

## AN OPEN VIEW OF GOD . . . DOES HE CHANGE?

At the November 2000 national meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Nashville, the executive committee passed the following resolution:

The Executive Committee, in response to requests from a group of charter members and others, to address the compatibility of the view commonly referred to as “Open Theism” with biblical inerrancy, wishes to state the following: We believe the Bible clearly teaches that God has complete, accurate and infallible knowledge of all events past, present and future including all future decisions and actions of free moral agents. However, in order to insure fairness to members of the society who differ with this view, we propose the issue of such incompatibility be taken up as part of our discussion in next year’s conference “Defining Evangelicalism’s Boundaries.”<sup>1</sup>

That such a statement was deemed necessary reflects the fact that the last fifteen years or so have seen the development of new theological formulations on many fronts, not the least of which has been the exploration of what appear to be non-traditional ways of looking at God Himself and how He interacts with the created order, especially with human beings. At stake in the discussion is the understanding that Christian believers should have concerning evil, suffering, prayer and the guidance of God in everyday life.

This novel foray into *theology proper* (the doctrine of God) has severely tested the unity of churches, pastors, and congregational members in the Baptist General Conference (BGC), a Baptist denomination of some 875 churches located mostly in the northern and western parts of the United States. Some of the best information giving both sides of the debate can be found at the denomination’s website.<sup>2</sup> The flagship school for the denomination, Bethel College and Seminary, located in St. Paul, Minnesota with a sister school in San Diego, finds itself near the center of the controversy with professors on each side.

To be sure, the open view of God has captured only a small minority of professing evangelicals. However, several serious-minded and well-versed theologians and pastors are among those propounding this approach to understanding God and the future. The major proponents for the open view of God are Clark Pinnock,<sup>3</sup> Richard Rice,<sup>4</sup> John Sanders,<sup>5</sup> William Hasker,<sup>6</sup> David

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<sup>1</sup> The resolution was read twice during business meetings at the ETS conference and published in a letter to the membership dated December 26, 2000 from the Secretary-Treasurer James Borland.

<sup>2</sup> Go to <http://www.bgcworld.org> and click on the link for theological discussion.

<sup>3</sup> Clark Pinnock, “Systematic Theology” in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 101-25.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Rice, “Biblical Support for a New Perspective” in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 11-58.

<sup>5</sup> John Sanders, “Historical Considerations” in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 59-100; *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998). *The God Who Risks* is probably the first place any student should go to for the most complete and competent presentation of the view.

Basinger,<sup>7</sup> and Gregory Boyd.<sup>8</sup> While Pinnock is the most well known theologian among the group, Sanders, Boyd, and Basinger have been in the forefront of attempting a coherent and complete presentation of the view.<sup>9</sup> As one reads the literature of these men, one finds that the discussions are part of the larger considerations of trends in theological method and the deliberations about the direction that evangelicalism should be going.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, the debate over the open view of God is co-extensive with evangelical interactions about postliberalism,<sup>11</sup> post-conservatism,<sup>12</sup> and postmodernism.

On the other side, among the strongest defenders of classical theism over against the open view of God has been Pastor John Piper<sup>13</sup> along with theologians Norm Geisler,<sup>14</sup> Thomas Oden,<sup>15</sup> Bruce

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<sup>6</sup> William Hasker, "Philosophical Perspective" in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 126-54.

<sup>7</sup> David Basinger, "Practical Implications" in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 155-76; *The Case for Freewill Theism: A Philosophical Assessment*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000); "The 'Open' View of the Future," <<http://www.bgcworld.org/4know/openvw.htm>>, January 17, 2001; "God and the Future: A Brief Outline of the Open View," <<http://www.bgc.bethel.edu/4know/future.htm>>, January 17, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> The notable philosopher Alvin Plantinga has also been viewed as part of this group. See C. Richard Wells, "Review of *The Case of Freewill Theism* by David Basinger and *No Place for Sovereignty* by R. K. McGregor Wright," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 18 (Fall 1999): 290-91. Unfortunately, this present author has yet to deal with Plantinga's contributions in this area.

<sup>10</sup> For example, see Stanley Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson, *20<sup>th</sup>-Century Theology: God and the World in an Age of Transition*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), and John G. Stackhouse, Jr., ed., *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Some of the same kinds of methodological discussions in the debate over the open view of God can be found in George P. Schner and John Webster, *Theology After Liberalism: A Reader*, (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2000). One can see the appropriation of some of these ideas expressed by professing evangelical Stanley Grenz in "Beyond Foundationalism: Is a Nonfoundationalist Evangelical Theology Possible?" *Christian Scholar's Review* 30 (Fall 2000): 57-82.

<sup>12</sup> See Roger Olson, "Postconservative Evangelicals Greet the Postmodern Age," *The Christian Century*, (May 3, 1995): 480-83 and "Reforming Evangelical Theology" in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr., (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 201-207.

<sup>13</sup> John Piper has written a series of articles posted on the Baptist General Conference website addressing various issues from the classical theistic viewpoint: "The Enormous Ignorance of God: When God Doesn't Know the Future Choices of Man," <<http://www.bgcworld.org/4know/enormous.htm>>, December 2, 1997; "Does God Make Mistakes? A Response to Greg Boyd's Treatment of Jeremiah 3:6-7, 19-20," <<http://www.bgcworld.org/4know/mistakes.htm>>, March 18, 1999; "Pastoral Implications of Greg Boyd's View in Dealing with Suffering," <<http://www.bgcworld.org/4know/implicitns.htm>>, April 8, 1998; "Answering Greg Boyd's Openness of God Texts," <<http://www.bgcworld.org/4know/answer.htm>>, May 11, 1998; "Is the Glory of God at Stake in God's Foreknowledge of Human Choices? Jonathan Edwards' Response to Gregory Boyd," <<http://www.bgcworld.org/4know/glory.htm>>, July 1998.

<sup>14</sup> Norman L. Geisler, *Creating God in the Image of Man?* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Oden, "The Real Reformers and the Traditionalists," 42 *Christianity Today* (February 9, 1998): 45; John Piper viewed Oden's article as significant enough to review it in one of his internet posted articles, "Thomas Oden's

Ware<sup>16</sup> and Millard Erickson.<sup>17</sup> What is especially interesting about this particular list of men is that it represents a broad evangelical spectrum from Wesleyan to Calvinistic viewpoints. This may be instructive concerning attempts by some to see the debate over the open view of God as simply a fresh recycling of the old Calvinistic-Arminian discussions (more on this later).

## The Designations of the Open View Of God

There are several names or designations that have surfaced in this debate which are intended to label the new viewpoint. Perhaps the most common is the *open view of God*, the *openness of God*, or *open theism*. This terminology is intended by proponents to convey the idea that God is open to the possibilities of the future. What is entailed in such a formulation is that God's understanding of the future is partially (not absolutely) contingent upon future human choices. He does not know all future events and occasions with certainty since they have not happened yet. Obviously, this is quite different from classical theism's view that God knows either intuitively or rationally all future events before they happen. Boyd describes the openness view this way:

In any event, the distinctive aspect of my approach is that I regard both motifs [future determinism and future openness] to be equally descriptive of the way God and the future actually are. On this basis, I arrive at the conclusion that the future is to some degree *settled* and known by God as such, and to some degree *open* and known by God as such. To some extent, God knows the future as *definitely* this way and *definitely* not that way. To some extent, however, he knows it as *possibly* this way and *possibly* not that way.

This is the "open view of God" or, as I prefer, the "open view of the future." It does not hold that the future is wide open. Much of it, open theists concede, is settled ahead of time, either by God's predestining will or by existing earthly causes, but it is not *exhaustively* settled ahead of time. To whatever degree the future is yet open to be decided by free agents, it is unsettled. To this extent, God knows it as a realm of possibilities, not certainties.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, from one perspective, the term *open* appears to reflect something about God, a limitation of some kind found in God himself, namely that He is limited by future possibilities. This limitation is reflected in the attribute of God's foreknowledge or omniscience. It is important to note that most open theists still refer to God as omniscient. They point out that in classical theism God's omnipotence is limited by God's nature. For example, He cannot make a rock too big for Him to move. Such a feat of power would violate the very nature of God. In the same way, open theists insist that God's omniscience must be redefined to come into closer harmony with Scripture and reality.<sup>19</sup> This redefinition is sometimes couched in the terminology of *God's self-limitation*.<sup>20</sup> However, it

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Charge of Heresy Concerning the Denial of God's Foreknowledge," <<http://www.bgcworld.org/4know/thomaso.htm>>, April 8, 1998.

<sup>16</sup> Bruce A. Ware, "Despair Amidst Suffering and Pain: A Practical Outworking of Open Theism's Diminished View of God," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4 (Summer 2000):56-75; "Meditation on John 18:4 in Relation to Open Theism," <<http://www.bgcworld.org/4know/ware.htm>>, January 2001; *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001).

<sup>17</sup> Millard Erickson, "God, Foreknowledge, Bethel, and the BGC: Questions and Answers," <<http://www.bgc.world.org/4know/millard.htm>>, January 17, 2001.

<sup>18</sup> Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 15.

<sup>19</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 199.

leaves the open theist vulnerable to the charge that he has posited something outside of God that produces the limitation rather than basing the so-called limitation upon who God is as in the classical view of omnipotence. Nonetheless, the open theist asserts what is sometimes called “presentism” or the idea of “present knowledge.” This view “affirms omniscience but denies exhaustive foreknowledge. Though God’s knowledge is coextensive with reality in that God knows all that can be known, the future actions of free creatures are not yet reality, and so there is nothing to be known.”<sup>21</sup> In this light, it is easy to see why Boyd would prefer to speak of the “open view of the future” rather than the “open view of God.”

This leads to the use of the term *freewill theism* (or *basic freewill theism* to borrow Basinger’s term<sup>22</sup>) to describe the theology of the open view of God. This particular terminology highlights the specific nature of the future that leads to an open view of God and future events. This specific nature of the future is rooted in the free moral choices of individuals as granted by God’s design. Basinger summarizes:

Since freewill theists believe that God has chosen to create a world in which humans have been granted the power to exercise pervasive, morally significant freedom of choice (and thus action) and that God cannot unilaterally ensure that humans exercising free choice will make the decisions he would have them make (and thus act as he would have them act), freewill theists conclude that God does not exercise unilateral control over many important aspects of what occurs in our earthly realm.<sup>23</sup>

In short, God by sovereign design, according to the freewill theists, has decided to give humans room to make *absolutely* free moral decisions. If any of these decisions were “determined” ahead of time in any way (such as in a view that holds to God’s complete foreknowledge or predestination of the future), then humans would not be the free moral agents that God intended them to be. The conclusion of the matter then for freewill theists is that God does not have complete knowledge of the future until the future becomes today. In this way, both God and humans are “open” to the possibilities and not the certainties of tomorrow.

It is a small step from this particular understanding to another term that is used by Sanders. He refers to the open view of God as *relational theism*.<sup>24</sup>

What I call “relational theism” affirms that God freely enters into reciprocal relations with creatures. There is significant diversity within this category, aside from a general agreement that God, though ontologically distinct from creation (contra process theology), enters into genuine give-and-take relations with his creatures and is resourceful, creative and omniscient instead of all-determining and completely unconditioned by creatures. This has to be understood, however, as God’s free and sovereign choice to create this state of affairs. It is not forced on God, as in process thought. God has made significantly free creatures upon whom he conditions some of his actions. God is truly involved in human history, opening up new possibilities in overcoming sin.<sup>25</sup>

Sanders goes on to say that God is the God who does not just *act*, but also the God who *reacts*. It is Sanders’ perception that this is a radical break with the classical view of sovereignty where God is not

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 224-28. Sanders maintains that God’s self-limitation should not be understood in a restrictive sense but from the vantage point of the outworkings of His self-giving love. See also Basinger, *Freewill Theism*, 36.

<sup>21</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 198.

<sup>22</sup> Basinger, *Freewill Theism*, 13.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>24</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 161-64.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 161-62.

conceived of in such terms.<sup>26</sup> This new view of a more personal kind of God who is in a give and take relationship with his creatures has significant ramifications for everyday life.

But God does react and enters into genuine responsive relationships with his creatures. In his relationships God is faithful, but God can change his mind and sometimes does. Evangelicals especially see the opportunity of affecting God in prayer. Of course, this is only because God makes himself open to our prayers, not because we can force our will on God.<sup>27</sup>

The idea that God has opened himself up to this kind of interaction with his creatures at the personal level leads in relational theism to a portrait of God as a risk-taker.<sup>28</sup> Basinger asserts that “the fact remains that freewill theists . . . must ultimately view God in a very real sense as a *risk-taker*. The God of FWT [freewill theism] hopes that individuals will always freely choose to do what he would have them do. But for the freewill theist there can be no assurance that they will do so.”<sup>29</sup>

The previous labels for the open view of God have been used by proponents. Norman Geisler, an opponent of open theism, has rejected these terms as, at best, non-descriptive. He prefers instead the term *neotheism*:

Proponents have variously labeled their view “The Openness of God View” or “Free Will Theism.” Others have called this new theism a form of process theology or panentheism because of its important similarities to this position. . . . But it seems more appropriate to call it *neotheism* for several reasons. First, it has significant differences from the panentheism of Whitehead, Hartshorne, and company. *Neotheism*, like classical theism, affirms many of the essential attributes of God, including infinity, necessity, ontological independence, transcendence, omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence. Likewise, it shares with traditional theism the belief in *ex nihilo* creation and direct divine supernatural intervention in the world. Since process theology denies all of these, it seems unfair to list *neotheism* as a subspecies of that view.

On the other hand, since there are significant differences between the new theism and classical theism, neither does it fit comfortably in the theistic category. For example, *neotheism* denies God’s immutability, eternity, simplicity, and pure actuality.

In addition, it denies God’s foreknowledge of future free acts, and as a consequence, God’s complete sovereignty over human events. These are serious enough deviations from a bimillennial Christian view to deserve another name, as well as to arouse interest in the topic.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, in Geisler’s opinion it is ultimately best to use *neotheism* as the designator of the open view of God to highlight the continuities and discontinuities with classical theism.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> This idea of risk is an extremely crucial concept in the formulations of a theology of providence for those who hold to the open view of God.

<sup>29</sup> Basinger, *Freewill Theism*, 36.

<sup>30</sup> Geisler, *Creating God*, 73-74.

<sup>31</sup> In an earlier work, Geisler used the term *neoclassical theism* to refer to panentheism and process theology. See Norman Geisler and William Watkins, *Perspectives: Understanding and Evaluating Today’s World Views*, (San Bernardino, CA: Here’s Life Publishers, Inc., 1984), 100. According to William Hasker, this term originated with Hartshorne himself (“A Philosophical Perspective,” 140).

## The Proposed Spectrums in the Debate

It is somewhat helpful to consider the open view of God within a spectrum of ideas on several fronts. Many writers have done this thereby giving the debate some overall perspective as one studies the theological landscape. Perhaps the most frequently mentioned categorization of the open view of God in this way is *to place it on the spectrum between process theology and classical theism*. Geisler's quote above had hinted of this placement. However, the advocates of the openness of God also like to demonstrate where they are exactly by distancing themselves largely from process theology as well as seeing themselves as a recasting of classical theism. Boyd comments:

Passages such as these [Isaiah 46 & 48] beautifully demonstrate that the future is settled to whatever extent the sovereign Creator decides to settle it. God is not at the mercy of chance or free will. This understanding of divine sovereignty contrasts sharply with a popular liberal theological movement called "process theology." Some evangelical authors have wrongly accused open theists of being close to process thought, but in truth the two views have little in common.

Process thought holds that God *can't* predetermine or foreknow with certainty *anything* about the distant future. Open theists rather maintain that God can and does predetermine and foreknow whatever he wants to about the future. Indeed, God is so confident in his sovereignty, we hold, he does not need to micromanage everything. He could if he wanted to, but this would demean his sovereignty. So he chooses to leave some of the future open to possibilities, allowing them to be resolved by the decisions of free agents. It takes a greater God to steer a world populated with free agents than it does to steer a world of preprogrammed automatons.<sup>32</sup>

While most of the quote above deals with distinguishing the open view of God from process thinking, that last reference to automatons reflects the penchant among advocates of the open view to see classical theism as maintaining an undesired fatalistic view of God and the world.

This particular way of viewing the openness of God is further enhanced by emphasizing more fully the aspect of *theological determinism* that might be along the spectrum of ideas. Basinger, taking a slightly different approach, makes this plain. Process theology is on one side of the spectrum where God is not viewed as being able to guarantee anything that he desires to take place, since at every point, human cooperation is necessary.<sup>33</sup> Over against process theology, Basinger places three different forms of what he calls classical theism:<sup>34</sup>

1. **theological determinists** (unlimited compatibilists) – those who believe that “God can always ensure that humans will voluntarily make the decisions he would have them make;”<sup>35</sup>
2. **limited compatibilists** – those who acknowledge that “to the extent that God grants us voluntary choice, God may not be able to . . . ensure unilaterally that we will always voluntarily make the decisions he would have us make;”<sup>36</sup>
3. **freewill theists** (incompatibilists) – those who believe that “to the extent that God grants individuals freedom, he gives up complete control over the decisions that are made.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 31.

<sup>33</sup> Basinger, *Freewill Theism*, 22.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

Although Basinger has placed freewill theism within the boundaries of classical theism, it is easy to see a continuum from what traditional theists have taught to process theology with freewill theism somewhere in between as it relates to the level of theological determinism in each theological system.

Such discussions about determinism naturally raise in one's mind the possible discussion of the Arminian-Calvinism continuum that might be at play in this debate. It was cited earlier that some believe this to be a resurfacing of the time-worn controversy. To be sure, all advocates of the open view of God tend to be on the Arminian side of the debate. It is also true that John Wesley, John Calvin, and the history of Augustinianism-Calvinism and Arminianism come up in the literature on the discussion of freewill theism.<sup>38</sup> In fact, R. K. McGregor Wright sees the open view of God as simply one variation of the age-old discussion of the two major views that have come to be called Calvinism and Arminianism.<sup>39</sup> One review actually agrees by noting that

The term 'freewill theism' is a fairly recent designation for contemporary versions of what evangelicals have traditionally called 'Arminianism.' The new term is an improvement over the old one partly because it is not restricted in scope to the standard set of soteriological questions that define Arminianism, and also because it has the advantage of freedom from the emotional freight carried by the traditional term.<sup>40</sup>

However, it is probably simplistic to view the debate over the open view of God in these terms. Classical Arminianism has always held to the view that God knows all future events exhaustively and actually bases its doctrine of soteriology partly upon the fact of the foreseen faith of individuals. In addition, at the heart of the open view of God is a rejection of the idea that God exhaustively knows the future. Therefore, in spite of similarities that might exist elsewhere, these two views (Classical Arminianism and the open view of God) conflict at the level of basic understandings concerning God and the future. Consequently, this way of defining the spectrum is not likely to be helpful in understanding open theism.

## The Proposed Exegetical Basis of the Open View of God

Fortunately, the advocates of the open view of God have done a good job of explaining the basic outline of their own position. Following a sketch provided by Greg Boyd, it seems that the main approach of the open view of God is to begin with the idea that **God repents or changes his mind.**<sup>41</sup> Boyd believes that the Lord frequently changes his mind. Furthermore, He does so due to changing circumstances or because of prayer. Boyd cites numerous passages in support of this claim including Ex. 32:14; Num. 14:12-20; Deut. 9:13-4, 18-20, 25; 1 Sam. 2:27-36; 2 Kings 20:1-7; 1 Chron. 21:15; Jer. 26:19; Ez. 20:5-22; Amos 7:1-6; Jon. 1:2; 3:2, 4-10; Jer. 18:7-11; 26:2-3; and Ez. 33:13-15. In fact, Boyd goes so far as to suggest that God's willingness to change is "one of God's attributes of greatness" citing Joel 2:13-14 and Jonah 4:2. The open theist Sanders comments on this belief in the following way:

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<sup>38</sup> See especially Sanders' chapter entitled "Divine Relationality in the Christian Tradition" in *The God Who Risks*, 140-66. Also, one could review Sanders, "Historical Considerations," 80-91.

<sup>39</sup> R. K. McGregor Wright, *No Place for Sovereignty*, 205-32.

<sup>40</sup> David M. Ciochi, "Review of David Basinger's The Case for Freewill Theism and R. K. McGregor Wright's No Place for Sovereignty," *Christian Scholar's Review* 27 (1998): 517-19.

<sup>41</sup> Boyd, "God and the Future," 1. I am using website printed page numbers in this and future citations.

The biblical references to God's changing his mind have created no small controversy in the history of interpretation. Such texts raise a number of issues. One concern is whether divine repentance implies that God is fickle or untrustworthy. If God *can* change his mind, can God be trusted? Yes. As the biblical narrative progresses, it becomes clear that God remains faithful to his overarching goals. For instance, in Exodus 32 whether God destroys the Israelites and begins again with Moses or decides to continue working with the people, God remains faithful to his promises to Abraham and his project of developing a people of faith. But God has different options available, and the one that he will choose is not a foregone conclusion. Sometimes God allows human input in regard to the option that is realized. As God permitted Abraham's intercession for Sodom (Gen. 18:16-33), so now God allows Moses incredible access to him. With or without human input, God remains faithful to his project of redemption. God shows steadfast love and sticks to his overarching goals, which he has made known through his promises. God remains unchangeable in his commitment to this project of redemption but remains flexible regarding precisely when, where and how it is carried out.<sup>42</sup>

Sanders goes on to reject explicitly John Calvin's view that passages which speak of God repenting "do not describe God as he truly is but only as he appears to us."<sup>43</sup> In general he does not accept any *anthropomorphic* view of such texts. Instead he chooses to consider divine-repentance texts as *metaphorical*: "Just as the metaphors regarding God's eyes or hands signify divine awareness and ability to act, so the metaphor of divine repentance informs us that God is responsive in his relations with us—a very meaningful metaphor indeed."<sup>44</sup> In doing so, Sanders shows that the open view of God clearly breaks with classical theism's view of the nature of God. He also believes that the new view actually takes the Bible passages more seriously.

Other texts, which Boyd uses to outline the open view of God, are those in which God expresses *regret and disappointment* (Gen. 6:5-5; 1 Sam. 15:10; Ez. 22:29-31), *surprise* (Isa. 5:3-7; Jer. 3:6-6, 19-20), or *ignorance* (Jer. 7:3; 19:5). Furthermore, Boyd would add texts in which God is *testing His people to discover their faithfulness* (Gen. 22:12; Ex. 16:4), *asking non-rhetorical questions which leave the future open* (Num 14:11; Hos. 8:5), or speaking to people "in terms of what may or may not happen" (Ex. 3:18-4:9; Jer. 38:17-18).<sup>45</sup> Such a presentation shows that the advocates of the open view of God have spent quite a bit of time wrestling with the text (regardless of whether they are correct in their interpretation). In dealing with such texts, Boyd demonstrates the basic hermeneutical approach that is at the heart of how open theists understand themselves and their use of the Bible:

Traditionally, theologians have taken all the passages that demonstrate that the future is settled in [sic] either in God's mind (foreknowledge) or in God's will (predestination) as revealing the whole truth about God's relationship to the future. They therefore interpret all passages . . . which suggest that God faces a partly open future as being figurative. On exegetical and theological grounds I do not see this approach as warranted. I am therefore compelled to take both sets of passages as literal and thus to draw the conclusion that the future which God faces is partly open and partly settled.<sup>46</sup>

Consequently, open theists see their theological position as exegetically defensible and true to the biblical text.

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<sup>42</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 66.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Boyd, "God and the Future," 1-2.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.



## Are There Any Good Features of Open Theism?

Below a refutation of open theism will be provided. However, in spite of the need to reject this innovative view, there are some good features that its advocates have brought to the table for theological consideration. Oftentimes, aberrant views have a set of right concerns and overreact to produce wrong theological formulations. This may be what has happened among the scholars who have voiced agreement with open theism.

Millard Erickson notes six positive things that could be said about open theism: (1) there is a genuine attempt to be biblical; (2) there is an attempt to be holistic theologically taking into account biblical, historical, philosophical, and practical theology; (3) there is a recognition that theology is not done in a cultural vacuum and so we must be aware of cultural influences that affect our own interpretations; (4) there is a correct understanding that Greek philosophy has probably been read into the Bible too much; (5) there is a good desire to relate doctrine to practical issues of life; (6) the proponents have largely treated the issue “coolly and rationally, rather than emotively.”<sup>47</sup>

To such a list could be added three additional positive ramifications from the open theist discussions. First, fatalism is viewed as a flawed option. Open theism, although it goes too far, rightly refuses to view the biblical data as expressing a stilted kind of theological determinism that removes the mystery of God’s dealings with man. It is tempting, however, to note that open theism itself has removed the mystery of God’s dealings with man, only from the human side of the equation. Second, open theism has focused attention on passages that have had little attention in some evangelical circles. Darrell Bock, clearly **not** an open theist, has noted that

The issue, as I see it, is how to relate passages where relational dimensions are highlighted in Scripture with those that highlight sovereignty. BOTH sets of texts need incorporation. In the debate, each side tends to choose its texts and then handle the others accordingly. For example, the passages that say God repents cannot be solved simply by calling them anthropopathic. For figures DO affirm something in their comparison. So the question becomes what does saying God repented mean, even if it is only a comparison to human emotion. The figure still has to say something. What? To annul its force is not to interpret it. On the other hand passages that speak of names written in the book of life look more sovereign in orientation than openness advocates.<sup>48</sup>

This is linked to a third good consequence of the discussions about the open view of God. There are some pockets of evangelicalism that are known for a posture of scholastic rationalism that leaves little room for the relational side of God. In spite of whatever faults it has, open theism does force evangelicals to think about the passages that assert the feelings and relationships that God has with respect to the world in general, and believers in particular.

## Refutation of the Open View of God

Earlier, Thomas Oden’s charge of heresy with respect to open theism was raised. If openness theology is outside the scope of orthodoxy altogether it must be rejected in the strongest of terms. Many solidly evangelical thinkers have taken on the task of a greatly needed analysis and refutation in this matter.

Millard Erickson’s bevy of arguments against open theism can be grouped under three headings: (1) inadequate use of Scripture, (2) a misrepresentation of classical theism, (3) lack of

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<sup>47</sup> Millard Erickson, *God the Father Almighty*, 84-85.

<sup>48</sup> Darrell Bock, <[DBockDTS@aol.com](mailto:DBockDTS@aol.com)>, Private email message to Mike Stallard, 21 November 2000.

internal consistency and coherence.<sup>49</sup> For the sake of brevity, only a few examples of these will be cited. Concerning the inadequate use of the Bible by open theists, Erickson challenges the overly selective use of Scripture that he perceives. Passages about the love of God are given more weight among open theists than passages about God's holiness or wrath. Of more significance perhaps is the unbalanced focus on passages that tend to assert that God changes in some respect to the exclusion or downplaying of passages that teach God's "unchanging nature, or his complete power, his determination of the events of history or of persons' lives, and his complete knowledge of everything, including the future."<sup>50</sup>

Erickson then gives an example of how a passage is misapplied by the open theist Rice. When commenting upon the Joseph story in Genesis, a section which goes to the heart of the issues of this debate, Rice says that God's use of "the hatred of Joseph's brothers to save the Israelites from famine" (Gen. 45:6-7) is actually not a case of God's direct intervention to carry out His plan but a time when He "interacts with creaturely agents in pursuing his goals."<sup>51</sup> Erickson correctly responds by noting the larger context which has been missed by Rice, namely, that "verse 7 . . . seems to indicate that this is not primarily God's reaction to something humans did, but rather part of his antecedent plan" which is also spelled out in Gen. 50:20 where Joseph tells his brothers that God intended it for good.<sup>52</sup>

Erickson also believes that open theists have caricatured classical theism. He criticizes Pinnock's description of classical theism's God as the "aloof Monarch."<sup>53</sup> This classical theistic God in Pinnock's view is unchanging, all-powerful, and one who never takes risks. According to Erickson, Pinnock says this God should be described as "being a metaphysical principle rather than as a person."<sup>54</sup> However, the classical theistic view of God does not have to be portrayed in this mechanistic way. Erickson cites many theologians including Luther as well as modern authors who, following the classical view of God in the history of the church, nonetheless maintain a view of a God who personally relates and sympathizes with the suffering of his creatures in spite of the fact that He is changeless in his being.

Two other important comments can be made along these lines. The first is that the open view of God, with its caricature of classical theism, appears to diminish the significance of the Trinity in determining its view of God. To be sure, Pinnock correctly refers to the Trinity as proof of the eternally relational aspect of God.<sup>55</sup> One can readily see why the open theists would be drawn to this point. However, this relational aspect of God has always been a major feature of classical theism. The unchanging nature of God expressed in so many passages in the Bible (e.g., Mal. 3:6) can be understood in *ontological* terms, that is, with respect to God's being or essence. However, the many varied relationships of God can be expressed precisely because God is one being in three *persons*. It is the mystery of the Trinity that keeps classical theism from falling into the trap of the static, unfeeling God which Pinnock and other open theists despise.

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<sup>49</sup> The discussion of Erickson's refutation is taken primarily from *God the Father Almighty*, 85-92.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>51</sup> Rice, "Biblical Support," 37.

<sup>52</sup> Erickson, *God the Father Almighty*, 86.

<sup>53</sup> See Clark Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," 103; Erickson, *God the Father Almighty*, 87-88.

<sup>54</sup> Erickson, *God the Father Almighty*, 88.

<sup>55</sup> Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," 107-109.

The second comment to be made here is that the caricature of classical theism found in open theistic writings has been heavily borrowed from process theology. There is a striking resemblance between Pinnock's criticisms of classical theism and those of prominent process theologians such as David Ray Griffin and John Cobb. Long ago Griffin and Cobb likewise complained of the traditional theistic God who is characterized as cosmic moralist, the unchanging and passionless absolute, controlling power, sanctioner of the status quo, and male (in their view unfortunately so).<sup>56</sup> Yet, such a caricature has already been refuted by Ron Nash. Nash notes that this portrait is actually a version of Thomistic theism (going back to Thomas Aquinas) rather than a picture of the orthodox God of the last two thousand years of church history. Consequently, the choice between Thomistic theism and process theology is a "forced and artificial" one.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, it appears that open theists have borrowed a straw man from process theology and have presented their theological system in reaction to it.

John Piper has also given many criticisms of the open view of God. For the purpose of the discussion here, the debate over one particular passage will be highlighted. In Isaiah 38:1-5, King Hezekiah while suffering sickness is told by God through the prophet Isaiah that he is to die from this sickness. Hezekiah's response is to seek mercy from God. God sees his tears and adds fifteen years to his life. The openness view sees in this passage an example of God not knowing how Hezekiah would respond ahead of time. However, when Hezekiah sought mercy, God responds to what He now knows and changes his mind about whether Hezekiah was to die. In summary, by this openness understanding the prediction by God that Hezekiah would die is disingenuous if God was not entitled to, and in fact did, change His mind.<sup>58</sup>

Piper shows that this kind of charge against the traditional understanding that God knew ahead of time what Hezekiah's response would be should be turned on its head over against the openness view. Is it not also dishonest of God to say "You shall die, and not live," when he really means, "You might die, but won't if you repent?"<sup>59</sup> In other words, both sides affirm what God does or does not know ahead of time based upon an understanding of God that comes from outside this passage, since this passage does not strictly bring up God's foreknowledge. In this case, the upper hand will belong to the classical theist because of the abundance of material throughout the Bible affirming God's exhaustive knowledge. Piper points out a fundamentally wrong assumption in this matter that seeps into the openness view's exegesis of passages like this:

But it is not true that one must always express explicitly the exceptions to the threats one gives or the predictions one makes in order to be honest. One reason for this is that there can be a general understanding in a family or group of people that certain kinds of threats or warnings always imply that genuine repentance will be met with mercy.<sup>60</sup>

In other words, the ancient Israelites lived in a world where such implicit understandings were taken for granted and one should not be surprised to see such things not stated in every text. Therefore, one

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<sup>56</sup> John B. Cobb, Jr., and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976).

<sup>57</sup> Ron Nash, *The Concept of God: An Exploration of Contemporary Difficulties with the Attributes of God*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 30. This book is one of the best refutations of process theology and its implications that has been written in this writer's estimation.

<sup>58</sup> Gregory Boyd, "The Open View of the Future."

<sup>59</sup> John Piper, "Answering Greg Boyd's Openness of God Texts," 1.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

cannot automatically cull from these texts the understanding that God changed His mind when “new” information came His way.

Piper’s generalization is given detailed support by Bruce Ware. Ware’s criticism of openness theology notes the overwhelming number of possible biblical texts to counter the open theists:

How many specific passages of Scripture, interpreted correctly and in context, stand to challenge the openness denial of God’s exhaustive foreknowledge? I don’t know the number, but I do know this: as one reads the Bible afresh with the openness model in mind, one confronts more and more texts that, previously, one might not have given a second thought to, but now stand out in their relation to the openness proposal.<sup>61</sup>

Ware goes on to discuss in particular the importance of John 18:4 in the debate. In that passage, Jesus confronts those who have come to arrest him in the garden of Gethsemane. The words in the text are significant: “Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, ‘Who is it you want?’” On the surface it would seem that Jesus (who is God) had full exhaustive knowledge of what was going to happen to him. One should not understate the case here. Ware comments that this statement

is astonishing in itself for its overt and explicit claim of comprehensive knowledge of these future events. Consider how many specific actions and events that must comprise “all these things” that Jesus is here said to know – the guards, the soldiers, the trials, the accusations, the questioning, the beatings, the denials, the betrayals, the release of Barabbas, the thorns, the cross. Just the sheer amount of factual knowledge about the future claimed in this statement defies explanation apart from God’s having exhaustive foreknowledge. But consider further, how many of these future actions and events only occurred as they did, and only occurred as Jesus knew they would, by the free choice decisions of numerous human moral agents. Every soldier’s strike, or false accusation, or stated blasphemy, or hurtful lie, or mocking of honor, or hammer blow was done by some free-will agent or another. According to open theism, God could know none of those future free-will actions. But, this text tells us differently; this text tells us that Jesus knew “all the things” that were coming upon Him. In other words, this text tells us that Jesus knew what open theists say he couldn’t know.<sup>62</sup>

One could respond by saying that even all of these actions are not exhaustive of future events that need to be taken into account in a theology of Providence. However, the implication of the word *all* with respect to all that is going to happen mitigates against such a limited understanding.

Thomas Schreiner also has entered the debate with a concise criticism of the hermeneutics of the open view of God. In particular he notes that

Some openness theologians claim to be radical biblical literalists, contending that traditional evangelicals have failed to interpret the scriptures in accord with its most likely meaning. Hence, open theists insist that when scripture says, “God repents,” the text means exactly what it says. God really and truly changes his mind. . . . The biblical strength of their view, however, is exaggerated. The hermeneutical method of open theists would be convincing if they were consistent. Open theists should argue, if they were consistent, that God does not know the present either. After all, God asks Adam, “Where are you?” (Gen. 3:8). A radical biblical literalist would say, “God must not know where Adam is since he asks the question.” Further, the Lord had to go down to Sodom and Gomorrah to know what was happening in those cities according to Genesis 18:20-21.<sup>63</sup>

In other words, the way that open theists handle passages that relate to God’s future knowledge, if applied to passages that related to God’s present knowledge, would make God no better than man.

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<sup>61</sup> Bruce A. Ware, “Meditation on John 18:4 in Relation to Open Theism,” 1.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Thomas Scheiner, “Editorial: Sovereignty, Suffering, and Open Theism,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4 (Summer 2000): 3.

Thus, the open view of God, despite its own self-understanding in the matter, is practicing a dual hermeneutic.

One final criticism that can be leveled at the open view of God is the potential it leaves for unraveling the prophetic portions of God's Word. While they attempt to keep prophecies cogent, it is somewhat hard to see how they approach prophetic texts with the certainty that they require. If God cannot really know the future actions of free moral agents (many of whom are involved in the fulfillment of biblical prophecies), how can He competently bring such predictions to pass. The approach is more one of probability concerning future actions rather than God clearly bringing to pass what He has promised. It is theological conundrums like this within the openness position that has led some to wonder if such a view can really be harmonized with the biblical doctrine of inerrancy.<sup>64</sup>

## Conclusion

The open view of God is one of the most innovative theological positions to be advanced within the last hundred years. Its adherents are sincere but influenced too greatly by interactions with those who hold to non-evangelical and non-orthodox positions. In their zeal to picture God as One who "feels our pain," they have developed a theological system that is outside the boundaries of where they want to place themselves. It is a system that does not exhaustively cover all of the biblical information about God's knowledge of the future. It is a position with inconsistent hermeneutics. It is a teaching that has been espoused by no orthodox believers in almost two thousand years of church history. All believers must take this seriously and prayerfully and biblically consider its end. It is much better to commit oneself into the hands of Him who holds the future.

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<sup>64</sup> Robert M. Stiner, "Open Theism and the Death of Biblical Inerrancy," <<http://www.bgcworld.org/4know/stiner.htm>>, January 17, 2001.