

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF *GOD OF THE POSSIBLE*

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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.

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"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).

²R. Albert Mohler, Jr., "The Eclipse of God at Century's End: Evangelicals Attempt Theology Without Theism," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 1/1 (Spring 1997):9.

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).

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

⁴Greg Boyd, "What Is Open View Theism?," www.gregboyd.org/gbfront/index.asp?pageID=257 (2/1/2001):1. Royce Gruenler asks, "Does he have 20% and the advancing world has the other 80%? Is it 30/70?," in Wendy Murray Zorba, "God at Risk" *CT* 45/4 (March 5, 2001):57.

⁵Millard J. Erickson, *God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) 14.

⁶They include: *Trinity and Process: A Critical Evaluation and Appropriation of Hartshorne's Dipolar 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* 9) has asserted, “[W]e 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.⁷ 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.⁸

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.⁹ 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).

⁷Cf. “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).

⁸David Wells, “Foreword” in *Whatever Happened to the Reformation?*, ed. by Gary L.W. Johnson and R. Fowler White (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2001) xxiii-xxviii expresses his shock and incredulity that *CT* would publish such an affirming position on the openness view.

⁹Robert 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 anthropomorphisms 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).¹⁰

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.

¹⁰Robert B. Strimple, “What Does God Know?,” in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, John H. Armstrong, gen.ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1996) 144, writes, “The role of the God of free-will theism thus seems to be reduced to that of a well-meaning but essentially powerless grandparent, who desires the best for his grandchildren but can do little to bring it about.” See R. K. McGregor, *No Place For Sovereignty: What’s Wrong With Freewill Theism* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1996) for a rigorous critique.

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 reviews¹¹ and one in book format.¹² 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

¹¹Francis J. Beckwith, “God Knows?,” *Christian Research Journal* 22/4 (2000):54-56. A. B. Caneday, “The Implausible God of Open Theism,” *Journal of Biblical Apologetics* 1/1 (Fall 2000):66-87; John S. Hammett, *Faith & Mission* 18/1 (Fall 2000):136-40; Paul Kjoss Helseth, “On Divine Ambivalence: Open Theism and the Problem of Particular Evils,” *JETS* 44/3 (September 2001):493-511; Myron J. Houghton, “An Evaluation of the ‘Open’ View of God: A Response to Gregory A. Boyd’s *God of the Possible*,” unpublished review; R. Albert Mohler, Jr., “Does God Give Bad Advice?” *World* 15/24 (June 17, 2000):23; Roger Nicole, “A Review Article: God of the Possible?,” *Reformation and Revival Journal* 10/1 (Winter 2001):167-94.

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.

¹³Nicole, “Review Article,” *Reformation and Revival Journal* 191-93.

theology—the 16th-century A.D. heresy of Socinianism, which was popularly developed by Faustus Socinus (A.D.1539-1604).¹⁴

Socinus denied the triunity of God, the deity of Christ, and a substitutionary atonement,¹⁵ among other essentials of the faith. His theological tradition was later manifest as Unitarianism. On God's omniscience he reasoned, "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-theists¹⁹ 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

¹⁴Boyd actually admits the connection of openness with Socinian thinking, while back pedaling from the rest of Socinian heresy, in "The 'Open' View of the Future," www.opentheism.org/open_view_of_future_boyd.htm (2/16/2001):8-9. See Strimple, "What Does God Know?" 151 n. 11, for further reading on Socinian theology.

¹⁵See John MacArthur, "Open Theism's Attack on the Atonement," *TMSJ* 12/1 (Spring 2001):7.

¹⁶See *Praelectionis Theologicae* 11 (1627):38, as quoted by Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (reprint; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1992) 1:208.

¹⁷Elsewhere 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*?

¹⁸S. M. Baugh, "The Meaning of Foreknowledge," in *The Grace of God, The Bondage of the Will*, Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware, eds (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 1:184-85.

¹⁹A term used by Norman L. Geisler, *Creating God in the Image of Man?* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1997) 19-20, 71-91. Robert E. Picirilli, who writes from a classic Arminian posture, in "An Arminian Response to John Sanders's *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence*," *JETS* 44/3 (September 2001):491, calls the Open view "neo-Arminian" and rejects the idea that openness theology and classical Arminianism are similar.

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 biblicist 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

²⁰Beckwith, "God Knows?," *Christian Research Journal* 54-55.

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 exegetes.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).

²¹David Basinger, “Can an Evangelical Christian Justifiably Deny God’s Exhaustive Knowledge of the Future?,” *Christian Scholars Review* 25:2 (1995):133 [emphasis in the original].

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.

²⁴Norman L. Geisler, “Beware of Philosophy: A Warning to Biblical Scholars,” *JETS* 42/1 (March 1999):3-19.

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 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 his fishness.²⁷

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.²⁸

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? (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

²⁷Strimple, “What Does God Know?,” in *the Coming Evangelical Crisis* 145.

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.²⁹ 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,” *EQ* 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!” Do we have to? “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).

Scripture. Contra John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2001).

³⁰See Stephen J. Wellum’s well reasoned article, “The Importance of the Nature of Divine Sovereignty for Our View of Scripture,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4/2 (Summer 2000):76-90.

³¹For helpful discussions on this subject see Robert Strimple, “What Does God Know?,” in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis* 139-51, and idem, “God’s Sovereignty and Man’s Free Will,” *Modern Reformation* (January/February 1993):3-7. Also D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty & Human Responsibility* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981).

³²Douglas F. Kelly, “Afraid of Infinitude,” *CT* 39/1 (January 9, 1995):32-33.

³³See Nicole, “Review Article,” *Reformation and Revival Journal* 168-70.

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!"³⁴

God of the Possible Dismisses Anthropopathisms³⁵

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.³⁶

Boyd goes to great lengths to make his point (11, 54 ff., 118-20) that when it comes to God's emotions and/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 *anthropopatheia*. 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 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 housetops. 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 Book³⁹

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.⁴⁰

³⁹For 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 autographa and the trinity of God.

⁴⁰Thomas C. Oden, "The Real Reformers Are Traditionalists," *CT* 42/2 (February 9, 1998):46. Simply put, "A Socinian view of God leads inevitably to a Socinian view of salvation . . .," notes Strimple, "What Does God Know?," in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis* 150. Also see Oden's "Why We Believe in Heresy," *CT* 40/3 (March 4, 1996):12-13.