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Confronting Five-Point Calvinism

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CONFRONTING FIVE-POINT CALVINISM

Louis C. Midgley

Review of Roger E. Olson. Against Calvinism. Foreword by Michael Horton, author of For Calvinism. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011. 207 pp., no index. \$16.99 (paperback).

The arguments in Roger Olson's *Against Calvinism* rest on his deep sympathies with the Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609), whose followers were known as Remonstrants. Arminians traditionally qualify, question, or reject what is commonly known as Five-Point Calvinism which is often but not necessarily summed up by the acronym *TULIP*: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance. Olson traces the versions of Calvinist dogmatic theology to which he objects back to the decisions made at the famous Synod of Dort, a gathering of Calvinist divines that took place in the city of Dort (Dordrecht in Dutch) in 1618–19.

Against Calvinism contains strong objections to some versions of Calvinism, or to what is also known as Reformed theology, though not to all of what John Calvin (1509–1564) taught. Olson's objections are directed especially at recent aggressive manifestations of what he calls "mere Calvinism" and "the *TULIP* system" (p. 38). His protests against what is entailed in these versions of Calvinism should, I believe, be of interest to Latter-day Saints, whose faith is often criticized by zealots whose opinions are often heavily influenced by various brands of Calvinism.

Dutch Calvinists, somewhat like those who constitute the anti-Mormon element in the unseemly countercult industry, were ardent heresy hunters. The primary differences between the two are the absence of intellectual fire-power among countercultists, and also the fact that Dutch Calvinists could and did make full use of the power of political regimes which they controlled to crush what they considered heresy. An example of their passion for persecution was their treatment of the famous jurist Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), an Arminian whom they sentenced to life in prison (though, with the help of friends, he escaped in a book chest and fled to Paris).

Later the Synod of Dort was anxious to quash the Arminian Remonstrants through the setting out of what were believed to be their heresies. The eventual result was, Olson claims, what is now known as Five-Point Calvinism (see pp. 40–41 for his account of the famous Synod). However, the acronym TULIP was fashioned much later, first appearing in American newspapers in 1913. Subsequently TULIP has become a kind of benchmark of presumably authentic Reformed theology for many scholars and preachers.¹ Put another way, not all Calvinists against whom Olson remonstrates in *Against Calvinism* necessarily employ the TULIP acronym or, from his perspective, display all the errors and excesses that clearly trouble him.

Olson considers Calvinists of whatever brand to be Christians (pp. 12–13), though he winces because not all Calvinists return the favor (p. 15).² He can “worship with Calvinists without cringing,” and he considers them “a part of the rich tapestry of classical Christianity” (p. 13). Although

1. For a useful history of the TULIP acronym and also an analysis of some of the myths that surround Calvin’s legacy, see Kenneth J. Stewart, *Ten Myths about Calvinism: Recovering the Breadth of the Reformed Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 75–96. See also my review of this important book in *Mormon Studies Review* 23/1 (2011): 177–79.

2. Olson has had more to say about this elsewhere. See his *Arminian Theology* and related commentary below.

he does not oppose all of Reformed theology as such, he is strongly against those he calls “high Calvinists,” that is, “those committed to the entire TULIP schema” (p. 13). Besides opposing high Calvinism (p. 15), he objects to the pugnacious “‘new Calvinism’ celebrated by *Time* magazine (12 May 2009) as one of the ten great ideas changing the world ‘right now’” (pp. 15–16).³ He argues that TULIP does not accurately or fully describe Calvin’s views or even the theology of some and perhaps many of those who have been his disciples (pp. 26–37). Hence Olson does not object to all of Reformed theology. He argues, instead, that this venerable theological tradition, apart from what he considers its more objectionable elements, is in his estimation clearly Christ-centered (p. 13). Latter-day Saint readers should be aware that Olson does not allow that their faith is Christian despite the fact that it is profoundly *Christ-centered*. This seems odd to me and I have dealt with this seeming anomaly elsewhere.⁴

Some contemporary Reformed scholars avoid TULIP entirely, while others use it to describe the very core of Reformed theology. In addition, many of those in the unseemly countercult industry advance strident, rough versions of Reformed theology in which elements of TULIP are driven home with force.⁵ Perhaps pugnacious people have a proclivity for harsh versions of Calvinism. In addition, those who maintain that God predestined some to salvation—the predestined elect at the moment everything was created out of nothing—always

3. See also Collin Hansen, *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist’s Journey with the New Calvinists* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

4. See my essay entitled “On Caliban Mischief,” *FARMS Review* 15/1 (2003): ix–xxxv at xxv–xxx; and also “Evangelical Controversy: A Deeply Divided Movement,” *Interpreter* 3 (2013): 63–84 at 69, 79, 82.

5. An example of this can be found in the “debates” of “Dr.” James R. White, who directs the Alpha and Omega Ministries, which is his Reformed style evangelical “outreach” based in Phoenix, Arizona, through which he blasts away at the faith of Roman Catholics, and also, among others, Latter-day Saints.

turn out to picture themselves as elected, and all those who do not share their opinion were passed over when justification was determined. These folks are often busy trying to spot signs of “works righteousness” among those not so fortunate. For this and related reasons the gentle Richard Mouw, who affirms TULIP, admits that he finds it harsh and those devoted to it highly contentious and quarrelsome rather than kind and loving (see p. 36).⁶ Contentious Calvinists are, it seems, part of Calvin’s somewhat ambiguous legacy.

Olson insists that “renowned scholars of the Reformed tradition” both define and describe it very differently (p. 35). Hence what he calls the “high” and the “new” varieties of Calvinism are treated by him as a subset of Reformed theology (p. 38), and are seen as merely branches of a larger Reformed tradition. Since Calvinists of all stripes stress divine sovereignty, Calvinists also commonly insist on predestination and meticulous divine providence. But, according to Olson, within this “commonality” there “exists a diversity that often gives rise to debates even among Calvinists” (p. 38), which is clearly the case. What he also calls “mere Calvinism” or “garden variety Calvinism” (p. 38) is not, he insists, tightly linked to Calvin. Why? “What we usually call ‘Calvinism’ today includes some elements Calvin himself did not emphasize if he believed them at all” (p. 38). Olson thus strives to save Calvin from at least some or, perhaps, from many Calvinists.

Latter-day Saints who have encountered TULIP-spouting countercult critics of their faith will, I am confident, agree with Olson that God must be seen as “the standard of moral goodness” and “the perfectly loving source of love” (p. 178). The Calvinism against which Olson remonstrates tend to

6. For Mouw’s account of his attachment to TULIP-type Calvinism, see his *Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport: Making Connections in Today’s World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004). See my review in the *FARMS Review* 19/1 (2007): 366–68.

confess that God ordains, designs, controls, and renders certain the most egregious evil acts such as the kidnaping, rape, and murder of a small child and the genocidal slaughter of hundreds of thousands in Rwanda. They confess that God “sees to it” that humans sin. . . . And they confess that all salvation is absolutely God’s doing and not at all dependent on free will decisions of people . . . and that God only saves some when he could save all—assuring that some large portion of humanity will spend eternity in hell when he could save them from it. (pp. 178–79)

In this and other instances, Olson expresses moral outrage at the God often pictured in Reformation theology. He does not, however, wish to be seen as rejecting Reformed theology as such, or even all of what is commonly known as Calvinism. He objects, instead, primarily to what is set forth in the notorious TULIP acronym.

Olson’s complaints against Calvinism ultimately rest on what he terms *conundrums*, which are for him logical puzzles that lie somewhere between mystery and contradiction or paradox and that need to be solved. Whereas mysteries like the Trinity are for him acceptable, contradictions are not. Conundrums jar the mind, he says. They “appear at times like contradictions although they are not formal, logical contradictions” (p. 175). He strives to demonstrate that Calvinism is replete with conundrums (pp. 175–79). If the radical divine determinism entailed in Five Point Calvinism is taken seriously, God is dishonored on moral grounds, and His good name impugned. According to Olson this is done for no good reason. Despite the heavy hand of Augustine on the Reformation, neither logic nor the Bible requires it. I am in full agreement with Olson on these matters.

What Augustine bequeathed to the Protestant Reformation has led its theologians to deny what the Saints call *moral agency*. Those in debt to Augustine, of course, celebrate what they call *free will*. They insist that the human will is free to do as one desires, but they also insist all desires are strictly given to human beings and hence are firmly determined by God. So from this perspective one is merely free to do what one was predestined to desire. This is clearly not what the Saints know as moral agency.

The Augustinian legacy has thus, it seems, led Calvinists to picture human beings as puppets in the hands of an all-powerful, inscrutable First Thing that created everything, including both space and time, out of nothing and that in a full sense caused everything, including even the moral evils, that humans encounter in this often troubling, fallen world. Insisting on divine sovereignty in such a very loud voice may end up actually demeaning the divine. This problem seems to me to stem from a fascination with what is now sometimes called classical theism, where what is attributed to God makes it impossible for him to be loving, gentle, and merciful. But most conservative Protestants, despite the abstract distant figure sketched by classical theism, when they face evils in this disconsolate world, end up pleading with a God who is not passive, but fully passionate and both can and will listen and respond to those who genuinely turn to him for mercy and consolation, as well as hope beyond the miseries of this world and of the grave.

But Protestant theologians, it seems, by either challenging or rejecting Calvinism, risk being accused of an affront to the dignity of the divine, as well as of believing in dreaded “works righteousness.” Protestants it seems often genuinely fear this possibility, and their anxiety in this regard has been shaped by a long history of heresy hunting which once led to bold persecution when the force of nation-states could be employed. All of this, in addition to classical theism and the great ecumenical

creeds, lurks behind or flows from the TULIP ideology against which Olson now remonstrates.

It should be clear that I admire Olson's historical scholarship. I have urged the Saints to consult his books, which include the following, some of which I have previously reviewed favorably:

(With Stanley J. Grenz) *20th Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992).

The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999).⁷

(With Christopher Hall) *The Trinity* (Eerdmans, 2002).

Though I have not published a review of this book, I have often recommended it to Latter-day Saints who are often faced with critics who seem to spout the Sabellian (or modalist) heresy, at least when they attack the faith of the Saints.

The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity and Diversity (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).⁸

The Westminster Handbook to Evangelical Theology (Westminster John Knox Press, 2004).⁹

7. See Midgley, "On Caliban Mischief," *FARMS Review* 17/1 (2005): 363–64, and see also David Paulsen's rather enthusiastic review of Olson's *The Story of Christian Theology* in *BYU Studies* 39/4 (2000): 185–94.

8. For comments on Olson's impressive *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, see Midgley, "On Caliban Mischief," xxv–xxx.

9. This book was published in England as *The SMC Press A-Z of Evangelical Theology* (London, UK: SMC Press, 2005). Olson explores (1) The Story of Evangelical Theology; (2) Movements and Organizations Related to Evangelical Theology; (3) Key Figures in Evangelical Theology; (4) Traditional Doctrines in Evangelical Theology; and (5) Issues in Evangelical Theology, all of which is worthwhile material for one striving to understand the current evangelical movement.

Arminian Theology: Myths and Reality (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006).¹⁰

Pocket History of Evangelical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007).¹¹

(With Adam C. English) *Pocket History of Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005).¹²

I am impressed by Roger Olson's historical scholarship. And I am pleased to recommend to Latter-day Saints readers his impressive *Against Calvinism*, which is a useful book for all those interested in one of the contending versions of historical and contemporary Protestant dogmatic theology.

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10. See my review in *FARMS Review* 19/1 (2007): 368–69.

11. See my review in *FARMS Review* 22/1 (2010): 286–89.

12. See my review in *FARMS Review* 22/1 (2010): 290–92.

