

Against Calvinism, by Roger E. Olson. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011. 207 pp. \$16.99.

Well-known Arminian theology professor, author, and blogger, Roger Olson, has taken on the task of refuting Calvinism in this brief volume. He clarified his intent in the subtitle of the e-book edition, “rescuing God’s reputation from radical Reformed theology.” The occasion for the book is the recent revival (disturbing to Olson) of the doctrine of the absolute sovereignty of God as found in John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards (21–22). Olson does not aspire to detail Arminian theology here but to bring attention to what he sees as errors within Calvinist theology.

Olson’s introduction outlines his background in research in Reformed studies and his theological framework, including the Wesleyan Quadrilateral (24). In the first three chapters, Olson documents the ambiguity of terms like “Calvinist” and “Reformed” and attempts to clarify what he is critiquing. He specifies that while the Reformed umbrella is broad, he is focusing his attention on the classic TULIP system along with its formulation of God’s relationship to evil (28). He strives to appraise a living version of Calvinism and not a caricature, so he records the historical continuity of the basic TULIP system from John Calvin (who did not embrace limited atonement according to Olson), through Jonathan Edwards and Loraine Boettner, to R. C. Sproul and John Piper. Olson cites these five theologians frequently throughout the following chapters as he critiques their doctrines of providence (chapter 4), unconditional election (chapter 5), limited atonement (chapter 6), and irresistible grace (chapter 7).

While Olson organizes his chapter divisions around these distinctive tenets of Calvinism, his argument can be reduced to the following twin ideas: Calvinism cannot meaningfully support the biblical thesis that God is love but instead it presents a morally despicable God. First John 4:8 and John 3:16 are the biblical cornerstone texts upon which he bases the first side of his argument. “How is God love,” Olson asks, “if he foreordains many people to hell for eternity when he could save them because election to salvation is always completely unconditional and has nothing to do with character or choices?” (111). On the other side, Olson departs from his generally irenic tone when he remarks, “While non-Calvinists are willing to admit that high Calvinism is God-centered, they have good reason to wonder how exactly to distinguish between the God it centers itself on and Satan—except that Satan wants all people damned to hell and God wants only a certain number damned to hell” (159).

Olson uses a few pages in various places throughout the book to suggest Arminianism’s “evangelical synergism” as an alternative (172). In order to preserve creaturely guilt and thus God’s reputation, Olson suggests that God, without whose permission nothing occurs, has drawn back his sovereignty to allow his creatures to express their free choice (98–99). Then, within the world of depravity these free beings have

erected, God has universally granted humans the ability to choose Christ for salvation. Thus, the believer's part in his salvation is allowing God to save him. From that perspective the believer's response to this universal prevenient grace is essential, but it does not merit or add to his salvation (169–72).

The strength of Olson's work is presenting a cogent, thoughtful response to Calvinism from within the bounds of historic evangelical orthodoxy. (Though Olson dedicates his book to Clark Pinnock among others, Olson's theology is not openness theology.) In addition the book is free of the vitriol that sometimes characterizes debates on this important issue. Instead the reader will find thoughtful arguments based on biblically informed ethics.

The weakness of the book is Olson's concept of "divine self-limiting sovereignty" (101). Here he is liable to precisely the same critique he levels against Calvinism. If God could unilaterally save everybody and prevent all evil if he relinquished his self-limitation, why would he refuse to do so? On Olson's view, human free will must be maintained, or God's reputation would be stained (23). That is to say, if God unilaterally saved people, if he violated their free will, he would become responsible, in Olson's understanding, when others sin and refuse to believe. In other words, even on the Arminian view, if God allows any sinners to be judged for their sins, God must be more concerned with his reputation than he is with the salvation of all of his fallen creatures. While Arminians like Olson recoil from such a conclusion, historic Calvinists have learned to trust the God whose own reputation is so important to him because they see this God revealed in Scripture.

While I doubt that Olson will convince many Calvinists with the argument of the book, he does provide a helpful, college-level introduction to the main arguments against the Calvinist system.

Jeremy Pittsley

Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations, by Walter Kaiser, 2nd ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012. xix + 128 pp. \$16.99.

Baker Publishing Group has released a second edition of Walter Kaiser's *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations*. This concise and readable work, which generally follows the Old Testament canonically, is reorganized and expanded throughout, including a brief excursus on Enoch and a four-page study and discussion guide. The book's message may sound familiar to mission personnel as it is an expanded form of a six-page article in the mission training curriculum, *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, edited by Ralph Winter and Steve Hawthorne. Altogether, though, the second edition of the book disappoints as it does not provide the precise exegetical underpinnings for its overall thesis—that centrifugal mission begins with Genesis