

## **“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 anthropomorphisms 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.”<sup>1</sup>

Not only for the individual, but also “the most revealing thing about the Church is her idea of God. . . .”<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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.”<sup>4</sup>

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

---

<sup>1</sup>A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (Lincoln, Neb.: Back to the Bible, 1971) 7.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>R. Albert Mohler, Jr., “The Eclipse of God at Century’s End,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 1 (Spring 1997):38.

<sup>4</sup>John Sanders, *The God Who Risks* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998) 11.

affirming the openness of God.”<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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., Adrio Konig, Vincent Brummer, Nicholas Wolterstorff, James Daane and Harry Boer). Things are certainly changing in Reformed theology!”<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup>

---

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

<sup>6</sup>Sanders, *God Who Risks* 162-64, 311 n. 106.

<sup>7</sup>*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).

<sup>8</sup>For a critique of this openness argument from an Arminian perspective, see Robert E. Picirilli, “Foreknowledge, Freedom, and the Future,” *JETS* 43/2 (June 2000):259-71.

## 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.”<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup> 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.”<sup>11</sup>

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

---

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

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>11</sup>*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.<sup>12</sup> 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 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. . . .<sup>13</sup>

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.”<sup>14</sup>

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. . . .”<sup>15</sup>

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

---

<sup>12</sup>See 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 espouse 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.

<sup>13</sup>Gerald Bray, *The Personal God* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster, 1993) 7.

<sup>14</sup>Adolph von Harnack, *What Is Christianity?*, trans. Thomas Bailey Saunders (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1901) 13.

<sup>15</sup>Bray, *Personal God* 7.

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."<sup>16</sup> 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."<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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."<sup>19</sup>

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."<sup>20</sup> 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."<sup>21</sup> Thus, Open Theism "adopts the major process category of a socially related, becoming reality

<sup>16</sup>H. E. W. Turner, *The Pattern of Christian Truth* (London: A. R. Mowbray & Co., 1954) 18.

<sup>17</sup>Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) 31.

<sup>18</sup>Gregory A. Boyd, *Oneness Pentecostals and the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992) 192-95.

<sup>19</sup>Clark Pinnock, "Between Classical and Process Theism," in *Process Theology*, ed. Ronald Nash (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 316. See also Richard Rice, "A Philosophical Perspective," in *The Openness of God* 138-41.

<sup>20</sup>William D. Watkins, "A Summary Critique," *Christian Research Journal* 16/2 (Fall 1993):43.

<sup>21</sup>Gregory A. Boyd, *Trinity and Process* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), Preface.

while rejecting certain other metaphysical views found in Process Theology. . . .”<sup>22</sup>

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 anthropomorphisms; and (2) An emphasis on divine ignorance.

#### A Minimization of Anthropomorphisms

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 anthropomorphism, on the other hand, speaks of God by using words about the human emotional life—words such as grief, repentance, anger, and regret.<sup>23</sup> 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.”<sup>24</sup> In another place, Calvin writes, “Although he is beyond all disturbance of mind, yet he

---

<sup>22</sup>Tiessen, “Openness Model of God,” *Didaskalia* 98. See further, Clark Pinnock, “Between Classical and Process Theism,” in *Process Theology* 309-27. Also, for an excellent summary and analysis of Process Theology from an evangelical perspective, see John Feinberg’s chapter, “Process Theology,” in his book, *No One Like Him*, 149-79. Also see John B. Cobb Jr., and Clark H. Pinnock, eds., *Searching for an Adequate God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000). The subtitle of this book is, “A Dialogue between Process and Free Will Theists.” Interestingly, Rice says that “it would seem that Process Theology itself is also vulnerable to criticism for excessive deference to philosophy—in this case, to the process philosophy of Whitehead” (“A Philosophical Perspective,” in *The Openness of God* 141).

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

<sup>24</sup>John Calvin, *Commentaries on Genesis*, trans. John King (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 249.

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.”<sup>25</sup> 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.’”<sup>26</sup>

Some classic theologians have proposed a mediating view that God does have emotions such as love and anger, and does genuinely grieve over sin.<sup>27</sup> 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.

### **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 LORD God called to Adam and said to him, ‘Where are you?’

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

Gen 18:20–21—“And the 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.’”

<sup>25</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 227.

<sup>26</sup>Boyd, *God of the Possible* 170 n. 2.

<sup>27</sup>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” (*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.

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.”<sup>28</sup>

But Bruce Ware has responded well to Boyd’s argument.<sup>29</sup> 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.”<sup>30</sup>

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; 17:1-8). 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

---

<sup>28</sup>Boyd, *God of the Possible* 64.

<sup>29</sup>Bruce Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2000) 67ff. Ware’s book is a “must” read in understanding the biblical weaknesses of openness innovations.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 68.

reactions when it actually happens.”<sup>31</sup> 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.”<sup>32</sup> 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.”<sup>33</sup> Moreover, “Love is the essence of the divine reality, the basic source from which all of God’s attributes arise.”<sup>34</sup> 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.”<sup>35</sup>

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

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 91.

<sup>32</sup>Clark Pinnock and others, “Preface,” in *The Openness of God* 9.

<sup>33</sup>Richard Rice, “Biblical Support for a New Perspective,” in *The Openness of God* 14.

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

<sup>35</sup>John MacArthur, *The Love of God* (Dallas: Word, 1996) 28. See also D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 241; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 180; and Bruce Demarest and Gordon Lewis, *Integrative Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) 197.

### God Is Mutable and Passible

Classic theologians have taught that God is immutable and impassible. Immutability means that God is unchangeable in His essence, attributes, consciousness, and will.<sup>36</sup> 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.”<sup>37</sup>

Impassibility (ἀπαθήζ, *apathēs*) is defined lexically as “not being subject to suffering.”<sup>38</sup> 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. . . .”<sup>39</sup> 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.<sup>40</sup>

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.”<sup>41</sup> 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

---

<sup>36</sup>For 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).

<sup>37</sup>Boyd, *Trinity and Process* 386.

<sup>38</sup>Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd edition, rev. and ed. by Frederick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000) 95.

<sup>39</sup>“Second London Confession,” II,1, in William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Los Angeles: Judson Press, 1959) 248.

<sup>40</sup>For example, see Sanders, *The God Who Risks* 142-47.

<sup>41</sup>Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God: Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998) 98. For examples of other discussions of impassibility, see Bertrand R. Brasnett, *The Suffering of the Impassible God* (New York: Macmillan, 1928); Charles Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity: A Social Conception of God* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1948); Warren MeWilliams, “Divine Suffering in Contemporary Theology,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 33 (1980):33-53; Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) 268; J. K. Mozley, *Impassibility of God: A Survey of Christian Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1926); T. E. Pollard, “The Impassibility of God,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 8 (1955):353-64; Bruce A. Ware, “An Evangelical Reformulation of the Doctrine of the Immutability of God,” *JETS* 29 (December 1986):431-46.

immutability, it is necessary to reject divine impassibility" (277).<sup>42</sup>

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. . . .<sup>43</sup>

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."<sup>44</sup> 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."<sup>45</sup>

### **God Is Not In Full Control**

Open theist Greg Boyd writes, "There is no single, all-determinative divine will that coercively steers all things. . . ."<sup>46</sup> "God, for whatever reasons, designed the cosmos such that he does not necessarily always get his way. . . ."<sup>47</sup> 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."<sup>48</sup>

### **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

<sup>42</sup>John Feinberg, *No One Like Him* 277. See also Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* 165-66.

<sup>43</sup>Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998) 179.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2000) 60.

<sup>46</sup>Gregory A. Boyd, *God At War* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997) 20.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 47.

<sup>48</sup>Sanders, *God Who Risks* 12.

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.<sup>49</sup>

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.”<sup>50</sup> 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.<sup>51</sup>

### **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.<sup>52</sup> 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

---

<sup>49</sup>Richard Rice, “Divine Freewill Theism,” in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, ed. Clark Pinnock (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1989) 134.

<sup>50</sup>Boyd, *God of the Possible* 15-16.

<sup>51</sup>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.

<sup>52</sup>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.”<sup>53</sup>

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.<sup>54</sup> 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.<sup>55</sup> In the doctrine of eschatology, annihilationism, and post-mortem salvation are common among open theists.<sup>56</sup> 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."<sup>57</sup>

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

---

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 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.

<sup>54</sup>A. B. Caneday, "Putting God at Risk: A Critique of John Sander's View of Providence," *Trinity Journal* 20 (1999)133.

<sup>55</sup>Sanders, *God Who Risks* 45-49.

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

<sup>57</sup>Boyd, *God At War* 13.

with, and battle against other created beings.”<sup>58</sup> 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.”<sup>59</sup> 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.”<sup>60</sup> 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.”<sup>61</sup>

### **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.”<sup>62</sup> 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.”<sup>63</sup> 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

---

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 20.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 53.

<sup>60</sup>Sanders, *God Who Risks* 92.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 94.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 133.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 100.

the God of the Bible.”<sup>64</sup>

## 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.<sup>65</sup>

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.’”<sup>66</sup>

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.”<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup>Caneday, “Putting God at Risk,” *Trinity Journal* 163.

<sup>65</sup>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.

<sup>66</sup>Caneday, “Putting God at Risk,” *Trinity Journal* 163.

<sup>67</sup>Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy* 9-10.