

AGAINST CALVINISM

ROGER E. OLSON



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Against Calvinism

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FOREWORD

Roger Olson's book *Against Calvinism* represents a contemporary presentation and defense of evangelical Arminianism that not only merits but requires careful and sympathetic reading by non-Arminians as well.

Roger is correct when he says that it is increasingly difficult to know what the label "Reformed" actually means today. Especially in America, where everyone likes to pick and choose the elements of one's personal creed, it sounds arrogant to tell other people they're not actually Reformed if they hold views that differ significantly from our confessions and catechisms. However, like other confessional traditions, Reformed teaching is determined by a common confession of believers in actual churches, not by the emphases of certain teachers or popular movements. The creeds and confessions don't speak *for* us; we speak as churches *through and with* them. Non-Calvinists should therefore evaluate these summaries and the doctrinal systems that are consistent with them rather than depend on idiosyncratic presentations.

When it comes to the doctrines of grace, our confessions reject hyper-Calvinism as well as Arminianism. Furthermore, covenant theology—including the baptism of covenant children and connectional church government led by ministers and elders—belong to our common confession along with the famous TULIP. God's glorious grace is as evident in our view of baptism and the Lord's Supper as means of grace rather than as merely human acts of commitment and remembering. For confessional Reformed and Presbyterian churches, regulating worship, ministry, outreach, and discipline on the basis of Scripture is as crucial to glorifying and enjoying God as is the doctrine of election or justification.

But this challenge cuts both ways. Although most Arminians do not subscribe to a common confession or collection of doctrinal standards, there are fairly standard representations at least of evangelical Arminian convictions. Roger Olson cuts through the caricatures, challenging misconceptions. If popular criticisms of Calvinism often trade on

misunderstanding or exaggerated representations, then Calvinists should also feel sympathy for Arminians when they are falsely accused, for example, of being “Pelagians” who deny grace in favor of works-righteousness.

Neither of us is immune to the temptation of false accusations, but Roger and I agree that there has often been more heat than light in contemporary Calvinist-Arminian debates. Neither of us succumbs to the illusion that both represent partial truths that can be balanced in a non-contradictory and harmonious blend. There is no such thing as “Calminianism.” Where these classic positions clash, Roger is a full-blooded Arminian and I am just as convinced that Scripture teaches what is rather infelicitously nicknamed “Calvinism.” Yet we also agree that nothing is gained—in fact, much is lost—by misrepresenting each other’s views. It’s one thing to say that someone holds a certain view that the person explicitly rejects and another thing to argue that the view leads logically to that conclusion. This is where we often go astray on both sides: confusing our interpretations of the consequences of each other’s positions with a charitable statement of each other’s stated views.

On the one hand, Roger thinks that *if* I followed Calvinism to its logical conclusions, I *should* concede that the Holocaust and natural disasters are caused directly by God and that those condemned on the last day could justly blame God rather than themselves. In his view, the serious error of hyper-Calvinism is actually the position that follows most logically from Calvinism itself. In my view, it is not at all surprising that some Arminians have abandoned the classical Christian consensus concerning some divine attributes and original sin and have adopted moralistic theories of Christ’s person and work as well as justification.

On the other hand, I think that *if* Roger followed Arminianism to its logical conclusion, he *should* go on to deny that salvation is entirely of God’s grace; that Arminianism leads inevitably to human-centered rather than God-centered convictions if followed consistently. In other words, we each believe that the other person is inconsistent. At the end of the day, Roger suspects that monergism (e.g., God alone working) undermines God’s goodness and love (as well as human agency), and I cannot see how synergism can be reconciled with *sola gratia* (grace alone). Yet Roger knows that Calvinism does not teach that God is the author of evil or that human beings have no responsibility. And it would be reckless for me to describe Arminianism as “Pelagian.”

Although I’d still take exception to some of Roger’s descriptions of

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Calvinism, I respect his commitment to engaging real differences rather than caricatures. For my part, I have learned much from Roger about the stated positions of leading Arminian theologians and appreciate his cautions and rebukes along the way.

I also share Roger's appraisal of the state of much in contemporary evangelicalism. Far beyond Arminianism, he argues, Pelagian assumptions seem astonishingly prevalent. He agrees that "Christless Christianity" is "simply pervasive in American church life." When Arminian friends like Tom Oden, William Willimon, and Roger Olson challenge this state of affairs while some professing Reformed preachers sell their birthright for a deadly soup of folk religion, our differences—though important—are put in proper perspective. I have no doubt that James Arminius or John Wesley would be as offended as Roger Olson at what often passes erroneously for "Arminianism" today in many circles.

I am grateful to Roger for the candor, passion, and informed argumentation that this book represents. At the end of the day, Roger and I share the most important agreement: namely, that the crucial questions involved in this or any other debate must be brought to the bar of Scripture. We both believe that Scripture is clear and sufficient, even if we are confused and weak. We are all pilgrims on the way, not yet those who have arrived at our glorious destination. Only by endeavoring more and more to talk to each other as coheirs with Christ instead of about each other and past each other as adversaries can we engage with serious disagreements—and with the hope that we may also be surprised by felicitous agreements along the way.

Michael Horton

PREFACE

I write this book reluctantly; polemics is not my preferred style of scholarship. That is to say, I would rather proclaim what I am *for* than denounce what I am *against*. I value the irenic approach to theology, and I hope to be against Calvinism as irenically as possible. I want to make clear “right up front” that I am not against Calvinists. Many of my relatives are Calvinists, and I love them dearly. Although my immediate family was not theologically of that persuasion, we knew our relatives were every bit as Christian as we were. I still believe that to be the case; a person can be as marvelously saved and as dedicated a Christian as possible and be a Calvinist. Let me repeat: I am not against Calvinists.

I am well aware, however, how difficult it can be to separate one’s sense of self-worth from one’s passionately held beliefs. I hope my Aunt Margaret is not rolling over in her grave as this book is published! And I pray my Calvinist cousins and friends are not offended. I try as far as possible to separate myself from my theology in order to accept criticism of the latter graciously without becoming personally defensive. I can only hope and pray that my Calvinist friends and family will do the same.

This hope for a fair hearing requires that I be scrupulously fair in my handling of Calvinism. That is my intention in this little book. I promise to do my best to represent Calvinism as Calvinists themselves would represent it—without distortion or caricature. I promise not to set it up as a straw man easily cut down and burned. My motto is “Before saying ‘I disagree’ be sure you can say ‘I understand.’” Another principle I try to follow is “Always represent the other viewpoint as its best adherents represent it.” That’s what I want done with my Arminianism, and I promise to do my best to do that with Calvinism.

I consider Calvinists my brothers and sisters in Christ, and it grieves me to have to write against their theology, which has a rich history and tradition. I confess that Calvinism, which I have studied from its primary sources (from Calvin through Jonathan Edwards to John Piper

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and numerous Reformed theologians between them), has many positive aspects. As many Calvinists love to point out, Calvinism (or Reformed theology) is not reducible to the doctrines popularly associated with it—total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints (TULIP). Some of those (especially the middle three) are the beliefs I will criticize in this book. Reformed thought in general, however, transcends them and is a larger whole of which they are only a part. How crucial they are to Reformed thought is much debated both by Calvinists themselves and by others.

My point here is simply to acknowledge that when I say I am “against Calvinism,” I am talking only about some points of Reformed theology and not all that it stands for. Because the Reformed tradition (perhaps as distinct from some of its objectionable doctrines) is Christ-centered, I consider it a part of the rich tapestry of classical Christianity. I can and do worship with Calvinists without cringing.

In case anyone needs more persuasion about this matter, I wish to point out that I have worked and worshiped alongside Calvinists in three Christian universities and several churches (Baptist and Presbyterian) over the past thirty years without difficulty. I have voted to hire Calvinist professors and to give them tenure. I have no qualms about Calvinists being genuine Christian believers and faithful Christian scholars and teachers. I know firsthand that they often are. I admit that I am offended by some Calvinists. They are those that consider their theology the only authentically Christian (or evangelical) one and who misrepresent theologies other than their own—especially Arminianism. Unfortunately, especially in recent years, I have found those traits all too common among the “new Calvinists.”

Some readers may question my credentials for writing about Calvinism. Let me reassure them. For a number of reasons I consider myself able to write fairly and accurately about a theology with which I disagree. I have taught historical theology in three Christian universities on both the undergraduate and graduate levels for almost thirty years. I studied Calvin and Jonathan Edwards and other Reformed theologians in seminary and graduate school and have always required my students to read them as part of their historical theology courses. I have also gone out of my way to invite “high Calvinists” (those committed to the entire TULIP schema) to speak to and interact with my classes. I have read John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* as well as many of

Jonathan Edwards' treatises carefully and with extreme attentiveness to being unprejudiced.

I am well acquainted with the new Calvinism's greatest contemporary proponent—John Piper—and have read several of his books. I have studied the writings of numerous other Calvinists, including Charles Hodge, Loraine Boettner, Louis Berkhof, Anthony Hoekema, R. C. Sproul, and Paul Helm. I have attended Calvinist theological conferences, contributed to Calvinist publications, engaged in extended dialogues with Reformed thinkers, and published a major historical theology textbook that extensively engages Reformed theology.

My acquaintance with Calvinism and Reformed theology is more than a passing one. It has become a passion—and not only with the intent to refute it. My study of Reformed sources has greatly enriched my own theological and spiritual life. I lay no claim to being an expert on Calvinism, but I will defend my ability to describe and evaluate it based on thorough study of its primary sources both ancient (sixteenth century) and contemporary. I hope and expect that even well-informed Calvinists will consider my descriptions here fair if not profound.

I wish to thank several people for their invaluable help in bringing this book to completion. Calvinists all, they aided it unwittingly simply by answering my questions and engaging with me in theological dialogue. There was no subterfuge on my part; the idea for this book arose later than most of those events. First of all I want to thank Michael Horton, editor of *Modern Reformation* and astute Calvinist scholar, who has graciously conversed (sometimes debated) with me about these matters over several years. I have learned much from him. I also want to thank my Calvinist friends of Redeemer Presbyterian Church of Waco, Texas, and of the local Reformed University Fellowship. They have graciously endured my (hopefully) light-hearted heckling when they spoke to my classes and always gently corrected my errors. Finally, I thank my many Calvinist students who took my classes in spite of my well-known qualms about Reformed theology and who often contributed to my understanding of their own faith tradition.

ONE

INTRODUCTION: WHY THIS BOOK NOW?

Soon after I began teaching theology, an eager young student followed me to my office and asked to speak privately with me. Without hesitation I invited him to sit down next to my desk and tell me what was on his mind. He leaned toward me and with earnest countenance said, “Professor Olson, I don’t think you’re a Christian.” Needless to say, I was somewhat taken aback.

“Why is that?” I asked.

“Because you’re not a Calvinist,” came his reply.

I asked him where he got the idea that only a Calvinist can be a Christian and he named a leading pastor and author whose church he attended. That pastor and author has since become world famous for his promotion of high Calvinism. I encouraged my student to go back and talk with his pastor about this matter, and I confirmed my confidence in being a Christian because of my faith in Jesus Christ. The student never did recant his charge that I was not a Christian. Years later, however, the pastor did deny that he ever taught that only Calvinists could be Christians.

That was the first salvo, as it were, of my long struggle with the “new Calvinism” celebrated by *Time* magazine (May 12, 2009) as one of the ten great ideas changing the world “right now.” My student accuser was one of the first of a movement later labeled the “young, restless, Reformed” generation of Christians. At the time, all I knew was that many of my best and brightest theological students were gravitating toward Calvinism under the influence of the pastor the student mentioned. Many on our faculty called them “Piper cubs.” But their tribe was destined to increase over the next few years.

THE YOUNG, RESTLESS, REFORMED PHENOMENON

In 2008 Christian journalist Collin Hansen published the first book-length exploration of a phenomenon most evangelical Christian leaders were talking about: *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist's Journey with the New Calvinists*.¹ The roots of this movement go deep into Protestant history. Calvinism, obviously, derives its name from Protestant Reformer John Calvin (1509–1564), whose 500th birthday was recently celebrated across North America with conferences and worship events dedicated to his memory. A more recent catalyst was New England Puritan preacher, theologian, and educator Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), who famously defended a version of Calvin's theology against what he saw as the creeping rationalism of deism in his day. One apparent aspect of the new Calvinist youth movement (not confined to youth) is the popularity of graphic T-shirts sporting the face of Jonathan Edwards and the motto "Jonathan Edwards is my homeboy."

A major contemporary catalyst of the movement is Minneapolis Baptist pastor, author, and popular speaker John Piper (b. 1946), whose numerous theological books are unusually reader-friendly and scholarly—a rare combination. His *Desiring God: Confessions of a Christian Hedonist*² is second only to the Bible in terms of inspiration and authority for many of the young, restless, Reformed Christians who eagerly devour Piper's books and sermons (readily available online). Piper speaks to enormous youth audiences at "Passion Conferences" and "One Day" events—sometimes attended by as many as forty thousand people under age twenty-six. What many of his followers do not know is something Piper makes no secret about—that he is simply repackaging the Calvinist theology of Jonathan Edwards for contemporary youth. (Edwards' writings can be daunting to read!)

For readers not sure what this "new Calvinism" (or perhaps even Calvinism itself) is all about, I will here present journalist Hansen's apt nutshell description. (A fuller account of Calvinism and Reformed theology will unfold throughout this book.) According to Hansen:

Calvinists—like their namesake, Reformation theologian John Calvin—stress that the initiative, sovereignty and power of God is the only sure hope for sinful, fickle, and morally weak human beings. Furthermore, they teach that the glory of God is the ultimate theme of preaching and the focus of worship.³

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Furthermore, Hansen explains, “Calvinism puts much stock in transcendence which draws out biblical themes such as God’s holiness, glory and majesty.”⁴ But if these were the only emphases of the new Calvinism (or old Calvinism, for that matter), few genuinely evangelical Protestant Christians would quibble with it. What evangelical Christian denies them? For Hansen and those he studies, however, it may be a matter of emphasis. According to him, the new Calvinists are reacting to what they regard as a general decline of theology and especially emphasis on God’s glory in contemporary American church life. His subjects, he says, are reacting against the “feel good theology” of many contemporary evangelical churches.⁵

Hansen refers to sociological studies of evangelical Christian young people that label their default view of God as “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism”⁶—a fancy term for a vision of God as a grandfatherly figure in heaven who demands perfection but always forgives anyway. This “God” is both a judge and a self-esteem coach. He cannot be pleased but he always forgives. This is a weak and thin vision of God by historical Christian standards, and many young Christians have figured that out and turned to the only alternative available to them—the strong and thick doctrines of Calvinism.

As a veteran teacher of Christian college and university students, I accept this critique of much contemporary evangelical church life and preaching. Far too many Christian youth grow up with almost no biblical or theological knowledge, thinking that God exists for their comfort and success in life even if he lays down a law nobody can really live up to. Like a kindly grandfather who dotes on his preteen progeny while decrying their bad grades, God may be disappointed in us but his whole goal is to make us fulfilled anyway.

That may be something of a caricature; few evangelical pastors or teachers would say that. But my experience resonates with what Hansen argues—that somehow or other most evangelical Christian young people manage to latch onto such a picture of God and fail entirely to plumb the riches of either the Bible or Christian theology to deepen their understanding of themselves and God. So many of the brightest and best become vaguely aware that something is missing in their spiritual upbringing, and when they hear the message of Calvinism, they latch onto it as their lifeboat from watery, culturally accommodated spirituality. Who can blame them? However, Calvinism isn’t the only alternative;

most of them know little to nothing about either its weaknesses or historically rich, biblically faithful, and more reasonable alternative theologies.

ROOTS OF THE NEW CALVINISM

By now readers may be wondering if this new Calvinism phenomenon is a youth fad that popped up out of nowhere. I've already strongly hinted that's not the case. But something new is afoot in it—the appeal of a very old theology to a very young audience. Calvinism and Reformed theology (the distinction and relationship of those terms will be unpacked in chapter 2) used to be considered largely a Christian tradition of mostly old people. Years ago even many evangelical Christians thought of Calvinism as almost confined to the Dutch enclaves of Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Pella, Iowa (and similar communities populated mainly by Dutch immigrants). Holland was, after all, a country where Calvinism especially caught on. Grand Rapids sports a number of influential Calvinist institutions such as Calvin College and Seminary, several Reformed-leaning publishers, and numerous large Calvinist churches. In Pella, Iowa, the scene of a well-attended, annual tulip festival, one can find First, Second, and Third Reformed churches within blocks of each other. And the town boasts the fine Central College—a Reformed liberal arts school.

All that is by no means meant to demean Reformed churches or Calvinist theology; they have a rich historical tradition and a major presence within American evangelical Christianity. Many leading evangelical leaders and thinkers have been Reformed since the days of the Puritans (who were English Calvinists). However, for several generations during the twentieth century Calvinism's vitality seemed to be waning. One can sense that in the defensive tones of lofty Calvinist theologian Loraine Boettner's (1901–1990) massive tome, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*.⁷ (Boettner's book was long treated as a magisterial source on high Calvinism by numerous Reformed Christians even though more popularly written books that espouse the same theology have largely eclipsed it.)

Boettner, who declared that “a full and complete exposition of the Christian system can be given only on the basis of the truth as set forth in the Calvinistic system”⁸ and that “our doctrine is the clearly revealed doctrine of the Scriptures,”⁹ decried the decline of strong Calvinist belief among evangelical Americans. He would be delighted to see its current renaissance. But he was right. In the 1940s through the 1980s Calvinism struggled to hold onto young people; the 1970s Jesus movement was any-

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thing but Calvinistic, and the charismatic and Third Wave movements were also, for the most part, non-Calvinist. These were the popular Christian movements of my youth; many of today's Christian teenagers and university students (and older people as well) are just as excited about their newfound faith in God's absolute sovereignty as Christian young people of my generation were about "getting high on Jesus."

However, Calvinism never disappeared or even went underground. It has always been a strong force in certain segments of American church life. And the contemporary young, restless, Reformed believers are largely unaware of Calvinists before John Piper (and his popularizing young preachers and writers), who paved the way for their rediscovery of that message and lifestyle. One was Boettner—little known but influential. Another was one of my own seminary professors, James Montgomery Boice (1938–2000), who pastored the strongly Calvinistic and evangelical Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. He was also a radio preacher, Bible commentator, Christian magazine publisher (*Eternity*), and author of numerous books mostly about Reformed theology. (Boice took a sabbatical from his church in the mid-1970s during which he taught a course at North American Baptist Seminary in Sioux Falls, South Dakota; I was one of his students during that minisemester course on preaching.) Most of the young, new Calvinists have never heard of Boice, but he was an amazingly prolific pastor-theologian-author-speaker who was, like Piper later, almost a force of nature in American evangelical life.

Another precursor and pioneer of the new Calvinism is Reformed theologian and apologist R. C. Sproul (b. 1939), founder of the influential Ligonier Ministries, which specializes in Christian apologetics. (Not all Calvinists are as fond of rational apologetics as Sproul, but there can be no doubt about his Calvinist credentials.) Sproul has taught at several leading conservative Calvinist seminaries and has appeared in person and via media at numerous Christian conferences and church events. Among his widely read expositions and defenses of Calvinist theology are *What Is Reformed Theology?*⁹ and *Chosen by God*.¹⁰ Hansen gives Sproul great credit for paving the way for the new Calvinism even though he is not nearly as well-known among the young, restless, Reformed as John Piper.

Another popular Calvinist writer and speaker who helped set the stage for the revival of Reformed theology among the youth is radio evangelist, pastor, and Bible commentator John F. MacArthur (b. 1939),

pastor of one of the original megachurches—Grace Community Church of Sun Valley, California. His radio program *Grace to You* has been in constant broadcast since 1977. In 1985 he founded his own Christian college and in 1986 his own seminary. He is the author of numerous books, all of which promote a Calvinist perspective on the Bible and theology. There can be no doubt that, like Boice and Sproul, MacArthur's influence "trickled down" to the new Calvinists who, by and large, have never heard of him.

One other precursor and pioneer must be given credit for the resurgence of Calvinism even though few of its youthful adherents know about him. That is prolific theological author and editor Michael Horton (b. 1964), who teaches theology at Westminster Theological Seminary's California campus in Escondido. He is the consummate organizer and has brought together many Calvinists (and others with similar views of God and salvation) in organizations such as the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, of which he was executive director. He is editor of the enormously successful *Modern Reformation* magazine and host of the *White Horse Inn* radio program—both serious but popular organs of Calvinist Bible interpretation, cultural critique, and theology. Many young Calvinists are discovering Horton and his works, such as *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church*¹¹—a prophetic critique of the thin "man-centered" theology and spirituality of much contemporary evangelical Christianity.

These notable Calvinists are surrounded by a host of others who could be named as influential promoters of evangelical Calvinism and preparers for the rise of the new Calvinism in the 1990s and first decade of the twenty-first century. But one more phenomenon must be mentioned to give even a cursory accounting of its background—the "Edwards renaissance" in both philosophy and theology during the last decades of the twentieth century. For decades and perhaps a century Jonathan Edwards was known to most people, including Christians, only as the cranky Puritan preacher of the sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." However, he was rediscovered as a profound philosopher and theologian as well as an astute observer of nature and amateur naturalist in the 1980s and beyond. Numerous books continue to fall from publishers' presses touting Edwards as "America's Theologian"—the title of one theological recommendation of Edwards and his thought.¹² During his student days at Fuller Theological Seminary, John Piper chose Edwards as his

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theological mentor and found in him the richest and fullest account of biblical Christianity in the modern world.¹³

None of this history includes those associated with the bastion of American Reformed thought and life—Calvin College and Seminary of Grand Rapids, Michigan. The extent to which those institutions paved the way for the new Calvinism is uncertain. Their influence is probably more remote. Moreover, some American Reformed thinkers associated with those institutions have expressed certain reservations about the new Calvinism that, interpreted in a certain way, could be taken as casting doubt on its already named precursors.

The December 1, 2009 issue of *Christian Century* magazine contained an article by Reformed theologian Todd Billings of Western Theological Seminary of Holland, Michigan (like Calvin College and Seminary, a center of the older Dutch-rooted Reformed tradition). In his article “Calvin’s Comeback? The Irresistible Reformer,” Billings decried the new Calvinism’s one-sided focus on some of Reformed theology’s more exotic doctrines and especially the TULIP scheme of total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace and perseverance of the saints. He averred that the new Calvinists use TULIP as a litmus test by which one’s authenticity as Reformed is tested. In response he claims that “TULIP does not provide an adequate or even accurate distillation of Reformed theology”¹⁴ and criticizes the new Calvinists for placing at the center what is peripheral to the tradition.

For Billings and for many other “churchly Calvinists” (a term for those associated with the older Dutch and Scottish Reformed and Presbyterian liturgical and sacramental denominations) the new Calvinists are missing the boat almost entirely. “Reformed” designates not an emphasis on predestination and certainly not on reprobation (predestination of some persons to hell)—what Calvin famously called the “horrible decree [of God]”—but on a certain catholic (with a small “c,” meaning universal) and sacramental vision of Christianity that does emphasize God’s sovereignty but does not play it out in celebration of God’s absolute control of the minutest events including evil.

Billings’ objection will no doubt be debated by other self-proclaimed Reformed Christians. I only mention it here because it well expresses a murmur against the new Calvinism one can hear emanating from the older Reformed institutions of American and European Christianity that have to some extent downplayed the TULIP system of Reformed

theology. I will explore this and other aspects of Reformed and Calvinist diversity in the next two chapters.

THE NEED FOR A RESPONSE NOW

This introduction is entitled “Why This Book Now?” Indeed, why a book now *Against Calvinism*? Isn’t the rise of serious theological reflection and commitment among young Christians a good thing? Why pour cold water on the revival fires of spirituality among the young? I take that objection seriously to heart.

However, I believe the time has come for someone to point out the flaws and weaknesses in this particular type of Calvinism—the type widely embraced and promoted by leaders and followers of the young, restless, Reformed movement. But the promotion of what I consider a flawed system comes not only from them. The same theology of God’s absolute sovereignty can be found in Calvin (perhaps without the aspect of limited atonement), Edwards (in an extreme way as I will explain), Boettner, Boice, Sproul, and numerous other popularizers of Calvinism. So what’s wrong with believing in and celebrating God’s sovereignty? Absolutely nothing! But, it can be and often is taken too far—making God the author of sin and evil—which is something few Calvinists admit to but which follows from what they teach as a “good and necessary consequence” (a somewhat confusing technical phrase often used by Calvinists themselves to point out the dreaded effects they see in non-Calvinist theologies).

One can go to the Internet phenomenon called YouTube and watch numerous video clips by adherents of the new Calvinism declaring shocking beliefs about God’s sovereignty, including that God causes all calamities and horrors “for his glory.” John Piper famously published a sermon a few days after the Twin Towers terrorist events of September 11, 2001, declaring that God did not merely permit them but caused them.¹⁵ He has since published other statements similarly attributing natural disasters and horrific calamities to God. Piper is not alone; many of the new Calvinists and their mentors are aggressively asserting that this view of God is the only biblical and reasonable one.

Contemporary popular Calvinism may be by-and-large consistent with Calvin and many of his followers (although I think it is even more shaped by his successor as chief pastor of Geneva, Theodore Beza [1519–1605] and his followers), but it is not the only version of Reformed

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theology and Calvinism. I will explain that further in the next chapter. For now, suffice it to say that even many Reformed Christians are shocked and appalled at the implications of the new Calvinism's extreme emphasis on God's sovereignty.

Of course, the definition of "Reformed" depends largely on the church or thinker claiming the label. In fact, the worldwide organization called the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) includes many denominations and churches that in no way embrace the whole TULIP system. (In fact, shockingly to some Calvinists, the WCRC includes some Arminian churches that believe in free will and deny God's meticulous, providential control of all events!) I consider myself Reformed in its broadest sense—non-Lutheran in the broad Protestant stream extending from the Swiss Reformation led originally by Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531).

I believe someone needs finally to stand up and in love firmly say "No!" to egregious statements about God's sovereignty often made by Calvinists. Taken to their logical conclusion, that even hell and all who will suffer there eternally are foreordained by God, God is thereby rendered morally ambiguous at best and a moral monster at worst. I have gone so far as to say that this kind of Calvinism, which attributes everything to God's will and control, makes it difficult (at least for me) to see the difference between God and the devil. Some of my Calvinist friends have expressed offense at that, but I continue to believe it is a valid question worth pursuing. What I mean is that *if I were* a Calvinist and believed what these people teach, I would have difficulty telling the difference between God and Satan. I will unpack that in more detail throughout this book.

Some Calvinists accuse non-Calvinists of rejecting their theology of God's sovereignty because of a latent humanistic love for free will. A Calvinist colleague, who has since become a well-known author of Reformed books, once asked me seriously if I had considered whether my belief in free will was evidence of unrecognized humanism in my thinking. Needless to say, I rejected that suggestion. The fact is that I, like most non-Calvinist evangelical Christians, embrace free will for two reasons (beyond that we believe it is everywhere assumed in the Bible): it is necessary to preserve human responsibility for sin and evil, and it is necessary to preserve God from being responsible for sin and evil. I can honestly say (as most non-Calvinist evangelicals do) that I don't give a flip about free will except for those reasons.

I have no interest in man-centered theology; I am intensely interested in worshiping a God who is truly good and above reproach for the Holocaust and all other evils too numerous to mention. Too many Calvinist authors misrepresent non-Calvinist theologies as if they are all man-centered, humanistic, less-than-God-honoring, and even unbiblical without ever acknowledging the problems in their own theology. Too many young, impressionable followers have not yet figured out what those problems are.¹⁶ I write this to help them.

So, the time has come for an irenic and loving but firm “No!” to the extreme version of Calvinism being promoted by leaders of the young, restless, Reformed generation and too often uncritically being embraced by their followers. I will demonstrate that the “No!” can be said from within Reformed theology itself and has been said by some leading Reformed theologians and biblical scholars. I will show that this extreme Calvinism, which with adherent Hansen I label “radical,”¹⁷ is inherently flawed biblically, logically, and in terms of the wider Christian tradition.

I will put all my cards on the table here and confess that I operate with four criteria of theological truth: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience (the so-called Wesleyan Quadrilateral). *Scripture* is the primary source and norm of theology. *Tradition* is theology’s “normed norm”—a respected guidance mechanism. *Reason* is a critical tool for interpreting Scripture and weeding out absolutely incredible theological claims that contradict each other or lead to consequences that are untenable in the light of what else is believed. *Experience* is the inevitable crucible in which theology is done, but though it is a criterion for evaluation, it is not an authority, so I will hardly appeal to it at all. What I do believe about experience is that no theology is created or embraced in a vacuum; experience always colors what we believe and how we believe it.

I will argue throughout this book that high Calvinism is not the only or the best way of interpreting Scripture. It is one possible interpretation of isolated texts, but in light of the whole witness of Scripture it is not viable. Furthermore, I will argue that high Calvinism stands in tension with the ancient faith of the Christian church and much of the heritage of evangelical faith. Some of its crucial tenets cannot be found before the church father Augustine in the fifth century, and others cannot be found before a heretic named Gottschalk (d. circa 867) or from him until Calvin’s successor, Theodore Beza.

Introduction: Why This Book Now?

Finally, I will argue that high Calvinism falls into contradictions; it cannot be made intelligible—and Christianity should be intelligible. By “intelligible” I do not mean philosophically rational; I mean capable of being understood. A sheer contradiction is a sure sign of error; even most Calvinists agree about that. The greatest contradiction is that God is confessed as perfectly good while at the same time described as the author of sin and evil. I do not say that all Calvinists admit that their theology makes God the author of sin and evil; many deny that. But I will show that it is a “good and necessary consequence” of what else they say about God.

Someone has said that no theology is worth believing that cannot be preached standing in front of the gates of Auschwitz. I, for one, could not stand at those gates and preach a version of God’s sovereignty that makes the extermination of six million Jews, including many children, a part of the will and plan of God such that God foreordained and rendered it certain.¹⁸ I want young Calvinists (and others) to know and at least come to terms with the inevitable and unavoidable consequences of what this radical form of Reformed theology teaches. And I want to give their friends and relatives and spiritual mentors ammunition to use in undermining their sometimes overconfidence in the solidity of their belief system.