

## **A Critique of Free-Will Theism, Part One**

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**Robert A. Pyne and Stephen R. Spencer**

*[Robert A. Pyne is professor of Systematic Theology, Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, Texas, and Stephen R. Spencer is professor of theology, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois.]*

Does God know the future in exhaustive detail, or does His omniscience pertain only to the past and present? A relatively recent movement among evangelicals maintains that God's knowledge is limited to what is knowable—past and present actualities. According to this view future contingent events are unknowable, even to God, because they are conditioned on other events and have not yet been determined.

This view has been called “open theism” or “the open view of God,” because it emphasizes that the future is open-ended, not closed. It has also been called “relational theism,” because its advocates believe God is engaged in a more genuine, “give-and-take” relationship with His creation, in contrast to classical theism, which they self-consciously reject. This series of two articles uses the term “free-will theism” because the nature of freedom under

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providence constitutes the movement's controlling concern.

Since each of these labels could be (and have been) applied to other theological movements, it is important to understand the view addressed here. Free-will theists differ from classical theists by rejecting divine timelessness, immutability, impassibility, meticulous providence, and exhaustive foreknowledge. They maintain that these doctrines rule out any genuine sense of human responsibility, divine relationality, or conflict between good and evil. If God determines (or completely knows) the future, they argue, then every event and every apparent choice takes place by necessity, for history cannot unfold any other way. Believing that individuals cannot be held responsible for what they do by necessity, free-will theists argue that a fully known (or knowable) future eliminates human freedom and responsibility. They also argue that classical theism entails a basic confusion between good and evil, as all things proceed equally from the same impassive Deity, who essentially becomes the Author of

sin. As Pinnock summarizes the point, “Total knowledge of the future would imply a fixity of events. Nothing in the future would need to be decided. It also would imply that human freedom is an illusion, that we make no difference and are not responsible.”

Process theists agree with each of these criticisms, but they differ from free-will theists by arguing that God is metaphysically related to the world and *always* works through persuasion, for He “cannot override the freedom of creatures.” Free-will theists believe God *usually* works through persuasion, but “still reserves the power to control everything,” as His actions are limited not by His

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nature but by His choices.

This article argues that free-will theists and process theists are wrong in their critique of classical theism, largely because of their false assumptions about human freedom and responsibility, divine relationality, and the problem of evil. This article also argues that free-will theists mishandle biblical theology in seeking to support their position exegetically, a view that ultimately offers little comfort to those who rightly grieve the presence of evil in a fallen world.

### **Basic Assumptions of Free-will Theism**

Though free-will theism is a relatively recent movement, the topic has already generated a considerable body of literature, most of which includes extensive interaction with Scripture. Before examining some of the biblical arguments, however, it will be helpful to consider several assumptions that seem to influence the free-will theists’ interpretation of the Scriptures.

#### **The Nature of Human Freedom**

John Sanders summarizes free-will (or, as he prefers to call it, “relational”) theism in four points.

1. “God loves us and desires for us to enter into reciprocal relations of love with him and with our fellow creatures. The divine intention in creating us was for us to experience the triune love and respond to it with love of our own. In this we would freely come to collaborate with God toward the achievement of God’s goals.”

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2. “God has sovereignly decided to make some of His actions contingent on our requests and actions. God establishes a project and elicits our free collaboration in it. Hence there is conditionality in God, for God truly responds to what we do.”

3. “God chooses to exercise general rather than meticulous providence, allowing space for us to operate and for God to be creative and resourceful in working with us.”
4. “God has granted us the libertarian freedom necessary for a truly personal relationship of love to develop.”

“In summary,” Sanders writes, “God freely enters into genuine give-and-take relations with us. This entails risk-taking on His part because we are capable of letting God down. This understanding of divine providence deeply affects our views concerning salvation, suffering and evil, prayer and divine guidance.” Each of Sanders’s points has a common thread. For love to be genuine, it must be chosen freely, and for love to be chosen freely, it cannot be subject to divine control. From his perspective personal responsibility is incompatible with any kind of determinism. That is why he describes human freedom as “libertarian freedom,” in which individuals choose from a variety of options, none of which is necessitated. Sanders’s incompatibilist assumption maintains that one must have libertarian freedom to have genuine freedom, especially when choosing between good and evil. Otherwise a person cannot be held accountable for doing evil or be rewarded for doing good.

Having defined freedom as libertarian freedom, free-will theists believe classical theism denies genuine freedom. Considering this a serious offense, one that makes God the Author of sin, they denounce it with harsh, often sarcastic rhetoric. To illustrate, this comment by Sanders about freedom leads to a particularly inappropriate criticism: “Yet some reject His grace; God cannot save them without destroying the rules of the game He has established for His project of having a reciprocal relationship of love with us. God does not rape us, even for our own good.”

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Classical theists rightly protest that such statements misrepresent their position through offensive caricature. After all, nonlibertarian models of human freedom have consistently affirmed that both personal responsibility and practical freedom can be compatible with divine determinism. For example Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards each held to a “spontaneous” version of the will, maintaining that human choices are free in that they are not coerced. In other words people are free to do as they desire. From this perspective human responsibility is compatible with strong views of both human depravity and divine providence.

Regarding depravity, a spontaneous model of freedom can affirm that individuals remain fully responsible for their sinful choices even though they are “slaves to sin” (Rom. 6:17) and “not even able” to subject themselves to God’s law (8:7–8). As Luther put it, “That is to say, when a man is without the Spirit of God he does not do evil against his will, as if he were taken by the scruff of the

neck and forced to it, like a thief or robber carried off against his will to punishment, but he does it of his own accord and with a ready will.” And John Calvin wrote, “If freedom is opposed to coercion, I both acknowledge and consistently maintain that choice is free, and I hold anyone who thinks otherwise to be a heretic.” “But,” he said, “it makes a great difference whether the bondage is voluntary or coerced. We locate the necessity to sin precisely in corruption of the will, from which it follows that it is self-determined.” From this perspective, which was also articulated by Augustine in His writings against Pelagius, one need not have libertarian freedom to be fully responsible for sinful choices. Individuals choose what they wish, and they are responsible for their decisions.

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A spontaneous model of freedom is compatible not only with human depravity, but also with divine providence. For example God told Abraham, “*Know for certain* that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve; and afterward they will come out with many possessions. And as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age. Then in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete” (Gen. 15:13–16, italics added).

God told Abraham that the Egyptian bondage would surely take place, yet it was accomplished through a complicated web of human choices, most of which were sinful. The preservation and enslavement of Israel was part of the promise given to Abraham, but it took place through Jacob’s deception, Esau’s wrath, Laban’s deception, Jacob’s mistreatment of Leah, the rivalry between Leah and Rachel (which was communicated to their children), the boasting of Joseph, the cruelty of his brothers, the lust of Potiphar’s wife, and the ruthless ambition of Pharaoh. When Joseph said, “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive” (50:20), did his perspective imply that God had put the evil desires in their hearts? No, but neither did God change their hearts. They acted without coercion, and God used them to accomplish His purposes.

A spontaneous view of freedom affirms that even when God does intervene to change people’s hearts, they act freely. After the abusive rule of the Egyptians, the miracles wrought through Moses, and the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart, the Egyptians willingly participated in their own plundering. That had been promised in Genesis 15, but in this case God directly intervened. “The Lord had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have their request” (Exod. 12:36). People do not naturally give up their jewelry, and here God apparently did something to change the hearts of the people. But they still acted freely, that is, without coercion.

King Ahasuerus seems to have acted freely with every virgin in the region at his disposal, yet the Scriptures say Esther became queen “for such a time as this” (Esth. 4:14). Did the king act under compulsion? He seems to have been as unrestrained in his debaucheries as any individual imaginable. Did God intervene to give Esther favor in the eyes of the king? Perhaps, but the text does not acknowledge it. However, it does seem that God in His providence oversaw the circumstances and accomplished His good pleasure.

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Incompatibilism is not the only option, nor is it the most biblical. Instead, the spontaneous view of freedom upholds the compatibility of human depravity, practical freedom, human responsibility, and divine providence. Without free-will theism’s assumption of incompatibilism and a libertarian view of freedom, the logical necessity of their position collapses. One need not say that God preserves human freedom by leaving the future open-ended; one need not say that He “allows space” for humans to operate; and one need not say that He is taking risks so that humans can have genuine responsibility. Humans have genuine responsibility even when they are slaves of sin in a world governed by divine providence.

### **The Nature of Genuine Relationships**

Free-will theists recognize that God enjoys relationships with His people, and they base that concept on several assumptions about the nature of genuine relationships. This is evident in these statements by Sanders: “God creates a world in which he sovereignly decides to experience genuine give-and-take relations with his creatures.” “The divine decision was yet open [regarding the judgment of Sodom], and God invited Abraham in the decision-making process. God chooses not to exercise judgment without the human input of this man he trusts.” “God initiates the relationship and intends for it to involve give and take.” “God, the king, wants a relationship with the people, the vassal, not with automatons who can do nothing but what the programmer designs.” “Apparently, Moses has a relationship with God such that God values what Moses desires. If Moses interprets God’s intentions in an unfavorable way and God values his relationship with Moses, then God must either persuade Moses or concede his request.” From this perspective genuine relationships involve “give and take.” They demand mutual trust, concession, and freedom, and they cannot include control or domination.

True, God is relational, and an everlasting relationship with Him is the very essence of eternal life (John 17:3). However, do the

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Scriptures teach that God and His people share the kind of mutual concession and dependence described by Sanders? Free-will theists appear to rely too heavily on the pattern of human relationships in the effort to understand God’s association

with people. A Christian college student recently said that she did not have a relationship with God. Real relationships, she reasoned, involve direct interpersonal communication, and God had never spoken to her in words apart from the Bible. Therefore, she said, “I must not have a real relationship with God.”

One might just as easily (and just as erroneously) say that genuine relationships must engage the senses as a person sees, smells, hears, or touches another individual. That may be true at the human level, and some people have questioned the genuineness of “cyber-relationships” on that basis. But does the lack of physical sensation or personal verbal revelation mean a person cannot have a genuine relationship with God? To believe that would be to rely too much on assumptions about the nature of relationships. Free-will theists seem to make the same mistake.

### **The Problem of Evil**

The problem of evil is perhaps the dominant question of contemporary theology. How can one believe in a good *and* sovereign God in the midst of horrific evil? Free-will theists take the problem very seriously, and they believe they address it more satisfactorily than do classical theists. Gregory Boyd opens his book *God at War* with the story of Zosia, a child tortured and killed by Nazis in front of her mother. Viewing her experience through the words of the hymn, “My Times Are in Thy Hand,” Boyd writes,

Again, if we have the courage to allow the antinomy between the lyrics of this hymn and Zosia’s tortured screams to engage us on a concrete level, the antinomy borders on the unbearable. What does it mean to assert that the hand of the all-powerful and all-loving Father “will never cause his child a needless tear” when asserted in the vicinity of a child who has just had her eyes plucked out and of the screams of Zosia’s terrorized mother? In this concrete context, does not suggesting that this event came from the hand of God, and that it came about “as best as it seemed to thee,” come close to depicting God on Hitlerian terms? What is more, would not such a conception significantly undermine the godly urgency one should have to confront such evil as something that God is unequivocally against? ... The Nazis’ agenda somehow here seems to receive divine approval. Yet while we are to view the Nazis’ agenda as being diabolically evil, we

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are apparently supposed to accept that God’s agenda in ordaining or allowing the Nazis’ behavior is perfectly good.

Boyd argues that the Bible was written from the perspective of a “warfare worldview.” As he describes it, this worldview

is predicated on the assumption that divine goodness does not completely control or in any sense will evil; rather, good and evil are at war with one another. This assumption obviously entails that God is not now exercising exhaustive, meticulous control over the world. In this worldview, God must work with, and battle against, other created beings. While none of these beings can ever match God’s own power, each has some degree of genuine influence within the cosmos. In other words, a warfare worldview is inherently pluralistic. There is no single, all-determinative divine will that coercively steers all things, and hence there is here no supposition that evil agents and events have a secret divine motive behind them. Hence too, one need not agonize over what ultimately good, transcendent divine purpose might be served by any particular evil event.

Sanders presents a similar argument. Opening his book with the tragic story of his own brother’s death, he writes, “In years to come many a Christian attempted to provide me with ‘good’ reasons why God would have ordained my brother’s death. Those discussions served to spur my reflection on divine providence for over twenty years.” In free-will theism he has discovered a view of providence that “allows for things to happen that are not part of God’s plan for our lives; it allows for pointless evil.” Sanders then concludes, “Although God may sometimes bring about, or may deliver from, a particular misfortune, there is not a divine reason for each and every misfortune. Genuine accidents or unintended events, both good and bad, do happen, for that is the sort of world God established.”

Such statements imply that God is not able to prevent evil events from happening—a conclusion that does little to reinforce one’s hope for the future. Free-will theists, however, balk at this conclusion, for they do believe God can intervene. Arguing that God will surely defeat His enemies in the eschaton, Boyd writes, “Hence the ability of any within the angelic or human society of God’s

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creation to rebel freely against God shall someday come to an end. Apparently out of integrity for the gift of freedom he has given, God endures for a time the wrath of these destructive rebels.” After expressing his disgust at the “Hitlerian” implications of providence, is this the way Boyd would answer his own questions about the cries of a tortured child? Did God, who was capable of intervening, choose not to act because He wanted the oppressor to remain free?

Process theologians rightly criticize free-will theism on precisely this point. If free-will theists believe God can intervene to prevent tragedies of human evil or

natural disaster, they have in no way escaped the traditional problem of evil. It will not help to say that God does not “frequently” or “routinely” intervene. If He *can* intervene but does not do so, the problem remains. Why did God not do something, maybe just one more time?

The problem may also be highlighted with a less somber illustration.

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Boyd argues that God is engaged in a “real” war with the forces of evil, one in which the Creator battles earnestly against His creatures in order to regain control over His creation. Other free-will theists prefer a different analogy, arguing that God restrains His activities in this world because He is abiding by the rules of the game He has established. With either metaphor the basic problem is the same. When a man plays table tennis with his eight-year-old daughter, he will likely try to keep the game close. He may intentionally hit the ball a little too wide or a little too far, because he does not want to discourage her. In other words he restrains himself in order to lose. Free-will theists say God is restraining Himself while trying to win, but they cannot have it both ways.

From Genesis to Revelation the Bible reveals God as one who intervenes with unchallenged power. Therefore, when people suffer, there is no way to avoid Martha’s sorrowful reproach, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died” (John 11:21). Her words implied a question, and it was perfectly acceptable. But God does not usually explain His apparent absence—not to Martha, not to Job, and usually not to believers today. In the face of His silence, those who offer either insipid platitudes or reasoned theological explanations inevitably transgress the boundaries. It is presumptuous to explain why God has acted (or not acted) in particular ways when He has not revealed His purposes.

The idea that our God, who is good, has knowingly allowed all events does not (indeed, must not) suggest that all events are themselves good. God uses evil for good, just as He often uses good for good, but evil remains evil. Evil continues to violate the moral will of God, even if it continues to exist under His providential will.

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## **The Plain Reading of Scripture**

In addition to their assumptions about the nature of free will, the nature of relationships, and the problem of evil, free-will theists seem to operate under a hermeneutical assumption that merits analysis. They claim to read the Scriptures in a straightforward, unbiased manner, and they accuse their opponents of relying too heavily on philosophy. The following statements from Boyd’s web site show how he defends his interpretation of Scripture.



If God was certain of this all along, however, *Scripture is incorrect* when it describes God's motive in bringing the animals to Adam... . Conversely, *if we accept that Scripture is speaking plainly here* and God's regret was real... then it seems more reasonable to believe that until that point in time, God didn't know with certainty that humanity would grieve him the way it did... . The only reason I can see as to why someone would insist that the testings were for the people, not God, is because they bring to the text a theology which will not allow them to accept *the straightforward meaning of the text...* . *If we believe that God speaks straightforwardly*, however, it seems that he didn't know exactly how the elders would respond to Moses... . *If we simply allow the text to say what the text says*, however, we are led to embrace the beautiful truth that God is omni-resourceful and thus doesn't need to have everything in the future settled... . *Scripture's teaching* that God "changed His mind" about the matter would be inaccurate as well. *If God's declared intention and Scripture's teaching are true*, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that God's mind was not eternally settled... . I do not see how the classical view can account for a *straightforward reading* of this fascinating passage... . *If we believe that Scripture cannot err*, it seems we should conclude that God does not necessarily foreknow such matters after all.

These examples could be multiplied many times over, and such arguments have a natural appeal to evangelicals. However, arguments about the plain meaning of Scripture can easily prove too much. For example, since Genesis 2:19 states that God brought the animals to Adam "to see" what the man would call them, Boyd says that a "plain" reading of the text means that God did not yet know the animals' names. But if Genesis 2:19 implies that God did not know the future, then do the interrogative questions of 3:9–11, 13 imply that he did not know the past or the present? "Where are you?" "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" "What is this you have done?" The simplest reading of these verses, isolated from the broader sweep of biblical theology, would suggest that God did not know where Adam was or what he had done. Boyd rightly rejects

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such a "straightforward" reading in this case, arguing that since other passages establish God's knowledge of everything past and present, He must have already known the answer to these questions, which are evidently rhetorical. Boyd (rightly) follows the same principle that he (wrongly) finds so inappropriate in others. That is, he interprets specific biblical statements through the lens of a wider biblical theology.

Read "straightforwardly," many biblical metaphors or anthropomorphic expressions would yield false, even heretical, notions of God. Recognizing this

fact, every biblical theologian must determine which statements to take literally, on the basis of broader revelation. Free-will theists make such determinations as often as anyone. Free-will theists do not differ from classical theists in the use or nonuse of control beliefs or paradigms that affect the way they understand the biblical text, but they do differ in the content of those beliefs. Classical theists, convinced that other Scripture passages teach exhaustive divine foreknowledge and/or meticulous providence, reject the “straightforward” interpretation of verses that would imply divine ignorance. Free-will theists, convinced that genuine freedom is incompatible with determinism, reject the “straightforward” interpretation of verses that imply divine control.

That is not to say the two parties must remain at an impasse. Since classical and free-will theists agree that the broad scope of biblical revelation should inform their reading of particular passages, perhaps mutual consideration of that revelation will point to a way forward.

### **Suggested Biblical Arguments for Free-will Theism**

As already noted, much of the literature regarding free-will theism includes extensive interaction with Scripture. Obviously space here does not allow all the relevant verses to be discussed. However, most biblical arguments for an “open” future fall into two categories: Scriptures in which God appears not to know the future, and Scriptures in which God repents or changes His plan.

#### **Scriptures In Which God Appears Not To Know The Future**

A number of Scripture verses, particularly in the Old Testament, seem to suggest that God does not know the future. For example in

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some passages He explains what He will do “if” certain circumstances occur, implying (in the view of free-will theists) that those circumstances are not fixed and that God does not know whether they will in fact occur (e.g., Exod. 4:8–9; 13:17; Jer. 7:5–7; 18:7–11; 26:2–3; 38:17–23; Ezek. 12:1–3; Rev. 3:5).

Most of these conditional statements concern judgment and blessing. They do demonstrate that humans are responsible agents whose actions have consequences, but they do not necessarily imply that future actions are unknown to God. For example Deuteronomy 28–30 records many conditional statements, as Israel’s future blessings in the land were directly dependent on her obedience. But God knew they would disobey, and He knew they would not possess the land. He said, “This people will arise and play the harlot with the strange gods of the land, into the midst of which they are going, and will forsake Me and break My covenant which I have made with them” (Deut. 31:16). Contrary to free-will theism’s incompatibilist assumptions, God’s knowledge of His people’s hearts (and their future) did not minimize their guilt. In the same way, their obvious

responsibility (underscored by the conditional promises) is apparently not a contradiction of His knowledge.

The same pattern may be present in Jeremiah 18:6–11, a passage that Boyd regards as “perhaps the best example” of “the explicit teaching of Scripture” regarding God’s limited knowledge of the future.

“Behold, like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel. At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it, if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it. Or at another moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to build up or to plant it, if it does evil in My sight by not obeying My voice, then I will think better of the good with which I had promised to bless it. So now then, speak to the men of Judah and against the inhabitants of Jerusalem saying, ‘Thus says the Lord: “Behold, I am fashioning calamity against you and devising a plan against you. Oh turn back, each of you from his evil way, and reform your ways and your deeds.” ’ ’ ”

Here God’s judgments are plainly conditional. If the people repented, they would be spared; if they continued to disobey, they would be judged. But do these verses rule out the possibility of

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foreknowledge? Boyd believes they do. “I suggest that if this text isn’t enough to convince us that God’s mind is not eternally settled, then our philosophical presuppositions are controlling our exegesis to a degree that no text could *ever* teach us this.”

Does this Scripture passage really stand so explicitly against traditional theism that honest readers must either deny foreknowledge or deny biblical authority? Verse 12 suggests otherwise. “But *they will say*, ‘It’s hopeless! For we are going to follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart’ ” (italics added). Ware comments, “Oddly enough for open theists, in the very text they appeal to most regularly to support the idea that God does not know how people will act and so his prophecies must be alterable depending on what unfolds, here in fact God declares that he *knows exactly what his people will do*. Despite his warning of judgment, Israel will not turn from their stubbornness and evil ways, and God declares in advance that this will be true.” As in Deuteronomy, the people remained responsible, here rebelling according to the stubbornness of their hearts. But that is not incompatible with divine foreknowledge.

Boyd also believes God’s lack of foreknowledge can be seen in God’s question in Hosea 8:5, “How long will they be incapable of innocence?” Boyd writes, “If God knows the future to be eternally settled ... he could not in earnest

ask this (or any other) question about the future. He would have known from all eternity that Israel would continue to reject his program of holiness. The fact that the Lord sincerely asks this question and authentically attempts to answer it as soon as possible, testifies to the truth that the future of Israel was not completely settled at this time—not in reality, and thus not in God’s mind.” Aside from Boyd’s assumptions regarding “authentic,” “earnest,” or “sincere” discourse, there is no reason why God’s question in Hosea 8:5 should not be regarded as rhetorical. Far from “authentically” attempting “to answer it as soon as possible,” God stated this question as an unanswerable lament in the context of an extensive proclamation against Israel. It

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demonstrates grief on the part of God, but not lack of knowledge.

Other passages are said to reveal limitations in God’s knowledge by picturing Him as a learner understanding something previously unknown. For example Sanders says this about Genesis 22:12: “God’s statement, ‘now I know,’ raises serious theological problems regarding divine immutability and foreknowledge. Many commentators either pass over this verse in silence or dismiss it as mere anthropomorphism. It is often suggested that the test was for Abraham’s benefit, not God’s. It should be noted, however, that the only one in the text said to learn anything from the test is *God*.”

What did God learn? Sanders seems to be saying that God learned what was in Abraham’s heart. But did He not know that already? Does not God know the hearts of people (1 Sam. 16:7; Jer. 17:10; Acts 1:24; 15:8; Rom. 8:27)? Is He not capable of distinguishing between character and conduct?

Regarding Exodus 16:4 Boyd states, “Testing people to find out how they will resolve their character only makes sense if God is not certain of their character ahead of time.” In the same way, he comments on Deuteronomy 13:1–3: “Moses tells the Israelites that God allowed false prophets to be correct sometimes because ‘the Lord your God is testing you, to know whether you indeed love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul.’ If God already knows such matters with certainty, Scripture’s inspired description as to why such testings take place (viz. for God ‘to know ...’) cannot be correct. If we believe that Scripture cannot err, it seems we should conclude that God does not necessarily foreknow such matters after all.”

Boyd’s argument again proves too much. The passage does not address foreknowledge, as his statement implies; it addresses the *present* condition of their hearts. If God does not know what is presently in people’s hearts until He tests them, then He does not really know people’s hearts and He does not really know all that is presently knowable. But that violates both Scripture and free-will

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theism's own limited definition of omniscience.

## Scriptures In Which God Repents Or Changes His Plan

A number of Scripture passages state that God repents, changes His mind, regrets His intentions, or modifies His plans, especially in response to human repentance, prayer, or intercession (e.g., Exod. 32:9–14; Num. 11:1–2; 14:12–20; 16:20–35; Deut. 9:13–14, 18–20, 25; Judg. 10:10–15; 1 Sam. 2:30–31; 13:13–14; 1 Kings 21:27–29; 2 Kings 20:1–7; 1 Chron. 21:15; Ezek. 33:13–15; Hos. 11:8–9; Jon. 3:10). Such responsiveness may seem incompatible with classical theism. After all, if God has always known the future, why would He express disappointment? Why would He speak of changing a course of action if His actions have been planned from eternity?

These texts reveal that God is, by nature, a God of justice and compassion. He punishes the guilty and unrepentant, but He is merciful to those who trust in Him (Exod. 34:6–7). Divine justice and grace are particularly evident in biblical narratives—when individuals repent, God responds with a kind of repentance of His own. He may repent of justice and turn to mercy (Exod. 32:14), or repent of benevolence and turn to justice (Gen. 6:5–6; 1 Sam. 15:11, 23), but His orientation toward people changes when they change their orientation toward Him. This reality poses no threat to a

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traditional understanding of immutability, as Berkhof noted: “The divine immutability should not be understood as implying *immobility*, as if there were no movement in God. It is even customary to speak of God as *actus purus*, a God who is always in action. The Bible teaches that God enters into manifold relations with man and, as it were, lives their life with them. There is change round about Him, change in the relations of man to Him, but there is no change in His Being, His attributes, His purposes, His motives of action, or His promises.”

God's foreknowledge of Israel's disobedience did not make His conditional offer of blessing any less real, nor did it render His grief at their rebellion any less genuine (Jer. 3:1–13). Free-will theists have strongly criticized classical theism on this point, arguing that a traditional understanding of divine eternity, immutability, and impassibility cannot do justice to biblical descriptions of God's emotions. But classical theists have handled this issue in different ways, while unhesitatingly affirming exhaustive foreknowledge. Calvin argued that the Bible used language of accommodation when speaking of divine emotion, a position defended recently by Helm. But Chemnitz maintained that God's emotions, far from being less authentic than human emotions, must be far greater. “It is true, to be sure, that an accident does not happen to God and that mercy in Him is not the same kind of feeling that it is in us. But because His mercy cannot be separated from His essence, it is greater in God than we can even imagine.” Charles Hodge, too, spoke of genuine emotions in God.

Here again we have to choose between a mere philosophical speculation and the clear testimony of the Bible, and of our own moral and religious nature. Love of necessity involves feeling, and if there is no feeling in God, there can be no love... . The philosophical objection against ascribing feeling to God bears ... with equal force against the ascription to Him of knowledge or will. If that objection be valid, He becomes to us simply an unknown cause, what men of science call force; that to which all phenomena are to be referred, but of which we know nothing. We must adhere to the truth in its Scriptural form, or we lose it altogether. We must believe that God is love in the sense in

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which that word comes home to every human heart. The Scriptures do not mock us when they say, "Like as a father pitieth His children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear Him" (Ps. 103:13).

Also Ware has argued that God has real and changeable emotions that do not threaten His ontological and ethical immutability. These examples indicate that classical theists do not speak with one voice on the issue of God's impassibility. They also show that one need not deny the certainty of God's foreknowledge to affirm the reality of His feelings.

This assessment of major arguments and assumptions has been brief, but it has seriously challenged the adequacy of free-will theism's biblical and philosophical support. Positive support for classical theism may be found in a number of Scriptures, but perhaps most clearly in the biblical narrative of the death and resurrection of Christ.

### **The Cross as Pattern**

Free-will theists emphasize love as "God's preeminent moral attribute." However, as McGrath notes, that idea can easily be misleading.

The full impact of culture upon the concept of God which we *want* to discover inevitably means, given the richness of the Christian understanding of God, that we isolate and identify one aspect of that understanding of God as normative. In western culture, this has led to the hard-won insight that "God is love" being construed to mean he is a sugar-coated benevolent God who endorses all the insights of western culture and lends them a spurious sanctity. This concept of God—which owes more to nature-religion than Christianity, and continually threatens to degenerate into sheer sentimentalism—arises largely, if not entirely, through dissociating the insight that "God is love" from the source of that insight—the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Stating the point succinctly, McDonald wrote, “God’s love must be viewed in the light of the atonement, not the atonement in the light of God’s love.” The Cross poses a particularly strong challenge to the assumptions of free-will theism.

### **The Predetermined Plan and Foreknowledge of God**

“Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know—this Man, delivered up by the predetermined [  $\mu$  , from ] plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death” (Acts 2:22–23). Peter’s statement on the Day of Pentecost described Jesus’ death as divinely planned and foreknown, but it was an event for which His hearers were accountable.

The Greek term denotes an appointment or determination, and the New Testament employs it most frequently in a Christological sense (e.g., Acts 10:42; 17:31; Rom. 1:4). In Acts 2:23 it is God’s plan ( ) concerning Christ that is appointed—the divine determination that the Son would suffer betrayal and death. These events were fully anticipated beforehand (Luke 9:22, 44; 17:24–25; 18:31–33; 22:22; Acts 3:18; 13:29), for the plan was unalterable (Heb. 6:17), part of the established purpose of Him “who works all things after the counsel of His will” (Eph. 1:11). “Even in putting Jesus to death, the Jews were simply fulfilling what God had already determined must take place and indeed had been foretold in the prophetic writings.”

Sanders argues that the passage reveals not divine certainty, but a high degree of probability. “It was God’s definite purpose to deliver the Son into the hands of those who had a long track record of resisting God’s work. Their rejection did not catch God off guard, however, for he anticipated their response and so walked onto the scene with an excellent prognosis of what would happen. The crucifixion could not have occurred to Jesus unless somehow it fit into the boundaries of what God willed (boul , Acts 2:23; 4:28). But this

does not mean that humans cannot resist the divine will. Luke says that the Jewish leaders ‘rejected God’s purpose for themselves’ (Lk 7:30).”

Several points are worth noting in response. First, does not simply denote generalized boundaries or a probable plan. Instead it reflects a thoughtful decision, determined beforehand and then worked out in experience. As Schrenk observes, “This counsel is predetermined and inflexible. Both phrases emphasize the resolute and inviolable determinateness of the decree. Similarly Ac. 4:28

treats of the fact that Herod, Pilate, the Gentiles and Israel all conspired against Jesus to do . Here the and , separated in 2:23, are combined in a single word, , thus showing that Luke wishes to emphasise the elements both of impregnability and of foreordination. The related stresses the thought of the providential guidance of the world.”

Second, Sanders’s reference to Luke 7 illustrates his refusal to distinguish between the moral will of God and the determined will of God. More will be said about this point shortly.

Third, contrary to Sanders’s incompatibilist assumption, willing human participation in the Crucifixion is not at issue here. As argued earlier, a spontaneous understanding of free will affirms that divine necessity and noncoerced human choice are compatible. In fact that seems to be precisely the pattern suggested by this passage. The people were fully responsible, for they acted without compulsion, but their actions were consistent with God’s determined plan.

### **Judas and the Nature of Freedom**

Regarding Jesus’ crucifixion Boyd wrote, “While Scripture portrays the crucifixion as a predestined event, it never suggests that the individuals who participated in this event were predestined to do so or foreknown as doing so... . They participated in Christ’s death of their own free will.” Since Boyd wrongly assumes that willing, responsible choices are incompatible with foreknowledge, he concludes that Judas and others were not inevitable participants. “If [Judas] had made himself into a different kind of person, he would not have been a candidate for fulfilling the prophecy of the Lord’s

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betrayal. In this case the Lord simply would have found someone else to fill this role.”

But Jesus *knew* Judas was going to betray Him, and He *chose* Him to that end (John 6:70–71; 13:18, 26). Boyd rightly observes that the text does not say when Jesus first knew it would be Judas, but that does not ultimately help his argument. The issue, it seems, is not *how long* Jesus knew His betrayer would be Judas, but *whether* Jesus knew *with certainty* that His betrayer would be Judas before Judas actually betrayed Him. If Jesus knew Judas’s future free actions with certainty, then how could those actions remain truly free (as Boyd would define freedom, in a libertarian sense)? If Jesus’ knowledge (and His identification of Judas) might have turned out to be wrong—if Judas, in the end, had decided not to betray Him—what are the consequences for one’s view of Christ? Was He incorrect in some of the things He believed and said? If so, what would be the consequences with regard to His deity? After all, when predicting His betrayal (and claiming



knowledge of the betrayer), Jesus said, “From now on I am telling you before it comes to pass, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am He” (John 13:19). As Ware states, “Jesus’ knowledge of the future is evidence that he is God in human flesh.” But if the knowledge is false, the claim is thrown into question.

Jesus’ foreknowledge about Judas was accurate, and the account provides an excellent example of compatibilism. Jesus said

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in Mark 14:21, “For the Son of Man is to go, just as it is written of Him; but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born.” As Williams has suggested, this statement reveals both divine necessity and human responsibility. “Jesus’ death was inevitable, but the betrayer was culpable.” This is especially interesting in view of the fact that the betrayal by Judas was at least in part satanically motivated (Luke 22:3; John 13:2, 27). In summary, Judas acted under satanic influence in complete accordance with divine foreknowledge, but he was still responsible for his actions.

### **The Suffering of Christ and Christian Hermeneutics**

Jesus’ disciples looked at Judas differently after the betrayal. The Gospels consistently list him last among the Twelve (Matt. 10:4; Mark 3:19; Luke 6:16), even though he seems to have enjoyed some privilege in his experience as a disciple (John 12:6), and they highlight aspects of his conversation that had been overlooked before (12:4; 13:28). Similarly Jesus’ followers viewed some of His words and actions differently after His death and resurrection, and they read the Scriptures differently than they had before, recognizing a correlation between His life and prophecies of Him that had previously gone unnoticed (2:22; 12:16; Acts 13:27).

Believers in Christ also read the Scriptures through a Christological lens. As they read the Law, they acknowledge that it points forward to Christ (Luke 24:25–27; John 5:39; Gal. 3:24;

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Heb. 8:1–8), and as they read the prophets they know that Christ came to fulfill their expectations (Luke 18:31; 24:44; John 1:45; Acts 3:24–25; 10:43). Paul said, “And so, having obtained help from God, I stand to this day testifying both to small and great, stating nothing but what the Prophets and Moses said was going to take place; that the Christ was to suffer, and that by reason of His resurrection from the dead He should be the first to proclaim light both to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles” (Acts 26:22–23).

This Christological reading of Old Testament theology suggests yet another corrective to free-will theism. The great majority of biblical arguments for an

open future come from the Old Testament. This may be due in part to genre differences, as the biblical narrative portrays God in more relational terms, but it may also be due to a difference in the progress of revelation. Church-age believers see the rest of the story in a way that even the prophets, for whatever they knew of Christ, did not fully understand (1 Pet. 1:10–12). On this side of Jesus' resurrection, what once looked uncertain becomes definite, and what looked open-ended comes to a fully determined conclusion. Further, one must question the adequacy of Christians reading the Old Testament as if they are the original readers. One must be skeptical of seemingly "straightforward" readings that isolate specific passages from a broader biblical context that is ultimately centered on Christ and the Cross.

### **Gethsemane and the Will of God**

Jesus' repeated prayer in Gethsemane—"My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as Thou wilt" (Matt. 26:39)—rightly serves as "the classic text in theology for proving that Jesus had a human will as well as a divine will." However, Jesus' desire to avoid the cross need not be restricted to His humanity, for there is also a sense in which God may be said to have two wills. That is, there are two ways of willing in God. Piper explains this concept from the perspective of election. Election "implies that God decrees one state of affairs while also willing and teaching that a different state of affairs should come to pass. This distinction in the way God wills has been expressed in various ways throughout the centuries. It is not a new contrivance. For example, theologians have spoken of sovereign will and moral will, efficient will and permissive will, secret will and revealed will, will

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of decree and will of command, decretive will and perceptive will, *voluntas signi* (will of sign) and *voluntas beneplaciti* (will of good pleasure)."

These two senses of God's will are seen in several verses in 1 Peter. The apostle spoke of God's moral will when he encouraged his readers "to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God" (4:2). He was also speaking of God's moral or revealed will when he wrote, "For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men" (2:15). But apparently it is not always God's decision, His decretive or decreed will, that foolish men be silenced. Sometimes He determines that their voice be heard all too loudly. "For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong" (3:17). "Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right" (4:19). Such examples can be multiplied many times over.

Free-will theists deny that events may violate God's precepts while satisfying His decree, but, as already noted, the logic of their position drives them in the

same direction. Unless they become process theologians and deny God's ability to intervene in the world, they must acknowledge that He often chooses not to intervene, even when His moral will is being grossly violated.

One cannot imagine a greater violation of God's moral will than the Cross. God's own Son was put to death "by the hands of godless men" (Acts 2:23). But even in this consummate act of rebellion against the Creator, the condemnation and execution of the sinless Messiah, they were allowed to proceed without interruption.

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"But the Lord was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief; if He would render Himself as a guilt offering" (Isa. 53:10). Gethsemane illustrates the tension between these two wills, even within God Himself.

Free-will theists have offered a very different interpretation of Jesus' prayer in the Garden. They contend that the Cross itself was not part of God's eternal plan (a point already addressed), and they argue that Jesus demonstrated His belief in an open future by asking the Father if the cup might be removed. Boyd writes,

Jesus' request obviously could not be granted, but what is significant is the fact that Jesus made the request in the first place. For Jesus knew and had been teaching his disciples for some time that the divine plan was for him to be crucified (Matt. 12:40; 16:21; John 2:19). Yet here he is asking God the Father to change his plan "if it is possible." Jesus' request makes little sense if we assume that Jesus believed that the future was exhaustively settled in God's mind and/or that God's plans were unalterable. His prayer reveals that even with regard to the central defining event of world history there was in the mind of Jesus an outside chance that his Father might yet change his mind.

If it is "obvious" from Jesus' own teaching that the cup could not be removed, Boyd seems to be saying that Jesus thought His own teaching might have been false regarding its most central focus. That seems just as unlikely as the idea that His cry from the cross expressed ignorance as to the purpose of His suffering.

Instead, Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane and His cry on the cross as to why God the Father had forsaken Him demonstrate genuine emotion and suffering in God, but not apart from the inevitability of God's purposes. God is truly able to relate to His creatures and He is especially able to identify with their suffering in the passion of Christ, but at the same time the inexorable progress of His plan is evident. Gethsemane constitutes the Son's wrenching acceptance in time of God's decree from eternity.

### **The Cross and the Hiddenness of God**

In his Heidelberg Disputation, Martin Luther said, “That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks on the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest

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things of God seen through suffering and the cross.” Luther made that statement against the natural theologians who presumed to know God through reason and natural revelation rather than through the gospel, but he also applied this concept more broadly as an abiding lesson learned through the Cross. God is hidden, and the Cross demonstrates the unreliability of experience as an indicator of His presence. When God seemed utterly absent on Good Friday, He was in a sense more present than ever before, but He was “hidden” in Jesus’ abandonment.

God has made Himself known in the Cross. Contrary to natural expectations, one might have expected Him to come as an exalted king. But He was born to a poor peasant girl in a stable. One might have expected Him to conquer His enemies in a grand display of power. But He won His victory on a lonely hillside, abandoned by His followers, in what looked like total defeat. One might have expected Him to honor the virtuous, but He has promised to justify the ungodly. In short, God has not been very predictable, and His actions at the Cross—the central event in all of history—were not recognized or understood at the time.

This point should have a profound effect on discussions concerning the problem of evil. After all, the problem itself revolves around expectations. If God is all-loving and all-powerful, it is argued, He would eliminate evil. Since evil is not eliminated, many people ask, as did the enemies of the psalmist, “Where is your God?” (Ps. 42:3, 10; cf. 115:2). They believe God should be seen clearly in the things that are visible; they believe He should be predictable; they believe that because He exists He should be expected to act in certain ways. So when confronted with the reality of evil, they question God’s existence. To those expectations and to the atheistic charge associated with them Psalm 115:3 offers only one answer: “Our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases.”

From this perspective the Cross should cause believers to doubt their doubts and to be cautious about their expectations. The

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Cross should also warn them against premature explanations for God’s apparent absence. Between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, every human attempt to explain the death of Christ was wrong. Likewise every explanation Job’s friends gave him for his suffering was misguided. Until God chooses to provide His own explanations, His purposes remain hidden and believers are left with the Cross as the pattern in the midst of suffering. The more complete answer to the question “Where now is your God?” is that He is precisely where He was on Good Friday:

identifying with humankind in their suffering, acting to resolve that suffering in ways believers may not see or imagine, and yet sovereign in the heavens, accomplishing His eternal purposes.

## **Conclusion**

This article has examined some of the major assumptions and exegetical arguments behind free-will theism and has demonstrated that the cross of Christ raises serious questions about those assumptions. Judas demonstrates spontaneous, not libertarian freedom; Jesus' resurrection calls for a Christological reading of the Old Testament; Gethsemane reveals that divine relationality and emotion are consistent with an immutable plan; and the "hiddenness" of God in the Cross causes believers to reconsider any notion that He is absent in the midst of humanity's suffering.

The relationship between free-will theism and soteriological inclusivism, along with questions of theological method, historical precedent, and orthodoxy will be addressed in a subsequent article.