reformed perspective, see W.G.T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, ed. Alan W. Gomes (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2003), 318–324; 953–954.