

	<i>Why I'm Not An Arminian</i>	<i>Why I'm Not A Calvinist</i>
Strengths	1. Use of Scripture.	1. Practical
	2. Discussion of history.	2. Authors overall generous.
Weaknesses	1. Lack of application.	1. Inadequate use of Scripture.
	2. Does not address people's difficulties about predestination.	2. Argument for free will.
		3. Predestination corporate not individual.

Strengths of 'Why I Am Not An Arminian'

A strength of '*Why I Am Not An Arminian*'¹ is its thorough use of Scripture to prove what is being said. Turn to almost any page and you will see multiple Scriptural references. Often passages of Scripture are discussed at length. For example, Romans 8:28-30 is in the chapter on predestination.² Demonstrative of how well '*Why I Am Not An Arminian*' does is the chapter on freedom. When the issue of human freedom is discussed it is tempting for many to give a primarily philosophical argument rather than citing and referencing Scripture frequently. Peterson and Williams do not succumb to this temptation. In this chapter on freedom, which spans 25 pages, they give 70 Scriptural references.³ They also do well in proving what is being

¹ Robert A. Peterson and Michael D. Williams, *Why I Am Not An Arminian*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press) 2004.

² This passage is discussed on pgs. 54-56.

³ This is in stark contrast to Walls' and Dongell's chapter on human freedom which only cites Scripture 3 times in the whole chapter which spans 22 pages,

said from Scripture in that they often quote the Biblical text so the reader can see for himself or herself what the Bible says regarding the point being made.

Their adequate usage of Scripture is evident in the chapter on predestination. In the Calvinism-Arminianism debate, predestination is always a topic that is much debated, especially predestination in Romans and Ephesians. However, I think that one strength of this book is that it provides us with a solid basis of understanding election in the rest of Scripture especially Romans and Ephesians. Election is discussed in regard to Abraham, Jacob, and Israel. Its different uses in synoptic Gospels, John, Paul's Epistles, Acts, and Revelation are discussed as well. I do not think I have ever read another book making a case for Calvinism that handles the concept of election so well by showing how it may be understood in the rest of Scripture outside of Romans and Ephesians. In discussing election in texts outside the most debated texts of Romans and Ephesians, the Reformed understanding of election is articulated more fully.

One final strength of '*Why I Am Not An Arminian*' is the discussion of the history behind the Calvinist/Arminian debate. It helps the reader understand how the debate came about and what is at stake. For example, the discussion of Augustine and Pelagius helps us to see how it is not only the issue of free will that is at stake but how one understands grace. This is seen in chapter two when it is said,

“Augustine’s doctrine of the supremacy and all-sufficiency of grace in the salvation of sinners presents a vision that seemed for some to be too unrelenting in its affirmation that God’s gracious action alone is operative in salvation. Human freedom seems bypassed, or even denied.”⁴

The discussion of Arminius and the Synod of Dort in chapter 5 is also helpful. The discussion gives us some historical context to understand why the five points of Calvinism are discussed rather than other points. After all, why reduce a whole theological system down to five points?

⁴ *Why I Am Not An Arminian* p. 23.

The answer is that the five points of Calvinism are a response to five points that Arminians took issue with against Calvinists. This discussion also gives us the central point of contention between Calvinists and Arminians. The debate is whether salvation is conditional or unconditional and whether salvation is synergistic or monergistic.⁵

Weaknesses of ‘Why I Am Not An Arminian’

One weakness of ‘*Why I Am Not An Arminian*’ is that doctrine is never applied to the discussion of everyday life. Some things that would be good to know are: How should being a Calvinist affect the way we live out our lives everyday? How does predestination affect the way the treat other people? How do we deal with suffering in light of the doctrine of election? What is the application of predestination to evangelism? What are some of the main pastoral applications that we should take away from the doctrine of predestination? What kind of application does the Calvinist’s teaching of election have for our prayer life? How does the Reformed understanding of election apply to our assurance of salvation? Nothing like any of this is discussed. It would be good to see more application to everyday life and to pastoral ministry.

The case for predestination in “*Why I Am Not An Arminian*’ does not deal sufficiently with common difficulties readers may have with the Calvinists’ concept of predestination. Any case made for a view should deal with difficulties people will have in accepting it. To make a case that raises difficulties in people’s minds, and then never to deal with those difficulties, is not favorable. Any time I have ever heard Calvinists’ concept of predestination come up in discussion difficult questions always arise in people’s minds.⁶ Some of these difficulties include things like: If God determines who will be saved, then how does He love the reprobate? How

⁵ Ibid., p. 134.

⁶ Though I am Reformed, I do not come from a Reformed background. That is way I have always heard difficult questions arise about Calvinist’s view of predestination. The questions that follow are some questions I have encountered people asking in my on experience of discussing this topic.

does election not undermine evangelism? How is predestination not unfair and make God a respecter of persons? These matters need addressed.

Strengths of ‘Why I Am Not A Calvinist’

One strength of Walls’ and Dongell’s book, is that they make an effort in chapter 6 to apply their arguments practically to everyday life. For example, they say,

“We will ask whether Calvinists forthrightly and consistently apply their theology in the rough and tumble of daily life and ministry or whether they tend to cloak their distinctively Reformed commitments in those contexts.”⁷

They also state that they have the conviction that one’s pastoral theology should naturally flow from one’s biblical or systematic theology.⁸ They make application of predestination to practical things such as what they see as the application of predestination in the situation of someone who experienced the evil of being sexually abused. They discuss how predestination applies to Christians having assurance of salvation.

A strength of ‘*Why I Am Not A Calvinist*’ is that the authors are overall generous.⁹ This is a significant point because all too often the debate between Calvinists and Arminians has been less than generous. They do not resort to namecalling, misrepresenting, or caricaturing Calvinists as has often happened in debates like this. An example of how they are generous is evident in the discussion of election and evangelism. They recognize the claim that the Calvinist’s view of election undermines evangelism can be misguided. They give credence to

⁷ Jerry L. Walls and Joseph R. Dongell, *Why I Am Not A Calvinist*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004) 188.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

⁹ I say they are “overall generous” rather than “are generous” because I think at times they unnecessarily try to catch Calvinists in contradictions such as on pg. 173 when they claim Packer is inconsistent because he upholds the claim that: “Not all persons can actually accept the offer of salvation and be saved.” Then according to them Packer claims, “All persons can actually accept the offer of salvation and be saved.” They then assert that clearly this cannot be resolved by understanding the meaning of the terms, and so give no explanation for their claim. However, I think contrary to them is this statement is not clear. I at least fail to see why they could be saying it is clear. It leads me to think that they are being ungenerous because they are making a claim of a Calvinist being inconsistent while not supporting their claim. This should not detract from my claim that they are overall very generous, because they are though there are some exceptions when they appear not to be as this case shows.

Calvinist's claim that God ordains means as well as ends when they say, "In fairness to Calvinists this objection is often misguided, because their position is easily distorted or misunderstood on this matter."¹⁰ They are also generous to Calvinists by choosing to interact with the best representatives of Calvinism such as Piper, Packer, and Sproul.

Weaknesses of 'Why I Am Not A Calvinist'

One weakness of "*Why I Am Not A Calvinist*" is that it does not make adequate use of Scripture.

Walls and Dongell claim that,

"the fundamental issue here is which theological paradigm does a better job of representing the biblical picture of God's character: which theological system gives a more adequate account of the biblical God whose nature is holy love?"¹¹

Given this claim we ought to expect sufficient proof from Scripture. Everything should be backed up biblically with passages cited to prove each point if they are to be successful in arguing for why they think Arminianism better represents the biblical picture. Though they do give some support from Scripture they do not use enough. Most Scripture citations/references occur in the second chapter, "Engaging the Bible", and in the conclusion. Of all 212 pages in the book, 154 pages have no Scripture reference (70% of all the pages in the book). Of the 89 pages spanning from pages 96-185, only 14 times do they mention a Scripture reference by at least book and chapter, 3 times in chapter 3, 4 times in chapter 4, and 7 times in chapter 5.

This inadequate use of Scripture impacts their case for predestination. In concluding their account of predestination they say that "we have defended a view of God's salvation that honors his decision to create a world of free creatures."¹² As is seen by this statement, they center their biblical doctrine of predestination around the concept of free will. If they are to do this we should

¹⁰ *Why I Am Not A Calvinist* p. 192.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 94

expect this concept of free will to be thoroughly defended biblically with sufficient Scriptural citations. However, in their chapter on freedom, they only defend this view very briefly, dealing only with Jeremiah 7:1-29.¹³ Though they give more support in chapter 2,¹⁴ they need more Scriptural proof to support their claims about freedom throughout the rest of the book, especially given how important of an assumption it is for all their conclusions and arguments.¹⁵

Another weakness is Walls and Dongell's argument for the concept of free will, which they use to deny the Calvinist's concept of predestination. They argue that while Scripture is primary, inconsistency ought to raise suspicion in a system of thought. However, while arguing for consistency they do not provide us with reason for thinking that their view of a self-determining will is consistent. They simply assert it is a basic intuition. I agree it is intuitive but if it is incoherent it is not something we should accept. Whether a self-determining will is a coherent concept or not has been much debated, but I do not think it is. It requires that the same thing should be both the cause and effect of itself. It must be uncaused by everything other than itself, but intuitively we should want to think that it has a cause. Another problem with their view of freedom is the assumption that having possible alternatives is necessary for free will and moral responsibility. In heaven when God removes the sinful nature, people will not have any possible alternative to good actions (i.e. they will not have the possibility to sin), yet the Bible affirms such people to be free.

One assumption particularly weak in "*Why I Am Not A Calvinist*" is how they take predestination to be corporate rather than individual. How does this help? Individuals make up

¹³ They give this argument on pgs. 117-118.

¹⁴ They give 17 citations.

¹⁵ Their assumption of libertarian freedom is the most important one they make because their belief in this leads them to all their conclusions about: Calvinist's views of predestination, Calvinist's view of sovereignty, how they believe Calvinist's view of election undermines evangelism and Christian assurance, and it leads them to their conclusion that Calvinism misrepresents the love and character of God. Hence, this view of freedom is a fundamental assumption in all their arguments.

corporate entities and so why would God not do for the individual what he does for the group? Why must there be such discontinuity? Scripture does not ever seem to affirm the corporate to the exclusion of the individual. In all the covenants God made there is both a corporate and individual aspect. By one individual's act (Adam's) all come into sin and by another individual's act (Christ's) all are saved from sin. God corporately elected Israel to bless all people and because of this we as individuals may receive the blessing. If as they assume the corporate is taken against the individual, where else in Scripture is there support for this? This is never adequately answered. At most, the only answer I can find is an argument from context. Walls and Dongell claim election must be corporate and not individual when referring to Rom 9:11-12 and 9:16 they say,

“Now if these verses are stripped from their place within the whole argument of Romans 9-11, then they quite easily conform to the Calvinist doctrine of unconditional, individual election to salvation. But again the larger context and flow of the argument takes us in another direction.”¹⁶

The direction it takes us according to them, is that it refers to, “*Jewish confidence that possessing and doing (specific feature of) the Mosaic law will guarantee salvation* (e.g., Rom 2:17-29).¹⁷ While context is important, more of an argument is needed to support their claim.

‘*Why I Am Not An Arminian*’ and ‘*Why I Am Not A Calvinist*’ were both enjoyable reads. The former succeeds in giving the best account of Scripture (due to its use of Scripture and because of its arguments) while the latter fails (due mostly to lack of Scriptural support). This was perhaps the best handled debate between Calvinists and Arminians that I have read. I would recommend both of these books to anyone I know.

¹⁶ *Why I Am Not A Calvinist* p. 93.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 93.