“IS THERE KNOWLEDGE IN THE MOST HIGH?”
(PSALM 73:11)

Larry D. Pettegrew
Professor of Theology

The importance of one’s view of God highlights the necessity of learning about Open Theism, a new approach to understanding God that deviates substantially from classical theism. Open Theism contends that some things happen that are contrary to God’s intentions and that He took risks in creating a world in which He does not know and control everything. Open theists defend their system by claiming that classic theology suffered ill effects in the early church and throughout church history when theologians allowed their thinking to fall under the influence of secular philosophy. In response, classic theologians point out the same problem with Open Theism. Open theists also defend their view by reinterpreting OT events so as to disallow anthropopathisms in biblical descriptions of God and by passages emphasizing divine ignorance. In reconstructing the doctrine of God, open theists emphasize the love of God above all His other characteristics, deny the immutability and impassibility of God, dispute God’s full control of world affairs, and question God’s exhaustive knowledge of the future. They further defend their doctrine of God by claiming their system as a better explanation of human tragedies. Their view of God forces a revision of other areas of doctrine, including eschatology, angelology, Christology, and soteriology. All of Open Theism’s distinctive positions are contrary to sound biblical teaching.

* * * *

It is really quite peculiar. After two thousand years of Christian theology, serious Bible-believing Christians are once again debating what God is like. The debate is not even about the peripheral matters or technicalities. It actually revolves around some of the basic attributes of God. Does God control everything in the universe (omnipotence)? Does God know everything that happens and will happen (omniscience)? On one side of the debate is classic theology. God sovereignly controls the universe and knows the details of the future, including the future decisions and acts of free moral agents. On the other side of the debate is a new theology, also claiming to be evangelical, often called “Open Theism.”

The debate impacts Christianity in several ways. On a personal level, a person’s worldview depends on knowing who God is and what He is like. A. W.
Tozer once wrote, “...[T]he most portentous fact about any man is... what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like. We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God.”

Not only for the individual, but also “the most revealing thing about the Church is her idea of God...” R. Albert Mohler, Jr., warns,

Having debated issues ranging from biblical inerrancy to the reality of hell, evangelicals are now openly debating the traditional doctrine of God represented by classical theism. My argument is that the integrity of evangelicalism as a theological movement, indeed the very coherence of evangelical theology is threatened by the rise of the various new “theisms” of the evangelical revisionists. Unless these trends are reversed and evangelicals return to an unapologetic embrace of biblical theism, evangelical theology will represent nothing less than the eclipse of God at century’s end.

Moreover, the debate is not only about the doctrine of God. Thinking incorrectly about God also impacts all the other doctrines, including angelology, Christology, and soteriology.

The purpose of this essay, then, is to introduce and identify Open Theism. This essay is intended to be only a survey, with a minimum amount of critique. The goals are fourfold: (1) to describe Open Theism; (2) to identify the basic teachings about the doctrine of God in Open Theism; (3) to demonstrate how other important doctrines are being reinterpreted in Open Theism; and (4) to emphasize the importance of having a correct biblical doctrine of God. This is not a debate to be ignored. As Mohler says, “the integrity of evangelicalism as a theological movement” is threatened by the debate about God.

OPEN THEISM DESCRIBED

Open Theism has also been called openness theology, relational theism, freewill theism, simple foreknowledge, and presentism. It also represents what some have described as the “risk” view of providence. God has set up the universe so that “some things go contrary to what God intends and may not turn out completely as God desires. Hence God takes risks in creating this sort of world.”

Adherents to openness theology come from many circles. They claim, in fact, that “a fair number of today’s most prominent theologians and philosophers are

---

2 Ibid.
affirming the openness of God.”\(^5\) John Sanders lists evangelical theologians such as Richard Rice, Gregory Boyd, Clark Pinnock, and others who may or may not want to be included in the openness camp. He also includes some classic Arminian, Pentecostal, liberal, Roman Catholic, and feminist theologians, as well as some contemporary philosophers of religion.\(^6\) He even names some “Reformed” theologians. Sanders writes, “Something that surprised me as the study unfolded was the number of Reformed (Dutch Reformed in particular) thinkers who support the risk model (e.g., Adri Konig, Vincent Brummer, Nicholas Wolterstorff, James Daane and Herry Boer). Things are certainly changing in Reformed theology!”\(^7\)

The thesis of Open Theism is that God maintains a genuine, authentic relationship between Himself and mankind. Of course, no one will object to this thesis as it is stated. The tension arises in the explanation of the thesis and in the assertion that open theists’ understanding of God is superior to both Calvinism and Arminianism. According to open theists, if God has predestined everything, as the Calvinists say, there is no real interaction between God and man. And even if God only knows everything ahead of time, as the Arminians say, there is no real interaction between God and man. For, if, as both the Calvinists and Arminians teach, God knows in one eternal Now all that will happen in earth history, then all of those events must take place.

So, for example, if God foreknows that one of the readers of this essay will be run over by a speeding church bus next Sunday, God cannot really intervene. God foreknew in eternity past that it is going to happen, so it will happen. If He intervenes and keeps the accident from happening, then He really did not foreknow this event. Thus the openness theologians concluded that in both Calvinism and classic Arminianism, there cannot be genuine interaction of God with mankind. Even Arminian theology is thus too Calvinistic. God simply does not know all that will happen.\(^8\)

---

\(^5\)Clark Pinnock and others, “Preface,” in *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1994) 9.

\(^6\)Ibid., 284 n. 13. Perhaps the first major evangelical book to expound Open Theism was Richard Rice’s study, *God’s Foreknowledge and Man’s Free Will* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1985), originally entitled in 1980, *The Openness of God*. According to David Alstad Tiessen, in Wesleyan theology it was Lorenzo Dow McCabe (1817-1897) “who developed the first sustained ‘openness’ proposal from within an evangelical framework” (David Alstad Tiessen, “The Openness Model of God: An Evangelical Paradigm in Light of Its Nineteenth-Century Wesleyan Precedent,” *Didaskalia* 11/2 (Spring 2000): 79. Tiessen concludes, however, that there were significant differences between McCabe’s system and Open Theism (95-101).

OPEN THEISM DEFENDED

Openness theologians defend their theological system with historical, philosophical, biblical, and theological arguments. The following are typical.

The Corruption of Classic Theology

The Openness Charge

Openness theologians argue that classic theology has been corrupted by the inroads of philosophy. John Sanders, who writes the chapter on “Historical Considerations” in the book, *The Openness of God*, asks and answers a major question: “Where does this ‘theologically correct’ [classic] view of God come from? The answer, in part, is found in the way Christian thinkers have used certain Greek philosophical ideas. Greek thought has played an extensive role in the development of the traditional doctrine of God.”

Sanders gives a survey of the Greek philosophers (especially Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and Philo) whom he believes influenced the church fathers to bring philosophy into the doctrine of God. Since the Greek gods were “characterized by rationality, timelessness and immutability,” the church fathers brought these doctrines over into Christianity. Philo, who writes a treatise on God’s immutability and impassibility, is the mediator of this pollution of early Christian theology. According to Sanders, Augustine was especially beguiled. Sanders writes, “His emphasis on divine immutability and simplicity takes precedence over God’s suffering, love and faithfulness. Augustine always believed in the biblical God, but in my opinion he allowed neo-Platonic metaphysics to constrain that God. He quotes the Bible extensively, but interprets it with the neo-Platonic framework.”

Later Christian theologians were all the more influenced by pagan theology, says Sanders. In the Middle Ages, the scholastics made use of Greek philosophy to defend Christianity. In the Reformation, the Reformers, though able to restore some biblical semblance to ecclesiology and soteriology, failed in theology proper. Influenced by Augustine and some of the scholastics, they fortified the doctrine of God with Greek philosophical concepts. This polluted doctrine of God was passed along, declares Sanders, to later generations of divines, and is taught by such writers as Stephen Charnock, William G. T. Shedd, A. H. Strong, Louis Berkhof, Herman Bavinck, Lewis Sperry Chafer, A. W. Tozer, Charles Ryrie, J. I. Packer, W. Bingham Hunter, and Carl F. H. Henry.

The Classic Theology Response

---

9 John Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” in *The Openness of God* 59.

10 Ibid., 69.

11 Ibid., 85.
No classical theist, of course, would wish to defend all that the church fathers, scholastics, or even the Reformers had to say about theology or specifically, the doctrine of God. In fact, most conservative evangelical theologians would no doubt agree that what goes by the name of classic theology cannot be accepted in the whole, but must be adjusted when its weaknesses are exposed by Scripture. But open theists are not arguing for minor corrections. They are charging that the doctrine of God in classic theology has been so corrupted by Greek philosophy that it obscures who God really is.

So how have classic theists responded to this historical argument? First of all, they have pointed out that the this argument is not new and has been adequately answered in the past. The idea that classic Christian theology suffers from the inroads of Greek philosophy was the exact thesis of some nineteenth-century liberals. Gerald Bray recounts,

In fairness, it should be said that the gist of the above argument was not invented by the authors of the openness of God, nor is it a product of the most recent modern theology. It originated in the early nineteenth century in Germany, where it was connected with such names as Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792-1869) and August Neander (1789-1850). Later on, it was picked up by Albrecht Ritschl (1822-89), but the classic exposition which became famous all over the world is that of Alfred [Adolph] von Harnack (1851-1930), expressed most clearly in a series of lectures delivered in Berlin in 1900 and published in English translation as *What is Christianity?* Harnack’s thesis was later developed by Walter Bauer (1877-1960) and has gained wide acceptance.

Adolph von Harnack developed the metaphor of the nut—that the simple essence of the gospel (the kernel) had been covered over by a theology saturated with Greek philosophy, and thus it was imperative for Christians “to distinguish kernel and husk.”

Bray concludes his point, however, by saying that Harnack’s thesis “has been refuted in considerable detail by such eminent scholars as J. N. D. Kelly (1909-97) and H. E. W. Turner (1907- ) and is no longer taken seriously by church historians. It comes as a surprise to see this old idea served up as something new.”

Kelly’s and Turner’s studies are too in depth to rehearse here, but Turner’s

---

1See for example, John Feinberg, *No One Like Him* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2001). Naming classical theism, Process Theology, and Open Theism, Feinberg goes so far as to say, “[T]he position I shall expouse in this book is represented by none of the three. I shall offer a different mediating position, the model of the king who cares” (62). His mediating position, however, is only a moderate departure from classic theology, in comparison to Open Theism and Process Theology.


analysis of Harnack’s thesis is also a good response to the openness charge. Turner writes, “What Harnack interprets as the intrusion of alien elements into the Gospel is more correctly seen as the elucidation of its unique subject-matter in light of its contemporary setting.”16 In other words, doctrine books, theology sets, and confessions of faith written from the classic perspective are contemporary elucidations and systemizations of truth, not the corruption of the Christian message.

Classic theologians have another response to the openness argument that classic Christian theology has been polluted by Greek philosophy. This argument is unimpressive, they respond, in light of the fact that openness theology itself has been influenced by philosophy—specifically process philosophy and theology. This is not to say that openness theologians are themselves process theologians. Boyd insists, “Some evangelical authors have wrongly accused open theists of being close to process thought, but in truth the two views have little in common.”17 In process thought, for example, God cannot predetermine anything. In Open Theism, God does predetermine some things. In process thought, God needs the universe in order to express His love. He is ontologically dependent on the world. In open theology, love is expressed in the Trinity, and God is ontologically independent of the universe.18 Clark Pinnock has said, “Indeed, if the choice were exclusively between classical and process theism (which it is not), I would certainly opt for classical theism.”19

Still, careful critics have presented evidence that Open Theism has been influenced by Process Theology. According to William Watkins, open theist Gregory Boyd, in his academic work, Trinity and Process, “takes on process philosopher Charles Hartshorne in an attempt to salvage what’s viable in Hartshorne’s metaphysic and uses it to resolve what Boyd sees as the problem areas of classical Christianity.”20 In classic theology, God is pure act. He has no potential to be other than He is. Hartshorne, however, argues that God has two poles, one is His ever-changing experiences, and the other is constant. Therefore, becoming rather than being is the most fundamental characteristic of reality. Boyd, though modifying Hartshorne, agrees that “the fundamental vision of the process world view, especially as espoused by Charles Hartshorne, is correct.”21 Thus, Open Theism “adopts the major process category of a socially related, becoming reality

17Gregory A. Boyd, God of the Possible (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) 31.
18Gregory A. Boyd, Oneness Pentecostals and the Trinity (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992) 192-95.
while rejecting certain other metaphysical views found in Process Theology..."22

To summarize, openness theologians accuse classic theology of being corrupted by Greek philosophy. Classic theologians respond that this is an old argument well-answered in the past by Christian scholars. Though it is always liable to specific modification, classic theology, as we know it in the creeds, confessions of faith, and other evangelical literature is a generally accurate systematization of scriptural truth. Moreover, the historical argument of Open Theism seems to be a defective argument inasmuch as openness theology itself has been influenced by Process Theology.

A Reinterpretation of OT Events

Second, openness theologians defend their system by a reinterpretation of God’s activities in the OT. This defense includes at least two features: (1) A minimization of anthropopathisms; and (2) An emphasis on divine ignorance.

A Minimization of Anthropopathisms

An anthropomorphism is a figurative description of God using physical parts of a man, such as the eyes of God or the arm of God. Classic and openness theologians agree that such terms are figurative, and that God does not actually have physical eyes or arms.

An anthropopathism, on the other hand, speaks of God by using words about the human emotional life—words such as grief, repentance, anger, and regret.23 Historically, many classic theologians have viewed these terms as figurative. John Calvin, for example, claimed that God does not really grieve, but the biblical writers simply use terms like “grieve” to communicate God’s displeasure. In Gen 6:6, for example, “the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart.” Calvin comments, “Certainly God is not sorrowful or sad; but remains forever like himself in his celestial and happy repose: yet, because it could not otherwise be known how great is God’s hatred and detestation of sin, therefore the Spirit accommodates himself to our capacity.”24 In another place, Calvin writes, “Although he is beyond all disturbance of mind, yet he

---


23For a further study of these terms, see Graham A. Cole, “The Living God: Anthropomorphic or Anthropopathic?” The Reformed Journal 59 (April 2000):16-27.

testifies that he is angry toward sinners. Therefore whenever we hear that God is angered, we ought not to imagine any emotion in him, but rather to consider that this expression has been taken from our own human experience, because God, whenever he is exercising judgment, exhibits the appearance of one kindled and angered.\footnote{John Calvin, \textit{Institutes of the Christian Religion}, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 227.}

According to Calvin, God forever remains in his celestial and happy repose.

In contrast, openness theologians have argued that we should take these expressions of emotion by God as genuine and literal, not as anthropopathisms. God really does grieve, regret, and become angry. Gregory Boyd writes, “[L]anguage about God ‘changing his mind,’ ‘regretting,’ and so on should be taken no less literally than language about God ‘thinking,’ ‘loving,’ or ‘acting justly.’”\footnote{Boyd, \textit{God of the Possible} 170 n. 2.}

Some classic theologians have proposed a mediating view that God does have emotions such as love and anger, and does genuinely grieve over sin.\footnote{Another feature of the discussion of anthropopathisms in Scripture is the question of whether terms like “grieve,” “anger,” and “love” can ever be used of God in the same way as they are used of man. Feinberg asks, “Since God is so different from us, when Scripture says God is love, maybe we don’t know what that means” (\textit{No One Like Him} 78). Are these terms used of God and man univocally, equivocally, analogically, or in some other way? Thus, the doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God enters into this discussion. Anthropopathisms are also closely connected with the doctrine of impassibility, which will be discussed in the next section.} But such genuine emotions should not be placed in the same category as anthropocentric communicative expressions such as God’s changing His mind, regretting, not knowing where someone was, or unawareness of what was happening in some place on earth.

\textbf{An Emphasis on Divine Ignorance}

The OT narratives include a number of divine ignorance events. In these passages, God is unaware, does not know the future, does not know the character of some person, is surprised by a turn of events, or changes His mind. The open theists want to emphasize these and take them at face value. Some examples in Genesis include the following:

Gen 3:9—“Then the \textit{LORD} God called to Adam and said to him, ‘Where are you?’

Gen 6:6—“And the \textit{LORD} was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart.”

Gen 18:20–21—“And the \textit{LORD} said, ‘Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grave, I will go down now and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry against it that has come to Me; and if not, I will know.’

Gen 22:12—“And He said, ‘Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son from Me.’”
Some of these passages show clearly that divine ignorance is not real. Are we to believe that when God called to Adam, “Where are you?” that He really did not know where Adam was? Or, did God have to go down to Sodom to find out what was going on there? Obviously, divine ignorance passages are communicative devices. They are anthropocentric in nature intended to communicate key points in the narrative.

What about God’s seeming ignorance of the quality of Abraham’s faith? At first glance, the text seems to say that God did not know whether Abraham really trusted Him or not before the command to sacrifice Isaac. Commenting on Gen 22:12, Gregory Boyd writes, “The verse clearly says that it was because Abraham did what he did that the Lord now knew he was a faithful covenant partner. The verse has no clear meaning if God was certain that Abraham would fear him before he offered up his son.”

But Bruce Ware has responded well to Boyd’s argument. First, if God must test Abraham to find out what is in his heart, it calls into question God’s present knowledge of Abraham’s or anyone else’s spiritual, psychological, mental, and emotional state. Does not the Bible say, “For the Lord searches all hearts, and understands all the intent of the thoughts” (1 Chron 28:9). It is not just the future, but the present knowledge of God which is destroyed if God’s statement is robbed of its anthropocentric nature. Ware writes, “As such, this straightforward interpretation ends up conflicting with Scripture’s affirmation that God knows all that is, and it contradicts open theism’s own commitment to God’s exhaustive knowledge of the past and present.”

Second, God already had confidence in Abraham’s faith. Before this time, God had established and confirmed the Abrahamic covenant with Abraham (Gen 12:1-3; 15:1-18). In Gen 18:19, God testifies to His confidence in Abraham, “For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the LORD, to do righteousness and justice, that the LORD may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him.” In fact the faith of Abraham before and after the test in Genesis 22 is outlined specifically in Heb 11:8-12, 17-19.

So why did God take Abraham through this experience? As to the doctrine of God, it indicates, as Ware explains, God’s “real experience in historically unfolding relationships with people, of changed dispositions or emotions in relation to some changed human situation. Just because God knows in advance that some event will occur, this does not preclude God from . . . expressing appropriate
reactions when it actually happens.” Moreover, the test was a majestic confirmation of Abraham’s confidence in God. As such, Abraham becomes a magnificent example for every believer of every generation. What a man of faith!

Yes, God did know how Abraham would respond. God is never ignorant. God was, in fact, active in producing the faith that was put on exhibit. Still, God could and did express genuine pleasure when the event transpired in history. And the event becomes a tremendous encouragement for future generations of believers.

**A Reconstruction of the Doctrine of God**

Open theists believe that “a new wave of critical reappraisal and competent reconstruction of the doctrine of God is sweeping over the intellectual landscape.” This reappraisal features an emphasis on a certain attribute of God, a denial of two other attributes of God, and a minimization of the omnipotence and omniscience of God.

**God Is Essentially Love**

Openness theologians have set love up as a paradigm through which to view God. Richard Rice argues, “[L]ove is the most important quality we attribute to God.” Moreover, “Love is the essence of the divine reality, the basic source from which all of God’s attributes arise.” Such an idea, though attractive, is not biblically defensible. As John MacArthur has written, “Divine love in no way minimizes or nullifies God’s other attributes—His omniscience, His omnipotence, His omnipresence, His immutability, His lordship, His righteousness, His wrath against sin, or any of His glorious perfections. Deny any of them and you have denied the God of Scripture.”

No one attribute should serve as a paradigm for understanding God. Every attribute of God is equally essential in the divine person.

---

31Ibid., 91.


34Ibid., 21. This misinterpretation of the nature of God was discussed in a previous study of the doctrine of eternal punishment (Larry D. Pettigrew, “A Kinder, Gentler Theology of Hell?,” *TMSJ* 9 [Fall 1998]:207-10).

God Is Mutable and Possible

Classic theologians have taught that God is immutable and impassible. Immutability means that God is unchangeable in His essence, attributes, consciousness, and will.36 According to open theists, immutability is not a biblical doctrine, but comes from Greek philosophy. Instead of being immutable, God is “an eternally on-going event, and an event which is dynamic and open. . . . [There is] eternally room for expansion.”37

Impassibility (ἁπαθής apathēs) is defined lexically as “not being subject to suffering.”38 The Second London Baptist Confession of Faith, following the Westminster Confession and earlier theologians, states that God is “a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions. . . .”39 Some classic theologians would thus argue that to assert that God is “without passions” means that God is unable to suffer, sorrow, or grieve. In this way, God is impassible. Open theologians argue that the doctrine of the impassibility of God came from Greek philosophy rather than the Bible.40

Without going into detail in this survey of Open Theism, it is fair to say that the Greek philosophers had a more extreme doctrine of impassibility than have many classic theologians. Gerald Bray has shown that John of Damascus, for example, understood impassibility as meaning that God’s “being could not be attacked or harmed by an outside power.”41 This is different from saying that God is not “touched by the feelings of our infirmities” (Heb 4:15). Some modern-day classic theologians have in fact rejected the more extreme doctrine of impassibility. John Feinberg, for example, writes, “In light of the nuanced understanding of divine

---

36For an excellent discussion of what is changeable and what is not changeable in God, see John Feinberg, No One Like Him 264-76. Feinberg says, “What we need is a more nuanced notion of immutability, one that takes into account the criticisms of process and open view thinkers but still upholds the essential points taught in Scripture and demanded by the conservative tradition” (265).
37Boyd, Trinity and Process 386.
40For example, see Sanders, The God Who Risks 142-47.
immutability, it is necessary to reject divine impassibility” (277).\(^\text{42}\)

Robert Reymond concurs,

Thus whenever divine impassibility is interpreted to mean that God is impervious to human pain or incapable of empathizing with human grief it must be roundly denounced and rejected. When the Confession of Faith declares that God is “without . . . passions” it should be understood to mean that God has no bodily passions such as hunger or the human drive for sexual fulfillment. . . .\(^\text{43}\)

So, is God impassible? No, in the sense that the Greek philosophers understood it. Yes, when defined carefully. It is true that God is unable to be harmed or moved by an outside power unless He sovereignly wills it. Reymond writes, “We do, however, affirm that the creature cannot inflict suffering, pain, or any sort of distress upon him against his will. In this sense God is impassible.”\(^\text{44}\) In other words, God is unassailable, perhaps a better term. Carson writes, “If God loves, it is because he chooses to love, if he suffers, it is because he chooses to suffer. God is impassible in the sense that he sustains no ‘passion,’ no emotion, that makes him vulnerable from the outside, over which he has no control, or which he has not foreseen.”\(^\text{45}\)

**God Is Not In Full Control**

Open theist Greg Boyd writes, “There is no single, all-determinative divine will that coercively steers all things . . . .”\(^\text{46}\) “God, for whatever reasons, designed the cosmos such that he does not necessarily always get his way. . . .”\(^\text{47}\) Why? Because in the divine-human relationship, there must be “genuine give-and-take relations between God and humans such that there is receptivity and a degree of contingency in God.”\(^\text{48}\)

**God Does Not Exhaustively Know The Future**

According to open theists, God does not know what decisions and actions humans will make in the future. Richard Rice writes,

> God knows a great deal about what will happen. He knows everything that will ever

\(^\text{41}\)John Feinberg, *No One Like Him* 277. See also Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* 165-66.


\(^\text{43}\)Ibid.


\(^\text{46}\)Ibid., 47.

\(^\text{47}\)Sanders, *God Who Risks* 12.
“Is There Knowledge in the Most High?” (Psalm 73:11) happen as the direct result of factors that already exist. He knows infallibly the content of his own future actions, to the extent that they are not related to human choices. Since God knows all possibilities, he knows everything that could happen and what he can do in response to each eventuality. And he knows the ultimate outcome to which he is guiding the course of history. All that God does not know is the content of future free decisions, and this is because decisions are not there to know until they occur.\(^{49}\)

Rice seems to want to minimize his doctrine by saying, “all that God does not know.” But to say that God does not know the content of future free decisions is to admit that God does not know billions of things that will happen every day. Every member of the human race probably makes thousands of decisions daily. But in Open Theism, God does not know what these decisions will be.

To be fair, openness theologians argue that they believe God is omniscient. But to them, this means that God knows everything that is knowable. Boyd insists that the debate “is not really about God’s knowledge at all. It is rather a debate about the nature of the future. . . . Open theists affirm God’s omniscience as emphatically as anybody does. The issue is not whether God’s knowledge is perfect. It is. The issue is about the nature of the reality that God perfectly knows.”\(^{50}\) Since open theists believe certain things, such as the future acts of free agents are not knowable, they can still say they believe in omniscience because God knows everything that is knowable.

But the openness doctrine of omniscience is actually radically different from the classic doctrine. For classic theologians, God knows everything, including the future free decisions of all human beings. For openness theologians, God does not know billions and billions of future events.\(^{51}\)

**A Response to the Mysteries of Human Tragedies**

A fourth way that open theists defend their doctrine of God is by asserting that it better answers the mysteries of human tragedies. Indeed, one wonders whether this is not the primary reason for the development of Open Theism. Sanders begins his book with the story of the death of his brother in a motorcycle accident. At first, he accused God of killing his brother. But later he came to believe that God had nothing to do with the accident.\(^{52}\) Later in the book, Sanders claims, “When a two-month-old child contracts a painful, incurable bone cancer that means suffering and death, it is a pointless evil. The Holocaust is pointless evil. The accident that


\(^{50}\)Boyd, *God of the Possible* 15-16.

\(^{51}\)For examples of Scriptures that teach exhaustive omniscience of future free decisions, see 1 Chron 5:26; 2 Chron 21:16-17; Prov 21:1; Isa 44:23; 45:1ff.

\(^{52}\)Sanders, *God Who Risks* 9-10.
caused the death of my brother was a tragedy. God does not have a specific purpose in mind for these occurrences.”

It is at this point that it becomes clear that open theists, in practice, teach a doctrine of God similar to secularists and process theists. A. B. Caneday, in his critique of Sander’s book, discerningly points out that Harold Kushner’s, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, popularized the view of process theism that answers human puzzles in a similar way to open theists’ explanation. Scripture instead teaches that “all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose” (Rom 8:28).

**OPEN THEISM DEVELOPED**

The reinterpretation of one doctrine in a systematic theology impacts all other doctrines. In reinterpreting theology proper, open theists are forced to reinterpret other doctrines. In hamartiology, the doctrine of sin, some open theists teach that God did not expect Adam and Eve to sin in the Garden of Eden. In the doctrine of eschatology, annihilationism, and post-mortem salvation are common among open theists. In addition, the following three doctrines seem to be in the process of reinterpretation.

**Angelology**

Open theists, especially Greg Boyd, are constructing a warfare doctrine of God and angels. It is based on what seems to be a novel Christian worldview. Boyd writes, “Stated most broadly, this worldview is that perspective on reality which centers on the conviction that the good and evil, fortunate or unfortunate, aspects of life are to be interpreted largely as the result of good and evil, friendly or hostile, spirits warring against each other and against us.”

Thus, God, with the angels at His side, is locked in mortal combat against the devil and his angels. “[D]ivine goodness does not completely control or in any sense will evil; rather good and evil are at war with one another. . . . God must work

---

53Ibid., 262. See also Greg Boyd’s attempt to show that God did not know about a future tragedy, *God of the Possible* 103ff. Boyd argues that God always has a Plan B and Plan C ready when His Plan A doesn’t work out.


56For example, see John Sanders, ed., *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995) 21-55.

with, and battle against other created beings.” 58 

Not all events in history have a divine purpose, but occur as a result of the existence of a “myriad of free agents, some human, some angelic, and many of them evil.” 59 Such a doctrine is in contrast with the classic teaching that God is in sovereign control of angelic and demonic forces.

**Christology**

Open theists believe that Jesus Christ was the God-man, following orthodox Chalcedonian Christology. But because they believe that God has to relate mutually with humans and other free agents in order to get His will done, open theists are compelled to reinterpret the details of the life of Christ. For example, Mary did not necessarily have to be the mother of Jesus. “If Mary had declined,” writes Sanders, “then God would have sought other avenues. After all, it is doubtful that there was only one maiden in all of Israel through whom God could work. God is resourceful in finding people and then equipping them with the elements necessary for accomplishing his purposes.” 60 Even “the Bethlehem massacre was not the will of God and was not planned beforehand by God. Instead, it reveals that the will of God in its fullness may not be fulfilled in all situations.” 61

**Soteriology**

Sanders takes his belief that God lacks knowledge of future free decisions to its logical conclusion in the doctrine of salvation. Even though classic theologians would point to several OT passages, Sanders maintains, “There is nothing specifically said in the Old Testament that would have led one to predict a dying and raised Messiah.” 62 Even up to the time of the Garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus prayed, “O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me” (Matt 26:39), the cross could have been avoided. Sanders asserts, “Jesus wrestles with God’s will because he does not believe that everything must happen according to a predetermined plan. . . . Although Scripture attests that the incarnation was planned from the creation of the world, this is not so with the cross. . . . Until this moment in history other routes were perhaps open.” 63 For classic theologians, Sanders’s theory that the cross could have been avoided is abominable. Caneday warns, “If anyone follows Sanders’s guidance fully on how to understand such events, one jeopardizes faith in

---

58ibid., 20.
59ibid., 53.
60Sanders, *God Who Risks* 92.
61ibid., 94.
62ibid., 133.
63ibid., 100.
the God of the Bible."\(^{64}\)

**CONCLUSION**

In this essay, we have surveyed Open Theism, a new system vying for the attention of evangelicals. We do not assert that Open Theism is wrong because it is new. Likewise, we do not assert that the classical view is without weaknesses. Tradition, of course, can never be a test of faith and practice. Open Theism can be dismissed only if it fails to comply with the biblical teachings concerning the doctrine of God.\(^{65}\)

For many, however, it is clear that open theists have not interpreted the teaching of the Bible correctly, and have therefore produced a “dangerous” system. Caneday explains, “It is dangerous not only because Sanders forges a God who resembles the image and likeness of man, but also because he builds his argument upon artifice, misrepresentation, prejudiced and selective use of biblical texts, pejorative remarks, and historical selectivity, all intended to induce disgust toward the God Christians have worshiped, from the beginning, and to welcome the deity of ‘open theism’.”\(^{66}\)

May we take Tozer’s reminder seriously: “The heaviest obligation lying upon the Christian Church today is to purify and elevate her concept of God until it is once more worthy of Him... We do the greatest service to the next generation of Christians by passing on to them undiminished that noble concept of God which we received from our Hebrew and Christian fathers of generations past.”\(^{67}\)

---

\(^{64}\)Caneday, “Putting God at Risk,” *Trinity Journal* 163.

\(^{65}\)Boyd complains, with some justification, that “most of the published criticisms raised against the open view have largely ignored the biblical grounds on which open theists base their position” (Boyd, *God of the Possible* 12). The task of comparing and contrasting the details of this system with the biblical material is not yet complete, though some important critiques have already been completed. Again, I recommend Bruce Ware’s book, *God’s Lesser Glory*. Four other articles in this issue of *The Master’s Seminary Journal* are also intended to contribute to the literature challenging the biblical interpretation on which open theists base their position.


THE OPENNESS OF GOD: DOES PRAYER CHANGE GOD?

William D. Barrick
Professor of Old Testament

A proper understanding of two OT prayers, one by Hezekiah and one by Moses, helps in determining whether prayer is the means by which God gets His will done on earth or the means by which the believer’s will is accomplished in heaven. A chronological arrangement of the three records of Hezekiah’s prayer in 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, and Isaiah reveals the arrogance of Hezekiah in his plea for God to heal him. Because Hezekiah missed the opportunity to repent of his self-centered attitude, God revealed that his descendants would become slaves in Babylon, but Hezekiah’s arrogance kept him from being concerned about his children and grandchildren. His pride further showed itself in his inability to trust God for defense against the Assyrians. God healed Hezekiah, not so much because of his prayer, but because of the promises that God had made to Hezekiah’s ancestors about sustaining the Davidic line of kings. Hezekiah’s prayer changed Hezekiah, not God. Moses’ prayer in Exodus 32 sought a change from God’s expressed intention of putting an end to Israel and starting over again with just Moses. This suggestion was not something that the Lord ever intended to occur; such a course would have voided His expressed purpose for the twelve tribes of Israel (Genesis 49). God did not change His mind regarding His plan for the twelve tribes; He rather altered His timing in order to keep His promises to them. What He did in response to Moses’ prayer cannot be taken as normative action. His “change of mind” was a tool to elicit a change of response in Moses. Moses’ prayer changed Moses, not God.

* * * *

Introduction

Two very different views of prayer pervade the church today. The first view teaches that prayer is one of the means by which God gets His will done on earth: “Effective prayer is, as John said, asking in God’s will (John 15:7). Prayer is not a means by which we get our will done in heaven. Rather, it is a means by which God
gets his will done on earth.”

The second view proclaims that prayer is one of the instruments by which the believer’s will is accomplished in heaven. This view holds that prayer can change God:

Prayer affects God more powerfully than His own purposes. God’s will, words and purposes are all subject to review when the mighty potencies of prayer come in. How mighty prayer is with God may be seen as he readily sets aside His own fixed and declared purposes in answer to prayer.

This view sees prayer as changing God’s mind or helping Him decide what to do, since He does not know everything. In his book *The God Who Risks*, John Sanders writes, “Only if God does not yet know the outcome of my journey can a prayer for a safe traveling be coherent within the model of S[imple] F[ore-knowledge].” In other words, an individual has reason to pray about a journey only if God does not know where that person is going or what will happen to him. If God already knows where someone is going and what is going to happen, open theism believes there is no need for prayer regarding the journey. The prayers of Hezekiah and Moses are among the passages whose interpretation is contested by these two views.

**Hezekiah’s Prayer** (2 Kgs 20:1-11; Isa 38:1-8; 2 Chr 32:24)

Open theists present the prayer of Hezekiah as an example of prayer changing God’s mind. Error in open theists’ approach to this prayer is partially due to their failure to examine all three records of Hezekiah’s prayer (2 Kgs 20:1-11; 2 Chr 32:24; Isa 38:1-8) in their respective contexts.

**Hezekiah’s Arrogance**

King Hezekiah repeatedly manifested an arrogant mindset. What was...
admireable about Hezekiah was that, in spite of that arrogance and egotism, he was yet sensitive to the leading of God through the words of the prophet Isaiah. The king allowed himself to be rebuked, would demonstrate a sincere change of mind, and turn to God in faith. Close scrutiny of the order of events in Hezekiah’s fourteenth year reveal the king’s arrogance as well as his moments of faithfulness.

Old Testament scholars recognize that the biblical records of Hezekiah’s reign are not in chronological order. Prior to his illness, Hezekiah had already been on the throne for 14 years of his 29-year reign (2 Kgs 18:2, 13). At the time God granted him healing and an extended life, He also promised to deliver both Hezekiah and Jerusalem from the Assyrians (2 Kgs 20:5-6; Isa 38:6). Clearly, therefore, that deliverance had not occurred prior to Hezekiah’s healing. When Merodach-baladan, king of Babylon, sent envoys with a letter and a gift for the restored Hezekiah (Isa 39:1), the proud king showed them his stored treasures (39:2-4). Thus, the stripping of Jerusalem to pay tribute to Sennacherib had to have taken place subsequent to that event. Careful reconstruction of the events of Hezekiah’s fourteenth year as king reveals that it was a very busy year:

1. Sennacherib invaded Judah (2 Kgs 18:13; 2 Chr 32:1; Isa 36:1).
2. Hezekiah became mortally ill (2 Kgs 20:1; 2 Chr 32:24; Isa 38:1-3).
3. Hezekiah was healed and granted an additional 15 years of life (2 Kgs 20:5-6; Isa 38:4-22).
4. Merodach-baladan’s envoys bring Hezekiah a letter and gift because Babylon had heard of the Judean king’s illness (2 Kgs 20:12; Isa 39:1).
6. Isaiah informed the king that one day his own descendants would serve in the palace of Babylon’s king (2 Kgs 20:16-19; Isa 39:3-8).
7. Hezekiah constructed the Siloam water tunnel, strengthened the walls of Jerusalem, and prepared weapons to defend the city (2 Chr 32:2-8).
8. Weakening in his faith, Hezekiah stripped both the Temple and his own treasuries to pay tribute to Sennacherib at Lachish (2 Kgs 18:14-16). This wealth was what God had given to Hezekiah (cf. 2 Chr 32:27-30).
10. The Assyrian officers left Jerusalem and rejoined Sennacherib at Lachish (2 Kgs 19:8; Isa 37:8).
11. Rumor of the Ethiopian king’s intent to attack Sennacherib resulted in renewed

---

8 Whether this was just a weakening of his resolve to resist Sennacherib or a play to buy time for further strengthening of Jerusalem’s fortifications, it is evidence that Hezekiah was depending upon his own actions rather than upon the living God’s protection.
12. In what the writer of 2 Kings and Isaiah both present as a significant act of faith, Hezekiah took the letter demanding surrender into the Temple and prayed for deliverance (2 Kgs 19:14-34; 2 Chr 32:20; Isa 37:14-20).
14. Assyrian troops surrounded Jerusalem; 185,000 were slain by divine intervention; and Sennacherib returned to Nineveh (2 Kgs 19:35-36; 2 Chr 32:21-22; Isa 37:36-37).
15. The people bestowed such an abundance of gifts on Hezekiah that even the nations around Israel began to exalt him (2 Chr 32:23).

Why is the order of the record in 2 Kings and Isaiah so confused? It appears that with chapters 36 and 37, Isaiah intended to wrap up the prophecies he had begun in chapter 7 concerning the Assyrian era. Starting at chapter 38 and continuing through at least chapter 48, he is dealing with the Babylonian era. The writer of 2 Kings was probably well aware of Isaiah’s order and chose to follow it himself. A summary of each king’s life was a characteristic part of the formula employed by the writer of Kings. In 2 Kgs 18:3 the summary declared that Hezekiah “did right in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his father David had done.” After describing the revival under Hezekiah’s rule (v. 4) and his piety (vv. 5-6), his political achievements are listed (vv. 7-8). The most prominent of these was the repelling of the Assyrians. Therefore, the writer proceeds to describe it in detail (v. 9-37). Then he reveals another side of Hezekiah that God did not choose to hide from His people. Hezekiah was not a perfect saint.

Hezekiah’s illness probably was due to divine chastening for his arrogance. Fourteen years prior to becoming mortally ill he had repaired the Temple doors, ordered the cleansing of the Temple, and arranged for its reconsecration (2 Chr 29:3-36). He also had re instituted the observance of the Passover (30:1-27) and a revival broke out in the nation (31:1). Then he led the people in the provision of tithes and offerings for the Temple service (31:2-7). So much was given that room had to be prepared for storing them in the Temple (31:8-19). The first words of 32:1 sound ominous: “After these acts of faithfulness. . . .”

One indication of the king’s arrogance appears in the self-centered character of his plea for God to heal him. A comparison of Isa 38:3 with 37:16-20 reveals that Hezekiah’s emphasis in the former was upon his own deeds (“I have walked before Thee in truth and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in Thy sight”). By contrast, the latter prayer focused upon God Himself (“Thou art the God, Thou alone, . . . Thou hast made . . . Incline Thine ear . . . open Thine eyes . . . that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that Thou alone, Lord, art God”).

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references are taken from the New American Standard Bible (1977).

Cf. Hobbs, 2 Kings 290.
Further evidence of the king’s arrogance is obvious in that even after his healing, Hezekiah was chastised for arrogance: “But Hezekiah gave no return for the benefit he received, because his heart was proud; therefore wrath came on him and on Judah and Jerusalem” (2 Chr 32:25).

God gave Hezekiah the opportunity to show that his mortal illness and divine healing had changed his attitude (2 Chr 32:31). Finding no such change, God sent Isaiah to prophesy that Hezekiah’s descendants would become slaves in Babylon. But all that the king could think about was that he would be spared such an indignity. He showed no concern for his children or grandchildren (2 Kgs 20:19; Isa 39:8).

Hezekiah was one of the most truly human of the kings, and his portrait here accords with what is recorded elsewhere. He was a man whose heart was genuinely moved towards the Lord but whose will was fickle under the pressures and temptations of life. Like the David who was his ancestor, and unlike the greater David who was his descendant, his first thoughts were for himself. On hearing of his imminent death his only cry amounted to ‘I do not want to die’ (38:2-3), and on hearing of a dark future for his sons his private thought was ‘There will be peace . . . in my lifetime’ (39:8).11

Perhaps Hezekiah’s first words (“The word of the Lord which you have spoken is good,” Isa 39:8a) were merely a public show of yielding to God’s will. However, the Lord knew the king’s true thoughts in the matter (v. 8b). “The clay feet of Hezekiah are now apparent.”12 Assuming that Hezekiah did not hide such feelings from Manasseh, it is no wonder the son turned out to be so antagonistic to spiritual things.

Hezekiah lacked the capacity to trust God totally for his and the nation’s deliverance from the Assyrians. The fact that he sent tribute to Sennacherib seems to indicate as much. Isaiah had exposed Ahaz’s dependence upon Syria in the face of the Assyrian threat (Isa 8:6-8). Hezekiah may have followed in his father’s footsteps and merited the prophetic accusation that he made plans and alliances apart from the Lord (30:1-5, 15-17; 31:1). There was truth to the accusations made by Rabshekeh that Hezekiah had sought help from Egypt (36:5-9). As Motyer so eloquently stated, “Sennacherib arrived! But the Lord looks on the heart. Sennacherib would not have come had Hezekiah kept himself free from the worldly expedient of arms, alliances and rebellion.”13

Therefore, with Whitcomb, the conclusion must be “that if II Kings 20:1 were expanded, it would read: ‘In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death because Jehovah chastened him for the pride that was rising within his heart after so many

---

12Hobbs, 2 Kings 295.
13Motyer, The Prophecy of Isaiah 291.
years of prosperity and blessing.\textsuperscript{14} In addition to the prosperity, there was also the matter of Hezekiah trusting more in his own ingenuity at preparing the defenses of Jerusalem, amassing armaments, and seeking advantageous political alliances.

**Hezekiah’s Ancestry**

Why did God heal Hezekiah? One possible reason would be that Manasseh, who began his reign at the age of 12 when his father died (2 Kgs 20:21–21:1), might not have been born yet. However, that has been disputed. The Israelite system of co-regencies makes it possible that

Manasseh . . . was probably a co-regent with his father—perhaps for 10 years—since his 55-year reign is difficult to fit into the history without such a co-regency. Hezekiah appears to have failed to provide Manasseh with sufficient reason to be a godly king. However, he may have played a part in Manasseh’s later repentance (2 Chr 33:12-13).\textsuperscript{15}

Oswalt takes a line in Hezekiah’s psalm (Isa 38:19, “It is the living who give thanks to Thee, as I do today; a father tells his sons about Thy faithfulness”) as an indication that he was still heirless at the time of his healing.

As Young notes, if it is correct that Hezekiah had no heir at this time (see on 38:3), then the opportunity to declare God’s faithfulness to his children through the added years of life would have been a special blessing. Given Manasseh’s apostasy, one can only wonder whether Hezekiah then missed the opportunity when it was given him.\textsuperscript{16}

Whether or not Manasseh had not yet been born, there was a greater reason why God prolonged Hezekiah’s life. Divine action was founded upon the Lord’s covenant with David. That motivation is clearly declared in regard to God’s promise to rid Jerusalem of Sennacherib (“I will defend this city to save it for My own sake and for My servant David’s sake,” 2 Kgs 19:34). “It also makes clear that, in spite of his piety and his prayers, Hezekiah played a minor role in the deliverance.

\textsuperscript{14}Whitcomb, *Solomon to the Exile* 126.

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., 127.

\textsuperscript{16}John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1–39*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 689. Herbert Lockyer concurs: “His prayer was heard and his tears seen. God added fifteen years to Hezekiah’s life, during which time a son was born to him, Manasseh, who became an abomination unto the Lord. It might have been better for Hezekiah had he died when the divine announcement reached him. There are occasions when God grants our request, but with it comes leanness of soul” (*All the Prayers of the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959] 80). Cf., however, “Nor did God punish Hezekiah by giving him the full measure of his ‘wrongful prayer’ as some have suggested. Indeed selfish, misdirected prayer (James 4:3) and petitions that are contrary to God’s will are not granted (cf. Deut 3:23–26; 2 Cor 12:8 with 2 Chr 7:14; John 15:7)” (Richard D. Patterson and Hermann J. Auskel, “1, 2 Kings,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank E. Gaebelein [Grand Rapids: Regency/Zondervan, 1988] 4:274).
Yahweh acted because of his promise to David.”¹⁷ The Davidic factor is “emphasized by the use of the self-designation of Yahweh as אלוהי דוד אביך, “the God of David your father”).¹⁸ Hobbs proposes that the reference to David as Hezekiah’s “father” is followed by the promise to add to Hezekiah’s days (2 Kgs 20:6) because the “only commandment with a promise attached grants length of days for honoring parents.”¹⁹

In other words, the answer to Hezekiah’s prayer had more to do with the welfare of the nation and with sustaining the Davidic line than with the prayer of Hezekiah. “It is a sobering thought that when God answers one’s prayer, He can also be considering others in the larger picture, not just him.”²⁰ Oswalt seconds this concept: “Hezekiah’s recovery is not merely because God has changed his mind but because of his willingness to keep faith with those to whom he has committed himself in the past (Deut. 4:37, 38).”²¹

Did Hezekiah’s Prayer Change God’s Mind?

God did not change His mind because of Hezekiah’s prayer. Nowhere in the text of 2 Kings 20, 2 Chronicles 32, or Isaiah 38 is the claim made that God changed His mind. Absence of such a statement in Scripture does not, however, prevent open theists from making that claim. Their claim flies in the face of all that the Scripture has to say regarding God’s relationship to the Davidic line.

1 Sam 15:29 affirms that Yahweh’s choice of David and his dynasty is irrevocable, unlike his choice of Saul. Nathan’s statement to David in 2 Sam 7:15 concurs. 1 Sam 24:21; 2 Sam 3:9-10; 7:12, 16; Pss 89:4-5, 36-37; 132:11 all connect Yahweh’s irrevocable oath to his promise to David and his descendants. Thus, 1 Sam 15:11, 29, and 35 all come from the same Davidic circle, which advocated that whereas Yahweh repented over his choice of Saul, he would never repent of his choice of David and his dynasty.²²

“It seems clear,” as Bruce Ware points out, “that the divine repentance, in such cases, functions as part of a tool for eliciting a dynamic relationship with people, a means of drawing our responses which God uses, then, to accomplish his

¹⁷Hobbs, 2 Kings 282.
¹⁸Ibid., 287.
¹⁹Ibid.
²⁰James E. Rosscup, unpublished manuscript on prayer, 36.
²¹Oswalt, The Book of Isaiah 677.
ultimate purposes. “The change was not in God. The change was in Hezekiah. How can the reader of Scripture ascertain whether the change was first in Hezekiah rather than in God? Within this context the reader is repeatedly reminded that the focus is not really Hezekiah. “I will defend this city to save it for My own sake and for My servant David’s sake” (Isa 37:35) does not include “for your sake.”

God will never contradict what He has said or promised elsewhere. He knew what He had promised in the Davidic covenant and would not violate it. Divine provision and care for the nation and for the Davidic dynasty superseded any immediate death sentence on Hezekiah, no matter how much it might have been justified. The illness was designed, not to kill Hezekiah, but to humble him. Its purpose was to teach the arrogant king that he was insignificant in God’s overall plan. Likewise, there was no change in anything that the Lord had planned with regard to the length of Hezekiah’s life (cf. Ps 139:16). As far as Hezekiah’s limited grasp of reality was concerned, God had added the 15 years at the time of his prayer. The Lord spoke of them from Hezekiah’s standpoint.

A reprieve had been granted to Hezekiah. However, that reprieve was primarily for Jerusalem’s benefit, not his. As a matter of fact, the reprieve was “only a temporary one. And it is conditional. The life of a man or of a city is solely in the hand of God.”

Interestingly, God’s specific declaration that Hezekiah’s life would be extended 15 years is, in itself, inconsistent with Open Theism.

God granted to Hezekiah fifteen years of extended life—not two, not twenty, and certainly not “we’ll both see how long you live,” but fifteen years exactly. Does it not seem a bit odd that this favorite text of open theists, which purportedly demonstrates that God does not know the future and so changes his mind when Hezekiah prays, also shows that God knows precisely and exactly how much longer Hezekiah will live? On openness grounds, how could God know this? Over a fifteen-year time span, the contingencies are staggering!

Moses’ Prayer (Exod 32:1-35)

---


24Isa 38:6’s parallel in 2 Kgs 20:6 adds a nearly identical statement: “I will defend this city for My own sake and for My servant David’s sake.”

25Boyd tortures the text in order to gain support for his opinion that the length of one’s life may be altered (*God of the Possible* 40-42).


27Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah* 673. Oswalt introduced this declaration with an astute observation regarding the theme of Isa 38: “the major thrust of the chapter, including the psalm (vv. 9-20), is upon the mortality of the flesh.”

28Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory* 95.
Exodus 32 is another passage contested by the two views of prayer introduced at the beginning of this essay. Open theists parade it as evidence that prayer changes God’s mind. The chapter describes the role of Moses’ prayer in God’s dealing with Israel’s rebellious and idolatrous worship of the golden calf at Sinai.

That idolatry aroused God’s anger. As a result, He spoke of putting an end to the nation and starting over again with just Moses (Exod 32:10). Did the Lord make a legitimate offer to Moses? Is it possible that God had only made an announcement, not a decree, therefore He was free to change His mind about its implementation? Could the Lord nullify the prophecies concerning the individual tribes of Israel (cf. Genesis 49) or the prior promises to Abraham (Gen 12:1-3) in order to produce a new nation from Moses? Did Moses’ prayer permanently remove the sentence of death from the nation?

Unlike the biblical accounts concerning Hezekiah’s prayer, Exodus 32 specifies that “the Lord changed His mind” (v. 14). What is involved in God changing His mind or relenting? Is it the retraction of declared punishment in an act of forgiveness? Parunak offers parallelism, idiom, and context as indicators for determining the meaning of DHμ (n̂hm, “He changed His mind”). Are these sufficient for determining the meaning in this text? Since a postponement of inevitable judgment would allow time for the rise of a new generation of Israelites to replace the one to be destroyed, was the change of mind a matter of expediency?

Who was changed? God or Moses? How does prayer relate to the petitioner’s will and God’s will? Is prayer a means of training leadership and/or testing leadership? Is prayer the means of human participation in God’s program? If so, what kind of participation? Does anthropomorphic interpretation apply well to the concept of God changing His mind or regretting His actions? In such matters, is there anything to Graham Cole’s comment that “it may not be so much a matter of God being anthropopathic (human like) but of our being theopatic (God like) as bearers of the divine image”?

---


32“The Scriptures, however, which come to us as a revelation from God, often bear an anthropomorphic character. All our speaking of God must, in fact, be anthropomorphic. We need not, on that account, devalue Scripture’s ascription of longsuffering to God. To do so consistently would be to rob Scripture of much of its own vocabulary” (G. C. Berkouwer, The Providence of God, Studies in Dogmatics [reprint of 1983 ed.: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983] 73-74). Berkouwer is discussing the forbearance of God in the days of Noah when God patiently held back judgment for a time while the call to repentance was given. This same discussion of anthropomorphism could be equally applied to concepts of God “regretting” or “repenting” of his actions.

In this examination of Exodus 32 the text itself is enlisted as the primary witness. Therefore, the study will be organized according to the order of the text. Donald Gowan makes the important observation that the Book of Exodus “reaches its theological conclusion with chapters 32–34, for they explain how it can be that the covenant relationship continues in spite of perennial sinfulness.” Thus the context itself emphasizes the Lord’s faithfulness in spite of Israel’s unfaithfulness.

Israel’s Disobedience and Idolatry (32:1-6)
While Moses was on Mt. Sinai, the Israelites and Aaron made a golden calf idol for themselves and attributed to it their deliverance out of Egypt. The people had deliberately committed the sin of idolatry; therefore they deserved to die (cf. Deut 7:4; 8:19; 29:17-20; 32:15-25). By his later actions, Moses demonstrated that he recognized the justice of the death sentence for his people because of their wickedness (Exod 32:27-29). When he had seen for himself what the Lord had already seen, Moses’ actions mirrored those of God: anger, determination to remove the idolatry, and ordering the execution of the idolaters.

The Divine Declaration of Judgment (32:7-10)
“Go down at once, for your people . . . have corrupted themselves” (32:7). When the Lord revealed the crisis to Moses, He changed the possessive pronoun to indicate “that he was disowning Israel (contrast ‘my people’ of 3:10 et al.).” Then He proceeded to offer Moses the opportunity to start over with a different people who might not be so stubbornly disobedient. Gowan claims that the offer to Moses reveals the “vulnerability” of God. He quickly adds,

Having said that, I must immediately emphasize that in this passage God’s vulnerability is set alongside strong statements concerning his sovereignty. . . . Yet this sovereign God, who is fully in charge, . . . is also represented as a God who will change his plans as a result of human intervention, and more than that; he indicates that he has subjected himself to some extent to the will of Moses.

The implications of “Now then let Me alone” (32:10) have been variously construed by the commentators and theologians. Kaiser viewed it as God’s way to

---


35Identifying the idol and dealing with questions of polytheism and syncretism will not be handled in this study.


37Gowan, Theology in Exodus 222.

38Ibid.
test Moses. Some ignore the divine statement altogether, some make it an example of divine accommodation to human inability to understand the mind of God fully, and others claim that “it is actually God’s invitation to Moses to intercede.” To claim that God is “unwilling to act without Moses’ ‘permission’” seems to be making too little of God in the situation. Fretheim argues that

For such a word to make sense, one must assume that, while God has decided to execute wrath (see v. 14), the decision has not reached an irretrievable point; the will of God is not set on the matter. Moses could conceivably contribute something to the divine deliberation that might occasion a future for Israel other than wrath. In fact, God seems to anticipate that Moses would resist what is being said. . . . God thereby does leave the door of Israel’s future open.

Moberly agrees with Fretheim’s observation and proceeds to take it one more step by declaring that the “importance of Moses’ role in these chapters and elsewhere has frequently been underestimated through a slightly exaggerated emphasis on divine sovereignty.” But even Fretheim admits that it is possible “that God was testing Moses in some way, seen not least in God’s reference to Moses’ future.” That leads to God’s offer to produce a new nation from Moses. Was His offer to Moses a sincere offer? Gowan believes that Moses’ appeal to God’s solemn oath to Abraham (32:13) is, “in a way, . . . a very weak argument, for God has offered to start over with Moses, who is a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and who could keep the line intact.” However, the matter is not that simple. Even if God kept the Abrahamic line intact, it would still result in the repudiation of prior divine revelation regarding the twelve tribes of Israel (cf. Genesis 49). Moses was a member of the tribe of Levi. Therefore, if God were to begin again with Moses alone, only the Levites would survive to fulfill the prophecies concerning them (Gen

---

40Gowan, Theology in Exodus 223. Brevard S. Childs, The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974) 567: “The effect is that God himself leaves the door open for intercession. He allows himself to be persuaded. That is what a mediator is for! As B. Jacob correctly observes, God could have shut the door—indeed slammed it—as he did in Deut. 3.26 when Moses requested permission to enter the promised land. Moreover, the personal promise to Moses to make him into a great nation picked up the identical words of the prior promise to Abraham (Gen. 12.2), giving Moses his strongest argument by which to counter the threat.”
41Ibid.
44Ibid., 51.
45Fretheim, Exodus 284.
46Gowan, Theology in Exodus 224-25.
God’s suggestion to Moses could not have been something the Lord ever intended to occur. If He did intend for it to happen, it would indicate either that He forgot what He had previously declared about the tribes, or that His previous prophecies were false and untrustworthy, or that Genesis 49 is an illegitimate intrusion in the Scriptures. It is more logical and consistent to understand the divine offer as a test intended to prepare Moses for the remaining 39 years of leading Israel in the wilderness.

The position taken by Robert Chisholm is that God had only made an announcement, not a decree, therefore He was free to change His mind about its implementation. His position, however, has several problems. First, grammatically the distinction between decree and announcement is not sufficiently diverse. Imperative + jussive + cohortative is not exegetically distinct from waw + imperative + waw + cohortative. Second, contextually it does not take into account the direct ties to the Abrahamic Covenant (Exod 32:10 [cf. Gen 12:2] and Exod 32:13) and the final declaration of unretreated judgment (32:34, 35). Exodus 32 shares elements in common with Elijah’s judgment speech against Ahab in 1 Kings 21:20-24—it would still come to pass because “it was a divine decree that could not be altered.”

Third, theologically it does not make sense that Moses could “persuade Him to change His mind.” Chisholm’s ultimate conclusion is not consistent with the contents of the passage as a whole: “In every case where such a change is envisioned or reported, God had not yet decreed a course of action or an outcome. Instead He chose to wait patiently, hoping His warnings might bring people to their senses and make judgment unnecessary.” The Lord had decreed what He would do in the first half (up to the aynnach in the Hebrew) of 32:10. The last half of the verse is obviously inconsistent with what He had decreed concerning the twelve tribes of Israel in Genesis 49. Perhaps it would be best to keep in mind Chisholm’s final word (his last sentence): “At the same time such passages should not be overextended. God can and often does decree a course of action.”

Was there anything conditional about God’s declaration? No new condition was given, but God had repeatedly declared His principles of justice and compassion (cf. Gen 18:19, 25; Exod 33:19; 34:6-7).

Moses’ Prayer and Its Answer (32:11-14)

The petition of Moses was heard by God and He “changed His mind” (32:14). What does that phrase mean? It is the Hebrew verb הָנַה (nhm). Unfortu-
nately, the entry on *nḥm* in *NIDOTTE*\(^{53}\) is woefully inadequate and overly brief in its discussion, offering virtually no help at all for someone struggling with its utilization in passages like Exodus 32:14. The entry in *TLOT*\(^{64}\) is a little more extensive in its discussion and of more help. Note especially Stoebe’s observation that *nḥm* in the Niphal “is never sorrowful resignation but always has concrete consequences. Consequently, ‘and he regrets the evil’ can elaborate ‘he is gracious and merciful’ (Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; . . .).”\(^{55}\) Fortunately, the entry in *TDOT*\(^{55}\) is substantial.\(^{57}\) Simian-Yofre concludes, “The *nḥm* of Yahweh is thus presented as a response to Moses’ appeasement. Yahweh’s repentance is a change of purpose incidental to the circumstances, not a modification of the circumstances.”\(^{58}\) Although he did not directly apply it to Exodus 32, one of Simian-Yofre’s observations is pertinent to our current discussion: “The only element common to all meanings of *nḥm* appears to be the attempt to influence a situation: by changing the course of events, rejecting an obligation, or refraining from an action, when the focus is on the present.”\(^{59}\) In Exodus 32 God is obviously refraining from an action—indeed, He is temporarily postponing the inevitable judgment. That postponement is not a change in His purpose—it was a planned postponement in order to allow time for the rise of a new generation of Israelites to replace the generation He will destroy in the wilderness. God’s action was a temporary delay of punishment in order to allow for a replacement generation to arise.

The reprieve is only temporary, because the people are still in open rebellion and obviously Yahweh will not tolerate apostasy and idolatry. . . . Unless there is a radical change on the part of the people, the grace period will elapse and the judgment will be re instituted. . . . intercession can only produce a temporary reversal; the basic situation must be rectified.\(^{60}\)


\(^{55}\)Ibid., 2:738.


\(^{57}\)However, the contribution to the study of Exodus 32 is marred by Simian-Yofre’s adherence to the documentarian views of Martin Noth: “Ex. 32:9-14 is an addition in Deuteronomistic style that inappropriately anticipates the question of Israel’s punishment” (ibid., 9:345 [emphasis added]).

\(^{58}\)Ibid., 9:342.

If Manasseh had not yet been born when Hezekiah was ill, the same observation would apply. God postponed Hezekiah’s death until the next Davidite was ready to take the throne.

Furthermore, God did not change His mind regarding His plan for the twelve tribes of Israel. He merely altered His timing in order to keep His promises to the tribes in Genesis 49 as well as His promise of judgment on the entire nation. In the light of this conclusion, it is significant that six of the thirty times the Old Testament speaks of God repenting or changing His mind emphasize that He does not repent or change His mind (Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29; Jer 4:28; 20:16; Ezek 24:14; Zech 8:14).\(^6^1\) God will never do that which would contradict His previously revealed declarations.

At no time did Moses attempt to justify the idolatry of the Israelites. “He realizes that they committed a great sin, and that strict justice requires them to be severely punished, but he appeals to the Divine attribute of mercy, and relies on the Lord’s paternal love for his people.”\(^6^2\) To explain how Moses’ prayer could actually change God’s mind, adherents of open theism appeal to “the fellowship model” in which “God is genuinely responsive to us. . . . God changed his mind to accommodate Moses’ desires.”\(^6^3\) A milder, but nonetheless equally anthropocentric approach explains that

God is always ready to be entreated. He is unchanging in his intention to bless his creatures and is willing to change his word if people turn to him in intensity of faith (Jon. 4:2). This does not mean that matters will always turn out as we wish. But it does mean that prayer can change the course of events, and that failure to pray is not necessarily a sign of submission to God’s intractable will. Rather, it may be a sign of apathy and unwillingness to wrestle with God (note Jacob’s refusal to let go of the man with whom he wrestled, Gen. 32:26).\(^6^4\)

This concept that God is unchanging in His intention to bless is often carried over to His “unwavering intention to save.”\(^6^5\)

Those who would be more theocentric in their interpretation of passages referring to God’s change of mind, would propose that “divine repentance, in such cases, functions as part of a tool for eliciting a dynamic relationship with people, a means of drawing our responses which God uses, then, to accomplish his ultimate

---


\(^{63}\)Sanders, *The God Who Risks* 271.

\(^{64}\)Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah* 675.

\(^{65}\)Gowan, *Theology in Exodus* 226.
purposes.” Indeed, a more theocentric approach is open to the thought that the Lord considers more than the petitioner when answering prayer. That was also observed in the examination of Hezekiah’s prayer. Israel’s temporary reprieve from divine judgment was not because God had changed his mind, but because the Lord would keep faith with those to whom he had committed himself in the past (cf. Deut 4:37, 38). As John Sailhamer declares, “When the Lord did act mercifully with them as a result of Moses’ intercession (v. 14), the basis of his actions was not any merit of Aaron or the people, but rather his own oath sworn to the patriarchs (vv. 12-13).”

Fretheim’s conclusions are a classic example of the explanation offered by open theists:

The God of Israel is revealed as one who is open to change. God will move from decisions made, from courses charted, in view of the ongoing interaction with those affected. God treats the relationship with the people with an integrity that is responsive to what they do and say. Hence human prayer (in this case, intercession) is honored by God as a contribution to a conversation that has the capacity to change future directions for God, people, and world. God may well adjust modes and directions (though not ultimate goals) in view of such human responsiveness. This means that there is genuine openness to the future on God’s part, fundamentally in order that God’s salvific will for all might be realized as fully as possible. It is this openness to change that reveals what it is about God that is unchangeable: God’s steadfastness has to do with God’s love; God’s faithfulness has to do with God’s promises; God’s will is for the salvation of all. God will always act, even make changes, in order to be true to these unchangeable ways and to accomplish these unchangeable goals.

Some commentators have sought to distinguish a divine change of mind from a human change of mind as the explanation. Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman emphasize that God does not change His mind the way human beings change their minds. We often change our minds “frivolously, capriciously, or arbitrarily, whereas Yahweh does so only for cause. . . . Yahweh’s repentance is limited to situations of a certain number and kind and occurs only under certain conditions.” At the same time, Andersen and Freedman admit that the whole issue involves the employment of a metaphor to seek to represent a difficult concept for humans to understand about God.

The situation involved a very unusual occurrence that places the event outside that which should ever be considered normative for our practice of prayer.

---

64Ware, God’s Lesser Glory 97.
66Fretheim, Exodus, 287.
67Andersen and Freedman, Amos 644.
68Ibid., 645.
In Scripture, only Moses ever used the imperative of *nhm* with God (Exod 32:12; Ps 90:13). “To instruct God to repent (using this verb with its connotations and overtones) is a privilege claimed by Moses and restricted to him.”

Parunak’s suggestion that *nhm* should be given the meaning of “forgive” is based upon three observations. First, parallelism with אֲשֹׁב (šûb) (another expression meaning forgiveness) in Exod 32:12 might support such a conclusion. Second, the Hebrew phraseology (the use of *nhm* in association with הֶלְעָב [‘l] followed by a term referring to the proposed judgment—note Exod 32:12, 14) is capable of bearing such a meaning. Third, context can be an indicator for this meaning of *nhm* in cases where there is “a contextual reference to punishment, and usually to its withdrawal on condition of a change in the sinner.” However, these factors together do not trump the overall force of the passage and its context as a whole.

**Moses’ Actions and Their Results (32:15-29)**

Although Moses prayed for mercy while he was still on the mountain, when he descended and beheld what had occurred, his actions were swift and bloody (32:27-29). It was as though he changed his mind and began to agree with the Lord’s assessment of the seriousness of Israel’s sinful rebellion. In a parallel passage (Deut 9:7-21) Moses gave a few additional details about the incident that occurred at Sinai. His reference to the events was to support his sermonic declaration that the Israelites were not chosen by the Lord because of any righteousness they possessed (Deut 9:4-6). He had not only led the slaying of about three thousand (Exod 32:28), he had also spent another forty days and nights in prayer (Deut 9:18).

**Moses’ Intercession and God’s Response (32:30-35)**

God revealed that even Moses’ prayer could not remove the irrevocable sentence of death that the people had incurred (Exod 32:34-35). Had God really determined to destroy the Israelites? Was His statement to Moses an unalterable decree or a mere threat? It was obviously a decree (cf. Ps 95:8-11). The punishment was inevitable, even if it were temporarily delayed (Exod 32:34-35). It was delayed, not because of Moses’ prayer nor because of any righteous action or confession by the Israelites, but because of the sworn promise the Lord had made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Deut 9:5).

Moses’ action bought time only, time to remedy the situation, because a holy God cannot
dwell in the midst of an idolatrous people, and unless the idolatry and the apostasy are eliminated the great experiment will end at its birth. . . . Moses achieved a more permanent rescission of the judgment. The temporary suspension of judgment was confirmed, and with some reservations Yahweh agreed to keep his people and lead them to the holy land.  

Punishment for the nation’s sin would be postponed to some undefined time in the future. In Num 14:36-38 a similarly undefined future plague was to kill the unbelieving spies. That judgment is referred to in a way that interrupts the narrative in much the same way as Exod 32:35 interrupts its surrounding narrative.  

Verse 35 is the ultimate fulfillment of the initial execution carried out by Moses in verse 20. Only in the last verse of the chapter do we see God himself acting in that judgment. The reason for this focus on Moses’ role in judgment rather than God’s is apparently the writer’s desire to stress God’s gracious response to Israel’s sin. The central theme of the subsequent narrative (Ex 33) is God’s great mercy and compassion (33:19). God’s dealings with Israel henceforth emphasize his goodness and compassion. What the present narrative shows, however, is that God’s gracious dealings with his people are not accomplished in the absence of a clear acknowledgment of his wrath.

Compassion or deferred execution do not nullify the federal consequences of sin. Nor does the necessity of judgment nullify God’s prior promises (cf. Heb 6:18).

**Concluding Thoughts**

Since God was not changed and His plan unaltered, and since Israel did not repent and remained in their sinful and rebellious condition, Moses must have been the only one who was changed by this incident at Sinai. Is it possible that prayer could change him? John Yoder’s response is instructive for both Hezekiah and Moses:

Why prayer? Because it lifts man from being an observer in God’s arena to being a participant. He does not idly watch God’s will being done in history; he earnestly seeks it. He asks for each need and praises for each victory. In prayer we see God near His humblest point: He allows men to do what He could do so easily. In prayer we see men

---

54Andersen and Freedman, Amos 674.

55Cassuto, Commentary on the Book of Exodus 424. Cassuto has an unusual interpretation that adds another divine reservation stating that God would not dwell in the midst of the Israelites in the Tabernacle because of their disobedience in the golden calf incident (425-26).


57Sailhamer, The Pentateuch as Narrative 312.
at their highest pinnacle: bringing fire from heaven, raising the dead, feeding the hungry, winning lost souls, and learning to fellowship with their Maker. In God’s goal of discipling men, nothing is more effective than prayer.

Our argument for prayer is that prayer changes me. How so? (1). It leads us to earnestly desire what He desires; my will becomes merged with His. (2). We become more grateful for everything He does. (3). Not only is God’s will done, but we learn to fellowship with Him. (4). We begin to see that God is behind all events. (5). We become participants in God’s program, not spectators.78

Norm Geisler agrees: “There was a change in Moses. As leader and mediator for his people, there was a change in Moses’ heart, which allowed God’s unchanging mercy to flow to Israel through Moses as their mediator.”79 Indeed, if man is capable of changing the mind of God, then it might be argued that man knows more about governing this world than God.80 However, God does know what He is doing. The appearance of change is merely the fact that God had already planned to “change” when His people have finally come to behave in the way He had anticipated they would in response to His words and actions.81

It is significant that God would utilize this incident to motivate Moses to be the kind of mediator he needed to be. Moses was to be the revelation of God, not on tablets of stone, but on a tablet of a heart and life of flesh (cf. 2 Cor 3:1-3). May these examples of Hezekiah and Moses produce in us a godly humility and commitment to the Word of God that will fit us for service for the Sovereign Lord.

---

79Geisler, Creating God in the Image of Man? 86. Charles Swindoll recounts how Donald Barnhouse “came to the pulpit and made a statement that stunned his congregation: ‘Prayer changes nothing!’ You could have heard a pin drop in that packed Sunday worship service in Philadelphia. His comment, of course, was designed to make Christians realize that God is sovereignly in charge of everything. Our times are literally in His hands. No puny human being by uttering a few words in prayer takes charge of events and changes them. God does the shaping, the changing; it is He who is in control. Barnhouse was correct, except in one minor detail. Prayer changes me. When you and I pray, we change, and that is one of the major reasons prayer is such a therapy that counteracts anxiety” (Charles R. Swindoll, The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart And 1,501 Other Stories [Nashville: Word, 1998] 451).
80Yoder, Your Will Be Done 2:478, 479.
81Ware, God’s Lesser Glory 92-93. Cf. William Lane Craig, Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom: The Coherence of Theism: Omniscience, Brill’s Studies in Intellectual History, vol. 19 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991) 12: “God’s foreknowledge encompasses the most contingent of events, even the very thoughts that a person will think (Ps. 139:1-6). It is true that there are instances in which God is said to ‘repent’ of some action He has taken or to relent on something He had said would take place, which would seem to undermine the doctrine of foreknowledge. But a careful study of the relevant texts reveals that God’s ‘repenting’ does not mean His changing His mind, but simply ‘to suffer emotional pain’, and that His relenting on prophesied judgements is due to a change in human behavior which renders the judgement no longer appropriate. In such a case the prophecy of judgement was not a manifestation of foreknowledge but was rather a forecast or forewarning of what would, ceteris paribus, happen, that is, unless the persons involved repented.”
ISAIAH 40–48: A SERMONIC CHALLENGE TO OPEN THEISM

Trevor Craigen
Associate Professor of Theology

Eight sermons in Isaiah 40–48 pose a challenge to Open Theism’s limitation of the LORD’s power and knowledge of the future. Rhetorical questions and declarations about the certainty of divine purpose are two literary strategies employed by Isaiah. Rhetorical interrogation and appropriate vocabulary and facts characterize the first sermon in Isaiah 40. These constitute a powerful indictment against Israel for her lack of trust in the LORD. According to Isaiah 46, He planned the creation from outside of time and history and implemented His plans within time and history. Isaiah 44 cites classic examples of His governance in world history, including His naming in advance a Persian king who would decree the rebuilding of Jerusalem. These sermons also cite the deeds of the LORD in dealing with Israel and the nations. The sermons, though addressed to Israel as a rebuke for her idolatry, also point out the error of Open Theism in that system’s demeaning of God and exalting of man.

* * * *

Introduction

The prophet Isaiah’s volume of eight sermons1 may very well stand as a penetrating polemic against pagan idolatry, but it also stands as a challenge to any denial or substantial re-defining of the LORD’s knowledge of the future. Open Theism, when first encountered, sounded like a violation of Isaiah 40–48, or at the least it sounded as though these sermons were not taken into account. Bruce Ware’s critique, God’s Lesser Glory,2 referred often to Isaiah’s words, supporting the observation that this new offering on understanding God in relation to the future

---


2Bruce Ware, God’s Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2000) 169.
might have been delinquent in this respect. Eugene Merrill opened his article, “Isaiah 40–55: An Anti-Babylonian Polemic,” by noting that a major adjunct to the theme of salvation in these chapters is the prophet’s assault upon the religio-cultural structure of the Babylonian society from which the Jewish exiles would be delivered in the distant future.

A proposition around which to arrange serenonly the thrust of Isaiah’s sermons as it pertains to Open Theism would be: “Two literary strategies in proclaiming God that theologically block any attempt to limit His power and knowledge deliberately.” The two strategies are (1) rhetorical questions, which Isaiah uses often, and (2) declarations on the certainty of divine purpose, which also frequently burst forth. Some overlap of these two categories is unavoidable since question and declaration are yoked together in the same context.

**Key Questions Introduce Transcendence** and **Immanence**

Rhetorical questions are well-known communicative devices in all languages, because they draw in the mind of the reader or listener to adjudicate the facts and come to an obvious conclusion.

Rhetorical questions are frequently used in the Old Testament to express the absolute power, uniqueness, singularity and incomparability of a person. The rhetorical question is one of the most forceful and effectual ways employed in speech for driving home some idea or conviction. Because of its impressive and persuasive effect the hearer is not merely listener: he is forced to frame the expected answer in his mind, and by doing so he actually becomes a co-expressor of the speaker’s conviction.

Isaiah’s rhetorical questions mixed with divine self-predications, imperative clauses, reminders of past actions, and divinely authoritative predictions of what will be done deliver a powerful karate chop to the neck of Open Theism. Undoubtedly Isaiah’s words captured and still capture attention, because he so graphically presents the sharp contrast between idols and the Holy One of Israel, the Lord the Almighty. Masterfully, the major contrast between idol-gods and the one and only true God is brought to the forefront of attention. This Lord of Israel, the

---


*Transcendence may be defined as the uniquely otherness of the eternal God in relation to everything that exists; it speaks to His majesty and greatness.

4Immanence may be defined as the providential and personal involvement of God in His creation.

The OT contains a surfeit of information on idolatry. Not only are idols portrayed as non-entities, but how much their devotees invested in their self-made gods is also brought out. Their deities remain on the level of comparison with each other, but never alone and wholly incomparable, notwithstanding their worshipers’ pompous claims to that effect.

These questions are variously introduced: two with יָאוֹת (vv. 12-13), one with יָאוֹת נַעֲרֵי (v. 14), two with יָאוֹת נַעֲרֵי (vv. 18, 25) and four with נְעָרָיָה (v. 21).
has “marked off” the Spirit (40:12b, 13a). “Who furnished the Spirit with the standard according to which all was done?” might be the way to pose it.9 Such a piling up of words on power to handle and to know the created order (40:12)10 as well as on self-wisdom and regulation (40:13)11 renders it impossible for another candidate, no matter what his stature, wisdom, and authority, to step forward and claim the same, or confidently assert, “I can!”

In an earlier chapter (Isa 25:1), Isaiah had already used “to consult” of God’s having worked wonders which were planned in advance and thereafter occurred just as He delineated. Indeed, Isaiah had also referred to Him by the appropriate title of “Counselor” or “Planner” (Isa 9:6). In fact, God knows all the plans of man (Isa 29:15), not only for Himself but also those one man devises against another man (Jer 18:23). When man’s plans conflict with God’s, they are worthy of shame, not fame (Isa 30:1)! Isaiah had also emphasized earlier that the Lord had a plan against the whole earth (Isa 14:26), with a follow-up rhetorical question intensifying the certainty of its fulfillment, because no one could nullify it, or turn back His Hand from it (14:27).

To teach or instruct or to cause one to have understanding (40:14) distinctly implies that someone with more knowledge and/or experience brings another up to the standard he has not yet achieved, or has informed him of what he does not know. But that is an unthinkable assessment with respect to God! This first batch of questions tolerates no downgrading or downsizing of His knowledge. Since no one could possibly give Him direction or point Him to the right pathway in which His understanding was to move, then obviously He does not need the warning given to men not to depend upon their own understanding (cf. Prov 3:5). Self-wisdom is not defective in God, but in man it is. Thus man needs God’s wisdom by which to have his life directed or regulated and that same wisdom to know what will be. “The Bible declares,” as Bruce Ware so aptly puts it, “that part of what it means for God to be God is precisely this: no one has ever been his counselor or has ever informed him!”12

Two similar questions, one asked by Isaiah—“To whom then will you liken God?” (40:18)—and the other asked by God Himself—“To whom then will you liken Me?” (40:25)—stress His incomparability. The first one links the nations with the idolatry naturally attached to them, as the sarcasm on the manmade creation of non-functioning deities indicates (40:19-20). The second one breaks in pointedly after the insertion of a concise piece on idolatry and before the reassertion of facts about the Lord which should have been acknowledged from the very beginning, and

---

10“Measured; ‘marked off/regulated,’ ‘calculated/comprehended,’ and ‘weighed.’
11“Counselor,” ‘taught,’ ‘take counsel,’ ‘instructed,’ ‘showed…understanding.’
12Ware, God’s Lesser Glory 169 [emphasis in the original].
which is signified by the rhetorical repetition of “Have you not known, have you not heard?” (40:21, 28).

The question the Lord asked of the nation of Israel (40:27) is not so much rhetorical as it is one of accusation, an indictment of lack of trust, an ignoring of His immanence. More than that: it is also their accusation against their own Lord, who had just been called “The Holy One” (40:25) and who had just pointed out again in the sermon His power over creation. Accusation at this level from their side unveiled an idolatrous perspective: the national deity, for one reason or another, may suffer from an attention deficit disorder and just simply forgets his people.

**Appropriate Facts Weave Their Way Between the Questions**

Since facts and questions are tied together—the questions are not irrelevant insertions—one risks unnecessary repetition in treating them separately. A few elements can still be highlighted to buttress the conclusion of incomparability in power, knowledge, and purpose.

In regards to the nations (40:15-17), Ware’s comments are pertinent:

> Imagine this! The nations as a whole with all of their collective knowledge, wisdom, and insight, all taken together, constitute before God “a drop from a bucket,” or “a speck of dust on the scales.” How lofty we consider our great learning and wisdom, but how utterly insignificant it is before God.\(^{13}\)

With respect to divine knowledge, then, the Lord holds the monopoly! Rival claims voiced of other gods are simply meaningless. “Voiced of” is advisable because nothings cannot say anything! Others, who made them, must say it for them, and that accurately reflects the uselessness of idols or foreign gods. Further, whatever stability the idols have is to be attributed to the skill of the workman (40:20; cf. 41:7) and not to the idol itself. It leaves the distinct impression that this is so very much unlike the real God. His stability arises not from what is done to make Him so, but comes from within Himself; He is steadfast in every respect. To view Him in terms analogous to idols is to demote Him and to promote man as God’s maker.

With regard to God and His creation (40:22-24): His exalted status over creation interspersed with statements of His supremacy over the nations rules out both pantheism and panentheism\(^ {14}\) as suitable explanations of Israel’s Lord in

---

13 Ibid. Geoffrey W. Grogan, “Isaiah,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 6:246, notes, “His absolute control over all human life is quite unchallenged. Verses 23-24 represent a great truth of course, not only about individual rulers, but also about world empires.”

14 Pantheism may be defined as shutting God up in creation so that all is Him and He is all. Panentheism may be defined as every part of creation exists in Him but God’s Being is more than it. In fact, fatalism is also ruled out because it would shut God out of the world and shut up the creature under the harsh hand of an impersonal force.
association with the universe and its history. Frankly said, national leaders of whatever stature are where they are and are what they are because of His ruling, and are insignificant in the big plan and scheme of things. Pride they might have in their achievements and conquests, but power to change the course of history they did not and do not have.

With regard to God, Israel and creation (40:26-31): Although a specifically expressed syntactical linkage is absent, it is implied. The command to look at the heavens and see the celestial bodies He had made and continues to sustain is abruptly followed by the accusing question “Why do you say, O Jacob . . . ?” (40:27). But linkage of thought does occur. The expressive “But not one is missing” (40:26) immediately preceding that accusing question lingers in the mind and, on reflection, quickly forges a connection, “So why do you say, O Jacob . . . ?” From Israel’s side the question was a despondent accusation aimed at God and concluding that He had simply forgotten the nation. Divine titles in the immediately succeeding context (40:28) signal the greatness of the Lord God and serve to intensify the illegitimacy of their accusation. “The everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth” who upholds the heavens, upholds His people too, and in so doing, never grows weary.

The point to be taken is this: even if His handiwork in history seems undetected, the nation must remain convinced that their everlasting and incomparable Lord governs all He has done since eternity past. Indeed, His understanding, His knowledge, has no limitations or restrictions, clearly implying that any thought of His having forgotten them is to drag Him down to the human level, to view Him through their eyes. Making God analogous to them is wrong thinking leading to despondent reaction. To do so is to be guilty of humanizing God and ascribing to Him human limitations.

The reader has good cause to recall Ps 33:10 wherein the psalmist penned these words on the Lord’s supremacy: “The Lord nullifies the counsel of the nations; He frustrates the plans of the peoples.” In contrast the next verse asserts, “The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation.”

Key Declarations Introduce the Certainty of Divine Purpose

Overlap with some of the declarations surrounding the rhetorical questions in the first sermon may occur in this section. Repetition, however, is perhaps a notable element in the sermons and has pedagogical impact.

---

15Grogan, “Isaiah,” in Expositor’s Bible Commentary 6:246, writes, “This passage is antimythological; for it asserts that—far from being deities in their own right—the heavenly bodies are simply the creatures of the one Creator-God, who is Israel’s Holy One. He orders their pattern, knows each in its distinctiveness and upholds them all in their being.”
Assertions of Definite Goals and Purpose

Most apt is Grogan’s heading for Isaiah’s eight sermons, which captures well their overarching note and theme: “The sole sovereignty and sure promise of the Lord (40:1–48:22).”

A clear declaration occurs in the sixth sermon (46:10-11). Three participles link the content of these two verses to the parallel statements of incomparability: “For I am God, and there is no other; I am God and there is none like me” (46:9). It declared what had been rhetorically asked in the preceding context (46:5). He’s not like idol-gods at all. Three participles in succession, “declaring,” “saying,” and “calling,” move the thought from what evidently only God can do and has done to a specific purpose yet to come on the stage of history. The climax of the impotence of idols, who cannot copy it, is seen in the classic example of calling forth a specific individual, the “Man of My Purpose” (46:11), Cyrus of Medo-Persia. Note that the identification of this person is accompanied by assertions of fulfillment, three of which are prefixed with an asseveration of truth, “moreover, surely.” Assertions plus asseverations cannot but emphatically signify completion of plan and achievement of goal. Add to this the significant swapping of past and future tenses: “Indeed I have spoken it; I will also bring it to pass. I have purposed it; I will also do it.” An unspoken Nike dynamic intrudes: “God will just do it!” Use of past/future tense swapping occurred earlier in the chapter (46:3-4): “have been upheld,” “have been carried,” and then, as though stifling any question of “by whom?,” a switch to the first person follows with “I will carry you,” “I have made,” “I will bear,” “I will carry,” and “[I] will deliver you.” Piling up these terms and changed tenses leaves no doubt about God’s very personal aid of Israel in the past and in the future, even right then in the present. What a magnificent contrast when set against the prophetic words opening the chapter. Pagan Babylonians will carry and protect their idol-gods (46:1-2), but the LORD will carry His people from the beginning unto the very end!

A contrast of concepts may perhaps be seen in this sermon: The Lord calls

---

16Ibid, 240.

17Not notably used three times and leaving no room for hesitancy or doubt. Translated in v. 11 once as “indeed” and twice as “also,” but “surely” in lieu of “also” would not be out of order here, rendering, “Surely I will bring it to pass,” and “Surely I will do it.”

18Grogan, “Isaiah,” in Expositor’s Bible Commentary 251 well comments at 41:21-24, “If the gods of Babylonia and other nations have objective reality as deities, they should be able to predict the future and also to so interpret history that past and future are seen to be linked in one divinely controlled plan.”

19Perhaps this is an example of merismus, i.e., the expression of a totality in an abbreviated form. See Wilfred G. E. Watson, Classical Hebrew Poetry, JSOT Supplement Series 26, ed. David J. A. Clines et. al. (reprint; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995) 321, who notes: “The significant point is that in merismus, of whatever form, it is not the individual elements themselves that matter but what they amount to together, as a unit.” See also Moshe Held, “The YQTL (QTL-YQTL) Sequence of Identical Verbs in Biblical Hebrew and in Ugaritic,” in Studies and Essays in Honor of Abraham A. Neuman, ed. Meir Ben-Horin et. al. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1962) 281-90, for more information on this construct.
someone forth to be part of His purpose, whereas idols cannot respond to the calls of others to come forth (46:7). Idols cannot get involved when called upon to do so, whereas the Lord is involved from the very beginning. They have no predictive ability whereas the Lord does. Ability to predict without the power and authority to ensure its success and fulfillment is hardly worthy of any attention, for it would be mere bluster. Nothing in this sermon, nor in any of the eight sermons, suggests only potentiality and uncertainty. Rather it is certainty and factuality, albeit some events are yet to occur. One does not think after reading Isaiah’s words that probability is all it is, or an awaiting with bated breath, as it were, to see if it will work out as planned, if the individual and collective decisions of men involved in the events of the future are favorable or unfavorable with God’s counsel and all His good pleasure (46:10).

In summation and in doctrinal reflection, the conclusion must be that the sovereign Lord planned from outside of time and history and carried out His plans within time and history. That’s why He is so different—unlike men or their gods, both of whose planning is fragile because of too many variables and unknowns and because of that, they have a total incapacity to forecast the future accurately. Since He cannot be likened to men, any suggestion of faulty, incomplete knowledge will pull down the incomparable to the comparable and simply slot Him into the prevailing pantheon.

Classic Examples of Divine Governance

The Appointment with the Foreign King, Cyrus (44:24-28). Following hard on the heels of a magnificent poem of self-predicated transcendence and immanence (44:24-27), a daring prediction from the human standpoint darts to the forefront—the specific naming of a Persian king yet to come (44:28; 45:1).

This king’s decree to rebuild Jerusalem without fortification is evidence of remarkable advance knowledge on the part of the Holy One of Israel. Such prophetic skill is indeed formidable evidence of the certainty of the Lord’s purpose seen in the decree issued in 538 B.C., one and a half centuries later, after both the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires had come and gone. It is more than knowledge of what will be. Rather it is having that king not only say what God says, but also perform what is part of His good pleasure (44:28). This is the climax of the string of nine clauses subordinate to, yet enlarging upon, the identifying declaration “I am the Lord” (44:24). These clauses, Allis notes, are


\[\text{Grogan, “Isaiah,” in Expositor’s Bible Commentary 249, remarks, “The revelation of the name of Cyrus is a moment of great prophetic drama.”}\]
intended to declare, describe, and prove the incomparable greatness of Him who bears this mighty and glorious Name . . . [and] are arranged in a chronological sequence the aim of which is to show that the God of Israel is sovereign in all the affairs of men, that past, present, and future events are all within His control and determined by Him.22

Neither Cyrus’ decree nor his conquests were of his own accord. The poetic sermon makes it quite clear that whatever he did, he did because of God’s doings which are described in some detail following the announcement of Cyrus being the Lord God’s anointed one, His messiah (45:1). This special individual in God’s program for that time would be divinely guided—“whose right hand I have held.” More than just guidance is unveiled, for God declared what He would actually do in a series of “I will” declarations (45:2-3, 5) and in past tense declarations what He had done—He called and named (45:4). Deeds and declarations were not bereft of ordered purpose as indicated by the “that you/they may know” (45:3, 6) and “for the sake of” (45:4).23 That such planning and preparation and governance of national movements was beyond the capacity of anything else is indicated by the twofold self-predication of solitariness and incomparability (45:5-6) as well as in the emphatic expression, “I, the Lord, do all these things” (45:7). His power is underscored in another emphatic expression, “I, the Lord, have created it” (45:8), followed by a more extended indication of being the sovereign creator who not only made the heavens and the earth but also man to live on earth (45:12). Upon reflection, a suggestion of teleological action is not a foreign element here. He is none less than the Maker of Israel who knows everything about their future and can answer all questions relating to them as the “work of His hands” (45:11). A play on concept occurs here as the reader is reminded that these hands stretched out the heavens too (45:12)! No problem exists then in accepting that such power can and did raise up Cyrus to do what God wanted Him to do (45:13). Note again the interplay between past tense and future tense and the sense of certainty it conveys. There’s no entertaining of possibility or probability, of a “will he/won’t he?” perspective. An inclusio, marked by “says the Lord” (45:11, 14), serves to underscore divine planning and purpose. All this portrays a divine governance which is not dependent upon outside influence or anticipation of a future decision.

The Deeds of the LORD with Israel and the Nations.24 A dominating and repetitive note in these eight sermons of Isaiah is God’s actions and plans concerning both Israel and the nations. The created idol-gods of the nations could not speak with the clarity and detail of their countries’ histories to come as the Lord could of

---

22Aliss, The Unity of Isaiah 66.
23לטימ על עלם נלטיים
His people—and of their histories too (cf. 44:9-20). Neither could they save and deliver their people as He does His (46:7).  

A special bond between Israel and God is pervasive, not the least of which is Israel’s God being called their Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel. The nation is not to fear, not only because He created and formed them, but also because they distinctively belong to Him as noted in the claims “You are mine!” or “To Me you belong!” (43:1). These recall the possessive expression “My People,” about which Bullock notes, “In that pronoun was contained both election and providence,” which indicates surety of future fulfillment. “My People” (40:1; 43:20; 47:6), “means that Israel could never be ‘free’ to go her own way. There was no world big enough in which she could lose herself to the watchful care of her God, whether by her own rebellious behavior or the militancy of a pagan nation.” This perhaps recalls Psalm 100 and its declaration, “Know that the LORD is God; it is He who has made us and not we ourselves; we are His people and the sheep of His pasture.”

Again they are not to fear because of what the LORD will still be doing for them, ultimately bringing them back into their land for His glory (43:5-7) and to His praise (43:21). Put this alongside “I act and who can reverse it?” (43:13), and the certainty of divine purpose and promise shines forth yet again.

One realizes after reading all eight sermons that the LORD’s relationship with Israel is one of both punishment and deliverance, but without their disobedience and unfaithfulness being viewed as having thwarted His original purpose or threatening the completion of His purpose in the present. Appeals to look to the LORD and be saved do not break down the sureness of His plan of salvation being fulfilled (see e.g., 45:22-23 and 46:12-13). That He is an eternal and everlasting Lord compels one to think in terms of Him being all-knowing rather than knowing clearly only the past and the present but not so the future.

**Conclusion**

Carl Henry perceptively observes: “If God’s plan achieved what it did not purpose, if part of it conflicted and competed, if his purpose itself requires constant

---

25Labuschagne, *Incomparability of Yahweh* 91, points out, “Through the whole of the Old Testament there is a very real and close connection between the LORD’s incomparability and the fact that He intervenes in history as the redeeming God” [emphasis in the original].

26This divine title, the Holy One of Israel, occurs six times in this volume of sermons, but always in company with other divine appellations: 41:14 the LORD, your Redeemer; 43:3 the LORD your God . . . your Savior; 43:14 the LORD, your Redeemer; 45:11 the LORD . . . his [Israel’s] Maker; 47:4 our Redeemer, the LORD of hosts; and 48:17 the LORD, your Redeemer . . . the LORD your God.


28Ibid.
revision, then God would be neither all-wise nor all-powerful.”

He also concluded:

God’s decrees will eventuate with certainty whether they come to pass solely by his own causality or through the agency of his creatures. God, moreover implements his divine purpose throughout the course of human affairs and not just sporadically or in isolated events. All history reveals the certainty of events decreed by God.

More from his adept pen is pertinent:

God is the God of predictive prophecy. . . . [H]e foreordains even contingent events (cf. Gen 45:8, 50:20; Prov 16:33) and knows and appoints even the duration of our lives (Job 14:5; Ps 39:4). The alternative would be a universe in which God is as uninformed and as uncertain about what will happen from moment to moment as are human beings.

Bruce Ware’s sharp critique is a fitting one to record: “It [Open Theism] is so demeaning to God as it is so unrightfully exalting of us.”

Rhetorical questions with divine self-predications mixed with imperital clauses, reminders of past actions, and authoritative predictions of what will still be done deliver a powerful karate chop to the neck of Open Theism! Isaiah 40–48 cannot be overlooked without prejudice to the current doctrinal debate and argument. The prophet’s inspired sermons are most instructive!

---

30Ibid.
31Ibid, 85-86.
32Ware, God’s Lesser Glory 148.
THE HERMENEUTICS OF “OPEN THEISM”

Robert L. Thomas
Professor of New Testament

Like other recent evangelical innovations, Open Theism has faltered through its use of errant hermeneutical principles. It has adopted a wrong view of general revelation, has allowed preunderstanding to produce a subjectively biased understanding of various texts, has used 1 John 4:8 as an interpretive center for the whole of Scripture, and has followed a discourse analysis approach that fails to take into account the contexts of various statements. Open Theism views the sovereignty of God as limited, an inadequate view that is especially prominent in the way its advocates handle Romans 9–11. A careful tracing of the reasoning of Romans 9 in particular reveals that the open-theistic view that God has surrendered some of His sovereignty is totally unbiblical.

* * * * *

At its annual meeting on November 14, 2000, the Executive Committee of the Evangelical Theological Society formulated the following resolution:

The Executive Committee, in response to requests from a group of charter members and others, to address the compatibility of the view commonly referred to as “Open Theism” with biblical inerrancy, wishes to state the following: 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. However, in order to insure fairness to members of the society who differ with this view, we propose the issue of such incompatibility be taken up as part of our discussion in next year’s conference “Defining Evangelicalism’s Boundaries.”

“Open Theism” is one of several innovations that have come to the forefront among evangelicals in recent years. All such innovations have a common thread, that of falling into the pattern of new hermeneutical principles that have become the norm among many evangelicals in about the last twenty years. The following investigation will seek to illustrate how Open Theism is an example of departures from

---

1Progressive Dispensationalism, Pluralism, Feminism, Self-love Psychology, and Conditional Immortality are among the other systems that have emerged recently in evangelical circles.
traditiona traditional grammatical-historical principles of interpretation. The discussion will then focus on the way Open Theism handles the NT teaching of divine sovereignty.

**Hermeneutical Weaknesses of Open Theism**

(1) **A Wrong View of General Revelation**

*Open Theism and general revelation.* Open Theism runs counter to grammatical-historical principles in a number of ways, but most basic to the system is its assumption that “all truth is God’s truth.” This common saying is a hypothesis that repeatedly weaves itself into the system’s discussions of God. Boyd, in treating the topic “Integration of Theology and Recent Scientific Advances,” has penned the following:

> As Christians, we of course want our worldview to be fundamentally derived from God’s Word, not the climate of opinion that happens to prevail in the world in which we live. Still, since “all truth is God’s truth,” as Aquinas taught us, we should assume that whatever is true about the views of our culture, including the views of science, will be consistent with God’s Word (assuming we are interpreting it correctly).²

The bottom line for Boyd in determining the correct interpretation of God’s Word, in this instance, is how science views a particular theme.

In explaining how the traditional view of God came into orthodox Christian circles, Sanders has written,

> [T]hey [early Christian writers] saw a need to proclaim that the Father of Jesus was the universal God and not merely the ethnic God of the Jews. Hence, they sought to demonstrate that the Christian God was the author of all creation according to the idea of the universal God articulated by the philosophers. . . . Moreover, they [the fathers] desired to show that the God of the Bible was the universal God, that this God was compatible with the best thinking of their day, and the Christ God was the fulfillment of the God sought by the philosophers.³

Whether Sanders’ characterization of Christianity’s early fathers is accurate or not, he approves of the principle of interpreting the Scriptures in line with the findings of philosophy when he later says, “[N]ot all philosophy is bad.”⁴ He credits philosophy with positive effects: “Philosophical theology can lend clarity to concepts about the divine nature and providence that can be useful to the biblical


⁴Ibid., 100.
skeptics." He feels that biblical scholars need philosophy in order to do their job properly.

Pinnock joins Sanders in approving the principle “all truth is God’s truth”:

No one should criticize the fathers for trying to integrate current philosophical beliefs and biblical insights. If God is the God of the universe and if truth is one, theologians should try to integrate all of the truth that they know from any quarter. But it is essential to integrate the various insights in such a way that the biblical message is not negated or compromised. In the integration the insights of revelation must be normative and not swept aside.

He later adds, “While open to everything that is good in Greek thinking, we must discard what is not good.”

Hasker has summarized the issue: “It is apparent from the historical survey that philosophy bears part of the blame for obscuring the biblical conception of God, so it is fitting that philosophy should also have a part in the work of restoration.”

He charges the early church with using bad philosophy in formulating the traditional doctrine of God and implies that “Open Theism” uses good philosophy to correct the error. His words expand on this:

I don’t wish to create the impression that I think it was simply a mistake for the early fathers to utilize the resources of Greek philosophy in formulating the Christian conception of God. On the contrary, I regard the availability of philosophy for this purpose as a manifestation of divine providence, allowing the church to make progress in clear and rigorous thinking about God that might otherwise have been impossible to achieve. But it is clear that great discernment was required in applying philosophical conceptions to the biblical God, and we need not assume that the church fathers made the correct decisions in every case.

“Our philosophy was bad; ours is good,” is the essence of Hasker’s claim.

**Traditional hermeneutics and general revelation.** In response to the endorsement of the maxim “all truth is God’s truth,” several observations are...
necessary. First, open theists have yet to prove that the early fathers fell under that much influence from philosophical notions. Examine the ancient writings that the open theists cite, and you will find the fathers more interested in preserving apostolic doctrine than in integrating secular philosophy with it. Second, even if the open theists were right about the fathers, the battle would boil down to a contest between differing philosophical systems, a contest that in essence puts biblical revelation in the background. Neither side would base its ultimate position on Scripture.

Third and most basic of all, the assumption that “all truth is God’s truth” is full of deceptive implications. I will not at this point repeat everything that I included in a discussion of “General Revelation and Biblical Hermeneutics” in a recent issue of The Master’s Seminary Journal, but will briefly point to four shortcomings of this widely cited, unbiblical foundation for biblical interpretation:

1. First, though all truth is God’s truth, truth exists in varying degrees of certitude. We can never be absolutely sure about any conclusions derived from study of a secular discipline such as philosophy.
2. Though all truth is God’s truth, all truth does not rest on the same authority. Truth resting upon God’s revelation in the Bible certainly rests on a higher authority than alleged truth unearthed by human research.
3. Though all truth is God’s truth, all truth does not fall on receptive ears. Truth from general revelation retains its truthful status only when received by nonexistent infallible humans. Sin has distorted man’s ability to receive truth. Illumination of the Holy Spirit to overcome man’s blindness is available only in connection with the understanding of Scripture.
4. “All truth is God’s truth” derives from wrong assumptions about the range of general revelation. Information and discoveries originating in secular fields do not belong in the category of God’s revealed truth. The scope of general revelation covers only a limited field of information about God.

One open theist, himself a philosopher, furnishes an illustration of the insufficiency of the “all truth is God’s truth” maxim when speaking of a limited agreement among philosophers on the openness question. He acknowledges, “I do not mean to say that a universal consensus has emerged; that rarely if ever happens in philosophy.” If universal consensus is so evasive for philosophers, philosophers are not candid if they claim that they have discovered truth that merits enough consideration to be integrated into one’s interpretation of the Bible.

Years ago Terry warned of the comparable danger of trying to integrate the findings of secular science with biblical interpretation:

Others have attempted various methods of ‘reconciling’ science and the Bible, and these have generally acted on the supposition that the results of scientific discovery necessitate a new interpretation of the Scripture records, or call for new principles of interpretation. The new discoveries, they say, do not conflict with the ancient revelation; they only

---


conflict with the old interpretation of the revelation. We must change our hermeneutical methods, and adapt them to the revelations of science. How for the thousandth time have we heard the story of Galileo and the Inquisition.  

Terry continues,

Hasty natures, however, indulging in pride of intellect, or given to following the dictum of honoured masters, may fall into grievous error in either of two ways: They may shut their eyes to facts, and hold to a delusion in spite of evidence; or they may become the obsequious victims of ‘science falsely so called.’ That certainly is a false science which is built upon inferences, assumptions, and theories, and yet presumes to dogmatize as if its hypotheses were facts. And that is a system of hermeneutics equally false and misleading which is so flexible, under the pressure of new discoveries as to yield to the putting of any number of new meanings upon an old and common word.  

In warning of a similar danger connected with secular psychology, J. Robertson McQuilkin, writing in 1977, used the following words:

My thesis is that in the next two decades the greatest threat to Biblical authority is the behavioral scientist who would in all good conscience man the barricades to defend the front door against any theologian who would attack the inspiration and authority of Scripture while all the while himself smuggling the content of Scripture out the back door through cultural or psychological interpretation.  

Both Terry and McQuilkin have proven to be accurate in their anticipations of the direction of evangelical hermeneutics. What Terry said about integrating science with the Bible and what McQuilkin said about integrating psychology with Scripture is equally true about the dangers of integrating philosophy with biblical hermeneutics.

(2) The Negative Impact of Preunderstanding on Biblical Hermeneutics

Open Theism and preunderstanding. In 1980 Eerdmans released an earthshaking work by Anthony C. Thiselton: Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description. As the book’s title indicates, it

12Milton S. Terry, Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments, 2d ed. (Reprint; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.) 533. Milton Spenser Terry (1840-1914) was a nineteenth-century Methodist Episcopalian. He was a graduate of Yale Divinity School and professor of Hebrew and Old Testament exegesis and theology at Garrett Biblical Institute. He was the author of Biblical Apocalypses and numerous commentaries on Old Testament books, but is most often remembered for his work on Biblical Hermeneutics, which was viewed by evangelicals as the standard work on biblical hermeneutics for most of the twentieth century.

13Ibid., 534.

recommended a philosophical approach to NT hermeneutical principles. Though not directly acknowledged, it advocated a major change in the way believers have understood divine revelation, at least since the Reformation and probably since the best days of the Garden of Eden. Thiselton advocated incorporating a new beginning point in the interpretation of Scripture, that of the preunderstanding of the interpreter. Prior to that, the interpreter sought for objectivity in interpretation, in letting the text speak for itself, without injecting personal bias. As innocent as this change may at first appear to be, it has utterly devastated evangelical hermeneutics for the last two decades. Subjectivism has become the rule rather than the exception, whereas prior to the focus on preunderstanding, the goal of exegetes was to learn what the text meant in its original setting.

I have elaborated on this hermeneutical shift in a 1996 article where I sought to show the dire consequences of such a change and the desirability of retaining traditional standards of objectivity. I will not cover that ground again, but will simply show how the incorporation of preunderstanding into the interpretive process has been largely responsible for the emergence of Open Theism.

Pinnock evidenced the impact of preunderstanding on his work when he wrote, “In theology, as in science, we also make use of models. . . . In the case of the doctrine of God, we all have a basic portrait of God’s identity in our minds when we search the Scriptures, and this model influences our exposition.” He continues,

Two models of God in particular are the most influential that people commonly carry around in their minds. We may think of God primarily as an aloof monarch, removed from the contingencies of the world, unchangeable in every aspect of being, as an all-determining and irresistible power, aware of everything that will ever happen and never taking risks. Or we may understand God as a caring parent with qualities of love and responsiveness, generosity and sensitivity, openness and vulnerability, a person (rather than a metaphysical principle) who experiences the world, responds to what happens, relates to us and interacts dynamically with humans. . . . God is sovereign in both models, but the mode of his sovereignty differs. . . . In this book we are advancing the second, or the open, view of God.

To impose a “model,” any “model,” on the Bible in deriving a doctrine of God does not allow the Bible to speak for itself on the subject. Traditional

---

17 Ibid.
18 A common practice is to exaggerate the model of the opposite position to make it less appealing to the general reader. Open theists utilize this technique in describing the position of traditional theism as illustrated in Pinnock’s statements just given. In response to Open Theism’s harsh-sounding model of God, MacArthur appropriately writes, “The God of the old-model theology is also unceasingly gracious, merciful, and loving (a fact one would not be able to glean from the gross caricature new-model
The Hermeneutics of “Open Theism”

hermeneutics advocates that exegetes and theologians approach Scripture with an open mind regarding the subject and let the doctrine emerge from applying grammatical-historical principles. Pinnock and the rest of the openness advocates evidence no inclination toward that practice. His own words are, “What we are really doing is conducting a competition between models of God.”19 Anyone interested in a true picture of God is not interested in such a competition. He only wants to know the truth about God presented in the Bible.

Sanders’ approach to preunderstanding differs only in phraseology from that of Pinnock. He stated the options and his choice this way:

There are many different views of divine providence. For the purposes of this study, all of them may be placed under one of two basic models: the “no-risk” view and the “risk” view. . . . According to the risk model of providence, God has established certain boundaries within which creatures operate. But God sovereignly decides not to control each and every event, and some things go contrary to what God intends and may not turn out completely as God desires.20

Leading into the interpretive exercise, he assumes that God chose to gamble on granting mankind freedom by surrendering some undefined aspects of His sovereignty. He realized He might lose His bet—indeed, He has lost in many cases—but He chose to live with that risk. When one reads Scripture with this assumption in mind, clearly he will find instances when God took chances in which He had absolutely no control over the outcome. He was “open” to any result.

Rice displays the effects of preunderstanding on interpretation with the following words: “The Bible contains an enormous range of material, and on almost any significant topic we can find diverse statements if not diverse perspectives as well.”21 He clarifies his meaning with an explanation:

This is why biblical scholars often object to expressions like “the biblical view of” or “according to the Bible.” They insist that there are biblical views, but no one biblical view. While it is not true, in spite of what some people claim, that you can make the Bible say anything you want it to say, different passages often seem to support different points of view. To cite a familiar example, many people do not see how the same God could command Israel on occasion to utterly destroy its foes (Josh 6:17; 1 Sam 15:2-3) and through Jesus instruct us to love our enemies (Mt 5:44).22

advocates like to paint when they describe ‘old-model orthodoxy’)” (John MacArthur, “Open Theism’s Attack on the Atonement,” TMSJ 12/1 [Spring 2001]:4).


22Ibid., 177 n. 7.
His explanation creates concern in one of two ways. Either the whole Bible is not inspired, or a single passage may have more than one meaning.\textsuperscript{23} Plenary inspiration requires that one part of the Bible not contradict what is taught in another part. Since it is doubtful that Rice would deny plenary inspiration, his words amount to an indirect acknowledgment that preunderstanding will sway decisions regarding the meaning of an individual passage. Depending on interpretive assumptions, a single text may mean several different things caused by varying preunderstandings. Rice treats this as an outcome of legitimate hermeneutics. Yet that is certainly contrary to traditional interpretive practices.\textsuperscript{24}

**Traditional hermeneutics and preunderstanding.** A major problem with current evangelical hermeneutics in general is its preunderstood assumption about what the text is going to yield. With that as the launching pad for interpretation, one can expect the emergence of many new doctrinal fads such as “Open Theism.” Terry proposed objectivity as a goal in a grammatical-historical approach to interpretation:

> In the systematic presentation, therefore, of any scriptural doctrine, we are always to make a discriminating use of sound hermeneutical principles. We must not study them in the light of modern systems of divinity, but should aim rather to place ourselves in the position of the sacred writers, and study to obtain the impression their words would naturally have made upon the minds of the first readers. . . . Still less should we allow ourselves to be influenced by any presumptions of what the Scriptures ought to teach. . . . All such presumptions are uncalled for and prejudicial.\textsuperscript{25}

The interpreter’s challenge is to bring nothing to the passage so that he can allow the passage to speak for itself.

\textsuperscript{23}Evangelicals in their newfound subjectivism in hermeneutics are closely approximating the interpretive technique of deconstructionism according to which each passage may have a number of correct interpretations. Rather than calling this by the postmodern name of deconstructionism, however, they will generally speak of “the hermeneutics of humility” whereby no person dares to claim he has the correct interpretation of a passage. Pinnock typifies the practices of allowing for multiple meanings in his defense of Open Theism: “Among other hermeneutical presuppositions, I accept diversity among biblical witnesses and recognize the dialogical character of the Bible. . . . [T]he Bible is a complex work by many authors whose views may vary and . . . the text is open to various plausible interpretations. . . . This means I cannot claim that the Bible teaches the open view of God or any other subject simply and straightforwardly such that there is no counter testimony which probes and questions and objects. For this and other reasons I look to the Holy Spirit in approaching the treasures of Scripture, praying that God’s breath will make it a living word and the source of fresh insight” (Pinnock, \textit{Most Moved Mover} 21). Later he adds, “[E]xegesis is not an exact science, owing to the historical situatedness of text and reader” (ibid., 60). Is Pinnock by these words endorsing reader-response hermeneutics?


\textsuperscript{25}Terry, \textit{Biblical Hermeneutics} 595. Terry elaborates further on the need for the interpreter to avoid personal bias in his approach to the text in ibid., 152-54; 220.
(3) The Fallacy of Adopting an Interpretive Center

Open Theism and the interpretive center. Rice explicitly exemplifies another major hermeneutical flaw of “Open Theism.” That is the error of designating “. . . a clear text, an interpretive center, a theological and hermeneutical key, a ‘locus classicus,’ a defining passage, a starting point that serves as a filter. . . .”26 To interpret obscure passages in light of such “a clear text” may seem reasonable on the surface, but it robs other passages of their distinctive contributions to the broad revelation of Scripture.

In formulating a view of God, Rice designates one passage as the interpretive center for discovering from the Bible who God is:

From a Christian perspective, love is the first and last word in the biblical portrait of God. According to 1 John 4:8: “whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.” The statement God is love is as close as the Bible comes to giving us a definition of the divine reality.27

Rice calls 1 John 4:8 the most important description of God in the Bible, concluding that “God is love” succinctly summarizes a pervasive biblical theme. He devotes several pages to elaborating on the importance of this theme. He states, “Consequently, when we enumerate God’s qualities, we must not only include love; to be faithful to the Bible we must put love at the head of the list.”28 Pressing his case ever further, he concludes, “A doctrine of God that is faithful to the Bible must show that all of God’s characteristics derive from love.”29

The rest of the openness people promote this same emphasis because they want to portray a God who is strongly relational, both within the persons of the Trinity and with the creatures He has created. Boyd has this eye-catching statement: “God is an eternal triune dance of love who eternally displays structure and freedom. His creation, which he invites to join his dance, manifests the same balance of structure and freedom.”30 Boyd contrasts this freedom with what he calls “the now-debunked deterministic framework of the past,”31 in other words, “the now-debunked teaching that God has a detailed plan for the future of both individuals and society.”

God interacts with His creatures, allowing them freedom to choose and remaining unaware of the choices they will make until they make them. That is the demonstration of His love.

Sanders adds a different wording in support of the primacy of God’s love:

---

28Ibid., 21.
29Ibid.
30Ibid.
31Boyd, God of the Possible 111.
32Ibid.
“The God of Greek thought is anonymous, self-sufficient, alone (unrelated), invulnerable, self-thinking thought, changeless and egocentric. The triune God of the Bible is ‘named’ (as Yahweh to Israel and then as Father, Son and Spirit through Jesus), is God for others, makes himself vulnerable and is self-giving love.”

Pinnock joins the case for making love God’s overriding quality when he states, “[L]ove rather than almighty power is the primary perfection of God.”

**Traditional hermeneutics and the interpretive center.** Terry points out the fallacy of having an interpretive center: “But we must avoid the danger of overstepping in this matter [i.e., in the use of parallel passages to interpret one another].” He particularly warns about using the writings of one biblical author to throw light on the meaning of a passage by another author. That error is precisely the one committed by open theists in their interpretation of all Scripture in the light of 1 John 4:8. Their approach reads the meaning of 1 John—if indeed they have interpreted 1 John correctly—into the rest of the Bible and deprives sections dealing with God’s other attributes of their biblical role in constructing the doctrine of God.

Without question the Bible says plenty about the love of God. Depictions of Him should always include this marvelous attribute. Yet the Bible also says God is holy (Lev 19:2; 1 Pet 1:16). It also says that God is a consuming fire (Heb 12:29). To exclude any one of these or the many other attributes of God spoken of in Scripture is to give an unbalanced view of His person. The doctrine of God should grow out of the whole counsel of God, not just selected parts. To interpret Lev 19:2 or Heb 12:29 through the eyes of 1 John 4:8 does severe injustice not only to the contexts of Lev 19:2 and Heb 12:29, but also to the context of 1 John 4:8, which nowhere sets forth the idea of an overriding theological concept.

To formulate the doctrine by giving preeminence to 1 John 4:8 is a classic example of using a *locus classicus* to interpret the rest of Scripture. Evangelical feminist hermeneutics have illustrated this malpractice by using Gal 3:28 as an interpretive filter in analyses of 1 Cor 11:2-16; 14:33-35; 1 Tim 2:11-15; Eph 5:22-33; 1 Pet 3:1-7. Such a practice results in wrong understandings of what the other passages are stating as well as a reading into Gal 3:28 of something that is not there. The choice of a hermeneutical key on any biblical subject will inevitably reflect the preunderstanding of the interpreter, not the objective teaching of Scripture. To use such a key is also inconsistent with the evangelical doctrine of plenary inspiration. Including all texts on a given subject allows each text to have its distinctive input and avoids interpretations that are slanted by human bias.

---

32. Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” in *The Openness of God* 100.
34. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 222.
35. See Felix, “Hermeneutics of Evangelical Feminism,” *TMSJ* 165-68, for further elaboration on the need to avoid reading other Scripture through the eyes of a single passage.
Other characteristics of God deserve equal places alongside love in describing who God is. Adam sinned in the Garden as Gen 3:6-7 records, but God in His omniscience knew beforehand that he would. Otherwise, the Lamb would not have been foreknown and selected to die before the foundation of the world (1 Pet 1:20). God in His omnipotence had a plan for the world even before it was created. Nothing is impossible for Him any more than planning that His Son would be born of a virgin and then implementing that plan (Luke 1:37). God is an eternal being. Otherwise, one day could not be for Him as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day (2 Pet 3:8). He is omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent as Psalm 139 so beautifully recognizes (139:1-16). To allow any of these other qualities to overshadow God’s love would be equally misleading as is the converse.

(4) The Fickleness of “Hermeneutical Hopscotch”

Open Theism and discourse analysis. The case for openness rests on a running survey of biblical passages. This hermeneutical procedure is a recent development that usually goes by the name of discourse analysis. It is the product of modern developments in the field of linguistics. “Generally speaking, discourse analysis is the attempt to study the organization of language above the sentence level. It is the study of larger linguistic units such as entire conversations or written texts.”

It charts the flow of the argument of a passage. “As such, discourse analysis is a type of translation pointing to the gist of the argument developed in the text.” This technique seeks a larger picture in a passage before investigating the details. In fact, it disparages traditional methods that investigate the details first, before proceeding to the larger picture. In implementing this wholistic approach, the method takes into consideration sociological, psychological, communicative, and other elements that may have influenced an author to produce what he did.

This hermeneutical innovation has given rise to a practice that I have elsewhere termed “hermeneutical hopscotch,” the practice of hopping from one carefully selected part of a larger section to another. By selecting only parts that contribute to supporting a predetermined opinion, the “hopscotch” approach can demonstrate just about anything the interpreter desires to prove.

That is essentially the method of Open Theism in its use of Scripture. For example, Boyd begins with Gen 6:6, and says, “The Lord was sorry that He had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.” He then uses this to prove that God did not know in advance that humans would come to this wicked state. Then he does the same thing with 1 Sam 15:10, 35, drawing the same conclusion about God’s ignorance of the future. He cites Num 14:11 and Hos 8:5 where God asks questions about the future. Most have interpreted these as rhetorical


38Boyd, God of the Possible 55.
questions, but Boyd, after acknowledging rhetorical questions as a possibility, concludes that the questions must reflect God’s lack of knowledge about the duration of Israel’s stubbornness. He continues to string together such passages, picking only the instances that support his case. He strains one of these particularly when discussing “The ‘Day and Hour’ of the Coming.” Citing Mark 13:32—Jesus’ statement, “about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father”—Boyd interprets it through the eyes of 2 Pet 3:9-12 where Peter speaks of “hastening the day” of that coming by proper behavior. On the basis of Peter’s words and in contradiction of Jesus’s words, Boyd reasons that the Father could not know precisely the day or hour because that date has not yet been set. The “when” of the coming depends on human freedom of choice. Here is a classic example of eisegesis in both Mark 13:32 and 2 Pet 3:9-12. The time of the coming has been set according to Acts 1:7, and the Father does know when it will happen. We as humans do not know when, so as Peter instructs, we behave ourselves in a way to expedite that happening through godly living. It is altogether unnatural to interpret Mark 13:32 the way Boyd does, in the light of both the verse’s statement itself and the larger context of the Olivet Discourse.

Sanders proceeds in much the same way as Boyd, picking only those points that suit his purpose, first with Genesis 1 and then with Genesis 2–3. He then picks up with Genesis 6 as did Boyd, but in much more detail. Then he goes to the story of Abraham, moving from Gen 12:1-3 to 15:1 to 15:2-3 to 15:9-21 to 15:13-16 to 16:11 to 18:4 to 22:1 to 22:12 to 22:15-18. He stays with each passage only long enough to milk it for the argument he needs to prove his preconceived point. He does the same with the Joseph narrative.

Along the way he is careful to explain away Gen 18:14—"Is anything too difficult for the LORD?" (God’s unqualified omnipotence)—and Gen 50:20—"And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive" (God’s absolute sovereignty).

Traditional hermeneutics and discourse analysis. That kind of selective interpretation hardly deserves the name of exegesis. For example, an interpreter, if he set out to do so, could use a discourse analysis of Genesis to prove Abraham was a very wicked man.

39Ibid., 58-59.
40Ibid., 72.
41Sanders, The God Who Risks 41-49.
42Ibid., 49-50.
43Ibid., 50-53.
44Ibid., 54-55.
45Ibid., 51-52, 55.
The Hermeneutics of “Open Theism”

Gen 12:11-13: 11 And it came about when he came near to Egypt, that he said to Sarai his wife, “See now, I know that you are a beautiful woman; 12 and it will come about when the Egyptians see you, that they will say, ‘This is his wife’; and they will kill me, but they will let you live. 13 “Please say that you are my sister so that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may live on account of you.” [Abraham encouraged his wife to lie to save his own neck.]

Gen 12:18-19: 18 Then Pharaoh called Abram and said, “What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? 19 “Why did you say, ‘She is my sister,’ so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife, take her and go.” [Abraham himself was a liar.]

Gen 16:3-6: 3 And after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Abram’s wife Sarai took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to her husband Abram as his wife. 4 And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her sight. 5 And Sarai said to Abram, “May the wrong done me be upon you. I gave my maid into your arms; but when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her sight. May the LORD judge between you and me.” 6 But Abram said to Sarai, “Behold, your maid is in your power; do to her what is good in your sight.” So Sarai treated her harshly, and she fled from her presence. [Abraham was an adulterer, and was unwilling to accept the responsibility of caring for the woman involved with him in the adulterous act.]

Gen 17:15-17: 15 Then God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. 16 “And I will bless her, and indeed I will give you a son by her. Then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.” 17 Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, “Will a child be born to a man one hundred years old? And will Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” [Abraham laughed at the promise of God as though it were ridiculous.]

Gen 20:1-2: 1 Now Abraham journeyed from there toward the land of the Negev, and settled between Kadesh and Shur; then he sojourned in Gerar. 2 And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, “She is my sister.” So Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah. [Abraham a second time lied about Sarah being his sister.]

Gen 20:12: 12 “Besides, she actually is my sister, the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife.” [Abraham rationalized to try to justify the lie he had told.]

Gen 21:14-15: 14 So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave them to Hagar, putting them on her shoulder, and gave her the boy, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beersheba. 15 And the water in the skin was used up, and she left the boy under one of the bushes. [Abraham refused to accept the responsibility for his child born out of wedlock and for the mother who had borne him.]

Gen 22:10: 10 And Abraham stretched out his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.
[Abraham was willing to murder his own son.]

Gen 24:2-4: 2 And Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his household, who had charge of all that he owned, “Please place your hand under my thigh, 3 and I will make you swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I live, 4 but you shall go to my country and to my relatives, and take a wife for my son Isaac.” [Abraham insisted on picking a wife for Isaac his son.]

In contrast to this negative picture, more comprehensive sections within this broad scope of Scripture teach that Abraham lived an exemplary life of faith in spite of his lapses, notwithstanding the “hopscotch” approach that might lead to the opposite conclusion.

Traditional hermeneutical authorities have strong words about the importance of context: “Many a passage of Scripture will not be understood at all without the help afforded by the context; for many a sentence derives all its point and force from the connexion in which it stands.” 46 Terry continues his emphasis on context with the following words:

Some religious teachers are fond of employing scriptural texts simply as mottoes, with little or no regard to their true connexion. Thus they too often adapt them to their use by imparting to them a factitious sense foreign to their proper scope and meaning. The seeming gain in all such cases is more than counterbalanced by the loss and danger that attend the practice. It encourages the habit of interpreting Scripture in an arbitrary and fanciful way, and thus furnishes the teachers of error with their most effective weapon. The practice cannot be defended on any plea of necessity. 47

Most of the biblical case for openness come from narrative-type passages 48 and the OT prophets, which are not the ideal types of literature for deriving doctrinal conclusions. For learning who God is, passages that have as their objective to teach that doctrine are much more satisfactory, as subsequent discussion will illustrate.

The Foundational Nature of Hermeneutics

Rules of interpretation lie at the root of any theological conclusions based on the Bible. “Open Theism” furnishes a testimonial to this fact. By deviating from traditional grammatical-historical principles, the variety of conclusions one can reach has no limit.

46Terry, Biblical Hermeneutics 219.
47Ibid., 219-20 n. 1.
48Typical of openness reliance on narrative passages for explaining God’s sovereignty is Pinnock’s statement, “The biblical narrative reveals the nature of God’s sovereignty” (Pinnock, Most Moved Mover 45 [emphasis added]). The nature of God’s sovereignty needs to be explained in light of texts whose purpose is to teach that doctrine—passages such as Romans 9—not on the basis of narrative passages that lend themselves to a number of possible explanations.
On our way home from a lengthy freeway trip recently, my 13-year-old granddaughter was getting impatient with the length of the trip. She kept asking, “How much longer? How much longer?” When we reached a point that I knew was about twenty minutes from home, I thought it would be a good idea to turn her impatience into a game. So I told her that we would arrive at home at 7:08 p.m. She took the game over from there. She entered her prediction of 7:05 p.m., and then to safeguard her position she added a second prediction of 7:09 p.m. She became the self-proclaimed authority on the rules by which we would play game. I could not get her to explain why she was allowed two predictions to my one. She said we were going to follow the rules of the TV game “The Price is Right,” whatever those are. She then added several other stipulations that made it next to impossible for me to win the game. I suffered a bitter defeat playing according to her rules, and she came away triumphantly.

The new set of rules for interpreting the Bible that some evangelicals have adopted enables them to prove just about anything they want to prove. A recent illustration of this is the increasingly popular “open view of God,” the teaching that the future is not closed off by a settled divine foreknowledge, that it is left open for possible happenings that have not yet occurred to either God or man. Reportedly, the advocates of this view support it with “clear and responsible biblical interpretation.” It is “clear and responsible” when playing by the rules open theists have invented, but not according to traditionally accepted principles.

**The Sovereignty of God**

Discussions of Open Theism could go any number of directions. They could respond one passage at a time to the system’s alleged supporting texts, which is what Bruce Ware does to some extent, or they could deal with differing definitions for each of the attributes of God—His omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, impassibility, transcendence, eternality, immutability, and so on. Open Theism defines all of these differently from traditional orthodoxy. For the purposes of this study, however, divine sovereignty will be the focus, because all the other attributes derive from this attribute in one way or another.

**Open Theism’s Explanation**

Sanders agrees with the foundational nature of this attribute of sovereignty when he says, “I argue that the key element in the debate over providence is not the type of omniscience God has but the kind of sovereignty God has decided to

---

49Walter Brueggemann’s endorsement of Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible*, No. 5 of *The Discerning Reader* from Baker Book House.

exercise.”

Open theists speak of the sovereignty of God, but they also say that God surrendered a degree of that sovereignty when He created mankind.

Sanders leads into such a thought when he writes, “God is the sovereign Creator, for there is no opposition to his act of creating. We must be careful in basing a doctrine of providence on this aspect of creation, since it is an open question . . . whether God can and will sovereignly create beings over which he does not exercise total control.” Sanders later decides that God has given away some of His sovereignty: “God sovereignly decides that not everything will be up to God. Some important things are left in the hands of humanity as God’s co-creators such that we are to collaborate with God in the achievement of the divine project. . . . There is freedom for humans to be creative within the ‘rules of the game’ God has established.”

Rice expresses God’s partial sovereignty as follows: “At times, God acts to bring things about unilaterally, as it were. . . . At other times, however, God interacts with creaturely agents in pursuing his goals.”

“The fact that God foreknows or predestines something does not guarantee that it will happen, the fact that God determines part of history does not mean that he determines all of history. . . . Consequently, the actual course of history is not something God alone decides all by himself. God and the creatures both contribute.”

Boyd speaks of God’s sovereignty in much the same way: “To confess that God can control whatever he wants to control leaves open the question of how much God actually does want to control.” Later he adds,

Thus far we have examined the motif of Scripture that celebrates God’s sovereignty over creation and lordship over history. God predestines and foreknows as settled whatever he sees fit to predestine and foreknow as settled. We have also seen, however, that this motif of future determinism does not warrant the conclusion that God predestines and foreknows as settled everything about the future.

He clarifies his view further: “The open view concludes that the future is literally settled to whatever degree God wants to settle it, and literally open to the extent that God desires to leave it open to be resolved by the decisions of his creations.”

By implication, these and other open theists put God into the same category.

51Ibid., 12.
52Sanders, The God Who Risks 41.
53Ibid., 44.
55Ibid., 55-56.
56Boyd, God of the Possible 51.
57Ibid., 53.
58Ibid., 54.
as Adam in some respects. God created Adam as sovereign over all creation (Gen 1:28), but Adam chose to surrender his sovereignty when he yielded his role to the serpent and Satan (Gen 3:6-7). The psalmist elaborates on the purposed sovereignty of mankind in Ps 8:4-6. The writer of Hebrews, however, elaborates on the loss of man’s sovereignty and how man through Jesus will regain it in the future during the age to come (Heb 2:5-9).

The open theist would have people believe that a similar thing has occurred with God. By choice God surrendered a degree of His sovereignty over His creation and will someday regain it at the second coming of Christ. The principal difference is that Adam surrendered his sovereignty in toto, but God surrendered only a part of His sovereignty. The obvious question is, however, Is there any such thing as partial sovereignty? If one surrenders even a fraction of his sovereignty, does sovereignty still exist? Webster defines “sovereign” as “supreme in power, rank, or authority.” Someone who has surrendered even a fraction of that power, rank, or authority is no longer a sovereign. It is one thing for a sovereign to delegate responsibility, but it is another for him to surrender his authority as open theists say God has done. In that case God no longer exercises control over all that happens with the result that creatures are operating independently of Him, without having to answer to Him for their actions. That is perhaps why significant advocates of Open Theism oppose the doctrine of eternal punishment. God granted human freedom and so will not punish anyone who uses it wrongly, they say.

When open theists speak of sovereignty, they do not mean “supreme in power, rank, and authority” any more than they mean that God knows all when they speak of His omniscience. Nor do they mean that God is everywhere present when they speak of His omnipresence or that He is all-powerful when they speak of His omnipotence. They do not mean that He existed before time sequence became a reality when they speak of His eternality. They have retained traditional terminology, but have attached their own definitions to these words because of the contradictory nature of their system in saying all these attributes are only partial.

The Biblical Explanation

Examples of mishandling the text. Many texts teach specifically the absolute sovereignty68 of God. Open Theism has ways to explain away many of

---


69For more information on those who oppose the doctrine of eternal punishment, see *TMSJ* 9/2 (Fall 1998), an issue devoted to critiquing that doctrine from a biblical standpoint.

68“Absolute sovereignty” is a redundancy, because sovereignty rightly understood is always absolute. It is the same as using “very unique” to describe a phenomenon, because if something is unique, only one degree of uniqueness exists. Yet because of the relativizing of sovereignty in Open Theism’s system, for clarity’s sake “absolute sovereignty” will sometimes appear in this discussion. Pinnock refers to limited sovereignty as “meticulous sovereignty” and to absolute sovereignty as “general sovereignty” (Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover* 53). That is veiled terminology to obscure the impossibility
these texts. One proponent assigns Jesus’ statement, “All authority has been given to Me” (Matt 28:18), to the time of the end, and notes that in the meantime, “The way of God in Jesus will not be achieved through overwhelming power or invulnerability.”\textsuperscript{62} Stated in other terms, he says the sovereignty of God is not currently operative. Yet, Matt 28:18 specifically states that all authority had already been granted to Christ at the time He uttered those words, just before His ascension. To postpone the operation of that authority till His second coming not only reads something into the statement that is not there, but also violates the context of Matthew 28 by removing the motivation for fulfillment of the Great Commission.

Another “open” proponent assigns God’s election of Christians before the foundation of the world in Eph 1:4 to the realm of corporate election. He interprets Paul to mean that God made this choice of everyone who would be in Christ, without knowing their identity individually. He writes,

Note, Paul does not say that we were individually predestined to be “in Christ” (or not). Scripture elsewhere tells us that if it were up to God alone, he would save everyone (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9). But it is not up to God alone; God gave humans free will. What Paul says in this verse is that \textit{whoever chooses} to be “in Christ” is predestined to be “holy and blameless before him in love.”\textsuperscript{63}

The open view advocates that choosing individuals is one of the areas where God in His limited sovereignty has refrained, according to this reading of Eph 1:4.

Yet the verse does not say God has chosen a group; it says He has chosen individuals. Lying in a context of Eph 1:3-14 where the heavy emphasis is on the primacy of God’s role in salvation, the verse leaves no room for human activity.\textsuperscript{64} It could hardly refer to the corporate election of whoever may come to be in Christ. Crawford has written,

Though it is true that Christ is God’s Elect One (Isa 42:1, 6 f.; cf. Matt 12:18) and that apart from His election there could be no realization of the election of unbelievers, His election is of a different nature. Christ was elected to be the redeemer in contrast to sinners being elected for redemption. Thus Christ’s election does not truly parallel that of Christians, and so theirs cannot be contained in His.\textsuperscript{65}

Therefore, from a biblical standpoint Open Theism strikes out again.

Yet the passage that appears to give the open theists the biggest problem
is Romans 9–11, particularly Romans 9. In commenting on the potter metaphor in Romans 9, Sanders observes, “Paul is not arguing for divine pancausality here. This misunderstanding occurs when Romans 9 is divorced from its historical setting and universalized into timeless truth. Paul is not arguing about abstract principles of providence but about a specific historical situation between God and Israel.”66 This comes in the midst of Sanders’ lengthy discussion of the extended passage. In summing up the section, he remarks, “God has achieved some of what he desired, but not everything. . . . In his providential work God encounters conflict and opposition to his project, and in seeking its fulfillment he experiences both victory and defeat.”67

Boyd deals with Romans 9 in his “question and objection” chapter of God of the Possible.68 He devotes more space to this question and objection than to any of the other eighteen that he includes. He attempts to make six points in explaining the passage from the open viewpoint. (1) Arminianism does not understand Romans 9 to teach God’s sovereignty. That, of course, is a theological argument and proves nothing about the meaning of the passage. (2) The view that God determines who will and will not receive mercy contradicts the teaching of Scripture that God’s love is universal and impartial and that He desires everyone to be saved (Acts 10:34; 1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9).69 Here is another hermeneutical flaw. Each passage must stand on its own and make its own distinctive contribution. (3) Paul’s summary in Rom 9:30-32 reveals the meaning of the passage: the verses appeal “to morally responsible choices of the Israelites and Gentiles.”70 Yet Paul’s statement in 9:30 excludes a moral choice. For the Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness to attain the same must be a sovereign choice of God, not a human moral choice.

(4) The OT source of the potter metaphor of Romans 9 is Jeremiah 18. In Jeremiah the metaphor does not prove sovereignty, because the “clay” in the potter’s hands is not passive. The potter’s action depends on what the clay does.71 This, however, is a questionable interpretation of Jeremiah 18 and is conspicuously a wrong interpretation of Romans 9 as subsequent discussion will show. Besides, Paul as a NT writer is not bound in his use of the OT to abide by the grammatical-historical meaning of the Jeremiah passage. (5) Boyd continues,

When Paul responds to the charge of injustice by asking, ‘who . . . are you, a human being, to argue with God?’ (v. 20), he is not thereby appealing to the sheer power of the potter over the clay. He is rather appealing to the rights and wisdom of the potter to

67Ibid., 123-24.
68Boyd, God of the Possible 139-44.
69Ibid., 140.
70Ibid.
71Ibid., 141.
fashion clay according to his providential purposes ("as it seem[s] good to him" [Jer. 18:4]), and in a manner that is appropriate, given the kind of clay he has to work with.  

Unfortunately, this is a classic case of eisegesis in Boyd’s approach. Romans 9 says absolutely nothing about the quality of the clay the potter works with. (6) The point of the passage is not who will and will not be saved, but whether or not God’s covenantal promises have failed.  

Boyd concludes that faith makes one a true Israelite and that a Gentile can belong to God’s covenant by faith. God’s covenant, originally with ethnic Israel, is now fulfilled with those outside Israel, is presumably Boyd’s meaning. If his reasoning is correct, however, God’s covenantal promises have failed. This is contrary to Romans 9–11, however, which demonstrates that God’s covenantal promises to ethnic Israel will not fail, but will eventually be fulfilled.

**An example of the true meaning.** If the openness people and Arminians have missed the point of Romans 9, what does the chapter teach? Romans 1–8 presents universal truths regarding condemnation, justification, sanctification, and glorification, and ends with a hymn of victory that, because of the promises of God, nothing can separate believers from the love of Christ (8:38-39). Certain historical developments, however, raise a question about the reliability of God’s promises. Those developments connect with the rejection of Israel by God and the promises of God made to Israel. If He has rejected Israel and does not fulfil His promises to Israel, how can other recipients of His promises, those benefitting through the work of Christ, expect Him to fulfil His promises to them?  

To that question Paul responds in His famous theodicy in Romans 9–11, his defense of God’s dealings with mankind.

**Israel’s rejection a cause of great sorrow to Paul (9:1-5).** The first section of Romans 9 (vv. 1-5) shows the impact of Israel’s rejection on Paul. He declares his love and personal sorrow over the plight of his fellow Israelites, and in so doing, recalls their distinctive and permanent role as recipients of the law and the natural stock that produced the Messiah.

**First objection and response: God’s promises to Israel have not failed (9:6-**

---

72Ibid., 142.
73Ibid., 142-43.
Next Paul responds to the first of three objections he imagines a Jewish opponent might raise, an objection that the promise of God to Israel has failed. He elaborates on the connection between Israel’s rejection and the promises of God made to the nation (9:6-13). The promise of God to Israel has not failed, because the promise did not belong to every single individual among the natural descendants of Abraham. It belonged only to chosen members of that race. God in His sovereignty chose Isaac, the son of promise, rather than Ishmael, the son of the flesh. He made clear that His choice was apart from any human consideration by choosing Jacob over Esau, doing so before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad. God’s sovereignty in this matter was absolute. Already in Israel’s history, before her rejection by God at the Messiah’s first advent, God had demonstrated His sovereignty by twice narrowing the line of Abraham’s descendants to smaller groups. His actions had nothing to do with human responses. His sovereign rejection of portions of the nation in former days does not invalidate His promises. It simply narrowed their fulfillment to smaller segments of Abraham’s descendants. The same applies to His most recent rejection of a portion of the nation.

Second objection and response: God is not unjust in hardening Israel this way (9:14-18). In response to a second implied objection that God is unjust for hardening Israel this way, Paul points out that God’s rejection of Israel is perfectly consistent with God’s nature and character (9:14-18). The imaginary objector holds that for God’s absolute election to be independent of any human merit, as Paul has just stated in 9:11, is not fair. A Jewish objector would heartily approve of the rejection of Ishmael and Esau, but when their rejection illustrates a principle that would exclude the nation as a whole from the promises made to Abraham, such would provoke the objection that God is unjust. Paul responds that God is not unjust in hardening the nation that way.

He cannot be unjust because He is sovereign. According to Moses, He will have mercy on whom He chooses because His decisions are independent of human merit (9:15). That leads to the conclusion that the reason for God’s choice is not a human response or a human exertion, but the reason lies in the person who shows mercy—i.e., God (9:17). Because God is sovereign, for Him to make independent choices cannot be injustice.

For further proof of God’s sovereignty from Scripture, Paul turns to Moses’ enemy, Pharaoh (9:17). In Pharaoh he finds an example of God’s dealings with the other class of mankind. God raised Pharaoh to prominence to furnish an example of His power and to make known His name and sovereignty throughout the world.

---

75 Piper, *Justification of God* 50; Gifford, “Romans” 169; Morris, *Romans* 351-52.
76 Piper, *Justification of God* 179; Morris, *Romans* 358; Moo, *Romans* 589-91.
77 Moo, *Romans* 595. Sanders ignores the plain statement of Rom 9:17 when he writes, “God strengthened Pharaoh’s heart in his rebellion in the hopes that it would help him come to his senses and repent” (*The God Who Risks* 121). *God hardened, not strengthened, Pharaoh’s heart to show His power*
Consideration of the examples of Moses and Pharaoh leads inevitably to the conclusion that choosing the objects of His mercy and hardening the rest are choices that are His and His alone, independent of any interaction with humans (9:18).

Third objection and response: God is the one who hardens, yet He can still put the blame on man because He is the Creator (9:19-29). Paul sees himself faced with a possible third objection: “If God Himself hardens the heart, why does He find fault with man? What justice is there in continuing to blame a creature when God so wills and no one can resist Him?” (9:19). To this objection the apostle responds by rebuking the presumption of mere man in replying to God this way; the thing made dare not ask the maker, why have you made me this way? (9:20). The potter has power over the clay to make honorable vessels and dishonorable vessels (9:21). The absolute power of the creator over His creatures is the general point, but the specific point is God’s absolute power over Israel to do with her as He pleases. Paul derives his potter metaphor from the same figure in the OT where God’s control over Israel is in view (cf. Isa 29:16; 45:9; 64:8; Jer 18:6).

Though the creator’s prerogative is to show His power by inflicting immediate wrath on vessels of wrath, in actuality He has put up with those vessels for a while because of His great long-suffering (9:22). Since the creator has opted to delay the imposition of His wrath even though the vessels are fitted for destruction, how can anyone raise a further objection against His justice? To dampen further objections to God’s justice, Paul notes the way God has demonstrated the riches of His glory on vessels of mercy whom He prepared before for glory (9:23) and identifies those vessels as coming from among not just the Jews, but also from among the Gentiles (9:24). People from among both groups were among those receiving God’s sovereign call to benefit from His mercy.

To justify God’s inclusion of Gentiles along with Jews, Paul quotes Hos 2:23 and 1:10 to recall the principle that God can take into His place of privilege those who had been previously cut off from it (9:25-26). He then cites Isa 10:22-23 and 1:9 to support the calling of Jews, passages that emphasize the calling of only a remnant of Israel, however (9:27-29). The inevitable conclusion is the bulk of Israel are vessels of wrath.

Note the repeated emphasis on God’s sovereignty. In 9:11: “For though the twins were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God’s purpose according to His choice might stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls.” In 9:15: “For He says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’” In 9:16: “So then

in Pharaoh and that God’s name might be proclaimed in all the land according to that Scripture.

76Piper, Justification of God 186; Cranfield, Romans 490-91; Morris, Romans 364-65.

77The potter illustration has nothing to do with resistance put up by the clay, as Sanders and Boyd contend (Sanders, The God Who Risks 122; Boyd, God of the Possible 141). The text never alludes to the quality of the clay. Its whole attention focuses on the sovereign will of the potter (Rom 9:21).
it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.” In 9:18: “So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.” In 9:21: “Does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use, and another for common use?” In 9:23-24: God desired “that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles.” Only an intentionally blind person can fail to see God’s absolute sovereignty in hardening Israel as Paul defends God’s unique role in Rom 9:1-29.

How the hardening works from a human perspective (9:30–10:21). In 9:30–10:21 Paul turns to view how the hardening works itself out from the human perspective. Notably, the inclusion of some Gentiles who did not seek righteousness has accompanied the exclusion of Israel (9:30; cf. 9:24-26; 10:19-20). That is a sovereign act of God even though it resulted in moral choices by human beings, the choices to believe and not to believe. Human responsibility to choose accompanies divine sovereignty.

God’s rejection of Israel is not complete (11:1-10). As Paul resumes God’s dealings with Israel in Romans 11:1-10, he points out that God’s rejection of the nation is not complete. God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew (11:1-2a). As in the days of Elijah, He has picked a remnant according to the election of grace (11:2b-6). The remnant has obtained what Israel sought, but the rest were hardened (11:7-10). The promise of God is still in effect in His inclusion of a remnant of ethnic Israel in the church. The full sovereignty of God is still operative even though the vast majority of Israel are hardened.

God’s rejection of Israel is not final (11:11-32). Paul continues to detail God’s dealings with the nation in demonstrating that His rejection of Israel is not final (11:11-32). In His sovereign purposes their stumbling was for the purpose of bringing salvation to the Gentiles, which in turn had its goal of provoking Israel to jealousy. God broke off the natural branches of the olive tree (11:21) and He is able to graft them in again (11:23), illustrating the severity and kindness of God (11:22). In God’s sovereign plan, partial hardness has come to Israel until a full number of the Gentiles has come into the body of Christ (11:24). Then all Israel will be saved (11:25).

God’s promises to Israel have not failed. In His sovereign dealings He has set the nation aside for a time for the purpose of including Gentiles as objects of His

---

80Moo, Romans 617.
81Piper, Justification of God 184; Moo, Romans 671-72.
mercy (11:28-32). Eventually all Israel will be saved.

Doxology because of God’s unsearchable judgments and unfathomable ways (11:33-36). It is no wonder that Paul closes these three chapters with a doxology celebrating God’s unsearchable judgments and unfathomable ways (11:33-36). What a marvelous plan!

Yes, late in chapter 9, in chapter 10, and occasionally in chapter 11 the apostle injects words about the part played by human moral choices, including belief and unbelief, but these are instances of viewing God’s sovereign activity from a human perspective. Finite men see only their own responsibility to make right moral choices and the penalties involved for failing to do so. That is a perfectly accurate human perception. But from the divine perspective God is at work in individual lives, enabling some people to choose right or withholding that enablement from others. He can do that because He controls all that happens.

The Impossible Dilemma of Open Theism

Openness advocates cannot live with this tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Their solution to relieve the tension is to have God surrender enough of His sovereignty and free mankind from His control in their lives. That is an unbiblical solution. Saucy has touched on the biblical solution when writing about Christ’s offer of the kingdom at His first coming:

We suggest that the solution lies in the same realm as other problems related to the sovereign decree of God for history and the responsible actions of mankind. The idea that God could offer humankind a real choice and opportunity, knowing all the while that humankind would fail (and, in fact, having decreed a plan on the basis of that failure), is expressed in other passages of Scripture. In Eden, humankind was given a genuine opportunity to choose holiness, yet Scripture indicates that God’s plan already included the sacrifice of Christ ‘from the creation of the world’ (Rev 13:8; cf. Ac 2:23; 4:28). Thus in this instance, a similar unanswerable question as that related to the offer of the kingdom might be posed: “What would have happened to the death of Christ if Adam and Eve had not sinned?”

The Scripture furnishes numerous instances where God’s sovereignty and man’s free will interplay with each other. Both are biblical teachings. For man to try to alter either one to find a reconciliation is an attempt to eat of the fruit of the forbidden tree, an attempt of man to escape his finitude so as to become like an infinite God. Open Theism attempts to alter biblical teaching about God’s sovereignty, and in so doing, make God like man, thus creating the likeness that Adam and Eve sought in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:5). Such attempts will never succeed. Valid principles
of hermeneutics for understanding what God has said in His Word will not permit it.

The best we as humans can do is to accept the Bible’s teaching about both the absolute sovereignty of God and freedom of men to make their own moral decisions whether to believe in Christ or not, without changing either teaching. From the standpoint of human logic and philosophical reasoning, the two teachings are in conflict, but from a biblical standpoint they are not.
THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF GOD OF THE POSSIBLE

Richard L. Mayhue
Senior Vice President and Dean
Professor of Pastoral Ministries and Theology

Gregory A. Boyd has written God of the Possible to promote “Open” or “Free-will” Theism at the grassroots level of Christendom. This volume proposes to show how classical theism is inferior and Open Theism is superior. In this reviewer’s opinion, Dr. Boyd has failed to prove his point and accomplish his purpose for at least eight reasons. First, the history of orthodox Christian doctrine declares against, not for, Boyd’s position. Second, God of the Possible depends upon philosophy, not theology, to prove its point. Third, this volume deifies man and humanizes God. Fourth, Boyd discards the unknown, mysterious dimensions of God in his discussions. Fifth, the book is built with an aberrant methodology. Sixth, God of the Possible dismisses the literary device of anthropopathism. Seventh, Boyd’s position diminishes the Almighty’s deity. Eighth, the author downplays determinative biblical texts. For these points, God of the Possible and Open Theism are judged to be heretical. Thus, the church needs to be warned to reject these ideas, not to entertain or embrace them.

* * * *

“Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man . . .” (Rom 1:22-23). Admittedly, “openness” advocates have not yet strayed this far, but they are, in this reviewer’s opinion, further away from the truth and closer to idolatry than they realize or care to admit. This neo-processian movement1 has so disturbed the evangelical community at-large that one clear-minded thinker has observed, “[T]he crisis of evangelical theism is seen in the denial of the God of classical theism as sovereign, transcendent, omnipotent, and omniscient.”2

1A term used by Robert A. Morey in “Does God Really Know the Future?,” Journal of Biblical Apologetics 2/1 (Spring 2001):5-18, who believes that the thinking of openness proponents is closer to process theism than it is to classical theism. Also see his Battle of the Gods (Southbridge, Mass.: Crown, 1989).

This review article will evaluate Gregory A. Boyd’s volume, *God of the Possible,*\(^3\) which espouses a view of God called the “Open” view. Boyd teaches “that the future exists partly as actualities (future events which God sovereignly determines to bring about) and partly as possibilities (aspects of the future which God sovereignly allows His creatures to bring about).”\(^4\)

Since God is the unmistakable core, centerpiece, and organizing principle of theology,\(^5\) then it behooves the evangelical community to study this supposedly new contribution to determine whether or not it is truly new and/or biblical. In this author’s opinion, the “Open” view does not correspond to or complement the doctrine of God as presented in Scripture. As such, openness theology poses the first major doctrinal threat to evangelicalism in the twenty-first century.

**About the Author and His Book**

**Who Is Gregory A. Boyd?**

Born in 1955, Dr. Boyd was educated at the University of Minnesota (B.A., philosophy major), Yale Divinity School (M.Div.), and Princeton Theological Seminary (Ph.D.). Currently, he teaches as Professor of Theology at Bethel College in St. Paul, Minnesota, and pastors Woodland Hills Church (a Baptist General Conference church), also in St. Paul. Boyd has authored several volumes.\(^6\) He is most widely known as a teaching advocate of openness theology and one who has attempted to popularize the view in *GP.*

**Why Review *God of the Possible?***

This volume by Boyd is the latest in a spate of books that have been published on the Open view since 1980. The most prominent ones include: Richard Rice, *The Openness of God* (Bethany, 1980), which has been republished as *God’s Foreknowledge and Man’s Free Will* (Bethany, 1985); Clark Pinnock, ed., *The Openness of God* (InterVarsity, 1994); and John Sanders, *The God Who Risks* (InterVarsity, 1998).

\(^3\)Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), hereafter referred to as *GP.*


\(^6\)They include: *Trinity and Process: A Critical Evaluation and Appropriation of Hartshorne’s Di-Polar Theism Towards a Trinitarian Metaphysics* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992); *Letters From a Skeptic* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1992); *Cynic, Sage, or Son of God?* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor/Bridgepoint, 1995); *God at War* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997). At the time of this writing (September 2001) two volumes are expected to be released by InterVarsity in Fall 2001: *The Myth of the Blueprint and Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views* with Boyd writing the section on the “Open” view.
Pinnock (The Openness of God) has asserted, “We believe that the open view of God needs to be appraised by a broader public, one beyond the confines of professional theologians and philosophers.” Many would doubt whether Pinnock accomplished this specific purpose in his rather technical volume. However, Boyd has contributed a better effort in accord with his stated purpose, “I believe there is currently a need to present this issue in a manner that can include as many lay people as possible. This book attempts to do just that” (GP 13).

This subject has also received periodic attention during the last decade in Christianity Today, much of which has seemingly been affirming. Shocking to most evangelicals was the anonymous editorial, “God vs. God” which confronted the classical view of God and called for the Open view to be given equal time as a credible option.

Boyd’s volume, at face value, contains a well-written, compelling apologetic for the Open view. In light of the extreme importance of one’s view of God, the growing literature on the openness view, and now this issue’s being taken to the grassroots level in the church by Boyd, there is no other book on the subject that deserves and demands to be critiqued as much as this one. Is this some new, true slant on the character of God which the church desperately needs and has missed for nearly the last two millennia, or is this an old lie in new dress which seeks to corrupt the true, biblical view of God? Certainly, no subject in all of our theological studies is more crucial to get right than the true character and nature of God.

God of the Possible Develops What Core Ideas?

Dr. Boyd’s Open ideas were not published first in GP but rather in Letters From a Skeptic, in which letters he exchanged with his then unbelieving father were published. Greg Boyd attempted to show his father, Ed, that Christianity was rational and intellectually viable.

Boyd wrote, in a letter dated April 11, 1989, “God Himself risks a great deal in creating the world. The biblical perspective on God reveals a God who throughout history has suffered from the ill choices of human beings, and He suffers because He loves” (Skeptic 27).

---

1Cf. “Evangelical Megashift” (2/19/90); “Has God Been Held Hostage by Philosophy?” (1/9/95); “The Future of Evangelical Theology” (2/9/98); “God vs. God” (2/7/00); “God at Risk” (3/5/01); “Truth at Risk” (4/23/01); and “Does God Know Your Next Move?” Pt. 1 (5/21/01), Pt. 2 (6/11/01).


3Robert Chisholm, “Does God Change His Mind?” BSac 152/608 (October-December 1995):399, was mistakenly listed in Justin Tyler’s bibliography as being “Pro-Openness.” In recent, personal correspondence, the author clearly denied any leanings toward the Open view and fully affirmed the exhaustive foreknowledge of God. See also Robert A. Pyne and Stephen R. Spencer, “A Critique of Free-will Theism, Part One,” BSac 158/631 (July-September 2001):259-86.
Several weeks later (April 29, 1989), he observed, “But to assume He knows ahead of time how every person is going to freely act assumes that each person’s free activity is already there to know—even before he freely does it! But it’s not” (Skeptic 30).

After a decade had passed, Boyd wrote GP to share the fruit of his labors to determine what God knows and what God does not know. He concluded, “God does not know every detail about what will come to pass. . . . [T]he future is, to some degree at least, open ended and God knows it as such” (8).

Boyd’s openness views could be pictured as a seat supported by three legs. The first leg is philosophical in nature. He argues, as do all openness advocates, that God can know only what is; God cannot know what will be because it has not yet become reality and therefore cannot be known (16, 125-26). The second leg is psychological in nature. God is most clearly understood as a God of love, relating in meaningful ways to humans (Skeptic, 27). The third leg is hermeneutical in nature. Boyd reasons that there are no anthropopathisms in Scripture; rather, everything of this nature is to be taken literally and not figuratively (54, 118-20). Notably absent in constructing this “seat” is a credible theological leg, even though Boyd tries to convince the reader that he has marshaled a thorough, biblical case for his Open view.

What does the author do with the almost two-millennia-old, classical view of God? Read carefully. “My fundamental thesis is that the classical theological tradition became misguided when, under the influence of Hellenistic philosophy, it defined God’s perfection in static, timeless terms” (7). He then concluded, “This view is misguided on biblical, theological, and practical grounds” (18).

**How Is God of the Possible Presented?**

Boyd divides his presentation into four chapters (see summary, 18-19). Chapter One—“The Classical View of Divine Foreknowledge” (21-51) provides a critique of the motif of future determinism. Chapter Two—“The God Who Faces a Partially Open Future” (53-87) develops Boyd’s openness view. Chapter Three—“What Practical Difference Does An Open View Make?” (89-112) attempts to show that openness theology is not some kind of musing by ivory tower theorists but an approach to understanding the God who comforts Christians in times of distress. Chapter Four—“Questions and Objections” (113-56) anticipates some reaction from the reader and provides Boyd’s responses. He closes with an appendix containing other passages supporting the Open view (157-69). The contents are preceded by a well-crafted Introduction (10-20) in which he attempts to discredit the classic view and promote his own perspective.

---

What Sort of Response Has Greeted God of the Possible?

Generally speaking, GP has not been positively received by the Christian community other than by those who were already predisposed to embrace what it promotes. At least eight significant responses have been written—seven in the form of book reviews and one in book format. All of these have been unfavorable.

About the Errors and Flaws of This Book

As might have been surmised by now, this reviewer has no sympathies for the tenets of “openness” theology in general, nor GP in particular. As evidenced above, this has also been the overall evangelical response to Greg Boyd’s Open view of God.

There are numerous valid reasons (historical and biblical) for rejecting this teaching. Eight major errors and flaws have been selected for comment. These alone dismiss God of the Possible as impossible for evangelicals to embrace as a true biblical representation of Almighty God.

The History of Orthodox Christian Doctrine Declares Against God of the Possible

Boyd admits outright that the classical view “has always been the majority view of the church” (10). History itself would affirm more strongly that the classical view has been, with rare exceptions, the exclusive view of the church. Later, he more accurately states, “I must concede that the open view has been relatively rare in church history” (115).

Boyd attempts to show that there is a faint trace of openness thinking throughout church history, beginning as early as the 5th century A.D. (150). Roger Nicole does a brilliant job of bringing Boyd’s historical and theological accuracy into question, especially by pointing out that Adam Clarke, while Arminian in his theology, did not endorse the openness view as claimed by Boyd.13

Most telling in Boyd’s treatment of doctrinal ancestry or precedent is his utter silence about the real historical forerunner of modern-day openness

---


12Bruce A. Ware, God’s Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2000). Also see the unpublished work of John Piper and Justin Taylor, “Resolution on the Foreknowledge of God” (June 2000) prepared for the annual meetings of the Baptist General Conference.

Theology—the 16th-century A.D. heresy of Socinianism, which was popularly developed by Faustus Socinus (A.D. 1539-1604).

Socinus denied the triunity of God, the deity of Christ, and a substitutionary atonement, among other essentials of the faith. His theological tradition was later manifest as Unitarianism. On God’s omniscience he reasoning, “Since, then, there is no reason, no passage of Scripture, from which it can be clearly gathered that God knew all things which happened before they happened, we must conclude that we are by no means to assent such a foreknowledge of God. . . .”16 This sounds remarkably like Boyd: “If God does not foreknow future free actions, it is not because his knowledge of the future is in any sense incomplete. It’s because there is, in this view, nothing definite there for God to know!” (16, emphasis in the original). The same rationalistic pattern of Socinian thought that led to obvious doctrinal error also led to Socinian and Boydian thought in regard to God’s sovereignty and foreknowledge.

Perhaps Boyd’s identification with Socinus runs deeper than he understands. Consider Boyd’s disclaimer: “We are not addressing anything central to the traditional definition of orthodoxy, so it seems some flexibility might be warranted” (116).17 If Boyd considers the very nature and person of God to be peripheral, i.e., “not . . . central to . . . orthodoxy,” then he has disqualified himself, as both pastor and professor, to be called evangelical. He either misses or chooses to ignore what one respected writer recently labeled “the hallmark doctrine of the old Socinian heresy.”18

It appears that the neo-theists who espouse the open view are paralleling the past, but more recent, efforts of neo-orthodoxy. The parallel is this: just as those of the neo-orthodox persuasion tried to find some middle ground between liberalism and evangelicalism by ridding each of its alleged worst extremes and incorporating

---


17 Elsewhere Boyd claims, “Next to the central doctrines of the Christian faith, the issue of whether the future is exhaustively settled or partially open is relatively unimportant” (8). If the issue is secondary, why did he even write GP?


its best into a new view of orthodoxy, so neo-theists are attempting to find the middle ground between process theology and classical theology with regard to the sovereignty and omniscience/foreknowledge of God.

I assert that neo-theists have failed to mediate the truth between these two positions; thus they have failed to displace classical theism as orthodox much as neo-orthodoxy failed in its attempts to replace evangelicalism. The openness view is neither new nor right. It is as old and wrong as Socinianism and is bound to be hailed as heresy, just as was neo-orthodox thought and Socinian theology.

God of the Possible Depends Upon Philosophy, Not Theology

By the very wording of GP’s sub-title, “A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God,” Boyd attempts to persuade the reader that to be biblical on this topic is to follow his conclusion. Boyd recounts his three-year journey through Scripture which led him to embrace the Open view and concludes that it is “on the authority of God’s Word” that the future is not exhaustively settled (8). He states, “I feel it is time to establish the biblical case…” (13). Less than fifteen pages into GP, Boyd has tried to convince the reader that his treatise is built on the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible.

However, Boyd’s development of the case for openness does not limit itself to Scripture. Even while claiming to be a thoroughgoing biblicalist on this issue, Boyd makes some remarkably unguarded and revealing statements. “I will explain the philosophical basis and defense of this open view…” (8-9). “I happen to believe that the open view is the most philosophically compelling view available…” (12). Why bring philosophy into a discussion that is supposed to be uniquely theological?

At the same time that Boyd claims to base his beliefs exclusively on Scripture, he accuses those who espouse the classical view as inheriting a pagan, philosophical perspective (24) that has been flawed by embracing a God shaped more by Plato (429-347 B.C.) or Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) than by Scripture (17, 85, 87, 115, 130-31). In this reviewer’s opinion, the Open view is calling the Classic view false, when just the reverse is true. Francis Beckwith in his article has provided an adequate answer to this never proven, but frequently asserted, allegation.20

Openness theology is far more of a philosophical issue than a biblical one. David Basinger, a major Open view advocate and philosopher, has written,

It is important to note that this debate is not, as some have implied, over whether God is omniscient (or fully omniscient). To say that God is omniscient is to say simply that God knows all that can be known. And those of us who deny that God has exhaustive knowledge of the future do not deny that God knows all that can be known. The debate is over what it is that can be known. That is, the debate is over what it means to say that

---

God is omniscient.21

Boyd, who has strong philosophical training and leanings, states categorically that, “The debate between open and classical understandings of divine foreknowledge is completely a debate over the nature of the future: . . . that is the question at hand, nothing else” (17 [emphasis in the original]). From these statements, it seems clear that Boyd’s approach is primarily a philosophical one, not an exegetical one. It is based far more on the rationale of human thought than the revelation of divinely inspired truth. The question over the knowability of the future by God was imported to Scripture by philosophers, not extracted from the text by exegesis.22

Millard Erickson carefully notes concerning contemporary debates regarding the person of God, “[T]he issues on which controversy centers are not primarily exegetical in nature. Rather, they are largely philosophical, and much of the discussion is being carried on by philosophers.”23 We would do well to take the warning of a past ETS president’s remarks, concerning philosophy, to heart.24 And so would Greg Boyd.

God of the Possible Deifies Man and Humanizes God

I agree wholeheartedly with Millard Erickson that openness theology is an anthropocentric theology in which roles are reversed whereby God glorifies humans so that they can enjoy themselves forever.25 Openness theology treads dangerously close to fulfilling atheist Voltaire’s (A.D. 1694-1778) oft-quoted observation, “If God made us in His image, we have certainly returned the compliment.” A motto I saw recently could easily become the mantra of openness philosophers—“The freedom to be yourself is the freedom to be your best.” By the way, the motto was printed on a Southwest Airlines napkin, not in a theological journal.

Bruce Ware’s subtitle “The Diminished God of Open Theism” for God’s Lesser Glory expresses this characteristic. However, to be fair, Greg Boyd should be allowed to express himself.

I have discovered a new appreciation and excitement regarding my own responsibility in bringing about the future (8).

---

22This was the general, but not unanimous, conclusion reached by the participants in the Christianity Today forum “Has God Been Held Hostage By Philosophy?” 39/1 (January 9, 1995):30-34.
23Erickson, God the Father Almighty 9.
25Erickson, God the Father Almighty 92.
To whatever degree the future is yet open to be decided by free agents, it is unsettled (15).

Boyd’s overemphasis on the human at the expense of the divine borders on an “I’m the master of my fate, the captain of my soul” mindset. It involves “divine demotion” and “human promotion.” There is no longer a vast, unmeasured gulf between the transcendent God and His human creation. Philosophically speaking, Open theists are attempting to level the playing field by bringing God down closer to man’s level, and thereby giving the appearance that man has been elevated.

Boyd teaches about a God who has backup Plan B and Plan C just to cover what man might do to confound His best Plan A (106). Rather than focusing on the ignorance and incompetence of man, openness focuses on the alleged ignorance and incompetence of God.

A. B. Caneday picks up on this theme and shows just how disastrous it can be in redefining the person of God [see his comments on the implication of footnote 2 (170) in the Introduction of *GP* (14)].

It becomes apparent that Boyd believes all analogical portrayals of God in terms of human characteristics (not form) should be taken literally in the sense that the analogy is not figurative but a portrayal of God as he actually is. On this basis, Boyd says that God is analogous to humans, which is to say that God is in the image of man rather than humans exist in the image of God (p. 170). This means that he believes God thinks, loves, acts justly, changes his mind, regrets, plans, and determines like humans do. This belief that God is analogous to humans is the taproot of Open Theism, for God’s sovereign actions toward and relationships with his creatures are limited by the “free-will” of his creatures. That is why the designation “Free-will Theism” (open theists’ self-designation) so well describes this system of belief concerning God. What is at stake for Boyd and other open theists is their passionate belief that humans must be absolutely self-determining or else they are not free in any sense. This belief concerning creatures determines Boyd’s view of God.26

Robert Strimple illustrates the fallacy of this humanistic Openness mindset with a “fish tale” that conveys accurate truth and which he first heard from Cornelius Van Til.

In order to emphasize the sharp contrast between the popular contention that, if God were truly sovereign and ultimately in control, genuine human freedom would be destroyed, and the biblical perspective, a little fish story may be helpful. One day it occurred to this fish as he swam in the vast ocean with water all around him, on every side, that this water was hemming him in, cramping his style, limiting his freedom and his opportunity to fulfill the full potentialities of his “fishness.” So he swam over near the shore, and he huffed and he puffed and he threw himself up on the beach. And he shouted out: “I’m free at last!” But you and I know what was really the case. Almost with that very shout

---

26Caneday, “Implausible,” *Journal of Biblical Apologetics* 69 [emphasis is in the original].
he was not free but dead! The water all around him had not been limiting his freedom as a fish or making it impossible for him to fulfill all the potentialities of his fishness. On the contrary, that water was the very element in which he lived and moved and had his being as a fish. It was the necessary and perfect environment in which to fulfill hisfishness.  

Greg Boyd and his fellow Open view proponents are so driven by demanding human freedom at the expense of God’s sovereign will and exhaustive foreknowledge that they, in effect, deify man and humanize God. That certainly did not come from the Scriptures, but the philosophizing of men. They fail in coming to grips with the Scriptural reality that God’s sovereign will and man’s responsible will are not mutually exclusive ideas, even though man cannot intellectually understand or reconcile how they logically relate to one another.

**God of the Possible Discards the Unknown, Mysterious Dimensions of God**

The Bible continually portrays God as One whose character and ways are infinitely beyond any substantial human understanding and whose future plans will not be overturned by anyone or anything. Here is a Scriptural sampler.

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unfathomable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, OR WHO BECAME HIS COUNSELOR? (Rom 11:33-34).

“And all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, ‘What hast Thou done?’” (Dan 4:35).

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,” declares the LORD. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa 55:8-9).

Do you not know? Have you not heard? The everlasting God, the LORD, the creator of the ends of the earth does not become weary or tired. His understanding is inscrutable (Isa 40:28).

How precious also are Thy thoughts to me, O God! How vast is the sum of

---


28All Scripture citations in this article are from the New American Standard Bible. Boyd cites none of these passages in the Scripture Index (173-75). As an editorial note, on page 175 the heading “Revelation” needs to be added after 5:19 156 and before 1:1 50.
them! If I should count them, they would outnumber the sand. When I awake, I am still with Thee (Ps 139:17-18).

How great are Thy works, O LORD! Thy thoughts are very deep. A senseless man has no knowledge; nor does a stupid man understand this (Ps 92:5-6).

How blessed is the man who has made the LORD his trust, and has not turned to the proud, nor to those who lapse into falsehood. Many, O LORD my God, are the wonders which Thou has done, and Thy thoughts toward us; there is none to compare with Thee; if I would declare and speak of them, they would be too numerous to count (Ps 40:4-5).

The LORD nullifies the counsel of the nations; He frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation (Ps 33:10-11).

Openness advocates, so bent on philosophically and anthropocentrically finding closure in defining and explaining God, cannot properly handle the tensions that are presented in Scripture when the divine side and the human side are both presented side-by-side without any sense of contradiction or need of special explanation.

For instance, take the inspiration of Scripture.

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16).

For no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God (2 Pet 1:21).

Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, . . . to all who are beloved of God in Rome. . . (Rom 1:1, 7).

I, Tertius, who write this letter, greet you in the Lord (Rom 16:22).

Who wrote Romans? God the Father? God the Spirit? Paul? Or Tertius? The answer is “Yes!” There was a Divine side and a human side. Do we

---

29Read Clark Pinnock’s struggle to reconcile these two aspects of inspiration in such a way that the human side overshadows the Divine side; that decision then leads him to disparage the idea of inerrancy in The Scripture Principle (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1964) 100-105. It is clear that Pinnock is too concerned with the human side and too little with the Divine. Randall and David Basinger also struggle with this tension in “Inerrancy, Dictation, and the Free Will Defense,” EJQ 55 (1983):177-80. Nicole, “Review Article,” Reformation and Revival Journal 180, recognizes how the principles of Boyd’s openness view, when applied to the doctrine of Inspiration, would lead to a low, not a high, view of
understand fully how it works? “No!” Do we accept it by faith? “Yes!” Do we believe that God dictated all of Scripture, even though we know that He actually dictated some? “No!” Do we believe the human authors could have exercised their own will and human acumen to override what God intended to be written? “No!” Can we explain this with full satisfaction to the human mind? “No!” We must live with the tension that God determined and man participated in recording what Scripture itself calls “the Word of God,” not the “Word of men” (1 Thess 2:13).30

The same tension exists in understanding that Christ is fully God and fully man. Who can explain it? No one, but we believe it by faith as taught in the Bible. Mental tension also exists in attempting to understand what part God plays and what part man plays in individual human salvation. The same tension is experienced in reconciling how God’s will and foreknowledge relate to the will of humans.

When faced with these immensely important issues which stretch the human mind to and sometimes beyond its limits, it is best to let God be God, to rest in the fact that God has not revealed an unabridged knowledge of Himself in Scripture, and to decide on behalf of God being determinative rather than humans. It will never be God’s lack of knowledge concerning humans, but rather our finite, limited understanding of God that creates the intellectual difficulties with which we struggle.31 “Human reason, therefore, must adjust itself to God’s being and not the reverse.”32 Thus, this subject is an exegetical issue not a philosophical one; it is decidedly revelational in nature.

An Aberrant Methodology Develops in God of the Possible

First, Boyd essentially assumes throughout GP that divine determination usually ceases when human freedom commences. Even though he does not say it explicitly, this foundational premise drives the entire openness discussion in its several varieties. Openness begins with the decision to grant humans full freedom of will at the expense of God’s sovereign will. Starting from here, the argument then goes on to the more obvious discussion of God’s abridged or non-exhaustive foreknowledge.33 Let it be said that when one has a faulty starting point (premise), he almost always ends up at an unintended destination (conclusion).


Second, Boyd primarily engages in philosophical speculation. For instance, “God knows it [the future] as a realm of possibilities, not certainties” (15). This conclusion did not result from a careful exegesis of a biblical text(s). Therefore, it had to be imported to the text.

What follows is nothing more than scholastic double-talk, and definitely does not represent anything that is recorded in Scripture. Boyd writes,

Open theists affirm God’s omniscience as emphatically as anybody does. The issue is not whether God’s knowledge is perfect. It is. The issue is about the nature of the reality that God perfectly knows. More specifically, what is the content of the reality of the future? Whatever it is, we all agree that God perfectly knows it. . . . If God does not foreknow future free actions, it is not because his knowledge of the future is in any sense incomplete. It’s because there is, in this view, nothing definite there for God to know! (16).

One last Boydian speculation is offered to emphasize the point: “[F]ree actions do not exist to be known until free agents create them” (17).

Third, the author employs non-exegetical exegesis. In other words, Boyd would have his reader believe that he has thoroughly tackled and subdued “the most explicit and compelling verses in the Bible pertaining to God’s foreknowledge . . .” (29). When in fact, he has delivered little more than a once-over-lightly commentary. Take Isaiah 46:9-10, for example, as Exhibit A. One would expect pages of exegetical gems thoroughly disproving God’s alleged exhaustive foreknowledge. However, one actually encounters a mere page (30) of questions rather than clarifications. For instance, “Does this imply that everything about the future is settled in God’s mind?” (30). He fails to inform the reader that the opposite question also could and should be raised, “Does this imply that everything about the future is not settled in God’s mind?” Boyd has definitely not begun to deal adequately with this majestic text. His cry of victory for an Open view here should be saved for after the battle, which he is still yet to enter. I offer, with no comment, Boyd’s mere one-third of a page discussion of Isaiah 48:3-5 as Exhibit B of less-than-adequate biblical exposition.

Finally, consider Boyd’s considerable skill as a debater/illustrator. Far more frequently does Boyd resort to analogy than exegesis to make his point (see 17, 32, 43-44, 45-46, 47, 103-6, 107-11, 124, 127-28, 134, for example). His analogies involve everything from a monkey (17) to an Acura (124) to a chess master (127-28). Roger Nicole’s treatment of the chess master comparison shows how impotent and prone to error “theology by analogy” really is.

This, I submit, is a very infelicitous comparison for the following three reasons: (1) In chess both players start with a rigorously equal chance both as to the value of the pieces and the number of moves permitted. This would fit a Zoroastrian dualism rather than a theistic outlook; (2) The chess pieces are wholly devoid of a personal will. Thus the model lacks the very thing that Boyd meant to emphasize; (3) In the process of the game, the greatest chess masters have to concede the sacrifice and removal of some of
their pieces: pawns, rooks, bishops, knights, even queen. It would be hard to condemn the attitude of one such sacrificed piece in hell saying, “I am now suffering the pain of damnation just to provide the Creator with the entertainment of a chess game!”

God of the Possible Dismisses Anthropopathisms

Anthropomorphism is a word used to describe figurative language which portrays God as having human characteristics, especially human form. Anthropopathism is a word specifically used to portray God figuratively as having human emotions and/or responses. These literary devices are used by God in Scripture to describe something about His divine “otherness” in a literary fashion that is a gracious accommodation to the ignorance of the human reader in regard to the person and character of God.

Few today would argue for the literal physical characteristics that are figuratively used of God in Scripture (the Mormons excepted). Evangelicals would not take “hands” in Psalm 95:5 or “wings” in Psalm 91:4 to mean that God has actual, physical wings or hands. We understand that God is spirit (John 4:24) and that God is not a man (Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29). These anthropomorphisms are clearly understood as such.

However, when it comes to God’s emotions or responses, Open view advocates want to do just the opposite—treat them literally rather than figuratively. Why? Is it because God is no longer God and therefore emotes and responds like humans? Is it because God is now a man? Is it because God is now flesh, not spirit? “No” is the resounding answer to these questions. So we ask, “Based on what do we take God figuratively in the physical realm but literally in the emotive and responsive realm?” This reviewer proposes that it is because of a preconceived idea of openness that is imposed on the biblical text, a step without which openness would fail.

Boyd goes to great lengths to make his point (11, 54 ff., 118-20) that when it comes to God’s emotions or responses they are to be taken literally, not figuratively. However, there is nothing clear, suggestive, or compelling in the biblical text to warrant such an inconsistent conclusion. As a matter of fact, there are numerous defining texts that would forcefully argue otherwise. As is usually the case, Boyd has not included them in the Scripture Index (except James 1:17, which he treats in passing on 136).

---

34Ibid., 184.

35See E. W. Bullinger, Figures of Speech Used in the Bible (reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968) 871-97, for a thorough listing of anthropopathia. In Latin, the speech figure is termed condescensio indicating language that condescends to the ignorance and infirmity of humanity which God used to describe Himself in ways that man could not otherwise begin to understand.

36Caneday, “Implausible,” Journal of Biblical Apologetics 67-78, deals extensively with this issue which is critical to the Openness view. Also see Nicole, “Review Article,” Reformation and Revival Journal 180-81.
The Impossibility of God of the Possible

The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation (Ps 33:11).

“But You are the same, and Your years will not come to an end (Ps 102:27).

Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow (Jas 1:17).

God of the Possible Diminishes the Almighty’s Deity

Bruce Ware’s God’s Lesser Glory has proven to be an outstanding critique of openness theology in general and Boyd’s GP in particular. The most compelling argument Ware makes in the entire volume deals with how the openness view seriously undermines the doctrine of the divine nature of God. He writes,

Yahweh, the God of Israel, is known as the true and living God in contrast to idols, whose pretense to deity is evident on the basis that the true God knows and declares the future (including future free human actions) before it occurs, while those impostor rivals neither know nor declare any such thing. Consider the force of these passages.37

Printed below are some of the passages Ware cites to make the point. Again, Boyd has altogether failed to take these highly relevant texts into consideration in GP, with the exception of his cursory comments on Isa 46:10 (25, 30) and Isa 48:3-5 (25, 30-31).

Let them bring forth and declare to us what is going to take place; as for the former events, declare what they were, that we may consider them and know their outcome. Or announce to us what is coming; declare the things that are going to come afterward, that we may know that you are gods; indeed, do good or evil, that we may anxiously look about us and fear together (Isa 41:22-23).

“I am the Lord, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another, nor My praise to graven images. Behold, the former things have come to pass, now I declare new things; before they spring forth I proclaim them to you” (Isa 42:8-9).

‘And who is like Me? Let him proclaim and declare it; yes, let him recount it to Me in order, from the time that I established the ancient nation. And let them declare to them the things that are coming and the events that are going to take place. Do not tremble and do not be afraid; have I not long since announced it to you and declared it? And you are My witnesses. Is there any God besides Me, or is there any other Rock? I know of none’ (Isa 44:7-8).

37Ware, Lesser Glory 102 [emphasis in the original].
“Declare and set forth your case; indeed, let them consult together. Who has announced this from of old? Who has long since declared it? Is it not I, the LORD? And there is no other God besides Me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none except Me” (Isa 45:21).

“Remember the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure’” (Isa 46:9-10).

“I declared the former things long ago and they went forth from My mouth, and I proclaimed them. Suddenly I acted, and they came to pass. Because I know that you are obstinate, and your neck is an iron sinew, and your forehead bronze, therefore I declared them to you long ago, so that you would not say, ‘My idol has done them, and my graven image and my molten image have commanded them’” (Isa 48:3-5).

Any theology that denies or diminishes the deity of God is one which is to be rejected. Such is the Open view. Undoubtedly that is why Socinius is known for denying Christ’s deity and espousing an Open view of God, long before Greg Boyd.

God of the Possible Downplays Determinative Biblical Texts

There is a generally accepted rule of literary interpretation (which also applies to the Bible) that the greater, more definitive, and most complete passages interpret the more obscure, the less detailed, and the most ambiguous passages. Put simply, the clearer text should interpret the confusing or cloudy text. Never should the process be reversed. However, in GP Greg Boyd has deliberately (no other explanation is plausible in light of his training and experience) chosen to ignore key, determinative texts on God’s sovereignty. Selective-evidence presentation is satisfactory for a secular debate but not one in which the very character of God’s being is reconsidered.

I submit that the combined weight of the following biblical texts alone makes the assertions in GP impossible to believe.38

Not one of the good promises which the Lord had made to the house of Israel failed; all came to pass (Josh 21:45; cf. 2 Cor 1:20).

“But where can wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding?

38Steve Roy cites 2,323 predictive prophecies concerning future free human decisions or events that involve such free decisions in one way or another in the appendix of his unpublished dissertation, entitled “How Much Does God Foreknow? An Evangelical Assessment of the Doctrine of the Extent of the Foreknowledge of God in Light of the Teaching of Open Theism” (Ph.D. dissertation, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Ill., 2001).
Where then does wisdom come from? And where is the place of understanding? God understands its way; and He knows its place. For He looks to the ends of the earth, and sees everything under the heavens” (Job 28:12, 20, 23-24).

“For truly my words are not false; One who is perfect in knowledge is with you” (Job 36:4).

“Do you know about the layers of the thick clouds, the wonders of one perfect in knowledge . . .” (Job 37:16).

Great is our Lord and abundant in strength; His understanding is infinite (Ps 147:5).

The king’s heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes (Prov 21:1).

Do you not know? Have you not heard? The everlasting God, the LORD, the creator of the ends of the earth does not become weary or tired. His understanding is inscrutable (Isa 40:28).

“Even from eternity I am He; and there is none who can deliver out of My hand; I act and who can reverse it?” (Isa 43:13).

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” declares the LORD. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts (Isa 55:8-9).

“What I tell you in the darkness, speak in the light; and what you hear whispered in your ear, proclaim upon the households. And do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered” (Matt 10:27-30; cf. Luke 12:6-7).

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! FOR WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, OR WHO BECAME HIS COUNSELOR? OR WHO HAS FIRST GIVEN TO HIM THAT IT MIGHT BE PAID BACK TO HIM AGAIN? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen (Rom 11:33-36).

For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And there is no
creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do (Heb 4:12-13).

For God is greater than our heart and knows all things (1 John 3:20; cf. John 16:30; 21:17).

**About the Verdict on This Book**

Open Theism in general and Greg Boyd’s *GP* in particular have been taken “captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men . . .” (Col 2:8). This view of God, which is not a mediating position between the classical view and the Arminian view of God’s foreknowledge, is rather an extreme view outside the acceptable and reasonable boundaries of orthodoxy. *GP* focuses more on God’s ignorance than it does on God’s omniscience. Thus, *GP* is found to be biblically deficient in its own defense and is to be rejected as a heresy which measurably distorts the biblical portrayal of God as sovereign ruler over all.

I wholeheartedly endorse Thomas Oden’s reflections in this regard:

If “reformists” insist on keeping the boundaries of heresy open, however, then they must be resisted with charity. The fantasy that God is ignorant of the future is a heresy that must be rejected on scriptural grounds (“I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come”; Isa. 46:10a; cf. Job 28; Ps. 90; Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1), as it has been in the history of exegesis of relevant passages. This issue was thoroughly discussed by patristic exegetes as early as Origen’s *Against Celsus*. Keeping the boundaries of faith undefined is a demonic temptation that evangelicals within the mainline have learned all too well and have been burned by all too painfully.

---

39 For some, these conclusions may seem too strong because they are rather forthright in their presentation. Let the reviewer say that I have purposely not commented upon Dr. Boyd as a person but only his ideas. I have meant no harm or malice toward him, but rather I passionately desire to protect the sheep, whom Christ purchased with his own shed blood, from a doctrine that portrays a god of less glory than the God of Scripture (Acts 20:27-28). I am fearful that if the author continues on the path of his current thinking, sooner or later, it will lead him to more serious deviation from generally accepted Christian orthodoxy, such as denying one or both of the doctrinal standards of the Evangelical Theological Society, i.e. the inerrancy of Scripture’s autographs and the triunity of God.

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF WORKS ON OPEN THEISM

Compiled by Dennis M. Swanson
Seminary Librarian

Earlier pages of this issue of The Master’s Seminary Journal contain articles on Open Theism, a relative new field also known as openness theology and the openness of God. The following bibliography represents the collected research of the articles’ authors and some additional sources that were discovered, but not cited in the articles. Its five sections are (1) Reference Works, (2) Systematic Theologies, (3) Monographs and Multi-Author Works, (4) Journal Articles, (5) Unpublished Materials. This listing is not exhaustive, but will serve as a foundation for readers desiring to pursue the study further.

Reference Works (including lexical entries)


Systematic Theologies (Note: the section below is simply a representative sampling of systematic theologies since all such works deal with theology proper).


**Monographs and Multi-Author Works**


Bibliography


Journal Articles


Ware, Bruce A. “An Evangelical Reformulation of the Doctrine of the Immutability


**Unpublished Materials**


Rosskopf, James E. Manuscript on prayer, Sun Valley, California: The Master’s Seminary, n.d.


DIVISIVE UNITY

Iain H. Murray

Murray introduces the origin of Evangelicalism Divided by recalling a meeting in 1966 at which Martyn Lloyd-Jones spoke on “Evangelical Unity,” and had his position challenged by John R.W. Stott, who closed that meeting. The anniversary of that meeting and another series of circumstances led Murray to research and write Evangelicalism Divided. A review of nineteenth-century British church history revealed the cause of the division: liberalism that crept into the church allowed for a faith in Christ without revealed truth and an authoritative Bible, i.e., a new definition of a Christian. When this happened, some evangelicals left the mainline denominations, but others remained and maintained a close tie with other evangelicals who had left. When Billy Graham came to England, he was welcomed by evangelicals, but at first shunned by denominational leaders. Yet when the leaders saw Graham’s large crowds, they accepted him. Some understood the leaders’ change as a new openness to the gospel, yet those leaders were just using Graham as a tool to bring people into their churches. Under the pressure of ecumenism, Graham and others began to think in terms of winning denominations back to evangelicalism, and eventually fell into the error of compromising evangelical doctrine. Two basic problems contributed to the division of evangelicals: neglect of what makes one a Christian and neglect of the depth of human depravity. Lloyd-Jones diagnosed the problem as an evangelical dependence on human methods and a failure to rely on the Holy Spirit. He offered a positive alternative to evangelicals: dependence on God alone and the sufficiency of the Word of God.

* * * *

All books have a story of some kind behind them. They come into existence and take their shape by many different ways. It may help to introduce the subject before us if I begin by saying something on the origin of Evangelicalism Divided. In Britain the year 1996 marked the thirtieth anniversary of an event which became

---

¹The author was asked to give a summary of his recent book Evangelicalism Divided at the Shepherds’ Conference at Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, California on March 11, 2001. This article is the substance of his address. References for all quotations given here will be found in the book itself.
a milestone in the evangelical history of our country. Thirty years before, on 18 October 1966, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones spoke at a National Assembly of Evangelicals in London. His subject was “Evangelical Unity.” At the end of his address the chairman, the Rev. John R.W. Stott, instead of closing the meeting, did something unscheduled. He took several minutes to make clear to the assembly that he disagreed with what they had just heard, and he gave some reasons. So a conference intended to promote evangelical unity had the opposite result. It was said that evangelical unity was fractured; some said it was “wrecked.” Who was to blame for that outcome?

On the anniversary of that event, thirty years later, the question was again being discussed, both in magazines and books. It figured prominently, for instance, in the biography of Dr. James I. Packer, published in 1997. My interest in this renewed debate prompted me to give an address on the subject in Australia in February 1998. At that time, while I was still in Australia, I came across the sympathetic and definitive biography of Billy Graham, A Prophet With Honor, written by William Martin. One might suppose that a biography by an American and on an American would have no connection with the difference that had developed between British evangelicals, but the Graham biography provides strong confirmation for thinking that there was indeed a connection. As the Martin book further opened out the subject for me, it was clear that the disagreement in London in October 1966 has to be understood in a much wider context, for to a surprising degree, the main issue was the same on both sides of the Atlantic. This led me to research the subject more thoroughly, and in the course of two years my initial address grew into the present book.

I have personal reasons why I found the theme difficult to handle. For one thing, Evangelicalism Divided is a sad book. I found it sad to think about and sad to write about. One reason for this is that the subject has to do with the difference, not between the good and the bad, but between genuine, eminent, Christian men. The devil has often used the strategy of distracting believers from their work by provoking them into controversy with each other. In that way, instead of strength being united against a common enemy, energies are weakened and opportunities are lost. The book of Genesis pointedly tells us that at the time when the unhappy strife between Abram’s servants and those of his nephew Lot occurred, “the Canaanite and the Perizzite dwelt then in the land” (Gen 13:7). Scripture means for us to note the words and be warned. Our first duty is to love one another, not contend with one other. When disagreement among Christians cannot be avoided, it should be a cause of pain, and we ought to do all we can to not aggravate it. The wisdom which is from above, says James, is “peaceable,” and I have tried to write with respect and esteem for evangelicals with whom I have to disagree. But lest any should find Evangelicalism Divided depressing, I need to add something that is really obvious. The book, of course, is not intended in any sense to be a history of the gospel in the last fifty years. In that period, great spiritual blessings have come across the world, and my theme is in no sense a denial of that reality.

A further difficulty for me in writing the book was this: as the subject
developed, I was not able to record events merely as an onlooker. Rather I found myself confronted with a searching, humbling question. As I thought that other evangelicals made mistakes and erred in judgments, I was forced to ask myself how I might have fared, had I been in their situations and subjected to the same pressures that they faced. Unusual success, popularity, and eminent positions are dangerous things. For those of us who have little exposure to such dangers, it is easy to imagine how much better we might have done. But the reality is that we could have done worse than those with whom we differ. We share a common frailty and proneness to err. We are all “unprofitable servants.” “We all stumble in many things,” says James (3:2). The more I saw this, the more I found my whole subject to be a humbling one. Sometimes we may have to disagree with other believers, and even to disagree strongly, but at the same time it is imperative that we watch ourselves and our own motives. We are fellow-servants in Christ, and Paul’s words are very searching:

But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ . . . So then each of us shall give account of himself to God (Rom 14:10, 12).

I come then to the main question before us: When we talk about evangelical divided, what was the cause of the division to which we are referring? What were Lloyd-Jones and John Stott disagreeing about? Asking this question leads us immediately into the controversy, because, strange as it may sound, to this day there is no agreement over what the difference actually was! This much is clear: it was not over any basic evangelical belief. No fundamental truth was being denied or opposed by either side. Both sides held to Scripture and to the Person and work of Christ. How then could there be such a serious difference? To explain, I need to give you a brief résumé of some British history.

**Liberalism, Evangelicals, and the Ecumenical Movement**

It is agreed that to speak of an “evangelical” is simply another way of describing a person or a denomination that believes the gospel. In the middle of the nineteenth century all Protestant denominations in the country were evangelical in their statements of belief. But then a great decline began. Liberalism entered our pulpits and it came in the name of Christ. It spoke much of devotion to Jesus. It used traditional Christian language. Christ, it said, is to be experienced, admired, and followed. A crucial difference between its message and historic Christianity, let me remind you, was over how anyone enters into real Christian experience. Liberalism taught that faith comes from our own human intuition, all that is needed is a well-disposed heart. It held that there can be faith in Christ without revealed truth and an authoritative Bible. People can have genuine experience of Christ quite apart from doctrinal beliefs. “Christianity is life not doctrine” was the great cry. The promise was that Christianity would advance wonderfully if it was no longer shackled by insistence on doctrines and orthodox beliefs.
That kind of teaching swept through the British denominations and it instituted a new definition of a Christian. An unbeliever in the fall of man, or the atonement, or the deity of Christ, could now be said to be a Christian. This thinking had innumerable representatives. A professor of theology in Edinburgh, who died in 1960, affirmed that a person could be a “believer” without knowing it. It is possible, he said, for individuals to deny God with the “top of their minds,” yet believe in the bottom of their hearts. In that same year, 1960, a leading British politician died and, despite his atheism and indifference to Christianity, he was honoured in Westminster Abbey, the main shrine of the national church. Archbishop Michael Ramsey—to whom I will refer more fully later—defended that action with the words, “Heaven is not a place for Christians only. . . . I expect to see some present-day atheists there.”

True believers in the gospel, that is, evangelicals, were dismayed at what they saw happening in the churches after the rise of liberalism in the nineteenth century. Two courses were open to them. Some left the mainline denominations. C. H. Spurgeon, the most notable example, left the Baptist Union in 1888. Others stayed within, and, because they were too few to exercise any discipline, they lived largely apart from the non-evangelicals of their own denomination who generally were in the positions of leadership. Further, these evangelicals, whether still in the main denominations or outside them, kept up a regular association among themselves by means of a common membership in various non-denominational organizations. In these agencies, biblical beliefs were preserved and non-evangelicals were excluded. So evangelicalism was a unity transcending denominations; in a number of respects, it approximated to fundamentalism in the States, and American fundamentalists were welcomed by evangelicals in the United Kingdom. A characteristic of an evangelical was that he put his evangelical commitment before denominational allegiance, and, while he was happy to work in evangelism and conventions with evangelicals of other denominations, he avoided corporate witness and activity with those who were not of like faith. Evangelical organizations, such as InterVarsity, had statements of Faith which were definitely intended to exclude liberals from membership. In 1954, when Billy Graham came to Britain, on his first major crusade at Harringay, London, he was welcomed by evangelicals. But he was not welcomed by the denominational leaders. No denomination had agreed to sponsor his crusade. Archbishop Ramsey equated evangelicalism with fundamentalism and called them both “heresy.” Of Graham he said, “He has taught the grossest doctrines and flung his formula ‘the Bible says’ over teaching which is emphatically not that of the Bible.”

But then a remarkable thing happened. As the crusade went on through three months, with many thousands attending, religious leaders and the religious press began to show interest, and by the time it ended, liberals who had stood far apart at the beginning were even to be found sitting on the evangelist’s

---

2British Weekly, 9 February 1956. Ramsey’s verdict at the end of the Crusade was, “He has gone. Our English fundamentalism remains. It is heretical.”
platform. At the final meeting no less a person than the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Fisher, gave the benediction.

Why this change of attitude among those who had not been known for belief in conversion and gospel preaching? That question is crucial to an understanding of what was to follow. A number of evangelicals, especially those in the Church of England, made up their minds that they knew the answer. They were persuaded that something very important was happening; they spoke of witnessing “the beginning of another Evangelical Revival”—a movement which could change the face of the churches. They believed they were seeing something that they had never seen before, and perhaps had never expected to see, namely, preachers who denied the substitutionary atonement and the fall of man sitting quietly under such preaching and apparently approving the evangelist. Surely this was evidence that a non-evangelical ministry was recognizing the emptiness of its message and was looking for something better.

This was one explanation of the apparent change of attitude among non-evangelicals, and those who accepted evangelical beliefs began to think that some change would also be appropriate on their part. Not a change of belief but a re-think of the policy of standing apart from liberals. Perhaps if evangelicals were more willing to cooperate with those of other views, they might win them just as Graham appeared to be doing. Perhaps it was their own fault that they had enjoyed small influence compared with the 38,000 decisions registered at Harringay.

Just at this point in time another powerful influence was at work, in all the mainline denominations and across the English-speaking world. The ecumenical movement was in its ascendancy and promising that a new era of Christian influence was at hand if only all Christians would unite. Ecumenism stood for a new openness, with charity for all opinions. One result of this charity was that instead of being cold-shouldered, evangelicals now had the new experience of being invited to play a full part in their denominations and in the wider unity movement. If they accepted this opportunity, they were assured of having an influence which had previously escaped them. They had been living “in a ghetto,” it was said; let them come out, and they would be welcome to take their share in places of leadership.

While ecumenism was speaking this way, simultaneously on both sides of the Atlantic, a new evangelical policy was being born. It began in the States before it took hold in England. Its main advocates were Fuller Seminary, Christianity Today, and the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. For a time these three new institutions became something of a threefold cord which could not be broken. The same leaders were related to all three. Together they shared the common conviction that fundamentalism had been too separatist, too negative, too exclusive. Evangelicals needed to make their voices heard in the mainline denominations. Many Christians were still to be found there, and, with a wise approach, the denominations might yet be won back to the faith. The policy, for a time called “the New Evangelicalism,” was to concentrate on the positive, especially on evangelism, on better scholarship. It sought to take advantage of the ecumenical ethos to gain a new respect for Scripture. Many things happened which appeared to demonstrate the
success of this policy. And the cooperation of non-evangelicals in the Graham crusades seemed to endorse its correctness. No less a figure than Archbishop Michael Ramsey himself became a supporter. In 1961 Dr. Graham accepted an invitation to the Conference of the World Council of Churches in New Delhi. There he met the man who had described his beliefs as heresy in 1956, and in his autobiography Graham records this of the conversation which took place between them:

Dr. Ramsey, could we—you and I—be good personal friends? Do we have to part company because we disagree in methods and theology? Isn’t that the purpose of the ecumenical movement, to bring together people of opposing views?

The response, as Graham tells us, was this: “A strong supporter of the ecumenical movement, he had to smile and agree with my logic.” Thereafter the two men were to be friends.

It was this same policy which now came to be advanced in England, especially by evangelicals in the Church of England. John Stott, one of the youngest of these men, is said to have acted as the unofficial chaplain to the Graham team during the Harringay crusade. He now became the leader among the younger generation of Anglican evangelicals and their new policy was summarized in the words, “Cooperation without Compromise.” The outworking of this policy led in 1967 to the first National Evangelical Anglican Congress, and the guest invited to speak at the opening of the Congress was Michael Ramsey. The Archbishop used the occasion to tell his hearers that “experience goes before theology,” that they must learn from each other, and if the evangelicals were prepared to play a full part in the life of the Church of England, they must turn their back on their old exclusiveness. When it was all over, the published Congress statement included these words in a section on “Dialogue”: “The initial task for divided Christians is dialogue, at all levels and across all barriers. We desire to enter this ecumenical dialogue fully. We are no longer content to stand apart from those with whom we disagree.” This exciting Congress was spoken of as part of a new evangelical renaissance. A corner had been turned and the old isolationism—as it was now called—was to be a thing of the past.

To summarize, I repeat that this new-look evangelicalism was not new with respect to beliefs. It stood and intended to stand for biblical Christianity. It was new rather in policy and strategy, and in my book I do not argue this was wholly mistaken. The older Evangelicalism and fundamentalism is to be defended on all points. Some change was needed. Without question, a number of the influences which came out of the alliance of Fuller Seminary, Christianity Today, and the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association were good. And many souls were brought to real faith in Christ under Graham’s ministry. All that is to be remembered with thankfulness. Where then lay the problem? What caused the division among evangelicals?
Two Principal Explanations

1. The new emphasis on “openness”, and on the wider co-operation of evangelicals with others, failed to address the fundamental problem in the mainline denominations. That problem was the way in which the definition of a Christian had been changed and undermined. A different idea of what it meant to be a Christian was very widespread, both in pulpits and in pews. Scripture teaches that it is faith in the gospel of Christ which is indispensable for salvation: liberalism believes that men and women can have “the Christian life” without the Christian faith. Charles Hodge states the cleavage in these words:

A man who believes certain doctrines is a Christian. If his faith is mere assent, he is a speculative Christian; if it is cordial and appreciating, he is a true Christian. But to say that a man may be a Christian, without believing the doctrines of Christianity, is a contradiction. A man may be amiable and benevolent, without any definite form of faith, but how is he to be a Christian?

Contrary to those words, the starting point of the ecumenical movement is that all who say they are Christians, on a minimum profession of faith, are to be accepted as such. It saw no reason to question that assumption. So the priority for the churches, according to ecumenism, is not a recovery of the faith and of truths essential to salvation; it is the uniting of those who say they are already believers. In a day when liberalism was dominant in almost all the main denominations, the ecumenical church leaders were ignoring the main problem. The possibility that teachers and people had adopted the Christian name without ever meeting with the risen Jesus did not seem to come into their reckoning.

In this situation evangelicals had a crucial problem. If agreeing to the ground rule “we are all Christians” was necessary to gain ecumenical and denominational acceptance, how could such agreement be consistent with the uniqueness of their beliefs? If evangelical belief is, in essence, gospel belief, how can Christian fellowship exist independently of any common commitment to that belief? And how can a right belief on fundamentals retain the primary importance which Scripture gives to it if, after all, that belief is not necessary to salvation? Or to put the same question another way, How can evangelicalism be said to represent biblical essentials if one regards those as Christians and works alongside those who actually deny these essentials? This was the point that Lloyd-Jones took up in his address at the meeting of October 1966 which brought on the disruption. His central point was that as fellowship and brotherhood in Christ depend on gospel belief, therefore the unity with which evangelicals should be concerned has to be evangelical not ecumenical. “We should be asking: What is a Christian? How do we get forgiveness of sins? And, What is a church?” He believed that for evangelicals to appear to accept the “we are all Christians” axiom of ecumenism was fundamentally wrong.

The Lloyd-Jones message cut right across the policy that was becoming popular in evangelical circles. In response to him it was said that the issue was
really only about churchmanship, and that Lloyd-Jones was simply repeating
the old separatist message which led men into backwaters and minimal influence.
No, he replied, the issue was the practice of evangelical belief. The faith can be
undermined in practice, he warned, even where it is held in principle. Very few
evangelical leaders thought the warning was relevant. One who did was Francis
Schaeffer. In the same year as the Lloyd-Jones address in London, Schaeffer
spoke at the Berlin Congress on Evangelism where he said:

Let us never forget that we who stand in the historic stream of Christianity really
believe that false doctrine, at those crucial points where false doctrine is heresy, is
not a small thing. If we do not make clear by word and practice our position for
truth as truth and against false doctrine, we are building a wall between the next
generation and the gospel.

In other words, if the practice of broad cooperation did not stop, the distinctiveness
of the gospel would be lost. A difference of conviction over this point was
a main cause of division.

2. Another explanation of the division has to do with difference of opinion over
the depth and reality of human depravity. I do not mean that one side denied
human sinfulness, but it is possible to have a correct definition of the fall of man
and yet act in a way that fails to take sufficient account of Christ’s command-
ments, “Beware of men” (Matt 10:17); “Beware of false prophets which come
to you in sheep’s clothing” (Matt 7:15). The teaching of Scripture on the
deceitfulness of the human heart is given to us for urgent practical reasons.
“Take heed to yourselves” and “Watch” are constant biblical injunctions (Acts
20:28-31; 1 Tim 4:16, etc).

I believe the success of the early Graham crusades, and the new evangelical
policy, was connected with a failure to give sufficient weight to the warnings of
Scripture on human nature. Both in the States and in Britain, the support of
non-evangelicals and even of open liberals came to be deliberately sought in
crusade evangelism. I have given you one explanation why this change of
attitude occurred among evangelicals. The willingness of non-evangelicals to
co-operate was interpreted as heralding a significant change of spirit; it was
believed that one-time opponents of evangelical belief were becoming its
friends. So the caution which previously characterized the relationship of
evangelicals with others was now replaced with openness and optimism.

But there is another interpretation of the change on the part of liberals, and
I am afraid it is the true one. This is not merely my opinion, for these many years
later we have the biographies and writings of a number of the church leaders
who were one-time crusade supporters. In repeated instances they reveal that
there was no change in their beliefs at all. They were simply impressed with the
numbers attending Graham’s ministry and were interested in channeling some
of the crowd into their own churches. Men such as Dr Leslie Weatherhead and
Archbishop Ramsey said as much. “What does fundamentalist theology matter,” Weatherhead said to fellow-liberals, “compared with gathering in the people we have all missed.” In the 1966 Graham London crusade, Archbishop Ramsey told his clergy to receive those referred to them “whatever one thinks of the theology.”

Ramsey’s biography gives us this illuminating anecdote. By coincidence the Archbishop had planned to be in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1974 at the same time as a Graham crusade was being held in the city. When Graham heard this news, at once he invited Ramsey to come and speak for a little at the opening meeting. Ramsey’s biographer writes that he “did not believe in crusades,” nevertheless he accepted the invitation and Graham wrote him to say he was “overwhelmed with gratitude . . . we come from such diverse religious backgrounds and yet . . . this glorious unity.” Before the meeting the Archbishop went over the notes of what he intended to say with the Portuguese-speaking interpreter. The man, a Brazilian Presbyterian pastor, objected that “he could not translate all that on grounds of conscience.” In this impasse the issue was taken to Graham who insisted the Archbishop was his guest and that the translator must interpret every word. So among other things, the audience that night heard these words from the Englishman:

> You cannot come to Christ unless you bring your Roman Catholic brother with you. . . . If you are asked to come forward to testify to Christ, don’t come unless you bring with you a resolve to be more charitable to your Roman Catholic brothers.

This was extraordinary news for Brazilian Christians who had left the Church of Rome where they had known nothing of brotherhood in Christ. Sometimes, no doubt, liberals were converted under Graham’s ministry, but it is not being cynical to say that the widespread interest of non-evangelicals in his crusades was commonly related to advancing their own agenda. They were using him, as an official of the World Council of Churches admitted when he said, “We do not agree with Billy Graham’s theology, but we are using him to build our churches.” I need hardly remind you how Graham defended what he called his “ecumenical strategy.” What did it matter, he said, who co-operated and who associated with the crusades, provided the preaching stayed in evangelical hands. But the truth was that he wanted the cooperation of these men for the aid that their reputations gave to his work, and for the way it could secure wider denominational support. Winning the mainline denominations remained the primary objective and that could not be done without the good will of the leaders. So both sides were motivated by an ulterior motive. On Graham’s side the motive was to get a wider hearing for the gospel, but in order to do this, he adopted an attitude towards false teachers that is not compatible with the New Testament.

The new evangelicalism on both sides of the Atlantic was so hopeful of
success that such words as “Beware of men” seemed to be out of place and uncharitable. Men who had never preached the gospel in their lives now came to be regarded as basically good. “Billy won’t believe anything bad about a person,” said his associate, Robert Ferm. Even in his autobiography Dr. Graham appears to be unconscious of the way he was repeatedly used by men for their own ends. He describes, for instance, an afternoon in the White House with President Clinton in these terms:

It was a time of warm fellowship with a man who has not always won the approval of his fellow Christians, but who has in his heart a desire to serve God and do his will.

This is not an isolated example of naivety in the realm of the political. After another lapse on his part, Graham was heard to say, “I was like a babe in the woods; I didn’t know what was going on.” Such failure becomes the more dangerous when it involves assessment of preachers and the spiritual. To me the saddest words in the whole of Martin’s long biography of the evangelist occur in the following quotation which he gives:

Those who know Billy best say that it is his amiable personality that makes him believe he can become a sort of pontiff—or bridge-builder—between Bible-believing Christians and those attractive personalities who are the proponents of the non-redemptive gospel. [At a recent breakfast] he pleaded with us to recognize that many liberals were good men, loved the Lord, and perhaps could be won over to the conservative position. . . . Billy spreads himself too thin; he tries not to offend anybody in any way. . . . Not making war on some things he has gone to the other extreme, and made peace, not with the doctrines of apostasy, but with those who preach the doctrines of apostasy. This, I believe, is deadly and will one day defeat the whole cause for which this man of God is labouring.

The Evangelical Change and Its Results

I offer these two points as explanation of the cause of division. As I have already mentioned, from the other side a different explanation is put forward for the evangelical disunity in Britain. After 1966 Lloyd-Jones began to break off public cooperation with the evangelicals who were committed to promoting unity with non-evangelicals. For this he was greatly blamed. Evangelicals on the other side, such as John Stott and Jim Packer, recommended a double commitment: they wanted to continue a commitment to fellow evangelicals and also to support the broader ecumenical discussion on Christian unity. In their eyes, by declining cooperation with fellow evangelicals Lloyd-Jones was introducing a division in evangelicalism where there was none before. Lloyd-Jones replied that it was not he who had brought in the division; it was those who were introducing the policy of a double commitment. To allow the rightness of that policy would be, in his judgment, to produce such a change in evangelicalism that its historic meaning would be lost. Evangelicals should not, and could not, defend a unity with men who did not believe
the same message. While he knew that those evangelicals who disagreed with him were not intending to undermine the gospel, he was convinced evangelicalism would not remain evangelicalism unless its practice was consistent with its belief. The uniqueness of the gospel message could not live with a policy of ecumenical openness, and he saw those who promoted that policy as the unwitting supporters of a situation in which what was distinctive about evangelical belief would be progressively weakened. As early as 1965, Lloyd-Jones was saying:

We have evidence before our eyes that our staying amongst such people [i.e., non-evangelicals] does not seem to be converting them to our view but rather to a lowering of the spiritual temperature of those who are staying amongst them and an increasing tendency to doctrinal accommodation and compromise.

What we have to assess here comes down to questions of historical fact. Since the 1960s, has evangelicalism remained a movement of strong doctrinal convictions, asserting the supernatural over against the man-centeredness and the expediency of so much contemporary religion? Has it kept to the fore what it means to be a Christian in contrast with the popular view which denies that “strait is the gate and narrow is the way that leads to life and few there be that find it”? I believe that on both sides of the Atlantic the evidence exists to prove that what Lloyd-Jones, Schaeffer, and a few others feared has come to pass.

In England it can be seen, for instance, among many Anglican evangelicals who believed that “openness” was the right policy in the 1960s. One of the leaders affirmed in 1973: “Evangelicals recognize other Anglicans as fellow Christians however critical they are of Evangelicalism.” Another leader went on record saying that those who deny the virgin birth and the bodily resurrection of Christ do not “forfeit the right to be called Christians.” In the case of a well-known bishop, who denied the resurrection of Christ, Anglican evangelicals now said that it was unworthy to entertain “a lurking suspicion that this cannot be genuine Christianity.” In a book entitled Anglican Evangelicals, the two reputed evangelicals who wrote it asked for a contribution to its pages from the Bishop of Edinburgh, Richard Holloway, who is a liberal Anglo-Catholic. So Holloway wrote the final chapter in which he says that evangelical belief has no relevance to the question how anyone becomes a Christian; because “we are incorporated into Christ by baptism and grace.” He went on to write that it was inadmissible to make “the substitutionary theory of the atonement one of the prime tests of doctrinal purity,” and he deplored any practice which would make it a test of unity. Holloway’s words were duly published without any expression of disagreement on the part of the editors. One of the men involved in the new evangelicalism within Anglicanism was George Carey. He is now the Archbishop of Canterbury, and his high office is sometimes adduced as proof of how evangelicals have now gained positions of leadership. But for Carey any exclusiveness for evangelical beliefs has long since gone. This is how he speaks about the Church of England:
I remain convinced it is a broad Church combining the catholic, evangelical, charismatic and liberal in joyful harmony. . . . For many of us in the Church, liberalism is a creative and constructive element for exploring theology today. . . . It would constitute the end of Anglicanism as a significant force in world-wide Christianity if we lost this ingredient.

Yet such opinions did not prevent the Graham organization from inviting Archbishop Carey to speak at last year’s congress in Amsterdam. The sad fact is that Graham himself has progressively lost any insistence on what makes an evangelical an evangelical. William Martín noted his “diminishing dogmatism” and his “ever widening acceptance of others who professed to be Christians.” Graham says, “[T]he ecumenical movement has broadened my viewpoint.” Referring to differences between evangelicalism and Roman Catholicism, he can say, “I don’t think the differences are important as far as personal salvation is concerned.” “I feel I belong to all the churches. I am equally at home in an Anglican or Baptist or a Brethren assembly or a Roman Catholic church.” In 1978, McCall’s magazine quoted Graham as saying, “I used to believe that pagans in far countries were lost if they did not have the gospel of Christ preached to them. I no longer believe that.”

The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and Christianity Today denied the authenticity of these words, but in 1997, on television for all to see and hear, Graham repeated the same statement in conversation with the liberal Dr Robert Schuller. The body of Christ, he told Schuller, would be made up from all the Christian groups around the world, and from outside the Christian groups. “I think that everybody that loves or knows Christ, whether they are conscious of it or not, they are members of the body of Christ. . . . They may not know the name of Jesus but they know in their hearts that they need something they do not have, and they turn to the only light they have, and I think that they are saved and going to be with us in heaven.”

Schuller, with undisguised pleasure, cross-questioned the evangelist on the point: “I hear you saying, that it’s possible for Jesus Christ to come into human hearts and soul and life, even if they have been born in darkness and have never had exposure to the Bible. Is that the correct interpretation of what you are saying?” “Yes, it is,” Graham responded in decided tones. At which Schuller exclaimed, “I’m so thrilled to hear you say this.”

**Why the Lloyd-Jones Understanding Differed**

Lloyd-Jones died in 1981. It was a cause of great grief to him that precisely what he had warned against twenty years earlier was patently happening. Schaeffer felt the same. In 1984 he wrote,

What is the use of evangelicalism seeming to get larger and larger if sufficient numbers under the name evangelical no longer hold to that which makes evangelicalism evangelical? My point is that the evangelical “openness”, introduced and practised from the 1950s onwards, brought on a drift which its exponents never anticipated and have not
The conduct of Archbishop Leighton in the seventeenth century suggests a parallel with more recent leaders: “Leighton’s was one of many instances of a good man helping Christ’s enemies out of apparent zeal for Christ, on grounds of theory that seemed to him quite sound, but miscalculating the necessary effect of his actions” (G. Blaikie, The Preachers of Scotland [reprint; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2001] 146).
ability to discern the demonic was no longer treated as a necessity. Thus in the midst of apparent success, people could see no danger and did not conceive of the possibility that the devil as an angel of light could himself have part in celebrating an evangelical renaissance.

As years passed, much ought to have made evangelicals suspect their optimistic openness and recognize a deceiver at work in their midst. Consider these few quotations. James Davison Hunter, in his book, Evangelicalism (1987), wrote of evangelicals:

There is less sharpness, less boldness, and, accordingly, a measure of opaqueness in their theological vision that did not exist in previous generations (at least to the present extent). A dynamic would appear to be operating that strikes at the very heart of Evangelical self-identity.

Commenting on the evangelical scene in the 1980s, Dr. Carl Henry believed, “Numerical bigness has become an infectious epidemic.” Or again, Dr. David Wells, referring to the appearance of evangelical strength, said, “The perception was a mirage.” If these assessments are not denied, whose influence ought they to suggest to us? An evangelical strategy which aimed at the best and yet, in important respects, turned out for the worst, was surely being affected by an influence other than that of God. Evangelicalism was too largely concentrating on numbers, on personalities, on publicity, on organization, when according to Scripture the real conflict is not in the realm of the visible at all. The main conflict is supernatural:

We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places (Eph 6:12).

The recognition of Satan is supremely important. It keeps before us the fact that evil is not merely an idea, it is a great and personal power. It teaches us that errors over the gospel are not innocent mistakes, they are demonic deceptions: there are counterfeit Christs and false gospels. The existence of Satan as the ruler of all unregenerate men and women is also a final proof that the difference between Christian and non-Christian is absolute and radical. We are not to please men, nor to fear men, says Scripture. Why not? For one reason, because, supposing we please them and gain their approval, we gain nothing. “Cease ye from man, whose breath is in his nostrils” (Isa 2:22). No influence except that of God himself can meet the realities of their situation. That is the explanation of Paul’s conduct at Corinth, “And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom” (1 Cor 2:1).

**The Positive Alternative**

From my references to Lloyd-Jones, it would be a great mistake to conclude
that his role was primarily a critical one. On the contrary, his main work was to present a positive alternative to the popular trend. He disputed the idea that evangelicals had to choose between ecumenical cooperation on the one hand and isolation on the other: another option was open and supremely needed, namely, reliance on the power of the gospel. The churches in general were in the midst of a moral and social decay which they were powerless to alter. That fact did not dismay him for he knew that conditions equally deplorable had existed many times before.

In the early eighteenth century, materialism reigned, false charity prevailed, and conviction of sin had almost disappeared. The Wesleys and George Whitefield faced that situation by a direct and bold return to Scripture. Instead of seeking the support of fellow-churchmen, they were ready to stand alone, convinced it was by unfaithful preaching that the church and the world had become mixed together. They made the recovery of the gospel and of what it means to be a Christian the one great need. Instead of making them popular, this brought on intense opposition from the leaders of the Church of England. William Warburton, Bishop of Gloucester, demanded of John Wesley, “Why do you talk of the success of the gospel in England, which was a Christian country before you were born?” To which Wesley replied,

Was it indeed? Is it so at this day? If men are not Christians till they are renewed after the image of Christ, and if the people of England, in general, are not so renewed, why do we term them so? “The god of this world hath” long “blinded their hearts”. Let us do nothing to increase their blindness; but rather recover them from that strong delusion, that they may no longer believe a lie.

After Wesley preached at the university church in Oxford on the subject “The Almost Christian,” he was never allowed to speak there again. He demonstrated to his hearers on that occasion the marks of a real Christian and then anticipated the objection which would be raised over the relevance to them of Paul’s words to King Agrippa (Acts 26:28):

“O, but this is not a parallel case! For they were heathens; but I am a Christian.” A Christian! Are you so? Do you understand the word? Do you know what a Christian is? If you were a Christian you would have the mind of Christ; and you would walk as he also walked—Are you inwardly and outwardly holy? I fear, not even outwardly.

This was the issue that the evangelical leaders constantly pressed everywhere in the eighteenth-century awakening. They believed that the majority of the clergy fell under the same condemnation as the false prophets to whom God said, “You have strengthened the hands of the wicked, so that he does not turn from his wicked way to save his life” (Ezek 13:22). Their opponents said of them, “Their doctrine is too strict; they make the way to heaven too narrow.” On which words Wesley made this all-important comment: “And this is in truth the original objection (as it was almost the only one for some time), and is secretly at the bottom of a thousand more, which appear in various forms.” In the same spirit, Whitefield told
the Bishop of London that he was treating nominal Christians as being in “a very imperfect state,” whereas the truth was that they were “in no state of Christianity at all.” The ministry of Dr. Lloyd-Jones exemplified this same approach. He knew that the progress of the gospel today is not obstructed by new and unique problems which an adherence to Scripture cannot answer. The one great problem in every age is that “the natural man receives not the things of the Spirit of God.” The first need of men and women today is exactly the same as in the apostolic era or as in the days of Whitefield and Wesley: it is the need of regeneration. Human nature is engulfed in a spiritual deadness which no one but the Spirit of God can remove. When that conviction prevails, then the question how opposition to evangelical truth is to be addressed takes on a very different answer:

Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help. His breath goes forth, he returns to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish. Happy is he that hath the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the Lord his God (Ps 146:3–5).

Conclusions

To judge situations chiefly by the appearance of things is always dangerous. Evangelical opinion in these last fifty years has been too largely influenced by what men believed they saw—numbers, attractive personalities, the charismatic “revival,” the friendliness of the new Roman Catholic policy, “many Roman Catholics are true Christians,” etc. But Scripture and not the observable is the rule of faith. Our own hearts and our own understanding of events provide no trustworthy guide. “Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment” (John 7:24). “There is a way which seems right unto a man, but the end thereof is the ways of death” (Prov 14:12). The argument from apparent success or popularity is a particularly dangerous one. A religious majority generally uses such words as those with which Bunyan’s “Mr By-ends” describes the faithful:

They are for holding their notions, though all other men be against them; but I am for religion in what, and so far as, the times and my safety will bear it. They are for religion when in rags and contempt; but I am for him when he walks in his silver slippers, in the sunshine, and with applause.

Our only security is real and continued communion with Christ. Correct belief is essential but it is not enough. We can be orthodox and yet proud, cold, and careless. A thousand temptations surround us and, left to ourselves, any one of them would be enough to bring us down. Self-confidence is the greatest danger of all. “Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he falls” (1 Cor 10:12).

The only safe place to live, where we may have assurance of God’s presence, is in “the valley of humiliation,” where, Bunyan tells us, the shepherd’s boy sang,

He that is down, needs fear no fall;
He that is low, no pride;
He that is humble ever shall
Have God to be his guide.

To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembles at my word (Isa 66:2).
BOOK REVIEWS


*Preaching with Conviction* is the third in a series of books published by Kregel as sources to help modern preachers address the needs of their congregations. Dr. Kenton C. Anderson is dean and assistant professor of applied theology at ACTS Seminaries. He also served in the pastorate.

The book is written in a novel format which quickly arrests attention and keeps it to the very end. The story line is about a small town preacher who is questioning the validity of the message as well as the medium of preaching as a way to impact human nature. Caught in the tide of postmodern thinking, the community in which the preacher finds himself challenges his basic presupposition concerning the message preached.

The dialogues in the novel revolve around the basic components of preaching:

- First Stage: Discovery (The Message)
- Second Stage: Construction (The Sermon)
- Third Stage: Assimilation (Uction)
- Fourth Stage: Delivery (The Event)

The other two chapters deal with the problem of postmodernism and a discussion of the theology of preaching.

The reader should keep in mind that all is done in the context of a novel. To this reviewer, the approach was effective as well as entertaining. It challenges the preacher to stick to his convictions, both about the message and about the task of preaching.


This volume on 2 Samuel is from the author of *Judges, A Narrative of God’s Power and The Books of Samuel*, vol. 1, on 1 Samuel. He also is well-known
250  The Master's Seminary Journal

for his work *The Minister's Library*, which he has periodically updated since the early 1970s. More recently he coauthored *An Introduction to Theological Research*.

The focus in the present work is on the theme of God’s sovereign faithfulness in establishing the kingdom and raising up prophets, priests, and kings, as He deals with the unfaithfulness of mankind (13). Barber outlines 2 Samuel in six divisions to reflect this emphasis. His twenty-three chapters on the twenty-four chapters of 2 Samuel sometimes deal with more than one biblical chapter at a time. At the rear of the commentary he offers chapter notes and indexes on Scripture, persons, and titles. He draws his chapter notes from commentaries, journals, encyclopedias, works of archaeology, atlases, and other sources.

Because the work is designed for pastors, Bible teachers, and group discussion leaders, each chapter on 2 Samuel begins with a transitional illustration that seizes attention. Barber crafts a broad exposition of each section within each chapter of 2 Samuel under a lucid heading and verses. He climaxes each chapter with pertinent lessons, e.g., in 2 Samuel 1, making decisions as David did in executing the Amalekite who claimed to have ended Saul’s life, and remembering the good of others as when David honored Saul and Jonathan.

The author supposes the account of Saul’s death in 1 Samuel 31 is accurate and the Amalekite’s claim a fabrication (29, 378 n. 9). He gives a good summary defense of the eternality of the Davidic Covenant (116). Barber argues that evidence is insufficient for the common belief that in 2 Sam 11:1 David was at fault for being soft, indulgent, and absent from the troops in battle (169-71). Rather he focuses on the unexpected temptation in seeing Bathsheba. He discusses the custom of bathing in an enclosed courtyard hidden from others on the ground level, but visible to one like David looking from above. In chapters 13ff. of the commentary, Barber emphasizes the vital place of choices and problems to which wrong choices can lead. He reconciles the apparent discrepancy between Satan stirring David to number his people (1 Chr 21:1) and God moving David to do this (2 Sam 24:1). He says that God did it in His sovereignty, allowing “an adversary” (the word for Satan is without the article) to tempt the king (364). But a reader needs more explanation about who or what adversary might have been involved, and how such a person was relevant.

Much in the book has stimulating lessons and applications, both in the flow of exposition and at the ends of chapters. The book will provide quick, provocative ideas for preparing sermons or Bible class lessons and also stimulation for serious devotional readers.

For thirty years, *New Testament History* by F. F. Bruce has been the standard evangelical work in its field. Now, Bruce’s classic work has been supplemented by this important work from the pen of Paul Barnett, currently the Anglican bishop of North Sydney, Australia, and previously Master of Robert Menzies College, Macquarie University. In *Jesus & the Rise of Early Christianity*, Barnett expands and amplifies his previous book, *Behind the Scenes of the New Testament* (see review in *TMSJ* 5 [1994]:101-2). Barnett is also the author of the valuable NICNT volume on *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Eerdmans, 1997) and *Jesus & the Logic of History* (Eerdmans, 1997) in the New Studies in Biblical Theology series.

Barnett has high praise for Bruce’s “great” volume. He writes, “The strength of Bruce’s history is the sheer quantity of historical detail that he amasses and that thereby establishes inferentially the historical character of Christianity and its rootedness in the soil of those times” (24). Bruce wrote his history as a historian, not as a theologian. His goal was to describe the history of the NT era from Jewish and Roman sources and then fit in the data found in the NT. In contrast, Barnett writes as a theologian and historian. He states, “I have attempted to grasp the meaning of the primary texts from the inside, as it were, with only selected reference to secondary literature” (10). His main purpose is to describe the theological truth of the NT as seen in its historical development enlightened by extra-biblical documentation. For Barnett, “A New Testament history . . . must be the story of Jesus and the unfolding story of his followers in the next generation after him” (17).

The author states that his goals are to show that the Christ proclaimed by the apostles was one and the same as the Jesus of history and to demonstrate that the events recorded in the NT were nothing less than God fulfilling His promises made in the OT, particularly those made to David (10).

The first two chapters of the book lay the foundation for what follows. Chapter one, “The New Testament as History” (13-26), affirms the possibility of writing a NT history. “The historical context of the *kerygma* written in the Gospels and Acts and the rootedness in history of all of the literature of the New Testament make possible an attempt to retell the story of Jesus and the rise of his movement” (14). Further, Barnett lays out a chronology based upon biblical references correlated with extra-biblical data that is followed in the remainder of the book. In chapter two, “The Impact of Christ” (27-46), the Davidic ancestry of Jesus as the Messiah/Christ is shown as confirmed in Christian and non-Christian sources. The author concludes, “The earliness and the breadth of the witness to Jesus (the) Christ/the Son of God suggest that this idea did not derive from the early church but from Jesus himself” (44).

The main thrust of the work is to relate the story of Jesus and the rise of Christianity, which is narrated in chapters three through seventeen (47-375). Particularly valuable are the sections that describe the historical and theological context in which the events of the NT took place. The reader is given well-outlined, succinct summaries of information with bibliographic resources from which he can...
pursue further study. These chapters go over the same ground as Bruce’s history utilizing Barnett’s “inside” approach, which gives a more readable presentation, especially for the beginning NT student.

Chapter eighteen, “The Four Gospels” (376-99), has a good discussion of the historical nature, scriptural status, purposes, and dissemination of the written Gospels. Unfortunately, the author follows the four-source theory concerning Gospel origins, one of the sources being “Q,” “a Greek written document” (379). Chapter nineteen, “The Kingdom of Christ” (400-414), gives an introduction to the book of Revelation. Though information on the historical background of the book is helpful, Barnett does not espouse a futurist perspective toward the book. Chapter twenty (415-22) is an epilogue summarizing the main points of the entire volume. A select bibliography (423-29), author index (431-32), subject index (433-36), and Scripture index (437-48) add to the usefulness of this book as a reference tool.

\textit{Jesus \& the Rise of Early Christianity} is a valuable resource for the student and expositor of the NT, especially when consulted together with Bruce’s \textit{New Testament History}.


This work deserves a place as one the best of all time in contributing information on background issues and exegesis of the epistle. Barth (1915–1994) was Professor of New Testament Studies at the University of Basel, Switzerland, and son of the famous Karl Barth. Blanke was his student and now pastors in Germany. The present volume is in the Eerdmans Critical Commentary.

Pages 1-103 discuss rather exhaustively what is known about facets of slavery in NT times; 104-242 deal with literary, biographical, and contextual subjects; then 243-498 provide commentary. After this is a bibliography of 19 pages and indexes of modern authors, subjects, and ancient literature. The book draws upon much journal literature. The second section adds many thoughts about slavery to those of the first section. Among thirty-seven sections or sub-sections in Part One on slavery is one on “Fugitive Slaves” (26-31), citing top specialized sources. The authors discuss such matters as reasons for slaves’ flight, dangers, pursuits to which they might turn, attitudes toward runaways, and rewards for returning them. An interesting section looks at possibilities for Onesimus as a fugitive returning. One wishes in all of this for one clear-cut section on a Christian attitude toward slavery, but has to draw that from voluminous readings throughout to piece this together.

The commentary is lengthy, but the information is much of value. Verse 1 receives eleven pages; verse 2 gets nearly eleven, verse 3 only three pages, verse 12 nearly twelve, verse 13 nearly fifteen, and verse 16b (“a brother who is loved”)
twenty-eight and a half. Within the commentary are twenty-three excurses on topics such as “Timothy,” “House Churches,” and “Legal Options for Onesimus’s Future.” These writers are usually clear, but not always. Their comments favor Paul’s claiming in verse 9 to be Christ’s “ambassador,” not Paul “the aged” (321-24). They have a good discussion of what Paul means by verse 18, “If he has wronged you.” The authors favor viewing Onesimus not as having stolen and fled with valuables, or cheated Philemon of work time, but as having a servant’s debt he has not paid off (480-82). Against many commentators, their hard-to-follow discussion of verse 22 sees Paul as writing from Ephesus, not Rome.

Extensive discussions of the work form a major contribution to professors and students in deep NT scholarly study. Others who are patient to read and reflect, such as pastors who do in-depth study, will derive much profit, agreeing at times and disagreeing at others.

Reviewed by William D. Barrick, Professor of Old Testament.

Teaching theology for nearly forty years, Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) succeeded Abraham Kuyper at the Free University of Amsterdam. This volume is a translation of only the fifth chapter in the second volume (out of four volumes) of Bavinck’s Gereformeerde Dogmatiek (Reformed Dogmatics; original Dutch published, 1895-1901). The chapter’s original title was “Over de Wereld in haar Oorspronkelijke Staat” (“Concerning the World in Its Original State”). Translated from the second expanded edition of Gereformeerde Dogmatiek (1906-1911), In the Beginning is the Dutch Reformed Translation Society’s second volume in its project to translate the entire work. The first translated volume was The Last Things: Hope for this World and the Next (Baker, 1996).

Bolt’s “Introduction” (9-20) briefly sketches the historical, theological, and biographical setting for Bavinck’s writings. Observing that Bavinck was willing to confront modern thought and science as a theologian, Bolt reminds the reader that “many of the specific scientific issues he addresses in this volume are dated by his own late-nineteenth-century context” (13). As a trinitarian and Calvinist, Bavinck emphasizes grace’s restoration of nature (16). Bolt summarizes the significance of this volume by declaring, “Creation is . . . more than just a debate about the age of the earth and the evolutionary origins of humanity” (18). He views Bavinck’s dogmatics as “biblically and confessionally faithful, pastorally sensitive, challenging, and still relevant” (19).

The editor composed and inserted excellent chapter synopses. Readers will find them a helpful guide for understanding the major themes and theses of the volume. An appendix cross-references the sections of the Dutch with the pages of
this volume (261-62). A bibliography (263-89) lists the sources cited by Bavinck himself. Some references remain incomplete due to unavailability of full information. Where multiple English editions are available (e.g., Calvin’s Institutes) the most recent or most frequently cited or most accessible edition is listed. Scripture passages discussed at length by Bavinck are listed in a “Select Scripture Index” (291). To list all Scripture references cited would lengthen the volume significantly since his discussions include many proof texts (there are 62 references in the first two pages alone).

An indication of Bavinck’s views regarding general revelation and common grace appears in the second sentence of the first of seven sections (“Creation,” 23-60): “Creation is the initial act and foundation of all divine revelation and therefore the foundation of all religious and ethical life as well” (24). Employing the Hebrew of the OT and the Greek of the NT, citing church history and historical theology, and debating Aristotle and Plato, the author defends the doctrine of creation ex nihilo (“out of nothing”) (34-39).

“Heaven: The Spiritual World” (61-93) is a parade example of the breadth of Bavinck’s reading and knowledge. Interacting with scores of theologians and philosophers from ancient times up to his own day, he develops a Scripture-based angelology. He enters into the debates over extra-terrestrial life (67-68), the “sons of God” in Genesis 6 (75-76), and guardian angels (84-88).

Writing of the second sphere of creation (“Earth: The Material World,” 95-133), the author rejects attempts to discover mythological elements in the Genesis record. “Everything rather argues for the assumption that in Genesis 1 we have a tradition that derives from the most ancient times, was gradually adulterated in the case of the other peoples, and preserved in its purity by Israel” (100). Bavinck examines various views regarding the days of Genesis 1, the gap theory, and the universal flood in Noah’s day. Although he appears to be ambivalent on the nature of the six days of creation and comes close to soft scientism, ultimately he does insist that Christians must take their stand on divine revelation rather than science. One oddity is his claim that “Genesis calculates the day from morning to morning” (124).

Bavinck systematically critiques Darwinism in the section entitled “Human Origins” (137-57). He states, “From the Christian position there is not the least objection to the notion of evolution or development as conceived by Aristotle; on the contrary, it is creation alone which makes such evolution possible” (139). However, he confines such “evolution” to variations within species (144). Darwinian evolution is discredited by its ties to naturalism and materialism (145-47). Interestingly, although Bavinck had established that the earth’s present form was the result of immense changes brought about by the universal flood (131), he does not mention that as a factor affecting attempts to identify the location of Eden (155-57).

In “Human Nature” (159-95) Bavinck provides the reader with a detailed examination of the meaning of “the image of God” in historical theology. It is a superb presentation of the differences between Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Reformed theologies. He argues against trichotomy (187-88), includes dominion as
an element of the image of God (193), and holds that any definition of God’s image must take into account the incarnation of Christ (192-93). Continuing the discussion of God’s image (“Human Destiny,” [197-225]), the author develops his views of the covenant of works (apparently limited to the pre-Fall relationship of Adam and Eve to God, 199-216) and creationism (as opposed to traducianism in regard to the origin of the soul, 216-25). Within those discussions he proclaims that federal headship (as opposed to seminal headship) is the only viable view of the relationship of humanity to Adam.

The final section deals with the matter of divine providence (229-60). Bavinck defines providence as “that act of God by which from moment to moment he preserves and governs all things” (234). Rebutting the errors of deism, he posits, “A Deist is a person who in his short life has not found the time to become an atheist” (243). Providence includes the continuing actions of God (“God is never idle,” 245) after creation and distinct from creation (246-48). Under the heading of “Concurrence: Secondary Causes” (248) Bavinck concludes that “a miracle is not a violation of natural law and no intervention in the natural order. From God’s side it is an act that does not more immediately and directly have God as its cause than any ordinary event” (250). Under “Providence as Government” (256) he discusses God’s relationship to the origin of sin (257-59).

In the Beginning is a brilliantly researched and developed contribution to the disciplines of systematic and historical theology. We all owe a debt of thanks to the Dutch Reformed Translation Society for making Bavinck’s work available in English.


Apologetic methodology has been a topic of debate in recent decades, due partly to the contrasting views of a number of prominent apologists and partly to developments in thinking about the underlying epistemological issues. Cowan’s book brings direct interaction in a field that rarely benefits from it.

In the book, each apologist presents a case for his apologetic approach and responds to the others. Then each has a chance to respond to his critics. And finally, Cowan, a pastor and an adjunct professor of philosophy at Ouachita Baptist University, offers his insights into the areas of agreement and disagreement.

William Craig, with characteristic precision, sets forth his Classical Method, adding that he sees a difference between knowing Christianity to be true and showing it so. Accordingly, the Christian’s primary assurance is not from argument but from the internal witness of the Holy Spirit: “[R]ational argument and evidence
may properly confirm but not defeat that assurance” (28). As to showing Christianity to be true, Craig supports the traditional two-step method of using arguments for the existence of God to show that theism is more probable than not, and using historical arguments to demonstrate the truth of Christianity.

Gary Habermas, the Evidentialist, rightly distinguishes between evidentialist epistemology, which holds that something must be proved in order to be believed, and evidentialism as an apologetic methodology (the view he defends). Though the former has fallen into disfavor, the latter is widely used by apologists who are, for example, internalists (i.e., those who hold that for belief to be knowledge a person must be aware of his reasons for holding the belief in question), foundationalists (who hold that some beliefs, such as those that are self-evident, can be known without being supported by other beliefs), and reliablists (who hold that belief is knowledge if we know that we obtained it through a process that reliably gives us knowledge).

Habermas argues for a one-step approach in which both God and Christianity can be proved chiefly by the historical method—the existence of God being convincingly entailed in an event like the resurrection. In addition, however, he welcomes theistic arguments. Craig finds the approach too broad to be a distinct method (122) and argues for greater stress on theistic arguments. Without that stress, he says, the Christian’s appeal to the miraculous will seem ad hoc (i.e., contrived to explain a narrow set of facts and unconnected to other knowledge or explanations). The problem will be avoided, Craig points out, if theistic arguments are used to provide independent support for a supernatural being.

Paul Feinberg sees Christian theism and its competitors as whole systems of belief that compete as the best explanations for all the data for which we must give an account (151). The model for his Cumulative Case method, then, is not philosophy or logic, but law, history, and literature. Consequently, premises and derivations are absent; however, tests for truth are appropriate. These are the same tests used in other rational endeavors, such as science and history, and include consistency, correspondence, comprehensiveness, simplicity, livability, fruitfulness (favorable consequences), and conservation (changing the theory only as necessary; Craig rejects this as akin to mere commitment to one’s theory and thus pluralistic in its effect, 181). The advantage of comparing whole explanations, says Feinberg, is that an opponent must offer an alternative that is superior to Christianity and not merely criticize it.

Craig responds that Feinberg confuses argument to the best explanation with accepting the cumulative nature of evidence (i.e., that arguments can be added to one another to make a stronger case). Habermas points out that a cumulative case is essentially an inductive one (193) and that the approach is standard for Evidentialism (184). Consequently, it is difficult to see it as a distinctive methodology.

In contrast to Kelly James Clark (the Reformed Epistemologist), John Frame believes that the Bible is specific as to not only epistemology but also apologetic methodology. In other writings, Frame has modified some of Van Til’s
views while maintaining, as he does here, major themes. For these he is criticized. Craig, Habermas, and Feinberg object that Presuppositionalism is problematically circular, presupposing Christianity in order to prove it (e.g., Craig, 232, who says that the view “is guilty of a logical howler”). Frame defends it, saying that Christians presuppose God’s Word as the ultimate standard of truth, there being no higher standard by which to validate it (355, 357). He admits a circularity which argues “for an ultimate standard of truth by appealing to that very standard” (356), yet his approach welcomes evidence, logical syllogisms, and the like. In fact, Craig characterizes Frame’s own example of an apologetic case (223f.) as “a straight evidentialist apologetic” (233). Yet in Craig’s view, Frame fails to use one of Presuppositionalism’s central insights, the transcendental argument (233), which (following Kant) argues for x by showing that even a denial of x must assume that x is true. Frame counters that unlike Craig and fellow Presuppositionalist Greg Bahnsen, he himself does not think that the transcendental argument must be unique, but can incorporate other types of arguments (359).

While Frame argues that apologetics shows what we must believe, Clark argues that it shows only what we may believe—the central insight of his Reformed Epistemology being that one need not have proof in order to be rational (364, 372). Surprisingly, some of the most spirited exchanges occur between these epistemological cousins. Clark finds Frame a cut above other Presuppositionalists, namely Van Til and Bahnsen, both of whom he characterizes as long on assertion but short on proof (256, 259; he finds Van Til “obviously false” where he is not outright “baffling,” 255).

Clark points out that Reformed Epistemologists like Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff have helped turn the intellectual tide toward belief by successfully showing that Christianity is rationally acceptable even if its arguments cannot coerce belief. Faith is like that, Clark says; it is a matter of the will not the intellect—a leap not into the dark, but into the dim (373). Habermas responds by quoting atheist Keith Parsons, who says that if theists claim only that they are rational, then atheists can certainly claim the same, and on that basis theists should be met with apathy rather than hostility (334).

In spite of the contrasts there is a surprising amount of agreement between the authors. Each agreed that apologetics should not only respond to objections but also present a positive case, that the Holy Spirit’s role is pivotal, and that there is useful common ground between the believer and non-believer. Habermas and Craig disagreed about little, and Clark said he could have written much of what Craig had to say (366). Craig found Frame’s model of his case for Christianity quite evidentialist. Perhaps it was their affinity on a practical level that, in turn, led Frame to recommend writings by Craig and other “evidentialists” (229 n.).

The book is a must read for anyone interested in apologetics, especially those who want to explore the latest thought on apologetic approaches. It is lucid enough to be helpful to those new to the field (I have had some enthusiastic responses from students) while still being sophisticated enough to interest the

*More Money, More Ministry* is about the role that money has played in the growth in North American evangelicalism over the last two centuries. The editors compiled a group of experts to discuss how evangelicals have used and raised money to advance the cause of Christ and the church. The work is extremely helpful in understanding the role and influence of money in the church and in Christian organizations.

The editors have rendered a great service to Christian leaders both in the church and in para-church organizations, which need great resources to operate their ministries. Larry Eskridge is associate director of the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals at Wheaton College in Illinois. Mark A. Noll is from the same institution and is McManis Professor of Christian Thought.

The book contains three sections: Part I: Overviews and Orientations. Here the editors provide a glimpse at the way things were in the past. The fourth chapter on “The Financing of American Evangelicals since 1945” by Michael S. Hamilton is especially insightful. Part II: Specific Studies present investigations into role of money in various organization such as the China Inland Mission, the funding of higher education, the ministry of Larry Burkett, and various fundamentalist institutions. There is also a discussion on the “New Era” scandal and its implications to evangelicalism. Part III: Concluding Observations offer two concluding chapters on the theology of money as it relates to the contemporary church.

Although the material in the book is somewhat focused on specific organizations, it is an excellent source in the study of how money does in fact impact Christian ministries. This reviewer gained much insight into the value of God-given resources and the proper and careful use of “mammon.”


Very few dependable resources for the study of the book of Proverbs are available for lay people and pastors alike. This small volume is an excellent introductory guide. Goldberg’s alertness to the nuances of the Hebrew language in
the original text is like a glass of cool water to a thirsty man. In addition, the author is sensitive to NT parallels and applications. He also brings a knowledge of rabbinic materials to the text by way of illustration and amplification.

The Introduction (13-24) provides the reader with helpful discussions of wisdom literature, the nature of a proverb, and the interpretation of proverbs. Chapters 1-7 (25-111) are a running commentary on Proverbs 1:1–9:18. Chapters 8-12 (113-216) present the most significant and frequent topics contained in Proverbs 10:1–31:31. Those topics include God and man (113-39), the believer and his emotions (141-65), family relationships (167-80), speech, laziness, and folly (181-201), and life and death (203-16). Goldberg employs Proverbs’ Hebrew vocabulary to subdivide topics. For example, his treatment of the topic of God begins with proverbs employing “LORD” (Yahweh), the most frequent divine title (115-37). Then, those proverbs employing Eloha[sic]/Elohim (137-38) and “Holy One” (138-39) are discussed.

Sunday school classes and Bible studies operating on a quarter system will appreciate the volume’s arrangement into thirteen sections (an introduction plus twelve chapters). A brief bibliography (217-18) concludes the volume. Unfortunately, Goldberg’s bibliography omitted a reference to the very helpful volume in The New American Commentary series by Duane A. Garrett (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs [Nashville: Broadman, 1993]). In addition, the volume’s usability is hampered by the lack of a Scripture index by which the reader could readily access its wealth of information on any particular passage of Proverbs.

In his treatment of Proverbs 8 the author holds a mediating position. Wisdom is not the Messiah, but is “in the living Word, Jesus the Messiah” (106, Goldberg’s emphasis). Goldberg consistently translates the Hebrew prohibitive with the negative הַאֲלָה (‘al) as “do not even begin to . . .” (cf. 34, 35, 50). Such a rendering is not improbable in some cases, but it might be overdoing it to apply it to all occurrences in Proverbs. The subjective negative (‘al) is commonly employed to reflect urgency or immediacy, while the objective negative (נַא, ‏וֹ) indicates legislation as an emphatic (or, permanent) negative (cf. Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax [Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990] 567).

Louis Goldberg (Th.D., Grace Theological Seminary) was formerly Professor of Theology and Hebrew Studies at Moody Bible Institute. He is now Scholar in Residence with Jews for Jesus in New York City. For more than twenty-five years Dr. Goldberg has been spending his summers in Israel assisting indigenous congregations.

This volume seeks to address various theoretical and practical issues relating to teaching the OT in a classroom context, whether in a university, Christian college, or seminary setting. The core essays were originally delivered at a Tyndale Fellowship OT study group in Cambridge. The editors solicited other essays to provide a more comprehensive treatment of the issue.

The first section of this volume ("Content"—3 essays) contains the most theoretical essays, which suggest broad parameters for an OT curriculum.

The next section ("Context: Seminaries, Universities, Societies"—8 essays) contains essays that provide suggestions relating to teaching the OT in a variety of contexts, ranging from the seminary to the secular university classroom, in different parts of the world, at varying academic levels (from a basic college degree to a doctorate), from the perspective of different theological and confessional biases, and even an essay on teaching the OT in an Islamic context.

The final section ("Communication"—2 essays) includes an essay on teaching Hebrew and a pedagogical essay that seeks to connect factors that determine student learning with how a professor designs and delivers a given course. The volume concludes with an annotated OT bibliography (that also appears on the Denver Seminary website). The book has no subject, author, or Scripture indexes.

On the one hand, this volume provides the reader an interesting overview of educational challenges and suggestions from those teaching the OT in a number of settings. On the other hand, the observations are relatively diverse and at times incompatible. The “incompatibility” of certain suggestions included in the book is unavoidable in light of the diversity of cultural context and academic levels about which the authors write. Though that diversity is interesting to note, it can be somewhat confusing. As with most festschriften, the variety of perspectives found in the volume precludes its use for one purpose (except an overview of pedagogical suggestions from diverse perspectives).

The book was a disappointment to this writer because of its lack of coherence. The book may serve the needs of someone interested in surveying pedagogical variety, but will not provide much helpful guidance for a seminary or college professor.


This work uses thorough exegetical data from wide research to determine the meaning of 3:28 on its own right and Paul’s flow of argument in Galatians 3–4. Wayne Grudem on the back cover says, “It may well be the definitive work on this
The book has introductory and concluding chapters and four chapters in between. The introduction discusses views on 3:28 and the importance of the text to the debate over men’s and women’s roles. The conclusion argues for “clarity and charity” in the passage and related issues. A bibliography of five and a half pages lists top works on the debate—commentaries, theologies, journal literature, and other scholarly writings. General and Scripture indexes follow. The work grew from a master’s thesis that D. A. Carson and Grant Osborne supervised, and was published through encouragement of these two and Wayne Grudem.

The point Hove sees in the Galatians 3 context is that by faith people become one in salvation, whatever their racial, social, or gender orientation. God fully includes Gentiles into His people by faith, as Gen 12:3 anticipates spiritual descendants (46-47). All in Christ are members of God’s household, as all in Abraham, as Israelites, shared in promises through him (57). Hove marshals evidence that the third couplet in Gal 3:28 (male and female) is rooted in Gen 1:27. The words “there is no” do not deny any sense of a distinction in believers just because they all have benefits in Christ; oneness in this sense does not imply equality in all ways (107). Lexically, “one” never means “equal,” and it did not mean “equal” in the three hundred years surrounding the NT (108). Rather, “one” highlights an element shared in common, not sameness. Hove cites examples (1 Cor 3:8, even where two have different roles and rewards; John 10:30, where Father and Son share the same kind of nature, but differ in person and role). A cup of sugar equals a cup of flour in granular volume, but they are quite different in another sense, that sugar cannot be used in a recipe in place of flour (111). For real distinctions Hove cites evidence in Scripture, Philo and rabbinitics (112-13). The issue in Gal 3:28, then, is in what sense men and women are compared. Does it concern value, abilities, roles, callings, inheritance, or what?

The author argues that all have the inheritance in common, and offers three reasons that the verse does not primarily address the issue of sexual roles, such as interchangeable ministries (116-17). These three are Paul’s flow of argument (2:15–3:29), the logic in 3:26-29, and the implications of “you are all one.”

Hove’s reasoning is clear as he brings evidence to bear. His work has value due to its breadth and depth of research, insistence on keeping to textual evidence, the clarity of logic, reasons articulated, and fairness to those of egalitarian persuasion. It is a book that all who are involved in church ministry ought to read, whatever view they favor.

This book is sometimes helpful and sometimes unhelpful. The author, a Roman Catholic priest (cf. 192, 239) and professor at Seton Hall University, works on a premise. The psalms, he says, were “originally prayers on the lips of Jews” and “began to be uttered by Christian lips. . . .” So they should be “Christian prayers on the lips of Christians” (7). He attempts to help readers pray the psalms and elevate their minds to God. To do this, he gives a general background on the psalms, for example a section on their use as Jewish and Christian prayers (9-28), then a commentary on each psalm (29-237).

Often the book suffers from a dry lecture tone that will not make it inviting and refreshing to follow. One has to read much to gather some nuggets amid the verbiage. Occasionally nuggets do come, as “The purpose of the prayers is to turn the soul into a sort of burning bush, . . . [and] the soul itself ought to catch fire in order to communicate with God” (27).

Like most psalms commentators, Jaki sees Psalm 2 as a summary of all the psalms (31). He provides no outline for any psalm. The author at times gets more involved with tangents than staying with the flow of thought, for example in Psalm 1. There, he spends much time on trees’ place in human history, and little on explaining the actual thoughts of the psalm; a reader finds general philosophical discussion and no exposition. Likewise on Psalm 2, this reviewer came away with little to guide prayer unless he figured out the relevancy in addition to Jaki’s discussion, a discussion which gave much information about other things but was sparse on how Psalm 2 can be prayed. One would wish that the author would trace the line of thought through a psalm, then draw principles that are relevant for praying.

Occasionally, relevancy peers through more sharply, for instance in the prayer on Psalm 5 that God will keep the believer’s “way clear from those who lie in wait” as with “traps laid by business associates, by lobbyists, and . . . reporters . . .” (42). Or, on Psalm 91, the author says of the cry “God is my refuge” that one can in principle pray today for protection from road-rage drivers (170). Much of the time, however, one can get the feeling that just using the psalms alone will offer more vitality than wading through discussions that drift to the author’s own ideas of relevancy and do not appear vitally right to the point of the psalm. Often an assumption appears to make the book ineffective: more general commentary summarizing a dominant theme is adequate, without a guide on how to pray it today (cf. on Psalms 111, 112, and 139, to name a few). Psalm 16 seems to be treated too briefly, in less than a page, whereas some shorter and less-known psalms are given more space (e.g., Psalms 9, 14). Roman Catholic theology comes through as in saying on Psalm 16 that Christ’s mother was “saved from the decay of her mortal body” (59).

Certain comments offer understanding, e.g., “scattering bones of the wicked” (Psalm 14) could have been true, for example, in the cases of Pharaoh’s soldiers at the Red Sea and Assyrian troops whom the Angel of the Lord put to death in Isaiah 37 (56).
Instances appear where praying a psalm seems to be forgotten, crushed out by anecdotes. An exception ends Psalm 40, which is clear on asking God to rescue from a predicament. On Psalm 45, the author believes that Mary is the bride of the Holy Spirit. She is "queen and mother, and stands above all the choirs of angels in her golden dress . . . because she is the mother of God" (101). Jaki is citing Thomas Aquinas and seems to endorse this. After a discussion about Catholic ideas, one is not told how to pray Psalm 45.

Jaki will not find agreement from all when he says that imprecatory psalms, as in Psalm 58, disqualify the psalm from the lips of praying Christians (118). Likewise, he will not convince Protestant readers that Augustine’s words are true, “I would not believe the Bible were I not prompted by the authority of the Church”—the Roman Catholic Church (192).

The book has many good moments within the range of a hundred and fifty psalms. But it also has many instances where its discussions lead one away from refreshing thought in the Bible itself to its own discussions, and thereby hinder meaningful prayer rather than helping by providing a guide.


Waiting for an up-to-date, accurate, and understandable guide for the study of the Greek Septuagint (hereafter, LXX) is over. Henry B. Swete’s *An Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek* (Cambridge University Press, 1900) and Sidney Jellicoe’s *The Septuagint and Modern Study* (reprint; Eisenbrauns, 1978) will continue to be valued volumes (especially in advanced studies), but *Invitation to the Septuagint* undoubtedly will become the textbook of choice for any institution offering an introductory course in Septuagintal studies. Although Jobes and Silva purposefully presumed no prior knowledge of the LXX on the part of their readers, they have also included much of interest to advanced students.

Why study the LXX? In their introduction (19-26) Jobes and Silva answer by demonstrating the value of the Greek OT to the study of the Hebrew Bible, the extent of its use in the Christian Church, and its significance for NT studies (“No New Testament scholar can afford to ignore the Septuagint,” 24). Each of the three subsequent parts of the book commences with a brief overview. Each chapter within those three parts begins with a descriptive summary of the chapter’s contents and concludes with a segment entitled “To Continue Your Study.” One of the most helpful of these chapter-concluding segments deals with establishing the LXX text (137-45). Four pages are reproduced from standard critical editions of the LXX (Larger Cambridge, Rahlfis, and Göttingen Septuagints) and a descriptive key is provided, identifying, highlighting, and explaining their key elements. Footnotes
provide additional information and refer the readers to additional resources. Simple, informative charts augment the text at strategic points (cf. 46-47, 56). Photographs introduce the readers to the LXX visually (cf. 60-62, 64-66).

The first part, “The History of the Septuagint” (27-102), includes chapters dealing with the origin of the LXX and Greek daughter versions (29-44), the transmission of the LXX (45-68), modern editions (69-85), and LXX’s characteristics as a translation (86-102). In the description of the daughter versions (Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion; 38-42), Jobes and Silva could have defined more of their individual characteristics as elaborated by Jellicoe (The Septuagint and Modern Study, 76-99). Without clearly understanding the character of the LXX as a translation, text critics and exegetes alike have misused the witness of the Greek OT by too often rushing to offer a retroversion (hypothetical Hebrew translation based on the Greek of the LXX; cf. 153-57, 327). Jobes and Silva confirm that the tension between translation technique and a variant Hebrew text as potential solutions “is perhaps the weightiest problem in Septuagint scholarship” (90).

“The Septuagint in Biblical Studies” (103-236), the second part, covers the LXX’s language (105-18), its own textual criticism (119-45), its use for textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible (146-66), the relationship of the Dead Sea manuscript discoveries (167-82), the LXX’s contributions to the study of the NT (183-205), and the interpretation of the LXX (focusing on Gen 4:1-8; Isa 52:13–53:12; and Esth 5:1-2) (206-36). Jobes and Silva are blunt but duly circumspect in their declaration that the concept of autographa needs to be retained in the text critical study of both the LXX’s and the Hebrew Bible’s texts (120-24). Happily, they provide the readers with a much-needed set of cautions with regard to both the maximalist and the minimalist application of the traditional canons of textual criticism (128-31). The discussion of transcriptional probability is just one of many examples of the duo’s balanced approach. It is as satisfying as a deep breath of fresh mountain air. The same can be said of their positive description of the Masoretic Text: “The remarkably faithful work of the Masoretes assures us that the form of their text takes us as far back as the late first century of our era” (147). As far as the Dead Sea manuscript finds are concerned, “It is clear from the Hebrew texts found at Qumran that the MT, on which modern English translations of the OT are based, is indeed an ancient text that was already stable before the time of Jesus” (177).

The volume’s final part, “The Current State of Septuagint Studies” (237-307), introduces significant LXX scholars of the past (239-57), current studies in linguistic research (258-72), a discussion regarding reconstruction of the LXX’s textual history (273-87), and theological development in the Hellenistic Age (288-307).

Four appendixes designed to increase the usability of the volume are inserted ahead of the indexes: Appendix A describes major organizations and research projects (311-18), Appendix B is a partially annotated bibliography of reference works (319-23), Appendix C is a very helpful glossary (324-28), and Appendix D provides a table of differences in versification between English
translations of the OT and the LXX of the Rahlf's edition (329-31). Indexes include subject (335-43), author (344-48), and Scripture (349-51).

Let readers of this review who have experienced little interest in the Septuagint heed this warning: Jobes and Silva's volume is not an abstract and antiseptic approach to the Greek OT—it is a level-headed, captivating introduction that has the potential of piquing your interest in the LXX for life. For this reviewer, this volume will be his required textbook for introductory courses on the LXX until someone is able to trump its balance, accuracy, and usability.


*The Hebrew English Concordance of the Old Testament (HECOT)* was prepared for those who are not fluent in OT Hebrew, makes use of the NIV for its contextual readings, and is the first complete Hebrew-English concordance published in more than 150 years. It builds on features of the older concordances by presenting exhaustive indexes, providing generous lines of context, valuable frequency statistics, and various other unique features. The volume has four major sections: the Main Concordance (Hebrew-English and Aramaic-English) (1-1720), the Select Index of Adverbs, Conjunctions, Particles, and Pronouns (1720-33), the NIV English-Hebrew & Aramaic Index to the OT (1734-2069), and Concise Hebrew-English and Aramaic-English Dictionaries to the OT (2070-2192).

A typical entry in the Main Concordance section has the following key features: the Goodrick/Kohlenberger number (*NIV Exhaustive Concordance*), the word in question in Hebrew and in transliteration, the part of speech, the frequency count (in Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia and in NIV), cross-reference to related words, and a list of NIV translations for that word (more information is available in the Introduction). The context lines that follow each entry (giving examples of each verse where the word in question appears) provide three kinds of information: the book, chapter, verse reference; the line in which the word occurs (NIV); and the textual variant information (where appropriate). The context lines provide a host of other varied details that space limitations prevent listing here. One important feature of this concordance is the manner in which it draws attention to the Hebrew and Aramaic verb stem for the verbs it indexes. Unlike most of the older concordances, *HECOT* maintains the English canonical order of all the lines (rather than dividing them into categories in accordance with specific verb forms) and provides an abbreviation at the beginning of the context line that delineates that information. The abbreviation key [xiv] utilizes consecutive letters of the English alphabet to represent the various Hebrew and Aramaic verb forms. There is no clear way of
associating the letter of the alphabet with the verb form (e.g., A = Qal, B = Qal passive, C = Niphal, etc.).

While the Main Concordance offers 237,194 contexts, indexing 8,705 Hebrew words and 636 Aramaic words, the Select Index of Adverbs, Conjunctions, Particles, and Pronouns indexes 44,370 references to 38 highly frequent Hebrew words and 4 Aramaic words (without providing any context lines) (also providing the part of speech and frequency count).

The NIV English-Hebrew & Aramaic Index lists every word in the NIV OT in alphabetic order, followed by a complete list of the Hebrew and Aramaic words translated by any NIV phrase that includes the indexed word (providing the Goodrick/Kohlenberger number, transliteration of Hebrew word, and frequency of occurrences).

The final section, a Concise Hebrew-English and Aramaic-English Dictionaries to the Old Testament, offers a concise definition for each word of the Hebrew Bible and indexes each word with reference to four key reference tools: Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance, Brown, Driver, and Briggs Lexicon, Koehler and Baumgartner’s Lexicon (1958 ed.), and Holladay’s Concise Lexicon.

This reference work, HECOT, at last provides an up-to-date and thorough English concordance of the Hebrew OT. It provides much more detail than any of the older concordances. Students of Hebrew will find the abbreviation system for the Hebrew and Aramaic verbal system somewhat frustrating, but that fits within the intention of the authors to provide a tool that helps the student of the Scriptures who does not know Hebrew.


Tremper Longman III, professor of Old Testament at Westmont College and author of a number of literary works, wrote this volume as part of the Three Crucial Question series (at least twelve volumes are envisioned). The books in this series seek to address a specific topic relevant to the Christian faith in understandable language. As an OT professor, Longman admits that the OT is both difficult to appreciate and understand because of numerous differences in time and culture. In the present volume Longman argues that the only way one can fully understand the NT is to comprehend and appreciate the OT.

Longman poses and answers three key questions (which serve as the titles of the book’s three chapters): What are the keys to understanding the OT?, Is the God of the OT also the God of the NT?, and How is the Christian to apply the OT to life? The volume concludes with a brief Scripture and subject index.

After surveying some attractions and obstacles to OT study, Longman
delineates nine interpretive principles: discover the author’s intended meaning, read Scripture in its context, identify the genre of the book and passage, consider the historical and cultural background of the Bible, consider the grammar and structure within the passage, interpret experience in the light of Scripture (not Scripture in the light of experience), always seek the full counsel of Scripture, discover how the Scripture passage presents Jesus Christ, and be open-minded and tolerant of other interpretations. Space limitations permit only a few comments on this overview. As part of Longman’s helpful treatment of the issue of authorial intention, he wrestles with the challenge of interpreting the ancient Scriptures in light of one’s present situation (30). He suggests that an American and Latin American student of the Word might come to different interpretations because of their unique set of circumstances. Longman proposes that these two interpretations might not only be contradictory, but that both might be correct. I do not disagree if he means that both may have correctly understood an aspect of the right interpretation of a given passage and misunderstood other aspects of a passage. However, if Longman means that two contradictory interpretations are compatible or that both could be right, I disagree. That seems to border on a reader-response approach to Scripture that suggests that meaning and not just application can be determined by the setting of the reader. Secondly, in his explanation of the necessity to consider the genre of a passage, Longman correctly observes that “much mischief can go on under the rubric of genre” (43). That observation does not dismiss the benefit or importance of considering genre issues, but does provide a necessary caution when giving attention to the genre question.

In the second chapter Longman seeks to respond to the false stereotyping of God in the OT (as arbitrary and angry) and God in the NT (as loving and kind) as presentations that are contradictory. He directs the reader’s attention to four themes that give coherence to the OT’s and NT’s presentation of God: Yahweh as the central theme throughout the Bible, the metaphor of covenant king, the metaphor of the Divine Warrior, and the metaphor of Immanuel (God’s presence with His people). Longman’s Reformed perspective is especially apparent in his explanation of the second and fourth themes. First, he contends that all the OT covenants reach consummation in Christ, who rules over a heavenly kingdom rather than an earthly one in the Millennium. Whether or not any OT covenants find fulfillment in the NT age, this interpretation spiritualizes or makes figurative the various statements in the OT that depict Christ ruling over the earth in the distant future. Secondly, in his attempt to trace the manifestations of God’s presence throughout the Bible (e.g., in Eden, through altars, the Tabernacle, and the Temple), Longman posits that Christ is the new temple of God. There will be no earthly Temple rebuilt during the Millennium. In commenting on John 4:23-24 (where Jesus exhorts his followers to worship His Father in spirit and in truth), Longman concludes that Jesus’ comments imply that the Temple is no longer needed. According to Longman, each of the Gospel writers understood Jesus to put Himself in place of the Temple. Once again, although Christ does make some association between Himself and the Temple, He
never presents Himself as the final replacement for the Temple.

In answering the question, How is the Christian to apply the OT to life?, Longman addresses the specific issue of the Law and the Christian and then the more general issue of applying OT truth in a broad sense. In the first part of his discussion (103-23), he presents theonomy and dispensationalism as the two extremes or poles of opinion as relates to the question of whether or not a Christian must live under the Mosaic Law. After giving a brief overview of theonomic beliefs and giving a more brief mention of the historically recent appearance of dispensationalism, he dismisses both alternatives (he never interacts with any dispensational beliefs).

Longman contends that the commands of the Moral Law are still operative for the Christian (110). Although no one has been or can be saved by the law (or by obedience to it), Longman suggests that the Law’s role in the life of the Christian is the same as it was for the Israelites. The Law represents “our gracious God’s guideline for living that pleases him and is good for us” (118). In addition to the continuing binding nature of the Ten Commandments, the case laws do illustrate ethical principles that are relevant today (although they are not directly applicable to the contemporary Christian).

In his broader treatment of the OT (123-36), Longman surveys the key sections (history, poetry, wisdom, and prophecy) exhorts the present believer to read the OT carefully and apply it to his life.

There is no easy or brief answer to the “Law and the Christian” issue. Several passages in both testaments demand attention in order to deal with the question. However, the NT’s presentation of Christ as the fulfillment of the Law suggests that the Law is no longer operational as a binding standard for the NT Christian.

Longman’s volume is a helpful one. He wrestles with some very important questions as it relates to appreciating and understanding the OT, a much-neglected topic. He provides some helpful guidelines for interpreting the OT, sheds light on key points of thematic coherence between the Old and New Testaments, and addresses the sticky issue of the Law and the Christian. Although Longman’s work has value, his Reformed perspective comes through at a number of junctures (as one should expect). Consequently, one needs to read this volume carefully, but not skeptically.


The importance and contribution of John Calvin’s Academy in Geneva is noteworthy to any historian of either the ecclesiastical or educational domains. In his
introductory essay to Cotton Mather’s *Magnalia Christi American* [The Great Works of Christ in America], George H. Williams developed a lineage from Calvin’s Geneva Academy in the old world to Harvard College in the new through the “... transfer of knowledge (translatio studii) from Paradise through “the universities of Palestine” ... to the University of Paris (where the four faculties were likened to the four rivers of Paradise), to old Cambridge, and to John Calvin’s Academy in Geneva” (Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi American*, Kenneth Murdock, ed. [Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press Harvard, 1977] 56). Yet, in spite of so apparent an intellectual contribution, a relative dearth of Anglophilic scholarship exists on this important institution. Previous treatments of the Academy have been largely limited to the French-speaking world, notably Charles Borgeaud, *Historie de l’université de Genève: L’ Académie de Calvin 1559-1798* (Geneva, 1900).

Karin Maag’s *Seminary or University? The Genevan Academy and Reformed Higher Education, 1560-1620* makes a critical contribution in this regard. Maag (Ph.D., University of St. Andrews) is Director of the H. Henry Meeter Center for Calvin Studies and a professor of history at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Previously, Maag was an honorary lecturer in the modern history department at St. Andrews and was a fellow of the Reformation Studies Institute. She additionally held a post-doctoral fellowship for research on the Swiss Reformation. Maag’s publications include *Melanchthon in Europe: His Work and Influence Beyond Wittenberg* (Baker, 1999); *The Reformation and the Book* (Ashgate, 1998); and *The Reformation in Eastern and Central Europe* (Ashgate, 1997). *Seminary or University? The Genevan Academy and Reformed Higher Education* is part of the St. Andrews Studies in Reformation History series and an adaptation of Maag’s Ph.D. thesis.

According to its own abstract, *Seminary or University?* is a “... wide-ranging study of the ideological divisions, institutional structures and communication networks of the leading Reformation centers of higher education in Switzerland and North-Western Europe in the late 16th and early 17th century. At its core it is an extensive and deep study of both the Genevan archives and those from other European institutions. The study is illuminated by revealing portraits of the students, professors, and administrators from the institutions.”

The text is organized into two units embracing seven chapters. Chapters one through three are institutional and chronological treatments of the Geneva Academy covering the years of 1559 to 1620. Chapters four through seven extend the discussion by exploring externally the Academy’s relationship between Protestant France in general, Zwingli’s Zurich, Heidelberg University, and Leiden University. Maag offers an even treatment of a subject—Calvin and the Genevan Academy—that can be either grossly laudatory or inflammatiorily critical, depending upon the writer’s perspective. Relying on both primary archival source materials and non-English secondary sources, Maag offers an informative piece of scholarship that is well-written, liberally-noted, and unusually balanced. Detailed bibliography and index are provided for consultation.
Seminary or University? breaks from predictable and self-promoting style that plagues many institutional histories of higher learning, particularly in the Christian realm. No less than Samuel Morison, the great Harvard historian, heaped undocumented praise on Geneva when he said, “The Geneva Academy . . . offered better instruction in Arts, Theology, and Law than many universities at the time. For Protestant youths, Geneva was the most stimulating educational center in Europe” (Morison, The Founding of Harvard College, 132 [emphasis added]). Readers of Seminary or University? may draw a slightly different conclusion. Maag paints Geneva as it was—gleaned from archival sources rather than undocumented and uncritical assumption. The narrative openly examines the challenges and problems that shaped the Geneva Academy. Rather than expounding biographically the prominent leadership such as Calvin and Beza, Maag looks closely at the interchange of the various constituency groups that comprised the Genevan Academy, thereby providing a truer picture of the historical reality. Such a treatment is refreshing. Maag explores faculty, student, council, and church interplays that create a real understanding of institutional dynamics. Vignettes on faculty and students color the narrative.

The second portion of the book focuses on the interplay between Reformed culture and Protestant society in the broader European context and its subsequent relationship to Geneva—first by looking at the church (France and Zurich) and second, by examining other university centers of Reformed learning (Heidelberg and Leiden). This section offers insight into church-academy dynamics and fraternal relationship among educational institutions that is usually overlooked in the literature. By exploring this neglected area, Maag does a tremendous service in helping readers glean valuable insights that often bear similarities to contemporary church-college relations. At several points this reviewer noted references connecting Geneva with Montpellier. Readers interested in connecting these centers of learning might consider Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie’s, The Beggar and the Professor (University of Chicago, 1997). Though Laudrie’s treatment is earlier (1552-1556), the chronologic proximity and documented references to Geneva make this work an additional reference for those interested in the two learning centers. For additional discussion, see J. Gregory Behle, review of The Beggar and the Professor: A Sixteenth-Century Family Saga, by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Arthur Goldhammer, trans., The Master’s Seminary Journal 10/2 (Fall 1999): 309-10.

This reviewer felt that the lists of professorial turnover in the schola publica became, at points, monometrical in the opening chapters of the work. Although undoubtedly a critical dimension, the rate of change among the professors tends to dominate the narrative as a theme. Maag offers a detailed appendix of the Genevan professors from 1559-1620 (196-98) which further evidences the focused nature of her research. Unfortunately, this reviewer’s greatest criticism is outside the purview of the author. The $94.95 price tag for this fine work will render it inaccessible to all but the most determined readers. This, in combination with publication by a small scholarly press, may relegate this otherwise excellent work to scholarly obscurity.
Readers interested in Reformation history and culture, the contribution of European higher education to American colleges and universities, or Calvin’s Geneva in general, will be well-served by this fine edition. *Seminary or University? The Genevan Academy and Reformed Higher Education, 1560-1620* offers a solid exploration of the historical realities from primary archival materials and non-English sources, devoid of preferential or mythological assumptions. Though the steep price tag will preclude a large portion of potential readership, Maag’s contribution to both Reformation and higher education history is too important to ignore.


Stephen Macchia, author of *Becoming a Healthy Church: 10 Characteristics,* is president of Vision New England, the largest regional church renewal and evangelism association in the country. He also teaches at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. The author offers advice which grew out of his experiences ministering first as a pastor and then as the director of a ministry in New England. His desire is to see a healthy church in every community. For that he offers these ten characteristics:

- God’s Empowering Presence
- God-Exalting Worship
- Spiritual Disciplines
- Learning and Growing in Community
- A Commitment to Loving and Caring Relationships
- Servant-Leadership Development
- An Outward Focus
- Wise Administration and Accountability
- Networking with the Body of Christ
- Stewardship and Generosity.

In addition to supplying these ten characteristics, Macchia surveyed one hundred churches along with over eighteen hundred individuals. He concluded that healthy churches have the following:

- Love, acceptance, and forgiveness
- Relational integrity
- Hunger for personal growth
- Shift from traditional to contemporary worship
- Prayer
- Relationship-centered ministry
- Use of personal stories
Service
Networking
The author states: “The overwhelming unanimity of support for these ten guiding principles will make for vibrant congregations prepared to enter the twenty-first century with renewed energy and power. In order for the ten characteristics to be realized in the context of community life, they must first be owned by each member and leader” (25).

Church growth is not a pure science, nor is it to be reduced to a formula. Church growth is also a sovereign work of God. It can be very difficult and frustrating given certain circumstances. Having said that, this reviewer feels that much of what is found in this book is helpful in endeavoring to build a biblical ministry. Some of the material is obviously contextualized. Nevertheless, the Bible does affirm some of these characteristics. It is a book worth reading.


The Smell of Sawdust is written by Dr. Richard J. Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary and is “gentle and deeply personal.” Dr. Mouw traces his own roots to the fundamentalist heritage of his youth, explaining in glowing and moving terms the glamor and faith of the early revivals epitomized by the so-called “sawdust trails.” His desire is that evangelicals reclaim some of the essentials that made fundamentalism so effective: their radical commitment, their faith in the Bible, their wonder of God and His creation.

In Dr. Mouw’s closing paragraph he states the purpose of the book:

Wonder is not a uniquely evangelical experience. We have much to learn from other traditions of wonder. But evangelicals have focused in a special way on the wonder of a divine love that could send the Savior to the cross for the likes of us. People on the sawdust trail wept tears over that kind of love and sang praises to “the love that drew salvation’s plan!” I hope evangelicals will continue to shed those tears until Jesus comes to wipe every tear from their eyes forever. And I hope those particular songs of praise will never be forgotten—and that the smell of sawdust will forever linger in the air (156).

The book carefully and gently disavows much that fundamentalism stands for, such as dispensationalism, inerrancy, separation, and a high standard of holiness. What the author does not see is that when one abandons these things, a certain dullness and coolness settles over the church. It is these basic truths that ignite the passion in the soul and which makes the troubled sinner walk down the sawdust trail.
Thanks, Dr. Mouv, for that gentle reminder.


The second English edition of Schmidt’s work is based on the fifth German edition (*Einführung in das Alte Testament* [de Gruyter, 1995]) that offers three basic modifications to the previous English edition: (1) expansion of the section regarding Pentateuch research to outline briefly the differing points of departure for contemporary perspectives (see 50-52, 53-54), (2) addition of an essay on OT theology regarding anthropology (cf. 372-88), and (3) revision and expansion of the bibliography (399-447).

This introduction to the OT takes a stance consistent with liberal higher criticism. For example, Schmidt adheres to a form of the documentary hypothesis similar to that of Martin Noth (76), sees at least three redactions for the Pentateuch (49), connects the account of Israel’s slavery in Egypt to the time of the building of Solomon’s temple (77), and relates the contents of Leviticus to the post-exilic period (94). An evolutionary view of the development of religion is implicit in his rationale for dating the Priestly document of the Pentateuch: “The decisive arguments for assigning a late date to this source were drawn not so much from its language as from the history of ideas” (97). After all, he claims, in view of the fact that circumcision was well-known among Israel’s neighbors, it “was unknown in the Babylonian world and could therefore become a criterion of the Jewish religion amid the other religions of that environment” (98). The introduction to the Book of Deuteronomy is well written with valid biblical observations about the theme of the book (120-21). However, he denies Mosaic authorship, placing its composition “under the monarchy or even later” (123).

Not even Solomon’s prayer at the Temple’s dedication is exempt from being chopped into pieces to support a variety of redactions (148). Schmidt proposes the possibility that additions to the Chronicler’s work could have been made much later than 300 B.C. (161). He counts at least three “Isaiah’s” (256). The reader senses the author’s frustration that the “strikingly uniform style of the book makes it difficult to distinguish between traditional material and secondary revision” (246). It is, indeed, difficult work to parcel out the OT in accordance with materialistic, humanistic, and evolutionary biases. The author also identifies two different Zechariah’s (270), places Joel’s prophecies after the capture of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. (282), dates the Book of Daniel to “around 165 B.C.” (6, 288), and charges that that book contains inaccurate and unreliable prophecies (288, 295). In addition, he categorically denies Mosaic authorship of Psalm 90 in accord with attributing
unreliability to the psalm headings (301). Combining the views of Wolff on Hosea 1 and Rudolph on Hosea 3, Schmidt concludes that there were two women involved in Hosea’s love life (204).

Late dating of books like Ecclesiastes and Daniel appears to be independent of any appeal to the existence of Aramaisms in them. Perhaps Schmidt’s failure to follow that run-of-the-mill argument for late dating is due to his recognizing that Aramaic was probably the original language of Israel’s ancestors and that the divine title Yahweh is probably Aramaic (9). On the other hand, language is one of the key reasons for dating portions of the Song of Solomon to the late post-exilic period (312). Its “novella” literary style gains for the Book of Ruth an origin in that same late post-exilic period (317). Obviously, Schmidt’s evolutionary view of literature likewise prohibits any earlier Israelite period from possessing the capacity to produce such literature. Qoheleth’s thinking is too advanced for Solomon, therefore it must have been composed in the early Hellenistic period when there were minds worthy of such deep thinking (330).

Schmidt’s emphasis is upon literary and form critical analyses and OT theology. As a result, there are a few sections of his volume that provide some useful information. One of these is his fairly detailed description of OT Law in its casuistic and apodictic forms (110-14). The highlight of his discussion of OT prophecy is the description of the various forms of discourse the prophets employed (184-88). Amazingly, it appears that Schmidt did not hold that prophecies concerning the future were composed after the fact (vaticinum ex eventu) (cf. 188-90). In his discussion of OT poetry he correctly assesses the difficulty of ever resolving the problem of meter (300).

Schmidt’s major contributions are in the theological essays concluding the volume, although the volume is very limited in the areas of the Messiah and eschatology. Readers will find his OT introduction void of any conservative or evangelical voices both in the body and in the bibliography. Only an occasional volume from the New International Commentary on the Old Testament and the Word Biblical Commentary manage to be recognized by Schmidt. His academic context in this work is almost exclusively European. Schmidt’s volume is reminiscent of Otto Eissfeldt’s The Old Testament: An Introduction (trans. by Peter Ackroyd; Harper & Row, 1965) in its approach, tone, and context, though updated at least twenty years.


Written in thirteen concise but lucid chapters, The Story of Joseph and the Family of Jacob is about the life of Joseph from his selling into bondage to his death at the end of the Book of Genesis. Ronald S. Wallace, a retired instructor at
Columbia Theological Seminary, in this volume continues his exposition of the patriarchs in Genesis. The two previous works were Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and were expositional studies into the lives of these patriarchs.

The author is well acquainted with the scholarship bearing on the story of Joseph, yet the work is not a scholarly tome but rather a devotional exposition of the final chapters of Genesis. The Mosaic authorship is assumed and the Christological end of Scripture is affirmed.

Wallace asserts that the dreams Joseph had were inspired, and form the basis for the rest of the story. He also thinks that Joseph went too far in his effort to see if his brothers had repented of their callousness toward their father and brother. Nevertheless, the book treats the life of Joseph with great dignity and offers some great application to the present life. If anyone is looking for deep exposition, this is not the place to begin. But if he/she is looking for a way to make preaching from the OT practical, especially from narrative sections, then this is a fine example to follow.