

Editorial: Sovereignty, Suffering, and Open Theism

Editorial: Thomas R. Schreiner

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Intense suffering provokes questions about God's sovereignty and love. When we suffer deeply, we ask the question, "Why?" Why does God allow such pain in the lives of his children, and why is the world wracked with so much misery? Christians have asked these questions for centuries, and philosophers and theologians have reflected on these matters, attempting to provide answers to what is often called "the problem of evil." I do not want to minimize in the least the importance of such answers, and some of our contributors in this issue help us in this regard. At the outset, however, I do want to point to the crucified Christ. Whatever solution we suggest for the problem of evil (and thinking rightly on this matter is of vital importance), we need to remind ourselves that we worship one who suffered, died, and was buried. We do not know a Savior who is untouched by human misery, who gazes at us from afar and did not share our plight. We worship one who shared our infirmities and weakness (though he was without sin), so that he sympathizes "with our weaknesses" and our temptations (Heb 4:15). He voluntarily took our sin and suffering upon himself, so that we can be free from sin and suffering in the world to come. The crucifixion of God's Christ demonstrates to us God's love and mercy in a suffering world.

I recently heard some words from James Montgomery Boice, the pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Dr. Boice has been

diagnosed with liver cancer and his prospects for life are not encouraging. He reminded the congregation of God's sovereignty in the situation, rejecting the idea that God was not in control. But he said that what has struck him even more powerfully is the goodness of God. God is sovereign and he loves us. God is in control and he has a tender and ardent love for his children.

Christians have always taught that God foresees what his people will suffer, and that he is sovereign over this world. Recently, however, "open theism" has called this truth into question. Open theists argue that God does not and cannot know the future free will decisions of human beings. If he did, they claim, then human beings would not be truly free. In their view, human beings cannot be free if God knows in advance what we will choose to do. They see another advantage in their paradigm, namely, God is not responsible for the suffering we experience, for he did not know or ordain that it would occur. It is fair to say that open theists think that one of the great advantages of this new paradigm is that it solves the problem of evil.

Some of our readers, perhaps, have not even heard of open theism. If so, they might be surprised to learn that "evangelical" scholars are promulgating it and urging its acceptance. Remarkably enough, even *Christianity Today* in an editorial ("God vs. God," *Christianity Today*, February 7, 2000, 34-35) urged both open the-

ists and their traditional evangelical opponents to study the scriptures carefully before criticizing the other side. What is astonishing about this is not that *Christianity Today* urged both sides to study the Bible. We all, of course, agree with that injunction. What is surprising is that the editorial begins by speaking very negatively of the classical view of God (ironically quoting Pascal, who had a very strong view of divine sovereignty as a Jansenist!) and a very positive estimation of the benefits of open theism. Indeed, despite some closing words about the importance of church history, we are given the impression that both open theism and classical theology are equally plausible. The bulk of the editorial is written as if there were no context for such a study, as if we do not already have twenty centuries of careful Christian reflection upon the scriptures, as if Christians have not studied issues pertaining to the very questions posed for centuries. It is instructive that no branch of Christendom, whether Roman Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant, has ever embraced open theism.

This is not to say that we have arrived theologically, that everything the church has agreed on historically is true, or that every new idea should be jettisoned from the outset. But a responsible editorial on the matter should say that the burden of proof is strongly against a theological position that has been rejected for all of church history by every segment of the Christian church. The Reformers believed that the scriptures were the final authority, but they often cited church fathers to demonstrate that their theology was not wholly new. When I read an editorial like this, I wonder if some segments of evangelical Christianity are rootless, lacking any sense of the teaching of the church through the ages. We should study our

Bibles, realizing that our ancestors were imperfect and may need correction. And yet we do not dismiss lightly the wisdom of those who preceded us, lest we be guilty of what C. S. Lewis called “chronological snobbery.”

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. This claim should be examined seriously since we are summoned to review our hermeneutical approach. The biblical strength of their view, however, is exaggerated. The hermeneutical method of open theists would be more 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. As radical biblical literalists, open theists should say God did not know the present state of affairs in Sodom and Gomorrah since he needed to travel there to discover what was going on. If they respond by saying, “Many other verses teach us that God is omniscient and that he knows the present perfectly,” then I reply, “That is the same answer we give to the verses they cited to prove that God does not know the future.” I conclude, therefore, that the *Christianity Today* editorial is wrong on another score. The biblical support for open theism is not remarkably strong. On the contrary, they

can only advance their cause by being hermeneutically inconsistent. We do not need to begin at ground zero to determine the plausibility of this new hypothesis. Nevertheless, the debate will continue. I am confident that forthcoming work, such as Bruce Ware's anticipated book on the topic from Crossway, will demonstrate that open theism's hermeneutic, biblical exegesis, and theology are faulty.

Why is this new movement dangerous and harmful? It is pernicious precisely because it removes the sovereignty of God from suffering. We may not understand why we are suffering, and we know that the pain in this world is staggering. Nonetheless, we do not surrender what the scriptures teach. Our God is good and he is sovereign. Our God cares and he is in control. Our God loves and he reigns. Our Father works everything for good to those who love him and who are called according to his gracious purpose (Rom 8:28). The judge of all the earth always does what is right (Gen 18:25). Our trust in him and love for him will not be increased if we surrender his lordship and kingship. Such an option may be tempting to some, but it is unbiblical and pastorally irresponsible.