

OPEN THEISM'S ATTACK ON THE ATONEMENT*

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Open theism arose in evangelicalism over a decade ago when evangelicals posited a God to whom one can easily relate and who is manageable in place of a God who punishes sinners for their sin. This they did by proposing a model of Christ's atonement that was not substitutionary. To do so they adopted the model of the 16th-century Socinian heresy, which taught that God could forgive without the payment of a ransom. The biblical doctrine, however, is that Christ's atonement was substitutionary, a teaching that was not immediately defined in the early church, but which Anselm stated clearly during the 16th century. Open theists on the other hand tend to vacillate between the inadequate positions of Abelard and Grotius in their views of the atonement. Because of their distorted views of the atonement, open theists do not belong in the ranks of evangelicalism.

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More than a decade ago a controversial article in *Christianity Today* heralded the rise of open theism. The article, "Evangelical Megashift," was written by Robert Brow, a prominent Canadian theologian. Brow described a radical change looming on the evangelical horizon—a "megashift" toward "new-model" thinking, away from classical theism (which Brow labeled "old-model" theology).¹ What the article outlined was the very movement that today is known as the "open" view of God, or "open theism."

Although Brow himself is a vocal advocate of open theism, his 1990 article neither championed nor condemned the megashift. In it, Brow sought merely to describe how the new theology was radically changing the evangelical concept of God by proposing new explanations for biblical concepts such as divine wrath, God's righteousness, judgment, the atonement—and just about every aspect of evangelical theology.

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¹Robert Brow, "Evangelical Megashift" *Christianity Today* (19 Feb 1990):12-14.

The Quest for a Manageable Deity

Brow's article portrayed new-model theology in benign terms. He saw the movement as an attempt to remodel some of the more difficult truths of Scripture by employing new, friendlier paradigms to explain God.

According to Brow, old-model theology casts God in a severe light. In old-model evangelicalism, God is a stern magistrate whose judgment is a harsh and inflexible legal verdict; sin is an offense against His divine law; God's wrath is the anger of an indignant sovereign; hell is a relentless retribution for sin; and atonement may be purchased only if payment in full is made for sin's judicial penalty.

In new-model theology, however, the God-as-magistrate model is set aside in favor of a more congenial model—that of God as a loving Father. New-model thinkers want to eliminate the negative connotations associated with difficult biblical truths such as divine wrath and God's righteous retribution against sin. So they simply redefine those concepts by employing models that evoke “the warmth of a family relationship.”² For example, they suggest that divine wrath is really nothing more than a sort of fatherly displeasure that inevitably provokes God to give us loving encouragements. God is a “judge” only in the sense of the OT judges (“such as Deborah or Gideon or Samuel”³)—meaning He is a defender of His people rather than an authority who sits in judgment over them. Sin is merely “bad behavior” that ruptures fellowship with God—and its remedy is always correction, never retribution. Even hell is not really a punishment; it is the ultimate expression of the sinner's freedom, because according to new-model thought, “assignment to hell is not by judicial sentence”⁴—so if anyone goes there, it is purely by choice.

Gone are all vestiges of divine severity. God has been toned down and tamed. According to new-model theology, God is not to be thought of as righteously indignant over His creatures' disobedience. In fact, Brow's article was subtitled “Why you may not have heard about wrath, sin, and hell recently.” He characterized the God of new-model theology as a kinder, gentler, more user-friendly deity.

Indeed, one of the main goals of the open-theism megashift seems to be to eliminate the fear of the Lord completely. According to Brow, “No one would deny that it is easier to relate to a God perceived as kindly and loving.”⁵

Of course, the God of old-model theology is also unceasingly gracious, merciful, and loving (a fact one would not be able to glean from the gross caricature new-model advocates like to paint when they describe “old-model orthodoxy”). But old-model theologians—with Scripture on their side—teach that there is more to the

²Ibid., 12.

³Ibid., 13.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., 14.

divine character than beneficence. God is also holy, righteous, and angry with the wicked every day (Psalm 7:11). He is fierce in His indignation against sin (cf. Ps 78:49; Isa 13:9-13; Zeph 3:8). Fear of Him is the very essence of true wisdom (Job 28:28; Ps 111:10; Prov 1:7; 9:10; 15:33). And “the terror of the Lord” is even a motive for our evangelism (2 Cor 5:11). “Our God is a consuming fire”⁶ (Heb 12:29; cf. Deut 4:24), and “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb 10:31).

Nonetheless, open theists are determined to eliminate or explain away every feature of the divine character *except* those that are instantly “perceived as kindly and loving.” They want nothing to do with a God who demands to be feared. Their theology aims to construct a manageable deity, a god who is “easier to relate to”—a quasi-divine being who has been divested of all the features of divine glory and majesty that might provoke any fear or dread in the creature. Instead, they have made Him into a kindly, non-threatening, heavenly valet.

Redefining the Atonement

Above all, the new-model god never demands any payment for sin as a condition of forgiveness. According to the new-model view, if Christ suffered for our sins, it was only in the sense that he “absorb[ed] our sin and its consequences”—certainly not that He received any divinely-inflicted punishment on our behalf at the cross. He merely became a partaker with us in the human problem of pain and suffering. (After all, earthly “pain and suffering” are just about the *worst* consequences of sin new-model theologians can imagine.)

The most disturbing line in Robert Brow’s article is an almost incidental, throwaway remark near the end, in which he states that according to new-model theology, “the cross was not a judicial payment,” but merely a visible, space-time expression of how Christ has *always* suffered because of our sin.⁷

In other words, according to new-model theology, the atoning work of Christ was not truly substitutionary; He made no ransom-payment for sin; no guilt was imputed to Him; nor did God punish Him as a substitute for sinners. None of His sufferings on the cross were administered by God. Instead, according to the new model, *atonement* means that our sins are simply “forgiven” out of the bounty of God’s loving tolerance; our relationship with God is normalized; and Christ “absorbed the consequences” of our forgiveness (which presumably means He suffered the indignity and shame that go with enduring an offense).

So what *does* the cross mean according to new-model theologians? Many of them say Christ’s death was nothing more than a public display of the awful

⁶Scripture quotations here and throughout the essay are from the King James Version of the Bible.

⁷Brow, “Evangelical Megashift” 14. For a reply to the erroneous suggestion that God “suffers” at the hands of His creatures, see the chapter by Phil Johnson that will appear in *Taming the Lion: The Openness of God and the Failure of Imagination*.

consequences of sin—so that rather than offering His blood to satisfy *God's* justice, Christ was merely demonstrating sin's effects in order to fulfill a *public* perception of justice.⁸ Other new-model theologians go even further, virtually denying the need for any kind of ransom for sin altogether.⁹ Indeed, the entire concept of a payment to expiate sin's guilt is nonsense if the open theists are right.¹⁰

Thus new-model theologians have rather drastically remodeled the doctrine of Christ's atonement, and in the process they have fashioned a system that is in no sense truly evangelical—but is rather a repudiation of core evangelical distinctives. It is surely no overstatement to say that their emasculated doctrine of the atonement obliterates the true meaning of the cross. According to open theism, the cross is merely a demonstrative proof of Christ's "willingness to suffer"—and in this watered-down view of the atonement, He suffers *alongside* the sinner, rather than *in the sinner's stead*.

It is my conviction that this error is the bitter root of a corrupt tree that can never bear good fruit (cf. Matt 7:18-20; Luke 6:43). Church history is rife with examples of those who rejected the vicarious nature of Christ's atonement and thereby made shipwreck of the faith.

⁸This is a version of Grotius's governmental atonement theory discussed later in this chapter. See also Appendix 1 ("How Are We to Understand the Atonement?") in John MacArthur, *The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1998) 197-203, for a more thorough critique of Grotius's view of the atonement.

⁹John Sanders, a leading proponent of open theism, begins his discussion of the cross by writing, "I understand sin to primarily be alienation, or a broken relationship, rather than a state of being or guilt" (*The God Who Risks* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998] 105) With such a definition of sin, what need is there of any propitiation? Indeed, Sanders goes on to characterize the cross as a public display of God's willingness to "suffer the pain, foregoing revenge, in order to pursue the reconciliation of the broken relationship." In other words, the "cost of forgiveness" in Sanders's system is a sacrifice God makes pertaining to His personal honor and dignity, rather than a price He demands in accord with His perfect righteousness. So Sanders believes God ultimately *relinquishes* the rightful claims of His justice and holiness rather than *satisfying* them through the atoning blood of Christ. That is the typical view of open theism toward the atonement.

¹⁰Open theist David Basinger suggests that the believer's own free-will choice—rather than Christ's atonement—is what "bridges" the "initial separation . . . between God and humans" (Clark Pinnock, et al., *The Openness of God* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1994] 173-75).

Basinger moreover describes the gap "between God and humans" without a reference to sin whatsoever; it is merely "an initial inability for God and humans to interact to the extent possible" [*ibid.*]. He depicts the gospel as "'good news'—the joy and excitement of being properly related to God" [*ibid.*]. Utterly missing from his discussion of open theism's evangelistic ramifications is any reference to the cross of Christ or the meaning of atonement. No wonder—for if Basinger and other open theists are right, the cross is really superfluous as far as divine forgiveness is concerned. The crucifixion of Christ becomes little more than a melodramatic display of sentiment, not a ransom for anything.

Socinianism Redux

In fact, the “new-model” innovations described in Robert Brow’s 1990 article—and the distinctive principles of open theism, including the open theist’s view of the atonement—are by no means a “new model.” They all smack of Socinianism, a heresy that flourished in the 16th century.

Like modern open theism, 16th-century Socinianism was an attempt to rid the divine attributes of all that seemed harsh or severe. According to Socinianism, love is God’s governing attribute; His love essentially overwhelms and annuls His displeasure against sin; His goodness makes void His wrath. Therefore, the Socinians contended, God is perfectly free to forgive sin without demanding a payment of any kind.

Moreover, the Socinians argued, the idea that God would demand a payment for sins is contradictory to the very notion of forgiveness. They claimed that sins could be either remitted or paid for, but not both. If a price must be paid, then sins are not truly “forgiven.” And if God is really willing to *pardon* sin, then no ransom-price should be necessary. Moreover, according to the Socinian argument, if a price is demanded, then grace is no more gracious than any legal transaction, like the payment of a traffic ticket.

That argument may seem subtly appealing to the human mind at first. But biblically it falls far short. In fact, it is completely contrary to what Scripture teaches about grace, atonement, and divine justice. It hinges on definitions of those terms that ignore what Scripture clearly teaches.

Grace is *not* incompatible with the payment of a ransom. It was purely by grace that God Himself (in the Person of Christ) made the payment we owed. In fact, according to 1 John 4:9-10, this is the consummate expression of divine grace and love: that God willingly sent His Son to bear a world of guilt and die for sin in order to propitiate His righteous indignation, fully satisfy His justice, and thereby redeem sinners: “In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son *to be the propitiation for our sins*” (emphasis added). Christ came to be “the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). That language is a plain reference to the OT sacrificial system, deliberately evoking the concept of expiation, which in the Jewish sacrificial system involved the payment of a blood-price, a penalty for sin.

Furthermore, anyone who studies what Scripture has to say about the forgiveness of sin will see very quickly that the shedding of Christ’s blood is the *only* ground on which sins may ever be forgiven. There can be no forgiveness unless the ransom-price is paid in blood. Remember, that is the very thing both Socinians and open theists deny. They say forgiveness is incompatible with the payment of a penalty—sins that must be paid for have not truly been remitted. But Heb 9:22 clearly refutes their claim: “Without shedding of blood [there] is no remission.”

The Biblical Doctrine of Substitutionary Atonement

On the cross, God made Christ a *propitiation*—a satisfaction of the divine wrath against sin (Rom 3:25). The sacrifice Christ rendered was a payment of the penalty for sin assessed by God. Christ offered Himself on the cross *to God*. He “loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice *to God* for a sweetsmelling savour” (Eph 5:2, emphasis added). His death was a sacrifice offered to appease God’s justice. It was the only way God could remain just while justifying sinners (Rom 3:26). It was the only way He could forgive sin without compromising His own justice and holiness.

Scripture expressly teaches this. Christ died in our place and in our stead. He “was once offered to bear the sins of many” (Heb 9:28). He “bore our sins in His own body on the tree” (1 Pet 2:24). And as he hung there on the cross, he suffered the full wrath of God on our behalf. “Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.” (Isa 53:4-5). “The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all” (v. 6). “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us” (Gal 3:13). These are principles established in the OT sacrificial system, not concepts borrowed from Greek and Roman legal paradigms, as open theists are so fond of claiming.

It was *God* who decreed and orchestrated the events of the crucifixion. Acts 2:23 says Christ was “delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God.” God’s hand and His counsel determined every facet of Christ’s suffering (Acts 4:28). According to Isa 53:10, “it pleased the Lord to crush him; *he* hath put him to grief.” That same verse says the LORD made His Servant “an offering for sin.” In other words, *God* punished Christ for sin on the cross and thereby made Him a sin offering. All the wrath and vengeance of the offended Almighty was poured on Him, and He became the sacrificial Lamb who bore His people’s sin.

This is the whole gist of the book of Hebrews as well. “It is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins” (Heb 10:4). Verse 10 says “we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” Verse 12 says His death was “one sacrifice for sins for ever.” Very clearly those verses are teaching that Christ was sacrificed as a blood atonement to meet the demands of God’s righteousness. No wonder many find that a shocking truth. It *is* shocking. And it is profound. It ought to put us on our faces before God. Any “new model” that diminishes or denies the truth of Christ’s vicarious suffering at God’s own hand is a seriously flawed “model.”

What do you think of when you ponder Christ’s death on the cross? Open theism reasserts the old liberal lie that He was basically a martyr, a victim of humanity—put to death at the hands of evil men. But Scripture says He is the lamb of God, a Victim of divine wrath.

What made Christ’s miseries on the cross so difficult for Him to bear was not the taunting and torture and abuse of evil men. It was that He bore the full weight of divine fury against sin. Jesus’ most painful sufferings were not merely those inflicted by the whips and nails and thorns. But by far the most excruciating agony

Christ bore was the full penalty of sin on our behalf—God's wrath poured out on Him in infinite measure. Remember that when He finally cried out in distress, it was because of the afflictions He received from *God's own hand*: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). We cannot even begin to know what He suffered. It is a horrible reality to ponder. But we dare not follow open theism in rejecting the notion that He bore His Father's punishment for our sins, for in this truth lies the very nerve of genuine Christianity. It is the major reason the cross is such an offense (cf. 1 Cor 1:18).

Scripture says, “[God] hath made [Christ] to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him” (2 Cor 5:21). Our sins were imputed to Christ, and he bore the awful price as our substitute. Conversely, His righteousness is imputed to all who believe, and they stand before God fully justified, clothed in the pure white garment of His perfect righteousness. In other words, this is the meaning of what happened at the cross for every believer: *God treated Christ as if He had lived our wretched, sinful life, so that He could treat us as if we had lived Christ's spotless, perfect life.*

Deny the vicarious nature of the atonement—deny that our guilt was transferred to Christ and He bore its penalty—and you in effect have denied the ground of our justification. If our guilt was not transferred to Christ and paid for on the cross, how can His righteousness be imputed to us for our justification? Every deficient view of the atonement must deal with this same dilemma. And unfortunately, those who misconstrue the meaning of the atonement invariably end up proclaiming a different gospel, devoid of the principle of justification by faith.

The Battle for the Atonement

The atonement has been a theological battleground ever since Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) first began to focus the clear light of Scripture on this long-neglected and often misunderstood aspect of redemption. The early church, consumed with controversies about the Person of Christ and the nature of the Godhead, more or less took for granted the doctrine of the atonement. It was rarely a subject for debate or systematic analysis in early church writings. But when Church Fathers wrote about the atonement, they employed biblical terminology about ransom and propitiation.

Few would argue that the Church Fathers had a well-formed understanding of the atonement as a penal substitution, but Augustus Hodge pointed out that the idea of vicarious atonement was more or less implicit in their understanding, even if it was “often left to a remarkable degree in the background, and mixed up confusedly with other elements of truth or superstition.”¹¹ Specifically, some of the Fathers seemed confused about the nature of the ransom Christ paid—especially on the question of to whom the ransom was due. Some of them seemed to think of it as

¹¹A. A. Hodge, *The Atonement* (Memphis, Tenn.: Footstool, n.d.) 267.

a ransom paid to Satan, as if Christ paid a fee to the devil to purchase release for sinners. That view is often called the *ransom theory* of the atonement.

Nonetheless, according to Hodge, “With few exceptions, the whole church from the beginning has held the doctrine of Redemption in the sense of a literal propitiation of God by means of the expiation of sin.”¹² Selected Church Fathers’ comments about the ransom of Christ should not be taken as studied, conscientious doctrinal statements but rather as childlike expressions of an unformed and inadequate doctrine of the atonement. Philip Schaff, commenting on the lack of clarity about the atonement in early church writings, said, “The primitive church teachers lived more in the thankful enjoyment of redemption than in logical reflection upon it. We perceive in their exhibitions of this blessed mystery the language rather of enthusiastic feeling than of careful definition and acute analysis.”¹³ “Nevertheless,” Schaff added, “all the essential elements of the later church doctrine of redemption may be found, either expressed or implied, before the close of the second century.”¹⁴

Until Anselm, no leading theologian really focused much energy on systematizing the biblical doctrine of the atonement. Anselm’s work on the subject, *Cur Deus Homo? (Why Did God Become Man?)*, offered compelling biblical evidence that the atonement was not a ransom paid *by* God to the devil but rather a debt paid *to* God on behalf of sinners, a satisfaction of divine justice. Anselm’s work on the atonement established a foundation for the Protestant Reformation and became the very heart of evangelical theology. The doctrine Anselm articulated, known as the *penal substitution theory* of the atonement, has long been considered an essential aspect of all doctrine that is truly evangelical. Historically, all who have abandoned this view have led movements *away* from evangelicalism.

A close contemporary of Anselm, Peter Abelard, responded with a view of the atonement that is virtually the same as the view held by some of the leading modern open theists. According to Abelard, God’s justice is subjugated to His love. He demands no *payment* for sin. Instead, the redeeming value of Christ’s death consisted in the power of the loving example He left for sinners to follow. This view is sometimes called the *moral influence theory* of the atonement. Abelard’s view was later adopted and refined by the Socinians in the 16th century (as discussed above).

Of course, as is true with most heresies, there is a kernel of truth in the moral influence theory. The atoning work of Christ *is* the consummate expression of God’s love (1 John 4:9-10). It is also a motive for love in the believer (vv. 7-8, 11). But the major problem with Abelard’s approach is that he made the atonement *nothing more* than an example. If Abelard was correct, Christ’s work on the cross accomplished nothing objective on the sinner’s behalf—so that there is no real

¹²Ibid., 269.

¹³*History of the Christian Church*, (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 2:584.

¹⁴Ibid.

propitiatory aspect to Christ's death. That essentially makes redemption from sin the believer's own responsibility. Sinners are "redeemed" by following the example of Christ. "Salvation" reduces to moral reform motivated by love. It is a form of works-salvation.

Abelard's view of the atonement is the doctrine that lies at the core of liberal theology. Like every other form of works-salvation, it is a different gospel from the good news set forth in Scripture.

A third view of the atonement was devised by Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) during the Arminian controversy in Holland. Known as the *governmental theory* of the atonement, this view is something of a middle road between Abelard and Anselm. According to Grotius, Christ's death was a public display of God's justice, but not an actual payment on behalf of sinners. In other words, the cross shows what punishment for sin would look like if God recompensed sin. But no actual vicarious payment of the sinner's debt was made by Christ.

Grotius, like Abelard and the Socinians, believed God could forgive sin without any payment. But Grotius said the dignity and authority of God's law still needed to be upheld. Sin is a challenge to God's right to rule. If God simply overlooked sin, He would in effect abrogate His moral government of the universe. So Christ's death was necessary to vindicate God's authority as ruler, because it proved His willingness and his right to punish, even though He ultimately relinquishes the claims of His justice against repentant sinners. Christ's death therefore was not a substitute for anyone else's punishment, but merely a public example of God's moral authority and His hatred of sin.

In other words, unlike Abelard, Grotius saw that the death of Christ displayed the wrath, as well as the love, of God. Like Abelard, however, Grotius believed the atonement was exemplary rather than substitutionary. Christ did not actually suffer in anyone's place. The atonement accomplished nothing objective on the sinner's behalf; it was merely a symbolic gesture. Christ's death was an example only. And redemption therefore hinges completely on something the sinner must do. So the governmental theory also results inevitably in works-salvation.¹⁵

New-model open theists seem to halt between two wrong opinions—sometimes echoing Grotius's governmentalism; sometimes sounding

¹⁵Most governmentalists stress repentance as a human free-will decision. Charles Finney, a conscientious defender of Grotius's view of the atonement, preached a message titled "Making a New Heart," in which he argued that regeneration (and particularly the change of heart that involves removal of the stony heart and implantation of a heart of flesh—cf. Ezek 36:26), is something each sinner must accomplish for himself. Moreover, in his *Systematic Theology*, Finney wrote, "[Sinners] are under the necessity of first changing their hearts, or their choice of an end, before they can put forth any volitions to secure any other than a selfish end. And this is plainly the everywhere assumed philosophy of the Bible. That uniformly represents the unregenerate as totally depraved [a voluntary condition, not a constitutional depravity, according to Finney], and calls upon them to repent, *to make themselves a new heart*" ([Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1994] 249 [emphasis added]).

suspiciously Abelardian.¹⁶ But one thing all open theists would agree on is this: Anselm and the penal substitution view of the atonement are obsolete, part of an outdated model they can hardly wait for the evangelical movement to shed.

Evangelicalism? Hardly

Clearly, Brow, Pinnock, Greg Boyd, and most other leading advocates of new-model open theism want to be accepted as evangelicals. Near the end of his article, Brow wonders aloud whether new-model thinking has any place under the evangelical umbrella. Does it provide a more helpful picture of God's good news, or is it 'another gospel'?¹⁷

Earlier generations of evangelicals without qualm or hesitation would have answered that question by declaring that open theism's message is "another gospel" (Gal 1:8-9). Indeed, that is precisely how they *have* answered whenever Socinians, Unitarians, liberals, and various other peddlers of new theologies have raised these very same challenges to the "old model."

Unfortunately, the major segment of this generation of evangelicalism seems to lack the will or the knowledge to decide whether open theists are wolves in sheep's clothing or true reformers.¹⁸ But let it be clearly stated: by any definition of evangelicalism with historical integrity,¹⁹ open theism opposes the very core truths that evangelicals stand for. And by any truly *biblical* definition, they are heretics, purveyors of a different gospel. Both of these charges are substantiated by open theism's abandonment of substitutionary atonement alone.

In fact, the only significant difference between today's open theists and the Socinians of yesteryear is that the Socinians denied the deity of Christ, whereas open theists ostensibly do not. But in effect, open theists have denied the deity of *God Himself*, by humanizing Him and trying to reconcile Him with modern standards of

¹⁶In his article "From Augustine to Arminius: A Pilgrimage in Theology," Clark Pinnock recounted his own retreat from the penal substitution view via a route that took him from Anselm to Grotius to Barth (Pinnock, ed. *The Grace of God, the Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990]).

¹⁷Brow, "Evangelical Megashift" 14.

¹⁸The Baptist General Conference's recent refusal to clarify their doctrinal statement and rule out open theism's deficient view of divine omniscience is clear evidence that modern evangelicals are vacillating and ambivalent on these issues.

¹⁹Quite simply, the label *evangelical* has historically been used to identify those who hold to both the formal and material principles of the Reformation—*sola Scriptura* (Scripture as the supreme authority) and *sola fide* (justification by faith alone). Although in recent years much broader and more complex definitions have been proposed, the history of the evangelical movement is inextricably linked with a resolute defense of those two vital principles. Absolutely essential to the doctrine of justification by faith is the truth of a vicarious atonement, where the guilt of the sinner is imputed to Christ and paid for, while the merit of Christ is imputed to the believer as the sole ground of acceptance with God. All who have denied substitutionary atonement have either been far outside the historic evangelical mainstream, or they have led movements that quickly abandoned evangelical distinctives.

political correctness.

In "Evangelical Megashift," Robert Brow claims that "the wind of [new-model theology's] influence blows in through every crack when we read C. S. Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia stories."²⁰ Lewis was no theologian, and there's no doubt that his views were squidgy on the question of eternal punishment. He held other views that make old-model evangelicals shudder. But one wonders if he really would have been in sympathy with open theists' quest for a tamed and toned-down deity.

In the Narnia Chronicles, Aslan, the fierce but loving lion, represents Christ. His paws are frighteningly terrible, sharp as knives with the claws extended, but soft and velvety when the claws are drawn in.²¹ He is both good *and* fearsome. When the children in Lewis's tale looked at him, they "went all trembly."²² Mr. Beaver says of him, "He's wild, you know. Not like a *tame* lion."²³ And Lewis as narrator observes, "People who have not been in Narnia sometimes think a thing cannot be good and terrible at the same time."²⁴

That same basic false assumption was the starting point for the heresy of open theism. New-model theologians began with the assumption that God could not be good and terrible at the same time, so they set out to divest Him of whatever attributes they did not like. Like the Socinians and liberals who preceded them, they have set out on a misguided quest to make God "good" according to a humanistic, earthbound definition of "good." They are devising a god of their own making.

In the final book of the Narnia series, a wicked ape drapes a lion skin over a witless ass and pretends the ass is Aslan. It is a sinister and dangerous pretense, and in the end it leads countless Narnians astray. The god of open theism is like an ass in an ill-fitting lion's skin. And it is leading many away from the glorious God of Scripture.

God is both good *and* fearsome. His wrath is as real as his love. And though He has "mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, [He] will by no means clear the guilty" without satisfying His own justice and wrath (Exod 34:7).

True evangelicals will never relinquish those truths. And those who cannot stomach God the way He has revealed Himself have no right to the label "evangelical." These are issues worth fighting for, as both church history and Scripture plainly prove. The rise of open theism is a grave threat to the cause of the true gospel. May God raise up a new generation of evangelical warriors with the courage and conviction to contend for the truth of substitutionary atonement.

²⁰Brow, "Evangelical Megashift" 12.

²¹C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: MacMillan, 1950) 125.

²²*Ibid.*, 123.

²³*Ibid.*, 180.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 123.