

A CRITIQUE OF *THE POTTER'S FREEDOM* BY JAMES WHITE

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I. INTRODUCTION

One thing Calvinists can never be accused of is failing to present their views. Of all the books written by Calvinists during the past ten years, James White's book *The Potter's Freedom*¹ is perhaps the most polemical. And because it is so illustrative of the Calvinists' continual rehash of their errors, it merits further attention because of its prominent place in the current round of what I call the TULIP Wars.

James White is the director of Alpha and Omega Ministries,² an apologetics ministry he co-founded in 1983. In addition to his crusades against the King James Bible,³ he has debated assorted atheists, Catholics, and cultists. He has also authored a number of good books, such as his recent work on justification.⁴ White's theological position should have been apparent even before he wrote his book on Calvinism since he is a member of the Phoenix Reformed Baptist Church. A Reformed Baptist Church, although it is inherently Calvinistic, is not just a polite term for a Calvinistic Baptist Church. Many Calvinistic Baptists would never describe themselves as *Reformed* because they would shun, and rightly so, the immediate identification with Reformed Theology—a system of theology that rejects dispensationalism and premillennialism. A Reformed Baptist is therefore not much more than a Reformed Christian who baptizes adults only and by immersion only.

¹ James R. White, *The Potter's Freedom* (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press Publishing, 2000).

² <http://www.aomin.org>.

³ James R. White, *The King James Only Controversy* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1995).

⁴ James R. White, *The God Who Justifies* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2001).

Article III of the constitution of the Phoenix Reformed Baptist Church⁵ states: “We do hereby adopt as a reasonable expression of our faith the 1689 London Confession of Faith as republished in 1974 under the title *A Faith to Confess*.” As any student of church history knows, the 1689 London Confession of Faith is nothing more than a “baptized” Westminster Confession of Faith, put out by the Presbyterians in 1646. This 1689 Baptist confession made its way to America in 1742, and with the addition of two new articles, became the Philadelphia Confession of Faith. Neither the Westminster Confession of Faith nor either of the Baptist confessions are the slightest bit dispensational or premillennial. The statement of faith on the Alpha and Omega Ministries website simply says: “We believe that Christ is coming again to judge the living and the dead. This promise is found throughout the inspired Scriptures.”

II. DON'T JUDGE THE BOOK BY ITS COVER

White's book *The Potter's Freedom* is said on its cover to be “A Defense of the Reformation and a Rebuttal of Norman Geisler's *Chosen But Free*.” But the cover alone is a typical Calvinistic misrepresentation, and for two reasons.

The first problem is that the title is based on a twisted view of the passage in Romans 9 regarding the potter and the clay. Romans 9 is the “haven of reprobation” for all Calvinists. In Romans 9, Calvinists throughout history have seized upon three verses and made them the pillars to support their teaching of the reprobation of the non-elect. The three verses in question are: “Esau have I hated” (Rom 9:13), “whom he will he hardeneth” (Rom 9:18), and “vessels of wrath fitted to destruction” (Rom 9:22).

The third verse is part of the account of the potter and the clay in Rom 9:22-24. “*What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory, Even us, whom he hath called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?*”

According to one Calvinist, because the potter has power over the clay, this proves “God's absolute sovereignty to determine the final des-

⁵ Available at <http://www.prbc.org>.

tiny of men, either to honor or dishonor, to salvation and glory or to damnation and desolation.”⁶ When White called his book by the seemingly innocuous title *The Potter's Freedom*, he was actually saying that God, as the potter, has the freedom to foreordain the “elect” to heaven and the “reprobate” to hell by a sovereign, eternal decree.

Does Paul's illustration of the potter and the clay have anything to do with the salvation of NT Christians? The potter and the clay was a common illustration in the OT (Isa 29:16, 45:9, 64:8; Jer 18:1-6). Never is it a reference to anyone's salvation. Israel is said to be the clay (Isa 64:8; Jer 18:6). The clay is formed, not created. There was no clay before the foundation of the world, and neither is anyone said to be fitted or prepared before the foundation of the world. And although the “vessels of mercy” are said to be “afore prepared unto glory” by God, no agent is given in the case of those “fitted to destruction.”

The second problem with the cover of *The Potter's Freedom* is that the unsuspecting reader would never think that the book is actually a defense of Calvinism, not the Reformation. White uses the old Calvinist “guilt by association” argument. As everyone knows, the Reformation pitted the Reformers against the Roman Catholics. Therefore, if you are against White's book, you must be against the Reformation—and for the Roman Catholics, or at least that is the implication. Calvinists like to refer to Calvinism as the gospel, biblical Christianity, the faith of the Reformation, New Testament Christianity, the Doctrines of Grace—anything but Calvinism. But if Calvinism is all these things, then anything that is opposed to Calvinism must be opposed to the gospel, biblical Christianity, the Reformation, and salvation by grace.

Regarding the Reformation itself, there are several things that bear mentioning. First, it is not enough just to defend the Reformation. The Reformation was a reform and not a wholesale return to biblical Christianity. The Reformers had numerous Roman Catholic hangovers: infant baptism, baptism by sprinkling, the uniting of Church and State, amillennialism, and a false conception of the nature of the local church.

Additionally, because they are hung up on the Reformation, Calvinists have substituted Reformed Theology for the Bible. The final authority for a Calvinist is not the Bible at all, it is Reformed Theology. One of the endorsements in the back of White's book says that “James White's

⁶ Herman Hoeksema, *God's Eternal Good Pleasure*, ed. and rev. Homer C. Hoeksema (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1979), 60.

book, *The Potter's Freedom*, is as clear a presentation of the Reformed doctrine of salvation as I've ever read." That statement is classic, and is reminiscent of Loraine Boettner calling his book on Calvinism *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*. Calvinism is a Reformed doctrine. It has its own plan of salvation—the Reformed doctrine of salvation—that is different from the plan of salvation found in the Bible, as will presently be seen.

The descendants of the Reformers—Christian Reformed, Dutch Reformed, Presbyterians, etc.—don't think that Baptists like James White are real Calvinists. Herman Hanko, a Dutch Reformed Calvinist with impeccable credentials, says that "a Baptist is only inconsistently a Calvinist."⁷ So, in spite of the attempt of some Baptists to call themselves Calvinists or Reformed, and in spite of the fact that it is the Calvinistic Baptists who are the most zealous Calvinists, the fact remains that Baptists are only second-class Calvinists.

Therefore, it is no surprise that White's book contains endorsements by Presbyterian and Reformed authors such as Jay Adams, Kenneth Gentry, Joel Beeke, Robert Reymond, and George Grant. What is disturbing about the endorsements section is that it also contains endorsements by three members of the Southern Baptist Founders Ministries and the Southern Baptist author and teacher Tom Nettles. Dr. Erwin Lutzer, the Senior Pastor of Moody Church in Chicago, and Dr. Daniel Wallace, the Greek scholar from Dallas Theological Seminary, also have endorsements in the book.

III. TEN ARGUMENTS THAT CRUMBLE UNDER SCRUTINY

As anyone who has studied the writings of Calvinists knows, there are a number of standard arguments and innuendos that all Calvinists use to discredit their opponents and promote their theology—and White is no exception. And as we have seen already, this is even apparent on the cover of the book.

First, White tries to make all Christians either Calvinists or Arminians (pp. 20, 295). Once this grouping is made, Arminians are made to look so bad that Calvinism is chosen by default. To a Calvinist,

⁷ Herman Hanko, *We and Our Children* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1988), 12.

Arminianism is anything that is opposed to Calvinism. Thus, we continually read of Arminians (p. 147), Arminianism (p. 175), Arminian positions (p. 235), Arminian preachers (p. 231), Arminian exegetes (p. 153), and Arminian views (p. 136). Other forms of this argument use Augustine and Pelagius (p. 40) or Luther and Erasmus (p. 34).

Second, White uses the guilt by association argument (pp. 33, 85, 92, 233). After consigning all Christians to one of two groups (Calvinists or Arminians), Calvinists typically associate Arminians with every conceivable heretic or heresy so as to discredit them. The most common enemy is Roman Catholicism. Thus, in White's book, to reject Calvinism is to be associated with Roman Catholicism, Ignatius Loyola, Jesuits, Thomas Aquinas, and the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

Third, White claims that non-Calvinists misrepresent Calvinism (p. 21). This argument is typical of Calvinists. They have written so much espousing their system that it is almost impossible to misrepresent them. No one has to create a caricature of Calvinism; an abundance of quotes from Calvinistic authorities on any subject relating to Calvinism can always be found. But when this is done, and their true beliefs are exposed, Calvinists say that they are being misrepresented.

Fourth, White exalts God's sovereignty above His holiness (pp. 41-44). The fact that God is sovereign is obvious. If God was not sovereign he would not be God. The rulers of many countries have absolute sovereignty, but that does not mean they are holy or even good. The important thing about God is that he is sovereign yet holy. White relates God's decrees to Calvinism (p. 45). The decrees of God in the Bible do not relate in any way to salvation, and none of them are said to be eternal, like all Calvinists teach. He maintains that God has decreed not only salvation, but everything that has taken place, is taking place, and will take place (p. 45). White also claims that God only has foreknowledge of what He has already decreed to take place (pp. 53, 57). This is an attack on God's omniscience. What kind of power does it take to know something that you already decreed to take place?

Fifth, White appeals to men (pp. 125-31, 255). Calvinists are always appealing to men: Augustine, Calvin, Pink, Edwards, Hodge, Dabney, Boyce, Gill, Berkhof, et al. Calvinists claim that all the great preachers, teachers, and commentators throughout history have been Calvinistic, and, because they are in the majority, they must be correct. One man in particular that White appeals to is Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892), the great Baptist preacher (pp. 36, 277). Since Spurgeon was one

of the few Calvinistic Baptists in history to have a large church and a fruitful ministry, all Calvinists, whether Baptist or Reformed, appeal to Spurgeon as if his ministry was the result of his Calvinism instead of in spite of it.

Sixth, White appeals to extra-biblical sources like creeds and confessions (pp. 78, 125). Whether it is the Canons of Dort, the Westminster Confession, the Second London Confession, or the Westminster Catechisms—Calvinists often put the words of men above the Scripture.

Seventh, White uses the standard proof texts: John 6:37, 44; Rom 8:28; 1 Cor 2:14; Acts 13:48; Eph 1:4; 2 Tim 1:9; and Romans 9 (pp. 96, 109, 154, 159, 186, 195, 208, 211, 213). Calvinists never seem to tire of running around the same circuit of verses.

Eighth, White claims that Jesus Christ taught Calvinism (pp. 153-69). Chapter 7 in White's book is called "Jesus Teaches 'Extreme Calvinism.'" What a better authority to which to refer? Why not just say that to deny Calvinism is to deny Christ?

Ninth, White overwhelms the reader with theological terms (pp. 91-92). Calvinists are the masters at this tactic. One barrier to understanding Calvinism is that one must learn its vocabulary: synergism, monergism, effectual calling, preterition, Pelagianism, semi-Pelagianism, and jaw-breakers like supralapsarianism, infralapsarianism, and sublapsarianism.

Tenth, White makes all sorts of false implications that are standard operating procedures for a Calvinist. He implies that if you are not a Calvinist then you deny salvation by grace (p. 91). He implies that a rejection of Calvinism means that justification by faith must be rejected as well (p. 36). He implies that a denial of Limited Atonement means that the substitutionary nature of the Atonement of Christ is being rejected (p. 233).

IV. CONCLUSION

Having read all the works of past and present Calvinists, I can say that James White's book, *The Potter's Freedom*, although ostensibly written to refute Norman Geisler's *Chosen But Free*, is merely a regurgitation of all the discredited Calvinist arguments that have ever been presented. This does not mean that everything in Geisler's book should be defended, but it does mean that White's book is a weak attempt yet once again to advance the Calvinist agenda in what has become a TULIP war.