

## 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, mistaken 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.

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

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 includes 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.

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<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 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).