

A Revitalized Arminianism—New Challenges for Reformed Christians

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I have already gone on record in this publication regarding the many new and wonderful opportunities that we as Reformed Christians have to spread Reformed theology throughout North America. I remain convinced that this is a *Kairos* moment of sorts for Reformed Christians.

But it is this same renewed interest in Reformed theology which has prompted an equally renewed and vigorous response. This response comes not only from those who see Reformed theology as a threat to the increasingly fragile evangelical coalition. It also comes from those who see Reformed theological distinctives as something quite detrimental to the well-being of the kingdom of God. Sad to say, the same doctrines of grace which we Reformed Christians regard as precious jewels, are seen by many of our contemporaries as theological millstones which must be rejected if Christians are going to speak in meaningful ways to our contemporary world.

This renewed attack upon Reformed doctrines should not surprise us, though the level of invective and degree of sophistication associated with some of it just might. But this recent round of attacks upon Reformed distinctives ought to be seen as a blessing in disguise. For criticism of our faith should—in the long run—only serve to encourage us to be all the more diligent in articulating and defending that which we as Reformed Christians believe about God, ourselves and the world around us. It should also be noted that much of this recent criticism, despite assertions to the contrary, does not contain anything new. In every case, these supposedly formidable new arguments raised against Reformed doctrines fail to deliver the promised knock-out punch. In fact, in many cases, these new challenges actually end up exposing the theological bankruptcy of those who would attack Reformed distinctives, since it is obvious that they seek to replace them with something quite inferior.

As I evaluate the current situation, the negative response to the recent advance of Reformed theology takes three basic forms. The first line of response is the lament that for far too long Reformed thinking has dominated the evangelical establishment. Several noted theologians now contend that the time has come to make the theological tenor of evangelicalism much more inclusive and less tradition bound. It is the distinctives of Reformed theology—they argue—which supposedly hinders greater ecumenicity and evangelistic outreach. The second line of response amounts to a renewed attack upon the doctrines of grace, as seen in the recent book by Norman Geisler, *Chosen But Free*, (Bethany House Publishers, 1999). The third line of attack is surely the most serious. This is the growing insistence, on the part of some, for evangelicals to revise the classical doctrine of God. This is known as the “openness of God” theology, in which it is argued that the classical doctrines of divine immutability and omniscience must be redefined so as to make room for a “god” who takes risks about the future, suffers with his creatures, and who learns from his mistakes. No longer limited to the fringe of evangelicalism, this movement has made significant advances of late, even into so-called Reformed circles. After describing each of these challenges, I will conclude with some suggestions about how we as Reformed Christians should respond to these pressing challenges.

The first line of this reinvigorated response to Reformed theology is that associated with the perception of an undue influence that Reformed theology supposedly has upon the evangelical movement in general. The evangelical movement is often identified as that coalition established by young evangelical scholars in the 1950's, such as Carl F. H. Henry and Harold Lindell, who were associated with Billy Graham. This rise of this movement coincides with the founding of the magazine, *Christianity Today* and Fuller Theological Seminary. Though it has changed greatly in the decades to follow, the evangelical movement

lives on into the present through a number of institutions and para-church organizations, though its relative influence upon American Christianity and culture are matters of on-going debate. Though there were significant contributions to the evangelical movement by a number of Reformed theologians over the years, the movement can hardly be characterized as “Reformed” even if there have been some Reformed influences upon it. While this particular lament constitutes the least serious of the recent challenges to Reformed theology, the lament is itself illustrative of how historic Reformed distinctives are now perceived by much of evangelicalism.

Perhaps the leading spokesmen for this appeal for evangelicals to jettison Reformed distinctives is Arminian theologian Roger Olson, formerly professor of theology at Bethel College, and now teaching at Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University in Houston, Texas.

In a May 1995 article in *The Christian Century*, Olson sets forth an agenda he describes as a call for the formation of a “postconservative evangelicalism.” Though this was a provocative move at the time, many of the issues Olson raised five years ago now drive much of current evangelical concern.

According to Dr. Olson, postconservative evangelicals can be identified by four things they affirm [an emphasis upon the new birth, reliance upon the Bible as the ultimate religious norm, a desire to share their faith with others, and an emphasis upon Christ’s atoning work], as well as that which they will not defend, “historic orthodoxy—especially Reformed scholasticism” (p. 480). Historic Reformed orthodoxy is, of course, that theology associated with the Reformed confessions, especially the Canons of Dort and the Westminster Standards, with Reformed theologians like Charles Hodge, B. B. Warfield and Louis Berkhof, and with Reformed institutions like Princeton Theological Seminary of the nineteenth century, as well as the two Westminsters (Philadelphia and California) in the twentieth.

Olson points out that postconservative evangelicals are “concerned with theology’s domination by white males and Eurocentrism.” They also seek to consider contributions by women, people of color and Third World Christians (pp. 480-481). While we as Reformed Christians must make every effort to make sure that our churches reflect the multi-racial and diverse socio-economic demographics of North America, this is simply the politically correct version of the same complaint we heard a generation ago, namely that Calvinism is too male dominated and not democratic enough to satisfy increasingly feminized and egalitarian North Americans. But, as we have seen, the vitality and influence of many confessional Reformed churches and institutions has only increased during this same period, despite these concerns.

Olson endorses evangelical theologian Stanley Grenz’s call to “revision” evangelical theology. This means that we must regard the essence of evangelical theology as “an experience and a distinctive spirituality centered around it.” It is important to take note of the ramifications of defining evangelicalism in such terms. For one thing, this means that “theology is a second-order reflection on the faith of the converted.” In other words, doctrine is trumped by experience. Therefore, says Olson, we must see that the “essence of both Christianity and theology, then, is not propositional truths enshrined in doctrines but a narrative-shaped experience” (p. 481). Rather than treat Christianity as though it were based upon fixed and unchanging doctrines, postconservative evangelicals must embrace the changing world and culture. This amounts to a full-blown frontal assault upon all of us who regard ourselves as confessional Reformed Christians and who really do believe that our theology is Biblical.

Olson goes on to state that “theology can never replace experience and doxology” [praise and worship]. This opinion also has serious consequences. Directly associated with this emphasis upon experience comes Olson’s call to “reject a ‘wooden’ approach to scripture, preferring to treat it as a Spirit-inspired realistic narrative” (p. 481). Though Dr. Olson tries to retain a place for the authority of Scripture, in

practice, what this means is that a man with an “experience of God” need not listen to a man who has an argument based upon the Scriptures. Thus Reformed Christians cannot use the Bible to stifle these supposedly new and dynamic activities of the Holy Spirit. Readers of *Christian Renewal* may recall how this very argument underlies many of the liberalizing tendencies in those denominations some of us were forced to leave because of the increasing infidelity to the clear teaching of Scripture in these same denominations. When we said, “the Bible says,” we were told that “the Spirit is doing a new work and that we cannot limit God to doctrines we believed in the past.”

The final point in Olson’s article is his call for postconservative evangelicals to give serious consideration to moving away from “classical Christian theism and toward an `open view of God.” This is a point to which we will turn shortly and which, in fairness, is a view to which Dr. Olson has not yet committed himself, though he has said he is increasingly open to it.

The rub in all of this has to do with the influence of Reformed distinctives upon the broader evangelical movement. Says Dr. Olson, “no longer is it possible for an evangelical to write or speak as if Reformed theology is synonymous with biblical truth without provoking a serious challenge from representatives of the `Pentecostal paradigm’ in evangelical thought.” This means that stating that Reformed theology is true—in the sense of being what the Scriptures teach to the exclusion of other views—is nothing but “fundamentalist hubris with regard to truth claims” (p. 482). If Reformed Christians dare make an appeal to the truth of our position using either the Scriptures or our confessions which summarize them, then a Christian whose experience tells them otherwise, need not listen. Theological truths expressed in doctrinal and confessional propositions are inferior to Christian experience and the “leading of the Spirit.” This, of course, results in theological anarchy in which everyone simply does what is right in his or her own eyes.

Lest we think that during the five years intervening between the time that Olson first penned his article for *The Christian Century* and the present, Dr. Olson’s point of view has been rejected, I simply appeal to an editorial in *Christianity Today*, [February 7, 2000] entitled “God vs. God.” In this editorial, we are reminded that there are now two competing theologies within evangelicalism, each vying for dominance. The outcome of this struggle, we are told, remains very much in doubt. These two theologies are post conservative evangelicalism and classical Reformed orthodoxy, especially as these relate to our understanding of the doctrine of God. What this means is that postconservative evangelicalism has moved from the fringe to the center in just five short years! From a Reformed perspective, this is certainly indicative of the theological decline of evangelicalism in recent years. This also means that Reformed Christians will find American evangelicalism an increasingly hostile and foreign place in which to co-exist, should they choose to do so.

The second wave of this renewed attack upon Reformed doctrines seems to be coming through popular evangelical literature, readily available in any Christian Bookstore and the subject of which is certain dominate evangelical talk-radio and broadcasting. While we as Reformed Christians may not lose much sleep worrying about what will happen to the evangelical coalition, we can be sure that members of our own churches, our Christian friends, family and neighbors, will be forced to deal with attacks against our precious Reformed doctrines when it occurs on such a popular scale. I am thinking specifically in this regard of Normal Geisler’s recent book, *Chosen But Free*.

Chosen But Free presents a particularly difficult set of problems for Reformed Christians, not because its arguments are especially compelling—they are not—but because Dr. Geisler is such a highly influential figure in the evangelical world. What is worse, perhaps, is that in the book, Dr. Geisler himself claims to be a “moderate Calvinist.” He claims that his is the “balanced view of divine election.” Because of his

reputation as a heavy-weight Christian apologist, many evangelicals will simply take his word for it, without evaluating his arguments in light of the Scriptures or in light of the history of the church's reflection upon these matters. The reality is that Dr. Geisler is not a Calvinist of any stripe—even a “moderate” one. Far from presenting a “balanced” view of election, Dr. Geisler simply gives us a warmed over pseudo-Arminianism, a form of which I might add, is actually inferior to that genuine Arminianism to which our Reformed fathers responded at the Synod of Dort. *Chosen But Free* is a poorly researched, poorly argued and poorly written book. But *Chosen But Free* is a book which is destined to be popular among evangelicals and with which Reformed Christians will be dealing for years to come.

It is not my purpose in this essay to respond to the arguments Geisler marshals against the Reformed faith. That has already been done quite capably by James White in his fine book *The Potter's Freedom* (Calvary Press Publishing, 2000), which, by the way, I encourage all of you reading this article to purchase. The purpose of this article is merely to set forth the nature of the challenge Geisler raises for us as Reformed Christians.

I seriously doubt that *Chosen But Free* will lead many people away from the truths of Reformed theology. But what such a book will do is give those who already oppose Reformed theology a ready-made response to solid Reformed books, such as those written by R. C. Sproul, Michael Horton, J. I. Packer, the late James Boice and others, which are now widely read by evangelicals. It will also generate confusion and doubt for many in our churches who are troubled by tender consciences, or who are poorly grounded in their faith. What is worse, it will create a serious obstacle for many of those who are considering Reformed theology for the first time, and who do not yet know the Geisler's arguments are quite easily answered and refuted.

Many people react nervously at the very thought of identifying themselves with any theological tradition which is so “extreme.” After all, shouldn't we have a “balanced” and moderate view about such things? If Dr. Geisler is a noted theologian, why not take his word? As you can see, Geisler's book will make significant inroads because it takes some degree of theological sophistication to realize that Reformed theology is biblical—hence, “balanced” in the proper sense of the term—and that it is Dr. Geisler, who by attacking the entire Augustinian tradition, takes what really amounts to the more extreme position.

To my mind, the most disturbing aspect of the book is the shallow level of argumentation throughout. Reformed Christians are repeatedly called “extreme Calvinists” while Geisler, of course, passes himself off as a “moderate” who has answers to the mysteries of the faith which everyone else has missed. The list of supposed problems with Reformed theology are nothing but a rehash of common Arminian objections drawn from the last four-hundred years of theological debate. Says Geisler, as though none of us had ever considered these things before, the logic of Reformed theology enables us to escape the moral consequences for our own actions, since everything, including our sins have supposedly been foreordained by God (p. 131). He argues that Calvinism makes God the author of evil (p. 133), that Calvinism opens the door to universalism (p. 134), and that Calvinism destroys all motivation for evangelism (p. 136) and intercessory prayer (p. 137). In fact, Geisler goes so far as to state that Calvinism renders assurance of salvation impossible for a Christian, since there is no way to determine this side of death whether or not we are numbered among the elect (p. 100). I could go on and on, but by now you've gotten the point.

Even though the *Three Forms of Unity*, the *Westminster Standards*, and the great Reformed divines from Calvin to Warfield, have capably answered these matters from the pages of Holy Scripture, people reading Geisler's book would never know it. Like it or not, those of us called to pastor our flocks, will

have to be on our guard for a new wave of attack upon our most cherished of doctrines. Because Norman Geisler objects to Calvinism, and because evangelicals listen to Norman Geisler, it is inevitable that our great doctrines will come under renewed assault. And even though Geisler raises old questions—as tired and superficial as they may be—they will require fresh answers from the pages of Holy Scripture. It is our Biblical obligation to respond.

Ultimately then, Geisler's *Chosen But Free* does not present a serious challenge, though it will be a giant nuisance. But the same cannot be said for the burgeoning movement in evangelical circles known as the "openness of God" theology. According to the "openness" view, God does not exist outside of time, as Reformed Christians, following catholic orthodoxy, have traditionally argued. In this view God is in time with us, suffering with us, learning with us, and engaging us in a mutual give and take relationship. Though at first glance, this sounds like a form of process theology, the advocates of the openness of God vehemently reject the charge, even if the results are somewhat similar. In any case, this movement raises a genuine challenge to Reformed Christians everywhere.

In openness of God theology, God does not truly know the future, since future events do not yet exist for God to foreknow them. All that exists are future possibilities. Remember, they say, God is *in* time, not outside of time as is traditionally understood. This means that the traditional notion of God's omniscience must be redefined, since while God knows all of reality exhaustively, the creation lies open-ended with genuine possibilities yet to be brought to pass for both God and humanity. What is more, openness advocates contend that divine immutability [God's changelessness], as classically understood, must also be jettisoned, since for far too long, Calvinists have supposedly explained away all those biblical texts which teach that God repents, changes his mind, and which teach that outcomes of various situations are contingent upon the response of the parties involved. "No," they say, "God's essence does not change." But "yes," they say, "he is a dynamic and not a static being. His will and his purposes do change." While God knows all possibilities of what can happen, the actual outcome has not yet occurred so that God can foreknow it in advance. The future then is not subject to God's decree. Rather, it is determined by God's interaction with his free creatures unfolding in time. In other words, the end of the story has not yet been written. Creation is a work in progress.

If true, traditional Reformed theology can no longer stand. The Reformed doctrine of the divine decrees must go, and along with it the Reformed understanding of God's immutability and omniscience. In essence then, the openness of God theologians are seeking nothing less than a redefinition of Christian theism. Unlike the traditional debate between Calvinists and Arminians over how sinful people are, and about how it is that God saves such sinners, this is a debate about who God is! In this sense, it is a much more fundamental issue, since even many Arminians reject openness theology, even though Calvinist theologians have long pointed out that "openness theology" is the fruit of an Arminian view of human freedom.

Again, my purpose here is not to respond point by point to the openness view. That, too, has already been capably done [See Robert Strimple, "What Does God Know," in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, ed. J. H. Armstrong, Moody (1996); and in the two volumes edited by Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware, *The Grace of God, The Bondage of the Will*, Baker (1995), in addition to several forthcoming works by Reformed theologians in response]. Since the "openness of God" position has much in common with Socinianism, a heretical Pelagian and Unitarian movement during the period following the Reformation, there are effective treatments of many of these matters in older Reformed dogmatic texts such as Turretin's *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, and Berkhof's *Systematic Theology*. It is my purpose to point out the nature of the challenge that openness theology raises for contemporary Reformed Christians.

From this very brief survey, it should be immediately apparent that openness of God theologians are far more sophisticated and ingenious than garden-variety Arminians like Norman Geisler. Though you would think that this would be a debate reserved for pointy-headed theologians with too much time on their hands, this is not the case. The advocates of this view are also writing popular books, in several cases making a rather winsome appeal to all of the biblical passages which seem to say that God's purposes are not determined from all eternity. In a culture dominated by Oprah Winfrey like talk-shows loaded with tears and pathos, surely the "god" of the openness theologians will be very attractive. After all, the "god" of the openness movement understands us and empathizes with us much more than the stern God of the Calvinists.

What is more, these new books advocating openness theology are not being published by those publishers we might expect—namely those associated with liberal mainline churches such as Westminster-Knox or Fortress. The leading advocates of the openness of God theology are now published by evangelical publishers like InterVarsity Press, who published a book edited by Clark Pinnock, *The Openness of God: A Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (1994), and the book by John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (1998). Even former Reformed stalwarts like Baker have gotten into the act, publishing Greg Boyd's book, *The God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (May 2000).

What, then, can we as Reformed Christians say by way of response? We begin by affirming the simple yet vital truth that God is still on his throne and that whatever challenges come our way, are for our good and the well-being of Christ's church. This essay is not in any sense to be construed as a call to panic. It is simply a call to be diligent. These are pressing issues we must face. But since the truth is on our side, the outcome is not in doubt, despite what openness theologians may tell us.

To begin with, as Reformed Christians we must be clear about our role in any broader evangelical coalition. The degree to which we are faithful to our own confessions will be the degree to which we are precluded from seeing the evangelical coalition as the place to expend our precious time and energy in attempting to influence the world around us. Despite Dr. Olson's lament, confessional Reformed Christians have never really been a part of the evangelical movement, though many have felt that the evangelical movement was a useful means for demonstrating a broader kind of unity among Christians with whom we cannot have formal ecclesiastical relationships. I have many Christian friends who are Southern Baptists or Evangelical Free, and with whom I don't worship. There remains then, the need for some public forum in which all true evangelicals and Reformed Christians can mutually express our faith in Jesus Christ before the watching world. This cannot be in the local church, which is bound by confessional concerns. If broader evangelicalism can provide this forum, so be it. If not, a new forum for a broad public witness to Christ may be needed. The Alliance of Evangelicals (ACE) hoped to be such a place.

My second point should be the most obvious. The best way to protect Reformed Christians from such attacks upon their faith is to teach them the truth! If they are not doing so, our pastors and elders need to return to our confessional documents, read them, study them, and teach them to our congregations and families, with all of these new challenges in mind. It is time to get Louis Berkhof's venerable *Systematic Theology* down off the shelf, blow the dust off and work through these issues. I was amazed at how helpful Berkhof was on the subject of immutability, for example. Even in the 1930's Berkhof warned us not to confuse divine immutability [the fact the God does not change either his will or in his person] with immobility [the notion that God does not react to his creatures]. If we are clear about this point, much of the steam driving openness theology is simply dissipated. God doesn't change in his will or person, but he does, as the living God, react to us when we change or move. This kind of clarity is especially helpful

when new winds of doctrine bring confusion about old truths.

In addition to this, it is clearly time for Reformed Christians to carefully work through the *Canons of Dort* or the *Westminster Standards*, which effectively deal with many of these issues. Yes, Reformed Christians need to be reminded how “biblical” our theology is, and how capable of defense Reformed doctrines really are. This is a vital enterprise. If your church doesn’t offer instruction in Reformed doctrines, go to your pastor and elders and encourage them to start.

My third and final point is one which is not so obvious and about which not all of you will agree. I think it behooves us as Reformed Christians to know who our theological friends and enemies really are. I know there are many of you who think the age of the earth and six day creation is the place to draw the line in the sand so as to protect Reformed churches from encroaching liberalism. But Reformed Christians have commonly disagreed about the age of the earth and the line has historically been drawn at the point of the historicity of Adam and the theological and biological unity of the human race, not our understanding of the days of creation. Therefore, it concerns me greatly when so much ink is spilt and so much energy is being spent in Reformed circles debating the age of the earth. This is especially problematic when such serious external challenges are now being raised against doctrines all Reformed Christians hold dear, and nary a word is said in response. I think a warning about fighting the wrong fight is clearly in order.

I know the fable about the two brothers—who while fighting each other, ignore the presence of a bear who comes upon them and kills them both—has been used to justify all kinds of theological mischief when serious theological differences are ignored. But in this case, I really do think that Reformed Christians need to realize there are real and serious enemies attacking the citadel of faith. We had better put our energies to responding to them first before we are systematically divided and conquered while fighting over something about which we have traditionally tolerated disagreement!

It is time to realize that Reformed influences are being systematically eliminated from broader evangelicalism. By itself this may not be a loss, but it is indicative of how many evangelicals now perceive Reformed Christians. What is more serious is the fact that Reformed doctrines are now under a full-scale frontal assault by a popular evangelical writer. The ramifications of this will be felt by all of us. But the most serious matter of all is the fact that openness of God advocates are seeking to redefine the Christian faith so as to exclude the traditional Reformed doctrine of God, and far too many of us seem not to notice. This condition needs to be remedied.

But let us not forget that the reason for this revitalized Arminianism, is that a revitalized Calvinism has provoked it to wrath, and for this, we must all be thankful!