

BOOK REVIEW

of

Jerry L. Walls and Joseph R. Dongell,
Why I Am Not A Calvinist,
InterVarsity Press, 2004.

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

This book by Walls and Dongell is a companion volume to the book by Robert Peterson and Michael Williams, *Why I Am Not An Arminian*, InterVarsity Press, 2004, reviewed in the January, 2005 issue of *Evangel News*. Although I do not agree with the position of Walls and Dongell, and I assume that most readers of this review would not either, I think it is instructive to give attention to their arguments. I am not familiar with either Walls or Dongell, or any Arminian author for that matter, so it is difficult for me to write as to their qualifications, but I assume that they are well qualified to present the Arminian view for several reasons. First, they were selected by InterVarsity Press to represent the Arminian viewpoint. Second, they are both professors at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky, an institution known for its Arminian stance; Walls is professor of the philosophy of religion, and Dongell is professor of biblical studies. Third, the book is endorsed (not necessarily agreed with) by three other faculty at seminaries and Christian schools: Roger E. Olson, professor of theology at George W. Truett Theological Seminary, James F. Sennett, professor of philosophy and interdisciplinary studies at Lincoln Christian College and Seminary, and by Kelly James Clark, professor of philosophy at Calvin College. It is difficult for me to say just how well the Arminian position is put forth by Walls and Dongell, but at least Roger E. Olson apparently thinks they have done outstandingly well, as he writes "The biblical, theological and rational case against Calvinism has never been stated more clearly, concisely, irenically or convincingly." And even Kelly James Clark at Calvin College writes that "Walls and Dongell offer a clear and forceful biblical and philosophical case for Arminianism." If this book is indeed about as good of a case as can be made for the Arminian position, we can take great comfort in knowing that it is false! I will attempt to provide some justification for that conclusion in my comments below.

Why I Am Not A Calvinist has an Introduction, six chapters, and a Conclusion. Chapter 1 is titled Approaching the Bible. Chapter 2 is Engaging the Bible. Chapter 3 is Calvinism and the Nature of Human Freedom. Chapter 4 is Calvinism and Divine Sovereignty. Chapter 5 is Calvinism and Consistency. And Chapter 6 is Calvinism and the Christian Life.

Since many evangelical Christians attend congregations where the leadership holds an Arminian point of view, it may be thought by some that Calvinism and Arminianism are equally Biblical and therefore, equally valid. The argument is that since it is very difficult to understand these issues, either position is OK. I do not think that such is the case. I started to write this paragraph by writing that many evangelical Christians are of the Arminian persuasion, but this implies that the position, or persuasion, has been carefully thought out, and that is the point: most probably haven't carefully thought it out. It does not seem to me that both positions are equally Biblical, but rather that the Calvinist position has always been presented with a sincere effort to be true to the Scriptures, whereas the Arminian point of view seems to start not from the Word but rather from somewhere else. The book by Walls and Dongell does just that. Their Chapter 1, Approaching the Bible, presents some 23 pages attempting to convince us that most of us are incapable of reading the Bible and understanding it without great assistance from religious professionals such as themselves. The first few pages attempt to undermine the authority of the Bible, at least in my opinion, reminding us that holding to Biblical inerrancy is not unique to evangelicals, but embraced by cults as well. They write, "How much disagreement can we experience before we must admit that the Bible, like uninterpreted glossolalia, is a 'trumpet [that] does not sound a clear call.'" They do their best to convince us that we need them to be our interpreters. Do they make this case by careful Biblical arguments. No, they do not. They do so by arguing from what they consider to be common sense. Such as many "consider it axiomatic that human beings make decisions (even eternal ones) by free will, and that such choices have not been caused by any force outside themselves and that other real choices could have been made." Well, if it is axiomatic that eternal decisions are made without any influences from the Holy Spirit by our own free will, whatever that is (free will) they don't say, then I guess a careful study of what the Bible teaches would be superfluous. This is the main criticism that I have of this book. The starting point is the wisdom of man, not what the Bible teaches. The contrast with the approach of Petersen and Williams, and reformed writers in general, is huge! Is our goal to understand what the Scriptures teach, or read back into the Bible as best we can what we think we have learned elsewhere?

In Chapter 2, Engaging the Bible, one might hope for some true Biblical study, but it is only done in a mocking fashion. Can you detect the mockery in the following quote: "The Calvinist view of divine invasion is simple. God invades the camp, carries the prisoner out, strips the prisoner of her shackles and blinders, and injects 'faith' into the prisoner's veins. The former prisoner, having already been rescued from prison and positioned outside its walls, now trusts the Deliverer because of the potency of the administered faith serum." This passes for "engaging the Bible."

The remainder of the book differs with Calvinism philosophically. Some of the criticisms are helpful, for example where the authors argue in Chapter 5 that the only consistent Calvinism is the one that holds "that God not only knows the future completely but also controls it in every detail because he has determined everything that will ever happen." We may quibble with the hard determinism implied, but basically I think that that is the position of Calvinism and the Bible.

In the Conclusion, Walls and Dongell state that "Arminianism and Calvinism represent starkly opposing theological visions, at the heart of which are profoundly differing views of God." I agree. They go on to say "We believe the heart of the matter is how we understand the character of God." Where should we turn to learn about the character of God? Surely the only way is by a careful study of His Word. Comparing these two books (this one and the one by Peterson & Williams), it should be clear to all unbiased readers who has done the careful study of the Bible, and who hasn't. That is the root of the problem. Further on in the Conclusion, Walls and Dongell write that "True human love requires libertarian freedom." Here is another place where they have gone astray. By being committed *a priori* to "libertarian freedom" they have blinded themselves to a proper understanding of Biblical teaching. And as to their "libertarian freedom" philosophy, have they not read Jonathan Edwards' book on freedom of the will, written over 250 years ago and still in print, by one widely recognized for his scholarly achievements. Do Walls and Dongell even know what they are talking about when they speak of "libertarian freedom"? Not according to Edwards.

Walls and Dongell can be faulted on two levels. One is philosophically. But the other is of much greater importance, and that is Biblically. What does the Bible teach? They have not adequately inquired.