

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 panentheism; 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

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

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 believes, 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.