

BOOK REVIEW

of

Robert A. Peterson and Michael D. Williams,
Why I Am Not An Arminian,
InterVarsity Press, 2004.

This book is in the Evangel Library,
and this review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

Although John Calvin (1509–1564) and Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609) were not quite contemporary, the differences in their theological systems have divided Protestant Christianity since near the beginning of the Reformation. Perhaps there is no greater difference among evangelical Christians today, as well as hundreds of years ago, than the difference between these two systems of doctrine. The differences are not small: they involve fundamental differences in understanding about the very basics of salvation, the nature of God, freedom of the will, etc. We should be grateful to InterVarsity Press for inviting competent authors to present both sides. Peterson and Williams have presented the Calvinist point of view in the current book under review, and Jerry L. Walls and Joseph R. Dongell, in their companion book titled *Why I Am Not A Calvinist*, InterVarsity Press, 2004, present the Arminian point of view. It is interesting to note that both books are primarily about Calvinism, and neither has a strong case to be made, positive or negative, about Arminianism. Peterson and Williams present a positive case for Calvinism, and write in the Introduction to their book that they would have preferred the title of *Why I Am A Calvinist*, but that didn't fit the plan of the publishers. Walls and Dongell present what they believe to be a negative case for Calvinism. However, a negative case for Calvinism can be taken as a positive case for Arminianism. This is the position taken by Peterson and Williams in the opening lines of their Introduction: "J.I. Packer once observed that the very terms *Calvinism* and *Arminianism* represent an opposition: 'The words are defined in terms of the antithesis, and the point is pressed that no Christian can avoid being on one side or the other.' This suggests that the two ideologies — whatever each might stand for in its own right — are to be considered mutually exclusive positions. An Arminian is by definition not a Calvinist, and a Calvinist could not also be an Arminian. Whatever one stands for, the other represents its opposing perspective and thus its denial." With those comments, one might get the idea that Peterson and Williams present a harsh and judgmental case for Calvinism, but such is not the situation. They do insist that aspects of Arminianism are troubling both Biblically and theologically, but they do so in a gracefully irenic manner.

Robert Peterson and Michael Williams both teach systematic theology at Covenant Theological Seminary, and are known to us at Evangel in other ways as well. Robert Peterson was guest speaker at Evangel on March 28th, 2004, speaking at both morning worship services and during the adult Sunday School as well. Michael Williams was the speaker at a conference held by our sister congregation in Wichita, Heartland Community Church, July 16th through the 18th, 2004, and some from Evangel attended.

Why I Am Not An Arminian has nine chapters. Chapter 1 is the Introduction. Chapter 2 is titled Augustine and Pelagius. Chapter 3 is Predestination: Conditional or Unconditional? Chapter 4 is Perseverance: Uncertain or Certain? Chapter 5 is Arminius and the Synod of Dort. Chapter 6 is Freedom: Incompatibilist or Compatibilist? Chapter 7 is Inability: Hypothetical or Actual? Chapter 8 is Grace: Resistible or Irresistible? And Chapter 9 is Atonement: Governmental or Substitutionary?

From the chapter titles it can be seen that, while the authors reach back to early church history to set the stage by presenting the dispute between Augustine and Pelagius in Chapter 2, most of the issues presented look almost like a list of the five points of Calvinism, although not in the TULIP order. The authors are careful to point out that "the five points do not sufficiently define Calvinism, and certainly do not say all there is to be said about the Reformed faith." It is interesting to note that (1) the five points of Calvinism are credited as having first appeared in print in the Canons of Dort, a document published in 1619, some 55 years after Calvin's death, and (2) the five points of Calvinism were published in reaction to, point by point, the five points of Arminianism published as the Arminian articles in 1610. It is a strange bit of history that one seldom, if ever, hears about the five points of Arminianism, but one would think that the five points of Calvinism states all there is to say about Calvinism, while in fact it is only a beginning of the content of Calvinism.

In general, what one sees throughout this book by Peterson and Williams is a consistent attempt to present what the Scriptures teach on each of the topics covered, and to argue that Calvinism embraces these teachings whereas Arminianism does not. Very many Scripture passages are presented, with the attempt being made to give a consistent interpretation that honors the Bible as God's Word in a way that yields consistent theology. It is noteworthy that the book by Walls and Dongell does not do this. If you have not read both of these books, you could easily take my comment as biased, but the presentation method of Walls and Dongell is quite different from that of Peterson and Williams. I can't help but wonder if each saw the other's manuscript before going to press; if they had, would that have resulted in some significant changes? The approach of the two books is very different.

The primary question raised in the pages of *Why I Am Not An Arminian* is, how much of the work of salvation was and is of God, and how much is up to you? Were you predestined before the foundation of the world to be in Him, or is that conditional upon your response? Are you assured that you will persevere unto the end, or is that questionable? And if you are assured, what is that confidence based upon? Jesus said "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand." Are you in His hand? If so, how did you get there? How much of it was your doing? These are questions that have profound implications about your sense of assurance, your response to the Gospel, and your practical Christian living. This book is highly recommended.