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# KEYNOTE

## OPEN THEISM: ITS NATURE, HISTORY, AND LIMITATIONS

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### I. INTRODUCTION

This issue of the *WRS Journal* has for its theme “open theism,” in some ways a novel ideology that has occasioned widespread controversy in the evangelical world. In the following, we hope to supply background to the other articles in this issue by explaining, first, what open theism is; second, how it became a controversial subject in the contemporary church; and, third, why open theism implicitly conflicts with at least one Christian doctrine accepted by open theists themselves.

### II. WHAT IS OPEN THEISM?

*Introduction.*—In the widely publicized manifesto of open theists, *The Openness of God*,<sup>1</sup> David Basinger identifies five claims about God as integral to open theism:

God not only created this world *ex nihilo*, but can (and at times does) intervene unilaterally in earthly affairs. God chose to create us with incompatibilistic (libertarian) freedom—freedom over which he cannot exercise total control. God so values freedom—the moral integrity of free creatures and a world in which such integrity is possible—that he does not normally override such freedom, even if he sees that it is producing undesirable results.

God always desires our highest good, both individually and corporately, and thus is affected by what happens in our lives. God does not possess exhaustive knowledge of exactly how we will utilize our freedom although he may at times be able to predict with great accuracy the choices we will freely make.<sup>2</sup>

*Incompatibilistic freedom.*—Basinger’s second, fourth, and fifth claims require clarification. When Basinger ascribes “incompatibilistic” freedom to human beings in his second claim, he means to say that human actions are free in the sense that it is always within the power of human beings not to perform any action that they actually perform. Such freedom is “incompatibilistic,” because it is incompatible with divine causation of everything that occurs.

It is important to note that those who deny Basinger’s second claim do not, as a rule, consider human freedom illusory. Rather, they ascribe “compatibilistic” freedom to human beings, i.e., the freedom to do whatever one wants. Freedom of this sort can coexist with divine omnicausality, because it entails neither that human behavior can deviate from God’s eternal plan nor that the future is in any sense indeterminate. According to the compatibilist perspective, human beings can do what they want, but what they want is determined by God in advance. Freedom of this sort is not hollow, because a being who enjoys compatibilistic freedom never suffers divine compulsion to act in a manner contrary to his desires.

*Divine mutability.*—In Basinger’s fourth claim, he asserts that God’s wishes may be frustrated by the decisions of human beings and that human beings, consequently, can effect changes in God. Human beings, according to open theism, possess the power to inflict suffering on God or to give him pleasure. While such a view may seem to allow for a fuller presence of the intrinsically valuable aspects of emotion in God, it is important to note that, at least according to the perspective of classical theism, the view that creatures can give God pain or pleasure actually implies a diminution of God’s quasi-emotional actuality.<sup>3</sup>

While open theists envision a God whose joy increases and diminishes with the ebb and flow of human obedience, classical theists view God as fully actual at all times. A creature cannot increase God’s happiness, according to classical theism, because he is always as happy as he possibly could be. A creature, likewise, cannot increase God’s rage; for God is eternally aflame with a hatred of sin so intense that it admits of no supplement. It is true that classical theism, the perspective on the doctrine of God advanced in the Westminster Confession, does not ascribe grief to God and, in this respect, falls short of open theism in its ascription to God of intense quasi-emotions. It is doubtful, however, whether ascription of grief to God is a virtue. While the idea of a suffering God may prove comforting to persons suffering themselves, it could hardly bring delight to the saints in heaven.

*Divine nescience.*—In Basinger’s fifth claim, he asserts that God lacks exhaustive foreknowledge of human actions and can, at best, accurately predict a great

number of them. This claim has a number of disturbing implications for the doctrines of Scripture’s inerrancy and authority, as open theism’s opponents have not failed to note. First, Basinger’s affirmation of divine ignorance implies that God’s expectations may at times be mistaken. If this is so, then God’s prophesying that an event will occur in Scripture constitutes no guarantee of the event’s eventual occurrence. “We may not like to admit it,” writes open theist Clark Pinnock, “but prophecies often go unfulfilled. Despite the Baptist, Jesus did not cast the wicked into the fire; contrary to Paul, the second coming was not just around the corner...; despite Jesus, in the destruction of the temple, some stones were left one on another.”<sup>4</sup>

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Open theists claim that sentiments like Pinnock’s cohere with the doctrine of Scriptural inerrancy, because statements about the future lack truth value. Since statements about the future are not even intended to correspond with a reality existing at the time of the statement, the open theist argument goes, one cannot reasonably pronounce them true, i.e., in accord with presently existing reality, or false, i.e., inaccurate in their representation of presently existing reality. Since

prophecies are neither true nor false, the open theists maintain, one cannot reasonably attribute error to Scripture even if Scripture's predictions about the future are wildly inaccurate.

If prophecies are neither true nor false, however, then Jesus certainly errs when he states of all Scripture, prophetic passages not excepted, "Your word is truth" (John 17:17). In any event, regardless of how one resolves the issue of whether truth and falsehood are properties of statements about the future, the open theist position allows for the possibility that segments of Scripture may prove less than trustworthy. Whereas Jesus states unequivocally that "Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35), open theism implies that perhaps it can.

*Conclusion.*—Open theism, therefore, constitutes a system of thought diametrically opposed to the classical theism of the Westminster Confession. One ought not, however, to confuse open theism with process theology, a form of panentheism influential in some theological circles to which open theism bears some affinities. Whereas process theologians consider God dependent on the world for his very existence, open theists affirm the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. Whereas process theologians, likewise, consider God congenitally incapable of altering earthly states of affairs, open theists insist that God has intervened in his creation throughout salvation history and especially in the Incarnation of the Logos. Whereas process theologians, finally, typically give scant attention to the Bible, open theists typically view the Bible as normative for Christian thought and life and regard their position as grounded in the Bible. Open theism, therefore, is not a

non-Christian, philosophical paradigm masquerading as a form of evangelical theology. It is rather an uneasy compromise between contemporary forms of thought and biblical Christianity forged by persons who, not without some right, consider themselves evangelicals.

### III. THE HISTORY OF OPEN THEISM

*Introduction.*—In the present section, we should like, first, briefly to discuss the historical antecedents of open theism; second, to discuss the formative period of open theism, roughly from 1980 until 1994; and, third, to supply some information about what we shall call the period of controversy: the era of heated debate over open theism, which began with the publication of *The Openness of God* in 1994 and continues today.

*Historical antecedents.*—Any theological tendency that minimizes God's absolute immutability or sovereignty constitutes, in some sense, an antecedent of open theism. Open theist theologians and philosophers do, on the whole, seem principally concerned to vindicate two doctrines: (a) that the destiny of human beings in time and eternity depends principally, if not entirely, on their own, autonomous decisions; and (b) that God voluntarily renders himself vulnerable to his creation so that human beings can affect him for better or worse and collaborate with him in determining creation's future.

The first doctrine, of course, has claimed the allegiance of countless theologians throughout the past two millennia, although it has also faced opposition from some of Christendom's most distinguished thinkers: e.g., Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and John Calvin. However, before the time of G. W.

F. Hegel (1770-1831), perhaps history's most influential advocate of divine mutability, defenders of the second doctrine have appeared relatively rarely. Prescinding from isolated individuals, in fact, only three schools of thought seem to have emerged within professing Christendom before the Hegelian revolution that expressly denied the doctrine of divine immutability: the Audians, the Socinians, and the Arminians.

The first group, the Audians, derived their name from Audius, the fourth-century Syrian monk who founded the sect. The Audians, also known as Anthropomorphites, were inclined to interpret passages about God's walking, speaking, learning, forgetting, etc., in a crudely literal fashion and so, naturally, denied God's comprehensive knowledge of the future. This sect gained the allegiance of only a small number of ignorant folk and soon disappeared.

The second group, the Socinians, derived their name from Faustus Socinus (1539-1604), the philosopher/theologian whose teaching the sect believed and propagated. Although the Socinians accepted the accuracy of Scripture generally, they nonetheless taught that Christ was a mere man and that he died on the cross only to afford God the opportunity of demonstrating the immortality of the soul by raising him from the dead. The Socinians, moreover, specifically denied God's simplicity, his immutability, and his comprehensive foreknowledge of the future for the purpose, among other things, of securing a maximum of human autonomy. After flourishing in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Socinians gradually disappeared, their adherents either becoming non-religious altogether

or forming Unitarian congregations that professed no particular system of doctrine.

The third and final significant religious movement, before Hegel, to deny divine immutability was that of the Arminians. This group takes its name from James Arminius, the Leiden theologian who famously protested the Calvinistic doctrines of the Dutch national church and thereby provoked the civil authorities of the Netherlands to convoke the Synod of Dort. Arminians held then, as well as today, that Christ atoned for the sins of every human being; that the grace of regeneration is resistible; that unregenerate human beings are capable of exercising saving faith by their own volition; that human beings can fall away from a state of grace; and that election to salvation is conditional upon foreseen faith and obedience.

The last conviction, it is important to note, distinguishes classical Arminianism from open theism. The traditional Arminian joins the open theist in considering God dependent on creation for his knowledge of creation; unlike the open theist, however, the classical Arminian believes that God foreknows every future event without exception. Arminianism lives on today in the very few Remonstrant churches remaining in the Netherlands, in churches of Wesleyan vintage, and in numerous Pentecostal and charismatic churches throughout the world.

*The formative period.*—The willingness of open theists to conceive of God in less majestic terms than classical theists, therefore, is by no means without precedent even in the pre-Hegelian era. In the post-Hegelian era, denials of divine

immutability and impassibility became uncommon. Relatively few theologians and philosophers of religion in the period 1831-1980, however, publicly advocated open theism's most distinctive and controversial claim: that God lacks comprehensive knowledge of the future. In the English-speaking world, in fact, the only persons of whom we are aware who advocated in book-length works<sup>5</sup> divine ignorance of the future (excluding process theists, finite-Godists, and other impersonal theists) before the work of Richard Rice in 1980 are L. D. McCabe in his *Divine Nescience of Future Contingencies a Necessity* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1882) and *The Foreknowledge of God* (Cincinnati: Cranston & Stowe, 1887); Gordon Olson in his *The Foreknowledge of God* (Arlington Heights: Bible Research Corporation, 1941) and *The Omniscience of the Godhead* (Arlington Heights: Bible Research Corporation, 1972); J. R. Lucas in his *The Freedom of the Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970); Peter Geach in his *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); and Richard Swinburne in his *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).<sup>6</sup>

Support for full-fledged open theism, however, became relatively common after the publication by Richard Rice, the pioneer of contemporary evangelical open theism, of *The Openness of God: The Relationship of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Free Will* (Nashville: Review & Herald, 1980).<sup>7</sup> In the time between the first appearance of Rice's book and the beginning of significant controversy over open theism in 1994, six figures emerged as prominent advocates of open theism within evangelical theological circles: Rice himself, Clark Pinnock, William Hasker,

David Basinger, Gregory Boyd, and John Sanders. During this period, the six wrote numerous essays and three books in support of open theism. One of the books, moreover, gained significant critical acclaim: Hasker's *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion; Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989). During this period, nonetheless, the evangelical public, with the exception of some vigilant philosophers and theologians, was largely unaware of open theism.

*The period of controversy.*—Open theism emerged from its obscurity, however, in 1994 with the publication of *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, a volume of essays by Rice, Sanders, Pinnock, Hasker, and Basinger. This work, published by InterVarsity Press in the United States and Paternoster Press in Britain, was designed, in its authors' words, to bring open theism to "a broader public, one beyond the confines of professional philosophers and theologians";<sup>8</sup> and at this the work was an extraordinary success.

*The Openness of God* ignited a firestorm of controversy, provoking numerous hostile articles in academic and popular publications and at least one book-length criticism: R. K. McGregor Wright's *No Place for Sovereignty: What's Wrong with Freewill Theism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996). In the same year that Wright's work appeared, however, another apologia for open theism, David Basinger's *The Case for Freewill Theism: A Philosophical Assessment* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996) was published. In 1997 the opponents of open theism responded with

Norman Geisler's *Creating God in the Image of Man?* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1997). Yet Gregory Boyd in the same year generated another book on behalf of open theism, *God at War: The Bible & Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), in which he made open theism the centerpiece of an attractive theodicy.

Next, in 1998, Gerald Bray responded to open theism with the brief work, *The Personal God* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998) only to be answered by John Sanders' substantial defense of open theism, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998). In 2000 Clark Pinnock produced another apology for open theism, his *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids and Carlisle: Baker and Paternoster, 2000), while Gregory Boyd published his *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000). In the same year, however, Bruce Ware published what is surely the most influential critique of open theism, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2000).

In 2001, the tide of the debate seemed to turn somewhat in favor of classical theism. While Gregory Boyd did publish a sequel to his *God at War* this year, viz., *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), two book-length criticisms of open theism also appeared: John Frame's *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburgh: P & R, 2001) and Norman Geisler, Wayne House, and Max Herrera's *The Battle for God: Responding to the Challenge of*

*Neotheism* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001). At the Evangelical Theological Society's annual convention in 2001, moreover, the Society's members approved the following resolution by a wide margin: "Be it resolved that: We believe the Bible clearly teaches that God has complete, accurate and infallible knowledge of all events past, present and future including all future decisions and actions of free moral agents."<sup>9</sup>

In 2002-2003 the literary struggle continued with the publication of two volumes of essays critical of open theism: Douglas Huffman and Eric Johnson, eds., *God under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002) and John Piper, Justin Taylor, and Paul Helseth, eds., *Beyond the Bounds: Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003). Only one book-length defense of open theism appeared in 2002-2004: Gregory Boyd's *Is God to Blame? Beyond Pat Answers to the Problem of Evil* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), a popularization of Boyd's *Satan and the Problem of Evil*.

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At the Evangelical Theological Society's annual meeting in 2002, Roger Nicole accused Clark Pinnock and John Sanders of contradicting the doctrine of biblical inerrancy in their writings in support of open theism, an offense for which one can be expelled from the Society. The membership at this meeting voted, in accordance with the rules laid down in the Society's constitution, to refer the charges to the Society's Executive Committee. Several months later the Executive Committee examined Pinnock and Sanders privately to determine the soundness of their views. As a result of these proceedings, the Executive Committee recommended by a vote of 9-0 that the Society acquit Pinnock of the charges and 7-2 that the Society convict Sanders. Although all of the committee members agreed that Sanders' understanding of scriptural inerrancy was incompatible with that of the founders of the Society, two argued that since the Society had not officially defined inerrancy, it was unfair to expel a member simply because he adopted an idiosyncratic interpretation.

This issue loomed large at the 2003 annual convention of the Society, where the merits of the charges against Pinnock and Sanders were debated extensively. Since Pinnock had rescinded certain of his published statements, the membership by a two-to-one margin acquitted him of the charge of denying inerrancy, in accordance with the Executive Committee's recommendation. The status of Sanders in the Society, however, proved much more controversial. After a protracted debate on Sanders's case, much of which centered on the propriety of expelling someone for contradicting the doctrine of scriptural inerrancy when the Society had not defined precisely what this doctrine was,

62.7% of the membership voted to expel Sanders, slightly fewer than the two thirds majority required to dismiss a member.

As one might expect, this outcome occasioned considerable disgruntlement on the part of the majority of the Society's members; one past President of the Society, Norman Geisler, even resigned in frustration over the outcome. At the final business meeting of the 2003 convention, however, L. Russ Bush of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary proposed that the Executive Committee take steps to clarify the Society's understanding of inerrancy so as to avoid similar confusion in the future. Bush's proposal was approved by an overwhelming majority of the members, and the Executive Committee, accordingly, met in August of 2004 to consider means of clarifying the Society's position. The Committee determined to propose the following resolution to Society's membership at the annual convention in November of 2004:

For the purpose of advising members regarding the intent and meaning of the reference to biblical inerrancy in the ETS Doctrinal Basis, the Society refers members to the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978). The case for biblical inerrancy rests on the absolute trustworthiness of God and Scripture's testimony to itself. A proper understanding of inerrancy takes into account the language, genres, and intent of Scripture. We reject approaches to Scripture that deny that biblical truth claims are grounded in reality.

At the following annual meeting in 2004, the members of the Evangelical Theological Society voted by a five-to-one margin to approve this resolution.

However, in order for the resolution to become part of the Society's by-laws, so that it would be binding on members, it must again be approved again at the Society's annual convention in 2005.

*Conclusion.*—Open theism has, therefore, suffered a number of setbacks in recent years, especially within the Evangelical Theological Society. The movement, however, is by no means dead. Enthusiasm among theologians and philosophers of religion for human autonomy shows no sign of waning, and the anti-authoritarian culture of the contemporary West supplies an ideal climate for open theism's flourishing. Open theism and Arminianism in general, of which open theism is an extreme form, moreover, have a certain perennial appeal. For, as Scott Oliphint correctly observes, "Any view that minimizes or reduces God's 'God-ness,' including his absolute sovereignty over his creation, appeals directly, though subtly, to our sinful hearts."<sup>10</sup>

#### IV. LIMITATIONS OF OPEN THEISM

*Introduction.*—It seems appropriate, in view of open theism's perennial appeal, to offer some criticism of open theism. In order to render our critique brief and effective, we shall limit ourselves to proving that open theism implicitly undermines a belief that open theists themselves, along with all Christians, hold sacred: the belief that God "created all things" (Rev 4:11; cf. Eph 3:9; John 1:3 and Col 1:16).

*Creation.*—We shall argue in this section that open theism implicitly conflicts with the doctrine of the origination of all things in God, because this doctrine implies that God is simple: every aspect of his being is absolutely, albeit not necessarily relatively, identical with every other.

Now, a simple being, by virtue of the identity of its characteristics with each other, cannot change any aspect of itself without changing every aspect of itself and thus becoming another being altogether. A simple being, therefore, cannot retain its identity unless it never changes.

Open theism, as we have seen, implies that God changes continually, learning what his creatures freely decide to do and responding accordingly. Unless one wishes to imply that God is a constantly metamorphosing series of beings, each of whom endures for only an instant, then, one must either deny that all things owe their existence to God or reject open theism. A proof that God's creation of all things implies his simplicity, therefore, constitutes an indirect disproof of open theism.

That the origination of all things in God does entail divine simplicity appears from the following considerations.<sup>11</sup> If God created all things, then everything other than he must be a creature. The principle of causality dictates, moreover, that no perfection of God is a creature; just as the reader cannot pay the author a trillion dollars, because he does not possess a trillion dollars, so God could not create any perfection that he did not possess antecedently in himself. If it is the case, however, that everything other than God is a creature of God; and that no perfection of God is a creature of God; then no perfection of God is other than God. If no perfection of God is other than God, then every perfection of God is identical with God. If every perfection of God, furthermore, is identical with God, then the principle of the transitivity of identity (i.e., if  $a=b$  and  $b=c$ , then  $a=c$ ) dictates that every perfection of God is identical with

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every other perfection of God: that, in other words, God is simple. Since the doctrine of the origination of all things in God implies that God is simple, then, this doctrine at least implicitly conflicts with open theism.

*Conclusion.*—At least one core doctrine of the Christian faith, therefore, a doctrine accepted wholeheartedly by open theists, entails that open theism must be false; and the careful exegesis performed by many of the critics of open theism mentioned above has yielded many other arguments as cogent or more so to the same effect. May God use this literature, especially as donated to libraries or circulated privately by concerned individuals, to destroy the pernicious ideology of open theism. 📖

<sup>1</sup> Downers Grove and Carlisle: InterVarsity and Paternoster, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 156.

<sup>3</sup> For the senses in which it is and is not legitimate to ascribe quasi-emotional states to God, cf. Aquinas' *Summa Contra Gentiles* 1.89-90.

<sup>4</sup> *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids and *The WRS Journal* 12:1, February 2005

Carlisle: Baker and Paternoster, 2001), 51, n. 66.

<sup>5</sup> We do not mean to suggest that the works by J. R. Lucas, Peter Geach, and Richard Swinburne listed below are devoted entirely or even primarily to establishing divine nescience of the future; they are not. We are indebted for the references in this paragraph to John Sanders, "Historical Considerations" in *Openness*, 59-100 and 182-91 at 189, n. 60; and William Hasker, "A Philosophical Perspective" in *Openness*, 126-54 and 194-9 at 198, n. 48.

<sup>6</sup> Informed readers will recognize Geach and Swinburne as two of the most distinguished philosophers of religion of the twentieth century.

<sup>7</sup> We owe this reference and the references in the following five paragraphs to Glenn R. Wittig, "Open Theism: A Selected and Annotated Bibliography," *Criswell Theological Review* NS 1 (2004): 215-38.

<sup>8</sup> "Preface," *Openness*, 7-10 at 9.

<sup>9</sup> Further information concerning the events of 2001 and the succeeding conflicts over open theism in the Evangelical Theological Society can be obtained at the Society's website, [www.etsjets.org](http://www.etsjets.org).

<sup>10</sup> "Most Moved Mediator," *Themelios* 30 (2004): 39-51 at 39.

<sup>11</sup> A more sophisticated version of this argument appears in my "An Exposition and Critique of Karl Rahner's Axiom: 'The Economic Trinity is the Immanent Trinity and Vice Versa'," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 15 (2004): 165-200 at 176-8. For the idea of deriving the doctrine of divine simplicity from the doctrine of creation we are indebted to Brian Leftow, "Is God an Abstract Object?" *Noûs* 24 (1990): 581-98.

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# EXEGESIS

## DOES GOD PLAN THE FUTURE? GOD'S OMNISCIENCE REVEALED IN THE OT COVENANTS

CHRISTOPHER K. LENSCH

### INTRODUCTION

The “openness of God theology” denies the absolute sovereignty of God. As such it redefines the identity and nature of God, and has much in common with other humanist expressions of Christianity, like Pelagianism and Arminianism.

There are several motivations behind the current “openness of God” movement. One dominant concern is the effort to excuse God’s involvement in calamity and corruption in the world. The age-old question is, if God is almighty and loving, how can He allow suffering?<sup>1</sup> Openness theologians respond that God is not sovereign over the complex combinations in His creation and that He is just as surprised at calamities as we are. Therefore He cannot be responsible for the tragedies in our lives.

It comes back to the age-old question why there is evil in the world. Openness proponents reason that if God is not responsible for primary and secondary causes, then He can be acquitted in man’s [frivolous] lawsuits that charge Him with needless pain and suffering. Related to this concern is the core belief of openness theology, that the future is open to God. Neither the future nor the means of

getting there are pre-determined, but rather are in a state of constant flux. The flow of history for individuals and for civilization is a kaleidoscope of possibilities because individuals allegedly are sovereign in decision-making. This particular element of the movement simply re-asserts the autonomy of man.

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Sadly, man’s autonomy is a tenet of Pelagianism that is not far removed from naturalistic paganism. What the Bible calls “will worship”<sup>2</sup> recently was manifested at the Parliament of the World’s Religions when the Wiccans promoted their ethic, “As it harm none, do what ye will.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, you are the master of your own fate and may do what is right in your own eyes as long as your decisions do not harm others. Pagans have no higher authority than their own will, and proponents of openness theology, while recognizing the incumbency of following God’s revealed will, believe that their own wills

are inviolable and unmovable from outside themselves. Both of the above issues are best answered by classic Christian theology. In giving consistent, biblical answers to the problem of evil and to the question of the freedom of the human will, theological giants like Jonathan Edwards respond, “let God be God.”<sup>24</sup> There is no contradiction to God’s being simultaneously almighty, all-loving, and perfect in goodness.

There are innumerable biblical proofs and patterns revealing the absolute sovereignty of God over time and creation. We shall consider several from the Old Testament.

#### GOD’S COVENANT PROMISES

Christians have God’s solemn word that all of His promises to us are “yea and amen”<sup>25</sup> in Christ Jesus. These promises are more than a “divine hopeful” because they are the revelation of His eternal plan. They are God’s sovereign determination projected into the world.

God, of course, has limitless resources to ensure the ultimate execution of His purposes, and the openness theologians recognize this. His omnipotence, however, is not enough for them to admit God’s providential control over all His creatures and all their actions. While they tend to agree with classic theologians that God will achieve His purposes in the eschaton, they are reluctant to grant that God predetermines the events leading to His final objective. Contrary to this thinking, there are explicit predictions within the covenant that indicate God not only sees the future, but He has arranged the future in the unfolding of His promises.

Following are just a few short-term promises that ratify the unconditional nature of the covenants.

#### ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

In the Abrahamic covenant God gives Abraham several promises and offers other glimpses of the future for him and his posterity. Even though God tells Abraham to claim the territory of the promised land (Gen 13:17), Abraham actually never exercised stewardship over it as evidenced by his receiving bread from its inhabitants (Gen 14:18) and his buying a grave plot for his wife (Gen 23:4). In fact, more than 75 years before the event, God informs Abraham that he will die<sup>6</sup> at a good old age and that his innumerable descendants, (yet to be seen by Abraham who has no children at all), will possess the promised land (Gen 15:15, 18).

Another specific prediction of the future offered to Abraham (Gen 15:13, 14) is that his posterity (1) will multiply while it is in a foreign land, (2) where they will be afflicted, (3) for a definite time span of 400 years.

These are future details that God had predetermined and revealed beforehand. Despite Jacob’s later resistance to taking his family into Egypt during a Palestinian famine, God’s design revealed to Abraham was not frustrated. For God had sent Jacob’s son Joseph into Egypt to prepare the way for the incubation of Jacob’s clan into a great nation. Joseph’s wicked brothers thought they alone had sent him into Egypt when they sold him into slavery, but Joseph later knew that God had brought him there “to save much people alive.”<sup>27</sup>

## DAVIDIC COVENANT

Both the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants are unconditional. The promises must come to pass for Abraham and David. They may not have seen the realization of the promises in their lifetimes,<sup>8</sup> but it is no difficulty for God to raise the dead to life in order to receive that which was promised.<sup>9</sup>

God promised David that, unlike King Saul's throne, the dynastic rule over the theocratic kingdom would never be taken from his line:

“My lovingkindness I will keep for him forever, and My covenant shall be confirmed to him. So I will establish his descendants forever.”<sup>10</sup>

In the light of this sweeping, unconditional promise, consider this covenant curse that falls on the last Judean king in the Davidic line,<sup>11</sup> Jehoiachin. In the face of official apostasy, Jeremiah predicts God's future:

“Write this man down childless, a man who will not prosper in his days; for no man of his descendants will prosper sitting on the throne of David or ruling again in Judah.”<sup>12</sup>

Jehoiachin was carried captive to Babylon and the Davidic line ended until the coming of the Messianic King.

This curse did not vitiate the original promise to David. Rather, God in His unfathomable wisdom could bless David and Solomon's seed with an everlasting throne while ripping it from Jehoichin as the rightful heir. A comparison of Christ's genealogies in Matthew 1 and Luke 3 sheds light on this conundrum and also

upon one reason for His virgin birth. Jesus was the true son of David as the physical son of Mary (Luke 3), as well as the legal Claimant to the throne through his stepfather, Joseph, who was in the line of Jehoiachin. God clearly sees even difficult futures.

## THE BIG PICTURE

It is important to understand God's providence as the patriarch Joseph did. God not only works the good things together for the “good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose,”<sup>13</sup> but He wonderfully works the evil and tragic things together for good. This is because the God of providence cannot be surprised by evil actions; rather He superintends and overrules them for the good of the believer. Joseph comforted his sinful brothers with this gospel truth: “You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.”<sup>14</sup>

From the first sin to the greatest sin in history, God sovereignly disposes His will. Regarding the murder of the sinless Son of God, Scripture reveals that this heinous crime was “according to the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God.”<sup>15</sup> Ever since man's rebellion in Adam, the Almighty has used, nay, has “chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, and . . . the weak things of the world to confound the mighty.”<sup>16</sup>

**From the first sin to the  
greatest sin in history,  
God sovereignly disposes  
His will.**

So it is that God promised His Deliverer through the Seed of the woman in Genesis 3:15. In working out the divine plan of redemption, He promised that kings would come from barren Sarah. Other weak and despised vessels were elevated by God from privation and contempt to prominence. Examples of Leah, Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth all illustrate the supernal principle that “the first shall be last, and the last first.” This is so God’s purposes worked out in their lives might be by grace and not by the will of man.

As the sacred writers looked back over the outworking of God’s purposes in the lives of these women, they saw more clearly what God had seen from the beginning. In his genealogy of Christ, Matthew consciously highlighted only four women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. These women had less than glorious pedigrees or reputations. Yet God calls them and overrules their actions in the outworking of His irrefutable design that was grounded in the promise of grace given to Adam and Eve—the Deliverer would come as the seed of the woman.

The book of Ruth also seems to have a sense of destiny flowing from Genesis 3:15. But this sense is not conveyed in the lives of Ruth and Naomi so much as in the book’s flashbacks to Tamar.<sup>17</sup> Many believe that the book of Ruth was written as an apology for David’s and, perhaps Solomon’s, kingship. Neither king was the natural first choice for king, considering that lastborn David displaced King Saul, and that Solomon, born late in the royal pecking order of a questionable union, had to survive a popular coup. For the first audience, the story of Ruth, the ancestress of David and Solomon, illustrated how God elevated this despised woman

from obscurity to a mother in Israel. The allusions to Tamar and second choice Perez reinforce the message that God’s ways are not always man’s ways. If God can bless and redeem a Moabitess, He certainly can promote obscure Judean men to the throne in order that none can say they succeeded apart from God.

We now see God’s fuller purpose for the connection between Ruth and Tamar. Both of these spurned women were destined to be in the line of the Messiah. While Rahab and Bathsheba are not mentioned in the book of Ruth, their presence might be implied in the closing genealogy. Rahab’s husband is listed as a progenitor of Boaz, and David, upon whom the genealogy terminates, is the husband of Bathsheba. All of these women were divinely chosen in the outworking of the first promise of grace in Genesis 3:15.

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#### CONCLUSION

The focus of this short article has been upon the execution of some of God’s covenant promises, showing that His accomplishment of short-term objectives

deliberately builds toward the consummation of His plan. God knows not only where He is going, but where His people are going and how they will get there along the way. Through the ages He has been gathering the elect as a chosen people for his planned kingdom while He turns the wicked to destruction in order to magnify the glory of His justice, wisdom, and power.

More Old Testament illustrations of God's knowing the future and predisposing His designs could be given, especially in the matter of His control of creation in shaping the hearts of those at war with him. Events in the lives of Jonah, Elijah, Job, and Joshua come to mind.

The biblical record makes one thing sure: God's providence is always in motion, not in a responsive way, but in a guiding and providing way that works all things together for those who are called according to His purpose. We must agree with the Bible that God controls men—men do not control God.

Fallen human nature buttressed by smug theological ignorance will never on its own bow before the majesty of God's holiness, power, and omniscience. The openness of God teaching gives aid and comfort to such humanists who insist on human autonomy. This dangerous trend is just the latest manifestation in a long history of philosophers and churchmen trying to diminish God's majesty and authority. May openness theology see a short future at the hand of the great God of the Bible Who holds the future. 

<sup>1</sup> Gregory A. Boyd (*Is God to Blame? Moving beyond Pat Answers to the Problem of Evil; God of the Possible: A*

*Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God*), seriously reassessed his personal view of God's sovereignty after the tragic loss of a daughter in an automobile accident.

<sup>2</sup> KJV of Col 2:23.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in the Fall 2004 "Special Report" of the American Council of Christian Churches that covered the Fourth Parliament of the World's Religions held in Barcelona, Spain, in July 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and others have also addressed these questions biblically. For further reading, see Jonathan Edwards' works, *The Freedom of the Will* and *Original Sin*.

<sup>5</sup> 2 Cor 1:20.

<sup>6</sup> Matt 22:31, 32 and Luke 13:28 indicate that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will be in the future kingdom. The resurrection of the patriarchs ensures that they will personally receive the covenantal promises that they never saw in their lifetimes.

<sup>7</sup> Gen 50:20.

<sup>8</sup> See Heb 11:13. Similarly, God promises a "crown of life" to all believers, but this reward is not immediate in this lifetime (Jas 1:12).

<sup>9</sup> Heb 11:39, 40.

<sup>10</sup> Ps 89:28, 29. See also 2 Sam 7:15, 16 and 1 Kgs 2:45; 9:5.

<sup>11</sup> While Jehoiachin's uncle Zedekiah follows him as the very last king in Judah, Jehoiachin was the last king in the Davidic line of succession.

<sup>12</sup> Jer 22:30.

<sup>13</sup> Rom 8:28.

<sup>14</sup> Gen 50:20.

<sup>15</sup> Acts 2:23.

<sup>16</sup> 1 Cor 1:27, 28.

<sup>17</sup> Ruth 4:12, 18.

## SOME BIBLICAL ARGUMENTS USED BY OPENNESS THEOLOGY

JOHNA. BATTLE

Those promoting openness theology use many arguments to support their claim. These arguments come from philosophy, biblical exegesis, theology, and practical consequences. The most important arguments for Christians will be those coming from the Bible itself. John Sanders' *The God Who Risks*<sup>1</sup> provides about a hundred pages of arguments from the Old Testament and the New Testament. This article will deal with three of the most important of these arguments.

### GOD'S REACTIONS

In the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, God is said to react to what people on earth do. When they obey him, he is pleased. When they disobey, he is angry. Sometimes God seems so frustrated that he declares he will start anew—and he actually did that in the days of Noah. The Bible says, “The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain.”<sup>2</sup> When people sin, he declares he will punish them. But when they repent, he changes that pronouncement and sends blessings instead. When the Israelites rebelled near Mt. Sinai, God declared that he would wipe them out and make a great nation from the descendants of Moses. However, Moses prayed to God, and God said that he heard Moses' prayer, and would not wipe the Israelites out after all.<sup>3</sup> God told Jonah he would destroy the wicked people of Nineveh, but when Jonah relayed that message and they repented, God changed his decree against them and let them live.<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, in the New Testament God reacts to what people do. When Christians sin they “grieve the Holy Spirit.”<sup>5</sup> When a sinner repents the angels rejoice, and God is pictured as the happy father thrilled by the return of his wayward son.<sup>6</sup> Of course, it is clear that God's wrath is against sinners, but when they repent and believe, he changes that wrath into love and acceptance.

Openness theologians point to passages such as these, and ask, how can all these reactions of God to what people do be ignored? Doesn't it seem obvious that God is affected by what we do? Can't we make him happy, or sad? Can't we change his plans by changing ourselves? This is what they mean by the term “openness”; God is “open” to us. The relationship they picture is not one-sided, but mutually affective. God wants to love us, and be loved by us. But our love must be freely given, not predetermined or caused by him. He “opens” himself up to us, so that we can, by our own free decision, love him and obey him. This love makes him happy. When we, again in our own freedom, choose not to love him, it saddens him. This is the great “project” of God—the great “risk” he takes.

Contrary to this modern openness theology, orthodox theologians, and all major creeds of the church, have taught that God is unchangeable, eternal, infinite, and is perfectly self-sufficient. God dwells in eternal bliss, and cannot be harmed by us. For example, theologian Charles Hodge puts it this way:

The immutability of God is intimately connected with his immensity and eternity, and is frequently included with them in the Scriptural statements

concerning his nature. Thus, when it is said, He is the First and the Last, the Alpha and Omega, the same yesterday, today, and forever; or when in contrast with the ever changing and perishing world, it is said, “They shall be changed, but thou art the same,” it is not his eternity more than his immutability that is brought into view. As an infinite and absolute Being, self-existent and absolutely independent, God is exalted above all the causes of and even above the possibility of change. Infinite space and infinite duration cannot change. They must ever be what they are. So God is absolutely immutable in his essence and attributes. He can neither increase nor decrease. He is subject to no process of development, or of self-evolution. His knowledge and power can never be greater or less. He can never be wiser or holier, or more righteous or more merciful than He ever has been and ever must be. He is no less immutable in his plans and purposes. Infinite in wisdom, there can be no error in their conception; infinite in power, there can be no failure in their accomplishment.<sup>7</sup>

The Bible concurs in this view of God. His plans and purposes are carried out exactly, and God knows in advance what he will do and what the results will be.

- “The plans of the Lord stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations” (Ps 33:11).
- “Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will stand” (Isa 14:24).

- “I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please” (Isa 46:9-10).

**“He is no less immutable in his plans and purposes. Infinite in wisdom, there can be no error in their conception; infinite in power, there can be no failure in their accomplishment.”**

*-Charles Hodge*

The passages quoted by openness theologians describe the outward and observable actions of God’s providence, and are written in the popular, vernacular style used by the biblical authors. These passages, like many others, employ figures of speech called anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms. An anthropomorphism is a figure of speech in which God is spoken of as having human body parts or appearance—“the eyes of the Lord,” “the ears of the Lord,” “the Lord’s mighty arm.” An anthropopathism is a figure of speech in which God is spoken of as having human feelings or emotions—these are the passages quoted by the openness theologians.<sup>8</sup> This style of writing makes the Bible narratives more understandable and vivid to the reader.

A helpful illustration of this principle is found in the story of the Lord and two angels visiting Abraham, before they went ahead to investigate and then destroy the wicked city of Sodom. The Bible tells us what the Lord told Abraham: “Then the LORD said, ‘The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know.’”<sup>9</sup> This statement by the Lord vividly demonstrated to Abraham that the time for the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah had come. Abraham knew that those cities could not stand up to the Lord’s “inspection,” and he pleaded for Lot and his family, who lived there. What would an openness theologian make of this statement? To be consistent, he would have to say that the Lord did not know for sure if Sodom and Gomorrah were as wicked as he had heard they were. The Lord actually had to travel to the cities to see for himself. This seems like an excellent illustration of a “self-imposed limitation” on God’s knowledge. However, the openness theologians do not believe this. They say that God has perfect knowledge of the past and the present, it is only the future that he does not know.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, they agree that God is everywhere in the present, and does not need to move about to know what is going on. So they agree that this passage is anthropomorphic—God pictured himself to Abraham, and to us, with human limitations in order to make the situation more accessible and vivid. He actually had no such limitations.

By interpreting these anthropomorphic and anthropopathic passages with excessive literalism, openness theologians make the Bible teach a type of God that is inconsistent with what is specifically said

about him in other passages—that he is ignorant of the future, is changeable, and that his happiness is held hostage by his creatures. This is poor exegesis, and produces poor theology.

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#### GOD’S CHANGING HIS MIND

Several of the passages mentioned in the previous section seem to specifically say that God changed his mind. These passages deserve special consideration, since they seem to strongly support the openness position.

In a few places in the Bible it says “God repented” (KJV) or “God relented” (NIV).<sup>11</sup> These passages must be interpreted in harmony with the rest of Scripture. This is done by recognizing their literary character, again, the use of anthropopathism.<sup>12</sup> It seems to us, from our perspective, that God changed his mind. And if God were human, we could imagine him actually changing his mind. However, as God, his mind did not

change; he had planned this course of action from the beginning. Rather, what actually changed was his outward or observable providence toward his creatures, and this change was based on a change in the creatures.<sup>13</sup> When the person changed from good to bad, God's attitude and outward providence changed accordingly. When the person changed from bad to good, his outward providence likewise changed in keeping with the new situation. God's character and plan remained constant throughout the process. Actually, God would be changing his character if his outward providence did not adjust to a change in the situation.<sup>14</sup>

#### JESUS, THE IMAGE OF GOD

Jesus said, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father."<sup>15</sup> If we want to know what God is like, we need to look at Jesus Christ, who is the "image of the invisible God."<sup>16</sup> When we look at Jesus, what do we see? Do we see an "impassible" figure, one who is untouched by what we say or do? Do we see an "unchangeable" person, one who is always calm, reposed, and emotionally at rest? Quite the contrary! The Jesus presented in the Gospels is a man full of vigor and emotion, a man who loves, who grieves, who is anxious, who rejoices. Jesus is the God-man, yet he is vulnerable to us. People can hurt Jesus, they can bring him to sorrow, to anger, to compassion, to love.

If Jesus was so "open" to us when revealed on the earth, the argument goes, and if he is the exact image of God the Father, then it is obvious that God the Father has a similar character. He is not impassive and unchangeable, untouched by us. He too feels, loves, and experiences the varying emotions displayed by Jesus.

Orthodox Christian theologians have from the beginning recognized the emotions and reactions of Jesus Christ, as pictured in the Gospels. An excellent exposition of these passages was written by Benjamin B. Warfield in 1912.<sup>17</sup> But we do not say that God experiences these emotions and changes. How is this so? The answer lies in the unique person of Jesus Christ. He alone of the Trinity became man, and continues to be God and man in one person forever. The actions, thoughts, and emotions of Jesus pictured in the Gospels are those of a man, a human being. Jesus suffered in his humanity, not in his deity. It is sloppy theology to attribute the human aspects of Jesus' life to God.

What then did Jesus reveal of God? The answer lies in his moral life and in his teachings. Theologians refer to these as the relative or the communicable attributes of God—for example, his wisdom, holiness, goodness, and truth. These are attributes that can be shared to some extent with his creatures. The perfect righteousness of Jesus was the righteousness of God shown in a human life. Jesus' teachings were directly from his Father—they were the words of God. In these aspects of Jesus' life he perfectly represented his Father.

Actually, the openness view of God is logically false as well, because it proves too much. If the man Jesus Christ shows the changeableness and "openness" of God, then his other human features should as well. Jesus was poor; is God poor? Jesus was hungry; is God ever hungry? Jesus was thirsty; is God ever thirsty? Jesus was weary with the journey, and needed to rest. Is he who keeps Israel ever tired or weary? Jesus was tempted to sin;

is God ever tempted to sin? The Bible clearly answers all these questions, “No!” God owns all things, he has no need of food or drink, he never sleeps or is weary, he cannot be tempted to sin.<sup>18</sup>

Oftentimes we try to imitate or mimic a famous person. We can talk or move like he does, and people will laugh to see it. But the part of the person we are imitating is only accidental. We imitate about him something that is easy to imitate. But we cannot imitate that which made him famous in the first place. That was a peculiar gift he had; if we had that gift, we would be famous ourselves. For example, they say that J. Gresham Machen, the famous New Testament scholar, would teach Greek sometimes with a chalk eraser on his head. I can imitate Machen in my Greek classes by putting an eraser on my head. But that does not make me like Machen—to do that I would have to equal him in scholarship—no easy thing! This same principle applies to comparing Jesus and God. The ways that Jesus was like God were ways that humanity could be like God; they were those properties that a human could express. The human Jesus could not imitate those aspects of God that God does not share with humanity. Humanity itself is limited and created, and can never be like God in those ways that are unique to God. These properties are referred to as his absolute or incommunicable attributes, and include God’s simplicity, immensity, and eternity. The human nature of Jesus never did and never could possess those attributes; only his divine nature possesses them. It is improper to attribute the characteristics of Jesus’ human nature to his divine nature, and thus to the other members of the Trinity. But that is the error made by this openness argument.

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**The actions, thoughts, and emotions of Jesus pictured in the Gospels are those of a man, a human being. Jesus suffered in his humanity, not in his deity. It is sloppy theology to attribute the human aspects of Jesus’ life to God.**

#### CONCLUSION

In an interview with his publisher, John Sanders declared that the traditional view of God’s providence is “confused.”<sup>19</sup> It did not give him a satisfactory explanation of various tragedies that had come upon his family. Sanders rejected the idea advanced by many of his friends, that God had a good purpose in all these events: “To be honest, it didn’t sit well with me.” He then set off on his journey to rethink the whole issue of God’s providence. He concluded that bad things happen, but that God does not want those things to happen. This, he says, allows for true “lament.” God is disappointed too, and he weeps with us.<sup>20</sup>

It seems that Sanders, and the other openness theologians, are placing us and our desires on a higher level than the Bible does. God’s glory, not our happiness, is God’s primary goal, and should be our primary goal as well. This model of a reduced God may be appealing to self-important humans, but in the end it not only is unscriptural, but fails to provide a God “who works out everything in con-

formity with the purpose of his will.”<sup>21</sup>



<sup>1</sup> John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998) 39-139. See my review of this book in this issue of the *WRS Journal*.

<sup>2</sup> Gen 6:6-7.

<sup>3</sup> Exod 32:10-14.

<sup>4</sup> Jonah 3.

<sup>5</sup> Eph 4:30.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 15:7, 20-24.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (1871; reprinted: London: James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1960), 1:390. See also the good discussion in Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 1992), 1:204-206.

<sup>8</sup> For an excellent and thorough listing and cataloging of the many anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms of the Bible, along with some other comparisons of God to animals, inanimate objects, and other concepts, see the extensive section “Anthropopatheia, or Condescension: The Ascribing of Human Attributes, etc., to God” in E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible Explained and Illustrated* (1898; reprinted: Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1968) 871-897.

<sup>9</sup> Gen 18:20-21.

<sup>10</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 131.

<sup>11</sup> As Gen 6:6-7 (creating man); 1 Sam 15:10-11 (making Saul king); Jer 18:8 (judging a nation which repents); Jonah 3:10 (destroying Nineveh).

<sup>12</sup> “Those passages of Scripture in which God is said to repent, are to be interpreted on the same principle as those in which He is said to ride upon the wings of the wind, or to walk

through the earth. These create no difficulty.” Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:391.

<sup>13</sup> Sometimes God changed his outward providence toward a person because of a particular spiritual need of the person for sanctification, and a particular opportunity to display his glory and instruct believers. Such was the case of God’s changing his favorable providence toward Job, when Job’s life had not changed significantly—“ruin him without any reason” (Job 2:3).

<sup>14</sup> For a fuller discussion of God’s “changing his mind,” see the accompanying article in this issue of the *WRS Journal*, “Divine Repentance: A Word Study,” by Timothy Prussic.

<sup>15</sup> John 14:9.

<sup>16</sup> Col 1:15.

<sup>17</sup> “On the Emotional Life of Our Lord,” *Biblical and Theological Studies*, by the Faculty of Princeton Theological Seminary; reprinted as Chapter 4 of Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1970).

<sup>18</sup> E.g., see Ps 50:10, 12; 121:4; Jas 1:13.

<sup>19</sup> “Divine Providence: A Risky Business?” (interview of John Sanders by Rodney Clapp), *Academic Alert: IVP’s Book Bulletin for Professors* (Winter 1999) 1-3. All Sanders’ statements in this paragraph comes from this interview.

<sup>20</sup> For an excellent discussion of the negative consequences of this view in counseling situations, see the accompanying article in this issue of the *WRS Journal*, Eric S. Lasch, “Some Practical Consequences of Openness Theology.”

<sup>21</sup> Eph 1:11.

## DIVINE REPENTANCE: A WORD STUDY

TIMOTHY PRUSSIC

What does the Bible mean when it says that God “repented” or “relented?” Good Bible interpreters always ask questions of the text they seek to understand. One common question is, “What does this word mean?” As one part of this journal’s examination of the Openness of God theory, I shall examine the Hebrew verb  $\text{נָחַם}$ .<sup>1</sup> This word is often translated “repent” or “relent” and is near the center of the exegetical debates surrounding the openness of God theory. In this article, I shall briefly define the word by etymology and stem usage; then I shall examine its usage in the text of the Old Testament.

The etymology of a word does not define it, but helps us understand more about it. “The origin of the root seems to reflect the idea of ‘breathing deeply,’ hence the physical display of one’s feelings, usually sorrow, compassion, or comfort.”<sup>2</sup> *Nhm* is an expressive word; it can express sorrow, remorse, and even satisfaction. How is it used in the Hebrew Bible?

As with most verbal roots in Hebrew, *nhm* has various shades of meaning in its different stems. In the Niphal stem, it tends to mean to suffer sorrow or remorse, but can also mean to console oneself or to be comforted or relieved (by taking vengeance). In the Piel, *nhm* means to comfort or console, while the Pual stem means to be comforted or consoled. The meaning in the Hithpael is similar to that of the Niphal.

The Hebrew verb *nhm* is used with God as its subject throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. There are two ways in which the Old Testament portrays God as repenting or changing his mind. First, he relents from an intended good action; and second, he relents from intended vengeance.

Occasions are few when God intends to do a good or favorable action but repents and changes his mind. The most notable of these is found in the early chapters of Genesis.

The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry [*nhm*] that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, “I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them” (Gen 6:5-7).

God’s creation was very good (Gen 1:31), as was his preservations of the same. Yet God was made sorry (*nhm*) by the wickedness of mankind, and declared his intention to destroy mankind. To destroy his creation was, in effect, to reverse the good of divine creation and preservation.

More frequently divine repentance concerns a change from intended vengeance. One clear example of this occurred in conjunction with Israel’s sin in worshipping the golden calf at the foot of Sinai. Yahweh was angry with Israel’s infidelity and sought to destroy them (Exod 32:10). Moses, however, implored Yahweh not to destroy his people, and “the LORD relented [*nhm*] from the disaster that he had

spoken of bringing on his people” (Exod 32:14). Yahweh is depicted as repenting from bringing calamity upon his people not only in the Law, but often in the Prophets (Jer 23:20;<sup>3</sup> Joel 2:14; Amos 7:3, 6; and Zech 8:14) and in the Writings (1 Sam 15:11; 2 Sam 24:16; 1 Chr 21:15; and Ps 106:45).

Often Yahweh’s repentance is seen in conjunction with his other character attributes. Divine repentance “often occurs in the set formula describing God as ‘gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity’ (Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2, cf. 3:9-10).”<sup>4</sup> In Joel 2:13-14 God calls his covenant people to repent and declares himself to be one who, among other wonderful things, “relents from sending calamity.” In Jonah, however, the prophet knows that Yahweh, Israel’s covenant God, is so compassionate and gracious that he would relent from sending calamity even upon the pagan city of Ninevah. Yahweh’s repentance must not, therefore, be understood apart from his other character attributes.

Divine immutability needs to be understood in conjunction with his repentance. The word *nhm* is used often of God to teach that he does not change or repent.

“God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind (*nhm*). Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it” (Num 23:19)?

Maybe the most profound teaching concerning divine repentance and immutability is found in 1 Samuel 15. In verse 11, Yahweh himself, through Samuel, says “I regret (*nhm*) that I have made Saul king,

for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments.” In verse 29, however, Samuel declared that Yahweh, the Glory of Israel, “will not lie or have regret (*nhm*), for he is not a man, that he should have regret (*nhm*).” Yahweh is thus shown to repent or regret, but the prophet makes clear that he does not regret, at least not as mankind does.

Divine repentance can be a difficult thing to understand.<sup>5</sup> This small examination of the word *nhm* has attempted to demonstrate clearly that Yahweh is portrayed as one who occasionally relents from doing good and often relents from doing evil or calamity. I have also shown that the Scripture keeps divine repentance (so to speak) in balance with all divine character attributes. Finally, whatever divine repentance may be, it is altogether not like what mankind does when it is said to repent or change its mind. 📖

<sup>1</sup> Throughout the remainder of this article, I shall render this Hebrew word by a transliteration of its root form: *nhm*.

<sup>2</sup> *TWOT* 2:570.

<sup>3</sup> Jeremiah uses a different word: שׁוּב *shub*, which means “to turn,” “turn back,” or “return.”

<sup>4</sup> *NIDOTTE* 3:82.

<sup>5</sup> There exists a palpable tension between texts that assert divine repentance and those that deny its possibility. Here is one possible resolution: “When *nhm* is used of God, however, the expression is anthropopathic and there is not ultimate tension. From man’s limited, earthly, finite perspective it only appears that God’s purposes have changed” (*TWOT* 2:571).

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# PRACTICUM

## SOME PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCES OF OPENNESS THEOLOGY

ERIC S. LASCH

After four years of theological and counseling training, I am more aware of and constantly amazed at the significant impact that theology plays in our everyday life in the church, the home, the workplace, and the neighborhood. Openness theology is a heretical theological system that has profound, practical consequences for anyone who subscribes to its presuppositions. In this article we will focus on how openness theology undermines confidence – confidence in God, confidence in prayer, and confidence in the face of suffering and trials.

### OPENNESS THEOLOGY UNDERMINES CONFIDENCE IN GOD

Open theists construct a model of their god from their interpretation of certain scriptures. This god, conditioned by his creatures, is a risk-taker whose key attribute is love. They claim that he is omniscient, resourceful, creative and wise as he attempts to be a personal god who is committed to give-and-take relations with his creatures. They compare their god to a climbing party leader who plans routes and supplies yet must make ad-hoc decisions, sometimes in consultation with the party, in light of changes in terrain, injuries, etc. Constantly modifying his purposes to adjust to humanity's choices, their god is often caught off guard by the unexpected, disappointed by how things work out, vulnerable, mis-

taken in his expectations and open to failure. Unbelievably, they posit that this is a better representation of the God of the Bible. Consider some of the frightening practical consequences based on their defective view of three key attributes of God:

*God's sovereignty.*—Open theists speak of God's "general sovereignty" in which God macro-manages the overall project, micro-manages a few specifics, but leaves the remaining specifics open for his free creatures to manage.<sup>1</sup> While that often works well in corporate management, it's useless in the divine administration of the universe. Such a weak, vacillating king could not even begin to rule heaven or earth, much less bring man's rebellious heart into submission, obedience or godly fear.<sup>2</sup> But then, irresistible grace has no place in openness theology since, in their view, it would be equivalent to divine rape (i.e., nonconsensual control).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, open theists inflame the pride already resident in man's heart when they insist that we are partners with God in shaping the future, collaborators with God in achieving the divine project. Their false view renders man sovereign and is nothing short of idolatry. It serves to undermine sanctification, humility and wisdom.

*God's omniscience.*—Open theists grant that God exhaustively knows the past and present, but he does not know with certainty the future. The future is open as he awaits the free choices of his creatures. One implication of such a belief is that the promises and predictions in Scripture dealing with the future events are built

on the sand of possibilities. That should cause us to pause and wonder if anything God prophesied, predicted or promised can be trusted. For instance, if we think specifically about the numerous prophecies surrounding the future return of Christ, we would have to conclude that it might happen or not, depending on the free choices of men. If the cross were a contingent event, maybe the return of Christ is also and God's prophetic statements concerning it are mistaken.<sup>4</sup> A god who doesn't control the future might have difficulty orchestrating something as stupendous as the return of Christ. More than likely, the wicked would refuse to allow Christ to return and send him packing back to heaven. Of course, their god would have to be responsive to that decision. A second implication is that God might leave us or forsake us. Such an unconditional promise in Hebrews 13:5 is meaningless if God doesn't know or control the future. God might respond to a besetting sin or failure in our lives by forsaking us for someone else.<sup>5</sup>

*God's immutability.*—Open theists claim that God is not unchanging, but is flexible and constantly changing in response to man's choices. Apparently, this makes God more relational and personal. But how can we trust a god who changes in experience, knowledge, emotions and actions? Sanders states that we can trust because God is committed to his divine project.<sup>6</sup> That might provide some comfort on a global scale – but what about me? Will God be overcome by some unforeseen event or contingency and cease loving me? If the future is truly open, where is there any security for the individual believer? If our free will is more powerful than God's ability to preserve the saints, what would prevent us from

turning away from the faith and forfeiting our salvation? Our hope and confidence of salvation would always be in jeopardy. Not only is there doubt in the certainty of salvation, but also in the resurrection of the body. For millennia, Christians have been waiting for Christ to return in order to receive their new glorious body (1 Cor 15:35-58). Between the first century and now, a mutable God could have changed his mind. This leaves us without the hope of the resurrection; we might as well eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die.

**Such an unconditional promise in Hebrews 13:5 is meaningless if God doesn't know or control the future. God might respond to a besetting sin or failure in our lives by forsaking us for someone else.**

OPENNESS THEOLOGY UNDERMINES  
CONFIDENCE IN PRAYER

Open theists claim that under their theological presuppositions, prayer takes on an even greater meaning and value because the effectual fervent prayers of God's people can make a genuine difference in the way God acts.<sup>7</sup> Their god has chosen to govern our world adding our input into his decision-making process. As such, he is dependent on the requests of his children even to the point of altering or reversing his own plans. The future is partly open, waiting for our input through prayer.<sup>8</sup>

If one goes a little deeper below the surface of this presumptuous view of prayer, we find that the open theists have cast away the benefits and confidence of communication with God. Consider a few of the glaring logical inconsistencies within this flawed view of prayer:

- If God is really dependent on humanity's free will, he may be powerless to respond to your single prayer at the expense of someone else's freedom.
- If God is not in control over the operations of nature and the conduct of men, there is little motivation to pray.
- If God exercises only general sovereignty, and not specific sovereignty, your issues are probably too small for him to be bothered with.
- If God cannot bring to fruition his own eternal purposes unless we pray, then our will is effectively supreme and God is dethroned. So why take time to pray?
- If God's purposes are changing every hour, what comfort is it to be granted a petition one day and then denied it the next day?
- If God is finite with limited knowledge, it is possible that our petitions may be missed entirely amidst the millions of prayers offered every minute.

The truth is that confidence in God's powerful sovereignty and flawless providential care provides a much stronger foundation for passionate unceasing prayer than that taught by openness theology. God designed and commanded prayer as a means to accomplish his eternal purposes. As such, we should use prayer to praise God, confess our sins, and offer our petitions submissively and confidently according to His perfect pre-

ordained will. Such biblical prayer will always be answered.

#### OPENNESS THEOLOGY UNDERMINES CONFIDENCE IN THE FACE OF SUFFERING AND TRIALS

Imagine, for a moment, a member of your congregation sitting across from you, a pastor, an elder or biblical counselor. The reason that they are there is because their life is torn to shreds. Maybe it is due to a failed marriage, a lost child, a rape, an unexpected terminal illness, or a financial meltdown. Their world is spinning out of control, they are breaking up and spiraling downward. All too often, they, like Peter, have taken their eyes off of Christ and they are sinking into the sea wondering who is able to help. They come with plenty of fears and depression, but little hope and confidence. Their resources have been exhausted in their suffering and they are looking for answers and help.

If you are an open theist, your "comforting" response might go something like this: "God is as grieved (and surprised) as you are about the difficulties you are experiencing, and he too wishes things had worked out differently. Because God does not (and cannot) know, much less control, much of what the future holds, and because many things occur which are contrary to his good and loving desires, we must not blame God for the evil things that happen in our lives."<sup>9</sup>

If that is not sufficient to restore hope, here are more "comforting" thoughts from Sanders:

- "God is not behind every single event that happens in life."
- "The Bethlehem massacre was not the will of God and was not planned be-

forehand by God.”

- “God makes use of the sin, evil and tribulation – which he has not ordained to come about – *attempting* to bring good out of evil” (emphasis mine).
- “General sovereignty allows for things to happen that are not a part of God’s plan for our lives; it allows for pointless evil.”
- “God cannot be blamed (or held responsible) for the actual evil of the creatures, since God did not intend it.”<sup>10</sup>

So what is the cause of evil and suffering? Open theists maintain that the causes stem from the activities of Satan or the evil purposes of men with free will. While that might protect God from being responsible in some way, it fails on two counts: (1) It fails to provide lasting hope because it implies that no one is really in control of the moral government of the world. (2) It fails to inspire trust in a Being whose best intentions have been trumped down through the ages by the free will of creatures. In denying that God has a wise and sanctifying purpose in the miserable calamities (injustice, oppression, heartache and pain) we endure on this earth, open theists undermine confidence in God and leave desperate counselees adrift in a sea of futility.<sup>11</sup>

As a result, our security, joy and courage are forfeited. The all-sufficient, omnipotent and omniscient God that is portrayed in the Psalms (e.g., Ps 46) and who is considered the mighty fortress to the saints in times of trouble has been replaced by a very diminished humanized view of God. Such a weak, powerless and uncertain god could never truly be our helper, our refuge, our strength or our powerful advocate in the face of persecu-

tion, trials or affliction. Thus we are left to fend for ourselves in facing the fears and anxieties of daily life in this fallen world.

**In denying that God has a wise and sanctifying purpose in the miserable calamities (injustice, oppression, heartache and pain) we endure on this earth, open theists undermine confidence in God and leave desperate counselees adrift in a sea of futility.**

The pillars of the early church, Peter, James, and Paul, apparently thought differently than the open theists about the problem of suffering and pain. Peter wrote in 1 Peter 1:6-7 that trials strengthen and test the genuineness of our faith and result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ appears. James wrote in James 1:2-3 to count it all joy when trials come as it produces patience and spiritual maturity. Paul wrote from personal experience in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 about his thorn in the flesh and saw in his weakness that the power of Christ rested upon him. He even took pleasure in reproaches, needs, and distresses because he found more joy in God’s grace. In Romans 8:28, Paul reminds his readers that “all things work together for good to those who love God.”

These passages present a view of God who does more than feel our pain; he has a plan and a purpose. His intent in-

cludes our spiritual growth and edification with eternal consequences. When sitting across that table from a suffering Christian, it is our duty and privilege to help them lift up their eyes to our Sovereign God, who ordains every circumstance, in whose sovereign care is the only source of true comfort. What a blessing to serve and worship Someone who never makes mistakes, who will right all wrongs, who knows the future perfectly, and who declares with certainty that one day all tears will be wiped away.

#### CONCLUSION

Openness theology is not a minor aberration weakening the Church of Jesus Christ today. It is a massive frontal attack on the God of the Bible, a dangerous continuation of doubt in God and His Word that began in the Garden of Eden and has coursed through man's history ever since. As we have seen, the implications of such erroneous theology affect our lives and worship at every level. 

<sup>1</sup> John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998) 213.

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent exposition on the sovereignty of God, see *The Sovereignty of God* by Arthur W. Pink (Baker Books, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 240.

<sup>4</sup> Sanders infers that some prophecies either do not come to pass at all or fail to happen exactly as they were foretold. "In this sense the Bible does attribute mistakes to God" (132). "The future eschaton will surprise us because it is not set in concrete; it is not unfolding according to a predetermined script" (125).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 119. Sanders interprets Paul's rise in the work to the Gentiles as

*The WRS Journal 12:1, February 2005*

resulting from Peter's failure at Antioch. While it was God's intention to use Peter, God resourcefully turned to Paul when Peter failed.

<sup>6</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 187.

<sup>7</sup> Greg Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 98, "I do not see that any view of God captures the power and urgency of prayer as adequately as the open view does, and because the heart is influenced by the mind, I do not see that any view can inspire passionate and urgent prayer as powerfully as the open view can."

<sup>8</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 50, 53, 54, 64, 66, 162, 271-274.

<sup>9</sup> Bruce Ware, "Despair Amidst Suffering and Pain: A Practical Outworking of Open Theism's Diminished View of God," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* (Summer 2000).

<sup>10</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 87, 94, 128, 214, 220, 261.

<sup>11</sup> Sanders admits that "God does not have a specific divine purpose for each and every occurrence of evil" (262). Boyd admits that "It is true that according to the open view things can happen in our lives that God didn't plan or even foreknow with certainty (though he always foreknew they were possible). This means that in the open view things can happen to us that have no overarching divine purpose" (153).

**The implications of such  
erroneous theology affect  
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## BOOKS

***The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God***, by Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger. Downers Grove and Carlisle: InterVarsity and Paternoster, 1994. Reviewed by Dennis W. Jowers.

Karl Barth's Romans commentary of 1921, Karl Adam long ago remarked, "fell like a bomb on the playground of the theologians."\* *The Openness of God*, while certainly less influential than Barth's commentary, generated a similar disturbance in evangelical theology at its appearance in 1994. While open theism had received support in scattered and relatively obscure publications for decades, this book brought open theism to the forefront of the evangelical theological agenda. It seems only fitting, therefore, in this theme issue on open theism to revisit this seminal work. In the following, accordingly, we shall briefly outline the contents of the various essays that make up *The Openness of God*, appending criticisms where appropriate.

*The Openness of God* consists in the following five essays: "Biblical Support for a New Perspective" by Richard Rice; "Historical Considerations" by John Sanders; "Systematic Theology" by Clark Pinnock; "A Philosophical Perspective" by William Hasker; and "Practical Implications" by David Basinger. In the first of these, biblical scholar Richard Rice sketches the "traditional perspective" on the nature of God, which he opposes; sets forth some of the presuppositions that

guide his exegesis; marshalls what he considers biblical evidence for the open theists' viewpoint; and, finally, addresses passages that pose difficulties for the open position.

In the second essay, John Sanders attempts to supply a thumbnail sketch of the history of Western thought on the subject of the divine nature. Specifically, in the first three fourths of his essay Sanders summarizes what he takes to be the views of Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Heraclitus, Parmenides, Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Philo, Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, the unknown author of *Ad Theopompum*, Lactantius, Arnobius, Athanasius, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine of Hippo, Pseudo-Dionysius, Erigena, Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and Arminius on this subject: all, incidentally, in the space of 31 pages. Sanders tends to ignore evidence that runs contrary to his position: viz. that doctrines such as those of divine simplicity, immutability, impassibility, etc., derive from Greek philosophy rather than biblical revelation. And, as one might expect, Sanders commits a number of grave historical errors. Flaws of this sort, however, are virtually unavoidable in a survey of the breadth that Sanders attempts.

In the last fourth of his essay, Sanders briefly recounts what he describes as progressive, conservative, and moderate views of the divine nature. By progressive views, Sanders means varieties of pantheism; by conservative views, he

means classical theism and mild variations from it; and by moderate views, he means open theism. Although Sanders's categories do reflect fairly accurately the current state of theological opinion, evangelicals should realize that Sanders's progressives universally reject the authority of Scripture and that some open theists deny Scripture's inerrancy. If one restricted one's survey of theological opinion to theologians committed to biblical inerrancy, open theists would constitute not the moderate party among contemporary theologians, but a tiny minority on the left fringe.

In the third essay, Clark Pinnock attempts to re-interpret doctrines such as that of the Trinity, creation *ex nihilo*, and God's transcendence/immanence, power, immutability, impassibility, eternity, and knowledge in such a way that they cohere with the open theist perspective. Specifically, Pinnock argues for the inconsistency of the doctrine of divine simplicity, a cornerstone of classical theism, with the doctrine of the Trinity; that the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* does not imply that God exercises comprehensive control over human beings; for the necessity of balancing the doctrines of divine transcendence and divine immanence; that God must radically limit the exercise of his power in order to preserve human freedom and dignity; that God is ethically, rather than ontologically, immutable; that God is impassible only in the sense that "God is beyond certain modes of suffering" (p. 119); that God is eternal only in the sense that he is everlasting; and that God is omniscient, finally, only in that he is comprehensively aware of the past, the present, and those future realities that follow inexorably from present and past states of affairs. The future, Pinnock be-

lieves, is, to the extent that it depends on the free choices of human beings, unknowable.

In the fourth essay, William Hasker, after briefly contesting the claims that God is timeless, impassible, and immutable, analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of what he considers the four principal models of divine providence discussed in contemporary theology: process theism, according to which God is incapable of controlling the world and is, indeed, dependent on the world for his existence; Calvinism, according to which God exercises total control over every aspect of the world; Molinism, according to which God allows intelligent creatures to do as they wish, but is able to control them to the extent that he knows how they would freely respond to any given state of affairs; the doctrine of simple foreknowledge, according to which God does not in any sense control the actions of intelligent creatures, but foreknows those actions comprehensively; and open theism, according to which God lacks comprehensive knowledge of the future, because he accords intelligent creatures a capacity for self-determination so radical that even God cannot predict with certainty what they will do.

Readers of this journal will be pleased to learn that Hasker offers penetrating criticisms of Molinism, the most sophisticated of the models of divine providence that compete with Calvinism for the allegiance of evangelicals. Molinism, Hasker explains, is problematic in that it presupposes the conceivability of "counterfactuals of freedom," i.e., true statements about what a creature whose actions are in no sense determined in advance will do in a given situation. Hasker

states his criticism by way of the following example:

One way to look at the matter is this: If Adam is free with respect to eating the apple, then it seems reasonable to say that he *might* eat the apple, and also that he *might not* eat it. But if it is true that he might eat it, then (according to the principles of counterfactual logic) it is false that he *would not* eat it – and conversely, if it is true that he might not eat the apple, then it is false that he *would* eat it. So if he is free [in the libertarian, anti-Calvinistic sense of being able to do “x” or “not x” at any given time] with respect to eating the apple, then it is true that he might eat it and also true that he might not eat it, but it is not true *either* that he (definitely) *would* eat it *or* that he (definitely) *would not* eat it. Thus, if he is free in his decision to eat or not, then there is no true counterfactual of freedom describing what he would do in the situation [p. 145].

If there can be no true counterfactuals of freedom, of course, then God cannot know counterfactuals of freedom any more than he can know square circles. Molinism, therefore, is, at least according to Hasker, incoherent. While Hasker’s essay is flawed, therefore, in that it reaches conclusions contrary to Reformed orthodoxy about God’s nature, sovereignty, and knowledge, it is enlightening.

The same is true of the book’s concluding essay, which concerns the practical implications of open theism, by David Basinger. The open theist perspective, Basinger believes, allows evangelicals to achieve more logically and existentially

satisfying views on the following five subjects: petitionary prayer, divine guidance, human suffering, social responsibility, and evangelistic responsibility. Basinger’s treatment of the first subject, prayer, however, shows that open theism can introduce confusion even into those areas of Christian doctrine that it might seem to clarify.

Open theism, Basinger claims, coheres more with the practice and doctrine of petitionary prayer than other understandings of the divine nature in that it posits: (a) that God can change his mind in response to prayer; and (b) that the future is not fixed, but open to modification in accordance with requests offered by Christians to God. Basinger admits, nonetheless, that open theists question the propriety of prayers that might seem to ask God to modify the choices of other persons. As he explains:

A key assumption of the open model is that God so values the inherent integrity of significant human freedom...that he will not as a general rule force his created moral agents to perform actions that they do not freely desire to perform or manipulate the natural environment in such a way that their freedom of choice is destroyed. Accordingly, most of us who affirm the open view of God doubt that he would override the freedom of one individual primarily because he was freely asked to do so by another. We doubt, for instance, that God would override the freedom of someone in a troubled marriage primarily because he was freely petitioned to do so by a friend of the couple.

One cannot resolve this difficulty, moreover, by claiming that God might, nonetheless, answer prayers for change in others' lives by improving persons' lives in such a way that they would be likely to make better choices. For again, in Basinger's words, open theists hold that:

God loves all individuals in the sense that he is always seeking the highest good for each. For some of us this means that God would never refrain from intervening beneficially in one person's life simply because someone else has failed to request that he do so. And, accordingly, we naturally find prayers requesting even noncoercive influence in the lives of others to be very problematic.

Appearances notwithstanding, then, open theism accords quite poorly with the common belief in the efficacy of intercessory prayer; and one can level similar criticisms, *mutatis mutandis*, at Basinger's claims that open theism clarifies and reinforces other key doctrines.

Basinger's essay and *The Openness of God* as a whole, therefore, seem inadequate to the task of proving open theism superior to the other understandings of the world's relation to God that have traditionally enjoyed wide support among Christians. It does, however, constitute a simultaneously brief and lucid summary of what open theism is and why many evangelicals embrace it. For those who are thoroughly familiar with the doctrine of God as taught in classical, Reformed orthodoxy and the arguments for it, we recommend the *The Openness of God* unreservedly as a source of information about open theism. 

\* "Die Theologie der Krisis," *Hochland*, XXIII (1925/26), 271.

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**The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence**, by John Sanders. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1998. Pp. 367. Reviewed by John A. Battle.

Even though this volume appeared seven years ago, it remains the most thorough standard presentation and defense of the openness view of God. The author, John E. Sanders, is a professor of philosophy and religion at Huntington College in Indiana, and has also served as an Extraordinary Fellow at the University of Notre Dame Center for Philosophy of Religion. He recently survived an attempt to remove him from the Evangelical Theological Society for his novel views of Scripture and of God. In this book Sanders approaches his work from the standpoint of religious philosophy, but he also spends much effort defending his position in the areas of biblical exegesis, systematic theology, and pastoral ministry.

After explaining his basic position, Sanders seeks to demonstrate it and to defend it against objections arising from various areas of study: the Old Testament, the New Testament, historical theology, and systematic theology. He concludes with a lengthy discussion of practical conclusions and insights gained from the openness view of God.

Sanders begins his book by summarizing his position concerning the providence of God. He objects to the traditional definition of providence as God's "exhaustive control of all things." He rather pre-

fers his own definition: “The word *providence* refers to the way God has chosen to relate to us and provide for our well-being” (p. 11). With this new definition (actually, a non-definition), Sanders can claim to believe in providence, while denying its traditional meaning. Actually, the way he has defined it, everyone who believes in a god at all can be said to believe in providence.

The tests Sanders employs to evaluate his and other doctrines are the following: public intelligibility, conceptual intelligibility, and adequacy for the demands of life. He maintains that his view of God will rescue the idea of God from a premature death. The old understandings are dying (at least in the academic circles Sanders travels in); a new, revived doctrine of providence will enable intelligent and sensitive people to still affirm it.

One point he belabors is that there are many statements in the Bible in which God is said to react to what humans do. He sees and hears them; he tests them to see what they will do; he is angry when they sin; he is sad and even frustrated when they turn aside from his good plans for them; he is pleased when they obey; he answers their prayers; he pleads with them to believe in him and obey him. All these passages, Sanders maintains, show us the true nature of God as open to us and responsive to us. We affect him. He is not static, unchanging, uninfluenced by us. Those passages that seem to teach the unchangeableness of God, Sanders insists, are few in number compared to the passages that show his responsiveness to us. Since Scripture cannot contradict itself, we should interpret those few passages to agree with the other, more numerous passages. Traditional theolo-

gians have called the “changeable God” passages “anthropomorphisms,” figures of speech that describe God in human terms, to make the writing more dramatic or understandable. Sanders objects to this refuge of “anthropomorphisms.” Rather, it is the “unchangeable God” passages that need to be reinterpreted. They show, he says, that God always has the same moral character, love, and faithfulness in all situations, while we sinners fail to be consistent. They do not teach that God is unchangeable in some Greek philosophical sense, but that he is blessedly consistent in all his virtues.

Sanders builds the case for a “project” concept of the creation. God limits himself voluntarily as he creates and guides the universe and its inhabitants. Whether or not he was limited in this way before the creation Sanders is not willing to speculate. But he does strongly maintain that God’s limitations regarding us are a voluntary choice. God has made us as a sort of “project.” He subjects us to certain conditions, and waits to see what we will do. He wants us to know and love him. But he will not force us to do this. He does not even know ahead of time what we will do. He hopes for the best, but often is surprised, hurt, and frustrated when we don’t love him in return. He is “a God who risks.”

If God were to know ahead of time what we would do, then our freedom of choice would be compromised; and God regards our freedom as a nonnegotiable requirement. This is Arminianism with a vengeance. God does have complete knowledge of the past and the present, just not of the future. With this knowledge of the present, God can make pretty shrewd guesses as to what will happen. If

necessary, he can arrange circumstances, or even interfere with a special miracle, but he tries to keep those at a minimum. And when things don't go his way, he's very resourceful at thinking of alternate plans. God's really fast on his feet.

That's what happened with Adam and Eve. God was surprised and saddened when Adam sinned, but he immediately thought of a solution—to have his Son die in the place of sinners. Then God could be confident that some humans, at least, would choose to believe in Christ and be saved, and that he could fellowship with them in eternity. So, while he does not know who will be saved or lost, he is pretty confident that things will turn out in the end overall. This enables him to make some prophecies in the Bible that will come true, although some of his prophecies failed to come true, due to unforeseen aberrations in someone's free will. But we don't need to worry—those were not the important prophecies.

Sanders exhibits a wide-ranging scholarship, but perhaps of limited depth. The authorities he quotes for support for various points (the book has over fifty pages of footnotes in small print) represent a very wide variety of scholarship. There seems to be little effort to distinguish traditional, orthodox theologians from modern, unorthodox, or postmodern theologians or philosophers. Although he discusses many biblical texts (the Scripture index is seven pages), he does not always present the strongest texts for the traditional view (e.g., Eph 1:11 is not discussed at all).

The portrait of God painted by John Sanders is so radically different from the God that Christians through the centu-

*The WRS Journal 12:1, February 2005*

ries have seen in the Bible, that we can say it is a different god altogether. Many of the arguments Sanders sets forth for this new concept of God are dealt with in articles in this issue of the *WRS Journal*. However, we can be grateful that he has presented this lengthy work defending this view. By bringing the various arguments for open theism into this full a discussion, Sanders has provided a helpful resource for those who wish to defend the traditional, and we would say Scriptural, teaching about the providence of God. 📖

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***God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism***, by Bruce A. Ware. Crossway Books, 2000. 240 pages. ***No Place for Sovereignty: What's Wrong with Freewill Theism***, by R. K. McGregor Wright. InterVarsity Press, 1996. 249 pages. Reviewed by Christopher K. Lensch.

Both of these useful books are critiques of the open view of God and its theological underpinnings.

R. K. McGregor Wright begins *No Place for Sovereignty* by tracing the history of the debate over man's autonomy from the days of Augustine and Pelagius through the time of the Reformation into the days of Wesley and Whitefield. With a background in apologetics and systematic theology, Wright is skilled in showing "what's wrong—biblically, theologically, and philosophically—with freewill" theism. What gives him valuable credentials in the current openness controversy was his interaction with openness advocate, Clark Pinnock, who was Wright's

dissertation advisor. The dissertation was on the necessary interconnection between theistic apologetics and Calvinistic theology, a thesis that Pinnock is said to have chafed under. The strengths of *No Place for Sovereignty* are its breadth of discussion and its readability. There is a glossary of theological and technical terms, plus at the end of each chapter is a list of recommended works for further reading.

Bruce Ware's book, *God's Lesser Glory*, is a straightforward critique of openness theology. He has taught at Bethel College and Seminary, where he found ample opportunity to interact with openness proponent Gregory Boyd.

Because most openness theologians claim to be evangelicals, and because their books are published by evangelical publishers<sup>1</sup> and their papers have been debated at meetings of evangelical scholars, Ware's style is irenic. The urgency he communicates, however, is unabated.

Ware has thought through the implications of the God of the open future Who must learn things through trial and error as events unfold. This kind of God "...suffers greatly from this lack of knowledge and it affects his plans, wise counsel, predictive ability, and providential control of history."<sup>2</sup> This kind of "less glorious" God undermines the Christian's confidence in prayer, hope, and divine guidance.

While Gregory Boyd has stated that his redefinition of God is "peripheral" compared to Christian love and unity in Christ,<sup>3</sup> Bruce Ware sees the dangers and inconsistencies of open theism. He warns evangelical leaders and denominations to

take the openness trend seriously because it is a major departure from orthodoxy that will lead to an enervated Christianity with a heterodox gospel. 📖

<sup>1</sup> Intersity Press has published many openness books with a handful of orthodox responses. Baker Book House also has begun publishing openness authors like Boyd.

<sup>2</sup> Ware, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> Cited by Ware (p. 9) from Boyd's *God of the Possible*, pp. 19, 20.

# ***NOTES***

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