



Grace, Faith and Freewill. Contrasting Views of Salvation:

Calvinism and Arminianism

By Dr. Robert E. Picirilli

Reviewed by Fred Butler

Dr. Robert Picirilli has produced a fair and honest evaluation of Calvinism with his book, ***Grace, Faith and Freewill. Contrasting Views of Salvation: Calvinism and Arminianism***. Dr. Picirilli is the former academic dean and professor of Greek and New Testament studies at the Free Will Baptist Bible College in Nashville. He classifies himself as a *Reformed Arminian*, and he articulates his position well. According to him, he defends the Arminianism Jacob Arminius and his earlier followers believed and taught. Dr. Picirilli writes:

My aim is to present what I call "Reformation Arminianism," by which I mean the views of Arminius himself and his original defenders. This is an Arminianism that has too often been lost sight of by friend and foe alike, and it is eminently virile and defensible. [Grace, Faith, and Freewill, i]

His book lays out his case by first giving the historical background to Arminius's theology and the Remonstrant's disagreement with traditional Calvinism. I truly appreciated this historical survey in his opening chapters. It was unlike the myriad of other anti-Calvinistic books that argue against Calvinism in an historical vacuum, as if there is no historic background to the Doctrines of Grace. Dr. Picirilli then proceeds to outline Arminian theology and the larger body of his work provides a biblical exegesis for his case. During that process, as he builds his arguments, he interacts with Reformed Calvinism, answering their counter-arguments and offering Arminian rejoinders.

There are several areas of commendation with Dr. Picirilli's book. First and foremost, I appreciate the fact that he boldly proclaims that he is an Arminian. He is not the least bit ashamed of this designation. This is a sharp contrast to the typical critics of Calvinism, particularly those from the separatist, fundamentalist wing of Christianity. They tend to be disingenuous claiming, "I'm not an Arminian, nor a Calvinist; I only believe the Bible." That attitude just indicates to me that such a person usually has no clue about the key issues surrounding the debate.

Also, I was pleased with how Dr. Picirilli wrote respectfully and honestly when examining the disagreements between the two systems. His discussion didn't spiral down to a mournful remembrance of Servetus's burning, as if that event somehow discredits the theology of the Reformers. Moreover, he wasn't trying to hunt down any Calvinistic conspiracies with his work, and the tone he took when writing was pleasant. It was not the shrill, nails on the chalkboard tone that often is found in books against Calvinism, where the author writes in all CAPS when he emphasizes a point, as if to scream at the reader.

Then finally, I was refreshed that he bathed his book in a reasonable amount of exegetical study of the original, biblical languages. The books I have read in the past critiquing Calvinism are devoid of any meaningful exegesis and I mean that with all sincere honesty. If the serious student scanned the books by such men as Dave Hunt, Norman Geisler, Larry Vance and George Bryson, for instance, he would find that their exegetical work on the pertinent biblical passages under dispute between Arminians and Calvinists is just plain terrible.

Granted, there are some authors who try to do exegesis of the relevant passages and sometimes it is decent. For example, the theologians I. Howard Marshall, R.C.H. Lenski, and Fredric Godet have written various commentaries from their Arminian perspective that interacts well with important chapters from the scripture like Romans 9.

However, with the average pamphlets, booklets, and books meant to expose the evils of Calvinism, it is painfully obvious that the authors are ignorant of the original languages, or lack any true theological sophistication to interact with the exegetical arguments of the proponents of Calvinism. Dr. Picirilli was not like this and I felt that he had some good work to consider.

Yet, in spite of these fine points, the book did disappoint me to some degree.

For instance, consider the core theme of his book, "Grace, Faith and Free will." Because, *free will* is a key doctrine of his theology, I was hoping that there would be an extensive study on the subject. However, he does not give any real biblical discussion to the nature of free will to establish it upon scriptural grounds; rather, it is founded more along philosophical grounds.

His overall study of election, the atonement, regeneration and perseverance, operates from the presupposition that all men have libertarian free will, that being, an ability to distinguish between two opposing choices. This is what philosophers call the *liberty of indifference*, and it is the supposed liberty that men have to make real choices without any interfering influence upon the person choosing. It appeared from my reading that Dr. Picirilli assumes this presupposition outright, without question, before proceeding to outline his arguments. In my opinion, such a presupposition is detrimental to his overall thesis, because it does not have the scriptural high ground, so to speak.

Throughout his entire book, I was hard pressed to find any in-depth, *scriptural* study on the subject of free will and whether or not the Bible teaches that it is a necessary component to man's nature to begin with or any study that shows the significance of free will in the work of God's salvation. Furthermore, I was expecting Dr. Picirilli to interact with the Calvinistic understand of man's will, but his book lacked that study as well.

Where Dr. Picirilli does provide some hint of a discussion on the nature of free will is in two areas of his book.

First, in the third chapter entitled, *The Classic Arminian Doctrine of Predestination* [G,F,F-W, 35-64] and the fourth section of his book entitled *The Application of Salvation* [G,F,F-W, 139-181], but most of this discussion is again philosophical, not biblical. The third chapter is the most interesting, because it is there that Dr. Picirilli offers up his understanding of how God, being all knowing of all future events, relates to man's free will choices. It is his attempt in providing the Arminian solution to a problem that has vexed philosophers and theologians over the centuries: that being, how can we say, on the one hand, that a man is truly free in the choices he makes, yet on the other hand, affirm what the Bible teaches about God's exhaustive knowledge of all events in the future? Put another way, if God has complete knowledge of all future events, and all future events must play out as God knows them, or his attribute of omniscience (all knowing) is compromised, how then can we say that men make real, free will choices?

Dr. Picirilli begins to answer that dilemma by first pointing out his disagreement with Calvinism in understanding the relationship between the terms *certain*, *contingency*, and *necessary*. His discussion of these three terms is difficult to grasp; it even took me several readings to figure out what he was trying to say. What I gather from his study is that he first understands the term *certain* as descriptive of those events that are certain to happen because God knows perfectly all events that will transpire in the future. Dr. Picirilli writes concerning certainty, "The so-called 'certainty' of an event means nothing more than its 'eventness,' the simple fact that it will occur – and God knows that it will." [G,F,F-W, 37]

Then, under that broader category of *certainly*, there is *contingency* and *necessity*. A *contingency* is any free act of morally responsible persons. These are decisions that can cause events to go in more than one way. According to Dr. Picirilli, contingent events made by choices of free creatures do not contradict the certainty of that event. In

fact, states Dr. Picirilli, “The same event can be both certain and contingent at the same time.” [ibid] A *necessity* is any event that can only transpire in just one way. This is an event that must inevitably be the way that it is, and according to him, the causes leading up to that necessary event allowed no freedom of choice.

Though Dr. Picirilli devotes 4 to 5 pages to outlining the Arminian theology surrounding these three terms, he does not provide any biblical support for his argumentation, nor does he have biblical examples of any of these three terms playing out in the scriptural narrative.

In addition, he does not satisfactorily provide answers to the many obvious objections that could be leveled against his definitions. This is where it would have been beneficial for him to interact with the Calvinist view of man’s will. Calvinists do not deny that men have wills and the ability to choose with their minds, they just believe the Bible teaches that man’s will is not free from the power of his sin nature. Just as man has the physical limitations in order to will to walk on water or fly like a bird, he is also restricted in the moral choices that he makes. In other words, the choice for a man to fly like a bird is restricted by his physical limitations, and in like manner, the moral choices a man can make with his will are determined by his nature.

Dr. Picirilli seems to suggest, at least in this section of his book (he affirms man’s depravity in a later section) that the will of men is somehow separated from their overall character, thus a thorough interaction with the Calvinist’s belief, as well as the scriptures that undergird the Calvinist position on the will of man, would have been an immense improvement to his study and establishing his argumentation.

The most glaring problem with his Arminian position on man’s will and God’s knowledge is the fact that his discussion does not truly provide an adequate solution to the proposed dilemma. Even if God allows for contingent events to take place in His world, shaped by the choices of His free creatures, those creatures will still need to make the choices that God foreknows as certain in the future, or God is made to be mistaken about what He knew would come to pass.¹

I believe one problematic element to Dr. Picirilli’s supposed solution is the fact that he assigns an errant definition to the word *foreknowledge*. By that, I mean that he defines foreknowledge as God gaining information or knowing

¹ Interestingly, open theists recognize this problem with the traditional, Arminian position. They argue that even if God only *foreknows* what free choices a person will make in the future, that person will still have to make those choices, or God is made to be mistaken about what he knew that person would decide, or worse yet, be made into a liar. According to open theism, if God knows anything a person will choose in the future, that person does not truly have the ability to exercise free will. Thus, in order to safeguard man’s will, open theists conclude that God has voluntarily restricted His sovereignty and omniscience as to what happens in the future, so that God can be surprised by what men choose. Clark Pinnock, one of the chief proponents of open theism, argues that God is delighted or angered by the choices his free creatures make. Pinnock argues that our assurance with God does not come from His exhaustive knowledge, but with the fact that God has the wisdom to handle any surprises that may arise. Moreover, God has not predestined a blue print of what he wants to have happen in the history of the world, but God has predestined purposes and goals that he pursues with his free creatures and the choices they make. Theologian, Robert Reymond, points out that Pinnock and his open theists cohorts fail to answer three important questions with their theology: (1) can a risk-taking, self-limiting God who rarely if ever intervenes in the free choices and actions of human agents know that history will end the way he envisions and predicts *without having to rob creatures of their freedom?* (2) Can this God who does not know the future hold false views about the future? (3) Why should Christians pray to such a God for the salvation of absolutely free agents? *A New Systematic Theology of The Christian Faith, 2nd ed.*, Robert Reymond (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 347, fn 4 [emphasis in original]. I would add two further questions: Do men still exercise this absolute freedom in the eternal state, so that they could leave God’s presence if they so chose to do so, or are they “forced” against their wills to remain; and will God still limit his knowledge of the future when this age ends and the eternal state begins?

I must point out so that there is no confusion, that Dr. Picirilli completely rejects open theism and in fact, devotes an excursus in his book pointing out the theological errors with open theism as a system of theology (*Grace, Faith, and Free Will*, 59-63). Regardless of his objection to open theists, their overall complaint toward traditional Arminianism and its inadequacy to provide a solution to man having absolute freedom of the will in light of a God with exhaustive foreknowledge, is quite telling. In my mind, the open theist is merely taking Arminianism to its logical conclusion.

facts about events in the future before they play out in time. This is the typical Arminian understanding of foreknowledge. It is God foreseeing faith in a person and then electing and predestining a person to salvation based upon that foreseen faith. Thus, the Arminian view is that God foresees, or foreknows, and then foreordains based upon that knowledge. Dr. Picirilli writes that God foreknows all possibilities about the future, and then He chooses and ordains that course of action He wills to set into motion.

The Calvinists object to the Arminian definition of foreknowledge because it is not in keeping with the biblical language of the various writers. Rather than believing foreknowledge is defined as God foreseeing future events, particularly human faith, Calvinists believe that the Bible defines foreknowledge around the Hebraic understanding of knowing as involving a relationship experienced with individuals, and this especially refers to God's covenant love for His people (see for example, Ex. 33:17; Deut. 7:7,8; 10:15; Jer. 1:5; Amos 3:2; Matt. 7:22,23; 1Cor. 8:3; 2 Tim. 2:19). Therefore, when the biblical writers speak of foreknowledge, they are speaking of a direct action on God's part. God is more than merely passively gathering information, and then ordaining His plans upon what He knows will happen.

Dr. Picirilli doesn't interact with this view, and it would have strengthened his position if he had.

A second area where Dr. Picirilli's book was a bit disappointing is with the exegesis he offers in his book. Though it is excellent at times, it is not as careful and as thorough as it should be. In a sense, I felt as though Dr. Picirilli used just enough study of a particular passage to make his case for his Reformed Arminianism, but then he would stop and leave off interacting with any contextual nuances or other related passages that would challenge his exegetical conclusions. Such neglect tends to harm his case, and leaves the reader wondering if he had done all of his homework. Let me give a couple of examples to explain what I mean.

Pre-Regenerating Grace

Contrary to what most Calvinists would think, Reformed Arminianism does affirm the doctrine of total depravity in a similar way the Calvinist would define it. Dr. Picirilli outlines the Reformed Arminian understanding of total depravity in his section on the application of salvation, and in fact, he even departs from most of his contemporary Arminian counterparts when he writes his defense. He states his points as follows:

- Since the fall of Adam and Eve, all human beings inherit from the original parents a corrupt nature, as inclined toward evil now as Adam and Eve were toward good before the fall.
- In consequence of this condition, man's will is no longer naturally free to choose God apart from the supernatural work of the spirit of God.
- Therefore, left to himself, no person either can or will accept the offer of salvation in the gospel and put saving faith in Christ.
- This condition may rightly be called total depravity, in that it pervades every aspect of man's being, and total inability, in that it leaves him helpless to perform anything truly good in God's sight. [G,F,F-W, 149]

I, as a Calvinist, would agree with Dr. Picirilli. Adam's sin has corrupted mankind with a sin nature that renders all men who are born sinners with no ability to come to God on their own. Yet, Dr. Picirilli's affirmation of total depravity begs a crucial question: if men are so corrupted by sin that no person can, or even will accept the offer of salvation, then how exactly can any person be said to have free will in the manner he argues for in his book?

In order to work around what is an apparent contradiction in his theological conviction, Dr. Picirilli appeals to what is called *prevenient grace*. He explains *prevenient grace* as, "that grace that precedes actual regeneration and which, except when finally resisted, inevitably leads on to regeneration." [G,F,F-W, 153] He re-titles *prevenient*

grace as *pre-regenerating grace*, and describes it further as “that work of the Holy Spirit that “opens the heart” of the unregenerate...to the truth of the gospel and enables them to respond positively in faith.” [G,F,F-W, 154] In Dr. Picirilli’s Arminian system, a sinner is given grace to believe, but that grace only allows the sinner to be freed from his depravity long enough to choose to either believe the gospel, come to Christ, *then be regenerated*, and finally be saved; or it allows the sinner to reject the gospel, resist the work of the Spirit, and return to a life of spiritual darkness.

The key difference between the Calvinist understanding of regeneration and the Arminian notion of prevenient grace, or pre-regenerating grace, is that Calvinists believe that when God imparts His grace, it is to regenerate a sinner, and it will always be effectual. Whereas the Arminian teaches God only imparts grace, not regeneration, and that grace can be resisted, the Calvinist teaches that men can only believe the gospel if they are first regenerated, and everyone who is regenerated by God’s grace will believe the gospel, trust Christ and come to salvation. In the Arminian system, faith precedes regeneration; in the Calvinistic system, regeneration precedes faith.

Dr. Picirilli appeals to a handful of New Testament passages to demonstrate his understanding of pre-regenerating grace. For instance, he equates pre-regenerating grace with the biblical terms of “drawing” (John 6:44), “opening the heart” (Acts 16:14), and “opening blind eyes” (2 Corinthians 4:4), and states that this terminology is only meant to express a pre-regenerating grace, not actual regeneration. However, this is an example of where his exegesis does not go far enough in establishing his argument. Dr. Picirilli quotes Jesus’s words in John 6:44 in support of his position,

Scripturally, this concept [pre-regenerating grace] is intended to express the truth found in passages like John 6:44: “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him.” In this light, pre-regenerating grace may be called *drawing*. [G,F,F-W, 154]

But, he fails to finish the verse. Jesus actually said, “No man can come to me, except the Father which has sent me draw him *and I will raise him up on the last day.*” The remainder of the verse is vitally important to defining what Jesus meant with the word “draw.” If we are to understand that “draw” has in mind the Reformed Arminian notion of pre-regenerating grace, then how can pre-regenerating grace be resisted as the Arminian teaches? Jesus states rather emphatically that everyone drawn by the Father to him will be raised up on the last day.

Moreover, the entirety of the context of Jesus’s words begins in John 6:37 and finishes to the end of the chapter. In John 6:39, Jesus says, “This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at that last day.” The raising up of the last day is connected to the Father’s giving to the Son and the reason those drawn to Him by the father do come is because they have been given to the Son by the Father. If Christ’s words are true, then how exactly can pre-regenerating grace ever be resisted by those to whom it is given? This is one area where his exegesis does not take into account the details of the whole of Christ’s words. They contradict the teaching of pre-regenerating grace

1 John 2:2

Proponents of universal atonement frequently appeal to 1 John 2:2 as a proof-text for their position. John the apostle writes: “And He himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.” Those holding to a universal atonement understand John to be saying that Christ is the propitiation of the sins of not only all Christians, but of every single person who has ever lived in all places throughout the whole earth.

Calvinistic Christians, on the other hand, understand John to be saying that Christ is the propitiation of not only the sins of those Christians he is writing, but also all Christians throughout the whole earth at all times and in all places.

Dr. Picirilli devotes a good portion of chapter seven to an in depth study of 1 John 2:2 as a passage that teaches the Arminian point of universal atonement. [G,F,F-W, 123-133] The bulk of his study is to show how he believes the word *world* in 1 John 2:2 means that Christ's death is intended to be salvific for all humanity without exception. This is opposite the Calvinistic viewpoint that contends that Christ's death, though it was absolutely sufficient to merit the redemption of the entire world without exception, was intended by the Father to only secure the salvation of those for whom He elected in eternity past. These are the ones given to the Son and drawn to Him by the Father, and the ones the Son raises up on the last day as is described in John 6:37-45.

Dr. Picirilli provides three key reasons why he believes John's words in 1 John 2:2 are to be understood as universal in scope:

1. John's use of the word "world" throughout his epistle leads to no reason but to conclude that he meant the whole world of humanity without exception.
2. John's use of the first plural "we/us" contrasted with the phrase "not ours only, but for the sin of the whole world" is meant to be taken as John talking about Christians (we/us) and the entire world of unbelievers.
3. John's teaching on the atonement leads to the only conclusion that it was offered as a sacrifice on the behalf of the sins of the entire world.

However, in response to Dr. Picirilli's key reasons in favor of a universal atonement there are a handful of exegetical points he tends to gloss over, at least in my mind. First, John's use of the word *world*, translated from *kosmos*, has a variety of meaning in all of John's epistles, as well as his gospel and the book of Revelation. Some commentators have suggested that John has at least 18 different uses for the word *world* throughout all his writings. In order to determine which use John has in mind, the student of scripture will need to pay close attention to the context. That would include the broader context of the passage, the chapter, and the theme of the entire book, along with the immediate context where the word is used. Dr. Picirilli points this fact out in his study of 1 John 2:2, and he concludes that of the 23 times *world* appears in 1 John, the consistent use by the apostle is in the sense antipathetic to the church and Christians. [G,F,F-W, 125] However, it does not follow that if John means to use *world* as being hostile to Christians that such a use nullifies the Calvinist understanding of the passage. Christians are elected and called from a world hostile to the Church to begin with.

Also, Calvinists appeal to other factors in the passage to determine what John has in mind, for instance, his use of *propitiation* in the immediate context. Dr. Picirilli mentions the significance of this word in passing during the course of his study on 1 John 2:2. As he points out, the word *propitiation* has the idea of appeasement of God's wrath. But that definition has severe problems with proponents of a universal atonement, because if Christ has appeased the wrath of God against the whole world, then the question can be asked, "What remaining sin is in need of propitiation of those who go to hell?"

Calvinists believe, with strong exegetical foundation, that the death Christ died completely satisfied the wrath of God against sinners and that it accomplishes the salvation of those for whom it is made. This is the reason why the Christian can be assured of Christ's advocacy in regards to their sin. First John 2:2 is connected to verse 1 with the Greek conjunction, *kai*, translated as "and." Christ's role as the advocate for sinning Christians is conditioned upon his role as their wrath appeasing sacrifice. Hence, if Christ's propitiation is to be understood as universal, in that all men without exception are atoned for by Christ's death, then all men have Christ interceding for their sin in the role of advocate on their behalf.

Most importantly, I believe Dr. Picirilli misses an important theme highlighted throughout all of John's writings, particularly his gospel, and that is how the gentiles will be included with the Jews as heirs of salvation. The gentiles were considered the whole world, or the rest of the world, and when John speaks of Christ's salvation being offered to the entire world, he means to convey the extent and scope of Christ's saving work beyond the borders of Israel.

Probably the key reason Dr. Picirilli's exegesis was incomplete at times, along with his presuppositions unchallenged, is the fact that he lacks serious, in-depth interaction with a wide variety of Calvinistic writers. He does interact with classic systematic theologies written by such men of Calvinistic conviction as Louis Berkhof and William Shedd, and he does interact with Calvinist theologian Roger Nicole's various journal articles and books defending particular redemption. However, even though he gives mention to other Calvinist writers, thinkers and theologians, those are the three main authors he consistently quotes.

I would readily admit that these men are worthy defenders of their particular brand of Reformed, Calvinistic theology, but systematic theologies only devote a small section of the overall work to addressing the disagreements between the two systems of Reformed Calvinism and Reformed Arminianism. Perhaps Dr. Picirilli's book was developed from a class syllabus he has taught for many years, and he has lacked the opportunity to update his research, I wouldn't know. However, I believe Dr. Picirilli needed to recognize more recent works by Calvinists, ones that give a more comprehensive study of the subject at hand. For example, the recent collection of essays edited by Bruce Ware and Thomas Schriener called *Still Sovereign*; James White's *The Potter's Freedom*, the rebuttal book to Norman Geisler's, *Chosen, But Free*; R.K. McGregor-Wright's critique of free will theism as a theological system, *No Place for Sovereignty: What is Wrong with Free Will Theism*; and of course the one book that has introduced generations of Christians to the doctrines of Grace, David Steele and Curtis Thomas's brief work, *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, Documented*. In fact, I was rather surprised that he totally overlooked any reference to John Owen's monumental study on the atonement, *The Death of Christ*.

Regardless of these shortcomings, the overall effort made by Dr. Picirilli in his work *Grace, Faith, and Free Will*, is worth the time for an honest Calvinist to consider. Though Dr. Picirilli's book will remain limited in its readership, primarily because Picirilli is a member of a small, out of the mainstream denomination, it is not the typical anti-Calvinist hack job that is commonplace. If a truly honest Calvinist wants to know what Reformed Arminians think, this is the book to pick up. It will help place theological Arminianism in a proper perspective, because honesty and clarity with those who disagree with our positions should be a pursuit of God's people.