

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Arminianism: Semi-Pelagianism?

Calvinists in the Hands of an Angry Arminian: A Brief Response to Roger Olson (Part 3 of 3)

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ne of the major charges that Calvinists down through the ages have made against Arminians is that they are in fact *semi-Pelagians*.

Olson labors mightily throughout this book to slay that beast. Time and time again he stops what he is doing and returns to stab it once more. Toward the end of the book, we can overhear our weary combatant say under his breath, "It is still alive! I've done everything I could to kill this thing and it is still alive!" (Some of you will recognize here my indebtedness to Warfield and his review of George Stevens', *The Christian Doctrine of Salvation* in vol. X of his works: *Critical Reviews* pp. 127-136.

Olson complains,

Why do so many Calvinists insist on identifying Arminianism as Pelagian or semi-Pelagian? This puzzles Arminians because of the great lengths they have gone to distance their theology from those heresies. Perhaps critics believe that Arminianism leads to Pelagianism or semi-Pelagianism as its good and necessary consequence. But if that is the case, it should be stated clearly. Fairness and honesty demand that critics of Arminianism at least admit that classical Arminians, including Arminius himself, do not teach what Pelagius taught or what the semi-Pelagians (e.g., John Cassian) taught. (81)

Olson has on more than one occasion in this book acknowledged that Erasmus held a similar theological outlook to that later espoused by Arminius (22), admitting that Arminians were "influenced by Catholic reformer Erasmus" (63), and specifically contrasting Erasmus with Luther over the issues surrounding their debate over free-will (94).

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Luther considered Erasmus a semi-Pelagian. Here is the rub: no less a figure than Karl Barth draws the same firm conclusion:

There can be no doubt that the Remonstrants were, in fact, the last exponents of an understanding of the Reformation which Erasmus had once represented against Luther and later Castellio against Calvin; an understanding which can and should be interpreted in the light of the persistence of mediaeval semi-Pelagianism no less than in that of the Renaissance. And as the last exponents of that understanding, they were also the first exponents of a modern Christianity which is characterized by the very same ambiguity. (*Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of God 2* [T&T Clark: 1957], p.67).



Olson actually tries to link Barth with Arminianism (46), to which I think Barth would have responded as he did in his conflict with Emil Brunner with a very loud, "**NEIN!**" Whatever else one may think of him as the architect of Neo-orthodoxy, Barth has to be considered a theological giant; and as his *Church Dogmatics* demonstrate, he had a comprehensive grasp of the whole field of historical theology. (I should point out that my professor of theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, S. Lewis Johnson, studied under Barth in Basel and even though he did not agree with Barth on a number of theological points, he held Barth in high esteem, saying that Barth's real genius was as a church historian.)

But we should not merely accept Barth's assessment. A close examination of Olson's own defense of Arminianism from the charge of semi-Pelagianism is needed.

Olson begins early in the book by listing all the areas in which classical Arminianism lines up with Protestant Orthodoxy, insisting most emphatically that when it comes to the doctrine of total depravity, Arminians stand shoulder to shoulder with the Calvinists (33). Indeed, as Olson documents, this is affirmed as such by all the leading classical Arminians that he cites. As a result of the Fall, all of humanity was plunged into sin and as a result 'are totally depraved.'

However, in Arminian theology this important doctrine gets eclipsed. How so? According to Olson a better way of saying this would be "were totally depraved," with the operative word being "were." Olson begins by first underscoring the importance of a distinctively Arminian understanding of prevenient grace. "The emphasis on the prevenience and preeminence of grace forms common ground between Arminianism and Calvinism. It is what makes Arminian synergism "*evangelical*" (36).

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When Arminians like Olson speak of prevenient grace they are affirming "a universal healing of total depravity by the grace of God through the atoning work of Christ . . . it also mitigated the corruption of inherited depravity"(151). In other words, as Olson goes on to say, "People everywhere have some ability to hear and respond to the gospel freely" (154). In other words, *total depravity* is *not* a descriptive category that is true of anyone.

In fact, Olson candidly admits that as a result of prevenient grace "no person is left by God entirely in that state of nature without some measure of grace to rise above it if he or she cooperate with grace by not resisting it"(155). Here is where Calvinism stands in stark contrast with Arminianism. This is why Warfield declared that, "*irresistible grace, or effectual calling* is the hinge of the Calvinistic soteriology" (*Works V: Calvin and Calvinism*, 359). In the Arminian scheme, grace is resistible and the human will completely autonomous. Olson likes to speak of the *freed* will. By prevenient grace the will has been liberated from bondage so that it may freely chose to cooperate with God's grace (156).



This concept of prevenient grace enables the Arminian to affirm total depravity as a biblical truth while at the same time rendering it a useless category. Olson writes, "The person who receives the full intensity of prevenient grace (i.e., through the proclamation of the Word and the corresponding internal calling of God) is no longer dead in trespasses and sins. However, such a person is not yet fully regenerated. The bridge between partial regeneration by prevenient grace and full regeneration by the Holy Spirit is *conversion*, which includes repentance and faith"(36).

Note what Olson is saying here. What the Apostle Paul is affirming of people who had been dead in trespasses and sins but have been made alive with Christ, i.e. regeneration ([Eph. 2: 1-8](#)), Olson declares to be true of people who are in a partial or semi-regenerate state. According to Arminius this constitutes " an intermediate stage between being unregenerate and regenerate" (164). This is stunning. Do these people who are semi-regenerate lapse back into being dead in their trespasses and sins if they do not cooperate with prevenient grace, or do they remain in a state of partial regeneration all their lives as a result of prevenient grace? This is a can of worms.

But wait, says the Calvinist, are you saying that all that God's grace does is put us all in a position to *allow* the Holy Spirit to make us "more alive" and do His "complete" work of regeneration? If so, then the ultimate factor is my own "free-will"? Olson uses language that says, in effect, "That's right"

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"Arminianism hold that salvation is all of grace-every movement of the soul toward God is initiated by divine grace-but Arminians recognize also that the cooperation of the human will is necessary because *in the last stage* the free agent decides whether the grace proffered is accepted or rejected"(36, my emphasis).

Olson's protestations notwithstanding (and methinks he doth protest too much, anyway), as the saying goes, "If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it's a duck."

Barth was right. This is semi-Pelagianism, and the inevitable result of all types of synergism.

Final thoughts. Contrary to what some may take away from my assessment of Olson's book, I consider it a valuable book in some regards and one that should be read. Olson has done a great service to Arminians everywhere by once again introducing them to some of the most significant Arminian theologians of the 19th and early 20th centuries. I have in my own library Miley, Pope, Wiley and Watson. (I remember with delight stumbling upon the two-volume leatherbound *Theological Institutes* of Richard Watson in a second-hand book store. I had been trying to secure Watson after reading the high opinion of him that Robert Lewis Dabney, the famed 19th century Calvinist, expressed in his *Systematic Theology*.)

I for one sincerely hope that today's Evangelical Arminians will take heed to these noble Arminian theologians, and not listen to the siren call of the Open theists who are resurrecting the same sort of rationalism evident in the latter Remonstrants, which ended up serving as a bridge to Socinianism. It is on this score that I found Olson most disappointing. As one who is familiar with the history of Arminianism, he ought to have recognized this.



Also, I whole-heartedly concur with Olson's excellent discussion in "*Myth 2: A Hybrid of Calvinism and Arminianism is Possible.*"

Olson is right. Calvinianism is not possible.

[Part 1](#) [Part 2](#)

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