

Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities. By Roger E. Olson. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006, 250 pp., \$25.00.

Rare indeed is the book that discusses traditional theological issues in a way that respects tradition yet brings fresh, constructive insight to the contemporary theological scene. Roger E. Olson's path-breaking *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* is such a book. One reason that Olson is able to bring such freshness to the Arminian-Calvinist debate is that Jacob Arminius, the progenitor of the theological system that bears his name, has been so neglected. In his revival of the theology of Arminius, Olson joins recent thinkers such as Leroy Forlines (*The Quest for Truth*) and Robert Picirilli (*Grace, Faith, Free Will*) in a return to the sources, in which Arminius is rescued from obscurity and Arminianism is rescued from some of its later historical development.

Everyone interested in evangelical theology needs to read this work. Readers from across the spectrum, Calvinists and Arminians included, will greatly benefit from it. Reading this book will help Calvinists to move beyond the caricatures of Arminianism found in Calvinistic theological literature. Arminians and other non-Calvinists will be introduced—most for the first time—to a more grace-oriented stream of Arminianism with which they were formerly unfamiliar.

In his exposition of what he calls “classical Arminianism,” Olson argues that there are some issues on which Arminians and Calvinists cannot compromise (as in “Calvinianism”) and maintain the coherence of either of their systems. Yet Arminianism has much more in common with Reformed Christianity than most Calvinists realize. Indeed, Arminianism is more a development of Reformed theology than a departure from it.

Some of Olson's best passages are those in which he quotes contemporary Calvinists caricaturing Arminians and then shows how real Arminian theologians do not fit those caricatures. He is correct in criticizing, for example, the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals for excluding Arminians, though many confessional Arminians wholeheartedly agree with the Alliance's approach, except for its Calvinism. If paedobaptists and adherents of believer's baptism can work together for the mutual progress of the kingdom, Olson asks, then why can't Calvinists and Arminians? This gets back to the irresponsible ways that many well-known Calvinists characterize their Arminian brothers and sisters—associating Arminianism with heresy and liberalism and suggesting that it is closer to Roman Catholic than to Protestant theology. Olson provides numerous examples of Arminians past and present who defy such categories.

Olson contends that it is a mistake to think that free will is the guiding principle for Arminianism, when in reality free will for most Arminian theologians results necessarily from the goodness (or, for Arminius, the justice) of God. That is, they do not want to make God the author of sin, which they see divine determinism (whether direct or compatibilist) as logically doing.

Olson also dispels the notion that Arminianism does not believe in the sovereignty of God. It is not judicious, he argues, for Calvinists to define divine sovereignty in their own deterministic terms, and then suggest that Arminians do not believe in divine sovereignty just because the latter do not define it deterministically. Most sovereigns in this world have maintained rule over their realms without controlling every detail of them, Olson argues. Why must God's sovereignty be interpreted as control of every detail of reality? More importantly for Olson, the Bible does not present God's sovereignty and providence in this deterministic manner. However, it will surprise many Calvinist readers when they see how serious a doctrine of divine sovereignty was held by these traditional Arminians.

Calvinists often describe Arminianism as a human-centered theology with an optimistic anthropology. However, as Olson shows, Arminius's doctrines of original sin, total depravity, human inability, the bondage of the will, and the absolute necessity of divine

grace for salvation cannot be described as human-centered. That caricature is more the result of what Olson calls “vulgarized” American Arminianism that Jonathan Edwards encountered and Finney later popularized. Popular Calvinists also argue that Arminians cannot “give God the glory” for their salvation but take the glory themselves because their act of faith is a work. Olson shows how classical Arminian theologians argue that faith is a gift. Furthermore, a beggar simply receiving a gift from a rich man does not detract from the rich man’s glory nor give it to the beggar.

Another common myth is that predestination is a Calvinistic doctrine and that Arminians do not believe in it. Olson gives an excellent exposition of the Arminian account of election and reprobation conditioned on exhaustive divine foreknowledge of free human acts. He shows how Arminians have defended their viewpoint exegetically and how the classical Arminian approach is different from both Calvinism and open theism.

The last two chapters of the book, in my judgment, contain the most important argument of the book. In them, Olson dispels the commonly held notion that all Arminians hold views of justification and atonement that are inconsistent with those of the Reformers. He shows that it is a myth to believe that all Arminians deny the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the believer in justification, and that they hold the governmental view of atonement. On the contrary, many Arminians, like Arminius himself, subscribe to the penal-satisfaction theory of atonement and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the believer as the only meritorious cause of the believer’s justification before God.

The strengths of this book are many. It is the first book ever published to survey the field of historical Arminian theology so exhaustively. Yet it does so in a way that is accessible not only to scholars but also to college and seminary students, pastors, and interested laypeople. Those looking for an exegetical-theological defense of Arminianism will not be satisfied with this book. This is not the book’s purpose. Olson’s work is historical theology at its best. He paints a picture of the theology of classical Arminians past and present. This sets certain limits for his work. He insists that he is not defending any particular Arminian viewpoint, though his views do shine through at certain points. His aim is simply to present accurately Arminian soteriology so as to correct current misunderstandings and encourage more fruitful dialogue between Calvinists and Arminians.

In compelling and readable prose, Olson ranges over a great deal of territory. He discusses Arminius, the Remonstrants Simon Episcopius and Philip Limborch, John Wesley, nineteenth-century Wesleyan theologians such as Richard Watson, William Burton Pope, Thomas Summers, and John Miley, as well as twentieth-century and contemporary Arminians such as H. Orton Wiley, Thomas Oden, F. Leroy Forlines, Jack C. Cottrell, and H. Ray Dunning. He also makes frequent use of two fine dissertations recently written by John Mark Hicks and William G. Witt.

Olson cogently makes several important points that will add significantly to the discussion of Arminianism and that recent works in Arminian theology have not adequately discussed. For example, he clears up the misunderstanding of Arminianism as semi-Pelagianism by discussing Arminius’s disavowal of the label and the latter’s theological reasons for vigorously distancing himself from semi-Pelagianism. His terminology that the act of faith is the free “non-resistance” to the drawing power of the Holy Spirit is valuable.

Olson correctly speaks of individual election as the classical Arminian view. According to this perspective, the New Testament speaks of a personal election of individuals to salvation based on divine foreknowledge of them in their believing status. His emphasis that, for Arminius and other classical Arminians, this is individual election as opposed to corporate election is a welcome change to the overwhelming view of corporate

election among contemporary Arminians. In this way, Olson echoes recent grace-oriented Arminians such as Oden, Forlines, and Picirilli. Corporate election, according to classical Arminians, is the unconditional election of the church as the people of God. Individual election is the personal election of believers to salvation.

Olson accurately describes Arminius as a covenant theologian. This should gain the attention of traditional Reformed thinkers, who tend to be friendlier with Calvinist Dispensationalists than with non-Calvinists who share approaches to the covenants and eschatology that are closer to Reformed views.

Moreover, Olson states clearly that classical Arminianism is completely different from open theism, because the former demands absolute divine foreknowledge of future free contingents for its entire system of predestination to cohere. He is also to be commended for discerning that Arminius did not accept middle knowledge. Olson cogently argues that the idea of middle knowledge results in just another kind of divine determinism. Thus, it does not help the Arminian cause but in essence is incompatible with libertarian free will. He correctly says that the classical Arminian contends that middle knowledge is illogical because the concept of counterfactuals of freedom is illogical.

Though this is an excellent book, I do have a few criticisms. These are mostly inter-necine Arminian issues but are extremely important to the core argument that Olson is making. The first criticism is that Olson is vague on certain details that seem to mitigate the points he is trying to make in getting Calvinists to reconsider Arminianism. Perhaps this is because he is attempting to present a united front for evangelical Arminians.

As one example of this vagueness, Olson seems to minimize the distinctions between Arminius and later types of Arminianism, particularly Wesleyanism, in some places. Wesleyan Arminian theologians tend to take the view that either Christ's atonement or the drawing power of the Holy Spirit (or both—the reader is left confused over which it is) reverses inherited guilt (p. 33) or even releases all people from the condemnation for Adam's sin (p. 34). Olson seems to disagree with this, but he leaves too many loose ends for those Arminians who want to follow Arminius more stringently. Arminius simply believed that original sin, total depravity, and inherited guilt are the lot of all those born into the human race, and the Holy Spirit draws them individually by his grace. Thus, he would have disagreed with what Stephen M. Ashby has called the "scattergun" Wesleyan approach to grace. This view seems to aver that Christ's atonement automatically renders the will free, rather than the Holy Spirit's convicting power applied in his own time to individual sinners' hearts and minds. Olson would no doubt agree, but he would have done well to have made this clearer. Calvinist authors like Robert A. Peterson and Michael D. Williams, whose book *Why I Am Not an Arminian* Olson cites, are right to think that this view would mean that "in Arminian theology nobody is actually depraved! Depravity and bondage of the will is [*sic*] only hypothetical and not actual" (p. 154). Furthermore, one might wish that Olson had spent more time talking about how most Arminians after Arminius have differed with him on the imputation of Adam's sin to the race, a Reformed view that Arminius vigorously upheld.

Another place where one might wish for more clarity is Olson's discussion of prevenient grace as partially regenerative. He argues that classical Arminians see those under the sway of prevenient grace as partially but not completely regenerated. Thus, there is an "intermediate stage" between being completely unregenerate and fully regenerated, when the will is "freed to respond to the good news of redemption in Christ" (p. 164). Most Arminian theologians will be ill at ease with this concept, preferring to say that that saving faith logically precedes regeneration in the *ordo salutis*. Obvious related questions are, "Why is prevenient grace necessary if Christ's atonement reverses inherited guilt and releases people from the condemnation for Adam's sin? Would this not mitigate total depravity, rendering prevenient grace superfluous?"

As a second criticism, many Arminians, with Calvinists, will be uncomfortable with Olson's view that divine love is the "guiding vision" of Arminian theology (pp. 72–73). They, along with Arminius, would say that God's justice or holiness is the guiding vision in Arminianism as much as in Calvinism. This is the view of recent Arminians such as Forlines, Oden, and Picirilli.

Third, Olson is quite clear that classical Arminianism is incompatible with open theism and that he disagrees with the latter. Still, traditional Arminians will be concerned about Olson's footnote regarding open theism: "I consider open theism a legitimate evangelical and Arminian option even though I have not yet adopted it as my own perspective" (p. 198, n. 65).

For the fourth criticism, a few comments are in order regarding Olson's treatment of justification and atonement in Arminianism. Olson correctly notes that Wesleyans in the nineteenth century and afterward have disagreed with the imputation of the righteousness of Christ as the sole meritorious cause of the believer's justification and the concomitant penal-satisfaction doctrine of atonement. He states clearly that he regrets this development and prefers the contemporary Wesleyan theologian Thomas Oden's approach, which defends both these doctrines. The difficulty is that Olson seems to hope fondly that these doctrines are not at the core of Wesleyan Arminianism and that Wesleyans can choose between the mainstream Wesleyan view and Oden's view. This hope seems to root itself in one of the few profound misunderstandings in Olson's entire book: Wesley's doctrines of atonement and justification.

While Wesley uses imputational language in his discussion of justification, he falls far short of a Reformed understanding of the imputation of Christ's righteousness as the meritorious cause of the believer's justification before God. Furthermore, Wesley melds satisfaction and governmental motifs in his doctrine of atonement, arguing that Christ's death atones only for the believer's past sins. Thus, Olson's interpretation of Wesley's views on atonement and justification is flawed. This likely accounts for what seems to be his hope that Wesleyans can recover from these theological views by going back to Wesley himself.

One historiographical criticism may account for why Olson misunderstands Wesley: the only period of Arminian theology of which Olson does not take account is seventeenth-century English Arminianism. Yet this is the most crucial period for the development of subsequent (largely Wesleyan) Arminian thought. In other words, seventeenth-century English Arminianism, from the Arminian Puritan John Goodwin to thinkers such as Jeremy Taylor and Henry Hammond of the Anglican "Holy Living" school, provided the context for Wesley's development of his Arminianism. These are the people he read and studied and re-published, not Arminius. Understanding the historical context of Wesley's soteriological development would have helped Olson's treatment. Yet it makes clearer the divide that really does exist between Reformed theology (as well as Arminius) and Wesleyan theology on such issues as the actual total depravity (in the here-and-now) of sinners, the satisfaction view of atonement, and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ.

Finally, Olson fails to deal with sanctification and perseverance. Perhaps this is because he wants to bring together all non-Calvinists in a united voice against the determinism, unconditional predestination, and limited atonement of classical Calvinism (a noble aim and something that needs to be done). Dealing with these issues would have shown the consequences of many Arminians not believing in the imputation of Christ's righteousness and the satisfaction view of atonement: that is, a belief in the possibility of entire sanctification or sinless perfection, which dovetails with the notion that only past sins are forgiven and hence one can lose salvation by committing acts of sin and regain it by repenting. Olson fails to deal with these crucial doctrines, repeating the mistaken view that Arminius is not really sure if once-regenerate people can lose their

salvation. On the contrary, Arminius believed that one can “decline from salvation,” but only by “declining from belief.” Arminius reinforced this view again and again when he made statements that not all believers are elect—that the elect are only those regenerate individuals who *persevere* in belief until the end of life. Those who do not continue in belief have, by that unbelief, committed the sin against the Holy Spirit and cannot be renewed to salvation.

Despite these criticisms, if Olson’s purpose is to provide a united front for all non-Calvinists, help Calvinists get past their unfair caricatures of Arminian theology, and help breathe new life into the Calvinist-Arminian debate, then he has fulfilled his purpose grandly. Olson says that, while Calvinists and Arminians, like paedobaptists and adherents of believer’s baptism, will have a difficult time being members of the same congregations, they can do great things together for evangelical theology and the kingdom of God. One hopes that this view can be reflected in reality, and I believe that *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* can play a significant role in making it so.

J. Matthew Pinson

Free Will Baptist Bible College, Nashville, TN

The Baptist Way: Distinctives of a Baptist Church. By R. Stanton Norman. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005, vii + 212 pp., \$16.99 paper.

Within the church, ecclesiology is now a featured theological issue for the early twenty-first century. As the church wrestles with matters related to cultural and moral shifts, kingdom expansion, and the attempt to maintain a biblical response to the question, “What is the church?”, Norman’s work has arrived at just the right moment, especially for Southern Baptists in particular and Baptists in general. The author serves as director for the Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry and as Associate Professor of Theology at the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

This work is actually the second phase of Norman’s writings on Baptist distinctives. Following his publication of *More Than Just a Name: Preserving Our Baptist Identity* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), in which he examined historical writings on Baptist distinctives (e.g. contributions by E. Y. Mullins, H. Wheeler Robinson), *The Baptist Way* is “an attempt to identify and describe the distinctive traits of Baptists and thus is more prescriptive than descriptive in nature” (p. 9). The author is quick to note that this work has three limitations. First, because the focus of the work is on the theological tenets that have been historically regarded as Baptist characteristics, this book is not a “full-fledged ecclesiology” (p. 10). Second, though the work does contain numerous citations from scholarly sources, Norman confesses that he has written this work for the church and not the academy. He readily admits that his book is more of a primer than a detailed analysis. Finally, though this work will appeal to a wide audience, Norman notes that his primary audience are those individuals affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention.

The heart of this work consists of eight chapters, each addressing a clear distinctive of Baptist churches. Though Norman notes that other churches and denominations will find some or even significant agreement with many of these eight distinctives, he particularly attempts to address how each of these beliefs are uniquely Baptist. For him, “To misrepresent or modify the tenets that historically have distinguished the Baptists is to belittle the labor and sacrifice of those who have preceded us. In addition, to redefine the essence of our Baptist identity destroys the foundation of the association of our Baptist churches” (p. 9).