

F. Leroy Forlines, *Classical Arminianism*. Nashville: Randall House, 2011. 379 pages ISBN: 9780892656073

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In 2001 Forlines wrote *The Quest for Truth*, which was a readable systematic theology written at a popular level. Classical Arminianism has omitted discussion on such topics as revelation, inspiration, the nature and attributes of God, the Trinity, creation, and the Incarnation to focus on Calvinistic-Arminian controversy.

A graduate of Free Will Baptist Bible College, Jim Jones studied under Forlines while there from 1977-1981. "Brother Forlines taught at Free Baptist Bible College for 39 years. Although officially retired, he still teaches an occasional course. I had him for Systematic Theology and Bible Ethics and have the upmost respect for him as both a man and a theologian."

Forlines articulates what is termed "Classical Arminianism" or "Reformed Arminianism." Classical Arminians agree with Calvinism on the sinful nature of humanity and the way God accomplished redemption through Christ, but disagree with Calvinism on how redemption is applied.

This label also distinguishes them from Wesleyan-Arminianism. While the agenda of this magazine is to articulate and defend classic Wesleyan Arminian theology, before we raise our hackles, let us identify our common ground.

- We agree that the final authority of theology is the inerrant Scriptures.
- We agree that denying God's foreknowledge as a means of solving the problem of Calvinism only results in larger problems since the Scriptures clearly teach God's foreknowledge.
- We agree on total depravity, meaning that the corruption of sin has extended to man's entire being and that, as a result, man can do nothing meritorious saving favor with God.
- We agree that mankind is unable to seek God on its own. Thus, the real debate with Calvinism is not over "free will," but over the practical application of God's sovereignty.
- We agree that God's election to salvation is conditional with that condition being faith in the atonement of Christ.
- We agree on the universal atonement of Christ.
- We agree that the preliminary grace of God may be resisted.
- We agree that salvation may be forfeited.

Therefore, we in the Wesleyan-Arminian camp appreciate the contribution of Forlines in *Classical Arminianism* to the cause of truth. His chapters on a biblical theology of election are very helpful.

However, we cannot avoid the areas of tension between classical and Wesleyan Arminianism.

- Classical Arminianists, such as Forlines, Picirilli, Pinson, and Ashby are committed to a defense of the position that the atonement is penal satisfaction. Jones comments, "They falsely equate the governmental view of the atonement with all Wesleyan theology and reject it as inadequate, as do I. However, the early Methodists (and many Wesleyans today) also held to a penal satisfaction view as Reasoner documents in his Romans commentary, pp. 141-154. Thus, a proper understanding of the nature of the atonement is actually more of a tension *within* Wesleyan-Arminianism rather than between the Wesleyan and the Classical positions."
- Forlines contends that election, as taught in Romans 9, is individual and not corporate. Historical Methodism has been more open to the interpretation that the election in Romans 9 was corporate. This question needs to be addressed with more clarity. However, the greater issue — that election is conditional — should unite us. There is no need to divide over the secondary issue of whether conditional election is individual or corporate.
- Classical Arminianism rejects the doctrine of entire sanctification. While Wesleyan-Arminianism advocates this doctrine, we have not always been clear or Scriptural in our proclamation of the doctrine. This magazine has consistently challenged those under the Wesleyan-Arminian banner to return to the teaching of early Methodism. If entire sanctification is reduced to the later teachings of Charles Finney or Phoebe Palmer, then many who affirm the historic Methodist understanding of Christian perfection would reject the distortion along with classical Arminians. It remains to be seen whether Classical Arminians would embrace or reject a biblical and truly Wesleyan doctrine of entire sanctification. The Free Will Baptist Treatise of 1842 taught that one should seek entire sanctification in this life, now!

Thus far the tensions between the two brands of Arminianism may be better understood as tensions *within* the Wesleyan-Arminian camp. However, review of Forlines' position does reveal at least two substantive differences.

- Classical Arminianism refers to justification as the imputation of Christ's active and passive obedience. The active obedience of Christ refers to his sinless life, while the passive obedience of Christ refers to his atoning death. The Wesleyan understanding is that *faith* is imputed for righteousness. Our concern is that an emphasis on the imputation of both active and passive righteousness of Christ, without imparted righteousness, leads to antinomianism. Wesley denied that the righteousness of Christ is imputed in lieu of any subsequent obedience.

Other early Methodists also weighed in. Joseph Sutcliffe concluded that if the active and passive righteousness of Christ is imputed to us, we do not need the sanctifying grace of the Holy Spirit to make us righteous. John Fletcher explained that we are made righteous, not by speculative imputation of the works of Christ, but by being made partakers of the divine nature, begotten of God, and clothed with righteousness and true holiness. Richard Watson concluded that imputation is never used in scripture "in the sense of accounting the actions of one person to have been performed by another." Instead, the imputation of righteousness is the non-imputation, or pardon, of sin.

As late as 1891, J.J. Butler and Ransom Dunn were teaching that Free Will Baptists did not believe in active imputed righteousness. That teaching not enter the denomination until 1940 with the FWB Bible College in Nashville. Even now, there are those in Oklahoma who want to introduce a motion picture at their State Association stating that active imputed righteousness is not a prescribed FWB doctrine.

- Classical Arminianism does accept the possibility of apostasy, but in contrast to the Wesleyan-Arminian interpretation of apostasy, they do not see it as a once-for-all, irremediable event, a complete shipwreck of saving faith. Matthew Pinson asserts that sin does not cause a loss of salvation in a believer. A. B. Brown said that apostasy is committed by willful unbelief, not by sin. But unbelief is sin! According to Stephen Ashby, a believer who dies in a state of unconfessed sin would not lose his salvation.

Yet there is an inherent danger in teaching that we can sin and not lose our salvation. How else would we lose it? According to Galatians 5:19-21, the works of the flesh listed can rob the believer of the kingdom of God. Thus, we must walk in the Spirit.

Classical Calvinists hold that no saint will die in sin. Thus, they have no assurance of their election unless they persevere. The popular once saved always saved position teaches that one can have both assurance and security — even if the believer dies in his sin.

The early Methodists took sin and holy living seriously. Adam Clarke said, "Apostasy begins in the closet: no man ever backslid from the life-giving power of Christianity who continued constant and fervent, especially in private prayer."

However, this is mis-characterized by Ashby as having to get saved all over again each time we commit sin. Ashby declares that we all sin and the implication is that we must do something much worse in order to lose our salvation. According to Ashby we must cease believing. Forlines declares that Christianity is not lost every time a believer sins. But the real question is whether an unrepentant believer can maintain faith while living in a state of continued disobedience and sin.

Arminius declared that if David had died after his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah, he would have been condemned to death [Works, 2:725]. "True believers are capable by their own fault of falling into flagrant crimes and atrocious wickedness, to persevere and die in them and therefore finally to fall away and perish" [The Five Points of the Remonstrants, "Article 5, Proposition 4].

But the Remonstrants also taught that one can be renewed should he fall away. "Yet though true believers sometimes fall into grievous sins, and so destroy the conscience, we do not believe that they immediately fall away from all hope of repentance; but we acknowledge this to be an event impossible to occur, that God, according to the multitude of His mercies may again call them by His grace to repentance" [Proposition 5].

Southern Methodist theologian, Thomas Summers, defended the thesis that saints may and do fall from grace — some partly but not totally or finally, some totally but not finally, and others both totally and finally. While some would attempt to make a distinction between backsliding and apostasy, Forlines thinks that the term "backsliding" creates confusion and does not like to use the term. While his view of apostasy is climatic and irreversible yet we must also understand that the journey to apostasy is usually progressive. Apostasy is the culmination of backsliding and that backsliding is the result of sin.

There is not complete unanimity within the Wesleyan-Arminian camp on this question and perhaps further dialog would reveal less divergence between Wesleyan and Classical Arminianism. However, it seems that the classical position starts by assuming too much of a Calvinistic definition of sin and salvation. Wesley held that the standard of the new birth was victory over sin.

In their defense, they are guarding against legalism. Jones added, "Forlines helped me by showing that my assurance of salvation comes not from my performance, but through believing and trusting in the work that Jesus did for me. Up to this point in my life I had tried to trust my performance as a condition for my salvation. This came from being raised in an environment where one could never be sure he or she was saved. And Wesley's teaching also helped me to understand, that the direct witness of the Holy Spirit of my acceptance by God is the birthright of every believer."

But we must also guard against lawlessness, while at the same time trying to avoid the opposite ditch of legalism. Sin is the road to apostasy and we cannot continue to practice sin without losing faith in Christ.

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